

# Window to the West

Culture and Environment in the Scottish Gàidhealtachd



Photo © Sean Purser

Meg Bateman and John Purser

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in the Scottish Gàidhealtachd

Meg Bateman

John Purser

Clò Ostaig

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*Window to the West: Culture and Environment in the Scottish Gàidhealtachd*, by  
Meg Bateman and John Purser

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Photo Dòmhnall Dòmhnallach



Photo Terry Williams

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*For*

*Will Maclean and Murdo Macdonald*





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## SYNOPSIS

This book asks whether there is anything distinctive about how the Gaels through the ages have looked at the world. The authors begin by considering how sight – and the lack of it – have been valued in Gaelic culture, how colour is represented in the language and how visual cues such as shape and pattern have generated Gaelic vocabulary. They investigate the stances embedded in Gaelic grammar and idiom and how these are made explicit in folklore, poetry and the thinking of Gaelic theologians. The recurrence of certain features is traced in the artefacts of the Gaels, in their buildings, metal-work, stone carving and manuscripts. These are seen to exhibit aesthetic trends towards abstraction, circularity, number symbolism, dynamism and interweaving – the same aesthetic that may be seen to underlie certain forms of poetry, dance and *ceòl mòr*.

Can such structures be shown to relate to cultural attitudes expressed in the language? The authors believe they can and propose a tenacious way of seeing among the Gaels which shaped and in turn was shaped by fundamental perceptions of mankind's position in the environment, of the nature of time, and of the relationship between the spiritual and the material.



## FOREWORD

In some ways this book swims against the current tide of scholarship in seeking out cultural unities rather than divergences. The emphasis of the major exhibition, *Celts, Art and Identity* (2015), curated jointly by the National Museums of Scotland and the British Museum, was on external influences and the probable lack of unity – genetic and linguistic – among the peoples who have been labelled Celtic since the 18th century. Though it rightly questions the assumption that the producers of Celtic art were necessarily speakers of Celtic languages, perhaps the pendulum has swung too far in the direction of the Celtosceptics. While their stance makes a welcome corrective to the more extreme Celtomaniac, nativist views, it also obscures cultural continuities. Of the Book of Kells, the authors of the publication accompanying the exhibition comment that, '[t]he style fuses influences from Britain, the Germanic world and the Mediterranean.' Though technically true, this statement subsumes the Picts and the Scots into Britain, omits Ireland completely and directs the reader away from the place of production – probably Iona – and its other artworks.

*Gille-brighde*, the name for the 'oystercatcher' in Gaelic, may provide us with an example of cultural continuity. English, French, German and Latin see a bird that catches oysters; Gaelic sees a bird that is 'the servant of [the goddess] Brigid'. It requires a stretch of the imagination to see the cross on its back with which the bird was marked for saving Christ, according to Gaelic folklore. Far clearer, however, are the white chevrons on the edge of its wings, a mark which Marija Gimbutas equates with the goddess throughout Neolithic Europe.<sup>2</sup> If these marks caused the bird to be linked with the goddess Brigid long before Brigid became a saint in Christian times, the Gaelic word preserves a particular way of seeing that is thousands of years old.

While the Irish are neither ignorant of nor frightened by their own cultural realities, the Scots and Scottish Gaels frequently are and are encouraged to downplay their cultural distinctions – with one notable exception: the tourist trade, where the acquisition of money and the presence of superficiality offer no threat to the political and cultural status quos. Well, not quite: David Cameron asked for, and was granted, the postponement of the screening of *Outlander* until after the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, fearful of a *Braveheart* effect.

Distorted cinematic versions aside, what this book aims to achieve is a fully-referenced and evidence-based assessment of the characteristics of Gaelic

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1. Fraser Hunter, Martin Goldberg, Julia Farley and Ian Leins, 'In Search of the Celts', in *Celts: Art and Identity* (London, 2015), 23.

2. M. Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess* (London, 1989).

heritage in Scotland. Michael Newton's *Warriors of the Word* and O'Driscoll's *The Celtic Consciousness* go some considerable way towards providing a coherent overview of that heritage and the present authors might be seen as following up and expanding upon their work. We trace a Scottish Gaelic cultural identity, exhibited in a continuum with its roots in prehistory, that is still evident in some respects in the Gàidhealtachd today. We identify the particularities that distinguish that culture and, crucially, the environment in which it was seeded and has grown. Our sources are wide-ranging: archaeological, mythological, linguistic, written (in whatever language, including Gaelic and Old Gaelic), oral, architectural, artistic and pastoral. The approach therefore is determinedly holistic. Through the sea of constant cultural exchange, we conclude by tracing a philosophical thread, further evidence of a Gaelic way of seeing.



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## INTRODUCTION

This book takes its title, *Window to the West*,<sup>1</sup> from the opening lines of Sorley MacLean's poem 'Hallaig', which begins,

Tha bùird is tàirnean air an uinneig  
trom faca mi an àird an Iar  
's tha mo ghaol aig Allt Hallaig  
na craoibh bheithe, 's bha i riamh

eadar an t-Inbhir 's Poll a' Bhainne,  
thall 's bhos mu Bhaile-Chùirn:  
tha i na beithe, na calltainn,  
na caorann dhìreach sheang ùir ...

*The window is nailed and boarded  
through which I saw the West  
and my love is at the Burn of Hallaig,  
a birch tree, and she has always been*

*between Inver and Milk Hollow,  
here and there about Baile-Chùirn:  
she is a birch, a hazel,  
a straight, slender young rowan ...*<sup>2</sup>

The poem was composed in 1967 by a rational, agnostic, university-educated, left-wing thinker and yet its authenticity rests on the Gaelic supernatural – and on the ancient Gaelic *topoi* of sight unseen, circular time and the interconnectedness of all life. The poet's visionary powers are enhanced by his natural vision being obscured by the boards on the window. The vision he sees through the boarded window is of his love in the form of various trees. Gradually he sees the past generations cumulatively peopling the island in the form of trees. His vision, induced by his love of the place and its culture, is in some ways redemptive of the tragedy and injustice of the Clearances.

In our research, as in MacLean's poem, the view to the west must be imagined because the window is boarded up. The house appears unoccupied, even derelict, perhaps as a result of the Clearances carried out by George Rainy on the island of Raasay in the mid-19th century. This parallels our own efforts

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1. The project, funded by the AHRC 2005–2010, was a research collaboration between the Visual Art Centre, Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design (University of Dundee) and Sabhal Mòr Ostaig (University of the Highlands and Islands); see *Window to the West: Redefining Highland Art* <<https://windowtothewest.weebly.com/>>.

2. Sorley MacLean, *O Choille gu Bearnadh/From Wood to Ridge* (Manchester, 1986), 226.



The Gaelic poet, *Somhairle MacGill-Eain* Sorley MacLean (1911–1996). Photo Lida Moser (1948)

not only to see what has been obscured by prejudice, poverty, depopulation and cultural disintegration but also to see further back into Gaelic culture, even to the cultures that preceded the settlement of the Gaels along the western seaboard of Scotland.

The project from which this volume springs was led by Professor Murdo Macdonald of the Visual Research Centre of Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design at the University of Dundee, in collaboration with Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, University of the Highlands and Islands. It sought to examine all aspects of art relating to the Highlands, including the work of prehistoric peoples, the Picts, the Gaels, Romantic painters, photographers and contemporary conceptual and land artists. The land

mass of the Highlands and Islands, then, was the unifying factor in the project's definition of Highland art.

The present authors, however, have followed a different but complementary line of enquiry in looking specifically at Gaelic culture. We have concentrated on the visual within Gaelic culture, not only its artefacts but also the whole language of seeing and conceptualisation, by which a commonplace in song can signal an imaginative hinterland to the listener. William McTaggart is of especial interest to our subject because he was a native Gaelic speaker from Kintail as well as a major painter and the founder of modernism in Scottish painting. His landscapes of shifting light and dissolving figures pose formal and cultural questions about painting and social change in the 19th century and even about how language might inform seeing. There is a small number of other Gaelic-speaking artists whose work figures in our discussions: Angus Morrison, Malcolm MacDonald, Donald Fergusson, Donald Smith, Calum Angus MacKay, Flòraidh MacKenzie and Eoghan MacColla, and it should be remembered that J. D. Fergusson's father was also a Gaelic speaker.

Perceiving and experiencing are not neutral or automatic but they are acts of cognition by which the brain sees what it has been conditioned to see by a



William McTaggart, *The Storm* (1890). National Galleries of Scotland

particular culture's hypotheses about the world.<sup>3</sup> The eighteenth-century Gaelic poet Donnchadh Bàn made the now famous song to his young wife, 'A Mhàiri Bhàn Òg: òran dha chèile nua-phòsta'.<sup>4</sup> When someone observed that Màiri was not as beautiful as the song claimed, he replied, *Chan fhaca tus' i leis na sùilean agamsa* ('You haven't seen her with my eyes').<sup>5</sup> This might be an analogy for any act of seeing. It has been the task of the present authors to try to identify the 'cultural spectacles' of Gaelic society. But this is hard as the process of cultural assimilation has been all too thorough. As John MacInnes wrote in 1982, 'For practically two centuries most of the social institutions that normally preserve a people's sense of identity have worked together to ensure that the native Gael views himself and his world through alien eyes'.<sup>6</sup> Sharon MacDonald notes the irony of making Gaelic fit for purpose today at the expense of losing what was distinctive about its world view:

... Gaelic could end up as simply an alternative set of labels – or a code – for

3. Peter S. Wells, *How Ancient Europeans Saw the World* (Princeton, 2012), 13.

4. Angus MacLeod, ed., *Òrain Dhonnchaidh Bhàin/The Songs of Duncan Ban MacIntyre* (Edinburgh: SGTS, 1952), 114.

5. An t-Ollamh Dòmhnall Seumas MacLeòid, 'Oidhche Dhonnchaidh Bhain', *An Gaidheal* (An Giblein, 1936), 101.

6. 'The Gaelic Continuum in Scotland', in Robert O'Driscoll, ed., *The Celtic Consciousness* (Portlaoise, 1982), 169.



an English or perhaps more generally ‘Western’ way of seeing, rather than offering an alternative ‘window’ onto the world, as it has sometimes been claimed to do. We could find ourselves in a paradoxical situation where, as ever more Gaelic terms are devised to cope with the contingencies of modern life, new technologies and so forth, a distinctive Gaelic way of perceiving and experiencing the world – a distinctive Gaelic system of cultural classifications – might slip away.<sup>7</sup>

The project bore the subtitle ‘Towards a redefinition of the visual within Gaelic Scotland’. A redefinition predicates an existing definition. From the point of view of the Gaels themselves, such a definition has scarcely been proposed. A redefinition, therefore, will initially be in terms of the view of the Gàidhealtachd from without rather than within. That view, though not formally defined, is widely associated with the Romantic Movement and with the parallel and associated Celtic Revival. Given its persistence, the image of the last of the Celts – living in a wild environment and surrounded by Celtic mists and fairies entangled in elusive knot work – should not be summarily dismissed without first investigating the realities which gave rise to such imagery.

Essential to a redefinition is an understanding of what is meant by ‘Gaelic’. Throughout this book, the word is frequently used to describe that linguistic continuum of Q-Celtic, which includes Irish, Scottish and Manx Gaelic, and for which we have written evidence from as early as the 6th century AD.<sup>8</sup> The existence of a kingdom and religious community of Gaelic-speaking and Gaelic-writing people – genealogically connected and spanning the North Channel between Scotland and Ireland from at least as early as the 5th century AD, a community which survives linguistically, culturally and socially to the present day – is seminal to our approach.

Is there any significance in the way the Gaelic language expresses perception and can any such significance be quantified in terms of vocabulary, syntax and underlying structure? Besides looking at the visual in the natural environment, this study considers its expression in image and artefact, in language, dance, music and the imagination.

In Strath, in the Isle of Skye, rests *Clach an Turramain* ‘the rocking stone’, described by the Rev. J. MacKinnon in the *New Statistical Account* as ‘an immense block of granite so nicely balanced on a level lime rock that it moves at the

7. Sharon MacDonald, ‘A bheil am feur gorm fhathast?’, *Scottish Studies* 33 (1999), 186–97.

8. Recognition of this continuum is referred to in D. Adger and G. Ramchand, ‘Dialect Variation in Gaelic Relative Clauses’, in W. McLeod, J. Fraser and A. Gunderloch, eds, *Cànan & Cultur/Language & Culture: Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 3* (Edinburgh, 2006), 180. The text, for example of ‘Amra Choluim Chille’, though written later, is widely accepted by scholars as being derived from a 6th-century original – see [IV.2.c](#).

slightest pressure of the finger’. The rocking of the stone, removed from its pivot in the 19th century, had long given guidance in prognostication, decision-making and judgement.<sup>9</sup> It is hard to say whether the stone should be seen as a man-made or natural object, as a work of art or as an adjunct to ritual. Indeed, these current Western European distinctions are not very useful in looking at older cultural productions.

The sculptor Antony Gormley concluded a radio broadcast about artefacts in the British Museum, saying that, in a world with a human population approaching ten billion, it is essential ‘we understand the fragile systems of the elemental, natural and cultural world on which all life depends, and that knowledge is not in the hands of the colonisers but in the hands of the colonised’.<sup>10</sup> Our exploration of the environment and the artefacts of the Gaels in Scotland may be seen as part of the process of teasing out the values and ways of thinking sustained in their culture, despite cultural imperialism and what John MacInnes calls the ‘overwhelming ethnocidal power’ of English.<sup>11</sup>

Our scope is both synchronic and diachronic. It is synchronic and holistic in its attempt to understand Gaelic material culture in the context of the culture as a whole, its physical environment and other contemporary cultures. It is diachronic in that, while focusing on the Western Highlands, our study is also informed where relevant by the monolith builders in Scotland and by the earlier cultures of the Celts of Continental Europe. It was necessary to be ambitious in our scope as our intention was to trace certain cultural continua which went towards shaping a particular world view. This is not to imply of course that there was anything static about Gaelic culture.

#### PREVIOUS WORK IN THE FIELD

In 1986, Malcolm Maclean and Christopher Carrell brought out *Às an Fhearann/ From the Land: A Century of Images of the Scottish Highlands*, accompanying an

9. The Rev. D. Lamond, *Strath in Isle of Skye* (Glasgow, 1913), 163.

10. ‘Missing Continents at the British Museum’ (Radio 4, broadcast 8 September 2016).

11. John MacInnes, *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal* (Edinburgh, 2006), 92.



*Clach an Turramain* (The Rocking Stone), Strath, Isle of Skye, shifted from its fulcrum. Photo John Purser

exhibition of the same name held at An Lanntair in Stornoway and the Third Eye Centre in Glasgow to mark the centenary of the Crofting Act 1886. Unlike the depictions of Gaels in Romantic artwork and travel literature, the photographs and newspaper illustrations in this collection are less than idyllic. The images include photographs of evictions as well as pictures from the *Illustrated London News* showing the people's resistance, when, for example, they were confronted by marines with fixed bayonets at Aignish Farm in Lewis in 1888. The book showed that there was a story to tell other than the official one and that there was visual material to support it.

At their best, photographs of the crofting way of life show the humanity of a particular people at a particular time and place. Photography is a powerful art form in the history of how the Gaels have been depicted, both by themselves and by others. Finlay MacLeod has been instrumental in gathering the disappearing marks of Gaelic culture in a series of books about ancient chapels, healing wells, mills, maps of the islands and old photographs.<sup>12</sup> He describes photography in the Highlands as 'an important means of expression, both for the artist and for the people whose ways and setting are being defined'.<sup>13</sup>

There have been many photographers and monographs of their work since George Washington Wilson and Walter Blaikie started working in the Highlands in the 1880s. Some, such as Margaret Fay Shaw, had an ethnographic approach, eager to show how tasks were done before a way of life disappeared; some, such as Robert Adam in the 1930s, were eager to portray the land and its uses, while others, like Paul Strand in the 1950s, portrayed the people. Gus Wylie and Murdo MacLeod towards the end of the 20th century photographed change in the people and their environment, the very domain where others had sought timelessness. In 2010, Angus and Patricia MacDonald brought out a book of photographs from another perspective – from the air – and discussed the marks left by succeeding generations, from the Mesolithic to the contemporary.<sup>14</sup> Dan Morrison and Murdo MacLeod are both from Lewis and can depend on the rapport between themselves and their subjects to enable them to photograph

12. Finlay MacLeod, *Togail Tìr/Marking Time: The map of the Western Isles* (Stornoway, 1989); *The Chapels in the Western Isles, Isle of Lewis* (Stornoway, 1997); *The Healing Wells of the Western Isles* and *Tobraichean Slàinte anns na h-Eileanan an Iar* (Stornoway, 2000); *The Norse Mills of Lewis* (Stornoway, 2009); *Sùlaisgeir: Photographs by James MacGeoch* (Steòrnabhagh, 2010).

13. Maclean, Malcolm, and Christopher Carrell, eds, *Às an Fhearann/From the Land* (Edinburgh, Stornoway, Glasgow, 1986), 50.

14. Angus and Patricia MacDonald, *The Hebrides: An Aerial View of a Cultural Landscape* (Edinburgh, 2010).

them unselfconsciously going about their lives.<sup>15</sup> However, some non-native photographers, such as Kessler, have gained a similar trust in their subjects, so it is simplistic to look on trust as an exclusively native boon.

*Muir is Tìr* (2005) by Seòras Chaluim Sheòrais/George MacLeod constitutes lists of Gaelic words and technical drawings elucidating every aspect of the fishing life (see over page). Having worked as a dental technician in Stornoway, the author compiled the book in his old age. He was born in the late 1890s in Great Bernera and fished in his youth off the west coast of Lewis in open boats. He describes the different types of nails used in boat building and the different knots used in nets; he describes weather and forecasting, navigation by compass, landmarks and heavenly bodies, and the way the globe, seasons and tides were visualised. In so doing, he was preserving centuries of expertise in one particular area of activity – fishing – as seen through Gaelic eyes.

A rather different attempt to bring the Gaelic word and image together, inspired by their integration in the Book of Kells, is realised in *An Leabhar Mòr/The Great Book of Gaelic* (2002), edited by Malcolm Maclean and Theo Dorgan. For this, new images were created by some of the best-known artists in Scotland and Ireland to complement a selection of Gaelic and Irish poetry. The lavish production did much to awaken a generation of artists and the public to the rich verbal images of Gaelic poetry. It also highlighted the lack of Gaelic-speaking artists and visual expression in recent times. Poverty, a Protestant distrust of the graven image and governmental and educational policies all have their part to play in the decline of the visual tradition in comparison to its wealth and distinctiveness in medieval and earlier times.

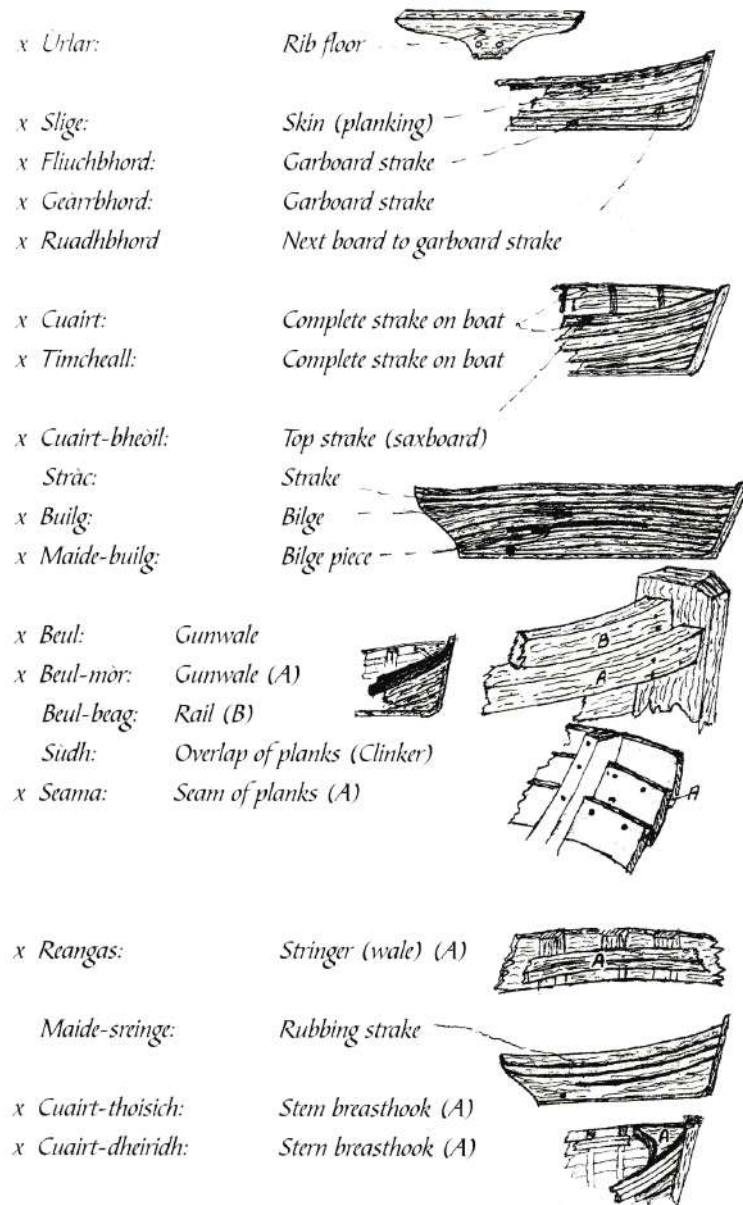
The work of the Window to the West project can be seen as part of a process to establish an art history of the Highlands and to encourage the further making



Calum Màiri and Oighrig, Photo Dan Morrison, from *Nis Aosmhor: the Photographs of Dan Morrison*, ed. Fionnlagh MacLeòid (Stornoway: Acair, 1997)

15. See, for example, pictures of groups going to a prayer meeting, rock fishing, at the Eoropie Bothan or preparing guga in Fionnlagh MacLeòid, ed., *Nis Aosmhor: the Photographs of Dan Morrison* (Stornoway, 1997).





A page from *Muir is Tìr* (2005) by Seòras Chaluim Sheòrais/George MacLeod

of art. In the course of the project, Murdo Macdonald et al. produced two books: *Highland Art: a Window to the West* in 2008, based on the collections of the Royal Scottish Academy, and *Sealladh às Ùr air Ealain na Gàidhealtachd/Rethinking Highland Art* in 2013, based on the exhibition *Window to the West: the rediscovery of Highland Art* held at the City Art Gallery in Edinburgh in 2010.<sup>16</sup> The paintings, prints, sculptures and photos in the former book date from the mid-18th to mid-20th centuries, while the emphasis of the latter book is on the contemporary. All the artwork takes the landscape and culture of the Highlands as its subject, treated variously under the influence of such major European art movements as History painting and Romanticism, Cubism, Symbolism and Surrealism. The vast majority of the work presented in both books is by non-Gaels, but they are presented bilingually to give Gaels a sense of ownership of the art history of the Highlands as well as the vocabulary with which to discuss it.

The artists' work inspired by the Highlands range from the antiquarian (e.g. McIan's and Macleay's recording of Highland dress and James Drummond's drawings of Highland sculpture and weapons) to the symbolist (e.g. J. Cumming's *The Woman with the Second Sight* and George MacPherson's *Mist*). Much of the work, for example by William McTaggart, John Blake MacDonald, Will Maclean and Helen MacAlister, has engaged with political issues of land use and language loss. It was probably no coincidence that John Blake MacDonald painted *Glencoe, 1692*, an example of state-sponsored barbarism, at the same time (1879) that the state was sanctioning the Clearances. Will Maclean and Kate Whiteford both make reference to prehistoric Highland art: Maclean in making memorial cairns to the land wars and Whiteford in decorating the ground itself with symbolic marks, especially with spirals.

Murdo Macdonald discusses the enduring enthusiasm for Ossian, inspiring John Runciman in the 18th century, H. W. Williams in the 19th, the Celtic Revival prints of John Duncan straddling the 19th and 20th centuries and, in the present century, Norman Shaw's 'sonorous landscapes' and Calum Colvin's redefinitions. Over the period, the Highland landscape has been treated in many different ways: Octavius Hill, for example, exaggerated the vertical to dramatic effect, Beattie Brown revealed its post-Clearance desolation, while Archibald Kay was keen to depict its industry in *Furnace Quarry – The Streets of a Great City*. Douglas Percy Bliss is both realistic and decorative in capturing the quality of light and detail of crofts in *In the Western Isles* (1936); William Gillies and Thora

16. Murdo Macdonald, Joanna Soden, Lesley Lindsay and Will Maclean, *Highland Art: A Window to the West* (Edinburgh, 2008). Murdo Macdonald, Lesley Lindsay, Lorna Waite and Meg Bateman, *Sealladh às Ùr air Ealain na Gàidhealtachd/Rethinking Highland Art* (Edinburgh, 2013).

Clyne treat the landscape as Colourists, and Denis Peploe treats *Glen Beg* as a Cubist. Frances Walker and Will Maclean imbue the landscape with symbolic references to the culture it sustained.

In defining Highland art, Murdo Macdonald is inclusive of all artists who have engaged with the Highlands – Gaelic-speaking, Highland, Scottish or from elsewhere, like the German Joseph Beuys and the American Jon Schueler. The geographical unit allows him to present a continuum between the builders of prehistoric monoliths, the medieval scribes of the Book of Kells, the monumental stone carvers and the work of 20th-century artists such as Will Maclean, Kate Whiteford, Frances Walker and Donald Urquhart. MB

# I

## THE ENVIRONMENT AND SIGHT

### INTRODUCTION

Our study looks at how the particularities of environment and pre-Christian belief have given rise to particular ways of seeing among the Gaels. Perhaps surprisingly then, our first section, Sight Unseen, concerns the lack of sight. Though natural vision is celebrated in Gaelic culture, the inner vision was even more respected. It is the basis of Fionn's knowledge acquired from within himself by chewing his thumb; it is the basis of the knowledge acquired by seers and poets composing in the dark and of the respect accorded to blind musicians. Inner visions are seen to relate to the Otherworld and, in the case of the Second Sight, they are considered to be a gift from the ancestors bestowed on the living. Ultimately, they are considered to be a privileged view of the true nature of things.

Perception of Time examines how time was modelled by the Gaels. Both the day and the year were seen as starting with the dark half. By this token, festivals started the previous night, and the Celtic year started at Samhain, the 1st of November. Time was measured by the fortnightly phases of the moon rather than by months which only became common with universal education in 1872. Indeed, the Gaelic names for the months often reuse terms that had applied to fortnightly periods of distinctive weather. The arrival of each season in Gaelic custom was marked by fire festivals to cleanse man and stock. The year was divided not by the solstices and equinoxes but by the quarter days between them: Samhain, Imbolc, Bealltainn and Lùnastal.

The Geographical Context looks at the physical conditions of the western seaboard, at questions of latitude, precipitation, geology and the proximity of the sea, and at the effects of these on the quality of light and the appearance – and attraction – of the landscape. A rich vocabulary and mythology relating to the effects of light and sea, for example in the cases of *na fir chlis* and *Coire Bhreacain*, show how these qualities have been noted and sometimes mythologised by the Gaels. The terms used in naming geological features give a very precise description of the landscape. Though the Celtic Revival's view of the Highland landscape as sublime is often considered an affectation, this section shows it can be a physical reality.

## I.1. SIGHT UNSEEN

## I.1.a. SECOND SIGHT

'S e gibht a th' ann – ach 's e gibht a th' ann nach toil le duine sam bith.  
*It's a gift – but a gift that no one wants.*

Lexy Campbell (1894–1986)<sup>1</sup>

One of the most remarkable aspects of the visual in Gaelic culture is the respect accorded to sight unseen, to the visions seen by the mind's eye by seers and poets. This section concerns itself with the second sight which was sometimes acquired at the expense of natural sight. It was said of the most famous of the Highland seers, Coinneach Odhar, the Brahan Seer, that he became *cam* 'blind in one eye' when he first looked through the hole in his divining pebble.<sup>2</sup>

The Gaelic term *an dà-shealladh* literally means 'the two sights' and refers to sight into *an dà-shaoghal* 'the two worlds' of the living and of the dead. It is understood as a gift of communication from the ancestors. It is significant that Coinneach Odhar acquired his divining pebble from the dead, finding it, variously, sticking up through a *sithean* 'fairy mound' – the fairies being the living dead – or in a loch where it had been cast by the ghost of a Norse princess.<sup>3</sup> The belief is derived ultimately from ancestor worship<sup>4</sup> and constitutes a warning from the dead of imminent danger. Their communication often takes the form of the manifestation of a living person. John MacInnes says that *an dà-shealladh* (like the *co-choisiche* 'double', see II.1.b.), is peculiar to Gaelic Scotland and does not appear in Irish tradition.<sup>5</sup>

Second sight, the ability to see into another dimension, can constitute precognition, distant viewing and telepathy. The same debates surround it as surround modern discussions of ESP (extra-sensory perception), with detractors who refute anything that does not follow the laws of physics, and apologists who feel that an absence of positivist evidence should not deny so widely attested a

1. <<http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/fullrecord/55835/1>>.

2. Alexander MacKenzie, *The Prophecies of the Brahan Seer* (London, 1977; 1st pub. 1877), 31.

3. MacKenzie, *The Prophecies of the Brahan Seer*, 27–31.

4. John MacInnes, 'The Seer in the Gaelic Tradition', in Newton, ed., *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal* (Edinburgh, 2006), 445.

5. MacInnes, 'The Seer in the Gaelic Tradition', 454. Norman MacRae (*Highland Second Sight* (Dingwall, 1908; repr. Largs, 1992), 10, draws a comparison between the *co-choisiche* and the report of Antiphon of Oreus given by Aristotle whose eyesight was so weak that his visual rays – vision originating with the viewer – were reflected by the air, so causing him to see his double.

phenomenon.<sup>6</sup> As the Rev. Dugald MacEchern said in 1919, 'All we know of the physical world is what we think of it in our minds, but we can never get outside it, so to speak, to see it whole!'<sup>7</sup>

In the 18th century, Theophilus Insulanus thought that second sight could be explained in terms of tricks of light such as the Brocken Spectre, the Fata Morgana of the Arctic and the desert mirage.<sup>8</sup> Modern scientific explanations sometimes point to quantum physics, with its lack of clear distinction between particles and energy waves, or to notions of hyperspace and serial time. Jungian explanations appeal to the universal consciousness accessed by individuals through



James W. Cumming RSA (1923–1991), *The Woman with Second Sight* (1962) © the artist's estate. Photo credit: Royal Scottish Academy of Art & Architecture

dreams. Other psychological explanations suggest that to the unconscious mind, the present time may be much greater than to the rational mind, so that events remembered in the conscious mind from the unconscious may appear as though they belong to the future.<sup>9</sup> According to Martin Martin, the subjection of the unconscious mind may account for adults being less susceptible to second sight than children and animals, particularly horses, cats and dogs.<sup>10</sup> Mystical interpretations envisage a universal present, where past, present and future events simultaneously exist, their position depending on the point from which they are observed. Emmanuel Kant was drawn into the debate in *Dreams of a*

6. Herodotus, Montaigne in the 16th century, Francis Bacon, Theophilus Insulanus and Thomas Pennant were among its detractors, while Samuel Johnson, Martin Martin, Robert Kirk, Immanuel Kant, the Rev. Frazer of Tiree and Fr Allan MacDonald of Eriskay were among its apologists.

7. Elizabeth Sutherland, *Ravens and Black Rain* (London, 1983), 143.

8. Theophilus Insulanus, *A Treatise on the Second Sight, Dreams and Apparitions* (Edinburgh, 1763), quoted in Norman MacRae, ed., *Highland Second Sight* (Dingwall, 1908; repr. Largs, 1992), 35.

9. H. F. Saltmarsh, *Foreknowledge*, quoted in Sutherland, *Ravens and Black Rain*, 297.

10. MacInnes, 'The Seer in the Gaelic Tradition', 447; and M. Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (London, 1716, and Edinburgh, 1981), 306–07.



*Visionary Explained as Dreams of Metaphysics* (1766). He reserved his judgement on individual cases, but held that how a body and spirit constitute a unity transcends human intelligence:

Departed souls and pure spirits, though they can never produce an impression upon our outward senses or stand in any community with matter, can still act upon the soul of man, which, like them, belongs to a great spirit commonwealth.<sup>11</sup>

However, our task here is not to provide explanations or give a full ethnography of the subject, but to describe second sight as a culturally specific, visual phenomenon. Though the term is on record only from the 17th century, practices of honouring the dead are pre-Christian.<sup>12</sup> There may be a certain degree of overlap between the divination of druids, which was conscious and elicited by ritual, and the spontaneous visions seen by those with second sight. The 17th- and 18th-century accounts given by learned enquirers such as Aubrey, Pepys, Scott and Johnson are sometimes contradictory, showing several systems at work upheld by various cultural beliefs. Some reported second sight to be hereditary, others that it could be acquired; some that it was feared, others that it was accepted; some that a vision could be shared by the seer making contact with another, others that it was unique to the seer.<sup>13</sup> What interests us most here is how both the behaviour of the *taibhsear* 'seer' and the details of the visions conform to a system of enculturated signs.

Seers receiving a vision are described by Martin Martin as staring with erect eyelids and appearing to be in another state until the vision passes.<sup>14</sup> Thomas Pennant describes seeing 'pretenders to second sight' in Skye during his tour in 1769 'fall into trances, foam at the mouth, grow pale, and feign to abstain from food for a month, so over-powered are they by their visions.' (Hallucination, salivation and eye agitation may also be indicative of the ingestion of fly agaric or psilocybin mushrooms, further discussed at VI.1.b.).

Though visions appear spontaneously, some seers cultivated their faculty for consultation. Some had an emblem of their power: we have mentioned Coinneach Odhar's bored pebble, the quartz content of which may have enhanced his ecstasy.<sup>15</sup> Coinneach Odhar himself became a symbol of the Highland seer in general and stories about multiple seers have accrued to him.<sup>16</sup>

11. Quoted in MacRae, *Highland Second Sight*, 21–22.

12. MacInnes, 'The Seer in the Gaelic Tradition', 445.

13. MacRae, *Highland Second Sight*.

14. MacInnes, 'The Seer in the Gaelic Tradition', 447.

15. Sutherland, *Ravens and Black Rain*, 146.

16. Sutherland, *Ravens and Black Rain*, 233.



*Lochiel and the Seer*, from *The Highlands and Highlanders of Scotland* by James Cromb (1883). Image: Am Baile

It was said that a person could share a seer's vision by standing on his foot and looking over his left shoulder, while the seer touched the other's head.<sup>17</sup> This is itself an elaborate visual symbol drawing on ideas associated with the head, the left side, and the one-legged stance of the Fomorians – the mythic race of giants inhabiting Ireland before the arrival of the Gaels, as described in the eleventh-century *Lebor Gabála* or Book of Invasions.

The visions are very specific and do not encompass the broader vision expected of a mystic. They are of the seers' time and place, reflecting their preoccupations and cultural milieu. If seers experience memory as something yet to happen, it follows that their visions will be parochial. The stress is on their creativity and sensitivity to their place and times rather than their access to arcane knowledge. It is also on the creativity of others involved in

the interpretation of seers' visions. Coinneach Odhar, for example, could not himself explain what ships going round the back of Tomnahurich or black rain might mean. It was later interpretations that have taken these to indicate the building of the Caledonian Canal and the coming of the oil. In his song, 'Moch madainn Chèitein an àm dhomh èirigh', Dr John MacLachlan interprets the clearance of Rahoy as the fulfilment of Thomas the Rhymer's prophecy that 'the teeth of the sheep shall lay the plough on the shelf'.<sup>18</sup>

Typical visions are of a person's double, a *manadh*, *samhla* or *taibhse*. This is not the same as a ghost because the 'original' is still living, unaware of being observed by the *taibhsear*. (Gaelic makes a distinction between the spectre of a living and a dead person, between the *taibhse* and the *tamhasg* or *tannasg*.) The double is not part of the original, but a form assumed by the ancestors or fairies to communicate with the living about the person whose likeness they bear. Often the double is seen where a person will shortly die or be injured.

17. MacInnes, 'The Seer in the Gaelic Tradition', 449.

18. A. L. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2005), 277.

The sort of fate to befall the original might be determined by the seer, depending on whether the *samhla* appeared to be covered in phosphorescence (*teine sionnachain*), denoting drowning, or blood, denoting a violent end (see also I.3.b.).<sup>19</sup> 'Blue quivering lights resembling the flame of a taper'<sup>20</sup> (*teine bàis/teine sìthe*) might be seen round the bed of a person shortly to die or at a place the funeral procession would pass. The proximity of the death might be denoted by the advance of the shroud up the person's body from feet to head.<sup>21</sup> The later the vision was received in the day, the sooner the death. The apparent shrinking of a person's usual size also denoted death.<sup>22</sup> John Aubrey in *An Account of Second-Sighted Men in Scotland* in 1696 reports that

If a man's fatal end be a hanging, [second-sighted men] will see a gibbet, or a rope round his neck; if drowned, they'll see water up to his throat; if unexpected death, they'll see a winding sheet about his head; all of which are represented to their view.<sup>23</sup>

Car accidents are seen by modern seers with the same sort of intensity as funerals in earlier times. However, not all visions were of bad news: some indicated happy events, such as marriage or a visit; neither were premonitions always communicated visually: sometimes they took the form of the sounds (*taradh* or *taislich*) associated with death, for example wailing, coffin-making and the tinkling of glasses.

Second sight is understood to be a spontaneous vision transmitted by the dead. It is different therefore from divination requiring the interpretation of signs, as in *leughadh nan eun* 'interpreting bird flight' or *slinneanachd* 'the examination of the scapula of a sacrificed beast'. Pennant records this latter as the method practised by a soldier before the battle of Culloden in 1746, by which he foretold both his own death and the Hanoverian victory.<sup>24</sup> Second sight is also different from visions acquired through *imbas forosnai* (as practised by Fionn for example), which required the chewing of flesh (see I.1.c.), or from visions which come in the biblical mould of a gift from the Holy Spirit, such as the visions of heaven and hell described in Gaelic literature, based on the visions of Enoch, Nicodemus and Jacob (see V.3.).

But how are we to understand Colum Cille's prognostications recounted by

19. Edward Lhuyd, quoted in Campbell and Hall, *Strange Things* (London, 1968), 17.

20. Alexander MacGregor, *Highland Superstitions* (Stirling, 1901), 42.

21. Martin, quoted in MacRae, *Highland Second Sight*, 26.

22. MacRae, *Highland Second Sight*, 15.

23. Quoted in MacRae, *Highland Second Sight*, 43.

24. Sutherland, *Ravens and Black Rain*, 46.

Adomnán at the end of the 7th century in *Vita Sancti Columbae*?<sup>25</sup> His visions of angels, to which the third book of Adomnán's work is dedicated, are not so much vaticinary as indicative of his closeness to God. But Adomnán also reports about fifty examples of Colum Cille's prophecies and his remote viewing of distant maltreated monks, of battles seen in the sky and of Cormac in danger in his boat. Adomnán reports these visions as gifts of the Holy Spirit. However, as Colum Cille was trained in a bardic school, and as the prophesying function of the druid was inherited by the poet or *file* – this word derived from the verb 'to see' – his visions may represent a Christianising of the same cultural continuum that was later to give rise to the notion of second sight.

The Church has a mixed attitude to prognostication. While apparitions, visions and distant viewing appear in the Bible,<sup>26</sup> Moses prohibits it to the children of Israel:

There shall not be found among you ... anyone who practises divination, a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer ... For these nations which you are about to dispossess give heed to soothsayers and to diviners; but as for you, the Lord your God has not allowed you to do so (Deuteronomy 18: 9–14).

In support of prognostication, the Magi and Joseph are separately warned in dreams of Herod's true intentions (Matthew 2: 12–13) and St Paul recognises prophecy as a gift of the Holy Spirit:

To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom...to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy ... (1 Corinthians 12: 8–10).

Ministers and priests have both condemned and condoned *an dà-shealladh* in recent times. Some clerics were themselves seers, such as the Rev. Robert Kirk in the 17th century and the Rev. John Morrison (known as the Petty Seer) in the mid-18th century. Many of the 'Men' or evangelical preachers at the end of that century used their gift to help their flocks and some even used fasting and chanting to increase their ecstatic states before preaching.<sup>27</sup> In the early 20th century, Fr Allan Macdonald made sympathetic enquiry into its use in Eriskay.<sup>28</sup> Others believed that second sight was originally gained through a pact with the

25. Adomnán of Iona, *Life of St Columba*, transl. by Richard Sharpe (Harmondsworth, 1995).

26. 'A spirit glided past my face; / the hair of my flesh stood up (Job 4:15); the people perceive that Zacharius has seen a vision in the temple (Luke 1:22); Elisha follows his servant 'in the spirit' as he doubles back to receive the gifts Elisha had refused (2 Kings 5:26) (Sutherland, *Ravens and Black Rain*, 54).

27. Sutherland, *Ravens and Black Rain*, 195.

28. MacRae, *Highland Second Sight*, 131.



Eilidh Watt (1908–1996) © Macdonald & Co. (Publishers) Ltd

devil but, as the faculty was hereditary, those who possessed it were even so innocent.<sup>29</sup>

Part of the difficulty for the Church was the question whether the future was already fixed – for God is omniscient – or whether events in the future could still be altered once made manifest by the ancestors. The two belief systems sat uncomfortably together. Some people with second sight say that accidents can be averted;<sup>30</sup> others, like Eilidh Watt, say that the future cannot be changed and so the faculty of second sight becomes a hardship.<sup>31</sup> She describes the phenomena of *an dà-shealladh* and *cian-shealladh* (distant viewing) both as a gift and as a *fàillinn* ‘failing’ that she would prefer not to possess.<sup>32</sup>

She describes her experience of bringing home her older son to keep him safe as a result of seeing a vision of what she imagined to be his grave. However, it was his younger brother that was killed when the older brother encouraged him to do ambitious tricks on his bicycle. She wondered whether she had been the means of her younger son's death by trying to cheat fate. She concludes:

Aon nì às a bheil mi cinnteach: is feàrr a bhith beò o latha gu latha ann an aineolas na ro-eòlas a chur air nì. Chan eil iarraidh agamsa air an còrr ro-sheallaidh fhaotainn.<sup>33</sup>

*One thing I am certain of: it is better to live from day to day in ignorance than to get foreknowledge of anything. I have no desire for any more foresight.*

To the people who say that such knowledge is against the laws of nature,

29. George Sinclair (Professor of Mathematics, University of Glasgow, 1654–1696), *Satan's Invisible World Discovered*, quoted in MacRae, *Highland Second Sight*, 11.

30. MacInnes, ‘The Seer in the Gaelic Tradition’, 458.

31. Sutherland, *Ravens and Black Rain*, 244.

32. Eilidh Watt, *Gun Fhois* (Edinburgh, 1987).

33. Watt, *Gun Fhois*, 86.

Eilidh Watt says it is only against the laws of nature as we understand them and that our understanding is wanting.<sup>34</sup> She explains post-cognition as being like the energy left by a wave that breaks prematurely on a rock as compared to the wave that runs its course and loses its strength on the shore.<sup>35</sup> She suggests that strong feelings and sounds might last forever, and that the ground might absorb the emotion of violent events, which are then perceived by people with second sight. Though every brain possesses the potential to perceive such things, as every flame possesses smoke, not every brain is tuned in:

Uairean tha mi 'm beachd gu bheil bad sònraichte ann, a tha ceangailte ris an eanchainn chorparr, far a bheil nitheigin a nì an aon obair is a nì crann rèidio, a thogas smuaintean mar a thogas crann rèidio briathran duinn. Ach dhealbhainn an ceangal fhèin ris an eanchainn mar a dhealbhainn ceò ri lasair-theine ... Mur biodh an crann ann am fìor ghleus, cha chluinneamaid lid ged a bhiodh an iarmailt làn ghuthan. Rud a tha.<sup>36</sup>

*Sometimes I feel there is a particular place in the physical brain where there is something that does the same work as a radio aerial which picks up thoughts as an aerial picks up words for us. But I would liken its relationship to the brain to the relationship between smoke and flame ... If the aerial were not well-tuned, we wouldn't hear a word, even though the sky were full of voices. Something which is it.*

She gives several models for precognition, saying some people are capable of seeing things that are still *anns a' bheairt*, literally ‘in the loom’.<sup>37</sup> She sees something as she will yet experience it, but she cannot know the full meaning, as her story above illustrates.

Nuair a chithear ro-shealladh faodaidh nach faicear ach an eang sin fhèin de thìm.<sup>38</sup>

*‘When a vision is seen, it can be that only that corner of time is seen.’*

Commentators stress that the seers discussed what was interesting to themselves and their communities. MacInnes describes stories of second sight as ‘cultural items which have their place in the social construction of reality’. Belief in second sight validated and was validated by other systems within the

34. Watt, *Gun Fhois*, 13.

35. Watt, *Gun Fhois*, 12.

36. Watt, *Gun Fhois*, 7.

37. Watt, *Gun Fhois*, 13.

38. Watt, *Gun Fhois*, 14.



culture, especially belief in fairies.<sup>39</sup> We have seen that the form of their visions were based on a limited number of motifs.<sup>40</sup> This suggests a creative art, by which a seer expresses in a distinct visual form a belief in prognostication through the living dead's compassion for the living, tempered by an understanding of probabilities and, usually, by sincerity and goodwill. The visions may indeed spring from the same creative impulse as other arts,<sup>41</sup> music and poetry and especially painting. In a culture where the visual was physically the least well represented of the arts, the spontaneous conjuring of visions in the mind is very significant. Visualising and describing a vision utilised the powers of the visual artist in a verbal manner. The cultural accretions of being a seer, perhaps of being the 7th son or of being blind, were part of the attendant cultural expectations, just as bohemianism attends the European idea of the Romantic artist. MB

#### I.1.b. BLINDNESS IN POETS AND MUSICIANS

[Introduction; Bardic and Mythological Roots; Blindness and Musicianship; The Depiction of Blindness](#)

##### INTRODUCTION

Ged a bha iad dall do shùilean  
 Cha bu dall an cùis no dhà thu:  
 Cha bu dall do bheul ri sùgradh,  
 'S cha bu dall air lùths do làmh thu.

*Though your eyes were blind, you were not blind in one or two matters: your lips were not blind in sporting, and you were not blind in the nimbleness of your hands.*<sup>42</sup>

In the context of sight unseen, blindness in poets and musicians has particular significance with respect to creativity and inner vision. Some of these significances are pursued in this and the following section.

The motif of the blind poet or musician stretches back at least as far as Homer. While it exists in many cultures, its persistence and prevalence in Gaelic culture, from some of the earliest manuscript evidence into modern times, is remarkable.

39. MacInnes, 'The Seer in the Gaelic Tradition', 444, 449.

40. See also the motif-index in Campbell and Hall, *Strange Things*, 326–29.

41. MacInnes, 'The Seer in the Gaelic Tradition', 446.

42. From 'Cumha Lachlainn Daill', a lament for a blind harper composed before 1727 by Sileas na Ceapaich, in Colm Ó Baoill, ed., *Bàrdachd Shìlis na Ceapaich* (Edinburgh, 1972), 110–11.

Between darkness and light, the unseeing and the visionary, there is a natural connection of opposites. Such connections have long been recognised with respect to poetic vision and have been commented upon by scholars with specific relation to Celtic-speaking cultures, also encompassing the appearance and even transfiguration of the poet or poetess from ugliness to splendour in terms of both bodily appearance and raiment.<sup>43</sup> It should not be understood that actual blindness was desirable in any way. The Gaelic word *rosg* couples sight with poetry, for it can mean 'eye, eyelid, eyesight, an incitement to battle' and 'prose or prose writing'.<sup>44</sup> As an adjective, *rosgach*, it can mean 'clear-sighted, dawning, wise and knowing'. The words are homonyms, but in modern times their meanings have been conflated, notably in the seminal series of ROSC exhibitions, for which the word is translated as 'the poetry of vision'. It is also clear that restoration of sight was as welcome to a poet as any other (see below), while the motif of deliberate blinding to repel a lover (T.327 in Cross's *Motif Index of Early Irish Literature*) appears in the *Betha Brigte*.<sup>45</sup>

Nonetheless, the relationship between the 'darkness' of blindness, inspiration and various abilities such as memorising and musicianship was significant and can perhaps be expressed as a need to look inwards rather than outwards. ('Darkness' is placed within inverted commas, however, as many blind people see light but cannot distinguish objects.)

##### BARDIC AND MYTHOLOGICAL ROOTS

It is still contested to what extent the poets of the Christian era took over the function of the druids,<sup>46</sup> but certainly the word *file* (or *filidh* 'poet or bard') contains a verb 'to see'. William Gillies has claimed that 'bardic verse ranked visualising much higher than seeing ...'<sup>47</sup>

Bill Innes notes that to this day much traditional poetry claims an inspired bardic view. Dòmhnall Iain Dhonnchaidh began several poems with *Chì mi* ('I see').<sup>48</sup> In the seventeenth century, Maighread nighean Lachlainn 'saw' her

43. P. K. Ford, 'The Blind, the Dumb, and the Ugly: Aspects of Poets and their Craft in Early Ireland and Wales', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 19 (Summer 1990), 27–40.

44. Edward Dwelly, *The Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary* (Glasgow, 1977): s.v. *rosg*; Alexander MacBain, *An Etymological Dictionary of the Gaelic Language* (Glasgow, 1982), s.v. *rosg*.

45. D. Ó hAodha, *Betha Brigte* (Dublin, 1978), 5; T. P. Cross, *Motif Index of Early Irish Literature* (Bloomington, 1952), 489.

46. Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present* (Maynooth, 1991), 227–28.

47. William Gillies, 'The Poem in Praise of Ben Dobhrain', *Lines Review* 63 (1977), 45.

48. D. J. MacDonald, *Chì Mi*, ed. Bill Innes (Edinburgh, 1988).

poems running on the rafters: ‘Bhiodh i feitheamh na bàrdachd a’ ruith air na glasfhadan.’<sup>49</sup>

Certainly bardic practices suggest that the equivalent of blindness was actively sought (see I.1.c.), and there is a marked significance in Gaelic culture of the eye that cannot see. One can find a mid-20th-century response to this in the work of Calum Colvin, in particular his Ossian works, but it has ancient roots. In a 12th-century commentary on Broccán’s Hymn to St Brigid, after two failed attempts to obtain the office of Peter and Paul, the saint sends her blind boy ‘for he could memorise instantly whatever he heard.’ He is successful and he brings the “Blind Lad’s Bell” which Brigid’s community possesses today, and the office which they observe is the office which the blind lad fetched from Plea.<sup>50</sup>

The significance of bells is treated in IV.2.c., but there is another motif in this story, namely that the place of retrieval is on the bed of the ocean, just as the well, over which the hazel that yields the nine nuts of wisdom depends, is on the bed of the ocean. The ‘eye-and-well’ motif as suggested by Carey is of relevance here.<sup>51</sup> The eye most obviously resembles a pool and the various interlinked tales make connections between water sources, wisdom and sight.

In one tale, the Scottish druid Loban demands of King Eochaid son of Maelugra his one eye. The king plucks it out for the sake of honour, but his sight is restored by St Ruadan.<sup>52</sup> In another version, his sight is restored either by three waves of water or by a spring which magically issues from the spot. Carey connects this motif with the story of Boand who ‘recklessly defies’ the power of a fairy well which tears a foot, a hand and an eye from her and pursues her to the sea, thus creating the River Boyne. The well itself is a source of knowledge and inspiration – as are many wells, which also assist fecundity.

The Argyllshire legend of the *Cailleach Bheur* has suggestive parallels. Like Boann, she is a goddess-type figure. She is charged with covering the sacred well on Ben Cruachan in Argyllshire but one night falls asleep and forgets to cover the well. It floods the valley below, drowning many people and creating Loch Awe. The *Cailleach Bheur* is herself turned to stone and can be seen figured in the landscape.<sup>53</sup> This story was to find celebrated expression in a sculpture by

49. Colm Ó Baoill, *Maighread Nighean Lachlainn* (Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 2009).

50. John Carey, *King of Mysteries* (Dublin, 2000), 165.

51. John Carey, ‘Irish Parallels to the Myth of Odin’s Eye’, *Folklore* 94.ii (1983), 214.

52. C. Plummer, *Lives of the Irish Saints* (London, 1922 and 1968), 319–20 (NB Not p. 329 as cited in Carey, ‘Irish Parallels’, 218, fn 10).

53. R. A. Smith, *Loch Etive and the Sons of Uisnach* (London, 1879), 53–55. The story is verified in local tradition by Brigadier John MacFarlane, who got it from his mother – personal communication.



Pomeroy, *The Nymph of Loch Awe* (1897). Photo © Tate London 2020

Pomeroy, in which she is depicted as a beautiful nymph (see I.3.a.). A similar legend is known in relation to Loch Tay.

Behind these various legends, Carey and, before him, Myles Dillon, are surely right to see a connection with the Sivi-Jātaka legend in which Sivi’s generosity is tested by the king of the gods who requests one of his eyes.<sup>54</sup> Sivi gives both, but they are restored to him when he later recounts their loss truthfully. In the various Gaelic versions, it is the bard who tests the generosity of the host, but the restoration of sight is normally associated with water, or rushes and water. The Christianised version omits this element, but in other Gaelic versions it is crucial. Either the element water itself has been abused, or it is the means of restoration. Such was the virtue of St Patrick’s well at Old Kilpatrick in Dunbartonshire, but it has fortunately been covered over as, last seen, it was more likely to cause than to cure blindness.

The best-known example of the blind poet in Gaelic culture is Ossian, and his status could reasonably be described as iconic, to such an extent that he features in a considerable number of paintings from across Europe, including Scotland.<sup>55</sup> Here, though the visionary element remains strong, Ossian’s blindness leads to his being imposed upon. Even in his old age, Ossian still keeps cattle and has his servants carry him out to them each evening. Some of them try to persuade

54. Carey, ‘Irish Parallels’, 215.

55. Something of the influence of Macpherson on music, opera and the visual arts can be found in Roger Fiske, *Scotland in Music* (Cambridge, 1983), 31–54; James Porter, *Beyond Fingal’s Cave – Ossian in the Musical Imagination* (Rochester, 2019).

him that the night is wet and wild and throw water on his face to create the illusion. One servant, however, loyally informs him that it is a fine night and he should go out as usual.<sup>56</sup> It is this story which inspired the Scottish composer Erik Chisholm to compose his *Night Song of the Bards*, based upon James Macpherson's version of the story in which five bards and the chief bard each give differing descriptions of the night.<sup>57</sup> A parallel deception is enabled by necessary concealment rather than blindness: *Uath Beinne Etais* is an episode in the Diarmaid and Gráinne story in which the couple, hunted by Gráinne's husband, Finn, hide at night in a cave on the Hill of Howth.<sup>58</sup>

Macpherson's version of the Ossian story is based upon 9th- and 10th-century Gaelic sources,<sup>59</sup> themselves contrived to accommodate its descrip-



Alexander Runciman (1736–1785), *Blind Ossian*

56. J. G. Campbell, 'Oidhche Dhoirbh', *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition*, Argyllshire Series No. IV: *The Fians; or, Stories, Poems, & Traditions of Fionn and His Warrior Band* (London: David Nutt, 1891), 101–03.

57. James Macpherson, 'Croma: A Poem', *Fingal, An Ancient Epic Poem in Six Books Together with Several Other Poems, Composed by Ossian the Son of Fingal, Translated from the Gaelic Language by James MacPherson* (Dublin, 1763), 246–47. See also John Purser, 'Sources for Macpherson's "Night Song of the Bards"', paper given at *Rannachadh na Gàidhlig 2006*, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, 20 July 2006, also Purser, J., 'Night Song of the Bards', in M. McCulloch, ed., *Scottish Studies Review* 6.1 (Spring 2005), 43–58.

58. The story comes from the 15th century MS Harleian 5280, f35a, 2–35 b, 1, and is discussed and edited in Kuno Meyer, 'Uath Beinne Etais', *Revue Celtique* XI (1890), 125–34. Though the source is 15th century, the poem is dated to the 11th century by Jackson. An old woman is persuaded by the pursuing Finn to betray their hiding place. On returning to the cave, she wets her cloak in the sea and, in a poem similar to those in the earlier manuscripts, pretends that the weather that night is wild, intending that they should therefore remain where they are and be easily captured. Gráinne, however, tastes the salt on the cloak, realises they have been betrayed and she and Diarmaid escape.

59. J. Carney, *Medieval Irish Lyrics* XI (Portlaoise, 1985), 98; Kenneth Jackson, *Studies in Early Celtic Nature Poetry* (Cambridge, 1935, Felinfach, 1995), 44.

tive elements.<sup>60</sup> The context is that of MacLesc – Lazy Lad – who uses the foul weather of the night as an excuse for refusing to fetch water for his master Finn. In the Rawlinson version, Finn tells his servant that he is lying and proceeds to praise the weather and the season. He then ties MacLesc, naked, to a standing stone and leaves him there till the morning – in the circumstances, a salutary and commendable procedure.

Blindness is attributed to Ossian only in later versions of these stories, but they all involve the darkness of night, including one from the 12th-century *Acallamh na Senórach* in which Cailte confesses to the same frailties of age as Ossian:

Is úar geimred; at-racht gáeth;  
éirgid dam díscir dergbáeth;  
nocha te in-nocht in sliáb slán,  
gé beith dam dian ac dordan. ...

In-díu isam senóir sen;  
ní aithnim acht becán fer;  
ro chraithinn coirsleig co crúaid  
i matain aigríd innúair.

*Winter is cold; the wind has risen; the fierce stark-wild stag arises; not warm tonight is the unbroken mountain, even though the swift stag be belling. ... Today I am old and aged; few men do I recognize; I used to brandish a pointed spear hardly on a morning of truly cold ice.*<sup>61</sup>

These elements survive in 'The Story of Ossian' as told (originally in Gaelic) by Alasdair 'Brian' Stewart, recorded in the mid-20th-century. His version starts at night and ends with Ossian blind and deaf and disputing with St Patrick. However, in a parallel to the salmon of wisdom story, Ossian recovers his sight by eating a giant deer.<sup>62</sup> He sends his boy to look into a hole in the ground – into the dark. Ossian calls out and raises the great deer and hounds of the Fianna, which the boy sees, still with his head in the hole. The best hound brings down the greatest deer and the boy brings this to Ossian. While the belief was that everything was bigger and better in the days of Ossian and the Fianna, it is worth

60. The sources are Rawlinson B.502, 106 b. – see Kuno Meyer, ed., 'Fuitt co brath', in *Four Old-Irish Songs of Summer and Winter* (1903), 18, and Carney, *Medieval Irish Lyrics* XI (Portlaoise, 1985), 3–24; the Book of Leinster, 208a, ll. 37–52 – see R. I. Best and M. A. O'Brien, eds, 'Fuitt co bráth', in *The Book of Leinster* IV (Dublin, 1965), 1006.

61. G. Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics* (Oxford, 1977), 154–55; see also Whitley Stokes, *Irische Texte* IV 1 (Leipzig, 1900), 100, and translation by Standish Hayes O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica* Vol. 2 (London, 1892), 192 (NB Not p. 172 as given by Murphy in his note on p. 233).

62. A. Bruford and D. MacDonald, *Scottish Traditional Tales* (Edinburgh, 1994), 171–76.



pointing out the possibility of a relationship between these stories and the many skeletons found in Ireland of the giant deer, *Megaloceros giganteus*, which died out c.8000 BC in this, its extreme western habitat.<sup>63</sup> It is not inconceivable that such stories contain elements of racial memory (see III.1.c.). In any event, the motif of the restoration of Ossian's sight in this tale is an old one. There are many relevant examples from Gaelic mythology of the significance of blindness, at least in one eye, particularly in relation to poets,<sup>64</sup> but the famous blind Gaelic poet, Dallán Forgaill, is accepted by scholars as historical. His 'Amra Choluimb Chille' (Dallán's elegy for St Columba), with its attendant glosses, is referred to in II.3.c. and IV.2.c. According to one of the glosses, his sight was to be restored to him once he made the poem.<sup>65</sup>

On the other hand, Columba himself completely covered his eyes on his return to Ireland for the Council of Druim Cett, not simply to fulfil a vow, but also to evoke an association with bardic inspiration, and – in conjunction with a sod of Scottish earth under his feet and a diet exclusively of Scottish food – to assert the cultural rights of the Dàl Riada in Scotland or, as Columba would have called it, Alba.<sup>66</sup>

#### BLINDNESS AND MUSICIANSHIP

Blindness and enhanced levels of musicianship are commonly and internationally associated and recent research demonstrates the reality of these perceptions in physiological terms as the brain compensates for the loss.<sup>67</sup> These enhanced levels of musicianship are not confined to performance but also include creativity. 'My eyes are transplanted into my ears' was how the blind harpist O'Carolan expressed it.<sup>68</sup>

Amongst the many musicians employed by the Gaelic-speaking King James IV are a blind lutan and a blind harper.<sup>69</sup> When the status of the blind harper Ruairidh Dall O'Cathan (fl.1600) was called into question, the assertion of his

63. Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin, 2000), 272, fn 3.

64. P. K. Ford, 'The Blind, the Dumb, and the Ugly: Aspects of Poets and their Craft in Early Ireland and Wales', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 19 (Summer 1990), 37–40.

65. Whitley Stokes, 'The Bodleian Amra Choluimb Chille', *Revue Celtique* XXI, 134–35.

66. J. F. Nagy, *Conversing with Angels and Ancients* (Dublin, 1997), 190–91.

67. Oliver Sacks, *Musicophilia* (Basingstoke and Oxford, 2007), 160–64, and in an updated paperback edition (New York, 2008), 171–76.

68. J. C. Walker, *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards* (1786), 287.

69. See *The Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer* for 1501, 104. Also for 1501–1502, 131. The blind harper was paid the same sum on the 'the xviii day of Aprile, Pasch Tisday', 1503 (ibid., 367), and 'the xxv day of March', 1505 (ibid., 132), and in 1505 'the blind harp' was paid seven shillings 'be the Kingis command' (ibid., 163).

proper place in society became enshrined in the title and character of a tune which has been prominent in the Scottish and Irish repertoires for over four hundred years. The tune is 'Tabhair dam do lamh' (Give me your hand) and was composed as a gesture of reconciliation after Lady Eglintoun was obliged to apologise to O'Cathan for treating him with insufficient respect.<sup>70</sup> The title is significant. Lords and ladies may offer a hand (usually gloved) to a stranger for a brief contact and as a gesture of condescension. In this instance, the title is little short of a command from the person of supposedly inferior status.

In her 'Cumha Lachlainn Dail' (c.1720), quoted at the start of this section, Sìleas na Ceapaich describes her favourite *clàrsair* (harp player) in terms of the highest praise, balancing the reality of his blindness with the reality of his other abilities.

In the case of Am Piobaire Dall (1656–1754), J. G. Campbell gives a tale in which a MacCrimmon piper is blinded by one of two banshees who come upon him asleep. When the second, kindlier banshee requests he be granted a means to earn his living, he is given a brindled chanter which enables him to outrival all pipers. Ronald Black suggests that he has been blinded because he had second sight and could see the two fairy women.<sup>71</sup> The story conflates that of the famous MacCrimmon fairy silver chanter with the reality of Am Piobaire Dall's blindness. None of the MacCrimmon pipers is known to have been blind.

#### THE DEPICTION OF BLINDNESS

In Gaelic culture, the patronymic system makes use of descriptive names and, as we have seen, many harpers and pipers were actually named as blind – *dall* – smallpox being frequently the cause. Such names rarely carry with them any implied indignities. They are straightforwardly descriptive, and this is also the case in other cultures.<sup>72</sup> Am Piobaire Dall (Iain Dall MacKay) the composer of 'Corrienessan's Salute' (see III.1.) is referred to by Ruairidh Dall in his eponymous poem.<sup>73</sup> Ruairidh Dall O'Cathan (fl.1600), Lachlann Dall Mac Ionmhuinn (probably MacKinnon, fl.1700),<sup>74</sup> Ruairidh Dall Morison (c.1656–1713/14) and Blind Denis Hempson (1695–1807) are the best known in Gaelic-speaking

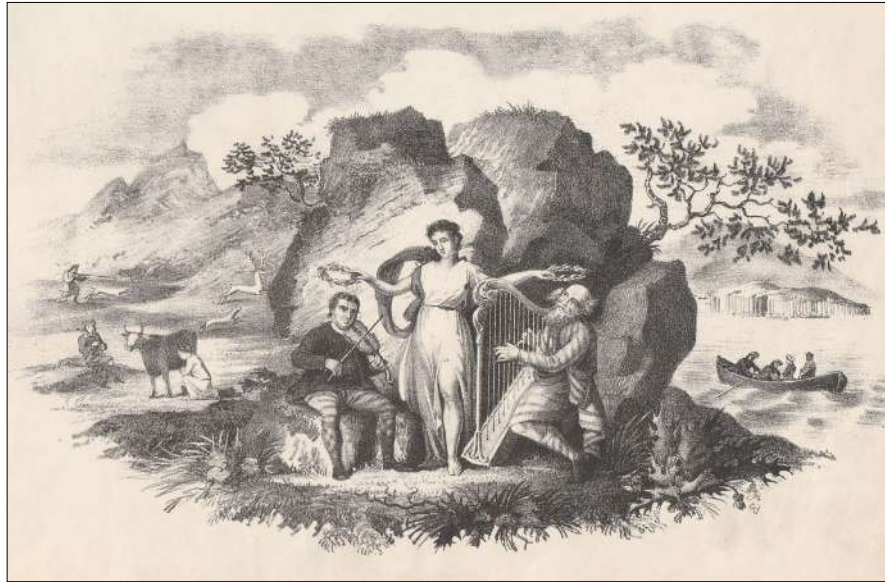
70. The story, with references, is told in John Purser, *Scotland's Music* (Edinburgh, 2007), 151 and note 35.

71. Ronald Black, ed., *The Gaelic Otherworld* (Edinburgh, 2005), 74 and 344, fn 240.

72. Sacks, *Musicophilia*, 161.

73. B. Mackenzie, *Piping Traditions of the North of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2003), 200–01, 327–34.

74. See C. Ó Baoill, *Bàrdachd Shilis na Ceapaich*, 175–77, for a discussion of his identity.



Detail from Frontispiece to Simon Fraser, *Airs and Melodies* (1816)

Scotland.<sup>75</sup> There were also blind fiddlers, there being the sad example of 'An Dall Munro' (1773–1830), who was both a fiddler and catechist until conversion led him to throw away his fiddle.<sup>76</sup>

The depiction of blindness is in itself interesting. In sculpture and painting, it is usually achieved by omitting any indication of the pupil. In the case of the vignette (engraved by R. Scott of Edinburgh) on the frontispiece to Simon Fraser's *Airs and Melodies* of 1816, it is achieved by partly omitting the rest of the eye so that the pupil appears as a large hole, rather than as a part of a surface. This is reinforced by the fact that the harpist looks upward, whereas the fiddler Neil Gow, who was not blind, simply looks outward. The image gathers further significance in that it includes a boat taking tourists – sightseers – to Fingal's Cave and the vignette might almost seem to ask whose sight sees furthest.

In Walter Geikie's (1795–1837) etching of a blind fiddler, the eyes are

75. All the following Irish harpers were blind, though not all from birth: Turlough O'Carolan, Dominic Mungan, Daniel Black, Hugh Higgins, Patrick Quin, Rose Mooney, Owen Keenan, Hugh O'Neill and Arthur O'Neill. O' Cathan and Hempson were Irish but played very frequently in Scotland, as did Echlan Kane (though he was not blind); see E. Bunting, *The Ancient Music of Ireland* (Dublin, 1840), 73–82.

76. Entry for Munro, Donald, in Derick Thomson, ed., *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland* (Oxford, 1983), 205.



*The Blind Harper*, Patrick Byrne (1840s), Hill and Adamson, National Galleries of Scotland

prominent and staring.<sup>77</sup> In 1832, James 'Blind' Airth was painted with his fiddle.<sup>78</sup> He is shown playing with eyes almost closed and mouth slightly open, wholly absorbed in the world of sound, whereas the flautist who awaits his moment to start playing, looks self-consciously and directly at the viewer. These are sophisticated well-dressed musicians playing with a keyboard instrument, the sighted players reading the music. But even the poorest, blind street musicians were given some level of honour. Blind Wee Willie White (d.1858) and 'Blind Alick' MacDonald (fl.1800) were well-known Glasgow street musicians of whom portraits survive, both with their eyes closed. In White's case, his funeral was paid for by his fans and a tin whistle was carved on his

tombstone.<sup>79</sup> Ossian's blindness is the subject of Calum Colvin's attention, with the pupils essentially merged with the iris.<sup>80</sup>

While performance of music could be undertaken by a blind person, in 'portraits' (imaginary or otherwise) of blind Gaelic musicians their blindness is not presented with any suggestion of handicap, inferiority or even dependence. These men are not shown with a servant boy carrying the harp on his back (though they were often dependent upon a servant); they are not depicted with a stick feeling their way through the world; they are not shown as mendicants begging for a living: on the contrary, such figures are shown with dignity and even with a sense that they possess an inner vision appropriate to their status

77. *A Blind Fiddler*, from W. Geikie, *Etchings, Illustrative of Scottish Character and Scenery; Executed after His Own Designs* (Edinburgh, 1841), No. XXXV. For further detailed information on blind fiddlers, see K. Campbell, *The Fiddle in Scottish Culture* (Edinburgh 2007), Chap. II, 15–34.

78. The painting by Neil MacDougall is reproduced in Purser, *Scotland's Music* (2007), Colour Plate XXVIII. The painting is now in the National Portrait Gallery of Scotland.

79. The portraits can be seen in the Provand's Lordship Museum in Glasgow.

80. T. Normand, *Calum Colvin . Oisein . Bhoighean de Sheann Bhàrdachd – Ossian Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (Edinburgh, 2003), 10–17.





John Duncan, *Head of Ossian*. No date

as bardic musicians. This tradition survived into the early days of photography when Hill and Adamson photographed the blind Irish harper, Byrne, with white druidic cloak and rapt appearance as he plays.

In the 20th century, John Duncan portrays blind Ossian with visionary gaze, and Calum Colvin pursues a somewhat more ironic version of Runciman's 'Blind Ossian', but with something approaching obsession, in a way that relates both to the fragments that inspired Macpherson's text and to the obsessive revisiting of those fragments by scholars. JP

#### I.I.C. *IMBAS FOROSNAI*

#### Introduction; Mantic Dreams; The Limitation of Sight for Prognostication and Poetry

##### INTRODUCTION

Thàinig tonn den lasair a-nall 's loisg i ball air a' bhreac, nì a bha air a' bhachall. Chuir e an seo a mheur air a' bhall dhubh a thàinig air a' bhreac, 's loisg e i, 's chuir e an sin na bheul i. Fhuair e an seo fios gur e Arcan dubh seo a mharbh athair.

*A wave of the flame came over and it burned a spot on the trout, the thing that was on the crook. Then he put his finger on the black spot that came on the trout, and it burned him, and then he put it into his mouth. Then he got knowledge that it was this Black Arcan who had slain his father.*<sup>81</sup>

This section concerns *imbas forosnai* and other forms of vision and divination produced through ritual, dreaming and incantation. This is in marked contrast to the second sight, discussed in [I.I.a.](#), which was understood as a spontaneous vision. However, both forms of vision owed something to knowledge of the spirit world.

The example above of Fionn<sup>82</sup> accessing an interior vision was recorded in South Uist in 1860 but the idea is very old in the Celtic tradition. In the Gaelic tradition, it relates to three poetic techniques known as *imbas forosnai*, *tenm laida* and *dechetal di chennaib*.<sup>83</sup> *Imbas forosnai* is defined in Cormac's Glossary from the 9th century as a 'manifestation that enlightens':

It discovers what thing soever the poet likes and which he desires to reveal. Thus then is that done. The poet chews a piece of red flesh of a pig, or a dog, or a cat, and puts it then on a flagstone behind the door-valve, and chants an incantation over it, and offers it to idol gods, and calls them to him, and then chants over his two palms, and calls again idol gods to him, that his sleep may not be disturbed. Then he puts his two palms on his two cheeks and sleeps. And men are watching him that he may not turn over and that no-one may disturb him. And then is revealed to him that for which he was (engaged), till the end of a *nómad* (three days and three nights) ... and therefore it is called *imm-bas*, to wit, a palm (*bas*) on this side and a palm on that around his head. Patrick banished that and the *tenm láida* 'illumination of song' and declared that no-one who shall do that shall belong to heaven or earth, for it is in denial of baptism.<sup>84</sup>

Another example relates such practices to the bull feast and the selection of the next king. A white bull was slaughtered and one man ate his fill of the meat and its broth and fell asleep. Four druids then made an incantation over him.

81. 'Mar a chuireadh suas an Fhinn/How the Een (*sic*) was set up', in J. F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (1860–64; facsimile Hounslow, 1983), Vol. 3, 359, 352. The same events are recounted in the tale/lay 'Eas-ruaidh', recorded in Mull in 1800 in John Francis Campbell, *Leabhar na Fèinne* (London, 1872), 37.

82. In the Scottish Gaelic tradition, the hero is known as Fionn while in Irish he is Finn. The variant spellings of his name in this work reflect the provenance of the traditions to which we refer.

83. Nora Chadwick, 'Imbas Forosnai', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* IV (1935), 97–135.

84. Stokes's translation of Cormac's Glossary, quoted in Chadwick, 'Imbas Forosnai', 98.

When the man awoke, he would impart the identity of the man he had seen in his vision.<sup>85</sup>

Gilbert Cambrensis, writing in Wales in the 12th century, defined the similar ritual of *Awen* as ‘prophetic inspiration conferred in sleep’ and the *Awentithion* as the class of people endowed with *Awen*, who would deliver unintelligible rhetoric in that condition.<sup>86</sup>

In the Gaelic tradition, Fionn is the chief practitioner of *imbas forosnai* and the related arts. Tales survive of his acquisition and his use of *imbas forosnai*, either to reveal knowledge or to produce poetry. Fionn’s ability closely parallels that of Pwyll and Rhonabwy in the Welsh tradition, in his mantic dreaming and knowledge of the Otherworld.<sup>87</sup>

In the tale, ‘Finn and the Man in the Tree’, from *Senchus Mór* (8th or 9th century), Fionn acquires *imbas forosnai* from jamming his thumb between door and post in a fairy mound. On putting his thumb in his mouth, he discovers he has *imbas* and begins to chant, magically identifying the man in the tree.<sup>88</sup> In *MacGnimartha Find* (The Boyhood Deeds of Fionn) from the 12th century, it is the salmon of Fec’s pool in the Boyne from which he acquires his powers;<sup>89</sup> in ‘Fionn and the Phantoms’, it is from the flesh of his horse, partially cooked by a giant.<sup>90</sup> He sees future events in dreams, when, for example, he wakes from a dream knowing that the crag opposite him is where he will spend the longest night of his life, fighting off the people of the Danan.<sup>91</sup>

Fionn is also said to have gained poetic inspiration through *imbas forosnai*.<sup>92</sup> His first poem is introduced in one version of his Boyhood Deeds:

Ro foghlúimsim in tréide nemthigius filid .i. teínm láeda 7 imus for-osna 7  
díchedul di chennaib. Is ann sin do-róine Finn in laígsi oc fromad a éicsi:  
Cétemain, cain cucht/ rée roshaír rann ...

*Finn learnt the three arts which establish a poet in his prerogative, namely teinm laeda (prophetic marrow-chewing) and imus for-osna (divination*

85. W. Stokes, ‘Mélanges – Mythological Notes’, *Revue Celtique* 1 (1870–1872), 261.

86. Giraldus Cambrensis, *Descriptio Cambriae*, quoted in Chadwick, ‘Imbas Forosnai’, 132–33.

87. Pwyll spent time in Annwn, the Otherworld, and Rhonabwy had a dream of King Arthur’s times while lying on an oxskin, which parallels the raw flesh, salmon or thumb of the Gaelic tales.

88. Edited and translated by Kuno Meyer, *Revue Celtique* 25 (1904), 344ff.

89. Edited and translated by Kuno Meyer, quoted in Chadwick, ‘Imbas Forosnai’, 97–135.

90. Edited and translated by L. C. Stern, *Revue Celtique* 13 (1904), 5ff.

91. ‘The Fine/Na Féinne’, in Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* Vol. 2, No. 29.

92. K. Meyer, *Fianaigeacht* (Dublin, 1910), 28ff.

*which illuminates) and díchetal di chennaib (incantation from heads). And it is then he made this lay to prove his poetic skill: ‘May Day, fair aspect, perfect season ...’*<sup>93</sup>

Older examples of *imbas forosnai* occur in *Táin Bó Cuailgne* where it is particularly associated with women and with Britain. Fedelm and Nede have both learnt the skill of prophecy as part of their training in *filidecht* (‘poetry’) in ‘Alba’. When Medb asks Fedelm to look and see how her attack on Ulster will fare, Fedelm replies that she sees it red and crimson.<sup>94</sup> Scáthach and Aoife are two other women who combine militaristic with mantic skills.<sup>95</sup>

There is an undoubted correspondence between those features described in Cormac’s Glossary and the motifs of later tales. There is a connection between Cormac’s raw meat and Fionn’s partially cooked salmon or horse or even his thumb; between Cormac’s stone, where the chewed meat is laid, and the post and door of the *sidh* (‘fairy mound’) between which Fionn stuck his thumb; between Cormac’s mantic sleep and the dreams of Fionn and the Welsh *Awentithion*; between Cormac’s idol gods and the fairies.<sup>96</sup> It is of course significant that the salmon cooked by Fionn has fed on hazel nuts dropped into the source of the Boyne and that the raw meat and the *sidh* represent the dead.

There would seem to be a line of influence between a poetic practice of self-induced mantic visions (perhaps, in its original form, more common among women poets than men, and more common in Britain than Ireland), the literary motif of Fionn’s divinatory powers and such practices as *taghairm*, known in 18th-century Scotland (discussed below). As we have seen, Cormac’s Glossary states that the practice of *imbas forosnai* was forbidden by St Patrick, which explains why it became only a literary motif in Christian times. However, because the visions of dreams and second sight come unbidden, their practice and interpretation survived into modern times.

#### MANTIC DREAMS

Dreams have a long and respected place in Gaelic culture connected to prophecy, judgement and poetry. In the mid-20th century, Sorley MacLean let it be known that he woke from a dream to write down the poem ‘Coin is Madaidhean-allaidh’ (Dogs and Wolves). It is at once a vision and a prophecy of his relentless pursuit of the white hind of beauty:

93. Gerard Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics* (Oxford, 1956), No. 52, 156. *Imbas forosnai* was also the inspiration of the poem he made when he tracked down and killed Ferchess in revenge for the death of Maccon (K. Meyer, *Fianaigeacht*, 28ff).

94. Thomas Kinsella, *The Tain* (Oxford, 1970), 13 and 61.

95. Chadwick, ‘Imbas Forosnai’, 114.

96. Chadwick, ‘Imbas Forosnai’, 127.



coin chiùine caothaich na bàrdachd,  
 madaidhean air tòir na h-àilleachd,

*the mild mad dogs of poetry,  
 wolves in chase of beauty.*<sup>97</sup>

In the 5th century, we find both St Patrick and St Brendan inspired by dreams to return to Ireland, St Patrick having escaped from slavery there only a few years previously, and St Brendan having set up a monastery on Eileach an Naoimh in the Garvellachs north of Jura. No doubt the native importance attached to dreams was augmented by their standing in the Bible.<sup>98</sup> *Fís Adomnáin* (The Vision of Adomnán) from the 10th century purports to be a vision seen by Adomnán on the eve of St John the Baptist's feast, when he is taken by his guardian angel to see the pains of hell and the seven heavens before he returns to his body to impart his vision to his fellow. Adomnán recounts Colum Cille's pregnant mother, dreaming of a beautiful cloak being given to her by an angel. She is disappointed when it is shortly taken from her and sent flying over the land. Then a voice explains that she is to give birth to a son who will be reckoned as one of the prophets, his far-flung influence represented by the cloak.<sup>99</sup>

Dream lore interpreted certain standard symbols: eggs denoted trouble, and herrings snow; certain animals denoted particular clans: a dog denoted a MacDonald, and a deer a MacKenzie – see III.3.c).<sup>100</sup> Though schematic, the systems were not arbitrary but had deep cultural connotations (see III.2.b.). The traditional love song, 'An t-Iarla Diùrach' (The Earl of Jura), describes a dream seen by a sailor, exhausted and drenched on difficult seas. He sees a swan sailing away from his ship and takes it to signify that his sweetheart has left him:

'S ann a bhruadair mi raoir  
 an eala air a' chuain 's i snàmh,  
 's a h-aghaidh gu tìr:  
 bha mo leannan 's mi fhìn mu sgaoil.

*I dreamt last night of the swan swimming on the ocean with her face to the land: my love and I had parted.*

In 18th-century Ireland, dreams took a very specific form in the Jacobite *aisling* (dream) poetry of the period, when the poet falls asleep to discover the

97. Somhairle MacGill-Eain, *O Choille gu Bearradh/From Wood to Ridge* (London, 1991), 135.

98. For example, the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4: 19–37), Jacob (Genesis 28: 10–22) and Joseph (Genesis 41: 14–24).

99. Adomnán of Iona, *Life of St Columba*, translated by Richard Sharpe (Penguin Classics, 1995), Book III, 1.

100. MacInnes, 'The Seer in the Gaelic Tradition', 450.

languishing figure of Éire mourning for her true mate, the Old or Young Pretender, the disinherited Catholic Stewart monarchs.<sup>101</sup> The dream could be construed as the expression of political desire but it goes deeper than that because the *spéirbhean*, an embodiment of the sovereignty goddess, is ultimately the mother of the ancestral dead. This example is from Aodhagán Ó Rathaille:

Aisling ghéar do dhearcas féin  
 ar leaba 's mé go lagbhrioch,  
 an ainnir shéimh darbh ainm Éire  
 ag teacht im gaor ar marcaíocht,  
 a súile glas, a cúl tiubh casta,  
 a com ba gheal 's a mailí,  
 dá mhaíomh go raibh ag tíocht 'na gar  
 a díogras, Mac an Cheannaí.

*A bitter vision I beheld  
 in bed as I lay weary:  
 a maiden mild whose name was Éire  
 coming toward me riding,  
 her eyes green, her thick hair curled,  
 fair her waist and her brows,  
 declaring he was on his way  
 – her loved one, Mac an Cheannaí.*<sup>102</sup>

Though *aisling* poetry did not occur in Scotland, the literary traditions of the two countries having been separated by the Reformation, dream poetry still gave poets the right to speak from a higher authority. It is evident from the diaries of the evangelical poet Dùghall Bochanan (1716–1768) that he valued dreams both as a source of spiritual growth and poetic inspiration. He used the dream form in his poem 'Am Bruadar', where, while dreaming of worldly delights, he is spoken to by a stranger who shows him that only the things of the spirit give lasting satisfaction.<sup>103</sup> For Uilleam Ros (1762–1791), a dream allowed him to maintain that he had heard the land lament the absence of its human consort in 'Còmhradh eadar am Bàrd is Blàbheinn'. In his love song, 'Is truagh nach d' rugadh dall mi' (Better had I been born blind), the dream form allows him the expression of his desires while at the same time granting him diminished responsibility:

101. See, for example, Séan Ó Tuama and T. Kinsella, *An Duanaire: 1600–1900; Poems of the Dispossessed* (Portlaoise, 1981).

102. Séan Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella, *An Duanaire* (Dublin, 1981), No. 51.

103. Dùghall Buchanan, *Dàin Spioradail le Dùghall Bochanan* (Glasgow, 1946), 33.



Horatio McCulloch, *Storm on a Highland Coast* (1850s), showing *Blàbheinn* (Blaven)

Chunnaic mi brúadar dh'fhàg suaimhneach a-raoir mi  
 bhith faicinn bean mo ghaoil ri mo thaobh fad na h-oidhche;  
 nuair thionndaidh mi le sòlas gus pòg thoirt dhan mhaighdinn  
 's ann chuimhnich mi gun do phòs i 's e 'm bròn thug nam chuimhn' e.

*Last night I saw a dream that left me restless,  
 having seen the woman I love by my side all night long;  
 when I turned joyfully to give a kiss to the maiden  
 I remembered she had married, a memory brought by sorrow.*

A pair of gold armlets from the Late Bronze Age is exhibited in the West Highland Museum in Fort William. The museum reports that the crofter who



found them in 1871 said he was alerted to their whereabouts in a dream. He gave them to Lord Lochiel who excused him rent for life.<sup>104</sup> Another example of the mantic power of dreams is reported by Pàdruig Moireasdan (1889–1978), when a

A pair of Late Bronze Age gold armlets.  
 © West Highland Museum, Fortwilliam

104. <<http://www.westhighlandmuseum.org.uk/collections/archaeology/>>.

woman in Grimsay, North Uist, is woken three times by the voice of a drowned neighbour telling her at what inlet her body is to be found. The voice becomes increasingly urgent as the tide comes in, until the woman eventually leaves the house and retrieves the body just in time.<sup>105</sup>

A satire composed by Dòmhnall Bàillidh after the acquittal of Patrick Sellar for his part in the Sutherland Clearances includes his dream of the perpetrators being imprisoned and burnt. With the history of mantic dreams in Gaelic tradition, he hoped it would prove prophetic:

Chunnaic mise brúadar,  
 'S cha b' fhuathach leam fhaicinn fhathast,  
 'S nam faicinn e nam dhùsgadh  
 Bu shùgradh dhomh rim latha.<sup>106</sup>

*I saw a dream  
 and I wouldn't mind seeing it still,  
 and if I could see it when awake,  
 I would be happy all my days.*

#### THE LIMITATION OF SIGHT FOR PROGNOSTICATION AND POETRY

The motif of the senses being limited in order to increase the powers of divination is a common one. The eyesight might be naturally limited. Theophilus Insulanus, the pen-name of Donald MacLeod (1729–1781), a minister in Skye, in trying to account for the visions of seers on natural grounds, reports in 1763 that 'in some instances they are weak-sighted.'<sup>107</sup>

The senses might also be intentionally limited. In the practice of *frith* (remote viewing), the *frithir* was taken blindfold to the doorway to receive a vision of the whereabouts of a missing thing or person.<sup>108</sup> As late as the 1770s, Thomas Pennant tells of the practice of *taghairm* in the district of Trotternish in Skye, which seemed to involve extreme sensory deprivation:

A wild species of magic was practised in the district of *Trotterness*, that was attended with a horrible solemnity: a family who pretended to oracular knowledge practised these ceremonies. In this country is a vast cataract, whose waters falling from a high rock, jet so far as to form a dry hollow beneath, between them and the precipice. One of these imposters was sowed up in the hide of an ox, and, to add terror to the ceremony, was

105. Pàdruig Moireasdan, *Ugam agus Bhuam* (Steòrnabhagh, 1977), 77–78.

106. Donald Meek, *Tuath is Tighearna/Tenants and Landlords* (Edinburgh, 1995), 54.

107. Theophilus Insulanus, 1763, *A Treatise on the Second Sight, Dreams and Apparitions*, quoted in Norman MacRae, ed., *Highland Second Sight* (1908; repr. 1992), 35.

108. Elizabeth Sutherland, *Ravens and Black Rain* (London, 1983), 45.

placed in this concavity: the trembling enquirer was brought to the place, where the shade, and the roaring of the waters, encreased the dread of the occasion. The question is put, and the person in the hide delivers his answer, and so ends this species of divination styled *Taghairm*.<sup>109</sup>

Just as Coinneach Odhar's pebble was bored through with a hole, the diviner's vision was often circumscribed. Robert Kirk describes in *The Secret Commonwealth*, written around 1690, a seer's initiation requiring him to look back through his legs or to look through a hole left by a knot of wood.<sup>110</sup> The Rev. James Kirkwood reports divination through the thumb and finger rings of shears.<sup>111</sup> J. G. Campbell reports how the rind of the Christmas cheese, *cùl na mulchaig*, was pierced and a person looking through the *laomachan* 'slice' could find his way in the mist. The smoke hole (*farlas*) provided another such aperture for divination, and young people would climb onto the roof at New Year and, looking down, identify their future spouse as the first person seen or heard spoken of through the hole.<sup>112</sup> Prognostication itself becomes an art, requiring a knowledge and a creative interpretation of a range of signs.

Visual deprivation seems to have been fundamental to musical and poetic inspiration, as discussed in I.I.B. The musician frequently went underground to acquire musical skills and thus the *sìth-bhrugh* or fairy-house, which is always underground, features in many stories, as do caves, notably in the story of the Cave of Gold, which gives its name to a famous pibroch (a classical piece for the pipes).<sup>113</sup> Visual deprivation was commonly used by Gaelic bards, as recorded by Martin Martin in the late 17th century:

They shut their Doors and Windows for a day's time, and lie on their backs, with a Stone upon their Belly, and Plads about their Heads, and their Eyes being cover'd, they pump their Brains for Rhetorical Encomium or Panegyrick; and indeed they furnish such a Stile from this dark Cell, as is understood by very few.<sup>114</sup>

Martin's account is backed up by the practice as recorded in Ireland in the memoirs of the Marquis of Clanricarde:

109. Thomas Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides in 1772* (Chester, 1774), 311.

110. Sutherland, *Ravens and Black Rain*, 54.

111. Sutherland, *Ravens and Black Rain*, 53.

112. John Gregorson Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, ed. Ronald Black (Edinburgh, 2005), 531.

113. D. F. Melia, 'The Lughnasa Musician in Ireland and Scotland', *Journal of American Folklore* 80, 365–73; J. Purser, *Scotland's Music* (Edinburgh, 2007), 160.

114. Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (London, 1716), 115–16.

It was likewise necessary the Place should be in the solitary Recess of a Garden or within a Sept or Enclosure far out of reach of any Noise ... The Structure was a snug, low Hut ... No Windows to let in the Day, nor any Light at all us'd but that of Candles, and these brought in at a proper Season only ... The reason of having the Study aforesaid in the Dark was doubtless to avoid the Distraction which Light and the variety of Objects represented thereby commonly occasions. This being prevented, the Faculties of the Soul occupied themselves solely upon the Subject in hand, and the Theme given ...<sup>115</sup>

There is evidence that this practice is at least as old as the 11th century. A poem in the *Dindsenchas* (or Lore of Place-Names) commencing 'Cid dorcha dam im lebaid' (Though it be dark to me in my bed) confirms the visionary nature of the supposedly historical and geographical memories it records:

Ó na lecaib-sin ille  
réil ós tecmaisín tíre  
Slíab Lecga im radars fromtha  
cen amarc ní himdorcha.

*From those stones till now  
clear above the occurrences of the land  
is Sliab Lecga to my searching gaze;  
even without sight of eyes it is not wholly dark.*<sup>116</sup>

*Islendingabók*, written in the 1200s by Ari the Wise, gives confirmation of similar practices taking place about the same time in Iceland.<sup>117</sup> Þorgeir reaches a decision on whether Iceland should become Christian by going under his cloak for the remainder of the day and the whole of the ensuing night. Other instances of the practice, especially in the context of the composition of *Egils Saga*, are found in Icelandic sources, and connections between these, Gaelic sources and soothsaying, are discussed by Adelsteinsson and Bergin.<sup>118</sup> Bergin writes:

115. Preface to the *Memoirs of the Marquis of Clanricarde* (1722), quoted in O. Bergin, *Irish Bardic Poetry* (Dublin, 1984), 6–7. The Preface is thought to have been written by Thomas O'Sulleavane – see R. Flower, *BM Cat. of Irish MSS* iii, 16.

116. The *Dindsenchas* (the name is variously spelt) exists in copies of which the best is the 14th- or 15th-century *Rennes Dindsenchas*, which Stokes suggests could well have been collected in the 11th or 12th century; see W. Stokes, 'The Prose Tales in the Rennes Dindsenchas', *Revue Celtique* 15, 272. This poem ('Bend Etair II') comes from E. Gwynn, ed. and trans., *The Metrical Dindsenchas Part III* (Dublin, 1913 and 1991, 110–19).

117. J. Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas* (Reykjavík, 1988), 13.

118. See J. H. Adalsteinsson, 'Under The Cloak', in *Studia Ethnologica Upsaliensia* 4, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis (Uppsala, 1978), 103–23. Also Bergin, *Irish Bardic Poetry*, 9–10.



It looks very like a relic of some rite or ceremony of divination handed down from pagan times, long after its original purpose had been forgotten. We know that in early times the functions of the poet and the druid or magician were very similar, and both practised magic.<sup>119</sup>

It is possible that something similar should be understood of Saint Columba's action of withdrawing his head into his hood at the Council of Druim Cett to which he had gone to determine the future of the bardic orders in Ireland. A twelfth-century gloss on *Amra Choluimb Chille* states

... co tuc in clerech iarsin a chenn inna choimm, 7 co nderna athirge, 7 co tuargaib iarsin a chenn asa choimm, 7 co roemid ceo mór dia chind, 7 co ro scailset ass na demna triasin ciaich sin ...

... so then the cleric put his head into its cover to do penance, and then he took his head out of its cover, and a great mist broke from his head, and the demons scattered from it because of that mist ...<sup>120</sup>

This may mark the rationalisation of a druidic practice of divination as the Christian expulsion of demons.

In later cases of bardic composition, it has been suggested that Sìleas na Ceapaich, Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh and Maighread nighean Lachlainn used starvation as a technique for inducing trance-like states of mind.<sup>121</sup> Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair started composing 'Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill' in 1751 lying in the dark under a boat<sup>122</sup> at Lag nam Boitean in Canna, where he was bailie between 1747 and 1752. He is also described by Reid in 1832 as lying 'on his back in bed in winter or on the grass in summer, with a large stone on his breast, muttering to himself in a low whisper his poetical aspirations'.<sup>123</sup> The Morrison bards to the MacLeods of Dunvegan had a reputation for the arcane and were originally known as 'Clan vic-na-heiche, or children of the night, but corruptly and very unwarrantably [are] now called Morisons, to whom they have not the least affinity'.<sup>124</sup> Some members of the MacMhuirich bardic family had the reputation for being wizards as we see in a tale of a MacMhuirich helmsman

119. Bergin, *Irish Bardic Poetry*, 9.

120. W. Stokes, 'The Bodleian Amra Choluimb Chille', *Revue Celtique* XX (1899), 43.

121. Colm Ó Baoill, *Bàrdachd Shilis na Ceapaich* (Edinburgh, 1972), lxxiii–lxiv.

122. D. Thomson, *Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, Selected Poems* (Edinburgh, 1996), 134.

123. Quoted in Ronald Black, *Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair: The Ardnamurchan Years* (Inverness: The Society of West Highland & Island Historical Research, 1986), 14.

124. Letter from John MacKinnon in Mull to MacLeod of Talisker, 1755, quoted in Hugh Cheape, 'The MacCrimmon Piping Dynasty and its Origins', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* 62, 2000–2002 (2004), 10.

protecting a boat from being sunk by witches.<sup>125</sup> The connection between poets and the black art survived long enough to give Iain Dubh Dhòmhnail nan Òran (1847–1901) the reputation for being *dubh air a h-uile dhòigh* 'black in every way',<sup>126</sup> based on little more than his black hair and a few conjuring tricks.

The evidence cited above goes some way to demonstrating that sensory deprivation played an important part in bardic culture, whether by accident or through deliberate action, and that similar practices continued well into the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries.<sup>127</sup> Hearing, taste, touch and, above all, sight were excluded to induce the inner visionary states from which prophecy and art could emerge. So, in concluding this section, we may say of both Runciman's and Macpherson's images of Blind Ossian that, far from being an invention of the Celtic revival, they are derived from deliberate practice, and represent a straightforward continuation of elements which even the most sober of scholars is prepared to associate with druidic sources.<sup>128</sup>

As much as we can tell, these practices conflated dualities, rational and chronological thinking in the pursuit of mystical, creative and mantic visions. The contemporary Scottish artist Norman Shaw (overpage) engages with these ideas. His statement reads:

A deep ecological awareness underlies Shaw's practice. His artworks are visual representations of the liminal zone where ecological awareness overlaps with mythic consciousness. Experience of wild woods, mountains and wildernesses become portals into the unbroken totality from which our reality is born. Shaw also draws heavily on the indigenous mythologies of his native Highlands. His mythic consciousness peers through the veil of separateness to find archetypal symbols that reveal the essential unity of experience.<sup>129</sup>

The reader may be interested in the evocation of fractals in his work which give a modern explanation for a mystical unity of nature, and also in his nocturnes 'darkness luminous'<sup>130</sup> that are revealed in darkness and obscured in light.

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125. 'Dark Lachlan and the Witches', in Bruford and MacDonald, *Scottish Traditional Tales* (Edinburgh, 1994), 395–96.

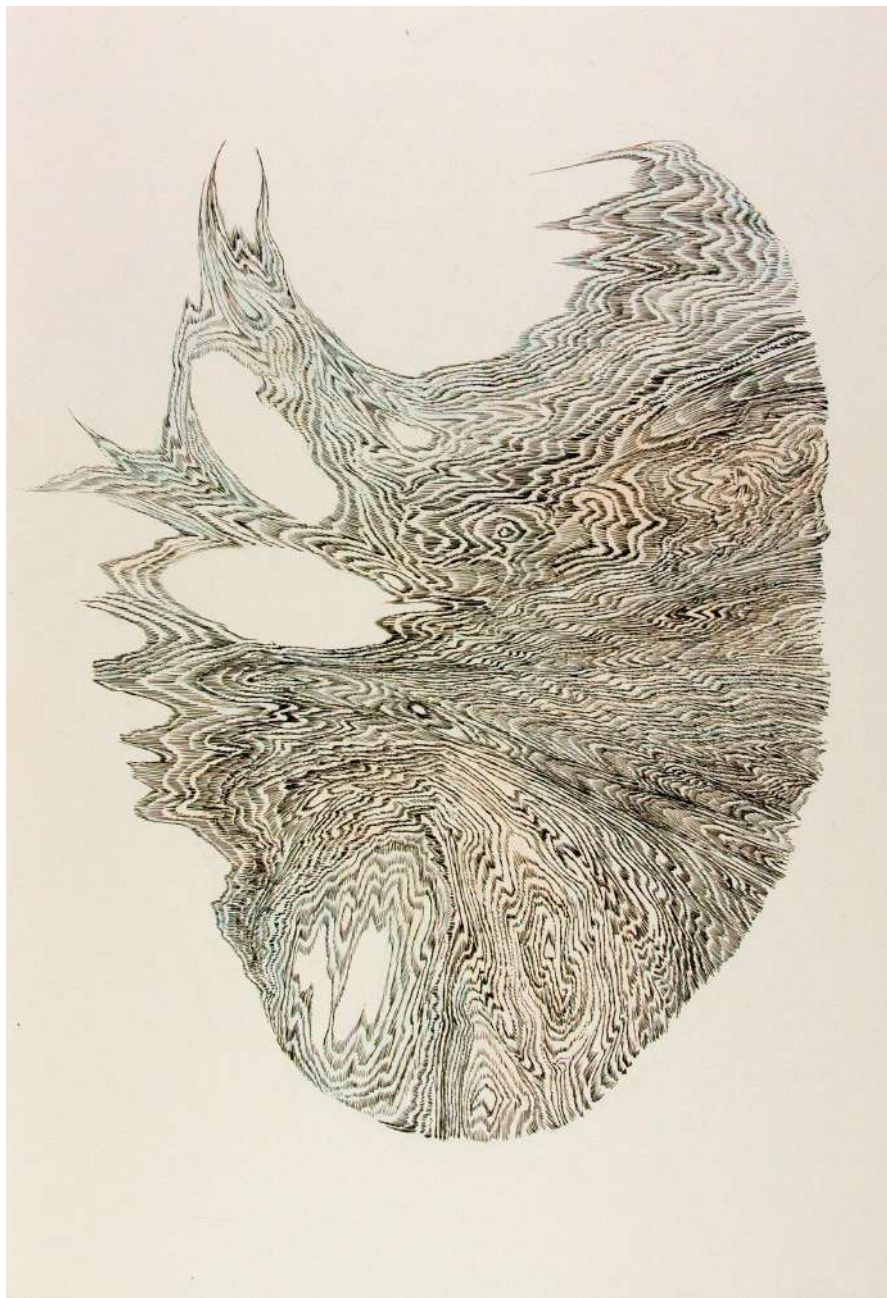
126. James Ross, 'Iain Dubh Dhòmhnail nan Òran', Gaelic radio programme (BBC, 1964).

127. E. Knott, *Irish Classical Poetry* (Dublin, 1960), 56–57.

128. Bergin was Professor of Early and Medieval Irish in University College Dublin and was described by his successor as 'the prince of native scholars' (D. A. Binchy, sleeve note to Bergin's *Irish Bardic Poetry*, cited above).

129. <<https://www.normanshaw.land/about>>.

130. <<https://www.normanshaw.land/images>>, under Artwork/darkness luminous.



Norman Shaw, *Coire Tao* (2018). Courtesy of the artist,  
[www.normanshaw.land/metaformations](http://www.normanshaw.land/metaformations)

## I.2. PERCEPTION OF TIME

## I.2.a. NIGHT AND DAY

[Introduction](#); [Divisions of Time](#); [The Womb of Time and of Sound](#); [The Lunar Calendar](#); [Conclusion](#)

## INTRODUCTION

Night is calm and fair; blue, starry, settled is night. The wind with the clouds, are gone. They sink behind the hill. The moon is up on the mountain. Trees glisten: streams shine on the rock. Bright rolls the settled lake; bright the stream of the vale. ... Night is settled, calm, blue, starry, bright with the moon. Receive me not, my friends, for lovely is the night.<sup>131</sup>

The standard image of an English village has, at its heart, the village church with its bells and its clock tower, comfortingly or annoyingly marking out the divisions of time by day and by night. In the Gàidhealtachd, clocks and bells are mostly notable by their absence. They are not particularly helpful, especially in hilly country with high winds. Work was largely timed by the elements, and the elements are capricious in the West of Scotland. An entertaining sidelight on the dominance of nature over modern time-keeping devices was the experience of Calum MacLeod. In making his celebrated road on Raasay and trying to keep track of time for returning home to milk his cows, Calum's Herculean labours broke so many wrist and pocket watches that he resorted to a stick stuck in the ground. With this, probably the most ancient of time-pieces, he was never more than half an hour out.<sup>132</sup>

Today, electricity is virtually universally available in the Highlands and inhabited islands, but street lighting is very recent and a substantial proportion of the population of the West Highlands still has to co-exist with the dark and pay attention to the moon. Through the centuries, cattle drovers in particular would have to be aware of the times of moonrise, as cattle resting in unfenced stances (of which there were hundreds throughout the Highlands) were inclined to wander when there was sufficient moonlight, and drovers developed the most acute hearing for the movement of animals straying in the dark.<sup>133</sup>

In the late 18th century, James Macpherson describes the night in an extended

131. James Macpherson, 'Croma: A Poem', in *Fingal, An Ancient Epic Poem in Six Books together with Several Other Poems, Composed by Ossian the Son of Fingal, Translated from the Gaelic Language by James MacPherson* (Dublin, 1763), 248–49.

132. Roger Hutchinson, *Calum's Road* (Edinburgh, 2006), 117–18.

133. A. Haldane, *The Drove Roads of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1997), 37, and R. McIan and J. Logan, *Highlanders at Home* (1848), 37.

footnote in *Croma* (the source for our opening quotation and also discussed in [I.1.b.](#)). Macpherson makes a point of the effect of latitude and environment on the variety of experiences one can have in any one night. He is not romanticising here, simply reporting from his own observations – observations backed up by generations of herdsmen, hill-walkers and climbers:

The story of it is this. Five bards, passing the night in the house of a chief, who was a poet himself, went severally to make their observations on, and returned with an extempore description of, night. The night happened to be one in [Oc]tober, as appears from the poem, and in the north of Scotland, it has all that variety which the bards ascribe to it, in their descriptions.<sup>134</sup>

The significance of the geographical and elemental realities is considered in [I.3.a.](#), [I.3.b.](#) and [I.3.c.](#), especially with respect to latitude and the region's highly dynamic environment, which makes prediction hazardous – but how the division of time is visualised may not necessarily be tied to such realities. Cultural preferences may also have their part to play. We have seen how significant was the dark with respect to inspiration in [I.1.b.](#), but does this have any parallels in how time was divided in the Gaelic imagination, specifically with respect to night and day?

#### DIVISIONS OF TIME

The disagreement between the Columban and Roman church at the Synod of Whitby in 664 over the date of Easter has been adequately discussed by many scholars.<sup>135</sup> That there were other clear cultural differences between the two churches is evident from Bede's account<sup>136</sup> and these are referred to elsewhere, but as regards Easter itself, the Columban method of calculation was simply a different one and was, in terms of ecclesiastical unity, an inconvenience. This does not mean, however, that the Columban church, both before and after Whitby, was incapable of reviewing its methodology independently. Columba himself is described by Dallán Forgaill as a man well versed in such matters:

Sina sceo imrima raith ...  
Sceo ellacht imhuaim n-eisci im rith  
Raith rith la gréin ngescaig,  
sceo rein rith.  
Rimfed rind nime ...

<sup>134</sup> Macpherson, 'Croma: A Poem', 246.

<sup>135</sup> For example, Thomas Clancy and Gilbert Markus, *Iona* (Edinburgh, 1994), 13–14.

<sup>136</sup> J. A. Giles, ed., *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of England* (London, 1903), 155.

*He harmonised the movement of the moon with the rayed sun and the movements of the sea. He could number the stars of heaven ...*<sup>137</sup>

Also knowledgeable in such matters, and at one time from Iona under the rule of Abbot Suibne (d.772), was Dicuil (fl.800).<sup>138</sup> His *Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae*, written in Aachen, shows a direct acquaintanceship with the western islands of Scotland and also asserts that monks from Ireland (Hibernia) had been the first inhabitants of Iceland and others 'ex nostra Scottia' the first inhabitants of the Faroes.<sup>139</sup> Dicuil's distinction between Hibernia, Britannia and Scottia is not absolutely clear, but the fact that he makes use of these three names is significant. Dicuil was well read and had a better understanding of the effects of the northern latitude on the length of the days and nights than his predecessors and contemporaries.<sup>140</sup> We need not be surprised that he was chief geographer and astronomer at the court of Charlemagne. Virgilius of Salzburg (d. 784) is thought to be another cosmographer from Iona,<sup>141</sup> so the Iona community seems to have been as geographically aware as its contemporaries: they had to be, for they were travellers and navigators. Dicuil himself pointed out the importance of navigation by the stars and refused to accept the common and erroneous assumption that the six months of light and six of darkness at the North Pole also applied to Thule.<sup>142</sup>

While the calculation of Easter (no longer an issue by the time of Dicuil) has long dominated attitudes to the Celtic church, and to the Iona community in particular, in the broader terms of the computation of time there are more interesting and fundamental distinctions.

The first is that the 'day' actually starts with its preceding night.<sup>143</sup> A particularly striking example of this is in the Irish monk Marcus's *Vision of Tnugdál* written in 1149 at Ratisbon. Here he writes in the context of original sin '... nec infans unius nocti' as opposed to St Augustine's '... nec infans, cuius est unius diei vita super terram.' – Tnugdál describing the infant as 'one night old' and Augustine writing 'whose life is but a day upon earth.' In the same work,

<sup>137</sup> Whitley Stokes, 'The Bodleian Amra Choluimb Chille', *Revue Celtique* XX (1899), 256–59. The translation is by J. Purser.

<sup>138</sup> J. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical* (1st pub. 1929; Dublin, 1997), 545.

<sup>139</sup> J. Tierney, ed., *Dicuili Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae* (Dublin, 1967), 72–77.

<sup>140</sup> Tierney, *Dicuili Liber*, 114–16.

<sup>141</sup> Clancy and Markus, *Iona*, 17.

<sup>142</sup> Tierney, *Dicuili Liber*, 81 (VII.29) and 75 (VII.13).

<sup>143</sup> Caesar, *De Bello Gallico* VI, 18.



Marcus writes of Tnugdál staying three nights, rather than days, with a friend.<sup>144</sup> To this day, many festivals are preceded by a vigil the night before, the Gaelic word *féill* (festival) being derived from Latin *vigilia* – Halloween being the most obvious example.

In the same context, Caesar reports that the Gauls declared themselves to be descended from Dis – Pluto, or the god of the underworld. It has been suggested that this implies they thought of themselves as an autochthonous people – aboriginal rather than immigrant;<sup>145</sup> whether or not, it certainly underlines the concept of origins and beginnings in darkness. Human life was calculated on a different basis, the age of persons being established from the day of their conception rather than of their birth.<sup>146</sup> As regards the darkness of winter, the quarter days (still in legal use in Scotland) were based upon a division of the year which commenced at *Samhain*, or the 1st of November, as evidenced by the Coligny calendar (c.200 AD) in which the day and the year commence with the dark (see I.2.b.).<sup>147</sup>

In terms of visualisation, these are interesting distinctions. The dusk starts the new cycle rather than the dawn: the darkness of the womb starts the new child rather than the exposure to light at birth: the dusk of *Samhain* starts the year. The significance of the womb is fundamental to this understanding of the importance of the dark as the place of initiation. The relevant Gaelic word is *brù* and it has been used to describe the area of megalithic tombs beside the River Boyne since at least c.800 AD.<sup>148</sup>

#### THE WOMB OF TIME AND OF SOUND

However, *brù* is not to be confused with *brugh* meaning a dwelling, even though the fairy house (*sithean*) is virtually always situated inside a round-topped hill and has no windows, and is known to this day as a *sith-bhrugh*. The apparent similarity between the two words is not backed up etymologically, but the images invoked in their particular associations are remarkably close and the meanings of the word *brugh* include ‘tumulus’, ‘cave’ and ‘house’ under the surface.<sup>149</sup>

144. Quoted in J. M. Picard and Y de Pontfarcy, *The Vision of Tnugdál* (Blackrock, 1989), 22–23.

145. C. Hammond, *Caesar: The Gallic War* (Oxford, 1998), 235.

146. C. Lainé-Kerjean, ‘Le Calendrier Celtique’, *Zeitschrift für Celtisches Philologie* XXIII (1943), 257–58. This concept was also held by the Florentines as opposed to the Romans, as Michelangelo’s father Ludovico noted on registering the birth of his son.

147. J. Loth, ‘L’Année Celtique ...’, *Revue Celtique* XXV (1904), 113–62.

148. W. Stokes and J. Strachan, eds, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* II (Cambridge, 1903), 310, l. 32, and, for the dating, xxxvii.

149. E. Dwelly, *The Illustrated Gaelic Dictionary* (Glasgow, 1977), 131.



Great Cairn at Achnacridhe, (Achnacree.)

Illustration from R. A. Smith’s *Loch Etive and the Sons of Uisnach* (1879)

The womb itself was a dwelling place out of which the human voice could be heard:

agus is ed so atbertis a broind a mathar: ‘Hibernenses omnes clamant ad te,’ ocus rocluintea sen co menic do chaintian doib fo herind ule ...

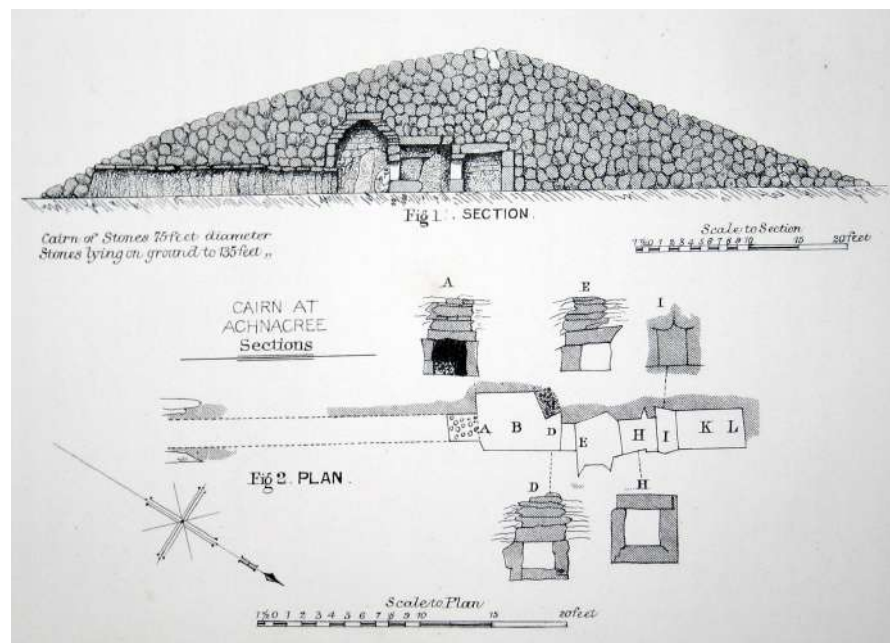
*And this they used to say out of their mother’s womb: ‘All the Irish call upon thee,’ and they were often heard repeating that throughout all Ireland.*<sup>150</sup>

The story of Deirdre and Naoise is a particular favourite in Gaelic and many of the place-names around Taynuilt relate to it – described by Dr R. Angus Smith in a kind of antiquarian guidebook, published in 1879.<sup>151</sup> In 1905, Alexander Carmichael published a version of the story itself, based on a version recited in Barra, with a frontispiece by John Duncan.<sup>152</sup> Deirdre, the tragic heroine of *Longes mac n-Uislenn* (The Exile of the Sons of Uisneach) calls out from the womb in the night, to the dismay of all within earshot:

150. Whitley Stokes and John Strachan, eds, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* II (Cambridge, 1903), 313, ll. 18–20, 43–45.

151. R. A. Smith, *Loch Etive and the Sons of Uisnach* (London, 1879).

152. Alexander Carmichael, *Deirdre and the Lay of the Children of Uisne orally collected in the Island of Barra ...* (Edinburgh, 1905).



Megalithic tomb, from R. A. Smith's *Loch Etive and the Sons of Uisnach* (1879)

Cia deilm dremun derdrethar  
Dremnas fot broinn búredaig?  
bruith clúasaib cluinethar.

*What violent noise resounds, that rages in your bellowing womb? It crushes the ears of the hearer.*<sup>153</sup>

Cathbad, the druid, then describes the unborn Deirdre and interprets the cry as foretelling sorrow, which indeed comes to pass.

There are two aspects of this early tale which are relevant to the topic of Night and Day, or darkness and light. The first is simply that the cry comes in the night from the darkness of the womb: the second is that the druid alone is able to interpret the cry and describe the child, being able to 'see' in the dark (see I.1.b.). But there may well lie behind this extraordinary prophecy a much more ancient practice, namely of the use of sound as an aspect of ritual in megalithic tombs, associated with fertility. One might speak even of the womb of sound.<sup>154</sup>

153. The poem from which these lines are taken dates from the 8th or 9th century and is variously transcribed. The version used here is as quoted in Calvert Watkins, 'Indo-European Metrics in Irish verse', *Celtica* VI, 222.

154. Purser, John, 'The Womb of Sound', in E. Hickmann, I. Laufs and R. Eichmann, eds, *Studien zur Musikarchäologie III*, Orient-Archäologie 10 (Rahden, 2002), 27–38.

Maes Howe megalithic chambered tomb in the Orkney Islands was built around 3000 BC. It is orientated so that the midwinter setting sun penetrates it to reach towards the bones of the honoured dead that had been returned whence they came – the womb of the earth. The interpretation of such monuments as having a relationship with the fertility of the earth is scarcely disputed. It does not, therefore, require any imagination, but merely straightforward logic, to relate them to the womb and to pregnancy. The mounds are swellings of the earth's surface, they are hollow, and many of them are designed to be penetrated by light at the crucial time when light begins to grow again. It symbolises rebirth to us; perhaps it was rebirth for our ancestors – not a symbol but a reality, as is the Eucharist for Roman Catholics. Interestingly, fairy mounds are frequently associated with the theft of children or nursing mothers, as though there lingered still in the tradition some notion that underground chambers were associated with fertility or, indeed, the lack of it, given that they housed the dead. It is conceivable that fairy thefts are not merely reflections of abduction and child murder, as suggested persuasively and eloquently by Ronald Black,<sup>155</sup> but also faint echoes of other practices, not supernatural, but pre-historical.

For example, in the traditional Gaelic version of the Deirdre story, collected by Carmichael from Iain Donn MacNeill of Barra, Deirdre's parents are barren and the druidic prophecy of her birth is at first rejected. The infant Deirdre is taken away to a distant mountain and concealed in a green mound made by her father:

Thug e ma-near ann an sin cnoc cruinn, gorm, a threachailt as a bhroin,  
agus an còs a chomhdach gu grinn mu 'n cuairt, air chor agus gu'n  
deanadh coisridh bheag cuideachd comhnuidh ann.

*He there betook him to dig out the inside of a green conical mound, and to line the hollow thus formed right round, so as to enable a small party to dwell therein comfortably.*<sup>156</sup>

While the megalithic tombs retained much of their significance in Gaelic culture, in the guise of fairy houses and the like, they were no longer functional; however, the moments in the solar calendar retained their significance into modern times in terms of actual practice. For example, at New Year's Eve, the inhabitants of the island of North Rona would observe, through the holes in St Ronan's cross and the door and window over Ronan's Chapel, two candles they had placed on the altar. This was done in the 19th century, though nobody any

155. Ronald Black, ed., *The Gaelic Otherworld – John Gregorson Cambell's Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland ...* (Edinburgh, 2005): Introduction [conclusions drawn on pp. lxxviii–lxxxii].

156. Carmichael, *Deirdre*, 22–23.



longer knew why.<sup>157</sup> It is certainly suggestive of the assertion of light in a sacred chamber at the dark time of year.

It is likely that there is a distant relationship between this ritual and rituals associated with divination by looking through a hole as, for instance, An Dall Coinneach Odhar (see I.1.c.). The North Rona cross itself is particularly significant in that, besides its three holes, it has clearly marked male genitalia (see IV.1.b.). It is tempting to see in the ritual on North Rona a coming together of several ancient strands – midwinter solstice, restriction of vision, a light placed in the darkness of a cell, the altar of a fertility saint. Is there not an analogy here between the monastic cell and the womb?

#### THE LUNAR CALENDAR

Another important aspect of the calculation of time is that relating to the lunar calendar. The Celts of the West and their predecessors had particular reason to develop a relatively sophisticated understanding of the lunar cycle both on account of the dramatic tidal movements experienced along their western seaboard and, in Scotland in particular, the continuing significance of the hunter-gatherer in society and the wide seasonal variations related to the high latitude of the Gàidhealtachd in particular.

With respect to the tides, the Mediterranean does not experience anything remotely approaching the variations in height or the flow of tidal streams of the west coast of Scotland. Timeus, for example, thought that tides were caused by rivers flowing into the ocean from Celtic mountains. Pytheas of Marseilles probably acquired his understanding of the relationship between the tides and the moon through contacts with the local Armoricans,<sup>158</sup> though it is also possible that he observed them directly on the Scottish coast on a journey which took him to the Arctic Circle. Early Irish Latin texts show a more sophisticated understanding of the interrelationship between moon and tides than elsewhere in Europe.<sup>159</sup>

Additionally, the length of darkness in northern latitudes in the winter months makes knowledge of the lunar phases of profound importance when many activities are likely to run out of daylight. Whether this is reflected by the significant number of Stone Age structures claimed to have been set up as lunar observatories is still open to discussion, but recent evidence from the Warren

157. Iain T. MacKay to T. S. Muir c.1857, from T. S. Muir, *Characteristics of Old Church Architecture etc. in the Mainland and Western Isles of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1861), 191–92, quoted in M. Robson, *Rona the Distant Island* (Stornoway, 1991), 14.

158. V. Kruta and W. Forman, *The Celts of the West* (London, 1985), 23.

159. M. Smyth, 'The Physical World in 7th-century Hiberno-Latin Texts', *Peritia* 5 (1986), 227–28.

Field site near Crathes Castle in Aberdeenshire suggests that hunter-gatherers had set up a lunar calendar as early as 8000 BC.<sup>160</sup>

The much later recumbent stone circles of Aberdeenshire and the renowned Callanish stones have been described as relating to the lunar calendar, but debate on their astronomical significance continues. At the very least, one would expect an awareness of the 19-year lunar cycle to have been developed, especially as there is a full moon at the time of the winter solstice once every nineteen years.

In the case of Callanish (which appears to have been in use for well over two millennia, from c.3000 BC to c.800 BC), there seems to be good evidence for supporting the suggestion. The names of the hills from which the moon is seen to rise near its southern extreme are, in English, The Sleeping Beauty and in Gaelic, *Cailleach nam Mòinteach* (The Old Woman of the Moors), and the evidence taken together is interpreted as symbolic of the pregnancy of the earth giving birth to the moon.<sup>161</sup> This lunar association of one of the most remotely situated monuments in western Europe may have been sufficiently famous to be commented upon by Diodorus Siculus in the 1st century BC, as suggested by Aubrey Burl:

Mentioning a 'spherical temple', thought to be his vague idea of a stone circle, he wrote that in it '[The moon] dances continuously the night through from the vernal equinox until the rising of the Pleiades ...' This temple has often been interpreted as Stonehenge but that is an astronomical impossibility. The Wiltshire ring is 500 miles too far south of the correct lunar latitude.

If the 'spherical temple' was not Callanish it is a remarkable coincidence that it was only the moon, the equinox and the Pleiades that Diodorus mentioned. Callanish seems associated with all of them. The avenue was directed towards the southern moonset; the western row was oriented on the equinoctial sunset. Although other stars are feasible targets the eastern row could have been aligned on the Pleiades around 1550 BC, the third of the heavenly bodies named by Diodorus.<sup>162</sup>

Callanish is also a solar observatory: the same stone from which the extreme southern lunar rise is observed also marks the midsummer sunrise – but the

160. <<http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/36670/details/crathes/>> and <[http://intarch.ac.uk/journal/issue34/gaffney\\_index.html](http://intarch.ac.uk/journal/issue34/gaffney_index.html)>.

161. M. and R. Curtis, *Callanish: The Stones, the Moon and the Sacred Landscape* (Callanish, 2008).

162. Aubrey Burl, *A Guide to the Stone Circles of Britain, Ireland and Brittany* (New Haven and London, 1995), 150.



Callanish (2014). Photo © Takeshi Shikama, by kind permission

observer must mount the stone to see the alignments and the two stones whose arced sides frame it. This has been recorded by Malcolm MacLean on camera and also on video.

Equally remarkable are the alignments at Temple Wood and Nether Largie, near Kilmartin in Argyllshire, which include a number of rock carvings, possibly related to the astronomical observations.

The north-east direction of the Temple Wood circles orientates to the rising major standstill midwinter full moon, while the long axis of the southern circle is towards Nether Largie stone S7 and the setting southern major standstill moon ... The complexity revealed by the Kilmartin



Calanais Midsummer Sunrise – An Alignment of 3 Stones (1980).  
Photo Malcolm Maclean and Jim MacDougall

observations, where solar and lunar events were used in combination, suggests an equally complex context of commemoration or prediction.<sup>163</sup>

That these alignments were intentional and geometrically worked out was first proposed by Alexander Thom and, subsequently, Euan MacKie (see [IV.3.c.](#)). Recently, a team from the University of Adelaide, subjecting the results from 2D and 3D surveys of monumental alignments to statistical analysis, has concluded that they were indeed intentionally and accurately aligned.<sup>164</sup>

How did our ancestors react to or use such knowledge? We do not know, but a Gaelic welcome to the new moon may give a sense of how such significances were felt – a sense which goes beyond calculation. Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica* contains a number of such prayers, invocations or welcomes to the moon:

<sup>163</sup>. D. Scott, 'Recent astronomical observations at Kilmartin Glen, Argyll, Scotland', *Antiquity* 84, Issue 324 (June 2010): <<http://antiquity.ac.uk/projgall/scott324/>>.

<sup>164</sup>. Gail Higginbottom and Roger Clay, 'Origins of Standing Stone Astronomy in Britain: New quantitative techniques for the study of archaeoastronomy', *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 9 (October 2016), 249–58.

Fàilte dhut, a ghealach ùr,  
 Àilleagan iùil na bàidh!  
 Ta mi lùbadh dhut mo ghlùn,  
 Ta mi cumadh dhut mu ghràidh ...

Tha thu siubhal 'na do chùrs,  
 Tha thu stiùradh nan làn;  
 Tha thu soillseadh dhuinn do ghnùis,  
 A ghealach ùr nan tràth.

*Hail to thee, thou new moon,  
 Guiding jewel of gentleness!  
 I am bending to thee my knee,  
 I am offering thee my love ...*

*Thou art travelling in thy course,  
 Thou art steering the full tides,  
 Thou art illuming to us thy face,  
 O new moon of the seasons.<sup>165</sup>*

Support for the moon-observatory theory with respect to the recumbent stone circles even appears to be colour- and size-coded, for, in the case of Easter Acquorthies, the main recumbent stone is a strikingly rippled, pink granite:

whereas those [stones] on the east are whitish pink those opposite are dark grey ... Like many recumbent stone circles the stones appear to have been erected in opposing pairs with a single lowest stone at the NNE. At the SSW the axis of the ring is aligned on the southern moonset.<sup>166</sup>

With respect to the Clava cairns, a type predominant in Inverness-shire, Burl writes:

The general association with the setting moon, scatters of white quartz pebbles that so often have been placed with the dead as talismans and the carving of cupmarks on the stones show that these encircled cairns, whose entrances were aligned upon the moon, were built by people to whom the moon and death were intimately connected.<sup>167</sup>

The colours of the moon (black for no moon, white for the full moon, red for the moon at eclipse) are the colours associated with Brigid, the pre-Christian

165. Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* III (Edinburgh and London, 1976), 284–85.

166. Burl, *A Guide to the Stone Circles*, 100.

167. Aubrey Burl, *Prehistoric Stone Circles* (Princes Risborough, 1997), 14–15.

goddess become saint. The birds sacred to her – the oystercatchers – are called *Gille-Brighde* in Gaelic (the servants of Brigid), because they too are black, white and red (see also [III.3.e.](#)).<sup>168</sup> These are the colours associated with the stone circles and also reflect the contrast of moonlight and firelight to which Richard Bradley has drawn attention.<sup>169</sup> The Clava cairns at Culloden were also aligned to the mid-winter sunset, so that they functioned in relation to light for both night and day.<sup>170</sup> Questions surround the continuity of significance, if not of use of such structures from pre-Celtic to Celtic peoples (see [I.2.b.](#) and [IV.2.b.](#)).

#### CONCLUSION

What is suggested above is that the divisions of time in the Gàidhealtachd begin with the dark: not in a sinister sense, but as the initial state from which time, in the form of light, emerges. This perception has interesting parallels with the philosophy of Eriugena and Dickson (see [VI.2.](#)), but in [I.3.a.](#) we shall see how it also reflects the geographical realities of higher latitudes. JP

#### I.2.b. DIVISIONS OF THE YEAR

[Introduction; The Prehistoric Celtic Year; The Christian Year; Divisions of the Gaelic Year; Meteorological and Agricultural Observation; Festivals of the Gaelic Year; Conclusion](#)

#### INTRODUCTION

Craobh mhòr agus ceithir mèir oirre,  
 trì nid dheug anns a h-uile meur,  
 seachd uighean anns a h-uile nead,  
 agus ceithir buill fhichead air a h-uile ugh.<sup>171</sup>

*A big tree with four branches,  
 thirteen nests on every branch,  
 seven eggs in every nest,  
 and twenty-four spots on every egg.*

This riddle of the tree of the year is interesting because it counts thirteen lunar months rather than the twelve months of the Julian or Gregorian calendars that have dominated European civilisation since the time of Julius Caesar. The

168. Mary Beith, 'Deanamh a' Leighis', *West Highland Free Press* (30 January 2004).

169. Richard Bradley, *The Moon and the Bonfire* (Edinburgh, 2005), 112.

170. Information panels on site by Aaron Watson.

171. *Aithris is Oideas* (London, 1964), 49.

system of counting thirteen lunar months in the year belongs, to this day, to the Islamic and Chinese calendars, and appears to be the basis of our earliest example of a Celtic calendar – the Coligny calendar – from the 2nd century AD. This section discusses how time was visualised by the Gaels. Leap years, for example, were associated with danger, bad weather and misfortune, as is seen in Iain Dubh mac Iain mhic Ailein's poem on the death of Ailean Dearg (Red Allan), chief of Clanranald who fell at Sheriffmuir in 1715:

Bliadhna leuma d' ar milleadh,  
An còig deug 's am mìl' eile  
'S na seachd ceud a rinn imeachd,  
Chaill sinn ùr-ròs ar fine –  
Is geur a leus air ar cinneadh r' am beò,  
Is geur a leus air ar cinneadh r' am beò.

*A leap year to ruin us, the fifteen, the other thousand and the seven hundred now gone by, we lost the fresh rose of our kindred – its blister will torture our kin all their lives, its blister will torture our kin all their lives.*<sup>172</sup>

There is a perception that the Gaels were slow to adapt to new calendrical systems, primarily based on the famous 7th-century dispute over the timing of Easter (discussed below), in which the Columban church's views were rejected. But there is ample evidence that Celtic-speaking people had a highly sophisticated version of the calendar, superior to that of the Romans, with possible antecedents in the Stone Age.<sup>173</sup> In more recent times, Scotland moved to join most of Europe in 1599 in making 1 January rather than 25 March the beginning of the year, while England did not do so until 1752 when both countries adopted the Gregorian calendar.

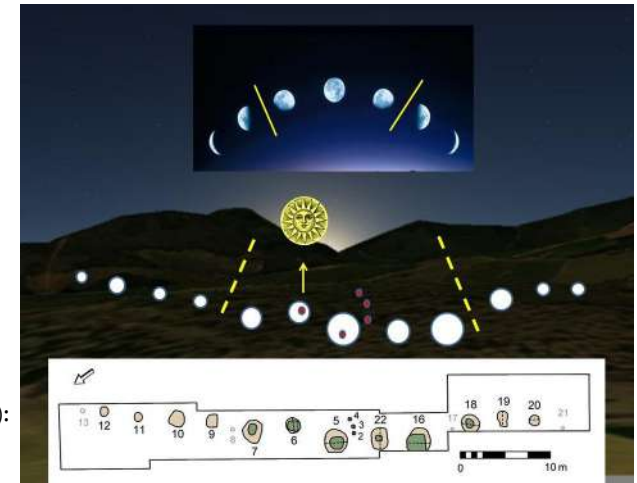
#### THE PREHISTORIC CELTIC YEAR

Observation of the skies formed the basis of much religious ritual in primal cultures, as Posidonius states, commenting on the druids. The natural was sacred and it fell to a priestly class to understand and disseminate their interpretations of nature to their people. An understanding of seasonal variation was essential both to hunter-gatherers and later to farmers. Calendars can be based on the apparent movement of the stars, on the sun or the moon, or on combinations of them both, as is our present Gregorian calendar. The oldest calendar yet discovered is sited at Warren Field near Crathes Castle in Aberdeenshire and

172. R. Black, 'The Quern-dust Calendar', *West Highland Free Press* (29 February 2008).

173. M. Brennan, *The Stones of Time* (Rochester, 1994), 138ff; also N. L. Thomas, *Irish Symbols of 3500 BC* (Dublin, 1988).

Warren Field, Crathes, Aberdeenshire: a mesolithic calendar monument c. 8,000 BC (*Internet Archaeology* 34): <<https://intarch.ac.uk/journal/issue34>>



dates from 8000 BC.<sup>174</sup> It was identified from the air by RCAHMS and excavated in 2004. It comprises twelve pits correlating with the phases of the moon, and its alignment with a point on the horizon (the pass of the Slug Road), marking sunrise at the winter solstice, would have allowed for an annual adjustment to the solar calendar. Its early date means it was constructed by hunter-gatherers rather than farmers.

Archaeological investigations on circles of megaliths suggest that these marked both solar and lunar movements, the solar year being divided into eight sections by solstices and equinoxes and the mid points in between.<sup>175</sup> The solar element is clearly of importance in the positioning of burial cairns. A solar calendar has been identified on one of the kerb stones of the burial cairn at Knowth, near Newgrange, from 3000 BC.<sup>176</sup>

The Coligny calendar – a fragmented bronze plaque originally 5 by 3.5 ft, found at Coligny near Lyons in 1897 – is a Gaulish calendar from the 2nd century AD, whose systems bear some resemblance to the Gaelic calendar described by John Gregorson Campbell in the 19th century (discussed below). It is a lunisolar system starting at *Samonios* (cognate with Gaelic *Samhain*), which probably indicates the year starting on the quarter day at the beginning of winter. Each

174. V. Gaffney et al., 'Time and a Place: A luni-solar "time-reckoner" from 8th millennium BC Scotland', *Internet Archaeology* 34 (2013): <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1141/ia.34.1>> – accessed 24 February 2017.

175. Stephen McCluskey, 'Astronomies and Rituals at the Dawn of the Middle Ages', in Clive Ruggles and Nichols Saunders, eds., *Astronomies and Cultures* (Colorado, 1993), 100.

176. E. W. MacKie, 'A Rosetta Stone for the Prehistoric Solar Calendar? Kerb stone K15 at Knowth, Ireland', *Time and Mind* 6.2 (July 2013), 211–30.





Coligny Calendar close-up, 2nd century AD

month, varying between twenty-nine and thirty days – the lunar month is 29.53 days – starts with the new moon, and the month is divided in two at the full moon, a point marked *Atenoux* 'renewal'. The fortnight then – the period between the new moon and the full moon and vice versa – is the basic unit of time, a feature common to Gaelic folklore, seen for example in the fortnightly periods designated on either side of quarter days. A solar year does not have a whole number of lunar months, so a lunisolar calendar reconciles the two systems by inserting an intercalary month every two or three years. The Coligny calendar shows five years consisting of sixty-two rather than sixty months, two years of 385 days with thirteen lunar months and three years of 355 days with twelve lunar months. It has

been suggested that part of the reason for the gatherings at seasonal festivals was to inform people of the adjustments to be made to calendars.<sup>177</sup>

#### THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

Rather than supplanting this eight-point system of solstices, equinoxes and quarter days, the Christian year can be seen to have adapted itself to the Celtic system. The quarter day of *Samhain* became All Souls' Day or Martinmas; *Imbolc* became St Bridget's Day or Candlemas; *Bealltainn* became Whitsun; and *Lughnasa* became Lammas. The birth of Christ as *sol invictus* fitted the symbolism of the winter solstice, while the birth of John the Baptist, who prefigured Christ, fitted the summer solstice, known in Gaelic as *Fèill Eòin*. John was the waning sun to Christ's growing sun, and their conceptions were marked at the autumn and spring equinoxes. The growing days and accompanying growth of vegetation of the vernal equinox also suited the symbolism of Easter, while the autumn equinox became Michaelmas. The process of Christianisation can be seen in the way Lugh's festival of *Lughnasa* near Lyons (whose Latin name *Lugdunum* commemorates him) became firstly the Imperial festival of Rome and Augustus,

<sup>177</sup>. Stephen McCluskey, 'Astronomies and Rituals at the Dawn of the Middle Ages', 104.

#### A Comparison between Celtic and Christian Festivals

QUARTER DAYS	CROSS-QUARTER DAYS	CHRISTIAN FESTIVALS
Winter Solstice (c. 21st December)		Christmas (25th December)
	<i>Imbolc</i> (beginning of February)	Candlemas (2nd February)
Vernal Equinox (c. 21st March)		Lady Day (25th March)
	<i>Bealltainn</i> (beginning of May)	Whitsun (variable)
Summer Solstice (c. 21st June)		Feast Day of St John the Baptist (24th June)
	<i>Lùnastal</i> (beginning of August)	Lammas (1st August)
Autumn Equinox (c. 21st September)		Michaelmas (29th September)
	<i>Samhain</i> (end of October/beginning of November)	All Saints' Day/All Souls' Day (1st/2nd November)

then the feast of the Maccabees and finally the feast of St Justus, a 4th-century bishop of Lyons.<sup>178</sup> St Augustine's recommendation that Christians should pray facing the rising sun, and the practice of orientating churches towards the east, are further examples of the Christianisation of pagan (Roman) observance of the sun.

The date of Easter utilises both solar and lunar symbolism of the triumph of light over darkness. In solar terms, it post-dates the vernal equinox, so the days are longer than the nights; in lunar terms, the moon must rise before midnight so the majority of the night is light. Jesus is the sacrificial Passover lamb and so dies at Passover which takes place on the full moon of the Hebrew month of Nisan. But as Easter is the feast of the Resurrection, it has to fall on a Sunday, that Sunday being the nearest to the full moon after the vernal equinox.

Dallán Forgaill praises Colum Cille around 597 for his computational skills in working out the date of Easter in 'Amra Choluimb Chille' (see [I.2.a.](#)). Columbanus,

<sup>178</sup>. Stephen McCluskey, 'Astronomies and Rituals at the Dawn of the Middle Ages', 105–09.

however, early in the 7th century, detected a discrepancy between the dating of Easter by the Iona *familia* and by the Frankish monasteries in Gaul and wrote to the Pope complaining at the dissonant symbolism of celebrating Easter before the equinox or when the moon rose after midnight.<sup>179</sup> Most of Ireland had adopted contemporary Alexandrine Roman methods for computing the date of Easter by 630, but the discrepancies came to a head at the Synod of Whitby in 664 when Oswy king of Northumbria and his wife were found celebrating Easter on different days. The Iona methods placed Easter on the 1st Sunday between the full moon of the 14th (the date of the Passover) and the 20th day of the Jewish lunar month of Nisan. In synchronising the Jewish lunar months with the Julian months and the spring equinox, the Iona method followed an eighty-four-day cycle – the *latercus* – which had originated in Rome. This method had since been superseded in Rome by the Dionysius Exiguus tables using a five hundred and thirty-two-day cycle in which the coincidence of Passover and Easter was avoided. The Synod of Whitby in 664 judged in favour of the later Roman method because Christ built his church on Peter and his followers. In the cause of Christian unity, Adomnán accepted the Synod's rejection of the Iona method but his monks, in loyalty to St Columba, maintained the older system based more closely on John 19:14 which states that Jesus was crucified before the Passover – unlike the other Gospels in which he is crucified on the day of the Passover – though not to the extent that Easter should be celebrated on the full moon on any day of the week.<sup>180</sup>

Observation of the stars was important to both the pagan and Christian calendar. (It was, after all, the appearance of a new star that alerted the Magi to the birth of Christ in Matthew 2:2). John Cassian, writing his *Institutes and Conferences* in 420, stipulated that the monastic hours during the night should be regulated by the course of designated stars. His book, adapting Egyptian monastic practice to European requirements, was available in the monastery at Iona.<sup>181</sup> In more recent times, the appearance of the dog star Sirius in July and August has given rise to the term *mìos crochadh nan con* 'the month of hanging the dogs' for this period before harvest when food could become scarce.

#### DIVISIONS OF THE GAELIC YEAR

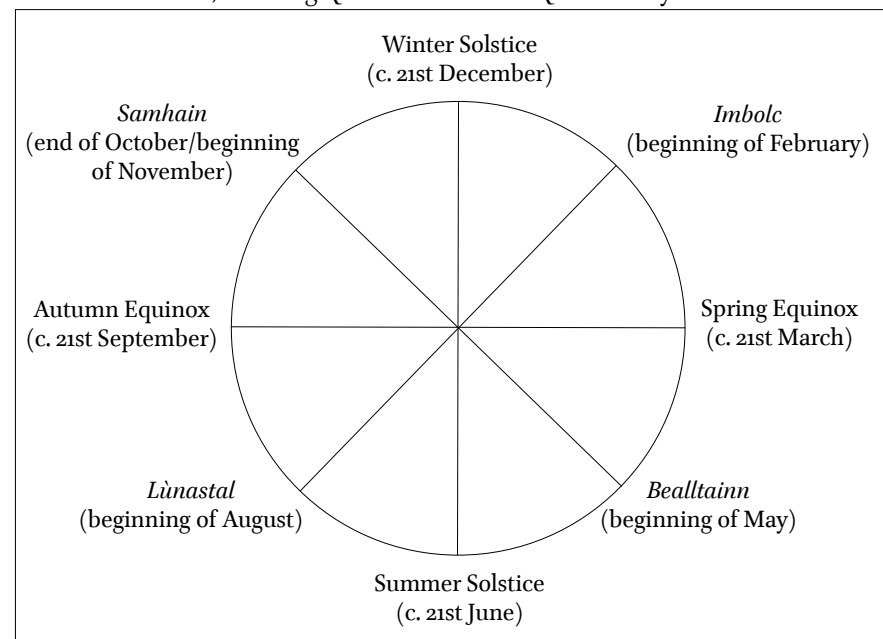
In Gaelic folklore, the pagan Celtic year represented by the Coligny calendar

179. Columbanus, Letter to Pope Gregory, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* 13 (Second Series), 40; and Bede, *Church History of the English People* 2.2, in J. E. King, trans., *Bede: Historical Works, Vol. 1* (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1930), 205.

180. Alfred P. Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men* (Edinburgh, 1984), 111–40.

181. Stephen McCluskey, 'Astronomies and Rituals at the Dawn of the Middle Ages', 116.

Wheel of the Year, showing Quarter and Cross-Quarter Days



can be seen to co-exist with the Christian year. As the day was envisaged in two halves, starting at dusk the previous night (see I.2.a.), so was the year envisaged in two halves, one dark, starting at Samhain, and one light, starting at Bealltainn. Each half constituted two seasons, which were divided symmetrically by the solstices and equinoxes. The beginning of each season was marked by the cross-quarter days, Samhain, Fèill Brìghde, Bealltainn and Lùnastal, midway between the equinoxes and solstices. These were equivalent to the 1st day of November, February, May and August (Old Style, i.e. following the Julian calendar, which was about twelve days behind the Gregorian calendar, introduced into Scotland in 1752). A later system described by George MacLeod in *Muir is Tìr* gives dates based on the equinoxes (*co-fhad thràthan*) and solstices (*uair-àirde* and *uair-isle grèine*) but is still very specific about the exact timing of the seasons: spring begins at 5am on 21 March, summer in the morning of 22 June, autumn at 3pm on 23 September and winter at 10am on 22 December.<sup>182</sup>

In England, the old 'term days' for paying rent and hiring – Lady Day (25 March), Midsummer, Michaelmas (29 September) and Christmas – approximate to the equinoxes and solstices. By contrast, the term days in Scotland – Candlemas, Whitsun, Lammas and Martinmas – fall on the cross-quarter days

182. Seòras Chaluum Sheòrais/George MacLeod, *Muir is Tìr* (Stornoway, 2005), 74.



approximating to the old Celtic festivals. A song by Dòmhnall Phàil (1798–1873) says that those who emigrate to Australia will no longer have to suffer the shame of trying to find their rent at Martinmas:

Nuair a thig an Fhèill Mhàrtainn cha bhi nàir' air ar gruaidh.

*When Martinmas comes we'll no longer feel shame upon our cheeks.*<sup>183</sup>

The seasons in English may be said to come late or early; they are impressionistic terms with no fixed dates. In Gaelic, the cross-quarter days fix the seasons into equal periods of three months each. A vestige of this system can be seen in the Irish names for September and October: *Meán Fomhair* and *Deireadh Fomhair* respectively, 'the middle' and 'the end of autumn', August being the start of autumn. Things were felt to be best accomplished within a season or even within a phase of the moon. Campbell refers to a marriage proclaimed in one season and enacted in another as being unlucky or *gobhlach mun ràith* (straddling the quarter).<sup>184</sup> Likewise, in divination by scapula, the animal had to be killed and its scapula examined within one phase of the moon.<sup>185</sup> (We see a respect for boundaries in other aspects of Gaelic culture, e.g. in the panels of stone carving and in verses in poetry.)

As each cross-quarter day marked the boundary between seasons, they were felt to be dangerous, liminal times when human endeavour was particularly open to invasion by the powers of chaos. The dead, the fairies, the uncultivated and the past and future could all interfere with society at these times,<sup>186</sup> but, as the normal boundaries were loosened, they were also good occasions for divination. It was important to maintain the physical integrity of the house on these quarter days by not allowing anything such as fire, milk or ashes to leave it in case they were acted on by witchcraft. The observance of each feast, beginning of course the previous night, reinforced the boundaries between the living and the dead, the inside and the outside, the arable and the wild, light and dark, health and sickness, with rituals of saining (protecting from evil) and fire lighting. Though not a cross-quarter day, New Year's Day was treated similarly, being in a liminal state between years. The saining of man and beast against ill fortune for the next three months was accomplished by lighting fires, applying tar behind the ears of cattle, decking the house with rowan and holly, especially at the doors and windows, and by feasting. The long-lived practice of driving animals between two fires is

183. 'Guma slàn do na fearaibh chaidh thairis an cuan' (Farewell to the people who have crossed the sea), in Anne Lorne Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2006), 265.

184. J. G. Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, 527.

185. John MacInnes, 'The Seer in the Gaelic Tradition', in M. Newton, ed., *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal* (Edinburgh, 2006), 451.

186. Michael Newton, *A Handbook of the Scottish Gaelic World* (Dublin, 2000), 177.

both symbolic of the sun and practical in terms of cleansing through fumigation. Archaeological evidence suggestive of this practice has been discovered at the Ness of Brodgar in Orkney, where one of the main buildings had two hearths beside each other and opposite the entrance. Bealltainn fires are responsible for the earlier burning of the Fortingall yew, which survives only through its suckers, and for the destruction of Fura Mòr, a giant oak tree at Leitir Fura in Skye.<sup>187</sup> The custom survives to this day at San Bartolomé de Pinares in Spain, where horses are ridden through bonfires on the eve of the feast of St Anthony.

While the domestic was sained at the seasonal festivals, the wild might be petitioned. The feeding of the sea with ale at Samhain, and of the eagle, wolf and fox with bannocks at Bealltainn, was carried out in the hope of returned obligations: a supply of seaweed for fertilising the fields from the god Seonaidh (Shony) and the sparing of the stock by wild animals.<sup>188</sup>

The denoting of days by month – the system reinforced by universal primary education from 1872 – did not become common in Gaelic until the early 20th century. Earlier, days were related to the nearest quarter day or feast day and the fortnightly phases of the moon. Gaelic, like many other languages, counts a fortnight (*cola-deug*) as fifteen rather than fourteen nights. The score was the basic unit in the counting system, so periods of time were often measured in scores or fractions of scores rather than in weeks, hence *deich là* (ten days), *cola-deug* (fifteen days) and *fichead là* (twenty days).

The names for the days of the week are a mixture of Latin and Gaelic references. The names *Didòmhnaich*, *Diluain*, *Dimàirt* and *Disathairne* (Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and Saturday) follow the Latin system, commemorating the Lord, the moon, Mars and Saturn. But *Diciadain*, *Diardaoin* and *Dihaoine* (Wednesday, Thursday and Friday) are based on the Gaelic word *aoine* 'fast' and recall the practices of the early church, meaning 'the day of the first fast', 'the day between two fasts' and 'the day of the fast', respectively.<sup>189</sup>

The old Gaelic terms for different periods in the year have been made to correspond somewhat crudely to the Roman, and subsequently English, system of twelve months. The terms *Faoilleach*, *Cèitean* and *Iuchar* nowadays correspond to the months of January, May and July, respectively, but their significance in the traditional Gaelic year was as keys which opened up the next season, falling

187. John MacInnes, 'Samhla na Craoibhe', in M. I., ed., *Sàr Ghàidheal: Essays in Memory of Rory MacKay* (no date).

188. The practice is reported both by Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (1703), 28–29, and by Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* I, who, like John Francis Campbell, associates it with Maundy Thursday, *Latha a' Bhrochain Mhòir* 'the day of the great porridge'.

189. See A. MacBain, *An Etymological Dictionary of the Gaelic Language*, s.v. *Di-*.

symmetrically for a fortnight on either side of the thresholds between seasons: *Latha Fèill Brìghde*, *Bealltainn* and *Lùnastal*, respectively. *Am Faoilleach* fell between winter and spring; *An Cèitean* between spring and summer; *An t-Iuchar* between summer and autumn. The word *Iuchar* may actually mean 'key' or 'boundary'.<sup>190</sup> The four seasons thus have lost their bridging points. Additionally, Gaelic terms that used to refer to specific periods of weather – *An t-Ògmhios*, *An t-Sultain* and *An Dàmhair* – have likewise become fixed as the names for the months of June, September and October.

#### METEOROLOGICAL AND AGRICULTURAL OBSERVATION

Much of the nomenclature of the traditional Gaelic year is based on meteorological and agricultural observation. The lengthening of the day after the winter solstice is noted in *tha ceum cas coilich air latha na Bliadhn' Ùir* 'the cock goes an extra step on New Year's Day' (for it could take the hens further afield to feed) and *tha uair a' ghille-chonnaidh air an latha* 'the fuel boy has an extra hour to fetch in the peat'.<sup>191</sup> Following the New Year is *Am Faoilleach*, which is usually termed the 'wolf month' from *faol* 'wolf' though MacBain suggests it may be derived from *faillidh* denoting a carnival. It was also known as *am marbh-mhios* 'the dead month' and marked the nadir of growth. *An Fheadag* 'the Whistler', *An Sguabag* 'the Sweep' and *A' Ghobag* 'the sharp-beaked one' were three distinct winds prevalent in February and March; the last three days of March, *trì làithean nan òisgean*, were known as 'the wedders' three days.' St Patrick's Day *Fèill Pàraig*, a very busy time in the agricultural year, was also known as *Là nan Tri Sealladh* 'the day of the three sights' (ploughing, sowing and harrowing) or *Là nan Seachd Oibrichean Fichead* 'the day of the twenty-seven tasks'. *A' Chailleach*, is the time of cold weather at the beginning of April when nature, represented as the hag, is destructive to new life.

May is called *An Cèitean*, meaning the 1st month of summer. The 1st day of the month, *Latha Buidhe Bealltainn* 'the yellow day of Beltane', is a fire festival, the name derived from the Celtic god Belenos. A further cold period was recognised in May as *Seachdain na Feadaireachd* 'the week of whistling'. *An t-Ògmhios* 'the young month' is June when stock are young. *An t-Iuchar*, the 'key or border' and *Mios Crochadh nan Con* 'the month of hanging the dogs' were used of the warm month or the dog-days when the dog-star Sirius appears and approximates to the month of July. August for the Gaels is not associated with the Emperor Augustus but with the Celtic god Lugh, hence *Lùnastal* and the feast and assemblies marking the beginning of the harvest and the ascendancy of fertility over the powers of destruction. In September, *Fèill Micheil* or *Latha na Marcachd*, Michaelmas or

190. See Ronald Black's note 156, in Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, 597.

191. Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, 583, and *Digital Archive for Scottish Gaelic* (DASG): <<http://www.dasg.ac.uk/en>>, s.v. *gille-connaidh*.

'the day of the cavalcade' marked the end of the harvest. While the names of the months September to December are derived from the numbers seven to ten in Western European calendars, in Gaelic they are *An t-Sultain* (the fat month), *An Dàmhair* (the time of the stags belling), *An t-Samhain* (either 'summer-end' or 'assembly') and *An Dùbhlachd* (the dark time). In visualising the annual changes in nature, these names structure the year independently of the Latin months.

#### FESTIVALS OF THE GAELIC YEAR

Rituals attached to different days are derived from the Roman, Celtic and Christian modelling of the year. In superimposing the Roman on the pagan year, its start changed from 1 November to the 25 March and to 1 January in 1599. In celebrating the foregoing night, Hogmanay was termed *Oidhche nan Callainnean* 'the night of the Kalends', from the Latin *kalendae* 'the 1st day of a month'. The Latin word is related to *calare* 'to call or proclaim', but in Gaelic various folk etymologies became attached to the word. It was understood to mean 'the night of the blows' (from *callainnean* 'blows'), from the Hogmanay ritual of banishing hunger from the following year by striking the hide of a sacrificed animal or carrying a corn dolly – called the *cailleach* (hag) – which was pierced in the eyes and belly. As *Duan Challaig* 'the Hogmanay chant' says,

Bior na dà shùil	<i>a stake in her two eyes</i>
Bior na goile ...	<i>a stake in her belly ...</i> <sup>192</sup>

*Oidhche Challainn* gave rise to two other folk etymologies from similarly sounding words: *Oidhche Choinnle* 'candle night' and *Dàir na Coille* 'the fecundation of the wood', when a westerly wind was believed to enable the fertilisation of trees prior to their spring growth. *Dà latha dheug na Nollaige* 'the twelve days of Christmas' were said to constitute a model of the year's weather, each of the twelve days indicating the predominant weather to be expected in each of the following twelve months. Christmas to St Bride's Day, *Earrach beag nam Faochag* 'the little spring of the wheelks' marked the best season for shellfish, before spring growth could provide other sustenance. The motherhood and fertility of Brigid, firstly pagan goddess and subsequently Christian saint, was marked by the making of corn dollies and rush beds and the imprint of her stick by the door. Shrove Tuesday was known as *Inid bheadaidh* 'impudent Shrove', as it was the only feast celebrated on the day rather than on its vigil.<sup>193</sup> *Dihaoine na Ceusa* is 'Friday of the Crucifixion' when, in respect of the nails being driven into Christ's flesh, no one would use iron in the soil. No new enterprise was begun on 3 May, *Latha seachnach na Bliadhna* 'the avoiding day of the year', on which the fallen angels were expelled from heaven.

192. Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, 531.

193. Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, 546 and 589.

*Latha Màrtainn Bhuilg* (St Martin of the Bag's day), 4 July, marked the day when St Martin's remains were moved to the cathedral of Tours – the Translation of Martin. The designation *Builg* 'of the bag', felt to befit a missionary saint, probably comes from a folk etymology of his surname *Bouillant*. Assumption Day, 15 August, was designated as *Fèill Moire Mhòr* 'the big feast of Mary', in contrast to 25 March, *Fèill Moire an t-Sanaid* 'the feast of the Annunciation (to Mary)'. The night of 14 September, *Fèill Ròid* (Roodmas), was termed *Oidhche na Cnò Naomh* (*sic*) 'the night of the holy nut' and marked the beginning of the nutting season. *Samhain*, the beginning of the Celtic Year, was Christianised as *Latha nam Marbh* 'the day of the dead' or All Souls' Day.

The longest night was *Fèill Fionnain* 'St Finan's feast'. The 24 December was *Oidhche nam Bannagan* 'the night of bannocks' – the bannocks representing plenty. *Latha Nollaig Mhòir*, 25 December, was 'big Christmas', while the seven-day period up till the end of the year was known in general as *Nollaig* 'Christmas'.

#### CONCLUSION

The influence of several different calendrical systems has left distinctive marks on the way time has been envisaged by the Gaels. Rather than the twelve-month division of the year used today, the early Celtic lunisolar calendar left a system of eight divisions marked by the solstices, equinoxes and cross-quarter days with fortnightly bridging periods between seasons. The lunar element made the fortnight – the phase of the moon between new and full – the basic unit of time rather than the week. Time could then be specified by season and moon. When



*The Children in Their Hallowe'en Guise* (c. 1930).

Photos by Margaret Fay Shaw, *Folksongs and Folklore from South Uist* (1955)

the use of months became widespread, their names were approximated, with the exception of *am Màrt* (March), to the relevant seasonal festival or to shorter periods of meteorological observation. The lunisolar calendar shaped the Gaelic understanding of any period of time starting with the darker part. Thus, the lunar month started with the new moon, the day started at the previous sunset and the year started at *Samhain*. The solar element dictated the festivals would be marked by fire, while the Gaelic interest in thresholds meant they were seen as times for prognostication and communion with the dead. The early Celtic church, which, following the Egyptians, timed the canonical hours of the night by the stars, left its stamp on the naming of three of the days of the week and the Christianisation of the earlier festivals. Agricultural and local practices made distinctive associations with certain prominent days, for example New Year's night had associations with the fertilising of trees, Maundy Thursday was kept as a day for pouring porridge on the sea and *Bealltainn* for making a truce with wild animals.

John Francis Campbell writes in 1860 of a 'minute and circumstantial local history' being by far the most abundant sort of folklore among the people.<sup>194</sup> In the absence of a formal calendar, at least in the popular imagination, dates could be established in relation to a particular event – the big storm, the big snow, and so on. The year 1745 was known as *Bliadhna Theàrlaich* 'Charlie's Year'; 1792 as *Bliadhna nan Caorach* 'the year of the sheep' when protests were made in Ross-shire and Sutherland against the introduction of sheep farms; and 1814 was *Bliadhna an Losgaidh* 'the year of the burning' (of tenants' houses in Strathnaver). MB

### I.3. THE GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

#### I.3.a. LATITUDE AND LIGHT

[Introduction](#); [Latitude and Light](#); [Light and Weather](#); [Artistic Responses to West Coast Light](#)

#### Introduction

politically, linguistically and artistically, he was prepared to go a certain distance toward the horizon but he was not prepared to leave behind the landscapes and seascapes, where the navigation of his spirit were located.<sup>195</sup>

This section describes both the geographical context of the Gàidhealtachd and some artistic responses to those realities from native and other artists. When

194. John Francis Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (1860–64), Vol. I (Hounslow, 1983), xxxv.

195. Seumas Heaney, 'The trance and the translation', *The Guardian* (1 November 2002).



Seamus Heaney spoke of Sorley Maclean, as quoted above, he spoke with a keen understanding of what it is that motivates so much of the Gaelic way of life – for it is by no means the prerogative of the poets to feel such profound attachments. Nor does the fact that so many Gaels were forced or chose to emigrate in any way diminish the strength of their attachments, for which the untranslatable word *dùthchas* perhaps provides the best understanding. Rather than plunder the English dictionary for a sufficiency of nouns to encompass the word's meaning, it is simpler to state that the whole purpose of this book and its contents is derived from the concept and hopes to elucidate it in the context of the visual through the ages. In the meantime, there are quite simple, tangible facts which at least give a reasonably objective idea of the environment in which such a rich conception arose.

#### LATITUDE AND LIGHT

The Gàidhealtachd is situated at a relatively high latitude and this makes for considerable alterations in the character and angle (both horizontal and vertical) of sunlight between summer and winter. At midsummer, the time between sunset and sunrise is over 17½ hours: at midwinter, barely 6½ hours. The Gaelic for December is *An Dùbhlachd* – which means 'the blackness' but includes tempestuous weather, gloominess and depth of winter as parts of its meaning. But winter has its own ways of distributing light, as when the mountains are covered in snow and, instead of being dark against the sky, become, like the negative of a photograph taken in summer, light against a dark sky. On the other hand, Kitty MacLeod from Lewis recalled life in the summer shielings in the 1930s:

We sometimes don't go to bed at all ... I remember very very vividly ... staying up all night and going up to the top of a little hill and watching the midnight sun from Lewis ... the nights are much much brighter than they are here [Edinburgh] ... we had just been up singing and talking and generally enjoying ourselves, we waited up purposely to see the sun.<sup>196</sup>

The length of twilight or gloaming is also affected by latitude. Twilight (assumed as that period between sunset and the sun being 5° below the horizon) at midsummer at N 57° is 60 minutes, whereas at Athens at N 38° it lasts only 29 minutes and about 20 at the Equator.<sup>197</sup> Perhaps in response to this, Gaelic has over 20 different words or expressions for twilight, with a further

196. K. MacLeod, interviewed by Alan Lomax (Edinburgh, 1951): National Sound Archives, Alan Lomax: Scotland R (28) 1. and 2.

197. N 57° is chosen as being a roughly central latitude within the range of the Gàidhealtachd.

7 referring to dusk, some referring to colour (*liath-fheasgair, gormadh, dubh-thràth, dubhar*), others to the broken nature of the light (*breac-sholas*).

The character of the light is also affected by the sun's azimuth. Out of a notional 360° variation, there is nearly a 200° variation between summer and winter (slightly less than 100° either side of midday). Expressed in terms of the compass, at midwinter the sun rises in the SSE and sets in the SSW. At midsummer it rises in the NNE and sets in the NNW. This variation in the horizontal angle of light relative to any fixed object is matched by and combines with a related vertical variation. The variation in elevation of the sun is, of course, uniform throughout the globe at 47°, but at latitude 57°N that variation is at a very high elevation in summer and a very low one in winter, compared with equatorial regions where the varying elevation is always high. The consequence in high latitudes is that the angles of illumination of everything from a blade of grass to a mountain range are likewise varied across the seasons. The declination of the moon is equally varied, so that the duration and angle of its light, so crucial in the long winter nights, even with extensive cloud cover, produces similarly varied effects: the lower the sun in winter, the higher the full moon. In mountainous country at high latitudes, this means that full moonlight can illuminate narrow glens and defiles.<sup>198</sup>

It is perhaps as a consequence of a northern perspective with respect to the potential sources of light, that in Gaelic one goes up to the south and down to the north: *a' dol suas gu deas* and *a' dol sìos gu tuath*. In high summer in particular, the sun's rising motion southwards is as obvious as its downward motion northwards. Reference is made at II.1.a. to the absolute as opposed to egocentric expression of 'rightness', as it is expressed in English. In Gaelic, the 'right' hand is often expressed as *an taobh deas* – literally 'the south hand'. To go *deiseil* (sunwise) was virtually mandatory in formal situations in the past, though disapproved of by the Church, as evidenced in the 17th century by the minister's reaction to such a practice on North Rona.<sup>199</sup>

Seasonal variation is increasingly significant in higher latitudes, so it is not surprising that permanent ways of marking the seasons are common. Many of the prehistoric monuments in north-west Scotland are now clearly understood to be responses to the relationship between latitude and light. These monuments, which have been a part of the landscape for thousands of years,

198. The southern hemisphere is not considered here, as there is very little permanently habitable land at comparable latitudes.

199. Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (London, 1716, and Edinburgh, 1981), 20.

include the passage grave type, primarily associated with the north and west.<sup>200</sup> This awareness extended to the winds to which colours were assigned (II.2.a.). There is further discussion of prehistoric monuments in I.2.a., IV.1.a. and IV.2.f.

Longitude is not in itself significant in terms of the angle and rotations of the earth, but where the Celtic-speaking communities live it is fundamentally significant, as they happen to be in western maritime locations which are impinged upon by oceanic currents and prevailing weather systems crossing west-east. As a consequence, by comparison with places such as Moscow or the southern part of Hudson Bay (which are on similar latitudes), the climate of the Gàidhealtachd may be described officially as temperate; but it is equally capable of extremes, supporting sub-arctic species such as ptarmigan, snow bunting and white hares, within a few miles of imported sub-tropical species such as palms and eucalyptus. High winds, high rainfall, substantial tidal differences and flows, all add to this highly dynamic environment. The pioneer of countryside interpretation, Don Aldridge (1930–2008), making associations between the physical and the cultural, writes:

Along with other parts of Europe north of 56° north, much of Scotland can claim to have sublime elements in its landscape as a matter of scientific fact.<sup>201</sup>

Aldridge lists 'Infinity', 'Mystery' and 'Solitude' as the three component parts of the sublime. The age of the rocks, the situation near the edge of the continental shelf and glacial erosion he gives as examples of Infinity, to which he might have added that we have not just a maritime, but an oceanic coast with the consequence that the horizon can be unbroken by land. For Mystery, for which Aldridge also reads 'Obscurity', he cites the darkness of winter, the struggle between four major air masses and the consequent climate effects: and for Solitude he refers to an inhospitable landscape, poverty of natural resources and the arctic-alpine terrain surviving from an Ice-Age climate.

These facts fundamentally influence human adaptation to the environment. Houses must be built to withstand hurricane force winds and torrential and frequently horizontal rain travelling at high velocity, coupled with high humidity levels (see IV.1.a.). Clothing has to cope with the same problems. The shepherd and cowherd, and the breeds they choose to nurture, have to deal with snow and ice in the mountains and quagmires in the bogs; the fishermen and, in the old

200. P. J. Ashmore, *Neolithic and Bronze Age Scotland* (London), 56–57. Also F. Lynch, *Megalithic Tombs and Long Barrows in Britain* (Princes Risborough, 1997), 36.

201. D. Aldridge, 'A Sense of Place: An Exercise in Interpretation and Communication', in A. Fenton and H. Pálsson, eds, *The Northern and Western Isles in the Viking World* (Edinburgh, 1984), 338.

days, the major part of the transport system, had to deal with some of the most dangerous waters in the world. A well-known chant for protection from a hail-shower pictures a herdsman's situation with vivid economy:

Clach mhìn mheallain 's an tobar ad thall.  
Clach mhìn mheallain 's an tobar ad thall.  
Am buachaille bochd fo sgàil nan cnoc  
A bhata fo uchd 's a dhealg 'na bhrot,  
'S e 'g iarraidh air Dia turadh is grian a chur ann.

*Smooth hailstones in yonder well.  
The poor herdsman  
In the shadow (shelter) of the hills  
With his stick under his breast (leaning on his stick)  
And his pin on his chest (his plaid pinned at his chest),  
And he asking God to send dry weather and sun.*<sup>202</sup>

Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair is equally expressive in his 'Song of Winter':

Thèid a' ghrian air a thuras mun cuairt  
Do thropaic Chapricorn ghruamaich gun stad,  
On tig fearthainn chruinn mheallanach luath  
Bheir à mullach nan cruaidhtichean sad;  
Thig tein-adhair, thig torann na dhèidh,  
Thig gaillean, thig èighre nach lag,  
'S cinnidh uisge na ghlainneachaibh cruaidh,  
'S na ghlas-leugaibh mìn fuar-licneach rag.

*The sun proceeds on its course  
to grim Capricorn's tropic in haste,  
whence comes round and swift-falling hail  
that thuds on the tops of the rocks;  
there's lightning followed by thunder,  
gales that are strong and frost,  
water turns into splinters of glass,  
smooth jewels like cold toughened stone.*<sup>203</sup>

Everything was and to a degree remains conditioned by these facts. Even nor-

202. Sung by Annie Johnston of Barra on the School of Scottish Studies recording SSS Log 88 (a). An alternative version of the above is given in *An Gaidheal XLVII* (An Damhar 1952), 80: 'The Herdsman Game'. *Eileanach* says the reciter addresses a ladybird.

203. Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, 'Oran a' Gheamhraidh', in Derick Thomson, ed., *Gaelic Poetry in the Eighteenth Century* (Aberdeen, 1993), 28.



mally nocturnal creatures are obliged to expose themselves to view in the long daylight hours of summer.

The types of animal, bird, fish, insect and plant that are native to the area all likewise respond to these elemental forces. Highland cattle are not merely picturesque, they are fitted to the environment and they are visible at all seasons and in all weathers because they do not require to be housed. The same applies to the Highland garron. As for the Soay sheep, they are a last relic of a Bronze Age breed. They scatter rather than flock together when attempts are made to gather them. They still come into season according to the time of year and they shed their coats. The Scottish deerhound is equally adapted to the extensive open terrain (see III.3.a.). The so-called 'Scotch black' bee (*Apis mellifera mellifera*) is likewise adapted to the conditions. *Apis mellifera mellifera* is a sub-species common to north-west Europe, though local adaptations may well also be involved. It is both hardy and more likely to forage in wet and/or windy conditions, and its colonies being smaller are less subject to starvation during nectar or pollen shortages.<sup>204</sup>

One of the most significant and characteristic features of the landscape in the Gàidhealtachd is that of the temperate rainforest, intimately connected to latitude. These woodlands are now becoming known as the 'Celtic rainforest'. The expression certainly makes sense with respect to the western seaboard of Scotland and Ireland, western Scotland in particular having a rainfall well above the diagnostic two metres per annum. The additional factor of a multitude of steep gullies retaining high humidity levels, along with proximity to the sea, ensures that this environment is remarkably species-rich. This partly explains why Scotland, with a tiny proportion of the land area of Europe, supports about 58% of the total species of mosses and liverworts, 45% of ferns, and 37% of lichens known in Europe.<sup>205</sup>

Human clothing also responds to the conditions. The tartan plaid and its development into the kilt is an undoubted response to the exigencies of outdoor survival in wind and rain, and Edmund Burt noted that plaids would be wetted to keep out the wind.<sup>206</sup> Burt is the first to use the term 'quelt' to describe that part of the plaid which was gathered by a belt and hung in pleats from the waist (see IV.2.a.).<sup>207</sup> Likewise, brogues were designed for wet walking, allowing water to exit, in the certainty that it would enter. The word itself is derived from Old Gaelic *bróc* and possibly from Norse. Samuel Johnson observed,

<sup>204</sup> P. Hunter, 'Characteristics of the Native Bee – Fact or Fiction?', *Bee Improvement and Conservation* 36 (Summer 2011), 17–20.

<sup>205</sup> M. Coleman, 'Celtic Rainforest', *The Nature of Scotland* (Summer 2011), 61–63.

<sup>206</sup> A. Simmons, ed., *Burt's Letters from the North of Scotland as Related by Edmund Burt* (Edinburgh, 1998): Letter XIX, 197–98.

<sup>207</sup> Simmons, *Burt's Letters*: Letter XXII, 231–36.



Celtic Rainforest. Photo © Seán Purser

The use of Brogues, a kind of artless shoes, stitched with thongs so loosely, that though they defend the foot from stones, they do not exclude water.<sup>208</sup>

The modern brogue with its patterns of holes on the outer leather refers back to the original permeability of the design. Travelling long distances across such a land- and seascape also develops its own special responses. Cattle droving is described in III.3.d., but it is worth mentioning here that cattle were until very recently made to move from one winter grazing to another by swimming from Staffin Island to the Island of Skye, the state of the tide being crucial. The name Colintraive (*Caol an t-Snàimh* 'the narrow of swimming') refers directly to this former practice between Cowal and Bute.

The praise of a chieftain frequently includes his prowess at climbing and the ability to cope with such a demanding environment is enshrined, for example, in the lullaby for a future MacKinnon chieftain. The nurse envisages the child's increasing prowess as a climber, Blàbheinn being the highest peak in the Parish of Strath on the Island of Skye:

M' aighear 's mo rùn, cas dhìreadh stùc,  
Gill' air do chùl, le chù air straing.

<sup>208</sup> Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands* (London, 1775 and 1924), 44.

Dhireadh tu Màm, cìreanan àrd,  
'S cinnteach do làmh 'm Blàbheinn nan allt.

*My joy and my love, foot sure on the steep hillock,  
A boy following thee, with his dog on a leash.  
You would climb the pass, high crests,  
Sure is your hand on Blaven of the streams.*



Such an upbringing is delightfully caricatured in the outstanding pen and ink illustrations by Robert Lawson for Munro Leaf's *Wee Gillis*, an American children's tale set in Scotland in which the Highlands and Lowlands are opposed, not by the usual categories, but by the contrast between a valley-based pastoral and a mountain-based hunting society.<sup>209</sup> In reality, and in the illustrations, the two overlap and the conceit of the story is based as much upon that geographical reality as it is upon any imagined social divisions.

Robert Lawson, illustration from  
Munro Leaf, *Wee Gillis* (1938)

#### LIGHT AND WEATHER

The variation of possible angles of light upon the land- and seascape have been referred to above, but the effects of these in terms of variety of growth and form on land and in the sea themselves have their wide seasonal effects. Most obviously, the colour range is not only affected by the seasons, but by the variety in the light – often additionally affected by reflection off the numerous fresh and salt water lochs. Scotland has over 30,000 fresh water lochs and 10,000 river and stream systems, concentrated in the north-west, on which the light and the wind can play.<sup>210</sup> In addition, the high rainfall of the west coast gives regular dousings to rocks and plants that might have momentarily settled into dusty obscurity. The surfaces of things are constantly being refreshed (see also [III.3.e.](#)).

209. M. Leaf, *Wee Gillis* (New York, 1938).

210. Nicholas Dixon, *The Crannogs of Scotland* (Stroud, 2004), 9. Also P. Pullar and M. Low, *Fauna Scotica* (Edinburgh, 2012), 83.

'The dramatically changeable weather conditions' of, for example, Iona are referred to with respect to Cadell's work there, including his richly colourful 'The Dutchman's Cap from Iona' (c.1919).<sup>211</sup> The same might equally be said of Peplow's work on Iona or, indeed, McTaggart's west-coast works; and Peplow's 'Barra' (1905) exhibits that freedom of brushwork and richness of colour which perhaps best convey the visual dynamic of the west of Scotland.<sup>212</sup> John Berger memorably described the similar environment in the west of Ireland to which Jack Yeats's paintings returned time and again:

The land is as passive as a bog can be. The sky is all action ... a dancer, tender and wild alternately, and then furious, ripping her clothes and parading her golden body to get just one glimmer of response from the peat. And she gets it. For in the ruts and bog puddles and along the wet shoulders of a tarpaulin the water flashes back, seeming by contrast with its surroundings even brighter than her.<sup>213</sup>

On the other hand, something approaching a Mediterranean light can be seen in Fergusson's 'Highland Landscape' (c.1921–1922), where the vigorous brushwork occurs within delineated forms.

Because of the variability of the weather, with layers of air at different temperatures, highly varied types and densities of cloud are common and rarer forms, such as nacreous clouds, more likely to be seen in northern latitudes.<sup>214</sup> High-altitude noctilucent clouds are best seen around the summer solstice at latitudes between 50° and 65°,<sup>215</sup> and with varied temperature layers such phenomena as mirages are a commonplace on land and sea. The Gaelic words for mirages – *criththeas* and *coileach-teas* – describe the rippling effect of the light caused by heat; there is also a specific term, *corra-shùgain*, for the flickering light caused by reflected rays of light on rooves or walls.

Rainbows and double- and triple-rainbows are, naturally, very common in a climate with high rainfall and are occasionally seen reflected in the sea.<sup>216</sup> Turner's *Peat Bog, Scotland*, published in 1812, shows a double rainbow, the shape

211. Tom Hewlett, entry on Cadell in Harris and Halsby, eds, *The Dictionary of Scottish Painters* (Edinburgh, 2001), 29. Cadell's *The Dutchman's Cap from Iona* is in Glasgow's Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum.

212. In 1910, Peplow married Margaret MacKay of Barra, but whether she (or he) spoke Gaelic has yet to be determined. However, he will certainly have had the opportunity to come to terms with the human and physical environment in ways that went deeper than those of a visiting external observer.

213. John Berger, 'Jack Yeats', *New Statesman and Nation* (8 December 1956), 741–42.

214. Chris Mitchell, 'Nature Notes', *West Highland Free Press* (12 November 2010), 19.

215. Chris Mitchell, 'Nature Notes', *West Highland Free Press* (29 June 2017), 19.

216. For an example, see *West Highland Free Press* (11 April 2008).



of which appears to have inspired the extravagant rendering of the rainclouds. Even quadruple and inverted rainbows are known, and in mountainous country rainbows can also be seen below the observer. On occasion, a triple rainbow may feature one of the rainbows out of parallel with the others, terminating in the same place as one but ascending in a wider arc and thus increasing the distance between the two.<sup>217</sup> Unicoloured rainbows (pink, orange or white) are also seen, the white being the rarest. It takes the same form as the normal rainbow and is created by sunlight reflected, rather than refracted, by minute water droplets in the atmosphere on the opposite side from the sun; also known as fog rainbows, they are usually diffuse in form but can be as sharp as a normal rainbow. In addition, a wide variety of cloud formations is regularly present, covering virtually all types of clouding from mamma clouds to alto-stratus, many appearing simultaneously. As for the varied effects of the light on the sea, these are pursued in I.3.b.

Moon rainbows are occasionally observed, being quite different from the relatively common *fàl* or ring round the moon. A true moon rainbow is, like a sun rainbow, on the opposite side of the sky from the light source. In the case of a moon rainbow, however, the colours, though discernible, are much less obvious.

None of these phenomena is unique to the western seaboard of Scotland and Ireland, but all of them have been seen in the parish of Strath, Isle of Skye, within the last twenty-five years.<sup>218</sup> The relative frequency of these phenomena in the Gàidhealtachd is significant and for that we can thank the volatility of the weather, the complexity of the land and sea forms, and the clarity of the air. The long nights of winter in northern latitudes and lack of street lighting also increase the chances of seeing such phenomena, including of course *na fir chlis* – literally ‘the men of tricks’ or ‘the dancing men’ – meaning the Aurora Borealis or Northern Lights. These are sufficiently common for a children’s saying to refer to them. When children saw red lichen on the rocks, they would say ‘*thug na fir chlis á càch a chéile an-raoir*’ ‘the merry dancers bled each other last night’. The belief is that their displays are likely to end up in violence: *An uair a bhios na fir-chlis ri mire ’s gann nach dean iad milleadh* ‘when the merry-dancers play they are like to slay’.<sup>219</sup> They are also associated with bloodstone (see I.3.c.). It was the

217. I am grateful to Ilona MacLeod of Breakish for images of just such a phenomenon, also reflected in the sea.

218. For example, a quadruple rainbow seen by Peter John MacKinnon, Strath (3 February 2012); an inverted rainbow seen by Zoe and Emma MacKinnon, Strath (2 February 2008); a white rainbow seen by John-Angus MacKinnon, Martin MacKinnon and John Purser, Strath (6 July 1989); an orange rainbow seen by Barbara Purser, Strath (January 2008); and a rainbow below the observer, seen by Bonnie Rideout and John Purser, Strath (12 August 1994). Mamma clouds seen by Emma MacKinnon in Strath (March 2011).

219. Edward Dwelly, *The Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary* (Glasgow, 1977), 439.



Brocken Spectre seen from Glàmaig, Isle of Skye. Photo © Alan Donald

frequency of appearance of the Aurora Borealis which partly drew Necker de Saussure to Portree in the Isle of Skye, where he is buried (see also I.3.c.).

Similarly dramatic light effects are frequently seen in the mountains, notably the Brocken Spectre,<sup>220</sup> in which the shadow of the climber on a ridge is projected by the sun onto the cloud below or beside him, and commonly surrounded by a coloured halo. It was the sight of a Brocken Spectre on Ben Nevis in 1894 that led the Scottish physicist, C. T. R. Wilson, to his invention of the cloud chamber in 1912, for which he won a Nobel prize in 1927.

A remarkable sense of human connection with light and colour comes from the 17th century, in which the people of North Rona are recorded as taking their surnames ‘from the Colour of the Sky, Rainbow, and Clouds’.<sup>221</sup>

This sense of connection also took miraculous form, as in Adomnán’s 7th-century story of Eithne’s dream. Eithne was the mother of St Columba and, during her pregnancy, had a vision of a robe ‘of extraordinary beauty, in which the most beautiful colours, as it were, of all the flowers seemed to be portrayed.’ The robe recedes from her grasp and expands ‘until its width exceeded the

220. The Brocken Spectre is named after the highest peak (1142 m) in the Harz mountains in Germany.

221. Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (London, 1716, Edinburgh, 1981), 21.



John Duncan, *The Coming of Bride* (1917). Glasgow Museums Resource Centre

plains, and in all its measurements was larger than the mountains and forests.<sup>222</sup> Fergusson had surely read this passage from Adomnán's *Life of Columba*, when he painted his '*Danu, Mother of the Gods*' (see VI.1.a.).

In the 9th to 10th-century 'Broccan's Hymn' to St Brigid, she is supposed to have hung her mantle on a sunbeam; and in a later 12th-century commentary, the feat is imitated by St Brendan. In another version of the commentary, Brigid holds sunbeams in her right hand:

forsna gó grene robátar (in)a laim deis.<sup>223</sup>

222. W. Reeves, ed., *Life of St Columba ... written by Adomnan* (Edinburgh, 1874), 79.

223. Whitley Stokes and John Strachan, eds., *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* II (Cambridge, 1903), 336.

This hymn is recalled in 'An Eòir a Chuir Moire' (The Charm Sent of Mary) collected by Alexander Carmichael in the 19th century.<sup>224</sup> John Duncan's images of Brigid make extravagant use of colour on the mantles of the angels who carry her ('St Bride', 1913), or the companions who greet her arrival ('The Coming of Bride', 1917), though she herself is depicted in virginal white.

Although Brigid's sunbeam miracle is not included, light is a regular and sometimes culminating feature of the Gaelic prayers to the saints and to Christ, collected by Carmichael:

Is gràdh-gheal nan neul thu,  
Is gràdh-gheal nan speur thu,  
Is gràdh-gheal nan reul thu,  
Is gràdh-gheal na ré thu,  
Is gràdh-gheal na gréin thu,  
Is gràdh-gheal nan nèamh thu ...

*Thou art the pure love of the clouds ... of the skies ... of the stars ... of the moon ... of the sun ... of the heavens ...*<sup>225</sup>

Barbara MacPhie's account of having seen the sun dance on Easter day belongs to the same tradition as Brigid's vision:

Bha grian or-ghil an deigh eirigh air sgeith nam bean mora agus i a caochladh dath – uaine, purpaidh, dearg, cra-dhearg, geal, gile-gheal, agus oir-gheal, mar ghloir Dhe nan dul do chlann dhaona. Bha i a' dannsadh a sios agus a suas ann an gairdeachas ri aiseirigh aigh Slanuighear gradhach nam buadh.

*The glorious gold-bright sun was after rising on the crests of the great hills, and it was changing colour – green, purple, red, blood-red, white, intense-white, and gold-white, like the glory of the God of the elements to the children of men. It was dancing up and down in exultation at the joyous resurrection of the beloved Saviour of Victory.*<sup>226</sup>

In death, light and landscape are also fundamental to the Gaels, for the commonest inscription on Gaelic gravestones is a quotation from The Song of Solomon, the words chosen (in particular the first part) being:

Gus am bris an là, agus an teich na sgàilean, pill; bi cosmhuil ri earbaidh, a ghràidh, no ri laogh féidh air beanntaibh Bheteir.

224. Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* II (Edinburgh, 1972), 152.

225. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* III (1976), 188–89.

226. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* II (1972), 274.



*Until the day break, and the shadows flee away, turn, my beloved, and be thou like the roe upon the mountains of Bethel.*<sup>227</sup>

Nor were these responses to the nature of light confined to poetry, song or inscription; they were part of everyday life. Alexander Carmichael describes a typical evening in a ceilidh-house:

The conversation is general: the local news, the weather, the price of cattle, these leading up to higher themes – the clearing of the glens (a sore subject), the war, the parliament, the effects of the sun upon the earth and the moon upon the tides.<sup>228</sup>

They might equally have discussed the phases of the moon with respect to the potential for dancing out of doors, a common enough practice in the Highlands.<sup>229</sup>

On the other hand, such conversations could enter into deeper speculations. Martin Martin, a Skyeman writing in the late 17th century and interested in the Orcadians' beliefs regarding the Ring of Brodgar and the Stones of Stenness, states that

Several of the Inhabitants have a Tradition, that the Sun was worshipped in the larger, and the Moon in the lesser Circle.<sup>230</sup>

#### ARTISTIC RESPONSES TO WEST COAST LIGHT

In III.1.a., III.1.b. and III.1.c., we discuss how Gaels have envisaged the land, water and sky. Here it may be interesting to see how various visual artists visiting the Highlands have been struck by the distinctiveness of West Coast light.

Returning to the opening quotation of this section – Seamus Heaney writing about Sorley MacLean – there is a parallel with that love of landscape in The Song of Solomon so often quoted on Gaelic tombstones. John Berger expresses similar ideas in his essay 'A Story for Aesop':

By 'address' I mean what a given landscape addresses to the indigenous imagination ... The address of Western Ireland or Scotland is tidal, recurring, ghost-filled. (This is why it makes sense to talk of a Celtic landscape.)<sup>231</sup>

Even to those who have to contend with it, the environment is full of

<sup>227</sup>. Am Biobull, Dàn Sholaimh II: 17.

<sup>228</sup>. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* I (1900): Introduction, xxix.

<sup>229</sup>. J. F. and T. M. Flett, *Traditional Dancing in Scotland* (London, 1964), 39.

<sup>230</sup>. Martin, *A Description*, 365.

<sup>231</sup>. John Berger, 'A Story for Aesop', *Keeping a Rendezvous* (New York, 1991), 53–81.

enchantment – an enchantment widely celebrated by Scotland's artists. In letters written from Glenuig to her teacher, August Rodin, the sculptor Otilie McLaren writes

... je ne peut pas vous donner une idée comme c'est beau ici dans les montagnes éternelles et entouré par la mer qui nous parle toujours et nous dit de si belles choses quoi qu'en changeant continuellement de voix.<sup>232</sup>

*I can't give you enough of an idea of how beautiful it is here, in the eternal mountains, surrounded by the sea that always talks to us and tells us such beautiful things while continuously changing voices.*

It is a landscape real, mythological and magical:

qui doit être comme celui que trouvaient les marins d'Odysseus – ou on oublie tous les chagrins et les soucis, ou on est seul avec les montagnes et les petites fleurs, et on s'éveille et s'endort à la musique des vagues ou du vent dans les arbres. Je voudrais vous peindre en mots, cette mer gris bleu semée de petites îles montagneuses, et toute couverte de cette tendre voile lavande ou l'atmosphère est humide.<sup>233</sup>

*which must be like that discovered by Odysseus's sailors – where we forget all grief and worries, where we are alone with the mountains and the little flowers, and we wake and fall asleep to the music of the waves and the wind in the trees. I would like to paint you with words, this blue-grey sea, sown with small mountainous islands, and all covered with a tender veil of lavender where the atmosphere is humid.*

Less rhapsodic, but equally impressionable, was the decidedly down-to-earth Scottish music critic Cecil Gray. Writing about his opera based upon the tale of Deirdre of the Sorrows, he refers specifically to the light:

... nothing could be less akin in mood to *The Wind Among the Reeds*, and the Celtic Twilight, than my *Deirdre*. Celtic it is, undoubtedly, but the light is that of broad noontide. Whatever its faults or virtues, it is full of the superabundant vitality and vigour of youth.<sup>234</sup>

But, as has been demonstrated above, the twilight was as genuine a reality as the mist and Gray was drawn to it, willy-nilly:

<sup>232</sup>. Otilie McLaren to August Rodin (11 September 1899), Musée Rodin Archives. Her French is left uncorrected.

<sup>233</sup>. McLaren to August Rodin (12 September 1900), Musée Rodin Archives.

<sup>234</sup>. Cecil Gray, *Musical Chairs* (London, 1948 and 1985), 172.

I have noticed whenever my Pegasus – or Rosinante – sniffs the air, paws the ground, and kicks up his heels, the characteristic whinny he emits is unmistakably that of *The Songs of the Hebrides*.

I do not know the islands well; indeed, I have only visited the inner fringes – Skye, Mull, Staffa, Iona; but that is enough and more than enough. To tell the truth, I am afraid to venture further for fear that I should never return: that once I had entered into that magic circle I should not be able to escape from the enchantment, a kind of *envoûtement*, which emanates from that mysterious region.<sup>235</sup>

Gray, in acknowledging Marjorie Kennedy-Fraser's influence, was fully aware of the 'highly suspect accuracy of their notation' and 'deplorably amateurish and inadequate piano accompaniments unnecessarily provided ...' – a somewhat harsh judgment which did not cloud his appreciation of the basic material, as evidenced by a letter from D. H. Lawrence to Gray:

And the Hebridean songs of the damned: that is, songs of those who inhabit a suggestive underworld which is never revealed or opened, only intimated, only *felt* between the initiated – I won't have it. ... you want an emotional sensuous underworld, like Frieda and the Hebrideans: my 'women' want an ecstatic subtly-intellectual underworld, like the Greeks ...<sup>236</sup>

These parallels and contrasts with Greek mythology (which are also deeply embedded in the early Gaelic tradition) find expression in sculpture in Pomeroy's 'Nymph of Loch Awe' of 1897 (see I.1.b.).<sup>237</sup> In painting, Alexander Goudie's 'Europa and the Bull, Colonsay' (c.1965) simply imports the Greek myth, rather than transforming a Gaelic one. But the colours and light effects that this painting shares with Peplow are inhabited not by Peplow's lady and child, but by that mythological presence, epitomised by the bull whose power is as fundamental to Gaelic mythology as it is to Greek mythology. In the great *Táin Bó Cuailnge* and *Táin Bó Fraoch* and in many another tale, the bull is central, and the Pictish image of the bull is the symbol of the Gaelic College on Skye, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. Besides the volatility of his bull, Goudie's land-, sea- and skyline in this painting are more volatile than Peplow and Cadell, who concentrate more

235. Gray, *Musical Chairs*, 29.

236. Quoted (undated) in Gray, *Musical Chairs*, 133.

237. Frederick William Pomeroy (1856–1924) exhibited *The Nymph of Loch Awe* in 1897, in which year it was given to the Tate Gallery by the Chantrey Trust.

on light than on movement.<sup>238</sup> The painter Frances Walker (1930–) has been strongly influenced by the light of the Gàidhealtachd. She spent the early years of her career as an art teacher based in North Uist, as well as spending time on Tiree and Oronsay.

More recently, this volatility, this sense of something which cannot be readily grasped and might run away with you, finds expression in the unexpected artistic arena of the avant-garde work of the Glasgow-born composer James Dillon, for whom it takes on a structural significance:

If you are brought up on the west coast of Scotland, it is impossible to have a rosy view of nature, it is forever in flux.<sup>239</sup>

The influence of this Heraclitean flux, which Dillon observes in Scotland's western seaboard, is not expressed through exploitation of style or by any attempt at illustration. Typically, Dillon responds to the fundamental truths abstracted from experience, rather than their superficial manifestations.

Nonetheless, the superficial manifestations of that environment are impressive enough and, as suggested in the basic geographical facts outlined in this and the ensuing two sections, have their origins in an unimpeachable reality. JP

### I.3.b. THE SEA

[Introduction; Tide-rips and Whirlpools; Marine Vocabulary; Mirages and Rainbows; Coastal Vocabulary; Artistic Responses to the Sea](#)

#### INTRODUCTION

Hó rionn éile, O-hì a-hó! O-hà, ibh o, Hó-ró hù-ó, Hó rionn éile, O-hi a-hó.  
 'Ailein duinn beul a' mhànrain, beul an t-sùgraidh, 'sa chiùil ghàire.  
 Rìgh nam fear! Bu mhór mo ghràdh dhuit. Gu 'n aithnichinn siubhal do bhàta  
 'S tu fhèin a ghaoil air ràmh bràghad. O gur mis' tha air mo sgaradh  
 Gu bheil do leabaidh anns an fheamainn; Gur h-iad na ròin do luchd-faire  
 Do choinlean àrd na reultan geala; 'S do cheòl-fidhle gaoir na mara.  
 Fhaoileag bheaga, fhaoileag bhàn thu! Thig a nall, is inn's do naigheachd.  
 C'àit an d'fhàg thu na fir gheala?'

'Dh'fhàg mi iad 's an eilean mhara, cùl ri cùl, is iad gun anail.'

238. Reproduced in *Joie de Vivre! The Art of Alexander Goudie*, Exhibition Catalogue (Paisley Museum, 2008), Plate 20.

239. Quoted in Andrew Clements, liner note for *James Dillon: The Book of Elements*, NMC, NMC D091.

*O Alan of the brown hair, mouth of tender tones, of mirth and of melodious laughter! Noblest among men, great was my devotion to you. I could recognise the movement of your boat, and you, beloved, at the stroke oar. How it grieves me that your bed is the seaweed; that those who wake you are the seals; your tall candles the shining stars; and your violin music the murmur of the sea. O little gull! O white gull! Come and give me your tidings. Where have you left the dead men? I left them on an island of the sea, back-to-back, and without breath.*<sup>240</sup>

Including islands, Scotland has 13,115 kilometres of coastline (69% of the UK coastline) and, proportionately, by far the greater part of this is on the west coast.<sup>241</sup> In relation to the size of the country, this is one of the most visually complex coastlines in the world, which also affords transport routes that penetrate deep inland. Much of the coastline is mountainous, although the beaches and machair of the Outer Hebrides are in marked contrast. 'Machair' is a Gaelic loan-word in English, useful because it describes a unique coastal ecosystem and habitat, flat, fertile and often including dune systems.<sup>242</sup>

The relationship between sea and land has altered substantially since the last Ice Age, and the evidence for this is retained in many raised beaches. On the other hand, the Western Isles have no raised beaches but have lost much territory to rising sea levels on their Atlantic seaboard.

The Western Isles are also known as *An t-Eilean Fada* 'the long island', and in a secular poem recalled by Fearchar Beaton in 1870 it is stated that all the islands in the Outer Hebrides were joined together:

When I was a 'marcag mullaich,' little summit rider, Heisgeir was the peninsula of Ei, in Benbecula, and joined to South Uist and to North Uist. South Uist was joined to Barra, and North Uist was joined to Harris, and this Long Island was called 'Innis Cat ...'

Beaton was able to recall part of this in its original poetic form, describing nuts being gathered in South Uist:

Chuirinn mo naoi imirean lurach lin  
An gleannan grin Chorradail,  
Is thogainn mo chrioslachan chno  
Eadar dha Thorarnis.

<sup>240</sup> Frances Tolmie, *One Hundred and Five Songs of Occupation from the Western Isles of Scotland*, repr. from *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* 16 (1911) (Vol. IV, Pt 3) (Llanerch, 1997), 204.

<sup>241</sup> The Scottish Environment Statistics (1998).

<sup>242</sup> Ian Armit, *The Archaeology of Skye and the Western Isles* (Edinburgh, 1996), 28–30.

*I would sow my nine lovely rigs of lint  
In the little trim glen of Corradale,  
And I would lift my skirtful of nuts  
Between the two Torarnises.*<sup>243</sup>

Immediately post the last glaciation, these islands were indeed joined together and, though there have not been nut trees on South Uist in modern times, nuts have been found below the peat and immediately above the glacial rocks. The natural inference here is that oral tradition retained a truth which would not have been credited without recent scientific verification. The apparently mythical journey just might have once occurred, recalled across some 5000 years of changing land forms. There is also the legend of a 'Female Warrior' on Hiort (St Kilda), who is said to have been

much addicted to hunting, and that in her time all the space betwixt this isle and that of Harries, was one continued tract of dry land.<sup>244</sup>

It is just conceivable that what we have here is also a racial memory of a geographical reality.

The sea itself is subject to spectacular variations even if wind, weather and light are discounted. By virtue of the number of sea lochs with substantial rivers feeding into them (many sea lochs are defined by these river names), the levels of salinity vary from day to day and tide to tide, sometimes leaving the waters divided by lines so well defined that one can row along them with one oar in brownish sea water, the other in grey.

These sea lochs have complex submarine topographies, making for up-and-down currents which produce convection effects of equal complexity, and the early summer arrival of plankton produces vast areas of relatively calm water by virtue of the oil content. This surface, which is ever-changing even in a flat calm, is additionally affected by winds whose angles of approach are often unpredictable on account of the surrounding mountains. The words *fraoch* and *caitein* mean the ruffling of water by wind, perhaps prefacing a squall. Both words also refer to the ruffling of temper and of vegetation, so that *fraoch* can mean anger and heather, and *caitein* can mean the shining movement in long grass blown by the wind (or to the nap on cloth).

It is not merely the angles of approach as in points of the compass for which the Celtic winds have different colours assigned to them (see II.2.a.), but the angles of verticality, which affect the water. A single down-draught, williwaw or *cnap-gaoithe* has been seen to lay every boat (large and small) on its side at the

<sup>243</sup> Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* II (Edinburgh, 1900 and 1984), 282–83.

<sup>244</sup> Martin Martin, *Voyage to St Kilda* (1697), Chapter 1.



anchorage at Loch Slapin, the gusts then proceeding down the loch in a series of mini-tornadoes and water spouts. The admiralty chart for Mallaig to Canna Harbour includes a special warning in its own window on the chart:

Loch Nevis is a dangerous place for boats in a strong wind as squalls are violent and of uncertain direction.

The frequent presence of high land adjacent to water (fresh or salt) also allows for complex reflections, often clear enough to deceive a camera so that the photograph can be inverted; other times more ruffled and muted so that the sea takes on the colour of the land rather than the sky, appearing brown or green, black or yellow, according to the topography and the season.

#### TIDE-RIPS AND WHIRLPOOLS

The presence of numerous islands in inshore and offshore waters has a considerable effect upon tides and currents – *Coire Bhreacain* (the Corryvreckan whirlpool) between Jura and Scarba is particularly well known and recorded from the time of Fordun,<sup>245</sup> the whirlpool referred to by Adomnán being of the same name but between Rathlin and Ballycastle.<sup>246</sup> *Coire Bhreacain* is the world's third largest whirlpool and, according to the Admiralty's Pilot for the West Coast of Scotland, is

very dangerous and no mariner should attempt the passage without local knowledge.

*Coire Bhreacain* appears to mean 'the cauldron of the plaid', a folk etymology of Adomnán's *Charybdis Brecani* 'St Breacan's whirlpool'. The comparison with a plaid probably refers to the flecked appearance of foam churned up by the tidal race and gave rise to the story that it was there the *Cailleach Bheur*, the old hag of winter, washed her great plaid.<sup>247</sup> There is also a legend of a Norse Breacan, reputedly drowned therein.

The tide rip at Kylerhea occasionally reaches 12 knots, though even its normal 8 knots is too much for many vessels, powered or under sail. There are plans to utilise the Kylerhea tidal flow for electricity generation. Kylerhea, *Caol Reatha*, is associated with the drowning of a Fenian hero.

Some of these tidal features become personified in the mythology.<sup>248</sup> *Coire*

245. W. Skene, ed., *Johannis de Fordun Chronica Gentis Scotorum I* (Edinburgh, 1871), 43.

246. W. Reeves, ed., *Life of St Columba ... written by Adarnan* (Edinburgh, 1874), 251.

247. Marian McNeill, *The Silver Bough II* (Glasgow, 1959), 20.

248. See J. Borsje, 'The Movement of Water as Symbolised by Monsters in Early Irish texts', summary only in Black, Gillies and Ó Maolalaigh, eds, *Celtic Connections* (East Linton, 1999), 497–98.



*Coire Bhreacain*. Photo by Walter Baxter

*Bhreacain* itself is sometimes simply *A' Chailleach* 'the hag'. The personification is particularly well known at the narrows leading out of Loch Etive, *Éiteag* or 'the little horrid one' being a supernatural being associated with the legends and in particular the violent squalls of the loch itself. The Falls of Lora themselves get their name from Gaelic *labhra* 'noisy or talkative', and at the strongest tide rips these seawater falls are indeed noisy. That, however, is the full extent of the personification.<sup>249</sup> In rendering *labhra* as Lora, the description has been turned into a person or goddess, partly encouraged by James Macpherson's use of the name Lora in his poem 'Cath-Loda'.<sup>250</sup>

Care, therefore, has to be taken with such names. The popular understanding of Lochs Hourne and Nevis as meaning 'the lochs of Hell and Heaven' (due to the similarity in sound with the words *iutharna* and *nèamh*, respectively) should, if anything, have its designations reversed. Hourne most probably derives from *Subh-bheàrna* 'the berry gap', the stream from which issues into the loch; Nevis probably comes from *neimh* 'venom'. Even the revered Watson is not beyond the disingenuous when, in apparent support of this interpretation, he offers a quotation without explaining its context:

249. As was already understood by R. A. Smith in his *Loch Etive and the Sons of Uisnach* (London, 1879), 52.

250. James Macpherson, *Temora* (Dublin, 1763), 246–47.



Gleann Nibheis, gleann na gcloch,  
 Gleann am bi an gart anmoch;  
 Gleann fada fiadhaich, fàs,  
 Sluagh bradach an mhìoghnaìs.

*Glen Nevis, glen of stones,  
 a glen where corn ripens late;  
 a long, wild, waste glen,  
 with thievish folk of evil habit.*

The original context is that of a group of satirical poems in which all but one glen is described in negative terms, so the reference has no particular value in relation to Glen Nevis and cannot be used to support the etymology.<sup>251</sup>

In the case of *Sruth nam Fear Gorma* ‘the stream/current/tide of the blue men’, the appearance of the sea has become personified and mythologised. The stream itself is a passage of troubled water between *Na h-Eileanan Seunta* (The Shiant Islands) and Lewis.<sup>252</sup> It is notorious and was possibly a contributing factor in the drowning of Ian Garve MacLeod of Scalpay in the 17th century.<sup>253</sup> Also associated with this passage of water is the drowning of Allan Morrison in 1786, lamented in *Ailein duinn, a nì 's a nàire* ‘Brown-haired Allan, alas and alack’.<sup>254</sup> The blue men were described as one of the three divisions of fallen angels, the other two being the fairies and the *fir chlis* or dancing men (i.e. the Northern Lights – see I.3.a.). J. G. Campbell reports an account by someone who had seen the blue men, one with a long grey face (*aodann fada glas*).<sup>255</sup>

The complexity of the tides in the Western Isles is described in some detail by Martin Martin.<sup>256</sup> Perhaps Gaelic-speaking Colin McLaurin’s memories of Kilmodan and Kilfinan were a partial prompt for his work on tidal forces as expressed in the McLaurin series and in his dissertation on the tides of 1740.<sup>257</sup> Certainly, he was not loath to give the observation of nature its due, stating it is

251. W. Watson, *The Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1926 and 1993), 123 and 471–72. Watson’s version of the Gaelic, which is given here, differs from its declared source in G. Henderson, ‘Aonghus nan Aoir’, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* XXVI, 463, but does not affect the reading in any material way.

252. A. Nicolson, *Sea Room – An Island Life* (London, 2001), 38–39.

253. For an account and transcription of one of the associated laments, see John Purser, *Scotland’s Music* (Edinburgh, 2007), 149.

254. J. Campbell and F. Collinson, *Hebridean Folksongs I* (Oxford, 1969), 44–49 and 161–62. Also A. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2005), 48–51.

255. Ronald Black, ed., *The Gaelic Otherworld* (Edinburgh, 2005), 107.

256. Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (London, 1716, and Edinburgh, 1981), 44–47.

257. This was republished in MacLaurin’s *Treatise of Fluxions* in 1742.

preferable to follow cautiously and slowly the traces of nature itself, having been thoroughly informed by the less fruitful success of so many men. For if we can reduce phenomena to certain general principles, and subject their properties to calculation, we will grasp as a result of these steps some part of the true philosophy; this will indeed be defective or incomplete, if the causes of the principles themselves are not revealed: however, so great is the beauty in the nature of things that that part is far superior to the finest inventions of very acute men.<sup>258</sup>

#### MARINE VOCABULARY

Something of that beauty is to be found in the rich vocabulary which the sea enjoys in Gaelic. *Caitein* is ‘cat’s-paws’; *cathadh fairge* (literally ‘ocean drift’) means ‘spindrift’; *marcach-sìne* (literally ‘storm riders’) has a similar meaning; *làthach* is the ‘scum’ on water; *siaban ròd* is ‘foamy spray’ but *siaban nan tonn mòra* is the ‘drifting of spray’ from waves in a storm in the same manner as dry sand drifts in a wind in the maram grass. *Sluaisreadh* is an onomatopoeic word for the sound of the sea; *corra slugadh* describes the under-tow from the retreat of a large wave from the shore in terms of ‘swallowing’, but *corra-shùghadh* describes the back-swell from the shore of a large wave, or a wave trough. *Cladh* means a ‘hollow’ between two waves but carries with it many associations, from ‘burial’ to ‘spawning’. *Udlanachd* is a ‘trough in the sea’ and *marbhanach* is a ‘big, slow roller’ that never breaks or crests, experienced in calm weather. *Logart* means ‘deep, unbroken waves’; stormy waves are described as though they were burning embers – *tha na tuinn nan caoir* – and in such conditions the sea is *molach*, literally ‘hairy’.<sup>259</sup> The path of a vessel through the sea is the *gorm-rathad* ‘the blue/green road’.

But the sea does not always have to be menacing. Sunlight on water is described as the *gair-theas*, literally ‘heat-shimmering’; at night time, the sea has its own light, the *soillse-bianain* or *coinnle-brianan* (amongst its many Gaelic names), the phosphorescence caused by phytoplankton, which can be seen frequently in the relatively warm Hebridean waters, even in mid-winter. The following lines from ‘Creagan Beaga’ by Sorley MacLean describe the light on the sea at night:

Stràcadh na soillse air clàr mara  
 o Rubha na Fainge sìnte tuath,  
 agus an sruth an Caol na h-Àirde  
 a’ ruith gu deas le lannir luaith.

258. I. Tweddle, ed. and trans., *MacLaurin’s Physical Dissertations* (London, 2007), 99.

259. Many of these terms, and others relating to fishing, wind, weather and the seasons, can be found in George MacLeod’s *Muir is Tìr* (Stornoway, n.d. [2005]).

*The light levels the sea flatness  
from Rubha na Fainge stretched north,  
and the current in Caol na h-Àirde  
is running south with swift glitter.<sup>260</sup>*

The word *lainnir* has also the more specific meaning of the glitter caused by oil on water – the oil in such a case being from plankton or an abundance of mackerel.

#### MIRAGES AND RAINBOWS

Light is frequently bent in maritime situations. Islands seem to float, boats seem to be divided in two or are upside down, gaps open up in land masses where no gaps should be, the Fata Morgana inverts the landscape and, in certain conditions, the apparent heights and distances of well-known landmarks can be substantially affected. These are sufficiently common phenomena in the Hebrides to require explanation in a local newspaper's nature column.<sup>261</sup> A dramatic example of this occurred in the same conditions which produced a white rainbow (see I.3.a.). The sea mist so distorted the angle of the light that, showing over the mist, the top of the Island of Rum (3000 feet in height and eight miles distant) appeared to be little more than a mile away and was more in the order of 8000 feet in height. This was not a simple illusion. The light was so dramatically bent that the line of vision had to be substantially raised in order to see the top of the island. Its normal appearance from many angles was well known, it being used as a sea-mark in line with the point of Strath.<sup>262</sup> The phenomenon sometimes allows land to be viewed that is normally below the horizon and may have aided early exploration of the north Atlantic.

Commonly seen is the *fadadh-cruaidh* or *gath-doineann*, the dog-tooth rainbow associated with storms. In the magnificent *Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill* (see also IV.2.e.), Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair describes Clanranald's birlinn setting forth on St Brigid's Day, with a dog-tooth rainbow and the cold wind that precedes a shower. St Brigid's Day is 1 February, so the weather described here is wonderfully appropriate:

260. Sorley MacLean, *From Wood to Ridge* (London, 1991), 238–39.

261. Chris Mitchell, 'Floating Islands and Inverted Ships in the Minch', *West Highland Free Press* (6 October 2006), 17; and 'Kelp, Tides and Illusions in the Sound of Harris', *West Highland Free Press* (19 October 2007), 21.

262. This was a personal experience shared with John-Angus MacKinnon and Martin MacKinnon. A fine mist will create a white rainbow by diffraction, causing an overlap of all the colour bands. It is a rare phenomenon but is not uncommonly seen from aircraft.

'Ghrian a' faoisgneadh gu h-òrbhuidh,  
Às a mogal,  
Chinn an speur gu dùldaidh dòite,  
Làn de dh'oglachd;

Dh'fhàs i tonn-ghorm, tiugh, tàrr-lachdann,  
Odhar, iargalt',  
Chinn gach dath bhiodh ann am breacan  
Air an iarmailt,

Fadadh-cruaidh san àird' an iar oirr',  
Stoirm 'na coltas –  
'S neòil shiùbhhlach aig gaoith gan riasladh,  
Fuaradh-frois' oirr'.

*As the sun burst yellow-golden  
Out of her husk,  
The sky grew overcast and singed,  
Truly ugly;*

*It grew wave-blue, thick, dun-bellied,  
Sallow, surly,  
With every colour in a tartan plaid  
Spread on the sky,*

*And a bit of rainbow over in the west,  
It looked like storm –  
Scudding clouds being torn apart by wind  
And showery squalls.<sup>263</sup>*

Perhaps the sky envisaged here is a nacreous one (see I.3.a.). In this context, it is worth observing that the Italian term *Fata Morgana*, usually referring to a mirage in the Straits of Messina, is derived from the Celtic fairy world of Morgan le Fay, the fairy half sister of King Arthur. Other relatively frequent phenomena include the omega sun and green flash at sunsets and sunrises. These, though experienced throughout the world, are much more likely to be seen in the conditions prevalent in the west of Scotland, with clear air and ocean horizons, along with the common effect of the Gulf Stream forming a layer of warm air

263. Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, 'Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill', in Ronald Black, *An Lasair* (Edinburgh, 2001), 216–17. Mac Maighstir Alasdair is reputedly buried at Kilmory, Arisaig, where there is an armorial panel from 1641 with a carving of a birlinn – see D. Rixson, *The West Highland Galley* (Edinburgh, 1998), Plate 15.

trapped under a colder air stream.<sup>264</sup> In addition, the higher latitude extends the period in which it may be seen, as sunrises and sunsets are more prolonged (see I.3.a.). Perhaps for this reason, Jules Verne invented a Scottish legend about the green flash giving the viewer extraordinary powers of discrimination.<sup>265</sup> No source for such a legend has ever been identified.

#### COASTAL VOCABULARY

Apart from the vocabulary associated with the sea, there are many words for different coastal landforms. A *morbhach* is land liable to sea flooding – there is just such a place, so named locally, at the head of Loch Slapin. In Skye, *leac* means a ‘ledge of rock jutting out from the foot or base of a cliff on the foreshore and covered by the sea at flood tide’.<sup>266</sup> *Geodha* is a ‘deep sea cleft’, *glomhas* a ‘chink or chasm’; *stiogha* is a ‘narrow cleft leading to the sea’; *carr* is a ‘projecting shelf of rock’; *carrraig* a ‘rock jutting into the sea’ and *sgor* is a ‘concealed rock jutting into the sea’. *Stac* is the same as the English *stack*, *iola* is a ‘fishing rock that covers at high tide’ and *stallachan* are ‘rocks by the sea’. *Sgeir* is a ‘reef which covers at spring tides’, *bodha* a ‘submerged rock which may occasionally uncover’ but, in some districts, means a ‘rock that is never uncovered’ and can be deep enough to be invisible at all tides. *Fadhlaichean* are ‘sandy fords’ that can be crossed at low tide, hence *Beinn na Fadhlá* (Benbecula), and *faoileann* (also *fadhlaínn*) is applied to a ‘raised beach or spit of gravelly land leading out into a sea-loch’. A ‘patch of good land from which the sea is heard murmuring’ is known as *gead a’ bhorbhain*.<sup>267</sup>

In ‘Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill’, Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair describes the necessary attributes of the crew to operate in such waters. The larger part of the poem is given over to such descriptions (see IV.2.e.). Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair and An Clàrsair Dall (whose wonderfully bawdy ‘Féil nan Crann’ describes an all-female crew) provide us with powerfully visual and down-to-earth poetic responses to the sea; but there were also poets who had no love of it, such as Aonghus Mór Mac Dòmhnaill (d.1296), and who specifically mentions *Coire Bhreacain*.<sup>268</sup>

264. Chris Mitchell, ‘Butterflies, Mirages and the Illusive “Green” Flash’, *West Highland Free Press* (12 June 2009), 19.

265. Jules Verne, *Le Rayon Vert* (1882; publ. in English as *The Green Ray* in 1883).

266. Alexander Forbes, *Place-Names of Skye* (Paisley, 1923), 233.

267. This place-name is not on any map but is close to Torrín in the parish of Strath, Skye, beside *Dùn Beag*.

268. W. McLeod, *Divided Gaels* (Oxford, 2004), 162–65.

#### ARTISTIC RESPONSES TO THE SEA

The response of the painters has been very different, though powerful in its own way. Aonghas Moireasdan (Angus Morrison 1872–1942) might also be described as down-to-earth were not his paintings almost exclusively of the sea and its traffic, around where he lived at Ness in Lewis. For him, recognition of the geographical reality of his environment was an everyday fact of life, but one which he wished to record, and did record in his own lively way, having had no training in art whatever, led only by his observant eye. His interest was, however, primarily in ships and boats – a subject discussed in IV.2.e.

The photographer and naturalist Norman Morrison (1869–1949), from Shawbost in Lewis, could also describe the sea in words:

Visibility was low, but for a moment or two the sun peeped through a rift in the mad racing clouds, revealing in sharp detail a wide expanse of huge, darkish-blue combers, capped with roaring cataracts of snowy-white brilliancy – the white and blue competing, as it were, for supremacy. One moment I imagined that the blue was going to gain the ascendancy, but the next moment a cloud of spindrift rose and swept along the face of the deep like a shower of minute icicles robing a large patch of the sea in an ashen pale garment of exquisite hue.<sup>269</sup>

The two artists most closely associated with the sea, in a west-coast, Gaelic-speaking environment, are William McTaggart and Jack Yeats, one Highland, the other Irish. Both returned again and again to paint the wind and the sea. Both placed their figures in a land-, sea- and skyscape, which for the most part dominates the human element, though they were also ready enough to show the strength and determination of mankind in their paintings of boats and fishermen, often with historic or legendary associations, as in McTaggart’s *The Coming of St Columba* (1895) or *Emigrants Leaving the Hebrides* (1883–1889), or Jack Yeats’s *The Island Funeral* (1923) or *Queen Maeve walked upon this Strand* (1950; overpage).

It is a journey into nature, epitomised in Jack Yeats’s case by his great painting *Two Travellers* (1942), in which the two men briefly greet each other on a wild road in a wild landscape, the colours of which seem to invade their clothing. In his many paintings of the Atlantic seaboard, such as *By Streedagh Strand* (1940) or *The Violence of the Dawn* (1951), Yeats’s figures are subsumed into the seascape. McTaggart’s own output equally reflects that journey into nature:

‘A Cool June Day, Machrihanish’ (1903) is from Bay Voyach, the view almost exactly as in ‘Machrihanish, Bay Voyach’ painted nine years earlier.

269. N. Morrison, *Hebridean Lore and Romance* (1936), 152.





Jack Yeats, *Queen Maeve Walked Upon This Strand* (1950). National Galleries of Scotland

In the 1903 painting, however, there is no human presence, no ethereal children paddling or fishing or basking in the sun. There is nothing but the elemental, timeless landscape.<sup>270</sup>

These last paintings, sometimes with almost vestigial figures, other times unpeopled, have provoked differing responses. J. M. Gibbon noted ‘the emerging of another, bleaker view’ in *The White Surf* (1908). But referring to the same painting, James Caw maintained,

It is, however, the wild beauty and tumultuous splendour of the sun-touched windy sky and stormy sea and not their sinister import and tragic possibilities, which hold the eye and appeal to the imagination.<sup>271</sup>

Kvaerne agrees with Caw, remarking that

McTaggart wished to portray stormy weather hitting the Atlantic shore of Kintyre with full force, but he did so with an elemental empathy that should not be mistaken for existential despair.<sup>272</sup>

270. P. Kvaerne, *Singing Songs of the Scottish Heart: William McTaggart 1835–1910*, 228, 232.

271. Both quoted in Kvaerne, *Singing Songs of the Scottish Heart*, 233 and 236.

272. Kvaerne, *Singing Songs of the Scottish Heart*, 236.



William McTaggart, *The White Surf* (1908).  
Fife Council Museums, Kirkcaldy Museum and Art Gallery

That ultimate subservience to nature – for it cannot be described as a mere accommodation or acceptance in the work of either artist – is an expression of a profound reality. It is an awareness of the fragility of one’s own significance and may well have relevance in other contexts such as that considered in [II.1.a](#). There is a particularly intriguing example in *Immacallamh in Dá Thuarad* ‘the colloquy of the two sages’, which dates from between the Viking invasions and the 9th-century *Sanas Cormaic* ‘Cormac’s glossary’. The young druid Néde is a son of the druid Adnae. Néde, while studying science in Scotland, is described going to the sea:

Luid laa and in gilla co mbúi for brú mara, ar bá baile fallsigthe éicsi dogrés lasna filedu for brú usci.

*One day the lad fared forth till he was on the brink of the sea, for then poets deemed that on the brink of water it was always a place of revelation of science.*<sup>273</sup>

JP

273. Whitley Stokes, ‘Colloquy of the Two Sages’, *Revue Celtique* XXVI (1905), 9.



## I.3.c. GEOLOGY

[Introduction](#); [Scottish Geologists](#); [Leading Geological Researchers of the 19th Century in Scotland](#); [Geology and Aesthetic Responses](#); [International Significance](#); [Geology of the Islands](#); [Vocabulary and Function](#); [Gems and Healing Stones](#); [Geography and Sound](#); [Conclusion](#)

## INTRODUCTION

Heaven's arch is oft their roof, the pleasant shed  
 Of oak and plane oft serves them for a bed;  
 To suffer want, soft pleasure to despise,  
 Run over panting mountains crown'd with ice,  
 Rivers o'ercome, the vastest lakes appal,  
 Being to themselves oars, steerers, ship and all,  
 Is their renown. A brave all-daring race,  
 Courageous, prudent, doth this climate grace ...<sup>274</sup>

Thus William Drummond in the voice of Caledonia addressed King Charles I on his arrival to be crowned in Scotland on 15 June 1633. Caledonia's description of the Scots immediately relates the people to the landscape and its associated climate. We shall see below that this relationship was also commented upon by the early geologists in Scotland.

Scotland and Ireland – especially in their residual Gaelic-speaking areas – are geologically complex. Much of the west of Scotland is composed of ancient rock, Cambrian and pre-Cambrian, yet it is a young landscape, heavily glaciated and eroded, and featuring enormous fault lines, notably the Great Glen through which the Scottish engineer Thomas Telford constructed the Caledonian Canal, bisecting the country from east to west (see [III.3.d.](#)).

Besides corries, U-shaped glens and deep sea lochs, there is also the striking evidence of glacial lochs, especially the former shorelines in the form of the 'parallel roads' of Glens Roy, Gloy and Spean. Drumlins and eskers, and related types of glacial moraine, are common throughout Scotland – corrie, drumlin and esker being derived from Gaelic or Irish *coire*, *droimnín* and *eiscir/eisgír*, respectively (see [III.3.d.](#) in relation to roads).<sup>275</sup>

The massive landslides on the Trotternish peninsula of the Isle of Skye are the largest in the British Isles and their landforms were the subject of a major art project organised by Angus Farquhar, involving lighting, sound installations, live

274. W. Ward, ed., *The Poems of William Drummond II* (London, n.d.), 80–81.

275. J. B. Sissons, 'Quaternary', in G. Y. Craig, ed., *Geology of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1983), 399–424.

performance and a book of essays.<sup>276</sup> The sea cliffs of Hiort (St Kilda) and Mingulay are the highest in the British Isles and there are also areas of spectacular Tertiary igneous rocks which have intruded their way through Triassic and Jurassic sediments, the latter yielding dinosaur footprints and fossilised bones. The parish of Strath on Skye has the biggest vertical exposure of Jurassic rock in the British Isles. The geological substructure is quite simply ever-present and commands visual attention. It is not surprising then that the science of geology owes much to Scotland and not least Gaelic-speaking Scotland, where the landforms are particularly complex and a high proportion of the bedrock is exposed.

The subtitle of Malcom Rider's highly informative book *Hutton's Arse is 3 billion years of extraordinary geology in Scotland's Northern Highlands*.<sup>277</sup> Rider is not alone in making such claims:

For its size Scotland has remarkable geological diversity reflecting a long and eventful history of rock formation ... Few countries exhibit a more extraordinary variety of geology and scenery than Scotland. Grand rugged mountains, rocky islands, fjord-like lochs, heather-clad moorlands, broad firths and straths are inexorably tied to their underlying bedrocks, to the character of the rocks themselves, their soils, the structure of the local and regional geology, and their geological history. What is visible today is a remarkably varied and complex landscape in which the geological framework has been gradually modified by weather, erosion and in most recent times by the work of ice and man.<sup>278</sup>

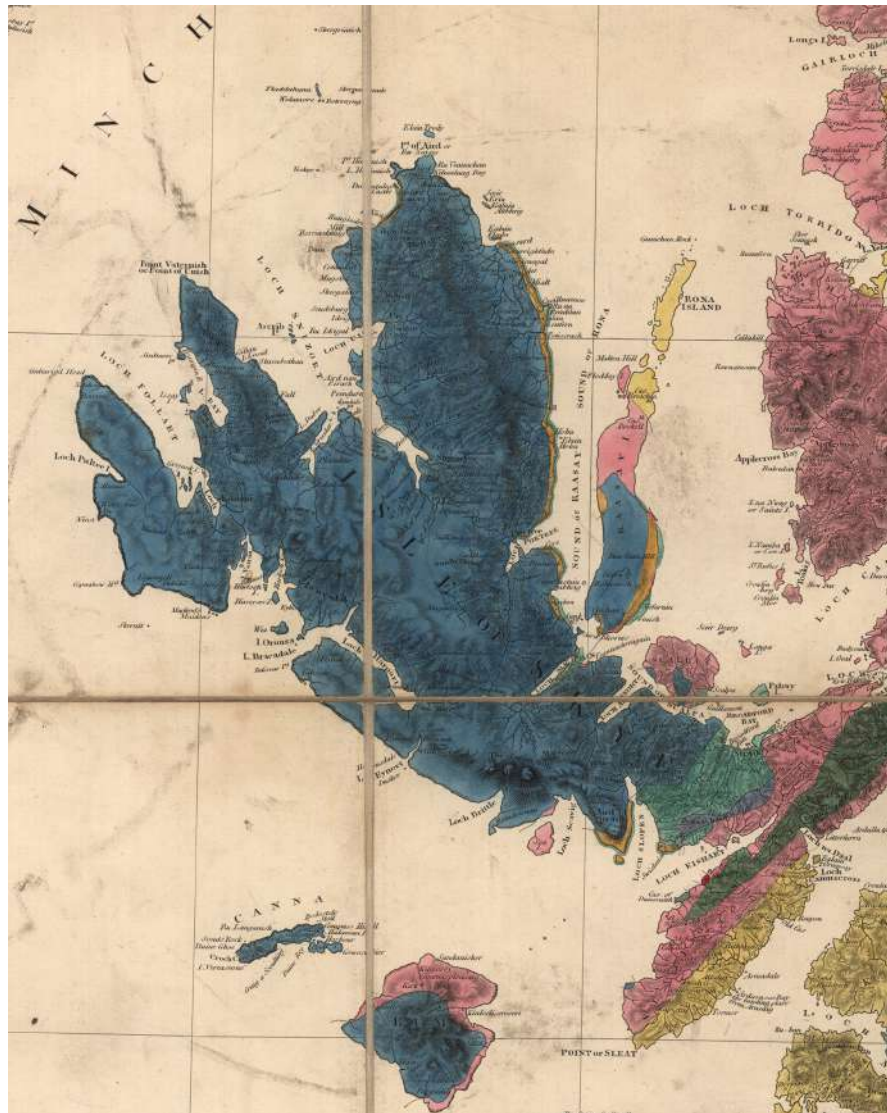
## SCOTTISH GEOLOGISTS

Those realities must surely have been a stimulus to the pioneering work of so many Scots in the subject. James Hutton (1726–1797) is regarded by many as the father of modern geology and the first to put forward an igneous origin for many of the earth's rocks. He was followed by John Playfair (1748–1819) who clarified Hutton's theories and added much on fluvial and glacial erosion. Both men were highly influential in the subsequent work of the Swiss geologist, Louis-Albert Necker de Saussure (1786–1861), who travelled extensively in Scotland, learnt Gaelic and retired to the Isle of Skye. John MacCulloch (1773–1835), of Galloway stock, continued the work of Maskelyne and Playfair and paid particular attention to the Western Islands of Scotland, writing in the form of letters to Sir Walter

276. Angus Farquhar, *The Storr: Unfolding landscape* (Edinburgh, 2005).

277. M. Rider, *Hutton's Arse: 3 billion years of extraordinary geology in Scotland's Northern Highlands* (Rogart, 2014).

278. 'Geology', in J. and J. Keay, eds., *Collins Encyclopaedia of Scotland* (London, 1994), 415 and 417.



John MacCulloch, *Geological Map of Scotland* (1840). National Library of Scotland

Scott. T. F. Jamieson in the 1860s was a leading authority on glaciation and was the discoverer of the Postglacial Climatic Optimum.<sup>279</sup> James D. Forbes's (1809–1868) seminal glacial studies were in part inspired by a visit to the Isle of Skye, his paper *The Topography and Geology of the Cuchullin Hills* (given to the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1845) even being published in a tourist brochure of

279. Frank Mitchell, *Reading the Irish Landscape* (Rathmines, 1986), 65.

the 1860s. Sharing a place in the same publication were engravings by Horatio McCulloch, including one of Loch Coruisk, which might well have served to illustrate Forbes's paper.<sup>280</sup>

#### LEADING GEOLOGICAL RESEARCHERS OF THE 19TH CENTURY IN SCOTLAND

James Nicol (1810–1879), Sir Roderick Murchison (1792–1871), Sir Charles Lyell (1797–1875), Hugh Miller (1802–1856) and Sir Archibald Geikie (1835–1924) all furthered these studies. They were followed by Sir Charles Wyvill Thomson (1830–1882) and Scottish-based geologist Charles Lapworth (1842–1920). Benjamin Peach (1842–1926) and John Horne's (1848–1928) fieldwork backed up Lapworth's vital discovery in Assynt that older rocks had been thrust over younger ones. The Scottish Highlands (notably the regions of Glencoe, Ardnamurchan and the Inner Hebrides) also provided evidence, through the work of Sir Edward Bailey (1881–1965), for the presence of calderas (large volcanic craters); and it was in Edinburgh that Arthur Holmes's (1890–1965) seminal theory of plate tectonics was first published in 1944.

#### GEOLOGY AND AESTHETIC RESPONSES

The visual drama of the geology not only made discoveries possible, it prompted an aesthetic response – a response sometimes directly related to the culture of the inhabitants. The most famous is the explanation of the Giant's Causeway, known as *Clochán na bhFomhóraigh*. The legend was prompted by the similarity of the basalt pillars of Antrim in Ireland and Staffa in Scotland, part of the same volcanic flow, hidden by the North Channel but revealed on either side. The causeway was said to have been built by Fionn mac Cumhaill when challenged to fight a Scottish giant, who later tore up the causeway, doubting his chances. Another story is recounted by Alexander Carmichael of two giants breaking off a huge stone from the parent rock – the stone is called *Clach Mhòr Leum nan Caorach* – to make a bridge over a gully so their horses could cross over and, in the night, being defeated in their aim by a subtle enemy in a magic mist. The narrator's grandson objected to the fantasy but was made to look foolish when told the giants' names were Frost and Ice and the enemy was Thaw.<sup>281</sup>

The connection between the study of geology and an aesthetic appreciation of the consequent landforms in Scotland goes back at least as far as the pioneering work of Geikie.<sup>282</sup> He was no mean artist in his own right, as evidenced by his

280. W. Keddie, *Highland Route V: Oban to the Isle of Skye* (Glasgow, n.d., but post-1865): Appendix.

281. Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* I (Edinburgh, 1900), xxxii.

282. Archibald Geikie, *The Scenery of Scotland* (1st edn, London, 1865; 3rd edn, London 1901.

notebooks and drawings kept at the museum at Haselmere where he retired.

Geikie was possibly influenced, however, by the work of James Beattie who, having described the 'Long tracts of mountainous desert', 'the grotesque and ghastly appearance of such a landscape by the light of the moon' and other such observations, wrote (in 1776) of the people and culture of the area:

their style must have been better suited to their circumstances. And so we find in fact that their music is. The wildest irregularity appears in its composition: the expression is warlike, and melancholy, and approaches even to the terrible.<sup>283</sup>

In Geikie's mind, too, the landscape affected the human environment and culture, including language and music:

If natural scenery has affected national temperament, this influence cannot fail to have made itself manifest in the literature of a country. That it is traceable in the poetry of the different districts of Scotland cannot, I think, be doubted. One of the characteristic features of Highland poetry, and even more, of Highland music, is their melancholy cadence ... Amid all the changes of human feeling and action, we seem to hear the solemn surge of the Atlantic breakers, or the moan of the wind across the desolate moore, or the sigh of the pine-woods, or the dash of the waterfalls and the roar of the floods, as the rain-clouds burst among the glens. We are reminded that the poetry was born among the mountains, that the bards were hunters and cragsmen, familiar with the corries where red deer pasture, and with precipices where eagles build.<sup>284</sup>

Geikie goes on to give an intelligent response to Macpherson's *Ossian* in a chapter entitled 'Influence of the Physical Features of Scotland upon the People' and which develops its theme through historical, linguistic and agricultural surveys expressed in language beautifully attuned to its purpose.

The Gaelic-speaking philosopher, Daniel Dewar (1788–1867; see VI.2.) had drawn out similar inferences from the physical environment, contrasting the more rugged landscape of the Scottish Gaels with the more undulating landscape of the Irish Gaels, suggesting that these have an influence on character and thought.<sup>285</sup>

That influence operates in many ways. Robert Moyes Adam's photograph 'Loch Ossian', taken in 1933, is a

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283. A. Beattie, *Essay on Poetry and Music* (Edinburgh, 1776), 479–83.

284. Geikie, *The Scenery of Scotland*, 436–37.

285. Daniel Dewar, *Observations on the Character, Customs, and Superstitions of the Irish* (London, 1812), 29–30.

recurring subject ... Hill and Adamson, George Washington Wilson, James Valentine, Robert Moyes Adam *et al* ... had all ... touched upon the sites and symbols of the Ossian story ... in many ways the story is both a mythic representation and its own myth.<sup>286</sup>

It was a story taken up by Calum Colvin (see I.1.b. and I.1.c.) who associates the image of the mythic hero with native rock, stone sculpture and rock art, over which aqueous lines extend from his facial hair in much the same way as beards and hair become extended and intertwined in the artwork of the Book of Kells.<sup>287</sup>

Geikie was far from being alone in such appreciation. Other Scottish geologists such as Murchison (who travelled with Geikie in the Glenquoich district)<sup>288</sup> and Sir Andrew Ramsay (1814–1891) – for whom Geikie wrote a sympathetic obituary – were equally open to consideration of the landscape as a source of aesthetic pleasure as well as scientific investigation; as for James Nicol, he published a book whose title, *The Geology and Scenery of the North of Scotland*, speaks for itself.<sup>289</sup> Even in a book whose aim was primarily biographical, Henry Coates lays his foundations in geology. Describing the Highland fault near which the subject of his biography was born and lived, he continues:

The difference in rock structure dominates the romantic features of the landscape, the nature of the soil, and the character of plant and animal life, as well as the attributes of the human inhabitants.<sup>290</sup>

'The Perthshire Naturalist', Charles MacIntosh of Inver (1839–1922) was the subject of Coates's biography. His employment was as a postman, but his interests covered everything from music to geology and he was a close friend of Beatrix Potter.<sup>291</sup> He was among the first to establish that a terrace near Inver, formerly thought to have been a glacial lake, was in reality made up of river material.<sup>292</sup> MacIntosh had no training in geology, but he was by nature observant and also appreciative.

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286. T. Normand, *Scottish Photography: A History* (Edinburgh, 2007), 19 and Fig. 7.

287. T. Normand, *Calum Colvin, Oisein, Bhoighean de Sheann Bhàrdachd – Ossian Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (Edinburgh, 2003), 10–28.

288. E. C. Ellice, *Place-Names of Glengarry and Glenquoich and Their Associations* (London, 1898 and 1931; Marsh Barton, 1999), 95–96 and facing illustration by Prosper Mérimée.

289. J. Nicol, *The Geology and Scenery of the North of Scotland* (1866).

290. H. Coates, *A Perthshire Naturalist: Charles Macintosh of Inver* (London, 1923), 4.

291. Taylor and Rodger, eds, *A Fascinating Acquaintance, Charles McIntosh & Beatrix Potter: Their Common Bond in the Natural History of Dunkeld Area* (Perth, 1989).

292. Coates, *A Perthshire Naturalist*, 213.





*Sidh Chailleann*. Photo © Seán Purser

Native music was indeed being cultivated alongside the native landscape, sometimes more intimately and dramatically than one might expect – or, indeed, than was intended. On 24 October 1774 on Sidh Chailleann (Schiehallion, in Perthshire – literally ‘the fairy hill of the Caledonians’), at 2090ft above sea level, Duncan Robertson’s fiddle was lost when the bothy on the north face went on fire during the celebrations – assisted by a keg of whisky – of the completion of Nevil Maskelyne’s determination of the gravitational pull of the mountain. Maskelyne arranged for a replacement fiddle to be sent up from London and Robertson composed ‘The Yellow London Lady’ in praise of the new instrument, it being as yet unvarnished.<sup>293</sup> It was from Maskelyne’s calculations on the mountain that the earth’s density was first reliably measured.

The attitudes of these earlier geologists contrast starkly with some of the actions of present-day geologists, for instance at Clach Oscar (with edges recently hammered off), and on the approach to Boreraig and Suisnish (all in Skye), where the fine conglomerate formations have been very recently drilled for core samples right beside the path. Clach Oscar is named after the son of the Celtic hero Oisean and the stone is reputed on the one hand to have been thrown by him and, on the other, to have been carried up in her apron by the *cailleach* of *Beinn na Caillich* and hurled down at Oscar from the top – which would explain why it is in three parts, the smallest of which is a rock gong.<sup>294</sup>

293. John Muir Trust, *Journal & News* (Summer 2000), 17–18.

294. Otta Swire, *Skye the Island and Its Legends* (Glasgow, 1961), 223, and local tradition collected by the author. The identification of the smallest of the three parts of the rock as a rock gong was made by John Purser in ‘Island Rock Gongs’, *Scottish Islands Explorer* 2, Issue 2 (March/April 2001), 7–8.

#### INTERNATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

Not only were Scottish geologists in the forefront of the early development of the subject, the country itself, and specifically the Highlands, have been of fundamental importance internationally, providing the English language with various terms. Strontium comes from Strontian – in Gaelic *Sròn an t-Sithein* ‘the nose/headland of the fairy dwelling’) in Ardnamurchan. Caledonian, like the Welsh Cambrian, has pan-European geological meaning. There are also more localised systems which have well-established international reputations such as Lewisian and Torridonian, and specific rock types such as Kentallenite, an olivine from Kentallen on Loch Linnhe. That these names have taken on such significance furth of Scotland is partly owing to the fact that many of the earliest geologists were Scottish, but that said, in more recent times the discovery of oil and gas in Scottish coastal waters has made a huge impact:

No small country in the world has been the focus of so much geological attention in the last twenty years.<sup>295</sup>

These topographical riches have their equivalents in the Gaelic language, notably for mountains and also for boggy landscape (see [V.1](#)). While it is possible to render these terms in English without involving too much repetition, to a walker or climber the Gaelic has much more precise connotations in terms of the likely terrain. For the intimate relationship between landforms and human forms see [III.1.a](#).

#### GEOLOGY OF THE ISLANDS

The Island of Skye is a particularly good example of the significance of geology in terms of what is seen. Being large, visible from long distances on account of its mountains, and being centrally placed in the Hebridean archipelago, it is widely known.<sup>296</sup> But the drama of the island is based on its geology, for it is a meeting place for an astonishing variety of rock types ranging from the Pre-Cambrian Lewisian metamorphic gneisses, and Durness limestones, through Cambrian, Ordovician, Triassic and Jurassic sediments, to a series of major Tertiary igneous events, followed by massive glaciations, erosions and

295. G. Y. Craig, *Geology of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1983), xiii.

296. Some, for whom maps are orientated on the basis of population or political dominance, may question the description of Skye as ‘centrally placed’. But in terms of its general situation on the globe, it is visible from a wide variety of directions and from considerable distances and is centrally placed within the Gàidhealtachd. See, for instance, Fig. 1.6 ‘An Island-centred Geography’, in Ian Armit, *The Archaeology of Skye and the Western Isles* (Edinburgh, 1996), 7.



landslides.<sup>297</sup> The Red and Black Cuillin are situated next door to grey limestone, white and green marble, orange sandstone, greenish-blue dolerite (hence the name Blàbheinn) and coffee-coloured peat. The results are spectacular to say the least, and since all of these events are also impinged upon by the sea in equally complex forms, the coastal features are equally spectacular:

The presence, therefore, of the Lower Tertiary igneous rocks, the Lower Palaeozoic thrust sheets, and the Mesozoic sedimentary rocks, has made Skye a classic area for field studies.<sup>298</sup>

From a house in Skye, it is possible to select a round-topped, a flat-topped or a jagged mountain for a day's climb without having to use a car. The coast can similarly be selected for mud, gravel, sand, 'coral'<sup>299</sup> and rocky beaches; for limestone caves, fossiliferous rocks, shales, granites, marble or glaciated gabbro; and the considerable tidal range can be exploited to enjoy the whole range of different species at different levels. The massive lava sheets in Strathaird and North Skye are described as *leacach*, and the spectacular basalt columnar formation at Trotternish is popularly known as 'the kilt rock'. These, and the basalt columns round *Uamh an Òir* at Bornesketaig in Kilmuir parallel the columns at Fingal's Cave and the Giant's Causeway.

Similar variety can be found on the Island of Rum, but the western seaboard of Scotland is not, as it were, unvaried in its variety. There are areas of geological uniformity – the Lewisian gneisses of the Outer Hebrides, for example. But in all cases, the extensive glaciation, the different coastal features (machair on the west coast of the Outer Hebrides, rock on the east) and the dynamic maritime conditions, make for complex visual experiences, some of which have acquired a significance which has led to the use of Gaelic loan-words including bog and machair. Others are more specific at the same time as making connections between weather and geology. Such a one is *uar*, which can mean a waterfall, a heavy shower, and 'a scooped hollow with water and gravel coming down in spate'.<sup>300</sup>

This concentration of variety has to be lived with. The man who farms not only has to understand his own soil type and how it responds to weather extremes, but is likely to have some knowledge of soil types other than his own. The native

297. For a detailed account of the geology of Skye, see B. R. Bell and J. W. Harris, *An Excursion Guide to the Geology of the Isle of Skye* (Glasgow, 1986).

298. Bell and Harris, *An Excursion Guide*, 10.

299. In fact a red alga known as 'maerl'. See Chris Mitchell, 'In Celebration of Coral', *West Highland Free Press* (2 May 2008), 17.

300. G. Henderson, footnote in Frances Tolmie, *One Hundred and Five Songs of Occupation from the Western Isles of Scotland*, repr. from *JFSS* 16 (1911) (Vol. IV, Pt 3) (Llanerch, 1997), 166–67.

Gaelic-speaker, Martin Martin, writing in English in the late-17th century, pays much attention to the rocks and soils of the various islands, and their uses and virtues.<sup>301</sup>

#### VOCABULARY AND FUNCTION

The Gaelic names and uses for specific types of rock are also of interest. Appearance naturally determines some names – limestone is *aol* (from Old Gaelic *áel*, derived from an earlier word for light or fire),<sup>302</sup> granite is *clach ghràineil* (from its granular structure). But function was equally important. Martin Martin gives Latin equivalents or English translations only for a number of the Gaelic names for stones, but all connect the stones with their uses. He refers to Cramp-stones, Bot stones and Quartz (*clach-eite* or *Lapis Hecticus* in Latin) which latter was used to cure dysentery and diarrhoea.<sup>303</sup> The pebble which Coinneach Odhar used for prognostication was quartz (see I.1.a.).

The medical uses for stones are discussed in Mary Beith's *Healing Threads*,<sup>304</sup> where metals are also included (for the use of bells, see also IV.2.c.). For references to quarrying and its effect upon the landscape, see III.3.d.

Specific types of rock naturally determine how they are used. The stone normally employed for a *brà* or quern (a rotary hand-mill) was gneiss;<sup>305</sup> and in the 18th century, quern stones from the Isle of Raasay were fetching from £9–£12 a pair.<sup>306</sup> The epidiorite of the Kilmartin area of Argyllshire

has been long used for standing stones, henges and the slabs in burial cairns because it breaks into large slabs along natural fractures which could be easily quarried ... Epidiorite has also been used for graveslabs and crosses from early Christian to Victorian times and because it is relatively hard and durable, yet is soft enough to carve, it forms the outcrops on which one finds most of the local rock art.<sup>307</sup>

301. Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (London, 1716), throughout.

302. Alexander MacBain, *An Etymological Dictionary of the Gaelic Language* (Glasgow, 1982), s.v. *aol*.

303. Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (London, 1716), 134.

304. Mary Beith, *Healing Threads* (Edinburgh, 1995), 144–61.

305. Alexander Nicholson, *History of Skye* (Portree, 1930 and 1994), 117.

306. S. Matheson, 'The Stone Industry and Masonry Skills on the Island of Raasay through the Centuries: An examination of the evidence for their importance in the material culture of the island', paper given at the *Heritage and Environment* conference at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Isle of Skye (June 2007).

307. R. Andertom, 'The Geology of the Kilmartin Archaeological Sites', *Kilmartin House Museum Newsletter* No. 17 (Autumn/Winter 2009), 1–2.

Recently discovered burial cists at Armadale on the Isle of Skye had capstones of micaceous schist 'which would have shimmered in colour and have been a visible marker on the cists.'<sup>308</sup>

An entertaining local saying, dependent upon an understanding of the divergent rock types on the island, is *Clachan an t-Sratha, boireannaich Shlèite* 'Strath for stones and Sleat for women'. The parish of Strath has substantial quantities of good hard limestone with natural corners and good faces for wall building. The neighbouring peninsula of Sleat, on the other hand, has very hard contorted metamorphic rocks, difficult to quarry and less suitable for building. But, as in English, 'stones' can also mean testicles. The alternative implications of the saying may best be left to the reader.

The following *duanag* or little rhyme is also inspired by the geology of Strath – white because of the white marble in the strath itself, hard because this is a very hard marble, shot through with hard basalt dykes, and interfacing with a hard red granite and, at a point just at the southern mouth of the Strath, including peridotite – one of the hardest rocks on earth. That the women and dogs are associated with these admirable qualities indicates also how the visual operates in the Gaelic-speaking mind.

An Srath Fhionnghain gheal  
'S an grinne beus gun smal,  
An srath is cruaidhe clach  
'S an sgaitiche cù 'us bean.

*The white Strath of MacKinnon  
of beautiful flawless nature,  
The strath of the hardest rock  
and the most incisive dogs and women.*<sup>309</sup>

Strath still supports a marble quarry, producing white marble (nowadays only for aggregate) and with occasional green marble. Formerly, green marble was produced for ornamental work and to supplement Iona marble when the quarry there ran out. Right beside the marble quarry in Strath is some of the earliest evidence for copper mining in Scotland, with associated artefacts found at the *Uamh an Àrd-Achaidh* site, also referred to in [III.3.c.](#) and [IV.2.c.](#)

308. Anon., 'Bronze Age Cists and More Discovered at Armadale Dig', *West Highland Free Press* (6 November 2009), 17.

309. J. G. MacKay, 'Social Life in Skye from Legend and Story', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* XXIX, Part 2, 337.

#### GEMS AND HEALING STONES

Scotland is often spoken of as a geologist's paradise because of its great variety of rocks and rock structures, but it is also somewhat of a paradise for the student of minerals whether he be a scientific mineralogist or merely a collector of interesting specimens.<sup>310</sup>

As in most cultures, many stones were believed to have special properties. Examples from the Gàidhealtachd include the charmstone of Stewart of Ardshiel, the Glenorchy stone and the green stone from Arran, known as *Ball Mo-Luidhe*, 'much like a Globe in figure, about the bigness of a Goose-Egg'.<sup>311</sup>

Pennant describes a group of such stones at St Oran's chapel in Iona:

A little North-West of the door is the pedestal of a cross: on it are certain stones, that seem to have been the supporters of a tomb. Numbers who



Stone from Ronan's Chapel, North Rona.  
Photo © John Purser

visit this island ... think it incumbent on them to turn each of these thrice round, according to the course of the sun. They are called *Clacha-bràth*; for it is thought that the *bràth*, or end of the world, will not arrive till the stone on which they stand is worn through. Originally, says Mr. *Sacheverel*, here were three noble globes, of white marble, placed on three stone basons, and these were turned round; but the synod ordered them, and sixty crosses, to be thrown into the sea. The present stones are probably substituted in place of these globes.<sup>312</sup>

The stone excavated by Fraser Darling from under St Ronan's Chapel on North Rona<sup>313</sup> may have been one of the ten healing stones referred to by Martin

310. W. J. McCallien, *Scottish Gem Stones* (London and Glasgow, 1937), 1.

311. The first two are held in the National Museum of Scotland and *Ball Mo-Luidhe* is referred to in Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland* (London, 1716; Edinburgh, 1981), 225–26. See also Marian McNeill, *The Silver Bough I* (Glasgow, 1957), 92–94 and Illustrations of Amulets and Charms I–V.

312. Thomas Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides; MDCCCLXXII* (Chester, 1774), 251.

313. F. Darling, *A Naturalist on Rona* (Oxford, 1939), 43–44.

Martin in the late 17th century.<sup>314</sup> Like *Ball Mo-Luidhe*, it also is green and the size of a goose's egg (see IV.3.c.).

Martin also mentions a round blue stone which is always moist, kept on the altar of St Columba's church on the island of Fladda-Chuan. This stone would be washed all over to obtain a favourable wind and was used to cure stitches and oaths were sworn upon it.<sup>315</sup> Fossils such as belemnites were also used to cure cramp in cattle.<sup>316</sup>

Bloodstone was amongst those used for healing:

Among the articles exhibited in the temporary museum of the Archaeological Institute in Edinburgh in 1856, was 'a necklace of bloodstone, and two ornaments of beautiful workmanship; one of them has on both sides a gem engraved in cameo; the other bears an enamel representing a figure holding a tablet. A portion of this rich ornament had been esteemed as of special efficacy, like the eagle-stone or aetites, in child-birth'.<sup>317</sup>

Its name in Gaelic is *ful sìochaire* 'elf's or fairy's blood' and is thought to be the congealed blood of *na fir chlis* 'the dancing men' or Northern Lights (see I.3.a.).<sup>318</sup> From as early as the Mesolithic period, bloodstone from the Isle of Rum was used in place of flint – for arrow heads among other things<sup>319</sup> – and this may explain the association with elves and fairies and with the term 'elf-shot'.<sup>320</sup>

While the appearance of many of the healing stones was undoubtedly significant, there are some which have taken on an extra visual significance by being incorporated into art objects. Rock crystals surmount the sceptre of the Scottish Regalia and St Fillan's crozier, and they were used to adorn harps (see IV.2.c.). The National Museum of Scotland have the Stewarts' red crystal from Ardvorlich, known as *A' Chlach Dhearg*, and the ridged rock crystal known as the Glenorchy Charmstone, which belonged to the Campbells. The latter was silver-

314. Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles*, 21–22.

315. Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles*, 166–67. See also G. Henderson, *Survivals in Belief among the Celts* (Glasgow, 1911), 198–206, 227–36, 332.

316. Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (London, 1716), 134.

317. G. Black, 'Scottish Charms and Amulets', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* XXVII (1892–1893), 516. Black's quotation comes from p. 138 of the exhibition catalogue.

318. Ronald Black, ed., *The Gaelic Otherworld* (Edinburgh, 2005), 107–08.

319. M. Magnusson, *Rum: Nature's Island* (Edinburgh, 1998), 8–9.

320. Black, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, 14 and 304–05.

mounted in the 17th century but is possibly from a much earlier reliquary.<sup>321</sup> A small ball of semi-translucent quartzite, known as the Lochnell charmstone, can be seen in the Kilmartin House Museum and a number of fine examples, including one in a silver pendant, can be seen in the West Highland Museum in Fort William. The value attached to precious stones is also underlined in visionary and voyage literature:

In *Fís Adamnán*, the wheel of torment has vanished, to be replaced by a characteristically Irish motif [§18] – the place is illumined by the brilliance of precious stones.<sup>322</sup>

#### GEOGRAPHY AND SOUND

There is a well-documented relationship between land-form and sound, nearly always associated with mountainous country. John Murray draws attention to some examples but there are many more in what is a relatively unexplored area of research.<sup>323</sup> The song 'Tha sìor chóineadh am Beinn-Dórain' refers specifically to unusual sound effects from the wind in the high corries, of which Dr George Henderson writes as follows:

The reference [to wailing] is to what is known to shepherds and others who are often out at night as *a' ghaoir-uisge*, *a' ghairm-uisge*, a loud continuous murmuring sound, like the cry of a child in pain. It is very eerie in its rise and fall, and may last for ten minutes. It is a natural phenomenon, and is a forerunner of wind and rain. 'Beindouran in Glenorchy ... emits this noise in a most striking manner'.<sup>324</sup>

A variant of this story is given by Alexander Carmichael in relation to the massacre of Glencoe in his notes on the words *caoineag*, *caointeag*, *caoineachag*, *caointeachag* and *caoidheag*:

321. Beith, *Healing Threads*, 144–58. Hugh Cheape, 'Touchstones of Belief', *ROSC* 20 (2008), 110–12.

322. David Dumville, 'Towards an Interpretation of *Fís Adamnán*', *Studia Celtica* XII–XIII, 67.

323. J. Murray, *Reading the Gaelic Landscape* (Dunbeath, 2014), 152–57.

324. Frances Tolmie, 'One Hundred and Five Songs of Occupation from the Western Isles of Scotland', *Journal of the Folk-song Society* 16 (Vol. IV, Pt 3) (1911), 166: No. 11. For further references to this phenomenon, see 'Reminiscences of Evander MacIver' in George Henderson, ed., *Memoirs of a Highland Gentleman* (1905), 318–19, with mentions of Eddarachillis, Glen Du, Glen Coul and Morvern. There is also a reference to Beindouran and to presaging sounds from rivers in *Sketches of the Manners and Customs of the Highland People* by Stewart of Garth (Edinburgh, 1822). Correspondence on this and related topics can be found in the letters section of *The Scots Magazine* for June, August, October and November 2002.

Weeper, mourner; from ‘caoin,’ weep, and ‘caoidh,’ mourn. These names are applied to the naiad who foretells the death of and weeps for those slain in combat. Unlike ‘nigheag,’ ‘caoineag’ cannot be approached nor questioned. She is seldom seen, but often heard in the hill, in the glen, and in the corrie, by the lake, by the stream, and by the waterfall. Her mourning and weeping cause much trepidation to night-farers, and much anxiety to parents whose sons are in the wars. ... It is said that she was heard during several successive nights before the Massacre of Glencoe. This roused the suspicions of the people, and notwithstanding the assurance of the peace and friendship of the soldiery, many of the people left the glen and thus escaped the fate of those who remained. Fragments of the dirges sung by ‘caoineachag’ before the massacre are current in that valley of the dark shadow of death:

Tha caoineachag bheag a’ bhroin,  
A’ dortadh deoir a sula,  
A’ gul ’s a’ caoidh cor Clann Domhuill,  
Fath mo leòin! nach d’ èisd an cumha.

*Little ‘caoineachag’ of the sorrow  
Is pouring the tears of her eyes,  
Weeping and wailing the fate of Clandonald.  
Alas my grief! that ye did not heed her cries.*<sup>325</sup>

Another wind phenomenon, more in the nature of an unexpected breeze, is known in Gaelic as the *oiteag sluaigh*, the *sluagh* being the host of the dead or the fairy host<sup>326</sup> Martin Martin, writing at the end of the 17th century, declares:

These Spirits us’d also to form Sounds in the Air, resembling those of a Harp, Pipe, Crowing of a Cock, and of the grinding of Querns.<sup>327</sup>

That this was a very ancient belief is manifest from the report of Demetrius of Tarsus’s visit to the islands around Britain c.80 AD. His story is reported by Plutarch as follows:

Soon after his arrival there occurred a great confusion in the air, with many heavenly portents; squalls got up, and there were whirlwinds and lightning. When these subsided the islanders said that some great one had passed away.<sup>328</sup>

These phenomena have been experienced over hundreds of years. In the *Lebor*

325. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* II, 244–45.

326. Marian McNeill, *The Silver Bough* I (Glasgow, 1957), 119.

327. Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands*, 335.

328. I. A. Richmond, ‘Notes and News’, *Antiquity* XIV (1940), 193–95.

*Bretnach* version of the mid-11th-century *Historia Brittonum*, the following passage is included in a series of Scottish *mirabilia*:

Ata dano glenn i nAengus 7 eigim cacha h-aidchi luain and 7 Glend Ailbe a ainm 7 ni feas cia dogni fuith.

*There is moreover a glen in Angus, and screaming there every Monday night, and Glenn Ailbe is its name, and no one knows who makes (the screaming).*<sup>329</sup>

Watson suggests Glen Isla as the location.<sup>330</sup> The name *Lochnagar* is probably derived from Gaelic *Loch na Gàire* meaning either ‘the loch of the outcry’ or, more likely, ‘the loch of the cry (of the wind)’.<sup>331</sup>

Much more recently, in Iain MacCallum’s song ‘Mo Chulaobh ris a bhaile so’, composed in 1872 or 1873, the line *Cha’n fhaigh mi tuilleadh mànràn*<sup>332</sup> refers to the low humming of the land, and this experience is also referred to in ‘An Eala Bhàn’:

gleanntannan a’ mhànrain  
nan loch, nam bàgh ’s nan sròn.

*the murmuring of glens  
of lochs, bays and headlands.*

*Coire nam Bruadaran* ‘the corrie of the dreams’ in the Isle of Skye is another possible example. The Gaelic scholar and folklorist John MacInnes suggests that it could be so called because the wind occasionally behaves very strangely in that corrie and produces sudden moanings out of nowhere.<sup>333</sup> It has, however, also been suggested that the corrie is full of the sound of bees and that this might in some way be related.

Iain Thornber recalls hearing a strange sound in Glengalmadale in Morvern:

I became aware of the silence being broken by a sound which I initially took to be a little breeze picking up among the rocks above me. I paid little attention to it to begin with but then it seemed to expand across the face of the hill. Although it grew in intensity I found it impossible to say with any

329. Thomas Clancy, ‘Scotland, the “Nennian” Recension of the *Historia Brittonum*, and the *Lebor Bretnach*’, in S. Taylor, ed., *Kings, Clerics and Chronicles in Scotland, 500–1297* (Dublin, 2000), 87–107: 93–94.

330. W. Watson, *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1926 and 1993), 512–13.

331. R. MacLean, ‘Litir do Luchd-ionnsachaidh’, *West Highland Free Press* (26 March 2004).

332. MacCallum MS, No. 27. This reference was kindly supplied by Brigadier John MacFarlane.

333. Personal communication.



certainty where it was coming from largely because I could not physically feel it on my face and neck. At times it seemed to start in Coire a' Chùil Mhaim to my left and then move over to Coire an Dubh-alltan and Coire nam Muc ahead of me. Much like the end of a rain-bow it was everywhere but nowhere.

It is difficult to describe the sound. If one can 'feel' or 'see' a noise it seemed cold, almost metallic and grey-blue in colour (like Payne's grey). Coming as it did on an otherwise fine winter's day, it felt strange, almost ominous. I was not aware that the deer reacted to it though.<sup>334</sup>

John Gregorson Campbell reported a *sgiamhail oillteil agus glaothaich* 'a horrible screaming and shouting' at *Ceann Gheàrrloch* (Kingairloch) near the mouth of Glengalmdale, which he suggested presaged a death the following day.<sup>335</sup> *Geàrr* means 'short', which is true of this sea loch, but there is also a possible derivation from *gàir* meaning to cry out.

An interesting suggestion has been put forward by Bill Stirling that temperature inversions can create a 'corridor', which carries sounds in much the same manner as light, producing mirages.<sup>336</sup> Dr Althea Tyndale heard 'a long clear note of great purity' in cold snowy weather in the calm immediately preceding a fierce and sudden blizzard in Strath Don.<sup>337</sup> A similar note in the same sort of conditions was recorded by Elizabeth Goudge.<sup>338</sup>

A common place-name element associated with the sound of the wind is *feadan*. The OS Landranger 34 gives *Fedden* in Glengarry but this should be *Feadan*, with a variety of meanings all derived from *fead* 'whistle' or 'whistling noise'. Dwelly includes 'crevice through which the wind whistles' as one of the meanings of *feadan* and the interpretation is supported by Ellice.<sup>339</sup> The geography would also support the association as *Feadan* is situated where three very steep-sided glens meet, with a fourth (equally steep-sided) joining one of them at only a mile's distance from the congruence.

An equally windy corner is *Sròn na Glaothaich* 'the nose of crying out' near Elgol on the Isle of Skye, and the wind may partly have motivated the name.

334. Personal communication from Iain Thorber.

335. J. G. Campbell, *Witchcraft & Second Sight in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (Glasgow, 1902), quoted in Ronald Black, ed., *The Gaelic Otherworld* (Edinburgh, 2005), 263.

336. Correspondence in *The Scots Magazine* (November 2002).

337. Personal correspondence (31 March 2003).

338. E. Goudge, *The Joy of Snow* (London, 1974), 138.

339. E. C. Ellice, *Place-Names of Glengarry and Glenquoich and Their Associations* (London, 1898 and 1931; and Marsh Barton, 1999), 40.

However, locally the name is explained by two separate stories: that a group of MacKinnons shouted from there for help, when confronted by their enemies; or that this was where coffin bearers from Elgol would pause for breath before the long descent to the old graveyard, when the women would take the opportunity to keen over the coffin. The 'nose' referred to is a ridge descending from Ben Meabost and, if there is a wind to be had, that corner of the road is where it will be found.

Sound and geology also come together in the rock gongs and standing stones, but these are discussed in IV.2.c. and IV.1.c., respectively. But perhaps most famous for the association is Fingal's Cave on Staffa.

'Fingal's Cave' is known in Gaelic as *Uamh Bhinn* 'the sweet-sounding cave' and it has been suggested that the name of Fingal only became attached to it because *Uamh Bhinn* sounds identical to *Uamh Fhinn* (Fionn or Fingal's Cave) – *mh* and *bh* in Gaelic both sounding like *v* in English, and *fh* being silent in Gaelic.<sup>340</sup> The sound of the sea in its various moods in the cave was captured by Mendelssohn with the heart of a romantic. It has been suggested by Iain Thorber that Mendelssohn's choice of 16 December to launch the 'Hebrides Overture' was taken in the knowledge that on that day the sun penetrates to the very back of the cave – knowledge that would have been acquired from local guides.<sup>341</sup> Interestingly, the top of Iona is just visible from the very back of the cave.<sup>342</sup> Turner famously painted Staffa with the smoke of a steamship appearing as prominently as the mist, and in the 1880s James Aitken painted it on the walls of the Argyll Hotel on Iona, showing it from both exterior and interior viewpoints.<sup>343</sup> Mendelssohn was a gifted artist himself and, confronted with the climatic realities of sketching in Scotland, he reported

[I have] developed a new manner of drawing on purpose for it, and have rubbed in clouds today and painted grey mountains with my pencil.<sup>344</sup>

It cannot be said of Turner, who followed Mendelssohn to Fingal's Cave, that he had to develop a new technique to portray either Staffa or the Cuillin, but he certainly made full use of his wildest manner to portray the land and sea scape as he experienced them, not least in his studies of Glencoe and Loch Coruisk, and a peat bog (I.3.a.).

340. D. MacCulloch, *The Island of Staffa* (Glasgow, 1927), 40.

341. Personal communication from Iain Thorber, who has photographed the phenomenon on the appropriate day.

342. MacCulloch, *The Island of Staffa*, 35–36.

343. MacCulloch, *The Island of Staffa*, 46.

344. Mendelssohn. Letter of 3 August 1829 (in the evening), quoted in D. Jenkins and M. Visocchi, *Mendelssohn in Scotland* (London, 1978), 66.

## CONCLUSION

Taking the evidence presented in I.3.a, I.3.b. and I.3.c., Aldridge's statement (I.3.a.) that much of Scotland can claim to have sublime elements in its landscape seems justified by the basic geographical realities. It is not that any particular aspect or phenomenon is unique to the country, but rather that the quantity and nature of the environmental evidence, and the manner in which it affects and is reflected in the culture, is remarkable. The evidence from the Gàidhealtachd, whether it take the form of light, sea, land or sound, exhibits a variety and dynamic exceptional for such a small part of the world, and it has been – quite naturally – reflected in the works of many artists, be they poets, painters or musicians.

In such an environment, then, it behoves us to be cautious before accepting too readily suggestions that wild raging torrents, gloomy mountains, Celtic twilight and Celtic mist are mere fictions. They are, as a matter of fact, matters of fact. JP

## I.3.d. CARTOGRAPHY AND ILLUSTRATION

## MAPPING THE WEST OF SCOTLAND

The discovery of Neolithic pottery on *Hiort* (St Kilda) indicates that navigation around the western coasts of Scotland extended at least forty miles out into the Atlantic Ocean some 5000 years ago. As for the links between the north of Scotland and the rest of Britain, the distribution of stone axes made at Creag na Caillich in Perthshire around 3000 BC and found as far apart as Lewis and Buckinghamshire would suggest they were significant.

The first written records of travel in and around Scotland come from Greek and Roman sources of which a useful summary is given by David Breeze,<sup>345</sup> with merchants, travellers and refugees as possible sources for much of the information gathered in Greek and Roman accounts and on their maps.

However, in the early medieval period, one of the first geographers to take an empirical approach to mapping was Dicuil (fl.800) who probably served under Abbot Suibne on Iona before proceeding to Aachen to write his *Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae* in 825.<sup>346</sup> Dicuil's observations are discussed in I.2.a. and their significance is widely accepted.

In light of the general attitude of early medieval scholars toward authority and experience, the case of Dicuil seems very unusual. Unlike other

345. D. Breeze, 'The Ancient Geography of Scotland', in B. Smith and I. Banks, eds, *In the Shadow of the Brochs* (Stroud, 2002), 11–14.

346. J. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical* (1st pub. 1929; Dublin, 1997), 156.



Murdoch MacKenzie, *The North Part of the Lewis* (1750). National Library of Scotland

geographical writers, who relied solely on written authority, Dicuil included several eyewitness reports.<sup>347</sup>

Dicuil's observations were based upon maritime experience and in many respects maritime mapping was, and remains, as important an aspect of mapping the Gàidhealtachd as that of the land mass. With 13,115 km of coastline, including islands, Scotland has 69% of the UK coastline, with the west coast possessing proportionately by far the greater part.<sup>348</sup> The Gàidhealtachd has 56 inhabited islands and innumerable uninhabited ones, although many, such as Barra Head, Mingulay, Pabbay and Sandray, were inhabited up to the early 20th century. What this means is that, in terms of access to the substantial population as well as to the mainland, a knowledge of the sea routes was fundamental.

In 1750, Murdoch Mackenzie published eight coastal charts – three of Lewis and five of Orkney – using Kirkwall as the meridian rather than Greenwich. This work so impressed the Admiralty that in 1751 he was commissioned to chart the coastal waters of the Hebrides and Western Scotland, work he completed in 1757.

This was followed by a commission to do the same for England and Wales,

347. N. Lozovsky, *The Earth Is Our Book' – Geographical Knowledge in the Latin West c. 400–1000* (Michigan, 2003), 147–48.

348. *The Scottish Environment Statistics* (1998).

as far south as the Bristol Channel, and for the whole of Ireland. MacKenzie was the inventor of the station pointer, an instrument which could determine a ship's position by triangulation, and which remained in use well into the 20th century. It would be fair to say that his work marks the beginning of serious coastal surveying, using proper scientific methods. Today's Admiralty charts and Imray's guides maintain that tradition and are enhanced by the historical and other notes provided by Haswell-Smith's seminal *The Scottish Islands*.<sup>349</sup> As for a specifically Gaelic response, MacLeod's *Muir is Tìr* provides a comprehensive vocabulary, as well as illustrations, and is particularly related to Bernera.<sup>350</sup>

If the complexities and dangers of Scotland's northern and western maritime environments were a stimulus to charting those coasts, the same was true of the western mainland, which has been remarkably well mapped in relatively modern times. Only some sections of the Gàidhealtachd from Timothy Pont's late 16th- and early 17th-century surveys survive, but they form part of one of the most complete mapping projects of any country at that time and are far from being confined to plans of towns and cities. His work was incorporated into Blaeu's atlas of 1654. Pont's maps are enhanced by commentary as, for instance, Eddrachillis in Sutherland, which is annotated with 'Extreme wilderness' and 'Many wolves in this country',<sup>351</sup> but they are also remarkable for their detail, including many Gaelic place-names, with settlements, castles and churches (the latter symbolised by a cross), mountains, rivers and woodlands whose character is differentiated by different symbols.

With the Scottish Enlightenment came a further stimulus to mapping, but of a much more scientific kind, with the use of theodolites and careful measurements. One of the most significant initiators of Enlightenment interest in mapping was Colin McLaurin, born in the parish of Kilmodan in Argyll and son of one of those responsible for translating the psalms into metrical Gaelic. He studied at the University of Glasgow, was appointed Professor of Mathematics at Aberdeen University at the age of nineteen, and then to the Chair of Mathematics at the University of Edinburgh, where he lectured on surveying to

a brood of illustrious surveyors, architects and mathematical instrument-makers such as Alexander Bryce, Murdoch Mackenzie, Robert Adam and James Short. Sitting in McLaurin's audience, the Dundases, and perhaps Watson too, were among inspiring cartographical company.<sup>352</sup>

349. H. Haswell-Smith, *The Scottish Islands* (Edinburgh, 1998; rev. 2015).

350. G. MacLeod, *Muir is Tìr* (Stornoway, 2005).

351. J. Macadam, 'The Mapping Minister', *Life and Work* (June 2011), 36–37.

352. R. Hewitt, *Map of a Nation – A Biography of the Ordnance Survey* (London, 2010), 5.

All of this, it should be noted, precedes the Jacobite Rising of 1745, which undoubtedly prompted the Military Survey of Scotland, begun in 1747 and resulting in William Roy's map. Roy was a pioneer of spherical trigonometry and a member of the Royal Society, where he met James Cook. Cook's father was a Scot and it was his son who named New Caledonia – because the north-east of the island reminded him of Scotland – and the New Hebrides (Vanuatu), presumably for the same reason.

Following on Roy came William Bald, who surveyed Harris in 1805, when he was only sixteen. Later, he surveyed Benbecula, South Uist, Eriskay and Argyll. His surveys were incorporated into Aaron Arrowsmith's map of Scotland in 1807 and were amongst the most advanced of their time. Later, the Ordnance Survey (founded in 1791) was to put such ventures out of business, though the independent firm of Bartholomew was to survive into the late 20th century. The importance of place-names in the Gàidhealtachd is considered in [V.1](#), there being an on-going debate about the quality of the Ordnance Survey's recording of place-names. In that context, one should remember that the motivation for these surveys was initially driven by military and subsequently economic factors (see [III.3.d.](#)).

While maps are primarily intended as useful guides to location, offering the user the opportunity to find and fix a place in reality or the imagination, not all maps have to feed such expectations. Alastair Noble's on-going project Mapping Arcadia seeks to provoke thought and its powerful particularities are motivated by much broader concerns, for all that they are highly site-specific. Thus, the rowan trees planted on Isle Martin near Ullapool in Ross and Cromarty delineate an outline of the island's own contours. But it is important to note that this is a living 'map', existing in time. In this, as with place-names, it carries its own memories.<sup>353</sup> It also approximates to the notion of a map as large as the area to be mapped – as first conceived by Lewis Carroll in his *Sylvie and Bruno*.<sup>354</sup> Even

353. A. Noble, Mapping Arcadia: Isle Martin (initiated 2009).

354. L. Carroll, *Sylvie and Bruno* 2 (London, 1893), Chap. 11.



Colin McLaurin (1698–1746)

such a map can be but a poor approximation. To a crofter surveying lazy-beds, each clump of invasive rushes or intrusive stalk of bracken has a place marked in the mind, offensive to order but pursuing its own competing rationale. JP



## II WAYS OF SEEING IN THE GAELIC LANGUAGE

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the linguistic evidence for distinctive ways of seeing among the Gaels. The Self notes the relatively modest place accorded to the speaker and man in general in Gaelic syntax, with, for example, the self being the recipient rather than the agent of emotion. This and a lively tradition of shape-shifting and projections suggest that the place of the Self among living things is neither so fixed nor so dominant as is general in Western philosophy. We examine the longevity of Gaelic aesthetics of the person and the close correlation between literary and visual depictions of people.

The Visual Lexicon analyses how the language reflects, and in turn formulates, particular ways of seeing. This is most marked in the vocabulary relating to colour, in which saturation, shininess and patterning are at least as defining as hue. Shape is seen to have been important in the generation of vocabulary, making visual links across domains. The verbal imagery of poetry, far more than the visual imagery of portraiture, was clearly the principal vehicle for communicating a person's reputation.

With the Integration of Letter and Image we show how the word was valued not as an abstract sign but as a physical reality. Not only is it vested with magical powers to cast spells and protect, the word also has direct associations with gesture from the ogam alphabet in which phonetic values are given a visual structure.

## II.1. THE SELF

## II.1.a. ENVISAGING THE SELF IN LANGUAGE AND PAINTING

[Introduction](#); [Iconoclasm and Abstraction](#); [Corroboration and Inauguration](#); [Naming](#); [Periphrastic Characteristics](#); [Knowledge Claims](#); [I and Me](#); [Causation](#); [Assertion and Negation](#); [VSO](#); [Possession](#); [Orientation](#); [Artistic Evidence](#); [McTaggart and Yeats](#); [Conclusion](#)

## INTRODUCTION

Am fear a chailleas a chànan,  
caillidh e a shaoghal.  
An Gàidheal a chailleas a chànan  
caillidh e an saoghal.

*He who loses his language  
loses his world.  
The Gael who loses his language  
loses the world.*

The assertion that the loss of his language to a Gael means not just the loss of his world, but the loss of *the* world, is a bold one. It is as much as to say that, by comparison with other cultures, the Gaelic language embodies the world. It is not *his* world that is lost, because it is not a matter of possession. For the Gael in Iain Crichton Smith's poem, the loss is of the whole world of which he is only a part and to which he has a necessary connection through the language (to be demonstrated in this section). Smith goes on to refer to Wittgenstein's world as a solipsistic one:

Nuair a thèid Wittgenstein às,  
thèid a shaoghal às.

*When Wittgenstein dies,  
his world dies.*<sup>1</sup>

It is only *his* world that dies, not *the* world. Whether this is fair to Wittgenstein's philosophy is not relevant here. What matters is that to one of the leading voices in the Gàidhealtachd, Gaelic was not simply imaging a particular world, it was imaging the whole world.

Angus Peter Campbell has wittily both supported and satirised these niceties of linguistics in his imagined, but unequivocally Gaelic island, *Labhraigh*. The language of *Labhraigh* is not, of course, Gaelic. Rather it has developed

an entire speech system based on conversation, or what grammarians

1. From Iain Crichton Smith, 'Am Faigh a' Ghàidhlig Bàs?', *Lines Review* 29 (June 1969).

used to call the Present Indicative active tense, mood and voice ... In the Labhraighese dialect, or language, there are no words for 'yesterday' or 'today' or 'tomorrow', as there are no verbal concepts as such for 'was', 'am' or 'will'.<sup>2</sup>

The result is that everything is expressed in the present tense, and past and future are indicated only by vocal inflexion, context and gesture. Campbell is here perhaps picking up on Whorf's discredited claims for the Hopi language. Bryan O'Nolan (alias Myles na Gopaleen and Flann O'Brien) satirised the attempts of linguists and others to understand, never mind quantify Irish Gaelic, in *An Béal Bocht – The Poor Mouth*. His fieldworker

understood that good Gaelic is difficult but that the best Gaelic of all is well-nigh unintelligible.<sup>3</sup>

As Bertrand Russell has put it,

The tacit assumption is that language as ordinarily used is possessed of some superior genius or hidden intelligence. A further assumption, linked indirectly with this, allows that one may ignore all un-linguistic knowledge, a dispensation liberally indulged by its adherents.<sup>4</sup>

But such satire can only bite because there is something to be bitten. It is the same something which motivates this section, namely, the distinctive linguistic characteristics which set Gaelic apart from the dominant languages of Europe, and which have, naturally enough, provoked academic interest. Bearing directly on this point, Campbell's *Labhraighese* is placed in a relationship with other languages so tangential that any attempt at grammatical analysis is doomed to failure and the speakers themselves are confused:

With no verbal structure to differentiate the past from the present or the present from the future or, for that matter the future from the past, the whole language has already entered a plateau of confusion where the communicants are unsure as to whether the world that is being given is living, dead or imagined.<sup>5</sup>

As for O'Nolan, his fieldworker's Gaelic

came from our rambling pig.<sup>6</sup>

2. A. P. Campbell, *Invisible Islands* (Glasgow, 2006), 55 and 63.

3. F. O'Brien, *The Poor Mouth*, transl. Patrick Power (London, 1975), 44.

4. B. Russell, *Wisdom of the West* (London, 1959 and 1975), 309.

5. Campbell, *Invisible Islands*, 63.

6. O'Brien, *The Poor Mouth*, 45.

Splendid satire was surely never intended to put an end to discussion. Rather, it is its business to provoke it. It is in that spirit that the following is offered.

#### ICONOCLASM AND ABSTRACTION

How the self is envisaged in a language may well give us some clues as to how its particular culture depicts itself in visual artefacts. One of the most notable features of Celtic art is the general absence of portraiture and a lack of emphasis on verisimilitude in favour of subtle abstraction and non-representational design elements, based on geometry and interlace – this notwithstanding the cult of the human head. The artists of the early Celtic manuscripts

did not attempt naturalistic representation but made the figures of a picture as free as if they were calligraphic designs, so that it is often difficult to see what these plaited figures really mean. This anti-naturalistic method of representation stands in sharp contrast to the whole range of classical antique art in all its derivations.<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, one of the leading representatives of abstract art in Ireland, Mainie Jellett, wrote

Do not think that the reason for abstraction in pre-Christian Celtic or Early Irish Christian Art or in any other art-form was, and is, the failure and incompetence of the artist to reproduce nature realistically. The Celtic sculptors or those of the Early Irish Christian High Crosses and the painters of the illuminated manuscripts had consummate skill and a highly developed sense of form. The photographic representation of the human figure if they had wished to do it, would have been child's play after the formal intricacies of Celtic or early Irish Christian abstract pattern and form. The ideal behind this art was the same as that of the ancient African and of many other great art forms, the creation of form either inspired by nature or by the human mind and used to produce a complete organic structure of form and colour controlled by whatever medium the artist chose to employ.<sup>8</sup>

George Bain takes this further, in stating that

representations of the human figure by Celtic Artists were influenced by the Pagan Laws that forbade the copying of the works of the Almighty Creator ... Portraiture of a living person, in his created form was a heinous

7. 'Illuminated Manuscripts', *Encyclopaedia Britannica* Vol. 11 (London and New York, 1968), 1090.

8. Mainie Jellett, 'Looking at Pictures' [c.1940], in E. MacCarvill, ed., *Mainie Jellett: The Artist's Vision* (Dundalk, 1958), 75–76.

crime. The portrayal of the Saints of the sacred Gospels in the Books of Kells and Lindisfarne was that of persons who had long departed from earthly habitation ... In a similar way persons were dead before they were depicted on the Pictish stones of East Scotland and could no longer be injured by the copies that were made of them. Such beliefs have survived from prehistoric times in many countries and in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland even to the present day.<sup>9</sup>

Bain does not give us the source of his assertions, but such taboos are not uncommon and, though now long abandoned, may not have been unrelated to the genuine fear of satire directed at an individual by a bard, and which might cause actual injury, including disfigurement or even death.<sup>10</sup> Even the praise poem, which to some extent fills the role of portraiture, is heavily codified. In both Islam and Judaism, figurative representations were and, in some cases, still are forbidden and the dominance of geometric forms in Islamic art offers many parallels to the dominance of geometric forms in early Celtic art<sup>11</sup> – exemplified by the assembly of manuscripts in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin.

Of course, from the late 17th century on a number of leading Gaelic families commissioned portraits by such as Aikman, Ramsay and Raeburn, but none of the artists employed came from a Gaelic-speaking background, and we shall see below that the two leading artistic representatives of Gaelic-speaking Scotland and Ireland avoided portraiture. Samuel MacKenzie (1745–1847), a Gaelic speaker who apprenticed himself to Henry Raeburn, left a particularly fine portrait of the great Scottish anatomist, John Hunter; but MacKenzie is an exception and this section looks for any potential explanation of that fact in the naming of persons and clans and in the structure of the language.

Linguistic links alone are commonly regarded as sufficient in themselves to establish a sense of cultural identity. Languages and their shared roots are profound sources of cultural values that are inevitably embedded in the lexicon. Whether they are so embedded as to form or limit modes of thinking (as asserted in the Sapir-Whorf theory and reasserted more recently in modified form) need not detain us here, and no such notion is proposed in what follows. What is scarcely disputed, however, is that a language to a fair degree determines the

9. George Bain, *Celtic Art* (London, 1951 and 1977), 127.

10. Sir Philip Sidney in his *Apologie for Poetry* (1581) puts a mild curse upon those who decry poetry, but stops short of asking that one 'be rimed to death, as is sayd to be done in Ireland' (p. 72). Stokes gives an interesting example of disfigurement by satire in the 'Story of Nede Mac Adnal', in the Preface to his edition of *Cormac's Glossary* (London, 1862; repr. Llanerch, 2000), xxxvi–xxxviii.

11. The Chester Beatty Library in Dublin with its magnificent collection of Islamic books in particular has mounted exhibitions demonstrating these parallels.

nature of the *expression* of thought and therefore how a speaker is perceived whether at home or abroad.<sup>12</sup>

This applies quite naturally within any language and is generally taken for granted. But most languages do not exist in isolation and it is reasonable, and possibly illuminating, to comment upon their characteristics from an external viewpoint. The Welsh philosopher J. R. Jones (partly influenced by Wittgenstein) confronted issues of identity and the self, leading him to propose what amounts to a causal connection between community and linguistic identity. The proposal was misunderstood, as ‘community’ identity was misinterpreted as ‘national’ identity and gave rise to accusations of linguistic racism which were wholly unfounded.<sup>13</sup>

It is not possible here to pursue such social and philosophical issues, whether personal or societal. Rather, what follows is an attempt to focus attention on specific and distinctive aspects of the Gaelic language, from which one might draw some tentative inferences. With respect to the title of this section ‘Envisaging the self’, Gaelic has many distinguishing features, and, if amongst Gaels there are some who would prefer not to have their language focussed upon for its peculiarities, the fact is that they do exist and are of interest.

#### CORROBORATION AND INAUGURATION

For example, the rights, responsibilities and admissibility of individuals and their testimony impinge directly on fundamental principles in Scottish law. Visual evidence is the most common but, uniquely in Scottish law, evidence of whatever kind is unacceptable from a single witness. There must be corroboration. This insistence on independent corroborative evidence, reaffirmed in 2015 despite attempts to remove it, seems to stem directly from similar provisions in old Celtic law.<sup>14</sup> It puts a greater emphasis on social than on individual responsibility and can be related to other aspects of Scottish law derived from older Celtic law, ranging from the monarch to the poet.

Until the time of David II, the kings of Scots were inaugurated rather than anointed and crowned and [the role of the seanchaidh in reciting the genealogy of the monarch](#) was assigned to Lord Lyon King of Arms and in use as recently as 1628. To this day, it is Lord Lyon who performs the equivalent function to that of an archbishop or bishop in England or France.<sup>15</sup> What this tells us is that

12. D. Gentner and S. Goldin-Meadow, ‘Whither Whorf’, in Gentner and Goldin-Meadow, eds, *Language in Mind* (Cambridge Massachusetts, 2003), 5ff.

13. Conversation with Meredith Evans. See also D. Phillips, *J. R. Jones* (Cardiff, 1995), esp. Chaps IV–VI.

14. F. Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin, 1991), 202–03.

15. W. D. H. Sellar, ‘Celtic Law and Scots Law’, *Scottish Studies* 29, 4.

the notion of the ‘Divine Right of Kings’ was not and is not part of the Scottish inauguration or, indeed, ‘coronation’, and it might be kind if not reasonable to attribute historical sympathy to Her Majesty the Queen when, in 1953 in the year of her coronation in England, she processed with the Scottish crown carried before her, but she never put it on.

It is, however, Saint Columba who is credited with first anointing a Scottish monarch – his cousin Aidan of the kingdom of Dalriada. This ecclesiastical blessing was not uniformly maintained and the principle which it appears to establish has been opposed by many, including King James VI’s Gaelic-speaking tutor George Buchanan, who went so far as to consider regicide acceptable in certain circumstances. In this we see a clash between the hierarchical priorities of a religion wishing to establish its rights over secular governance and the pre-Christian management of rights of succession established by a combination of genealogy and suitability. Was Buchanan’s position one of Renaissance sensibility or was it perhaps derived from his knowledge of history, specifically of the history of the Gaels?

#### NAMING

Naming is an important aspect of how the self is envisaged. In Gaelic, people are frequently referred to by terms describing their appearance. Given the patronymic system, still so widely employed by Gaelic speakers that they create their own local telephone directories, some of these characteristics have entered the names of entire clans. One may go through life spoken of in terms which recall one’s grandfather’s hair colour or his mother’s squint eye, characteristics which become codified as surnames. *Caimbeul* (Campbell) means ‘twisted mouth’ and there are those who would say that, for historical reasons, it is eminently suitable. *Camshron* (Cameron) means ‘bent nose’. *Beag, mòr, breac, bacach, gruamach, caoch, dall, ruadh, bàn, dubh* and *donn* (‘little, big, pock-marked, lame, sullen, blind in one eye, blind, red-haired, fair-haired, dark and brown-haired’) are all in common use as identifying aspects of names. Nicknames can also include characteristics of an ancestor as in one *Murchadh Stal* so named because his grandfather wore a bandage round his head.<sup>16</sup>

The palette of established surnames is relatively small, surnames only coming into use due to the demands of government census. The consequence was that people entirely satisfactorily named using the patronymic system, supplied the want of a surname by taking on the name of their clan chieftain, resulting in many shared surnames. People are also frequently nicknamed by their profession or place of residence and these names can also continue

16. Personal communication, Murchadh Stal (Murchadh MacDhòmhnaill) to Meg Bateman.



through the generations. While this was a common practice in many countries in the past, it is still prevalent today amongst Gaelic speakers, so that one's name may also carry with it not just family appearances but family history. The initial impression is that there is a strong sense of identity, and this is true from the perspective of a community. But in such circumstances, that identity is not so much a personal one as an identity within a stream of identities – ancestors, occupations and places of residence. If a person withholds his or her name, others are deprived of a certain power over them. *An Ceathairmeach Caol Riabhach* (The Slim Swarthy Champion) refuses to divulge his name or enter bonds of mutual reliance through an exchange of gifts. When he wreaks havoc in O Dòmhnail's court after entering through the roof, O Dòmhnail admits that he feels anger: *nam biodh fios agam cò ris a leiginn a-mach e* 'if I (only) knew at whom I should let it out'.<sup>17</sup> Cú Chulainn's son, Conlaoch, is obliged not to divulge his name. When he travels from Scotland to Ireland, he is challenged to mortal combat by his father for this. Ironically, knowing his name would have given Cú Chulainn the power of choice not to kill his own son.

Many elegies speak of the relief of seeing a son fill the place of the deceased and carry the inherited characteristics of the clan.<sup>18</sup> The descriptive terms are not chosen by the individual, nor necessarily even by the parents, and we shall see that the language itself does not favour an emphasis on one's own ego.

#### PERIPHRASTIC CHARACTERISTICS

For example, a tendency to favour negative structures might be compared with other aspects of the language in which certainties are avoided, including the certainty of one's own identity. Gaelic often favours short sentences and negative constructions that carry a sort of cautionary or provisional understatement (see II.2.d.).<sup>19</sup> *Chan ann fuar a bha e a-raoir* 'it is not cold it was last night' rather than 'it was warm last night' or 'you might not be wrong' in place of 'you are right' are typical. This approach can be useful when it comes to insults: *Cha bu tu mi, 's cha bu mhi an cù* 'you are not I and I am not a cur' is, as Dwelly states, 'a Celtic way of telling a man he is a hound'.<sup>20</sup> Different in

17. J. F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (1860–1864; facsimile Hounslow: Wildwood House Ltd, 1983), Vol. I, 298 and 309.

18. For example, see Derick Thomson, *Gaelic Poetry in the Eighteenth Century*, 4–5 and 10–11.

19. Somewhat more complex sentence structures are still used in formal prose and traditional narrative, see W. Lamb, 'The Noun Phrase in Gaelic Speech and Writing', in McLeod, Fraser and Gunderloch, eds, *Cànan & Cultar | Language & Culture Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 3* (Edinburgh, 2006), 155–56 and 178. See also W. Lamb, *Scottish Gaelic Speech and Writing ...* (Belfast, 2008).

20. Edward Dwelly, *The Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary* (Glasgow, 1977), 557 fn.

structure but similar in effect is the double negative construction *cha mhòr nach eil mi deiseil* 'it is not (by) much that I am not ready', meaning 'I am almost ready'. These periphrastic modes are entirely natural and unforced in Gaelic but can sound whimsical in English.

One could here posit a relationship between avoidance of direct assertion and the occasional desire to conceal knowledge or intent that has an ancient history. The use of ogam as a secret language is well known (see II.3.c.) and has a long scholarly pedigree, but it is not without its connection to *Beurla nam filidh* 'poetic language' and *Beurla Reagaird*, the cant used by Gaelic-speaking travellers, in which obsolete and scholarly Gaelic vocabulary sometimes makes an appearance. An example is the word *gloramas* 'speaking'. *Beurla Reagaird* parallels Irish *Shelta*, which is also claimed to have ancient roots.<sup>21</sup>

#### KNOWLEDGE CLAIMS

The assertion of personal identity is partly based upon knowledge claims and, in many languages, is expressed through a verb specifically designed for the purpose – 'to know'. There is no equivalent verb in the Celtic languages. 'Knowledge' is a noun with an independent life of its own. *Tha fios agam* (literally, 'there is knowledge at me') is the basic way of making a knowledge claim, but it lacks the same absolute self-assurance of 'I know' in which the knowledge is, as it were, internally validated rather than making an external visit. This does not mean that assertive knowledge claims are not made in Gaelic, but how they are expressed has a different force and emphasis, with the knowledge rather than the knower being the subject of the sentence. It is much more common to express knowledge – whether of facts or of people – with the noun 'making an external visit' rather than with the self as the subject of an active verb. So *tha fios agam air X*; *'s aithne dhomh X*; *tha eòlas agam air X* ('knowledge is at me or to me of X') are much more common than *aithnichidh mi* or *fiosraichidh mi*.

As in languages such as Welsh and French, one cannot use the same vocabulary for knowledge of persons as opposed to things. *Eòlas* may be used in all situations, however *fios* is never used of people but is reserved for concepts and things, and *aithne* is only used of people.

#### I AND ME

Personal identity is also rendered less certain and less self-referring by the nature of Celtic language structures. For instance, there is no clear distinction between the nominative and accusative forms of the 1st person singular

21. Timothy Neat, *The Summer Walkers* (Edinburgh, 1996), 225–29. K. Meyer, 'The Secret Languages of Ireland', *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, New Series, 2, 241–46.

(between subjective 'I' and objective 'me'). In Gaelic, *mi* and its emphatic form *mise* have to stand for both. Moreover, they can never initiate a sentence because the language is a VSO one (see below), and they are never capitalised.<sup>22</sup> This characteristic is not unique to Gaelic. There is only one word to serve for both 'I' and 'me' in any of the Celtic languages. Chinese, likewise makes no such distinction:

So *I* have two *mes*? According to Mrs Margaret, one is subject *I* one is object *I*? But I only one I. Unless Mrs Margaret talking about incarnation or after life ... Person as dominate subject, is main thing in an English sentence.<sup>23</sup>

#### CAUSATION

With respect to causation, none of the main European languages has regular causative inflections but, for example, English, French, and German make use of the verbs 'make' or 'have' (*faire* or *laisser*, and *lassen*). Gaelic, however, lacks these verbs and, indeed, 'has no morphological causatives'. As William Lamb points out, a sentence such as 'Mary made Seamus eat' has to be rendered as *thug Màiri air Seumas ithe* (literally, 'brought Mary on Seumas eating').<sup>24</sup> Using the Iconicity Principle (which proposes that shorter forms encode causation more directly than longer ones), the effect is more periphrastic and less forceful in terms of the power of one individual over another. This tendency to avoid subordination in preference to the equality of status implied by coordination is manifest throughout the Celtic language group. It might be assumed that this reflects the characteristics of essentially oral cultures, but it holds true also for the extensive literature in Gaelic. As Elmar Ternes writes,

Another characteristic feature of Celtic is the clear preference for syntactical coordination instead of subordination. Celtic languages generally have very few subordinating conjunctions and they do not even like to make extensive use of those few. No Celtic language has a proper relative pronoun ...

Scottish Gaelic does have complementisers: *a* + lenition (direct), *an* (indirect), *na* + lenition (antecedent) and *nach* (negative) as in *fhuair mi an rud nach robh mi ag iarraidh* (I got the thing [which] I didn't want). But the status

22. Elmar Ternes has pointed out that capitalisation of 'I' (in English) is largely owing to a need for clarification in medieval manuscripts and its significance should not be exaggerated.

23. X. Guo, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (London, 2008), 25, 27.

24. W. Lamb, *Scottish Gaelic Speech and Writing: Register Variation in an Endangered Language* (Belfast, 2008), 242.

of such words as pronouns can be equivocal. In sentences such as *sin an duine a chunnaic Seumas* there is ambiguity as it can mean either 'that is the man who saw Seumas' or 'that is the man whom Seumas saw'. The grammatical status of such constructions is still under discussion.<sup>25</sup>

Ternes follows the above quotation with the remark that

... the Celtic languages resort to syntactical patterns that are rather ingenious and quite complicated in their own way, just in order to avoid subordination.<sup>26</sup>

This is not to deny that Gaelic places phrases within phrases, but there is a marked preference for shorter sentences and a relatively scanty use of recursion. Traditional poetry for example very much confined a thought to a verse, while, by contrast, Carswell's long sentences constructed from multiple subclauses in his 1567 translation of Knox's Liturgy was an innovation.<sup>27</sup> The suggestion is taken up below that a preference for simplicity of syntax may reflect a desire to express the immediacy of experience.<sup>28</sup>

#### ASSERTION AND NEGATION

Another characteristic of most Celtic languages is that there are no words for 'yes' or 'no'.<sup>29</sup> Hence, replies repeat the verb of the question and are always couched in terms of tense, e.g. '(we) will'. '(it) is so'. '(he) did not'. All positive and negative statements have to be accompanied by a verb and therefore a tense. All such answers are therefore doubly contingent: not only upon the nature of the question but upon the tense of the answer. The reply might be the opposite one second later, or might only have had validity for a brief period in the past. We have the feeling that we are in the hands of greater forces – in this instance time – that have to be acknowledged in the way we speak. Campbell's satire, quoted at the start of this section, may be sportive, but it touches on that reality,

25. Christine Sheil, 'Scottish Gaelic Prepositional Relatives: the Problem of Inflection', *Working Papers of the Linguistics Circle of the University of Victoria* Vol. 21, No. 2 (2012), Proceedings of the Workshop on Syntax of Relative Clauses: <<https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/WPLC/article/view/7762>> – accessed 2 June 2020.

26. E. Ternes, 'The Grammatical Structure of the Celtic Languages', in R. O'Driscoll, ed., *The Celtic Consciousness* (Portlaoise and Edinburgh, 1982), 77.

27. John Carswell, *Foirm na n-Urrnuidheadh: Gaelic Translation of the Book of Common Order*, ed. R. L. Thomson (Edinburgh, 1970).

28. D. Everett, *Don't Sleep, There are Snakes* (London, 2008), 234ff.

29. Ronald Black, *Cothrom Ionnsachaidh* (Edinburgh, 1997), 22. In Old Gaelic (pre-900 AD), *tó* and *nathó* meant 'yes' and 'no' – see E. Quin, *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (Dublin, 1990), 475 and 593. Perhaps influenced by French, Breton has words for 'yes' and 'no', but in answering the verb is often repeated in place of 'yes' or 'no'.

by removing from Gaelic the very thing that is essential to all its forms of assent or dissent, namely tense.<sup>30</sup>

#### VSO

Unlike other European languages, the Celtic languages (Cornish and Breton excepted) place the verb before the subject. Typologically, therefore, Gaelic is a VSO (Verb-Subject-Object) language.<sup>31</sup> 'I went down' is rendered as *chaidh mi sìos* 'went me down'; or where in English we say 'I took it from him', in Gaelic it is *thug mi bhuaithe e* 'took me from him it'. In simple terms of priority, the role of the individual as originator of the action is secondary to the action itself. Even in sentences in which common emphatic forms are used – *'s mise a tha a' smaoineachadh...* 'it is me that is thinking' – the basic structure of VSO is retained. In terms of visualisation, the picture in the mind commences with motion. It incorporates an instant awareness of the verb rather than the noun.

#### POSSESSION

Doris Edel has commented upon a similar aspect of the language in early Irish Gaelic narrative texts, referring to 'their tendency to focus on the action rather than on the actor', to which she adds a footnote 'As evinced, for instance, by the frequent use of impersonal verbal forms.'<sup>32</sup> Much the same is asserted by Wehr: 'the role of the subject is weakened; Experiencers are not wholly, and Possessors not at all, integrated into the function "subject".'<sup>33</sup>

Connected with the preceding, and in addition to the absence of a verb of possession, there are no possessive pronouns such as 'mine' and 'yours', and the determiners 'my', 'your' etc. are used much more sparingly than in English. Possession has to be expressed in a way which is less absolute and legalistic: 'the car at me' *an càr agamsa* or 'the house at me' *an taigh agamsa* rather than 'my car, my house'. Most body parts are possessed (e.g. *mo chridhe* 'my heart'), but the language acknowledges that eyes and hair are perhaps not so reliably one's own, for not all speakers say 'my eyes' or 'my hair' but 'brown eyes are in me', *tha sìùlean donna annam* and 'it is not much hair that is on me' *'s gann am falt a tha orm*. In the case of the 3rd person singular, the determiner 'a' does not itself define gender, the gender being rendered by altering the word for the thing possessed, a

30. *Seadh* is frequently used as an affirmative, but conceals the copula and the old neuter pronoun *eadh* – see Lamb, *Scottish Gaelic Speech and Writing*, 240.

31. D. MacAulay, *The Celtic Languages* (Cambridge, 1992), 7.

32. D. Edel, 'Early Irish Queens and Royal Power', in M. Richter and J.-M. Picard, eds, *Ogma* (Dublin, 2002), 1–2.

33. B. Wehr, 'Typological Characteristics of Irish' (abstract only), in Black, Gillies and Ó Maolalaigh, eds, *Celtic Connections* (East Linton, 1999), 555.

*cù, a chù* 'her dog, his dog'. This feature is common to all surviving Celtic languages and transfers ownership from independent possession to dependence upon that which is owned.<sup>34</sup>

Another aspect of this approach to possession occurs when the determiner is omitted so that *an cù aig Calum* 'Calum's dog' becomes *cù Chaluim*, which is the preferred expression. In this usage, it is the owner who comes second and is altered by the relationship rather than the owned.<sup>35</sup> The great Gaelic hero who starts off life as Sétanta has his name changed to *Cú Chulainn* 'Culann's Dog', emphasising his role as the substitute for Culann's dog which he had killed. Moreover, in traditional Gaelic the prepositions used to express possession can carry markedly different meanings within otherwise identical sentences. *Tha beul air Iain* means 'there is a mouth on Iain' (for eating). *Tha beul an Iain* means 'there is a mouth in Iain' (for speaking), and *tha beul aig Iain* means 'there is a mouth at Iain' (for swearing with).<sup>36</sup>

When it comes to feelings, similar effects can be observed.<sup>37</sup> There is no verb for 'to fear' and the verbs *gaolaich* and *gràdhaich* meaning 'to love' are not often used. In Gaelic *tha gaol agam ort* is used in place of 'I love you':

The English words 'I love you' inevitably feature the first person pronoun 'I' as the grammatical subject, and the 'you' becomes the object no matter whether the 'you' in question even wishes that assignment. In Gaelic, on the other hand, the corresponding sentence, 'Tha gaol agam ort,' approaches the matter much more subtly. To translate its overtones, the sentence means 'There is (tha) love (gaol) within me (agam) towards you (ort).' By means of what grammarians unromantically call 'prepositional phrases,' *agam* and *ort*, the lover is simultaneously able to downplay his own ego and at the same time to imply that 'There is love in the air between us.'<sup>38</sup>

To put it another way, it makes the space between the two much richer. The same is true of Irish Gaelic *tá grá agam duit*. This is 'there is love at me for you' and both Irish and Scottish Gaelic can subtly modify the phrase according to the strength of emotion in *tha dùil agam annad* and *tha cion agam ort* 'there is affection at me for you' and 'there is respect or esteem at me on you'.

34. MacAulay, *The Celtic Languages*, 7.

35. MacAulay, 6.

36. MacAulay, 161.

37. Ternes, 'The Grammatical Structure of the Celtic Languages', 76–77.

38. Charles W. Dunn, 'Why Study the Scottish Highlanders?', typescript of an address delivered on 6 November 2003 at Richmond, Virginia, during the Highlanders Conference held at the Richmond Historical Society and the University of Richmond, 6–8 November 2003. By kind permission of the author.

Nor can one really speak of ‘my fear’. Rather there is ‘fear’ or even ‘the fear’ on me – *tha (an t-)eagal orm*. The same applies to other emotions, such as *farmad* ‘envy’ and *fearg* ‘anger’ and though there is a verb ‘to remember’, *mo chuimhne* ‘my memory’ is not a common usage; ‘I remember’ is rendered as *is cuimhne leam* ‘there is memory with me’. Illnesses work in the same way, with the illness rather than the sufferer being the subject. *Tha an cnatan, a’ chaitheamh no a’ ghriùthrach orm* expresses ‘I have the cold, TB or measles’.

However, although *mo ghaol*, *mo ghràdh* and *m’ eudail* do imply intimate possession, on examination of the context they do not carry possessive so much as connective force as endearments, and, when a love relationship is legalised by marriage, neither wife nor husband is described by a possessive pronoun. *Mo bhean* ‘my wife’ is not a mandatory usage; instead, Gaelic offers commonly used alternatives such as *a’ bhean agam* and *an duine agam* ‘the woman or the man at me’.<sup>39</sup> Given the nature of human behaviour, this is not just a nicety but an acceptance of reality – a reality which was expressed in the far greater legal and moral independence accorded to women in Gaelic society than in most other western European societies.<sup>40</sup>

One’s children, having an inalienable genetic connection, are described using the possessive pronoun – *mo mhac agus mo nighean* ‘my son and my daughter’ – and these forms were also used for foster children and siblings, for whom ‘the ties of milk are stronger than the ties of blood’.

#### ORIENTATION

It may also be significant that the words for ‘south’ (*deas*) and ‘southward’ (*deiseil*) are commonly used to express the idea of correctness which, in English, is egocentric (‘right’). As a geographical marker, ‘right’ only has meaning with respect to the speaker: *deiseil*, however, offers absolute coordinates, independent of the speaker.<sup>41</sup> It is even suggested that the phrase *tha mi air an obair a dhèanamh* ‘I have just done the work, or I am after doing the work’ – originally *tha mi iar an obair a dhèanamh* – may have the sense of ‘I am west of doing the work’. In other words, work is envisaged as being completed by the sunwise movement of the day, commencing in the east and concluding in the west.<sup>42</sup> The cardinal points derive their names from sun worship. *Ear* ‘east’ means ‘before’, and *iar* ‘west’ means ‘behind’, the names being derived from the assumption that one is

39. R. Black, *Cothrom Ionnsachaidh* (Edinburgh, 1997), 38–39.

40. H. Henderson, ‘The Women of the Glen: Some thoughts on Highland History’, in R. O’Driscoll, ed., *The Celtic Consciousness* (Portlaoise and Edinburgh, 1982), 259–60.

41. See S. Levinson, ‘Language and Mind: Let’s Get the Issues Straight!’, in Gentner and Goldin-Meadow, eds, *Language in Mind* (Cambridge MA, 2003), 38–41.

42. R. MacIlleathain, ‘Dualchas Coitcheann’, *The Nature of Scotland* (Summer 2011), 16.

facing the rising sun. Thus, ‘north-east’ is expressed as *ear-thuath*, east preceding north in the term.<sup>43</sup> This geographical awareness includes the regular use of the term *deiseil* (meaning ‘sunwise’ or ‘southwise’) for a number of situations, ranging from ‘readiness’ through to ritual customs such as performing any circuit sunwise, including turning a boat away from one fishing spot to another. This was always done *deiseil* (and still is by a very few) irrespective of whether one was rowing and facing astern, or at the tiller and facing forrard, and even if it involved a three-quarters rather than a quarter turn. Such awareness finds eloquent expression in Sorley MacLean’s ‘Creagan Beaga’ (quoted in I.3.b.), in which the sounds and sights of nature are given compass directions. Such orientations are frequent in his poem ‘An Cuilthionn’ and extended to his concern when the present author proposed trimming a rowan. MacLean asked on which side of the house was the rowan that was selected for ‘mutilation’ and, on being told the north side, replied ‘and especially *not* the north side’.

In the native Australian Guugu Yimithirr language, personal coordinates – left, right, in front, behind – simply do not exist, and other languages exhibit similar traits.<sup>44</sup> However, in Gaelic, personal coordinates are undoubtedly commonly used, but this was not always the case. The present writer has experience of Irish and Scottish Gaels asking one to ‘move a bit to the west’, and his grandfather being, on one occasion, directed ‘south by the stones and west by the birds.’ One suspects that instances of such usage have largely gone unnoticed or have been regarded as mere whimsy.

An interesting 8th-century Irish text requires that the reader understand that Christ is facing west, this (in Orthodox Church tradition) being the direction He is described as facing when crucified:

Dextera Christi saluauit sinistram mundi laeua eius saluauit dexteram partem capud orientem redemit plante occidentem.<sup>45</sup>

*With His right hand He saved the left of the world, i.e. the North; with His left hand He saved the right parts of the world, i.e. the South; His head redeemed the East, and His feet the West.*<sup>46</sup>

43. For some examples of sun worship, see Edward Dwelly, *The Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary* (Glasgow, 1910–1911 and 1977), s.v. *deiseil*.

44. G. Deutscher, *Through the Language Glass* (London, 2010, 2011), 165ff.

45. The Würzburg Glosses from which this passage is taken are dated to c.700 AD by Thurneysen and Stokes in Whitley Stokes and John Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus I* (Cambridge, 1901, xxiii–xxv); the Latin original is quoted from the same volume (p. 636).

46. Quoted in H. Richardson, ‘The Cross Triumphant: High crosses in Ireland’, in Richter and Picard, eds, *Ogma: Essays in Celtic Studies in Honour of Próinséas Ní Chatháin* (Dublin, 2002), 114. The original is found in the Würzburg Glosses, MSS m.p.th.f.12.



The topic of orientation is also discussed in III.3.b.

Putting all these characteristics together – no independent word for ‘I’; no words for ‘yes’ or ‘no’; no verb of possession; no possessive pronouns (e.g. no word for ‘mine’) and sparing use of possessive pronouns (‘my’, ‘your’); a preference for coordination over subordination; frequent use of double negative constructions for positive statements; and word orders placing action before actor; the more frequent use of absolute rather than personal coordinates; and you have something that adds up to the individual being comparatively less significant than the environment and/or the events which he or she experiences or even initiates, than would be the case in English. Man is less the agent and more the receptor in his environment, and emotions and illnesses are the subject, and the person experiencing them the object.

In Gaelic culture, there is also little room for the ego with respect to man’s relationship with nature. There is a ‘system of formulated attitudes’ in which man’s place in nature is one ‘of stewardship rather than of dominance.’<sup>47</sup> Dominating nature in the Gàidhealtachd presents peculiar difficulties, reflecting the dynamic character of the environment (see I.3.a., I.3.b., I.3.c. and III.3.d.).

#### ARTISTIC EVIDENCE: MCTAGGART AND YEATS

Just as the individual’s significance within the context of the language and its structure is less pronounced than in most other European languages, so, in the language of art, is the individual less prominent. The foregoing begs a question about the stress on the individual as the subject of praise poetry (discussed in II.2.d.). In this context, it could be argued that such poems stress a chief’s fulfilment of his social role rather than describing his idiosyncrasies.

Portraiture is a relatively new phenomenon in the Gaelic arts, with some notable contributions from photographers. Norman Morrison of Shawbost, Isle of Lewis, made a series of finely posed glass-plate images of the people of his district; and photographers such as Margaret Fay Shaw, Werner Kissling and George Washington Wilson produced outstanding portraiture of people in the Gàidhealtachd. But Robert Adam’s ‘engagement with people seems always to be from a distance . . .’ and in his images of people at work in the landscape, while suggesting that man and his environment are interlinked, ‘the effect of man tends to be passing and transient, leaving behind wisps of memories and myths and names.’<sup>48</sup>

For the painters it was another matter. The relative economy of the camera in more remote locations with few wealthy patrons may be part of the explanation,

47. Meg Bateman, ‘The Environmentalism of Donnchadh Bàn: Pragmatic or mythic?’, in *Crossing the Highland Line* (Glasgow, 2009).

48. F. MacLeod, Foreword to *Cas-cheum an Leòdhas/Footfall in Lewis* (Stornoway, 2006), vii.

but there is more to it than that. A lingering mistrust of one’s likeness being taken, along with a religious tendency to iconoclasm, in particular in the Reformed churches, no doubt also played their part.

McTaggart painted relatively few portraits. He shared his consciousness of the community and the environment with Jack Yeats, who came a generation later. Yet the contact between these artists was not one of direct influence but of environment – specifically a western maritime, Gaelic-speaking environment. When Jack Yeats wrote the stage direction ‘The sky, sea and land are brighter than the people’<sup>49</sup> for his play *The Old Sea Road*, he was giving theatrical expression to a relationship between nature and man fundamental to his creative output, both as painter and writer, and in particular in his later years. He was one of the greatest of self-consciously Irish artists, but painted only two formal portraits, though his sketch-books and drawings, such as *Lives* are full of informal and unidentified portraits – character sketches one might say, but rarely compromised by identification.

In the paintings of both artists, when there are humans in the landscape, they are almost transparent, their bodies permeated by the colours and even forms of the landscape behind them, and the land-, sea- and skyscape are themselves at least as important characters in the action as are the humans (see I.3.b.). Jack Yeats’s stage direction caught Samuel Beckett’s attention, and he referred to it in his review of Jack Yeats’s novel, *The Amaranthers*.<sup>50</sup> But that ‘elemental empathy that should not be mistaken for existential despair’, which has been noticed in relation to McTaggart,<sup>51</sup> was indeed to develop into existential despair in Beckett’s own work, notably in the play *Not I* which Beckett wrote in English for an old Irishwoman to say. The title could not be more explicit in its economy, but it is not to be thought of in philosophical isolation. It came from a Gaelic background:

I knew that woman in Ireland ... I knew who she was – not ‘she’ specifically, one single woman, but there were so many of those old crones, stumbling down the lanes, in the ditches, beside the hedgerows. Ireland is full of them. And I heard ‘her’ saying what I wrote in *Not I*.<sup>52</sup>

Beckett brings an existentialist angst to the problem of the ego, but the stark negation of the title suggests a longing for a release from it. In constantly using

49. Robin Skelton, ed., *The Collected Plays of Jack B. Yeats* (London, 1971), 142.

50. Samuel Beckett, ‘An Imaginative Work!’, *The Dublin Magazine* Vol. XI, No. 3, (July-September 1936), 80–81.

51. P. Kvaerne, *Singing Songs of the Scottish Heart, William McTaggart 1835–1910*, 236.

52. Quoted in Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett* (London, 1978), 524.



McTaggart, *A Sprig of Heather – Farewell to the Emigrants* (1893). Photo © Phillips Edinburgh

the 3rd person, the Mouth enacts the title of the work. In this context, Beckett would surely have approved of Jack's statement:

To me, man is only part of a splendour and a memory of it.<sup>53</sup>

For McTaggart, even in the close-up figurative painting *A Sprig of Heather – Farewell to the Emigrants* of 1893, we see only the side of the face and an ear, no eye or mouth. The girl holds in one hand, against her breast, a tiny bunch of pink and white heather, and from the other raised hand there flows in the wind a kerchief of the same stuff as her shawl, of the same texture and colour as the bunch of heather; as though the luckiest flowers of the landscape were woven into the fabric of her life, held hopeless against the winds of history, as the emigrants make their way across a rich blue sea towards the emigrant ship whose bare spars are silhouetted against the sky. McTaggart returned to this subject often, for he was an Argyllshire man and he knew well, not just the sea road of the saints, but the sea road to America, along which so much of Gaelic identity, individual and communal, Scottish and Irish, had made and was still making its way.

Towards the end of his life, McTaggart painted *The Wind on the Heath* (1905). The title carries with it a particular poignancy, for it comes from a passage in George Borrow's *Lavengro*. Borrow was also a favourite author of Jack Yeats's.<sup>54</sup> In *Lavengro*, the gypsy, Jasper Petulengro, replies that, even in blindness, life is sweet:

There's the wind on the heath, brother; if I could only feel that, I would gladly live for ever.<sup>55</sup>

This sense in which we are subject to a dynamic environment has been applied to some of the apparently rigid formal structures incorporated into early Celtic design:

More than any other style of decoration, with the possible exception of the fully fledged Moslem arabesque, Hiberno-Saxon art aims at kinetic effects.<sup>56</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

This dynamic environment, into which the individual is subsumed and as much acted upon as acting, is mirrored in another aspect of the Gaelic language which

53. Jack Yeats, letter to John Quinn (17 November 1920) (New York Public Library), transcription by Hilary Pyle.

54. Letter from Jack Yeats to Ria Mooney (10 May 1939).

55. George Borrow, *Lavengro* (London and Glasgow, n.d.), 202 (conclusion of Chap. XXV).

56. Carl Nordenfalk, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting* (London, 1977), 16.



relates closely to our perception of music. Unlike many European languages, the individual word is less readily heard or understood as a discrete unit. Elmar Ternes has even claimed

There is hardly a language in the world for which the traditional concept of ‘word’ is so doubtful as for the Celtic languages.<sup>57</sup>

There are two main reasons for this. The first is that grammatical case is expressed by both initial and final mutations. These changes in words at both beginning and end also occur in the expression of gender and possession, both of which pertain to individual identity. The second reason is that in the flow of sound between consonant and vowel, vowels can be intruded or elided.

An attempt to draw an analogy between the status of the individual word in the flow of speech, and the individual speaker in the flow of existence, would be highly speculative: but one trusts it will do no harm to give expression to a possibility which might, with further study, lead us to a better understanding of how the Gaelic language operates in a psychological and even philosophical context. The great German Celtic scholar, Kuno Meyer, wrote of the oldest written Gaelic:

We find here a fully-formed learned prose style which allows even the finest shades of thought to be easily and perfectly expressed, from which we must conclude that there must have been a long previous culture going back at the very least to the beginning of the 6th century.<sup>58</sup>

In the 20th century, the language was seen as fundamental to self-perception for more than Iain Crichton Smith, with whom we commenced. As Fionn MacColla wrote in his autobiography:

If there is any magic in anything I have written, any express lucidity, anything shining with an especial light, anything above all that is at once durable and sweet, they are derived from that special sighting of Reality which can not be attained save through the window of the Gàidhlig.<sup>59</sup>

In Chapter VI.2. A Celtic Philosophical Thread?, an attempt is made to expand on the philosophical aspects of Gaelic thought; and in the visual context to which this book addresses itself, the notion is pursued under such headings as shape-changing, emblems and totems, script, and books and illumination, in which hierarchies, and even distinctions, between humans and other creatures, and all living things and the written word, become wonderfully ambiguous.

57. Ternes, ‘The Grammatical Structure of the Celtic Languages’, 72.

58. Zimmer, Meyer and Stern, *Kultur der Gegenwart*, Part I, Section XI, 80.

59. F. MacColla, *Too Long in this Condition* (Thurso, 1975), 56.

For an avowedly Celtic-influenced painter such as J.D. Fergusson, that ambiguity provoked him to review his own approach, involving an underlying philosophical sense of the interconnectedness of all things which he regarded as Celtic. It finds expression in Fergusson’s own description of how he painted a portrait of Kathleen Dillon:

Looking at K[athleen Dillon] I soon saw that the hat was not merely a hat, but a continuation of the girl’s character, her mouth, her nostril, the curl of her hair – her whole character – (feeling of her) like Burns’s ‘love is like a red red rose’. So she like Burns again lighted up my jingle and I painted ‘Rose Rhythm’ – going from the very centre convolutions to her nostril, lips, eyebrows, brooch, buttons, background, cushions, right through. At last this was my statement of a thing thoroughly Celtic.<sup>60</sup>

JP

## II.1.b. SHAPE-SHIFTING AND THE *CO-CHOISICHE*

### [Introduction; Shape-shifting; The \*Co-choisiche\*](#)

#### Introduction

Tachraidh d’ fhiadh fhèin riut fhathast.

*You’ll meet your own deer yet.*

This was said to a man as a warning that his recklessness would one day kill him. It came from the belief that a person who was soon to die could see himself as a deer separated from the herd.<sup>61</sup> This section considers how human and animal identities can be merged in accounts of shape-shifting or doubled in accounts of the *co-choisiche*.

#### SHAPE-SHIFTING

Shape-shifting, reflected in Gaelic folklore, philosophy, mythology and iconography, allows a human to become a bird, beast, insect or even water (in the case of Étain and Odras) without any loss of identity or status. Tuán Mac Cairill and Amairgin, both in *Lebor Gábala*, are the obvious – perhaps prototypical examples.<sup>62</sup> Tuán mac Cairill, born first as nephew to Parthalán, the first invader of Ireland, had survived for hundreds of years in the form of a stag, boar, eagle and salmon, when he was eaten in this last form by Caireall’s wife, who gave birth to him as Tuán. The ostensible purpose of his shape-changing is to give

60. Margaret Morris, *The Art of J. D. Fergusson* (Perth, 2010), 98–99.

61. Malcolm MacPhail, ‘Folklore from the Hebrides II’, *Folklore* Vol. 8, No. 4 (December 1897), 380–86: 383.

62. J. Carey, *Ériu* XXXV, 93–111.

him the longevity to witness the history of Ireland since the Flood. His method of shape-shifting, by fasting and sleeping, is typical of shamanic practices in all cultures. However, Amairgin's assertions of various identities have a different purpose: to bring about accord between Ireland and her new rulers, the Gaels. This he does by promising to name the land after the three goddesses, and, in his role as chief poet of the Milesians, by becoming one with the land:

Am gaeth i m-muir	<i>I am Wind on the sea,</i>
Am tond trethan	<i>I am Ocean Wave,</i>
Am fuaim mara	<i>I am Roar of Sea,</i>
Am dam secht ndírend	<i>I am Bull of Seven Fights,</i>
Am séig i n-aill	<i>I am Vulture on Cliff,</i>
Am dér gréne	<i>I am Dewdrop,</i>
Am cain lubai	<i>I am Fairest of Flowers,</i>
Am torc ar gail	<i>I am Boar for Boldness,</i>
Am he i l-lind	<i>I am Salmon in Pool,</i>
Am loch i m-maig	<i>I am Lake on Plain,</i>
Am brí a ndai	<i>I am a Mountain in a Man,</i>
Am brí danae	<i>I am a Word of Skill,</i>
Am gai i fodb (feras feochtu)	<i>I am the Point of a Weapon</i> <i>(that poureth forth combat),</i>
Am dé delbas do chind codnu.	<i>I am God who fashioneth Fire for a Head.</i> <sup>63</sup>

The Book of Kells has unexpected instances of shape-shifting among the symbols of the Evangelists (Matthew as the Angel, Mark as the Lion, Luke as the Calf and John as the Eagle), taken from the 'living creatures' of Revelation. In three of the tables of the Eusebian canons, designed to show parallels between the gospels, some of these symbols have been combined. Thus, on f.2v, Luke and John are combined as Calf-head and Eagle-body, while on f.3v and f.4r, Mark and Luke are variously combined from the Lion and the Calf.<sup>64</sup>

Shape-shifting seems possible because of a non-hierarchical view between man and other living beings. Shape-changing might be seen as a deliberate subversion of the generally accepted Aristotelian hierarchy, with the Holy Trinity, the angelic orders, mankind, and the animate and inanimate creation ranked in descending order, were it not that there appears to be no engagement with such a concept in the first place. Nor are we presented here with a characteristic medieval *mundus inversus* with the stag playing the hunter's

63. R. A. Stewart MacAlister, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, Part V, Irish Texts Society Vol. XLIV (Dublin, 1956), 110–13, Section VII, Verse LXIX.

64. J. Cronin, 'The Evangelist Symbols as Pictorial Exegesis', in C. Bourke, ed., *From the Isles of the North* (Belfast, 1995), 113–14.



Luke and John combined as Calf-head and Eagle-body; detail from the Book of Kells, f.2v

horn:<sup>65</sup> no such obvious and deliberate subversions are illustrated in the early Celtic tradition. Instead we see human and animal on much the same level – with the animals occasionally appearing to act as critics of the humans, for example, on the Clonmacnoise and Lethendy images of triple pipe players which show respectively an indifferent cat, and either a cat or dog with back arched antagonistically.<sup>66</sup>

In the same context, the famous poem, *Pangur Bán* (further discussed in III.1.d.), draws a sincere parallel between the cat's pursuit of mice and the monk's pursuit of meaning.<sup>67</sup> The poem makes a picture in the mind in which neither cat nor human takes precedence. This is part of it in Robin Flower's translation:

I and Pangur Bán, my cat,  
 'Tis a like task we are at;  
 Hunting mice is his delight,  
 Hunting words I sit all night.  
 Better far than praise of men  
 'Tis to sit with book and pen;  
 Pangur bears me no ill will,  
 He too plies his simple skill.

...

65. A stag playing a hunter's horn is seen in MS Hunter 279, f.54v, reproduced in J. Purser, 'Reconstructing the River Erne Horn', in C. Bourke, ed., *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* Vol. 61 (2002), 21.

66. J. Purser, 'Listening to Picts', in E. Hickmann, I. Laufs and R. Eichmann (Hrsg.), *Studien zur Musikarchäologie IV*, Orient-Archäologie 15 (Rahden, 2004), 224–25.

67. Frequently translated, the original text with a fairly literal translation can be read in G. Murphy, ed., *Early Irish Lyrics* (Oxford, 1977), 2–3.



'Gainst the wall he sets his eye  
Full and fierce and sharp and sly;  
'Gainst the wall of knowledge I  
All my little wisdom try.

...

Practice every day has made  
Pangur perfect in his trade;  
I get wisdom day and night  
Turning darkness into light.<sup>68</sup>

It is interesting that the one MS instance we have of this poem is preceded by sections from Ambrose of Milan's *Hexameron*, a text which expounds on Basil the Great's understanding that God permeates and fills all things.<sup>69</sup> This context gives the poem almost certain proof that it is not an anthropomorphic fancy but the expression of a theological stance whereby man and cat, in doing what is natural to them, praise their Creator.

A story in Adomnan's 7th-century *Life of St Columba* has the monastery horse shedding tears at its foreknowledge of Colum Cille's imminent death. John Duncan's fine rendition of this event, *St Columba Bidding Farewell to the White Horse* of 1925 might be cited by some as a pathetic fallacy. Adomnán himself cites the story as an example of a miracle. Whether miracle or pathetic fallacy, the story appears to have precursors in pre-Christianity, expressing a similar affinity between man and beast. When Cú Chulainn is dying in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (The Cattle-Raid of Cooley), his horse weeps tears of blood at his feet and lays his head on his breast:

La sodain dodechaid in Liath Macha co tarlaic a bolgdéra móra fola fora  
dib traighthib ... Luid dano in Líath Macha co tarat a chend for brunnib  
Con Culaind.<sup>70</sup>

*Then the Gray of Macha came and let his big round tears of blood fall on  
Cú Chulainn's feet ... Then the Gray of Macha went and laid his head on Cú  
Chulainn's breast.*

While not involving metamorphosis between animal and human form, animals are frequently invoked in naming people, for example, in the association between the pig, *orc*, and tribes in Orkney, and with the cat and tribes in Caithness. Heroes are given kennings as salmon, stags or hawks in

68. Robin Flower, *The Irish Tradition* (Oxford, 1978).

69. Gregory Toner, "Messe ocus Pangur Bán": Structure and Cosmology', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 57 (Cambridge, 2009), 2–22.

70. R. Best and M. O'Brien, eds., *The Book of Leinster* Vol. II (Dublin, 1956), 443.

praise poetry. Some first names such as Ronan and Oisean evoke animals, here the seal and deer respectively, while the clan names MacMhathain, Campbell and MacCodrum have a totemic tie with the bear, boar and seal (III.3.c.). Colum Cille was first named 'fox', *Crimthann*, before he took the byname of the dove.

In early medieval iconography tongues, beards, hair, crests, arms, legs, wings, tails, stems and leaves are all intertwined across species and apparently without discrimination, the expressions in most cases being as lively on the faces of the non-human as on the human creatures. The designs may represent the interconnectedness of all life, synchronically and diachronically: all life is interdependent and life is derived from life. It is interesting that shape-shifters often pass through a range of animal phyla, insect, fish, bird and mammal, as if passing through the range of animal forms. Far from man's relationship with animals being hierarchical, the knowledge of, and identification with, animals gives Gaelic heroes many an advantage. Suibne, despite his suffering, is the outstanding example of a beneficiary of the companionship of nature (III.1.d.).

Such concepts and images in which we are physically entwined with our fellow creatures, even to the extent of being interchangeable with them, finds a religious, if not a philosophical outlet in the concept of reincarnation – a subject taken up in Chapter VI. Suffice it to say, that no matter what the transformation, the dignity of the particular life form is no more compromised if the human becomes a fly than if the fly becomes a human. Not even a fly is too non-descript to be cherished by St Moling:

A madman [Suibne] and a fox [lived with St Moling], also a wren, and a little fly that used to buzz to him when he came from matins, till the wren hopped on it and killed it; and this killing by the wren was displeasing to him, so he cursed the wren, and then he said: 'Howbeit,' says Moling, 'but he that marred for me the poor pet that used to be making music for me, let his dwelling be for ever in empty houses, with a wet drip therein continually. And may children and small people be destroying him!'<sup>71</sup>

If the cursing of the wren detracts from the point about cherishing even a fly, there are plenty other instances of the empathy early Gaelic saints had for animals. St Gall fed a bear and asked it to put a log on the fire; St Caoimhin of Glendalough kept his arms extended in prayer throughout Lent till the fledglings of the blackbird who had nested in his hand would fly; and St Colum Cille sent

71. Translated from Brussels MS 4190–4200, ff.43–65; Whitley Stokes, *The Birth and Life of St Moling, edited from a manuscript in the Royal Library, Brussels* (London, 1907), paragraphs 73–75: <[archive.org/stream/stmolingoostokuoft/stmolingoostokuoft\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/stmolingoostokuoft/stmolingoostokuoft_djvu.txt)>. Rody Gorman says that more important than the fly's lowly status is the example of a triple death afforded by the fly being killed by the wren which is killed by a fox.

his brothers to minister to an exhausted guest – a crane or heron – in Iona.<sup>72</sup> More interesting than the question of the truth of these legends is the hagiographers' desire to make the saints conduits of compassion for all life, particularly in times when society was often brutal. This empathy for nature among the early saints may well have had its roots in the teachings of the druids, and in particular in their teachings on reincarnation. In the context of the present chapter on the self, it is interesting in showing the respect given to non-human life.

However, there must be a philosophical difference between shape-shifting undertaken willingly and shape-shifting imposed as a curse or spell. Suibne deemed that it was God who had separated him from his *dealbh* or 'form', in fulfilment of Ronan's curse, when he was turned into a bird.<sup>73</sup> The Children of Lir were cursed to become swans by their jealous step-mother, and Étaín (in *Tochmarc Étaíne*) was turned into a pool, a worm and a fly by her husband's first wife who is jealous, to be conceived as a female child again when the fly is swallowed. In the Scottish Gaelic version of Snow White, the place of the



dwarves is taken by cats who are the bewitched sons of the king of Norway.<sup>74</sup> A 20th-century poem by Dòmhnall Iain Dhonnchaidh 'An Ròn' (The Seal) is put in the words of a princess, cursed to take the form of a seal in the land below the waves, who explains that her nature and her concerns are

*St Kevin and the Blackbird.*

Miniature from an Irish codex, 9th or 10th century

72. See Maud Joynt's translation of Walahfrid Strabo's *Life of St Gall* (1927), 55 and 77; the anonymous Irish Life of St Kevin in *Bethada Náem nÉirenn (Lives of Irish Saints)*, ed. by Charles Plummer (Oxford, 1922), 159–60 (<<https://celt.ucc.ie/published/G201000/index.html>>):

Agus corghas da raibhe amhlaidh sin, tainig lon on choill don chro, & toirlingis ar a bhois, & é 'na luighe ar an lic, & a lamh sinte uaidh amach; & congmhuis a laimh mar sin, go n-derna an lon nead innnte, & go t-tug enlathie amach.

and Adomnán of Iona, *Life of St Columba*, transl. Richard Sharpe (Penguin Classics, 1995), 150.

73. J. G. O' Keefe, 'Buile Suib detaches itself from *ne*', *Irish Texts Society Vol. XII* (1910), 8:

Misi sunn ag Ros mBearaigh,  
domrad Rónán fo mheabhail,  
romsgar Dia rém dheilbh nád ró,  
sgaraidh ré mh'eól, a ógó.

74. 'Lasair Gheug', in Bruford and MacDonald, *Scottish Traditional Tales* (Edinburgh, 1994), 98; see also 'Cath nan Eun' (The Battle of the Birds), when the raven changes back into a prince, in J. F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (Hounslow, 1983), Vol. I, No. II.

nevertheless human.<sup>75</sup> In these cases, shape-shifting appears to be a demotion, an exclusion from human society.

J. F. Campbell uses the word *cochal* (Dwelly *cochull*: husk, mantle, skin of a snake, sheath etc.) for the enchanted form assumed by a shape-shifter,<sup>76</sup> which emphasises the outer rather than inner nature of the change. Shape-shifting to an animal form could allow a human to avoid detection. This was what lay behind Tuán's metamorphoses mentioned above, so he would not be killed by each of the successive invaders of Ireland. St Patrick and his followers became deer to avoid detection by the pagan King Laogaire.<sup>77</sup> In the 8th-century Dream Oengus, Oengus shape-changed to become a swan in order to woo Caer Ibarneith, who also had the form of a swan.<sup>78</sup>

The pre-Christian earth goddesses changed shape between maiden, mother and hag, following the cycle of the seasons, the hag of winter destroying the fertility of summer, yet being renewed herself in spring. As a goddess of war, the Morrigan shape-shifted to confuse her enemies, often between a crow and an eel. If the *gruagaich* of Scottish Gaelic folklore are demonised versions of the earth-goddess, their shape-changing into crows, wolves, hares, cats, deer and eels is also to demonic purpose. In one tale, two maidservants, anxious about losing their employment on the marriage of their mistress, fly out as crows – the same as the Morrigan – to a boat carrying the bridegroom, in an attempt to drown him.<sup>79</sup> In another, the *gruagach* changes from hen to bloodsucker to gain the human body-fluids that would allow her to gain a soul and hence heaven:

An ùine ghoirid thàinig cearc a-staigh, agus leig i aon taobh foidhpe air lic an teinntin, agus chùim i an taobh eile ris an teine. Cha robh i fada san t-suidheachadh sin an uair a thòisich i ri at agus ri at. An ceann tacain dh'èirich i, agus thionndaidh i an taobh a bha foidhpe ris an teine; agus ma dh'at i roimhe, dh'at i nis a sheachd uibhir. Mu dheireadh dh'fhàs i na boireannach, agus sheas i suas air an ùrlar mu choinneamh an t-sealgair.

*In a short time a hen entered and rested herself on one side of the hearth, while she kept the other side to the fire. She was not long in that position when she began to swell and to swell. In a while she rose, and turned the other side under her to the fire; and if she swelled before, she now swelled*

75. Donald Iain MacDonald, *Chì Mi*, ed. Bill Innes (Edinburgh, 1998), No. 63.

76. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* Vol. III, 440.

77. See 'Feath Fio', in John Carey, *King of Mysteries, Early Irish Religious Writing* (Dublin, 2000), 130–35.

78. F. Shaw, ed., *The Dream of Óengus* (Dublin, 1934).

79. 'Dark Lachlan and the Witches', in Bruford and MacDonald, *Scottish Traditional Tales*, 395.

seven times more. At last she became a woman, and stood up on the floor before the hunter.<sup>80</sup>

The woman proceeds to suck the hunter's blood, and in the fight which follows she is attacked by his dog. On returning home, the hunter finds one of his neighbours has an identical injury to that sustained by the *gruagach* and kills her as a witch.

A surprisingly late survival of a belief in shape-changing is connected with the disappearance of three lighthouse keepers in December 1900 from the Flannan Isles, nineteen miles west of Lewis. The story is surrounded by mystery and superstition because the terrible storms that caused the bending of metal round the lighthouse occurred after the last sighting of the light. The rational explanation for the disappearance of the keepers is that they were swept to their deaths by a freak wave. However, one of the keepers, Donald McArthur, came from Lewis, and there some maintained that the men had been turned into seabirds. This was supported by accounts that the investigating crew had seen three cormorants dive into the sea as they approached the island or that they had encountered three birds flying out of the lighthouse when they opened the door. Whether this is understood as a form of metempsychosis by which the men continued to live as seabirds, or whether their migrating souls temporarily took the form of seabirds, their fate seemed less dreadful than drowning.<sup>81</sup>

#### THE CO-CHOISICHE

If the Gaelic imagination allows the self to be seen as part of a continuum with other life forms, it also allows it to comprise an anarchic alternative personality in the form of the *co-choisiche* 'fellow-walker'. Martin Martin, for example, describes a man in Lewis who threw a burning coal at his *co-choisiche* for having addressed him impertinently. In reprisal, the *co-choisiche* beat the man so badly that he was confined to bed for fourteen days.<sup>82</sup> Mention has already been made (in I.1.a.) of the *samhla*, *taibhse* or *manadh*, a fetch of a person, often seen at the same place where death or injury will shortly occur. The *co-choisiche* is also a double, but in the particular sense of an alter ego, unrestrained by society's conventions. John MacInnes, as we have already noted, maintains that all these doubles of the living are peculiar to Gaelic Scotland, and he suggests that the *co-choisiche* could be the source for Robert Wringhim's double in Hogg's *Confession of a Justified Sinner* and for the battle of good and evil in the one person in *The*

80. 'Sealgair Shrath Èireann is a' Chailleach' (The Strath Dearn Hunter and the Witch), in MacDougall and Calder, *Folk Tales and Fairy Lore* (Edinburgh, 1910), 230.

81. Murray MacLeod, 'Na h-Eileanan Flannach: Tri sgairbh no suaile', *An Gàidheal Ùr* (2000).

82. Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland* (1703), 316–17.

*Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.<sup>83</sup> In both tales, the double represents the dark side of an individual's split personality that gradually corrupts and gains control of the other part.

Doubles appear to be part of an Indo-European understanding both of the shadow of a living person and of a trouble-making alternative personality that detaches itself from its owner when the latter is in a trance-like state, and travels away, often in the form of an animal. Such doubles are known in German, Norse, Slavic and Hungarian folklore,<sup>84</sup> and the daemons in Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* (1995) probably owe something to the concept. Shelley, who saw his own Doppelgänger before his death, appears to be speaking of the same with his 'shadows of all forms' in *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), lines 195–199:

For know there are two worlds of life and death:  
One that which thou beholdest; but the other  
Is underneath the grave, where do inhabit  
The shadows of all forms that think and live  
Till death unite them and they part no more ...

In traditional Gaelic folklore, the world of the *sìth* allowed for a commentary on social mores, among other things, perhaps as soap operas today parallel current concerns. Belief in the *co-choisiche* could excuse uncharacteristic behaviour as the work of the double acting beyond the control of its owner. It might also be explained as an external projection of 'being in two minds', or of serious psychotic states. Believers in that world thought that everyone had a *co-choisiche*, but that these were only seen when the owner was in some state of transition, perhaps when in a trance or dying. It could appear as a physical or a phantom body, or shape-changed into an animal. It was understood to belong to the 'other side' or the spirit world, *an taobh thall*, to which it would return and from which it could be sent to communicate with the living.<sup>85</sup>

Though very much the European symbolist poet, Sorley MacLean also worked within the terms of the Gaelic Otherworld and made use of both shape-shifting and the *co-choisiche*. As we have seen in 'Hallaig', the lost population of Raasay takes the form of trees, or vice versa, in a continuum of life. In the closing section of 'An Cuiltheann' ('The Cuillin'), at night on the bare slopes of that mountain, the poet meets his *co-choisiche*:

83. John MacInnes, *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal* (Edinburgh, 2006), 454.

84. Eva Pócs, *Between the Living and the Dead: A Perspective on Witches and Seers in the Early Modern Age* (Budapest, 1999); MacInnes, *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal*, 454.

85. Norman MacRae, ed., *Highland Second Sight* (Dingwall: George Soutar, 1908; repr. Largs, 1992), 2.

Cò seo, cò seo, oidhche chridhe?  
 Chan eil ach an nì do-ruighinn,  
 an samhla a chunnaic an t-anam,  
 Cuilitheann ag èirigh thar mara.

*Who is this, who is this in the night of the heart?  
 It is the thing that is not reached,  
 the ghost seen by the soul,  
 a Cuillin rising over the sea.*<sup>86</sup>

He describes this presence over several verses in various terms – *manadh*, *spiorad*, *anam*, *tannasg*, *samhla*, *falbhan* – an apparition, a spirit walking by his side, a soul, the ghost of a heart, and the journeying one. It was the poet's particular anguish to be torn between a vision of the absolute and the limitations of the practical. Usually in his poetry, the Cuillin symbolises the absolute but, in the verse quoted above, it symbolises that part of himself which restlessly and insatiably pursues it. His identification of the deepest part of the self with the land calls to mind Amairgin's identification of himself with Ireland with which we opened this section.

In conclusion, the fluidity between plant, animal and human, and between the living and the dead, suggests that humanity's place in the Gaelic imagination can be very different from Aristotle's hierarchy or from Christianity's linear journey of the soul. Classical writers such as Lucan report that the druids taught reincarnation, and the tradition of shape-shifting is probably a survival of this sort of belief.<sup>87</sup> Older tales give examples of both reincarnation – the transmigration at death of the soul into a new body of the same or a different species, as with Étaín – and of metamorphosis, as with Tuan and Mongán, of a continuously conscious existence passing through different shapes. At the deepest level, shape-shifting probably arises from a cosmology in which all life, plant, animal and human, past, present and future, is connected, though in later stories, shape-shifting often amounts to little more than trickery, losing its connotations of shamanic practice. An entry from *Sanas Chormaic* (Cormac's Glossary) of the 9th century defines *tuirigin* or *torrachta-gein* as 'a birth that passes from every nature into another' and quotes Fachtna son of Senchaid:

Fuirem gein torrachta doreith aicned noll o adam conimteit tre gach  
 naimsir nadamra cobetha brath, berid aicned enbethae di cach duil derb  
 deisin oen connoe .i. cossin duine ndedenaig bias cobruindi brathae.

86. Somhairle MacGill-Eain, *O Choille gu Bearradh/From Wood to Ridge* (London, 1991), 128–31.

87. See Carey in John T. Koch, ed., *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia* (California, 2006), 1484.

*He gives a transitory birth which has traversed all nature from Adam and goes through every wonderful time down to the world's doom. He gives a nature of one life ... to the last person who shall be on the verge of judgement.*<sup>88</sup>

The self then was not as circumscribed by its species and times as in our modern concept of the individual. In a meshing of Christian and pagan models, an Early Modern Gael might have understood his soul to be destined for Heaven or Hell, and his body for the earth, while his astral body, his *samhla*, *taibhse* or *co-choisiche*, would live in one of the *sithein* (fairy mounds) that were found beside churchyards, along with the ancestors. His life would be witnessed by the living dead who were not normally seen themselves, but who might take on other forms, human or animal, to communicate with the living. MB

#### II.1.c. PICTURING PEOPLE IN WORDS

[An Enduring Standard of Beauty; Colour and Hair; Hands and Feet; Brightness of Skin; The Person of the Warrior; Female Beauty; Ugliness in Satire and Traditional Tales; Eloquent Gestures; The Destructiveness of Beauty](#)

##### AN ENDURING STANDARD OF BEAUTY

Diarmaid, Mac Uí Dhuibhne fhéil,  
 a thuiteam tré éad, mo-nuar!  
 bu gile a bhráighe ná grian,  
 ba deirge a bhial ná bláth cnuas.

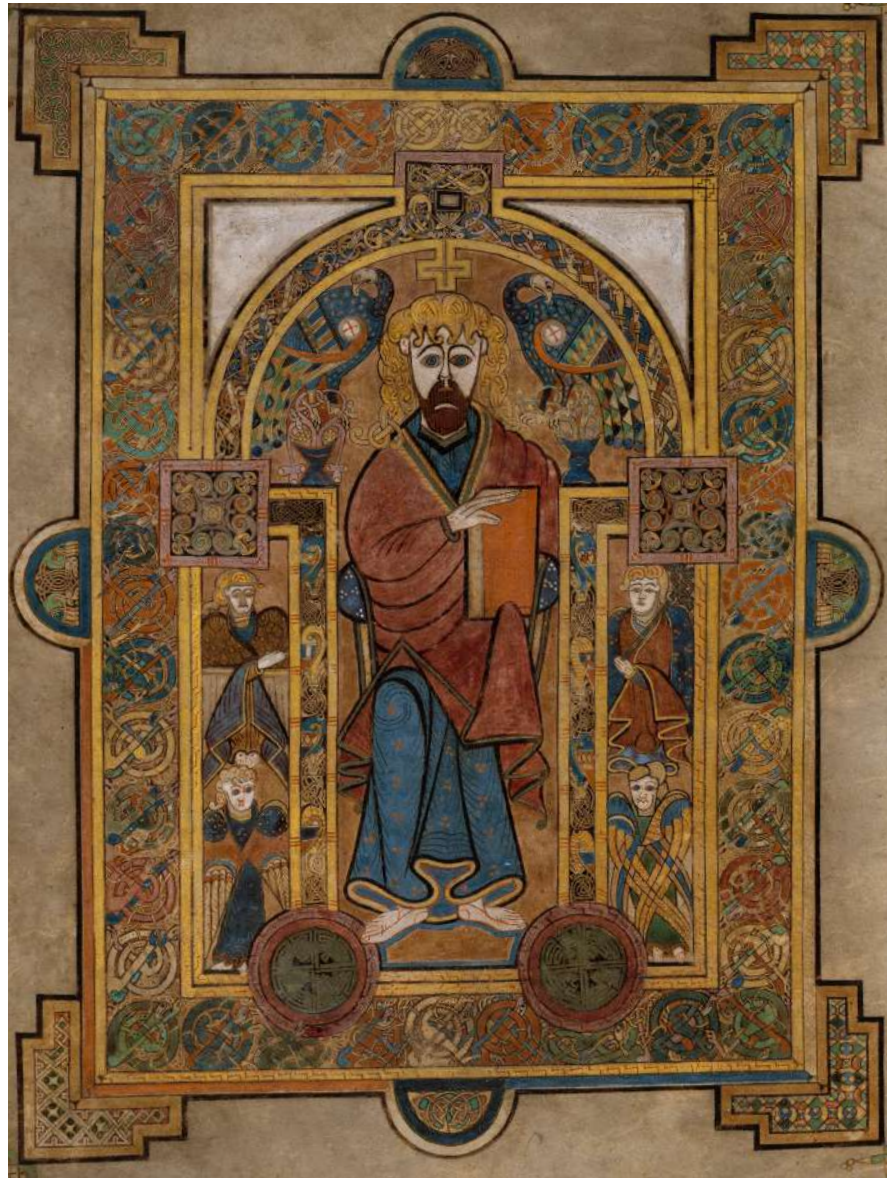
Fá buidhe fhionnadh 's a fholt,  
 fada a rosg barrghlan fá fhleasg,  
 guirme 's glaise 'na shúil,  
 maisie is caise a gcúl na gcleacht.

Binneas is grinneas 'na ghlóir,  
 gile 'na dhóid bháirdheirg bhláith,  
 méad agus aobhacht 'san laoch,  
 seinge is saoire 'na chneas bán.

*Diarmaid, generous Ua Duibhne's son,  
 being killed through jealousy, alas;  
 his breast was brighter than the sun,  
 his lips redder than the blossom of fruit.*

88. O' Donovan, John, *Cormac's Glossary*, translated and annotated by John O' Donovan, ed. Whitley Stokes (Calcutta, 1868), 159.





Christ Enthroned, the Book of Kells, f.32v

*Yellow was the hair of his cheek and head;  
below his headband his lashes were long and fair;  
blueness and greyness were in his eyes;  
lustre and curliness in his ringleted hair.*

*Sweetness and delicacy were in his voice,  
whiteness in his smooth rosy-nailed hands;  
stature and comeliness were in his form,  
slenderness and nobility below his white skin.<sup>89</sup>*

The standard of beauty evinced by this 16th-century Fenian ballad is remarkably enduring, and may be seen as early as the 8th-century figures in the Book of Kells (or even as early as the prehistoric heads with curling hair, round eyes, fine eye-brows and moustache found on the Continent) and as late as Sorley MacLean's depiction of 'Eimhir' in the 20th century, as *nighean a' chùil bhuidhe, throm-bhuidh, òr-bhuidh ... do bhial-sa uail-dhearg san t-seann òran* 'girl of the yellow, heavy-yellow, gold-yellow hair ... your mouth proud and red with the old song' with her 'white body and forehead's sun'.<sup>90</sup> There is always an especial emphasis on the hair which is long, ringleted and yellow; on white skin, chiselled teeth, fine brows and calm, round eyes. Long limbs and soft palms and feet also prevail. The standard for both sexes seems the same. Iain Lom, for instance, refers to Dòmhnall Gorm Òg in the 17th century as:

*Caol mhala gun ghruaim,  
Beul meachair bhon suairce gràdh  
...*

*A slender brow without scowl  
a tender mouth of most affable love  
...<sup>91</sup>*

It has been suggested that the poet imagined the chief as a woman in order to praise his beauty; at any rate we become used to seeing a chief praised for what, by today's standards, seems feminine: for slender eye brows, red lips, and soft, white skin. Such features reflect a refined aesthetic,



Celtic head c. 150–50 BC, from the sanctuary at Mšecké Žehrovice, Czech Republic

89. Wilson McLeod and Meg Bateman, *Duanair na Sracaire/The Song-book of the Pillagers* (Edinburgh, 2007), No. 59.

90. 'Gaoir na h-Eòrpa', in Somhairle MacGill-Eain, *O Choille gu Berradh/From Wood to Ridge* (London, 1991), 8–9.

91. Colm Ó Baoill and Meg Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach: Anthology of 17th Century Gaelic Poetry* (Edinburgh, 1994), 100.

also expressed in a taste for fine fabrics and well-crafted weapons (see IV.2.d.) and courtesy. To the trained MacMhuirich poet, the untrained poet's boorish manners are just as objectionable as his sloppy versification:

Níor chuir Dia ad dheoidh do dhochar  
anmhuin ris an altachadh  
gan bhuaib briuais da gach bord  
a n-uair niuais do neamhlorg.

*God was not so hard on you  
as to make you wait till grace is over  
before you swipe the brose from each board  
without as much as 'What's new?' to anyone.*<sup>92</sup>

It is noteworthy that facial expression and tone of voice also constitute part of the depiction of beauty. A man may be described flushed with fury in battle or serene and loving in the drinking hall. The following description from a 15th-century Fenian lay preserved in the Book of the Dean of Lismore depicts 'High-Spirited Goll' both as warrior and as patron of the arts in his drinking hall, sometimes flushed, sometimes serene:

bruinne mar chailc,  
iomlán má chorp  
lomlán do sheirc ...  
maoidheamh na gcreach  
a dhreach fá bláth ...  
Mac Morna as dian,  
fá h-orra a ghéill,  
ionnuar a ghlór,  
biothbhuan a thréan ...

*chest like chalk,  
perfect in form,  
overflowing with love ...  
when boasting of raids,  
his complexion blooms ...  
Mac Morna who is strong  
his pledge ensured,  
serene his voice,  
lasting his strength ...*<sup>93</sup>

92. Cathal Mac Muireadhaigh, 'Sona do Cheird, a Chalbhaigh', in Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, 91.

93. 'High-Spirited Goll', in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 58.

In the 13th century, Muireadhach Albanach depicts the Virgin Mary as a classic Gaelic beauty with ridged yellow hair, blue eyes, long, soft fingers with red/brown finger nails and long, soft feet. At the end of the poem he asks her to raise her face like calf's blood, 'so with your soft tresses I may feast'. She is deliberately given an emotional and proactive role in the salvation of mankind, as she invites her kin into the drinking hall of heaven.<sup>94</sup>

Strabo says of the Celts on the Continent, 'They try not to become stout and fat-bellied, and any young man who exceeds the standard length of a girdle is fined.'<sup>95</sup> The Gaelic aesthetic still prefers the slim to the voluptuous in both sexes. Love songs praise slender lips and thin eye brows, long, slim fingers, figures that are neat, firm and chiselled, *foghainteach*, *deas*, *grinn*, *snaidhte*, and a step that does not bruise the grass: *tròigh shocrach nach dochann faiche*.<sup>96</sup> The very words *fiùran* and *geug* (sapling and branch) used of young men suggest their slenderness and vigour. In the literature men generally appear clean-shaven, though there are exceptions in art (the portraits of Matthew, Mark and John from the Book of Kells, and an unknown warrior effigy in Iona).<sup>97</sup> Fionn's first action, when he takes over the leadership of the Fianna and finds the men bearded and thin, is to shave them with his sword.<sup>98</sup>

#### COLOUR AND HAIR

The colours praised in the loved one are almost always yellow of hair, whiteness of skin and teeth, blueness of eye, and redness of lip and cheek as seen in the opening quotation.

The black, white and red combination sought by Deirdre in 'The Exile of the Sons of Uisneach' is fairly exceptional as a mythic archetype, and is rare enough in poems and songs inspired by real people, such as 'An Gille dubh, ciar-dhubh' and Muireadhach Albanach's elegy to his wife from the 13th century. We should remember that 'donn' (brown) can have connotations with nobility (see II.2.a.).

That hair is the principal site of beauty for both sexes in the Gaelic imagination is amply borne out in the material and verbal record. The entire chorus of the song 'Falt trom trom dualach' is a description of a girl's hair:

94. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 5.

95. Quoted from J.J. Tierney 'The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* (1960), 189–275, in Anne Ross, *The Pagan Celts* (London, 1986), 86.

96. Anne Lorne Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2006), 352.

97. See K. A. Steer and J. W. M. Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture in the West Highlands* (Edinburgh, 1977), Pl. 8D.

98. John Gregorson Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV (London, 1891), 22.



Falt trom trom dualach  
 Falt trom trom dualach  
 tha ciabh buidhe dualach  
 mu ghualainn mo leannan-sa.

*Heavy, heavy, curly hair,  
 Heavy, heavy, curly hair,  
 there are yellow curly locks  
 around my sweetheart's shoulders.*<sup>99</sup>

Praise of hair alone can act as a shorthand for all other aspects of beauty. A *ghruagach as bachlaiche chùil* (O girl of most ringletted hair) is all Uilleam Ros needs to say to indicate the beauty of the girl for whom he is dying.<sup>100</sup>

While the Fianna of course have long, yellow, waving hair,<sup>101</sup> their slaves have short hair. Eight hundred short-haired, red-cheeked men, *Ochd ceud gearr-fhaltach, gruaidh-dhearg*, is part of the ransom offered to the smith of the sea if he leaves Ireland after the death of the Muileartach.<sup>102</sup> In modern Gaelic, *gruagach*, literally 'a long-haired one', is a term for a maiden or fairy, but in the tale, 'How Fionn Found his Missing Men' the Gruagach is a chief whose status is shown by his having long hair in contradistinction to the short-haired bondsmen.<sup>103</sup>

The Muileartach, a euhemerised sea goddess (as discussed in III.1.b.), has long loose grey hair, representative of her nobility and the sea's wave crests (where English sees white-horses):

Bha a falt liath a' slaodadh rithe, agus rug Oscar air. Thug e dùil-leum, agus chuir e trì duail do fhalt cas liath na caillich mu dhòrn.

*Her grey hair was hanging behind her and Oscar caught it. He sprang and put three plies of the grey wreathed hair of the old woman about his fist.*<sup>104</sup>

Another of the Fiana, Garaidh, has long enough hair for the women to be able to peg it to the ground while he sleeps. When he rises with a start at the Fenian war cry, his hair is wrenched off him. Being bald is such an indignity for him that he makes to burn the women in the dwelling of 'Brugh Farala' after which the ballad is named.<sup>105</sup>

99. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 402.

100. 'Òran Eile air an Adhbhar Cheudna', in Ronald Black, *An Lasair: Anthology of 18th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse* (Edinburgh, 2001), 316–17.

101. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays* Vol. IV, 142 and 152.

102. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays* Vol. IV, 155.

103. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays* Vol. IV, 193.

104. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays* Vol. IV, 138 and 148.

105. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays* Vol. IV, 165 and 169.

It appears then from two-thousand years of graphic and verbal evidence that long, yellow, ringletted hair was celebrated both for its aesthetic qualities and for its symbolic connection to freedom, nobility and power.

#### HANDS AND FEET

When Fionn asks, *Dè as maoithe na clòimhteach?* (What is softer than down?), Gràinne answers, *Deàrna air an lethcheann* (The palm on the cheek).<sup>106</sup> To our modern sensibilities there is nothing remarkable about the praise of a woman's foot in a shoe, or of a man's leg in hose, but we are not so accustomed to the palm of the hand and the sole of the foot as sites of beauty. It is probably significant that hair does not grow on them nor on the *slios*, the side of the torso, which have all been consistently picked out in Gaelic poetry over many centuries. Through synecdoche, the hands and feet, described as white, long-fingered and shiny-nailed in both men and women, indicate the general beauty of the subject. *Gealachos* 'White Foot' is even the name of a girl, whether mythic or historical, who was abducted by Norsemen from Little Bernera and returned seven years later.<sup>107</sup> In laments, the exposure of the soles, normally hidden by their contact with the ground, emphasise the beauty and prone position of the corpse.

A satire from the Book of the Dean of Lismore of a ship crewed by women, 'Tánaig Long ar Loch Raithneach' (A Ship Has Come on Loch Rannoch), mentions the women's dyed palms. Though nail painting is unexceptional in the poetry, palm-painting is otherwise unknown and brings *mehndi* to mind, the ancient Indian tradition of painting the hands and feet of the bride and groom. It is suggested here that hand gestures and the decorative painting of the palms alluded to in Gaelic poetry may owe something to an Indo-European continuum.

Tá lán Luicifeir i luing

Mheic Cailéin, Donnchaidh dhearccuir,  
 ar ghalraighe ar ghnáth ar dhath,  
 do mhnáibh na ndeárna ndathta.

*Clearly Lucifer's brood is in the barque  
 of round-eyed Donnchadh, son of Cailean,  
 from the sickliness, habits and hue  
 of the dyed-palmed women.*<sup>108</sup>

106. John Francis Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* Vol. III (Hounslow, 1983), 48: 'Ceistean Fhinn'.

107. 'Gealachos', in Donald MacDonald, *Tales and Traditions of the Lews* (Edinburgh, 2004).

108. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, 269, No. 44.

An interest in hands and feet is evident in the Book of Kells, the Four Gospels of St Gall and similar MSS. Figures are generally bare-footed, and the folds at the bottom of a garment make a design with the feet, the ankle bone often picked out either by line or as a red spot (see, for example, the pictures of [Christ Enthroned](#), of [John the Evangelist](#) and the Evangelical Symbols in the Book of Kells). The correct number of digits on hand and foot is sacrificed to achieving an overall shapely design; they are depicted at their most typical and pleasing angle, which gives the impression in the portrait of the Virgin and Child of the Virgin having two right feet and Christ, two left feet.<sup>109</sup> In depictions of the fully clothed Crucified Christ, it is the hands and feet that have to express the beauty of the whole body.

Muireadhach Albanach's verse makes frequent reference to the hands and feet. He describes his wife as *an ghéag úr mhéirleabhar mhór* (the fresh, lithe-fingered, long branch).<sup>110</sup> In his poem to the Virgin, discussed above, he describes the beauty of both Mary's and Christ's hands and feet, but he also expresses the intimacy of mother and son through Christ holding her pap in his hand and she kissing his hands and feet.<sup>111</sup> At the end of the poem, he asks that she raise her hands and foot (and head) as a sign of his acceptance into Heaven, a gesture perhaps inspired by an icon of the Orthodox Church.

An anonymous poet of the 16th century focuses, through synecdoche, on the chief's fair-soled foot and pointed-fingered palm:

Ní locfa mise, a mhic Shéamuis,  
síth no cogadh rét chneas tláith,  
's réd dhearc mar néimh óir ar oighridh,  
's réd throighidh séimh mboinnghil mbláith ...

Ní éarfuinn tú um tabhairt ccogaidh  
dod chúl mbachlach mar bharr fraoich:  
sibh anois tar m'fhíoch ní éarfuinn  
fá síoth dod bhois mhéarchuirr mhaoith.

*I will not refuse, O son of Seumas,  
peace or war with your soft skin,  
with your eye like ice with gold gleaming,  
and with your smooth gentle fair-soled foot ...*

109. George Bain, *Celtic Art: The methods of its construction* (London, 1977; 1st pub. 1951), 130.

110. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 27, v. 11.

111. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 6, v. 23.

*I would not refuse you in making warfare  
with your curly hair like the top of a mane:  
I would not refuse, despite my anger,  
peace with your soft pointed-fingered palm.*<sup>112</sup>

Giolla Críost Brúilingeach (c.1450) praises both his Irish patron and his wife through their hands and feet: 'in his smooth regal palm there is rage ... a prince of men and scion white-footed ... Caitilín of the white palms ... the painted polished nails of her hands.'<sup>113</sup>

There may be a vulnerability attached to the soles of the feet. It was there that Diarmaid was fatally wounded by the boar's venomous bristle. It is the soles of the dead that are remembered in an early folksong, 'Là Mille Gàraidh' (The battle of the spoiling of the dyke), c.1580:

Bha fir an sin  
air dhroch chàradh,  
  
An druim fodha,  
's am buinn bhàn ris.

*Men were there in a sad condition,  
on their backs, their white soles showing.*<sup>114</sup>

The lament composed by the poet, Ó Maoil Chiaráin, sometime before 1500 for his only son, Fearchar, focuses extensively on the hands and feet. Fearchar was also a poet, and was killed by the English while on a bardic circuit in Ireland.

Ionmhuin trácht nachar throm lúdh,  
ionmhuin bonn mar bhláth na ccaor,  
ionmhuin seangthroigh is bos bhán,  
cos is lámh Fhearchoir ar-aon.

*Beloved the instep that carried little weight,  
beloved the sole like the flower of the ash,  
beloved the slender foot and white palm,  
the hand and foot of Fearchar, both.*<sup>115</sup>

112. 'An síth do rogha, a rígh Fionnghall' (Is peace your choice, O king of Hebrideans), in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 25.

113. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 21.

114. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 25. The Battle of Mille Gàraidh/Spoiling the Dyke was so called because of the way the dead were hastily buried by pushing a dyke over on top of them.

115. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 30.



A much later use of the image is made in an elegy from 1717 for James MacDonald, 'An Tánaiste Tais' (The Gentle Tanist) of Benbecula who died as a young man after being educated in France. The poem is an unusually late example of the classical dialect and has much of the feeling of an earlier poem, not least of all in the picturing of the soles:

A gcladh Mhoire chuiradh a chrios  
'na luighe don bhonnghéal bras.

*In St Mary's churchyard has been laid  
the skin of the swift man with white soles.*<sup>116</sup>

#### BRIGHTNESS OF SKIN

Extreme whiteness of skin is celebrated in the Gaelic tradition. In the ballad 'Eas Ruadh', the radiance of *Nighinn Rìgh fo Thuinn* (The Daughter of the King under the Waves) is like that of the sun: *B' ionann deàtradh dhi's don ghrèin.*<sup>117</sup> The same sun-like beauty is ascribed to Seathan, *mo ghile ghrèine* (my sun's brightness) in the song 'Seathan mac rìgh Èireann'.<sup>118</sup> In the song 'Ailein Duinn, a nì's a nàire', the singer, whose family have been lost at sea, asks a seagull: 'Càit an do dh'fhàg thu na fir geala?' 'Where did you leave the bright men?'<sup>119</sup> The refrain of Christina Fergusson's lament for her husband after Culloden is *mo rùn geal òg* (my bright young love), in which she compares his side to the swan.<sup>120</sup> In all these instances, the word *geal* relates not to the whiteness of hair, which would be *bàn* or *fionn*, but to the whiteness or brightness of skin. Usually, comparisons for whiteness of the skin are made to the swan, foam or bog-cotton (*eala*, *cop* and *canach*). More remarkably, Donnchadh Bàn describes his newly-wed wife as a sea trout, *gealag*, in keeping with his analogy of fishing for a bride.<sup>121</sup>

#### THE PERSON OF THE WARRIOR

All praise of men, whether in tales, praise poetry, laments or love songs, is based on the panegyric code (discussed at II.2.d.). The emphasis varies, but all the men are seen as embodying the heroic ideal. They may be seen in action in their roles as warrior, hunter, sailor or lover, or as the host of the drinking hall, dispersing wealth and rewarding and inspiring loyalty, and as the patron of the arts through

116. Black, *An Lasair*, 88–95.

117. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays* Vol. IV, 96.

118. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 327.

119. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 49.

120. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 186.

121. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 387.

which these heroic values were disseminated. The lynch pin of the system was love between the chief and his clans people, hence the flushed appearance and the tender mouths mentioned above.

A very few examples of these verbal depictions must suffice. This is from Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh's lament for Iain Garbh Mac Gille Chaluim Ratharsair in which the physical and spiritual ideals of the hunter and patron are linked through the image of the hand:

Bu tu sealgair a' gheòidh,  
làmh gun dearmad gun leòn,  
air am bu shuarach an t-òr  
thoirt a bhuannachd a' cheòil,  
is gun d' fhuair thu nas leòr 's na chaitheadh tu.<sup>122</sup>

*You were the hunter of geese,  
an unerring hand without fault,  
which freely gave out gold  
in the patronage of music,  
and what you spent was repaid in plenty.*

Christina Fergusson, mentioned above, laments and praises her husband, William Chisholm, for his physique and sartorial elegance. The comparison of the man's calves with the salmon gives an alerting picture of their muscle and of the smooth look afforded them by the fashionable wearing of hose:

Bu tu 'm fear slinneanach, leathann,  
bu chaoile meadhan 's bu dhealbhaich;  
cha b' e tàilleir gun eòlas  
a dhèanadh còta math gearra dhut,  
no dhèanadh dhut triubhais  
gun bhith cumhang no gann dhut,  
mar gheala-bhradain do chasan,  
led gearr-osan mud chalpa,  
mo rùn geal òg.

*You were a broad-shouldered strapping man,  
with the slenderest most shapely waist;  
it was not an unskilled tailor  
who would fashion you a well-fitting doublet,  
or who could make you trews  
neither tight nor skimpy on you;  
your legs were like silver salmon*

122. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 153.

*with your short hose about your calf,  
my fair young love.*<sup>123</sup>

In addition to the conventional praise of seamanship, martial prowess and generosity, the singer of 'Mo robairneach gaolach' (My Beloved Brigand) praises her subject as a swimmer of the kyle, *snàmhaiche linne*, and as a dancer. Drinking is admired as it epitomises generosity and the bond between allies:

Pòitear an fhìona thu,  
saoidh nach dèan sòradh.

*You are a drinker of wine,  
a warrior who never holds back.*<sup>124</sup>

#### FEMALE BEAUTY

The idealised female figure of love songs, laments and homeland songs is generally indistinguishable from the idealised male figure, in the preference for fair hair, white skin, fine brows, shapely feet etc. The following verses come from an elegy from about 1520 attributed to Eachann Mòr MacGill'Eathain, 11th chief of the MacGill'Eathains of Duart:

'S ann san Earrach an seo shìos,  
Tha 'bhean as meachair' mìngheal cruth,  
Deud air dhreach cailce na beul  
'S binne na 'n teud-chiùil a guth.

Mar chobhar an uisge ghlain,  
Mar shlios eala ri sruth mear,  
Glan leug mar an cathadh-cuir,  
Dh'fhàs mi gun chabhair ad chean.

Ur-shlat ùr nam fàinne fionn,  
'S do bhàrr air fiamh glan an òir,  
Do ghruaidh mar an caoran dearg,  
Air lasadh mar dhealbh nan ròs.

Meòir fhionna air bhasa bàna,  
Uchd solais as àille snuadh,  
An gaol a thugas duit ra luathas,  
Ochan nan och! 's cruaidh an càs.

123. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 186.

124. 'An gille dubh, ciar-dhubh', in Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 335.

*Lying here in the Earrach below  
is the gentle woman of soft white form,  
teeth like chalk in her mouth,  
sweeter than harp-strings her voice.*

*Like foam on a pure loch,  
like a swan's flank by a running stream,  
a bright jewel like drifting snow,  
I have grown helpless with lack of you.*

*Fresh shoot of the fair rings,  
your hair burnished bright like gold,  
like the rowan berry your cheek,  
flushed like the colour of the rose.*

*Fair fingers on fair palms,  
bright breast, loveliest of hue,  
Alas, sorry is my plight  
to speak of the love I gave you.*<sup>125</sup>

This image of the breasts, employed by Dòmhnall Phàil (1798–1873) in 'Duanag a' Chìobair', is unusual in being specifically feminine and comes from a later period:

Ciochan corrach, is iad glè gheal,  
ann am broilleach a lèine  
mar aiteal na grèin' ri latha ceò.

*Pointed breasts, very white,  
are in the bosom of her shift  
like the rays of the sun on a misty day.*<sup>126</sup>

Like the male, young women are often depicted in action – if humble, tending cattle while singing; if aristocratic, sewing fine shirts. While a man is depicted with weapons, a woman is depicted in fine, fashionable clothing and much is made of the wearing of shoes.

#### UGLINESS IN SATIRE AND TRADITIONAL TALES

Satire, which has none of the subtlety of the form in English, sees an inversion of the usual categories of praise. Hence baldness and fatness take the place of

125. 'S Luaineach mo Chadal A-nochd', in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, 50.

126. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 407.

curling hair and trimness, cowardice takes the place of bravery, and meanness takes the place of generosity. Though praised elsewhere, Ailean mac Ruairidh, chief of Clann Raghnaill, who died in 1505, is satirised as *an maoltorc mall gan mhathas* (the bald boar, sluggish and meritless); in place of allies, he is supported by devils, and in place of praise for his wife, he is accused of incest.<sup>127</sup>

Donald Baillie satirised Patrick Sellar in 1816 for his part as factor in the Sutherland Clearances. His disapproval is expressed above all as an account of Sellar's ugliness:

Tha Sellar an Cùl-Mhàillidh,  
Air fhàgail mar mhadadh-allaidh,  
A' glacadh is a' sàradh  
Gach aon nì thig na charaibh.

Tha shròn mar coltair-iarainn,  
No fiacail na muice-bioraich;  
Tha ceann liath mar ròn air,  
Is bòdhan mar asal fhireann.

Tha rugaid mar chòrr-riabhaich,  
Is ìomhaigh air nach eil tairis,  
Is casan fada liadhach,  
Mar shiaman de shlataibh mara.

*Sellar is in Culmailly,  
left there like a wolf,  
catching and oppressing  
everything that comes within his range.*

*His nose is like an iron plough-share  
or the tooth of the long-beaked porpoise,  
he has a grey head like a seal  
and his lower abdomen resembles that of a male ass.*

*His long neck is like a crane's,  
and his face has no appearance of gentleness,  
his long, sharp-shinned legs  
resemble ropes of sea tangle.<sup>128</sup>*

127. 'Theast Aon Diabhal nan nGaoidheal/The Chief Devil of the Gael is Dead', in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 38.

128. 'Aoir air Pàdraig Sellar', in Donald Meek, *Tuath is Tighearna/Tenants and Landlords* (Edinburgh, 1995), No. 2.

Fionn's mother, the Ulster smith's daughter, was notable for being the ugliest woman in Ireland, her looks not improved by her pregnancy: *Dh'fhàs i torach trom breac ballach* (She grew heavy and fruitful, spotted and speckled).<sup>129</sup> Conan was bald and fat, his ugliness being part of his character as the buffoon, who rushes impetuously into the fray, is first routed, and then, enflamed by the humiliation, returns to gain the victory: *Cha d' rinn Conan tapadh riamh ach gus an gabhadh e nàire*.<sup>130</sup> The appearance of the smith, Lon Mac Liobhainn, exemplifies ugliness in his asymmetry, his worn and ill-fitting garments and rusted weapons:

Chunnacas a' tighinn na còiribh  
Aon fhear mòr, is e air aona chois,  
Aon sùil mhullach an clàr aodainn  
'S e sìor-dhèanadh air Mac Cumhaill.  
Bu ghrannda tighinn an oiglaich mhòir,  
Bu ghrannda sin 's bu duaichnidh  
Le clogada ciar-dhubh craicinn nach dh'fhàs dualach  
Air maol bhearta 's air dhearg ruadh bhric,  
Le clogada ceanna mhòr ceutach  
Air maol èididh a d'fhàs duaichnidh ...

*There was seen coming towards us  
A tall man on one leg,  
One top eye in his forehead,  
Making straight for the son of Cumhal.  
Ugly was the coming of the big man,  
Ugly he was and deformed,  
With his darksome helmet of skin that did not grow twined,  
Barely woven and deeply red with rusted spots,  
With his excessively large helmet  
On bare garments that had become ugly ...<sup>131</sup>*

Conn the Red's army is also demonised through being lop-sided, one-eyed and one-handed, *air leth-shùil is air leth-làimh*,<sup>132</sup> as is the beast in 'Fionn 's Bran' who has one blubbery eye in its forehead, *aon sùil ghlogach an clàr a h-aodainn*.<sup>133</sup> In the mythic history in *Lebor Gabála*, the Fomorions also exhibit asymmetry, in

129. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays* Vol. IV, 17.

130. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays* Vol. IV, 237.

131. From 'Duan na Ceàrdaich', J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays* Vol. IV, 65 and 67.

132. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays* Vol. IV, 129.

133. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays* Vol. IV, 221.

their being one-eyed, one-armed and one-legged. They represent gods of chaos in their battling against Tuatha Dé Danann, the gods of civilization.<sup>134</sup>

Having an unblemished face was the idea behind *einech* 'honour' (as discussed in II.3.a.). There are several instances of mythical kings losing their position because of a blemish on their person or character. Nuada lost his position as king of Tuath Dá Danann when he lost his arm at the Battle of Moytura. Bres then took his place, but when he was satirised for inhospitality, he too lost the position, and the kingship was returned to Nuada who by this time had been given a working silver arm by the physician Dian Cecht. In another story Fergus mac Leite is disqualified from kingship by the deformities he suffers in fighting a sea monster. He revenges his deformity but would have preferred death.<sup>135</sup>

In 'Éiric Fhinn' (Fionn's Ransom), Fionn's honour is damaged when his teeth (three above and three below) are knocked out by the rider of the Black Steed. They are later restored to him by 'Am Fear Beag Ìosal Lapanach' or The Swaddler as John Gregorson Campbell calls him.<sup>136</sup> In traditional tales, the beautiful are generally good and the bad are ugly. However, this tale is an exception, and would appear to have been told to prove that the ugly are not always bad. 'Am Fear Beag Ìosal Lapanach' is dismissed on the grounds of his unprepossessing appearance by Fionn's foster-brothers, but Fionn gives him a chance to prove himself. He accomplishes feats the foster-brothers cannot: he makes *leum nan trì eang* 'the spring of the three hooves' and retrieves Fionn's teeth – and thus the very honour which the foster brothers had bragged they would never let anyone insult.

Playing with the panegyric code begets humour. John MacCodrum (born North Uist, 1693–1779) has a constantly humorous eye in the way he depicts people. In this example, 'Òran an Teasaich' (The Song of Fever), describing his own bout of fever, there is constant play on the panegyric code. The legs which would bend at the touch of the grass parody the grass that does not bend under the light-stepping hero:

Do chòta fàs 's e gun lionadh,  
D' osain rocach air dhroch fhiaradh,  
caol do choise nochdaidh pliadhach,  
iongnan cho fad' ri cat fiadhaich,

134. M.-L. Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts*, transl. Myles Dillon (Berkeley, California, 1982).

135. 'Aided Fergus mac Léti', in O' Grady, *Silva Gadelica* Vol. 2 (1892), 285.

136. J. G. Campbell, *Waijs and Strays* Vol. IV, 245–51.

tràighean fiara gun sùgh  
fon dà shliasaid gun lùth:  
gur pailt liagh dhaibh seach lunn –  
cha bhean fiar dhaibh nach lùb.

Bidh do mhuineil fada fèitheach,  
d' asnaichean mar chabair clèibhe,  
iosgaidean glagach gun spèirid,  
glùinean a' tachas a chèile:  
Glùinean geura gun neart,  
iad cho ciar ris a' chairt,  
thu cho creubhaidh 's a tha 'n cat –  
b' fheàrr an t-eug gad sgath às.

*Your coat is empty and unfilled, your hose wrinkled and badly twisted, your ankles conspicuous and splayed, nails as long as a wild cat's; bandy legs without sap under the two thighs without strength: they are more oar blade than shaft – if grass but touch them they bend.*

*Your neck is long and scraggy, your ribs like the staves of a creel, shaky hams without vigour, knees scratching each other; pointed knees without strength, they are as swarthy as bark; you are as irritable as a cat – better had death cut you off.*<sup>137</sup>

#### ELOQUENT GESTURES

Eloquent human gestures emerge from the literature like stills from a film. One of the most striking is the blood-drinking motif, when a woman – a wife, sweetheart or foster-mother – expresses a passionate desire to drink the blood of the deceased or wounded. It occurs in 'MacGriogair of Glenstrae' 'Ailein Duinn, shiùbhlainn leat' and 'A Mhic Iain 'ic Sheumais'. Perhaps it springs from a desire to retain something of the deceased. Anna Chaimbeul sang her song in 1786 expressing her desire to drink her drowned lover's blood:

Dh'òlainn deoch, ge b' oil le càch e,  
chan ann do dh'uisge no do shàile  
's chan ann do dh'fhion dearg na Spàinne,  
ach fuil do chuim, 's do chlàibh, 's do bhràghad.<sup>138</sup>

*I would drink a draught, though others might abhor it,  
not of fresh water or brine,*

137. Matheson, William, ed., *The Songs of John MacCodrum* (Edinburgh, 1938), 162–63.

138. Ronald Black, ed., *An Lasair: Anthology of 18th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse* (Edinburgh, 2001), 278–79.



*nor of red Spanish wine,  
but the blood of your body, of your chest and your throat.*

The practice may also have served to clean a wound or a bite. The subject of the song 'A Mhic Iain 'ic Sheumais' from the Battle of Carinish (1601) survives, perhaps because of his foster-mother's blood-drinking:

Bha fuil do chuirp chùbhraidh  
a' drùdhadh tron anart ...  
Bha fuil do chuim uasail  
air uachdar an fhearainn ...  
bha mi fhìn ga sùghadh  
gus na thùch air m' anail ...

*The blood of your fragrant body  
was seeping through the linen ...  
the blood of your noble form  
was all over the ground ...  
I myself was drinking it  
until it made me choke ...*<sup>139</sup>

Songs allude to the dishevelled hair and beating of the hands on the coffin lid as part of the mourning ritual (echoed in traditional performances of the fiddle *piobaireachd* 'MacKintosh's Lament'):

Cha d'fhàg mi ròin de m'fhalt gun tarraing  
No craiceann air mo làimh.

*I left no hair of my head unpulled  
nor skin upon my palms.*<sup>140</sup>

In the tales, the motif appears of Fionn being carried half dead on the points of the Fenians' spears (*air barraibh nan sleagh*). The Fenian band is pictured in modern times moribund, *air a h-ulinn* 'propped on one elbow', awaiting the final blowing of the horn to rouse them to fight again.<sup>141</sup> This gesture is still evoked from time to time of people waiting to spring into action.

#### THE DESTRUCTIVENESS OF BEAUTY

This section has examined the longevity of Gaelic aesthetics of the person, chiefly concerning the hair, skin, face, hands and feet, with a general predilec-

<sup>139</sup> Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 130.

<sup>140</sup> 'Cumha Ghriogair MhicGhriogair Ghlinn Sreith', in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 71.

<sup>141</sup> F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* Vol. II (Hounslow, 1983), No. 29.

tion for trimness. Beauty and ugliness carry symbolic meaning, physical perfection being a prerequisite to the king's ability to satisfy the land or earth-goddess; its loss constituting a loss of honour. Ugliness and asymmetry are generally associated with evil and the demonic.

However, beauty is not always good: the destructive and wounding power of beauty is a common theme in love poetry. Uilleam Ros (1762–91) was not alone in wishing he had been born blind:

Is truagh nach d' rugadh dall mi gun  
chainnt is gun lèirsinn  
mus fhac' mi d' aghaidh bhaindidh rinn  
aimhleas nan ceudan ...

*It is sad I wasn't born blind, without speech  
or sight,  
before I saw your modest face that has  
wounded hundreds ...*<sup>142</sup>



John Duncan (1866–1945), *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. National Galleries of Scotland, 1905

Doubtless such examples owe much to the European courtly love tradition with its conceit of the disease of love, popular in Gaelic from perhaps the 14th century. But the belief in the destructiveness of beauty (a theme epitomised in Greek myth by Helen of Troy) is much earlier. In Gaelic, it is epitomised by Deirdre whose destructive beauty is foretold by Cathbad even before her birth in 'The Exile of the Sons of Uisneach':

Within the cradle of your womb  
cries a woman of curling yellow hair,  
with slow grey eyes.  
Like the foxglove are her purple cheeks,  
to the colour of snow we compare  
the spotless treasure of her teeth.  
Bright are her lips, of vermilion red.  
A woman through whom there will be many slaughters  
among the chariot-warriors of Ulster ...<sup>143</sup>

<sup>142</sup> 'Fil ò ro', ann an Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 392.

<sup>143</sup> K. H. Jackson, *A Celtic Miscellany* (Penguin; 1st pub. 1951), 49.

Diarmaid's beauty was also the cause of his death, for it was his *ball-seirc* or beauty-spot, inspiring Gràinne to elope with him, which aroused Fionn's jealousy and desire to kill him.<sup>144</sup> The name 'Gràinne' itself is probably derived from the word for ugliness, and may mark her out as a former earth-goddess, possessed of destructive as well as regenerative powers. Such a figure may also be the prototype of the *gruagaich*, the beautiful girls who sleep with hunters in their bothies only to turn into witches who drink their blood.<sup>145</sup> MB

## II.2. THE VISUAL LEXICON

### II.2.a. COLOUR<sup>146</sup>

[Introduction](#); [Berlin and Kay's Basic Colour Terms](#); [Scales of Saturation, Shininess and Hue: Blues, Greens and Greys](#); [Whites and Browns](#); [Gladstone and Homer](#); [Donnchadh Bàn and Domain](#); [Is the Gaelic Palette Muted?](#); [A Gaelic Way of Seeing](#); [Colour as Process](#); [Colour Symbolism](#); [Conclusion](#)

#### INTRODUCTION

'S ann an Ìle gorm an fheòir  
a rugadh mi 's a thogadh mi,  
'S ann an Ìle gorm an fheòir  
a rugadh mi 's a bhà mi.

*It is in blue|green Islay of the grass  
that I was born and grew up,  
it is in blue|green Islay of the grass  
that I was born and lived.*<sup>147</sup>

The fact that the same word in Gaelic can describe both the green of foliage and the blue of the sky is a marvel to native speakers of English, in which blue and green are quite distinct. It may be added that it is no less a marvel to Russians that English clumps both *siniy* and *goluboy* together as two shades of blue, a distinction incidentally maintained in Gaelic in *liath* and *gorm*. If English speakers retort that this is only a matter of saturation, they should remember

144. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays* Vol. IV, 52.

145. For example, see MacDougall and Calder, *Folk Tales and Fairy Lore* (1910), 230: 'The Sreathdearn Hunter and the Witch'.

146. A section of this chapter has been published in Gaelic as 'An Saoghal tro Speuclairean na Gàidhlig', in Bateman and Cox, ed., *Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig* (2019).

147. Words of a well-known port-à-beul.

their distinction between red and pink, or brown and beige, is also only a matter of saturation.

Nowadays, after 140 years of universal education, Gaelic categories of colour have largely been aligned with those in English, and the traditional distinction between greens of different saturations is hardly made, though it was common enough in 20th-century Gaelic literature. Gaelic and the Celtic languages are not alone in having one term that can cover both blue and green, sometimes called 'grue'. Vietnamese, Thai, Korean, Arabic and most South African Nguni languages have a 'grue'. However, the situation with Gaelic is not a simple combination of these two cool colours, because the colour *gorm* does not include all greens: *glas* and *uaine* also exist. In other words, hue is not the only axis on which colours are determined.

#### BERLIN AND KAY'S BASIC COLOUR TERMS

The debate on colour was made popular in 1969 with Berlin and Kay's argument that all languages pass through the same seven stages of increased sophistication towards the eleven basic hues of modern European languages.<sup>148</sup> Lazarus Geiger first demonstrated in 1867 that languages follow a similar sequence in their development of colour terms: firstly a distinction is made between darkness and lightness or black and white; then red, the colour of blood, is added; then yellow and green, the colours of ripe and unripe vegetation. In all cases, the word for blue or violet arrives last, often derived from the existing word for black or green, indicating darkness or coolness. (In Gaelic, *gorm* is cognate with the Early Welsh *gwrn*, 'dusky').<sup>149</sup>

Berlin and Kay tabulated the eleven basic colour terms as follows, with grey entering the system as early as stage II or as late as stage V:

Stage I	white and black
Stage II	and red
Stage III	and green/blue or yellow
Stage IV	and yellow and green/blue
Stage V	and differentiated green and blue
Stage VI	and brown
Stage VII	and purple, pink, orange. <sup>150</sup>

Heidi Layzer-Meyn has shown Old Gaelic to have been at stage IV of Berlin and Kay's colour system, with five basic colour terms based on hue: *bán*, *dub*,

148. Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, 1969, *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press).

149. Guy Deutscher, *Through the Language Glass* (London, 2011), Chaps 2 and 3.

150. Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (1969).

*derg*, *glas* and *buide* (white, black, red, 'grue' and yellow). She also noticed two sets of non-basic colour terms, a set of saturated and unsaturated colours and a set with limited lexemic application. The Old Gaelic scheme is clearly the basis for colour terminology in Scottish Gaelic. Scottish Gaelic traditionally agrees with Berlin and Kay's stage IV in having an undifferentiated blue/green, and yet confounds it in having three or four names for the same hue: 'white' may be *geal*, *bàn* or *fionn*; 'red' may be *dearg*, *ruadh*, *donn* or *glas* (of brown paper); and 'green', as has been seen, may be *gorm*, *uaine* or *glas*. Terms for the colours in stage VII are recent borrowings from English,<sup>151</sup> introduced at the time of the increase in consumer choice and stability of colour reproduction that came with industrialisation.

For a pastoral people, the multiplication of terms for browns and greens is not surprising, as animals had to be identified and grazing conditions discussed. These two domains introduce scales of colouring not present in Berlin and Kay's scheme: a scale of patterning and a scale of saturation, used of animal hides and of various states of vegetation becoming increasingly rich in chlorophyll as spring turns to summer and then leaching out as winter approaches.<sup>152</sup> A third scale at work in the Gaelic colour terms marks the difference between shiny and matt surfaces. The distinction was also made in Latin between shiny and matt black, *niger* and *ater*, and between shiny and matt white, *candidus* and *albus*. In Gaelic, the scale may reflect the importance of weapons and metal-work in a martial culture where the warrior and smith were venerated. Many objects viewed indoors would be lit by a sole source of light – the fire – making the gleam and patterns of engraved metal more discernible than patterns of hue.

#### SCALES OF SATURATION, SHININESS AND HUE: BLUES, GREENS AND GREYS

The scales of saturation, shininess and hue can be seen working in apposition to one another to produce Gaelic colour terms. To people conditioned by English, it is surprising that while *glas*, *gorm* and *uaine* can all refer to green, they can also refer to blue, grey and metallic. In terms of saturation, *gorm* is opposed to *glas* and *uaine*. *Gorm* is the saturated colour of dark green foliage while *glas* is

151. Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, as ever the innovator, makes early usage of the loan-word for an orange in 'Moladh Mòraig':

Thogamaid ar fonn	<i>We'd raise our tune,</i>
anns an òg-mhadainn,	<i>in the early morning</i>
's Phèbus 'dath nan tonn	<i>when Phoebus would dye the waves</i>
air fiamh òrainsean.	<i>with the colour of oranges.</i>

in Derick S. Thomson, ed., *Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair: Selected Poems* (Edinburgh: Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 1996), 63.

152. John Murray, *Reading the Gaelic Landscape* (2014).

the paler green of fresh or old foliage; *gorm* was the darkness of a negro's skin while *glas* is the pallor of someone unwell; *gorm* was also the colour of dark animal hair: e.g. *Irt nan caorach gorma* 'St Kilda of the dark sheep'. *Glas* can be the pale and shining colour of the sea. The element *glas* in the names *Dubhghlas* and *Gaodhal Glas* probably refers to the shine of weapons. In Old Gaelic texts, there is a distinction between *uaine*, the mineral green of manmade objects, and *glas*, the green of vegetation. In modern Gaelic, *uaine* is the colour worn by fairies, as in *bean chaol a' chòta uaine*, but it is also used of vegetation, in poetry rather than placenames, where assonance in *ua* is required.



An Lochan Uaine (The Green Loch), Aviemore

*Gorm*: rich and shiny green, blue, grey

used of: vegetation, eyes, metals – lead, steel, sea, sky, negro skin, dark sheep

*Glas*: light and shiny green, blue, grey

used of: vegetation, eyes, face, animal and human hair, metals, silver, sea, water, sky

*Uaine*: (mostly non-vegetal) green

used of: fairy clothing, turquoise mineralised water

#### WHITES AND BROWNS

*Fionn* (warm, shining white), *bàn* (warm, unsaturated, matt white) and *geal* (cold shining white) are apposed in terms of shininess and mattness, warmth and cold. *Fionn* is used of hair and the names *Fionn*, *Fionnlagh* and *Fionnghall* refer to shining, fair hair (and in this last example to the fair foreigners – the Vikings – and the territory they inhabited, the Highlands).<sup>153</sup> *Bàn* is used of warm, unsaturated, matt tones in hair and landscape, while *geal* can refer to the cold brilliance of skin, teeth, milk, snow, dew, foliage and swords.

*Donn* and *odhar* work in a similar apposition. *Donn* is a saturated, shiny

153. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanair na Sracaire* (Edinburgh, 2007), No. 21: 'Lámh Aoinfhir Fhóirfeas i nÉirinn', by Giolla Críost Brúilingeach.



brown and may refer to hair, fingernails, and impressionistically to nobility. *Odhar* is matt and unsaturated, and may be used of animal hides, beavers, the landscape, water and, pejoratively, of old and dead skin, stupidity and the penis.

## GLADSTONE AND HOMER

Does a paucity of terms for hue mean a lack of perception? In the 19th century, Gladstone was amazed that Homer was able to describe the Mediterranean without mentioning the blue of the sea and sky or the redness of poppies. In his *Studies on Homer and the Heroic Age* (1858), he analysed Homer's slight use of colour and its uneven distribution in the spectrum, black and white being by far the most common hues, with only a smattering of words describing red, yellow and violet. He even wondered if Homer had been colour-blind. The exploration of colour perception has moved on since then: far from proposing the rapid inheritance since Homer's time of the acquired characteristics of colour perception,<sup>154</sup> we now know that while colour vision is a human universal, colour terminology is established culturally. Perception and articulation cannot match (and no language gets near describing) the million or so shades perceptible to the human eye.

## DONNCHADH BÀN AND DOMAIN

The 18th-century poet, Donnchadh Bàn, is considered the nature poet *par excellence* of the Gaelic tradition. It would be reasonable to expect a poetry bursting with colour in such songs as 'Òran an t-Samhraidh' or 'Moladh Beinn Dòbhrain'<sup>155</sup> and yet it is striking that words describing *hue* are scarce. Instead, the poetry abounds with descriptions of texture, light effect and pattern. Plants are described in terms of texture as glossy, bright, shaggy, downy, tangled, sleek-eared, growing in tufts, curly and hairy,<sup>156</sup> and in terms of pattern as brindled, chequered or spotted,<sup>157</sup> and it is enough to say that the deer, cock and trees are coloured without saying what colour.<sup>158</sup> In describing cattle, the emphasis is as much on the skewbald patterning

154. It was widely accepted in the scientific community, even by Darwin, that humans had acquired the ability to see colour since Homer's time, until the inheritance of acquired characteristics was disproven by Weismann in 1887; see Deutscher, *Through the Language Glass*, 45–55.

155. Angus MacLeod, ed., *Òrain Dhonnchaidh Bhàin/The Songs of Duncan Ban MacIntyre* (Edinburgh, 1952), 184–95 and 196–225.

156. *Liomharra, glan, mollach, càiteanach, cràsgach, sliomchluasach, badanach, amlach, ròmach.*

157. *Riabhach, breac, ballach.*

158. MacLeod, ed., *The Songs of Duncan Ban MacIntyre*, ll. 2622–23, 2659 and 2673. The same could be said about hair, wine and textiles which are merely described as coloured in other songs.

of the calves, on flank, leg, belly and back, as on the colours themselves.<sup>159</sup> The orchid is described as tender, spotted, forked and glossy but with no mention of its salient magenta colour.

Dóbhreach bhallach mhìn,	<i>Tender spotted orchis,</i>
Ghóbhhlach bharrach shliom,	<i>Forked, spiked and glossy,</i>
Lòintean far ann cinn	<i>On meadows where, in clusters,</i>
I na mòthraichean.	<i>It flourishes.</i> <sup>160</sup>

Perhaps Gladstone would have wondered if Donnchadh Bàn too were colour-blind for he describes calves as *buidhe* 'yellow' and *cràdhearg* 'blood-red'; the deer of Ben Doran as *dearg mar chèir* 'red like wax' and the yellow of celandines as *ruadh* 'rusty-brown'. Clearly in a five point scale (Berlin and Kay's Stage IV), these colours have a wider range than today.<sup>161</sup>

The context or 'domain' substitutes the unspecified colours and shades; indeed, the deer might appear red in contrast to the cool greens of vegetation. It appears the colours work in relative terms within domains rather than by reflecting an objective reality.

So what colours *does* Donnchadh Bàn use? The verdure of the summer growth is described with the words *gorm, glas* and *uaine/uainealach*; the heather is *grisdearg* (a mixture of grey and red); the cattle are various browns, and the bee, yellow. In addition to *gorm* being the colour of vegetation, it is also ascribed to his wife's eyes, to lead bullets, guns, to salmon and a stream, significantly all with shiny surfaces, but where is the blue of the sky, and the pink, orange, purple and blue of the flowers? Compared with the plethora of adjectives describing texture and pattern, the colour terms are few and limited mostly to black and white, red and brown, yellow and green. His eye is more taken up with texture and pattern than with the assignation of hue.

Donnchadh Bàn often indicates colourfulness by comparison to other coloured objects without defining an exact colour. In 'A Waulking Song', he describes a tartan 'of the costliest colours' only in terms of pattern:

An clòth brionnach ballach ciatach	<i>The brindled, checked, comely cloth</i>
Triuchanach stiallagach gathach;	<i>of stripy pattern, banded, radiant;</i>

An clòth taitneach basach boillsgeil	<i>delightful tweed, mottled, gleaming,</i>
Laiste daoimeanach, 's e leathan.	<i>glinting, diced and wide of measure.</i> <sup>162</sup>

159. MacLeod, ed., *The Songs of Duncan Ban MacIntyre*, ll. 2726–33.

160. MacLeod, ed., *The Songs of Duncan Ban MacIntyre*, ll. 2954–55.

161. MacLeod, ed., *The Songs of Duncan Ban MacIntyre*, ll. 2731 and 2788; nowadays the usage of *dearg* rather than *ruadh* for human or animal hair would be impossible.

162. MacLeod, ed., *The Songs of Duncan Ban MacIntyre*, ll. 2038–41.



In the 8th century, Adamnán did the same in giving an account of the vision seen during her pregnancy by Eithne, Saint Columba's mother, of a robe 'of extraordinary beauty, in which the most beautiful colours, as it were, of all the flowers seemed to be portrayed'.<sup>163</sup> The use of comparisons in preference to colour terms is very common in the Gaelic tradition as it was with Homer in his description of the 'wine-coloured sea'.

#### IS THE GAELIC PALETTE MUTED?

Any page from the Book of Kells or portrait of an 18th-century chief should refute the frequently-made claim that the Gaelic palette is a muted one:<sup>164</sup> a lack of a detailed terminology does not imply a lack of interest in colour. The physical environment of the Gaels is highly colourful. A high rainfall keeps plants fresh in contrast to the foliage of the Mediterranean. The geology is richly varied between blue gabbro, white marble, red granite and sandstone, and pale shell sand producing turquoise under the sea. It is clear that an interest was taken in unusually coloured stones which became amulets and healing stones (see I.3.c. and IV.2.b.), such as the green stone from Arran, known as *Ball Mo-Luidhe*,<sup>165</sup> the blue stone on the church altar on Fladda-Chuan,<sup>166</sup> and the bloodstone necklaces said to aid child-birth.<sup>167</sup>

Archaeological work at Dunadd has found orpiment in a cache of other luxury items such as Continental glass and pottery from the 7th century. This yellow pigment was probably *en route* to Iona for manuscript decoration.<sup>168</sup> Two hundred years later, the wide use of colour in the Book of Kells shows a great sophistication in the procuring and use of pigments, many of which came from the Mediterranean (but probably not from as far as Afghanistan as was previously thought in the case of lapis lazuli). Recent spectroscopic research has shown these pigments to be red lead, red and yellow ochre, orpiment, woad and indigo for

163. Reeves, *Life of Saint Columba* [1874] and facsimile of 1988: Book III, 1, 112.

164. Ronald Black typifies Gaelic as having a 'temperate zone minority language spectrum', in Ragnall MacilleDhuibh 'The epitome of colour', *West Highland Free Press* (9 May 2008); see also John Murray, *Reading the Gaelic Landscape* (Dunbeath, 2014), 195.

165. M. Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland* ([1716]; Edinburgh, 1981), 225–26.

166. Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, 166–67. See also G. Henderson, *Survivals in Belief among the Celts* (Glasgow, 1911), 198–206, 227–36 and 332.

167. G. F. Black, 'Scottish Charms and Amulets', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* Vol. 27 (1892–1893), 516. Black's quotation comes from p. 138 of the exhibition catalogue.

168. Alan Lane, 'Citadel of the First Scots', *British Archaeology* 62 (December 2001).



Charles Campbell of Lochlane, Advocate, anon., c. 1740. National Galleries of Scotland

blue, verdigris, carbon and iron gall for black and gypsum for white.<sup>169</sup> These were used neat, mixed, layered and juxtaposed to give a wide range of both subtle and strong colours, including those very shades of lemon, orange, pink and lilac for which terms do not appear in the Gaelic language till the 18th or 19th century.

It would be hard to overemphasise the significance of tartan (see IV.2.a.) with respect to a love of colour and pattern in the Gàidhealtachd – especially in the form of the plaid where the colour covered the entire body down to the knees.<sup>170</sup> A common misconception is that traditional tartans were woven only with the

muted colours of vegetable dyes, but recent analysis of 18th and early 19th tartans preserved by the National Museums of Scotland has shown that quality tartans at least were strongly coloured, and that Scotland had long been importing dyestuffs. Madder had been imported from as early as the 12th century, and woad and cochineal from the 15th and 17th centuries.<sup>171</sup> Analysis of the tartans themselves and of the accounts of the kilt makers, William Wilson and Sons of Bannockburn, show the wide use of imported dyes alongside native plant dyes. Imported dyes include the insect-based scarlets, cochineal and lac (the *càrnaid* with which Donnchadh Bàn indicated the brightness of tartan in general), the timber-based yellows, flavin and old fustic, and the blues of indigo and woad. The many portraits of Highland chiefs in red tartans has led Hugh Cheape to suggest that the wearing of expensive cochineal-dyed fabrics became a status symbol. Cheape has also shown that dyeing was part of the rural, domestic scene and it was accomplished with a mixture of native and commercial dyestuffs which were available from the

169. <<http://www.tcd.ie/Library/manuscripts/book-of-kells.php>>.

170. J. McLauchlan writes that black, blue, green and red were the dyes universally used for clothing in Strathspey in the 1830s, in *New Statistical Account*, cited in Hugh Cheape and Anita Quye, 'Historical and Analytical Research of Dyes in Early Scottish Tartans', in Rob Janaway and Paul Wyeth, eds, *Scientific Analysis of Ancient and Historic Textiles* (London, 2005), 202–07.

171. Anita Quye, Hugh Cheape et al., 'An Historical and Analytical Study of Red, Pink, Green and Yellow Colours in Quality 18th- and Early 19th-Century Scottish Tartans', in Jo Kirby, ed., *Dyes in History and Archaeology* 19 (2000), 1–12.

Inverness markets from the mid-17th century.

#### A GAELIC WAY OF SEEING

Berlin and Kay thought that all languages and cultures would move towards the same eleven-point basic colour system. No doubt trade and scientific developments that made colour definable and reproducible have moved most industrial cultures along this trajectory, but there is nothing inevitable about a hue-based system. The Hanunoo people of the Philippines make a distinction between humid and dry colours. Some languages do not determine colour by hue at all: Chinese describes colour in terms of emotion; some central African languages describe it in terms of human characteristics, such as rough, smooth, hard, soft, laughing, deaf and talkative.<sup>172</sup>

It has been seen above how the scales of saturation, patterning and shininess reflect the pastoral and martial life of the Gaels. These scales reflect and reinforce aesthetic and evaluative considerations which amount to a Gaelic way of seeing. Bi-colouring and multi-colouring are clearly valued. An interest in the bicoloured patterning of cattle is reflected in terms such as *breac* (dappled), *riabhach* (brindled), *ballach* (spotted), *srianach* (striped), *cròinfhionn* (white with a dark patch) and *grisfhionn* (grizzled). The singer of 'Thig an smeòrach as t-earrach' praises her lover

le crodh druimfhionn is guailfhionn  
air do bhuaile mar chòmhlà ...

*with white-backed and white-shouldered cattle  
all together in your fold ...*<sup>173</sup>

Rather than describing colour, traditional praise poetry often notes the play of light and shade, for example on embossed bows and targes, on a carved knife-handle, or in the landscape:

Iain Mhùideartaich nan seòl soilleir  
Sheòladh an cuan ri là doilleir.

*John or Moidart of the bright sails  
who would sail the ocean on a gloomy day.*<sup>174</sup>

Shininess and saturation are generally seen as praiseworthy in contrast to the contemptibility of mattness and lack of saturation. The skin of Diarmid is white: *Bu ghile a bhráighe ná grian* 'Brighter his breast than the sun', while the

172. Laura Spinney, 'Shades of Meaning', interview with Annie Mollard-Desfour in the *New Scientist* (30 June 2007), 45–46.

173. Anne Lorne Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2006), 367.

174. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, No. XX.

skin of Old Age is sallow, dressed down by Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn in the 16th century:

Aois pheall-eudannach odhar,	<i>Bristly-faced, sallow old age,</i>
Bhios gu ronnach bodhar èitigh,	<i>dribbling, deaf and feeble,</i>
Creud fan ligfinn leat, a lobhair,	<i>why should I let you, leper,</i>
Mo bhogha 'bhreith dhìom air èiginn?	<i>deprive me of my bow by violence?</i> <sup>175</sup>

So too are the Campbell dead described by Iain Lom at the Battle of Inverlochry of 1645:

'S iomadh slaodanach mòr odhar    *There was many a great sallow sloucher*  
Bha na shìneadh air Ach an Todhair.    *lying stretched out on Ach an Todhair.*<sup>176</sup>

*An trustair odhar* 'the sallow churl' is still a term of abuse.

The words *glas*, *gorm* and *fionn* can also refer to this propitious state of shininess, as in *airgead glas* (cooly shining silver), *claidheamh gorm* (a steel sword) and *gàir na mbléidhe fleasgach fionn* (the clatter of warmly shining, engraved goblets).<sup>177</sup>

*Donn* is the saturated colour of painted finger-nails, of hair with rich hues and of embossed targes. *Donn* appears to have a secondary metaphorical meaning of 'noble' in phrases that would be contradictory if taken literally: for example, *Diarmaid Buidhe Donn* (literally, yellow brown Diarmaid) and '*S i an taobh geal donn a rug a mac dhomh* (literally, it was the white brown body that bore a son to me) in the song 'A Mhòr, a ghaoil, till ri d' mhacan'. Indeed the name *Donnchadh* (Duncan) celebrates this abstract quality of brownness, and *Donn* is the name of a figure in the Celtic pantheon from whom man is descended and to whom he will return.<sup>178</sup> The term suggests both the darkness of death and burial and the nobleness of this ancestor.

The desirability of multi-colouring is seen in descriptions of the Otherworld. Animals belonging to the Fenians tend to be piebald or skewbald: the horse *Blar-aghan* has a white face; the cow *Glas-ghoileam* is grey-bellied, the dog *Geoladh* is white-eared: *gaothar a' chluais bhàin* (*sic*)<sup>179</sup> and the stag seen by Murchadh

175. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire/The Song-book of the Pillagers* (Edinburgh, 2007), No. 68.

176. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, No. XX.

177. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, Nos. V, XIX and VII.

178. John MacInnes, *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal* (Edinburgh, 2006), 467.

179. John Gregorson Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV (London, 1891), 197.

mac Bhriain has one silver and one gold antler.<sup>180</sup> The dog Bran is depicted thus:

Casan buidhe bha aig Bran,      *Yellow paws Bran had,*  
 Dà thaobh dhubh agus tàrr geal, *Two black sides, and underneath white,*  
 Druim uaine mun suidhe sealg, *The back green which carried the game,*  
 Cluasan corrach crò-dhearg.      *Erect ears, strongly red.*<sup>181</sup>

Multi-colouring is valued whether in clothes, housing materials, animal hides or vegetation. Fionn and his foster-brothers are found taking in the view *air cnocan bòidheach breac*, ‘on a pretty dappled knoll’ at the beginning of ‘Èirig Fhinn’.<sup>182</sup> In the older language, this same taste for the multi-coloured can be seen in *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, in the three colours of Cú Chulainn’s hair and the four colours of his dimples, in Conall Cernach’s one blue and one black eye, with one fair and one black eye-brow, and in the many coloured and many patterned clothes of Aillil and Medb.<sup>183</sup>

In the 8th-century *Voyage of Snedgus and MacRiagla*, part of the king’s oppression of the Men of Ross (in Ireland) was to deny them coloured raiment. This has been compared to the phrase in the Annals of the Four Masters, *aendath i n-edoighibh moghadh* ‘one colour in the clothes of slaves’.<sup>184</sup>

Yet it seems that monotone clothing could also carry positive connotations. A 17th-century account of the inauguration of the Lords of the Isles describes the white clothing of the incoming chief, which was then cast to the poet, another truth-speaker:

He was clothed in a white habit, to shew his innocence and integrity of heart, that he should be a light to his people and maintain the true religion. The white apparel did afterwards belong to the poet by right.<sup>185</sup>

The first named MacCrimmon was known as ‘Finlay of the White Plaid’ – *Fionnlagh na Plaide Bàin* – perhaps suggesting a link with a priestly or warrior caste who might eschew the ostentatious consumption of multi-coloured

180. Bruford and MacDonald, *Scottish Traditional Tales* (Edinburgh, 1994), 153.

181. Gaelic original from Alexander and Donald Stewart, *Cochruinneacha taoghta de shaothair nam bard Gaieach* (Edinburgh, 1804), 560; translation from Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV, 202.

182. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV, 250.

183. Heidi Ann Lazar-Meyn, ‘Colour Terms in Táin Bó Cúailgne’, in J. P. Mallory and G. Stockman, eds, *Ulidia: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales* (Belfast, 1994), 201–06.

184. Annals of the Four Masters, Anno Mundi 3664: <<https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T100005A/>>.

185. J. R. N. MacPhail, *Highland Papers* (1914), quoted in M. Newton, *Warriors of the Word* (Edinburgh, 2009), 133.

weaving.<sup>186</sup> Quye and Cheape conclude from an early 17th-century comment about the white plaid of the Earl of Sutherland’s daughter that she was ‘not behaving with the customary flamboyance’ expected of an individual of noble birth.<sup>187</sup>

There is an attentiveness in the language in general to bicoloured patterning and the word *breac* ‘dappled’ generates much vocabulary, making links across different domains. A range of spotted fish, in particular the brown trout and the salmon, are known as *breac*, while a range of multi-coloured birds are designated by the diminutive, *breacan*, e.g. *breacan-beithe* ‘chaffinch’, *breacanglas* ‘wagtail’ and *breac-mhac* ‘magpie’. The Gaelic for tartan, *breacan*, alludes to the textile’s checks, while the word *breacag*, used of a pancake, alludes to its dimpled surface, browned in spots. It can refer to the spottiness of smallpox, *a’ bhreac*, or of freckles, *breac-sheunain*. As a verb, Dwelly gives ‘to carve, engrave, speckle, embroider, write or to skin top soil’, all actions that cause a surface to become bi-coloured. At a metaphoric level, it is used to express mixed qualities, as in *breacarsaich* ‘mixed health’, *breac-chreideamh* ‘mixed religion’, or *breac-shean* ‘oldish’.

Finally, a distinction between cold and warm colours can be added to the distinctions that have been significant to the Gaelic culture. Cold and warmth give colours to the winds in the 10th-century *Saltair na Rann* and the *Senchus Mòr* as follows:<sup>188</sup>

186. H. Cheape, ‘The MacCrimmon Piping Dynasty and its Origins’, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* LXII, 2000–2002 (2004), 8–9.

187. Quye and Cheape, ‘Rediscovering the Arisaid’, in *Costume* Vol. 42 (2008), 1–20: 7.

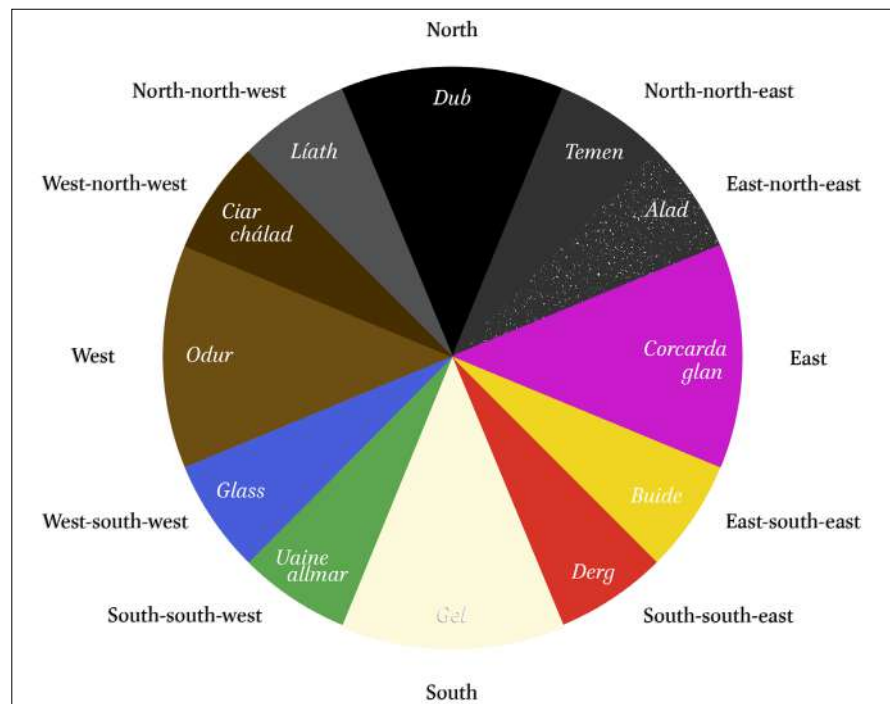
188. The colour of the winds is an arresting notion that was taken up by Fiona MacLeod (William Sharp) in his popular book, *The Dominion of Dreams: Under a Dark Star* (1895), which includes the Gaelic-charm-type poem ‘Deep Peace’ with the lines:

Deep peace, red wind of the east from you;  
 Deep peace, grey wind of the west to you;  
 Deep peace, dark wind of the north from you;  
 Deep peace, blue wind of the south to you!

The colours of the winds are also described in Flann O’ Brien, *The Third Policeman* (1967), 33–34. This may suggest that the tradition survived until the 19th and 20th centuries, but it seems more likely that it was reintroduced through Whitley Stokes’s 1883 edition of *Saltair na Rann*. However, earlier than Stokes, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote of a Hebridean girl in a letter to his mother from Wick in 1868:

The day when the boats put out to go home to the Hebrides, the girl here told me there was ‘a black wind’; and, on going out, I found the epithet as justifiable as it was picturesque. A cold, BLACK southerly wind, with occasional rising showers of rain; it was a fine sight to see the boats beat out a-teeth of it. (*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson* (University of Adelaide) – accessed 26 February 2017).





The colours of the winds

N *Dub* Black, NNE *Temen* Dark grey, ENE *Alad* Speckled, E *Corcarda glan* Purple, ESE *Buide* Yellow, SSE *Derg* Red, S *Gel* White, SSW *Uaine allmar* Green, WSW *Glass* Blue, W *Odur* Dun, WNW *Ciar chálad* Dark brown, NNW *Líath* Grey.

Broadly speaking, the colours reflect the passage of the sun throughout the day and year, the southern colours being brighter than the northern colours. Not unnaturally, the North wind is black and its opposite, the South wind, is white. The East wind is purple which would include crimson, which would suit the dawn, and the West wind is dun, which would suit the draining of colour at dusk and the world of the dead.<sup>189</sup> The concept of coloured winds is also known in Slavic, Turkic, in Tibet, China, among the Ainu in Japan and the Mayans, and the North wind is usually associated with black.

The coolness of colour is used arrestingly in this image of a kiss from the song *An t-Iarla Diùrach* 'The Earl of Jura':

Bha mi raoir leat na mo bhruadar  
Thall an Diùraidh nam beann fuara,

<sup>189</sup> J. Carey, 'Cosmology in Saltair na Rann', *Celtica* XVII (1985), 38.

Bha do phògan mar bhiolair uaine  
Ach dh'fhalbh am brùadar is dh'fhan an cràdh.<sup>190</sup>

*Last night I was with you in a dream  
over in Jura of the cold peaks,  
your kisses were like the green watercress  
though the dream went, the pain remained.*

#### COLOUR AS PROCESS

Ronald Black quoted the following poem in the *West Highland Free Press*<sup>191</sup> to demonstrate the different hues that could be covered by the word *glas* – the green, grey and silver of plant growth, skin, metal and whey. A man returning home after nearly seven years finds his sweetheart about to marry another. She does not recognise him, and dismisses him as a *corra-ghille glas* 'an odd, wan lad'. With the last verse about splitting milk into curds and whey, he signals to her who he is: she breaks off her engagement and they marry:

'S e labhair i le còmhradh borb	<i>What she declared with wild speech</i>
Gun robh mi 'm chorra-ghille glas.	<i>was that I was an odd, wan lad.</i>
Is glas am fochann, is glas am feur,	<i>Wan is the young corn, wan the grass,</i>
Is glas a' choille fo a duibhneul,	<i>wan the forest beneath her black gloom,</i>
Is glas an dos tha 'm bàrr a' chroinn,	<i>wan the tuft at the top of the tree</i>
'S ar leam fhìn gur glas an cuileann.	<i>and in my opinion, wan the holly.</i>

Is glas an claidheamh,	<i>Wan is the sword inside the scabbard,</i>
Is glas an tuagh sa bheil a' chas,	<i>wan the axe in which is the handle,</i>
'S ma bhios a faobhar gu tana geur,	<i>and if its blade is narrow and sharp,</i>
Gu dè as miost' a mèinn bhith glas?	<i>how is it worse if its appearance is wan?</i>

Is geal am bainne thig bhon bhuar,	<i>White is the milk that comes from the cows,</i>
Is milis 's is buan a bhlas;	<i>sweet and enduring is its taste,</i>
'S nuair a sgaras an gruth o mheadhg	<i>and when the curds split from the whey,</i>
Tionndaidh e thaobh 's bidh e glas.	<i>it turns away and then goes wan.</i>

But there is more to the colour-coding of the poem than being an intriguing display of differently-hued yet similarly-unsaturated tones. There is also an implied dynamism between things that are an unsaturated *glas* but would be better were they saturated. The holly, the corn and the metal would be in a better state were they *gorm*, dark, glossy and shining; the man would be in a better

<sup>190</sup> <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/alba/oran/orain/an\\_t\\_iarla\\_diurach/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/alba/oran/orain/an_t_iarla_diurach/)>.

<sup>191</sup> Quoted from Lord Archibald Campbell, *Records of Argyll* (1885), in Ragnall MacilleDhuibh, 'The Epitome of Colour', *West Highland Free Press* (9 May 2008).



state were his face not grey with shock but bright as milk, as would happen, were he together with his sweetheart.

#### COLOUR SYMBOLISM

There is a certain amount of use of colour symbolism in the language. *Dubh* and *dearg*, black and red, are used as intensifiers, as in *thug iad gèill agus dubh ghèill* (lit. they gave submission and black submission) and *dearg amadan*, *dearg mheàrlach* or *dearg ghèile* (a red fool, red thief, or red storm). *Dubh* often carries negative connotations. 'S *dubh an t-sùil a tha nad cheann* (lit. black is the eye that is in your head) refers to a look of guilt. It is an element in words for sadness such as *dubhachas* and *dubhadh*, and has sinister connotations in *an sgoil dubh* (black art/witchcraft), *dubh-bhuille* (a black or fatal blow) and *dubh-chosnadh* (black-earning or exploitation). It is used in disparagement in 'An Spaidsearachd Bharrach' (The Barra Boasting): *A bhradag dhubh bheag ... Barraigh dhubh bheag* (Little black thief ... little black Barra). It suggests the obscurity of allegory, *dubh-fhacal* (a black word) and blank verse, *dubh rann*.

*An Dearg* (the red) was a byname for deer; while the flea, *deargan*, is one who reddens. Ploughed land is *dearg* as opposed to fallow land which is *bàn*. *Deargadh* (a reddening) is any creature, as in *cha d'fhuair sinn deargadh èisg*: 'we didn't get a single fish'. Dwelly cites *dearganach* as a red-coat and hence a soldier, or a naked mouse or rat before hair has grown on it. The verb *deargaidh* means 'to kindle, make an impression, wound, or plough' so *cha dearg mi air* means 'I can make no impression on it/I cannot do it'. Red can represent 'the Otherworld in its more unfavourable aspects',<sup>192</sup> and specifically connotes slaughter, for which there is a parallel in Fedelm's prediction of bloodshed in the *Cattle Raid of Cooley*: *Atchú fordérg. Atchú ruad* (I behold bright red. I behold dark red).<sup>193</sup>

*Ruadh*, rusty red, also means 'deer' or the skin disease, erysipelas. *Ruadhadh* is blushing or rusting, depending on context, while *ruadhaich* is to shame someone. Reddish animals like the crab and robin can be called *ruadhag*. *Ruadhan* is mineral scurf on water or over-cooked food. It gives a term for cholera: *ruadh-laith* (lit. red stomach).

*Buidhe*, yellow, has come to be associated with luck and gladness through its similarity to the word *buidheach* 'thankfulness', giving rise to phrases like 'S *buidhe dhut* (things are yellow/lucky for you) and *Am mìos buidhe*, the yellow month, July. By comparison, November is the black month: *Am mìos dubh*.<sup>194</sup> There are several instances of the colours red, green/blue and white appearing together symbolically. 'The Cambrai Homily', copied for the Bishop of Cambrai

192. P. MacCanna, *Branwen Daughter of Llyr* (Cardiff, 1958), 41.

193. Best and Bergin, *Lebor na Huidre* (Dublin, 1969), ll. 4531, 4536, 4541–42, 4545.

194. G. MacLeod, *Muir is Tir* (Stornoway, 2005), 93.

in the 7th or 8th century, describes three kinds of martyrdom: *dercmartre*, red martyrdom, requiring torture or death; *bánmartre*, white martyrdom, requiring 'separation from all that is dear' through religious exile, and *glasmartre*, green martyrdom, perhaps with reference to the wan complexion of the ascetic, requiring fasting and sleep deprivation.<sup>195</sup>

Another early example, from Cormac's Glossary (8th century), uses the same three colours of blisters induced by satire, corresponding to death by spears, rejection and burial below stones:

Caier arose next morning early (and went) to the well. He put his hand over his countenance. He found on his face three blisters which the satire had caused, namely Stain, Blemish and Defect, to wit, red and green and white. Caier fled from thence. That none might see the disgrace.<sup>196</sup>

The 'three-coloured strings' or *snàithle* worn for protection and described by J. G. Campbell, are, according to Carmichael, black for the condemnation of God, red for the Crucifixion and white for the purification of the Holy Spirit.<sup>197</sup>

Something should be said here about the colour symbolism of Iain Crichton Smith, the most prolific of 20th-century Gaelic writers. Though his style is simple in lexis and syntax, his ideas are complex, with meaning layered through his constant use of symbolism.

Smith's pervasive use of colour is born in defiance of the denial of art and worldly beauty in his religious upbringing. His collection of short stories from 1963, *An Dubh is an Gorm* (The Black and the Blue/green), explores a basic division between what is life-denying and life-affirming. While black would represent the former in any culture, *gorm*, in being the colour of both sky and of lush foliage in Gaelic, is doubly symbolic of nature. Black is constantly referred to as the colour of the Bible and of the clothing and hats of the pious. The young student in the story, 'An Dubh is an Gorm', from which the collection takes its title, moves away from his mother's religious beliefs that have led him through a childhood of illness, fear and duty, to a realisation that the world is beautiful.<sup>198</sup>

White may symbolise purity, but for Smith it also suggests a lack of compassion. It is the colour of the gloves of a woman who walks away in the moonlight from the scene of an accident,<sup>199</sup> and of the suit of the poet who

195. Clare Stancliffe, 'Red, White and Blue Martyrdom,' in *Ireland in Early Medieval Europe: Studies in memory of Kathleen Hughes* (Cambridge, 1982).

196. Stokes, *Cormac's Glossary*, in *Three Irish Glossaries* (1962 and 2000), xxxvii–xxxviii.

197. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* Vol. IV, 166, and J. G. Campbell, in *Black, Gaelic Otherworld*, 211.

198. Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn, *An Dubh is an Gorm* (Glaschu, 1963), 96.

199. 'An Carbad', in Mac a' Ghobhainn, *An Dubh is an Gorm*.

causes himself writer's block by isolating himself from the world.<sup>200</sup> In his novella *An t-Aonaran* (1976), the white marble busts of classical thinkers symbolise the coldness of the intellect. Against these, red is the colour of passion, hope and the vulnerable grace of humanity.

Smith typifies himself, bilingual and bicultural, in the piebald costume of the jester. Modern capitalist culture commodifies him; in the deserted tourist town of Oban he sees himself paper-thin, outlandishly coloured, perhaps by neon lights or by the colours of tartan:

Tha am muir a-nochd mar shanas-reice,  
leabhar an dèidh leabhair a' deàlradh.  
Tha m' fhaileas a' ruith sìos don chuan.  
Tha mo chraiceann dearg is uaine.

Cò sgrìobh mi? Cò tha dèanamh bàrdachd  
shanas-reice de mo chnàmhan?  
Togaidh mi mo dhòrn gorm riutha:  
'Gàidheal calma le a chànan.'<sup>201</sup>

*Tonight the sea is like an advertisement,  
book after book shining.*

*My shadow is running down to the sea.*

*My skin is red and green.*

*Who wrote me? Who is making a poetry  
of advertisements from my bones?*

*I will raise my blue fist to them:*

*'A stout Highlander with his language.'*

#### CONCLUSION

Since the time of Sapir and Whorf, there has been a discussion between language relativists and universalists about the degree to which our native language determines our view of the world. Colour has been an important subject in that debate. Language relativists point to the various ways the spectrum is divided up by different languages as an elegant model of the arbitrary division of the conceptual plane by different cultures. Language universalists, on the other hand, point to the universal physiological and psychological constraints on human perception of colour, and conclude that all cultures view colour similarly.<sup>202</sup>

200. 'An Guth', in Mac a' Ghobhainn, *Na Guthan* (Glaschu, 1991).

201. 'An t-Òban' (3), in Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh, ed., *Nua-Bhàrdachd Ghàidhlig/Modern Scottish Gaelic Poems* (Edinburgh, 1976), 179.

202. Deutscher, *Through the Language Glass*.

Guy Deutscher returned to the subject in his book *Through the Language Glass* (2010) and came to a view somewhat between the two. Following the Boas-Jakobson's principle that 'Languages differ essentially in what they *must* convey and not in what they *may* convey',<sup>203</sup> he considered how a language habituates its speakers to think in certain ways because of what it forces them to do.<sup>204</sup> In this way it can be seen that the conservative system of colour-naming in Gaelic habituated its speakers to notice shininess, degree of saturation, and pattern.

In Gaelic, colour did not have a fixed, objective value but was mutable, part of a process, defined in relative terms by other colours in the domain and moving back and forth along scales of hue, saturation and shininess. Because of this, it would not be a helpful mode of enquiry to ask a native-speaker to comment on coloured chips devoid of context: the domain is all-important. There may be a dichotomy between the descriptive function of colour terminology in modern languages and its evaluative and interpretive function in older cultures: pattern, shininess and saturation reflect cultural aspiration.<sup>205</sup> If we can learn to see the connections between differently-hued, but similarly reflective and saturated colour-terms across domains, we are beginning to see through a Gaelic lens. MB

#### II.2.b. SHAPE AND FORM

[Introduction; A Gaelic Way of Seeing; Shape Generating Vocabulary; The Physical Expression of Mental States](#)

#### INTRODUCTION

Rinn mi urchair gun àgh  
Air làrach a' chath' air Rònan,  
Bhean i ris a' chlag naomh  
A bh' air uchd a' chlàirich.

Mar a thilg mi 'n urchair  
Air làrach a' chath' air Rònan,

203. Quoted in Deutscher, *Through the Language Glass*, 151.

204. In terms of colour, research has shown that speakers of languages which have a linguistic boundary between, for example, blue and green or light blue and dark blue exaggerate the distance between identically distanced chips of colour. However, if the language part of the brain is distracted by another task, the difference between shades is perceived as by other speakers ('Experiments on mother-tongue interference on colour perception', reported in Deutscher, *Through the Language Glass*, 219–32).

205. I thank Georgina Cockburn for this suggestion.

'Cead dhut' ars' an clèireach  
'Dol an lùib nan spideagan'.

*i pointmade an unfortunate cartridgeshot on the victorypresentsite of  
batallionbattle at Ronan, it womantouched the holy crashclockbell on the  
beadlecrabcleric's intercessionbrowbreast*

*as i vomit-threw the cartridgeshot on the victorypresentsite  
of batallionbattle at Ronan, 'you have my leave' says the  
beadlecrabcleric 'to go mancunningwolfsnarebendamong the  
delicaterobintauntnightingales.'<sup>206</sup>*

The quotation above comes from a long series of poems by Rody Gorman, derived from and inspired by *Buile Suibne* 'The Madness of Sweeney' (c. 900–1200) (III.3.d.). The poet invented a form of translation in which he runs together in English the full range of meanings and associations of each Gaelic word, both etymological and homonymous. Far from being a gimmick, his method sheds light on the nature of language and translation. His work is an interesting point at which to start this section on shape in the Gaelic language, because it exposes individual morphemes embedded in words of which speakers are normally barely aware.

#### A GAELIC WAY OF SEEING

Does Gaelic generate more items of vocabulary from visual clues than other languages? It is hard to say, but what can be said with greater certainty is that the building blocks of each language forge unique connections that can surprise the bilingual. While a cup and a bicycle in English have handles, in Gaelic they have ears. The Gaelic word for hand, *làmh*, includes the arm, and the word for foot, *cas*, includes the leg. The language can shock a learner into seeing things differently. *Mogal* is a mesh and a cluster of nuts, where the interstices between the nuts seem more defining than the nuts themselves; what is background in English becomes foreground in Gaelic like one of Escher's designs. The words *sùilean* and *sùileag* refer to a child, male and female, about three months old, who 'opens the eyes and starts looking around'. How has English not noticed this?

Dwelly's *Illustrated Dictionary* constantly brings to mind different ways of seeing. *Clach-ultaich* is a lift-stone, a concrete measure of the strength of a man. Dwelly tells us that Iain Garbh of Raasay's *Clach-ultaich*, weighing about a ton, can be seen at Duntulm. He describes the names of earmarks in sheep in considerable detail, twenty-one of which are listed and illustrated under *Comharradh* 'mark'. The marks are doubly interesting as they function both as

<sup>206</sup> From 'liosta/a tedious list', in Rody Gorman, *Suibhne: an intertongueing* (London, 2013).

a visual and as a verbal language, for the signs can be either read on a sheep's ear or referred to in discussion of ownership and identity. Thus they constitute a language of signs which can appear in different combinations, position and number. Only the thief's mark, *beum mhèirlich*, varies, in being lopped off at whatever point is necessary to remove the original marks. Some of the names of the marks are merely factual: a hole, nip or semi-circle, slit, cut or slice. Other names are figurative: *sùileag* 'a little eye'; *gearradh cròcan* 'a hook cut'; *cas-chaibe* 'a spade'; and *an t-snathad* 'a needle-like tongue of skin made by bending the ear lengthwise and cutting'.

#### SHAPE GENERATING VOCABULARY

Just as colour makes links across language domains in an 'aesthetic synthesis',<sup>207</sup> so does shape, as Ronald Black (Raghnaid MacIlleDhuibh) points out:

In my days as a teacher of Gaelic literature, my students were often baffled by the variety of meanings provided by Dwelly for a given word. I used to say: 'Don't just pick a meaning at random. Look at *all* the meanings and try to make a picture in your head of what they have in common. Everything called a *crann* will be pole-shaped. Everything called a *cliath* will be grid-shaped. Everything called a *cròic* will be like the ice-cream in your cone before it begins to melt.'<sup>208</sup>

Here is a closer look at these three examples. Dwelly defines *crann* as:

1. Plough. 2. Bar, bolt. 3. Tree. 4. Beam. 5. Mast. 6. Shaft. 7. Lot. 8. Measure for fresh herrings (cran). 9. Chance, risk, ballot. 10. Partiality, side, interest.
11. Membrum virile, penis. 12. Saltire *in heraldry*...

The oldest meaning of *crann* is 'tree', and as such it becomes the basis for many things that have the shape of a tree-trunk, regardless of size or material. Hence, a *crann* can be as tall as a mast or as small as a door bolt or as the sticks used to draw lots. The language has well over a hundred terms which include the word *crann* with the emphasis on shape rather than size. *Crann-tara*, the fiery cross used as a summons to war, is literally a 'gathering beam', half-burnt and dipped in blood to threaten the non-compliant. *Crann-ola* in the biblical context is an olive tree while it is also a neologism for an oil-rig.

Dwelly defines *cliath* as:

1. Harrow. 2. Grate. 3. Lattice. 4. Casement 5. Battalion. 6. Shoal, as of fishes. 7. Darning of a stocking. 8. Worm of a still. 9. Body, multitude.

<sup>207</sup> M. Macdonald, 'Seeing Colour in the Gàidhealtachd', *Scottish Affairs* No. 73 (Autumn 2010).

<sup>208</sup> R. MacilleDhuibh, 'The Epitome of Colour', *West Highland Free Press* (9 May 2008).



10. Hurdle, as for fulling cloth. 11. Hurdle, as used in fencing. 12. Weir for salmon. — *Lewis*. 13. Strong stockade constructed of wood or wattle and erected in olden times to protect ‘meanbh-chrodh’ (small cattle, as sheep, goats, &c.), from the ravages of wild animals. 14. Set of oars. 15. Treadles of a loom. 16. Certain use of the fingers in playing bagpipe and other music ...

Ronald Black identifies the ‘grid-shape’ as the common denominator in these definitions, which, applied to a shoal of fish or to a battalion, may give non-Gaelic eyes a new way of seeing.

Finally, Dwelly defines *cròic* as:

1. Deer’s antler. 2. Rage. 3. Foam on the surface of spirituous liquors. 4. Skin, hide. 5. Cast seaweed. 6. Difficulty, hardship, hard task ...

These disparate meanings are linked by their common heap-like shape. An antler branches up from the head; rage and difficulties and the foam on beer mount up; cast seaweed heaps up on the shore, as perhaps do skins, heaped over the skeleton or other structure.

A *meall* is a lump, as small as the boss on a shield or as big as a hill or a shower approaching over the sea. Many more examples could be given of shape generating vocabulary, regardless of size or domain, but just a few must suffice. *Gob* means a bird’s beak, and its pointed shape gives the word for as large a beak as the point of a headland, *gob rubha*, and as small a beak as a pin point, *gob prìne*. It is used pejoratively of the human mouth, as in the words, *glas-ghuib*, a gag, *gobach*, a chatterer or scold, and *gobag*, a garrulous female. Not surprisingly, the word generates names for birds with remarkable beaks (the avocet, *gob-ceàrr*, which is ‘wrong-beak’), but it also gives the name to the dog-fish, *gobag*, a sort of shark with a beaky appearance. The term *gobag* is used of beak-shaped hooks and staples, and for the ‘pecking’ wind that occurs in March between *Feadag* and *Gearran* (see I.2.b. Divisions of the Year).

*Gobhal* means ‘fork’ and hence ‘crutch’ and ‘groin’. It marks the fork-shapes common to the compass (*gobhal roinn*) and the sitting position with legs astride (*suidhe casa-gobhlach*). *Gobhlachan* is an earwig or ‘forkie-tail’ or a cricket or crane-fly, from the apparently hinged legs of these insects. A bow-legged female is a *gòbhlag* and the clipt or gaff of a boat is the *gobhlaisteach*. The element occurs in the names of various birds with forked tails such as the martin, swallow, redshank, petrel, swift, little grebe and dab-chick. These are *gobhlan-dubh*, *-gaoithe*, *-mara*, *-monaidh*, *-mòr*, *-taighe*, and *-uisge* (the ‘forked ones’, black or big, of the wind, sea, moor, house and water). It is the shape, not the genus, which generates these names, crossing the boundary between insect and bird, between the animate and non-animate.

The hooked shape of the shepherd’s crook or crozier, *bachall*, from Latin *baculum* (a staff), gives the word for various other objects which involve a curl on the end of a straight. These include curls of hair, the rim of a wheel, slippers, a tennis racket and a dolt.<sup>209</sup>

Parts of the body give the words for huge features in the landscape (see III.1.a.) as much as small parts of machinery. The eye, *sùil*, gives the name of small holes in the loom, spinning wheel, quern and mill. It refers to a deep bog covered with moss (*sùil-chruthaich/chritheach*), which is either an ‘eye of Creation’ or a ‘trembling eye’, and to a small cluster of herring in water. The word for the back (*druim*) gives the name for many arched surfaces: the surface of the sea (*druim na mara*), the ridge of a hill, keel of a boat, and the roof of a house and of the mouth. The zenith is the back of the skies (*druim nan speur*): while Gaelic visualises a body of air, English visualises an empty vault. *Cas* ‘leg’ gives words for leg-shaped objects, such as the straight or crooked spade, *cas-dhireach* or *cas-chrom*; or the handle of a knife or hammer.

The common practice of naming different working parts of an object by different parts of the body can give rise to a sense of animism about the object as a whole. In Gaelic, the hammer has a leg, while in English it has a means to be handled. A boat<sup>210</sup> has a *sròn* (‘nose’: prow), *druim* (‘back’: keel), *aisnean* (ribs), *claiqeann* (‘skull’: stem), *slige* (‘shell’: skin/hull), *beul mòr* (‘big mouth’: gunwhale), *cìrean* (comb), *giall* (jaw) and a *gobhlag* (‘groin’ clipt). A still<sup>211</sup> has the byname *a’ chaora chrom* ‘the lop-sided ewe’, which depicts the ‘worm’ as her single horn. Further, it has a ‘penis’ in the discharge cock, a head and shoulder (*bod-an-leanna*, *ceann* and *braghad*).

The plough,<sup>212</sup> peat-bank<sup>213</sup> and harp are likewise visualised in animate terms.



1 An Leid, the fire-place—Ross-shire; an Sorch-an—(AH) N. Argyll; an Teallaich—Lorn.  
2 Bod-an-leanna, the discharge cock.  
3 An Braghad, the shoulder.  
4 An Lionadair, the charger.  
5 An Ceann, the still-head.  
6 An Gearradan, the connecting piece.  
7 A' Chliath, the worm.

209. See also nouns based on the morpheme *cam* ‘crooked’: *camag* (curl, comma, temple of the head); *camagan-srèine* (bit for a horse); *caman* (shinty-stick); *camart* (wry neck); *camas* (bay); *cam-dhàn* (iambic verse because of the asymmetrical nature of the foot); *cam-dhubh* (foreleg of cattle and sheep); *cama-lùbach* (sandpiper).

210. See Dwelly, under *bàta*.

211. See Dwelly, under *poit-dhubh*.

212. See Dwelly, under *crann-nan-gad*.

213. See Dwelly, under *mòine*.



## THE PHYSICAL EXPRESSION OF MENTAL STATES

Gaelic often gives physical form to what are considered mental states in English, raising philosophical questions as to the placing of the mind in the brain or the body, questions addressed recently by the *New Scientist*.<sup>214</sup> *Cas a' falbh agus cas a' fuireachd* 'one foot going and the other foot stalling' is said of someone who is undecided, who may be *eadar dà lionn* 'between two layers of water' (as a fish), *air udalan* 'on a fulcrum' or *air clach an turramain* 'on a rocking stone'. *Beul air gualainn* 'mouth on the shoulder' describes reticence; *an guainibh a chèile* 'in each other's shoulders' describes solidarity. Discretion can be expressed as having a 'hem on the mouth' (*faidheam air beul*) and indiscretion as having 'too fast a mouth' (*beul ro luath*).<sup>215</sup> In Gaelic song, mental states as a rule are given physical expression (see in II.2.d.). Some personal characteristics are couched in clearly physical terms: *eangarra* 'hoofed' and *cas* 'steep' refer to being short-tempered; *aon-fhillte* 'one fold' means innocent and *beulchair* 'mouthy' means plausible.

Various mental processes in English can be seen as physical processes in Gaelic. *Thilg e orm* 'he threw on me' means that he accused me; *tharraing e asam* 'he pulled out of me' means that he teased me; *chaidh e uaithe* 'he went from it', means that he deteriorated. *Thàinig e fodham* is 'it occurred to me', literally 'it came under me'. The image is not so different from the Latin root of *occur* 'to run towards', which is obscure in English.

If something is 'as debts on you', *mar fhiachaibh ort*, you are obliged to do it. If you have £5 on me, *ma tha £5 agadsa orm*, I owe you £5. Playing on this, when Iain MacCodrum was asked by James MacPherson in the 18th century whether he had anything on the Fenians, MacCodrum replied that he owed them nothing. Similarly, when asked if he had a particular song, the South Uist *seanchaidh* Seonaidh Phàdraig replied, *Cha tug mi leam e* 'I didn't take it with me', which gives an insight into the physicality of memory.<sup>216</sup> The physicality of heredity is evident in a phrase like *Thug e siud bho athair* 'He took that from his father'.

*Thug e sùil*, literally 'he gave an eye', is commonly used for 'he looked'. Many other expressions make reference to the physical eye rather than to the act of looking: *Chuir e sùil innte* 'He put an eye in her' means he took a fancy to her; *chan eil dùil no sùil agam ris* means 'I have neither hope nor eye for him'. Someone who is *sùileach* is knowing, because in Gaelic knowledge comes

214. Anil Ananthaswamy, 'Mind over matter? How your body does your thinking', *New Scientist* Issue <2753> (24 March 2010).

215. Many of these examples comes from Garbhan MacAoidh, *Tasgadh: A Gaelic Thesaurus* (Tulach Mhór, Èirinn, 2007).

216. I am grateful to Angus Peter Campbell for this information.

from seeing (see I.1.a.). In this way, *chuir e air shùilibh dhuinn*, literally 'he put on our eyes', means 'he suggested to us'.

In II.1.a., we discussed how emotion is habitually expressed as agent in the language. In the current discussion of form, it is interesting to note that jealousy is given the physical form of *an droch shùil* 'the evil eye'. This gives rise to such expressions as *sùil-bheum* 'eye-blow' for the influence of the evil eye and the adjective *sùil-bheumach* 'eye-blowing' for possessing the evil eye. There is no doubt what sort of eye is implied in *Ge b' e có rinn dhut an t-sùil* 'Whosoever made the eye on you ...' or *Sgoiltidh sùil a' chlach* 'An eye will split a stone'. An envious person may be admonished with *Fliuch do shùil* 'Wet your eye' to prevent another's beast or child sticking to the evil eye and sickening. This is a marked example of the language giving physical form to a mental state, and the point is doubly marked by that form logically being the eye which first apprehends the object of envy.

In conclusion, the generation of vocabulary by shape is seen to make unique links between objects across domains, regardless of size. When the shapes in question are taken from the human body, there appears to be a blurring of the distinction between the animate and non-animate. The strong tendency in the language to give physical form to mental states further blurs the distinction between the mind and body. MB

## II.2.c. FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

[Introduction; Nomenclature Incorporating \*cailleach\*; Other Metaphoric and Associative Names; Proverbs; Riddles](#)

## INTRODUCTION

Bu chòir an t-iasad a chur dhachaigh a' gàireachdaich.

*The loan should be sent home laughing.*

This proverb urges the liberal repayment of loans. The loan has been personified by being made to laugh: an abstract concept has been made physical as we saw with mental states in the previous section. The advice is probably always fitting, but in times of scarcity, or where 'thigging' was particularly common, it may have been more urgent.<sup>217</sup> There may be nothing unique about the advice or about the use of figurative language in Gaelic nomenclature, proverbs and

217. Giolla Coluim mac an Ollaimh complains bitterly of the practice in a poem from the 16th century. While the rules of hospitality meant it was unlucky to refuse a request, the burden on the lender could become intolerable; see W. J. Watson, *Scottish Verse from the Book of the Dean of Lismore* (Edinburgh, 1937), 66.

sayings, but where it is culturally specific it provides further evidence of a Gaelic way of seeing.

Every language generates some of its vocabulary from visual cues, some metaphoric, some descriptive, some associative, especially for names of broadly similar specimens, for example, of plant and animal life. We may start by looking at words incorporating the term *cailleach*, the archetypal ‘hag’ in Gaelic culture.

#### NOMENCLATURE INCORPORATING *CAILLEACH*

The word *cailleach* ‘old woman’ or ‘nun’ is used figuratively of various solitary objects and of birds which have a distinctively coloured head. The original meaning of *cailleach* was ‘veiled one’, from Old Gaelic *caille* ‘veil’, from Latin *pallium* ‘cloak’. It is a veiled woman that is seen in the names of various members of the tit family with their distinctively coloured heads. *Cailleachag-cheann-dubh* ‘the little black-headed veiled one’ is the coaltit, and *cailleachag-cheann-ghorm* ‘the little blue-headed veiled one’ is the bluetit. It is not so clear whether the image of the ‘nun’ or the ‘black old woman’ lies behind the name for the cormorant, *cailleach dhubh*. Considering the great cultural tradition of birds as soothsayers, historians, enchanted people and as the souls of the dead (see III.2.b.), the anthropomorphism of these bird names is no surprise. A wimple-like rim of feathers frames the owl’s face, so it may be as much the image of the nun as the old woman that lies behind the Gaelic for ‘owl’, *cailleach-oidhche* ‘old woman of the night’. However, the Poor Owl of Strone, in the 16th-century poem ‘Comhachag Bhochd na Sròine’ by Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn, was clearly not a nun for she describes herself as having been faithful in love.<sup>218</sup>

A’ *chailleach* was also used of the last handful of standing corn on a farm. *Cailleach-baic* ‘old woman of the peat-bank’ was used of the outside peat, referring to its dried, wrinkled texture. By contrast, *cailleach uisge* ‘a watery old woman’ was used of a diseased potato. Among the names for the foxglove are *meuran nan cailleachan marbha* and *cìoch nam ban-sithe* ‘fingers or thimble of the dead old women’ and ‘breasts of the fairy-women’, with reference both to the form and to the poisonous properties of the flower. The *cailleach* was a byname for the earth goddess in her wintry destructive mode. It is possible that in these otherworldly usages we see a remnant of the fear and awe which surrounded her, as well as a sense that any animal or bird was an embodiment of her nature.

218. Wilson McLeod and Meg Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire/The Song-book of the Pillagers* (Edinburgh, 2007), No. 68, v. 5.

#### OTHER METAPHORIC AND ASSOCIATIVE NAMES

The names for natural specimens of particular beauty or finesse sometimes allude to the supernatural. For example, various terms for the butterfly – *dealan-dè*, *dearbadan-dè*, *amadan-dè* – make it God’s spark or God’s fool. The oystercatcher and the dandelion have associations with Brigid, the former *gille-Brighde* the ‘servant of Brigid’, through its red, white and black colouring; the latter *beàrnann-Brighde* the ‘notched one of Brigid’, through the appearance of its indented leaves near her feast day in spring. Both bird and plant are marked by the chevrons identified with the earth goddess throughout Neolithic Europe.<sup>219</sup> Many more plants and animals are associated with the Virgin Mary, the number increased by the interchangeability of *marra* and *Muire*, ‘of the sea’ and ‘of Mary’. The denotation *Muire* would seem to be used of the daintier specimens of a generic type. So the robin is known as *spideag-Muire*; a particular sort of fine limpet is known as *copan Muire* ‘Mary’s cup’. *Còig-mheòir Muire* ‘the five fingers of Mary’ is cinquefoil; and *dreimire-Muire* ‘Mary’s ladder’ is dwarf tufted centauray. St Columba’s advice is commemorated in the name *achlasan Chaluim Chille* (St Columba’s armpit) for St John’s wort, which he is said to have prescribed to calm a herd’s nerves when tending the cattle alone.<sup>220</sup>

Some plants are connected with the fairies through their natural resemblance to man-made objects. For this reason the bulrush is known as the fairies’ distaff, *cuigeal nam ban-sithe*, and milkwort, which foams with water, is known as fairy soap, *siabann nam ban-sithe*.

Some nomenclature picks up a striking visual or aural characteristic. The sea urchin, *crogan-feannaige*, is envisaged as the jar of a crow. The cuttlefish or squid, with its mouth lying in the middle of its tentacles, is known as *sùil-an-tòin* ‘eye in bottom’. Another bird name, *capall-coille*, which gives ‘capercaillie’ in English, means ‘horse of the wood’ because of the clapping sound it makes when displaying.<sup>221</sup>



*Gille-Brighde* (oystercatcher)

219. M. Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess* (London, 1989).

220. Alexander Carmicheal, *Carmina Gadelica II* (Edinburgh, 1900), 96–97.

221. Alan Richards, *British Birds: A Field Guide* (Newton Abbot, 1979), 54.



Paul Sandby, *A Gillee wet feet or Errand Runner* (c. 1750). National Galleries of Scotland

Association is a strong force in naming. A servant who carried his master over rivers or into boats was *gille-cas-fliuch* 'a wet-footed lad'; a walking companion is *cas-nàbaidh* 'a neighbour's leg'. By association with its use in coffins, cypress has become the tree of sorrow, *craobh a' bhròin*, and because of its trembling leaves, aspen, *critheann* the 'trembling one', has become associated with the wood of the Cross, trembling in expectation of Doom.

Association is imagined in filial terms in several Gaelic expressions. An echo is *mac-talla* or *mac-alla* 'son of the hall or rock'; the imagination, *mac-meanmna*, is the 'son of the spirit'. *Mac-na-bracha* 'son of the barley' is whisky, and *mac-leabhair* 'son of a book' is its

copy.<sup>222</sup> *Mac-leisge* and *mac-stròdha* are laziness and prodigality personified.

Many Gaelic words connected with the church and its attendant technology of writing are derived from Latin and often ultimately from Greek, but, unlike English, Gaelic did not generate much scientific vocabulary from classical roots until bilingual education required it in the late 20th century. Medical words are immediately transparent to Gaelic speakers in a way they are not in English. This may be illustrated by the names of diseases which are often descriptive of their symptoms. *A' chuing* 'the yoke' is asthma, denoting the constriction of the breath. *Teannachadh-innidh* 'tightening of the guts' is constipation and *a' bhuinneach* or *an spùt* 'the torrent' is diarrhoea. *An ruith-fhuail* 'constant urine' is diabetes, a symptom of that condition. *An ruaidhe* 'the redness' is erysipelas and *a' bhuidheach* 'the yellowness' is jaundice.

#### PROVERBS

Proverbs were and still are very popular in Gaelic culture. There are many collections, of which Alexander Nicolson's *Gaelic Proverbs*, first published in 1882,

222. This usage echoes Diarmaid's judgement that Colum Cille's copy of Finnian's psalter should stay with the original as the calf stays with its mother (see II.3.b.).

is the most famous.<sup>223</sup> Their economic syntax, sharp vignettes and of course their wisdom have appealed to people in all cultures through the ages. In a largely oral culture, proverbs take on greater significance than in a culture where the written – and now the broadcast word – gives constant stimulation for thought. Proverbs in Gaelic are encouraged by schools and by the Mod where children compete in reciting them.

However, a few individuals have criticised the culture of proverbs in both Gaelic Ireland and Scotland. The Irish poet Nuala Ní Dhómhnaill (b. 1952), complained of her grandmother's inability to think outwith the framework of proverbs. What may be a linguistic richness in the Irish-speaking community, she felt to be an intellectual and moral stricture.<sup>224</sup> Donald MacAulay (1930–2017) made a similar point in a short story which pitches the claims of individual integrity against the community's expectations. The main character complains,

Far a bheil uinneagan na h-inntinn dùinte gus an tèid i na faing bheag ghnàthasan-cainnte nach dèan eadar-dhealachadh eadar ionracas agus aonfhillteas, cha leig thu leas dùil a bhith agad ri mòran atharrachaidh. Far a bheil miann ath-cruthachaidh air leigeil roimhe. Tha comas tuigsinn air rud sam bith a tha tù muigh na fainge gun lorg air – gus an toir an èiginn dhachaigh e.

*Where the windows of the mind are closed into a narrow pen of proverbs and sayings that make no distinction between an individual's sense of integrity and simple morality, you can't expect much change. Where any desire for fresh thinking has been given up. There's no sign of an ability to understand anything outwith the pen – until desperation brings it home.*<sup>225</sup>

Though the import of sayings is as universal as the human nature they illustrate, their means of expression is more specific. Fairness is expressed as *Cothrom na Fèinne* 'Fenian fair play', by which unequal numbers were not to be pitched together in battle, still in common use in the 21st century. *Beurla na Fèinne*, referring to the antiquity and the obscurity of 'Fenian Language' was a byword for lawyers' or military Gaelic. The idea of 'Nature being red in tooth and claw' is quoted from Fenian lore as *A' bhèist as motha ag ithe na bèiste as lugha, 's a' bhèist as lugha a' dèanamh mar a dh'fhaodas i* 'The bigger beast eating the lesser

223. Nicolson's collection included the Donald MacIntosh Collection which was published in 1819 with the sobriquet 'The Way to Wealth'. An extended commentary on the wisdom of proverbs was the basis of a book by Donald MacKinnon (1839–1914), the first professor of Celtic at Edinburgh University.

224. Nuala Ní Dhómhnaill, information given at a poetry reading.

225. Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh, 'Deireadh an Sgeòil an Asgaidh', *Gairm* 11 (1962–63), 51–66, with the present editor's translation.

beast, and the lesser beast doing as it may'. *Sgoiltidh farmad a' chreag* 'Envy will split the rock' is a powerful visualisation of an abstract emotion, which originates in a tale of St Columba who was carrying a stone which he split to prove to an envious man that it was not a cheese.<sup>226</sup> Another story concerning St Columba gives the expression *Tuilleadh ùir* 'More earth' for 'Shut up'. It comes from the tale that Odhrán emerged from live burial to report that hell was not as bad as had been said (see VI.2.).

Making the abstract concrete in a sharp vignette is the art of the idiom or proverb. Many sayings clearly evoke the natural world of the Highlands and Islands such as *Cho crosta ris an dris* 'as cross as the bramble' or *Cho eòlach 's a tha am brìdean 's an tràigh* 'as well-acquainted as the oystercatcher and the shore'.<sup>227</sup> Others arise from Highland life, its social constraints and material culture. Moral guidance is given in warnings against indiscretion and infidelity: *Na gearr do sgòrnan le do theangaidh fhèin* 'Cut not thy throat with thine own tongue' and *Na cuir do spàin an càl nach buin dhut* 'Don't put your spoon in kail that's not yours', an exhortation against infidelity. 'Every little helps' is colourfully visualised in *Is mòid i siud, mun tuirt an dreathan donn nuair e rinn e dhileag sa mhuir mhòir* 'It's the bigger for that, as the wren said when he peed into the sea'.

Typical of the culture, the proverb *Cha chumar taigh le beul dùinte* 'House with closed door can't be kept' encourages hospitality. Matters of heredity and destiny were always of interest to the Gaels. Heredity is made visible in this observation from the animal world: *Bu dual do dh'isean an ròin a dhol thun na mara* 'The seal pup takes naturally to the sea'. The impossibility of evading destiny is illustrated by *Am fear a bhios a bharramhanadh a-mach, suidhidh e air fàil chorraich* 'He whose destiny is cast sits on a wobbly dyke'.

The typical honed language of the proverb focuses the mind's eye on telling detail. *Cha dèan cù sàthach sealg* 'A full dog won't hunt' and *Ni farmad treabhadh* 'Envy ploughs' look at questions of motivation. The focus on the hand on the tiller excuses occasional failure: *Cha do shuidh air stiùir nach tàinig bho làimh uaireigin* 'None ever sat at helm that it did not sometime slip his hand'. Here, the close-up of the hand illustrates a self-serving nature: *Am fear a bhios riarachadh na maraig, bidh an ceann reamhar aige fhèin* 'The man that divides the pudding will have the thick end to himself', while the close-up is of the finger in *Cha dèan corrag mhilis ìm, no glaimsear càise* 'Sweet finger won't make butter or a glutton cheese'. In the foregoing examples, the use of synecdoche (where the part represents the whole) seems very much a visual device. It will be argued in the next section (II.2.d.) that synecdoche should be seen as a visual rather than as a literary device in panegyric

226. Donald MacIntosh Collection (1819), No. 147.

227. All examples from Alexander Nicolson, ed., *Gaelic Proverbs* ([1881]; Edinburgh, 1996).

poetry too.

#### RIDDLES

Riddles, *tòimhseachain*, often constitute surprising ways of seeing. Some riddles use metaphorical language, others are based on punning. The first sort can be seen in Fionn's questions, *Ceistean Fhinn*, which he poses to any prospective wife and which Gràinne successfully answers. They give figurative expression to three characteristic aspects of Fenian lore: the provocativeness of their women, their lavish hospitality and their truth-speaking.

Dè as luaithe na a' ghaoth?

Aigne mnà eadar dà fhear.

*What is swifter than the wind?*

*A woman's thought betwixt two men.*

Dè as deirge na fuil?

Gnùis duine chòir nuair thigeadh coigrich an rathad  
's gun bhiadh aige a bheireadh e dhaibh.

*What is redder than blood?*

*The face of a worthy man when strangers might come the way,  
and no meat by him to give to them.*

Dè as gile na 'n sneachd?

An fhìrinn.

*What is whiter than snow?*

*The truth.*<sup>228</sup>

Many Gaelic riddles require the listener to identify an inanimate object described as something animate. For example, fire emerging from smoke is a man emerging from mist; a pot is a creature with three legs that do not move and two ears that do not hear.<sup>229</sup> The first example below describes a key in a lock; the second describes a griddle with pancakes:

Bò bheag odhar an doras an t-sabhail,

laogh ga deoghal

's cha bhleoghainn i deur: Glas agus iuchair.

*A little dun cow in the door of the barn,*

*a calf sucking her,*

228. J. F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* ([1860–64], facsimile Hounslow, 1983), Vol. III, 46–49.

229. *Aithris is Oideas* (London: The Scottish Council for Research in Education, 1964), 44–53.



and she won't give a drop: A lock and a key.

Tha caora dhubh san taigh ud thall,  
is cuiridh i fichead rùsg san latha dhith: Greideal.

*There's a black sheep in yonder house  
and she throws off twenty fleeces in a day: A griddle.*

MB

## II.2.d. THE VISUAL IN LITERATURE

[Visualisation in Composition](#); [Metonymy and Synecdoche](#); [Personification and Animation](#); [The Visualisation of Emotion](#); [Symbolism and Allegory](#); [Metre as Pattern](#); [The Visual Nature of Traditional Tales](#); [Visual Performance](#); [Conclusion](#)

And at the proper moment, she saw her poems running along the green curves that formed the intersection of wall and roof. The phrase used by the *seanchaidh* was: *A' feitheamh na bàrdachd a' ruith air na glasfhadan*.<sup>230</sup>

### VISUALISATION IN COMPOSITION

The word 'literature', derived from the Latin *litteratus* 'letter', is a misnomer for the majority of the songs and tales discussed in this section, which, being composed and transmitted without recourse to writing, would better be described as 'oracy'. The above description of Maighread Nighean Lachlainn's method of composition in the 17th and early 18th centuries demonstrates the visual basis of her poetry. Many song poems, collected orally, have only been committed to writing in the last century or two.<sup>231</sup> Professor William Gillies has said, 'Bardic verse ranked visualising much higher than seeing ...'<sup>232</sup> This should be of no surprise when we consider that the ultimate origins of bardic verse were the pronouncements of poets, druids and seers involved in negotiating the relationship between the king and nature, communicated to them through various signs and visions (see [I.1.c. Imbas forosnai](#)).

The poet's role is still connected to the transmission of visions. Dòmhnall Iain Dhonnchaidh (1919–1986), a traditional poet from South Uist, begins no less than six poems with the phrase *Chì mi* or *Chunnaic mi* 'I see' or 'I saw'.<sup>233</sup> Many

230. Quoted in Colm Ó Baoill, *Maighread Nighean Lachlainn* (Edinburgh, 2013), 8–9.

231. It has been shown, however, that tales were circulated in MSS as an aide memoir in the higher echelons of society; see Alan Bruford, *Gaelic Folk Tales and Medieval Romance* (Dublin, 1969).

232. William Gillies, 'The Poem in Praise of Ben Dobhrain', *Lines Review* No. 63 (1977), 45.

233. The poems in question are numbers 1, 8, 32, 47, 62 and 92 in Dòmhnall Iain MacDonal, *Chì Mi*, ed. Bill Innes (Edinburgh, 1998). Many other poems make reference within the text to his seeing.

traditional songs open with a reference to what the singer sees. Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh begins her song 'Luinneag MhicLeòid' with a description of the view from her place of banishment in Scarpa:

'S mi am shuidh' air an tulaich  
fo mhulad 's fo iomcheist,  
's mi coimhead air Ìle,  
's ann dem iognadh san àm seo.

*Here I sit on the knoll,  
feeling sorrow and anxiety,  
looking across at Islay,  
to my dismay at this time.*<sup>234</sup>

Another famous example is 'Clann Ghriogair air Fògradh' from the uncertain time of the persecution of the MacGregors at the end of the 17th century. The singer begins by describing herself sitting by the road looking out for a fugitive who can give her news of the clan.<sup>235</sup>

What is not seen can be as potent as what is seen. In the 13th century, Muireadhach Albanach laments his wife, looking at the bed on which she is not lying and feeling the absence of her hand beneath his head.<sup>236</sup> Similarly, Aithbhreac Inghean Corcadail begins a lament for her husband (d. 1470) with the absence of his hand from his rosary:

A phaidrín do dhúisg mo dhéar,  
ionmhain méar do bhitheadh ort ...<sup>237</sup>

*O rosary that woke my tears,  
beloved the finger that used to touch you ...*

The same practice endures into the 17th and 18th centuries, with Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh lamenting the absence of poets, drinking horns and song from the young chief's hall,<sup>238</sup> and with Donnchadh Bàn lamenting the lack of deer in the neglected Coire a' Cheathaich (The Misty Corrie).<sup>239</sup>

234. Anne Lorne Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2006), 147.

235. Catherine Kerrigan, *An Anthology of Scottish Women Poets* (Edinburgh, 1991), 38.

236. 'M'anam do sgar riomsa a-rèir/My soul parted from me last night', in Wilson McLeod and Meg Bateman, *Duanair na Sracaire/The Song-book of the Pillagers* (Edinburgh, 2007), No. 27.

237. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanair na Sracaire*, No. 28, vv. 1–2.

238. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 155–56.

239. Angus MacLeod, ed., *Òrain Dhonnchaidh Bhàin/The Songs of Duncan Ban McIntyre* (Edinburgh, 1952), 174ff.

'Negative antithesis', as it was termed by James Ross,<sup>240</sup> is a very common stylistic device in Gaelic song, when the singer visualises a series of poor conditions which are as nothing compared to the current situation. This is from the lament made by Anna Chaimbeul when Ailean Donn was drowned on the way to their marriage in Scalpay in 1786:

Gura mis' a th' air mo làireadh,  
Chan e bàs a' chruidh sa Chèitein,  
No tainead mo bhuaile sprèidhe,  
Ach a fhlichead a th' air do làine.

*It is me who is wounded,  
not by the deaths of stock in the springtime,  
nor by the leanness of my herd of cattle,  
but by the wetness of your shirt.*<sup>241</sup>

A gruesomely ironic example is given by Iain Lom in celebrating his clan's victory at the battle of Inverlochry in 1645:

'M b' aithne dhuibhse an Goirtean Odhar?  
'S math a bha e air a thodhar:  
Chan inneir chaorach no ghobhar  
Ach fuil Dhuibhneach an dèidh reodhaidh.

*Did you know the Goirtean Odhar?  
It has received a fine manuring:  
neither with sheep-dung nor with goat-dung,  
but with Campbell blood after congealing.*<sup>242</sup>

#### METONYMY AND SYNECDOCHE

The ideological basis for much bardic poetry and later vernacular love songs and laments is what John MacInnes has termed the panegyric code.<sup>243</sup> The poet demonstrates the chief's 'fitness for rule' through his abilities as a warrior and hunter to defend and provide for his clan and through his generosity as a patron of the arts in his drinking hall to reward loyalty. His own beauty and the presence of beautiful women demonstrate nature's satisfaction and bestowal of fertility, while the presence of poets and musicians affirms his generosity and assures the

240. James Ross, 'The Classification of Folksong', *Scottish Studies* I (1957).

241. Kerrigan, *An Anthology of Scottish Women Poets*, 46–47.

242. Colm Ó Baoill and Meg Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach: Anthology of 17th Century Gaelic Poetry* (Edinburgh, 1994), 112–13.

243. John MacInnes, 'The Panegyric Code in Gaelic Poetry and its Historical Background', *TGSI L* (1976–1978), 436ff.

wider broadcasting of his fame. The signs of plenty in food and drink, armour and weapons, money for gambling, and candles for lighting further prove that the chief is a suitable mate for the land which has responded liberally. The panegyric code is an ideological construct which is expressed in visual terms in the poetry and the tales of the period. In a very real sense, panegyric poetry of the 13th to 18th centuries can be seen as filling the same function as portrait painting in the Lowlands and elsewhere. Like the paintings, the poetry presented an idealised picture of the chief in his surroundings, in which he was *seen* to embody certain mental, physical and social qualities which belonged to the meta-ideology of the warrior.

The originality of metaphor is not what is required of an image, but the reinforcing of the chief's attributes by linking them to the terms of the panegyric code. Máire Ní Annracháin has shown that this is largely done through metonymy, i.e. through verbal images that reaffirm the subject's connections to the ideological structures of the heroic ethos. Thus any detail of beauty indicates the general attractiveness of the chief; any weapon indicates its owner's bravery; any detail of visiting poets, musicians or allies indicates his extensive reputation.<sup>244</sup> The distinction between metaphor and metonymy is very important to our understanding of imagery in the Gaelic tradition. Our Romantic and post-Romantic interest in the striking metaphor has led us to assess traditional poetry wrongly and to criticise poets such as Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh for a lack of originality of imagery to which they never aspired.<sup>245</sup>

In traditional poetry, there are many more conventional images of generous hands and overtopping trees than original images of kisses like watercress, deckhands like hares and squirrels, and dew like rosary beads. It is probably significant that the last two examples come from the work of that most innovative of poets, Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair,<sup>246</sup> and that the following example comes from a love song, a subject generally felt with greater subjectivity than praise of a chief:

244. Máire Ní Annracháin, 'Metaphor and Metonymy in the Poetry of Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh', in Sharon Arbuthnot and Kaarina Hollo, eds, *Fil Súil nGlais: A Festschrift in Honour of Colm Ó Baoill* (Ceann Drochaid, 2007).

245. Derick Thomson, for example, criticises the poet for lack of originality in his article, 'Imagery in the Poetry of Mary MacLeod', *The Clan MacLeod Magazine*, 432–36.

246. From 'Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill', see Black, *An Lasair*, 214–15; and 'Allt an t-Siùcair' in Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 231:

paidirean geal dlùth-chneap  
den drùchd ghorm air an fheur ...

*a rosary of gleaming beads  
of dew glinting (blue) on the grass ...*

'S e dh'fhàg gun tuar mi thu bhith cho fuar rium  
ri dèighean cruaidh air na lochan reòthhte.

*What left me wan is you being as cold to me  
as the hard ice on the frozen lochs.*<sup>247</sup>

Praise poems, whether in eulogy or lament, provide the listener with a wealth of vignettes. Each of these codifies the heroic ethos through metonymy; that is to say that each is linked to and exemplifies a category of the panegyric code. The song-makers espoused no new idea; all that was variable was the image used to express the concept of fitness for rule. Abstract nouns are not common because the poet aims to visualise rather than to conceptualise the subject. *Gruaidh ruiteach na fèileachd*, 'the flushed cheek of generosity',<sup>248</sup> is a rare example of the use of an abstract noun, which nevertheless is manifest in a flushed cheek. A good chief was rewarded by the land, and his ensuing generosity benefited the whole clan. The propitious union of chief and land was demonstrated by the fertility of the land and the hospitality of his drinking hall, thronging with his allies, poets, musicians and women:

Steach gu Ciosamul an aighir,  
far am faight' a' chuirm ri gabhail,  
'g òl an fhìon bho oidhche gu latha,  
caithream nam fear ag òl an leanna,  
piobaireachd nam feadan àrd' laghach,  
's clàrsach bhinn ga piobadh mar ris,  
sìoda donn ga chur air na mnathan.

*Towards joyful Kisimul,  
where the feasting takes place,  
drinking wine from night to day,  
the clamour of the men drinking ale,  
the piping of the tall lovely drones,  
and the sweet harp piping alongside,  
russet silk being worn by the ladies.*<sup>249</sup>

Metonymic detail – a dripping hogshead, the pledging of stakes, poets being drawn from Ireland, or necklaces on women – evokes the drinking hall of plenty where loyalty is rewarded.<sup>250</sup>

247. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 80.

248. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, 50.

249. From 'Beinn a' Cheathaich', in Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 134.

250. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, 68.

The chief's appearance is also described through metonymy, each detail providing a fresh angle on his beauty:

Gura math thigeadh èileadh  
Air an easgaid nach b' èidich.

*The kilt would well suit  
the thigh not misshapen.*<sup>251</sup>

Examples like this, where the part represents the whole, should be described as synecdoche. (Metonymy is a linked, rather than integral, part, as in 'the bottle' referring to alcohol.) The eyelash here provides an extreme example of synecdoche:

Is briste mo chridhe im chlí ...  
ar éis an abhradh dhuibh úir.

*Broken is my heart within my breast  
longing for the fresh dark lash.*

'A Phaidrín do dhúisg mo dhéar'<sup>252</sup>

Though synecdoche is generally used fairly formulaically, the isolation of an image can be very powerful, as in this 11th-century depiction of St Columba:

Fil súil nglais  
fégbas Éirinn dar a hais;  
noco n-aceba iarmo-thá  
firu Érenn nách a mná.

*A blue eye turns back,  
watching Ireland fade behind,  
never to see from thenceforth  
Ireland's women nor her men.*<sup>253</sup>

Likewise, the synecdochic use of the hand highlights the chief's martial skills:

Cha do ghabh thu bristeadh,  
lámh leigeadh na fala.

*You were never crushed,  
Oh blood-spilling hand.*<sup>254</sup>

251. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, 76.

252. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, 74.

253. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, 12.

254. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 131.

Metonymy and circumlocutions allow poets to find new ways to express commonplaces. Here the narrowness of the coffin is pictured in a lament:

Tha mo chomhaltan gaolach  
'N leaba chaoil 's an ceann ìseal

*My beloved foster brothers  
are in a narrow bed, their heads low;*<sup>255</sup>

and here, the lack of company of the grave:

Thu bhith 'd còmhnaidh sa chaibeal  
Gun chòmhradh gun chaidreabh  
'S gun de chòmhnardachd leapa ach bòrd.

*You dwelling in the chapel  
with no company or converse  
and nothing flat for a bed but a board.* <sup>256</sup>

Aithbhreac inghean Corcadail addresses her deceased husband in the 15th century as a lion, hawk, dragon and salmon.<sup>257</sup> Such kennings or heroic bynames are conventionalised and may have been totemic in origin.<sup>258</sup> They are metaphors which relate metonymically to the subject's martial skills. In a poem of eight verses by Sileas na Ceapaich to Alasdair of Gengarry, no less than half the lines consist of kennings. This is one of those verses:

Bu tu 'n loch nach fhaoidt' a thaomadh,  
Bu tu tobar faoilidh na slàinte,  
Bu tu Beinn Nibheis thar gach aonach,  
Bu tu chreag nach fhaoidte theàrnadh;  
Bu tu clach-mhullaich a' chaisteil,  
Bu tu leac leathann na sràide,  
Bu tu leug lòghmhor nam buadhan,  
Bu tu clach uasal an fhàinne.

*You were the loch that couldn't be emptied,  
you were the generous well of health,  
you were Ben Nevis above every hill-top,  
you were the cliff that no-one descends;*

255. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, 54.

256. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, 76.

257. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanair na Sracaire*, 174–75.

258. John MacInnes and Ronald Black have analysed the use of kennings; see *TGSIL*, 457, and Black, *An Lasair* (Edinburgh, 2001), 527.

*you were the highest stone in the castle,  
you were the flagstone of the street,  
you were the rare jewel of magic powers,  
you were the precious stone of the ring.*<sup>259</sup>

Every image used by Sileas relates the subject to certain heroic attributes. His place in the family line gives rise to his being addressed as a tree, sapling or nut, the tree representing his ancestry, with its suckers and nuts promising regeneration. His pre-eminence is shown by his being the tallest of trees, or those noblest of creatures, the lion or eagle. His masculinity is typified by the stag or cockerel; his ferocity, by the hawk (with its clear eyes for hunting), a dragon, a thunderbolt, rushing cascade or a mythological hero such as Lugh or Goll. His protective powers are expressed through his being a rock or a shield; his wisdom, by comparison to the salmon (with its mythical connections to the hazel nuts at the source of the Boyne) and to light-giving bodies such as the sun, stars, planets and even candles. Notions of the chief's propitiousness give rise to kennings of precious stones, jewels or wells representing the source of life. Though the images may vary, the ideology they evoke does not.

John MacInnes likens the body of metonymic Gaelic imagery to a creative sea from which images emerge fresh while still relating to an established set of values:

Throughout the whole range of the poetry, conventional images pass before us like the waves on the sea, endlessly recurring, formed in the same creative matrix, each a reflection of others, each one individual. They remind us of those that have passed; they prepare us for those that are to come. The rhetorical systems that contain these elements, interlocking and lighting up, as it were, in their entirety, no matter where we make contact, could not fail to keep alive the unity of the Gaelic nation.<sup>260</sup>

#### PERSONIFICATION AND ANIMATION

Perhaps humour alone is intended when Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair sees birds as musicians in 'Allt an t-Siùcar',<sup>261</sup> or when An Ciaran Mabach (d. 1688) describes a stag and hind as a couple who require neither pints of beer nor cushions,<sup>262</sup> but they may have deeper implications. It has been suggested (in II.1.b.) that such

259. Ronald Black, *An Lasair: Anthology of 18th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse* (Edinburgh, 2001), 102–03.

260. John MacInnes, *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal*, ed. Michael Newton (Edinburgh, 2006), 29.

261. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 231.

262. 'On his being once in Edinburgh', in Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, 180.



personifications merge the differences between human and animal and even the non-animate.

The animation of the inanimate is a frequent trope in Gaelic culture as was seen in the last two sections. In poetry, boats, guns and pipes are frequently animate because the materials from which they were made ultimately had a living source, if not as wood or animal skin, then as metal (part of the earth whose animism had been represented by goddesses, fairies and mythical smiths). A boat becomes animated as a horse when Murchadh Mòr mac mhic Mhurchaidh (c.1670) compares it favourably to the stubborn mare he is riding (see IV.2.e).<sup>263</sup> Guns and pipes are frequently personified as their owners' sweethearts, because they are held in an embrace and operate as one with their owner. Gilleasbuig na Ceapaich in the 17th century praises the pipes as a woman gathering armies under her skirts:

Bhean bhinn-fhoclach nach breun sturt,  
Chiùin chaoin-fhoclach, 's nìor breug sin,  
Labhras go sèimh air gach modh  
'S a brèid air slinneanaibh fir.

'Moladh na Pioba'

*The sweet-worded woman who is never in a huff,  
Gentle, smooth-worded and that is no lie,  
Who speaks softly in every mode,  
On a man's shoulders her kerchief thrown.*

'Praise of the Bagpipes'<sup>264</sup>

In the song 'Òran do MhacLeòid Dhùn Bheagain' (Song to Macleod of Dunvegan), An Clarsair Dall (c.1665–c.1714) meets *Mac-alla nan Tùr* 'the son of the hall or the rock', itself a personification for an echo. The echo of the now empty drinking hall proceeds to describe happier days in the time of Iain Breac, the father of the current profligate chief.<sup>265</sup>

There are numerous examples of the personification of the land, for example in 'Cumha Coire an Easa', when a corrie asks Am Pìobaire Dall (1656–1754) to play it a tune, and in 'Còmhradh eadar am Bàrd agus Blàbheinn' in which the mountain of Blaven laments its loss of population to the poet Uilleam Ros c.1790.<sup>266</sup> There are also the ancient speaking birds of 'Òran na Comhachaig' and 'Smeòrach Chlann Dòmhnail', who bear witness as timeless avatars of the land.

263. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, 150.

264. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, 160.

265. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, 200.

266. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, 207.

#### THE VISUALISATION OF EMOTION

It is generally true of Gaelic song poetry that, rather than recounting events chronologically, the singer circles around various scenes of high emotion. This viewpoint could be illustrated by hundreds of examples, one of which is 'Cumha Mhic an Tòisich', also known as a pibroch. The song is sung by a woman who had married a MacIntosh chief who died on their wedding day falling from his horse. His death is only inferred from such details as the deer walking past the man (who previously would have killed them), his being lifted and laid down (in the grave) and the beer for his wedding being drunk at his wake:

An leann a thug iad gu d' bhanais,  
An leann a thog iad gu d' bhanais,  
An leann a thog iad gu d' bhanais,  
'S ann gu d' fhalaireidh bha e.

*The beer that was brought for your wedding  
was drunk at your wake.*

Emotion is given concrete expression. For example, a woman says of her pain at the exile of Clan Gregor in 'Clann Ghriogair air fògradh' c.1589:

Chaidh saighead am shliasaid,  
crann fiar air dhroch shnaidheadh<sup>267</sup>

*An arrow has entered my thigh  
with a squint, badly-whittled shaft.*

A woman expresses sexual desire by envisaging bearing a man's sons:

B' fheàrr leam fhin gun saothraichinn mac dhut,  
còignear no sianar no seachdnar,  
's uallach a dhèanainn an altram,  
bheirinn glùin is cìoch an asgaidh,  
's thogainn suas air bharruibh bas iad ...

*How I wish I could bear you a son,  
five or six or seven sons,  
proudly I would nurse them,  
I'd give them freely of knee and breast,  
and I'd lift them up in my hands ...*<sup>268</sup>

Uilleam Ros's protestations of dying for love in 'Òran Eile air an Adhbhar Cheudna' (Another song on the same theme) were grounded in fact because he was suffering from tuberculosis:

267. Kerrigan, *An Anthology of Scottish Women Poets*, 40.

268. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 376.

Tha durrag air ghur ann am chàil  
a dh'fhiosraich do chàch mo rùn ...

*A maggot has hatched in my frame  
that has told everyone my plight ...*<sup>269</sup>

Hair is the commonest indication of distress, either in its loss of colour or in its dishevelment. 'Eilean a' Cheò' by Màiri Mhòr opens with

Ged tha mo cheann air liathadh  
le deuchainnean is bròn

*Although my head has grown grey  
with hardships and with woe ...*<sup>270</sup>

Dòmhnall Ruadh Corùna's red hair has turned white in the trenches while Nighean Fhir na Rèilig says that every grey hair on her head would grow yellow if her lover would return.<sup>271</sup> The Campbell woman who witnessed the beheading of her husband in 1570 'left no hair of her head unpulled nor skin upon her palms'.<sup>272</sup> This latter detail of traditional mourning rituals, along with passage by boat to the burial place, is evoked by Donald MacAulay (1930–2017) writing of his grandfather's death. Even if only imagined, their concrete details give him the means to express his sorrow.<sup>273</sup>

#### SYMBOLISM AND ALLEGORY

The use of conventional symbols is comparatively rare in traditional Gaelic verse and their use is the more striking for their scarcity. One such symbol is the Classical wheel of fortune. When this symbol was Christianised in the 6th century, it marked only the downturns in fortune caused by the trickiness of the world.<sup>274</sup> However, in the Gaelic tradition (as in the Classical), the wheel turns both ways, perhaps because of the Gaelic interest in movement sunwise and widdershins. An Clàrsair Dall, deploring the change in the ethos of the chief's hall since the succession of the young chief in 1693, says,

269. Black, *An Lasair*, 316.

270. Donald Meek, *Caran an t-Saoghail/The Wives of the World: Anthology of 19th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse* (Edinburgh, 2003), 366–67.

271. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 335, 209 and 369.

272. Kerrigan, *An Anthology of Scottish Women Poets*, 57.

273. Donald MacAulay, *Deilbh is Faileasan* (Stornoway, 2008), 201.

274. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. W. V. Cooper (1902), <<https://web.archive.org/web/20080919154058/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/BoePhil.html>> – accessed 13 August 2012.

Chaidh a' chuibhle mun cuairt,  
gun do thionndaidh gu fuachd am blàths.

*The wheel has gone round  
turning warmth to cold.*<sup>275</sup>

But Màiri Mhòr encourages the people of Skye in 'Eilean a' Cheò (The Isle of Mist) that the wheel will turn if they put up a fight – *gun tèid an roth mun cuairt dhuibh/le neart is cruas nan dòrn* – that they will gain land rights, find mineral wealth and that the English will be banished.<sup>276</sup>

Jacobite poetry, perhaps because of a need for secrecy, used a certain amount of symbolism. The appearance of a star for example at the time of Charles Edward Stewart's birth signalled the salvation of the Stewart cause.<sup>277</sup> 'Morag', the byname for the Prince in hiding,<sup>278</sup> allowed men to express their devotion to the cause, in the same way that poets could express their devotion to a lover. Pigs and piglets are used as symbols of unpopular monarchs by both Iain Lom and the Jacobite poets. MacCodrum, for example, says that when the sow is singed and her litter boiled, the sword and the tartan will no more be forbidden.<sup>279</sup>

In the 18th and 19th centuries, sheep, ruins and nettles become evidential and symbolic of the Clearances. In the same context, Donnchadh Bàn makes Beinn Dòbhrain a symbol of his mistaken belief in immutability:

'A' bheinn as beag a shaoil mi  
gun dèanadh ise caochladh,  
on tha i nis fo chaoraibh,  
's ann thug an saoghal car asam.

*The mountain that I little thought  
would ever change,  
now that she is covered in sheep  
I think the world has played a trick on me.*<sup>280</sup>

The episodic construction of most Gaelic verse, where discrete imagery is contained within a verse, generally militates against the use of extended

275. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 155.

276. Meek, *Caran an t-Saoghail*, 372–73.

277. The symbol occurs in songs by Iain MacLachlainn and Rob Donn; see John Lorne Campbell, *Songs of the Forty-Five* ([1933]; Edinburgh, 1984), 5 and 233.

278. See Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's 'Oran Luaidh', in J. L. Campbell, *Songs of the Forty-Five*, 145ff.

279. William Matheson, ed., *The Songs of John MacCodrum* (Edinburgh, 1938), 162–63.

280. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 243.

imagery. Allegory is rare in Gaelic outwith religious work, the apologues of praise poetry, and Jacobite poetry. In the context of religious poetry, we find the allegory of the hedgehog who stores up gold on earth in a poem of c.1600 in *Adtimchioll an Cheidimh* (Calvin's Catechism) (see III.2.b.); in the 18th century, Dùghall Bochanan addresses a skull as everyman in 'An Claigeann'; and in the 19th century we find *An Nuadh Bhreith* by Iain Gobha, an allegory of Christian rebirth, and *An Eaglais* by Fr Allan MacDonald, an allegory of the church as a ship.<sup>281</sup> Tartan became an important theme in Jacobite poetry because of its proscription, and the various processes involved with its manufacture became vehicles for political allegory (see IV.2.a.). Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair used waulking as an image for doing battle, the cloth being dyed by blood and the waulking girls to be provided by the anticipated troops from France. He considered that the Prince has been waulked into the souls of the people and could only be removed by violence.<sup>282</sup> John MacCodrum uses the extended imagery of pummelling and cutting cloth in inciting the Jacobites against the Redcoats and demands a head for every check on the tartan.

Tàilleirean clò ruaidh,  
gar nach fuaigh ach sracadh ...

*Tailors of red cloth,  
though they'll not sew but tear ...*<sup>283</sup>

Iain Crichton Smith and Sorley MacLean have both praised Gaelic literature for its realism, Smith with particular regard to 'Moladh Beinn Dòbhrain'.<sup>284</sup> However, it has been suggested that the long poems 'Moladh Beinn Dòbhrain' (In praise of Ben Doran) by Donnchadh Bàn and 'Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill' (Clanranald's Galley) by Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair are indeed allegorical. William Gillies suggested that Donnchadh Bàn's insistence that the deer have a rightful place on Ben Doran made a claim at the time of the Clearances for the people having a rightful place round their chief. Ronald Black has suggested that Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's description of a punishing but successful voyage between South Uist and Antrim is an allegory of the recovery of Clanranald after the disaster of the '45.<sup>285</sup>

281. Meek, *Caran an t-Saoghail*, 280 and 288.

282. J. L. Campbell, *Songs of the Forty-Five*, 150–53 and 158–59.

283. Matheson, ed., *The Songs of John MacCodrum*, 10–11; J. L. Campbell, *Songs of the Forty-Five*, 252–53.

284. 'Realism in Gaelic Poetry', in Sorley MacLean, *Ris a' Bhruthaich: The criticism and prose writings of Sorley MacLean* (Stornoway, 1997), and Iain Crichton Smith's introduction to his translation of Duncan Ban MacIntyre's *Ben Dorain* (Preston, 1969).

285. Ronald Black, *An Lasair: Anthology of 18th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse* (Edinburgh, 2001), 469–74.

#### METRE AS PATTERN

A comparison might be made with the woven aesthetic of the tartan and the metres of Gaelic poetry in which auditory correspondences are made within and between lines. An 18th-century poet, Lachlann MacMhuirich, actually makes this comparison:

Figheadóir mise cheana  
dealbhann na dáin ghlégheala

*I'm indeed a weaver  
who weaves splendid poems.*<sup>286</sup>

Syllabic metres as developed by professional poets stipulated the syllabic length of each line and the positioning and type of various sorts of rhyme, ranging from full rhyme to consonance and assonance. These were not only to occur at the end of lines but also within a couplet and between the last stressed word of one line and a word in the interior of the next. Alliteration was demanded by most metres, especially in the final couplet of each verse.

The verse below is the opening verse of Muireadhach Albanach's great poem to the Virgin, 'Éistidh Riomsa, a Mhuire Mhór', composed in the 13th century and preserved in the Book of the Dean of Lismore. The words that are metrically important are picked out. Whether the details are followed or not, the density of ornament will be appreciated involving more than half of the words.

Éistidh <i>riomsa</i> , a <b>M</b> huire Mhór,	<i>O great Mary, listen to me,</i>
do <b>gh</b> uidhe is <i>Liomsa</i> badh <b>l</b> údh;	<i>praying to you should be my zeal;</i>
do <b>dh</b> ruim réd <b>B</b> hráthair ná <b>b</b> íodh,	<i>on your brother turn not your back,</i>
a <b>M</b> háthair <b>R</b> íogh <b>D</b> uinn na <b>nd</b> úil.	<i>Mother of the great King of all.</i> <sup>287</sup>

The metre *rannaigheachd mhór* requires there should be seven syllables in each line ending on a monosyllable, which gives the poem a solemn lapidary quality as befits its subject. The final word of each couplet, *lúdh* and *ndúil* make full rhyme, not in the predictable way of identical consonants, but in the more interesting way of related consonants, *dh* and *l* both being voiced continuants. There is also consonance between *Mhór* and *bíodh* at the ends of line 1 and 3 (unmarked above), *dh* and *r* likewise belonging to the same class of voiced continuants. In addition, *bíodh* makes an *aicill* rhyme with *Ríogh* in the following line. There are two pairs of internal rhymes in each couplet, between *riomsa* and *liomsa* and between *Mhuire* and *ghuidhe* in the first couplet, and between *dhruim* and *duinn* and between *bhráthair* and *Mháthair* in the second. In each line, the final two stressed words alliterate. The poet maintains this pattern for over 55 verses.

286. R. Black, *An Lasair*, 200.

287. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 27.

It was conventional that the poem should close as it started, with the same syllable, word or entire line. This feature, known as *dúnadh* or ‘closure’, invites comparison with other forms of Gaelic art, for example pibroch which restates the opening theme at the end of a series of variations, and knotwork which comes full circle. These ideas in the musical context are further discussed in [IV.3.b](#). The profusion of ornament within borders also invites comparison with carpet pages and monumental sculpture in particular, where intertwining foliaceous scrolls fill geometric segments.

The *filí* were the inheritors of druidic learning and their work in maintaining the status quo had a high moral seriousness. Their thought might be seen as being housed in highly wrought language, just as religious texts and relics were held in highly wrought manuscripts and shrines. However, even the song poets of the 19th and 20th centuries, telling of love, sailing or anger at the Clearances maintain complex rhyme schemes like the following for example, involving twelve assonating words per four-line stanza over many verses.

Ruith na muic-mhara ri gailleann sa **chuan**,  
mo mhedòirean air reòthadh a dh’aindeoin bhith **cruaidh**;  
b’ fheàrr a bhith ‘n ceartuair air acair air **Chluaidh**  
na bhith dìreadh nan crann an South **Geòrgia**.

Dìle bhon t-sneachd’ s tu gun fhasgadh on **fhuachd**,  
d’ aodann air sgailceadh le fras bho gach **stuan**,  
’n t-airgead am pailteas gun dòigh a chur **bhuat**,  
’s e sior losgadh toll ann ad **phòca**.

*Hunting the whale in a gale in the ocean, | my fingers frozen even though I'm hardy; | I'd rather be at anchor on the Clyde right now | than climbing the masts in south Georgia.*

*A flood of snow but there's no shelter for you from the cold, | your face slashed by the barrage of each wave, | money in plenty but nowhere to spend it, | and it keeps burning a hole in your pocket.* <sup>288</sup>

#### THE VISUAL NATURE OF TRADITIONAL TALES

Fenian tales and traditional Gaelic tales of the Märchen type, such as *A' Mhaighdean-Mhara* (The Sea-maiden), *Cath nan Eun* (The Battle of the Birds) or *Sgeulachd Chonail* (The Tale of Conall),<sup>289</sup> are highly visual in their construction and in their cinematographic telling through action and direct speech, without

288. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 87.

289. John Francis Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* ([1860–1864]; Hounslow, 1983), Vol. I, Nos. IV, II and VII.



Gràinne riding one-footed on a goat from a *miserere* carving in Worcester Cathedral (1397). With permission from *The Burlington Magazine*

the intervention of a narrator. The audience is not made privy to the thoughts of the characters but watch, in the mind's eye, as the tale is unravelled and the hero wins despite various tribulations. This type of tale is of course not unique to the Gaelic tradition, but the persistence of the *cèilidh* into the 20th century meant that such tales and their aesthetic had a long currency.

Fenian stories were told only after dark, no doubt to aid the process of visualisation in both teller and audience.<sup>290</sup> The audience was able to visualise the settings of traditional tales when they were projected onto the local landscape (see A Mythic Landscape, under [III.1.a](#)). Hector Maclean who collected stories in Barra for J. F. Campbell says it was the stories with frequent scene changes, regardless of the unity of the whole, which were most popular with the listeners.<sup>291</sup> It might be argued that the tales are a matrix for various highly visual set pieces. In *Cath nan Eun*, the hero is rewarded by the raven with the view from his back as he flies over seven bens, glens and moors. In the same tale, a mother and daughter each see in the well a reflection of the queen up a tree, which they mistake for their own likeness. A set piece may be a visual conundrum: Diarmaid attempts to protect his chastity by prohibiting Gràinne from appearing before him ‘either by night or day, clothed or unclothed, on foot or on horseback’. She circumvents the prohibition by appearing at dusk, wearing fairy clothing made from bog-cotton and riding on a goat.<sup>292</sup>

Named artefacts, often with the definite article appended, added to a sense of familiarity. Audiences would recognise the possessions of the Fenians with their familiar tags, such as the dog Bran with his venomous claw, the shield Sgiath Ghaillinn, which calls out to the Fenians when Fionn is in danger, the sword Mac an Luinn, ‘that never left the remnant of a cut’ (*nach do dh’fhàg fuigheall bèim*) and their ridged cup of virtues, the Cuach Bhuadhach.

The linear construction of tales, with one episode prompting the next without parallel subplots, makes traditional tales relatively easy to understand and to

290. J. H. Delargy, ‘The Gaelic Story-teller: with some notes on Gaelic folk-tales’, in *Proceedings of the British Academy* 31 (1945), 177–221.

291. J. F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* Vol. I, iv.

292. John Gregorson Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV (London, 1891), 52.



recall. Part of their formal satisfaction lies in every strand being plaited into the whole by the end. At the deepest level such tales, by a Jungian interpretation, may be shown to depict character development. The story of Conall Gulban is a story of rags to riches, with the hero, whom his stepmother wants to kill at the beginning, gradually coming into his own until he is married to the daughter of the king of Italy. A psychological journey from victimhood to kingship, involving suffering and delayed gratification, is expressed entirely in outward signs. It could be analysed as a broken-down myth, for the hero is required to suffer and die to himself as he suffers several different forms of live-burial and mutilation in order to become psychologically stronger.<sup>293</sup>

Naming in tales is another form of verbal visualisation. Names in stories may be explicit, for example, Casa Luatha (Long Legs), Fradharc Fada (Long Sight), Cluas Èisteachd (Hearing Ear).<sup>294</sup> The names of many of the Fenians give a suggestion of their appearance: Fionn was left nameless until he was named 'Fair' by people wondering who the fair boy was who was drowning their sons. Caoilte means 'thinness', a name that superseded his original name Daorghlas; Mala Liath 'Grey Eyebrows' is the name of the keeper of the boar that kills Diarmaid; Baoighre Borb 'Fierce Ruffian' is the son of the King of Sorcha who pursues the daughter of the King of the Kingdom below the Waves to Eas Ruadh and is killed by Fionn. The characters become representations of different qualities: Fionn represents wisdom through his tooth of knowledge (*deud fios*); Caoilte represents speed through his thinness; Diarmaid represents irresistibility to women through his beauty spot (*ball seirc*), while Conan represents the opposite through his baldness.

As the settings, the characters and their artefacts are familiar, so too are their actions and the images used to describe them. Frequently a hero is bound with *ceangal nan trì* – or *nan còig* – *caoil*, the bind of the three – or five – narrow parts, with the wrists and even the ankles tied to the belt at the small of the back. Caoilte and the dog Bran could move so fast that they were perceived simultaneously in three different places.<sup>295</sup> The ferocity of the dog Biorach mac Buidheig is shown by its liver and lungs being visible through its open mouth on the floor of its chest: *An gruthan 's an sgamhan air ùrlar a chlàibh*.<sup>296</sup>

Understatement is a peculiarly Gaelic way of seeing in words, almost impossible to achieve visually. Very often a 'gentle breeze' uproots trees.<sup>297</sup> Here a 'gentle touch' breaks bones:

293. J. F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* Vol. I, 147–60.

294. Pàdruig Moireasdan, *Ugam agus Bhuam* (Steòrnabhagh, 1977), 12.

295. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV, 64 and 173.

296. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV, 83.

297. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV, 140.

Tharraing i nall a falt cas liath o gàirdean toisgeil, agus leig i a làmh gu h-eutrom air, agus chual' e fhèin fuaim a h-uile cnàimh.<sup>298</sup>

*She drew over her wreathed grey hair below her left arm, and she laid her hand gently upon him, and he heard the noise of every bone breaking in his body.*

'Runs', *ruitheannan* or *ruisg*, are rhythmic and often onomatopoeic passages that recur in different stories. They are highly visual, showing the hero in action, in set scenes of seafaring, boat-beaching, donning armour, fighting or bespelling. They had the advantage of giving the teller respite from the architecture of the story. J. F. Campbell believed the runs might have been all that remained of 'bardic recitations fast disappearing and changing into prose'. His evidence was that the older and less educated a reciter, the more runs he had in his versions of tales. While the prose and dialogue passages varied from teller to teller, the runs, which he had found in no other language, remained static.<sup>299</sup> Here in translation, Fionn beaches his boat:

When [Fionn] reached the land he drew up the coracle seven feet, seven fathoms and seven steps on the green grass, and put the sails and masts, the baling-dish and oars, underneath it, and turned it over, so that no-one coming the way could move or launch it, and went up to look at the country.<sup>300</sup>

Specific symbolism is rare in the tales, but occurs when Diarmaid leaves out unbroken bread, *aran slàn*, to signify to Fionn that he has not touched Fionn's wife, Gràinne. When a giant sleeps with her, Diarmaid leaves out broken bread, though the infidelity was not his own.<sup>301</sup> A cloak in a Fenian lay in the Book of the Dean of Lismore tests the chastity of the women of the Fenians by revealing the nakedness of all but the most faithful,<sup>302</sup> and the sight of the fairy woman (Baobh) washing clothes before the battle of Gabhra indicates the deaths to follow.<sup>303</sup> The cloak of chastity is an international symbol, but the washerwoman at the ford is very much a Gaelic one, reflecting a territorial goddess's relationship with a particular tribe.

298. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV, 148.

299. J. F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* Vol. I, xxxiv.

300. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV, 213.

301. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV, 53–54.

302. Neil Ross, *Heroic Poetry from the Book of the Dean of Lismore* (Edinburgh, 1939).

303. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV, 39.

## VISUAL PERFORMANCE

The opening quotation of this chapter identifies a visual basis for the composition of poetry and it would appear that storytelling also springs from very similar visualisation. Donald Archie MacDonald interviewed Donald Alasdair Johnson of South Uist in 1973, who told him that he was able to remember a story by watching the scenes moving clockwise across the wall in front of him, as he had imagined them on first hearing and ‘taking stock’ of the tale. He explained that he saw no overall vision of the story but that the changing scenes kept pace with his recitation. In the absence of an overall picture, he found cutting or summarising a story impossible. He required quiet in order to concentrate on the visualisation and felt that each story was like a new film which he could not alter. The making of a new story or the alteration of an old one did not appeal to him: his task was the maintenance of a story as he had first heard and visualised it.<sup>304</sup>

Once you get started on it, and it’s there in your mind, you can see the whole thing before you there ... as if you were reading it off the wall ... as if it were coming to you ... It’s easier to tell a story right through from the beginning, because it’s there in front of you to the end, all the way. All you have to do is follow it.<sup>305</sup>

So is oral poetry visualised throughout the world. Tibetan ‘paper-singers’, for example, stare intently at a sheet of paper when delivering a poem, not to read any words but on which to project the sequence of events with their mind’s eye.<sup>306</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In this section, it has been shown that verbal imagery has been the principal means of transmission of the ideology of fitness for rule in panegyric poetry and of the resilience and growth of the individual in the tales. Visualisation was clearly an important element not only in the performance but also in the composition of poetry and tales. Images in poetry are generated through the concrete expression of emotion, through personifications and above all through metonymy and synecdoche (in which the part stands for the whole). Rather than surprise with the originality of metaphor, this last method was used by poets to restate society’s values through many associated images. Our interest has been in the visual rather than the auditory effects of the poetry, but the two come together when we draw a parallel between the criss-crossing of tartan and of

304. Donald Archie MacDonald, ‘A Visual Memory’, *Scottish Studies* 22 (1978).

305. Translated, with questions removed, from MacDonald, ‘A Visual Memory’, 18.

306. J. M. Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem* (Urbana and Chicago, 2002), 1–3.

assonating words within a verse (IV.3.b.). In a culture when visual representation on paper and canvas was rare, it is tempting to see its poetry and tales fulfilling something of the visual impulse. MB

## II.3. INTEGRATION OF LETTER AND IMAGE

## II.3.a. SANCTITY OF THE WORD

[Arbitrary Sign or Supernatural Force?; Christ, the Word; The Book of Kells; Loricae; Geasa; Written Charms; Fear of Satire; Recitation; Conclusion](#)

Cros Christ tarsin ngnúisse, tarsin gclúais fon cóirse.

Cros Christ tarsin súilse, Cros Christ tarsin sróinse.

*Christ’s cross over this face and thus over my ear.*

*Christ’s cross over this eye. Christ’s cross over this nose.*

(Mugrón, abbot of Iona, 965–81)<sup>307</sup>

## ARBITRARY SIGN OR SUPERNATURAL FORCE?

The Swiss linguist Saussure (1857–1913) taught that the word was an arbitrary sign whose meaning was conventionally agreed by a speech community; there was no inherent connection between the signifier (the word) and the signified (the concept).<sup>308</sup> But older traditions see words and letters as powerful things in themselves, with the capacity to create, to protect and to wound physically. Revelations 1:8 quotes God, saying ‘I am Alpha and Omega’, and the gospel according to John begins:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made ... (John 1:1–2)

Judging from the traditional fear of satire<sup>309</sup> and the imperative nature of *geasa* (prohibitions and taboos), it is clear that the word was considered a supernatural force in Gaelic culture too. When the Annals of Ulster describe the Book of Kells as the ‘chief relic of the Western world’, this was not only because of its gilded and jewelled covers and illuminated pages but also because it contained the Word. It had sacramental as much as practical use, suggested by the fact it was

307. Gerard Murphy, ‘Mugrón’, *Early Irish Lyrics* (Oxford, 1956), 32–33.

308. Jonathan Culler, *Saussure* (Glasgow, 1976).

309. W. Stokes, ‘Story of Nede Mac Adnal’, Preface to *Cormac’s Glossary* ([1862]; repr. Llanerch, 2000), xxxvi–xxxviii.





John, *In principio erat verbum*, the Book of Kells (f.292r) © Trinity College Dublin

stolen from a sacristy rather than a library.<sup>310</sup> When the illumination disguises letters and breaks words up it is clear that their presence is more important than their legibility. We see this, for example, in the arrangement of the opening words of St John's Gospel (f.292r), 'In principio erat Verbum et Verbum':

I            N            P  
 R I N            C I  
 PIOERAT        VER  
 BUMETVERBUM

We find the word functioning as a supernatural force in the prayers known as *loricae*, whose words, such as those quoted at the beginning of this section, protect the body as a 'breastplate'. And it was the Word protecting itself that allowed St Ronan's Psalter to come unscathed from the water where it had been hurled by the enraged Suibne.<sup>311</sup> Eight hundred years later than that account in *Buile Shuibne*, Martin Martin describes his surprise at being asked for a loan of his Bible by an illiterate man on Colonsay who used its pages to fan a sick person's face.<sup>312</sup> A similar respect for the Word is seen in the practice of disposing of Bibles by burying rather than burning them.

#### CHRIST, THE WORD

In the biblical tradition, the Word is equated with the creativity of God. Creation comes about at His word: 'And God said, Let there be light, and there was light' (Gen. 1:3). The Word existed like a 'master-workman' before the earth: 'The Lord possessed me at the beginning of His work ... Ages ago I was set up before the beginning of the earth. I was beside him like a master-workman ... whoever finds me finds favour from the Lord' (Prov. 8:22–36). In Greek philosophy, *logos* is a term distinct from *lexis* which means 'word' in a grammatical sense. *Logos* by contrast means 'sentence, saying, oration' or 'thought, grounds for belief or action'. Heraclitus (535–475 BC) used the word *Logos* to denote the source and order of the cosmos. The Stoics, from the 3rd century BC, understood *logos* to be the active principle in animating passive matter, giving perishable souls to man and animals which would be returned to the universal reason. The stoic Marcus

310. Robert G. Calkins, *Illuminated Books of the Middle Ages* (Ithaca NY, 1983), 79–82.

311. James O'Keeffe, *Buile Shuibhne* (London, 1913).

312. Martin Martin [1698], *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, ed. Donald J. Macleod (Edinburgh, 1994), 279.



Aurelius (121–180 AD) speaks in *Meditations* of the universe as ‘one living being’ and that all parts of it ‘have reference to one perception’.<sup>313</sup>

Philo of Alexandria (20 BC–50 AD), a Hellenistic Jew, brought the term *logos* into Judaism and Christianity by making the *logos* of the cosmos also its creative principle. Following Plato’s sense that matter was imperfect, Philo found in *logos* the necessary intermediary between God in his perfection and the imperfect matter of Creation. Man can only know God through *logos*. He termed *logos* the image of God, the heavenly Adam and the mediator and advocate of men. From this stance, it was a small step for the author of the Gospel according to John to equate *logos* with Jesus. Jesus, then, is the incarnation of order in the Greek sense, the creator as in Genesis and Proverbs who speaks the universe into existence, and the love of the God sacrificed for our sake in the New Testament.

Augustinus Hibernicus, writing *On the Miracles of Holy Scripture* in 655 in the monastery at Lismore, Co. Waterford, clearly equated Christ with the Word of God. He argued that, as Creation had been completed and perfected within six days, no further natural laws were possible for the accomplishment

of miracles. Miracles, he concluded, came about not through a breach of natural laws but through a change in governance. Christ could make a dumb man speak, for ‘How could a dumb man not speak, when the Word of God the Father besought him for an answer?’<sup>314</sup>

#### THE BOOK OF KELLS

The illumination of Gospel MSS served the two practical purposes of marking the divisions between chapters and verses before these were numbered, and of providing a visual reminder of the contents.<sup>315</sup> For example, two beard pullers in the Book of Kells (f.253v) show the internal conflict in serving two masters (Mat 6: 24).

It is suggested that a third purpose must surely be to illustrate *logos* becoming the created world and more particularly becoming incarnate in Christ. This is most

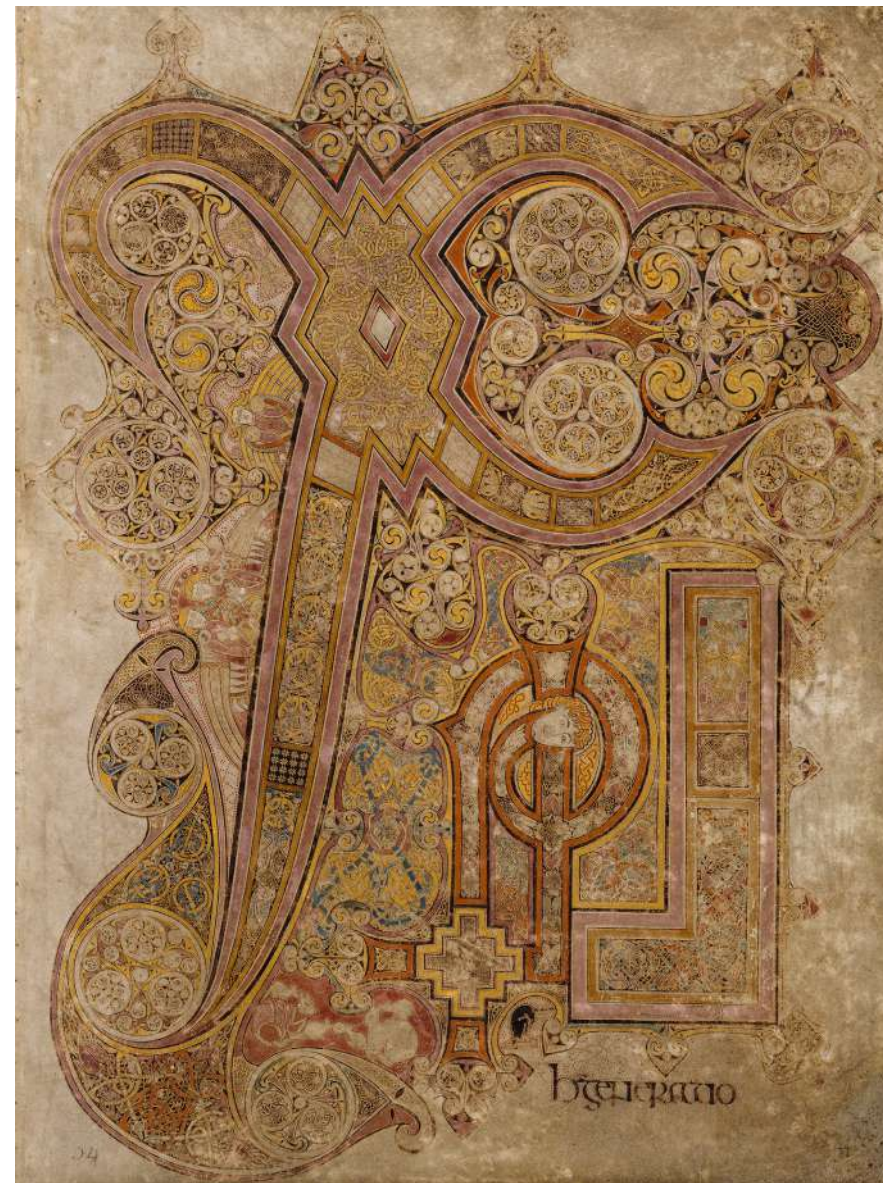


Two beard-pullers in the Book of Kells (detail) (f.253v)  
© Trinity College Dublin

313. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (iv, 40), The International Classics Archive: <<http://classics.mit.edu/Antoninus/meditations.4.four.html>> – accessed 16 March 2017.

314. Quoted in John Carey, *King of Exploring the Book of Kells Mysteries: Early Irish Religious Writing* (Dublin, 2000), 68.

315. George Otto Simms, *Exploring the Book of Kells* (Dublin, 1988), 30.



Matthew, The *Chi Rho* page, the Book of Kells (f.34r) © Trinity College Dublin

explicit in the *Chi Rho* page (f.34r), ‘Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way’. The monogram XPI, the first three letters of Christ’s name in Greek, forms the basis of a carpet page illustrating, in its swirling geometric design, its glowing colours and details of animal life, the harmony made possible by Christ’s birth.





The *Tunc crucifixerant* page, the Book of Kells (f.124r) © Trinity College Dublin

The written word also replaces image in the *Tunc crucifixerant* page (f.124r), illustrating 'Then there were two thieves crucified with him' (Mat. 27: 38) with a diagonal cross. Instead of Christ and the thieves, the Latin words XPI CUM EO DUOS LATRONES ('Christ with him two thieves') appear on the cross-beams; they are understood so physically they can take the place of human figures on the Cross. Similarly, on the Resurrection page (f.285r), the word UNA, for Sunday, the 1st day of the week, appears rather than the figure of Christ. Guarded by angels, the never-ending vine of eternal life issues from the U as if from the empty tomb.



John the Evangelist seated with reed pen, the Book of Kells (f.291v) © Trinity College Dublin

Animals guard letters of words that cannot be fitted onto the line with the rest of the word. A dog, for example, guards between its paws the last three letters of *Osanna in excelsis*.<sup>316</sup> It may be a scribal joke while simultaneously demonstrating the physicality of sacred words. The provenance of such sacred words is shown most graphically by the hands, feet and shoulders that appear behind the portrait of John the Evangelist seated with his reed pen and book (f.291v).

316. See Simms, *Exploring the Book of Kells*, 57.



Illumination is far more than decoration. The animation of letters may be a representation of all things being made through the Word. The variety of life forms – plant, human and animal – reminds the observer that in the Word was all life, while its illumination and beauty show the Word as the light of the world. The peculiar interchangeability of Word and image in the manuscript tradition both demonstrates and glorifies the Word as the creative principle of God, and identifies the Word with Christ and with the ongoing dynamism in Creation.

#### LORICAE

*Loricae* are prayers for self-protection, marked by their litany-like repetition of a certain phrase with variation in one element. In some *loricae*, it is the protective powers that are enumerated; in others, it is the parts of the body for which protection is sought. The name is apt, our earliest example, probably by the British Gildas (d. 570), *Suffragare, Trinitatis unitas*, including the word *Lorica*. What is distinctive about these prayers is that the words themselves are envisaged as a physical barrier to harm.

St Paul's analogy of 'God's armour' against the powers of darkness (Eph. 6:10–18) has been a source of imagery for sermon and literature alike from medieval times to the evangelical Awakenings of the 18th century. St Paul speaks of the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit. God and the devil, joined by the world and the flesh, are at war for the soul of man. The soul is weak and easily dominated by the bestial appetites of the body, but can be protected by spiritual armour. While the conceit of spiritual armour is biblical, the method of placing words as a physical barrier round the self may originally be pagan and Celtic. All the early examples of *loricae* belong to the British and Gaelic church, and both Calvert Watkins and Kuno Meyer have argued that one of them, 'Nuall Fir Fio', with its many references to natural forces, is a Christianised druid prayer.<sup>317</sup> *Loricae* remained a feature of spirituality in the Gaelic world till modern times, as evinced by examples collected in the 19th century by Carmichael in *Carmina Gadelica* (Vol. IV, 12–19).

It is said that another *lorica* known as 'Faeth Fiada' or Patrick's Breastplate was made by the saint to protect himself, seven other clerics and a serving lad from king Laoghaire, who had set an ambush to kill them on their way to Tara. Such was the protection afforded them that the men set on killing them saw only eight stags and a fawn passing them, hence the prayer's name, 'The Deer's Cry'. The speaker first girds himself with various powers, Christian and natural, and then places Christ as the protective power before, behind, within, beneath, above him, to his right and to his left:

317. 'Two Loricae' in Carey, *King of Mysteries* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 128.

Crist limm, Crist reum, Crist im degaid,  
Crist indium, Crist ísum, Crist uasum,  
Crist desum, Crist tuathum.<sup>318</sup>

The poem 'Altus Prosatur', probably by Colum Cille, was also believed to protect those who recited it every day.<sup>319</sup> The poem shares with the *loricae* a symbolism of completion, not through encircling the entire body in this case, but in the abecedarian structure of the poem. Though it is stated in the poem that this is the Hebrew manner, it was used in other religious Irish works, and it is suggested here that this element of exhaustiveness is essential in the word being able to offer protection.

Almost a thousand years later, Donnchadh Óg, in a poem from The Book of the Dean of Lismore (early 16th century), refers to the placing of prayers between himself and the devil's darts:

Cuirim Paidir aoinMheic Dhé  
is Cré na nOstal go beacht  
eadram agus guin na n-arm  
is cóig salm nó sé nó seacht.

*I place the Prayer of God's only Son  
and the Apostles' Creed carefully  
between me and the wounding of those darts  
and five, six or seven psalms.*<sup>320</sup>

The word *Cuirim* 'I place' in the above might suggest a written charm, but in a tradition where *loricae* had existed since the 6th century, it seems likely that the physicality of the protection was in the words themselves. It seems to echo the word *déanam* 'I make', which opens many prayers in *Carmina Gadelica*, e.g. *Déanam-sa duit / Upa ri shùil* 'I make for thee / Charms for evil eye'.<sup>321</sup> *Carmina Gadelica* also contains some forty prayers associated with labour – with smooing and kindling the fire, sowing and reaping, milking, weaving and sailing. The very act of naming the various processes and objects involved places them in God's protection.<sup>322</sup>

318. John Carey, *King of Mysteries*, 134.

319. Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus, *Iona, The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1994), 44ff.

320. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire/The Song-book of the Pillagers* (Edinburgh, 2007), No. 8, final stanza.

321. Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* IV (Edinburgh, 1941), 180–81.

322. Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* I (Edinburgh, 1928), 231–333.

## GEASA

Words have the power to control in the *geasa* or prohibitions of traditional tales. *Geasa* have the force of an absolute imperative, a force probably connected to the arbitrary observances paid to deities. In ‘Lasair Gheug, The King of Ireland’s Daughter’, a Gaelic version of the *Märchen* ‘Snow-white’, the cruel stepmother tries to get the king to kill his daughter for perpetrating various crimes the stepmother has herself committed. Lasair Gheug is sworn to secrecy by ‘three baptismal oaths, that she will not be on foot, she will not be on horseback, and that she will not be on the green earth the day she tells it’. She is only able to reveal the truth to her father when she circumvents the *geasa* by telling her three unbaptised children of the deception while riding on a boar in and out of a church.<sup>323</sup>

In the traditional tales, the laying of *geasa* is formulated in ‘bespelling runs’ which call upon both Christian and pagan elements, especially cold metal in the form of cow-fetters, a sword or knife, to reinforce the oath:

Thuir i an sin san dealachadh gun robh i gan cur fo chroisean is fo gheasan ’s fo naoi buaraidhean na mna-sìth, laogh maol carach nas miosa na ainm, a thoirt chinn gun chosnadh dhiubh mur coinnicheadh iad còmhla an ceann latha ’s bliadhna co-dhiubh bhiodh iad beò no marbh.

*She said to them at parting that she was laying them under crosses and spells and the nine cow-spencels of the fairy woman, the bald tricky calf worse than its name, to take off their heads without warning if they would not meet together at the end of a year and a day, whether they were alive or dead.*<sup>324</sup>

John Gregorson Campbell shows that verbal taboos were still respected in the 19th century. He explains that the phrase *meal is caith e* ‘enjoy and use it’ should not to be said by a woman (though a tailor should offer the compliment as part of his job), and that the evils of the tale ‘Gille nan Cochla Craicionn’ arose as a result of a woman ‘being too forward in using the expression’.<sup>325</sup> Anne Ross also considers that the conventions governing words to be avoided at sea, even to the present day, bore some relation to the *geasa* observed since pagan times in respecting the gods. Martin Martin gives some examples of these unlucky words and their coded replacements: Canna was referred to as *Tarsin*; *uisge* (water) as *bùrn*; *creag* (a rock) as *cruaidh*; *cladach* (the shore) as *uamh* (a cave). As bywords were acceptable, it is clear it was the words themselves rather than their meaning which were forbidden.

323. Bruford and MacDonald, *Scottish Traditional Tales* (Edinburgh, 1994), 98–106.

324. John Gregorson Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV (London, 1891), 270 and 263.

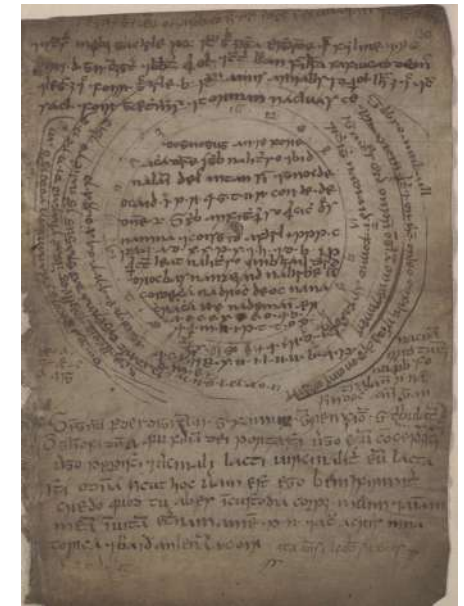
325. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV, 270, 263 and 276.

## WRITTEN CHARMS

Ronald Black’s research on ‘The Nine’, a charm written on brown paper by a Scottish Gael in North Carolina in the 18th century, contains a lot of material relevant to this discussion of the physicality of the word.<sup>326</sup> Black questions whether ‘The Nine’ was noted down for antiquarian interest or whether it functioned as an amulet. Its having been folded many times supports the second supposition, for it might have been sewn into a garment to protect the wearer. Black quotes John Gregorson Campbell’s account of charms being sewn into the clothing of fosterlings by foster-mothers, and of their being tied to people or animals.<sup>327</sup> It will be seen in the section on jewellery (IV.2.b.) that the written word formed part of the ornamentation of brooches because of their talismanic properties. These words were usually in Latin, consisting of the name of Jesus, of the magi or the Fates. Phylacteries or written strips of paper known as a *soisgeul* or a *seun* were also carried or sewn into garments, often with the injunction that they should not be opened.<sup>328</sup> (See II.3.c. for Gaelic charms in ogam, and I.3.c. for charm stones.)

Black cites further evidence of written words possessing the efficacy of physical amulets. Two charms were noted in the 14th century on the fly-leaf of the 12th-century Murthly Hours, one that had been placed by the angel by Christ’s head to staunch bleeding and the other that could be placed below the foot. He also gives examples of charms against toothache which could be stitched, unopened and unread, into clothing. The injunction not to open or read a charm shows again that its power lay not in the information but in the words themselves.

Rota of golden numbers with charms from a Gaelic medical MS (16th c.). National Library of Scotland. Ronald Black, “‘The Nine’” (2007)



326. Ronald Black, “‘The Nine’”: A Scottish Gaelic charm in the North Carolina State Archives’, *The North Carolina Historical Review* Vol. LXXXIV, No. 1 (January 2007).

327. John Gregorson Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, ed. Ronald Black (Edinburgh, 2005; 1st pub. as *Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland*, 1900), 211.

328. Hugh Cheape, ‘From Natural to Supernatural: The Material Culture of Charms and Amulets’, in Lizanne Henderson, ed., *Fantastical Imaginations: The Supernatural in Scottish History and Culture* (Edinburgh, 2009), 86–87.

The examples above speak of a tradition of the word on paper or vellum functioning as an amulet. But it is interesting that the same words – *seun*, *ub* or *soisgeul* – are used of written or spoken charms and amulets alike. J. G. Campbell refers to the spoken charm or the defensive function of iron, salt, coloured strings or a plant in the same breath.

#### FEAR OF SATIRE

The traditional sanctions against satire speak of a fear of the word, as does the belief that blisters in the face and even death were its consequences (II.2.a.). By contrast, the word *eineach* ‘face’ is synonymous with ‘honour’, the same concept being present in the Old Welsh for honour price: *wynebwerth* ‘face worth’. Diodorus Siculus reports bards singing praise and satire in Gall; the 8th-century *Senchus Már* says that poets worked with kings at the beginning of the world to establish *Cáin Enech*, the law of honour.<sup>329</sup> Satire was a way the druids or poets could control the behaviour of their leaders and how the socially inferior could have some leverage on those with honour to lose. A satirist could bring a wrong-doer to terms by writing down the offence, the name of the offender and praise of the offender on each of the arms of a cross. If the wrong-doer did not offer compensation within a stipulated time, the poet was free to satirise him.<sup>330</sup> That unjustified satire against a king merited death in the 8th-century *Bretha Nemed Déidenach* ‘Last of the Laws’ is further evidence of the seriousness of word power.<sup>331</sup>

Poets did not only pursue personal slights but used satire in the public interest. In *Cath Magh Tuired* the poet of Tuatha Dé Danann satirises the king, Bres, for niggardliness in hospitality, thereby motivating his subjects to rise up against him. We see it exercised by Rory Morison (1656–1714) in trying to control the profligate spending of the young chief of Dunvegan, who was sufficiently estranged from Gaelic culture for ‘Óran Mòr Mhic Leòid’ to have had little effect on him. Anne Lorne Gillies says what ‘was meant as a diatribe, ends up, effectively, as the lament for a way of life.’<sup>332</sup> In 1792, Coinneach MacCoinnich was mortified when the satire he published on Alasdair Mac an Tòisich seemed to cause his death three days later. He retrieved as many of the books as possible

329. D. A. Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, 6 vols (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1978).

330. Described from TCD MS 1337 H.3.18 by J. T. Koch, ed., *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, 2006), Vol. IV, 1561.

331. Koch, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia* Vol. IV, 1565.

332. Anne Lorne Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2006), 158.

and consigned them to the flames.<sup>333</sup> In the 20th century, Am Puilean tried to rid his house of rats by satire<sup>334</sup> and the Irish writer Tomás Ó Criomhthainn (1856–1937) lost a day as a boy at the peats rather than risk being satirised by a poet for not sparing him the time to write down his poems.<sup>335</sup> Some might say that the title track of the CD *Just for Seumas*, by the brilliant young piper Gordon Duncan (1964–2005), was not without its effect upon the object of its satire. Seumas MacNeill (1917–1996), Principal of the College of Piping, had dismissed Duncan’s informal, non-militaristic style as ‘garbage’ in 1993. A year later, Duncan retaliated by dedicating his CD, with an increasingly avant-garde use of the pipes, to his detractor (see IV.2.c.).<sup>336</sup>

#### RECITATION

Respect for words may be what lies behind the disinclination of storytellers to change their stories even over many years of recitation, as has been ascertained of the South Uist tradition-bearers Donald Alasdair Johnson (d. 1978) and Donnchadh Clachair (d. 1954).<sup>337</sup> It may also account for the retention of incomprehensible words such as those of Fionn, *Cò siud propadh mo cheaplaich?* – said to mean, ‘Who is that following my footsteps?’<sup>338</sup>

The formulaic endings of tales also suggest the seriousness of the words. To start with an early example, Snedgus and MacRiaghla come back from their *peregrinatio* in an 8th-century voyage tale with a leaf which becomes the *flabellum* for the altar at Armagh. Its physical presence proves the reality of the rest of the story. Such tokens are often claimed to be in the possession of a reciter to prove a tale’s veracity. But the formula is parodied in the list of impossible artefacts by which the reciter of ‘An Ceathairneach Caol Riabhach’ returned, in paper shoes on a road of glass, with butter on a cinder and porridge in a creel, which is as much as to say that the whole story was indeed fantasy.<sup>339</sup> The formula ‘I left them and they left me’ implies the mutual

333. See Ronald Black, *An Lasair: Anthology of 18th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse* (Edinburgh, 2001), notes to poem No. 58.

334. Aonghas Caimbeul, *Moll is Cruithneachd* (Glasgow, 1972). See <[http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/22977?backURL=/en/search%3Fpage%3D1%23tack\\_22977](http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/22977?backURL=/en/search%3Fpage%3D1%23tack_22977)> for four recordings of rat satires, and *Tocher* 35 (Summer 1981), 332.

335. T. Ó Criomhthainn, *An tOileanach* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1980), 92–93.

336. CD *Just for Seumas* (Greentrax, 1994).

337. Donald Archie MacDonald, ‘A Visual Memory’, and Alan Bruford, ‘Recitation or Recreation’, both in *Scottish Studies* 22 (1978).

338. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV, 192.

339. John Francis Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* ([1860–64]; Hounslow, 1983), Vol. I, 308 and 317.



reality of reciter and recited. Where the veracity is less certain, the reciter can give the disclaimer, *Mas e breug bhuan e, b' e breug thugamsa e* 'If I give it as a lie, I got it as a lie', thereby keeping the story intact while avoiding the responsibility of spreading fictions (when the Bible was deemed to be the only source of the Truth).

#### CONCLUSION

The Perthshire poet Gilleasbuig MacIain saw the estrangement of people and land as a consequence of the lack of provision for Gaelic in the 1872 Education Act. He predicted that the Gàidhealtachd would be put under a veil of mist and the mountains would lament the loss of their names.<sup>340</sup> The word is more than descriptive: it enshrines *Dùthchas*, the connection between a particular people and particular land, on which the people's identity and survival depend. John MacInnes writes:

The native Gael who is instructed in this poetry carries in his imagination not so much a landscape, not a sense of geography alone, nor of history alone, but a formal order of experience in which these are all merged ... *Dùthchas* is ancestral family land; it is also family tradition; and equally, it is the hereditary qualities of an individual.<sup>341</sup>

Far from being an arbitrary sign, the word in the Gaelic tradition is a reification. It has the power to give physical protection in the *loricae* and written charms, to control in *geasa*, to wound in satire, and to create, as *logos*. It is treated with utmost respect and words are not wilfully altered or used in the wrong context. Words are an essential part of *dùthchas* which at once binds a particular people to the land while allowing them to interact with it on a spiritual level. This point is made in a scene in Tormod Caimbeul's novella *Deireadh an Fhoghair* (1979), when a song on a piece of paper is found in a chest amongst hammers, graips, horse shoes, door knobs, nails, tools for wool-work and shoe-making: the song is also a tool, its purpose to enshrine memory.<sup>342</sup>

As a closing note, one of the present authors found a medicine bottle buried on his croft in Strath in Skye under a boulder surrounded by three rowan trees. The stoppered bottle, now in the National Museum of Scotland,

340. *An Gàidheal* 3 (1874), 143–44, in Newton, *Warriors of the Word* (Edinburgh, 2009), 301.

341. John MacInnes, *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal* (Edinburgh, 2006), 279.

342. Tormod Caimbeul, *Deireadh an Fhoghair* (Edinburgh, 1979), 65–66.

contains two strips of biblical text cut from a religious tract (cutting strips from a Bible would have been unthinkable). In an early Irish law tract, *Bretha Déin Chécht* (The Judgements of Dían Cécht), the recitation of incantations is a requisite skill of physicians.<sup>343</sup> Between the two instances, we see the longevity of a belief in the curative and prophylactic powers of the word, whether written or spoken, as a conduit between the natural and the supernatural, Christian or pagan. MB

Medicine bottle with biblical tracts.  
Photo John Purser



#### II.3.b. SCRIPT

[Introduction](#); [Insular Celtic Script](#); [Scribal Characteristics](#); [Integration of Text and Image](#); [Survival of the Script](#); [The Script in Print](#)

#### INTRODUCTION

The style favoured by the Gaelic literati over the centuries (and universally used in Gaelic Ireland) was the *corr-litir* or 'peaked letter' hand originally derived from Latin uncials but most familiar, perhaps, from the Gaelic font (*cló Gaedhealach*) widely used in Ireland until the middle of the 20th century.<sup>344</sup>

McLeod and Bateman rightly use the word 'Gaelic' to describe the style, for there is a serious problem with the description of many of the relevant manuscripts as 'Irish'. The Dalriadic kingdom and its attendant culture was as much at home in Scotland as in Ireland, and remains so. Gaeldom's most famous scribe, Colum Cille, was a leading figure in that culture, and one of the most significant and iconic books – the *Cathach* – has been plausibly attributed to his hand. Most famous of all, the Book of Kells

343. M. Binchy, 'Bretha Déin Checht', *Ériu* XII (1938), 1–77.

344. Wilson McLeod and Meg Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire* (Edinburgh, 2007), xxxii.

was probably written on Iona in the Scottish part of the trans-maritime Dalriadic kingdom. So the use of the word ‘Irish’ in some of the quoted passages following, has to be understood in a much broader way than is usual. There are political reasons for calling Gaelic ‘Irish’ in Ireland, but to call it ‘Irish’ in Scotland obscures the common culture of ‘the sea-divided Gael’.

In addition to this problematic use of the word ‘Irish’, the term ‘Insular’ has been of late preferred to ‘Celtic’ in relation to illumination, stone carving and other artistic manifestations of the early medieval period. The advantage attaching to this shift is that the influence of Anglo-Saxon and related styles is not excluded; the disadvantage is that it tends to mask a very real distinction between the work produced in the Celtic-speaking areas of the ‘British’ islands, and the work from outwith those areas, or from areas such as Northumberland profoundly under the influence of Celtic-speaking artists.<sup>345</sup>

In any event, as regards the manuscript tradition there is an acknowledgment of interacting traditions specifically between the western Celtic-speaking cultures – at its most obvious with respect to Scottish and Irish manuscript tradition – to which attention has been drawn by scholars such as Benjamin Hudson and Thomas Clancy.<sup>346</sup> To this one might add the evidence of a lost Iona chronicle, quite probably maintained by Colum Cille, but entries from which form a significant part of the Irish annals.<sup>347</sup> This interaction also extended into the Welsh manuscript tradition, as pointed out by Nancy Edwards with respect to an 11th-century Welsh manuscript:

It appears, then, that the Psalter and Martyrology of Rhygfarch and *De Trinitate*, like Sulien’s education in Wales, Scotland and Ireland, may well draw upon a Welsh tradition of manuscript illumination as well as using many of the same stylistic traits found in a variety of other Insular psalters from Ireland and probably Scotland.<sup>348</sup>

#### INSULAR CELTIC SCRIPT

The Insular Celtic form of writing the Roman alphabet has its own unique style – as mentioned already, using the term ‘Gaelic’. But ‘Celtic’ is used here for a particular reason, and that is in the context of the Scottish philosopher Alexander Dickson’s 345. G. Dunleavy, *Colum’s Other Island: The Irish at Lindisfarne* (Madison, 1960), 50–51 and fnn 37–38.

346. B. Hudson, ‘Scottish Texts in Irish Manuscripts’, paper given at Testing the Pen conference, University of Aberdeen (16–17 August 2004). I am grateful to Professor Hudson for providing me with a typescript of this paper. Also Thomas Clancy, ‘The Death-tale Anthology in NLS MS 72.1.40’, paper given at Testing the Pen conference, University of Aberdeen (16–17 August 2004).

347. D. P. McCarthy, *The Irish Annals* (Dublin, 2010), 153–67.

348. N. Edwards, ‘11th Century Welsh Illuminated Manuscripts: The Nature of the Irish Connection’, in Cormac Bourke, ed., *From the Isles of the North* (Belfast, 1995), 154.

usage in 1583, referring specifically to annals of the Celts.<sup>349</sup> In the later 16th century, the long Celtic scribal tradition of copying manuscripts was still very much alive, so Dickson was not writing as an antiquarian or simply repeating classical references to the Celts. Classical references make no mention of annals, so Dickson must have been aware of the existence of Celtic annals from some kind of personal experience and chose to describe them as Celtic; whether in relation to their language, contents, or style of writing is not stated.<sup>350</sup> From the point of view of language, George Buchanan had already established links between the Celtic languages, which he had published in 1582 (see [V.2.a.](#)).<sup>351</sup>

As for the style of writing, it is nowadays known as Irish majuscule and minuscule, but its use was far from being confined to Ireland and it is more accurate to describe it as Celtic, allowing for the geographical spread of the manuscripts, coming from Iona, Northumbria, Ireland, Wales, England and the Continent. This style is so fundamental to the Celtic scribal tradition that ‘the pure milk of Irish calligraphy’ is recognised in the earliest surviving manuscript of Celtic provenance.

As a beautiful writing [Irish half-uncials] attained in the 7th century a degree of perfection since unrivalled.<sup>352</sup>

In the Book of Kells, the text pages raise the art of writing and illumination to unequalled heights.<sup>353</sup> What has to be remembered is that the people making these manuscripts were relatively new to the art of writing. Far from being subdued by or subservient to their classical exemplars, they approached writing as much from a visual as an archival perspective. The Word became Flesh and the whole was animated. What is more, the Irish foundation of Iona was no mere outpost but, over several centuries, co-existed with a sophisticated Pictish visual culture (see [IV.2.f.](#)).

The Celtic calligraphic style was sustained through many centuries – in the Book of Kells, which was made from roughly the 8th–9th centuries, and in the *Salaberga Psalter*, from the 8th century,<sup>354</sup> but surviving in such manuscripts as the 16th-century *Dindsenchas*. In fact this manner of writing never really died out and is a familiar aspect of the Celtic-inspired tourist trade today. Some of its particularities and technical innovations are described below.

349. Alexander Dickson [Dicson, Dicsono], *De Umbra Rationis & Judicii, Sive De Memoriae Virtute Prosopopoeia* (London, 1583), 37.

350. Dickson, *De Umbra Rationis & Judicii*, Chap. II.

351. George Buchanan, *History of Scotland*, transl. John Watkins (London, 1836), 41.

352. E. Johnston, *Writing and Illuminating and Lettering* (1906), 40.

353. Christopher de Hamel, *Meeting with Remarkable Manuscripts* (Random House UK, 2016), 121ff.

354. D. Ó Cróinín, ‘The Salaberga Psalter’, in Cormac Bourke, ed., *From the Isles of the North* (Belfast, 1995), 128.

## SCRIBAL CHARACTERISTICS

It has been asserted that the development of Celtic calligraphy is at the basis of modern western writing:

To this scribal hand the Western world owes the form of the so-called Roman lowercase or small letters in which the greater part of Western writing is presented today.<sup>355</sup>

Not only is the script itself distinctive with its pointed descenders and ascenders widening into wedge-shaped or triangular tops,<sup>356</sup> but in the early manuscripts the ink retains its colour better, the gatherings are more commonly quinions rather than quaternions (groups of five rather than four folded sheets of vellum), punctuation, abbreviations and omission signs are used more liberally, and, most notably, the illumination exceeds all others in its complexity and virtuosity.

The Gaelic hand was highly ornate, and could be richly elaborated by means of decorated initials and such devices as rubrication.<sup>357</sup>

Rubrication was a widely-used device, using red ink for certain letters and for musical stave lines. It is still in evidence in later Scottish manuscripts of Celtic significance such as *The Inchcolm Antiphoner* and *The Sprouston Breviary*, both from the late 13th century (see IV.3.b. and V.2.b.).

A fundamental aspect of Celtic calligraphy was separation between words:

This lack of interest in tironian signs by Insular scribes suggests that one of their advantages, easy lexical access, was already well provided for in the word-separated Insular system.<sup>358</sup>

The separation of words in their written form by the use of spaces was a crucial innovation which undoubtedly aids silent reading. It spread from Celtic manuscripts across Europe and continues to spread across the globe.

The Celtic hand, though initially a majuscule or capital letter hand, used many ligatures to join letters and many scribal abbreviations. These, along with the occasional use of Tironian shorthand (notably 7 for 'ogus' or 'and'), and the flowing

355. L. Miller and P. Musick, 'Celtic Calligraphy: From Penstroke to Print', in R. O'Driscoll, ed., *The Celtic Consciousness* (Portlaoise and Edinburgh, 1982), 355.

356. G. Dunleavy, *Colum's Other Island: The Irish at Lindisfarne* (Madison, 1960), 50 and fn 36.

357. Donald Meek, 'The Scots-Gaelic Scribes of Late Medieval Perthshire', in Janet Williams, ed., *Stewart Style 1513–1542* (East Linton, 1996), 257.

358. P. Saenger, *Space Between Words: The origins of silent reading* (Stanford, 1997), 115. See also M. Richter, 'St Gallen and the Irish in the Early Middle Ages', in Richter and Picard, eds, *Ogma: Essays in Celtic Studies in Honour of Próinséas Ní Chatháin* (Dublin, 2002), 70.

character of the uncials, enabled greater speed in writing. As William Gillies pointed out:

Despite some scribes' indulgence in the use of contractions, Gaelic MSS are in general very easy to read, since the Gaelic hand (known as the *corr-litir*, or 'pointy letter') could be written quickly without recourse to cursive or long-hand versions.<sup>359</sup>

Precisely how we are able to recognise words on the page – indeed how we are able to 'read' words – is still the subject of debate.<sup>360</sup> The debate is often based upon aspects of visual perception without perhaps due attention being given to its rhythmic elements. The ascenders and descenders of the Celtic script naturally emphasise those letters which prompt them (b, d, f, g, l, p, q, t for example): but the rhythm and/or spacing of the appearance of those letters within and separate from the word, may be clues to recognition, potentially related to the rhythm of their spoken sound values. If so, then the exaggeration of those features as a consequence of the rhythms of penmanship may offer a connection between what is seen and what is understood through reading that would bear more analysis.

## INTEGRATION OF TEXT AND IMAGE

Equally important was the integration of text and image. Initial capitals were not treated as isolated phenomena with their own self-contained image, but as an integral part of the ensuing sentence. This takes several forms. The most obvious is *diminuendo* – seen clearly in the *Cathach* – the device whereby the initial letters become progressively smaller until they reach the size of the majority of the text. This is present in the earliest manuscripts, even though illumination does not feature extensively, except in the form of red dots surrounding some of the capitals,



a feature probably picked up from Coptic manuscripts. However, there is also an example in the *Cathach* of a La Tène-style trumpet spiral form for an initial letter (f.21r). There is also an initial developing into the neck and head of an animal that looks remarkably like the wild boar's head of the *carnyx* (f.48).

La Tène trumpet spiral in the *Cathach* (7th c.)  
© Royal Irish Academy

359. W. Gillies, 'The Red Book and Black Book of Clanranald', in Clan Donald Society Conference (2006): <<https://www.ed.ac.uk/literatures-languages-cultures/celtic-scottish-studies/research/internal-projects/clanranald>>.

360. See L. Henderson, *Orthography and Word Recognition in Reading* (London, 1982), for a lucid evaluation of the various theories.



The *Cathach* is commonly attributed to Colum Cille himself, though some scholars would suggest it dates from some 30 years later.<sup>361</sup> In any event,

Here we recognize for the first time a calligraphic inventiveness entirely different from any previous attempt at combining script and ornament. Instead of standing apart from the body of the text the initial is, as it were, drawn into it, the subsidiary letters also being treated as display characters, but on a gradually decreasing scale. This 'diminuendo' effect was an invention which from now on was to remain a constant in Hiberno-Saxon book decoration ... In the *Cathach* the art of book decoration has turned away from the Late Antique paradigms and adopted the native vocabulary.<sup>362</sup>

The *Antiphonary of Bangor*, written in Bangor Co. Down between 680 and 691, uses similar techniques,<sup>363</sup> and in the *Mediae Noctis* we have the text for a chant for which we also have the music. The opening line of *Mediae Noctis* (f.11v) displays diminuendo and the M also sports those little dots so characteristic of the early Gaelic style. The *Sancti venite* (f.10v) in the *Antiphonary of Bangor* is not only unique, it is the first known Eucharistic hymn, so we are dealing here with a manuscript of profound significance in Christian history.

Both the *Cathach* and the *Antiphonary of Bangor* will surely have been familiar to many of the west of Scotland's most significant religious figures and literati, notably the historically well-attested Saint Maelrubha, who in the year 671 at the age of 29 came (with his mother) from Bangor to Applecross and who died in Scotland in 722. The *Antiphonary of Bangor* was compiled during Maelrubha's lifetime, as evidenced by its list of abbots (f.36v), the last of whom died in 691.

A century or two later, the most elaborate examples of diminution are to be found as essential aspects of several of the most spectacular illuminated pages in the Book of Kells, demonstrating an astonishing development of the concept in visual terms from a simple leading-in of the eye to a degree of structural complexity in which letters may be laid on their sides or embedded in others

361. M. Herry and A. Breen, *The Cathach of Colum Cille: An Introduction* (Dublin, 2002), 5–6. Also L. and J. Laing, *The Picts and the Scots* (Stroud, 1996), 153. R. Ó Floinn ('Insignia Columbae I', in Cormac Bourke, ed., *Studies in the Cult of St Columba* (Dublin, 1997), 153) appears to accept Columba as a possible author. U. Roth ('Early Insular Manuscripts: Ornament and Archaeology ...', in M. Ryan, ed., *Ireland and Insular Art, AD 500–1200* (Dublin, 1987), 23) proposes 560, which certainly allows for Columba as its scribe. Others such as Carl Nordenfalk (*Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting* (London, 1966), 14) suggest c. 625.

362. Carl Nordenfalk, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting* (London, 1966), 13–14.

363. J. F. Kenny, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland* (Dublin, 1929–1997), 707.

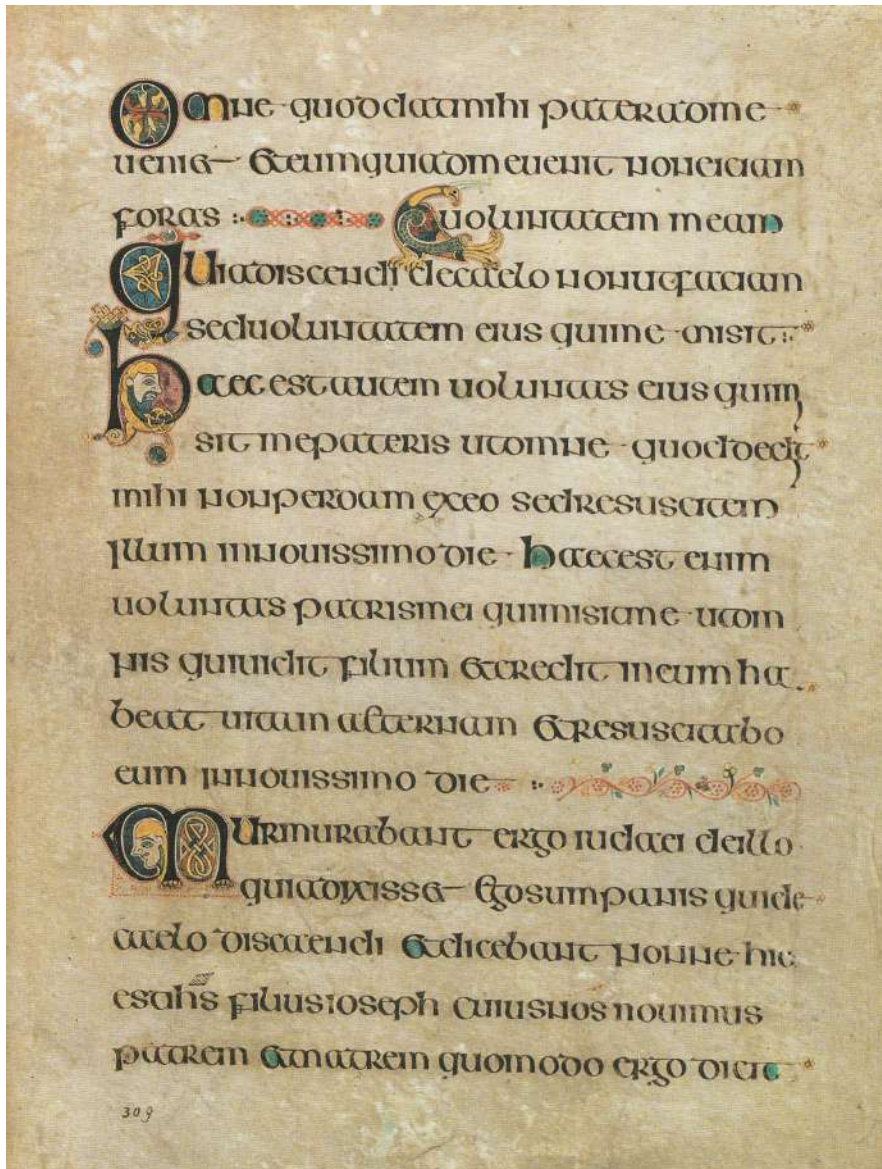


*Liber Generationis*, the Book of Kells (9th c.), f.29r © Trinity College Dublin

with a *jeu d'esprit* unmatched in other scribal traditions, so that the word itself is hard to decipher, though in the case of the *Liber generationis* folio, the individual letters are perfectly clear.

The development of this hand is highly relevant to Gaelic Scotland, for it





*Cenn fa eite*, the Book of Kells (9th c.), f.309r, between ll. 4 and 3 © Trinity College Dublin

not only features in the Book of Kells, but in the various books, such as the *Lindisfarne Gospels* (written at a daughter monastery of Iona) and the 9th- or 10th-century *Book of Deer* which were undoubtedly influenced by this style, and which also exhibit *diminuendo*.

Other aspects of the Gaelic script which are of visual significance include the device which the scribes themselves described in visual terms as *cor fa casan* (turn in the path) or *cenn fa eite* (head-under-wing) for ending a text on the previous line – frequently done for visual effect in terms of illumination and, in one case, filling up a space already embellished by an extension of the punctuation and marked by a crested peacock – perhaps thinking of putting his head under his wing.<sup>364</sup>

In Edinburgh University Library, there is a Celtic psalter which also sports little red dots as well as animal interlace, sometimes derived from the tongue, tail or legs of the creature. Its early provenance is obscure, but it is accepted as probably being Scottish in origin and dating from the 11th century.<sup>365</sup> With respect to the script, Finlayson comments that it is in an elegant Irish minuscule and, noting a regularised alternation of forms of capitals, that

The thoroughness and consistency of this mixture of forms seems to represent an attempt to promote genuine minuscule to be a decorative script for fine books of very small format.<sup>366</sup>



Initial from Celtic Psalter (11th c.)  
© University of Edinburgh Library

The repertoire of interlaces and stylised quadrupeds is limited, but they are finely executed and very different in style from the marginal creatures in the *Book of Deer*, though Finlayson draws parallels between a frilled triangular motif in EUL MS 56 and the *Book of Deer*. He also notes spelling errors derived from Gaelic pronunciation in silent diction and the use of the *cenn fa eite*.<sup>367</sup> Finlayson (p. xxxi) also notes that EUL MS 56 and the *Psalter of Rhygfarch* are both of the less common Hebrew single kind and comments upon a number

364. See Bernard Meehan, *The Book of Kells* (London, 1994), 78–79.

365. EUL MS 56. See C. Borland, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Western Medieval Manuscripts in Edinburgh University Library* (Edinburgh, 1916), 100; W.M. Lindsay, Appendix III to the same work; also C.P. Finlayson, 'Introduction' to *Celtic Psalter (Umbrae Codicum Occidentaliū VII)* (Amsterdam, 1962), xxx.

366. Finlayson, 'Introduction' to *Celtic Psalter*, x; N. Edwards, '11th Century Welsh Illuminated Manuscripts: The Nature of the Irish Connection', in Cormac Bourke, ed., *From the Isles of the North* (Belfast, 1995), 151.

367. Finlayson, 'Introduction' to *Celtic Psalter*, xviii, xxiii, xxx and xvii, respectively.

of parallels and distinctions between the two manuscripts. The single ‘Hebrew’ version is in fact a different translation made by Jerome around 392 and more closely associated with the original Hebrew. Although the provenance of EUL MS 56 is obscure, the evidence of the script, the spelling errors, the use of *cennfa eite* and aspects of the illumination all strongly suggest that this was a manuscript of Scottish provenance written by a native Gaelic speaker. The significance of the EUL MS 56 is further enhanced by the assertion that it was used as a source of inspiration for Mary Carmichael’s illuminated letters in *Carmina Gadelica*.<sup>368</sup>

#### SURVIVAL OF THE SCRIPT

While the examples given so far are all early medieval, the basic script survived with varying degrees of formality, though the elaborate illumination was almost, but not quite, abandoned. The 16th-century *Dindsenchas* shows a pig playing bagpipes (see IV.2.c.).<sup>369</sup> An early 15th-century medical manuscript (NLS 72.1.3) has its capitals in red, as well as slightly more ambitious efforts. It was used by the Gaelic doctor John Beaton, who signed his name in Greek in it in 1671. Martin Martin refers to Fergus Beaton being in possession of ‘antient Irish Manuscripts in the Irish Character; to wit, Avicenna, Averroes, Joannes de Vigo, Bernardus Gordonus, and several Volumes of Hypocrates.’<sup>370</sup> In addition, he writes that

The Life of Columbus, written in the Irish Character, is in the Custody of John Mack-Neil in the Isle of Barra; another copy of it is kept by Mack-Donald of Benbecula.<sup>371</sup>

From the late 15th century comes a further example. It is a religious poem ‘Comhar me, (a) Mhic mo Dhe’ (‘Help me, O Son of God’), written in a classical Gaelic script and orthography, added to the 13th-century Murthly Hours.<sup>372</sup> Clearly, then, there were scholars enough in the Western Isles, never mind the mainland, conversant with Gaelic script. These might well have included the MacPhies at *Dùn Eibhinn*, Colonsay, hereditary record keepers for the MacDonalds. But of *Dùn Eibhinn*, scarcely even the ruins

368. I. Finlayson, ‘Manuscripts, illuminated’, in Derick Thomson, ed., *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland* (Oxford, 1983), 194.

369. Royal Irish Academy, D.ii.2, f.34r.

370. Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (London, 1716; Edinburgh, 1981), 89. Also, MacCoinnich, *Scottish Gaelic Studies XXIV* (2008), 309–356.

371. Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*, 264. One of these manuscripts is possibly Adv. MS 72.1.40, 13A1-28A20, and is in the same hand as NLS Adv. MS 72.1.31, fos. 6–7, which is probably a Scottish hand. See M. Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry* (Blackrock, 1996), 212.

372. Ronald Black, ‘Later Additions in Gaelic’, in J. Higgitt, *The Murthly Hours* (London, 2000), 337.

are left on their prominent hilltop, and by 1609 their chieftain was illiterate, though documents survive from there dated 1492.<sup>373</sup>

However, Ronald Black also points out with respect to the Gaelic entries in *The Murthly Hours* that

Insofar as they can be read at all, our texts are notable for being in a scribal and orthographic tradition which is separate from the mainstream of Gaelic literature as practised in medieval Ireland and in the territory of the Lordship of the Isles, but which is closely comparable to that of the Book of the Dean of Lismore.<sup>374</sup>

This contrasting style of Scots secretary hand may have been influenced by the official status granted by parliament to Scots in 1398. Ronald Black agrees with Donald Meek’s thesis

that a 16th-century Highland legal practitioner such as the Dean of Lismore was likely to possess competence in the ‘mainstream’ traditions of both Gaelic and Scots, and to have been at his most comfortable in a fusion of the two.<sup>375</sup>

Meek even goes so far as to suggest that this was a progressive move to bring Gaelic letters into the Scottish mainstream in terms of handwriting and orthography.<sup>376</sup> Similar transitions are noted by Steer and Bannerman with respect to lapidary inscriptions:

But if, as seems likely, it had long been normal to Scotticise Gaelic surnames, not to mention place-names, in a Latin context in this area, then the Scots spelling adopted by the compilers of this collection should be seen as a much less isolated and startling innovation than at first appears. Gaelic vowels and consonants in the inscriptions are often represented as in the *Book of the Dean of Lismore*.<sup>377</sup>

The Irish philosopher, John Toland (1670–1722), who studied in Glasgow, used

373. K. Byrne, *Lonely Colonsay* (Colonsay, 2010), 24–25.

374. Black, ‘Later Additions in Gaelic’, 336.

375. Black, ‘Later Additions in Gaelic’, 337.

376. Donald Meek, ‘The Scots-Gaelic Scribes of Medieval Perthshire: An overview of the orthography and contents of the Book of the Dean of Lismore’, in Janet Williams, ed., *Stewart Style 1513–1542: Essays on the Court of James V* (East Linton, 1996), 262–63.

377. W. Steer and J. Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture in the West Highlands* (Edinburgh, 1977), 92.



an old Gaelic script (for which he apologises)<sup>378</sup> and was also able to read Old Gaelic, in 1718 describing the characters in a manuscript of the Gospels – ‘they are all thro-out the book very neat Irish characters ...’<sup>379</sup> In Scotland, as late as the end of the 17th century, *The Red Book of Clanranald* (largely written by Niall MacMhuirich c. 1637–1726) used a version of the Insular Celtic hand, as did the famous mid-18th-century Gaelic poet Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair (c. 1695–c. 1770), who also taught himself to read Gaelic miniscule. Ronald Black describes what he believes to be MacMhaighstir’s work thus:

The initial capitals, D and R respectively, are decorated in something akin to the thousand-year-old Gaelic manner, albeit very crudely in the case of R.<sup>380</sup>

Likewise, the Reverend Robert Kirk used old Gaelic script for words in Gaelic in his manuscript of *The Secret Common-wealth ...* written around 1691;<sup>381</sup> though, writing no later than the 1730s, Edmund Burt observed that

There are very few who can write the character, of which the alphabet is as follows:– Ailim, Beith, Coll, Duir, Eadha, Fearn, Gort, Uath, Jogha, Luis, Muin, Nuin, Oun, Peithboc, Ruis, Suil, Tinne, Uir.<sup>382</sup>

Even by the end of the 17th century, there were few who could read it. Kirk’s transliteration (1688–1690) of the Irish Bibles printed in Classical Gaelic using Gaelic script, would bear out this point, as Kirk’s work was printed in Roman typeface.

Kirk also records charms of which some were ‘written in paper, and ty’d about the patients neck.’<sup>383</sup> Kirk does not record whether these were written in a special manner, but Celtic script, illumination and ornament do appear to have

378. Toland’s entries in Martin Martin (1716 edn, BL C.45.c.1.). Toland is scathing in his entry facing the title page, but the actual notes show his fascination and even approval. He includes many Irish transcriptions (using old Irish script). His transcriptions show absolute fluency, though not all his translations are accurate in what is in any case an etymological minefield as regards place-names.

379. J. Toland, *Nazarenus*, Letter II (London, 1718), 8–9.

380. Ronald Black, ‘Mac Mhaighstir Alastair in Rannoch’, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* LIX (1994–1996) (Inverness, 1997), 371. The manuscript is NLS Adv. MS 72.1.39.

381. S. Sanderson, ed., *The Secret Common-Wealth & A Short Treatise of Charmes and Spels by Robert Kirk* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 1, 6, 7, 17 and 20ff. of the manuscript (EUL MS La.III.551).

382. A. Simmons, ed., *Burt’s Letters from the North of Scotland as Related by Edmund Burt* (Edinburgh, 1998), Letter XXII, 230–31.

383. Sanderson, *The Secret Common-Wealth*, 110.

survived within the tradition to enhance a written charm, right into the 19th century:

The words were written upon paper or parchment, and were often illuminated and ornamented in Celtic design, the script being thus rendered more precious by the beauty of its work and the beauty of its words.<sup>384</sup>

This information came from Calum Mac na Cearda on the Island of Tiree. Whether the writing was undertaken by the applicant or by a professional is not known and no actual examples survive. Ronald Black has suggested that Carmichael may have been ‘carressing the truth a little bit.’<sup>385</sup>

A more obviously historical awareness of the distinctive nature of the script and attendant illumination of capitals emerges in 19th-century books such as the Highland Society of Scotland’s report of 1805 in which finely executed copies from Celtic manuscripts can be found, and in *The Book of the Club of True Highlanders* (1881) by C. N. McIntyre North.<sup>386</sup> And Professor Macdonald comments that

The pioneering archaeology of Daniel Wilson is crucial to understanding this development. In 1851, shortly before McCulloch painted his *Cuillin from Ord*, in the heart of the period of the Clearances, Wilson made a major visual contribution to recording the art of the Gàidhealtachd in his *Archaeology and Prehistoric Annals of Scotland*. Wilson was both artist and academic, and many of the images in his book originate from his own hand, including the frontispiece, which shows the Hunterston Brooch. The cover of the first edition, perhaps also designed by Wilson, is a very early example of Celtic Revival design. Furthermore, in his text, Wilson takes the trouble to identify what he calls ‘Celtic arts’ as stylistically distinct.<sup>387</sup>

Andrew Gibb revived Celtic initials in Stuart’s *Sculptured Stones of Scotland* of 1867. This interest blossomed in the hands of Mary Carmichael, the wife of Alexander Carmichael, in her illustration of her husband’s work *Carmina*

384. Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* III (London, 1976), 182.

385. Personal communication.

386. H. Mackenzie, *Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland Appointed to Inquire into the Nature and Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh, 1805), Frontispiece and Plate II, 293.

387. Murdo MacDonald, ‘Art, the Highlands and Celtic Revival’, paper given at the Association of Scottish Literature Conference (June 2012), quoting D. Wilson, *Archaeology and Prehistoric Annals of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1851), 220–21.

*Gadelica* of 1900. Professor Macdonald has made a special study of this aspect of the Celtic revival and has identified the medieval sources, including the Book of Deer and possibly the Celtic Psalter (EUL MS 56 discussed above).<sup>388</sup>

In a parallel development in Ireland, Margaret Stokes (sister of the Irish philologist Whitley Stokes), in her *Early Christian Art in Ireland*, first published in 1887 under a different title, incorporated her own copies of illumination from the Book of Kells. By 1909, a lettering manual for art students in the USA acknowledged the origins and revival of the style:

... it has a primitive strength that combines well with the characteristic spirals and interlacements of the ornament of the period.<sup>389</sup>

In 1916, the Manx-based Scottish artist Archibald Knox (1864–1933) was working on St Patrick's Hymn, *The Deer's Cry*, in illuminated letters – interlaced, interlocked and interwoven – in a manner which parallels the paintings, but not the lettering, of Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Knox's watercolours of the hymn were never completed but were published with an introduction by Marshall Cubbon in 1983.<sup>390</sup> Knox was the son of a Scottish engineer and his mother was a Carmichael from Lismore and there is a possibility of a connection with the Carmichaels mentioned above.<sup>391</sup> It is worth comparing Knox's stunning artwork with the much more modest effort of the Cuala Press in their 1920 publication of *St Patrick's Breastplate*. The cover has a Celtic cross, but only the initial capitals are illuminated and there is no attempt at interlace, though the dots characteristic of the *Cathach* are incorporated.<sup>392</sup>

Analysis of the construction of Celtic art was pioneered by James Romilly Allen.<sup>393</sup> Allen's work essentially lay fallow until that of George Bain (1881–1968), and his son Iain, and has been developed in the work of Aidan Meehan.<sup>394</sup> Much of their analysis has related to calligraphy and this has been evident in the work of other artists such as James Cumming, who revived the delight in abstraction

388. See Murdo Macdonald, 'The Visual Preconditions of Celtic Revival Art in Scotland', *Journal of the Scottish Society for Art History* Vol. 13 (2008–2009), 16–21.

389. T. French and R. Meiklejohn, *The Essentials of Lettering* (New York, 1909, 1910, 1912), 51–52.

390. A. Knox, *Pages from an Illuminated Version of 'Deer's Cry' or 'St Patrick's Hymn'* (Isle of Man, 1983).

391. Murdo MacDonald, 'The Visual Dimension of Carmina Gadelica', paper for the Carmichael Conference, Benbecula (22–25 July 2006).

392. Anon., *St Patrick's Breastplate* (Dundrum, no date [1920]).

393. J. Allen, *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1903).

394. George Bain, *Celtic Art: the Methods of Construction* (Glasgow, 1951), and Iain Bain, *Celtic Knotwork* (London, 1986 and 1991).

which Celtic illumination regularly employed, as well as in the importance of calligraphy:

this plurality is made homogeneous by similarities in geometric design and in the lilting Celtic, linear rhythms calling to Cumming's sensibilities and which he particularly enjoyed. Later, they led him to explore in considerable depth the universal calligraphy locked in signs and symbols.<sup>395</sup>

In Ireland, Louis le Brocquy wrote about his own illustrations for *The Tain* in clear homage to the past, while asserting his own approach to the text:

Any graphic accompaniment to a story which owes its existence to the memory and concern of a people over some twelve hundred years, should decently be as impersonal as possible.

The illuminations of early Celtic manuscripts express not personality but temperament. They provide not graphic comment on the text but an extension of it. Their means are not available to us today – either temperamentally or technically – but certain lessons may be learned from them relevant to the present work. In particular they suggest that graphic images, if any, should grow spontaneously and even physically from the matter of the printed text.

If these images – these marks in printer's ink – form an extension to Kinsella's *Tain*, they are a humble one. It is as shadows thrown by the text that they derive their substance.<sup>396</sup>

Finally, the leading Scottish artist J. D. Fergusson (1874–1961) made forays into ogam script, which are discussed in [II.3.c](#).

#### THE SCRIPT IN PRINT

With respect to the incorporation of the style into print, although Roman type was used in the first ever publication in either Scottish or Irish Gaelic of 1567 – Carswell's *Foirm na n-Urrnuidheadh*, translated from John Knox's *Book of Common Order* – Queen Elizabeth of England ordered an Irish type printing press to be made and this was soon superseded by a type developed for the exiled Irish Franciscans in Louvain, and this in turn was developed into a type used by the Roman Propaganda Press – seen in an example of c.1675. As early as 1616, James Bonaventure Hepburn (1573–1620) included alphabets entitled

395. Edward Gage, 'Foreword,' in *James Cumming* (Edinburgh, 1995), 5.

396. Louis le Brocquy, 'Artist's Note,' in T. Kinsella, ed., *The Tain* (Dublin and Oxford, 1970), viii.

'Hibernicum' and 'Scoticum' in his *Virga Aurea* published in Rome in 1616. The 'Hibernicum' alphabet is clearly based upon the *corr-litir* tradition. But, as we have seen above, such typefaces were not readily accepted in Scotland. A further type was designed by Edward Moxon in 1680, but the first really carefully thought-out type based on the old Celtic scribal hand was designed by the great Irish antiquarian polymath, George Petrie, for the Irish Archaeological Society in 1840. Valuable insights into the comparative histories of publishing in Irish and Scottish Gaelic may be found in Richard Sharpe's *Manuscript and Print in Gaelic Scotland and Ireland 1689–1832*.<sup>397</sup>

At the start of the 21st century, a major project to relate script and image in a manner inspired by the Book of Kells resulted in the publication and related exhibition of *An Leabhar Mòr – The Great Book of Gaelic*.<sup>398</sup> The book brings Scottish and Irish Gaelic together, with material spanning many centuries, each poem being illustrated by a wide variety of contemporary artists and calligraphers. The texts themselves are printed using a consistent and limited range of modern typefaces, but many of the accompanying images incorporate the text, either handwritten or using a wide variety of typefaces. A few of these images ape some of the mannerisms of the Book of Kells itself but, for the most part, the integration of letter and image is handled in a spectacular variety of styles.

The mere fact of the accomplishment of this remarkable book is testimony to an enduring ideal which, despite centuries in which it might well have been thought to have been lost, has re-emerged from the very community which first brought the concept to such perfection. The originators of the concept were artists and monks of the Celtic church. They drew on many styles and ideas, but they were essentially at the cutting-edge of the development of the integration of word and image; and the focal point of that work is generally accepted as being Iona (see IV.2.f.), with the central figure of Colum Cille as its inspiring predecessor. That *An Leabhar Mòr* is a self-conscious work of renewal, rather than evidence of an actual continuity of practice, only speaks more clearly of the endurance of a cultural predisposition which was formally asserted by the Columba Initiative – *Iomairt Chalum Chille*:

In many ways the artists have anticipated or paralleled the best of the political process by working across old boundaries, seeking new perspectives, creating new relationships and reconciling history with the cutting-edge of the here and now.<sup>399</sup>

397. Richard Sharpe, 'Manuscript and Print in Gaelic Scotland and Ireland 1689–1832', in McLeod, Gunterloch and Dunbar, eds, *Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 8* (Edinburgh, 2016), 31–53.

398. M. Maclean and T. Dorgan, eds, *An Leabhar Mòr* (Edinburgh, 2002).

399. M. Maclean, General Introduction, *An Leabhar Mòr* (Edinburgh, 2002), 1.

This sense of history has in no way inhibited the variety of responses in the work, but neither has it lost contact with its linguistic and visual roots. As Duncan MacMillan asserts:

This book will, therefore, take its place alongside the great books in the modernist tradition, but it differs in one vital respect. It is rooted in Gaelic culture, and in this it achieves another great reunion.<sup>400</sup>

JP

## II.3.c. OGAM

[Introduction; Cryptic Uses of Ogam; Post-medieval Uses of Ogam; Ogam as a Musical Notation?](#)

## INTRODUCTION

bhdlnghfts mbhcfscbhrcbhnqr  
Aonghus MacFearcair [see below]

In addition to their own version of the Roman script, Gaelic speakers developed the ogam 'alphabet', which was unique to their culture until it was taken up by the Picts, though recent carbon dating suggests that the development of the Pictish symbols and the use of ogam in Scotland was at least as early as that in Ireland and probably inspired by contact with Roman writing.<sup>401</sup>

The ogam alphabet was ordered phonetically from the start, so the literal and the aural, the seen and the heard become as one, as part of a system. Its visual element does not exist in isolation and can scarcely be considered purely in isolation.

According to some manuscript traditions, ogam is named after Ogma, who may be related to the Celtic god Ogmios, but these putative connections remain obscure.<sup>402</sup> More likely is the theory that the word means 'point-seam' – that is a line made by a sharp point.<sup>403</sup> It has been suggested that 'there are some examples of an ogam-type spelling in the manuscript orthography'; for instance, where ogam uses g, d and b, the manuscript tradition uses c, t and p; but the earliest hand in the Würzburg glosses uses ogam spellings for *roslogeth* with ogam 'g' in place of 'c' in *ro-sluiced* and *adobrogart*, with ogam 'd' in place of 't'

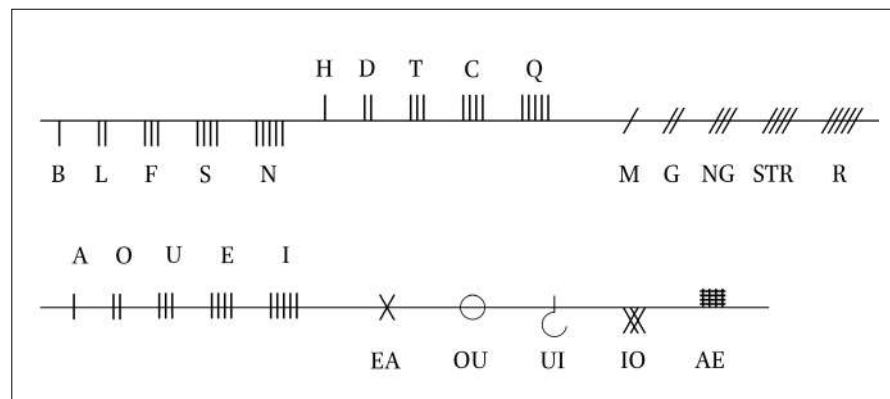
400. Duncan MacMillan, 'Scottish and Irish Visual Art', in *An Leabhar Mòr* (Edinburgh, 2002), 12.

401. Noble, Goldberg and Hamilton, 'The Development of the Pictish Symbol System: Inscribing identity beyond the edges of Empire', *Antiquity* Vol. 92, Issue 365.

402. B. Maier, *Dictionary of Celtic Religion and Culture*, 212–14.

403. D. McManus, *A Guide to Ogam* (Maynooth, 1991), 152–53.





Ogam alphabet

in *atob-rogart*.<sup>404</sup> In addition, the last group in the diagram above known as the *forfeda* may have been introduced 'to accommodate Gaelic sounds which had arisen at a later stage in the language.'<sup>405</sup>

Ogam is not strictly speaking an alphabet, but a linear code in which the signs stand for letters; but considered as an alphabet, it was in part designed to meet the sound values of the Old Gaelic language, for which the Latin alphabet was not wholly suited. Its form, which remained essentially static from its probable emergence in the 5th century AD<sup>406</sup> up to the 18th century, is without any obvious model.<sup>407</sup> It is grouped in five groups – *aicmi* – of five letters each.

It is immediately obvious from this alphabet, not only that it has a phonetic basis in its ordering, but that it is so designed that it can operate cheironomically, that is by use of the hands, as well as alphabetically. It could therefore be indicated by the fingers on either side of the shin bone or nose,<sup>408</sup> or any other straight edge. More practically, it could be readily inscribed or carved on any line or edge, its primary function in the earliest examples apparently being that of monumental inscription.

404. P. Russell, *An Introduction to the Celtic Languages* (London, 1995), 211, also 223–24. Russell also refers to earlier work by Carney and Harvey.

405. P. Sims-Williams, 'The Additional Letters of the Ogam Alphabet', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 23 (1992), 29–75, and P. Sims-Williams, 'Some Problems in Deciphering the Early Irish Ogam Alphabet', *Transactions of the Philological Society* 91 (1993), 133–80.

406. McManus, *A Guide to Ogam*, 96–97.

407. McManus, *A Guide to Ogam*, 4–5.

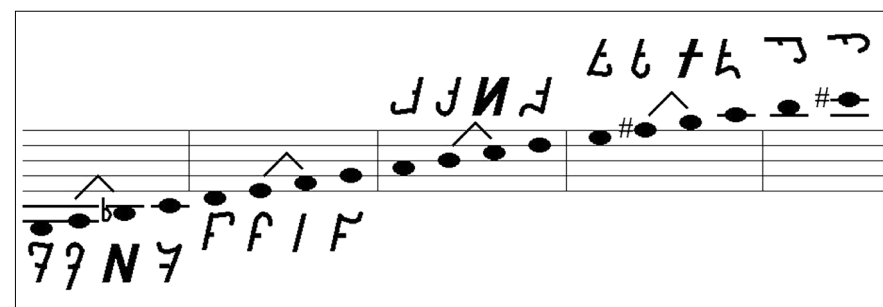
408. These uses are specifically referred to in *Auirecept na nÉces*.

An interest in the phonetic aspects of the alphabet was far from being unique to the Gaels. What is less usual is the embodiment of that interest in the symbols themselves; but neither that, nor phonetic ordering is unique and it has been argued that its phonetic order follows the phonetic order of the initial sounds of the *names* of the letters, not their single letter phonetic value.<sup>409</sup> Whatever the rationale, ogam is a unique and economical manner of ensuring the phonetic value's immediate visibility. Also important is that these signs cannot be traced to any pictographic or hieroglyphic origin, unless the numbers of lines be thought of as pictographic. If so, what is the significance of, for example, one line being assigned to A and five lines to I? One might speculate that the vowel sequence follows increasing narrowing of the vowels with attendant pitch implications, but

Most scholars, however, do concede that apart from some general principles such as the separation of vowels from consonants and the juxtapositioning of some phonetic pairs the sequence remains in essence as imponderable as its runic counterpart.<sup>410</sup>

How else might one rationalise the appearance of ogam? It shares features with Daseian notation, in that two of the groups of signs can be seen as rotations or, if one prefers, retrogrades and inversions of each other. Daseian notation is an alphabetical representation of pitch first used in *Musica Enchiriadis*, a 9th-century manuscript of possible Celtic provenance.<sup>411</sup> Its signs are grouped in fours, but a similar principle is at work, the *graves* or initial four letters being rotated and inverted to produce the other three groups.

There is a number of ogam inscriptions in Scotland, amongst the most interesting being that at the Dalriadic centre at Dunadd which may exhibit



Daseian notation

409. McManus, *A Guide to Ogam*, 33ff.

410. McManus, *A Guide to Ogam*, 30.

411. See John Purser, *Scotland's Music* (Edinburgh, 2007), 44 and 57.

a combination of Pictish and Gaelic ogam.<sup>412</sup> It has yet to be conclusively deciphered, and this applies to most of the ogams in Scotland. This is usually attributed to the belief that these ogams are in Pictish – a language for which we have not one single sentence and only a few putative words. Isaac points out that non-Indo-European elements are to be found in Pictish ogam and in the Pictish king list, suggesting that it was used distinctively by the Picts.<sup>413</sup>

A controversial case has been made for considering a number of these ogams to have been inscribed in a Norse language.<sup>414</sup> Aside from ogams inscribed on stone, an ogam-inscribed bone plaque was discovered at Bornais on South Uist. Its dating is uncertain but from the late Iron Age to perhaps the Viking period of the 8th to 10th century. The meaning and even the language of the clearly inscribed letters remain obscure.<sup>415</sup> The ogam-inscribed stones from Inchmarnock (an island off Bute) dating from the 7th to 9th centuries also present difficulties and, with the exception of a clearly presented ogam alphabet, being incomplete, also remain obscure. However, they do show characteristics unique to Scottish ogams, suggesting that there was a degree of development independent of Ireland.<sup>416</sup>

#### CRYPTIC USES OF OGAM

What we do know is that ogam was primarily of memorial and esoteric use and was intimately associated with concealment and obscurity. One might postulate at least a psychological link with other aspects of bardic practice such as seeking inspiration in the dark (see [I.1.b.](#) and [I.1.c.](#)). Ogam was undoubtedly made deliberately difficult on many occasions – and deliberate obscurity applied also to some bardic productions, notably the *Amra Colum Cille* by Dallán Forgaill,

412. Ian Fisher, ed., *Early Medieval Sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands* (Edinburgh, 2001), 152.

413. G. R. Isaac, 'A Note on Cormac's Pictish Brooch', *Journal of Celtic Linguistics* 9 (2005), 73–82; E. Colmán and C. Swift, 'English and Pictish Terms for Brooch in an 8th-Century Irish Law-Text', *Medieval Archaeology* XLVIII (2004), 31–48. Isaac cites the theses of O. J. Padel 1972 and K. S. Forsyth 1997.

414. Richard Cox, *The Language of the Ogam Inscriptions of Scotland* (Aberdeen, 1999).

415. K. Forsyth, 'An Ogham-Inscribed Plaque from Bornais, South Uist', in Smith, Taylor and Williams, eds, *West Over Sea* (Leiden and Boston, 2007), 461–77 and Illustrations 60 and 62.

416. K. Forsyth and C. Tedeschi, 'Text-Inscribed Slates', in C. Lowe, *Inchmarnock* (Edinburgh, 2008), 128–55. See also K. Forsyth, 'The Ogham Inscriptions of Scotland: An Edited Corpus', PhD thesis, Harvard University (1996).

renowned for its intentional obscurity.<sup>417</sup> This same delight in what is hidden can be seen in the two sorts of cryptic or hidden language in use by the poets, cited in *Auraicept na nEces: bérla fortchide* (obscure language) and *iarmbérl* (unaccented or iron language), of the latter of which it is stated that 'it is not possible to analyse it.'<sup>418</sup>

Similar obscurities are to be found in the *Immacallamh in Dá Thuarad* – The Colloquy of the Two Sages, which dates from between the Viking invasions and the 9th-century *Sanas Cormaic* – Cormac's Glossary. The obscurities and kennings used in this competition between an older and a younger druid are of particular interest, as the younger druid has just returned, via Kintyre, from being educated in his calling in Scotland by Eochu Echébél.<sup>419</sup> This implies that not only were druids active in Scotland, but that they were highly thought of within the order, as the younger druid Néde is the son of Adnae, the chief scholar of Ireland in science and poetry.

In one interesting tale, a land-owning woman with whom the hero Finn would sleep regularly was discovered by Finn's fool to be sleeping with another man. She begged the fool's discretion but he left the following message for Finn cut on a four-cornered rod:

Cuaille fernaie hi felain argaitt ath[aba] hifothrocht. Fer mna druithie  
druthlach laféinn foirthe. hifroch forhualaind linim luigi.

*A stake of alder in ... silver; deadly nightshade in brooklime. The husband of  
a lewd woman ... with the well-taught Fiann. There is heather on Ualann.*<sup>420</sup>

Obscure as it was intended to be, its metaphorical style was enough for Finn to understand, as Lady Gregory's more suggestive translation reveals:

*An alder snake in a paling of silver; deadly nightshade in a bunch of cresses;  
a husband of a lewd woman; a fool among the well-taught Fianna; heather  
on bare Ualann of Luigne.*<sup>421</sup>

To persons with a thorough knowledge of ogam, this need not have involved inscribing too many letters as some of the words also serve as letter names in different ogams. There is a strong case for approaching the Pictish ogams with this love of obscurity primarily in mind – and we shall see how cryptic use of

417. Whitley Stokes, 'The Bodleian Amra Choluimb Chille', *Revue Celtique* XX (1899), 32–33. T. Clancy and G. Márkus, *Iona* (Edinburgh, 1995), 100 and 103, accept the obscurity but do not seem to regard it as deliberate.

418. G. Calder, *Auraicept na n-Éces* (Dublin, 1917; repr. 1995), 102–03.

419. Whitley Stokes, 'Colloquy of the Two Sages', *Revue Celtique* XXVI (1905), 4–64.

420. Whitley Stokes, *On the Bodleian Fragment of Cormac's Glossary* (1891), 28–29.

421. Augusta Gregory, *Gods and Fighting Men* (1904; republ. Gerrards Cross, 1970), 216.

ogam was still in operation amongst the Gaels of Scotland in the 17th century.

Cryptic use of ogam is known from as early as the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* in which Cú Chulainn leaves behind an ogam marked on a piece of wood and beyond which one cannot pass without first interpreting it.<sup>422</sup> This saga is generally accepted as having its roots in an oral tradition which probably began to make its appearance in manuscript from the mid-7th century on, though the earliest recension (written around 1100) is a conflation of two 9th-century versions.<sup>423</sup>

One of the earliest manuscript examples of cryptic ogam is in the St John's MS 17 (c. 1110), for which it has been suggested that Byrhtferth's signature is a simple coded form of letter substitution.<sup>424</sup> Sims-Williams' conclusion has, however, been cogently challenged by Andrew West, without offering an alternative, but he has given an explanation of the central circular ogam diagram, his reading being 'Father, Father, Father, Father, Father, Father, Christ'.<sup>425</sup>

A possible example of ogam intended as some sort of message or even taboo is a knife haft with so-called 'Pictish' ogams on each side, inscribed on antler and found in Norfolk. We do not know in which direction they were read. The existing transliterations are dubious, all providing an extra line at the blade end of Side 1 to make a U rather than an O, for which there is vestigial evidence. The transliterations ignore the fact that the 6th character (15th clear line) reaches as high as the other vowels and therefore might be an A followed by an L rather than an F or V. Similar doubts surround the transliteration, never mind the meaning of the ogam-inscribed whale-bone knife handle from Bac Mhic Connain in North Uist.<sup>426</sup> In other words, right from the start, and notwithstanding considerable scholarly effort, we are in murky waters.

It is interesting that ogam taboos appear to have carried genuine weight, at least in story. The leaders of Maeve's army call up a druid rather than simply carry on and ignore the mental challenge. Alexander the Great is, of course, famous for cutting the Gordian knot, being unable to unravel it. By this action he should have passed down through history as an ignorant brute. As it was impossible to ignore Cú Chulainn's ogam, so too was it an offence to ignore the

422. C. O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (Dublin, 1984), 17, ll. 612–15.

423. O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, 9–14.

424. P. Sims-Williams, 'Byrhtferth's Ogam Signature', in *Essays and Poems Presented to Daniel Huws* (Aberystwyth, 1994), 283–91.

425. A. West, 'Byrhtferth's Ogham Enigma': <<https://www.babelstone.co.uk/Blog/2008/12/byrhtferths-ogham-enigma.html>> – accessed 4 February 2017.

426. Donald Buchanan, 'The Decipherment of Scholastic Ogham': <[www.academia.edu/14674743/The\\_Decipherment\\_of\\_Scholastic\\_Ogham](http://www.academia.edu/14674743/The_Decipherment_of_Scholastic_Ogham)>, 30 – accessed 16 February 2017.

challenge of satire.<sup>427</sup> In the Gaelic-speaking world Alexander might have shown more respect. *Auraicept na nÉces* boasts of the dire consequences of ignoring such a challenge:

Ogam romesc Breas .i. Bres mac Elathan – .i. ba ges do dul sech gan a legad. Rolad iarum int ogam-sa ina ucht ic tec[h]t a cat[h] Muige Tuireg. Romebaidh iarum in cath fair-sium gen robai ac legad in ogaim. Is i so appgitir an ogam-sea .i. sribthar in fid iarsin lin litir bis isin ainm in duine.

*The Ogham which confused Bres son of Elatha who was under a prohibition not to pass on without reading it. The Ogham was afterwards thrown into his bosom as he went to the battle of Moytura. Afterwards he lost the battle while he was reading the Ogham. This is the alphabet of this Ogham, to wit, the letter is written with all the letters that stand in the person's name.*<sup>428</sup>

In this ogam, each letter was written but followed immediately by its name in the tree alphabet spelt out. Thus 'Mac' – M A C – would be rendered MMUINAAILMCCOLL (vine, elm, hazel). One can see that it would take a few minutes to figure this out if you did not know which ogam was being used, and such devices appear to have been used among other things as delaying tactics, perhaps to cover a retreat or a regrouping.

At the same time, the extent of the obscurity of the various ogam ciphers can seem unnecessarily daunting, as seen in some of the pages in the *Auraicept na nÉces* or scholar's primer. The edition and translation by the Gaelic scholar, the Rev. Dr George Calder (1859–1941), remains the standard edition to this day.

For instance, in *Osogam* 'stag ogam' Aicme Beithe or the Birch class of letters (b, l, f, s, n) is represented by one to five stags, respectively, and Aicme hUath or the Hawthorn class (h, d, t, c, q) is represented by one to five hinds, respectively. Similarly, Aicme Muin or the Vine class (m, g, sgr, ng, r) is represented by fawns and Aicme Ailm or the Elm class (a, o, u, e, i) is represented by calves. How this was actually put to use is not clear. Did one say the substitutes, draw them, or write them out? There is a sense in which such systems playfully reverse the putative origins of writing (pictograph-ideograph-logograph-alphabet) by substituting images of actual objects for the abstract tally images of ogam (alphabet-tally cipher-grouped images).

One might, for instance, say to a fellow-student, 'I see coming over the hill two fawns, five fawns, five calves, one calf and five stags. What do I see?' In stag ogam, the answer would be 'grian' – the sun rising. It is not an efficient procedure, but it might well have had poetic and symbolic significances which we are slow

427. Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin, 1988 and 1991), 138.

428. Calder, *Auraicept na n-Éces*, 304–05.



to understand or to visualise. Many of these ogams require visualisation – colour ogam, agricultural ogam, bird ogam and so on. Given that the actual names of the letters in the ogam alphabet provoke such a visualisation, it is reasonable to assert that the whole system represents a remarkable interplay of sound, order and image, though word divisions are not often evident (II.3.b.).

There may, however, be some parallel operation at work in the substitution of one word for another in the application of charms in the Highlands:

and to strike a greater Reverence in the Receivers of Benefit by them, to change the names of ordinary things, with those of Creatures that had some like-operation to that which they designd to bestow: so framing a Sacred peculiar style of their own ...<sup>429</sup>

Such substitutions persist in many societies and not least amongst fishermen in the West Highlands.<sup>430</sup>

#### POST-MEDIEVAL USES OF OGAM

Ogam is largely referred to as an esoteric scholastic fashion which died out in the late Middle Ages, but it appears to have enjoyed a kind of half-life in subsequent centuries. References are found in Connell Mageoghagan's 1627 translation of the so-called *Annals of Clonmacnoise* in which there is a mention of Morish O'Gibellan, 'an excellent and exact speaker of the speech which in Irish is called ogham'.<sup>431</sup> Precisely what this might mean is not clear. Did he spell out words giving the ogam alphabet names for their letters, or was he using one of the more obscure substitutes? O'Molloy's *Grammatica Latina-Hibernica* (Rome, 1677) and Thomas Innes's *A Critical Essay on the Ancient Inhabitants of the Northern Parts of Britain or Scotland* (London, 1729) also mention ogam. These are literary references, but the alphabet was still in use in Scotland.

In a manuscript he completed in 1612, Aonghus mac Fhearchair mhic Aonghais signed his name in a cryptic mixture of letters:

bhdlnghts mbhcfscbhrcbhnqr<sup>432</sup>

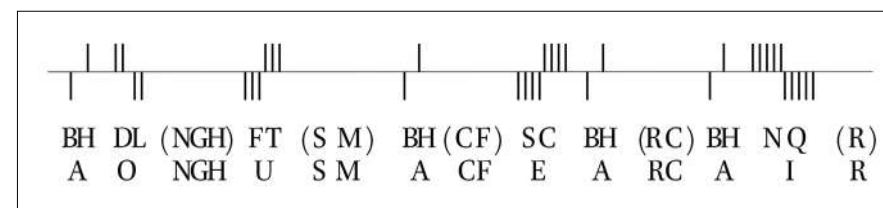
It took the insight of Mary Beith to spot how the encryption, which depends

429. S. Sanderson, ed., *The Secret Common-Wealth & A Short Treatise of Charmes and Spels by Robert Kirk* (Cambridge, 1976), 107 and 110.

430. W. B. Lockwood, 'Noa terms of the Gaelic fishermen', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* XI (1966), 85–99.

431. D. Murphy, ed., *The Annals of Clonmacnoise being Annals of Ireland from the Earliest Period to A.D. 1408, Translated into English A.D. 1627 by Connell Mageoghagan* (Dublin, 1896; Llanerch, 1993), 286.

432. Mary Beith, 'Deanamh a' Leighis', *West Highland Free Press* (20 March 1998). The Manuscript is NLS Adv. MS 72.2.10, and the cryptic signature is on pp. 302 and 401.



Aonghus MacFearcair's cryptic signature

on a knowledge of ogam, actually works. The consonants remained the same, but the vowels in his name were represented each by a pair of appropriately matching consonants, each pair being made up of mirror-image ogams. Thus the initial English vowel of his name – A – in ogam is a single stroke going through the central line, so it is represented by the ogams for b and h. Why? Because b is represented by a single stroke below the line and h by a single stroke above the line. The same technique applies to the other vowels, and Mac Fhearchair has no doubt noted that the visual sequence of the vowels follows the increase in the number of lines, with the single strokes for the letter A interspersed.

What we have here is a play on the visual and the letter, in which the original visual element is in the eye, but not on the manuscript, of the writer. This is unlikely to have been an isolated incident. The Gaelic physician John Beaton of Pennycross (c. 1640–1714) had a copy of the *Auraicept na nÉces* (NLS Adv. MS 72.1.1) which, as we have seen, contains much matter concerning ogam and, in particular, its cryptic uses. John Beaton even copied out the first pages of this manuscript for Edward Llyud.<sup>433</sup> According to Thomas Astle (1753–1803),

King Charles I corresponded with the Earl of Glamorgan when in Ireland, in the Ogham cipher.<sup>434</sup>

Charles I probably had this particular ogam-style cipher taught to him by the Earl of Glamorgan himself (a speculative inventor amongst other things).<sup>435</sup> It is also possible that Charles' doctor, David Beaton,<sup>436</sup> who appears to have accompanied him from London to Edinburgh with William Harvey had a hand in it.<sup>437</sup> The cipher is not strictly speaking in ogam, but is clearly inspired by it.

David Beaton was the grandson of the famous Cardinal David Beaton of St

433. J. Bannerman, *The Beatons* (Edinburgh, 1998), 113.

434. T. Astle, *The Origin and Progress of Writing, as well Hieroglyphic as Elementary* (London, 1784), VI, 180.

435. A. F. Pollard, 'Somerset, Edward', in *Dictionary of National Biography*.

436. Bannerman, *The Beatons*, 74.

437. E. L. Furdell, *The Royal Doctors 1485–1714: Medical Personnel at the Tudor and Stuart Courts* (Woodbridge, 2001), 122.

Andrews, and another David Beaton (of Culnaskea) may have been named after him.<sup>438</sup> In any event, this large and extended medical family was very likely to have shared the contents of the various family libraries, including of course the *Auraicept na nÉces*. An anonymous courtly love poem uses cryptic ogam to reveal the name of the woman the poet loved:

Smólach bheag agus lon dubh,  
agus naoi gcoill 'na gcruth féin –  
ainm na mná dá dtugas grádh,  
tré bhfuilim do ghnáth i bpéin.

*A thrush and a blackbird,  
and nine hazels in their own shape  
the name of the woman to whom I have given love,  
through which I am constantly in pain.*

Her name, Sile, has been revealed by Damian McManus. The S is derived from *smólach*, and the L from *lon dubh*. The nine hazels represent a group of five and four Cs, used in some ogams for the vowels, in this case I and E.<sup>439</sup>

It did not end there. In 1781, Vallencey published a claim to have found ogam in an Arabian manuscript from Egypt;<sup>440</sup> and the Scottish physician, James Lind (1736–1812), had printed little books ‘from characters which he called ‘Lindian Ogham’ cut by himself into strange fashions from battered printing-types’.<sup>441</sup>

By this time, we are clearly entering the world of the antiquarians and interest in ogam was becoming a matter not of esoteric scholastic use in the traditions of several hundred years, but of antiquarian investigation. However, the antiquarians were not merely delving into matter from the remote medieval past, but engaging with a tradition which had almost survived into their own times – and Lind’s interest went beyond analysis to a visual presentation of his own peculiar version of ogam.

By the late 19th century, one might reasonably assume that the use of ogam was dead. However, in 1872 J. F. Campbell lists ‘Irish charms written in Ogham by a modern quack for concealment’ which were given to him by Bishop Graves of Limerick.<sup>442</sup> These charms against toothache, the evil eye,

438. Bannerman, *The Beatons*, 74.

439. The stanza is in Tomás Ó Rathaile, *Dánta Grádha* (Cork and Dublin, 1926), No. 22, v. 4.

440. Reproduced in J. A. Allen, *Irish Orientalism: A literary and intellectual history* (Syracuse, 2004), 87.

441. Thompson Cooper, ‘Lind, James 1736–1812’, in *Dictionary of National Biography*. Lind published his oghams privately at his own press at Windsor in 1803.

442. National Library of Scotland, MS 50.3.11, f.33.

back pain, headaches and cattle disease (amongst others) show clear signs of being part of a tradition going back to early medieval times. They are written entirely in ogam and there are elements of cryptic writing in the manuscript over and above the cryptic nature of its basic ogam orthography.<sup>443</sup>

In the 20th century, ogam has been used as a primarily visual element in J. D. Fergusson’s *Megalithic* (see IV.1.c.) and his illustrations for MacDiarmid’s *In Memoriam James Joyce*. His frontispiece illustration of a figure, perhaps representing the goddess Danu,<sup>444</sup> is largely made out of Celtic, pre-Celtic and musical symbolism. Her breasts and ovaries are spirals, her pubic hair is the ogam for R – its name in ogam being *Ruis*, meaning the elder tree. Her hips are nudged by shamrocks. Treble clefs (incorporating the spiral form) accompany her, and the letter I – *Iogh* in ogam – leads from her breastbone to her navel and also makes a stitched gash in her thigh. *Iogh* means the yew tree, which is one of the noble woods, and was used by the Celts for making musical instruments.<sup>445</sup>



Fergusson, *Danu, Mother of the Gods*. Illustration from MacDiarmid’s *In Memoriam James Joyce*

#### OGAM AS A MUSICAL NOTATION?

Finally, the suggestion that ogam may have functioned as some kind of musical notation has not found favour, but there remains a very real possibility that it had a function in music theory.<sup>446</sup> In *Auraicept na nÉces*, the question *Caitte tomus fri fid?* ‘What is measurement by sound?’ is answered by a description

443. See John Purser, ‘Ogam’, *Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig* 9, from which this section is very largely taken.

444. T. Normand, *Modernism and Nationalism in Scottish Art 1928–1955* (Aldershot, 2000), 121.

445. See John Purser, ‘The Celtic Ballet: Ballet, Baton and Brush in Search of Peace in Time of War’, in L. Lindsay, ed., *Journal of the Scottish Society for Art History* 13 (2008–2009) (Dundee, 2009), 9–10.

446. John Purser, ‘Ogam and Interlace – Notation or Confusion’, in E. Hickmann, I. Laufs and R. Eichmann (Hrsg.), *Studien zur Musikarchäologie* V, Orient-Archäologie Band 20 (Rahden, 2006), 305–18.

of the complete ogam series. Even the terms for gender are given alternative musical explanations.<sup>447</sup>

Significantly, the letters of the series are most typically (but by no means exclusively) named after different species of tree.<sup>448</sup> MacAongusa points out that the Old Gaelic word *fid* (which appears over 190 times in *Auraicept na nÉces*) can mean ‘tree’, ‘wood’, ‘sound’ and ‘vowel’.<sup>449</sup> The harp or *cruit* was, and is known in Gaelic as ‘The Tree of Strings’ – *Crann nan teud* in modern Gaelic, *crann cúil* or ‘Tree of Music’ in the 11th-century Gaelic of the *Acallamh na Senórach* or ‘Colloquy of the Ancients’.<sup>450</sup> In *Auraicept na nÉces* the metaphor of climbing a tree is used to explain the ogam series:

It e a n-airdi: deasdruim, tuathdruim, leasdruim, tredruim, imdruim. Is amlaid imdreangair crand .i. saltrad fora freim in croind ar tus ocus do lam dess reut ocus du lam cle fo deoid. Is iarsin is leis ocus is fris ocus as trit ocus as immi.

*These are their signs: right of stem, left of stem, athwart of stem, through stem, about stem. Thus is a tree climbed, to wit, treading on the root of the tree first with thy right hand first and thy left hand after. Then with the stem, and against it, and through it, and about it.*<sup>451</sup>

In ascending the scale of a Celtic harp, one would naturally move hand-over-hand. The sound produced would be the sound of the tree, as in ‘Suibne in the woods’ where the birch is described as *borrfadach binn* ‘musical and proud’,<sup>452</sup> and the association of trees with birdsong is obvious. This is shown on the 11th-century Celtic shrine of St Mogue in the National Museum of Ireland, with a bird surmounting the ‘Tree of strings’ or harp.

So the terminology, the structure and the imagery of this linear code all suggest music. Whether, as Máire MacAongusa has suggested, it can be aligned with the greater perfect system of the Greek scale as handed down in the theory books is another matter, but that there is a *prima facie* case for considering ogam (amongst its other functions) as some form of musical instructional tool, there seems to be little doubt. JP

447. Calder 1917 and 1995, 112–17.

448. McManus, *A Guide to Ogam*, 36–39.

449. M. MacAongus, ‘Caite tomus fri fid?’, unpublished paper, by courtesy of the author, 5, 12–13.

450. Whitley Stokes and Ernst Windisch (1900), 99.

451. Calder 1917 and 1995, 70–73.

452. G. Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics* (Oxford, 1956 and 1977), 124–25.



### III

#### THE INHABITED LANDSCAPE AND SEASCAPE

##### INTRODUCTION

This chapter looks at man's place in the environment. Envisaging Landscape and Seascape shows the principal division lying between the arable land tamed by man and the wildernesses of land, sea and sky. This division is embodied in early Gaelic mythology in which man temporarily holds some parts of nature in subjugation, while other parts are dangerous and mysterious.

Some of the pre-Christian sensitivities to the persona of the wilderness are preserved in the Christian era, in fairy lore and ritual and in the literature associated with Suibne Geilt who found companionship in rivers and trees. The natural Environment is thus man's home, which he shares on an equal footing with other animals and plants. Trees become the central icon in Gaelic culture. In poetry, they symbolise the nobility of the chief linked with the correct rule of nature; in MS illumination and stone carving, they become symbolic of the life everlasting.

In Human Activity, it is argued that the plant and animal totems of clan badges and heraldry, now very much part of the tourist industry, have long lineages, in some cases extending to pre-Gaelic and prehistoric times. Human activity is seen as part of nature and the Clearances are viewed in poetry of the period as an impoverishment to both human culture and nature. This section also looks at the marks on the landscape made by the Gaels in practices such as hunting, agriculture, timber-harvesting, peat-cutting and industry.

## III.1. ENVISAGING LANDSCAPE AND SEASCAPE

III.1.a. ENVISAGING THE LAND<sup>1</sup>[Introduction; The Construction of Landscape; A Mythic Landscape; Wilderness and Arable Land](#)

## INTRODUCTION

Úir gan iodh a h-aithle a éaga,  
oighreacht Raghnaill, ní roinn mhion:  
mar táid ar ccroinn chnó gan toradh  
coill dá ló, folamh gach fiodh.

Tarrla ar an ghréin do ghlais cumhadh,  
nár chuir bláth tré barraibh géag;  
anfadh na síon ann gan iomlaoid  
gníomh barr go nfhionnmaoid a éag.

'Na aimsir fa ghormfhonn Ghaoidheal  
níor ghuth gort a ngeall re sín:  
go fuil d'a éag as a aithle  
gur bhréag muir a tairthe ó thír.

*After his death the soil bears no barley,  
Raghnaill's legacy, no slight share,  
for our nut trees are devoid of produce,  
our hazels decay, every wood is bare.*

*The sun is locked so tight in mourning  
that no blossom has come through the tips of the boughs;  
the rage of the elements without changing,  
a clear sign in which we recognise his death.*

*There was no word of famine from bad weather  
during his time in the fertile land of the Gael,  
but now as a result of his death it happens  
that the sea has beguiled its fruits from the land.<sup>2</sup>*

Romanticism stands as a watershed in the way we view the land. For non-

1. A version of this section has been published as 'The Landscape of the Gaelic Imagination' in *International Journal of Heritage Studies* Vol.15 (2009), Issue 2–3: Heritage and Environment, 142–52 (published online 28 May 2009).

2. 'Alba Gan Díon a nDiaidh Ailín', by Mac Muireadhaigh, in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire* (Edinburgh, 2007), No. 31.

Gaels, Romanticism turned a wild, frightening and detestable landscape (as observed by Defoe or Edmund Burt) into the sublime.<sup>3</sup> For Gaels, it validated the place they had traditionally given to the wilderness, but it did so by introducing a new sensibility: nature was now perceived as an empathetic force, rather than as the capricious and often intractable entity, in constant need of propitiation, that the Gaels had understood it to be.

This section is an attempt at reconstructing a model of the landscape of the Gaelic imagination, including the Otherworld, viewed independently of Romanticism, as evinced by place-names, poetry, songs and tales.

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF LANDSCAPE

What do we know of how the Gaels envisaged the landscape? Our earliest texts show that they had a concept of the world being round, a discrete entity, beautiful and colourful. The first excerpt here is from 'Altus Prosatur' attributed to St Columba from the 6th century; the second is from *Saltair na Rann* from the 11th century:

Magni Dei virtutibus appenditur dialibus  
globus terrae et circulus abyssi magnae inditus.

*By the divine powers of the great God is hung  
the globe of the earth, and the circle of the great deep placed about it.<sup>4</sup>*

Chruthaich an Rìgh, gun chrìoch air a dhealbhadh,  
ann an sloc na h-iarmailt,  
an cruinne àlainn, a tha ga mholadh aig na slòigh,  
mar ubhal cruinn daingeann.

*The King, unstinting in his designs, created  
in the hollow of the firmament  
the beautiful world, which multitudes affirm,  
like a fine round apple.<sup>5</sup>*

In English, the word 'landscape' subsumes arable land, woods, hills, mountains, sea and islands, with heaven and hell outwith the system. Though all these categories exist in Gaelic, a major fault line appears between the first, the arable land, and all the others, which can be classified as the wilderness,

3. Michael Newton, *A Handbook of the Scottish Gaelic World* (Dublin, 2000), 199.

4. T. O. Clancy and G. Márkus, *Iona, the Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* (Edinburgh, 1995), 49ff.

5. John Carey, *King of Mysteries: Early Irish Religious Writing* (Dublin, 2000), 99.

*am fàsach*. The first, *am baile*, where man has dominion over nature, is tiny compared to the vastness of the second, where nature holds dominion. In the first, the land is brought under control for agricultural and pastoral activities. By contrast, man's rational endeavours are lost in the wilderness; it is not the domain of the rule-bound, but of the natural forces of decay and regeneration.<sup>6</sup> The scheme mirrors man's first agricultural efforts in the later Stone Age, each side being represented in the Gaelic, and Celtic, pantheon. On the one hand, chieftain gods like Lugh, Cú Chulainn and the Dagda represent the social skills of leadership and artistry while, on the other, the goddesses, such as Brìde, Emer, Boann and the sea god Manannán, represent untamed nature.<sup>7</sup>

Before looking at the landscape itself, we should look at the relationship between man and nature as evinced by Gaelic mythology. The Gaelic sovereignty goddesses made their way to Scotland, as can be seen in such place-names as Loch Earn, Banff and possibly Atholl, which come from Èire, Banbha and possibly Fòtla, respectively. In *Lebor Gábála*, The Book of Invasions,<sup>8</sup> the sons of Míl, arriving in Ireland for the first time, are greeted by the three sovereignty goddesses, Èire, Banbha and Fòtla. They prosper because they recognise the goddesses as the spirits of the land with whom they must reach accord. The mating of the temporal prince with the earth goddess is an ancient Indo-European institution, commented on – but misunderstood – by Gilbertus Cambrensis in the 12th century when he witnessed the ritualistic mating of a mare and a chief on the chief's inauguration.<sup>9</sup> Seasonal festivals were further attempts to propitiate earth goddesses when such ritual was deemed to cause the varying seasons, before science showed these to be caused by the tilt of the axis of an orbiting earth.

Many more goddess names survive as the names of rivers and the river basins they commanded. A rare literary allusion to a sovereignty goddess of Scottish provenance is Muireadhach Albanach's poem to Alún mac Muireadhaigh, 'Saor do leannáin, a Leamhain', where the chief is referred to as the river Leven's consort.<sup>10</sup> Other goddess river names include *Uisge Dé* (Water of the goddess)

6. Michael Newton, ed., *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes* (Edinburgh, 2006), 492.

7. Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts* [1st pub. as *Dieux et héros des celtes*, 1941], transl. by Myles Dillon (Berkeley California, 1982): Introduction.

8. A loose collection of poetry and prose from the Books of Leinster and Fermoy in Middle Gaelic, relating to the mythological history of Ireland, published by the Irish Texts Society.

9. Giraldus Cambrensis, *Topographia Hibernica* (London, 1913).

10. Thomas Owen Clancy, *The Triumph Tree: Scotland's earliest poetry AD 550–1350* (Edinburgh, 1998), 258–59.



*Bod an Stòir* (The Old Man – lit. The Penis – of Storr) in Skye. Photo © Neil Campbell

was envisaged in masculine terms as demonstrated by the place-names *Bod an Stòir* (The Penis of the Storr) in Skye and *Bod an Deamhain* (The Devil's Penis) in the Cairngorms. Both names were gentrified in English as the Old Man of Storr and The Devil's Point respectively.

Was this usage metaphorical or literal, that is to say did the land merely resemble the body or was the land the body of the goddess, each named part invoking the whole? The answer is probably both, each interpretation corresponding to different levels of meaning. The earth could both look human and be conceived of as a living entity.<sup>12</sup> This discussion starts in prehistory and with pre-Celtic peoples who built burial cairns as wombs of the earth,<sup>13</sup> who saw a vulva in the limestone folds of the rocks at High Pasture Cave, in Strath on the Island of Skye,<sup>14</sup> and a pregnant woman lying on the horizon viewed from Callanish, as evinced by the name *Cailleach nam Mòinteach* (The Old Woman

for the rivers Dee and Don, *Tatha* (The silent one) for the Tay, *Éiteag* (The little horrid one – see I.3.b.) for the Etive, and *Clota* (The washer, the strongly flowing one) for the Clyde.<sup>11</sup> There are many earth goddesses and they had an allegiance with the particular tribes that lived in their sway.

Some place-names evoke parts of the body, especially the female body: *slios* 'side', *cìoch* 'breast', *màm* or *tàrr* 'belly' as in Tarnavie 'the belly of the nemed' near Dunning, Perthshire, *gualainn* 'shoulder', *braghad* 'throat', *achlais* 'armpit', *beul an t-slugain* 'mouth of the throat of a drainage point of a bog', *cruachan* 'hip-shaped mountain' and *leacann* 'the cheek of a hill'. Very occasionally, the landscape

11. W. Watson, *Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1926), Chap. 2, and W. H. F. Nicolaisen, *Scottish Place-Names* (London, 1976), 177.

12. It is hard not to see a connection between this tenet of primal religion and the 20th-century Gaia hypothesis of James Lovelock.

13. J. Purser, 'The Womb of Sound', in E. Hickmann, I. Laufs, R. Eichmann (Hrsg.), *Studien zur Musikarchäologie III*, *Orient-Archäologie* 10 (Rahden, 2002), 27–38.

14. Personal communication from Martin Wildgoose (<[wcas-skye.co.uk](http://wcas-skye.co.uk)>).





*Uamh an Àrd-Achaidh* (High Pasture Cave), Strath, Skye. Photo © John Purser

of the Moors).<sup>15</sup> The femininity of the land is assuredly maintained in the 18th century, when we see Uilleam Ros passionately addressing Blaven as *Rìbhinn nam beann nach fann gruaim* 'Maiden of the hills not faint of gloom', and the old Celtic formulation of the prince as the mate of the land is clear in the mountain's complaint that she lacks her earthly lord and the people of Clan Macleod: *Ach tha mi gun triath talmhaidh còir; | Mo chòir air sìol Leòid ...*<sup>16</sup> The feminine gender of the land is unmistakable too in the poetry of Donnchadh Bàn. Beinn Dòbhran with her corrie is a beautifully dressed woman, and when her state degenerates under the poor management of the gamekeeper, we

see the reverse side of that ancient topos, when the land fails to thrive under misrule.<sup>17</sup>

Goddesses in particular, and gods to a lesser extent, had animal form and practised shape-shifting (see II.1.b.): Epona was a mare, Boann (who gives her name to the River Boyne in Sutherland), a cow. Mongán could appear as a seal, salmon, deer, wolf or man. Far from being a dazzling feat, this shape-shifting was a manifestation of the goddesses' role as the spirit of nature in general, incorporating all forms of life. With the coming of Christianity the gods and goddesses disappear as such, but become euhemerised as fairies and heroes, who bear some of the same traits as the gods.<sup>18</sup> Like a shape-shifting earth goddess, the *gruagach* can appear as a hag, hen, hare or cat; like a tricky earth goddess, she too needs to be propitiated by her share of the milking or the harvest; like

15. M. and R. Curtis, 'Callanish: symbolic and dramatic potential of the landscape', in Clive L. N. Ruggles, ed., *Archaeoastronomy in the 1990s* (Loughborough, 1993), 309–16.

16. 'Còmhradh eadar am Bàrd agus Blàth-Bheinn', in George Calder, *Gaelic Songs by William Ross* (Edinburgh and London, 1937).

17. See Meg Bateman, 'The Environmentalism of Donnchadh Bàn: Pragmatic or mythic?', in *Crossing the Highland Line* (Glasgow: Association of Scottish Literary Studies, 2009).

18. Another Christian accommodation of the fairies was that they were the neutral angels, cast out of heaven when Lucifer was expelled, not into hell as were the fallen angels, but into the sea and hills of the earth. See Daithí Ó hÓgáin, *Myth, Legend and Romance: An Encyclopaedia of the Irish Folk Tradition* (London, 1990), 185–90.

a territorial goddess, the *caointeach* has a special bond with a particular family and her wailing presages their deaths.<sup>19</sup>

The hero Fionn, originally a god, changes shape as a dog, deer or man; his nephews are dogs, one of his wives is a deer and his son Oisean is part-deer. The scale of the sites associated with Fionn or Cú Chulainn also points to the heroes' former status as gods. Huge rocks throughout Skye are said to have been thrown down by the heroes or used by them for tethering a dog (Clach Luath beside Dunscaith in Sleat) or suspending a cooking pot (in Kenseleyre); a hill beside Portree is known as Suidh' Fhinn (Fionn's Seat). The 'Parallel Roads' in Glen Roy, caused by three different water levels as the ice retreated at the mouth of the glen, are known in Gaelic as Casan na Fèinne 'the hunting roads of the Fenians'. Apparently engineered in their spirit-levelled exactitude, such natural phenomena had to be the work of giants. Cailleach Beur's residence in the rocks of Tìree and Fionn's at Dùn Geal near Fortingall, the huge beds of Glas-Ghoileam, the Fenian's cow, and the flat-topped hills known as Fionn's Girdles demonstrate the same point: that natural features in the landscape which resemble outsized human artifacts were identified with the former gods. The



*Casan na Fèinne* (lit. The Path of the Fenians) or The Parallel Roads in Glen Roy. Photo © Richard Crowest

19. See, for example, James MacDougall and George Calder, *Folk Tales and Fairy Lore* (Edinburgh, 1910), 230, 214.

discovery of the fossilised bones of the giant elk in bogs in Ireland may similarly have given rise to the belief that the deer (*loin dubha*) of the Fenians had been outsize (see III.2.b.).

#### A MYTHIC LANDSCAPE

The Fenians inhabited the same landscape we do now. Traditional tales are firmly set in the Highlands (with excursions to Ireland, Norway and Syria), which makes this landscape also an enchanted landscape – it is a place where wonders have happened, where Fionn and the Fenians, Deirdre and Naoise, and Diarmaid and Gràinne have walked. It is not just a matter of lending vivacity and veracity to a tale; we project the events of the tales onto a familiar landscape and the landscape itself becomes their backdrop, a palimpsest of associations with historical and mythic events (the division is a modern one). Hundreds of years of lore are concertinaed into a glancing view of the landscape. Glen Etive has associations with Clann Uisneach (see the case study in VI.3.). Diarmaid's killing of the boar and his own tragic death are situated, in addition to various sites in Ireland, in Ben Gulbainn in Perthshire, in Ben Loyal in Sutherland, on Ben Nevis, at Ord in Skye and Loch nan Eala (Loch Nell) near Taynuilt.<sup>20</sup> Many legends are localised: *Tìr fo Thuinn* (The Land under the Waves), for example, was believed



*Dùn Sgàthaich* (Dunscath) in Skye. Photo © Sean Purser

20. R. A. Smith, *Loch Etive and the Sons of Uisnach* (London, n.d.).



*Sòrnaichean Coire Fhinn* (The Boulders of Finn's Cooking Pot), Loch Snizort, Skye.  
Photo © Meg Bateman

to be Tìree and it was believed that ships would slip down a slope towards that island and rise up a slope on leaving the island.<sup>21</sup> Also in Tìree, Kenavarra Hill is supposed to contain the cave where Diarmaid and Gràinne hid in their flight from Fionn.<sup>22</sup> In Skye, Dunscaith or Dùn Sgàthaich was believed to be the place where Cú Chulainn trained in arms with Scathach and left his son Conlaoch, and where Fionn is said to have healed his son Oscar, when the geese were swimming on the blood of his chest.<sup>23</sup> Even if some of these associations have been augmented through 18th- and 19th-century Ossianic enthusiasms, they build on genuine tradition and the established practice of siting tales locally.

The Fèinn or Fenians were said to have been subsisting on shellfish which they boiled in a cauldron hung between the standing stones of *Sòrnaichean Coire Fhinn* (The Boulders of Finn's Cooking Pot) at Loch Snizort. When they heard a shout from Caoilte who had located deer, one of the Fenians spat out his

21. John Gregorson Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV (London, 1891), 90.

22. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV, 53.

23. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV, 43.





*Creagan a' Bhalgaim* (The Rock of the Mouthful), Loch Snizort, Skye. Photo © Meg Bateman

mouthful of milk and shellfish and joined the hunt. A nearby stone, *Creagan a' Bhalgaim* (The Rock of the Mouthful), is discoloured as if with the projected shellfish and milk.<sup>24</sup> *Creag nam Meann* (Kid Rock) near Kingsburgh was said to be the bed of the Fenians' cow whose favourite grazing places are mentioned in a rhyme:

Eisgeadal is Toisgeadal,  
'S càrn a' Choin is Bràigh Bhraim,  
'S Uisgeadar 's Suileadar  
'S Beinn Mhoràig ceann an loch,  
'S Acha-choirc is Màlagan.<sup>25</sup>

What does the foregoing say about the construction of landscape in the Gaelic imagination? It shows that the land itself was felt to be animate as represented by a range of goddesses, and that the goddess herself – and hence the land – could manifest herself in any living form, making all life on earth interconnected, plant, animal, human and spirit. This interconnection is evident in the widespread association of animals with people (see III.2.b.), and is very different from the Christian model of an inanimate earth on which a transcendent God created animals and man, and from which we are to proceed to a superior spiritual place called heaven. As far as we know, there was no myth of cosmogony or of places beyond the earth in Celtic mythology. If time is conceived of as circular, there is indeed no need for a beginning to the world or to time.<sup>26</sup>

This awareness of connected elemental forces explains the motif of invoking protection and strength derived from nature. It occurs in poems from the 7th century to those prayers collected by Alexander Carmichael in the 19th century.<sup>27</sup> Their formulation implies an animism and a fluidity of life forms, the source of which must ultimately be pagan. One thousand years separate the following two

24. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV, 75–76.

25. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV, 76.

26. A simultaneous beginning to time and matter at the Big Bang 13.7 billion years ago is also refuted in Brane theory.

27. Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica, Hymns and Incantations*, 6 vols (Edinburgh, 1900–1971).

examples, the first from the 7th-century 'St Patrick's Breastplate' (discussed in II.3.a.) and the second from 'Donald Gorm's Lullaby', c. 1617:

Atomriug indiu	<i>Today I gird myself</i>
niurt nime,	<i>with the strength of heaven,</i>
soilsi gréne,	<i>light of the sun,</i>
étrochtai éscai,	<i>brightness of the moon,</i>
áni thened,	<i>brilliance of fire,</i>
déni lochet,	<i>speed of lightning,</i>
luaithi gáithe,	<i>swiftness of wind,</i>
fudomnai mara,	<i>depth of sea,</i>
tairismigi thalman,	<i>firmness of earth,</i>
cobsaidi ailech.	<i>stability of rock.</i> <sup>28</sup>

Near na cruinneadh leat, neart na grèineadh,  
neart na tuinneadh leat truime trèineadh,  
neart an tairbh dhuinn a bheir an sprèidh leat,  
O, neart Oisein leat 's Osgair euchdaich!

*Might of the world be with you, might of the sunshine!*  
*Might of the waves with you of heaviest onrush!*  
*Might of the brown bull that brings forth the cattle!*  
*O, might of Oisean and valorous Oscar!*<sup>29</sup>

#### WILDERNESS AND ARABLE LAND

Man's relationship with nature was not an easy one – man is the junior partner except for the agricultural areas he can tame with the co-operation of society and with iron implements. Beyond the *gàrradh crìche* 'the boundary wall', in the untamed land of the wilderness, the powers of nature are much more evident, dangerous and inspiring, especially at the earth's orifices and mounds where these forces emerge most strongly and where man can enter the Otherworld (see VI.1.b.). Among such places are rivers and wells (whose position can change if they are not respected), which span both the upper world of man and the lower world of regeneration, caves, lochs and graves. A man can stumble from the wilderness into the Otherworld, as did Murchadh mac Bhriain in the hero tale 'The Man in the Cassock', when, separated from the rest of his hunting party on a knoll, he was enveloped in a mist; or a boy can put his head down a hole and see the Otherworld and the deceased Fenians hunting enormous deer, as happens

28. Quoted in Carey, *King of Mysteries, Early Irish Religious Writing*, 132.

29. 'Tàladh Dhòmhnaill Ghuirm', in C. Ó Baoill and Meg Bateman, *Gàir na Clàrsach* (Edinburgh, 1994), 68–69.



in ‘The Story of Ossian’.<sup>30</sup> Society’s rules no longer apply in the wilderness: it is the site for trysting with fairies, murder, fornication (we should think of Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair’s supra-moral trysting with Morag in the woods<sup>31</sup>) and creativity. Someone who is composing poetry may be said to be *anns a’ chnoc* ‘on the [fairy] hill’. The song ‘Cò siud thall air sràid na h-eala?’ (Who is that on the road of the swan?) is one of self-imposed exile in the wilderness by a man who has committed rape and murder:

Leig mi fuil air cuim na lèinidh,  
Thug mi gu siubhal an t-slèibh,  
Uisge romham, gaoth gam reitheadh,  
Shaoil mi nach robh thus’ tuilleadh dèidheil.

*I left blood on the body of her smock,  
I took to wandering the hills,  
Rain in my face and wind battering me,  
As I thought you were no longer willing.*<sup>32</sup>

An unromanticised account of life as a fugitive in the wilderness is given in a song made by Fearchar mac Iain Òig, a gamekeeper in Kintail in the seventeenth century. When the factor distrained the cow and cooking pot from his wife in lieu of rent, Fearchar went after him and shot him dead. He describes himself living off nuts and berries, drinking from his shoe, drying himself with his plaid and sleeping rough without a fire lest the smoke should give away his whereabouts. Any hollow is his house, any crevice his bed. His vision is becoming blurred through these deprivations, the greatest of which is the absence of company and the physical comfort of his wife.<sup>33</sup>

Some conical hills either were or were imagined to be burial mounds and therefore the haunt of fairies or the living dead. Robert Kirk, a 17th-century Episcopalian minister in Aberfeldy, tells us that many churches were built beside ancient burial cairns. Glacial moraine that heaps itself up in distinct cairns in valley bottoms were likewise often named as *sitheanan* ‘fairy mounds’. Large conical hills such as Schiehallion in Perthshire and Cruachan were felt to be the sacred centres of the clans’ territory in which their dead might be buried. One of the Paps of Jura, also conical, is known as *Beinn Sheunta* (Blessed Mountain).

30. A. Bruford and D. A. MacDonald, *Scottish Traditional Tales* (Edinburgh, 1994): Tales 18 and 19, 153, 171–76.

31. ‘Moladh Mòraig’, in Ronald Black, ed., *An Lasair: Anthology of 18th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse* (Edinburgh, 2001), 126.

32. Morag MacKinnon, ‘Cò siud thall air sràid na h-eala?’, BBC Sound Archives.

33. ‘Chaidh moill’ air mo lèirsinn’ (My vision is blurred), in Anne Lorne Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2006), 226.

We saw Uilleam Ros, above, addressing Blaven in Skye as though it were the spokeswoman and witness of his clan. Again we see the association of a particular people with a particular district, the presence of their dead, supposedly in the hill, marking their spiritual centre. This agrees with the mourning motif, of rising and descending a hill, as in ‘S trom an dìreadh’ (Hard the climbing), a waulking song from 1577, mourning the loss of the entire population of Eigg, smothered to death by smoke in a cave.<sup>34</sup>

Away from society’s control, a person’s asocial side may appear in the wilderness as his double, his *samhla* or *co-choisiche* (see II.1.b).<sup>35</sup> Because nature is cyclical, time can behave differently near the Otherworld, allowing seers to see into the future and have visions of the past and for the dead to appear alive. Who are more dead, the living who must die or the dead who live forever? Some element of these raw forces of nature (perhaps the lack of rules or the perspective of life and death or the chaotic regenerative force of nature) encourages creativity. Pipers, fiddlers and poets were said to have had their gifts bestowed on them when in contact with the Otherworld in the wilderness; the donors of such gifts are generally the fairies, those intermediaries between the upper and lower worlds (see VI.1.b.), and their gifts can be paid for dearly.



*Uamh an Òir* (The Cave of Gold), associated with a disappearing piper, at Borneketaig, Skye. Photo © Sean Purser

34. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 82.

35. Newton, ed., *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal*, 454.

In the idealised landscape of Classical Gaelic praise poetry, the rightful chief's rule is affirmed by the burgeoning of a fruitful land, supporting a numerous population. The landscape consists of undulating plains, heavily cropped, forested and crossed by gently flowing rivers. A Scottish poet praised Tomaltach, Lord of Moylurg, who died in 1458 in the following terms:

Cruithneacht dearg ar maghaibh míne  
fá Thomaltach chosnas Chéis;  
bídh ar clár collbhán uí Cholla  
lomlán a droma ar gach déis.

Lacht milis ag buaibh i mbuailtibh,  
branar fa féaraighe fonn;  
fá h-árainn mhín is fá monadh  
tír álainn fá thoradh trom.

*Under Tomaltach's sway, Céis's protector,  
wheat grows red on gentle plains,  
in the white-hazelled realm of Colla's descendant  
each ear of corn bends with its weight.*

*The fallow land is of the lushest,  
cows yield sweet milk in folds,  
in both its gentle fields and moorland  
it is a beautiful land under heavy crop.<sup>36</sup>*

In the 16th century, an anonymous poet saw proof of the righteous rule of Gilleasbaig, Earl of Argyll, in an abundance of birdsong, sunshine, fruit, bees, deer and fish.<sup>37</sup> The opening quotation of this section shows how the conventions could be reversed when nature mourns her mate.

Wilson McLeod has pointed out that it was not only the idealised fertile landscape that was valued by the classical praise poets but also the wilderness. He quotes the wish of the Irish poet, Eochaidh Ó hEoghusa, that his estate should have equal measure of grazing, ploughland and wilderness.

Leth riamh do ríoghacht Bhanbha  
a fásaighe, a fiadhamhla,  
a sliabhtholcha sealga, a sreabh,  
's learga ciabhdhorcha a coillteadh.

36. 'Lámh Aoinfhir Fhóirfeas i nÉirinn', by Giolla Críost Brúilingeach, in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 21, vv. 9–10.

37. 'Maith an Chairt Ceannas na nGaoidheal', anonymous, in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 24.

Aoibhinn t'innmhe, a ua Riocaird,  
do'n eing éignigh oirdhiorcaigh:  
ochta sliabh, gaoithméide gleann ...

*One half of Irish kingship has ever been  
her wilderness and wild places:  
her great hunting hills, her streams,  
and her forests' dark-haired slopes.*

*Pleasant, O grandson of Riocard, is your share  
of her glorious salmon-rich territory:  
the mountains' breasts, the wind-swept gullies of the glens ...<sup>38</sup>*

So even among the nobility, that most settled section of society, the wilderness was highly valued, perhaps not only for hunting and fishing, but for its connection with the goddess. Alexander Carmichael shows that a huntsman venturing into the wilderness among the raw powers of nature, in proximity to the Otherworld, needs first to be sained and anointed with oil.<sup>39</sup> Fionn and the Fenians are the archetypes of life in the wilderness, living without the protection of clan or the right to land. Sjoestedt suggests such warrior bands living off hunting outwith society were an Indo-European institution, necessary for the landed tribe because it could absorb younger sons who did not inherit and social misfits.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps it absorbed the artistic, mad and mercurial. It also gives Gaelic literature an almost Jungian archetype of life outside society in contact with nature, represented primarily by the deer which they hunt, become and marry. Hunting is often pictured by exiled Gaels in song, perhaps because of the peculiarly intense experience that activity affords of the wilderness. This is true of various songs by soldiers, the gun making an obvious connection between fighting and hunting, but it is also true of poets distanced from the land by other circumstances – An Ciaran Mabach by visiting doctors in Edinburgh in the 17th century and Dòmhnall Ruadh Chorùna by old age in the 20th century. When Pàdraig Moireasdan was at Gallipoli, it was fowling in the bays and fords of North Uist he remembered:

Chan ionann 's nuair b' òg mi a' siubhal lem gheòla  
's mo chompanach còir leam bu deòin a bhith leam,  
gunna geal bòidheach 's mo chù air an t-sòile –  
nuair a dhèanainn-sa leònadh bhiodh Dòmhnall nan deann.

38. Wilson McLeod and Máire Ní Annracháin, eds, *Cruth na Tíre* (Dublin, 2003), 108–09.

39. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* Vol. I (Edinburgh, 1900), 310–13.

40. Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts*, 90.

*It was very different when I was young sailing my boat,  
with my dear companion who liked to be with me,  
with my fine silver gun and my dog on the thwart,  
when I wounded something Donald would go rushing off.*<sup>41</sup>

In Gaelic culture, we have the remnants of a primal understanding of man's place in nature. The Gaelic model not only articulates the relationship between nature and society to the mutual benefit of each, but also the relationship between the social and non-social parts of the individual. The intuition *imbas forosnai*, accessed by Fionn by chewing his thumb and sought by poets composing in the dark, is the knowledge drawn up through wells, roots and rivers of the mystery of regeneration. It is the understanding that life is wholly dependent on the earth. Adam's sin has made our life finite and therefore linear, and so skews our vision away from the cyclic time of nature. Normally, we see only through Kant's human spectacles, but the wilderness, where the Otherworld is glimpsed, reminds us of another reality. It is unavoidable not to view this model of man's place in nature as the antithesis of, and possibly as a corrective to, our post-Enlightenment view of nature as a resource to be dismantled, controlled and exploited.<sup>42</sup> The entrepreneur Lord Leverhulme came face to face with the difference in the two cultures when he found World War I veterans returning to Lewis unwilling to give up their claim to the intractable land to work for wages in his canneries in Stornoway.<sup>43</sup> MB

### III.1.b. ENVISAGING WATER

[Introduction](#); [The Sea](#); [The Land under the Waves](#); [Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill](#); [Freshwater](#); [Rivers](#); [Wells](#); [Islands](#); [Water in Traditional Song](#); [Conclusion](#)

#### INTRODUCTION

They call it the Kaillach, *i.e.* an old Hag; and they say that when she puts on her Kerchief, *i.e.* the whitest Waves, it is then reckon'd fatal to approach her.<sup>44</sup>

So wrote Martin Martin about *Coire Bhreacain*, the whirlpool between Jura and Scarba. His contemporary, the poet Mairead nighean Lachlainn, is probably also referring to the whirlpool when she wishes the following fate on her foes:

41. 'Òran a' Chogaidh', in Anne Lorne Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 206.

42. Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature* (New York, 1989).

43. Roger Hutchinson, *The Soap Man* (Edinburgh, 2003).

44. Martin, Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland* (1st pub. London 1703; this edition 1716), 237.

'S truagh nach robh iad sa Chaillich  
Fo chaithream a lionaidh!

*A pity they were not in the Cailleach  
below her clamorous tide race!*<sup>45</sup>

The last part, on how the Gaels envisaged the land, saw a primary division between wilderness and cultivated land. All forms of water – sea, lochs, rivers, wells, bogs and mist – belong to the same category as the wilderness, to the untamed elemental force of nature and, as seen above, the creatures that inhabit the water are mostly of the earth-goddess type – shape-shifting, regenerative and destructive.<sup>46</sup> Water in the form of mist forms the veil through which Murchadh mac Bhriain in the hero tale 'The Man in the Cassock' stumbles into the Otherworld. Man had little control over water.

The sea, represented by the wilderness gods Manannán mac Lir and Mongán in the pagan Celtic pantheon, becomes a metaphor for the unknowableness of God for Columbanus in the 6th century (VI.2):

If then a man wishes to know the deepest ocean of divine understanding, let him first if he is able scan that visible sea, and the less he finds of himself to understand those creatures which lurk below the waves, the more let him realise that he can know less of the depths of its Creator.<sup>47</sup>

The practice of *peregrinatio pro Christo* required the Egyptian Fathers to leave their homes for the desert in pursuit of solitude and penance. For Christians of the early Gaelic Church, the journey into the unknown was 'over the boundless ocean ... on a trackless sea', as Adomnán put it, another indication that the sea was envisaged as part of the wilderness.<sup>48</sup>

#### THE SEA

Manannán mac Lir is a shape-shifting god who inhabits the sea and gives his name to the Isle of Man, to Clackmannan<sup>49</sup> in the Forth Valley and Slamannan near Stirling. Like Fionn, Manannán, the god of the sea, is a god outside the

45. Colm Ó Baoill, *Mairghread nighean Lachlainn*, Scottish Gaelic Texts Society Vol. XIX (Edinburgh, 2009), 104.

46. I acknowledge the help of Liz Treacher, a former postgraduate student at the University of the Highlands and Islands, in drawing my attention to some of the detail of this section.

47. From G. S. M. Walker, ed., *Sancti Columbani Opera* [1957], 64–65, quoted in J. Wooding ed., *The Otherworld Voyage* (Dublin, 2000), 195.

48. Adomnán of Iona, *Life of St Columba*, transl. Richard Sharpe (London, 1995), 196.

49. Clach Mhanainn (The Stone of Manau) stands in the town square.



tribe. There are clear parallels between human society herding cattle on the plains, the fairies herding deer in the wilderness and the seal people herding *crodh mara* 'sea cattle' on the seabed. Like the earth-goddesses, the sea gods and goddesses required propitiation. An early mention occurs in 'Compert Con Culann' (8th–9th century): a king, Ruadh son of Ríghdhonn of Munster, on his way to Norway, finds his boat held fast from below. No amount of treasure thrown into the sea makes any difference and eventually the king himself goes into the sea. His boat is being held by women below the sea who do not permit him to continue until he has slept with each of nine women for a night, and one of them conceives a child by him.<sup>50</sup>



*Clach Manau* (1861), the Stone of Manannán mac Lir, atop a shaft in Clackmannan, by James Drummond

The need for propitiating the sea survived in the giving of beer to Seonaidh or Shony in Ness in Lewis as described by Martin Martin at the end of the 17th century:

The inhabitants came round to the Church of St Malvay ... every family furnished a peck of malt, and this was brewed into ale; one of their number was picked out to wade into the sea up to the middle, and carrying a cup of ale in his hand, standing still in that posture, cried out with a loud voice saying, 'Shony, I give you this cup of ale, hoping that you'll be so kind as to send us plenty of seaware for enriching our ground for the ensuing year, and so threw the cup of ale into the sea.'<sup>51</sup>

Alexander Carmichael adds to Martin's account that the ritual survived to the 19th century and took place on Maundy Thursday, *Diardaoin a' Bhrochain* (Thursday of the porridge), with the same request for seaware addressed to the god of the sea, *dia na mara*.<sup>52</sup> He describes another ritual for a good catch

50. K. Jackson, *A Celtic Miscellany* ([1951]; Harmondsworth, 1971), No. 129; original in A. G. Van Hamel, *Compert Con Culainn* (Dublin, 1930), 39–41.

51. Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, ed. by Donald J. Macleod ([1698]; Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1994), 107.

52. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* Vol. I, 162–63.

performed on St John's Eve when a *cliar* 'a bundle of reeds' would be burned while a *rann* was sung to the king of the sea, *Righ na mara*.<sup>53</sup>

The destructive powers of the sea goddesses can be seen in the Fenian 'Lay of the Muileartach' which survived uniquely in Scotland and was recorded as recently as 1970 from Penny Morrison, Eochar, South Uist. It describes a terrible hag who comes across the sea to take Fionn's Cup of Victory by force. She breaks down the door of the Fenians' house and kills many of the heroes before Fionn devises a plan to defeat her by digging a hole into which she sinks:

'S gum b' e b' ainm don fhuath nach robh tiom  
A' Mhuileartach mhaol ruadh mhuing-fhionn.  
Bha h-aodann dubh-ghlas air dhreach guail,  
Bha deud a carbaid claon-ruadh,  
Bha aon shùil ghlogach na ceann,  
'S gum bu luaith' i na rionnach madhair;  
Bha greann glas-dhubh air a ceann,  
Mac choille chrìonach ro chrith-reotha.

*The name of the apparition that was not gentle  
Was the bald-red white-maned Muileartach.  
Her face was dark-grey, of the hue of coals,  
The teeth of her jaw were slanting red,  
There was one flabby eye in her head,  
That quicker moved than lure-pursuing mackerel.  
Her head bristled dark and grey  
Like scrub-wood before hoar-frost.*

Her appearance is horrific, and yet her husband, the Smith of the Sea, refers to her as the gentle Muileartach, when he comes to revenge her death by taking Ireland off its fastenings:

Ma mharbhadh a' Muileartach mhin  
Nach fàg mi 'n Èirinn àigh  
Tom, innis, no eilean,  
Nach tog mi ann an crannagaibh mo long,  
Èirinn, coranta cothromach;  
Mar dèanadh i breabanaich air muir,  
Ga togail as a tonna-bhalla,  
Cròcain chroma ri tìr,  
Ga tarraing às a tàdhaibh.

53. Reported in W. Milliken and S. Bridgewater, *Flora Celtica* (Edinburgh, 2004), 158.

If the gentle Muileartach has been killed  
 I will not leave in fair Erin  
 Hillock, place of shelter or island,  
 That I will not lift in the cross-trees of my ships,  
 Erin, fairly-balanced, full-weight.  
 If it does not take to kicking at sea  
 When it is being lifted from its sea walls,  
 I shall put crooked hooks onto the land  
 To draw it from its fastenings.<sup>54</sup>

The Muileartach is probably a composite figure, with influence from the Norse sea ogress *margýgr* and the Scots *gyre-carling*. Some have suggested she is a specific goddess of the eastern or western sea, deriving her name from the elements *muir*, *ear* and *iar* (sea, east and west), but she should rather be seen as a manifestation of the general goddess in her destructive form of the *cailleach*.<sup>55</sup> This is borne out by the typical shape-shifting behaviour of other sea and water monsters, such as the water horse, and by the alternately benign and malign attitude of the *maighdeann mhara*, a shape-changing sea maiden, monster and hag.<sup>56</sup> Just as the land was seen in the last section to respond in terms of fertility to the rule of her earthly lord, so is the sea seen to bring fish into the estuaries under right rule in a praise poem of 1313<sup>57</sup> and to be fierce and deny the coast jetsam at the time of the death of her ruler about 1513:

go fuil d'a éag as a aithle  
 gur bhréag muir a tairthe ó thír.

but now as a result of his death it happens  
 that the sea has beguiled its fruits from the land.<sup>58</sup>

The sea has been pictured as having white hair since as early as the 6th century when Beccan of Rum says of Colum Cille, 'In scores of curraghs with an

54. 'The Lay of the Muileartach', in John Gregorson Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV (London, 1891), 131–58; these quotations are on pp. 152–53, 142–43, 154 and 144. See also Tobar an Dualchais for 6 recordings of 'Duan na Muilgheartaich'.

55. MacInnes, *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal*, 200–01.

56. 'A' Mhaighdeann-mhara', in John Francis Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* ([1860–1864]; London, 1983), Vol. I, No. 4.

57. See 'A Meeting of a Fleet against the Castle of Suibhne', in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanair na Sracaire* (Edinburgh, 2007), No. 3, v. 19.

58. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanair na Sracaire*: 'Scotland is Defenceless after Ailean', No. 31, v. 16.

army of wretches, he crossed the long-haired sea'.<sup>59</sup> The Muileartach is described above as having a white mane; the darkness of her face may reflect the darkness of a stormy sea, her squint teeth may be as rocks, and her invulnerability to the sword and eventual sinking into a hole reflects the behaviour of water. Likewise, the smith's threat to remove Ireland altogether may, like some geological myth, reflect an understanding of the sea's ability both to swamp and erode land (cf. [I.3.b.](#)).

The *Fir Ghorma* (Blue Men) may have been another form of euhemerised sea god, rationalised in Christian times as the neutral angels who had fallen into the sea. *Sruth nam Fear Gorma* (The Minch of the Blue Men) lies between Lewis and the Shiant Isles. This stretch of water is notoriously dangerous with opposing tides causing standing waves. These were pictured as blue men with grey faces who would float, following boats, exposed from the waist up (cf. [I.3.b.](#)).<sup>60</sup>

#### THE LAND UNDER THE WAVES

How come that Am Baile Sear 'the eastern township' lies on the western coast of North Uist? The answer is that Am Baile Siar 'the western township' now lies below the waves. This happened in the 16th century when a five-mile land bridge which stretched to the Monach Islands was swept away.<sup>61</sup> We have already quoted Martin Martin's account in *Voyage to St Kilda* (1697) of a legendary female warrior who hunted on dry ground between St Kilda and Harris ([I.3.b.](#)). Angus and Patricia MacDonald comment:

The land names of the Outer Hebrides are gradually sinking below the Atlantic Ocean. This geological fact is reflected in and elaborated upon by local legends, one of which suggests that what is now the Atlantic seabed between the Outer Isles and St Kilda, 40 miles out to sea to the west, was once the hunting grounds of a Hebridean princess.<sup>62</sup>

When we consider the longevity of some of the Indo-European ideas fundamental to the Gaelic view of the world – for example ideas about kingship and the animism of the earth – it may even be that a myth about a land under the sea springs from a memory of Doggerland before the level of the North Sea rose about 6,000 BC. But while we may seek factual explanations, it should be

59. Clancy and Márkus, *Iona, the Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* (Edinburgh, 1994), 147.

60. John Gregorson Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, ed. Ronald Black (Edinburgh, 2005; 1st pub. as *Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (1900)), 107.

61. Hamish Haswell-Smith, *The Scottish Islands* (Edinburgh, 2004).

62. Angus and Patricia MacDonald, *The Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (London, 1991), 19.

remembered that the Celts enjoyed the inversions of the Otherworld – we need think only of the shoes placed on the wrong feet in a Hallstatt burial and the invisible journey of the sun during the night – and we can see a comparison between our land of forests and meadows and the land below the waves of seaweed and turquoise sand.

In the same way that Patrick consulted Oisean about the life on land before the arrival of Christianity, Colum Cille consults Mongán, son of Manannán, about what lies below the islands to the west and gets the following answer:

‘Fil firu fondmuriu folthliubru fóó, fil buu huathmuru alachtmaru fóó assa bint ngeime, fil damai daum dai, fil euchu eithdiu, fiul déichendua, fiul tréchendi ind-Eorup, i n-Aisia, i tirib ingnath hferund glaiss osa ilimel coa inbir.’

‘Lour cosiun,’ oul Colum Cille.

*‘There are underneath them tuneful long-haired men, there are terrible pregnant kine underneath them whose lowing is musical, there are herds of deer, there are horse-like horses, there are double-heads, there are triple-heads, in Europe, in Asia, in unknown lands, a green land above its many borders(?) to its estuary(?)’*

*‘Enough so far,’ said Colum Cille.*<sup>63</sup>

Though Colum Cille continued to discuss the mysteries of heaven and earth at length with Mongán, he refused to relate any of it to his monks. His secrecy regarding Mongán’s account of the land below the waves is similar to his silencing of Odhrán who reported that hell was not as bad as was said (see VI.2.). Both tales pretend disapproval of pagan tradition while in effect preserving it.

Like the Otherworld, the Land under the Waves can be visited by mortals, as was seen above when Ruadh son of Ríghdhonn of Munster slept with women for nine days under the sea before proceeding to Norway. A tale collected by J. F. Campbell in the 19th century, ‘Nighean Rígh fo Thuinn’, concerns Diarmaid’s pursuit of the Daughter of the King under the Waves. Typically of goddesses, she came to him as a hag but transformed herself into a beautiful maid. They live for a while in a palace, but when he has cast up at her three times the hag-like state in which he first found her, she returns wounded to the Kingdom under the Waves. He follows her, pulled below the waves by his dead deerhound (for this is the realm of the living dead) and cures her at the expense of his desire for her. He returns to the Fèinn with nothing to show for his adventure.<sup>64</sup>

63. 8th century; from Trinity College codex H.3.18, ed. in Kuno Meyer and A. Nutt, ‘The Colloquy of Colum Cille and the Youth at Carn Eolairg’, *ZCP* II (1899), 315–17.

64. J. F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* Vol. III (Hounslow, 1983), No. 86.

#### BIRLINN CHLANN RAGHNAILL

Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair’s ‘Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill’ describes a difficult voyage from South Uist to Carrickfergus in the 18th century. Ronald Black’s suggestion has already been discussed (in II.2.d.) that the crew’s navigation of the sea may be an allegory for the recovery of the clan after the ’45. What interests us here is the animation of the sea in the poem. To some, it may seem a Romantic instance of personification, but, in the context of Celtic mythology, there is nothing novel about seeing the sea as an untameable partner in man’s affairs. The sea is depicted as the duelling partner, *cèile-còmhraig*, of the crew as they cross over to Carrick Fergus. Sea and boat are personified or animated throughout the poem, and the sharing of epithets between the sea, boat and crew adds much to the poem’s intensity and compactness. As brine pours off the timbers of the boat, so too does sweat pour from the brows of the oarsmen. The sea is wounded by the stabbing of the oars, it groans and bellows and angrily twists the oars in its armpits. It is *bronnach* ‘big-bellied’ or ‘gluttonous’, describing both the bulging waves and their ability to swallow up boats and men. It is old with streaming grey hair and a shaggy matted coat. The boat too whinnies (*seitrich*) and cries; she has shoulders and thighs, and her oars are described as wide-palmed. She treads the ocean, leaving smooth water in her wake, and her prow laughs above the waves. Later, in extremis, her timbers and pegs groan and sigh, she throws off her roves in the turmoil and she is relieved by the slackening of her halyards and sheets. The men are fully armed and yet there is no mention of battle on arrival: the battle has been with the sea, fought with sail, tackle and timber rather than with sword and shield.

#### FRESH WATER

We find the same untameable element inhabiting rivers, lochs, wells and bogs as inhabited the sea, and the entire water system should be taken together. The water horses who beguile maidens to ride on their backs and then devour them in the depths of lochs exhibit the same destructive power as the earth goddesses in winter. They also serve the function of frightening small children away from dangerous water, for water both gives and takes life.<sup>65</sup> The *bean-nighe* ‘washerwoman’ seen washing bloody clothing in a river in advance of battle is a manifestation of a river goddess in benign mode, lamenting the dead of her territory.<sup>66</sup>

The sacredness of water from pre-Gaelic times is demonstrated by archaeology in the deposits of votive offerings found in rivers, lochs and bogs

65. For water horse stories, see J. G. Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, 109, 114–15.

66. See, for example, ‘A’ Chaoiteach’, in MacDougall and Calder, *Folk Tales and Fairy Lore* (Edinburgh, 1910), 214.





Carved stone balls from the Rivers Tay and Forth. © National Museums Scotland

all over the British Isles and Europe. In Scotland, votive offerings of Bronze Age weapons and Neolithic carved stone balls have been found in the River Tay and Forth, in Duddingston Loch and by a burn above Achna cloich in Skye.<sup>67</sup> Also in Skye, *Uamh an Àrd-Achaidh* in Strath combines a stream and a cave into which the ashes of sacrificed pigs were washed and where votive offerings were found.

In the same way that the water-worn stones used to build Newgrange came from the River Boyne, it is significant that the bell-shaped stones that represent the Cailleach's family in Glen Cailliche came from the River Lyon. The figure of the Ballachulish goddess was found near water, over-looking the dangerous straits where Loch Leven enters the sea.<sup>68</sup> Under the ramparts of the Pictish fort at Burghead on the Morayshire coast lies the Burghead Well entered through a vault. The awkwardness of access and the work involved in carving it out from the living rock suggests its purpose was ritualistic rather than domestic.

Bogs appear to have been symbolically interesting, in being land that was both wet and dry. In 1875, three swords from 800 BC were found plunged into a bog in Eilean Shona in Loch Moidart and in 2009 three gold torcs from 300–100 BC were found in a bog near Blair Drummond.<sup>69</sup> The central pillar of the sun-wheel under the cairn at Emain Macha or Navan likewise stood in a bog.<sup>70</sup> The symbolism of all these examples may represent the male principle (post, sun or sword penetrating the female principle represented by water).

Most if not all of those places denoted as *annaid/annat* 'an old church

67. Trevor Cowie and Mark Hall, 'A new look at the Late Bronze Age metalwork from the Tay', in *Carpow in Context: A Late Bronze Age Logboat from the Tay* (Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 2010), 151–62: <<https://canmore.org.uk/site/11414/skye-achnacloch>>.

68. <<http://www.nms.ac.uk/explore/stories/scottish-history-and-archaeology/balachulish-figure/>>.

69. <<http://www.nms.ac.uk/explore/stories/scottish-history-and-archaeology/iron-age-gold-torcs/>>.

70. John Waddell, 'Archaeology and Myth: An Exploration', *The Rhind Lectures*, for the Society of Antiquaries (Edinburgh, 2014), Lecture 4.

site' have an associated burn or river, pointing to the Christianisation of pagan sacred water sites. *Ach na h-Annaid* for example in Waternish in Skye is situated on a bluff of land at the confluence of two rivers, a place of particular potency. It has been used as a fort, a religious site and a shieling.

We have various examples of lochs – *Loch nam Bràithntean*, *Loch na Bràthad* etc. – named for the quern stones that lie hidden in their depths. These, however, were not votive offerings but a sign of economic coercion, when hand querns were thrown into lochs at the end of the 19th century to force tenants to use the landlord's mill for grinding their corn.<sup>71</sup>

#### RIVERS

The goddess names of most of the main rivers in Scotland have been noted in previous sections. Like the sea, they fill with fish in pleasure at their temporal lord, and flood in displeasure, as is well illustrated in classical praise poetry:

Táinig d'iomad iasg na n-inbhear  
gan úidh duine ar déanamh lín;  
lór d'a mholadh, mana reachta,  
toradh mara ag teacht a ttír.

*The fish of the estuaries are so abundant  
that no man thinks to make a net;  
sufficient his praise, a portent of his fitness:  
the produce of the sea swimming to shore.*<sup>72</sup>

The motif of a river rising to drown her people's foes is as old as 'Táin Bó Cuailgne', in which Glas Cuinn in Ulster rises against the Connacht army. A poem laments the murder of Dòmhnall Gorm MacDhòmhnaill of

The Ballachulish goddess. © National Museums Scotland: <<http://www.nms.ac.uk/explore/stories/scottish-history-and-archaeology/balachulish-figure/>>



71. Michael Given, *The Archaeology of the Colonized* (London, 2004), 146.

72. 'Maith an Chairt Ceannas na nGaoidheal', anonymous, in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 24.

Islay who was killed in the massacre of Scottish Gaelic settlers in County Mayo in 1586. The poet Ó Gnímh sees the river Moy's flooding as an act of grief and fury at the death of her mate:

Ar ccur chaor ttuaithfeal tairrsi  
d'uisce fhuar don abhoinnsi,  
mar budh uisge agus é ar goil  
rom thuitsi agus mé ar marthoin.

In tráth do bhí ag báthadh cháigh  
'n-a tuinn mhir budh mó ttormáin,  
budh mó tteinn, budh treisi sriobh,  
meisi san linn do loisceadh.

*After flooding with great billows  
of chill water widdershins –  
as if the water boiled –  
the river has felled me, though still living.*

*When she was drowning all  
as a frenzied wave of greatest tumult,  
of greatest tension, of strongest gush,  
it was then I was scalded in the water.*<sup>73</sup>

A more recent instance was cited in the newspaper *The Highlander* in 1887, when two rivers in Uig in Skye broke their banks and flooded in the direction of the house of an unpopular landlord, Captain Fraser. Not only were the waters rising against him, so too were the dead, who were unearched from their graves and washed up by his house.<sup>74</sup>

The importance of rivers to Gaelic culture was recognised by Alexander Runciman, who, inspired by Macpherson's *Ossian*, designed paintings for the drawing room of Penicuik House in 1772, Midlothian, destroyed by fire in 1899. The central panel on the ceiling showed *Ossian* singing in the landscape, surrounded by four separate panels depicting figures representing the rivers Spey, Tay, Clyde and Tweed, the source of his inspiration.<sup>75</sup>

The Irish poet Nuala Ní Dhómhnaill identifies herself with the river Shannon in her poem 'The Shannon Estuary Welcoming the Fish'.<sup>76</sup> The model from nature

73. 'Do Loisceadh Meisi sa Mhuaidh/I have been burnt in the Moy', in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 32.

74. Michael Newton, *A Handbook of the Scottish Gaelic World* (Dublin, 2000), 195.

75. Derick S. Thomson, *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1983), 12.

76. 'Fáilte Bhéal na Sionna don Iasc', in Dermot Bolger, ed., *The Bright Wave/An Tonn Gheal* (Dublin, 1986), 138–39.



Giuseppe Carelli, *Ossian's Hall* (1878), in Penicuik House, showing two of four allegorical river figures in the spandrels. Reproduced by kind permission of Sir Robert M. Clerk of Penicuik Bt

of a salmon being drawn by the water of the river in which it was spawned, combined with the model of the sexually proactive goddesses, gave the poet a confidence and forthrightness never allowed to women by the Catholicism in which she was raised.

#### WELLS

As part of the system of waterways, wells were both physical proof and a symbol of the life-giving powers of water. Every village had wells for domestic use, but additionally some six hundred wells throughout Scotland were known for their healing powers.<sup>77</sup> Their reputation was a combination of their particular mineral properties and of folk belief, latterly in the saints whose names were attached to the wells, and in earlier times, in the regenerative powers of the earth brought forth in the water. Wells have retained some of the characteristics of the fickleness associated with earth goddesses. They could flood, as we see in several geographical myths, for example in the creation of Loch Awe when Cailleach Bheur left the cover off her well on the top of Beinn Cruachan, and they could dry up if they were given reason for offence. Martin Martin describes

77. Fionnlagh MacLeòid, *Tobraichean Slàinte anns na h-Eileanan an Iar* (Steòrnabhagh, 2000).

a well that moved from Colonsay to Islay after a woman abused it by washing her hands in it; another moved outside a fence when a man sought to charge people for its use.<sup>78</sup> St Maol Ruibhe's well in Loch Maree is said to have dried up when someone sought a cure from it for a dog. These examples of the animism of wells are strange nowadays, but perfectly in keeping with a view of nature as essentially animate, with that animism particularly potent in water.

Practices described by Martin and others, such as the visiting of wells on quarter days, the making of sunwise circuits of the wells and of leaving offerings, would be seen as enhancing the powers of the earth embodied or visualised in the well. Thus a well was a potent witness to vows and could be asked for prognostications, blessings and fertility. In this last case, there may be a correlation between a well as a fruitful vagina of the earth and the hoped for fertility of a barren woman.

Nowadays we are suspicious of water in its raw state and chlorinate and purify it. In this way, we have largely lost sight of the particular properties of particular sources and of the well itself as an orifice of the earth, and most wells have become overgrown. The Scottish poet Valerie Gillies published *The Spring Teller: Poems from the Wells and Springs of Scotland* in 2008 following her visits to over one hundred wells. These she photographed and recorded and she wrote poems based on each one's 'sonic signature'. The title shows her aim in renewing interest in a tradition which provides more than water. She writes, 'Springwater is like poetry, its source is underground'.<sup>79</sup> A well, whether marked by a concrete cistern or a medieval well-house, is a visual reminder of certain saints' cults, and earlier, perhaps of people's belief in the earth's power to heal. There is nothing fanciful in recognising that different wells have different mineral properties that were known for being helpful in combating particular ailments. Mad Suibne in his distress went to Gleann na nGealt (The Glen of the Mad) in Co. Kerry, where the well has been found to contain lithium, still the standard medication for manic depression.<sup>80</sup>

In his poem 'An Tobar' (The Well), Derick Thomson illustrates the attenuation of Gaelic culture with the image of a choked-up well. Just as an old woman believes her youth could be restored by a drop of its water, so the speaker believes his culture would be restored by the people who had gathered there, had both well and people not been lost to time.<sup>81</sup>

78. Newton, *A Handbook of the Scottish Gaelic World*, 195.

79. Valerie Gillies, *The Spring Teller: Poems from the Wells and Springs of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2008).

80. 'Gleann na nGealt', documentary on TG4 (28 October 2012), made by Sibéal Teo.

81. Derick Thomson, *Creachadh na Clàrsaich: Collected Poems 1940–1980* (Glasgow, 1982).

## ISLANDS

Old Gaelic *Eachtraí* or adventures trace attempts by heroes to reach *Tír na nÓg* 'the land of the young', an island in the west corresponding with the sinking sun and therefore with death. The pagan Celtic belief system had no transcendent worlds: *Tír na nÓg* and the Otherworld were very much part of the globe, albeit out in the ocean or hidden below the surface. In the 9th-century *Tochmarc Étaíne* (The Wooing of Étaíne), Midir offers to take Étaíne away to an island where there is no Original Sin or possessiveness, the land of the living dead whose inhabitants see us while not being seen themselves. It is Adam's sin that has rendered them invisible to us and made mortals of us.<sup>82</sup>

The suggestion that islands may stand outside the usual social order survives into the modern period, allowing lovers to be together, even in adulterous situations:

Nach truagh mar a tà  
nach tàrla mis' agus thù  
ann an eilean gun tràigh,  
gun ràmh, gun choite, gun stiùir.

*Is it not a shame  
that you and I didn't happen to be  
on an island with no shore,  
no oar, no boat, no rudder.*<sup>83</sup>

Some island place-names such as Pabbay and Pappadil contain the Old Norse element *papi* 'hermit or monk', denoting a place which was or had been inhabited by hermits or monks. They bear witness to the practice of *peregrinatio pro Christo* when Gaelic monks retreated to deserted islands in imitation of the Desert Fathers withdrawing to the desert in Egypt. Additionally, certain islands are associated with certain saints who engaged in this practice: St Donnán with Eigg, Beccán with Rum, Moluag with Lismore, Taran with Taransay and of course Colum Cille with Iona. The 8th-century voyage tales or *immrama* looked on islands as good places, for they permitted sinners to become sinless through penance.<sup>84</sup> In a 12th-century poem attributed to Colum Cille, it is clear that more

82. Gerard Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics* (Oxford, 1956), No. 41.

83. 'Am Buachaille Bàn', in A. L. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2006), 342–43; see also 'Thug mi gaol dhut, thug mi gràdh', 399–400.

84. The point is made by the now sinless men of Ross who had murdered the king in 'Immram Snedghusa agus mhic Riaghla', ed. by Whitley Stokes: 'good are we without sin, without wickedness, without ... of our crime', 'The Voyage of Snedghus and Mac Riaghla', *Revue Celtique* IX (1888), 23.



than penance is at stake – pleasure and wonder at the natural order will inspire godliness in the beholder:

Delightful it would be on the breast of an island  
on a rocky clifftop,  
from there I could often ponder  
the calm of the ocean.

I'd see her heavy billows  
on glittering surface;  
as they sang thus to their Father  
in eternal surging ...

I'd see her noble birdflocks  
on the teeming ocean;  
I'd see her whales, the greatest  
of all wonders ...

I would bless the Lord Almighty  
who maintains all:  
heaven with its pure, loving orders,  
land, shore and water.<sup>85</sup>

The insularity of islands allows them to be envisaged entire and gives rise to many songs praising them and their people. For Fr Alan MacDonald (1859–1905) the insularity has the advantage of keeping Eriskay safe from worldly influence:

Ach 's e chuir air barrachd lurachd,  
Air gach tulach 's gleann deth,  
Dion na tuinne a bhith uime  
Cumail muigh na h-anntlachd.<sup>86</sup>

*But what makes its every knoll and glen even lovelier  
is the protection of the waves around it, keeping out wickedness.*

The isolation of islands is illustrated in a folktale concerning St Ronan who left Lewis for North Rona with his two sisters. When one of them discerns that her brother, a fertility saint, is lusting for her, she removes herself from his temptation to the next island of Sulasgeir, 11 miles to the west, where she dies of starvation (see I.2.a., IV.1.c. and V.2.b.).

85. 'Meallach liom bheith i n-ucht oiléin', in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 5.

86. William Watson, 1976, *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig, 1550–1900* (Inverness: An Comann Gàidhealach, [1918]), 8.

#### WATER IN TRADITIONAL SONG

Setting mythological interpretations aside, the sea has enormous practical implications for a people living on the Western seaboard. It was the mark of separation caused by emigration, Clearance, drownings and war service, and the means of reunions and the arrival of such influences as Christianity, the Vikings and the Jacobite hope enshrined in Bonnie Prince Charlie. In traditional Gaelic songs, the sea is envisaged primarily as it relates to human activity. Many songs lament a lover who is away at sea. This example, 'Gur toil leam fhìn thu', is from the 18th or early 19th century when a woman's lover has been taken away by the press gang:

Bha mi 'n raoir am bruadar cadail,  
's chunnaic mis' thu air bruach mo leapa;  
nuair a dhùisg mi anns a' mhadainn  
muir mòr nan tonn 's e gu mòr cur eadrainn.

*Last night I had a dream  
and I saw you at my bedside;  
when I awoke in the morning  
the great ocean's heavy waves divided us.<sup>87</sup>*

Many songs and poems are made by a woman worrying if her seafaring sweetheart will remain faithful to her. The theme was expressed in the learned tradition by Iseabail Ní Mheic Cailein in the 16th century:

Acht ní éadtrom gan a luing,  
sgéal as truaighe linn 'nar ndís:  
esan soir is mise siar,  
mar nach dtig ar riar a rís.

*But it won't be easy without his ship,  
for the two of us it's a wretched matter:  
he is East and I am West,  
so what we desire won't again happen.<sup>88</sup>*

In 'Dh'fhalbh mo rùn 's dh'fhàg e 'n cala' (My lover went away, he left the harbour), the girl is left in Islay while her lover goes to Ireland from where she hears rumours of a marriage despite the pledges they have given one another.<sup>89</sup> Sailing, with the happier outcome of marriage, is described in 'Òran Mòr

87. Anne Lorne Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2006), 200.

88. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 48

89. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 25; see also 15, 'Mo robairneach gaolach', where the same theme occurs.

Sgorabreac', when the young laird of Scorrybreck in Skye is pictured leaving his drinking hall to visit his sweetheart in Raasay:

Doilleir, dorch air oidhche reòthte,  
chaidh do bhàt' thar Rubha Rònaigh ...  
tro na caoil a-null a Bhròchaill  
dh'amharc maighdeann an òr-fhuilte.

*In the dark mirk of a freezing night  
your boat passed the Point of Rona,  
through the kyles across to Brochel,  
to visit the golden-haired maiden.<sup>90</sup>*

Burial grounds were often on islands and the sight of a coffin being carried away in a boat for burial (perhaps on Iona, Eilean Fhianain in Loch Sheil, Munda Island in Loch Leven or Handa off Scourie) becomes a motif of mourning, the intervening sea coming to symbolise the separation of death:

Chì mi luingeas air Caol Ìle  
tighinn a dh'iarraidh Cairistìona,  
chan ann gu banais a dhèanamh  
ach ga cur san talamh ìseal.

*I see ships on the Sound of Islay ...  
coming to get Cairistiona  
not to celebrate a wedding  
but to bury her low in the ground.<sup>91</sup>*

Laments and their associated stories vividly envisage drowned bodies, either washed up on the shore or lying on the bottom of the sea. The wife in *Ailein duinn, a nì 's a nàire* is told by a seagull where the bodies of her husband, father, three brothers and son lie:

Dh'fhàg mi iad san eilean mhara ...  
cùl ri cùl is iad gun anail,  
beul ri beul a' sileadh fala.

Eilean Fhianain in Loch Sheil. Photo  
© Meg Bateman



90. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 38.

91. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 28; see also 'Thoir mo shoraidh thar Ghunaigh', 31, where the same theme occurs.

*I left them in the isle of the sea ...  
back to back no longer breathing,  
mouth to mouth dripping blood.<sup>92</sup>*

A beloved body is envisaged being destroyed by the sea. The wife of a man who fell to his death while collecting eggs on the cliffs of St Kilda sings:

'S ann bha d' fhuil air a' chloich ud –  
bha do lot an dèidh leumaidh,  
bha thu muigh air bhàrr stuaighe  
's muir gad fhuasgladh o chèile.

*Your blood was on that stone –  
your wound had spurted out,  
you were out on a wave-top,  
with the sea tearing you asunder.<sup>93</sup>*

Alan Morrison was on his way to his engagement in 1773 in Scalpay when he was drowned and Anna Chaimbeul pictures him: *mucan-mara bhith gad reubadh* 'whales ripping you asunder'.<sup>94</sup> The story goes that Anna died of a broken heart, first swearing that she would only be laid to rest where Alan lay. It was seen to be in fulfilment of this wish that the crew taking her to Rodel for burial had to jettison her coffin in a storm, after which the bodies were found together on the Shiants.<sup>95</sup> Considering the strength of the currents in these seas, such an outcome would not be unlikely.

The story associated with the song 'A' Bhean Eudach' (The Jealous Woman) conforms to an international tale type though its setting is West Coast. It concerns a young wife, deceived by her jealous sister to go to gather dulse and limpets on the shore. Her sister ties her hair to the rocks while she sleeps, so she is drowned by the incoming tide. The song is in the mouth of the drowned woman who envisages her discovery the next day by her father and brothers, who will lift her out on their oars. If her one-year-old wants a drink, he will only get salt water from her breasts.<sup>96</sup>

For Donald MacIver (1857–1935), the composer of 'An Ataireachd Àrd' (The High Surge), the sea is the unchanging backdrop against which the human dramas of clearance and emigration have played out.<sup>97</sup> He was inspired to write

92. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 49.

93. 'Gura thall an Sòaigh', in Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 55.

94. Catherine Kerrigan, *An Anthology of Scottish Women Poets* (Edinburgh, 1991), 46–47.

95. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 50.

96. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 33–36.

97. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 74.

the poem when his uncle, who had emigrated to Canada in 1851, returned in his old age and said that the only thing not to have changed was the swell of the sea:

An ataireachd bhuan,	<i>The ceaseless surge,</i>
Cluinn fuaim na h-ataireachd àrd,	<i>Listen to the surge of the sea,</i>
Tha torann a' chuain	<i>The thunder of the ocean</i>
Mar chualas leamsa nam phàist,	<i>As I heard it when I was a child</i>
Gun mhùthadh gun truas	<i>Without change, without pity,</i>
A' sluaisreadh gainneimh na tràgh'd,	<i>Churning the sand of the beach,</i>
An ataireachd bhuan	<i>The ceaseless surge,</i>
Cluinn fuaim na h-ataireachd àrd.	<i>Listen to the surge of the sea.</i>

#### CONCLUSION

So how does water – both salt and fresh – figure in the Gaelic imagination and what continuities can we observe?

Because of its untamable nature, water is represented, like the land, by mostly female personages (with the exception of Manannán, Mongán, Seonaidh and water horses). Like the earth goddesses, they can be benign or malign in their attitude to man. The sea can bring seaware and fish or cause drownings in the form of the shaggy-haired Cailleach or the Muileartach; rivers are mostly named after goddesses and can supply fish and lament the dead of their territory in the form of a *bean-nighe* or flood and unearth graves in anger; wells can heal or take an insult and dry up. We can trace the longest continuity in the practice of propitiating water: from the Bronze Age hoards cast into lochs and bogs to the practice of pouring ale or porridge on the sea, attested from the 18th and 19th centuries, not to mention the still current custom of offering gifts to and tying rags round wells.

The sea is prevalent in much of the human drama that gives rise to song. Being the cause, so it becomes a palpable symbol of the pain and separation involved in emigration, drownings, burials (which often took place on islands) and the loss of people to the press gang and work in the merchant navy. Some of the best songs are sailing songs, composed to a rolling 6/8 rhythm by sailors feeling homesick on the high seas.

A continuity of belief can be seen between the view of *Tìr nan Òg* as an island where the sun goes down inhabited by the ever young and the Christian view in the Voyage literature of heaven as an island of birdsong and apple trees in the western ocean. It seems then that it was not only the Desert Fathers' practice of retreat into the desert that inspired Gaelic monks to retreat into the ocean, but also that the otherworldliness of islands had long been established in the pagan tradition. MB

#### III.1.c. ENVISAGING THE SKY

[Introduction](#); [The Sky in Poetry](#); [The Solar Myth](#); [The Sky in Christian Symbolism](#); [Pantheism](#); [Weather Forecasting](#); [Observance of the Moon in Agricultural Practice](#); [The Names of the Stars](#); [Conclusion](#)

#### INTRODUCTION

An iarmailt cho soilleir tana  
mar gum biodh am brat-sgàile air a reubadh  
's an Cruthaidhear na shuidhe am fianais a shluaigh  
aig a' bhuntàt 's a sgadan,  
gun duine ris an dèan E altachadh.  
'S iongantach gu bheil iarmailt air an t-saoghal  
tha cur cho beag a bhacadh air daoine  
sealltainn a-steach dhan an t-sìorraidheachd;  
chan eil feum air feallsanachd  
far an dèan thu chùis le do phrosbaig.

*The atmosphere clear and transparent  
as though the veil had been rent  
and the Creator were sitting in full view of His people  
eating potatoes and herring,  
with no man to whom He can say grace.  
Probably there's no other sky in the world  
that makes it so easy for people  
to look in on eternity;  
you don't need philosophy  
where you can make do with binoculars.<sup>98</sup>*

Derick Thomson's playful poem, 'Leòdhas as t-Samhradh' (Lewis in Summer), suggests that the skies of the Western Isles are so clear as to give the inhabitants particular access to the transcendent, perhaps alluding to the vigour of theological debate among the Gaels. Gaelic poetry bears ample testimony to the presence and drama of the skies of the Western seaboard, borne of a large water content, few high buildings or trees to block out the view of the sky, the reflectiveness of the sea and an absence of light pollution. In [I.3.a.](#), latitude and light were discussed in largely naturalistic terms; in this section, it is considered how they are manifested in the imagination.

98. 'Leòdhas as t-Samhradh', in Ruairidh MacThòmais, *Creachadh na Clàrsaich/ Plundering the Harp* (Edinburgh, 1982), 218.



## THE SKY IN POETRY

The effects of the light are a constant source of imagery to the poets of Sorley MacLean's generation. In Sorley MacLean's 'Camhanaich' (Dawn), the light amplifies the delicate beauty of a woman; great banks of cumulous clouds are seen as castle ramparts by George Campbell Hay, and hence as an objective correlative for the splendour of God ('Na Baidealan'); and the same type of cloud represents the false and insubstantial visions that lured Derick Thomson away from his native Lewis ('Sgòthan'). In MacAulay's poem 'Leisgeul' (Excuse), the sound of a lark trilling in the May sky epitomises the incomparable joy of youthful innocence. Several poets stress the indifference of the skies to the doings of man. The reflection of the pale moon on the snaky sea at the beginning of MacLean's 'A' Chorra-Ghritheach' (The Heron) typifies a relationship of aloofness. Likewise, in Hay's 'Bisearta', the horrors of war in Tunisia in 1943 'believe and deny / the ancient high tranquility of the stars', and Thomson pictures seeing a star through the rafters of houses burnt in the Strathnaver Clearances ('Srath Nabhair'). The pale indifference of the moon is an image that runs through Iain Crichton Smith's work, often to be contrasted by the intense colour of foliage.<sup>99</sup>

For Sorley Maclean, the stars are his most pervasive symbol of the unreachable ideal that man longs for but cannot attain, and astral bodies represent unanswerable questions and the unknowable. But for the Jacobite poets, Iain MacLachlan and Rob Donn, a new star rising at the time of the birth of Bonnie Prince Charlie was seen as a messianic omen presaging fortune, God's grace and the direction the prince was to take.<sup>100</sup> In earlier song poetry, before the rupture of Clearance, it would be impossible for the sky, as part of nature, to be indifferent to the circumstances of man. The change in weather anticipated in 'Òran a Rinneadh an 1746' (A Song Made in 1746), presaging the coming of the Prince, would immediately be understood as confirming his fitness for rule.

'S fuar fearthainneach gach lò,  
Gach oidhche dorcha doineannach,  
'S tùrsach donn gach lò,  
Murtaidh trom le ceò ...

Thig soineann leis an Rìgh,  
Teichidh sneachd is eighre uainn;  
Fògrar dòrainn shìon,  
Thig solas, falbhaidh pian.

99. All examples from Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh, *Nua-Bhàrdachd Ghàidhlig/Modern Scottish Gaelic Poems* (Edinburgh, 1976), 156ff., 208ff., 122ff., 152ff.

100. See poems by John MacLachlan and Rob Donn in John Lorne Campbell, *Songs of the Forty-Five*, Scottish Gaelic Texts Society Vol. 15 (Edinburgh, 1933; repr. 1984), 5 and 233.

*Cold, rainy is each day,  
each night is dark and stormy,  
sad and dull each day  
with thick oppressive mist ...*

*The King will bring fine weather,  
snow and frost will flee from us,  
and storms be driven out,  
joy will come and pain will go.*<sup>101</sup>

The opposite may be seen in a poem lamenting the deaths in rapid succession of two chiefs of Clann Raghnaill, Ailean mac Ruairidh (d. 1509) and his son Raghnaill Bàn (d. 1513), that states that the sun is locked so tight in mourning that no blossom has come through the tips of the boughs.<sup>102</sup> Poor weather presages mishap in a song about the battle of Carinish (1601), 'A Mhic Iain Mhic Sheumais', in which the leader of the MacDonalds was wounded:

On latha thug thu an cuan ort  
Laigh gruaim air na beannaibh.

Laigh smal air na speuran,  
Dh'fhàs na reultan salach.

*Since the day you took to the ocean | darkness has lain on the mountains.  
The skies look gloomy, | the stars have grown murky.*<sup>103</sup>

The sky's involvement with the affairs of man reflects the same animism as we have seen in the preceding sections on the land and water. Like the Sea-maiden, the Daughter of the Skies in the traditional story 'Nighean Rìgh nan Speur' is a stealer of children.<sup>104</sup> As the Sea-maiden has designs on a poor fisherman's son, the Daughter of the Skies abducts a woman's three babies and her husband before she is tricked into giving them up for magic scissors, needle and thread. In both these stories, a supernatural female (whether of the sea or sky) desires human children. The motif is similar to fairies taking babies in changeling stories, which have been interpreted as showing the need of the fallen angels for a human soul to give them a chance to regain heaven. Perhaps

101. Derick S. Thomson, *Gaelic Poetry in the Eighteenth Century* (Aberdeen: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1993), 52.

102. 'Scotland is Defenceless after Ailean', v. 15, in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire* (Edinburgh, 2007), No. 31.

103. Colm Ó Baoill and Meg Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach* (Edinburgh, 1994), 50.

104. John Francis Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (Edinburgh, 1994), Vol. I, No. XII.

all three, the Sea-maiden, the Daughter of the Skies and the fairies, should be understood as types of the destructive and non-social aspects of the goddess, whether in the sea, sky or land.

#### THE SOLAR MYTH

The solar myth which informs Gaelic ideas of kingship and the Otherworld predates Gaelic civilisation by many millennia. It sees the sun as the male principle, the earth as the female principle, and their union as productive of fertility. We have already mentioned the symbolism of the sunlight penetrating many prehistoric cairns such as Newgrange and Maes Howe (see IV.1.c.). Other monuments of sun observation can be seen in the sun wheels below the cairn at Emain Macha and the Glebe Cairn at Kilmartin, Argyll, and the sun pillar found at Tara. East-west alignments of significant landmarks were noted for pointing to sunrise and sunset at the equinoxes or solstices. One such is at Knocknarea in Ireland, taking in Loch Gill in the east, Cairn Hill (associated with the Dagda) and Maeve's Cairn in the west. Less well known is a similar east-west alignment in the Lothians. From Arthur's Seat, sunrise and sunset can be seen at the equinoxes over the hills of Traprain Law in the east and Cairnpapple in the west. Philip Coppens connects this with the derivation of 'Lothians' from *Loth* or *Lleu*, the Welsh version of Lugh. About 600, the poet Aneirin calls the Gododdin, a tribe based first on Traprain Law and then on the rock of Edinburgh Castle, 'the people of the fortress of Lleu'.<sup>105</sup> Another alignment has been noted at Kintraw in Argyll, where the setting of the winter solstice sun could be viewed around the Paps of Jura from a prehistoric viewing platform on the hillside, the sight-line taking in a cairn and a standing stone.<sup>106</sup>

The apparent movement of the sun from east to west over the earth, and from west to east under the earth, gave rise to prehistoric designs of the sun being pulled in opposing directions by a chariot, a boat or birds. John Waddell suggests that disguised solar symbolism is involved in the opposing circular designs with birds' heads found on the Battersea shield, Petrie Crown (1st century BC or AD), Torrs Pony Cap and on the backs of several [Iron Age mirrors](#), the mirrors themselves representing the sun.<sup>107</sup>

105. Philip Coppens, *Land of the Gods: How a Scottish landscape was sanctified to become Arthur's Camelot* (Norwich, 2007).

106. Euan W. MacKie, 'The Midwinter Sunset Alignment at Kintraw, Argyll: A response', *Past Horizons* (16 January 2014): <<https://web.archive.org/web/20171126164305/http://www.pasthorizonspr.com/index.php/archives/01/2014/midwinter-sunset-alignment-kintraw-argyll>> – accessed 24 September 2020.

107. 'The Otherworld Hall on the Boyne', 2nd Rhind Lecture given to the Society of Antiquaries in Edinburgh, 2014: <[www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLomxmmDt-nmJ3-aamnxH5P58KDGgXq5d](http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLomxmmDt-nmJ3-aamnxH5P58KDGgXq5d)> – accessed 8 March 2017.



The Torrs Pony Cap, National Museum of Scotland

We have already commented on the fire festivals which marked the seasons by honouring the sun. Lughnasa was further marked by the ascent of a hill, fighting, sexual license and bull sacrifice.<sup>108</sup> These last three rituals reflected Lugh fighting the Fomorians, those representatives of chaos, and his bringing of fertility to the earth. While the bull sacrifices on Isle Maree are well attested, it seems likely that Slioch, the hill beside Loch Maree<sup>109</sup>, might have been climbed as part of the sun festival of Lughnasa.

In the literary record, the symbolism of the sun impregnating the earth appears in the tale of the conception of Cú Chulainn, 'Compert Chon Culainn', when the sun god Lugh and the tribal god Conchobhar compete to impregnate Deichtire (good land) in Brú na Bóinne. In the Scottish literary record, chiefs and mythical heroes are frequently compared to the sun, in this case, Fearghas: *Mac-samhail don ghrèin a chruth* (The counterpart of the sun his appearance).<sup>110</sup>

108. Máire MacNeill, *The Festival of Lughnasa* (Oxford, 1962).

109. Coppens, *Land of the Gods: How a Scottish landscape was sanctified to become Arthur's Camelot*, Chap. 1.

110. John Gregorson Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV (London, 1891), 111.



Slioch beside Loch Maree. Photo © Visit Scotland/P Tomkins

#### THE SKY IN CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM

Turning from one cosmology to another, the appearance of the sky gives one of the most common illustrations for Christian teaching. Light is a common image in the Bible. Isaiah says, 'The people who walked in darkness have seen a marvellous light' (Isaiah 9:1), interpreted by Christians as a symbol of the Messiah, and the image is carried on in the Ambrosian hymn 'Paschale mundo gaudium' of the 4th or 5th century which compares the resurrected Christ to the newly risen sun of Easter morning. Such light symbolism was frequently used of Colum Cille. Dallán Forgaill (c. 597) wrote that under Columba's influence the northern land shone: *lassais tír túath*; Beccán of Rum (d. 677) describes him, in addition to being a candle and a flame, as the sun of clerics that pierced the midnight of Erc's region.<sup>111</sup> In Adamnán's *Vita*, an angelic light from heaven frequently illuminates the saint, and he describes a pillar of light seen from Ireland on the day of the saint's death that lit up the whole sky.<sup>112</sup>

The weather provides a frequent trope in Classical Gaelic religious poetry for the scheme of redemption. After the rain of Christ's blood at the Passion, a period of fine weather marks our release from sin brought about by the Virgin

111. 'Amra Choluimb Chille' and poems of Beccán mac Luigdeach, in Clancy and Márkus, *Iona, The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* (Edinburgh, 1994), 106–07.

112. Adamnán of Iona, *Life of St Columba*, transl. Richard Sharpe (London, 1995), 219, 221, 229, 231.

who was pure enough to receive God. It is during this dry spell that man is advised to make peace with God, for there will be no other dry spell when the gathering storm-clouds of Christ's reopened wounds will break at Judgement. A variant of this metaphor links the new moon with the advent of fine weather, the old moon of Christ's anger having sunk when He became beholden to humanity through Mary.<sup>113</sup>

The signs of Judgement over the final fifteen days of the earth were known at least to the Classical Gaelic poets and were vividly imagined with both deluge and fire.<sup>114</sup> In the 18th century, Dùghall Bochanan derived the details of the Day of Judgement largely from the Revelation of St John, adding some of his own. The Day of Judgement is to start with a red sky presaging bad weather:

'N sin fàsaidh ruadhach anns an speur,  
mar fhàir' na maidne 'g èirigh dearg,  
ag innse gu bheil Ìosa fhèin  
a' teachd na dhèidh le latha garbh.

*Then the sky will grow ruddy,  
like the dawn rising red,  
telling that Jesus himself  
is coming in its wake with a rough day.*

He envisages the seas and rivers evaporating in the heat, the landscape melting like wax and molten metals pouring out of hills.

An cùrtean gorm tha nunn on ghrèin,  
's mun cuairt don chruinne-chè mar chleòc,  
crupaidh an lasair e r' a chèil'  
mar bheilleig air na h-èibhlibh beò.<sup>115</sup>

*The blue curtain spread out from the sun  
and round the universe like a cloak,  
the flame will wrinkle it up  
like birch-tree bark on live embers.*

#### PANTHEISM

While Christ and Mary may be symbolised as the sun and moon in religious poetry, the sun and moon are addressed and praised directly in *Carmina Gadelica*:

113. Meg Bateman, 'The Themes and Images of Classical Gaelic Religious Poetry', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Aberdeen (1991), 42.

114. Lambert McKenna, *Dioghluim Dána* (Dublin, 1938), No. 29, vv. 3–22.

115. Dùghall Bochanan, *Dàin Spioradail* (Glasgow, 1946), 18–19.



Sùil Dhè mhòir ...      *The eye of the great God ...*  
 Glòir dhut fhèin, a ghrèin,      *glory to thee, thou sun,*  
 A ghnùis Dhè nan dùl.      *face of the God of life.*<sup>116</sup>

Carmichael quotes his informant describing men doffing their hats on seeing the sun and women inclining to the moon. Notwithstanding the caution required in interpreting his sources, these fragments raise interesting questions about the ‘cosmic piety’ of Gaelic Christianity. A song in praise of Cruach Narachain in Argyllshire by Ailean Buidhe (MacDougall) in the 18th century describes the hunter climbing the peaks on a May morning: *Gur moch a nì e ùrnaigh, / A’ sìor thoirt cliù don ghrèin* (making an early prayer in constant praise of the sun).<sup>117</sup> The present author knows of instances in the 20th century of a crofting woman who would camp on Beinn Sgritheall in Kintail to greet the summer solstice sunrise and other women in Skye who would gather at a bonfire to mark the shortest night.

At the very least, the equation of God with the physical universe gives a panentheistic or neo-Platonic vision of the cosmos in which God is present in His creation. Thus, a request in an 8th-century *lorica* for God’s protection invokes parts of that creation:

Atomriug indiu      *Today I gird myself*  
 niurt nime,      *with the strength of heaven,*  
 soilsi gréne,      *light of the sun,*  
 étrochtaí éscái.      *brightness of the moon.*<sup>118</sup>

The same idea occurs in a song about eight hundred years later when signs of propitiousness are evoked by Donald Gorm’s nurse in ‘Tàladh Dhòmhnail Ghuirm’ (Donald Gorm’s Lullaby). She envisages him on a ship with his cup coming sunwise to him and with the powers of the world and sun behind him:

Nearn na cruinneadh leat, nearn na grèineadh ...

*Might of the world with you, might of the sunshine ...*<sup>119</sup>

Even as late as the 19th century, Dòmhnall nan Òran represents the sun as an animate, moral force. In his poem to the sun, ‘Dàn don Ghrèin’, when he upbraids the sun for not defending Christ at the Passion, the sun explains that it

116. Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* III (Edinburgh, 1940), 307 and 287.

117. ‘Òran Molaidh Cruaich Narachain’, v. 5, in Patrick Turner, *Comhchruinneacha do dh’òrain taghta Ghaidhealach* (Dunaidionn, 1813), 214–17.

118. ‘Patrick’s Breastplate’, anonymous, in John Carey, *King of Mysteries* (Dublin, 2000), 132–33.

119. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, 68.

would have attacked His persecutors had Christ not appealed to it to treat them with clemency.<sup>120</sup>

#### WEATHER FORECASTING

*Màirnealachadh*, the forecasting of weather, is of course of great importance in any pastoral, fishing and hunting society. The term in Gaelic refers particularly to forecasting the weather by the appearance of the sky and clouds.<sup>121</sup> The dark cloud, the *tarbh-coill*, for example, if seen on New Year’s Eve, portended a stormy season.<sup>122</sup> Some observations were given greater gravitas by being set in Fenian tales:

Ruthadh shuas an àm laighe  
 Dh’èireadh Fionn moch sa mhadainn;  
 Ruthadh shuas sa mhoch-mhadainn,  
 Dhèanadh Fionn an ath-chadal.

*With a rosy sky at bedtime, Fingal would rise early;  
 with a rosy sky at dawn, he would take another sleep.*

Numerous signs of rain were noted, from the hooting of the owl to a cap (of mist) on the hills.<sup>123</sup> Seòras Chaluum Sheòrais or George MacLeod gives pages of sayings forecasting weather, *seann eòlas air comharran tìde*, in *Muir is Tìr* (2005). Prognostication is about discerning patterns and every attempt was made to establish regularity. The new moon was associated with change in weather which was observed to persist until the next phase of the moon. Change could also be forecast in the appearance of clouds: in *craobhan* streaming upwards from the horizon or by a *crò*, a V-shaped formation which showed from which direction the wind would come. Gales were associated with spring tides and were expected to last three days. Less dependable was the belief in certain weather falling on particular days of the week. Unusual signs denoting bad weather were the appearance of a ring round the sun or moon, *buaille*; a sun dog or mock sun, *grianan*; a dog-tooth rainbow, *gath doinninn*; a green sky, *adhar uaine*; or the sun’s rays appearing in bars, *casa cearbain*.<sup>124</sup>

Martin Martin preserves some of the lore attached to prognostication of weather through the observation of birds. The singing of the ‘gawlin’ (Brent goose) foretells fair weather, while the rain goose ‘makes a doleful noise before

120. ‘Dàn don Ghrèin’, in Domhnall MacLeòid, *Dàin agus Orain* (Glascho, 1871), 6–9.

121. See Dwelly, under *màirneal* ‘pilot’.

122. Alexander Nicolson, *Gaelic Proverbs* ([1881]; Edinburgh, 1996), 369.

123. Nicolson, *Gaelic Proverbs*, 401, 380 and 397.

124. Seòras Chaluum Sheòrais/George MacLeod, *Muir is Tìr* (Stornoway, 2005), 83–96.

great rain' and the flocking of the 'goylir' (Arctic gull) presages a storm. He notes too that hot, dry weather hinders birds from laying their eggs, while damp warm weather encourages them.<sup>125</sup> He calls the Cuillin the 'husbandman's almanac' for the signs it gives of ensuing weather. He observes that a wind from the south can make the land to the north of the Cuillin wet, though land in the other three directions remains dry.<sup>126</sup> He describes the effects of different winds, the women in Skye finding their breasts contracted and their milk reduced during a north wind. He also discusses beliefs about the procuring of good weather. Sea-bound fishermen on Fladda Chuain, for example, rubbed a blue stone on the altar of St Columba's church to obtain a favourable wind; and in North Uist, a water cross was erected to procure rain, then lowered when it had rained enough.<sup>127</sup>

Fairy belief had its place in explaining unusual effects in the sky. It was said that the Northern Lights, *Na Fir Chlis*, constituted some of the fallen angels and that their fighting resulted in red lichen growing on rocks.<sup>128</sup> An eddying wind or *oiteag shuaigh*, blowing on an otherwise calm day, was thought to mark the passage of fairies, invisibly carrying off a person, animal or possession (see I.3.c.). Throwing the left shoe or something made of iron into the wind could get them to drop their prize. When rain and sun occurred at the same time, the fairies were said to be eating, and when rain and wind seemed to come from opposite directions, the fairies could be brought down by throwing dung into the air.<sup>129</sup>

Will o' the wisp, a light appearing over marshes, is known by various terms in Gaelic. *Teine sionnachain* links it with the same phosphorescence as is seen at sea. Another two terms, *teine biorach* and *diobardan* refer to its pointed and spiraling form. Its personification came from the observation that it followed people but receded when approached.<sup>130</sup> By the time the Rev. John MacRury was reporting on folk belief in 1894, the old animism connected with nature was felt to be threatening:

125. Martin, Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, ed. Donald J. Macleod ([1698]; Edinburgh, 1994), 141–42.

126. Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, 220.

127. Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, 217 and 131.

128. *Na Fir Chlis* was one third of the fallen angels, along with *na fir ghorma* in the sea and *na sithichean* on land (J. G. Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, ed. by Ronald Black (Edinburgh, 2008), 107.

129. J. G. Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, 13.

130. The phenomenon is not completely understood; some think it comes from methane, and others from the spontaneous combustion of phosphorus-containing substances arising from the decay of organic material on contact with oxygen.



*An Teine Mòr*  
(Will o' the Wisp),  
Ignis Fatuus,  
Study 3.  
© Frang Dushaj

Nam biodh fear na ònar ag iomradh eathair anns an oidhche dhuibh, dhuirche, thigeadh 'An Teine Mòr' gu bog, balbh na rathad, agus shuidheadh e gu socrach air sgruig-dheiridh an eathair. Ach cha bu luaithe a bhuaileadh sròn an eathair tìr na bheireadh 'An Teine Mòr' e fhèin às ... Ged nach d' rinn e cron air neach riamh, gidheadh bha eagal an cridhe aig gach neach roimhe, do bhrìgh gu robh iad a' creidsinn nach b' ann o nì math sam bith a dh'èirich e."<sup>131</sup>

*If a person was rowing by himself on a dark night, the 'Big Light' would come silently his way and sit itself down on the sternpost of the boat. But no sooner would the boat touch land than the 'Big Light' would take itself off. Though it never harmed anyone, nevertheless people were terrified of it, because they believed that it came from nothing good.*

#### OBSERVANCE OF THE MOON IN AGRICULTURAL PRACTICE

Today we are often oblivious to the moon's movements, but in pre-electric times the moon was an important source of light for night activities such as fishing (see I.2.a.). The moon was often simply termed the 'light', *solais*, and the nights were divided into the dark and the light phase: *an rath dorcha* and *an rath solais*.<sup>132</sup> The new moon is envisaged as a beak or horn in *gob soillse* or *adharc nan ùir* ('the beak of light' or 'the new horn'); a gibbous moon, either on the wax

131. An t-Urr. Iain MacRuairidh, 'Seana Bheachdan agus Seana Chleachdaidhean, I agus II, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* XXI (1896–1897), 369–79, and XXII (1897–1898), 125–40.

132. *Rath for ràith?* (Seòras Chaluum Sheòrais/George MacLeod, *Muir is Tìr*, 75).

or wane, is termed *crotach* 'hunch-backed'; and the full harvest moon, *Buidheag mhòr na Fèill Micheil* 'the big yellow one of Michaelmas', was believed to be bright enough to help ripen the crops, as its by-name *gealach an abachaidh* 'the moon of ripening' implies. This moon was also known as *gealach bhuidhe nam broc* 'the yellow moon of the badgers', by which the badger collects its winter bedding.<sup>133</sup>

Certain practices, such as the cutting of peat, timber and rushes, were felt to be better accomplished when the moon was waning: it is possible that the moon draws up the oil in peat as it does the tide and that timber and rushes become less brittle. The castration of beasts and the sowing of vegetable seeds were also carried out on the wane. Birds hatched on the moon's increase were said not to thrive, while eggs laid on the wane might be kept for hatching. It was for this reason that sickly children, Gregorson Campbell reports, were termed *eòin an fhàs* 'the birds of the increase'.<sup>134</sup> Martin Martin reports that a rock in the Sound of Eilean Glas on the east side of Harris had a vacuity which increased and decreased with the moon, and that a man in Rodel went blind at every new moon.<sup>135</sup>

#### THE NAMES OF THE STARS

The names of constellations in Gaelic generally have the same connotations as their Latinate counterparts in English but are more transparent in meaning. Hence *An Reith* (the ram) is Aries, *An Gobhar* (the goat) is Capella, *An Nathair-nimhe* is Scorpio. However, a few constellations have quite different connotations: the Milky Way is known as *Slighe* (or *Bogha*) *Chlann Uisnich* 'the path (or bow) of the Children of Uisneach'; the Plough, *An Crann-arain*, is also known as *Còig Gadhair Osgair* (Oscar's five hounds), the three stars of Orion's Belt are *An Gille, an Cù agus an Sgalag* (the boy, the dog and the servant), and Cassiopeia is sometimes known as *A' Chathair* (the chair), reflecting the older name for the constellation, Cassiopeia's Chair. Orion, *An Sealgair* 'the hunter', is envisaged with dagger, purse and plaid blowing away to his left (*biodag, sporan* and *breacan*). The Pleiades, *An Grioglachan*, and the Bear are both known as *An Seachdran*, referring to the appearance of seven stars in each.<sup>136</sup>

Long before the invention of the compass or before the Vikings reached the British Isles, Gaelic monks navigated their ways by the stars, certainly as far as Iceland and Greenland, and maybe as far as Canada. The Pole Star (*Am Bàrr-*

133. J. G. Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, 571.

134. Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, 222; see also J. G. Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, 571.

135. Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, 118.

136. Seòras Chaluum Sheòrais/George MacLeod, *Muir is Tìr*, 76.

*Reult*) was of prime importance with its two pointers, Tulga and Talga, at the front of the Plough. Other Gaelic star names relate to their colour and magnitude. *An Spor Dearg* (the red flint) is the red supergiant Betelgeuse in Orion, whose name means 'the hand of the giant' in Arabic. *An Spor Liath* (the blue flint) is blue-white Rigel, whose name in Arabic means 'the foot of the giant'.

Aldebaran, the brightest star in Taurus, whose name in Arabic means 'the follower of the Pleiades', is known in Gaelic as *Aibhseag*, 'the boasting one'. Though Spica 'the ear of corn' and Antares 'the rival of Mars' are both the brightest stars in their constellations of Virgo and Scorpio, their Gaelic names probably relate to their being variable stars whose magnitude fluctuates. In Gaelic, Spica is *Falachag* 'the hidden one' and Antares is *Sgleodhag* 'the dim one'.<sup>137</sup> The observation of stars' cycles is evident in *In Tenga Bithnua*, an early Gaelic version of a lost 4th- or 5th-century Egyptian Apocalypse of Philip. The Gaelic version describes stars circling the world between certain hours and then 'waxing into weakness', while others run for fifty years 'when a time of slumber comes to them'.<sup>138</sup>

Finally, a riddle invites us to look at the night sky as a colander with the light of heaven peeping through the holes:

Mias mhòr fheòdair 's ceud toll òir innte – an t-adhar.

*A pewter bowl with one hundred holes in it – the sky.*<sup>139</sup>

A similar image from Classical Gaelic poetry sees the night sky as a pierced gaming board, *clàr fhoirne nimhe*, through which the light of heaven shines.<sup>140</sup> This view came into European Scholasticism ultimately from the Mesopotamian model of the concentric spheres of the seven heavens surrounded by the light of God.

#### CONCLUSION

The vast island skies, uninterrupted by trees or streets, remain one of the principal sources of imagery in modern Gaelic poetry. The sky has long been scrutinised in the Highlands for both practical and spiritual purposes, though

137. John Douglas Pringle, *The Last Shenachie* (Sydney, 1976), 11; Alasdair Caimbeul, *An Fear Meadhanach* (Druim Fraoich, 1992), 15; Iain Aonghas MacLeòid, eadar-th., *Reul-Eòlas, le Pàdraig Moore* (Ayrshire, 1997).

138. Carey, *King of Mysteries*, 88–89.

139. *Aithris is Oideas* (London: The Scottish Council for Research in Education, 1964), Nos. 149 and 147.

140. Nicholas Williams, *The Poems of Giolla Brìghde Mac Con Midhe* (Dublin, 1980), No. 21, v. 26.



such a division is a modern one. It has been important in weather forecasting for fishing and agriculture (in which the phase of the moon is particularly important). Exceptional phenomena such as the Northern Lights and Will o' the wisp have been incorporated into fairy belief.

The names of stars largely reflect Classical learning and are often translations of the Latin or Arabic. However, sometimes they arise from independent observation, as in the names *An Spor Dearg* and *An Spor Liath* for Betelgeuse and Rigel respectively, or reflect Gaelic mythology, so that the Milky Way becomes *Bogha Clann Uisneach* 'the Bow of the Children of Uisneach'.

As part of nature, the sky, like the land and water discussed in the previous two sections, is given a certain animism observable in stories about the Daughter of the Skies and, more particularly, in the common response of the weather to the right ruler, whether in clan or Jacobite poetry. This topos is ultimately based on the pre-Celtic solar myth in which the sun and earth make up the male and female principles that together produce fertility. Observation of the disappearance of the sun at night gave rise to the inversions of the Otherworld and in the swirling circles of La Tène art. The solar myth, evidence of which can be seen in burial cairns, structures built on hills aligned east-west and Lughnasa practices, was easily transferred to images for Christ, and that in turn led to the early Gaelic Christian poets using light as a symbol of Colum Cille and other saints. The solar myth, perhaps combined with a Neoplatonic sense of God being present in all of creation, endured in practices of sun worship and belief in its protective power until recent times. MB

### III.1.d. SUIBNE GEILT – MAD SWEENEY

[Introduction: Suibne and Scotland; Suibne, the Owl of Strone and Later Gaelic Literature; Conclusion](#)

#### INTRODUCTION: SUIBNE AND SCOTLAND

The visual aspects of the Suibne story are striking, particularly as they bear upon the relationship between man and nature (see [III.1.a.](#), [III.1.b.](#), [III.2.](#) and [VI.3.](#)). It is no doubt partly for this reason that Seamus Heaney's revised version of his translation was accompanied by a series of photographs by Rachel Giese of some of the terrain referred to in the tale.<sup>141</sup> The strong links between the Suibne saga and Scotland, including the Gàidhealtachd, mean that its powerful imagery should have an important presence in any study of the visual in the Gaelic-speaking world.

141. Seamus Heaney and R. Giese, *Sweeney's Flight* (London 1992).

Much has been made of mad Suibne in Irish literature by W. B. Yeats, Flann O'Brien, Heaney and others. In Scotland, the tale is known primarily to academics, though it was translated into modern Scottish Gaelic, and English, by Uilleam Néill in 1974 and Rody Gorman has made a striking and innovative version in Irish and Scottish Gaelic and English (see [II.2.b.](#)).<sup>142</sup> Néill introduces his translations by claiming that the story is 'air a filleadh ann an dùthchas nan Albannach' – folded into the heritage of the Scots.<sup>143</sup>

Néill was justified in this claim. For a start, Suibne is sometimes portrayed as a Dalriadic Scot:

Suibne is é an fer fartalach . aife tri immain een luge,  
is innmain an t-Albanach . na tabair taob re duine.<sup>144</sup>

*Sweeney is a bold man ... beloved is the Scot who has dealings with no man.*<sup>145</sup>

The event which initiates the story and Suibne's madness is the battle of Magh Rath in 637 AD between the people of Dál Riada in Scotland, led by Domhnall Brec, and the people of Dál Riada in Ireland. The historic Suibne was very probably the son of Eochaidh Buidhe, king of the Scottish Dál Riada, and supported his brother, Eochaidh Buidhe's successor, Domhnall Brec.<sup>146</sup>

In *Auraicept na n-Éces* 'The Scholar's Primer', at least one copy of which was in the hands of the Beatons as late as the 17th century (see [II.3.c.](#)), this interaction between Scotland and Ireland, Scots and Irish, is clearly expressed as one of the four important outcomes of the Battle of Magh Rath:

in fear d'Albanachaib do breith in Erennaich 'na chois dar muir gen  
airiugud, .i. Dubhdiadh a ainm;

*the Scotsman bearing the Irishman along with him over sea without being  
noticed – Dubh Diadh was his name.*<sup>147</sup>

142. R. Gorman, *Suibhne: An intertongueing* (London, 2013).

143. U. Néill, *Buile Shuibhne* (Inbhirnis 1974), 3.

144. Whitley Stokes, ed., 'Poems ascribed to St Moling', in Bergin, Best, Meyer and O'Keefe, eds, *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts* Vol. II (Dublin, 1908), 22. These poems, preserved in an MS compiled around 1630 by Michael O'Clery, are dated to the 11th century on internal evidence. See K. Jackson, 'The Motive of the Threefold Death in the Story of Suibhne Geilt', in *Féil-sgríobinn Eóin Mhic Néill – Essays and Studies presented to Professor Eoin MacNeill* (Dublin, 1960), 538.

145. Jackson, 'The Motive of the Threefold Death', 539.

146. Suibne is twice referred to as 'mac Eachach' in a poem ascribed to St Moling, see Stokes, 'Poems ascribed to St Moling', 27. See also Jackson, 'The Motive of the Threefold Death', 540–41.

147. G. Calder, ed., *Auraicept na n-Éces* (Edinburgh, 1917; Blackrock, 1995), 6–7.



McTaggart, *Ailsa Craig*. Photo © Isobel Rimmer née McTaggart, Private Collection by kind permission

*Suibne Geilt* or Mad Suibne spends time in Scotland – on the Island of Eigg, in Kintyre, on Ailsa Craig, and in what is probably the forest of West Lothian. His story bears many similarities with that of Merlin and Kentigern, which survives in a Scottish Latin manuscript, the 12th-century *Vita Merlini Silvestris*, based in part upon a lost version *stilo Scottico dictatum* ‘composed in the Scottish style’. In the 12th century, this would have referred only to Gaelic-speaking Scotland.<sup>148</sup>

A curious remnant of that connection takes the form of a tale of a Scot called Alladhan, who is also cursed and mad and wandering naked in the woods. In the context of the Suibne tale, this would seem to be a wholly redundant interpolation, unless there were some memory of Strathclyde origins which demanded its presence. Suibne is described as flying from Ailsa Craig past the capital of Strathclyde – Dumbarton – and therefore going eastward. This would bring him to the woods to the east of Glasgow which feature in the *Vita Merlini Silvestris*. As for Alladhan, it has been suggested that his name is derived from Welsh Lailoken (Llallochan),<sup>149</sup> which was thought of as another name for Merlin

148. J. and W. MacQueen, ‘Vita Merlini Sylvestris’, *Scottish Studies* 29 (1989); K. Jackson, ‘A Further Note on Suibhne Gelt and Merlin’, *Éigse* VII, Part II; Jackson, ‘The Motive of the Threefold Death’, 535–50, especially 545.

149. J. Carney, *Studies in Irish Literature and History* (Dublin, 1979), 151.

at least as early as the 15th century and probably from the 12th.<sup>150</sup> The motif of the threefold death is common to both tales and refers back to pre-Christian motifs which appear even in Adomnán’s *Life of Columba* and in Columba’s own poem ‘Altus Prosator’ in which giants are drowned, scorched and bruised to death.<sup>151</sup>

In a further parallel, according to an entry in the Welsh annals for the year 573, Merlin is reputed to have been driven mad by the horrors of the battle of Arderydd, and this is also how the *Vita Merlini Silvestris* explains his madness, the battle being between Liddel and Carwannock.<sup>152</sup>

The sea plays an important role in both tales, with Kentigern making a ‘miraculous’ escape from his teacher St Serf, by summoning a tidal bore up the river Forth.<sup>153</sup> For Suibne, the struggle between the river Garbh and the sea is the subject of an entire poem, and it is where St Moling’s monastery is placed and where there is also a tidal bore.<sup>154</sup> What is of interest is that, in the case of both rivers, the tidal bore is very rare, the Forth, near Alloa, reaching a height of 0.75 m and that on the Suir-Barrow between 0.5 and 1.00 m.<sup>155</sup>

Geographical connections account only for a proportion of the relevance of the Suibne story to the *Vita Merlini Silvestris*. The motif of the fish and the ring (B548.2.1.)<sup>156</sup> is common to both saints, Kentigern and Moling,<sup>157</sup> and fundamental to both is the association with a madman, whose madness is initiated by a battle and/or the curse of a saint. Redemption through the offices of another saint in both cases concludes the story. Associated with this madness is exile in the wilds of nature.

150. MacQueen, ‘Vita Merlini Sylvestris’, 77: ‘qui Lailoken vocabatur, quem quidam dicunt fuisse Merlynum’. The MS of the *Vita Merlini Silvestris* is 15th century, but this section is possibly taken from a 12th-century original.

151. T. Clancy and G. Markús, *Iona* (Edinburgh, 1995), 46–47, 59.

152. See Welsh annals inserted into the Domesday Book, Public Record Office MS E.164/1. The entry reads ‘Annus. Bellum erderit inter filios elifer et Guendoleu filium keidiau in quo bello Guendoleu cecidit Merlinus insanus effectus est.’ MacQueen, *Vita Merlini Sylvestris*, 83. Many of these matters are discussed knowledgeably, if occasionally speculatively, in Nikolai Tolstoy’s *The Quest for Merlin* (London, 1985).

153. This motif features twice in the services for St Kentigern in the late 13th-century Sprouston Breviary, National Library of Scotland MS Adv.18.2.13B., in the Verse for the 3rd Response and the Prose of the 9th Lektion, f.36v and f.38r.

154. G. Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics* (Oxford, 1956 and 1977), No. 44 and 225–26.

155. S. Bartsch-Winkler and D. Lynch, *Catalog of Worldwide Tidal Bore Occurrences and Characteristics ...* (Washington, 1988).

156. T. Cross, *Motif-Index of Early Irish Literature* (Bloomington Indiana, n.d. [1952]), 75.

157. Sprouston Breviary, National Library of Scotland MS Adv.18.2.13B, f.38r; and J. O’Hanlon, *Lives of the Irish Saints* Vol. VI (Dublin, n.d. [1875]), 712.



Eòghann MacColl, *Sweeney* © Eòghann MacColl

In the Suibne material, the beauties of nature are appreciated almost as greatly at times of extreme privation and discomfort as they are at times of ease and pleasure. In this, they provide a secular and pagan parallel to the lyrics associated with Christian hermits,<sup>158</sup> for Suibne's situation as one

158. See, for instance, K. Jackson, *Studies in Early Celtic Nature Poetry* (Cambridge, 1935), 121.

accursed is effectively held in doubt until the end of the story. But the love of nature, so vividly present in verse and prose in the Suibne material in Gaelic, is conspicuously absent from the Latin *Vita Merlini Sylvestris*. Likewise, in the chants and lections for St Kentigern found in the *Sprouston Breviary*, the references to nature – the frozen twig, the dead bird, the high tide, the river flood, the salmon and the ring – are present only for hagiographical purposes.<sup>159</sup> They have no place in their own right and, while the music of the chants in the *Sprouston Breviary* has its beauties, it too functions primarily within a fairly rigid liturgical and hagiographical context.<sup>160</sup>

The connections, then, between the Suibne 'saga', as it is sometimes called, and the Kentigern material are undoubtedly real and significant, but the latter lacks the essential element of the beauty of nature poetry that has made the Suibne material so memorable.

However, such poetic elements, with echoes of the Suibne material, can be found in the Scottish Gaelic tradition, notably in 'Òran na Comhachaig', dated to the 16th century. The character of mad Suibne was undoubtedly known in Gaelic-speaking Scotland long after his tale was written down, for he features in a mid-15th-century poem by Giolla Crìost Brùilingeach, preserved in the early 16th-century Book of the Dean of Lismore. The poem contrasts the brave MacDiarmaid with the feeble Maguire, *Fear mar Suibhne nach beir buadh* 'The one is as Suibhne, who wins no triumph'.<sup>161</sup> The name of Suibhne is retained in Castle Sween, *Caistéal Suibhne*, but the clan permanently lost control of the castle in the late 13th century and became *gallóglaigh* 'gallowglasses' or mercenary soldiers to various clans in Ireland.<sup>162</sup> Brochel Castle on Raasay was also reputed at one time to have been a MacSween holding.<sup>163</sup>

#### SUIBNE, THE OWL OF STRONE AND LATER GAELIC LITERATURE

It is not proposed here that there is a direct connection between the Suibne saga and the 16th-century Gaelic song, 'Òran na Comhachaig' (The Song of the Owl) – the Owl being the Owl of Strone. But there are coincidences of subject matter, style and sensibility to which attention has also been drawn by Pat Menzies,

159. *Sprouston Breviary*, National Library of Scotland MS Adv.18.2.13B.

160. No modern edition is as yet available, but the Cappella Nova CD with accompanying texts in Latin and English – *The Miracles of St Kentigern*, ASV Gaudeamus CD GAU 169 – should be obtainable.

161. W. J. Watson, *Scottish Verse from the Book of the Dean of Lismore* (Edinburgh, 1978), 54–55, l. 524.

162. Wilson McLeod and Meg Bateman, eds and trans., *Duanaire na Sracaire* (Edinburgh, 2007), 220–29.

163. R. Miket and D. Roberts, *The Medieval Castles of Skye & Lochalsh* (Portree, 1990), 18.





Burial place of Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn at CilleChoirill.  
Photo © Seán Purser

who suggests that ‘there is some correspondence between the character of the Comhachag and that of Suibhne’.<sup>164</sup>

There are also possible connections with the story of the eagle of Loch Tréig, which suggest a measure of continuity.<sup>165</sup> The poem, as it survives, is ‘a conflated cycle of poems’.<sup>166</sup> In this it matches the Sweeney cycle. It is, however, identified with a single author – Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn – who, like the owl, was himself a hunter. The eagle story explores the past through the device of a consultation with the oldest living creatures in the district and belongs with ‘the widespread motif of the ‘Oldest Animals’ (see III.2.b.) which serves explicitly as a formula for envisaging the totality of time.’<sup>167</sup>

In ‘Óran na Comhachaig’, there are three protagonists: the Old Owl, Old Age, and the Poet. In certain respects, they are one and the same, and in some stanzas it is not clear who speaks. Much the same has been suggested with respect to the

164. P. Menzies, ed., *Oran na Comhachaig le Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn* (Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 2012), 22ff.

165. R. MacilleDhuibh, ‘The Little Man of the Highlands’, *West Highland Free Press* (19 April 2002), and ‘The Eagle of Loch Tréig’, *West Highland Free Press* (3 May 2002).

166. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, 392–93.

167. J. Carey, ‘Time, Space, and the Otherworld’, in Frykenberg and Hollo, eds, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* Vol. VII (1987), 10.

relationship between Fintan and the Hawk of Achill: ‘one can read the poem as a dialogue of Fintan with himself or with his other shape’.<sup>168</sup>

The Owl speaks like a human; Suibne flies like a bird and is feathered. Both give a voice to the wild and their knowledge of their terrain is copious. Pat Menzies has also drawn attention to the parallels between these interactions and those of Fintan and the Hawk of Achill, as well as the connections with the story of the Eagle of Loch Tréig, including the motif of the one-eyed fish who is Fintan in his spell of life as a salmon, recalling the wisdom acquired with blindness discussed in I.1.b.<sup>169</sup> In the case of the Eagle of Loch Tréig, the oldest of all the creatures, asked whether they recall a colder Beltane night than the one just past, is a trout who lost his eye when it froze to a rock as he leapt about to keep warm. This motif of the coldest night is also in *The Hawk of Achill*:

Adhaigh dhamh ar *in tuinn túaidh*  
ocus mé ar Ess rónach Rúaidh  
ní fúaras adhaigh mar sain  
ó thus co deireadh domain.

*I passed a night in the northern wave*  
*and I at Assaroe of the seals*  
*I never felt a night like that*  
*from the beginning of the world to its end.*<sup>170</sup>

It is immediately following this account that the salmon (Fintan) loses his eye to the Hawk of Achill.

Returning to ‘Óran na Comhachaig’, the Owl’s memory is long and includes the heroes of old, but when strife comes near, she flies off to her favourite resting place on Craig Uanach. This parallels the flight of Sweeney, first from the battle and later from an army sweeping into the camp (Section 33). The Owl, like Suibne, seems at times to be almost identified with the stag, and there are parallel lists of stags in both.

From *Buile Shuibne*:

Damh Sléibhi aird Eibhlinne,  
damh sléibhe Fúaid féigh  
damh Ella, damh Orbhraidhe,  
damh lonn Locha Léin.<sup>171</sup>

168. G. Bondarenko, ‘Fintan mac Bóchra: Irish Synthetic History Revisited’, in Fomin, Blazek and Stalmaszczyk, eds, *Studia Celto-Slavica* 6 (Příbram, 2010), 141.

169. P. Menzies, ed., *Oran na Comhachaig le Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn* (Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 2012), 25ff.

170. Bergin, Best, Meyer and O’Keeffe, eds, *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts I* (1907), 27.

171. J. O’Keeffe, *Buile Suibhne* (Dublin, 1975), 42, Section 40.

*The stag of high Slieve Felim,  
the stag of the steep Fews,  
the stag of Duhallow, the stag of Orrery,  
the fierce stag of Killarney [loch] ...*<sup>172</sup>

From 'Òran na Comhachaig':

Èighidh damh Beinne Bige  
'S èighidh damh Cheanna Craige,  
Freagraidh gach damh dhiubh d'a chéile,  
Fa cheann Locha Slèibhe Snaige.

*The stag of Beinn Bheag bellows  
and the stag of Kincaig bellows;  
each stag answers the other  
at the head of Loch Sliabh Snaige.*<sup>173</sup>

Both stanzas make use of alliterative place-names and both conclude with mention of a specific loch. The nature imagery makes reference to branches – the branches of trees and the branches of antlers. In both cases, of course, the main speaker is in the form of a bird, and birds and trees come in for special notice in both poems – in 'Òran na Comhachaig', the octosyllabic stanza form is full of assonance and alliteration:

Binn a h-iolaire fa bruachaibh,  
Binn a cuach 's is binn a h-eala;  
Seachd binne na sin am blaodhan  
Do nì laoghan beag breac ballach.

*Round her slopes, sweet the eagle,  
sweet the swan and sweet the cuckoo;  
seven times sweeter the bleating  
made by the fawn, dappled, spotted.*<sup>174</sup>

In a similar passage in 'Suibne in the woods', the syllabic structure supports the same thematic concern with equally appealing assonance as in 'Òran na Comhachaig':

Na corra go corrgaire  
i nGlinn Aigle úair;  
elta d'énaib imlúatha  
chucum ocus úaim.

172. Heaney and Giese, *Sweeney's Flight*, 104.

173. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, 400–01, ll. 101–04.

174. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, 396–97, ll. 53–56.

Ní charaim in sibenrad  
do-níat is mná;  
binne lim ac ceilebrad  
lon 'sin aird i tá.<sup>175</sup>

*The herons croaking  
in cold Glenelly;  
a flock of swift birds  
coming and going.*

*Not pleasing,  
laughter of men and women;  
sweeter to me  
the blackbird's singing.*<sup>176</sup>

Suibne is the Poet in his own saga, and the Poet in 'Òran na Comhachaig' initially uses the voice of the Owl; but both Poets require the presence and absolution of a saint or priest to allow them to tell their story. Joseph Nagy has made a strong case for this approach with respect to Suibne,<sup>177</sup> and an otherwise strange and solitary inclusion of a Christian context in 'Òran na Comhachaig' makes greater sense if understood as a remnant of a motif found not only in the Suibne saga, but also in that of Merlin and Kentigern:

Ach a-nis ata tu aosda,  
Dèan-sa d'fhaosaid ris an t-sagart;  
Is innis duinne gun euradh  
Gach aon sgeula d'a bheil agad.

*But now that you are aged,  
to the priest make confession,  
and tell me without omission  
every one of your stories.*<sup>178</sup>

The situation of the poet has been, in both cases, one associated with hunting and the hunted. Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh was himself a hunter. Nagy points out that this theme is explicit in the famous poem of Pangur Bán and goes on to comment:

The poet is a man of action and a predator, while the poem he produces  
and the vision the poem communicates are his captured prey, proudly put

175. Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics*, No. 46, 132 and 134.

176. Translation by the author.

177. J. Nagy, *A New Introduction to Buile Suibhne ...* (Dublin, 1996), 1–2 and 27–28.

178. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, 394–95, ll. 9–12.

on display ... and yet the bringer of fame invents his own conspicuousness ... Suibne's 'frenzy' ... constitutes a remarkable adventure in the inner workings of the persona of the poet as he vacillates between power and powerlessness.<sup>179</sup>

One might also draw attention to the images of hunting in Sorley MacLean's 'Hallaig', and 'Coin is Madaidhean Allaidh', in which there is a clear equation between the hunted deer and MacLean's art; and in 'Coilltean Ratharsair', where the hunter, as Actaeon, becomes the hunted. In the case of the Poet in 'Óran na Comhachaig', it is Old Age – the old age of the Owl at the beginning, and the old age of the Poet at the end of the poem – that effects a similar vacillation between power and powerlessness. In the case of Suibne, in Nagy's reading, madness is the price of his poetic gift and absolution his only ultimate release. The likely desire of the Christian author to impose such a resolution should be taken into account, but Suibne's love of and preference for nature also has its Christian equivalents, for example in the verse dialogue between King Gúaire and the Hermit Marbán. The relative space devoted to nature and Christianity in these poems perhaps gives us a clue to the poets' own inclinations and is further discussed in [VI.1.c](#).

#### CONCLUSION

In the Suibne saga, the natural world is seen as being naturally harmonious: music is made by the river Garb, the sea with its tides, the wind in the trees and on hill tops, and by the birds and stags. The noises of nature are preferable to human ones and are naturally religious: the stag is singing psalms and it is hard to respond to the bells of the canonical hours with the music of nature in competition. Suibne has become animal-like himself: with feathers, he is capable of flight and can outrun the deer to the tops of the hills. The trees and wolves provide him with company and he is able to ride a doe. He is completely at home in Glenn mBolcháin.<sup>180</sup>

In a way, Suibne's madness and partial exile represent a kind of blue martyrdom, *glasmartre*, the martyrdom of the penitent, which in the early Celtic church involved asceticism and replaced the ultimate and life-long degradations involved in penance on the Continent.<sup>181</sup>

Later faint echoes of the Suibne story can be found in the famous lament

179. Nagy, *A New Introduction to Buile Suibhne*, 1–2. Gregory Toner puts a somewhat heavy-handed Christian gloss on what is as playful as it is serious – G. Toner, "Messe ocus Pangur Bán": Structure and Cosmology', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 57 (Summer 2009), 1–22.

180. Numerous examples can be found in Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics*, Nos. 8, 44, 46, 47 and 48.

181. C. Stancliffe, 'Red, White and Blue Martyrdom', in Whitelock, McKitterick and Dumville, eds., *Ireland in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1982), 21–46, esp. 42–45.

'Seathan'. There are many versions, but in all the lovers are fugitives. In some, Seathan, like Suibne, is the son of a King, and the theme of the poem is that of constant travel, often in wild country and wild weather, from Scotland to Ireland and even to mainland Europe. There is mention of receiving Mass in the woods and of visits to nuns on Skye and Iona, so there is again a religious background and the implication of some initial wrongdoing.<sup>182</sup>

A last vestigial connection may be found in a strange and discomfiting song from Mingulay. *Cò siud thall air sràid na h-eala* 'Who is that on the road of the swan?' is the title and it was recorded by Morag MacKinnon of Mingulay.<sup>183</sup> Whooper swans pass through Mingulay regularly on their seasonal migrations. But the man on the swan's road is a wanderer because of his guilt, for he has committed rape and murder.

In Gaelic myth and song, swans are deeply symbolic. The Children of Lir were turned into swans and waited three hundred years upon the sea between Ireland and Scotland, until given baptism so that they could die. One of John Duncan's finest paintings is entitled 'The Children of Lir are driven forth on the western seas in the form of swans' (overpage). It dates from 1914 and emphasises the innocence and fragility of the children, as well as the whiteness of their skins – in this instance, a white martyrdom exposed to the full violence of the sea, as they look backward with longing to the land.

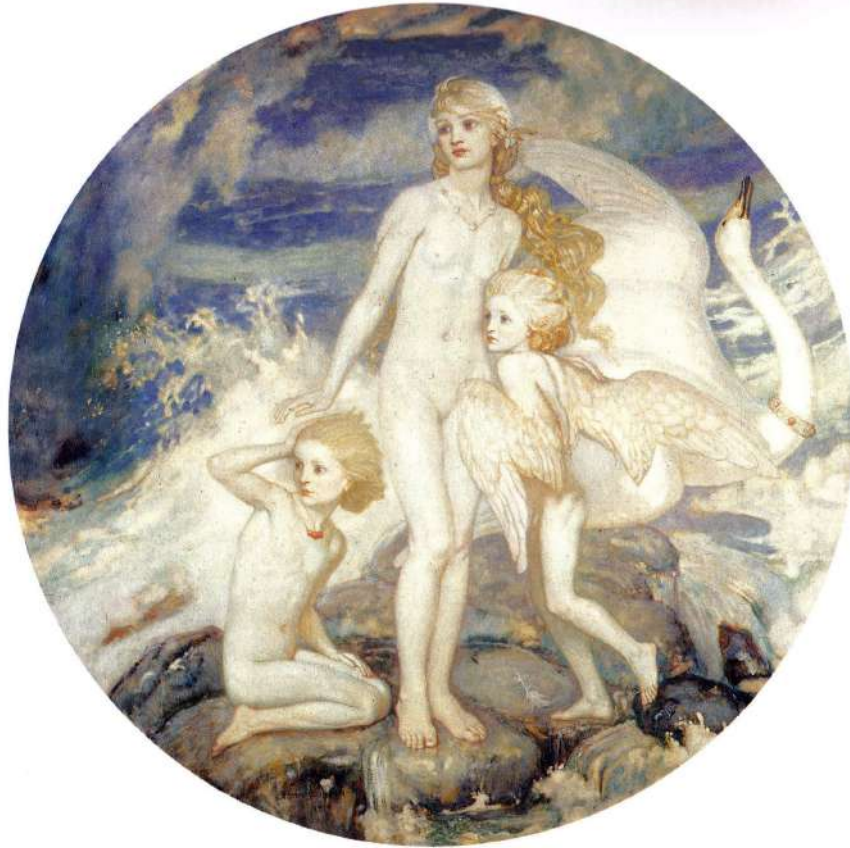
James Carney has convincingly put forward a list of parallels between the Suibne and Children of Lir stories.<sup>184</sup> In both cases, the action traverses the Sea of Moyle, the dangerous waters between Islay and Antrim. The colour symbolism of white, representing innocence, makes the swan an obvious choice of symbolic creature; likewise the dove, representing peace and the Holy Spirit and after which Colum Cille was named. In John Duncan's painting of 1925, *St Columba Bidding Farewell to the White Horse*, Colum Cille wears a white habit, and the horse, which sorrowfully foresees Colum Cille's death, is also white (as it is in Adomnán's text), emphasising the colour in paint and in the title. The symbolism is important, as, in Adomnán's telling, Colum Cille's fellow monks regard the horse as a mere ignorant brute, whereas Colum Cille is prepared to attribute to it human sentiments, albeit miraculously imparted. This may not go so far as a Christian endorsement of shape changing, but within Gaelic tradition Colum Cille does converse with a swan, which he is said to have healed when he found it wounded on the strand. It was a swan that had knowledge of life and death, and it explains that it was wounded by the Fianna – the warrior band of

182. Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica V* (Edinburgh, 1900 and 1987), 64–65.

183. Morag MacKinnon, BBC Sound Archive 22916 (1955).

184. J. Carney, *Studies in Irish Literature and History* (Dublin, 1979), Chap. IV, 129–64.





John Duncan,

*The Children of Lir are driven forth on the western seas in the form of swans* (1914)

the Gaels - and had swum from Ireland to be saved.<sup>185</sup> *Mo chasan dubh* – ‘The song of the swan on the beach’ – emphasises the symbolism and the connection between Scotland and Ireland inherent in the Suibne story:

*Mo chasan dubh* (× 3)

*’S mi fhéin gléigheal.*

*Gibhi gi gibhi gó.* (× 3)

*Chreachadh mo niod* (× 3)

*’S mi fhéin an Eirinn.*

*Gibhi gi gibhi gó.* (× 3)

<sup>185</sup>. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* IV, 28–31.

*My feet black and myself all white. My nest was plundered while I was in Ireland.*<sup>186</sup>

The theme of exile in the wilds for some wrong-doing – not necessarily a penance, as in the case of Suibne, but for something perceived as wrong by others – is, of course, international. In the Gàidhealtachd, however, it retained a particular relevance well into modern times. It adhered to the broken men of Rannoch, amongst whom Dugald Buchanan taught and preached, and it has its continuing echoes in the song made by Fearchar mac Iain Òig (see III.1.a.), and in the songs of emigration (for example ‘S a Choille Ghruamaich’),<sup>187</sup> in which those forced to leave were exiled into utterly unknown territory, often harsh, for no wrong-doing of their own. It is a wonder more did not go mad. JP

### III.2. ENVIRONMENT

#### III.2.a. THE SYMBOL OF THE TREE<sup>188</sup>

[Introduction](#); [Sacred Trees in Archaeology](#); [Sacred Trees in Place-names](#); [The Iconography of Trees](#); [Mistletoe as the Tree of Life?](#); [’Buile Shuibne’](#); [People Typified as Trees](#); [The Animism of Trees](#); [Continuity](#); [Conclusion](#)

#### INTRODUCTION

Bu tu ’n t-iubhar thar gach coillidh,  
 Bu tu ’n darach daingeann làidir,  
 Bu tu ’n cuileann ’s bu tu ’n draigheann,  
 Bu tu ’n t-abhall molach blàthmhor;  
 Cha robh do dhàimh ris a’ chritheann,  
 Na do dhligheadh ris an fhearna;  
 Cha robh bheag annad den leamhan;  
 Bu tu leannan nam ban àlainn.<sup>189</sup>

<sup>186</sup>. This version comes from the singing of Mrs Annie Johnston, Barra, School of Scottish Studies recording Log 87, ‘Port na h-Eala’. An extended version of the lyrics is in Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* II (Edinburgh, 1900 and 1984), 276–77. A different version is given in John Smith, *Gaelic Antiquities* (Edinburgh, 1780), 148–49.

<sup>187</sup>. I. Mac Ghille-Eathain, ‘Am Bàrd an Canada’, in W. Watson, *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig* (Inverness, 1918; repr. 1976), 14–19.

<sup>188</sup>. A version of this paper has been published as ‘The Image of the Tree in Gaelic Culture’, in Nancy McGuire and Colm Ó Baoill, eds, *Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 6* (Obar Dheathain, 2013).

<sup>189</sup>. Colm Ó Baoill, *Bàrdachd Shilis na Ceapaich* (Edinburgh, 1972), 72.

You were the yew above the wood,  
 you were the strong, steadfast oak,  
 you were the holly, the blackthorn,  
 you were the lichen-covered apple in bloom.  
 You had no kinship with the aspen,  
 you had no obligation to the alder,  
 you had no kinship with the elm,  
 you were the darling of beautiful women.

Probably the most pervasive of images in Gaelic culture is the tree. John MacInnes explored the connection between the tree's place in Gaelic cosmology and its being the predominant metaphor for the chieftain in praise poetry in his essay 'Samhla na Craoibhe'.<sup>190</sup> This section pursues the subject a little further into archaeology, manuscript illumination and monumental stone carving, learned texts and ogam (for more on ogam, see II.3.c.).

MacInnes points out how it is not by chance that a sacred tree, central point, Iron Age fort and church are in close proximity at Fortingall. The ancient yew tree at Fortingall is estimated to be at least 3,000 years old. To the south is Kyltirie, reputed, along with Tigh nan Teud, to be the central point of Scotland.<sup>191</sup> It is likely that this yew tree marked the centre of Scotland (as the ashes at Uisneach marked the centre of Ireland) and that other religious sites accrued around it – the *nemeton*, the fort and its association with the euhemerised god, Finn, and later, the Christian church of Fortingall, founded from Iona by Coeddi about 700.<sup>192</sup> This yew tree is a typical *axis mundi*, set in the middle of a people's territory, through which the earth is connected with the Otherworld and the heavens.

There is nothing unique about the importance of the tree to Gaelic culture, but it is striking how much and how tenaciously its imagery pervades the whole culture. In every continent, trees have been venerated by different peoples as vectors of regeneration, healing and fertility. The Norse had the ash tree, Yggdrasil, as such an axis with its roots in the earth and its crown in the sky. The Buddha attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. The Chinese venerated the pomelo tree; the ancient Egyptians the acacia; the Vedic texts, the banyan and peepal; the Herero people of southern Africa, the Omumborumbonga tree. The Waramunga people of Australia believed a child's spirit entered its

190. John MacInnes, 'Samhla na Craoibhe', in *Sàr Ghàidheal: Essays in Memory of Rory Mackay* (Inverness: An Comunn Gàidhealach, 1986).

191. John MacInnes, *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal* (Edinburgh, 2006), 23.

192. We see the Christianising of this pagan site in the keeping of Fèill Mo-Choid on 9th August, a fair in honour of Coeddi, bishop of Iona (d. 712). (Watson, *The Celtic Place-Names of Scotland*, 314).



The Fortingall Yew, CC licence.  
 Photo courtesy of Mogens Engelund

mother from a tree, and in Islam Mohammad's grandfather sees a tree in a dream which lights up the world.<sup>193</sup> Man-made structures are seen in many cultures doing the same job as the tree: the seven-tiered ziggurats of Mesopotamia, the Egyptian pyramids aligned perhaps with the stars of Orion's Belt, and Jacob's Ladder reaching to heaven.

Among the Gauls, the tree gods Fagus, Robur and Esus, are attested by votive offerings and stone

carvings. It is not known whether the Gauls had the concept of a world tree, but this concept develops in Gaelic cosmology with the belief in the five trees at Uisneach, the three ash trees (Uisneach, Tortu and Dathi), the yew of Ross and the oak of Mugna. These noble trees grew at the source of the Boyne, the mother water of all the rivers of Ireland. The trees represent a connection to the source of all knowledge and the powers of life and regeneration. The knowledge of Fionn is intimately connected to the tree because he acquired it, as is told in *Macgnimartha Find*, after burning his thumb on oil from the salmon of wisdom that had eaten hazel nuts from a tree whose roots had absorbed water from the spring of the Boyne at the centre of all Ireland (see I.1.b.). Lucan, Pliny the Elder and Tacitus mention the sacred groves of the Celts where assemblies were held. Pliny and Lucan also believed that the Gaulish word *druides* was derived from the Greek word *drus* for 'oak'.<sup>194</sup> The Gaulish may be derived from Old Celtic *\*derwijes*, representing Old Celtic *derwos* 'true' and *\*dru-* 'tree' (especially the oak) + *\*wid-* 'to know', hence druids are 'they who know the oak'.<sup>195</sup> This etymology is uncertain and others connect it to words meaning 'high' or 'true'.<sup>196</sup>

193. The Qur'an Al-Baqara, 128.

194. Bernhard Maier, *Dictionary of Celtic Religion and Culture* (Suffolk, 1997), quotes Pliny: 'Of itself the robur is selected by them to form whole groves, and they perform none of their religious rites without employing branches of it; so much so, that it is very probable that the priests themselves may have received their name from the Greek name for that tree.'

195. Online etymological dictionary, <<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=druid&searchmode=none>> (28 October 2009).

196. Alexander MacBain, *An Etymological Dictionary of the Gaelic Language* (1st pub. Inverness 1896; 2nd edn reprint, Glasgow, 1982), 141.

## SACRED TREES IN ARCHAEOLOGY

The evidence of archaeology gives some support to the significance of trees to the prehistoric Celts. The Gundestrup Cauldron, found in 1891 in Denmark, is thought to date from the 1st century BC. Though the workmanship may be Thracian, the imagery appears to be Celtic. [The plate of the warriors, tree and vat](#) (generally referred to as Plate E) has been interpreted in different ways, some saying the procession of foot soldiers are approaching the cauldron of rebirth and are resurrected as horsemen; others say it represents a ritual drowning. But the foot soldiers appear to be carrying a tree, perhaps for deposition as a votive offering in a sacred shaft, or for erection as a totem of the tribe. Excavations give evidence of both these kinds of ritual. Offering shafts, often in the middle of *Viereckschanzen*, have been excavated in Europe and Britain, for example at Holzhausen in Bavaria and at Findon in Sussex, where the pit was 250 ft deep. At Emain Macha near Armagh, five concentric rings of oak post holes have been found dating from around 100 BC, surrounding a huge post hole for a trunk that must have been about 36 ft high. The remains of similar poles, which may well have been decorated, have been found on Pilsdon Pen, the highest hill in Dorset, and in Goloring in Germany.<sup>197</sup> Massive post holes, suggestive of totem poles and dating from c. 4000 BC have been excavated on the ridge above the find spot of the Deskford carnyx in Banff (c. 150 AD, see [IV.2.c.](#)), potentially indicating thousands of years of ritual activity.<sup>198</sup> A ‘modern’ parallel to such poles is the ashlar-covered tree trunk of the late 18th- or early 19th-century Lanrick MacGregor monument at Kilmadock in Stirlingshire (referred to in [III.3.c.](#)).

## SACRED TREES IN PLACE-NAMES

MacInnes pointed out the significance of place-names in indicating the sites of trees sacred to the Gaels, of which the yew tree at Fortingall is a rare survival. Crieff and Balencrieff contain the element *craobh* ‘tree’. The element *bile* ‘sacred tree’ is contained in the place-names Dalavil, in Sleat in Skye, Coshievill (three miles from the yew tree at Fortingall), and Moville in Antrim. Tomnahurich, *Tom na h-Iùbhrach*, near Inverness, denotes ‘the mound of the yew’ where Fionn mac Cumhaill or Thomas the Rhymer are supposed to rise some day from their sleep. The P-Celtic word *pren* ‘tree’ gives Pirn (near Innerleithen), Pirnie (near Maxton), Primside (Berwickshire) and Primrose in Midlothian, Berwick and Fife.<sup>199</sup>

197. Anne Ross, *The Pagan Celts* (London, 1970), 106–10.

198. F. Hunter and M. Carruthers, ed., *ScARF Iron Age Panel Report* (Edinburgh, 2012).

199. W. J. Watson, *The Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (1st pub. Edinburgh, 1926; repr. Edinburgh, 1993).

At least three of Colum Cille's monastic foundations, *Doire* (Derry), *Darú* (Durrow) and *Eilean Idhe* (Iona), have associations with trees, probably all of pre-Christian religious significance. *Doire* and *Darú* refer to oaks, and Iona, although it has no yew trees on it, derives its name from *Iogh* meaning yew.<sup>200</sup> Colum Cille is associated with another yew tree on the tidal island of Bernera, north of Lismore, under which he is said to have preached to a thousand people.<sup>201</sup> The Bernera yew became famous in Campbell history, its felling for the purposes of building the Loch Nell castle staircase in the 18th century being seen to trigger Columba's curse of death, drowning and fire. A man was killed when it was felled, several others drowned when the boat carrying the timber sank and, though the timber was retrieved, the house went on fire several times. However, the root stock has sprouted again making this a very old specimen, as it was already mature in the 6th century. With this one tree species, we have still in operation a visual symbol which carries with it rich cultural significance, sustained by the careful maintenance of the trees and the obloquy, even injury, placed upon those who damage them.

## THE ICONOGRAPHY OF TREES

Turning to the iconographic evidence, we find trees and foliage are the dominant motif on most of the six hundred or so examples of late medieval monumental sculpture in the West Highlands. In their book of the same name, Steer and Bannerman do not entertain the possibility of a *thematic* connection between this motif and Gaelic culture:

It cannot be emphasised too strongly that late medieval West Highland art is Celtic only in the sense that it was produced by Celtic craftsmen and displays certain inherited qualities, such as a fondness for interlacing and the elaborate use of ornament to produce a rich spread of decoration ... The main source of inspiration was undoubtedly Romanesque art ...<sup>202</sup>

Foliaceous imagery on a grave slab in Iona, Photo © Seán Purser



200. Watson, *The Celtic Place-Names of Scotland*, 88.

201. Paul Greenwood, ‘St Columba's Yew, Bernera – a Miracle of Yew Regeneration’: <http://www.ancient-yew.org/mi.php/st--columba%E2%80%99s-yew/88> – accessed 26 March 2017.

202. K. A. Steer and J. W. M. Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture in the West Highlands* (Edinburgh, 1977), 4–5.



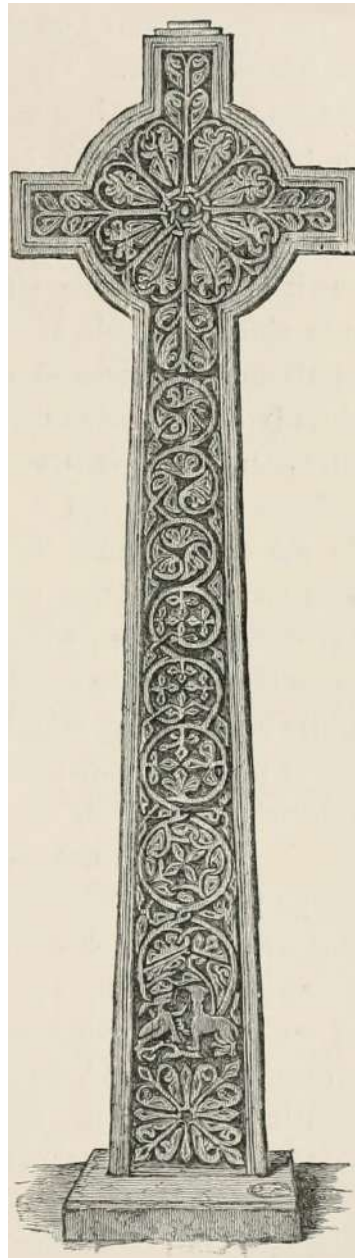
Here, however, it will be argued that the pervasiveness of foliaceous imagery forms a clear continuum with Gaelic culture and the Celtic past. Whatever the sources of the carved plant images, it would be strange if the motif were purely decorative, considering the significance of the tree to the Celts in prehistory and its continuing significance as a symbol in panegyric poetry of the same period as the sculpture. As all other elements of the stone carvers' iconography (swords, spears and battle-axes, shields, tools, shears, caskets, combs, ecclesiastical objects, galleys, castles, musical instruments and hunting scenes)<sup>203</sup> make reference to the society that produced them, it would be wise not to dismiss the foliage as being purely decorative. Though it can be made to fit any space, often appearing as a background, it is often the major element in a design, placed centrally on a grave slab or, in a bipartite design, placed opposite a sword.

Steer and Bannerman say that the only identifiable plant is the oak, the others being formalised.<sup>204</sup> This may be due to the oak leaf's natural decorative potential, but the oak's significance to the Gaels in pre-Christian times should not be overlooked. It will be argued below that the mistletoe, ivy, honeysuckle and convolvulus may also be identified in the iconography.

In Gaelic religious poetry, much play was made of the dual meaning of *crann* as tree and cross, bearing out the theological connection between the Tree of Knowledge by which mankind was lost and the Tree of Calvary by which mankind was saved. As the apple caused Adam's fall, so did the fruit on the Crucifixion tree, i.e. Christ, give man eternal life.

<sup>203</sup> Steer and Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture*, Plate VI.

<sup>204</sup> Steer and Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture*, 16.



Cross of Colinus MacDuffie (reverse)

Trom an toradh tháinig dhe *Heavy the fruit that came from*  
crann saortha na sé líne.<sup>205</sup> *the tree of salvation of the six generations.*

It is no surprise, then, to see crosses such as that of Colinus MacDuffie in Oronsay becoming tree-like, their arms growing leaves and their Calvary mounts growing roots.<sup>206</sup>

#### MISTLETOE AS THE TREE OF LIFE?

What plant then best symbolises the tree of life? In the Book of Kells, the design of a winding plant in a pot appears beside the figure of Christ (see especially the plates of the arrest and the [portrait of Christ](#)<sup>207</sup>) representing the life everlasting. Bernard Meehan suggests the plant is the olive or the vine due to their biblical connotations. George Bain suggests the plant here and on Pictish stones such as that at Hilton of Cadboll is mistletoe.<sup>208</sup>

Pliny describes the importance of mistletoe, *viscum*, to the druids:

They call the mistletoe by a name meaning the all-healing. Having made preparation for sacrifice and a banquet beneath the trees, they bring thither two white bulls, whose horns are bound then for the first time. Clad in a white robe, the priest ascends the tree and cuts the mistletoe with a golden sickle, and it is received by others in a white cloak ...<sup>209</sup>



The Hilton of Cadboll stone.  
National Museum of Scotland

<sup>205</sup> Lambert McKenna, *Aithdiogluim Dána*, Irish Texts Society Vol. XXXVII (Dublin, 1939), No. 76: 21; see also Nos. 77: 11 and 88: 1.

<sup>206</sup> See Steer and Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture*, Plates 11–16.

<sup>207</sup> Book of Kells, ff.114r and 32v.

<sup>208</sup> George Bain, *Celtic Art: The methods of its construction* (1st pub. 1951; London, 1977), 121.

<sup>209</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, Book XVI, 95: <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Aatext%3A1999.02.0137%3Abook%3D16%3Achapter%3D95>> – accessed 3 March 2012.

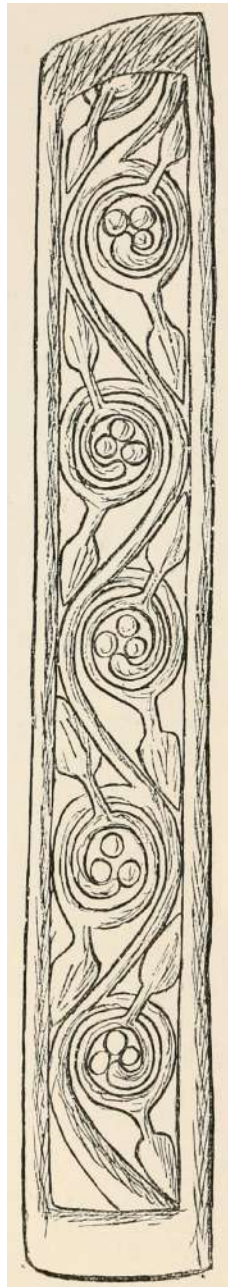


*Uil'-ioc* (Mistletoe). Public domain

As an evergreen, mistletoe had associations with renewal and fertility and Pliny said it was used in treating barrenness in animals. Indeed, with its climbing character, its pairs of long oval leaves on either side of clusters of three white berries, and small six-petalled flowers growing directly on the main stem, mistletoe bears a closer resemblance to these 'trees of life' than any other plant. That it is always pictured intertwined and cut in a pot supports this identification, as mistletoe is semi-parasitic and grows out of another tree. Birds are often incorporated in the design eating the white berries, just as the seed of mistletoe is eaten and spread by mistlethrushes – hence its name in English. Pliny says the name the druids used for mistletoe meant 'all-healing', *omnia sanantem*<sup>210</sup>; its name in Gaelic, *uil'-ioc*, means exactly that. It is therefore an appropriate symbol for Christ, *an lighiche mòr* 'the great healer', who vanquishes death. It is suggested here that the mistletoe, revered by the druids as a symbol of continuing life and fertility, came to represent the Christian life everlasting in the Book of Kells, and that it is this plant, along with the ivy and occasionally the vine, that appears on the grave slabs of West Highland monumental sculpture.

'Mistletoe' border on a Pictish stone at St Vigeans, Arbroath (detail). Joseph Anderson (1881), *Scotland in Early Christian Times: The Rhind Lectures in Archaeology for 1880*, 194

210. <[http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/L/Roman/Texts/Pliny\\_the\\_Elder/16\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/L/Roman/Texts/Pliny_the_Elder/16*.html)>.



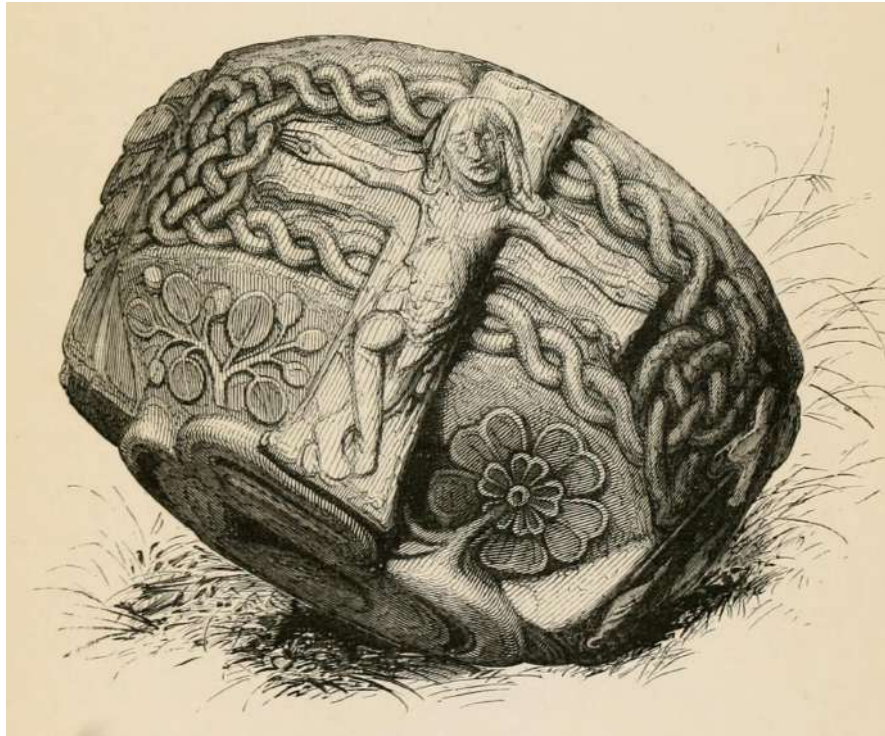
Guthrie Bell Shrine with possible mistletoe and convolvulus, designs.  
Image © National Museums Scotland

Mistletoe does not grow commonly in Ireland and Scotland<sup>211</sup> and so the mistletoe motif of the Book of Kells and of Pictish stones may have come to encompass other winding plants such as honeysuckle, ivy and convolvulus which, it is suggested, can be identified among the stone carvings. A three-berry design with sessile berries, distinctive of mistletoe, is used by the sculptors of the Iona and Kintyre schools and may be seen on various cross slabs, including the priory cross of Colinus MacDuffie in Oronsay, which includes two birds at the bottom (see Steer and Bannerman, Plate 13).<sup>212</sup> The design can also be seen

211. George Bentham and J. D. Hooker, *Handbook of the British Flora* (1943), 212.

212. See also Steer and Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture*, Plates 6 and 18.





Baptismal font from Borline in Skye, possibly showing mistletoe and convolvulus from Joseph Anderson (1881), *Scotland in Early Christian Times: The Rhind Lectures in Archaeology for 1880* (Edinburgh): title page vignette

on the Guthrie Bell Shrine and on the baptismal font from Borline in Skye.

A tri-partite palmate leaf, distinctive of ivy, is one of the commonest foliage designs in use by the Iona school. The leaves are often placed back to back as can be seen in the Campbeltown Cross (Steer and Bannerman, Plate 11). Lastly, it is suggested that the large flower that appears in Iona-school carvings at Borline in Skye and in the Lochsween-school grave slabs in Kilmory in Knapdale (see *ibid.*, Plates 15F and 23B) could be convolvulus, its climbing nature clear in its Gaelic name *Iadh-lus*. It is the only flower to appear in West Highland stone carving and appears to have taken the place of honeysuckle which features in the literature.

Neither honeysuckle nor ivy is an exact match for mistletoe but both can be evergreen and have clusters of berries that attract birds. It seems that these plants, both known as *feithlenn*, were accorded a special status in learned texts. The herbal, the *Rosa Anglica*, refers to *sugh Iosa na feithlinne* 'the juice of Jesus of the *Feithleann*', and in the 13th-century *Aidedh Ferghusa*, the fairy king Iubhdán

warns against burning *feithlenn* (translated here as 'woodbine', synonymous with 'honeysuckle'):

A fhir fhadós teine . ac Fergus na fled  
 ar muir ná ar tír . na loisc rí g na fed  
 Airdrí feda Fáil . im nach gnáth sreth sluaigí  
 ní fann in feidm ríog . sníom im gach crann cruaid  
 Dá loisce in fid fann . bud mana gréch glonní ro sia gábad renn ...

*O man that for Fergus of the feasts doth kindle fire,  
 whether afloat or ashore, never burn the king of the woods.  
 Monarch of Inisfail's forests, whom none may hold captive;  
 no feeble sovereign's effort is it to hug all tough trees in his embrace.  
 The pliant woodbine if thou burn, wailings for misfortune will abound ...*<sup>213</sup>

#### 'BUILE SHUIBNE'

Tree lore and a sensibility to trees is also evident in 'Buile Shuibne'. Suibne was known in Scotland too, in *Vita Merlin Sylvestris*, where he is associated with Ailsa Craig and Eigg (see III.1.d.). Cursed by St Ronan for abusing his clerics, the king, Suibne, goes mad, loses office and lives naked and feathered in the woods. Though excommunicated, deranged, filthy and abhorrent to his wife, Suibne is celebrated in poetry as a man in special communion with nature, who is comforted by the speech of the river and the company of trees and animals. That society valued these insights is proven by poets being drawn to the theme repeatedly between 9th and 12th centuries. In the 12th-century poem 'Suibne in the Woods'<sup>214</sup> each of 'the trees of Ireland' is affectionately addressed and its characteristics praised: the oak for its height over every other tree, the hazel for its nuts, the alder for its shine, the blackthorn for its sloes, the apple and rowan for blossom and berries, the yew and the ivy for growing in churchyards and dark woods, the holly for affording shelter, the ash for its use in weapons, the poplar for its leaves that rush noisily as if engaged in a foray, and the birch for being proud and musical (an image to which George Campbell Hay returns in the 20th century in his poem 'Do Bheithe Bhòidheach'). Suibne sleeps in trees, flies over them and enjoys the music the wind makes in them.

Suibne says, 'Rónán Finn's curse has brought me into your company, antlered one, belling one, you of the musical cry' and that Suibne is not his rightful name but Fer Benn 'the horned one'. This makes an immediate link with the god Cernunnos and Derg Corra, the man Finn finds in the top of a tree sharing a

213. Standish H. O'Grady, ed., *Silva Gadelica* (London and Edinburgh, 1892), Vol. 1, 245 (original) and Vol. 2, 278 (translation).

214. G. Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics* (Oxford, 1956), No. 46: 3–12.



meal with a stag, a blackbird and a trout.<sup>215</sup> The deer represents the wilderness and the message is clear: that living like a deer in the woods has its compensations.

#### PEOPLE TYPIFIED AS TREES

This section begins with Sileas na Ceapaich's elegy to Alasdair of Glengarry from the 18th century in which she typifies him as a yew, oak, holly and apple tree and denies he has any connection with the aspen, alder or elm. A division between chieftain and peasant trees is given in *Auraicept na n-Éces* (The Scholars' Primer) from the 7th–12th centuries, a text known to the Beatons (see II.3.c.). (The same scheme was used by the composer of a satire published in the Eigg Collection of 1776 who inverted Sileas's examples and syntax to show which trees did and did not constitute Dr Samuel Johnson.<sup>216</sup>)

Air atat ceithri hernaile for crandaib .i. airigh fedha 7 athaig fedha 7 lossa fedha 7 fodhla fedha; 7 is uaithibh sin a ceathrur ainmnigher fedha in oghaim. Airigh fedha *quidem* .i. dur, coll, cuileand, abhull, uindsin, ibur, gius. Athaig fedha.i. fern, sail, bethi, lemh, sce, crithach, caerthand. Fodhla fedha andso .i. draighen, trom, feorus, crand fir, fedlend, fidhat, finnocholl. Lossa fedha .i.aitean, fraech, gilcach, raid, lecla .i. luachair 7rl.

*For there are four classes of trees, to wit, chieftain trees, peasant trees, herb trees, and shrub trees; and it is from these four that the Ogam vowels are named. Chieftain trees, quidem, to wit, oak, hazel, holly, apple, ash, yew, fir. Peasant trees, to wit, alder, willow, birch, elm, white-thorn, aspen, mountain ash. The shrub trees, here, to wit, black-thorn, elder, spindle-tree, test-tree, honeysuckle, bird-cherry, white-hazel. Herb trees, to wit, furze, heather, broom, bog-myrtle, lecla to wit, rushes etc.*<sup>217</sup>

There are hundreds of examples of trees representing both men and women in Gaelic poetry from medieval times to the present which may well derive in large part from pagan lore. Words such as *fiùran*, *bile*, *geug*, *gallan*, *fleasgach* and *slat* ('sapling', 'sacred tree', 'branch', 'scion', 'wand' and 'shoot') are used interchangeably of both people and trees. The qualities the trees embody are both natural and supernatural by dint of their connection through the roots to regeneration and the Otherworld. The chieftain as a great tree possesses those abstract qualities that constitute fitness for rule and were pleasing to the earth goddess: he is of noble lineage, generous, brave, physically perfect and right-judging, and consequently the land is sheltered and blessed with happiness and fruitfulness.

215. *Revue Celtique* XV (1904): <[www.ancienttexts.org/library/celtic/ctexts/fo4.html](http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/celtic/ctexts/fo4.html)>.

216. Quoted in Newton, *A Handbook of the Scottish Gaelic World* (Dublin, 2000), 192–93.

217. George Calder, *Auraicept na n-Éces/The Scholars' Primer* (Edinburgh, 1917), 89–91.

Iain Molach, 2nd Mackenzie of Applecross, who died about 1684, is praised thus:

A' chraobh thu b' àirde sa choille,  
thar gach preas bha thu soilleir,  
a' cumail dìon air an doire  
le do sgèimh ghuirn fo bhlàth dhuilleag ...

*You were the highest tree in the forest,  
over every thicket you stood distinctive,  
affording shelter to the oak-grove  
with your shining green beauty under heavy foliage.*<sup>218</sup>

Muireadhach Albanach in the 13th century likens his wife to a fruitful, long-limbed tree and the supporting branch of the house:

Do tógbhadh sgath aobhdha fhionn  
a-mach ar an bhfaongha bhfann:  
laogh mo chridhise do chrom,  
craobh throm an tighise thall.

*A beautiful white bloom plucked  
from the tender, bending stem:  
my heart's darling has drooped,  
the laden branch of yonder house.*<sup>219</sup>

Neil Macleod laments the death of John Stuart Blackie, Professor of Greek at Edinburgh University, in 1895. The subject of his elegy, an academic and a tireless campaigner for a chair of Celtic at Edinburgh University, for crofters' rights and for the vindication of Macpherson's *Ossian*, may have been a new sort of warrior, but his likening to a tree is entirely traditional:

Ghearradh a' chraobh bu torach blàth,  
'S a dh'àraich iomadh meanglan òg,  
Bu taitneach leam a bhith fo sgàil,  
'S mo chàil a' faotainn brìgh a lòn.<sup>220</sup>

*The tree of fruitful blossom has been felled,  
which nurtured many a young shoot,  
it was my delight to be in its shade,  
my appetite nourished from its fruit.*

218. 'Marbhrann Thighearna na Comraich', in Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach* (Edinburgh, 1994), No. XXXVI.

219. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 27.

220. Donald Meek, *Caran an t-Saoghail/The Wiles of the World* (2003), 218.

Just as fruitfulness of trees reflects fitness for rule, the converse is also true. The poet MacMhuireadhaigh notes the absence of nuts and blossom on the trees in response to the deaths of two Clanranald chiefs, Alan and Randald, in 1509 and 1513.<sup>221</sup> In the 18th-century poem ‘Cumha Coire a’ Cheathaich’, Donnchadh Bàn, returning to the Misty Corrie where he had been a forester in his youth, expresses shock at how the land has suffered from the mismanagement of the woodlands. He ascribes the reduction in biodiversity to fallen timber, a lack of bushes and saplings and stagnant waterways. What might be seen as a literary convention is also the experience of the forester.<sup>222</sup>

Nuts or fruit carry a tree’s attributes to the next generation. Hence it is high praise when Aithbreac Inghin Corcadail in the 15th century terms her husband the topmost nut in the cluster of Clann Mhic Néill,<sup>223</sup> or when Mòr Chaimbeul in 1571 laments her husband as an apple, evoking both his nobility and the roundness of his head, severed from its body by Mòr’s own relatives:

Is ged tha mi gun ùbhlan agam  
Is ùbhlan uile aig càch,  
Is ann tha m’ ubhal cùbhraidh grinn  
Is cùl a chinn ri làr.

*Though now I’m left without apples  
and the others have them all,  
my apple is fair and fragrant  
with the back of his head on the mould.*<sup>224</sup>

#### THE ANIMISM OF TREES

It was seen above (II.3.c.) in the quotation from *Auraicept na n-Éces* (The Scholars’ Primer) that Old Gaelic *fid* means ‘tree’, ‘wood’, ‘sound’ and ‘vowel’. Tree names came to represent the different sounds of ogam and the alphabet.<sup>225</sup> We have seen how Suibne described the birch as melodious and loved the sound the wind made in trees. The harp is known as *craobh nan teud* ‘the tree of strings’,

221. ‘Alba Gan Díon a nDiaidh Ailín’, by Mac Muireadhaigh, in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 31.

222. Angus MacLeod, ed., *Òrain Dhonnchaidh Bhàin/The Songs of Duncan Ban MacIntyre* (Edinburgh, 1952), 175.

223. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 28.

224. ‘Cumha Ghriogair MhicGhriogair Ghlinn Sreith’, in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 71.

225. Máire Mac Aongusa, ‘Caithe tomus fri fid’, unpublished paper, courtesy of the author (2004), 5, 12–13. The point is also made in D. McManus, *A Guide to Ogam* (Maynooth, 1991), 35.

a by-name which simultaneously refers to the man-made instrument and its origins as a tree. The motif is known in Keating’s tale of Labhruidh Loingseach when a harp made of a willow sings out the secret that had been disclosed to the tree, suggesting that the dead wood, sawn and seasoned, still has the spirit of the living tree (see IV.2.c.).<sup>226</sup> It should be no surprise that foliage decorates the fore-pillar (known as the *làmh-chrann* ‘the hand-tree’) of [the Queen Mary harp](#).<sup>227</sup>

The animism of the tree is retained in poetic by-names for boats such as *giuthas*, *darach* or *iùbhrach* (‘pine’, ‘oak’ or ‘yew’). The word *crann* ‘tree’ also means ‘mast’ and, if they had survived, we might well have found masts to be decorated with foliage. Certainly in literature, the mast of a boat is often given tree-like attributes, with birds or sailors in its branches.<sup>228</sup>

#### CONTINUITY

At the end of the 19th century, Neil MacLeod’s brother, Iain Dubh Dhòmhnail nan Òran, satirises a neighbour for cutting some branches from a tree in the graveyard of Kilchoan in Skye to protect his stackyard from sheep. The neighbour is decried as a beast and an abomination who has committed an incomparable felony, *meàirle gun choimeas*.<sup>229</sup> Satire notwithstanding, the poet’s outrage at the pilfering of a few branches would be hard to comprehend without an understanding of the place of the tree in Gaelic culture, both pagan and Christian. That tree was significant for marking the grave of a Norse prince and for its power to comfort through representing resurrection each spring.

These ideas are still current in the Gaelic imagination, from Sorley MacLean’s ‘Hallaig’ and ‘Coilltean Ratharsair’ (‘The Woods of Raasay’) to Runrig’s ‘An Ubhal as Àirde’.<sup>230</sup> In a Gaelic context, Donald MacAulay’s opening lines to ‘A’ Chraobh’ are not surprising:

226. Osborn Bergin, *Stories from Keating’s History of Ireland* (1st pub. 1930; repr. Dublin, 1975), 1–2.

227. James Drummond, *Ancient Scottish Weapons* (Edinburgh and London, 1881), Plates XLVIII and XLIX.

228. For example, ‘Gilleann Ghleanndail’, in Anne Lorne Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2006), 71:

gun dìrich thu na crainn aice  
cho aotrom ris na h-eòin  
*that you climb her masts | as lightly as the birds*

229. ‘Aoir Dhòmhnail Ghreannnda’, in Meg Bateman, *Bàird Ghleann Dail/The Glendale Bards* (Edinburgh, 2014).

230. <<http://www.elyrics.net/read/r/runrig-lyrics/an-ubhal-as-airde-lyrics.html>> (27 October 2009).



'S dòcha gur h-e craobh / as coltaiche ris eil an duine ...

*Perhaps a tree / is what a man most resembles ...*<sup>231</sup>

The tree forms the dominant image in his existentialist poem 'A' Cheiste', which defends the individual's right to choice:

Ghineadh dhomh faillean  
à spàirn dhìomhair;  
dh'fhàs e tromham craobhach;  
chuir mi romham gum fàsadh e dìreach  
gus buil a thoirt air slatan fiara.

*A tree was for me engendered  
from some mysterious striving;  
its branches spread through me:  
I decided it should grow undeformed  
to combat deviant yardsticks.*<sup>232</sup>



'Cloutie trees' at Munloch, the Black Isle, Easter Ross. © Seán Purser

231. Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh, *Deilbh is Faileasan/Images and Reflections* (Stornoway, 2008), 220.

232. 'A' Cheiste', in Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh, *Deilbh is Faileasan*, 22.

Aonghas MacNeacail (b. 1942), writing in memory of his mother in 'chunnaic mi am measg nan ubhal thu', juxtaposes the apple tree of his childhood which was nurtured by his mother to provide food for the family with the apple tree of Eden which condemns woman by association with Eve as man's tempter. While she is diminished by her association with the Judeo-Christian apple tree, there is the implication that she would be ennobled by the apple tree of the pagans.<sup>233</sup>

'Cloutie trees' are another survival of Gaelic tree culture. A tree at Munloch on the Black Isle stands beside a well associated with St Curadan or St Boniface, who worked in the area around 620. To this day, healing is sought by washing the clothing of an ill person in the well and tying it into the trees nearby. Rags are tied to some of the coppiced oaks growing on Doon Hill near Aberfoyle into which the Rev. Robert Kirk was said to have disappeared in the 17th century. In Gairloch on Isle Ma' Ruibhe in Loch Maree, the remains of an oak tree can be seen, poisoned by the offerings of pins and copper coins driven sideways into its bark. The tree stands beside a well dedicated to the saint and the remains of his chapel.



Money tree on Isle Ma' Ruibhe.  
Photo Meg Bateman

#### CONCLUSION

The tree is the commonest and most tenacious symbol in Gaelic culture. Though used symbolically in most cultures, it is remarkable in Gaelic culture for its longevity and ubiquity, in the archaeological and place-name record and in literature and iconography, even to the present day. The companionship of trees afforded to Mad Suibne and their animism which survives their making into harps and boats manifest deep aspects of the culture. The tree can represent the *axis mundi* of a tribal area, the figure of man and his genealogy, sounds and letters

233. 'i saw you among the apples', in Aonghas MacNeacail, 'laoidh an donais òig/hymn to a young demon' (Edinburgh, 2007).



and the tree of life. An argument is made here against the foliaceous designs of stone carving having a merely decorative function. Rather it is suggested that they represent mistletoe (*uil-ioc* 'all-heal' in Gaelic), and other climbing plants such as ivy, woodbine, convolvulus and the vine, and carry the common Indo-European symbolism of a tree of life, of healing and of the life everlasting.

In our search for continuity in the tradition, we can conclude this part by mentioning Alasdair Gray's cover for Dwelly's dictionary,<sup>234</sup> based on the Gaelic tree alphabet. The motif is depicted by many others, for example, on the bridge crossing the railway in Kyle, Wester Ross, and by Donald Urquhart and Simon Fraser.<sup>235</sup> The tree in Gaelic culture indicates an understanding of man's involvement in nature, which informed the Romantic and Arts and Crafts movements, and thrives today in the ecological movement (of which more will be said in Section VI). MB

### III.2.b. ANIMALS AND BIRDS

[Introduction](#); [The Animal Master](#); [Kennings and Nicknames](#); [The Hunted and the Hunter](#); [Wolves](#); [Animals and the Otherworld](#); [The Oldest Animals](#); [Animals in Christianity](#); [Horses](#); [Birds](#); [Animal Symbolism](#); [Fantastic Animals](#); [Man and Animals: a Continuum?](#); [A Footnote on Bird Illustration and Photography](#); [Conclusion](#)

#### INTRODUCTION

*Nuair a bha a' Ghàidhlig aig na h-eòin, 's ann a bha linn an àigh.*

When the birds spoke Gaelic, that was the Golden Age.

This common saying expresses a longing for a mutual understanding with animals. This section looks at where that sense of commonality might have come from and at how the Gaels have visualised their place among wild and domestic animals through the ages.

Christianity and Judaism give man dominion over the animals of the earth, the fish of the seas and the fowl of the air.<sup>236</sup> Aristotle's teachings, which became widespread in Western Europe from the 13th century, also preached

234. Edward Dwelly, *Faclair Gàidhlig gu Beurla le Dealbhan* [Dwelly's Illustrated Gaelic to English Dictionary] ([1901–1911]; Glasgow, 1988).

235. <<http://www.simonfraser.co.uk/pages/collaboration.html#t1>>.

236. Genesis 1: 28–30.

that animal life was for the convenience of man.<sup>237</sup> We find evidence for a very different construction of belief in the archaeological remains of the Celts on the Continent, some aspects of which persist into Gaelic society to early modern, and even to modern, times. Martin Martin for example, remarks on the tenant of Fladda Chuain (off the north coast of Skye) who refused to eat the plovers which wintered there and was shocked that Martin 'could imagine that he would be so barbarous as to take the lives of innocent creatures as came to him only for self-preservation'.<sup>238</sup>

#### THE ANIMAL MASTER

Principal in the early Celtic belief system was the animal master (perhaps the horned god on the Gundestrup Cauldron and the later god Finn) who causes animal life to come forth. Animal life is taken from the wild with some degree of peril to the hunter, both physical (in the case of a boar, bear or stag hunt) and psychic. Reparation has to be made in the form of substitutionary sacrifices, often of domestic animals, to the earth.<sup>239</sup> Indeed, the horns on the figure on the Gundestrup cauldron and Finn's close familial relationship to deer and dogs



The horned god on the Gundestrup Cauldron. Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen

237. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1256 a–b.

238. Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, ed. Donald J. Macleod (1698; Edinburgh, 1994), 217.

239. Miranda Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth* (London, 1992), 62–65.

suggest that the boundary between the hunter and the hunted is to some extent blurred. The presence of foetal pig and foetal human bones mixed together at High Pasture Cave in Strath in Skye may represent a conciliatory ritual between man and nature. Certainly, Iron Age pits have been found in Europe and Britain offering domestic and wild animals to the earth. The dying bull on the baseplate of the Gundestrup cauldron is also likely to represent a sacrifice. It was hoped that the sacrifice of domestic animals, in severing their ties with this world, would cause a new life force in the Otherworld that would be productive of new wild life in this. It opened up a channel of communication between the two worlds in which a balance could be maintained between life, death and rebirth and between the domestic and the wild.<sup>240</sup>

In historical times we see similar respect for life and the land in the sacrifices of fowl made to Brigid ‘where three rivers meet’ and in the animal ‘foundation sacrifices’ made to appease the land when it was being taken over for building purposes. *Carmina Gadelica* contains prayers for saining the hunter engaged in the taking of wild life,<sup>241</sup> and Martin Martin records the proper way to undertake fowling in the Flannan Islands. The fowlers were neither to urinate on the isle nor kill a bird with a stone; they had to move sunwise, pray at the altar of St Flannan and to use certain word substitutions.<sup>242</sup>

Connected to the need to propitiate nature is a respect for the hunted, where the living world exists for itself rather than as a storehouse for humanity. There are many tales told against those who take excess. Cú Chulainn’s year-long wasting sickness appears to be the direct result of his killing an entire flock of swans, despite his initial resistance when goaded to do so by the women of Ulster.<sup>243</sup> The story of St Cuthbert sharing a fish with some strangers and with the eagle that caught it demonstrates a principle of sharing rather than of exploiting nature’s bounty.<sup>244</sup> It remains a tenet of crofting to this day. After a night of unexpected luck, a man in *Carmina Gadelica* discovers he has been fishing with the devil.<sup>245</sup> Traditional fresh-water pearl fishers who had worked the oyster beds systematically for generations were disgusted by the greed of

240. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, 92–96.

241. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* I, 310–13.

242. Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, 97–98.

243. ‘Serglige Con Culainn or The Wasting Sickness of Cúchulainn’, in Jeffrey Gantz, trans., *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (London, 1981), 155–78.

244. Mary Low, *St Cuthbert’s Way* (Glasgow, 2000), 181–82.

245. Quoted in Polly Pullar and Mary Low, *Fauna Scotica* (Edinburgh, 2012), from *Carmina Gadelica* IV, 9–10.

others that ruined their productivity,<sup>246</sup> as was Osgood MacKenzie on seeing the commercial salmon netting for export around the coast of Gairloch.<sup>247</sup>

#### KENNINGS AND NICKNAMES

In the tradition of the panegyric poetry, the animals most commonly used in kennings are the salmon, stag, lion and hawk and, to a lesser extent, the dragon and bear, boar and wolf (these two hunted to extinction in the 17th century). These animals all appear in Pictish stone carving and probably represent tribal names. Additionally, they are the same animals as often appear as ‘animal helpers’ in traditional tales. They are wild rather than domestic and it is possible that we have a continuum here from the time when the Celts, as hunter-gatherers, used these animals both totemically in their tribal names and shamanistically in calling forth the animals in the hunt.

There are also regional nicknames which associate districts with certain animals (discussed in III.3.c.). People to this day talk of *Coin Thròndairnis* (the dogs of Trotternish) and *Eireagan Eilean Iarmain* (the pullets of Isle Ornsay), and rhymes about the animals of rival areas are known from every area. Some of these usages may be very old, for example the connection of people from Kintyre and Jura with horses, *Luchd nan each*, which probably reflects the same totemism that caused the Romans to refer to the tribe there as the *Epidii*. Others however are more recent. Donald Fraser reports that the nickname *Na h-Òisgean* (the hoggs), arose from a particular instance when the people of Lismore went to Oban to pay their rent and each followed the first man in leaping like sheep over the doormat so as not to dirty it. Perhaps in times of little outbreeding, physical features such as hair colour or shape of nose came to be predominant in certain areas and may have been typified by comparison with animals. Whether or not this is the case, Fraser gives examples of the district nicknames of gannets, hawks, grouse, ravens, ducks and cuckoos, badgers, goats, rabbits, dogs, cats, hornless cattle, porpoises and otters.<sup>248</sup> The given names Oisean, Conan, Rònan, Faolan and Calum come directly from the words for deer, dog, seal, wolf and dove.

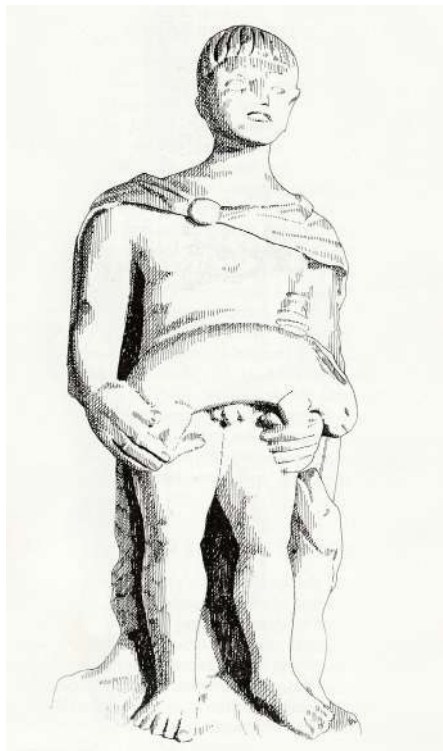
#### THE HUNTED AND THE HUNTER

We will see that the Gaels disdained the Pictish use of nets in hunting (see III.3.a.). The relationship between the hunted and the hunter was one of respect and even tenderness. It may be seen in the Iron Age image of the hunter-god

246. Pullar and Low, *Fauna Scotica* (Edinburgh, 2012), 117.

247. Michael Newton, *A Handbook of the Scottish Gaelic World* (Dublin, 2000), 188.

248. Domhnull Friseal, ‘Far-ainmean dùthchail na Gàidhealtachd’, *TGSI XLIV* (1974–76), 87–95.



The Iron Age image of the hunter-god holding a dead hare from Touget, Gers, France (Miranda Green, p. 59)

holding a dead hare from Touget, in the department of Gers, France,<sup>249</sup> and in Gaelic verse of the 18th century – most famously in Donnchadh Bàn's 'Moladh Beinn Dòbhrain', in the love and respect with which he describes his quarry, the deer. An Ciaran Mabach (d.1688) describes the deer with equal affection in a poem he composed in Edinburgh while seeking medical advice:

B' e mo ghràdh-sa am fear buidhe  
 Nach suidheadh mun bhòrd,  
 Nach iarradh ri cheannach  
 Pinnt leanna na beòir ...  
 B' i mo ghràdh-sa a bhean uasal  
 Dha nach d' fhuaras riamh lochd,  
 Nach iarradh mar chluasaig  
 Ach fìor ghualainn nan cnoc ...

*My love, the dun fellow,  
 who would sit at no board,  
 who would not seek to purchase  
 a pint of ale or beer ...  
 My love his noble lady  
 in whom fault was never found,  
 who desired no cushion  
 but the shoulder of the hills ...*<sup>250</sup>

Mary Low describes the white hind that followed a forester in Argyll's army in 1644. The forester obeyed Argyll's orders to shoot the hind, saying it would be the last thing he would do, and dropped dead on the spot (see also III.3.a.).<sup>251</sup> Martin Martin speaks about a taboo on the descendants of Lachlan MacLean on Rum

249. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, 59.

250. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach* (Edinburgh, 1994), 180.

251. George Henderson, *Survivals of Belief among the Celts* (Glasgow, 1911), 124–25, quoted in Pullar and Low, *Fauna Scotica*, 5.

who would fall ill and die if they shot deer on the hill of Finchra in Rum.<sup>252</sup> These taboos are similar, structurally and symbolically, to the *geasa* against Cú Chulainn eating dog flesh and Diarmid eating boar, which, once broken, led rapidly to their demise. Similar taboos existed against Fionn eating deer and the MacCodrums eating seal. It has already been seen that *imbais forosnai* required the chewing of the flesh of a cat or dog, as a dead animal had a connection with the Otherworld. A piece of the skin of the king otter was similarly meant to be protective at sea or in battle. The many cures based on the consumption of parts of animals mentioned by Martin Martin may have more to do with their connection to the Otherworld and to lost beliefs about animal helpers than with any chemical properties.

The hunt is the noblest activity for it requires a man to cross the boundary from the domestic to the wilderness and to face the forces of destruction and regeneration. Animals left undisturbed became a motif in laments for a dead hunter:

Chì mi na h-eòin air an rubha,  
 Cluinnidh mi an sgreuch 's an guileag,  
 Gun duine staigh bheireadh fuil orr'.  
 Mo cheist air giomanach a' ghunna,  
 Bheireadh air an earba fuireach,  
 An ròn maol ri taobh na tuinne,  
 Is an eala bhàn as binne luinneag.

*I see the birds on the headland,  
 I hear their screeching and mewing  
 and have no man to leave them bloodied.  
 My love the hunter with the musket  
 who would make the roe-buck falter,  
 the smooth-headed seal beside the wave-tops  
 and the white swan of the sweetest whooping.*<sup>253</sup>

In monotheistic religions where man is made in God's image, animals by definition have only a subordinate role. However, where the earth is the principal Other, as in primal religions, animals have an intrinsic right to exist and an intrinsic place in the Otherworld of the dead. Their forms on Pictish stones, whether symbolic or not, suggest they were observed as things of fascination and beauty in their own right. We need only think of the rippling muscles in their depictions of bulls and boars, the elegance of the deer and horses, the realism in the curve of the fishes' mouths and the wolves' ribs.

252. Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, 299.

253. Ó Baoill and Bateman. *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, 114–15.





Ardross Wolf Stone.

Photo © Ewen Weatherspoon/The Highland Council, Museum and Art Gallery

#### WOLVES

The wolf figures in the Gaelic imagination in contradictory ways: sometimes it is an admired fellow-hunter and representative of the wilderness, sometimes a demonic destroyer of flocks and even of people. Historical accounts, place-names and charms for protection of flocks suggest they were plentiful throughout the Highlands. John Bellenden wrote in 1536 about the high numbers of deer, foxes and wolves in the Caledonian forest.<sup>254</sup> Place-names containing the Gaelic element *madadh*, as in Portavaddie and Polmaddie (Argyll) and Toulvaddie (Ross), and the Norse element *ulfr*, as in Ulva and Ulbster, point to their widespread haunts. The term *Faoilleach*, now used for January, formerly referred, perhaps by folk etymology, to a lean period in late winter and early spring when the wolf (*faol*) could become a threat to human settlements (see I.2.b.).

Pictish depictions of wolves survive on the Ardross Stone (now in Inverness Museum and Art Gallery), on the St Andrews Sarcophagus and on the Mail stone in Shetland; a later medieval carving exists on Darnaway Castle, Morayshire. A depiction of a wolf in the Book of Kells, fol. 76v, shares much with the Ardross wolf in the depiction of its large feet, the scrolls of muscle on its flank and the angle of its tail. The carefully observed Ardross wolf is perhaps totemic or

254. Andrew Wiseman, "A noxious pack": Historical, literary and folklore traditions of the wolf (*canis lupus*) in the Scottish Highlands', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* XXV (2009), 95–142.

symbolic. The others show wolves being hunted, by both men and women. The Mail stone shows a man wearing a wolf mask, probably with ritual significance.<sup>255</sup> All these depictions imply that the wolf was a noble, wild creature, the pursuit of which was also ennobling. There is at least one reference to the use of their skins as a covering for harps.<sup>256</sup>

A skilful and ferocious hunter, words meaning 'wolf' came to be used as personal names and kennings. The names Fillan/Faolan (and hence MacLennan/MacGillFhaolain) and Shaw/Seathach are derived from *faol* and *sitheach* respectively.<sup>257</sup> As a kenning, Alexander Stewart, the Wolf of Badenoch (1343–1405) was known as *An Cuilean Curta* 'the Wicked Wolf'. Wolf kennings were still productive in the 16th century, over one hundred years after their annual persecution had been made obligatory by law. Both Fenian heroes and historical figures are praised as wolves, often with a place-name attached, as in *onchú Íle* or *onchú Leódhuis* 'the wolf of Islay' or 'the wolf of Lewis'.<sup>258</sup> There may be more to this kenning than the praise of ferocity alone; the wolf was also an archetypal figure of the wilderness, as is evinced by the terms *cù-fàsaich*, *cù-coille* and *mac-tìre* 'dog of the wilderness', 'dog of the wood' and 'son of the land'. This connection is made clear in an elegy of 1636, when the wolves' mood personifies the land's displeasure at the death of four Clanranald chiefs.<sup>259</sup> The wolf was one of the wild animals charged with sparing domestic herds by the offering of a bannock at Beltane.<sup>260</sup> 'The Wolf MacDonalds of Braemar', *Sliochd a' Mhadaidh-allaidh*, believed one of their ancestors, like Cormac mac Airt, high king of Ireland, Romulus and Remus and Mowgli, had been suckled by a wolf.<sup>261</sup> In all these cases, and bearing in mind the Gaelic distinction between *baile* and *fàsach*, between human settlement and wilderness, a man's association with the Other brought him both mystical and practical powers.

It has been suggested that wolves became more of a threat to humans and their livestock as their natural habitat was reduced by the destruction of forestry

255. For a discussion of this and other Pictish stones showing men wearing animal masks, see Val Turner, 'The Mail stone: An incised Pictish figure from Mail, Cunningsburgh, Shetland', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquities of Scotland* 124 (1994), 315–25.

256. 'Beannuigh do Theaghlach, a Thrìonóid', by Giolla Críost Táilliúr, in MacLeod and Bateman, *Duanair na Sracaire* (Edinburgh, 2007), No. 35, l. 29.

257. Wiseman, 'A noxious pack', 99.

258. For wolf kennings, see MacLeod and Bateman, *Duanair na Sracaire*, No. 17, l. 34; No. 18, l. 13; No. 25, l. 80; No. 33, l. 82; No. 58, l. 92.

259. Poem beginning 'Cumha ceathair do mheasg mé', in Cameron, *Reliquiae Celticae* II, 240–41, cited in Wiseman, 'A noxious pack', 110.

260. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* I, 208–09.

261. Wiseman, 'A noxious pack', 100.

for agriculture, boat-building and charcoal-making.<sup>262</sup> They were associated with digging up corpses, graveyards being sited on Handa and other islands in Loch Maree, Loch Leven and Loch Awe for this very reason. Their annihilation became highly emotive, with their heads displayed as trophies and multiple triumphant accounts being given of the killing of ‘the last wolf in Scotland’. This was variously held to be at the hands of Cameron of Lochiel at Killiecrankie, Chisholm at Gleann Con-fhiadh, MacQueen in Darnaway in 1743, and Polson at Glen Loth, Brora, who held the she-wolf back by the tail while his sons killed her cubs in their lair. There are numerous other accounts of women killing the last wolf with a cast iron pot or girdle.<sup>263</sup>

So the wolf gradually loses its reputation as a noble fellow-predator to become morally debased as implied in the wording of the 1427 Act which raised a hue and cry against ‘wolf, thief and sornor’. Both wolves and outlaws hid in the forests, which were sometimes set alight to drive them out. The prejudice against wolves is also biblical, where false prophets are termed ‘wolves in sheep’s clothing’ and where the wolf attacking sheep is a frequent figure for the devil’s attempts to win Christian souls.<sup>264</sup> The demonic association is very clear in an unusual poem in the Book of the Dean of Lismore, ‘Beannuigh do theaghlach, a Thríonóid’, by Giolla Críost Táilliúr (c. 1450).<sup>265</sup> It is not clear whether the wolves in question are the animal or metaphors for the murderers of King James I who was killed in Perth in 1437. The wolves are referred to as *gasradh dubh* ‘a black legion’, with Lucifer in their midst, who deserve to be cursed, burned, torn by deer hounds and to have their heads displayed on stakes.

Some would see the problem of the wolf as man-made and there is a move to redress our part in the devastation of its habitat and its extermination in the ‘rewilding’ of Scotland. Paul Lister, the landowner of the Alladale Wilderness Reserve in Sutherland, would like to reintroduce and contain wolves in parts of his estate, believing it would be beneficial to the regeneration of the Caledonian forest, as the control of elk by wolves in Yellowstone Park was beneficial to the whole environment. Others however see humans, in the aftermath of the Clearances, as the endangered species in the Highlands and suggest the wolf is becoming a ‘rich man’s guard dog’ that would endanger people’s lives and

262. Short, Janice <[http://www.wolvesandhumans.org/wolves/history\\_of\\_wolves\\_in\\_scotland.htm](http://www.wolvesandhumans.org/wolves/history_of_wolves_in_scotland.htm)> – accessed 7 November 2015.

263. James Edmund Harting, *British Animals Extinct within Historic Times* (1880), cited in Adam Weymouth, ‘The Place Where Wolves Could Soon Return’, BBC News Magazine (14 October 2015).

264. See Mat. 7:15; John 10:12; Luke 10:3.

265. MacLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 35.

livelihoods.<sup>266</sup> It is interesting to see how much the current debate over the wolf as both wilderness archetype and as marauder chimes with its dual reputation in the Gaelic tradition.

#### ANIMALS AND THE OTHERWORLD

The realm of the living dead does not concern humans alone: it was widely held that animals had second sight and that dogs and horses could see ghosts. Because of the way snakes slough their skin and emerge from the earth, they became symbols of rebirth to the Iron Age Celts, Picts and Gaels. The story of ‘St Fillan and the White Snake’, set in Kilillan in Kintail, is similar in many ways to the story of Fionn and the salmon. In this tale, the saint gains the gift of healing, rather than knowledge, when he burns himself on a cooking snake and, similarly to the salmon, this white snake has associations with water and a hazel, having been found beside Loch Long where the saint had cut himself a stove.<sup>267</sup> The nexus of symbolism in both tales links knowledge and healing with the earth, transmitted through water, a hazel and animals. In the later story, the saint acquires the Christian power of healing through contact with a snake, that ancient Celtic symbol of rebirth. It is no surprise then to find snake and boss decoration covering the major part of the high cross at Kildalton (see overpage) representing the resurrection through Christ.

In the story of ‘The Man in the Cassock’, it is a stag with one gold and one silver antler and a white hound with red ears that entice Murchadh mac Bhriain into the Otherworld.<sup>268</sup> Otherworld dogs, deer and cows are often red and white or multicoloured. But as the Fenians lived from the wild and not as herdsmen, their ‘cattle’ are the deer with their distinctive brown stripe down their backs, *slat dhonn nan druim*.

It was the enormous size of these deer, *loin dubha*, that finally made St Patrick realise that Oisean had not exaggerated the former size of the hunt (see ‘Ossian after the Fians’).<sup>269</sup> The fact that it is a bone ‘down which another large deer bone could fit’ that provokes the discussion and that it is in the Otherworld that Oisean awakes the hunt suggests that the belief arose from the fossil record rather than from any extant animal. Bones of the so-called Irish elk, *Megaloceros giganteus*, which stood seven foot at the shoulders and whose antlers spanned some twelve feet, have been found in bogs throughout Ireland. It used to be thought that human predation might have led to its extinction in Ireland around 11,000 years ago (though it may have survived longer in continental Europe), but

266. Adam Weymouth, ‘The Place Where Wolves Could Soon Return’.

267. Bruford and MacDonald, *Scottish Traditional Tales* (Edinburgh, 1994), 288–91.

268. Bruford and MacDonald, *Scottish Traditional Tales*, 153.

269. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV (London, 1891), 84.





Snake bosses on the Kildalton Cross, Islay. Historic Environment Scotland



The Pictish beast, elephant or water horse on the Maiden Stone, Aberdeenshire.  
Photo © John Purser



now starvation in the intergalactic period is thought the more likely cause. Its extinction in any case appears to be earlier than the oldest human settlement recorded from 9,000 years ago at Mount Sandel, Coleraine (but see I.1.b.).<sup>270</sup>

Words for deer, *fiadh*, hare, *gearr-fhiadh*, boar, *fiadh-chullach*, and wolf, *fiadh-chù*, all contain the word *fiadh* 'wild', making these four the archetypal animals of the wilderness and hence of the Otherworld. Ferocious regenerating boar are the food of the Otherworld and hares are the form often taken by witches when stealing milk. There was a belief that a deer seen away from the rest of the herd or in a place not frequented by deer was an omen of death.<sup>271</sup>

Otherworld cattle and horses are able to survive amphibiously as the sea and water give entry to the Otherworld. The North Uist storyteller Pàdraig Moireasdan describes *crodh-mara* 'sea cattle' coming in from the sea at low tide when the moon was out to feed on *gortan*, a plant growing in the machair. Two or three beasts could be caught each night by throwing a handful of dust over them.<sup>272</sup> The horses of the Fenians were capable of riding both under and over the sea.

Thuir na bràithrean ris gum faigheadh e uapasan Steud dhubh a mharcaicheadh an cuan glas mar mhachaire geal sgiamhach.<sup>273</sup>

*The brothers said they would give him a Black Steed that would ride the green ocean as though it were the fair grassy land.*

It has been suggested by Ronald Black that the water horse of the Gaelic tradition is derived from the most commonly carved animal on the Pictish stones: the Pictish beast or elephant (see previous page).<sup>274</sup> Accounts of the water horse in Gaelic tales, describing its pointed snout, its long mane and tail and the requirement for a bridle or magic cap to control it, tally well with the carvings. It may well be that the Torrs pony cap was made as part of the ritual associated with a Pictish deity, a keeper of the entrance – through water – to the Otherworld. We may see a significant point of contact between the pagan and Christian in St Columba's encounter with a water beast in the River Ness.<sup>275</sup> A

270. S. J. Gould, 'The Misnamed, Mistreated, and Misunderstood Irish Elk', in *Ever Since Darwin* (New York, 1977), 9–90.

271. Malcolm MacPhail, 'Folklore from the Hebrides II', *Folklore* Vol. 8, No. 4 (December 1897), 380–86; this quotation on p. 383.

272. Pàdraig Moireasdan, *Ugam agus Bhuam* (Steòrnabhagh: Club Leabhar, 1977), 57–58.

273. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV, 257 and 250; see also 'Eas Ruadh' (The Red Cataract), 9 and 97.

274. R. MacilleDhuibh, 'An t-Each Uisge', in Blankenhorn, ed., '*Craobh nan Ubhal*', *A Festschrift for John MacInnes, Scottish Studies* 37 (2014), 124–33.

275. Adomnán of Iona, *Life of St Columba*, transl. Richard Sharpe (London, 1995), 175–76.

deity seen springing on the Pictish stones, perhaps with waves around its hooves, is quelled into submission by the Christian saint and becomes demonised in the medieval tradition. Though its strength can be harnessed for a while, association with it inevitably ends in ruin when it drags farmer or maid into the water never to be seen again. The functional explanation that it existed to keep children away from dangerous water is only part of the story, though it may account for the survival of water horse sites to the present.

#### THE OLDEST ANIMALS

Ptolemy's idea of calculating the age of the world in the lives of animals and plants became known all over Europe and finds its way into much Gaelic and Irish material:

Trì aois coin, aois eich,  
Trì aois eich, aois duine,  
Trì aois duine, aois fèidh,  
Trì aois fèidh, aois firein,  
Trì aois firein, aois craoibh dharaich.

*Thrice a dog's age, age of a horse,  
Thrice a horse's age, age of a man,  
Thrice a man's age, age of a deer,  
Thrice a deer's age, age of an eagle,  
Thrice an eagle's age, age of the oak.*<sup>276</sup>

The scheme measured the world through the lives of a list of plants and animals which included man and bestowed on him no special treatment. The scheme lies behind such poems as 'Comhachag Bhoich na Sròine' and 'The Hawk of Achill', in which birds act as historians for a particular clan. In the latter, the hawk can remember times before the Deluge and speaks to Fintan who has survived through shape-changing for the 6,515 years since the beginning of the world.<sup>277</sup> In the 18th century, John MacCodrum and Dòmhnall nan Òran both made poems as the thrushes of their clans, the MacDonalDs and the MacLeods respectively, combining the reputation of birds as singers and as long-lived historians. By taking on the persona of the bird, the poet becomes part of the wilderness of his *dùthchas*, the hereditary land of his tribe: he speaks as more than himself.

276. Alexander Nicolson, *Gaelic Proverbs* (Edinburgh, 1996; 1st pub. 1881), 414.

277. See Eleanor Hull, quoted in Caitlín and John Matthews, *The Encyclopaedia of Celtic Wisdom* (London, 1994), 63–93.

## ANIMALS IN CHRISTIANITY

It is no surprise that pagan attitudes to animals are reflected in Christianity as practised by the Gaels. Many saints have particular associations with animals which we have mentioned before: Brigid with cows, Colum Cille with a crane and a horse, Caoimhín with a blackbird, Gall with a bear. Such affinities go deeper than a sentimental kindness: they reflect their common source, being and end in God. John Scotus Eriugena formulated it thus:

Therefore He is the Beginning, the Middle and the End: the Beginning because from Him are all things that participate in essence; the Middle, because in Him and through Him they subsist and move; the End, because it is towards Him that they move in seeking rest from their movement and the stability of their perfection.<sup>278</sup>

The Hawk of Achill clearly had a soul, for it is granted heaven by St Fintan at the end of their conversation. Suzanne Lewis suggests that the plethora of animals (cats, mice, moths, birds, dogs, otters etc.) in the Book of Kells may have more than decorative significance. On the Chi Rho page, animals representing each of the land, air and sea hold a sign of the Resurrection: the mice hold the host marked with a cross, the moths hold a chrysalis, a sign of rebirth, and the otter holds a fish. As part of Creation, they are part of the Word made physical, and as part of the body of Christ, they can look to the Resurrection, for, following Eriugena and the anonymous author of *In Tenga Bithnua*, ‘when Christ rose in a human body, the entire universe was redeemed’.<sup>279</sup> Like the snake sloughing its skin, peacocks were used since the time of the Roman catacombs as a symbol of renewal and resurrection, because they moult and regrow their feathers each



Detail of the Chi Rho page (f.34r), of cats, mice, an otter and a fish

278. John J. O'Meara, ed., *Eriugena* (Oxford, 1988), Chap. 1.

279. S. Lewis, 'Sacred Calligraphy: The Chi Rho page in the Book of Kells' in *Tradition* 36 (1980), 139–59; Carey, *King of Mysteries*, 76.



The modern cloister pillars at Iona Abbey. Photo © Meg Bateman

year and because their dried flesh did not decay. There are many depictions of peacocks in the Book of Kells, most prominently flanking [the portrait of Christ](#) (fol. 32v).<sup>280</sup>

Such inclusiveness was not unique to these islands, for the psalmist also instructs 'beasts and all cattle / creeping things and flying birds' to praise God (Ps 148) and the rivers and hills to clap their hands and sing before the Lord (Ps 98: 8). We find prayers for both domestic and wild animals in *Carmina Gadelica*, and their involvement in God's plan is reflected in their being included for extra portions on holy days.<sup>281</sup> Trout placed in holy wells to indicate the goodness of the water were cherished and protected.<sup>282</sup> The idea of birds being the souls of the dead in Gaelic Christian literature is a small step from the pre-Christian transmigration of souls and metempsychosis by which a soul enters different forms on shape-changing (see [II.1.b.](#)). In the Christian *immrama*, souls take the form of singing birds in the tree of the earthly paradise and beat their wings as they describe the coming of doomsday.<sup>283</sup> This 'cosmic piety' of Gaelic

280. For further images of peacocks in the Book of Kells, see Bernard Meehan: <[www.theguardian.com/books/gallery/2012/dec/14/book-kells-pictures](http://www.theguardian.com/books/gallery/2012/dec/14/book-kells-pictures)>.

281. Mary Low, 'The Spiritual Status of Animals in *Carmina Gadelica*', in McLeod and Gunderloch, *Cànan & Cultar: Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig* 3 (Edinburgh, 2006).

282. Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1994), 197.

283. Whitley Stokes, 'Imrum Snedhghusa agus Mic Riagla', *Revue Celtique* XIV (1893), 21.

Christianity, in which all of Creation rather than man alone is part of the emanation of God, is reflected in the animal carvings on the modern capitals of the cloister pillars at Iona Abbey and in the anarchic abundance of natural forms in St Conan's on Lochawe from the early 20th century.

The prohibition against eating meat during Lent led to some strange taxonomic beliefs. Both otters and barnacle geese were consumed as fish during Lent, the otter because of its provenance in the sea and the barnacle goose because it was held to hatch from barnacles.<sup>284</sup>

#### HORSES

The horse was an animal of great prestige among the Celts of the Continental Iron Age, judging from their inclusion in burials and votive sites, their decorated accoutrements, such as the Torrs pony cap, and their representation on utensils and carvings. The Celtic cavalry was remarked on by Classical writers and members were employed as mercenaries in Hannibal's wars.<sup>285</sup> The white horse carved into the Berkshire Downs at Uffington some two thousand years ago is a sign of the importance of the horse as a tribal symbol, probably among the Atrebates. A continuum of pride in the horse can probably be seen between the prehistoric Celtic cavalry and the cavalcades of bare-back riders with their sweethearts behind them (described by Martin Martin) that marked Michaelmas and other saints' days in the islands,<sup>286</sup> the horse and rider still evoking a mood of celebration, pride and virility. It was something of the same spirit that led young recruits from Uist to ride their horses along the machair to muster them so wastefully for World War II.<sup>287</sup> A love of horses is of course conspicuous among the Irish and the travellers in the Scottish Highlands, but a less usual example of a continuing equestrian flare is described by Iain Thomson, a shepherd in Strathfarrar in the 1950s:

We watched from the rowing boat as the MacKay boys, standing on the backs of the swimming ponies, balanced with the reins ...<sup>288</sup>

#### BIRDS

With their ability to fly in the air and swim on the sea and sing, birds were held in especial reverence from earliest times. Several songs mention a human

284. John Francis Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (Edinburgh, 1994), Vol. I, x.

285. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, 74–75.

286. Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, 147, 163, 317.

287. Roger Hutchinson, *The Silent Weaver* (Edinburgh, 2011), Chap. 1.

288. Iain Thomson, *Isolation Shepherd* (Edinburgh, 1983 and 2001), 114, 119–20.

longing to fly. It occurs in 'Gur toil leam fhìn thu', in which a woman would fly the kyles to reach her lover who has been taken by the press gang, and also 'Mo Rùn Geal Dileas' when a man would fly as a seagull to his love in Islay.<sup>289</sup> It occurs in 'He mandù' and the 'Lament for MacGregor of Glenstrae' from 1570 when the bereaved wife wishes she could have the shape of the lark with Gregor's strength in her arm so as to tear down the castle of her family who had beheaded her husband:

'S truagh nach robh mi an riochd na h-uiseig,  
Spionnadh Ghriogair ann mo làimh,  
Is i a' chlach a b' àirde anns a' chaisteal  
a' chlach a b' fhaisge don bhlàr.

*If only I had the flight of the lark  
with the strength of Gregor in my arm,  
the highest stone in the castle  
would be the closest to the ground.*<sup>290</sup>

A belief that swans were enchanted people, most famously the Children of Lir, led to their not being eaten in many parts of the islands, though they were eaten lustily in England.<sup>291</sup> Martin Martin says that people ate them but not without safe-guarding themselves first by a 'negative oath'.<sup>292</sup> The whiteness of the swan has led to its becoming a stock metaphor for both men and women in a culture that prized fairness of skin. It is how Muireadhach Albanach describes the Virgin Mary in the 13th century, how Christine Fergusson describes her husband who was killed after Culloden and how Dòmhnall Ruadh Chorùna described his sweetheart in 'An Eala Bhàn' (The White Swan), a song made in the trenches in the First World War. Their very presence enhances the beauty and nobility of the landscape: in the 16th century, Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn speaks of Loch Trèig with the sweet sounds of cuckoo and swan.

The power relationship between man and woman is internationally typified as that between a fox and a bird, but the symbolism is subverted in an Irish courtly love poem where the fox represents the woman who has severed the neck of the crane.<sup>293</sup> Though the woman is again the swan in the Gaelic song 'A Dhòmhnail nan Dòmhnail', she is nevertheless proactive:

289. Anne Lorne Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2006), 206 and 389.

290. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 71.

291. Pullar and Low, *Fauna Scotica*, 98.

292. Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, 140.

293. 'Cumann do cheangail an corr', in T. F. O' Rahilly, *Dánta Grádha* (Cork, 1926), 107.



Dè! nam biodh tu mar shionnach  
 air an tulaich ud thall,  
 agus mise mar eala  
 air bharraibh nan tonn,  
 Nàile! Rachainn ad choinneamh  
 agus mheallainn thu leam,  
 lùb ùr a' chùil chlannaich,  
 ort tha m' anam an geall.<sup>294</sup>

*God, if you were like a fox  
 on the hillock over there,  
 and I like a swan  
 on the crests of the waves,  
 by Nàile, I'd go to meet you  
 and would entice you away,  
 you head of fresh ringlets,  
 my soul is in your thrall.*

In 'Òran an amadain bhòidhich', Mairead Òg while bathing in a pool is mistaken for a duck when her lover is tricked by his mother into shooting her.

Birds were used in augury by the druids, which the Irish version of Nennius says originated with the Picts.<sup>295</sup> In recent times their flight was read for omens and their behaviour is still taken as an indication of the weather. It has been suggested that the Irish custom of killing wrens on St Stephen's day might have come from the Church's attempt to stamp out practices of bird augury.<sup>296</sup>

Because of their otherworldly links as souls of the dead, birds could protect man from supernatural harm. A helmet with a crest in the shape of a raven with hinged wings is known from Ciumesti from the 2nd or 3rd century BC,<sup>297</sup> and a warrior appear on the Gundestrup cauldron with [bird-crested helmet](#). They appear particularly on the Highland targes illustrated by Drummond in the 19th century.<sup>298</sup> In a 16th-century poem, Gilleasbuig is described going into battle with

294. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 340.

295. J. H. Todd and A. Herbert, eds, *Irish Version of Nennius*, Irish Archaeological Society Vol. XXVIII (1848), 124–25 and 144–45.

296. Daithí Ó hÓgáin, *Myth, Legend and Romance: An Encyclopaedia of the Irish Folk Tradition* (London, 1990), 35.

297. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, 89 and 134.

298. James Drummond, *Highland Targets and Other Shields* (Edinburgh, 1873), 'Highland Targets II. (The MacDonald target (Pl. I) confuses the argument because the double-headed eagle is part of the crest of the MacDonalds of the Isles.)

birds on the crest of his helmet and embroidered on his shirt.<sup>299</sup> The raven was the form (along with that of the eel and wolf) taken by the war goddesses Badhbh and Morrigan to instil panic into the enemy, for example when Cú Chulainn fights with Ferdia at the ford;<sup>300</sup> the same form was taken in a tale recorded in North Uist in 1981 by witches who flew out from Mull to try to sink the boat of their mistress's bridegroom.<sup>301</sup> The raven is still viewed as a bad omen, because it indicates the presence of carrion. Martin Martin was told about black eagles in Uist that would fix their talons between a deer's horns and flap their wings round its eyes until it became so confused that it would fall down and they would devour it.<sup>302</sup> Perhaps it is the countering of black by white in a tale recorded by Pàdruig Moireasdan (b. 1889) that allows a girl to free her three brothers from a spell that has turned them into ravens by weaving each of them a shirt of bog-cotton.<sup>303</sup> However, ravens were also recognised as being very intelligent and J. F. Campbell reports that children who had inexplicable knowledge were told *Tha fios fithich agad* 'you have a raven's knowledge'.<sup>304</sup> Ravens are also associated with drinking the blood of fallen heroes. Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair describes ravens and kites eating and drinking their fill on the battlefield in 'Òran nam Fineachan Gàidhealach' (The Song of the Clans):

'S mòr a bhios ri corp-rùsgadh  
 Nan closaichean sa bhlàr,  
 Fithich ann a' rocadaich,  
 Ag itealaich 's a' cnocaireachd,  
 Ciocras air na cosgarraich  
 Ag òl 's ag ith' an sàth ...

*Many will be stripping  
 the corpses on the field,  
 ravens will be cawing there,  
 fluttering and sauntering,  
 the kites ravenously  
 drinking and eating their fill ...*<sup>305</sup>

299. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 24, ll. 120 and 156.

300. T. Kinsella, *The Tain* (Oxford, 1988), 176.

301. 'Dark Lachlan and the Witches', in A. J. Bruford and MacDonald, *Scottish Traditional Tales* (Edinburgh, 1994), No. 84.

302. Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, 140.

303. 'Na Tri Lèintean Canaich', in Pàdruig Moireasdan, *Ugam agus Bhuam* (Steòrnabhagh, 1977), 16.

304. J. F. Cambell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* Vol. I, No. XVII.

305. J. L. Campbell, *Songs of the Forty-Five* (Edinburgh, 1984), 84–85.

In Fenian tales, geese swimming on a hero's breast are a sign of blood loss:

Nuair shnàmhadh na geòidh air do chneas,  
'S e mo làmh-sa rinn do leigheas.

*When geese swam upon your thy breast,  
It was my hand that healed thee.*<sup>306</sup>

The various poems spoken by thrushes, owls and hawks suggest a mutual intelligibility between man and bird, and a strong tradition remains of mimicking birds in Gaelic and of hearing Gaelic words in their calls.<sup>307</sup> In the story of 'Murchadh is Mionachag', for example, a wise crow calls *Gòrrag gòrrag* 'Fool, Fool', as she sees Murchadh trying to carry water in a sieve and advises him to use *Crèadh ruadh 's còinneach, crèadh ruadh 's còinneach* 'Red clay and moss'.<sup>308</sup> *Bi glic, bi glic* 'Be wise, be wise' (the call of the oystercatcher) is one of the most commonly quoted examples. The song of the thrush is imitated in this rhyme:

Iain 'ic IlleMhoire bhig,  
thig dhachaigh, thig dhachaigh.  
Cò thuige? Cò thuige?  
Gu d' dhinnear. Gu d' dhinnear.  
Dè 'n dinnear? Dè 'n dinnear?  
Aran cruaidh coircire, aran coircire.  
Meug leis, meug leis.  
Bi clis, bi clis!

*Little Iain Morrison,  
come home, come home.  
What for? What for?  
To your dinner. To your dinner.  
What dinner? What dinner?  
Hard rye bread, oat bread.  
Whey with it, whey with it.  
Be quick, be quick!*<sup>309</sup>

306. John Gregorson Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV (London, 1891), 43 and 47.

307. See, for example, 'Conaltradh Nan Eun', in Norman MacLeod, ed., *Leabhar nan Cnoc* (Glasgow, 1834).

308. J. F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* Vol. I, No. VIII.

309. From recordings made on Barra now held in the School of Scottish Studies (Tape 1951/10/A13), transcribed by Ian MacDonald, Gaelic Books Council. For further examples, see *Carmina Gadelica* IV, 20–31, *Celtic Review* II, 324, and Amy Murray, *Father Allan's Island*, 59; also S. Harris-Logan, *Nuair a Bha Gàidhlig aig na h-Eòin*, MPhil Dissertation, University of Glasgow Celtic Department (October 2007).

As people imitated birdsong in words and in music (see [IV.2.c](#). Musical Instruments), so did birds imitate musicians in Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's eyes:

Bha smeòrach cur na smùid dhith  
air bacan cùil leath' fhèin;  
an dreathan-donn gu sùrdail  
's a rifeid-chiùil na bheul;  
am bricean-beithe 's lùb air,  
's e gleusadh lùth a theud,  
an coileach-dubh ri dùrdan  
's a chearc ri tùchan rèidh.

*A mavis was singing her heart out  
perched on a branch, solo;  
the wren was busy  
with his chanter in his beak;  
the chaffinch was bending over  
to tune the tension of his strings,  
while the black-cock provided a drone  
and his hen murmured softly.*<sup>310</sup>

Indeed, human music was often compared unfavourably to bird song. The theme occurs as early as *Suibne Geilt* and *Acallamh na Senórach*, where Oisín prefers the blackbird's song to the sound of monastic bells and psalms,<sup>311</sup> and as late as Donald Lamont's 20th-century essay, 'Eòin is Radain'.<sup>312</sup> The composer of 'Fàilte Taobh Loch Beannchair', remembering 'dancing like a squirrel to the music of the birds', sings:

Nuair a tha eunlaith ri ceòl is danntsa  
Is còir do dhrannan a' bhàird bhith ciùin.

*When birds are singing and dancing  
The poet ought to silence his murmuring.*<sup>313</sup>

At some level this is fanciful, but at another it may spring from a cultural concept of the integration of all forms of life and a long admiration for 'natural music', not only of birds, but of deer, waves, caves (Fingal's Cave – *Uamh Fhinn* – is also known as *An Uamh Bhinn* 'the sweet cave') and cattle.

310. From 'Allt an t-Siùcar', in Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 231.

311. Dillon, *Early Irish Literature* (Chicago and London, 1948), 41

312. Thomas Murchison, *Prose Writings of Donald Lamont* (Edinburgh, 1988), 1.

313. Newton, *Bho Chluaidh gu Calasraid*, 268–71, v. 5.

## ANIMAL SYMBOLISM

A certain amount of animal symbolism exists. A satire of the 16th century calls Ailean mac Ruairidh, chief of Clann Raghnaill, a black boar, symbolising his uncouthness.<sup>314</sup> The fox was both admired and detested for its cunning and, while many fables relate to its powers to outwit its opponents, it is the fox that is used to characterise Colin of Glenure, who was murdered in 1752. Donnchadh Bàn ironically praised the fox for its persecution of the sheep that caused the Clearances.<sup>315</sup> On account of Samuel Johnson calling the Highlanders an ignorant people, Seumas Mac an t-Saoir's satire of 1775 calls him a frog, toad, newt, caterpillar, snail, dogfish, badger and sheep-louse:

Gur tu 'n losgann sleamhainn tarrabhuidh,  
'S tu maigean tairgneadh nan dìgean;  
Gur tu dearc-luachrach an fhàsaich  
Ri snag 's ri màgaran millteach.<sup>316</sup>

*You're the slimy yellow-bellied frog,  
You're the toad that inhabits the ditches;  
You're the newt of the wilderness  
Creeping and crawling with menace.*

The hedgehog came to be pictured as a persevering creature, perhaps from the international preaching repertoire. It brought apples on its spikes to succour Christ in the desert and so was it depicted by Athairne Mac Eoghain about 1600 in *Adtimchioll an Cheidimh* (Calvin's Catechism) to exemplify the folly of storing up gold on earth.<sup>317</sup> A foster-mother in the time of the outlawing of Clan Gregor in 1603 likens her charge to a hunted squirrel or hawk:

Ge ainmig an fheòrag,  
Gheibhear dòigh air a faotainn,  
Ge uasal an seabhag,  
'S tric a gheibhear le foill e.

*Though rare the squirrel,  
a way is found to catch it,  
though the hawk is noble,  
often is it caught through falsehood.*<sup>318</sup>

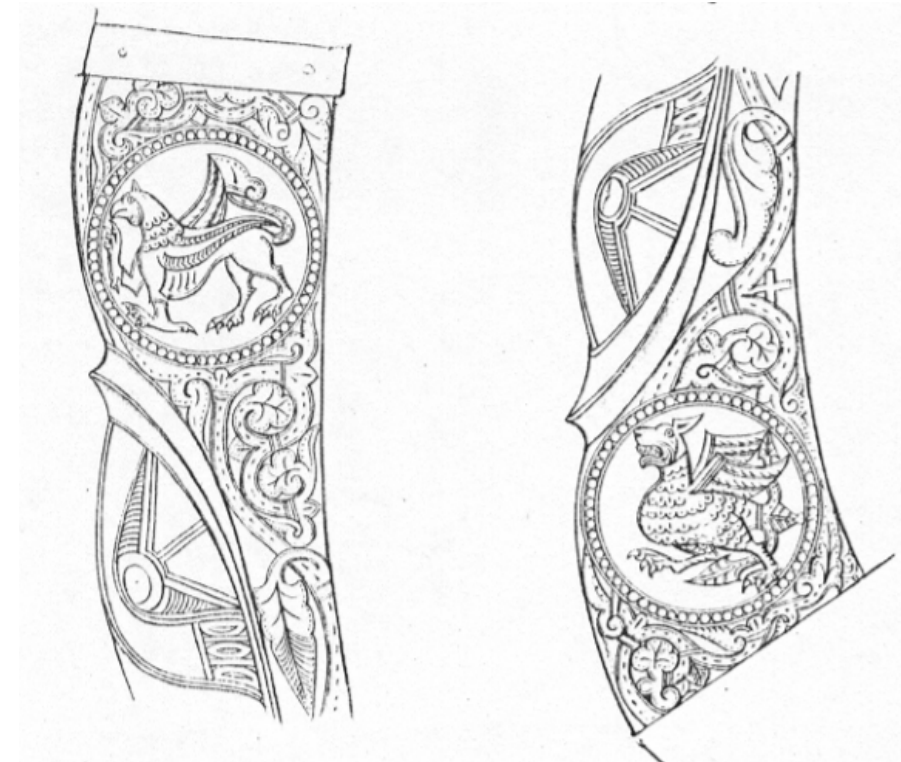
314. 'Theast Aon Diabhal na nGaoidheal', by Fionnlagh an Bard Ruadh, in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 38.

315. 'Òran nam Balgairéan', in Angus MacLeod, ed., *Òrain Dhonnchaidh Bhàin/The Songs of Duncan Ban MacIntyre* (Edinburgh, 1952), 346.

316. The Rev. John Kennedy, 'Poems from the Maclagan MSS', *TGSI XXII* (1897–98), 177.

317. 'Is mairg do-ní uaille as óige', in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 12.

318. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, 58.



The Queen Mary Harp shows a winged griffin and a cockatrice, James Drummond, *Ancient Scottish Weapons* (1881), Plate XLIX (detail)

## FANTASTIC ANIMALS

Fantastic beasts such as the centaur and unicorn came into the Celtic tradition from Scythia, from the anonymous Greek *Physiologia*, from Aristotle and Isidore of Seville. Griffins and sphinxes occur in La Tène art; the cockatrice and phoenix appear in the Book of Kells; a basilisk being attacked by a weasel occurs on the west face of the Cross at A' Chill in Canna (8th-9th century) and a winged griffin and a cockatrice decorate the Queen Mary Harp (15th century).<sup>319</sup>

However, it is significant that the indigenous supernatural beasts of the Gaelic imagination – the sea cows (*crodh-mara*), water horses (*eich-uisge*), magic boars (*tuirc shùithe*), crows, wolves, hares, cats, deer and eels – closely resemble their earthly counterparts. Their supernatural quality lies in their belonging to the Otherworld. They are feared in Christian times because they

319. Ian Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands* (Edinburgh: RCAHMS, 2001), 98, and James Drummond, *Ancient Scottish Weapons* (Edinburgh and London, 1881), Plates XLVIII and XLIX.



belong to a different cosmology where the dead can remain active on earth and where nature has a degree of autonomy. Shape-shifters assume the appearance of these animals (as discussed at II.1.b.), often with sinister intent.<sup>320</sup> Mermaids and many-headed sea monsters are probably derived from the demonised earth goddess and, like her, are associated with water, change shape and manifest the destructive qualities of nature in winter. Other creatures serve in topographic legends, such as *Bèist an dubh-ghiuthais* ‘the beast of the black pines’, that appeared to have burnt the blackened tree stumps in the bogs of Caithness and Sutherland.<sup>321</sup>

It is sometimes hard nowadays to distinguish between the truly fantastic and what seemed fantastic because it was unfamiliar. This may be true of the whale in *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* on which Brendan’s monks set a fire thinking themselves on an island. We are no wiser in determining whether the ‘loathsome little creatures’ described by Adomnán in his Life of St Columba were real or imaginary:

They struck with horrible force against the keel ... and the pressure of them was so great that it was thought they would pierce the skin covering the boat ... they were about the size of frogs, but exceedingly troublesome because they had spines ...<sup>322</sup>

Low and Pullar write ‘Fantasy animals exist because they give shape to certain kinds of experience’.<sup>323</sup> The biblical Leviathan flicking its tail is used by the poet John Smith (Seonaidh Phàdraig) of Bernera, Lewis, at the beginning of the 20th century as an image of the immense damage that can be inflicted on the poor by the rich.<sup>324</sup> We have already mentioned how Uilleam Ros envisages his wasting sickness of love (and TB) as being caused by a maggot breeding within him:

Tha durrag air ghur ann am chàil  
a dh’fhiosraich do chàch mo rùn.<sup>325</sup>

The distinction between real and supernatural animals in the Celtic context in some ways makes little sense as all animals have a supernatural aspect,

320. For an example about a werewolf, see ‘An Tuairseul’, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* XXXIV (1927–1928).

321. Pullar and Lowe, *Fauna Scotica*, 271.

322. Adomnán, *Life of St Columba*, 197.

323. Pullar and Low, *Fauna Scotica*, 263.

324. See ‘Òran Luchd an Spòrs’, in Meek, *Caran an t-Saoghail* (Edinburgh, 2003).

325. Black, *An Lasair*, 316–17.

either in their life in the Otherworld or, in the Christian context, in God as their source and end. Neither is the distinction between different animals or between animals and humans so significant in a culture where shape-shifting occurs (see II.1.b.) and where animals have totemic significance.

#### MAN AND ANIMALS: A CONTINUUM?

From Iron Age Celtic statues to Gaelic folklore we see compound animals. Iron Age Celtic designs show, for example, a snake with a ram’s head, horses with women’s heads and men with stags’ or bulls’ horns. The likely explanation for such symbols is the combining of potencies of fertility and regeneration. We have already noted the combining of the conventional symbols of the Evangelists in the Book of Kells (see II.1.b.), perhaps to represent the concordance between the Gospels. Entanglements, if not actually merging groups, of human, beast and plant are common in the Book of Kells. For example, in the opening letters of the parable of the Prodigal Son, a bird, beast, reptile and fish that devour and in turn are devoured by each other are further entwined by the distinct trefoil leaves of the Tree of Life.<sup>326</sup> We have suggested this shows the interconnection of all forms of life which constitute the Word made flesh. Additionally, and in the context of the Prodigal Son who was not only forgiven but also fêted by his father, it may also illustrate the anticipated inclusion of the whole of Creation in the Resurrection.<sup>327</sup> The same might be said of the detail in the monogram page, where two cats quietly observe [two mice nibbling the Host](#).

This reading of the Word becoming the Creation may be supported by the interlocking forms of life, including a merman, illuminating the genealogy of Christ (folios 200–01).<sup>328</sup> Here the merman may represent the fecundity of Creation, possibly in the form of Dagon, the fish and grain fertility god of the Philistines (see I Samuel 5: 2–7). There are a further two carvings of possibly androgynous mermen, one on a stone at Meigle with a double tail like the Book of Kells’s merman,<sup>329</sup> and another on a Christian phallic stone in Colonsay. Like the Cross on North Rona, and like the cattle rutting prayer ‘Eòlas na Dàire’,<sup>330</sup> Christianity here celebrates the fecundity and multiplicity of all life.

326. George Otto Simms, *Exploring the Book of Kells* (Dublin, 1988), 69.

327. See, for example, George Bain, *Celtic Art: The methods of its construction* (London, 1951), 100, 114 (for detail from the XPI monograph) and 126.

328. It is conceivable that the merman represents Dagon, the fish and grain fertility god of the Philistines mentioned in I Samuel 5: 2–7.

329. See Bain, *Celtic Art: The methods of its construction*, 120.

330. ‘Eòlas na Daire’ (Charm for fertility in cows), described by William Mackenzie, ‘Gaelic Incantations, Charms, and Blessings of the Hebrides’, *Highland Monthly* IV (1892–93), 157.



Medallion on the Queen Mary Harp shows a horse feeding an otter with a fish, from Drummond, *Ancient Scottish Weapons* (1881), Plate XLIX (detail)

A sense of a continuum of life forms may account for the respect and affinity for animals so often expressed in Gaelic culture. In a 12th-century poem in the mouth of St Columba, the whales in the ocean are considered the greatest wonders of creation.<sup>331</sup> It seems they were not hunted but would on occasion beach themselves when they would be enjoyed as sea pork. A famous carving on Muireadhach's Cross at Monasterboice depicts cats lying peacefully nose to nose with a mouse and a bird and a medallion on the Queen Mary Harp shows a horse feeding an otter with a fish.

Affection between animals and humans is seen in hagiographies and in Fionn's grief at the death of his dog Bran. Suibne enjoys the company of birds, wolves and especially stags,<sup>332</sup> and selkies and humans fall in love and produce children. The pibroch 'Maol Donn' laments the death of a cow.

Human and animal emotion are treated even-handedly in the love song 'Thug mi gaol dhut, thug mi gràdh dhut':

Thug mi gaol dhut, thug mi gràdh dhut ...  
 nach tug piuthar riamh da bràthair ...  
 nach tug bean da cìochran tàlaidh ...  
 nach tug bò da laogh air àirigh ...<sup>333</sup>

*I gave you love, I gave you affection,  
 that no sister ever gave her brother,  
 that no woman ever gave to her nursling  
 that no cow ever gave her calf on a shieling.*

331. 'Meallach Liom Bheith i n-Ucht Oiléin', in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 12: 5.

332. Gerard Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics* (Oxford, 1956), Nos. 43–47.

333. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 399.

The same might be said of the bird seen feeding her chicks in the left arch of the letter M of the Magnificat in the Book of Kells. It not only draws a parallel between animal and human motherhood but it also elevates the significance of the animal to some sort of participation in the divine. Over one thousand years later, Margaret Fay Shaw in South Uist was told that the oystercatcher, *gille-Brighde* 'the servant of Bridget' (Christ's foster-mother), wears a cross over its wings in recognition of it having concealed the infant Christ when in danger among the seaweed of the shore.<sup>334</sup> It has been argued in the Foreword that this bird's participation in the divine may be far older than Christianity, with an association with the pre-Christian goddess Brigid.

A different sort of continuum between human and animal may be seen in the following verses from 'Créide's Lament for Cael', in which both the woman and the animals mourn their dead (in translation):

A heron calls loudly in the marsh of Druim Dá Thrén: she is unable to protect her live ones – a two-coloured fox is on the track of her birds.

Sad is the cry the thrush makes in Drumkeen; and no less sad is the note of the blackbird in Leitir Laíg.

Sad is the sound made by the stag in Drumlesh: dead is the doe of Druim Síleann; a mighty stag roars now that she is gone.<sup>335</sup>

This sympathy between the human and the natural could suggest the 18th-century Romanticism of James Macpherson, but this poem is from the 12th century. The animals suffer the same state as the girl, not to amplify the dramatic setting, but because both depend on the rightness of nature which has been disturbed by the drowning of the hero Cael. It is a mythopoeic way of formulating man's interaction with the natural environment.

#### A FOOTNOTE ON BIRD ILLUSTRATION AND PHOTOGRAPHY

In the world of bird illustration, no one is more famous than Audubon, and, were a Scot to be named in his company, mention would probably be made of Alexander Wilson (1766–1813) of Paisley. William MacGillivray (1796–1852), however, deserves at least as much attention as Wilson, both in his own right as an artist and for his equally close association with Audubon, never mind the frequent citations of his work in Darwin's *The Descent of Man*. MacGillivray had assisted Darwin on several occasions when the latter was a student in Edinburgh.

MacGillivray was born out of wedlock and his parentage and place of

334. Margaret Fay Shaw, *Folk Songs and Folklore of South Uist* (Aberdeen, 1986), 14.

335. Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics*, 148ff.

birth are uncertain. In any event, from the age of three, he was brought up by an uncle in Harris. There, his education and his linguistic environment would have been primarily Gaelic. It was with pride that *Uilleam Beag* (as he was known) shot a golden eagle and presented it to his equally proud uncle. Perceptions change. At that stage in his career he was praised for his shooting as he was saving lambs. MacGillivray's love of nature was, however, part and parcel of his upbringing and of his student holidays when he would walk across Scotland, back and forth from Aberdeen University. He declared that 'The solitudes of Nature were my school'.

MacGillivray's *A History of British Birds* in five volumes (London 1837–1852) became a classic, but the illustrations were confined to black and white engravings of the heads and alimentary systems of the birds. His fine watercolours of British birds and other creatures are held in the Natural History Museum in London and the entire collection can be viewed online in fine resolution.<sup>336</sup> Audubon himself declared that MacGillivray's paintings were 'decidedly the best representations of birds I have ever seen'.<sup>337</sup>

Jemima Blackburn (1823–1909) became well known as an illustrator in Victorian times. She was born in Edinburgh but bought the estate of Roshven in Moidart with her husband in 1854. Her *Birds from Moidart* (Edinburgh 1895) may not equal MacGillivray's work, but hers too is a fine study, especially if (as with MacGillivray) her work is seen in colour as opposed to the black and white of the publication. Her earlier *Birds from Nature* (London 1862) was well received and compared favourably with John Gould's work on account of Blackburn's use of living, as opposed to stuffed, specimens. In the 19th century, it was usual to shoot specimens for the purposes of illustration, but Blackburn wrote:

My *Birds from Moidart* were done entirely from nature, backgrounds and all. Mostly I worked from living birds which I let go after drawing them.<sup>338</sup>

It is thanks to her careful observation and drawing that the controversy surrounding the behaviour of cuckoos was finally resolved, after Gould's attention was drawn to her work.<sup>339</sup>

Turning to photography, James MacGeoch (1921–1970) produced both stills

336. The William MacGillivray art collection Database at the Natural History Museum: <<http://www.nhm.ac.uk/our-science/departments-and-staff/library-and-archives/collections/macgillivray/index.dsm>> – accessed 6 December 2018.

337. J. Harley, *The Late Professor William MacGillivray* (Leicester, 1855), 119.

338. Quoted from her *Memoirs*, in R. Fairley, *Jemima* (Edinburgh, 1988), 143.

339. Fairley, *Jemima*, 54–55.

and cine of the gannet hunt on Sula Sgeir between 1956 and 1958, and again in 1968, also visiting North Rona and studying the seals there. McGeoch taught himself Gaelic and became a fluent speaker. His hobby became his work when he joined the photographic division of the Glasgow Police. The gannet hunt on Sula Sgeir still continues with legal sanction. Records of such activities, which have been a central part of human culture worldwide and from earliest times take on a new significance as hunting is increasingly restricted or declared illegal.

#### CONCLUSION

This section on animals and birds in the context of the environment has revealed several different cosmologies at work – pagan, Christian and folkloric – in formulating man's relationship with other living things. This is never so clear as in the changing reputation of the wolf, from admired hunter to vermin ripe for extermination. A prehistoric view of man and the animals he hunted required sacrifices to be made of domestic animals to replenish nature in the Otherworld. It was more a matter of balance between man and nature than the hierarchy of Aristotle and the Bible, which placed man over the animals. If we are right that the druids believed in reincarnation, it may account for the fluidity of life forms implied by later stories of shape-shifting and of souls as birds. The pagan view of animals survives into recent times in many ways: in the evoking of animal characteristics in people through first names, animal kennings and totems, in the ability of certain animals to pass between the Otherworld and this world and in the use of animals and animal parts in prophesying. The poetry of Aonghas Dubh MacNeacail in the present day would seem to preserve some of these 2000 year old attitudes to animals and to extend them into modern-day ecological arguments. He expresses respect for the mystery of nature and it is not surprising to find him using the image of the white hind for his human love.<sup>340</sup>

Christianity, coloured by these pagan attitudes, is sometimes seen to include the whole of the created world in its understanding of the Incarnation and in the hope of the Resurrection. This probably accounts for the celebration of animals in Gaelic Christian art, for the affection in which they are held by certain saints and for their inclusion in the prayers of *Carmina Gadelica*. Such attitudes survive in folklore as a view of all life as a continuum – which allows for birds to be rated superior singers to humans and for their use as clan historians. It is with the desire for mutual understanding along this continuum that we opened this section.

MB

340. aonghas macneacail, *An Seachnadh/The Avoiding* (Edinburgh, 1986).



## III.2.c. PLANTS

[Introduction](#); [The Ubiquitous Use of Local Plants](#); [Plant Colours and Dyes](#); [Plant Charms and Medicines](#); [Metaphorical Names](#); [Conclusion](#)

## Introduction

Tha 'n eilid anns an fhrìth mar bu chòir dhi bhith,  
Far am faigh i mìlteach glan-feòirneanach;  
Bruchorachd is cìob, lusan am bi brìgh,  
Chuireadh sult is ith air a lòineanaibh;  
Fuaran anns am bi biolaire gun dìth  
'S mìlse leath' na 'm fion, 's e gun òladh i.  
Cuiseagan is riasg chinneas air an t-sliabh,  
B' annsa leath' mar bhiadh na na fòlaichean.  
'S ann den teachd-an-tìr a bha sòghar leath'  
Sòbhrach 's eala-bhì 's barra neònagan;  
Dòbhrach bhallach mhìn ghòbhlach bharrach shliom,  
Lòintean far an cinn i na mòthraichean.

*The hind is in the forest as she ought to be,  
where she may have sweet grass, clean, fine-bladed;  
heath-rush and deer's hair grass, herbs in which strength resides,  
and which would make her flanks plump and fat-covered;  
a spring in which there is abundant watercress,  
she deems more sweet than wine, and would drink of it;  
sorrel and rye-grass which flourish on the moor,  
she prefers as food to rank field grass.  
Of her fare she deemed these the delicacies:  
primrose, St John's wort, and tormentil flowers.  
Tender spotted orchis, forked, spiked and glossy,  
On meadows, where in clusters, it flourishes.<sup>341</sup>*

The above quotation shows how minutely plants and their part in the ecosystem were observed by Donnchadh Bàn, an 18th-century gamekeeper in the area around Beinn Dòbhraich in Argyll. Plant nomenclature, which had to be exact for identification purposes, gives us a good laboratory for understanding a Gaelic 'way of seeing' as the referents (the plants) remain with us today. We see names generated by a plant's uses, appearance and religious connotations, both Christian and pagan. Some beliefs about plants, like the 'doctrine of signatures',

341. Angus MacLeod, ed., *Òrain Dhonnchaidh Bhàn | The Songs of Duncan Ban MacIntyre* (Edinburgh, 1978), 204–07.

are shared with European medical and religious traditions, as the Gaelic medical MSS testify; others, we will see, belong to a characteristically Gaelic view of the cosmos.

Some plant names and uses were recorded by the Gaelic medical families in their *materia medica* of the 15th and 16th centuries, while others were collected in the 18th and 19th centuries by Martin Martin, Alexander Carmichael, J. Cameron (*The Gaelic Names of Plants*, 1883), by travellers to the Highlands such as Lightfoot (*Flora Scotica*, 1777), who travelled with Pennant, and by contributors to the *Statistical Accounts*.

## THE UBIQUITOUS USE OF LOCAL PLANTS

While today much plant life impinges on us only as a vegetative background as our needs are met commercially, in a pre-industrial age local plant life provided building materials, foodstuffs and medicines for man and beast, as well as clothing, fuel and lighting, tools, spiritual defence and much else. Indeed, it was widely held that where illness occurred, its cure would be found growing nearby. Scurvy grass, for example, known as *am maraiche* 'the sailor' or *carran*, from *càrr* 'scurvy', grows on the seashore.

A house might be made of sods on a stone foundation and thatched with heather, straw, rush, bracken or broom. Wickerwork might be used to make both partitions and utensils. Foodstuffs were eaten that today we have forgotten, such as broom tops, dandelion and nettle leaves, stonecrop and the tubers of silverweed, *brisgean*, which was said to constitute a seventh of the Gaels' bread, *seachdamh aran a' Ghàidheil*, especially in the spring, during times of potato blight and the Clearances.<sup>342</sup> From the shore, glasswort, *gairgean creagach*, *saimbhir* or *lionaraich*, was eaten like asparagus, as well as dulse, *dulleasg*. Seaweed indeed was held good for slimming, because of the effect of iodine on a deficient thyroid. The tubers of orchids could be ground down to make salep, a thickener used in cookery. Livestock ate fodder made of mashed gorse or dried nettles not used today.

In addition to wool, linen was a major textile and the blue flowers of flax are notably absent from the landscape today. Linen provided the fabric of sailcloth and the padded saffron-dyed aketons worn by warriors (see [IV.1.b.](#) and [IV.2.d.](#)). The fibres of nettle were also spun and possibly bog cotton and willow catkins, *clòimh chat*, unless this was only in ritual.<sup>343</sup> Plants of many kinds were used in rope making – heather, straw, grass, pine roots, hemp, ragwort and willow.

342. Margaret Bennett, 'Plant Lore in Gaelic Scotland', in R. J. Pankhurst and J. M. Mullin, *Flora of the Outer Hebrides* (London, 1991), 56–57.

343. Barbara Fairweather, *Highland Heritage* (Glencoe, 1984), 94–95; Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* II (Edinburgh, 1900; this edition, 1928), 119.

(An artist living in Skye, Caroline Dear, continued this tradition in 2011 in a project 'suainte/entwined' in which she made 100 ropes over 50 days with plants used both traditionally and non-traditionally.)<sup>344</sup> Heather and straw provided softness and dryness for bedding, the heather twigs kept upright, while pillows might be stuffed with the down of thistles, coltsfoot or bog cotton.

Peat and wood provided fuel, while lighting could be provided by 'fir candles' (slivers of pine root dug out from bogs) and by candles made from the waxy cones of bog myrtle and from *mèilleag*, the rind of the birch. Rushes soaked in water, dried and peeled, could function as wicks in cruise lamps burning mutton fat. Rushes were also strewn over floors along with fragrant herbs such as meadowsweet. Cleaning materials were provided by plants rich in saponins such as soapwort and the ash of gorse or bracken mixed with clay. The ash of seaware was used in the preservation of cheese and for scouring flax. Tanning of leather and rope could be achieved with oak or chestnut bark or with tormentil, whose Gaelic name *cairt-làir* 'bark of the ground' refers to this function. Other domestic aids derived from local plants included starch from bluebell bulbs, flea repellent from bog myrtle, mouse repellent from mint and tinder from dried fungus. Plants were also used cosmetically: a skin tonic was made from a decoction of violets, meadowsweet or elderflower in whey. Referring to an earlier time, Cameron says sundew was used by the Celts to dye their hair.<sup>345</sup>

#### PLANT COLOURS AND DYES

We have already mentioned the robe seen in a dream by Eithne, the mother of Saint Columba, in which the colours of all the flowerers were portrayed (see I.3.a.). Flowers and berries provided more constant colour referents in stories and song than was possible with the naming of unstable pigments. The mouth

344. <<http://www.carolinedear.co.uk/projects/entwined-suainte>>.

345. Fairweather, *Highland Heritage*: Chap. 12, 'Highland Plant Lore', 87–100; and Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland* (1999), 112–21.



Tormentil or *cairt-làir*, used in tanning. Public domain from Franz Eugen Köhler, *Köhler's Medizinal-Pflanzen* (1897)

was frequently compared to raspberries, the cheeks to roses or rowan berries, the eyes to sloes or blaeberreries and the whiteness of the skin to bog cotton or the whitethorn (see II.1.c. and IV.1.c.). We discuss the implications of plant descriptions for colour nomenclature in II.2.a. and conclude that, in addition to hue, colour in Gaelic also describes saturation, shine and warmth, with some results surprising to our modern perceptions. In this way, a coltsfoot can be *ruadh*, a term more normally associated with rusty red than yellow, and foliage can be variously *gorm*, *glas* or *bàn*, depending on its stage between being shining and saturated with chlorophyll or dull and faded.

Plants, especially lichens, were the main source of dyes. Colours varied depending on the mordant (whether alum, salt, urine, cream of tartar or copperas), the material to be dyed and the part of the plant used. For example, bramble shoots gave a yellow when used with salt and a green when used with alum, and the root of iris produced black while the leaves produced green. A red could be produced by fat hen or sticky willy; crimson with the buds of St John's wort or the lichen cudbear, *corcar*, which actually means 'crimson/purple'; purple with the roots of gean or sundew; green from heather; blue from ash bark, bilberry or waterlily roots; yellow from marigold, bracken root and bog myrtle; orange from ragwort or lady's bedstraw; red-brown from the stone parmelia lichen, *crotal*; grey from bramble shoots. This is just a sample and full lists and recipes are provided by various authors, including Margaret Bennett, Su Grierson and Margaret Fay Shaw.<sup>346</sup> Shaw, observing Peigi MacRae of North Glendale in South Uist in the 1930s, describes her use of a four-gallon pot for the boiling of the plants and wool being dyed both in the fleece and after being knitted into stockings. She also describes the wooden raft made to fetch waterlily roots for dye. There was a widely held taboo against dyeing the clothes of sailors with lichen for fear that, being taken from the rocks, it would return to the rocks and the body would not be recovered.<sup>347</sup>

#### PLANT CHARMS AND MEDICINES

The distinction between the magical and medicinal use of plants is a modern one. Protection and healing were seen as a matter of counteracting misfortune by channelling propitiousness and deflecting evil through a mixture of practical measures, astrology, charms and Christianity. In the cycle of the year, plants were used in ritual and as talismans. Fumigation with juniper or fumitory at the New

346. Margaret Bennett, 'Plant Lore in Gaelic Scotland', in R. J. Pankhurst and J. M. Mullin, *Flora of the Outer Hebrides* (London, 1991); Su Grierson, *The Colour Cauldron* (Perth, 1989); Margaret Fay Shaw, *Folk Songs and Folklore of South Uist* (Aberdeen, 1986).

347. Margaret Fay Shaw, *Folk Songs and Folklore of South Uist* (Aberdeen, 1986), 53–56; Bennett, 'Plant Lore in Gaelic Scotland', 58.

A Corn Maiden or *Maighdeann Bhuana*, photographed in Mull. Courtesy of the School of Scottish Studies Archives: <<http://calumimaclean.blogspot.com/2013/02/the-corn-maiden.html>>

Year was seen to ward off evil from the houses while destroying insects, especially moths, and at Beltane cattle were similarly sained by being driven between fires of juniper. At Imbolc or St Bridget's day on the 1st of February, a figure made of a sheaf of corn was laid in a reed bed in the hope that the saint would make the flocks fertile, the imprint of her stave eagerly looked for as proof of her visit. At harvest time, a corn dolly, a *mhaighdeann bhuana*, made with the last sheaf of corn to be harvested, was kept in the barn to be fed to the cattle at New Year or ploughed into the soil the following year. But in the days of communal farming, the last sheaf to be harvested by the slowest band of reapers was made into the *cailleach* (hag) or the *gobhar bacach* (lame goat). These represented starvation and were tossed onto a neighbour's land. Such customs are Indo-European in origin and probably reflect the harvest sacrifice of a virgin or a goat, the goat subsequently eaten at the harvest feast.<sup>348</sup> Ronald Black suggests that the goat or old woman were probably the same as the skin beaten by the Hogmanay lads at New Year.



Watercress could be used as a vehicle for charming the milk away from its rightful owner with the words, 's leamsa leth do chuid-sa 'half of yours is mine',<sup>349</sup> but honeysuckle, St John's wort, groundsel, *bualan* or *grunnasg*, and pondweed gave protection against the evil eye. Alexander Carmichael collected a considerable number of charms which invoke a plant in the name of a saint for protection and for increase of milk and female calves.<sup>350</sup> All the plants mentioned in these charms are also medicinal plants – yarrow, ivy, figwort, St John's wort,

348. James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (Basingstoke, 1950), 399ff.

349. Fairweather, *Highland Heritage*, 94 and 98.

350. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* II, 76–118.

bog-violet or butterwort and club moss. Often the reciter said that (s)he plucked the plant as Christ, Mary or Bridget had, the plant thereby combining physical and metaphysical healing powers. The plant is often addressed in the 2nd person and is far more potent wild than cultivated:

Achlasain Chaluim-chille	<i>Plantlet of Columba,</i>
Gun sireadh gun iarraidh,	<i>Without seeking, without searching,</i>
Achlasain Chaluim-chille	<i>Plantlet of Columba</i>
Fom righe gu siorraidh ...	<i>Under my arm forever ...</i>
Ta mi nis da d' bhuain.	<i>I am now plucking thee.</i> <sup>351</sup>

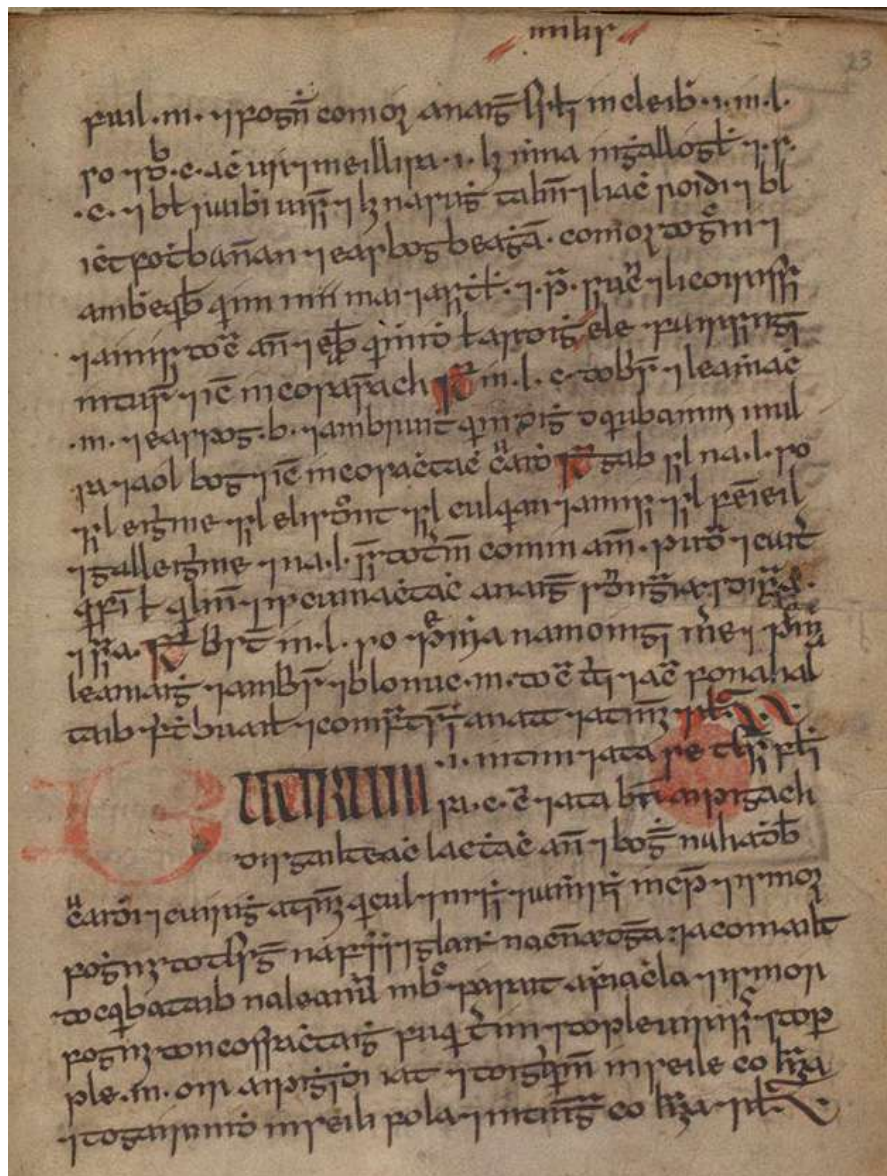
Perhaps the healing properties of such plants had been known in pre-Christian times and their association with a saint redirected the source of their power from the earth to God. As the associations of its name in Latin, English and Gaelic with Achilles, soldiers and bleeding imply, *Achillea millefolium* 'soldier's woundwort' or *lus casgadh na fala* was an astringent used for the checking of bleeding. *Scrophularia*, the source of a unique glycoterpenoid, gets its Latin name from its ability to relieve the inflammation and pain of scrofula. It is known as figwort in English and *fothlus* or *an torranan* in Gaelic, associated with St Torranan or Ternan who gives his name to Taransay, and perhaps with Taranis, the Gaulish god of thunder. St John's wort or Hypericum is so-named because it was picked at midsummer on St John's day and hung 'over the icon', showing it has been valued since Classical times. Its Gaelic name, *achlasan Chaluim Chille*, recalls St Columba giving it to a herd boy to keep in his armpit to overcome his fear of being alone at night. The herb is still used as an antidepressant and anti-inflammatory. *Mòthan*, the bog violet or butterwort, used for respiratory complaints and whooping cough



*Mòthan*, bog-violet or butterwort, used as an amulet for women in childbirth. Original book source: Prof. Dr. Otto Wilhelm Thomé *Flora von Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz* (Gera, Germany, 1885). Source: <[www.biolib.de](http://www.biolib.de)> (public domain)

351. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* II, 100–101.





A page from NLS MS 72.13, a 15th-century *materia medica*, f.23r.  
National Library of Scotland, CC BY 4.0

and for curdling milk, was prized as an amulet for women in childbirth and wayfarers. Carmichael reports that a circlet could be made of nine of its roots and kept in the mouth as a love potion and that a man who made a miraculous escape was said to have drunk the milk of a cow who had eaten bog violet:

*dh'òl e bainne na bà a dh'ith am mòthan*.<sup>352</sup> Club moss, like *mòthan*, was worn as an amulet on the body. Known as *garbhag an t-slèibh*, Lycopodiopsida has antibiotic spores that can be used to dry the sores of eczema. Spore-bearing plants like this and ferns were considered magical because they were seen to be able to reproduce without flower-bearing parts.

Plant lore used by the dynastic Gaelic medical families such as the Beaton and Livingstones shared much with the European tradition disseminated from Classical and Arabic sources in such books as *Lilium Medicinae* of 1305 and Dioscorides' 1st century *De Materia Medica*, both of which were translated into Gaelic.

Along with the effects of plants on the four humours came the 'doctrine of signatures', a belief that God had left a signature on certain plants to show their medicinal applications, for example in the resemblance between the eye and eyebright (*rinn an ruisg* 'apple of the eye'). The doctrine was known in ancient times but it was given Christian justification by the German mystic and theologian Jakob Boehme (1575–1624). The leaf of liverwort, *adha-lus* or *hepatica*, was seen to resemble the liver; the spores of spleenwort, *lus na seilge*, the spleen; and the flowers of toothwort, *slàn-fhiacail*, the teeth. The hollow stem of garlic indicated its use for throat complaints and yellow plants indicated their use in the treatment of jaundice. In Martin Martin's account of the 'illiterate empiric Neil Beaton in Skye', he describes him as being able to judge the various qualities of plants and roots by their taste, and how, with a 'nice observation of the colours of their flowers ... he learns of their astringent and loosening qualities'.<sup>353</sup>

Plants were prepared as ointments, decoctions, baths, poultices, fumigations and snuff. They were classified as vulneraries for healing wounds, febrifuges for reducing fevers, emetics for inducing vomiting, cathartics for purging, irritants for reducing pain by causing a counter-discomfort and tonics as an aid to general well-being.<sup>354</sup> *Slàn-*



The leaf of liverwort, *adha-lus*, resembles the liver. Public domain

352. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* II, 111.

353. Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, 123–24.

354. Angus M. Macfarlane, *Gaelic Plant Names: Study of Their Uses and Lore* (Inverness, 1924).

*lus* or *lus an t-slànachaidh* (from *slànaich*, *slànachadh*: ‘to heal’) could refer to any medicinal herb, just as many such plants are distinguished in English by the element *wort*, from Old English *wyrt* ‘root’. Ribwort plantain, self-heal and garden sage, which were put into the ears of sheep or cows to cure them of blindness, were all referred to as *slàn-lus*. There are often close parallels between the Gaelic and English names of medicinal plants, e.g. *cnàmh-lus* and cudweed for indigestion or *lus a’ bhainne* and milkwort, because the medical lore is derived from the same sources. Their names clearly served as an aide-mémoire to their use. *Miosach*, fairy flax, means ‘monthly’ and was used for menstruation pains; *lus an tàlaidh* ‘the attracting plant’ is enchanter’s nightshade and a love potion; *lus a’ chaitheimh* (sweet woodruff) is the ‘tuberculosis plant’; *lus a’ chrùbain*, field gentian, cured *crùban* ‘croodling’ in cattle. It is clear that some plants had multiple uses, such as bogbean (*lus nan laogh*), tormentil and bog myrtle (*roid*).

Some uses we would hardly recognise today, such as the prevention of drunkenness and hunger by chewing the root of carmel or knaphard; the prevention of visions by wearing St John’s wort at the neck,<sup>355</sup> or the allaying of tiredness by carrying mugwort (*an lus liath*).<sup>356</sup> Martin speaks of ‘shunnis’ (*siunas*, lovage) and dwarf cornel (*lus a’ craois* ‘gluttony plant’) as appetisers.

#### METAPHORICAL NAMES

For the plant symbolism of clan badges and their use in naming the letters of the alphabet, arising from the close association between wood and sound, see III.3.c. and II.3.c. Many plants share their names with other European languages, because of the common medicinal and religious traditions. *Lus na nathrach* is viper’s bugloss, because of its forked stigma. *Lus a’ chrann-ceusaidh* ‘the plant of the crucifixion’ is spotted persicaria or Jesus plant, believed to have got the red spots on its leaves from blood falling from Christ’s wounds. Likewise the leaves of Mary’s thistle, *fothannan beannaichte* ‘the blessed thistle’, traced with white, are said to have come from the Virgin’s milk. However, other names give an image peculiar to Gaelic. The form of a distaff or *cuigeal*, its long shaft top-heavy with spun wool, gives the name to two plants: the bulrush, *cuigeal nam ban-sithe* the ‘fairies’ distaff’ and the early purple orchid, *cuigeal an losgainn* ‘the frog’s distaff’. Some names clearly relate to their habitat or habit, for example *balgan-buachair* ‘dung-bag’ for mushroom; *crom-lus* ‘bent plant’ for the poppy; or *iadh-shlat* ‘round the twig’ for bindweed or honeysuckle, also known as *leuma-chrann* ‘jump trees’. Yellow

355. Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, 114–15.

356. Fairweather, *Highland Heritage*, 94.



The bulrush, *cuigeal nam ban-sithe*, literally ‘the fairies’ distaff’. Photo © AmadejTrnkoczy: <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/>>

loosestrife, *Lysimachia vulgaris*, is known as *conaire* ‘rosary’, probably because of the resemblance of its very round seed capsules to rosary beads.<sup>357</sup>

The flower of red campion, *cìrean coilich*, is seen as a ‘cock’s comb’; the ragged robin, *caorag lèana*, as a ‘marsh spark’ and the harebell as the ‘cuckoo’s cap’, *currac na cuthaige*. The ‘drowned leaf’ of the waterlily gives the plant the name *duilleag bhàite*, while the hirsute leaves of mountain everlasting give the name *spòg cait* ‘cat’s paw’. Hemlock or water dropwort is known as *iteodha*, perhaps from *ite* ‘feather’, reflecting the appearance of the leaves. It is also known as *fealladh bog* ‘subtle deceit’ because of its use as a poison.<sup>358</sup> Some berries carry images: the rose hip is *mucag* ‘little pig’, based on its oval form; the cranberry, *muileag*, rather less obviously is ‘little frog’; the rowan berry, *caorann*, is cognate with *caor* ‘blaze’; mistletoe berries are *sùgh an daraich* ‘the juice of the oak’, alluding to the plant’s parasitic habit on the oak. *Cochall* ‘hood’ or ‘caul’ is used of the seed pod of such plants as the broom.

The names of some poisonous plants make allusion to the fairies as the living dead. The best example is the foxglove, known variously as *meuran nan cailleachan marbha*, *lus nam ban-sith*, *meuran a’ bhàis* or *ciochan nan cailleach marbha* ‘the fingers or breasts of the dead old women, the plant of the fairies,

357. <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lysimachia\\_vulgaris#/media/File:Lysimachia\\_vulgaris\\_MHNT.BOT.2004.0.805.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lysimachia_vulgaris#/media/File:Lysimachia_vulgaris_MHNT.BOT.2004.0.805.jpg)>.

358. Bennett, ‘Plant Lore in Gaelic Scotland’, 56–60.



or the fingers of death'. *Feur gortach* 'starving grass', also known as *feur sìthein sìthe* 'grass of the fairy mound' was said to grow where someone had died of starvation and to cause sudden hunger in people who accidentally stepped on it.<sup>359</sup> The names for henbane, *gabhann*, and petty spurge, *geur-neimh*, were more straightforward in meaning the 'dangerous one' and 'sharp poison'.

While the names of saints are often linked with healing plants, a few names may be pre-Christian in their associations. *Cneas* or *Crios Chù Chulainn* 'Cú Chulainn's 'bosom' or 'belt' is meadowsweet which naturally contains salicylic acid, the pain-killer and febrifuge, now synthesised as aspirin. The name suggests it was the plant by which the god Lugh healed the wounds of his son, Cú Chulainn, between bouts of fighting, or that Cú Chulainn carried it with him in his belt to reduce his *mire-chatha* 'war spasms', which we suggest describe the symptom of recurrent malaria. *Mur-dhruidhean*, agrimony, may be the '(dispeller of) the sorrow of druids'. Pagan law may also be implied in the name *trom-bhòd* 'heavy oath' for verbena, used in the ratification of treaties.<sup>360</sup>

Two flowers had Jacobite associations: white roses, probably the burnet rose, and the pink convolvulus. The white rose was engraved onto the glassware of those loyal to the House of Stuart. It was the basis of the white cockade of the Jacobites, as it was in bloom at the time of James VIII's birth on 10th June 1688. The symbolism was picked up again in 1999 by the Nationalists at the opening of the Scottish Parliament. Pink convolvulus became known as *flùr a' phrionnsa* 'the Prince's Flower', its seed said to have been planted by the Young Pretender when he landed in Eriskay and where it uniquely grows in the Outer Hebrides. In English, ragwort was known as Stinking Billy, in reference to Butcher Cumberland, whose armies, it was believed, had spread this poisonous plant after the Battle of Culloden. It is interesting to see the same plant as the focus of a game *goid a'*

359. Macfarlane, *Gaelic Plant Names*, 26.

360. Agrimony is also *muir-dhroighinn* (Dwelly). Macfarlane, *Gaelic Plant Names*, 31.



A glass engraved with the white rose of the Jacobites (18th century). Image © National Museums Scotland

*chrùin* 'steal the crown', in which a child wearing a crown of yellow *buaghallan* had to elude the opposing team.<sup>361</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Just as plants were the environment of the deer in the opening quotation of this section, so too were they the necessary and normal environment of humans, providing shelter, clothing, food, fuel, lighting and medicines. This is not so true today, when many of our plant needs are met through importation in the case of clothing and food, chemical synthesis in the case of medicines, and other sources in the case of fuels.

Much of what has been said in the preceding section about the connection between humans and animals could also be said of the connection between humans and plants. In other sections, we have seen the association between plants and people through their use as clan badges and kennings in poetry. In some versions of 'The Oldest Animals' (see III.2.b.), it is a thorn bush or an oak tree that recites the history of Ireland from the time of the Flood, making plants, humans and animals participate in the same animation, history and consciousness. It has already been suggested that this is what is signified in scrollwork, where plant, animal and human life merges. As plants, like other living things and even the non-animate sun and water, are part of nature, they can be utilised in the channelling of fortune and averting of evil. We see this supernatural use in the multiplicity of plant names connecting plants with saints and fairies.

MB

### III.3. Human Activity

#### III.3.a. HUNTING

[Introduction](#); [The Visual Effects of Hunting on the Landscape](#); [Gaelic Deer Hunting](#); [The Depiction of Hunting and the Horses Employed](#); [Dogs and Deerhounds](#); [Hunting of Seabirds](#); [Feast and Famine](#)

#### INTRODUCTION

Arand na n-aighedh n-imdha . tadall fairge re a formna,  
ailén a mbiadhtha buidhni . druimne a ndergthar gáí gorma.

Oighe baetha ar a bennuibh – monainn mhaetha 'na monguibh,  
uisce fuar ina haibhnibh . mes ar a dairgibh donnuibh.

361. Bennett, 'Plant Lore in Gaelic Scotland', 59–60.



Milchoin innti is gadhair – smera is airne dubhdroighin  
dlúth a fraigreadh re fedhaibh . doimh ac deg hail 'má doiribh.<sup>362</sup>

*Arran of the many stags – the sea impinges on her very shoulders!  
an island in which whole companies were fed – with ridges where blue  
spears are reddened.*

*Skittish deer are on her peaks – soft blaeberreries on her heaths,  
cool water in her rivers – and mast upon her russet oaks.*

*Deerhounds there were in her, and beagles – brambles and sloes of the dark  
blackthorn, dwellings set close against her woods – stags scattered among  
her oaks.<sup>363</sup>*

This section is primarily concerned with the practice of hunting and its depiction or description, and the traces it has left on the landscape. In the wider mythological and totemic contexts, the creatures involved, including humans, and the situations described, are discussed elsewhere, under such topics as Shape-changing (II.1.b.), Heraldry, Emblems and Totems (III.3.c.) and Circular Time (V.3.).

Nostalgia plays a considerable part in the imagery of the hunt, particularly in the 11th-century *Acallamh na Senórach*, from which comes the above quotation. Likewise in An Ciaran Mabach's *Air dha bhith uair an Dùn Eideann*, the poet's love for the hunt is matched only by his love for the deer he hunts.<sup>364</sup> Something akin to nostalgia might also be said to operate in MacLean's *Hallaig*, with its opening and closing imagery of the hunt:

'Tha tìm, am fiadh, an coille Hallaig'

...

thig peileir dian à gunna Ghaoil;

's buailear am fiadh a tha 'na thuaineal

362. Whitley Stokes, 'Acallamh na Senórach', in *Irische Texte* (Vierte Serie) 1. heft (Leipzig, 1900), 10–11.

363. This translation is adapted from that of Standish O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica* (London, 1892), 109. O'Grady's use of the feminine gender for the island is preferred to the more usual neuter, as this reflects more truly the personification of the landscape so obvious in this and countless other Gaelic poems. Also, along with Jackson and others, he understands *ailén a mbiadhtha buidhni* as referring to the feeding of whole companies of people, rather than the rendering 'island where whole troops are ruined' (T. Clancy, ed., *The Triumph Tree* (Edinburgh, 1998), 187), which makes no sense in the obvious context of the hunt.

364. Colm Ó Baoill and Meg Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach* (Edinburgh, 1994), 176–81.

a' snòtaich nan làraichean feòir;  
thig reothadh air a shùil 'sa' choille:  
chan fhaighear lorg air fhuil ri m' bheò.

*'Time, the deer, is in the wood of Hallaig'*

...

*a vehement bullet will come from the gun of Love;*

*and will strike the deer that goes dizzily,  
sniffing at the grass-grown ruined homes;  
his eye will freeze in the wood,  
his blood will not be traced while I live.<sup>365</sup>*

These poetic references belong in a long and substantial tradition of visualisation of the hunt in one form or another but, at a much more basic level, the nature of hunting is determined by the landscape as described by Edmund Burt in the 1720s:

What I have been saying on this head is only to give you some taste of the Highland hunting; for the hills, as they are various in their form, require different dispositions of the men that compose the pack. The first of the two paragraphs next above relates only to such a hill as rises something in the figure of a cone; and the other, you see, is the side of a hill which is clothed with a wood.<sup>366</sup>

#### THE VISUAL EFFECTS OF HUNTING ON THE LANDSCAPE

If the nature of hunting is determined by the landscape, landscape can itself be determined by hunting. Hunting activity in the Highlands today is so far removed from the practices of earlier times that its pursuit has radically altered the appearance of thousands of hectares of the landscape. The so-called 'deer forests' of 19th-century Highland Scotland borrowed their name from the days when there were forests of native tree species for deer to dwell in, but the deer forests of the Victorian era were largely vast tracts of land already denuded by sheep or the demand for charcoal, oak-bark for tanning and pine for pit props. The sheep in particular exhausted in a few decades a resource of fertile land, managed and manured over centuries by more traditional stock management. James Hunter has dramatically but justifiably described this process as 'mining'.<sup>367</sup>

365. S. MacGill-eain, *O Choille gu Berradh/From Wood to Ridge* (London, 1989 and 1991), 226–27 and 230–31.

366. A. Simmons, ed., *Burt's Letters from the North of Scotland as Related by Edmund Burt* (Edinburgh, 1998), 223–24.

367. J. Hunter, *On the Other Side of Sorrow* (Edinburgh, 1995), 154–55.

To this day the 'deer forests' are under heavy pressure from deer themselves, never mind the sheep. Of trees there are virtually none, other than in inaccessible gullies, and thousands of hectares of moorland are today still managed primarily for the shooting of grouse, involving regular *falagsair* or muirburn.

It is this denuded, not to forget depopulated, landscape which is the subject of so many fine Victorian images of sportsmen, deer, grouse, ptarmigan and the like in the Highlands. Their paintings are not necessarily romanticisations – they painted what they saw and, indeed, directly experienced. Landseer went on many a hunt.<sup>368</sup> One of the iconic images from the Victorian era is that of Highland garrons carrying down the carcasses of red deer. More visually arresting – almost shamanic – is the common practice of deerstalkers wearing the dead body of a gralloched deer as a jacket, to bring it down more easily from places inaccessible to horses or ATVs. These latter are occasioning the scarring of mountains with new tracks for trophy hunters who, unlike their Victorian predecessors, are not fit enough for the mountains.

With the Victorians came the shooting lodge. These pseudo-rustic houses have their own style, often provided with porches or verandahs made with undressed timber and with their interiors bedecked with antlers and other trophies. The whole is an important adjunct to the Scottish baronial style, coupled with more than a hint of Gothic revival, memorably evoked, if not quite parodied in the concluding scenes of the James Bond film *Skyfall*.

The sheep farmers and the Victorian deer forests and grouse moors were not the only sources of manipulation of the mountain environment. The Gaels also manipulated the landscape for the purposes of hunting, and the traces of their work can still be seen.

An *eileir* or *eileirig* was 'where deer were driven to battue them.'<sup>369</sup> Also spelt as *éileag*, it described a 'V-shaped structure, wide at one end and narrow at the other, into which deer were driven and shot with arrows as they came out.'<sup>370</sup> The word is anglicised as 'elrick' but has no citation in the Oxford English Dictionary and, though its roots are in the Old Gaelic *erelc* meaning an ambush,<sup>371</sup> it seems that it is only in Scotland that it is used as a place-name,<sup>372</sup> indicating some kind of land formation, whether natural or artificial. The village of Elrick

368. E. Ellice, *Place-Names of Glengarry and Glenquoich and Their Associations* (London, 1898; rev. 1931; Marsh Barton 1999), 94 and facing plate.

369. Alexander MacBain, *An Etymological Dictionary of the Gaelic Language* (Glasgow, 1911 and 1982), 154.

370. Edward Dwelly, *The Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary* (Glasgow, 1911 and 1977), 390.

371. E. G. Quin, *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (Dublin, 1990), 278.

372. W. J. Watson, *The Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1926 and 1993), 489.

in Aberdeenshire thus derives its name and, in the form of *Elerc*, appears as a Gaelic note in the Book of Deer,<sup>373</sup> probably dating from the mid-12th century.<sup>374</sup> The place-name Elrick is common in Perthshire and Galloway and also appears in the shires of Argyll, Aberdeen, Forfar, Kincardine and Roxburgh, incidentally demonstrating the much wider spread of Gaelic language and culture than is evident today.

Some of the smaller crannog-like sites may have functioned as kennels for packs of hunting dogs, there being a number of them called *Eilean nan Con* – Island of the dogs.<sup>375</sup>

#### GAELIC DEER HUNTING

The most popular method of hunting in mainland Europe and England was *par force*, which pursued a single quarry, using scenting hounds released in relays; but in Scotland the course and the drive were favoured by the Gaels, and for both, greyhounds or their equivalent, hunting by sight, were necessary. This may reflect the fact that deer in Scotland are first and foremost a food source rather than a source of sport. Scots deerhounds, renowned throughout Europe from as early as Roman times, were recognised as a specific breed as early as the 9th century AD<sup>376</sup> and feature on Pictish stones and in the Fenian and Ossianic tales from much the same period (see below).

The history of hunting methods in Scotland before 1124 and the popularity of the drive point to the influence of Gaelic custom in hunting methods  
...<sup>377</sup>

Documentary and physical evidence support this suggestion. Monro, writing about the Island of Rum in 1549, describes 'settis' high up in the hills, with the deer being 'callit upwart ay be tynchellis'.<sup>378</sup> 'Tinchel' (there are many spellings) is derived from the common Gaelic word *timcheall*, meaning 'a circuit or ring of beaters', the deer being surrounded and driven into a sett or elrick. Evidence for these practices on Rum is referred to in the *Old Statistical Account of 1796*:

Before the use of firearms, their method of killing deer was as follows: on each side of a glen, formed by two mountains, stone dykes were

373. K. Jackson, *The Gaelic Notes in the Book of Deer* (Cambridge, 1972), 31, 34 and 52.

374. Jackson, *The Gaelic Notes*, 96.

375. N. Dixon, *The Crannogs of Scotland* (Stroud, 2004), 30.

376. F. Thompson, *A Scottish Bestiary* (Glasgow, 1978), 57–58.

377. J. Gilbert, *Hunting and Hunting Reserves in Medieval Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1979), 60.

378. R. W. Munro, ed., *Monro's Western Isles of Scotland and Genealogies of the Clans 1549* (Edinburgh, 1961), 66.



Elrick on Rum. Photo © Iain Thornber by kind permission

begun pretty high in the mountains and carried to the lower part of the valley always drawing nearer, till within three or four feet of each other. From this narrow pass, a circular space was inclosed by a stone wall, of a height sufficient to confine the deer; to this place they were pursued and destroyed. The vestige of one of these inclosures is still to be seen on Rum.<sup>379</sup>

Most of these structures are now scarcely visible and a number of them were probably for gathering, as opposed to slaughtering deer. Close to the old Falkland deer park, deep fan-like trenches drawing in towards a steep-sided stream have recently been identified as a device for funnelling wild deer into the park, and trenches in Ayrshire also close to a deer park have been similarly identified.<sup>380</sup> Elricks are still visible at two sites on Rum.<sup>381</sup> One of these is particularly clear, with otherwise inexplicable ruined dry-stone walls on a remote south-west-facing slope of Orval, serving as a timely reminder to those who wish to describe such territory as ‘wilderness’ that it is anything but.

379. Quoted in J. Fletcher, *A Life for Deer* (London, 2000), 37.

380. S. Taylor, ‘The Trenches at Falkland, Fife: A Legacy of Royal Deer Management?’, in H. James and P. Moore, eds, *Carmarthenshire & Beyond: Studies in History and Archaeology in Memory of Terry James*, Carmarthenshire Antiquarian Society Monograph Series No. 8 (Llandybie, 2009).

381. J. Love, ‘Deer Traps on the Isle of Rhum’, *Journal of the British Deer Society ‘Deer’* 5, (3) (1980), 131–32.

On Jura, one of the elricks appears to have had walls low enough to allow hinds to escape but not their calves, and it is possible that calves were weaned off hinds for transport to other islands.<sup>382</sup> Elricks are associated with another place-name – *Taigh Sealg* ‘hunting house’ – an enclosure at the bottom of the elrick in which the deer were finally trapped. Monro also describes ‘tynchells’ on Jura, making use of the natural topography.<sup>383</sup>

An interesting *duanag* may refer to the gathering of deer and is possibly a lament for someone killed during a deer drive:

Chaidh na fèidh thairis ort (× 3)  
Am bealach cùl a’ ghàrraidh.

Leag iad thu, thog iad thu, (× 3)  
Leag iad chun an làr thu.

*The deer went past you  
In the pass at the back of the dyke.*

*They knocked you down, they lifted you up,  
They knocked you to the ground.*<sup>384</sup>

The refrain lines of *Chaidh na fèidh* are very similar to ‘Cumha Mhic an Tòisich’, in which MacKintosh is killed in an accident on a horse. In both songs, there is reference to a dyke – *gàrradh* and *bealach a’ ghàrraidh*, the latter translated by Carmichael as ‘the breach of the wall.’<sup>385</sup> This interpretation suggests that an elrick is what is envisaged in the song. The deer hunt could also lead to satirical or sarcastic comment:

There is Gorrie’s Leap near Carsaig on Mull involving a deer drive which went wrong and the retribution enacted by a MacLaine of Lochbuie on a poor ‘forester’ who was supposed to turn the deer back at it.<sup>386</sup>

Some corries may not have required much in the way of structure for them to function as deer traps. The corrie referred to in Iain Dall MacAoidh’s ‘Cumha Choire an Easa’ is such a one:<sup>387</sup>

382. Personal information kindly supplied by Iain Thornber, from research in preparation for publication.

383. Munro, ed., *Monro’s Western Isles of Scotland*, 49–50.

384. Kenna Campbell states that ‘Chaidh na fèidh’ comes from a BBC recording of Jessie MacKenzie in Lewis, made in the 1950s or 1960s.

385. Ronald Black discusses ‘Cumha Mhic an Toisich’ in R. Black, *The Gaelic Otherworld* (Edinburgh, 2005), 366–67.

386. Personal communication from Iain Thornber.

387. A. J. Haddow, *The History and Structure of Ceol Mor* (Glasgow, 1982), 136–39.



'N àm don ghrèin dhol air a h-uilinn  
 Gasda glèidhteach reubach fuileach  
 Branach stràcach riachach finleach  
 Sealgach marbhach targnach giullach.

*When the sun is sinking on her elbow  
 well-protected the place for bloody tearing,  
 corn-husks and fennel, thumping and flaying,  
 hunting, killing, gillies boasting.*<sup>388</sup>

A loch in this area, west of Glen Golly, is called *Loch na Seilge* 'the loch of the hunt'.

Legendary accounts of deer hunts make what appear to be striking claims. A poem in the Book of the Dean of Lismore numbers three thousand hounds, each of which brought down two deer, and a thousand hounds with golden chains wounded by a thousand boars.<sup>389</sup> Though such legendary claims are clearly exaggerated, very large numbers of men were involved in these hunts and the massive deer drives involving hundreds of clansmen were initiated by the chieftain. Here, more modest claims are, in the light of later evidence, entirely credible:

Ouer all with ws in the hichest mountanis Gret hartis are sa frequent,  
 that commounlie in a solemne hunting, the Prince cheiflie present him  
 selfe, now fyue hundir, now viii. Hundir, sum tyme 1000 at ane tyme ar  
 slayne ...<sup>390</sup>

We were in the Pass of Struthair, one hundred right shapely warriors ...  
 Our hunting ... a hundred stags from every oak-grove that held a bush we  
 laid low.<sup>391</sup>

Nobody apart from a chieftain could command such numbers. Here is a description by the 'Water Poet' of a Highland hunt given by the Earl of Marr in 1618:

The manner of hunting is this:— five or six hundred men doe rise early in  
 the morning, and they doe disperse themselves divers wayes, and seven,

388. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, 212 and 213.

389. T. McLauchlan, ed., *The Dean of Lismore's Book* (Edinburgh, 1862), 6.

390. E. Cody, ed., *John Leslie Translated by James Dalrymple, The Historie of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1888), 19.

391. E. MacNeill, ed., *Duanaire Finn Part I* (London, 1908, 180). The MS dates from 1627 and was compiled for Somhairle MacDonnell, but its matter dates to the late medieval period.

eight, or ten miles compass they doe bring or chase in the deer in many  
 heardes (two, three, or four hundred in a heard) to such or such a place  
 as the noblemen shall appoint them; then when the day is come, the  
 lords and gentlemen of their companies doe ride or go to the said places,  
 sometimes wading up to the middles through bournes and rivers; and  
 then they being come to the place, doe lye down on the ground till those  
 foresaid scouts, which are called the tinckell, do bring down the deer; ...  
 then after we had stayed three houres, or thereabouts, we might perceive  
 the deer appeare on the hill round about us (their heads making a shew  
 like a wood), which being followed close by the Tinckell, are chased  
 down into the valley where wee lay; then all the valley on each side being  
 waylaid with a hundred couple of strong Irish greyhounds, they are let  
 loose as occasion serves upon the heard of deere, that with dogs, gunnes,  
 arrowes, durks, and daggers, in the space of two houres, fourscore fat  
 deere were slaine ...<sup>392</sup>

The same sort of hunting was being practised as late as the early-18th century:

The chief convenes what numbers he thinks fit, according to the strength  
 of his clan: perhaps three or four hundred. With these he surrounds the  
 hill, and as they advance upwards, the deer flies at the sight of them ...  
 till, in the end, he is enclosed by them in a small circle, and there they  
 hack him down with their broadswords. And they generally do it so  
 dexterously, as to preserve the hide entire.<sup>393</sup>

A somewhat esoteric hunt was ordered by King James VI and I when he  
 heard of a white hind in the Glen Orchy area. The King wished to add this rarity  
 to his herd at Windsor and in 1622 sent his most experienced deer manager  
 to help bring it back. The 'hunt' and trials of the King's forester in appalling  
 weather and rough terrain was researched and entertainingly described by Sir  
 James Ferguson.<sup>394</sup> The white hind was sighted but it was concluded that she  
 could only be driven alive out of the corrie by a minimum of twenty-four men,  
 and to get her any further for capture would require two or three thousand and  
 the stress would probably kill her.

392. John Taylor, 'The Water Poet', *The Pennylesse Pilgrimage* (London, 1618), quoted in W. Scrope, *The Art of Deer-Stalking: Illustrated by a Narrative of a few Days Sport in the Forest of Atholl* (London, 1838), 404–05.

393. A. Simmons, ed., *Burt's Letters from the North of Scotland as Related by Edmund Burt* (Edinburgh, 1998), Letter XXI, 223.

394. J. Ferguson, *The White Hind and Other Discoveries* (London, 1963), Chap. 7.

One of the last deer drives was in fact a form of raid, undertaken by starving crofters on the Park deer forest owned by Lady Matheson in Lewis in November 1887. In addition to providing food for the crofters, the raid marked a change in public opinion when the six ringleaders were found not guilty in an Edinburgh court.

Mharbh sinn iad 'nan ceudan  
Dh'fheann sinn iad gu brèagha;  
Dh'ith sinn iad gu rianail,  
Gu fialaidh 's gu cuireideach.

*We killed them in their hundreds,  
We flayed them splendidly,  
And we ate them in orderly fashion,  
With generous portions, deftly.*<sup>395</sup>

Like the deer drives before them, grouse drives from the 19th century on, though not employing hundreds, still called upon substantial numbers and can only be initiated by wealthy landowners with control over the shooting rights.

#### THE DEPICTION OF HUNTING AND THE HORSES EMPLOYED

The depiction of hunting is frequent in Pictish and Gaelic iconography and it is clearly an aristocratic activity, though there were differences of opinion as to what was noble and what was not. For example, the drive did not necessarily involve an elrick. The Picts also used nets spread across fields and disguised themselves with branches in order to slaughter any deer that struggled free – a method regarded as ignoble by the Scots.<sup>396</sup> However, this information comes from later historians (Boece and Bellenden) and it is quite clear from the hunting scenes so graphically carved on Pictish stones that, at the height of the Pictish culture, the deerhounds were accompanied by men on horseback with spears and the deer themselves were brought down by the hounds.

The back of the Nigg cross slab shows a man clashing cymbals to drive the deer, while a horseman is shown along with a deerhound holding onto the leg of a deer. The Aberlemno cross slab has two trumpeters to frighten the deer and four horsemen with deerhounds attacking stags. There are also two trumpeters on the back of [the Hilton of Cadboll cross slab](#) and a woman riding side-saddle, with another horse beside her in perfect step and, below, two horsemen with

395. Anon., transl. by Donald Meek, reproduced in A. and P. MacDonald, *The Hebrides: An Aerial View of a Cultural Landscape* (Edinburgh, 2010), 259.

396. H. Boece, *Historiae*.

spears and two deerhounds attacking a stag. The Burghead stone shows a smooth- and a rough-coated deerhound attacking a stag.<sup>397</sup>

The scenes are suggestive of aristocratic hunting practices, though some commentators have interpreted the Cadboll scene as a Flight into Egypt, with the woman as Mary and the hunters representing the forces of evil chasing the hind representing the human soul.<sup>398</sup> It is hard to accept this, given the parallel scene on the Aberlemno stone and the fact that, contrary to the argument, the female figure would be perfectly secure on a horse that is at the 'rack' (see below). Besides, the female does not carry a child.

Likewise, the interpretation of the hunting scene on [the Shandwick cross slab](#) as a 'ritual hunt' seems to stretch the evidence and is in danger of taking it too seriously.<sup>399</sup> Hunting does tend to involve ritual, but the stag looking back at the disguised hunter with his crossbow at the ready may simply indicate that the animal is cornered (by the edge of the panel?) and is turning on the hunter upon whose back there is a bird. Whether this bird is indeed a greater spotted woodpecker (as opposed to, for instance, a raven) does not turn it into 'the hunter's tutelary spirit'.<sup>400</sup> If it is a woodpecker, one is inclined to see humour in the situation: if a raven, impending death for the hunter. We do well to recall the frequent emergence of humour, incorporated directly into the texts of the gospels in the contemporaneous Book of Kells, not to forget the Pictish horseman on a slab from Invergowrie in Angus (if not a fake) shown drinking out of a horn. The horn is terminated by the head of a bird which looks back at the drinker, who is in no state for ritual of any sort, and the horse's head is lowered in resignation. Irene Hughson, who herself kept horses, has written:

I believe that people looking at the stones in the Early Historic Period would have taken the hunting scenes as a reference first and foremost to an activity that they were familiar with, even if only as onlookers.<sup>401</sup>

Turning our attention to the horses and riders shown on Pictish carvings, it is clear that we are in the presence of particular types of horse and ways of riding. 'Garron' is a loan-word into English from Gaelic *gearran* 'gelding'. This is also the name given to the month of February, because both horse and the month have

397. G. and I. Henderson, *The Art of the Picts* (London, 2004), 206; and I. Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands* (Edinburgh, 2001), 203.

398. E. Sutherland, *In Search of the Picts* (London, 1994), 187.

399. Gilbert, *Hunting and Hunting Reserves*, 75, also argues against these kinds of interpretation.

400. Sutherland, *In Search of the Picts*, 185.

401. I. Hughson, 'Pictish Horse and Pictish Society', in Black, Gillies and Ó Maolalaigh, eds, *Celtic Connections I* (East Linton, 1999), 216–17.



Eriskay pony. Photo © Seán Purser

been cut (*geàrr*). The Highland garron is a small horse and is shown as such on the carvings where it is perhaps closest to the Eriskay pony.

With very few exceptions, the riders on Pictish equestrian carvings have their legs thrust forward, the foot being more or less in line with the top of the horse's foreleg. In the mind of Edmund Burt, writing centuries later about the manner of riding Highland garrons, this posture was explained as follows:

They are so small that a middle-sized man must keep his legs almost in lines parallel to their sides when carried over the stony ways; and it is almost incredible to those who have not seen it, how nimbly they skip with a heavy rider among the rocks and large moorstones, turning zigzag to such places that are passable.<sup>402</sup>

While there may be some truth in Burt's observation, it seems more likely that these horses were being ridden at the 'rack', as still practised in Iceland today, where it is known as the *toelt*. The sequence of paces is neither diagonal nor lateral, but off-fore, off-hind, near-hind, near-fore. This gait produces a remarkably smooth ride up to fairly high speeds, and the rider's 'seat' is more naturally one of leaning back.<sup>403</sup>

402. A. Simmons, ed., *Burt's Letters from the North of Scotland as Related by Edmund Burt* (Edinburgh, 1998), Letter XX, 208–10.

403. A. Dent, 'Picts on Horseback', *The Scots Magazine* (November 1968), 160–66.

Hughson has also pointed out the acute observation of the stone carvers, concluding that

We have admissible evidence for the presence in Pictland from the 5th to the 9th centuries AD of a variety of different types of equines, including fine riding horses with Bactrian characteristics.<sup>404</sup>

The references to Pictish hunting scenes are relevant to the Gàidhealtachd:

Hunting scenes are depicted on several 14th-, 15th- and 16th-century west Highland tombstones in a manner strikingly similar to the hunting scenes on the Pictish stones ... While the west Highland scenes closely resemble the Pictish stones and while classical parallels can be found for the Pictish scenes, it is unsatisfactory to say that the scenes are random copyings ... Firstly, there is an obvious realism about the Pictish scenes, as there also is in the west Highland monuments. Moreover, there are differences between the Pictish and west Highland stones, not only in dress, but in the type of dogs being used.<sup>405</sup>

These differences are outlined below.

With the advent of firearms, hunting methods changed, and by the time of the 1796 Statistical Account, human population expansion and access to guns had reduced the deer population on Rum to zero.<sup>406</sup>

Guns, however, were far from being the only influence on deer population. With the advent of sheep, tree cover for deer was destroyed and any hope of regeneration lost. Tourists passing by train round the lower slopes of Beinn Dòbhrain might well wonder why anyone should have written a panegyric for the mountain. Duncan Ban McIntyre's poem 'Moladh Beinn Dòbhrain' is referred



Pictish Hunting Scene, Aberlemno 3.

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404. I. Hughson, 'Pictish Horse and Pictish Society', in Black, Gillies and Ó Maolalaih, eds, *Celtic Connections I* (East Linton 1999), 215.

405. J. Gilbert, *Hunting and Hunting Reserves in Medieval Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1979), 75.

406. Fletcher, *A Life for Deer*, 38.



to elsewhere, but the mountainscape it describes co-existed with hunting with guns and it was rich in flora and fauna. What survives today is little short of a desert with bare hillsides, coarse grasses and extensive erosion. MacIntyre lived to see the effects and lamented them in a further poem – ‘Cead Deireannach nam Beann’ (Final Farewell to the Bens). The loss is both one of the human population and its comradeship, and of the beauty of the environment and its ability to support the human and deer population:

On theirig coll is fraoch ann  
 'S na daoine bh' ann, cha mhaireann iad;  
 Chan 'eil fiadh r' a shealg ann,  
 Chan 'eil eun no earb ann ...

*For wood and heather have run out,  
 nor live the men who flourished there;  
 there's not a deer to hunt there,  
 there's not a bird or roe there ...*<sup>407</sup>

We should not, however, imagine that prior to the legal establishment of shooting rights the Gaels themselves could take deer where- and whenever they wished:

as the proverb says of a bad cooke, so these Tinckell men doe lick their own fingers; for besides their bows and arrows, which they carry with them, wee can heare now and then a harquebuse or musket goe off, which they doe seldom discharge in vaine.<sup>408</sup>

When Tormod MacNeacail of Scorrabreck (Norman Nicolson, b.1798) laments the restrictions of the law on hunting as a result of which he was forced to emigrate, among the images that stick in his mind are those of his slender gun, which he carried proudly with his arm round its neck and which is now rusting useless on a nail.

'S gann gun dìrich mi 'chaidh  
 'Dh-ionnsuigh frìthean a mhunaidh;  
 'S gann gun dìrich mi 'chaidh.

Tha mo ghunna caol air meirgeadh,  
 'S cha 'n fhaod mi a dhearbhadh tuilleadh.

407. A. MacLeod, ed., *Orain Dhonnchaidh Bhàin* (Edinburgh, 1952), 390–91.

408. John Taylor, ‘The Water Poet’, *The Pennylesse Pilgrimage* (London, 1618), quoted in W. Scrope, *The Art of Deer-Stalking: Illustrated by a Narrative of a few Days Sport in the Forest of Atholl* (London, 1838), 404–05.

Tha e 'n crochadh air na tàirngean,  
 'S cha do thoill e 'àite fuirich ...

'S iomadh latha bha sinn còmhla,  
 Is mo làmh gu fòil mu mhuineal.

*Sadly I'll give up climbing to the wilds of the moorland. Now my slender gun is rusting, since I can no longer use it. It is hanging on the gun-rack and it is not happy there ... Many days we were together, and my arm proudly around its neck.*<sup>409</sup>

#### DOGS AND DEERHOUNDS

When Alexander Campbell had William Lizars of Edinburgh draw, engrave and print the vignette for his *Albyn's Anthology* of 1816, he chose as its centrepiece a Scottish deerhound – in fact Sir Walter Scott's favourite, Maida. Maida is almost as large as the stag he has brought down and looks back, perhaps towards his master, with authority and pride in the midst of a wild romantic Highland scene. His white chest and legs, though not the white blaze on the head, are allowed in



Detail from Frontispiece of Alexander Campbell, *Albyn's Anthology* (1816)

409. Gaelic from Maclean Sinclair's *The Gaelic Bards from 1825–1875* (1904), 51–53. The translation is adapted from Donald A. Fergusson's *Beyond The Hebrides* (1977), 39.

today's definition of the breed. Sir Walter Scott, to whom Campbell was a music tutor, contributed many of the verses to *Albyn's Anthology* and described Maida as:

a stag hound of the old Highland breed ... and one of the handsomest dogs that could be found; it was a present to me from the chief of Glengary, and was highly valued, both on account of his fidelity, and the great rarity of the breed ... Maida, like Bran, Lerath [sic]<sup>410</sup>, and other dogs of distinction, slumbers 'beneath his stone,' distinguished by an epitaph, which to the honour of Scottish scholarship be it spoken, has only one false quantity in two lines.

Madae marmorea dormis sub imagine Maida  
Ad januam domini sit tibi terra levis.<sup>411</sup>

*Beneath the sculptured form which late you bore,  
Sleep soundly Maida at your master's door.*<sup>412</sup>

The subject of Scott's letter was a painting of the Scott family by David Wilkie, painted at Abbotsford. That sense of nostalgia related to the hunt is also present in Duncan Ban MacIntyre's poetry:

Ged tha mo cheann air liathadh  
'S mo chiabhagan air tanachadh,  
'S tric a leig mi mialchù  
Ri fear fiadhaich ceannardach:  
Ged bu toigh leam riamh iad,  
'S ged fhaicinn air an t-sliabh iad,  
Cha téid mi nis g' an iarraidh  
On chaill mi trian na h-analach.

*Although my head is hoary  
and my locks have become scanty,  
oft have I loosed a deer-hound  
against a wild, high-headed one:  
though I, who loved them always,  
were to see them on the hillside,*

410. It seems likely that this is a misreading for Luath, the name of one of the famous Fenian hounds, after whom Robert Burns named one of his own dogs.

411. Letter from Sir Walter Scott to Sir Adam Ferguson (2 December 1827), published in the *Bijou Annual* 1828.

412. Anon. (George King Matthews), *Abbotsford and Sir Walter Scott* (London, 1854), 218 (ebook).

*now, being sadly short of breath,  
I cannot go a-chasing after them.*<sup>413</sup>

An early reference to deerhounds from Scotland occurs in the 9th–10th-century *Scéla Cano*. Included in the retinue of Cano MeicGartnáin (whose main residence was probably Dùn Cana on the Island of Raasay)<sup>414</sup> were fifty gillies, each with two deerhounds on silver leads.

Fithchell for muin cach gilla[i] co feraib óir 7 airgid; timpán créda i(n)  
láim chlí in gilla[i]; da mílchoin ar slabra[i]d airgit ina láim deis.<sup>415</sup>

*On the back of each gillie, a chess-board with its men of gold and silver; in  
his left hand a bronze tiompan, in his right hand, two deerhounds on silver  
leads.*<sup>416</sup>

A poem from the Book of the Dean of Lismore refers to hounds with golden leashes in Ireland.<sup>417</sup>

Walter Bower, in a passage possibly derived from Geoffrey of Monmouth, describes 'The first outbreak of dissension between the Scots and the Picts in the time of Diocletian' as being over the theft of a dog:

a certain hound, which used to follow the scent on the tracks of beasts, was stolen away by the Picts, and was immediately discovered in their possession. When the Scots demanded it back, the [Picts] refused to return it.<sup>418</sup>

Bower was writing in the 1440s, Geoffrey of Monmouth in around 1140. Whether the dispute really took place in the time of Diocletian in the 3rd century AD or no does not diminish the significance of this type of breed being

413. A. MacLeod, ed., *Orain Dhonnchaidh Bhàin* (Edinburgh, 1952), 388–89.

414. D. MacLean, 'Maelrubai, Applecross and the Late Pictish Contribution West of Druimalban', in D. Henry, ed., *The Worm, the Germ and the Thorn* (Forfar, 1997), 174–75.

415. D. Binchy, ed., *Scéla Cano Meic Gartnáin* (Dublin, 1975), 2, ll. 35–37.

416. The translation is the author's. Thurneysen translates *créda* as 'tin', but the more usual and more likely meaning is 'bronze', referring either to bronze decoration on the instrument and/or to its strings. 'am Halse jedes Dieners ein fithchell (Brettspiel) mit Figuren (Steinen) von Gold und Silber; in der linken Hand des Dieners ein zinnemes timpán (Harfe), an seiner rechten Hand zwei Jagdhunde an silberner Kette' (R. Thurneysen, 'Eine irische Parallele zur Tristan-Sage', *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* 43 (1924), 389.

417. MacLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire* (Edinburgh 2007), No. 21.

418. J. and W. MacQueen, eds, *Scotichronicon by Walter Bower I* (Aberdeen, 1993), 265 and 387, fn to ll. 17–48.

sufficiently particular to the Scots to have to be stolen and to warrant an ensuing breakdown of all trust.

Deerhounds were by no means the only distinctive Scottish breed. Conrad Gesner writing in 1554 describes a *canis Scoticus furum deprehensor*,<sup>419</sup> and this ‘thief-catching, Scottish hound’ was known as the *cù dubh Griogarach*, which, as Dwelly notes, was a ‘kind of bloodhound, used of old for tracking deer; also used by their enemies for tracking fugitives of the Clan Gregor’<sup>420</sup> – hence its name. It is possible that Gesner’s source was Hector Boece, who, writing in 1527, describes a dog that is:

Reid hewit, or ellis blak, with small spraingis of spottis; and ar callit be the peple Sleuthhoundis. Thir doggis hes sa mervellus wit, that thay serche thevis, and followis thaim allanerlie be sent of the guddis that ar tane away; and nocht allanerlie findis the theif, but invadis him with gret cruelte:<sup>421</sup>

Topsell in his *The History of Four-footed Beasts and Serpents* of 1607 uses Gesner’s woodcuts to illustrate ‘The Hunting Hound of Scotland called Rache, and in English a Hound’.<sup>422</sup>

We are not solely dependent upon the historians for our evidence of such breeds. The MacMillan cross at Kilmory, Knapdale, is from the 15th century but much the same scene is depicted. Three mastiffs with collars attack a stag and the early 16th-century [MacLeod tomb at Rodel](#) shows two mastiffs held on a leash. These also appear to have been Scottish, wore spiked collars and were capable of bringing down deer. On Murchardus MacDuffie’s grave slab at Oronsay Priory, what appear to be two deerhounds attack a stag, with two hinds in the background.

Of the hunting dogs are sindrie kyndes, and sindrie natures, of quilkes the first kynde is gretter than ane tuelfmoneth alde calfe; and this sorte commonlie huntis the gretter beistes, as ye sall sie, athir the harte or the wolfe. The secund kynde of hunting dog is sumthing less than is this, bot mair couragious than he and nobilar of kynde, a beist of a meruellous audacitie and suitnes ... Another kind of hunting dog is to sent ... Is yit another kynde of senting dogs far different frome the first ...<sup>423</sup>

419. C. Gesner, *Historiae Animalium* (Switzerland, 1554).

420. Dwelly, *The Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary*, 283.

421. H. Boece and J. Bellenden, eds, *The History and Chronicles of Scotland* V 1 (1536) (Edinburgh, 1821), xlii.

422. Topsell, *The History of Four-footed Beasts and Serpents*, 118.

423. E. Cody, ed., *John Leslie Translated by James Dalrymple, the Historie of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1888), 20.

Bishop Leslie’s 1578 description of different types of dog takes more than two pages and it is clear from the context that they were used widely in mountainous country.<sup>424</sup> The late 16th-century song ‘Òran na Comhachaig’ (‘The Song of the Owl’) describes two types of hunting dog:

Ceòl as binne de gach ceòl  
Guth a’ ghadhair mhòir ’s e teachd;  
Damh na shiomanach le gleann,  
Mìolchoin a bhith ann is as.

*Music sweeter than any music,  
the mastiff’s baying on approach;  
a stag wavering down the glen,  
deerhounds rushing back and forth.*<sup>425</sup>

As is clear from the above and from Leslie’s descriptions, not all these dogs were naturally, or trained to be, silent.<sup>426</sup> Silence from the humans at least was not part of the Pictish hunting method, but for the deerhounds we know that it was important that they should be silent by nature and hunt silently:

A pack of hounds, like that of Actaeon, in the same metaphorical sense, would soon devour their master. But, supposing they could be easily maintained, they would be of no use, it being impossible for them to hunt over such rocks and rugged steep declivities; or if they could do this, their cry in those open hills would soon fright all the deer out of that part of the country. This was the effect of one single hound, whose voice I have often heard in the dead of the night (as I lay in bed) echoing among the mountains; he was kept by an English gentleman at one of the barracks, and it was loudly complained of by some of the lairds, as being prejudicial to their estates.<sup>427</sup>

These various references suggest that the breeding of hunting dogs for a variety of purposes was a speciality of the Gaels and that, in looking at the descendants of these breeds today, we are seeing at least something of the Gaelic world embodied in a highly selective process that, though having many of its earliest references in mythology, had both a tangible and a visible reality well into the 20th century, and realised beautifully in George Bain’s *A Celtic*

424. Cody, *John Leslie Translated by James Dalrymple*, 19ff.

425. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanair na Sracaire*, 398–99, with slight adaptation of the translation.

426. Cody, *John Leslie Translated by James Dalrymple*, 21.

427. Simmons, *Burt’s Letters from the North of Scotland*, Letter XXI, 223–24.



*Hunting Rug*, which was made in Kidderminster to his design.<sup>428</sup> Around its richly interlaced border, a pack of hounds is in joyous pursuit of each other and, in its main rectangular panel, Pictish horsemen with spears and hounds, and supported by horn players, bring down two stags. Nor did the advent of the gun take away from the excitement of the hunt, for man or dog, for the North Uist poet Dòmhnall Chorùna in the 20th century:

A' toirt làmh air a' ghunna  
Bhiodh an cuilean 's a shùil rium,

E ri miodal mun cuairt dhìom,  
'S a chridhe bualadh le sùgradh.

*As I reached for the gun  
The young dog would watch me,*

*Fawning around me,  
Palpitating with joy.*<sup>429</sup>

In response to such a companion (canine or human), the hunter, on seeing potential prey, would ready them with the word *eid*, which appears to exist for that specific function alone.<sup>430</sup>

#### HUNTING OF SEABIRDS

The gathering of food from the coasts of the Hebrides has provided us with some of our most iconic images – notably those of the guga hunters from Ness in North Lewis who travel annually forty miles out into the Atlantic to stay for weeks on a savage rock, *Sula Sgeir*, catching, killing, plucking, scorching, spatch-cocking, salting and storing the young gannets. Their odyssey – for so it seems to be, with its almost mythological status – has been recorded in film and photography more than once.<sup>431</sup> The hardihood of such men working in such conditions was necessary to survival for many in the past. Thus the men and boys marooned in the 18th century on *Stac an Àrmainn* near *Hiort* (St Kilda), survived for several winter months on birds and fish before their rescue – a story truly heroic in its physical and mental endurance.

Similar use of cliff-nesting birds was carried out in Mingulay, the birds being

428. George Bain, *Celtic Art* (Glasgow, 1951), 161.

429. Dòmhnall Ruadh Chorùna (1887–1967), 'Cha b' e gunna mo nàmhaid', in R. Black, ed., *An Tuil* (Edinburgh, 1999), 140–41.

430. Dwelly, *The Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary*, 388.

431. Mike Day, *The Guga Hunters of Ness* (BBC, 2010). John Beatty, *The Seabird Hunters of Lewis* (London, 1992).



*Stac an Àrmainn*, Hiort. Photo © John Purser

used to pay rent, and until very recently cormorants and shags were widely taken in the autumn, often being hunted from boats, but also snared from clifftops.

To a population increasingly divorced from the production of food, many of these practices are visually shocking as well as discomfiting for reasons of misunderstood ecology. The gannet population has never suffered from culling, nor did the seal population, though the mercifully brief exploitation of basking sharks by Gavin Maxwell and Tex Geddes nearly wiped out the local basking shark

population around Soay in South Skye where the ruins of their enterprise can still be seen. But that was conducted on an industrial scale and led, not by any Hebridean, but by the author of *Ring of Bright Water*, otherwise regarded as a man of ecological sensitivity.

#### FEAST AND FAMINE

The subjects of food provision, preparation and cooking are well covered by James Logan, with particular Gaelic emphasis, and in such books as Marian MacNeil's *The Scots Kitchen* and Annette Hope's *A Caledonian Feast*, so what follows are a few examples primarily related to the visual and to some of the prejudices that still exist with respect to the Highland diet.<sup>432</sup>

To provide a feast was one of the basic expectations of a clan chieftain, and praise of feasting, including of course drinking, features in many panegyrics. Most famous of Highland feasts is one in response to a slight from a lowland nobleman at the court of King James V, who suggested to the MacLeod chief that he would be unable to match the King's hospitality. MacLeod maintained he had 'a greater hall, a finer table, and more precious candleholders by far than any you see before you here.' He proved his point when in 1539 James V and his entourage came to visit and were taken up one of the two flat-topped hills

432. James Logan, 'Celtic Manners', Chap. IV in *The Scottish Gaël* Vol. II (1876; repr. Inverness, 1976), 108–84. Marian MacNeil, *The Scots Kitchen* (1st pub. 1929 and still in print; the edition referred to is that of 1985). Annette Hope, *A Caledonian Feast* (Edinburgh, 1987).

known as MacLeod's Tables.<sup>433</sup> Clansmen with blazing torches surrounded the smooth grassy top at dusk and, though we do not have the menu, the resources available to MacLeod would have been very considerable and absolutely fresh.

Famine, as opposed to widespread hunger was a rarity but, from the 18th century on, potatoes became a mainstay and the potato famine of the 1840s affected much of the Gàidhealtachd. A few fortunate islands such as Colonsay escaped the blight, but starvation was common and emigration one of the consequences. When any animal or fish was killed, nothing was wasted. Stornoway black puddings, their name protected by law, use the blood of the sheep and were traditionally made in the gut; the 'skirt' of the belly was made into a pocket and stuffed with oatmeal and onion and boiled. For *ceann cropaidh*, the livers of cod, lythe and saithe were pounded up with oatmeal and onion and boiled in the head of a cod and the broth served as soup. *Sgairbh* (cormorants and shags) were caught or shot, hung and skinned and made into stews and soup, or their breasts pan-fried. But if you look up how to cook a cormorant on the Internet, you will find nothing but ridicule, although during the Second World War they were welcome enough to many under the name of 'black duck'. Other resources such as the wilks (small black sea snails) are gathered for export, along with the farmed mussels, and not much valued, but in the past they were an important part of the diet. Many were the uses to which oats and milk were put, and some dishes can no longer be brought to perfection because of the way milk is now produced, as in hatted kit, providing us with an image of buttermilk being brought out to the cow for the cow to be milked straight into it. This 'very old Highland Dish ... can quite well be made without milking the cow into it, although the contributor's mother always considered that direct milking put a better hat on the kit.'<sup>434</sup>

These are just a few examples of the resourcefulness of people for whom venison, salmon, sea trout, eels, crabs, lobsters, prawns, oysters, mussels and scallops, and many other species were readily available when not commandeered by the landlords who have frequently had a way of interfering with every conceivable resource. As the proverb says:

Breac à linne, slat à coille is fiadh à fireach  
Mèirle às nach do ghabh Gàidheal riamh nàire.

433. See Nichola Fletcher, *Charlemagne's Tablecloth* (London, 2004), 37–38. Tradition states that the mountain was Healabhal Mhòr. However, though flat it is boggy, and Healabhal Bheag with its more dramatic rampart-like approach and drier top seems more likely.

434. *The Scottish Women's Rural Institute Cookery Book* (6th edn, March 1950), 109.

*A salmon from the river, timber from the wood, a deer from the hill,  
Theft of which the Gael was never ashamed.*

Landlords even attempted to prevent the traditional method of grinding oats or barley into meal with the rotary hand quern. Quern songs still survive in the repertoire, but their use was sometimes forbidden and the stones smashed or thrown into lochs in order to force people to use the landowner's water mill.

We conclude this section with a misapprehension which, in a way, matches the slight which provoked the MacLeod chieftain. It appears in Jane Grigson's *Fish Cookery*, first published in 1973. While praising bouillabaisse and other fish stews, she writes:

At the opposite end of existence, it can be perfectly disgusting. A friend told me recently that his grandmother went into a dark cottage in the Highlands of Scotland. There she saw a woman, apparently alone except for a cow, stirring a pot over the fire. In a few moments she poured the contents of the pot on to a pile of heather in front of the hearth. And from a shadowy hole in the wall darted two filthy children, who grabbed as many potatoes and raggy herrings as they could, and darted back again to eat them in obscurity. The liquor drained away through the heather stalks to be soaked up by the mud floor. That woman's resources were poor, her skills undeveloped, in such circumstances of life; but the method of cooking the stew was the same as the one used by any Marseillais fisherman to make his *bouillabaisse*. The result could have been perfectly edible, if the fish hadn't been overcooked, and if there had been plenty of butter to eat with it.<sup>435</sup>

What the grandmother saw was not a fish stew, but the pouring off of heavily salted water from salt herring and potatoes – a totally different dish. The attempt at empathy in excusing the woman's imagined lack of resources and skill, and the dwelling upon perceived squalor, might just be forgiven as a satirical literary trope, but what is inexcusable is the failure of Grigson to question the source. She has not only accepted her informant's account uncritically, she has mistaken the nature of the raw materials and the intention of the cooking method. Salt herring are firm and putting them in boiling water draws the salt out of them. Moreover, the herring are only in there for 'a few moments', yet Grigson has described what she had never eaten as 'overcooked' and 'perfectly disgusting'. It being, however, more pleasant to share knowledge than ignorance, here is the Reverend Alexander Stewart's account of a woman steaming fresh herring and potatoes with minute attention to detail. Stewart describes the finished result thus:

435. Jane Grigson, *Fish Cookery* (Harmondsworth, 1980), 83.

After a word of grace we dipped our hand into the pot and took out a potato, hot and mealy, and with another we took a nip out of the silvery flank of the herring nearest us. It was a mouthful for a king, sir!<sup>436</sup>

JP

## III.3.b. HUMANS IN THE LANDSCAPE

[Introduction](#); [Dùthchas](#); [A Peopled Landscape](#); [Depopulation](#); [Donnchadh Bàn and the Ecosystem](#); [Orientation](#); [Conclusion](#)

## INTRODUCTION

Na bailtean is na h-àirighean  
Am faighte blàths is faoileachd,  
Gun taighean ach na làraichean,  
Gun àiteach air na raointean.  
Tha h-uile seòl a b' àbhaist  
Anns a' Ghaidhealtachd air caochladh,  
Air cinntinn cho mì-nàdarra  
'Sna h-àitean a bha aoigheil.<sup>437</sup>  
*The villages and shielings,  
Where warmth and cheer were found,  
Have no houses save the ruins  
And no tillage in the fields.  
Every practice that prevailed  
In the Highlands has been altered,  
And become so unnatural  
In the places that were hospitable.*

In Gaelic poetry, nature is not seen as an object outside or different from the human environment. Nature *is* the human environment and human settlement is as much part of nature as other forms of life. In 'Oran nam Balgairan' (Song to the Foxes), of which an extract is quoted above, Donnchadh Bàn sees the sheep as the cause of the destruction of the ecosystem, of the people it sustained and of their culture. It is the absence of people in the landscape that he finds unnatural.

436. F. Marian McNeill, *The Scots Kitchen*, quoting Alexander Stewart's *Nether Lochaber* of 1883 (1st pub. 1929 and still in print; the edn referred to is that of 1985), 137.

437. 'Oran nam Balgairan' (Song to the Foxes), in Angus MacLeod, ed., *Òrain Dhonnchaidh Bhàn | The Songs of Duncan Ban MacIntyre* (Edinburgh, 1952), 346.

Only in recent times, in the light of the hole in the ozone layer and global warming, has the effect of the human economy on the economy of nature been taken seriously. While Marx defined the mastery of nature as humanity's distinguishing feature and Freud looked on an interest in nature as a bourgeois indulgence and a form of escapism from the 'reality-principle' of industrial production, the Gaelic nature poets had a very different understanding of the relationship between humanity and nature.

## DÙTHCHAS

In Gaelic, a person's heredity or *dùthchas* is formed as much by the place as by the people to which he or she belongs. In [II.1.c.](#), we looked at the human figure in isolation; now we must look at people in their environment – that is in the landscape – even at the risk of some overlap with [III.1.](#) In the poetry of the period, human society in many ways reflects the natural world: the rootedness of the tree, the singing of birds, the fecundity of the deer and the gaiety of family groups of cattle. The attributes of the warrior are seen in the stag, salmon and hawk. There is plentiful gain on both sides and the ideal of society in pre-Clearance times pictures a people at their most expressed when participating in that plenty. The hero shoots the stag and catches the salmon, groups of singing girls tend the cattle and in the evenings their *dùthchas*, that combination of people and place, is celebrated in the drinking hall or cèilidh house. The fruitful relationship of the people with the land is symbolised in the person of the chief. In his beauty and conduct, he is a worthy steward of the land; in his generosity, he is a conduit of its plenty; and in his martial prowess, he can hunt its deer and defend it for his people.

## A PEOPLED LANDSCAPE

Some songs make a request to a passing traveller to take a message to a lover. This immediately evokes a peopled landscape, giving us a sense of the Highlands criss-crossed with human relations, a sense now peculiarly poignant in a largely depopulated Highlands:

Fhir a dhìreas am bealach  
beir soraidh don ghleannan fo thuath,  
is innis dom leannan  
gur maireann mo ghaol 's gur buan.<sup>438</sup>  
*Oh man who climbs the mountain pass,  
bear greetings to the little glen to the north,*

438. Anne Lorne Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2006), 369.



and tell my sweetheart  
that my love will last forever.

A settled, cultivated landscape, productive of barley and oats, peas and beans, full of the sound of cuckoos and thrushes, and lively with the activity of cattle and people, is described in the many 'Homeland' songs, usually composed in absence, such as 'Beir soraidh bhuan' (Bear greetings from me).<sup>439</sup> The ecology is healthy for man, beast and plant, sustaining a far greater diversity than is possible nowadays with the over-grazing of sheep and the monoculture of forestry.

Love songs often evoke the shieling where the cows were put out to graze in the summer months, attended by the women and girls of the township. The shieling is evoked as a place of plenty, of courtship and freedom. Descriptions occur in many songs, e.g. Donnchadh Bàn's 'Cead Deireannach nam Beann', 'Bràighe Loch Iall', 'Bothan Àirigh am Bràigh Rainneach', 'An Gille Dubh Ciar-dhubh' and 'Thig an Smeòrach as t-Earrach'.<sup>440</sup> All speak of real or wished-for courtship in the wilderness, regardless of comfort. Soft beds with a king are disparaged in favour of a hollow with the beloved. Deer, birds and cows



Sidney Richard Percy (1821–1886), *Corn Stooks in a Mountainous River Landscape*.  
Public domain.

439. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 229.

440. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 241, 257, 330, 333, 364, respectively.

with calf are mentioned, as if their behaviour was conducive to the mating of humans. The poet of 'Bràighe Loch Iall' seems to have enjoyed the informality of the shieling, with only brushwood for a door. The girl in 'Bothan Àirigh am Bràigh Raineach' says how she and her lover will be woken in *bothan an t-sùgraidh* (the bothy of love-making) by the roaring of the stag and the singing of the birds.

The uncultivated land or wilderness also had its human relevance for hunting, fishing and unsanctioned liaisons:

Is truagh nach robh mise  
's an gille dubh ciar-dhubh,  
an aodann na beinne  
fo shileadh nan siantan,  
an lagan beag fàsaich  
no 'n àiteigin dìomhair ...

*I wish that I  
and my dark-haired lad  
were on the mountainside  
exposed to the elements,  
in a little deserted hollow  
or anywhere private ...*<sup>441</sup>

Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's 'Moladh Mòraig' (Praise of Mòrag) is about fornication *al fresco*. His editors, the MacDonald brothers, censured and censored parts of the poem as being immoral. Certainly there is a bit of daring in setting the earthy alongside elevated language and Latin references, but we should sooner look on 'Moladh Mòraig' as supra-moral, the key to this reading being its natural setting. It links the poem with a continuous thread in Gaelic tradition where people, in particular women, e.g. Deirdre, Gráinne, Medb, the singer of 'Bothan Àirigh am Bràigh Raineach' and of numerous other frank songs of sexual desire, excuse themselves from the *mores* of society by identifying themselves with the natural world. Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair delights in being free from attending to the 'trifles of marriage', *munaran pòsaidh*, that have caused him pain and harassment, and describes his 'free love' with Mòrag. Away from human constraints, human activity is integrated into the natural; nature is a locus of uninhibited pleasure, a 'universal home', and the love-making can be viewed as participation in the colourful, multiform, restless regeneration of creation:

441. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 334.

Fa 'r cèill cha bhiodh conn,  
 Air sgàth dhoire 's thom,  
 Sinn air dàireadh trom  
 Le 'r cuid gòraileis,  
 Direach mar gum bìodh  
 Maoiseach 's boc a' strì,  
 Crom-ruaig a chèile dian  
 Timcheall òganan ...

*Not confined by prudent sense,  
 In shade of grove and knolls,  
 Heavily entwined  
 In our dizziness,  
 Just as though we were  
 Buck and doe in pair,  
 Eagerly in chase  
 Among saplings ...*<sup>442</sup>

#### DEPOPULATION

'Fios chun a' Bàird' (A message to the poet) by William Livingstone (1808–1870) describes his native Islay on a beautiful summer's day with cows at the shielings, clear streams, still kyles, deer on the heights and the warmth of the sun giving growth to all. Into this idyll breaks the line *Tha Ìle an-diugh gun daoine* (Islay today is without people) and, as if on closer scrutiny, the poet notes the ruined houses, the absence of human activity and an adder coiled on the floor where children had grown to manhood:

Tha an nathair bhreac na lùban  
 air na h-ùrlair far 'n do dh'fhàs  
 na fir mòra chunnaic mise –  
 thoir am fios seo chun a' bhàird.<sup>443</sup>

Màiri Mhòr's memories of pre-Clearance Skye are particularly warm and concrete, of making her way lit by a peat to weddings and waulkings, and noting barrels overflowing with salted meat. But then she reads the signs of Clearance: the nettles growing up round the crofts, the fields becoming overgrown with rushes and heather and the people cleaving to a melancholy faith which somehow justifies their suffering. Depopulation is bad for nature as well as Britain, whose armies had been filled with stalwart Highlanders.

442. Derick S. Thomson, *Gaelic Poetry in the Eighteenth Century* (Glasgow, 1993), 36–37.

443. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 260ff.

#### DONNCHADH BÀN AND THE ECOSYSTEM<sup>444</sup>

In Donnchadh Bàn's 'Moladh Beinn Dòbhrain' (In Praise of Ben Doran), there is no contradiction between the poet's love for the deer for their exquisite adaptation to their environment (their speed, elegance, sense of smell and sight) and his admiration for the skill of the gamekeeper Pàdraig and for his gun, which is itself a sign of man's adaptation to the environment. He describes the gun in the same detail with which he describes the deer, the plants that are their foodstuff, the fish and the birds that share the ecosystem of Beinn Dòbhrain.

It is traditional to portray Donnchadh Bàn as a naive peasant, non-literate and unschooled, whose complexities were metrical rather than conceptual. The case need hardly be argued anymore that there is no connection between technological and psychological sophistication. As Paul Radin wrote in 1927:

It is manifestly unfair to contend that primitive people are deficient either in the power of abstract thought or in the power of arranging these thoughts in a systematic order, or finally, of subjecting them, and their whole environment, to an objective critique.<sup>445</sup>

With his move from the Highlands to Edinburgh to work in the city guard, from a kin-based to a money-based society, Donnchadh Bàn witnessed a greater contrast than most of us. The songs he made on his return visit to the Highlands give ample evidence of the clash of these two cultures. Man and the land belong together. He speaks of Gleann Urchaidh as the place where he belongs and should be buried. In 'Òran nam Balgairan', he sees it as wrong that a man has to leave the place inhabited by his forebears. Throughout the poems, Donnchadh Bàn exhibits a passionate love of nature, a love that is not contradicted when part of nature is destroyed by another part so long as the balance is maintained. In 'Cumha Coire a' Cheathaich', the balance is destroyed by a careless forester: waterways become clogged, woodlands mismanaged, the deer retreat, the rent goes up and people move away. Everything fails to prosper:

'Se 'n coire chaidh an dèislaimh,	<i>The corrie has gone to ruin</i>
On tha e nis gun fhèidh ann,	<i>since it now lacks the deer,</i>
Gun duine aig a bheil spèis diubh,	<i>no-one having a care for them</i>
Nì feum air an cùl.	<i>or any skill at hunting them.</i> <sup>446</sup>

444. Some parts of this section appear in Meg Bateman, 'The Environmentalism of Donnchadh Bàn: Pragmatic or mythic?', in *Crossing the Highland Line* (Glasgow, 2009).

445. Paul Radin, *Primitive Man as Philosopher* (New York and London, 1927).

446. 'Cumha Coire a' Cheathaich', in Angus MacLeod, ed., *Òrain Dhonnchaidh Bhàn/The Songs of Duncan Ban MacIntyre* (Edinburgh, 1952), 176.

Donnchadh Bàn's editor, Angus Macleod, describes this reciprocal relationship of land and man as 'but a poet's conceit'<sup>447</sup>, but there is every reason to take it literally. The poet demonstrates an understanding of the importance of the wise stewardship of the land and of the ensuing destruction of natural and human habitats should the land be abused. The relationship had long been implicit in Celtic mythology, but in modern terms we would say that Donnchadh Bàn demonstrated an understanding of ecology.

#### ORIENTATION

People in the islands speak of going *suas gu deas* 'up south' and *sios gu tuath* 'down north', a reflection of the movement of the sun upwards to its zenith in the south and downwards to its nadir in the north. Following the movement of the sun, the human being is orientated in the Gaelic imagination facing the sunrise in the east, with the right hand to the south, the back to the west and the left to the north. As a result of this orientation, *deas* means both south and right. In modern usage, left and right can still be referred to as north and south. This is from a novel by Màiri Anna NicDhòmhnaill from 2008:

Mullach mòr na leisge ... i fhèin air an t-sòfa a' cur grèim no dhà ann am pìos fuaigheil ghrinn, bogsa seòclaid gu deas agus leabhar gaoil gu tuath.

*The height of laziness ... herself on the sofa making a stitch or two in a piece of embroidery, with a box of chocolates to the south/on her right and a love story to the north/on her left.*<sup>448</sup>

To the speaker facing east, something to the west is behind him. In the Second World War, Ruairidh Alasdair Ruairidh described seeing a ship being torpedoed in the song "Tha mi fo chùram an cùlaibh Èirinn"<sup>449</sup> (I am distressed behind/to the west of Ireland) (II.1.a.).

Propitious human action proceeds sunwise, *deiseil*. Dòmhnall Gorm's nurse, for example, envisages her charge's ship going sunwise or southerly with his entourage of two hundred men, while a hundred others will send the drinking cup to him sunwise: *ceud eile bhith cur a' chupa deiseil dhut.*<sup>450</sup> Unpropitious action by contrast proceeds anticlockwise. *Chuir thu tuathal mi*, means 'You've put me contrary to the sun's course/northwards/widdershins' and therefore 'You've put me wrong'. A decision to fight Conan, Son of the Red, without Fionn's

447. MacLeod, *Òrain Dhonnchaidh Bhàn*, 480.

448. See Màiri Anna NicDhòmhnaill, *Cleas Sgàthain* (Inverness, 2008), 8.

449. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 212.

450. Catherine Kerrigan, *An Anthology of Scottish Women Poets* (Edinburgh, 1991), 20.

consent was 'like a turn to the left' *mar char tuathal*.<sup>451</sup>

With the connotations of east and west with beginnings and ends, perhaps we can interpret the line *Thug thu 'n ear dhiom is thug thu 'n iar dhiom* (You've taken the east and you've taken the west from me), from the anguished love song 'O, 's tu, 's gura tu th' air m' aire',<sup>452</sup> as a cry of total disorientation, disintegration and abandonment to grief. Orientation suggests that the scene on the Gundestrup Cauldron depicting warriors approaching a vat in which they are dipped and from which they ride off in an easterly direction represents rebirth. Guy Deutscher says that the use of cardinal points rather than personal prepositions in some Aboriginal languages makes even very young children aware of their orientation.<sup>453</sup> Likewise, a system of synonymous terms for left and north and for right and south in Gaelic places the speaker firmly in the landscape.



A scene from the Gundestrup Cauldron, possibly depicting the revival of dead warriors. Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen

#### CONCLUSION

In this section we see how much a part of nature human activity was and how place and people come together in the defining concept of *dùthchas*. Donnchadh Bàn and other Clearance poets see depopulation as leading to the degradation of both the land and human culture: the ancient model of stewardship of the

451. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition*, 122 and 128. For a discussion of the variant spellings of the terms *deiseil* and *tuathal*, see Richard A. V. Cox, *Geàrr-Ghràmar na Gàidhlig* (Ceann Drochaid, 2017), 415, fn 27.

452. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 345.

453. Guy Deutscher, *Through the Language Glass* (London, 2011), 163.



land or the modern model of ecology has been disrupted. Pre-Clearance song poetry pictures a peopled landscape of crops on the arable land and girls tending cattle at the shieling. The wilderness is peopled too with hunters of deer and the asocial. We consider the example of Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's fornication with Mòrag in the woods. On a very different note, we look at how people are able to go 'down north' and 'up south' in Gaelic, orientated by the apparent movement of the sun. MB

### III.3.c. HERALDRY, EMBLEMS AND TOTEMS

[Introduction](#); [Heraldry](#); [Beyond Symbolism](#); [War Cries](#); [Pre-historic Totems?](#); [Totemic Place-names](#); [Inauguration Stones](#); [Totemic Dreamings](#); [Conclusion](#)

#### INTRODUCTION

In the London Scottish Regiment Museum there are 116 carved wooden clan chieftains' shields, commissioned in the 1950s, another set of which was sent to Canada. Originally made for the Royal Caledonian School near Watford, some might ask what kind of fantasy they were supposed to engender in the pupils' minds? However, the School was founded in 1808 for Scottish orphans wandering the streets of London, whose fathers had been killed in the Napoleonic wars. In such circumstances, the totemic values of clan crests, battle cries and the like are something more than romantic: they are a point of contact and identification, coupled with pride and tradition, that might well mean a good deal to an orphan.<sup>454</sup>

The Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo reaches a television audience of over one hundred million, and its profits are largely given to military charities. The event is a visual display which includes contributions from across the world, but its fundamental raison d'être comes from the image of the kilted Highlander with the bagpipes and all the associated heraldry, emblems and totems which, as is proposed below, are anything but superficial.

'Totem' came into English in the 18th century from Native American Ojibwa *nintotem* 'mark of my family'. The term fits in with the Highland clan system, for the word 'clan' is borrowed into English from Gaelic *clann* meaning 'children' and 'tribe', but

Allusions to totemism in Celtic religion (e.g. animal and plant names used to form personal names and tribal names) are few and far between and offer far from convincing evidence.<sup>455</sup>

454. A. Polson, 'The Romance of Clan Crests and Mottoes', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* XXXII (1924–1925), 176–95.

455. B. Maier, *Dictionary of Celtic Religion and Culture* (Woodbridge, 1997 and 2000), 270.

The latter part of this section will attempt at least to modify this statement from Maier.

#### HERALDRY

Many of the clan emblems and totems have found their way into heraldry, but it is important to understand that these heraldic signs belong to the whole *clann* as well as to the Chieftain, for the clan is metaphorically composed of his children – and recent genetic evidence suggests that this can be quite literally so, with one or two alpha males leaving a disproportionately wide-spread genetic trace.<sup>456</sup>

With respect to heraldry, a few of the Scottish clans retain their right to appoint a Pursuivant of Arms. In the case of the Finlaggan Pursuivant, whose oath of fealty is to the MacDonalds, a newly-designed tabard, splendid in its ostentation, was commissioned for the revival of the inauguration ceremony. The ceremony was led by the Ross Herald of Arms, representing the Lyon Court, the oldest continuously functioning heraldic court in the world and which acknowledges its possible origins in the

much older Celtic office of royal *Seanchaidh* or of King's poet with responsibility for keeping royal genealogy and attending the inauguration (later coronation) of the King.<sup>457</sup>

At [Alexander III's inauguration](#) in 1249, his genealogy was recited to fifty-six generations, starting with Pharaoh's daughter Scota.<sup>458</sup> To this day, the Royal Standard of Scotland shows the Lion Rampant, indicating the Scottish monarchy's descent through Kenneth MacAlpin from Míl, whose sons were the first Gaels to come to Ireland. Míl was said to have killed three lions in Africa and to have borne them on his shield. When his two sons and grandson divided the lands of Ireland between them, they each retained one of these lions. Malcolm III (1058–1093) was probably the first Scottish king to use the rampant lion in his insignia, in recognition of his descent from Fearghas mac Erc and the sons of Míl.<sup>459</sup>

Such symbols and ceremonies are still important aspects of clan and state occasions, though their touristic value, added to the considerable commercial value of emblems and totems in the form of cap badges, brooches, mugs, clan

456. B. Sykes, *Blood of the Isles* (London, 2006), 213–17 and 284–85.

457. <[www.lyon-court.org](http://www.lyon-court.org)>.

458. J. Bannerman, 'The King's Poet and the Inauguration of Alexander III', *Scottish Historical Review* LXVIII (1989).

459. J. O'Hart, *Irish Pedigrees: Or the origin and stem of the Irish nation* (Genealogical Publishing Com., 1989), 55.

shields and so on, could be described as mere exploitation. But such exploitation depends upon long-standing, even ancient, realities, and those realities deserve no less respect than that accorded to the equivalents of other tribal peoples such as the First Americans.

Decidedly practical in terms of its application to action was the use of the badge of the Black Watch regiment for the creation of a whisky company designed to employ ex-servicemen. The whisky was Red Hackle. Though the whisky company no longer exists, the red hackle or cockade is worn on the left side of the headdress of the Black Watch – the name itself partly derived from the dark sett of the eponymous tartan. Such symbolism is not unique to Highland regiments, but it does retain its peculiar significance to the extent that, following the recent amalgamation of the Scottish regiments, their badges were retained for their appropriate battalions and red hackles were still proudly on show in Afghanistan.

In the past, clan crests and battle cries have been exploited in many situations, not least in warfare. In ‘Òran nam Fineachan Gàidhealach’ (The Song of the Clans) composed in 1745, Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair invokes the badge and quarterings of the MacDonalds of Clanranald:

’Nam brataichibh làn-éidicht’  
 Le dealas geur gun chealg,  
 Thig Domhnullaich ’nan déidh sin,  
 Cho dileas duit ri d’léine,  
 Mar choin air fasdadh éille  
 Air chath chrith geur gu sealg;  
 ’S mairg nìmhde do ’n nochd iad fraoch,  
 Long, leómhann, craobh, ’s làmh dhearg.

*Then with their flowing banners,  
 With unaffected zeal,  
 Clan Donald quickly follows,  
 As faithful as thy raiment,  
 Like hounds their leashes straining,  
 A-tremble for the hunt;  
 Pity the foes they show the ling,  
 Ship, lion, tree, red hand.*<sup>460</sup>

The reference to hounds may well be related to the battle cry of the Camerons of Lochiel, long associated with the MacDonalds of Clanranald – an association

460. J. L. Campbell, ed., *Highland Songs of the Forty-Five* (Edinburgh, 1984), 76–77, ll. 57–64.

recalled by Byron (see below). Such significances were still very much alive in the 20th century, with the lion, ship and red hand of the MacDonalds referred to in John MacCallum’s song ‘Cath Ghairidheach’, composed in 1905.<sup>461</sup>

#### BEYOND SYMBOLISM

These clan emblems and totems, however, went further than heraldic symbolism and were not confined to poetry and incitement. The Fraser Yew at Knockie Estate, Stratherrick, was the traditional gathering point of the Clan Fraser. The tree could be 700 years old and is within a Site of Special Scientific Interest. The yew is the clan’s plant badge and sprigs of it would be worn in the bonnet before joining battle. The MacKinnon badge, *Giuthas* (the Scots pine), was used on one occasion in a profoundly subtle and symbolic manner. The MacLeans of Mull had seized some MacKinnon land when the MacKinnon himself was on Skye. Hearing that the MacLeans were celebrating at Ledaig, MacKinnon waited until they were all drunk and had his men each cut and trim a Scots pine, placing them round the outside of the hall. He placed his own one with a naked sword in front of the door. When the MacLeans discovered next morning from this potent symbolism that they had been surrounded by a host of MacKinnons and could all have been slaughtered, they promptly withdrew from the MacKinnon lands they had taken.<sup>462</sup>

Although the Scots pine is their emblem, the oak features on the MacGregor coat of arms, and a remarkable early 19th-century ashlar-faced monument at Lanrick near Doune (overpage) takes the form of a tree with lopped off branches said to represent the sufferings of the clan.

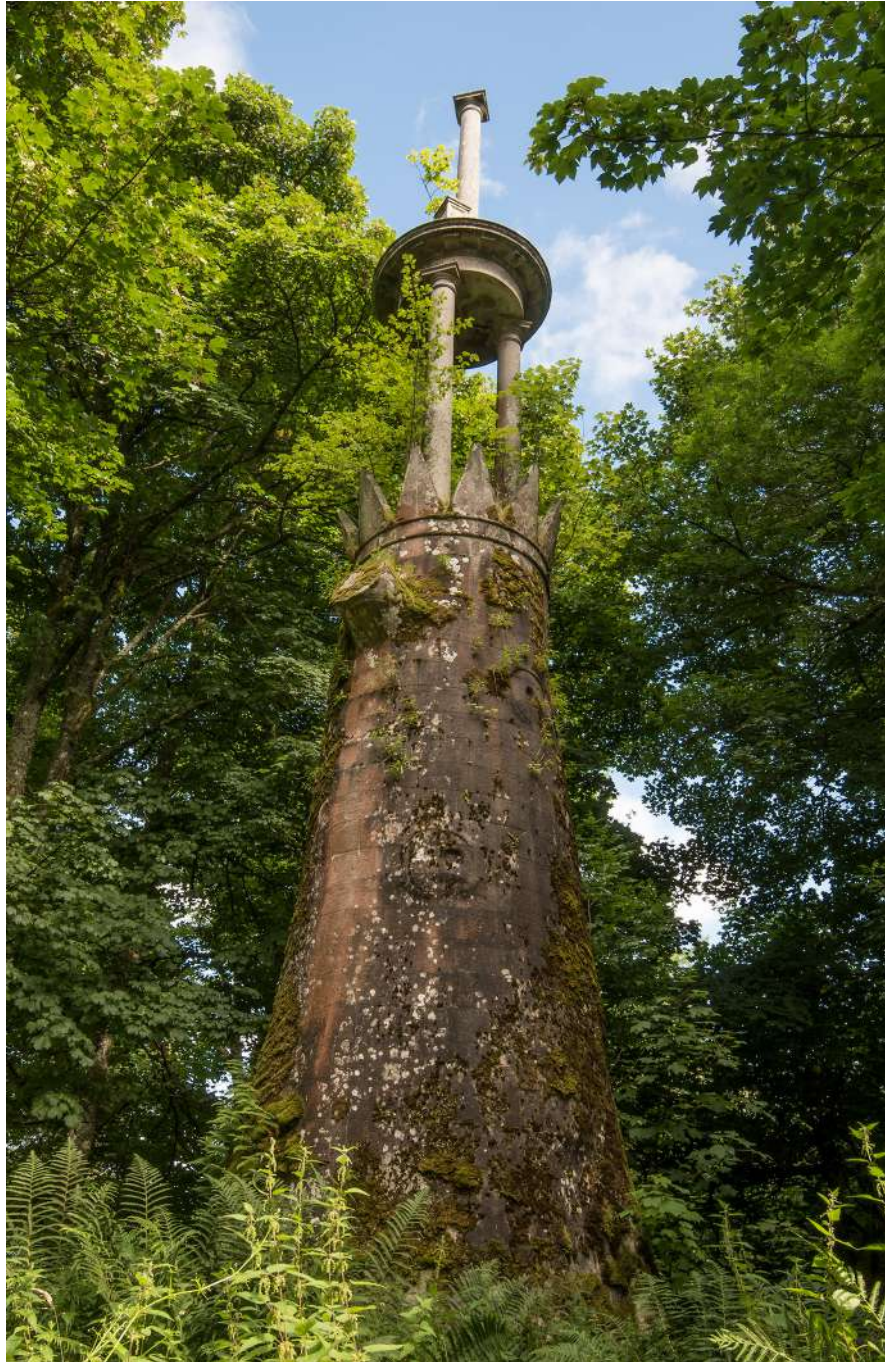
The monument (architect and precise date unknown) is 18 metres high, its last section being a pillar surmounted by an acorn, now fallen. The whole emerges from a crown-like parapet, perhaps representing the serrated leaves of the oak. It was thought to have been erected to celebrate the repeal in 1774 of the laws proscribing the Clan Gregor.

The durability and roughness of heather likewise has its symbolic significances. Heath and holly are clan badges of the MacKenzies, as shown in Kenneth MacLeay’s fine coloured lithograph of two Mackenzies on their home ground. Heather is also the badge of the MacDonalds and *Fraoch Eilean!* (Heather Island!) is their war cry. It will be recalled (see I.3.b.) that the word *fraoch* can also mean anger or fury, or the disturbance of a squall on a loch.

461. The song is on pp. 11–12 of the John MacCallum Manuscript Songbook, courtesy of Brigadier John MacFarlane.

462. G. Way of Plean and R. Squire, *Scottish Clan & Family Encyclopedia* (Glasgow, 1994), 228–29.





Lanrick MacGregor monument. Photo © Seán Purser



Kenneth MacLeay, *Clan of the MacKenzies* (1868). Royal Collection Trust

#### WAR CRIES

The Gaelic for a war cry, *sluagh-ghairm*, is the origin of the modern English word *slogan* – a fact which Sir Compton MacKenzie deplored, for it is now devalued by commercialism.<sup>463</sup> Slogans were also in use in Gaelic Ireland, as noticed by Spenser in the late 16th century.<sup>464</sup> They can be shouted, depicted or written and they can carry with them a complex imagery. The plant badge of the MacLeans is crowberry.

463. C. Mackenzie, 'Road From The Farm', *Scots Digest* Vol. 1, No. 2., 26, quoted from *The Evening News*.

464. Edmund Spenser, in W. Renwick, ed., *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (Oxford 1970), 54.



Clann Ghille Eóin na mbratach badhbha  
borb ri a mhiodhbhaidh ...<sup>465</sup>

*Clann Ghill'Eathain of the crow-marked banners,  
Savage to their foemen ...*

Crowberry (*Empetrum nigrum*) or *Lus na feannaige* gets its English name from its glossy black colour, similar to that of a crow's feathers, so there is a clear emblematic and totemic connection with plant and bird and the clan banners and the clan's ability to fight. The goddess of war, the Morrigan, takes the form of a crow. Of course the common association of crows with death is provoked by the birds' eating human carrion after battles, from as early as the Gododdin (600AD), but here it is associated with an image carried before a clan and representing the clan's character in battle.

A similar image of uncompromising attitude to death – indeed of being nourished by death – is found in the *sluagh-ghairm* or battle cry of the Camerons of Lochiel – *Chlanna nan con!* – completed with the phrase *thigibh a so 's gheibh sibh feòil*, which chillingly translates as 'Clan (or children) of the dogs, come here and you'll get flesh!' The *piobaireachd* 'The End of the Little Bridge' fits the battle cry and the clan motto *Aonaibh ri chèile* (Unite) is suggestive of a pack mentality. The Camerons' badge is the oak tree, but also the crowberry.

In the case of the MacKenzies, such is the degree of identification with the totemic creature that it is not only the battle cry and heraldic emblem but the actual patronymic of the clan: *caberféidh*, which means the stag's antlers. Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair turns this defiantly masculine and aggressive symbol against them in 'Dìomoladh Chabair Féidh'. In the poem, Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair emphasises the natural timidity of deer and refers to the superior totemic symbolism of the standard of the MacDonalds of Clanranald:

Làmh dhearg is long is leóghann  
Mar chòta don aitim ud  
'S bu phrìseil ri uchd gleòis iad  
Seach cròc nam meur glaganach.

*The red hand, ship and lion are like a coat for that clan and far better in a battle than rattling antlers.*<sup>466</sup>

George Henderson lists (amongst others) the MacEcherns, MacKichans, MacMahons and MacCullochs as deriving their names from horse, wolf,

465. Wilson McLeod and Meg Bateman, eds, *Duanaire na Sracaire* (Edinburgh, 2007), 162–63.

466. See R. MacilleDhuibh, 'The Quern-Dust Calendar', *West Highland Free Press* (19 January 2007).

bear and boar, respectively.<sup>467</sup> Alternatively, MacKichan might come from MacFhitheachain 'son of the raven'. The wild boar is the crest of the Campbells, Inneses and also the MacKinnons. In the USA, the MacDougalls, who had been frequently at odds with and defeated by the Campbells, annually slaughter and eat a pig named 'Porky Campbell' at the Grandfather Mountain Highland Games; at the Williamsburg Highland Games, the clans on parade call out their war cry, whether the clan is represented by many or by a single octogenarian and a dog.

#### PRE-HISTORIC TOTEMS?

This may all seem rather silly but, when it comes to the MacKinnons, matters go very much deeper. The legend is that Lachlan Mòr MacKinnon (d. 1700) was sheltering in a cave near Elgol when the boar whose lair it was charged him. Lachlan Mòr had just time to thrust the bone he was gnawing into its open jaws, grab his sword and kill the boar.

Recent archaeological discoveries at the heart of MacKinnon territory in Strath in the Isle of Skye suggest the possibility that this totemism had at one time a profound significance in the locality. The site at *Uamh an Àrd-Achaidh* (High Pasture Cave) has revealed ritual deposits within the channel dug by a subterranean stream. Also excavated were the body of a pregnant woman and a separate human foetus whose bones were mixed up with a pig's foetus and placed carefully on a ledge below.

These bones formed part of the final closure of a staircase constructed around 300 BC, which led down to this liminal space. Analysis shows that the woman was probably local and the site has produced an enormously high percentage of young (possibly domesticated) pig bones compared with others in the United Kingdom.<sup>468</sup>



Mixed foetal bones of human and pig at *Uamh an Àrd-Achaidh*

467. G. Henderson, *Survivals in Belief among the Celts* (Glasgow, 1911), 129.

468. L. Sinfield, 'The Human Remains at High Pasture Cave', a paper given at High Pasture Cave & Environs Project Seminar (16 June 2007). See also <[http://www.high-pasture-cave.org/index.php/the\\_work/article/specialist\\_report\\_2005\\_report\\_on\\_the\\_human\\_remains](http://www.high-pasture-cave.org/index.php/the_work/article/specialist_report_2005_report_on_the_human_remains)>, by Steven Birch and Laura Sinfield, and other related articles on the same website.



MacKinnon Crest

Also discovered was a wild boar skull with mature tusks.

The [underground passage](#) has beautiful limestone formations in highly suggestive sexual forms. Such liminal spaces – particularly when water is involved – are suggestive of the Otherworld and specifically of fertility. The mixture of the child's and pig's foetal bones is, in such a situation, of profound totemic significance, and of course pigs are notoriously fertile, with sows bearing large litters.

Close to the site of *Uamh an Àrd-Achaidh* is a boulder which looks like the head of a wild boar and may have been altered by the hand of man to improve the likeness.<sup>469</sup> A carving of what is probably a wild boar was found in Kilchrist graveyard, two miles distant from the cave. It is clear from the concave lower surface that the stone was part of an arch, which makes it likely to have been late medieval.<sup>470</sup> Finally, a photograph exists of a stone said to be erected to Lachlan Mòr and depicting some aspect of the tale, but the stone itself is lost.<sup>471</sup> Is it mere coincidence then that the totemic animal of the MacKinnons is a wild boar?

Totemic images of wild boar are found elsewhere in Scotland. They include the Pictish Knocknagael boar and the Pictish-style wild boar carved on the top of *Dùn Ad* (Dun Add, the ancient capital of Dalriada), probably dating from



Boar's skull with mature tusks from *Uamh an Àrd-Achaidh*

469. The resemblance was drawn to my attention by Howard Eastcott.

470. The stone is in the care of Dualchas at the Highland Regional Council offices in Portree. The carving is of a quadruped with formidable thighs and short legs, but the head has been broken off. The tail is held straight out – only done by cattle when defecating or running or giving birth – and the sex of the animal is not indicated. However, a bull would normally have its sex displayed and a sow would probably have her teats indicated. The tail is somewhat thick for a pig, but as it follows the top edge of the stone, it might have proved tricky to carve it any thinner.

471. The Rev. D. Lamond, *Strath: In Isle of Skye* (Glasgow, 1913, and Portree, 1984): picture section following the Preface. It is possible that the legend goes back much earlier than the time of Lachlan Mòr, who was unlikely to have encountered any wild boar in 17th-century Skye.

the 8th century. It is beside a carved footprint presumed to have been used for inauguration ceremonies.<sup>472</sup>

Perhaps the best known image of a wild boar is that of the [carnyx](#), which not only reproduces the image of the head, but can also reproduce the sound of a wild boar's grunting or screaming (see [IV.2.c.](#)). In the following quotations from the 18th century, the image of the wild boar is associated with military prowess:

Bha 'n suaicheantas àraid  
'S na h-àrmainn d' a réir:  
Bréid sròil ri crann àrd  
Is torc làidir nach géill.

*Their badge was distinctive,  
and the heroes matched it:  
silk banner on a tall staff,  
and a strong, unyielding boar.*<sup>473</sup>

In another poem, also in praise of the Campbells of Breadalbane, Duncan Ban MacIntyre says:

'S e sin a' gharbhhratach  
A dh' fhalbh o 'n bhaile leinn. <sup>474</sup>

*'Tis a rugged banner  
that went from home with us.*

In these two quotations, we find a kind of reciprocal significance; in the first, the heroes match the strong unyielding boar; in the second, the banner, which would have been emblazoned with the boar, is itself invested with characteristics of the humans for whom the boar is a totem.

#### TOTEMIC PLACE-NAMES

Places as well as peoples had such associations. *Creag an Tuirc* (The Boar's Crag) is the motto of Clan Maclaren, the rock being just above Balquhider, that served as their gathering place. In some cases, these associations are legendary rather than totemic: thus *Tòrr an tuirc* above Lochnell, east of Oban, relates to the legendary Fenian hero Diarmid, who killed a wild boar but was subsequently poisoned by its bristles. The shape of the hill may have suggested

472. I. Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands* (Edinburgh, 2001), 12.

473. A. MacLeod, ed., *Orain Dhonnchaidh Bhàin/The Songs of Duncan Ban MacIntyre* (Edinburgh, 1952), 376 and 377, ll. 5406–10.

474. MacLeod, *Orain Dhonnchaidh Bhàin*, 368, ll. 5308–09.

the association, but there is also a standing stone nearby, known as *Clach Diarmaid*, where Diarmid is supposedly buried. Again, Duncan Ban MacIntyre refers to this legend and associates the 'stern and prickly thistle' with the wild boar that Diarmid slew.<sup>475</sup> John MacInnes has drawn attention to the connections between Diarmid and King Arthur as slayers of magic venomous boars and their ramifications in the Otherworld.<sup>476</sup>

These tribal families also had strong territorial roots. The chieftains of the Campbells of Lochnell – *Loch nan Eala* (The Loch of the Swans) – are known as 'Lochnell'. A bagpipe lament, 'Cumha Loch an Eala' (*sic*), remembers one of them in this manner, as does the song 'Òran don Oighre Loch nan Eala', for the heir General Campbell.<sup>477</sup> A swan is a supporter or crest in the arms of the Lochnell Campbells, for the loch itself is frequented by migratory swans. But there are older resonances here, for at its south-western shore there is a bronze-age, serpent-shaped burial mound from which the three peaks of Ben Cruachan can be seen. Both swan and serpent are associated with Brigid, combining purity, fidelity and the coming of spring. But the view to Cruachan is a view to the winter aspect of Brigid and the *Cailleach Bheur* of Cruachan, the supernatural



Constance Cumming, *In The Hebrides*, Loch nan Eala Serpent Mound (1883)

475. MacLeod, *Orain Dhonnchaidh Bhàin*, 266–69, ll. 3932–39.

476. J. MacInnes, 'Gaelic Poetry and Historical Tradition', in *The Middle Ages in the Highlands* (Inverness: The Inverness Field Club, 1981), 160; also in M. Newton, ed., *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes* (Edinburgh, 2006), 31–32.

477. The song is on p. 71 of the John MacCallum Manuscript Songbook, courtesy of Brigadier John MacFarlane.

hag whose soapsuds are the first snowflakes of winter.<sup>478</sup> *Cruachan!* is the war cry of the Campbells and other clans.

In the case of MacKay of Corrienessan, the lament for his death, composed by Iain Dall MacAoidh in 1696, makes virtually no distinction between the man and the corrie – which is itself a personality with a voice.<sup>479</sup> That voice also finds expression in the *piobaireachd* 'Cumha Choire an Easain' also known as 'Corrienessan's Salute'. The MacKay badge is *seasgan* (*Arundo phragmites*) or *cuilc*, the reed grass used for making bagpipe reeds. The family of MacKay pipers was a famous one and the equally famous MacKay white banner (dating from as early as 1433 and now in the National Museums of Scotland) gives its name to a well-known *piobaireachd* 'Bratach Bhàn Chloinn Aoidh', which is also the clan's war cry. So a specific corrie, a leading member of the clan, the clan's badge, two pieces of music and the clan's piping reputation are all brought together with shared symbolic and actual resonances. Nor was this identification with the landscape confined to the Gaels. In the anonymous and scurrilous *The Character of a Jacobite*, published in 1690, Jacobites are described as 'the Mountains of Arbitrary Power and Magnificence' (the italics are in the original) and the satirical identification is pursued a few pages on:

In short, such *Noble-men* as these are like *Barren Mountains*, that bear neither Plants nor Grass for Publick Use; they touch the Skie, but are unprofitable to the Earth ...<sup>480</sup>

Jacobitical or no, to the Gaels these links to geographical realities and the landscape's historical and legendary past were very real. They were and still are paralleled by a number of clan cries which refer to specific places, often specific rocks. As well as being the motto, *Creag an Tuirc* is the clan cry of the MacLarens. The MacNeill war cry is *Biulacreag!*, a seven-hundred foot vertical sea cliff on the Island of Mingulay; and the MacPhersons' is *Creag Dhubh Chloinn Chatain!* (Black Rock of the Cat Clan!), uniting the totemic animal with the totemic place. Caithness and Sutherland formed the original province of *Cataibh* and the Duke of Sutherland's Gaelic title is *Morair Chat* (Lord of the Cats), while Shetland used to be known in Gaelic as *Innse Chat*.<sup>481</sup>

Charles Rennie Mackintosh used the symbol of the wild cat, his clan being a sept of Clan Chattan, and also the whortleberry, *braoileag*, the plant emblem

478. See Constance Cummings, *In The Hebrides* (Edinburgh, 1883), for an illustration of the site.

479. See Colm Ó Baoill, ed., *Gàir nan Clàrsach* (Edinburgh, 1994), 206–13.

480. Anon., *The Character of a Jacobite* (London, 1690), 1 and 6.

481. R. MacIlleathain, 'Dualchas coitcheann – Dùthaich nan Cat', *The Nature of Scotland* (Autumn 2010), 48.



of the clan. Likewise, Herbert McNair used the totemic mermaid of his clan in decorating his own flat and Margaret Macdonald made frequent use of her own clan emblem, heather, as well as the MacDonald lion.<sup>482</sup>

*Stad Creag Eileachaidh!* (Stand fast Craigellachie ‘the rock of the weir/stony place’) is the *sluagh-ghairm* of the Grants from which ‘Grants Standfast’ whisky gets its name. *Càrn na Cuimhne!* (The Memorial Cairn) is the *sluagh-ghairm* for the people of Braemar, and *Creagan-an-fhithich!* (The Raven’s Rock) that of the MacDonnells of Glengarry, the clan crest being a raven Proper perching on a rock Azure.

It has been suggested that many of the Pictish stones had a heraldic function.<sup>483</sup> Although the further suggestions that they acted as tribal boundary markers or markers of allegiances are largely discounted,<sup>484</sup> they cannot be rejected outright. For instance, the Eagle Stone at Strathpeffer, whether it has been moved any distance or no, is situated by the territory of the Munros, vassals of the MacDonalds, for both of which clans the eagle is the totemic creature. While the stone almost certainly pre-dates the arrival of the Munros, the possibility that they adopted the symbol of their predecessors on the territory should not be discounted.

The same could be said of the boar as the symbol of the MacKinnons (see above). In any event, the use of symbols on boundary marking stones is unequivocally attested in much more recent times. Just such a stone separated Munro territory from that of the Davidsons of Tulloch, with an eagle inscribed on the Munro side and a ‘T’ for Tulloch on the Davidson side.<sup>485</sup>

Likewise, the march dyke which divides the lands of Pityoulish from those of Rothiemurchus contains a stone known as ‘The Stone with the Two-Handed Sword’. This stone is still *in situ* near



The Eagle Stone, Strathpeffer.  
Photo © John Purser

482. T. Neat, *Part Seen, Part Imagined* (Edinburgh, 1994), 50.

483. W. A. Cummins, *The Age of the Picts* (Stroud, 1995), 125–37.

484. L. and J. Laing, *The Picts and the Scots* (Stroud, 1996), 125.

485. Information from Hector Munro of Foulis Castle. The information is found in Munro title deeds, but the stone has yet to be found.

the shore of Loch Pityoulish, with a two-handed sword inscribed upon it, though with what particular relevance is not known.<sup>486</sup>

#### INAUGURATION STONES

In some places, significant stones may have been used for inauguration ceremonies. Apart from *Dùn Ad* (see above), the *Lia Fáil* is the most obvious example. Also known as the ‘Stone of Destiny’, ‘Stone of Scone’ and ‘Coronation Stone’, a stone bearing that name is currently housed in Edinburgh Castle and is itself a focus of pilgrimage, as it was hitherto when it resided in Westminster Abbey, where English and British monarchs have been crowned sitting upon a 13th-century chair into which the stone (taken from Scone by Edward I) was incorporated. This is certainly not the true *Lia Fáil*, for it is a piece of Arbroath sandstone and has no footprints carved upon it. For a true inauguration, the person about to be inaugurated should have stood barefoot upon the stone which was supposed to utter a cry of recognition or acceptance.<sup>487</sup>

One version of the legend of the *Lia Fáil* is that it was Jacob’s pillow, brought to Ireland out of Egypt by Scota and Gaythelos, her Greek husband, and thence to Scotland some time after the Gaelic-speaking Scots settled in Dalriada in Argyll and the Inner Hebrides in the 5th century AD. If such a stone ever existed, it was surely known to St Columba who was reported by Adomnán to have been personally responsible for the election and ordination of Aidan, one of the Scottic kings of Dalriada.<sup>488</sup> The Egyptian origin legend was and remains part of the origin myth of the Scots. It includes a mid-14th-century mention of the stone by Scottish historian John of Fordun.<sup>489</sup> A 14th-century Irish Gaelic manuscript confirms that the *Lia Fáil* was removed from Tara, though to where is not stated, nor is there any indication in the relevant passage as to when the removal took place.

A Falias tucad an Lia Fail bui a Temraig. Nogesed fo cech rig nogebád Erinn.

*Out of Falias was brought the stone of Fáil, which was in Tara. It used to roar under every king that would take (the realm) of Ireland.*<sup>490</sup>

Walter Bower, writing in the 1440s, quotes extensively from a ‘legenda Sancti

486. Information from Hector Munro of Foulis Castle. The stone is referred to on an 18th-century plan of the Estates of the Dukes of Richmond and Gordon.

487. T. O’Broin, ‘Lia Fáil’, in P. De Brun and M. O’Murchu, eds, *Celtica XXI* (1990), 395.

488. W. Reeves, ed., *Life of Saint Columba, Founder of Hy. Written by Adamnan* (Edinburgh, 1874), 196–97.

489. W. F. Skene, *John of Fordun’s Chronicle of the Scottish Nation* (Edinburgh, 1872), Chapp. VIII–XXXI, esp. Chap. XXVII, 23–24.

490. Whitley Stokes, ed., ‘Cath Maige Turedh’, *Revue Celtique XII* (Paris, 1891), 56–57.

Congalli' which states that Fergus son of Feradach brought the stone to Scotland – *regalem in Scocia postea ferens cathedram marmoreo lapide decisam* – 'who later brought to Scotland the royal throne carved out of marble, on which the Scots kings crowned their first king in Scotland.'<sup>491</sup> This would have been in the 5th century, but the original from which he quotes is not known. Writing in the 18th century, John Toland, who was thoroughly versed in Old Gaelic and Classical learning, accepted this part of its legend, while mocking the credulity of those supporting the powers attaching to the stone itself.<sup>492</sup>

Whatever may be the truth about this stone, the fact is that its symbolism as a sacred object for the ceremony of inauguration remains central to our political self-perception, both in Scotland and England. Its removal from Westminster in 1951 was considered a treasonable offence. The possibility that it was also an idiophone may offer tantalising connections with that class of stones known to music archaeologists as 'rock gongs' (see IV.2.c.).

Less contentious than the *Lia Fáil* was the Finlaggan Stone, on Islay, upon which MacDomhnaill, Lord of the Isles, was inaugurated, and on which 'there was a deep Impression made to receive the Feet of *Mack-Donald*'.<sup>493</sup> This stone was apparently still in place in 1772,<sup>494</sup> but recent attempts to find its location have led to failure.<sup>495</sup> A further stone with a foot mark carved into it is *Creag Iannaiddh* in Glen Lyon, but there is no evidence that it was used for inaugurations.<sup>496</sup> However, in 1399 the Scottish king Mac Suibhne Fánad was inaugurated by the Ó Domhnaill at Carraig an Dúin at Kilmacrennan in County Donegal. The whereabouts of the inauguration stone itself is no longer known but the fact of the inauguration indicates the powerful ties between the Scottish and Irish Gaels, which were to continue well into the 16th century.<sup>497</sup>

491. J. and F. MacQueen, eds, *Scotichronicon by Walter Bower* Vol. I (Aberdeen, 1993), 196–97.

492. John Toland, *A Critical History of the Celtic Religion & Learning: Containing an account of the Druids ...* (Printed and sold by John Findlay in Arbroath, 1813), 136–39.

493. Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (London, 1716, and Edinburgh, 1981), 241. See also H. MacDonald, *History of the MacDonalds* (1680; pub. in *Highland Papers* Vol. I (1914), 23–24.

494. T. Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland, and Voyage to the Hebrides; MDCCLXXII* (Chester, 1774), 226.

495. E. Fitzpatrick, *Royal Inauguration in Gaelic Ireland c. 1100–1600* (Woodbridge, 2004), 120–21.

496. Fitzpatrick, *Royal Inauguration in Gaelic Ireland*, 121–22. See also the review of this book by Mark Zumbuhl at <<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/498>> and the author's response at the same location.

497. W. McLeod, *Divided Gaels* (Oxford, 2004), 46–47 and footnotes. Also Fitzpatrick, *Royal Inauguration in Gaelic Ireland*, 188–93.

While successive kings filled the same footprint, the implication of saints' footprints is that their spiritual power made a new mark on the land. Several footprints are said to have been left by Colum Cille. One pair is at Keil Point, *Rubha na Cille*, on Arran; another, near Southend in Kintrye, marks the spot where he first preached in Scotland. However, in the latter case, the legend of the saint may well be filling an existing footprint associated with Dunaverty as an earlier site of inauguration.<sup>498</sup>

#### TOTEMIC DREAMINGS

In contrast to the legendary origin myth, which was not without its political uses in the 13th to 15th centuries (see VI.1.a.), are the traditional dreamings associated with some clans. The song lines of the Australian aborigines, with their Kangaroo and Cockatoo and Lizard dreamings, are an accepted, indeed respected, aspect of their culture. The Highland clans also had their tribal dreams – the traditional cat dream of the cat clan (the MacPhersons and MacIntoshs of Clan Chattan), the pig dream of the Arcaibh or pig people of the Orkneys and the horse dream for the MacLeods. The victor over the MacLeods at the Battle of Carinish (1601) is described as having routed 'the Seed of the Mare'.<sup>499</sup> A curious rhyme refers to them as follows:

Siol nan Leòdach  
Siol a' chapuill  
Bhacaich spògaich

*Progeny of Leod, the progeny of the horse, lame and awkward ...*<sup>500</sup>

An instance of such dreams persisting into modern times comes from Jean MacLeod of Mull who on more than one occasion dreamt of a white horse shortly before the death of a family member.<sup>501</sup> As for the MacCodrums of North Uist, they were called *Sliochd an ròin* (the seal tribe) and had the power to change themselves into seals. Stories and songs about selchies (seal people) are to be had from the whole North Atlantic rim, but they have survived with particular

498. Tim Clarkson, *Columba* (Edinburgh, 2012).

499. J. MacInnes, 'Gaelic Poetry and Historical Tradition', in *The Middle Ages in the Highlands* (Inverness: The Inverness Field Club, 1981), 143; also in M. Newton, ed., *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes* (Edinburgh, 2006), 4–5. Also W. M. MacKenzie, *The Book of Arran* Vol. 2 (Glasgow: The Arran Society of Glasgow, 1914), 289–90.

500. Quoted in G. Henderson, *Survivals in Belief among the Celts* (Glasgow, 1911), 117.

501. Information from Valerie Miller, who spent part of her childhood with Jean MacLeod.

force in Scotland.<sup>502</sup> Though their lands were close by a major seal colony, the MacCodrums never hunted seals.<sup>503</sup> In modern times, a Lochalsh woman with Matheson blood in her was offered bear to eat by the Sami people, as a special honour. When the spirit of the bear was thanked, the woman's hesitation was assumed by her colleagues to have Presbyterian roots. In fact she was hesitant to eat her totemic animal.<sup>504</sup> The MacEachrans or MacKechnies get their name from *Eichthighearna* 'Horse Lord' and they come from that area of the Mull of Kintyre which Ptolemy denoted as 'Epidion Akron' or 'Horse Point'. As Ragnall MacilleDhuibh (Ronald Black) wrote, "These things are very deep."<sup>505</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

They are not only deep, they have been until recently a fundamental part of the motivation of thousands of men who have fought through the establishment and dismemberment of the British Empire. We have seen how the *sluagh-ghairm* of the Camerons of Lochiel forms the basis of their gathering *pìobaireachd* 'The End of The Little Bridge'. This is no casual association, nor is it a matter confined to thought. It is the fundamental motivation for action, as Byron knowledgeably points out in a passage from 'Childe Harold' (Canto III, XXVI), describing the eve of the Battle of Waterloo:

And wild and high the 'Cameron's gathering' rose!  
The war-note of Lochiel, which Albyn's hills  
Have heard, and heard, too, have her Saxon foes: -  
How in the noon of night that pibroch thrills,  
Savage and shrill! But with the breath which fills  
Their mountain-pipe, so fill the mountaineers  
With the fierce native daring which instils  
The stirring memory of a thousand years,  
And Evan's, Donald's fame rings in each clansman's ears!

502. D. Thomson, *The People of the Sea* (Frogmore, St Albans, 1965). W. Matheson, ed., *The Songs of John MacCodrum* (Edinburgh, 1938), xxxiv–xliv and 329–30. John Purser, *Scotland's Music* (Edinburgh, 2007), 276. For recordings of seal songs from Scotland, see *Old to New*: <[prehistoricmusic.com](http://prehistoricmusic.com)>, Track 6; and 'The Selkie's Song', sung by Bob Blair on Argo DA94 S1T3.

503. R. MacilleDhuibh, 'The Quern-Dust Calendar', *West Highland Free Press* (28 December 2001), 11. Also W. Matheson, *The Songs of John MacCodrum* (Edinburgh, 1938), xxxiv–xliv.

504. Information from Gavin Parsons.

505. R. MacilleDhuibh, 'Dream Signs', *West Highland Free Press* (27 May 2005), 'The King of the Cats', *West Highland Free Press* (19 August 2005), and 'How the MacIntoshes got a Roasting', *West Highland Free Press* (2 September 2005).

Byron's response may have been inspired at the height of the Romantic era, but the Battle of Waterloo was no more of a romance than the famous and successful uphill charge of the Gordons on the Dargai Heights in 1897, which inspired several paintings and earned the Gordons two VCs, one to the regimental piper, Findlater. It cost many lives (see [IV.2.c.](#)).<sup>506</sup> More recent, but equally apt, is the image deliberately evoked by Piper James 'Harry' MacMillan Tait of the 1st Battalion, The Black Watch, after their capture at St Valery en Caux on the 12th of June 1940. Harry was the only piper in the Battalion to escape and he called the tune he composed 'The Ladies from Hell'. It is full of defiance, 'The Ladies from Hell' being the name the Germans gave to Scotland's killed regiments. It was taken as a high compliment.

The equally iconic image of [Piper Bill Millin](#) playing 'Highland Laddie' on Sword Beach during the D-Day landings and 'Blue Bonnets over the Border' on their advance inland takes the stuff of romance into the world of grim realities. Behind the story there lies a significance that would have spoken directly to Adam Ferguson's ideas of military loyalty. Millin was instructed to play by his commanding officer Lord Lovat, but the instruction was against army regulations, so many pipers having been thus lost in the First World War. Millin did question the order, but had no difficulty in obeying it when it was repeated, Lord Lovat having declared that the regulation only applied to the English. A film, *The Longest Day*, was made which included the story; a set of Millin's pipes along with his bonnet and dirk (his sole armament) are on display in Dawlish, and a second set of his pipes at Pegasus Bridge in Ranville; and a bronze statue of Millin playing the pipes was unveiled at Coleville-Montgomery, with over five hundred pipers representing twenty-one countries.

As for the Germans, their snipers did not shoot Millin because they thought he was crazy, so, after their own fashion, they too respected the image. JP

#### III.3.d. PRE- AND POST-INDUSTRIAL MARKS ON THE LANDSCAPE

[Introduction](#); [Peat Cutting](#); [Lazy-beds and Run-rig](#); [Roads](#); [Canals](#); [Railways](#); [Neart nan Gleann – Power of the Glens](#); [Quarrying and Mining](#)

#### INTRODUCTION

Ged dh'òrdaich Diùc Earra-Ghàidheal  
gun chlach fhàgail an làrach  
aon tobhta nuair a dh'fhàsaich e Muile,

506. C. A. Malcolm, *The Piper in Peace and War* (London, 1927), is one of many books treating of this subject.



tha làrach a chionta air fhàgail  
 anns gach feannag chaidh àiteach  
 's anns na craobhan sàmhach tha crathadh mu Dhubhaird;

's ged thilleas an Leòdach  
 gu Dùn Bheagain air fòrladh  
 a thogail a' mhàil a chosgas e 'n Lunnainn,  
 chan eil làrach a bhrògan  
 no ainm aig' air àird ann,  
 no cnocan no alltan no monadh.

*Although the Duke of Argyll ordered  
 that not one stone be left in the imprint  
 of one ruin when he cleared Mull,  
 the imprint of his guilt is left  
 in each lazy-bed which was worked  
 and in the silent trees blowing about Duart;*

*and although MacLeod returns to  
 Dunvegan on holiday  
 to collect the rent he will spend in London,  
 neither has he left the imprint of his shoes  
 nor has he a name for any height,  
 any hillock, moor or stream there.<sup>507</sup>*

Catriona NicGumaraid's poem 'Laraich' points to a distinction between the true inhabitants of the Gàidhealtachd and those who control and/or merely visit it: only for the true inhabitants is the landscape imprinted. Although this section is concerned primarily with physical realities, the more spiritual character of the poem is fundamental to a proper understanding of the significance of those realities.

The Highland landscape presents to the uninformed visitor an apparently unconquered wilderness. The bare mountains, the deserted glens, the untamed rivers and the extensive moorlands have been used to justify the application of the words 'wild' and 'wilderness' to vast tracts of land which have in fact been managed by man for millennia. Moreover, those same tracts of land show all the signs of such management, aspects of which are mentioned in the section on Hunting (III.3.a.). This does not prevent such bodies as the John Muir Trust from buying up many thousands of hectares in Scotland of so-called 'wilderness' with the avowed aim of retaining them pretty much as they are, while allowing some reforestation of 'native species' – a term hard

507. Catriona NicGumaraid, 'Làraich', *Rè na h-Oidhche* (Edinburgh, 1994), 68–69.

to define, given that Scotland was totally covered in ice as recently as 12,000 years ago. There is interesting discussion of such bodies' various agendas in an essay by Mark Toogood with specific reference to the Highlands.<sup>508</sup>

However, the comparative absence of urban development is undeniable. In the Highlands and Islands there are only four sizeable towns, all essentially 19th-century developments, and their combined populations represent less than a quarter of the total, which is relatively dispersed and of low density by European standards.<sup>509</sup> The towns are not natural expressions of the culture, but grafted onto it – in the case of *An Gearasdan* (Fort William), grafted on by an occupying force and defined as such by its Gaelic name which means 'the garrison'. Its English name refers to a king who was profoundly unpopular in much of the region.

Even villages rarely conform to the usual image of houses gathered round a central green, with village church and clock, pub and shops. Where these elements exist together, they tend to be spread out.

On the other hand, a John Muir Trust trustee, on exiting a meeting at Elgol Village Hall on the Isle of Skye and looking south-east, declared that the thought of a single wind turbine in this area was unimaginable as it was true wilderness. It was pointed out that, far from being wilderness, this was where cattle grazed in the summer and had done so, in all probability, since the Bronze Age, that it was managed with occasional muirburn and that peat was still cut on it and had been in the past over a much wider area, and that there had also been a couple of houses on it. The ridges on the other side of the river were old lazy-beds, and the green patch just in view was where shinty used to be played only sixty years before – in fact the place was a vital part of the whole pastoral economy. Given that information, the trustee immediately withdrew his objection. He was a man experienced in the mountains over many decades, but he had just learnt to look at the landscape he thought he knew in a different way.<sup>510</sup>

One of the ways in which the area referred to above had been extensively worked was peat-cutting, of which the landscape still bears the marks – or scars, depending upon one's viewpoint. To peat-cutters, these, of course, are not scars. They are the records of decades, even centuries, of labour carried out with care for the environment and also for appearance.

508. Mark Toogood, 'Nature and Nation', *Scotlands* (3 January 1996), 42–55.

509. Inverness (population c. 70,000; recently designated a city), Fort William (pop. c. 11,000), Oban (pop. c. 9,500) and Stornoway (pop. c. 8,000).

510. Personal experience of the author, when himself serving as a trustee of the John Muir Trust.

## PEAT CUTTING

.i. moin coitcend hi, .i. a tocur don tig ocus hi tirim, .i. im coirseis, seis coir in ni curthar as in purt monad, in moin cruaid is in re suthain a tochuirthur.

*i.e. this is common turf, i.e. to carry it to the house when it is dry, i.e. for the right law, or right rule respecting what is taken from the turf bank, i.e. the hard turf in the proper time at which it is carried.*<sup>511</sup>

The above extract from the 7th- to 8th-century Old Gaelic law tracts may seem far removed from modern life but, where peat cutting still occurs, such laws, though no longer in force, are readily understood by crofters. For instance, the ‘seven ditches whose liabilities are not atoned for, whatever may have been drowned in them’ include *clas fót[b]aig móna* ‘the ditch of a peat hag’.<sup>512</sup> In modern times, however, such a ditch has to be broad enough for a cow to turn in, so over the centuries some small refinements have been added for the protection of stock.

Peat-cutting acts as a marker in the Gaelic-speaking landscape. It may not always be obvious to the eyes of visitors – may even escape their notice, or be misinterpreted as lazy-beds or natural features – but to the Gaels the marks of peat-cutting can be read like a book. On the other hand, to some ecologists peat-



Peat bank, ditch and regeneration, Isle of Skye. Photo © Seán Purser

511. From the 7th- to 8th-century *Senchas Már*, quoted in A. T. Lucas, ‘Notes on the History of Turf as Fuel in Ireland to 1700 A.D.’, in D. McCourt and A. Gailey, eds, *Studies in Folklife Presented to Emyr Estyn Evans* (Belfast 1970), 172.

512. Lucas, ‘Notes on the History of Turf’, 172.

cutting represents the release of carbon capture, the stripping of a wet-land asset and the draining of an environmentally sensitive habitat. Traditional peat-cutting, however, is done in such a way that the peat can regenerate and, in creating ditches, often increases the variety of wetland habitat and encourages species enrichment.

Peat bogs were not only marked by the cutting of peat for fuel but used to boast beautifully made stacks (*cruachan móna*) which kept the peats dry through the winter. They are rarities today, most crofters having abandoned peat-cutting or having adequate shed storage. But the stacks were by no means the only aspects of gathering peat that were of visual importance.

The first thing was the turfing, creating a strip of exposed peat about two feet wide by removing turves to a spade’s depth and throwing them into the ‘inside’ of the bank (*broinn a’ phuill*). The challenge was to make sure the line was straight, dead parallel with the face of the bank from start to finish.<sup>513</sup>

There is a practical reason for this, namely that the person cutting the peats does not have to keep adjusting the number of peats cut to accommodate the width that is exposed, but absolute accuracy is far from essential and is equally motivated by a care for appearances. That visual awareness was even translated into a proverb connected with the weather:

Tha làraich buain fhòd air an adhar; nì e latha math a-màireach.

*There is the appearance of turf clearing in the sky; it will be a fine day tomorrow.*<sup>514</sup>

The person who built a poor stack or who left the peat bank looking untidy or with uneven strokes of the cutting iron visible on the exposed face of the peat would be thought poorly of, not just for reasons of economy and uniformity, but because aesthetic sensitivities were and are upset by a poorly finished bank. Any little scarfs of peat left behind are carefully gone over to leave a tidy appearance:-

... but the cutter had to make sure his cuts were precise and even; and when he came to the end of the row he had to be careful not to leave the face of the bank scarred by the marks of the *taireisgeir*. That was a serious felony: like a joiner leaving hammer-marks on a door-facing.<sup>515</sup>

What is more, how the peat is cut and laid out, while primarily dictated by practical issues, also serves to act as a marker of identification and belonging. Different types of cutting iron produce different shapes of peat, brick-shaped or tile-shaped, and recently some have used machines which extract the peat in tubes vertically through the top growth. Tile-shaped peats are laid out to get a skin on

513. D. MacLeod, ‘Footnotes’, *West Highland Free Press* (6 June 2008).

514. G. MacLeod, *Muir is Tìr* (Stornoway, [2005]), 91.

515. MacLeod, D., ‘Footnotes’, *West Highland Free Press* (April 2006; also 6 June 2008).

them. Some lay them overlapping each other in rows and leaving a narrow space between the rows of peats to allow the air to dry them. This space is called *rathad an isein* – the bird’s path – not because a bird is expected to use it but because, in the mind’s eye, it is just the right width for a bird.<sup>516</sup> The name is also used as the title of *Rathad an Isein – a Lewis moorland glossary*, where the space is at the edge of the bank.<sup>517</sup> Later, the peats are lifted into small stacks of maybe half a dozen and then into larger stacks and, finally, bagged, unless a winter stack is made.

In many respects, peat-cutting creates a bond between man and nature. In their relationship with the moors, all who are working them are conscious that they are making their way down vertically through thousands of years, down to the scrub willow and birch easily identified in the bottom of the bog and good only for kindling, and down to the hazel trees whose nutshells still survive, sometimes in a cluster, with tell-tale holes in the shells, where mice have eaten into them – probably a store laid down by some small rodent of a thousand or more years ago. The work is hard but rewarding, as the following ditty shows:

Chaidh sinn a bhuain na mònach gu toilichte, gu toilichte  
Chaidh sinn a bhuain na mònach le tairsgeir agus spaid.

*We went happily to cut the peats with cutting iron and spade.*

It is impossible to work the peats without being aware of their history – even their archaeology, never mind the importance of the underlying geology which is occasionally exposed and where clay, sometimes of good enough quality to line a water tank, may be found. These are visual markers that are exposed, not just of ancestors, but of the nature of the place itself, the peat, the soil and the rock.

There are other factors relating to how what is seen (and felt) impinges upon the sense of belonging, and that is the awareness of the fact that this is a finite resource. The peat is uneven in quality. In the past, when peat-cutting was more extensive, the banks were rotated so that everyone got a fair share of the different qualities of peat. Why then is poor peat cut as well as peat of the best quality? When the present writer asked that question of his neighbour Lachlan John MacKinnon over forty years ago, the answer was ‘You take your share’. That was an answer which was not just a reflection of the sense of responsibility of his ancestors, but of his responsibility to his children and their children.<sup>518</sup> In the past in Ireland, peat was a sufficiently precious resource for women to take peat slurry and mould it with their hands into turves for sale.<sup>519</sup>

516. Information from Murdo MacDonald, lecturer at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Isle of Skye.

517. Anne Campbell, *Rathad an Isein: A Lewis moorland glossary* (Glasgow, 2013).

518. Personal communication from Lachlan John MacKinnon of Drinan, Strath (Spring 1969).

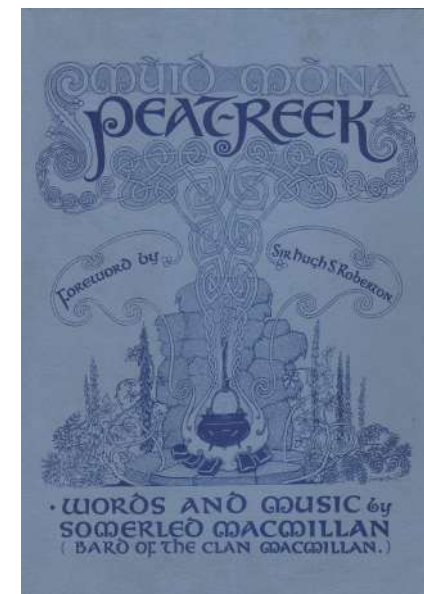
519. I. Rotherham, *Peat and Peat Cutting* (Botley, 2009), 14.

*A’ rùsgadh na mòine* means the skinning of the peats and this used to be done with a *caibe-làir* (turving iron). This instrument, more usually seen in museums, is of simple but subtle design. The long shaft is curved so that the cutting iron levels out as it is pushed along under the surface of the sod. It may also be curved slightly to one side so that the operator is not obliged to stand on the very edge of the bog, which might give way under his weight. If the angle of the cutting blade relative to the length of the shaft, and therefore its angle of attack, is so much as a centimetre out, the blade will not cut into the sod but will skid over it. Dwelly states that the instrument ‘never touches the breast’, but this is not true: the height of the handle as the stroke is commenced being dependent upon the contours of the ground. When it has done its work, it exposes the *carcair* or portion of the peat-bank stripped of its turf from end to end. There is a character dance related to the skinning and cutting of turf (see IV.3.a.).

In the end, the whole process is dedicated to the production of heat and the saying *Is fuar an coimpir’ an fhòid* ‘the turf is a cold companion’ refers to its function as a companion if there is nobody else in the household. Such a proverb might be spoken by a single person in the hope of gaining company.<sup>520</sup>

A peat fire has unique qualities. The disadvantages are that it produces large quantities of very fine ash which spread throughout the house and, if smooored regularly, the smoke deposits a thick tar inimical to modern chimneys. But the advantages far outweigh these problems. A peat fire rarely, if ever, sparks; it burns slowly and steadily; it heats a whole room but does not burn your shins; it can be made to produce flame but is hot enough when it glows; it is steady and does not require constant refuelling. As such it is an excellent fire on which to cook. George Bain nicely illustrates this function by turning the smoke into an elaborate interlace in his cover for *Smùid Mòna Peat-Reek*, a song with words and music by Somerled MacMillan, the bard of the Clan MacMillan.<sup>521</sup>

A peat fire can also easily be kept in overnight by smoooring, an activity traditionally undertaken by the woman



George Bain, cover for *Peat-reek*.

520. A. Nicolson, *Gaelic Proverbs* (1881; Edinburgh, 1996), 283.

521. S. MacMillan, *Peat-Reek (Smùid Mòna)* (London, ?1949).



of the house and accompanied by prayer or song. In this example, the burning peat becomes a metaphor for suffering:

Rìgh nan Dùl, Rìgh nan Dùl,  
Smàl an tùrlach, smàl an tùrlach;  
Iosa, leam 'nam shuain, 'nam dhùsgadh.  
Rìgh nan Dùl, Rìgh nan Dùl,  
Smàl an tùrlach, 's bàth le deòir  
Fàd na còmhraige 's na cuartaich,  
Bàth le d' dheòir, bàth le d' dheòir.<sup>522</sup>

*King of the Heavens, smoor the fire; Christ with me in my sleep and my waking. King of the Heavens, smoor the fire and smoor the fire of battle and of fever with your tears.*

#### LAZY-BEDS AND RUN-RIG

Lazy-beds are known in Gaelic as *feannagan* – a word also meaning crows or hoodie crows. Hoodie crows frequent lazy-beds and will pull up potatoes from them if the potatoes are left for any time after the shaws have died back; but the etymology is derived from a word for a trench, itself derived from *feann* meaning to flay, as in flaying an animal. In that sense, the land is indeed flayed or skinned and the characteristic marks of *feannagan* (on sometimes improbably difficult land for cultivation) can be seen throughout the Gàidhealtachd.

*Feannagan* or *feannagan taomaidh* are anything but 'lazy', being extremely labour intensive. They are designed to increase soil depth and shed water down the broad trenches. As they are frequently seen on land difficult to cultivate with machinery of any kind, they were usually constructed using the *cas-chrom* or foot plough. As Iain Crawford comments, 'This form of strip cultivation was essentially a response to environment.'<sup>523</sup>

The *cas-chrom* is a seemingly primitive tool, the proper design of which is as crucial as is that of the *caibe-làir* used for skinning peats (see above). Perhaps the most intelligent and sensitive appreciation of the utility and aesthetics of crofting agriculture is to be found in the book of that name by Fraser Darling, with outstanding black-and-white photography by Robert Adam.<sup>524</sup> Adam's work

522. M. Kennedy-Fraser, *Songs of the Hebrides* Vol. II (London, 1917), 31. Marked by Anne Germain as 'faithful to phonographic original' in the author's personal copy. The tune was gathered from Isabel MacLeod of Eigg and the words arranged from a fragment by Kenneth MacLeod.

523. I. Crawford, 'Feannagan Taomaidh', *Scottish Studies* 6, Part 2 (1962), 244–46.

524. F. Darling, *Crofting Agriculture* (Edinburgh, 1945), with 20 illustrations by Robert M. Adam.



*Feannagan* at Tusdale, Isle of Skye. Photo © John Purser

achieves a remarkable depth of field through the use of small aperture. The character of the coastal landscape of the Gàidhealtachd is favoured by such an approach, given the frequent simultaneous presence of dramatic features in the foreground and distance, divided by expanses of water or moorland. In addition, the comments on each photograph by Fraser Darling are as illuminating as the images themselves.

The design of *feannagan* is not only prompted by poor soil depth, but also by high rainfall, and the trenches themselves run downhill, often following the shape of the land but not on any one contour. They are one of the most characteristic features of the Highland landscape and, since they have largely been abandoned for the last fifty years, their presence serves as a reminder of harder times, when the best cultivable land had been taken over by the landlords, often for sheep. *Feannagan* were manured with seaweed and dung and over generations built up a reserve of nutrition which was exploited to the point of exhaustion by sheep-farming.

In the Gàidhealtachd the signs of run-rig are less obvious than those of lazy-beds. However, the term 'run-rig' is probably derived from the Gaelic *roinn ruith* 'division run'. By the time of Alexander Carmichael's *Report* of 1884, the more usual term was *mòr earann* 'great division':

Occasionally, however, an old person calls the system Roinn Ruith. This seems to be the correct designation, and the origin of the English term Run-Rig.<sup>525</sup>

Run-rig was a form of joint farming in which the land would be apportioned and sometimes reallocated so that each tenant had equal shares of good and poor land. It was characterised by the presence of a common enclosing dyke within which cultivation took place while the cattle were out on the moor during the summer months.

#### ROADS

Roads, being primarily designed to allow for the passage of wheeled traffic, armies and artillery, require surveying, mapping, planning and substantial investment in labour. It is not for nothing that the Ordnance Survey is so named. In the rugged territory of the Gàidhealtachd, roads are to this day few and far between. North of Crianlarich, there is no road connecting eastern to western Scotland, until one reaches Spean Bridge. For the entire west coast north of the Clyde, there is a choice of only two main roads going north and, in places, there is no choice.

Of course there were roads before the military came, whether in the form of Romans or others. Roads were part and parcel of Gaelic life and they feature in the early Gaelic Law Tracts, the following passage having been composed around 700 AD.<sup>526</sup>

Róda, cis lir-side? ni, a .u. i. slighi 7 ród 7 lamraite 7 tograide 7 bothar. (1) caide int slige? Ni, discuet da carput sech in aile, doronad fri imairecc da carpat .i. carpat rig 7 carrpat espuic ara ndichet cechtar nai sech araile. (2) Ród: docuet carpat 7 da oeneoch de imbi; doronad fri echraite mendoto a medon.

*Roads, how many are there? Not hard: five, i.e. highway, and road, and by road, and curved road, and cow-track. (1) What is the highway? Not hard, two chariots can go on it past each other. It has been constructed for the meeting of two chariots, i.e. the chariot of a king and the chariot of a bishop, so that each of them can go past the other. (2) Road: a chariot and two horsemen can pass on it. It has been constructed as a horse-road of the locality internally.*<sup>527</sup>

525. A. Campbell, *Report of Her Majesty's Commissioners of Inquiry into the Condition of the Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1884), Appendix A, 451.

526. F. Kelly, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin, 2000), 537.

527. Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 538.

In a recent article, Clancy has shown that the Scottish Gaelic word for a road, *rathad*, is derived from the Old Gaelic quoted above, and that neither is derived from English, except in the meaning of a boat anchorage.<sup>528</sup> A solid wooden wheel dating from c. 1000 BC found in Blair Drummond Moss points to the presence of wheeled traffic in the area of Perthshire.<sup>529</sup> An iron-rimmed chariot-wheel was discovered at the Roman fort at Bar Hill in Dunbartonshire, and fragments of two others at Newstead, all being probably booty or tribute from Caledonian tribes. Their design, with iron rim, felloe made from a single piece of ash, hub of elm and spokes of willow is 'decidedly Celtic'.<sup>530</sup> The great *Eiscir Riada*, the esker or glacial ridge which divides Ireland from east to west, raised above the bog, was one of the five great roads and these were reputed to be used by horse-chariots.<sup>531</sup>

Although roads were few in the Highlands, over the centuries cattle were driven hundreds of miles along drove roads to markets such as Crieff and Falkirk in the south of Scotland, and even into England. These were not so much roads as tracks followed across ground that would not damage the hooves or otherwise compromise the health and value of the cattle. Given the numbers being driven, these tracks could be quite broad where the terrain allowed and, on occasion, they had to traverse high passes, such as the Corrieyairack Pass which at 2526 feet (770 metres) was no mean undertaking. The last drives over the Corrieyairack took place as late as the late-19th century.<sup>532</sup>

The skills required for driving cattle were acquired, often at an early age, through the practice of transhumance – driving cattle in early summer to the higher pastures and returning them in early autumn (see IV.1.a.). This practice still continues in a few districts. However, cattle-raiding can also be seen as a precursor to droving,<sup>533</sup> though there is also evidence for genuinely commercial droving from as early as 1359.<sup>534</sup> There was a maximum daily distance cattle could be driven without loss of condition and this was around 14 miles, the precise

528. T. Clancy, 'OI ród, roit, ScG ròd, rathad, Scots rod, rode, Eng. road', in S. Arbuthnot and K. Hollo, eds, *Fil súil nglais – A Grey Eye Looks Back: A Festschrift in Honour of Colm Ó Baoill* (Ceann Drochaid, 2007), 27–28.

529. S. Piggott, 'A Tripartite Disc Wheel from Blair Drummond, Perthshire', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 90, 238–41.

530. W. Milliken and S. Bridgewater, *Flora Celtica* (Edinburgh, 2004), 93; also <[www.roman-britain.org/places/bar\\_hill](http://www.roman-britain.org/places/bar_hill)>, a photograph of the wheel after restoration is on the Hunterian Museum website: <[www.antoninewall.org/resources.php?sec=rsa](http://www.antoninewall.org/resources.php?sec=rsa)>.

531. E. Gwynn, *The Metrical Dindsenchas* Part III (Dublin 1913 and 1991), 282–85.

532. A. Haldane, *The Drove Roads of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1997), 221.

533. Haldane, *The Drove Roads of Scotland*, 8–9 and 21.

534. Haldane, *The Drove Roads of Scotland*, 11.



distances being determined by access to grazing and water. As a consequence, drovers' inns would be established at such places and subsequently a small village or permanent inn might be developed.

Many of the stances or resting places never developed into villages but their former presence can often be detected by the greener ground manured by generations of cattle. It was for this reason that payment was rarely requested for the use of a stance.<sup>535</sup> Place-names such as *Laggan a' Bhainne* (the milky hollow) south of Fort Augustus may be indicators of suitable resting places, as they suggest the presence of good grazing. *Bealach na h-Oidhche* (the pass of the night), between Beinn Sgritheall and Beinn a' Chapail, was the first stop for drovers from Sleat in Skye, whose cattle would have swum from Kylesha to Glenelg on the mainland.

The drovers themselves survived on oatmeal, milk and blood extracted from an artery in the neck of a suitable beast, with a specially designed fleam, *tuagh-fhala* or *-chuilse/chuisle* made from elder, punched into the blood vessel in such a way that, upon extraction, the blood pressure itself closed the puncture.<sup>536</sup>

The Gàidhealtachd, however, is not well suited to road building and one of the main forms of transport was by sea, which explains the siting of a number of the Gàidhealtachd's iconic castles (see IV.1.a.) and the centrality of Iona Abbey. At least in the summer, the sea was the main access route for a large proportion of the population of the Gàidhealtachd and remains so to this day. The fresh water lochs were also used. Loch Shiel had a mail boat until 1967 and Loch Lomond and Loch Nevis still do. In the past, cattle were regularly swum from the Island of Skye to the mainland at Kylesha, as mentioned above, and they still exchange winter grazings between Staffin Island and Skye by swimming over at the lowest tide, nowadays accompanied by a boat, but formerly by the herdsman swimming with them.<sup>537</sup>

Besides drove roads, there were routes followed by funeral parties, bearing the coffin to the burial ground. The resting places on these routes were marked by *cùirn cuimhne* 'memory cairns', to which the passer-by was expected to add a stone, and many of these are still visible, notably on the steep track up to the burial ground of Cille Choireil, near Roy Bridge (see IV.1.c.), but also at the appropriately named *Bealach nam Marbh* (the pass of the dead) between Glenuig and Kinlochmoidart,<sup>538</sup> and the Coffin Road, *Bealach Eorobhat*, on

535. Haldane, *The Drove Roads of Scotland*, 37.

536. Information from Donald John MacKinnon, retired vet, Old Corrie, Isle of Skye.

537. The crofter in question, Iain MacDonald of Staffin, has been doing this for over 60 years.

538. I am grateful to Hugh Cheape for this reference. See Edward Dwelly, *The Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary* (Glasgow, 1977), 169.



*Cùirn cuimhne*, Cille Choirill. Photo © Seán Purser

which the dead were carried from South Harris for burial in the deeper soil of the west side.

Because the Gàidhealtachd did not enjoy the benefit of Roman military roads and wheeled transport had not been a priority, many of the first roads of any length were built by General Wade, who in his 1724 survey described the existing tracks as being in a state of anarchy and confusion and 'virtually inaccessible'. The primary purpose of Wade's labours was to facilitate the disarming of the Highland clans and to permit the advance of the Redcoat army into the Highlands, following the Rising of 1715. Amongst the 240 miles of road for the planning and/or construction of which Wade was responsible were the roads connecting Dunkeld and Fort Augustus to Inverness, the road through the Great Glen and the road over the Corrieyairack Pass. How these roads are viewed today is somewhat different from the impression they made in the past. In London, Wade was named in the British National Anthem:

Lord, grant that Marshal Wade,  
 May by Thy mighty aid,  
 Victory bring,  
 May he sedition hush  
 And like a torrent rush,  
 Rebellious Scots to crush,  
 God save the King.



These road-making activities impacted on many aspects of the culture, including visual memory-markers. A notorious example is the disturbing of *Clach Ossian* in The Sma' Glen, near Crieff, as a result of which

The people of the country, for several miles around, to the number of three or four score of men, and venerating the memory of the Bard, rose with one consent, and carried away the bones, with bagpipes playing, and other funeral rites, and deposited them with much solemnity within a circle of large stones, on the lofty summit of a rock, sequestered and of difficult access, where they might never more be disturbed by mortal feet or hands, in the wild western recesses of Glen Almon. One Christie, who is considered the *Cicerone* and Antiquarian of Glen Almon, and many other persons yet alive, attest the truth of this fact, and point out the second sepulchre of the son of Fingal.<sup>539</sup>

Wade was also responsible for the construction of some 40 bridges, including the beautiful William Adam-designed bridge over the Tay at Aberfeldy. James McIntosh Patrick's 'General Wade's Bridge' (c.1935) is a particularly fine celebration of a different Wade bridge – an elegant narrow arch over a Highland river.<sup>540</sup> Happily, both bridges and roads also served as good places for dancing, favourite spots having the unmetalled surface 'packed down hard by generations of dancing feet' – a practice which survived well into the 20th century in the Outer Isles (see IV.1.a.).<sup>541</sup>

We have seen above that some towns were grafted onto Gaelic society, occasionally originating in military requirements. However, many military roads fell into disuse or disrepair, maintenance proving expensive, partly because they were built in a hurry by unskilled military labour.<sup>542</sup>

Following on Wade, Thomas Telford was responsible not only for over 1,000

539. F. R. Coles, 'Report on Stone Circles in Perthshire, Principally Strathearn: With Measured Plans and Drawings', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* Vol. IX, 4th Series (1910–1911), 46–116. The quotation from Thomas Newte is taken from a note appearing on p. 97 of Coles's paper. It appears on p. 229 of T. Newte, *Prospects and Observations on a Tour in England and Scotland* (London: Robinson, 1791). Pp. 228–31 of Newte's book include further reflections on the connection of Ossian with this part of Perthshire, including his links to Monzievaird which Newte translates as 'the hill of the bard'. The author is grateful to Professor Murdo MacDonald for drawing attention to this material.

540. Private collection, reproduced in P. Harris and J. Halsby, *The Dictionary of Scottish Painters* (Edinburgh, 1990), 174.

541. J. F. and T. M. Flett, *Traditional Dancing in Scotland* (London, 1964), 39.

542. A. Haldane, 'Communications', in D. Daiches, ed., *A Companion to Scottish Culture* (Frome, 1981), 72–74.

miles of roads, but for numerous bridges, churches and even towns. Telford was backed by a different motivation: in place of the military came the commercial. People were driven off the land to support the new fisheries. These required new roads, harbours and towns to support the new industry. Towns such as Ullapool, Mallaig and Tobermory were not organic products of the society which they were intended to serve. They were specifically designed by the British Fisheries Society in an attempt to encourage a new industry following the breakdown of the social structure and economy of the Highlands as a consequence of the work of Cumberland and Wade. This, however, was not an entirely new strategy. Plans for Stornoway are thought to have been formalised in 1598 'in an unsuccessful attempt to "colonise" Lewis and exploit its agriculture and fisheries' by planting a group of "Gentlemen Adventurers" from Fife.<sup>543</sup>

The quality of Telford's engineering was outstanding and innovative, and much of it is still in use today. It was Telford who pioneered the flat arch, which transmits the load more horizontally and puts less stress on the abutments at either end. Craigellachie cast iron bridge is the classic example. It crosses the River Spey in a single 150-foot span and gave its name to a famous strathspey composed by William Marshall, published in 1822. Telford's method of road construction required heavy and expensive foundations. However, John Loudon McAdam (the family name was originally McGregor) demonstrated that, by a careful and precise choice of the three layers of graded stone and a final layer of 20mm compacted gravel, heavy foundations could be dispensed with.<sup>544</sup> In replacing the 'rule of thumb' with an equally practical measure available to all his workmen, McAdam declared that no stone larger than what could be put into a man's mouth was to be used in the final grade.

But to what extent did Telford's work reflect the nature of its social and physical environment as opposed to its economic and industrial roots? The issue of why and where roads were built in the Gàidhealtachd is still one of major significance. Not only are many communities still served by single-track roads with passing places, but it is only very recently that several of the islands in the Outer Hebrides have been joined by causeways or bridges, and the bridge to Skye was only built in the late-20th century and initially commanded the highest toll in Europe. The failure to replace the Strome ferry with a bridge has cost Highland Council many millions of pounds attempting to maintain the hazardous (and frequently closed) road along the south side of Loch Carron: the recent designation and popularity of the 'North 500' scenic drive has exposed the woeful inadequacy of the transport infrastructure and a record tourist

543. Fojut, Pringle and Walker, *The Ancient Monuments of the Western Isles* (Edinburgh), 62.

544. J. Nisbet, 'The paving of a better future', *Leopard Magazine* (April 2011), 15–17.

season has led to major traffic management and parking problems at beauty spots such as the Fairy Pools and Neist Point, both on Skye.

For many communities, the absence of an adequate road infrastructure led to their eventual abandonment. Two examples of individuals who decided to take matters into their own hands are those of Alexander McDonald and Calum MacLeod. Both men were crofters and their roads were amongst the most iconic recent interactions between man and landscape in north-west Scotland. McDonald's 'Burma Road', as it was locally known, was in reality two stone footpaths, designed to save him and his family from a six-mile detour to reach Mallaig.

[Joseph Beuys and Jon Schueler] both recognised as a fellow artist the Mallaig farmer Alex McDonald ... He made the roads with love and understanding of the stones themselves and the precipitous slopes of that impassable mountainside ... In fact Alex McDonald had drawn two exquisite lines across that mountainside ...<sup>545</sup>

The Romanian artist Paul Neagu was equally enthusiastic, Adrian Henri included them in *Environments and Happenings*,<sup>546</sup> and army engineers put paid to much of McDonald's artistry by well-meaning 'improvements'.

MacLeod's road was much more ambitious. It was designed to take wheeled traffic, was one and three-quarter miles long and became the subject of a book, a television documentary, a stage play, a radio play and two songs. Of international interest, the road was also considered fit matter for the attention of art students.<sup>547</sup>

Living in a remote spot on the Island of Raasay, without vehicular access and having failed to persuade the local authority to make a new road, Calum MacLeod decided to make it himself. The fact that the character of the road was dictated entirely by practicalities – the nature of the terrain and the capacities of the man who built it – does not diminish its artistic value. Using local materials and (with the exception of some initial blasting undertaken for him by the road works department) nothing more than hand tools, the character of the structure

545. R. Demarco, *The Burma Road* (1971), quoted in E. McArthur, ed., 'The Burma Road: Photographs from the Demarco Digital Archive', *Journal of the Scottish Society for Art History* Vol. 13 (2008–2009), 53.

546. A. Henri, *Environments and Happenings* (London, 1974).

547. R. Hutchinson, *Calum's Road* (Edinburgh, 2006). The documentary about Calum MacLeod and his road was made by Derek Cooper. David Harrower adapted Hutchinson's book for the National Theatre of Scotland and Colin MacDonald did likewise for his radio play *Calum's Road*, BBC Radio 4 (5 October 2013). The songs were by Capercaillie and Runrig. Campbell Sandilands, a student from Dundee's Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, wrote his dissertation on Calum's Road.

was necessarily going to be substantially dictated by the natural land forms. One is reminded of Jack Yeats's comment in his seminal assertion of Ireland's potential contribution to the world of art:

I think the two most beautiful pieces of man's handiwork are the old-fashioned plough and a sailing ship. In each every curve is there at the command of the elements, and not for the little pride of man; though there are houses and walls in the country, and nature and the elements by their powers have ruled the shapes of the houses and the building of the walls ... In the country the veil between the artist and nature is more transparent. He feels he is part of everything that surrounds him ...<sup>548</sup>

Every curve of Calum's Road was 'at the command of the elements' – in this case, rock and bog. Whether Calum intended the road as a work of art or no, it is



Eòghann MacColl, *Rathad Chaluim* © Eòghann MacColl

548. Jack Yeats, *Modern Aspects of Irish Art* (Dublin: Cumann Leigheacht an Phobail, 1922), 6.

still considered as such. The desire to leave a drystone revetment with an even face, a regular curve, using matching types of stone, has much the same visual consequences as that of leaving a peat-face without ragged edges or irregular cutting marks, or a peat stack without bulges. The better finished they are, the better they last. But the people who build them judge their practicality by their appearance and a good appearance gives them pleasure, and that pleasure is sought as the mark of good work. Is this art, craft or engineering? Why ask? All are patently obviously involved and there need be no aesthetic conundrum attached to work undertaken with an integral understanding of its qualities – qualities recognised in the An Lanntair Gallery Exhibition *Moladh na Mòine*, which included a complete peat stack.<sup>549</sup>

Such stories, along with the practice of peat cutting and cultivation of lazy-beds may seem exceptional examples from a community increasingly moving away from crofting and connected with modern services. It is worth recording, however, that crofting households account for around 30,000 people in the Highlands and Islands. This represents some 30% of households in the mainland part of the region and 65% in the islands.<sup>550</sup> The marks on the landscape made by crofters are there to be seen and in places they are still being made, dictated to and for the most part in harmony with the environment from which they have developed.

Before leaving the subject of roads, a word or two should be offered on the subject of walking. In I.3.a., reference was made to the original function of brogues to cope with inevitably wet feet. Here attention is drawn to the fitness and endurance of many of the population, even into modern times. Distances covered in a day might commonly reach up to 40 miles and there is a Gaelic phrase to describe a fast efficient walk: *siubhal-sith*, meaning the gait of a fairy – in other words, almost gliding over the terrain. The phrase was used of one Seonaidh Ruairidh of Breakish, Isle of Skye, who walked daily to and from his work in Sconser, 16 miles there and 16 miles back, putting in a full day's work in between.<sup>551</sup> The phrase occurs in the well-known song 'Birlinn Ghoraidh Chròbhain', in which the ship is described as moving over the water with *siubhal-sith na gluasad*. Caution is therefore required before jumping to conclusions about 'isolated crofts', 'loneliness' and the like. Many people thought nothing of walking considerable distances for a ceilidh or a chat and were also quite ready to do so in the dark and, day or night, adopting different kinds of walk according to the terrain, such as the *ceum a' mhonaidh*

549. The exhibition opened in Stornoway on 31 August 2013.

550. Scottish Crofting Federation, *A Charter for Crofting*, 1, available as a download at <[www.crofting.org](http://www.crofting.org)>.

551. Information from Seanachan MacLeod, Breakish.

used on soft ground in which the toes dig in for traction but the pace is rapidly forward. *Ceum a' cheàird* 'the tinker's walk' was a springy walk used by those habitually covering a lot of hard ground.

#### CANALS

While roads span the pre- and post-industrial landscape, the main canals in Scotland were primarily prompted by industrial development. That said, John Rennie and Thomas Telford's Crinan Canal (finally completed in 1809) was also motivated by social concerns:

It will not only enable the inhabitants to avoid entirely the very dangerous voyage around the Mull of Kintyre, but, by affording a ready market for all the productions of the Western Isles, it will invite the people to pursue a variety of kinds of industry, to which they have hitherto been strangers. Above all, it will enable them to supply themselves with salt and coals ...<sup>552</sup>

Telford and Jessop's great Caledonian Canal was, like the Crinan Canal, partly prompted by the desirability of avoiding dangerous waters. Prior to its construction, access to substantial stretches of either coast required a voyage around the North of Scotland and through the notorious waters around Cape Wrath. The canal was also intended to provide employment in the hope of stemming emigration. Nevertheless, it was actively opposed by Alastair Ranaldson Macdonell of Glengarry. Painted by Raeburn in full Highland dress, he might be described as a throw-back to the glory days of the Highland chieftain. In fact, his opposition was more to protect his own peace and quiet, and by the time he died in 1828 he had run up debts of £80,000, many from legal actions, so his stewardship hardly reflected the older ideals of the clan system.

The Caledonian Canal itself is 60 miles in length and its 'Neptune's staircase' of eight locks at Banavie, raising the level by 64 feet, is the longest such staircase in the United Kingdom. Its course is determined by one of the most dramatic features of the Highland landscape – the massive fault-line of The Great Glen running right across Scotland from Fort William to Inverness and including, amongst other lochs, Loch Ness. The Caledonian Canal is regarded as one of the great feats of engineering, dealing with complex water systems and a demanding environment. It too was designed by Telford, as were a number of churches and manses which are still in use (see IV.1.a.).

552. The Rev. J. MacKinnon, *The [Old] Statistical Account of Scotland* (1791–1799).



## RAILWAYS

A later imposition upon the landscape was that of the railways. As there are essentially only single-track railways in the Gàidhealtachd, their impact has been as much psychological as visible, though they encouraged the further growth of towns such as Inverness, Fort William, Mallaig and Kyle of Lochalsh. However, some of the associated structures and engineering feats have acquired their own iconic significance, including the huge horse-shoe with its viaducts at the base of Ben Doran and the floating of the line across Rannoch Moor (with its associated snow sheds). The moor had been swallowing spoil and money and, had it not been for one of the directors personally funding the process of floatation on turf and brushwood, the entire project might have been abandoned. The navvies, in gratitude, manhandled a boulder onto the platform at Rannoch and carved J. A. Renton on it in profile. It is there still to be seen and must represent one of the most unexpected homages in the entire history of stone carving.

Finally, Simpson and Wilson's viaduct at Glenfinnan, famous even before featuring in the Harry Potter films, represents another innovative piece of engineering. The viaduct (constructed by Robert McAlpine between 1897 and 1901) was one of the very first to be built entirely of cement and its 21 arches, each spanning 15 metres, have a maximum height of 30 metres.<sup>553</sup>



J. A. Renton, Rannoch Station platform. Photo © Seán Purser

553. M. Pearson, *Rathad Iarainn nan Eilean* (2001), Map 14 and accompanying text.



Glenfinnan Viaduct. Photo © Seán Purser

Each one of these engineering feats is a response to the demanding nature of the terrain, but it brought changes of a character its promoters would scarcely have envisaged. As the railway made its way north-west, the sculptor Otilie McLaren, in a letter to August Rodin, wrote of its effects, not only upon greater ease of travel, but upon the subtle psychological effects of industrial intrusion upon a people whose minds were still open to beliefs now thought of as foolish:

On est en train de construire un chemin de fer qui fera le voyage ici bien plus facile, et j'ai toujours l'espoir de vous montre un jour ce ch r pays, qui doit  tre comme celui que trouvait les marins d'Odysseus ... o  les grands hommes au barbes rousses et au yeux bleus d'enfant vous disent tr s simplement qu'il y a encors des f es ici, mais que bient t il n'y en aurait plus par ce que le chemin de fer vient trop pr s.

*They are building a railway which will make the journey much easier, and I always long to show you our dear country, which must be like that discovered by Odysseus's sailors ... where grown men with red beards and blue eyes like children's will tell one quite straightforwardly that there are still fairies here, but that they will soon be gone as the railway is coming too close.*<sup>554</sup>

554. Letter from Otilie McLaren to August Rodin, 11 Septembre 1899, Glenuig, Kinlochailort N.B., in Mus e Rodin, Fonds Historique Manuscrits, Biblioth que, quoted by kind permission. Translation by the author.

## NEART NAN GLEANN – POWER OF THE GLENS

Amongst the most significant examples of post-industrial marks on the landscape – and certainly by far the most extensive in terms of area – are the great hydro-electric schemes created immediately after World War II and whose motto *Neart nan Gleann* was inspired by the strengths of the geology and rivers of the Highlands combined with that of the structures themselves – the massive dams and vast turbines.

The post-war culmination of state-sponsored classical monumentalism was located in the more emotively resonant context of the Highlands ... The [North of Scotland Hydro-Electric] Board's mighty engineering works – which began with the buttress dam at Loch Sloy (from 1946), and culminated in the deep underground machine hall of the Cruachan pumped-storage scheme (1960–65), for which 330,000 cubic yards of rock had to be blasted out, made a tremendous impression on many architects tending towards Modernism. In 1952, Basil Spence declared that the dams recalled 'the magnificence of Roman architecture'. But in the hierarchical world of traditionalism, it was rather the power stations which were exalted as noble works of architecture.<sup>555</sup>

The Cruachan scheme was highly innovative in terms of engineering, being the world's first pump storage scheme, with the generating turbines acting as pumps in the opposite direction. The implications for the hydrology of such a design were scarcely understood at the time and the daring of the whole concept, and its highly successful realisation, drew international attention. Edward McColl of Dumbarton was the first with the concept and James Williamson the man who realised it. The mural by Elizabeth Falconer in the main turbine chamber makes a small reference to the legend of the *Cailleach Bheur* (see I.1.b, I.3.b. and III.3.c.), who, in forgetting to cap the well on Cruachan one night, caused the flood which created Loch Awe. Symbolically, the pump storage scheme redresses her wrong – and was clearly so understood by its designers.

In order to retain some relationship with the local environments, facing stone was regularly used for the turbine houses, as at Pitlochry, which was faced in granite. Relief sculpture was also featured, notably in the work of Hew Lorimer (1907–1993), whose Celtic legend panels at Fasnakyle (1946–1952) consciously echoed Pictish artwork, as did the work of Thomas Whalen (1903–1975) at Grudie Bridge Power Station (1955);<sup>556</sup> while James Shearer (1901–1962) designed

555. Glendinning, MacInnes and MacKechnie, *A History of Scottish Architecture from the Renaissance to the Present Day* (Edinburgh, 1996), 415–16.

556. J. Soden, 'Sculptors and the Hydro-Board: An exploration into the work of Hew Lorimer and Thomas Whalen', a paper given at the conference *Redefining the Visual, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig* (3 September 2009).



Lorimer, *Kelpie*, Fasnakyle Power Station. Photo © Seán Purser

stone-built houses for the staff as part of a model Highland village at Cannich.

Praiseworthy as these efforts were, the fact is that the creation of large bodies of water with regular draw-offs means that many miles of freshwater shoreline in the Highlands are essentially ecological disaster areas where few species can survive the fluctuating water levels. The visual impact is equally stark when water levels are low, exposing on occasion structures of centuries past, the loss of which no amount of artwork can make good. The devastating effect of such schemes at Loch Monar are given poetic expression in Iain Thomson's *Isolation Shepherd*.<sup>557</sup>

In addition, the necessity for many miles of pylons and cable to carry power from remote areas to where it is consumed has had a major visual impact and remains controversial.

## QUARRYING AND MINING

A comprehensive study of the pre-history and history of mining in Scotland has yet to be made. The evidence from the Bronze Age for copper mining at *Uamh an Àrd-Achaidh* on the Isle of Skye is by no means isolated. Flint mining near Peterhead is recorded from the late 3rd millennium BC and Creag na Caillich in Perthshire was quarried for axe heads in the Late Neolithic, though the porcellanite used for the Shulishader axehead was imported from Antrim to Lewis at around the same time.<sup>558</sup> Haematite was mined at Bloodstone Hill on

557. I. Thomson, *Isolation Shepherd* (Edinburgh, 2007), Epilogue.

558. P. Ashmore, *Neolithic and Bronze Age Scotland*, 52–53 and 55. G. Barclay, *Farmers, Temples and Tombs* (Edinburgh, 1998), 27.



the Island of Rum and exported in the Mesolithic period,<sup>559</sup> and, as we have seen in I.2.a., in the Stone Age stones were being selected, if not mined, for their form and colour and placed accordingly.

Given such visual awareness exhibited by our ancestors, it is salutary to read the following quotation:

Geologists despair of architects and builders ever realising what could be achieved by using, for example, our own decorative stones. Two of the most recently (1979) finished buildings in Glasgow are faced with stone from South America that was cut in Italy – while Aberdeen's granite industry has stopped quarrying for this purpose but imports granite and gabbro from France and South Africa for polishing!<sup>560</sup>

The Ross of Mull granite quarries have likewise been closed down and, of the Tiree, Iona and Skye marble quarries, only the last is still functioning, but not in the production of decorative marbles, but as aggregate for roads and facings. Archibald Kay's 1929 painting *Furnace Quarry – the streets of a great city* makes the point in its title with respect to the granite quarry on the shore of Loch Fyne.

The Tiree green and pink marble was commercially quarried between 1791 and 1804<sup>561</sup> but, from a deposit of three pieces found in a prehistoric burial site, appears to have been valued for many centuries.<sup>562</sup> Iona marble is first mentioned as being quarried in 1693 and was again quarried briefly in the late 18th century and at the start of the 20th century, but the First World War cut off the trade with Belgium and also dispersed the workforce and the quarry was never re-opened.<sup>563</sup> A few remains of the machinery that was involved are still to be seen and occasional pieces of marble are delivered on the shore by storms. The communion table and font of Iona Abbey are said to be made of Iona marble, though it is possible that green and white marble from Torrinn on Skye was also used. The supply from Iona was never substantial and Connemara marble was occasionally being passed off as that from Iona.<sup>564</sup>

The main quarrying and mining activities in the Gàidhealtachd have been for iron ore, slate, aggregate and marble; but the abandoned granite quarry near

559. <[www.isleofrum.com/heritagehuman.php](http://www.isleofrum.com/heritagehuman.php)>, and <[www.rcahms.gov.uk](http://www.rcahms.gov.uk)>, under Bloodstone.

560. P. Duff, 'Economic Geology', in G. Craig, *Geology of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1983), 425.

561. D. Kennedy, *The Land below the Waves: Tiree past and present* (Tiree, 1994), 69.

562. E. Beveridge, *Coll and Tiree: Their prehistoric forts and ecclesiastical antiquities* (Edinburgh, 1903), 133.

563. J. Dunbar and I. Fisher, *Iona* (Edinburgh, 1983), 29. M. MacArthur, *Columba's Island* (Edinburgh, 1995), 62, 91, 97, 106 and 112.

564. MacArthur, *Columba's Island*, 90–91.

Crarae recalls the 1886 disaster in which several visitors died from toxic fumes after witnessing (from a steamer on Loch Fyne) a massive blast and then going to the site of the blast itself. Some gold mining has and is still taking place at Tyndrum. The impact has, for the most part, been slight, though the proposal for a super quarry at Lingerabay in Harris was only narrowly prevented after the local population came to understand that the economic benefits had been grossly exaggerated. The super quarry at Glensanda in Morvern offers an idea of the scale of visual scarring involved and its visual impact on the neighbouring island of Lismore is significant.<sup>565</sup> Of the old slate quarries, some have been landscaped as at Ballachulish but others were essentially abandoned as on Luing, or flooded as on the island of *Beul na h-Uamha* in the Firth of Lorne. Diatomite (used in the manufacture of dynamite and face powder) was mined from 1899 to 1960 in the Lealt valley in the Isle of Skye, and Baryte was mined in Glen Sannox on the Island of Arran, as well as at Strontian on the Ardnamurchan peninsula. Baryte is present in Glen Lyon and the UK's richest source is being mined today near Aberfeldy though the potential is restricted by environmental concerns.<sup>566</sup>

It is easy enough for visitors and summer residents to protest at such scars, but even one or two permanent jobs at a quarry such as the marble quarry at Torrinn, Isle of Skye, can make a major contribution to the viability of a small community. That said, quarrying has thrown up an interesting sidelight on industrial relations in the Gàidhealtachd, with significant lock-outs, closures and strikes taking place early in the 20th century. The first of these was at the Ballachulish slate quarries in 1902, involving an eighteen-month lockout, and in 1905 and 1907. The company was forced to change hands and continued operating into the 1950s.<sup>567</sup>

The second strike was at the Raasay iron mine between November 1917 and January 1918 and resulted in a rise in wages for the local men employed, whose complaint was that the German prisoners of war were being used as cheap labour and strike breakers. The remains of the substantial workings and related kilns, hopper and cast concrete jetty are still very much in evidence.<sup>568</sup> Raasay was also an important source of quern stones, as evidenced by the place-name *Àird nam Bràthan* (the Point of the Querns).

Slate quarrying on the Island of *Luinn* (Luing) also continued into the 1950s, though on a very minor scale, a few workmen sitting in desperately exposed

565. A. and P. MacDonald, *The Hebrides* (Edinburgh, 2010), 265 and 188–89.

566. 'Minerals in Britain: Past production Future potential': <[www.bgs.ac.uk/downloads/start.cfm?id=1321](http://www.bgs.ac.uk/downloads/start.cfm?id=1321)>.

567. N. Kirk, *Custom and Conflict in the 'Land of the Gael': Ballachulish, 1900–1910* (Pontypool, 2007), 1–4.

568. L. and P. Draper, *The Raasay Iron Mine* (Dingwall, 1990), 24–30.



conditions above the shore, their stances placed on a sea of grey slate consisting of the millions of shards they created with their slate knives, frequently in gales and rain. Just offshore, the tiny island of *Beul na h-Uamha* (Belnahua) with its flooded quarry was and is testimony to former activity which, along with the Ballachulish and other quarries, exported slate all over the world.

Coal was mined near Campbeltown from at least 1678 until 1967 and involved a James Watt-designed canal opened in 1791, traces of which can still be seen. A light railway was constructed in the 19th century, but a fire in 1958 could only be extinguished by flooding the mine, contributing to other difficulties which led to closure.<sup>569</sup>

The various mines at *Sròn an t-Sithein* (Strontian), which gave its name to Strontianite and Strontium 90, have been active off and on for 300 years. Originally mined for silver, lead and zinc, they now produce baryte for the oil industry. Strontian itself is stable unless subjected to nuclear fission when its radioactive isotope becomes highly dangerous. *Sròn an t-Sithein* means ‘the nose (hill) of the fairy house’ and there are those who would suggest that the name is not without a mystical connection to Strontium 90.

Our emphasis here has been on the visual aspects of mining in the Gàidhealtachd rather than its history, which, along with mining in Scotland, awaits an overall study. JP

### III.3.e. THE ENVIRONMENT OF IONA

Beannachadh Ì Chaluum Chille –  
 Innis tha beannaichte cheana,  
 Eilean a tha 'n iochdar Mhuile  
 'S e uile fo chis Mhic Chailein;  
 Ionad naomha a fhuair urram  
 Os cionn iomad tìr is fearann  
 Ghabhas dìleas ris gach duine  
 Thig o 'n uile rioghachd aineoil.

*The blessing of St Columba's Isle –  
 isle that is blest already,  
 an island that lieth below Mull,  
 all held in fee by MacCailein;  
 a sacred place that hath been honoured  
 above many realms and regions,*

569. <<https://campbeltownheritagecentre.co.uk/see-and-do/coal-mining/>> – accessed 21 November 2018.

*and faithfully entertaineth every man  
 that cometh from any strange country.*<sup>570</sup>

Composed towards the close of the 18th century, those lines of Duncan Ban MacIntyre's assert the continuing cultural and religious significance of Iona. This section considers whether there is anything significant about its environment that might have contributed to its enduring fame.

Though commonly referred to as Irish, the Book of Kells is accepted by most scholars as a product of the scriptorium in Iona.<sup>571</sup> It is possible that it was commissioned to celebrate the bicentenary of Columba's founding of the monastery on Iona in 563 or of his death in 597.

A book of such quality necessarily implies a highly sophisticated scriptorium with many years' scribal experience. The same applies to the Iona stone carvings: both were dependent upon a whole society – a society much larger than that of a single monastic settlement. Sculpture such as that of the Picts, both in terms of quality and quantity and a book such as the Book of Kells cannot be produced in poverty-stricken or marginal circumstances. Stone has to be quarried and taken to the site. Tools have to be forged and tempered. Stone carvers have to be supported. In terms of animals required for vellum, the Book of Kells alone must have cost around 185 calves, and this assumes a herd of around 1200 animals.<sup>572</sup> This figure has been reassessed by Denis Casey, who arrives at a herd size of 801.<sup>573</sup> In either case, Iona could not possibly have supported anything approaching this number. What is more, in taking the calves from their mothers, either *ex utero* or shortly after birth, it would have been essential to continue milking the cows for a period if they were not to get mastitis. In other words, a substantial number of farmers must, over several decades, have been prepared to accept the consequences of vellum production and, whether the farmers were paid or not, those consequences would have been at the very least thoroughly inconvenient. Unfortunately, Casey does not give any consideration to Iona in his study and his calculations of the acreage required to produce such a herd are based entirely upon Irish exemplars. The matter is best left with the observation that a good deal of co-operation was necessary between monastic requirements

570. Duncan Ban MacIntyre, 'Verses on Iona', in A. MacLeod, ed., *The Songs of Duncan Ban MacIntyre* (Edinburgh, 1952), 332–33.

571. Felicity O'Mahoney, ed., *The Book of Kells*, Proceedings of a conference at Trinity College Dublin, 6–9 September 1992 (Dublin, 1994). See also Ragnall MacilleDhuibh, 'Relic of the Western world', *West Highland Free Press* (6 June 1996).

572. M. Meehan, *The Book of Kells* (London, 1994), 86.

573. Denis Casey, 'How Many Cows Did It Take to Make the Book of Kells?', in Rachel Moss, Felicity O'Mahony and Jane Maxwell, eds, *An Insular Odyssey: Manuscript Culture in Early Christian Ireland and Beyond* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017), 81.

for skins and the wider society which produced them. Such co-operation might have involved barter or other forms of transaction if existing obligations were insufficient, and the requirement could have been spread over more than a single year.

Following the slaughter and skinning came the labour-intensive processes which gave the Hiberno-Saxon manuscripts their 'suede-like surface highly receptive to ink and colour.'<sup>574</sup> The inks and colours were themselves expensive but, ultimately, it is the labour of the writing and artwork that, in the case of an elaborate page such as the Chi Ro f.34r, must have taken a good month to complete.<sup>575</sup> The calculation accounts, however, only for the actual physical realisation. The amount of prior thought and planning simply to conceive of such a page is incalculable. All this work must have been supported not only by a reasonably stable and wealthy infrastructure, but a highly sophisticated pool of skills and knowledge ranging from cattle and sheep management through to the production of vellum, from the chemistry of colour mixing, to the handling of geometric forms and their related mathematical formulae, to an understanding of the scriptures and of symbolic meanings many of which we have yet to unravel.<sup>576</sup> No doubt youthful eyesight also played its part, but what is most striking is the sheer quantity of artistic creativity.

More than any other Insular manuscript, the Book of Kells has a profusion of ornament, the elements of which are found in other manuscripts but nowhere in such variety.<sup>577</sup>

The Pictish context for the manuscript is considered in IV.2.f., but the physical environment of Iona deserves to be considered too if it was indeed where this masterpiece was produced. The minutely detailed work which such books exhibit requires particularly good light, for which Iona is well situated. Being a low-lying island, the available light is extended and intensified by reflection off the sea. The prevailing winds being westerly, the cloud cover associated with mountains is more frequently to the east on Mull, and Iona itself is not large or high enough to form its own clouds with much regularity. Iona's relatively high latitude ensures that the brevity and low angle of winter light is amply compensated for by the extended light available between the spring and autumn equinoxes, when weather conditions are in any case better for such work. These geographical realities are discussed in I.3. and can be related to Iona's reputation for the intensity of its colours. The scribes are unlikely to have worked much

574. C. Nordenfalk, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting* (London, 1977), 15.

575. Meehan, *The Book of Kells*, 85.

576. Meehan, *The Book of Kells*, 88–89.

577. P. Brown, *The Book of Kells* (London, 1980), 90.

outdoors, but they experienced the island and it was the island light that lit their scriptorium.

In addition to the nature of light on the island, Iona's geography and geology mark it out from its immediate surroundings, and it is colourful (see I.3.c.):

to the traveller's eye Iona's mixture of grey and green and silvery white looks at once distinctive, whether approached from the dark basalt cliffs of Staffa and central Mull to the north, or across the Ross of Mull's mass of red granite to the east.<sup>578</sup>

The contrast between Iona and neighbouring Mull is explained by the dramatic 'Sound of Iona Fault', 'throwing down several kilometres to the ESE'.<sup>579</sup> Lewisian gneiss, with its distinctive red and black banding, forms the basis of the island, but the east coast has a layer of 'Torridonian sediment'<sup>580</sup> – a hard grey rock retaining the ripple marks of its deltaic deposition. The Iona white 'marble' with green and yellow veining was used in the reconstruction of the Abbey, and the dark green epidote is a possible source of the stone found buried under the altar in Ronan's 7th- to 8th-century chapel on North Rona.<sup>581</sup> If so, Iona stone was imbued with significance from the period of the making of the Book of Kells itself. There is white anorthosite in the south central area of the island, and substantial shingle ridges such as that at Columba's landing-place at Port a' Churaich offer a wide variety of stones. However, none of the Iona rock is suitable for stone carving, so the famous island crosses are mostly carved out of a dark green crystalline rock from south-west Argyll, though the early St Oran's cross was made from stone from the Ross of Mull which delaminated easily.<sup>582</sup>

Apart from the variety of colour inherent in the island's geology, there are the colours of the sea, sand and green machair, which so preoccupied the brushes of Duncan, Peploe and Cadell (see I.3.a.).

578. M. MacArthur, *Columba's Island* (Edinburgh, 1996), 3. The 8th duke of Argyll, who gave the abbey and its precincts to the Scottish nation, also comments on the special colour effects of land and sea at Iona in his book *Iona* (London, 1871), 70ff.

579. Potts, Hunter, Harris and Fraser, 'Late-Orogenic Extensional Tectonics at the NW Margin of the Caledonides in Scotland', *Journal of the Geological Society* Vol. 152, No. 6 November 1995), 907.

580. The Iona Torridonian is shown as such on geological maps, but its status is debated. See M. Johnson, 'Torridonian-Moine', in G. Craig, ed., *Geology of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1983), 49.

581. See M. MacArthur, 'Iona Stone Mix-up on Rona', *Stornoway Gazette* (30 January 1997), and reply from John Purser, 'Rona Stone Just a Source of Wonderment', *Stornoway Gazette* (10 April 1997).

582. D. MacLean, 'The Status of the Sculptor in Old-Irish Law and the Evidence of the Crosses', *Peritia* 9 (1995), 150.



Cadell, *The Dutchman's Cap* (c. 1919). Photo credit: Glasgow Museums

Painters began to take full advantage of the unique colours and light of Iona, and it was this which led many of them to return year after year. Iona's special qualities are derived from a combination of factors. Its many white sandy beaches contrast beautifully with the rich greens of the short-cropped pasture. The extent of the brilliant white sand surrounding much of the island ... means that the rays of the sun through the sea produce especially clear aquamarine and violet colours in the shallow waters close to shore, with deeper shades further out to sea.<sup>583</sup>

The relationship between the sea and the Book of Kells is made explicit by the keeper of manuscripts at Corpus Christi, Christopher de Hamel:

The whole effect is fluid and forever moving, like the sea, ebbing and flowing.<sup>584</sup>

From the perspective of the Gàidhealtachd, then, it is little wonder that

<sup>583</sup> J. Christian and C. Stiller, *Iona Portrayed* (Inverness, 2001), 51.

<sup>584</sup> De Hamel, *Meeting with Remarkable Manuscripts* (2016), 121–22.

the illuminated books that probably emanated from Iona are full of colour. Colour was, of course, widely used in other contexts, not least in the beautiful metalwork of the Sutton Hoo horde, but from an international perspective the environment of Iona was anything but inhibiting.

The surviving evidence from the later Middle Ages might suggest that books of any quality, visually, were a rarity in the Gàidhealtachd, and it was not until the 19th century that Iona was again to produce works of art employing colour – a gap of hundreds of years filled only by imported books such as the so-called Iona Psalter. The Iona Psalter, though produced in Oxford (c. 1180–1220), was probably intended for the prioress of the Augustinian nunnery on Iona.<sup>585</sup> Also imported, probably in the 14th century, was *The Murthly Hours*, though it contains additions in Gaelic, including obits for Sir John Stewart of Innermeath, Lord of Lorne (d. 1421) and for his wife Isabel MacDougall (d. 1439), which 'indicate a likely context in which the *Murthly Hours* could have come to Scotland'.<sup>586</sup>

Lorne is MacDougall territory and no great distance from Iona. A Dominican calendar with 'delicate Parisian illumination ... which contains the feast of St Columba in the original hand ... seems to have been ordered by a Scottish patron'.<sup>587</sup>

The Iona and Douce Psalters demonstrate that the Gaelic west of Scotland was not closed to cultural influences from England and from France, even if its closest and most enduring links were with Ireland. How far, if at all, Hiberno-Scottish traditions of book decoration survived into this period is not clear. We have seen that the scribe who wrote the Gaelic charms into the *Murthly Hours* did not use a traditional Irish hand.<sup>588</sup>

Artistic expression, however, found an outlet in stone carving and the products of the Iona school are considered in [IV.1.b.](#) and [IV.1.c.](#), though mention may be made here of the mass clock with its twenty-four hour divisions and its three Major Hours – Vespers, Matins and Lauds – only separated by six hours. This would imply that the engraved stone with its central hole for a gnomon, was placed horizontally and was in response to the long summer days on Iona when sunset would be around 10pm and sunrise around 4am. Matins being at midnight would then have been at 1am. Most mass clocks are only parts of circles, though transitional twenty-four hour mass clocks may have been a response

<sup>585</sup> J. Higgitt, *The Murthly Hours* (London, 2000), 278.

<sup>586</sup> Higgitt, *The Murthly Hours*, 284.

<sup>587</sup> Higgitt, *The Murthly Hours*, 279.

<sup>588</sup> Higgitt, *The Murthly Hours*, 280.





Mass clock, Iona Museum. Photo © Mhairi Killin

to the competition from mechanical clocks. Given the absence of light during the night for most latitudes such a response makes little sense, except on Iona during summer.<sup>589</sup> This dial featured recently as a central image in the mixed-media *Re-Soundings* commissioned by An Lanntair gallery in Stornoway, Lewis, in which the concept of circularity was also reflected in the musical score.<sup>590</sup> The mass clock is now housed in the museum adjacent to the abbey, it having been at one time used as a base for a cross.

The significance of Iona's legacy was never forgotten, however ruinous its monuments. In 1549, Dean Munro recorded its name as *Icholum chille* and in 1609 James VI chose Iona for the ratification of his Statutes (see [IV.2.a.](#), [IV.2.c.](#) and [V.3.](#)); Charles I refers to 'the Cathedrall Church of Icolmkill' with respect to carrying out repairs (see [V.2.b.](#)), and the quotation that heads this section demonstrates its significance in the late 18th century, by which time the island was becoming a tourist attraction following Pennant's tour of 1772, illustrated by Moses Griffith.

Griffith's attention was focussed on antiquities and in this he was followed by subsequent artists until William Bell Scott came to Iona in the 1830s and painted

589. Peter T. J. Rumley, 'Medieval Mass Dials Decoded': [www.buildingconservation.com/articles/mass-dials/mass-dials.htm](http://www.buildingconservation.com/articles/mass-dials/mass-dials.htm) – accessed 17 August 2016.

590. Mhairi Killin and Hugh Watt, *Re-Soundings, with Music by John Purser* (Stornoway, 2016).

pure landscape. However, it was only in the late-19th century that Iona itself became once more a centre for the production of beautiful art work. In 1887, William Muir and John MacCormick founded the Iona Press. Muir was former manager of the granite quarry on the Ross of Mull, MacCormick was from Tormore on the Ross itself. They produced handsomely illuminated booklets of traditional lore and poetry, including Colum Cille's *Altus Prosator*, which they published in 1889 and, in a new version, in 1897, the 1300th anniversary of Colum Cille's death. Local girls coloured in the decorative borders and the colouring is beautifully done with subtle but rich tones.

This work was followed up by Euphemia and Alexander Ritchie, whose 'Iona



Muir and McCormick, a page from *Altus Prosator*. Photo © Mairi MacArthur

Celtic Art' included jewellery, metalwork, book production, woodwork and silverware. Their work, carried out on the island over some forty years is still sought after today. They died within two days of each other in 1941 and were buried on the same day. Their relevance to the context of Iona itself could not be better expressed than in a remark of Alec Ritchie's:

I hope my Maker will credit me with the hours I have wasted watching  
the colours changing on the Sound.<sup>591</sup>

The work of the Ritchies and others is carried on today by a descendant of MacCormick, Mhairi Killin. JP

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591. Quoted in M. MacArthur, *Iona Celtic Art: The Work of Alexander and Euphemia Ritchie* (Iona, 2003), 54.

## IV MATERIAL CULTURE

### INTRODUCTION

The first two sections, Buildings and Memorials and Artefacts, look at the material culture of the Gaels – crosses and grave slabs, clothing and textiles, jewellery, household goods, musical instruments, weapons and armour, boats and books. While relevant ergonomic detail is explained, a common visual aesthetic is identified tending towards abstraction. This is seen in the repeated utilisation of certain forms, in particular the circle, triskele and spiral, and in a dynamic balance between intricacy and blank space, between the elaboration of interweave and the closure of boundaries. The section on Mixed Media gives further evidence of the abstract structures and number symbolism that underlie dance, music and poetry.



## IV.1. BUILDINGS AND MEMORIALS

## IV.1.a. SOCIAL AND SACRED SPACE AND ARCHITECTURE

[Introduction](#); [Coping with Climate](#); [Sacred Spaces and Structures](#); [Crannogs](#); [Duns and Brochs](#); [Promontory Enclosures](#); [Early Christian Architecture in the Gàidhealtachd](#); [Castles and Mansions](#); [Distilleries](#); [Lighthouses](#); [Hydro-electric Schemes](#); [Gatherings, Entertainments and Sports](#); [Gardens](#)

## INTRODUCTION

The main general surveys of social space and architecture in the Gàidhealtachd came out in 1981, 1986, 1996, 2008 and 2010. John Dunbar's excellent study of 'The Medieval Architecture of the Scottish Highlands' is not widely available.<sup>1</sup> Ian Armit's *The Archaeology of Skye and the Western Isles*, gives a most useful overview from the Mesolithic period to the Clearances, limited only by a geographical choice which Armit ably justifies.<sup>2</sup> Joanna Close-Brooks's *The Highlands* has been followed by Mary Miers's comprehensive *The Western Seaboard*.<sup>3</sup> Although both books are laid out as illustrated guides, they cover different if overlapping areas and their various sections provide useful overviews. Martin Coventry's *Castles of the Clans* has an appendix on the development of the castle and Richard Oram and Geoffrey Stell's *Lordship and Architecture in Medieval and Renaissance Scotland* offers a critical historical account, but is primarily concerned with castles and palaces and, as with Coventry's book, covers the whole of Scotland.<sup>4</sup> Also of importance is McKean's *The Scottish Chateau* and Mary Miers' *Highland Retreats*.<sup>5</sup>

Particularly useful and revealing is the work of Angus and Patricia MacDonald in an outstanding publication entitled, *The Hebrides*.<sup>6</sup> The MacDonalds are far from being the first to use the title (W. H. Murray's 1966 *The Hebrides* was a distinguished predecessor) but they have had the advantage of their own remarkable aerial photography, which they have coupled with a text of exemplary breadth and scholarship. Viewed from the air, much that might be

1. J. Dunbar, 'The Medieval Architecture of the Scottish Highlands', in L. MacLean of Dochgarroch, ed., *The Middle Ages in The Highlands* (Inverness, 1981).

2. I. Armit, *The Archaeology of Skye and the Western Isles* (Edinburgh, 1996), 4–5.

3. J. Close-Brooks, *The Highlands* (Edinburgh, 1986 and 1995); M. Miers, *The Western Seaboard: An illustrated architectural guide* (Edinburgh, 2008).

4. R. Oram and G. Stell, *Lordship and Architecture in Medieval and Renaissance Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2005).

5. C. McKean, *The Scottish Chateau* (Stroud, 2001); Mary Miers, *Highland Retreats: The Architecture and Interiors of Scotland's Romantic North* (New York: Rizzoli, 2017).

6. A. and P. MacDonald, *The Hebrides: An Aerial View of a Cultural Landscape* (Edinburgh, 2010).

difficult to envisage becomes wonderfully clear and may also be used to cast light on parallel mainland communities and environments. Finally, Milliken and Bridgewater's *Flora Celtica* has interesting sections with specific relevance for building materials.<sup>7</sup>

The following overview widens Armit's geographical spread and includes the contributions local knowledge can make to both archaeological and architectural studies, making use of information from local historical societies and similar sources. There is also reference to social spaces which were not necessarily built or, if so, only partly built.

## COPING WITH CLIMATE

A fundamental reality, dominating the character of the vast majority of social spaces and structures in the Gàidhealtachd, is that of climate. It often dictates the choice of materials, building stone being, in many places, much more readily available than timber, and thatch made from rushes and heather being more economical than slates or tiles, which require more timber for their support, though slates or tiles might also be covered with heather for insulation and protection from frost.<sup>8</sup> Wind velocities and rainfall are high and the choice of site and orientation of the structure is frequently determined by the need for the building's shelter. The size and number of windows and doors and where they are placed are similarly determined. Such responses are not merely for comfort; in the harsher environments, they are essential to survival. Even the waves and tides have to be taken into account, for they reach much further and higher than in most environments. The tragedy of the loss of an entire family swept out to sea in their cars between South Uist and Benbecula in January 2005, having abandoned their house for fear of the sea, provides all too stark a reminder. On Barra Head, Sir Archibald Geikie was told of the storm of January 1836 moving a 42-ton block of gneiss across five feet of ground.<sup>9</sup> In 1868, a green wave swept sheep off the 51-metre-high (167 feet) Geirum Mòr islet, just south of Mingulay. On North Rona,

It is certainly not safe for human beings to go looking at the wonderful spectacle of wild sea. The water climbs up the steep gullies on the west side of the peninsula and at a height of fifty or sixty feet above the sea has still sufficient force to roll boulders up and down which may weigh anything from a hundredweight to two tons.<sup>10</sup>

7. W. Milliken and S. Bridgewater, *Flora Celtica: Plants and People in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2004).

8. Milliken and Bridgewater, *Flora Celtica*, 86.

9. Archibald Geikie, *The Scenery of Scotland* (London, 1901), 78.

10. F. Darling, *A Naturalist on Rona* (Oxford, 1939), 48–49.

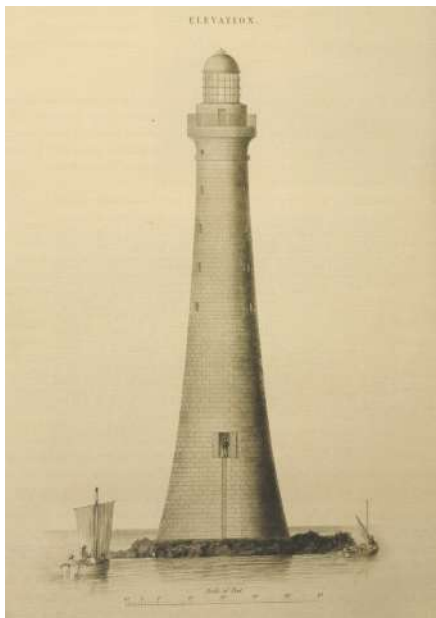
In 1798, Professor Garnett heard first-hand from the, by then, summer-only inhabitants of Staffa and wrote,

... during storms the waves beat so violently against the island that the very house was shaken, though situated in the middle of it; indeed, the concussion was often so great that the pot which hung over the fire partook of it and was made to vibrate. This so much alarmed the poor inhabitants one very stormy winter that they determined to leave the island ...<sup>11</sup>

Of course, lighthouses and in particular the great Scottish lighthouses (see below) represent the ultimate challenge of man to the sea. The tower of the Skerryvore lighthouse had to be able to withstand up to three tons per square foot of pressure from the waves and, in its entirety, a pressure of several thousand tons. At 156 feet, it is the tallest lighthouse in the United Kingdom, exceeding even Douglass's great Fastnet light, which is 147 feet in height.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, unbroken water frequently strikes the lantern of the Skerryvore light and has even smashed the glass and shaken the entire tower.

Barra Head, Mingulay, North Rona and Staffa were places where people lived and worked for thousands of years. Fraser Darling describes the ingenuity with which the structures on North Rona coped with the ferocity of the conditions:

Entrance [to the houses] is by an open doorway two and a half feet high in the eastern end, outside which is a passage-way with a double twist in it to baffle the wind ... There is one art common to the houses of Rona, the beehive shielings and the black houses of the Outer Isles, an art carried intact from the mists of antiquity. It is in the set of the flat stones of which



Alan Stevenson, *Skerryvore Lighthouse* (1844)

11. T. Garnett, *A Tour Through the Highlands of Scotland*, quoted in D. MacCulloch, *The Island of Staffa* (Glasgow, 1927), 55.

12. T. G. Wilson, *The Irish Lighthouse Service* (Dublin, 1968), 38.

all these buildings are made. Each stone is highest at its inward edge, so that the slope is downward and outward. If this technique is carried through from floor to roof, it is possible to bank up the outside with turf without any fear of wet trickling to the inside.<sup>13</sup>

The main settlement on North Rona is a fine and partially preserved example of an old and economical method of dealing with the wind and rain associated with the Atlantic seaboard. The method was simply to build substantially underground. There is widespread evidence for such structures in the Gàidhealtachd, which would also have made fewer demands upon the timber supply for flooring and roofing.<sup>14</sup> Prehistoric precedents for sinking buildings into the ground are famously known from Skara Brae in Orkney, but also within the Gàidhealtachd in the form of early round houses such as those at *Cladh Hallan*:

So the village would have appeared in the landscape as a row of green, grassy cones entered through small porch arrangements on their east sides.<sup>15</sup>

The early 13th-century *Historia Norvegiae* attempts to account for such dwellings by suggesting that the Picts

worked great marvels in city-building each evening and morning, but at noontide they were utterly bereft of their strength and hid for fear in little subterranean dwellings.<sup>16</sup>

Whether earthed over or turfed, a very large proportion of the structures in the Gàidhealtachd relied upon stone as their fundamental material. In an environment where bedrock is frequently exposed, nature provides the eye with an obvious guide to the intrinsic form of the landscape, as well as offering the basic material of construction, whose fracture planes necessarily reproduce that intrinsic form. The shapes of undressed local building stone will naturally lead to the construction of walls whose stability relates to that of the bedrock.

Stone being the cheapest and most readily available building material in much of the Gàidhealtachd, it could be said that it has imposed the ideals of Frank Lloyd Wright's 'Organic architecture' upon the many thousands of builders

13. F. Darling, *A Naturalist on Rona*, 36–37.

14. I. Armit, *The Archaeology of Skye and the Western Isles*, 128.

15. Pearson, Sharples and Symonds, *South Uist, Archaeology and History of a Hebridean Island* (Stroud, 2004), 68.

16. D. Kunin, trans., and C. Phelpstead, ed., 'A History of Norway and the Passion and Miracles of the Blessed Óláfr', in Faulkes and Perkins, eds, *Viking Society for Northern Research Text Series Vol. XIII* (London, 2001), 8.





peat would certainly be smoky. Dugald Buchanan, making use of a proverb that nothing is perfect, even has smoky peats in a list of the consequences of the Fall:

Tha smùdan fhéin ás ceann gach fòid.

*Each lump of peat emits its smoke.*<sup>24</sup>

But a well-maintained peat fire need not smoke excessively and is an efficient and benign source of heat which also heated the floor on which it was situated in black houses, including when smooored to keep it in overnight. The reconstructed house at Colbost on Skye was an excellent example, warm, dry and free from smoke.

In addition, as the architect Bruce Walker has commented, the rooves of some of the long black houses were designed to manage the air flow, with a roof pitch varying from 20° above the byre end of the building to 45° above the living area. This, coupled with the avoidance of too close-fitting a door, encouraged an air flow which drew the smoke up through the thatch.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, smoke did linger in the roof space and seating was kept low so as to avoid it. It was a price worth paying for the comfort and economy of the system.

Such houses were often situated in fairly close proximity to each other, though much less commonly side by side, the ‘village’ at *Cladh Hallan* being a notable and very early exception.<sup>26</sup> There is, however, evidence for groups of houses and structures such as those near Loch Duich, including stone and wattle-walled construction, which show that small groups of houses were not uncommon.<sup>27</sup> Rows of houses are known from the village streets on Hiort (St Kilda) and Mingulay and on Isay in Loch Dunvegan.

The term *clachan* is used for a number of such settlements, but is usually restricted in Scotland to a settlement with a church, such as Clachan of Campsie, the Clachan at Drymen and Clachan at Loch Duich. The last was photographed by George Washington Wilson, c. 1880 – a photograph which may have prompted the Clachan constructed on the site at the 1938 Glasgow Empire Exhibition.<sup>28</sup> It was described as the ‘Epitome of Scottish Gaeldom’, thus asserting a nostalgic

24. Dugald Buchanan, *Am Bruadar*, in R. Black, trans. and ed., *An Lasair* (Edinburgh, 2001), 250–251.

25. B. Walker, *The Hebridean Blackhouse* (Edinburgh, 1996), 8 and 27–28; M. Beith, ‘Blackhouse Model for Green Homes’, *Comunn Eachdraidh Uig* (22 October 2008).

26. Pearson, Sharples and Symonds, *South Uist: Archaeology*, 66.

27. A School of Scottish Studies photograph of the Loch Duich settlement is reproduced in Milliken and Bridgewater, *Flora Celtica*, 78.

28. The photograph is reproduced in Minto, *Victorian and Edwardian Scotland from Old Photographs*, Plate 110.

and by then almost wholly anachronistic image of the Gàidhealtachd, with a Highland lady at her spinning wheel, duly interviewed by Queen Mary.<sup>29</sup>

The typically strung-out appearance of villages in the Gàidhealtachd today is substantially due to the influence of the size and distribution of crofts and their subsequent sub-divisions. These were assigned in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Typical are the villages of Broadford and Breakish on the Isle of Skye. Earlier house distributions are more obviously responsive to land forms and the distribution of the houses and out-buildings is less systematic, though they do tend to form loose clusters. Examples of this older form of distribution can be seen in some of the cleared districts on the Isle of Skye. They include Kirkibost, Robostan and Boreraig in Strath, Dalavil and Caradale on Sleat and Rubha an Dunan and Tusdale in Minginish. The boast of an old woman at Tusdale, that when she got up in the morning she could see the smoke from the seven houses of her seven married daughters, gives a delightful image of the lightly dispersed nature of such settlements.

While the black house is the most commented on form of housing in the Gàidhealtachd, it is in reality only one of a number of different types of house form. There are examples of houses with opposing doors, varying forms of internal division and highly varied dimensions, the long house built on a slope so that the incorporated byre drains away from the house, being the largest.<sup>30</sup> There were also cruck-framed houses and byres.<sup>31</sup> To these latter one might add the bow tents of The Summer Walkers – the travelling people who were at one time a small but vital part of the social economy of the Gàidhealtachd (see below).<sup>32</sup>

Roundhouses and black houses were, and often still are, perceived as primitive and unhealthy. However, modernisation, though well-meaning, did not always bring benefits in terms of housing or related health issues. The modern ‘white house’ with its fireplaces and chimneys in the gable end rather than in a central hearth as in the old black house design were much more expensive on fuel and less effective in keeping the interior dry. These white houses were in some cases imposed upon the community, being the only approved new houses for tenants

29. Special supplement to the *Glasgow Herald* 1938.

30. See D. MacKie, *The Archaeology of Rural Settlement on the Strathaird Peninsula, Isle of Skye*, BSc Dissertation, University of Glasgow (25 January 1985), especially Fig. 49. Also Wildgoose, Birch, Kozikowski and Birch, *Glen Scaladal Isle of Skye: A Survey of the Archaeological Landscape*, unpublished survey for Strathaird Management Committee (Strathaird, 1998), especially Site 6/125.

31. B. Walker and C. McGregor, *Traditions in Timber*: <<https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/research/designing-with-timber/>>.

32. T. Neat and H. Henderson, film: *The Summer Walkers* (Wormit, 1977).

on the Lewis estate in 1879.<sup>33</sup> Dr Mackenzie, giving evidence to the Highlands and Islands Medical Service Committee in 1912 specifically in relation to the rising incidence of tuberculosis, stated that

The houses which are being built just now are built with chimneys in each end. The one end is the kitchen and it is pretty dry and quite sanitary, but the end that they sleep in has rarely a fire in it. It is plastered inside and out, and it has no effective ventilation ... the old houses built with the stones not closely together on one another allowed a free circulation of air. They had a fireplace in the centre of the house which allowed a lot of smoke to percolate through the walls or through the wood, and it acted as a disinfectant in these houses.<sup>34</sup>

With the white house came the extensive use of corrugated iron – a cheap and highly effective roofing material requiring no sarking, but offering no insulation, and very noisy in rain and hail, though some enjoy the sound. The corrugated iron of decades ago was of excellent quality and could last a century if kept well tarred. Even when left unmaintained, the iron would rust but still be watertight for many years, the characteristic orange of a rusted roof having almost become part of the iconography of the Highlands. A number of houses as well as churches, schools and village halls, all roofed with corrugated iron, came in kit form from a single firm in Glasgow. Examples of these can be seen at the Highland Folk Museum at Newtonmore. More recently, plasticated corrugated iron of a much lighter grade has been employed. It rusts very rapidly at cut edges but otherwise requires no maintenance.

These modern houses have also increasingly become subject to building and planning control. One family on Harris were not allowed to rebuild their house on the shore, to the doorway of which the high tide would occasionally reach. The occupants could on such occasions fish for mackerel out of the window and have them gutted and frying before they knew they were dead.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, it would no longer be permitted for cattle to be housed in a shared air space with humans, as was the case with the black house – and was clearly part of the careful design of the brochs of two thousand years before (see below).

Related to the main domestic architecture was the *àirigh* or shieling. These were temporary summer houses on the moors and even quite high up on the mountains, associated with the practice of transhumance and therefore placed wherever good summer grazing was available. They took various forms, often

33. M. Beith, 'White House Versus Black House', *West Highland Free Press* (23 February 2007). Also, M. Miers, *The Western Seaboard*, 288–89.

34. Quoted in Beith, 'White House Versus Black House' (23 February 2007).

35. Personal communication from K.-M. MacKinnon of Scadabay, Harris.



Ruined shieling

circular and with a small chamber attached, but also rectangular. They were windowless and had one or two doorways, a single doorway made of woven twig and wattle being used to close the windward side – '*sgur e bu dùnadh dha barrach*, as the famous song 'Bothan Àirigh am Bràigh Raineach' has it.<sup>36</sup> The foundations of the walls were stone, but as stone is often scarce on the upland grazing areas, the walls would be finished off with turves. The rooves were removed for the winter and rebuilt on the existing walls in the spring. An excellent account of how they were used has been given by Norman MacLeod of Borve.<sup>37</sup>

Transhumance was also practised in Wales and is reflected there in the archaeology as well as the vocabulary of Welsh, the *hendre* being the lowland farm and the *hafod* or *lluest* bearing some relationship to the shieling, though also involving some enclosure.<sup>38</sup>

There is much evidence of continuity in man-made structures across the millennia in the Gàidhealtachd, and perhaps the oldest and most basic was that of the Highland Travellers' bow-tents.

Habitations like the bow-tent provided the beginnings of European architecture. Siberian shelters constructed around found mammoth tusks

36. A. L. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2005), 330–32.

37. <[www.cjehebrides.blogspot.com/2008/05/shilings.html](http://www.cjehebrides.blogspot.com/2008/05/shilings.html)>. The full account, formerly on their website, should be available from the Comunn Eachdraidh Nis archive..

38. D. Browne and S. Hughes, *The Archaeology of the Welsh Uplands* (Aberystwyth, 2003), 35 and 120.

in the Palaeolithic period, have been reconstructed by archaeologists and look remarkably like Traveller tents. Structurally, it is interesting to note that bow-tents make use of the round arch and the half-dome and use an essentially modular system of construction ... the historical ancientness of Traveller culture is affirmed from so many different angles, that the likelihood of these tents being, at least partially, the direct heirs of prehistoric precedent is strong.<sup>39</sup>

The selection of the saplings that formed the frame required good judgment:

Now if ye cut them too short, then they ain't gaunnae meet to each other, an if ye cut them too long they can be too supple, that they're just gaunnae go up an' down like a bellows wi the wind. So, then if ye cut a stick that is brittle and easily broken, the minute ye try to bend it it's gaunnae break ... the best best stick for a tent is birch or rowan ... young rowan about fifteen or sixteen feet long.<sup>40</sup>

Cormac Bourke has drawn attention to the connection between tabernacles, tents, sacred spaces and shrines in Christian tradition – a connection traceable in the actual shape of the shrines as well as in place-names such as *Glac a' Phubail* (the hollow of the tent) on Iona and Pubil at the head of Glen Lyon.<sup>41</sup>

The frequent use of cavity-wall structures also goes back through the ages, as does that of circular forms. Of course, there were and remain thousands of rectangular structures, but the circular form is remarkable for its frequency and, from the late Bronze Age to the Roman invasions, circular structures were a distinctive feature throughout Britain, in contrast to mainland Europe.<sup>42</sup> A circle of a given circumference encloses more space than a rectangle with the same length of outline. A circular form is therefore more economical of materials. In engineering terms, a circular structure, especially when built of stone, has an integral strength which can also shed wind and rain more effectively than a straight wall. These facts apply with as equal force to the humble shieling in which one could scarcely stand up or the sheep pens above Village Bay on Hiort as to the mighty broch. In the case of the last, circular drystone cavity-wall structures can be built tall, without any need for internal or external buttressing. Some brochs attained a height of 13 metres.<sup>43</sup>

39. T. Neat, *The Summer Walkers*, 230.

40. Duncan Williamson interviewed for the School of Scottish Studies in 1979, quoted in Milliken and Bridgewater, *Flora Celtica*, 84.

41. Cormac Bourke, 'Corporeal Relics, Tents and Shrines in Early Medieval Ireland', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 74 (2017–2018), 118–29.

42. Pearson, Sharples and Symonds, *South Uist: Archaeology*, 66.

43. I. Armit, *Celtic Scotland* (London, 1997), 36.

In the Gàidhealtachd, circular structures commence with stone circles and burial chambers of the Stone Age, and develop through early roundhouses, wheelhouses and crannogs, the last in use from the Stone Age to modern times. The tradition continues with semi-brochs, brochs and duns of the Iron Age and early medieval periods. Early Christian architecture also shares this characteristic, with beehive huts, circular graveyards, cashels and round towers (see V.2.b.). Finally come the shielings, which have certainly been in use since the 16th century and remained in use well into the 20th century, and which exist in both single and double-cell form.

It has been proposed that activities within some roundhouses followed the transit of the sun and the life cycle, with burials typically in the north-east quadrant. Evidence for this stretches across 700 years, commencing around 1100 BC.<sup>44</sup> This is a recent area of research and may yield results in circular structures of other kinds (see IV.1.c.).

The list of circular structures above is an impressive one and includes several types of structure unique to Scotland and particularly to the north and west, and some of these earlier forms may have left their legacy in Scottish tower houses which, in turn, influenced the Scottish baronial style of the 19th century and were even echoed in the work of Charles Rennie MacKintosh and, more recently, Ian Begg.<sup>45</sup> It is worth noting that Charles Rennie MacKintosh was sent by his employer, Keppie, to Gigha and Iona to supervise the firm's work there and so would have encountered this style of building.

A noteworthy example of a broch-inspired structure is part of the award-winning Àrainn Chaluum Chille at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. Its attendant tower, Lòchran an Dòmhnallaich, was designed by George Mulvagh for Gillespie architects to echo the brochs at Glenelg, just across the Sound of Sleat.<sup>46</sup>

#### SACRED SPACES AND STRUCTURES

The Gaelic words which designate sacred places are *nemed*,<sup>47</sup> *annat* (principal or original church), *teampall* (temple) and *cill* (cell and, by extension, church and

44. Pearson, Sharples and Symonds, *South Uist: Archaeology*: Roundhouses and the Life Cycle, 69–82.

45. I. Begg, 'My Architecture', *Architecture and Urbanism* No. 326 (November 1997), 113–19.

46. Personal conversation with George Mulvagh. See Miers, *The Western Seaboard*, 205. The building was completed in 2000.

47. S. Piggott, *The Druids* (London, 1968 and 1991), 63–64. Further appearances of *nemed* in Scottish place-names are made in S. Piggott, 'Excavations at Cairmpapple Hill, West Lothian', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* LXXXII (1947–1948), 118. See also W. J. Watson, *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1926 and 1993), 246–47. In Ireland, the term also survives into modern times, see Boyle, 'A Townland Called Nevitt', *Archaeology Ireland* (Summer 2005), 26–30.



graveyard). Amongst several names for burial places, the most common is *cladh* (also meaning a bank or ditch), and [stopping places on the routes for coffin bearers](#) were associated with them (see [III.3.d.](#)).

The continuing and very obvious presence of prehistoric monuments in the landscape provides an inescapable visual continuity, irrespective of how subsequent generations regarded their presence. There is abundant evidence from archaeology and Gaelic written sources, both of continuity of use of certain sites and awareness of some kind of significance attaching to them. The vestigial stone circle at Strathaird in the Isle of Skye is locally known as *Na Clachan Brèige* 'the Lying (as in falsehood) Stones'. Traditionally, they were used for the making of oaths, the stones being the equivalent of a Bible and potentially having the power to expose deceit.<sup>48</sup> The Black Stones in Iona were similarly used. The word *clachan* is also used to mean a small settlement with a church (see above), being derived from Irish Gaelic *clochán* meaning a monastic stone cell or group of cells such as the connected pair on Eileach nan Naomh in the Garvellochs.

These continuities include the naming of a stone circle at Kensaleyre as *Sòrnaichean Coire Fhinn* (Finn's Hearth). A standing stone, *Clach Diarmuid* near Taynuilt, was named after this hero of Gaelic mythology, but the stone probably precedes him by many centuries.

A simple count of stone circles in Britain, Ireland and Brittany as listed by Aubrey Burl gives 89 sites in England, 142 in Scotland, 30 in Wales, 103 in Ireland and the Isle of Man and 20 in Brittany. Of the 142 in Scotland, 66 are in the Gàidhealtachd, including Perthshire.<sup>49</sup> Such modern political divisions are only loose guides to distribution but do suggest a higher concentration the further north one goes, which is potentially significant if solar and lunar orientations are accepted as a normal feature of such monuments, implying a greater interest in or dependence upon the information they could provide.

Other stone circles are known to have existed or have been subsequently discovered. In May 1994, an oval stone circle was discovered at Layaval Hill, South Uist,<sup>50</sup> and an unrecorded standing stone circle at Kilbride on the Isle of Skye is known to have been taken down to form a nearby road bridge, under which twenty-three matching stones are visible today. The only remaining stone is *Clach na h-Annait*, an outlier which, according to local tradition, cast its shadow at midsummer towards the centre of the circle.<sup>51</sup>

48. N. MacKinnon, 'Notes from Lag an t-Searrach', *Comunn Eachdraidh Ealaghol agus na Torran Newsletter* 3 (Autumn 2001), 14.

49. A. Burl, *A Guide to the Stone Circles of Britain, Ireland and Brittany* (New Haven and London, 1995).

50. *Archaeology in the Hebrides* (An t-Earrach 1996), 2.

51. Information from Calum MacKinnon, Torrin, and personal observation.

There is evidence at a number of stone circles of selection of the stones by colour and texture. Whether these choices were motivated by aesthetic or other considerations we are unlikely ever to know, but it is clear that choices were made and followed some kind of rationale hard to imagine as being purely utilitarian. Nor were such choices necessarily confined to stone circles. Recently discovered Bronze-Age burial cists at Armadale on the Island of Skye had capstones of micaceous schist 'which would have shimmered in colour and have been a visible marker on the cists.'<sup>52</sup> Recent excavations at Brodgar Ness in Orkney also point to the selection of differently coloured stone in the Neolithic period.

Amongst those sacred spaces only marginally affected by the hand of man may be included rocking stones.

There is a proverb in use in Strath, '*tha e na shuidh air clach an turraman [sic]*.' 'He is sitting on the rocking-stone,' said of a man who wobbles between two opinions. This stone rests on the Glebe at Kilchrist. We may well say it *rests*. For until lately and for thousands of years it was kept rocking; but a few years ago the marble-workers threw it off the pivot and gave it rest.<sup>53</sup>

The term *clach-bràth* (judgement stone) is also used for rocking stone and such stones are thought to have been used for purposes of judgment or decision making. The stones of that name at Iona referred to by Pennant belong in a different category (see [I.3.c.](#)), but the black stone, *An Leac Dhubh*, was used for oaths and the like before it was destroyed by a 'native maniac'.<sup>54</sup>

The river-sculpted stones at *Taigh nam Bodach* in *Gleann Cailliche*, opening into Loch Lyon, are themselves natural forms supposed to represent a *cailleach*, *bodach* and *nighean* (old woman, old man and daughter). However, they have been provided with a shrine to give them shelter in the winter and are moved outside annually at Beltane and back inside at Samhain.<sup>55</sup> It was believed that they protected the cattle and ensured mild weather in winter and summer.<sup>56</sup> How old this undoubtedly pagan custom is cannot be determined but the ritual is still carried out and is known from 1888, when there were twelve stones involved, possibly associated with St Meuran and his disciples, though it seems

52. Anon., 'Bronze Age Cists and More Discovered at Armadale Dig', *West Highland Free Press* (6 November 2009), 17.

53. Rev. D. Lamond, *Strath in Isle of Skye* (Glasgow, 1913; Portree, 1984), 163.

54. E. M. MacArthur, *Columba's Island* (Edinburgh, 1996), 68.

55. A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London, 1967), 40 and Plates 12a and 12b.

56. R. MacIlleathain, 'Litir do Luchd-ionnsachaidh', *West Highland Free Press* (15 July 2011), 18, and (22 July 2011), 22.

likely that this was simply an attempt to Christianise the ritual.<sup>57</sup> However, as Ruairidh MacIlleathain comments,

A *cailleach* is a 'veiled one' and is the term used for a Christian nun (sometimes made explicit as *cailleach dubh*). That a decidedly non-Christian figurine, representative of a deity, and a Christian holy woman should share the same word, without any sense of pejoration, might be seen as a legacy of a broad spiritual heritage in the Gàidhealtachd.<sup>58</sup>

Today there are seven stones and the little shelter is annually rethatched.<sup>59</sup>

Underground sacred spaces, apart from burial mounds, must surely include *Uamh an Àrd-Achaidh* (High Pasture Cave) in Strath on the Isle of Skye. This underground stream was the location of many ritual offerings, over a considerable period of time, and an access staircase was built down to it (see III.3.c.).<sup>60</sup> With respect to its undoubted use during the Late Iron Age, it would at least partially endorse Fraser Hunter's having suggested that ritual *foci* in north Britain were in natural rather than architectural settings.<sup>61</sup>

St Maelrubha's preaching rock at Ashaig on Skye, the church cave on Rona, the open-air church at Glaic at Plockton, and many others associated *faute de mieux* with post-Reformation and post-Disruption gatherings, are also basically natural features. Norman Morrison describes just such a gathering, relating it directly to comment in classical literature on the druidic use of woods in place of temples:

... while gazing at their decorous, solemn attitude, together with the romantic surroundings, Tacitus' observation on the Druidical system of worship came forcibly before my mind: 'They thought it absurd to portray like a man or circumscribe within the walls of a house that Being Who creates the immensities of the Heavens. Hence the reason their places of worship were always in the open.'<sup>62</sup>

*Creag nan Tarbh* (the Rock of the Bulls) on the shores of Loch Lomond, however, is a case where nature was assisted. In 1825, Peter Proudfoot offered to conduct services in the area if a vestry and pulpit were provided for him. A

57. D. Campbell, *The Book of Garth and Fortingall ...* (Inverness, 1888), 70–72.

58. MacIlleathain, 'Litir do Luchd-ionnsachaidh' (22 July 2011), 22.

59. A. C. McKerracher, 'The Crooked Glen (2)', *The Scots Magazine* (June 1979), 270 and 274.

60. Steven Birch, site report forthcoming. See High Pasture Cave website.

61. Fraser Hunter, *The Carnyx in Iron Age Europe: The Deskford carnyx in its European context*, 2 Vols (Mainz, 2019), Vol. I, 56.

62. N. Morrison, *Hebridean Lore and Romance* (Inverness, 1936), 207.

pulpit-like hollow was blasted into the enormous rock in its even vertical face and a platform and doors were added to it. The name of the rock was then changed to The Pulpit Rock and services continued there into the late 19th century.

The congregation sits (if it chooses to sit) on rows of seats fronting the pulpit, these seats being made of low dry stone wall, cushioned with turf.<sup>63</sup>

The rock itself has pre-Christian associations with the great Gaelic epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge* or The Cattle Raid of Cooley, as it marks the spot where a red and a black bull fought, mirroring the fight between the white and the brown bull in the *Táin*.<sup>64</sup> A leading Gaelic scholar, John MacInnes, has asked,

Is it simply a coincidence that in several areas the sites chosen for Communion are also sites with strong pagan associations? In some instances the physical configuration of the terrain make the choice obvious. In others one wonders if there was not some vestige of memory that these were traditionally gathering-places; latterly perhaps for a clan muster or the like. At any rate, the natural amphitheatre of Leaba na Bà Bàine ('the bed of the White Cow') in Gairloch – the cow goddess of Gaelic tradition – was one of the famous sites; another was Beul Àthan nan Trì Allt ('The Ford of the Three Streams') in Skye. This location has associations with the 'fairies', the ancestral dead; tribal gatherings were normally held at or near immemorial burial grounds.<sup>65</sup>

MacInnes's speculation finds support in the childhood memories of the leading theologian John Baillie (1886–1960), where, as reported by his cousin Isabel Forrester,

Crowds gathered in solemn awe at the yearly 'communion season', and the holiness and the mercy of God came like a wind upon the souls of men.<sup>66</sup>

There were also practical reasons for services being held outside. Often there was no building big enough to contain the numbers that would gather for communion across parishes, perhaps once or twice a year, as described

63. Lord Cockburn, *Circuit Journeys by the Late Lord Cockburn* (1889), 187.

64. M. Newton, *Bho Chluaidh gu Calasraid* (Stornoway, 1999), 86–89.

65. J. MacInnes, 'Religion in Gaelic Society', in M. Newton, ed., *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes* (Edinburgh, 2006), 441. See also D. Meek, 'Gaelic: Gaelic and Evangelicalism after 1800', in Cameron, ed., *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology* (Edinburgh, 1993), 346.

66. J. Baillie, *Christian Devotion, Addresses by John Baillie* (London, 1962), 2.

for example by Osgood MacKenzie in *A Hundred Years in the Highlands* (1921, Chap. 14). Indeed, in the case of new congregations following the Disruption, there was often no building at all.

#### CRANNOGS

The word crannog is a direct borrowing into English from Gaelic *crannog*, Old Gaelic *crannóc*. The word has a number of meanings associated with wooden objects, including that of ‘wooden structure; lake dwelling’ attested from the 12th century in the Annals of Connacht.

Crannogs ... can be viewed as a type of site restricted in distribution to Scotland and Ireland and therefore important in clarifying the cultural development of the people in these countries. The construction of crannogs is no longer seen as a borrowing from outside but as a concept initiated and developed by the indigenous population.<sup>67</sup>

The evidence for such structures is evenly distributed throughout Scotland, with stone-built structures predominating in areas lacking timber, such as Loch an Dùin, Loch an Duna and Loch Bharabhat in the Isle of Lewis.

These were highly visible structures, often associated with good agricultural



Oakbank Crannog reconstruction, Loch Tay. Photo courtesy of Oakbank Crannog Centre

67. N. Dixon, *The Crannogs of Scotland* (Stroud, 2004), 28.

land, built on piles or stone foundations in the water, or existing islets, and accessed by a causeway as well as, naturally enough, by boat or coracle. There is an obvious implication of some kind of defensive value, but such sites also enjoyed instant access to unlimited fresh water, had potential as fishing platforms and also offered protection from predators such as wolves, never mind a degree of privacy – a luxury much valued today but not to be excluded from studies of the past.

Carbon dating shows that crannogs were in use over millennia:

It is possible that a timber crannog built in the Iron Age, was re-used in the Roman Period and the Dark Ages, was rebuilt of stone in the Medieval Period, possibly with a stone castle built on it, and was even used as a summer home in the seventeenth century AD.<sup>68</sup>

However, there is evidence from Eilean Dòmhnuille on Loch Olabhat in North Uist of origins in the Neolithic period.<sup>69</sup>

These unique and widespread structures can be seen in part as a natural response to the presence of over 30,000 fresh water lochs, 10,000 river and stream systems and 13,000 kilometres of coastline which make Scotland's underwater resource ‘one of the richest in the world’.<sup>70</sup>

#### DUNS AND BROCHS

*Dùn* is a Gaelic loan-word into English with a wide variety of meanings, including ‘fort, castle, tower’ as well as ‘hillock or mound’. The word is also used for that class of monuments known as brochs – *broch* or *brugh* being a north-east Scots variant of Old Norse *borg*, the Gaelic for a broch being *dùn Cruithneach* or Pictish fort, though many pre-date the historical Picts who are first named as such in the 3rd century AD.

There are literally hundreds of duns in the Gàidhealtachd and there is much archaeological discussion of their varying types, periods of development and relationship to semi-brochs, broch, and other structures including crannogs.

A list of the structures that might fall within this broad definition, around a single sea loch, gives some idea of their ubiquity. With the exception of Dùn Sgàthaich, all are drystone. Moving clockwise around the coast from the south-west of Loch Slapin on the Isle of Skye, one encounters Dùn Grugaig, Dùn Liath, an unnamed dun south of Kilmorie bay, Dùn Ringill, Dùn Mòr, Dùn

68. Dixon, *The Crannogs of Scotland*, 31. Further evidence of more recent use is given in M. Shelley, ‘The Isle of Loch Clunie: The key to the see of Dunkeld’, in *The Innes Review* Vol. 64, No.1 (Spring 2013), 39–42. Shelley prefers the term ‘artificial island’ to ‘crannog’.

69. Dixon, *The Crannogs of Scotland*, 18 and 23.

70. Dixon, *The Crannogs of Scotland*, 12. See also [I.3.a.](#) and [I.3.b.](#)



Beag, Dùn Kearnstach, Dùn Borereraig, Dùn Sgàthaich (Dun Sgaith), a dun on Eilean Ruairidh and Dùn Geilbt. Of these, only Dùn Sgàthaich is not basically circular or suggestive of circular form. The history of Dùn Sgàthaich reaches back into semi-mythological times, when whatever structure was present was less likely to have been rectangular, but what remains is the vestigial ruins of a castle known to have been in use from the 14th to the early 17th century.<sup>71</sup> Many of these structures were visible from each other across the loch, but whether the potential for communication was used is not recorded.

In modern times, they were often plundered for building stone or otherwise recycled. Dùn Ringill is a case in point, with rectangular structures raised in its interior, though the basic partial oval outer structure is still clearly evident.<sup>72</sup> Dùn Ringill was also comprehensively robbed for the building of Kilmorie House, a bridge and railway track having been constructed for the purpose.<sup>73</sup> Dùn Ringill has many broch-like features, and the diameter of its base, as with the diameter of the base of Dùn Liath, is such as to imply an original height close to 10 metres. But Dùn Liath was robbed for an extensive enclosure wall nearby, probably in the 18th or early 19th century. The dun's own circular wall, which was clearly visible on both its internal and external circumferences fifty years ago, has become almost totally overgrown, owing to changes in grazing practice. Soon its existence will only be known from maps and other reports. In the case of Dùn Grugaig, all that remains is a well-preserved promontory-enclosing wall and entrance, built with some massive stones. However the sandy Jurassic limestone of the bedrock erodes rapidly, being frequently undercut by the sea, and the evidence of a substantial rock fall on the south side of Dùn Grugaig must act as a caution in terms of interpreting what remains.

With respect to the potential height of a broch, at its base the thickness of the wall itself would naturally be the determining factor.<sup>74</sup> Dùn Chàrlabhaigh (Dun Carloway) on the Isle of Lewis, with walls 3 metres thick at the base, was over 9 metres (30 feet) in height, with a base diameter of 14–15 metres.

Dun Telve has a wall some 4 metres thick at the base and the building survives to a height of 10 metres, with a base diameter of 18.3 metres. Armit

71. R. Miket and L. Roberts, *The Medieval Castles of Skye and Lochalsh* (Portree, 1990), 49–54.

72. MacKay, *The Archaeology of Rural Settlement*, Appendix, 5.

73. M. Johnson, Talk given to Elgol and Torrin Historical Society on 29 September 2000, *Comunn Eachdraidh Ealaghol agus na Torran Newsletter* 3 (Autumn 2001), 2.

74. This is the basis of all drystone wall structures, which are normally in straight lines. Circular structures would allow for greater height. A ratio of 3:1 for height to width of base would be normal.



Dun Carloway Broch, Lewis. Photo © Barbara Purser

suggests that the relationship of the overall diameter to the potential height of broch-like structures may approximate a 1:1 ratio:

There is not one single broch tower that is taller than it is wide, which one might assume to be a reasonable definition for a tower.<sup>75</sup>

As only one broch survives more or less to its full height (the broch at Mousa in Shetland), this assumption cannot be verified. The spectacular ratios achieved by industrial chimneys (albeit using mortar), might suggest otherwise, and the architect Ian Begg has had a drystone tower built as a memorial to his son, in which the ratio of the height to the diameter is much higher than 1:1. The possibility that some structures exceeded a 1:1 ratio of height to diameter should therefore not be discounted.

Some brochs show that the ground floor was not necessarily levelled, nor was the first floor any great height above it. The reason is that cattle would be kept there. The usual explanation is that this was to protect them from raiders and this may occasionally have been the case, though here the matter of water supply becomes crucial within a very short period of time. A more obvious reason is that cattle were housed in this manner both to protect them in bad weather and to provide heat to the upper levels. This was, and in

75. I. Armit, *Towers in the North: The Brochs of Scotland* (Stroud, 2003), 59.

some areas still is, the practice in Europe, with the floors immediately above the sheep and goats' quarters being made of split chestnut with gaps between the planks to allow the heat to rise.<sup>76</sup> In examining the functions of the various features of brochs, the architect John Hope has included the management of animal warmth in his proposals on how rain and air flow were managed by such structures.<sup>77</sup>

#### PROMONTORY ENCLOSURES

One of the most spectacularly situated of promontory enclosures is that on Barra Head, at the extreme south-west point, which is also the top of the island. As with many of these enclosed areas (for instance at *Rubha an Dùnain*, Minginish, Isle of Skye), there is no water supply and there is virtually no opportunity for escape once a community has retreated behind the wall. What this means is that, as defensive structures, such enclosures can only have had limited value – especially if cattle were herded there for protection, which would greatly increase the demand upon stored water. But the Barra Head enclosure is also a spectacular and remarkably sheltered potential meeting place, for nature has provided it with grassy ramparts so that one can enjoy relative calm and silence within a considerable area. In such places, it might be useful to consider the possibility of their having had additional social functions beyond that of defence.



Beehive hut, Eileach an Naoimh, Garvellachs.  
Photo © John Purser

#### EARLY CHRISTIAN ARCHITECTURE IN THE GÀIDHEALTACHD

A long-lasting tradition in Celtic church architecture has been that of simplicity. The earliest surviving structures include beehive huts on *Na Garbh-Eileacha* (The Garvellachs), St Ronan's Chapel and Cell on North Rona (both partially re-

76. Such farmhouses were common in the Ardêches and were fundamental to the design of ancient farmhouses such as that at Gourgounel (personal experience).

77. Armit, *Towers in the North*, 74.



A natural tau cross, Eileach nan Naomh,  
Garvellachs. Photo © John Purser

constructed in modern times) and the ruins of the cashel on Canna. Remoteness of location and a total absence of any kind of ostentation are the dominant features.

They mirror the eremitic tradition of the early church in the rest of Scotland and Ireland and, in the case of the beehive huts on the Garvellachs, the choice of location may have been partly inspired by an existing remarkable geological feature: a natural rock in the form of a tau cross.

Circular forms appear to have been common, an early reference to a high round building being in Adomnán's *Life of Columba*. Reeves thought this referred to a stone round tower, but Anderson and Anderson point this out as an anachronism.<sup>78</sup> It could

have been a broch. Circular graveyards are also common and usually indicate a degree of antiquity.

The ideal of simplicity in church architecture in the Gàidhealtachd was never forgotten. Even before the Reformation, examples of any degree of elaboration are few and far between. Ruined churches at Balnakiel (Durness), Cill Chrìost (Strathaird, Isle of Skye), Borline (Loch Eynort, Isle of Skye), Howmore (South Uist) Teampall na Trionaid (North Uist) and many more besides are never ostentatious. St Clement's, Rodel, though commissioned by a clan chieftain, is a simple cruciform structure, albeit with a tower and an elaborate tomb. One has to travel to the east coast to find more elaborate structures in what were once at least partially Gaelic-speaking areas, such as the cathedrals at Fortrose, Elgin, or Dunkeld.

After the Reformation, financial restraints will undoubtedly have been a factor, but the tendency to a more determined simplicity of service in the Presbyterian church was clearly of fundamental importance and found appropriate response in its architecture – notably in the work of Telford. The thirty-two churches and forty manses designed by Thomas Telford were all based upon a very simple plan with few options for variation. Their locations differ widely, but the standard

78. W. Reeves, ed. and trans., *Life of St Columba* III, XVI (Edinburgh, 1874), 203. A. and M. Anderson, *Adomnan's Life of Columba* (London, 1961), XV, 494–95 and 113.



T-shape for the churches, with two entrances and a small tower for a single bell, was applied uniformly across the Highlands.<sup>79</sup> They nonetheless succeed because of Telford's fine sense of proportion and, after two hundred years, they seem to be a typically modest expression of Highland architecture, fitting in naturally with the iconoclasm of the Presbyterian ethos. Telford's churches and manses could, however, also be construed as an imposition of Enlightenment values, stripped down to their barest minimum for no better reason than economy of effort as well as materials. One can also note here Telford's influence on the Highland sculptor and painter Samuel MacKenzie, who, early in his career, supervised large teams of stonemasons for Telford, whom he greatly admired.<sup>80</sup>

Post-Reformation churches in the Gàidhealtachd frequently exhibit central raised pulpits, emphasising the primacy of the Word of God and the preacher as its purveyor. The iconoclasm of the Presbyterian churches in Scotland extends beyond architecture to objects. Few churches even display a cross and traditionally there are few if any images. Rightly or wrongly, this preference was connected with the ideals of the early Celtic church in the minds of ministers such as Thomas McLauchlan (see [V.2.b.](#)) and architects such as MacGregor Chalmers.



MacGregor Chalmers, Canna Presbyterian Church. Photo © John Purser

79. C. Morris, *Thomas Telford's Scotland* (Longhope, 2009), 10, 26–27, 29, 40–42, 44–45, 60, 68–70, 72, 76–77.

80. J. M., *Reminiscences of Samuel MacKenzie, R.S.A. nat.1785 – ob.1847*, RSA Archives, artist files.

A striking example in architecture is St Columba's Presbyterian church on Canna, with its small round tower. It was designed by MacGregor Chalmers in 1912 and clearly inspired by St Kevin's Kitchen, the 6th-century church at Glendalough in Co. Wicklow. Chalmers also designed Kilmore Church at Dervaig on Mull, with a more substantial round tower. Scottish precedents for round towers exist at Brechin and Abernethy, dating from 1120 and the 11th century, respectively. These were known as bell towers (see [IV.2.c.](#)). But round towers were not essential to Chalmers's ideals: Hoselaw Chapel, near Kelso, was built in honour of the ideals of Dr Thomas Leishman and asserted its simplicities without an overtly Celtic structure. It is still understood today in the light of those ideals: 'there are those links with the remote past of Christianity in Scotland embodied in the scale and style of the building.'<sup>81</sup>

This claim upon the remote past is made dramatically explicit by the Canna church, which is placed across the harbour in what might be construed as direct opposition to the expensively-built Roman Catholic church of St Edwards, dating from the late 19th century. Only a year after the Presbyterian Canna church's commencement, the Reverend Lamond writing in the Parish of Strath, Isle of Skye, in 1913 underlines the claims of the Church of Scotland to represent the true inheritance of the early Celtic church when he refers to

formalists who affected what the Iona monks would have called 'modern ideas'. They were up-to-date, imperially minded, proud of their alliance with far distant Rome. Ritualists they were, in the worst sense of the term – pressing upon the conscience of the church external trivialities as if they were eternal realities.<sup>82</sup>

This ideal of simplicity was not, however, universal. One striking example is St Conan's by Loch Awe. St Conan's is early 20th century, designed by its commissioner Walter Campbell and incorporating many different stylistic elements, most notably Norman and Romanesque. However, this was a church commissioned by an aristocrat as a personal memorial – just as was St Edward's on Canna, the latter being the only one without any sense of connection to the Celtic church, either in its dedication, its style or its sculpture, thereby perhaps emphasising its ties with Rome.

#### CASTLES AND MANSIONS

The Scottish and Irish hall-house was more domestic in character than most other types of contemporary castle, corresponding closely in this

81. J. R. Hume, 'simple but meaningful', in M. Armstrong, ed., *Life and Work*, May 2009, 31.

82. Lamond, *Strath: In Isle of Skye*, 45.



respect to the English fortified manor-house. The presence of numerous buildings of this class in Argyll is indicative of a high degree of local stability and prosperity ...<sup>83</sup>

Nonetheless, the placing of the many sea castles in the Gàidhealtachd is a significant feature. Dùn Sgàthaich, Castle Tioram, Castle Sween and others are sited strategically. Several are difficult of access except by boat, but they formed a network which could make use of rapid communication by sea and, in some cases, communication could have been made by sight. Ardtornish can be seen from Dunstaffnage and Dunstaffnage from Duart Castle. A flag could be used to convey information as, on occasion, could music.

The *piobaireachd* 'The Piper's Warning to his Master' relates to Colkitto's piper, who had been captured by a Campbell garrison in Duntroon Castle, Argyll, when his chieftain was away. He was allowed to perform the usual welcome to the unsuspecting chieftain who was approaching by boat. Sound carries well over water and the piper included enough mistakes in his playing to make his chief suspicious, so he retreated and gathered enough force to retake the castle. When the piper's trick was realised, however, his captors cut off the upper joints of his fingers and he died of his wounds. The castle being by then under siege from the MacDonalds, the body was buried under a flagstone. In the mid-1800s, the kitchen was renovated and a flagstone removed, revealing a skeleton missing its finger joints.<sup>84</sup>

Amongst MacDonald castles should be included those on the coast of Antrim, such as the spectacular Dunluce on a sea stack accessible only by bridge, and from which the kitchen collapsed into the sea, killing several of the staff. Kinbane Castle, reached only by a steep path, has a cave underneath it, suitable for a birlinn, and it was there in *Lag nan Sasannach* that an English siege party was surrounded and slaughtered. Kinbane and Colonsay castles were swapped between MacDonalds, underlining the extent of the MacDonalds' maritime control over the Sea of Moyle (the North Channel) in the 15th to 16th centuries. Kinbane was later given to the MacAlisters in reward for their loyalty to the MacDonalds.

The ruinous state of these castles today belies both their status and their appearance. Like the Scottish chateaux of eastern mainland Scotland, their facades were harled with pebble dash and white limewash and would have

83. Dunbar, 'The Medieval Architecture of the Scottish Highlands', 58.

84. Information from Alasdair Campbell of Airds based on the memory of Miss Elder, whose father had been the Poltalloch factor and had been given Duntroon to live in at the time. The story is corroborated by Robin Malcolm of Poltalloch, chief of the Clan and living in Duntroon. The piper's body was reburied a few hundred yards from the castle.

been bright and welcoming in effect, rather than gloomy and forbidding, as so often portrayed in Romantic and modern literature.<sup>85</sup> An example is that of Dunderave Castle on the western shore of Loch Fyne. The seat of Clan MacNaughton, its ruins were the inspiration for Neil Munro's novel *Doom Castle* (published in 1901), the piper in Highland dress carved in 1596 asserting the castle's cultural status. However, Munro's piper is damned with faint praise and the doomed Jacobite cause epitomised by the castle itself is contrasted with the Enlightenment architecture of Inveraray Castle. In fact, Dunderave was about to be sympathetically restored by Sir Robert Lorimer at the same time as he was working on Ardkinglas House. Dunderave shares a number of features with Gylen Castle on Kerrera, both by the sea and both imposing in their verticality and not to be despised in their form or intention.<sup>86</sup>

There is also a small but significant class of structures which are neither castles nor palaces, best described as Victorian mansions. Kinloch 'Castle' on Rum (Leeming and Leeming 1900) falls more naturally into this category, despite its castellations, and Ardtornish House, despite its eclectic references to 'Germanic towers'.<sup>87</sup> In certain respects, these were structures owing their character to romantic notions of a European past scarcely relevant to their situations. But, in the case of Ardtornish, the architect Alexander Ross built the entire structure in steel and concrete with sandstone facings – a remarkably innovative approach for the 1880s.<sup>88</sup> Likewise at Kinloch, electricity, central heating (the radiators being fashioned to imitate marble), double glazing and air conditioning for the billiard room were installed, along with a plumbing system by Shanks of Barrhead, one of the most sophisticated to be found anywhere in the world.<sup>89</sup>

Ardkinglas at the head of Loch Fyne was a Sir Robert Lorimer design, almost miraculously built from design to completion in two years. Scottish baronial in overall style, its crow-stepped gables may be an east coast import and its loggia Italianate, but it serves its location.<sup>90</sup> Likewise Mount Stuart in Bute, one of the great Gothic fantasies of Europe, is able to assert its Romantic and quasi-religious ideals in a context which makes such ideals more probable

85. <[www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/castle-tioram-structural-report.doc](http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/castle-tioram-structural-report.doc)>, 2.3, 2 – accessed 26 March 2015.

86. C. McKean, *The Scottish Chateau* (Stroud, 2001), 150–51.

87. Miers, *The Western Seaboard*, 82–83.

88. M. Miers and F. Raven, 'Ardtornish, Morvern, Argyll', in Marvin, ed., *Exploring Morvern* Vol. 2 (Ardtornish, 2010), 116.

89. M. Magnusson, *Rum: Nature's Island* (Edinburgh, 1998), 36–40.

90. Information from David Sumption, himself an architect and owner of Ardkinglas House.

than improbable. This is an important point. Romanticism cannot easily be dismissed as ‘mere Romanticism’ – not when it inhabits a land and seascape as vibrantly romantic as that of the west of Scotland. What is more, these Romantic ideals are still appreciated and even fostered. The superb Dovecot tapestries at Mount Stuart, depicting ‘The Lord of the Hunt’ and ‘The Time of the Meeting’, both designed by William Skeoch Cumming, also have Gaelic titles, the second with a rather different emphasis: ‘Is Èibhinn an Obair an t-Sealg’ in English means ‘hunting is delightful work’ and is a quotation from the 16th-century poem ‘Òran na Comhachaig’ (see III.1.d. and III.3.a.). Mount Stuart, for all its Gothic assertions and vast extravagances of Italian marble, was the first house in Scotland with electricity, locally generated of course; with a heated swimming pool and, like Kinloch, centrally heated. But while its foundations are indeed on the ground, its ideals are in the heavens. The stars in the ceilings are not made of paint, they are made of crystal backed with silver; the stained glass lights above the great central well depict the signs of the Zodiac in combination with the seasons. Many gods inhabit this structure but, like MacLeod’s Tables, the canopy of lights beneath which its owners may dine is ultimately that of the heavens not of Earth.

These structures and their like struggle to find a role in the 21st century and are often viewed, within the historical context of the Gàidhealtachd, with some suspicion and occasional derision. One may regard them on the one hand as having exploited the vast gulf between the wealthy and the poor, on the other as having at least provided labour in their construction, albeit attended by many ironies and occasional opportunities for local craftsmen. At the most basic level, one hopes it was worth the extra shilling a week to wear the Rum tartan to work and that the smokers, who were encouraged by twopence a day to help keep the midges at bay, regarded it as money easily earned.<sup>91</sup>

In certain respects, these buildings are magnificent follies, in others a remarkable record of social and architectural transition. It should not be forgotten that the buildings in themselves are innocent, are of great historical and architectural significance and their contents equally worthy of preservation. The Byron Cooper landscapes of Rum at Kinloch, along with the famous orchestrion and the vast bronze eagle gifted by the Emperor of Japan are but a few of the items which, in other contexts, might have been better cared for. As it is, decades of ownership by the Nature Conservancy and subsequently Scottish National Heritage have left both the buildings and their contents in a parlous state. Community ownership may, one hopes, lead to a greater sense of responsibility.

A sad example of the lack of care for the significance of a house and its furnishings understood as a whole is the fate of Kilmorie House at Strathaird,

91. Magnusson, *Rum: Nature’s Island*, 37.

Isle of Skye. Built for Sir William MacKinnon, and remodelled for Lawrence MacEwan, it was furnished with exotica garnered from MacEwan’s armament sales in Japan, contained fine carved mirrors and mantelpieces of local marble. When the estate was sold by the then owners in 1973, many such items were removed or auctioned off.<sup>92</sup> Ardtornish, on the other hand, is well cared for by its family owners, while also being available for public use and where one may view what amounts to an encyclopaedia of the finest Italian marble in the numerous superb fireplaces. Also impressive are the original curtains and wallpapers and the exquisite wood-carvings by Thomas Beveridge in the panelled drawing room. One hopes that one day the campanile will be restored to full working order. On the other hand, Mount Stuart is in excellent condition, asserting the genealogical rights of its forebears who, like the other Stuarts and like the Hamiltons, had been amongst the principal people of the land. Whether the Highland manner is still alive in architect Moshe Safdie’s startling example of a post-modernist approach at Corrour Lodge might well be open to question, but the recent restoration of Kinlochmoidart shows that the genre is now a valued asset rather than an embarrassing memory of social injustice.<sup>93</sup>

#### DISTILLERIES

One of the most memorable of architectural shapes associated with the Gàidhealtachd is that of the pagoda-like chimneys designed to carry off the smoke from the process of drying the malted barley in whisky distilleries. In Highland distilleries this was usually done using peat and required carefully designed ventilation. Charles Doig was the architect who, in the later 19th century, developed the pagoda design, which drew the air efficiently and protected the process from draughts and rain. Such design requirements were not unknown to the freelance distillers whose efforts were subject to legal objections, but the siting of a still was more concerned with the smoke from the fire that was used to boil the mash than from any drying process. A well-sited still would be concealed, possibly up against a rock face which would act as a chimney, but the incriminating evidence was not so much the site as the copper ‘worm’ in which the distillate was condensed, often in a barrel fed from a stream. In modern distilleries, the vapour being distilled is carried off through a basically horizontal funnel-shaped lyne arm of subtle design and angle, but a few distilleries retain the older worm-tub in which the distillate condenses more slowly. These worm-tubs are characteristic external features but are a rare sight today.

92. Johnson, Talk to Elgol and Torrin Historical Society, 2–3.

93. Mary Miers, *Highland Retreats: The Architecture and Interiors of Scotland’s Romantic North* (New York: Rizzoli, 2017), 262–71 and 158–67.

## LIGHTHOUSES

Amongst the most iconic structures anywhere in the world are the great Stevenson lighthouses situated around the north-west coastline of Scotland and, of these, the Skerryvore light (12 miles SW of Tiree), 42 metres tall, is perhaps the finest. There are many taller lighthouses in the world, but compared with Skerryvore they are built on easy terrain.

The dips and summits of the reef fit the walls so closely that it is difficult to work out which parts are nature and which artifice. The first few courses are black Tiree gneiss, as organic as the roots of an old tree. Further up, the stone is pinkish. From a distance it looks like the last surviving remnant of a petrified forest. Skerryvore has been described as the most beautiful lighthouse in the world.<sup>94</sup>

Alan Stevenson chose a hyperbolic curve for its basic form, as much for the sake of beauty as anything else. The Hyskeir light near Canna is another elegant Stevenson design, 39 metres high.

Not all the designs were by the Stevensons. *Creag Fhada* lighthouse at Port Ellen on Islay, built in memory of Lady Ellenor Campbell, with a doorway in Gothic style, was probably designed by David Hamilton. It is, however, in the square tower rather than the round tower tradition revived in the Battle of Largs Memorial of 1912 (see [V.2.b.](#)).<sup>95</sup> Nor were all the Stevenson designs without the influence of other traditions – as evidenced by the Egyptian style of Alan Stevenson's Ardnamurchan light.

But the Stevensons were Edinburgh people and the workmen were imported, so this achievement of engineering and aesthetics was peculiarly Highland only in one respect: that it reflected the extreme severity of the conditions which have imposed their requirements upon its form. The *Dubh Artach* lighthouse was built with granite from *Eilean Erraid* and has had to withstand waves of over 90 feet and, though the designers and builders may have come from the Lowlands, many of the keepers came from the Highlands. They have all been replaced by automation.

A good account of life on some of these lighthouses is given by Peter Hill in *Stargazing*, in which he reproduces Ross's explanation of the Flannan Isles disaster, in which all three lighthouse keepers vanished without trace, leaving an unfinished meal on the table. Ross served on the Flannan Isles light and he and his fellow keepers were nearly lost when out to check a crane and a sudden wave 170–180 feet above sea level caught them, one of them being nearly swept

94. B. Bathurst, *The Lighthouse Stevensons* (London, 1999), 146.

95. A. MacKechnie, 'Càrn air a' Mhonadh: Gaeldom's Monuments – Cairns, Crosses and Celticism', *Journal of the Scottish Society for Art History* Vol. 13 (2008–2009), 30.

over the cliffs.<sup>96</sup> The likelihood is that something similar happened back in 1900, only the men were not so lucky. Ross points out that the run of the sea under particular storm conditions might have been coming from as far away as South Georgia.

The subject of lighthouses cannot be left without mention of 'Òran an Taigh-sholais' (Song of the Lighthouse), by Dòmhnall Ruadh Caimbeul of Roag. This is a humorous song referring to the sparks from the fire in Neil's cottage being bright enough to guide fishermen. The song treats his house as though it were a true lighthouse and when a storm and high tide obliged him to abandon it with his family, it is imagined that the Commissioners of Northern Lights had to be placated. The delivery is more in the style of an ancient lay rather than a popular tune, which adds to the mock seriousness of the whole, which is wonderfully envisaged.<sup>97</sup>

## HYDRO-ELECTRIC SCHEMES

The primary effects of the development of hydro-electricity on the landscape are considered in [III.3.d.](#) Pre- and Post-Industrial Marks on the Landscape and the architecture of the power houses is discussed under that heading. As social spaces such schemes have mixed values. The regular change in water levels makes the construction of access for boats problematic and the effect of diminished water supply to the rivers below the dams can equally affect their quality for leisure pursuits. On the other hand, the Cruachan pump-storage scheme at Loch Awe is a major tourist attraction and only materially affects the water level of the 'header' loch.

## GATHERINGS, ENTERTAINMENTS AND SPORTS

Fanks (cattle and sheep folds) and grain-drying kilns were natural centres of social activity and many fanks still function as such. Other sites were valued for their acoustic properties, including sites with rock gongs ([IV.2.c.](#) Musical Instruments) or for their suitability for dancing out of doors ([IV.3.a.](#) Dance), or for clan gatherings, often beside a noted rock or rocky outcrop such as *Creag an Eireachdais* at Crarae in Argyllshire (see [III.3.c.](#)). In Balquhider, *Tom nan Aingeal* is pointed out as a place where Beltane fires were regularly lit (see [I.2.b.](#), [IV.1.c.](#)). Sites used as traditional places for sports such as shinty and golf are often well known locally but easily overlooked by others, an example being a relatively level area near Elgol Village Hall, on Skye, now reverting to hill grazing but formerly a shinty pitch. Hugh Barron has written interestingly on this subject,

96. Hill, *Stargazing* (Milsons Point, NSW, 2003), 96–98.

97. The Campbells of Greepe, *Fonn* (Stornoway 2013), 200–203 and Track 20 on the CD.



listing traditional playing fields in Laggan.<sup>98</sup> Also likely to be overlooked is the historic golf course at Askernish in South Uist, originally laid out by Old Tom Morris in 1891. Now restored, it is regarded by many golfers as one of the classic links courses of the world.<sup>99</sup>

#### GARDENS

The outstanding contribution made by the late Victorian gardeners to areas of the West Highlands should not be forgotten. Crarae Gardens in Argyllshire has made use of a fine natural gorge to create a Himalayan landscape, with over 300 varieties of rhododendron and with other areas given over to Andean and New World species – all growing and reproducing freely in the wild. Only a temperate [Celtic rainforest](#) could sustain such a venture, the character of which is paralleled by the fine Benmore Gardens near Dunoon, also in Argyllshire. Osgood Mackenzie's 1862 Inverewe gardens in Wester Ross are equally renowned for their ability to sustain exotica, ranging from Wollemi pines and Himalayan blue poppies to eucalyptus. Inverewe also features rhododendrons, and the Achamore Gardens on Gigha, the Colonsay House Garden, the Arduaine, Ardkinglas, Angus, Ardmaddy, Ardtornish and Mount Stuart Gardens all exploit the temperate climate.

At Benmore, the architect designed a fernery, one wall of which consists of a natural rock face of gneiss and, in a further response to the Victorian craze for ferneries, Ascog Hall on the Island of Bute has a fine sunken fernery.<sup>100</sup> However, such are the conditions in much of the west of Scotland that the natural habitat supports a huge variety of ferns on stream and river banks, particularly in those areas described as 'Celtic rainforest'.

The gardens mentioned above (and many others might have been listed) were fundamental aspects of the Victorian estates. The associated paternalism and dependence upon absentee landlords and cheap labour of such estates have been mercilessly exposed, but they also contributed to employment and left many fine structures and managed environments which might deserve a more balanced assessment than they have recently been accorded. JP

98. H. Barron, 'Some Notes on Laggan in the Nineteenth Century', *The Hugh Barron Papers* (Inverness, 2011), 442 and 478–85.

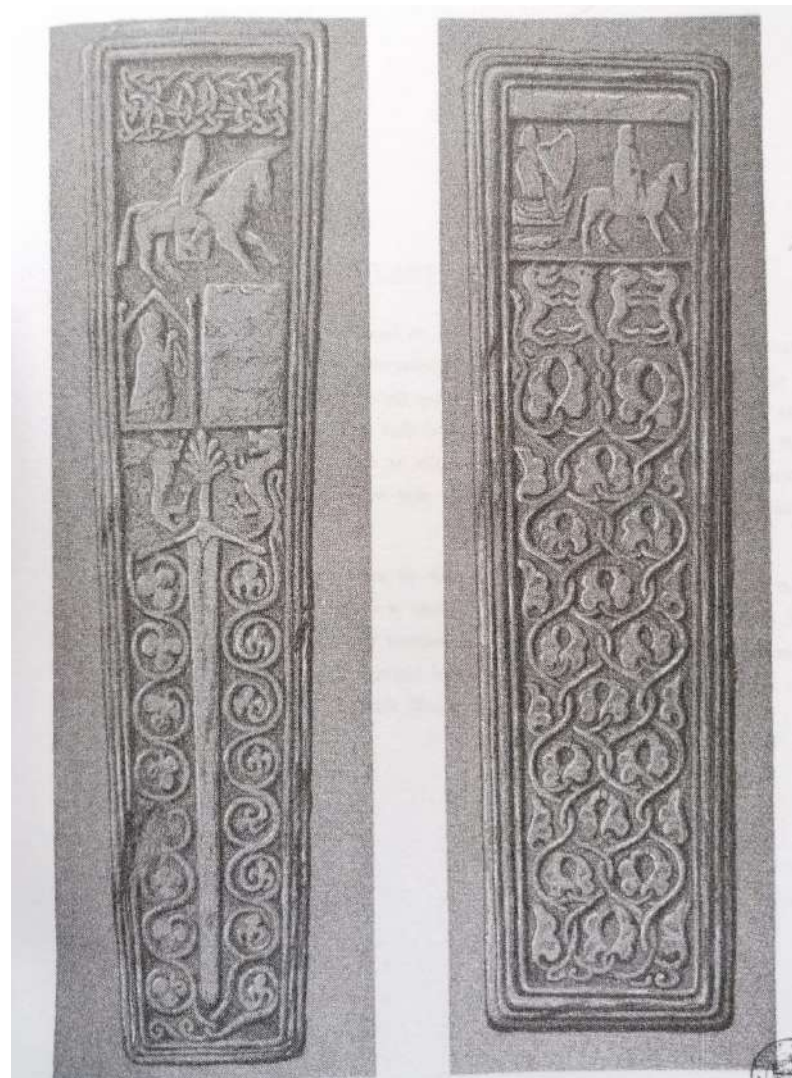
99. B. Wilson, 'Askernish Old: The world's number one golf course', *West Highland Free Press* (2 September 2011), 13. Also <<https://www.top100golfcourses.com/golf-course/askernish>>.

100. See S. Whittingham, *The Victorian Fern Craze* (Botley, 2011), for discussion and listing of ferneries.

#### IV.1.b. GRAVE SLABS

[The Heroic Life in Stone; Effigies and Coats of Arms; Parallels in Religious Poetry; Allegorical Interpretations; Conclusion](#)

The six hundred or so surviving examples of carved stones from the mid-14th to mid-16th centuries constitute the greatest body of material remains of Gaelic culture in Scotland. They have been illustrated in watercolour by



Two grave slabs from St Oran's Churchyard, Iona. Drummond, *Sculptured Monuments in Iona and the West Highlands* (1881), Plate XXVI

James Drummond in his *Monuments in Iona and the West Highlands* of 1881 and have been described in terms of chronology, influence and provenance by Steer and Bannerman in *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture in the West Highlands* of 1977. Through comparison of motifs, the authors establish the existence of a school of carving based at Iona, with three subsidiary schools in Kintyre, Oronsay and Loch Awe. The work of two lineages of masons, Ó Brolcháin and Ó Cuinn, is apparent in Iona and later, after the forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles, in Oronsay. Steer and Bannerman trace primarily Romanesque influence, especially in the use of acanthus leaves, though they also note Pictish, Anglo-Saxon, Viking and Gothic influence. With the exception of heraldic symbolism, they speak of the 'comparatively small part played by symbolism in the work of the West Highland sculptors', whose interest they say lay in producing 'realistic illustrations of objects from everyday life' rather than 'allegorical representations'.<sup>101</sup> More recent discussion of the stones has concerned their 'cultural biography', their 'births, deaths and multiple lives' in plaster, concrete or fibreglass replica, and how they should best be displayed and interpreted for the visitor.<sup>102</sup> However, contrary to the above, we suggest in this section that the grave slabs should indeed be read symbolically and allegorically just as the images of the panegyric and religious poetry of the period would have been read.

Grave slabs have a function to identify and commemorate the dead and to comfort the living. In the case of the West Highland grave slabs, which rarely bear inscriptions of a person's name or dates, this has to be done by visual means in accordance with society's Christian and heroic values of which we know a good deal through literary sources. Swords, crosses and plant scrolls are the commonest elements of design, identifying the élite members of society. Warriors were identified by swords and ecclesiastics by crosses (which are often highly decorated with foliage and roots, as if in promise of eternal life). The appearance of a sword



A cobbler's grave, Kiels. Drummond, *Sculptured Monuments in Iona and the West Highlands* (1881), Plate LXXI

101. Steer and Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture in the West Highlands* (Edinburgh, 1977), 4, 5, 174 and 176.

102. Sally Foster, 'Enduring Lives: Crafting stories from Iona's carved stones', talk given at Historic Scotland Iona Conference, 10–13 April 2012.

and a cross together perhaps marks the remains of a warrior who became a monk in old age. Plant scrolls which often appear as the sole element of design on a slab probably denote the grave of a chief, a vital link in the lineage of the clan. Metonymic symbols, where the related part represents the whole (see II.2.d.), mark the remains of certain professionals and craftsmen. Chalice, patens, cruets and combs (used before celebrating mass) would indicate the remains of a priest; a mitre or crozier, a bishop; while staffs of various sorts, bells and missals may indicate other ecclesiastics. The resting place of a smith is marked by pincers and anvils, a carpenter by a side-axe and hammers, and a cobbler in service to the chief by the sole of a shoe and leather cutter.<sup>103</sup>

#### THE HEROIC LIFE IN STONE

As the poetry of the same period works on a symbolic and, in particular, a metonymic basis, it seems highly likely that visual signs on the grave slabs might function similarly. That is to say, that Steer and Bannerman's 'realistic illustrations of objects from everyday life' are more than decorative. Like an elegy, the stones appear to commemorate and celebrate the life of the deceased. This can be seen in the two slabs from Iona with which we open this section. On the left, the sword by which the deceased won fame is surrounded by the tree of his genealogy initiated by two totemic beasts. Such beasts might be compared with the boar, bull, griffin or eagle which often appear as kennings or as charges on clan crests (see III.3.c.). Three other scenes fill the top third of the slab: the warrior on horseback, a kneeling woman saying the rosary and a casket. In the other slab, we have a different sort of plant scroll, initiated by four beasts, a huntsman on horseback followed by a dog and a harper in a boat. Another example from Keils (Drummond, Plate LVIII) gives at least seven indications of the deceased's prowess. In addition to his sword and flowering family tree, his place in heaven is indicated by an interlace cross, his patronage of the arts by a harp and book (?), and his wife by a mirror, comb and shears. A stone



A grave slab at Kiels, showing the deceased's prowess. Drummond (1881), Plate LVIII

103. Drummond, *Monuments in Iona and the West Highlands*, Pl. LXXI.



A grave slab inscribed with two pairs of shears, Iona. Drummond, *Sculptured Monuments in Iona and the West Highlands* (1881), Plate XII

inscribed with two pairs of shears in the Nunnery at Iona must indicate the burial of two nuns.

These are exactly the same images as appear time and again in panegyric poetry commemorating the reputation of the deceased. All the stones are divided into discrete areas, exactly as an elegy would indicate, verse by verse and episode by episode, a chief's genealogy and fertility, his piety and generosity to the church, his prowess as a warrior and hunter, his patronage of the arts, his fame among poets and the excellence of his wife. Such grave slabs can thus be read as a reiteration of the values of heroic society, their scenes echoing lines such as these:

Mac Diarmada ó Mhuigh Luirg líonmhoir,  
lánchara ceall agus cros ...

Míolchoin gharga ar iallaibh órdha  
ag Tomaltach 's ceann ar cách ...

Cuirn is cuaich is copáin chumhdaigh  
i gcúirt líonmhoir Locha Cé ...  
iomdha sleagh is lann is lúireach ...

*A true friend of churches and crosses  
is MacDiarmada of thronging Magh Luirg ...*

*Fierce deerhounds on gilded leashes  
are owned by Tomaltach, lord of all ...*

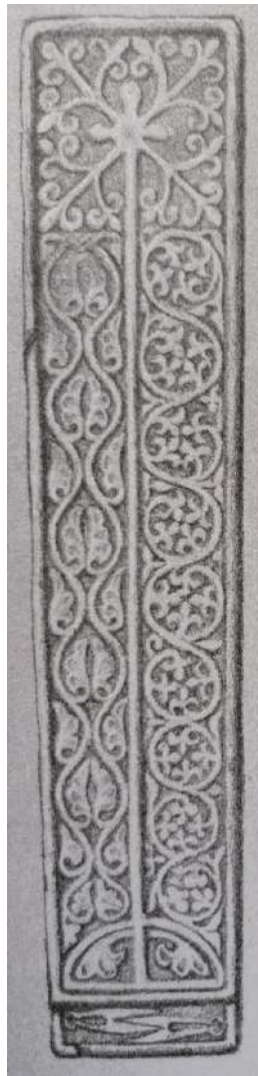
*Horns, quaichs and engraved goblets  
in the thronging court of Loch Cé ...*

*numerous his spears, swords, breast-plates ...*<sup>104</sup>

A great variety of swords are depicted and, if James Drummond is correct in suggesting that the masons may have drawn round actual swords,<sup>105</sup> the motif might have indicated who their owners were. (Incidentally, swords also form a key to dating, the two-handed claymore or *claidheamh mòr* superseding the single-handed sword around 1500.) When a sword appears as the sole motif on a slab, it is reasonable to ask if their cross-like form allows them to perform the dual

104. 'Lámh Aoinfhir Fhóirfeas i nÉirinn', in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire* (Edinburgh, 2007), No. 21.

105. Drummond, *Monuments in Iona and the West Highlands*, 3 and 15.



function of identifying their owner and of symbolising his life in Christ who has vanquished death.

A similar variety in the depiction of galleys suggests that the masons had no fixed template but copied their form from existing ships, with marked differences in the number of oar ports, in the terminals of prow and stern, the construction of keel and stern, and the reefing points of the sail. However, their depiction was conventionalised on one point – as to whether the sail is spread, furled or completely absent – and this varies according to the school of the carving.<sup>106</sup>

#### EFFIGIES AND COATS OF ARMS

Effigies of ecclesiastics, warriors and their wives of course offer the clearest indication of the identity of the deceased. Warriors are invariably depicted in full armour, displaying their wealth and status (this is true also of their depiction in hunting scenes when full armour would be unnecessary and impractical). Depiction of their weapons, armour and clothing is both detailed and decorative (see IV.2.a and IV.2.d.). Their clan is often confirmed by coats of arms carved onto their shields, perhaps showing the lion rampant to indicate the clan's lineage from the sons of Míl. The galley, castle and sun that appear as discrete designs in the recess of Sir Alexander MacLeod's tomb at St Clement's Church, Rodel, Harris, are probably taken from the clan shields of members of the family, the castle appearing on the shield of the MacLeods of Harris and Dunvegan, the sun on the shield of the MacLeods of Lewis and the galley on the shield of many clans – the MacDonalds, MacLeans and MacInneses to name three. As with English and European effigies, lions representing valour often appear under a knight's feet, and small dogs representing fidelity at a woman's feet. Two small lap dogs with collars appear on either side of Prioress Anna MacLean of Iona, as was common in depictions of clerics at the time, probably as much a marker of identity and status as of faith.<sup>107</sup>

#### PARALLELS IN RELIGIOUS POETRY

In addition to the parallels between the iconography of the stones and praise poetry, there are further parallels to be drawn, not surprisingly, with the Classical Gaelic religious poetry of the period.<sup>108</sup> Hunting and sailing images are common to

106. Steer and Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture in the West Highlands*, 180–83.

107. See Drummond, *Monuments in Iona and the West Highlands*, Pi. VII (44); Kathleen Walker-Meikle, *Medieval Pets* (Boydell Press, 2012), 75–77.

108. Meg Bateman, 'The Themes and Images of Classical Gaelic Religious Poetry,' unpublished PhD thesis, University of Aberdeen (1991), Chap. 1, Sections 14, 15 and 18 for the martial, hunting and sailing metaphors.



the stones, to heraldry and to panegyric and religious poetry. In the poetry, Christ is the huntsman, or even the hound, in pursuit of mankind on his foe's territory, hoping to return with us to heaven. Riding on his cross, he follows his quarry onto the hill of Calvary where he is injured in the wood of the nails. He has to postpone taking his quarry back to heaven till the day of Judgement.<sup>109</sup> In an allegory of sailing, man makes for heaven over the sea of life (as discussed under IV.2.e. Boats). Many different themes can be worked into this scenario: man may be aided by the currents of Mary's grace and impeded by the sea monsters of the devil; the saints may constitute the crew, and the cross the mast; the journey must be made before the storm of judgement and so on. It is possible that the spread sail in an allegorical reading of the galley motif mentioned earlier represents voyaging to heaven, while the furled sail in the carvings of the Iona school represents a journey completed and the safe arrival of the soul. With Mary as the helm and Christ as the mast, the poet's voyage over the waves is no trouble to him:

Mé ó phurt ag taisdeal na dtonn  
as a n-ucht ní haisdear liom  
mo sdiúir tar buinne an bhean mhall  
crann siúil mo luinge an Fear fionn.<sup>110</sup>

The symbols of the floriated cross and the tree of life might similarly represent the fulfilment of the scheme of redemption, whereby the tree that caused Christ's death at the Crucifixion becomes the fruitful tree of our salvation:

Trom an toradh tháinig dhe  
crann saortha na sé líne.<sup>111</sup>

*Heavy the fruit that came from the salvation cross of the six ages.*

#### ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

It may be possible to read the iconography of the grave slabs simultaneously in heroic and allegorical terms. The tomb of Sir Alexander MacLeod or Alasdair Crotach mentioned above is a canopied wall grave, completed in 1528, nineteen years before his death in 1547. It is different in form, content and location from the majority of grave slabs from the Iona school. It is unusual both in being situated not in Iona but in the chief's own land in Harris and in its quantity of religious illustration. Alasdair's effigy in black gneiss is surrounded by a depiction of Christ flanked by the four beasts of the gospels, by the Apostles and Evangelists and

109. See, for example, poems No. 63, 67, 68 and 76 in Lambert McKenna, *Aithdioghluim Dána* 2 parts (Dublin, 1939 and 1940) (Irish Text society Volumes XXXVII and XL).

110. Lambert McKenna, *Dán Dé* (Dublin, 1922), No. 27, v. 35.

111. See Lambert McKenna, *Aithdioghluim Dána*, No. 67, v. 21.

censing angels. The central scene in the recess is of the Virgin and Child, flanked by two bishops, one of whom is St Clement, to whom the church is dedicated. There are also depictions of the sun, of a ship, a hunt and a castle, and a scene of the Archangel Michael with his scales, overlooked by Satan. The sun may simultaneously be heraldic (it appears in the crest of the MacLeods of Lewes) and refer to both Alasdair and Christ. In contemporaneous Gaelic poetry, both sacred and secular addressees are compared to the sun and the resurrected Christ is seen as *sol invictus*.<sup>112</sup> Likewise, the ship, hunt and castle have both heroic and allegorical interpretations, being illustrative of the home of the deceased in this world and the next. The castle may be a stylised depiction of the castle of Dunvegan (Steer and Bannerman have conclusively shown it is not a realistic portrayal) and of the fortress of heaven where Mary will receive and feast her kin.<sup>113</sup> The point is more clearly made in the sketch of Anna MacLean's grave slab on Iona where the three-turreted building behind her, filled with angels, says something both of her position as prioress of the nunnery and of her existence in heaven.



Alasdair Crotach's tomb, St Clement's, Rodel, Harris.

By Gvdwiele – Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0

112. For chieftains being praised as the sun, see, for example, the inauguration poem 'Fíor Mo Mholadh ar Mhac Domhnaill' addressed to John, the last Lord of the Isles, in 1450, in which he is termed *Grian na nGaidheal* 'the sun of the Gaels', in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 18: 7. See also Nos 1: 28; 23: 54 and 59: 87 for praise as the sun in sacred and secular contexts.

113. See, for example, 'Éistidh Riomsa, a Mhuire Mhór', in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 6.

The scene on Alasdair Crotach's tomb of the Archangel Michael and Satan weighing the sins of man may have echoes in the many scenes of fighting animals on other grave slabs, perhaps representing the opposing forces of God and the devil in their battle for our souls. A dog appears with an eagle on its back, a seal and an otter play tug o' war with a salmon on a slab at Kilmory, a goose pursues a frog.<sup>114</sup> The sword, at one level a marker of the identity and resting place of a warrior, may also be a shorthand of the martial metaphor by which Christ has overcome Satan. Christ comes to earth on a military expedition to help mankind regain his rightful home of heaven which he lost on signing his allegiance to the devil in the Garden of Eden. Christ bridges the gap of death with the Cross, but is wounded while fighting with the devil and will only be able to lead the faithful to heaven at His second coming.

#### CONCLUSION

That the grave slabs are literally an interface between the temporal and eternal also suggests they should be read in more than one way. Steer and Bannerman are right in describing the decorative function of the everyday objects that identify the deceased, but, in addition, a comparison with panegyric and religious poetry shows their metonymic function in signalling the values of a heroic age and the religious allegory of redemption. If we interpret scenes of hunting and sailing, of fighting animals and of crosses bursting into leaf as referring both to this world and the next, then these grave slabs speak of a joy in life and a confidence in salvation that is in marked contrast to the *memento mori* of hourglass, skull and crossbones of 17th and 18th century tombstones. The Reformation of course forms a watershed between the two periods. The celebratory note of the earlier grave slabs is magnified by the rhythmic and dynamic qualities of their design. All down the west coast there are literally hundreds of grave slabs in which the conventional elements of swords, crosses, foliage, animals, galleys, hunting scenes etc. are assembled in beautiful and harmonious variation. It is no coincidence that this art was produced in the relative security of the patronage of the Lordship of the Isles in the period known as *Linn an Àigh* 'the era of glory'. MB

#### IV.1.c. CAIRNS, STANDING STONES AND CROSSES

[Introduction; Sculptural Continuities: Cairns; Fertility Symbolism and the Cross; Sculptural Continuities: Standing Stones and Standing Crosses; The Sign of the Cross; The Cross and the Tree; The Celtic Cross; Revival of the Celtic Cross and the Standing Stone](#)

<sup>114</sup> See Drummond, *Monuments in Iona and the West Highlands*, Plates LXVII and LXXVIII.

#### INTRODUCTION

The implicated generations made  
This symbol of their lives, a stone made light  
By what is carved on it.

The plaiting masks,  
But not with involutions of a shade,  
What a stone says and what a stone cross asks.

Something that is not mirrored by nor trapped  
In webs of water or bag-nets of cloud;  
The tangled mesh of weed  
lets it go by.

Only men's minds could ever have unmapped  
Into abstraction such a territory.

In Norman MacCaig's poem 'Celtic Cross', the stone itself is initially distinguished from the cross. The stone makes a statement; the cross asks a question. The carving upon it – the plaiting – masks the distinction between the two and, crucially, makes an abstraction of the plaiting of water, cloud and weed. But it is an abstraction from a beautiful territory and the envisaging of the symbol of the cross as an abstraction from a map had precedent in the minds of the 7th- to 8th-century Gaelic monks, for whom the four limbs of the cross were points of the compass, with Christ facing West:

Dextera Christi saluauit sinistram mundi laeua eius saluauit dexteram  
partem capud orientem redemit plante occidentem.<sup>115</sup>

With His right hand He saved the left of the world, i.e. the North; with His left hand He saved the right parts of the world, i.e., the South; His head redeemed the East, and His feet the West.<sup>116</sup>

Later in his poem, MacCaig transgresses other categories with

... links of song whose sweet  
strong choruses  
Are those stone involutions to the eyes  
Given to the ear in abstract vocables.

<sup>115</sup> The Würzburg Glosses from which this passage is taken are dated to c. 700 AD by Thurneysen and Stokes in W. Stokes and J. Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* Vol. I (Cambridge, 1901), xxiii–xxv, and the Latin original is quoted from the same volume from p. 636.

<sup>116</sup> Quoted in H. Richardson, 'The Cross Triumphant: High crosses in Ireland', in M. Richter and J.-M. Picard, eds, *Ogma: Essays in Celtic Studies in Honour of Próinséas Ní Chatháin* (Dublin, 2002), 114.

The possibility that MacCaig's metaphor had a reality in terms of designs actually representing music has been considered elsewhere (see IV.3.c.) but, although the design may mask the distinction between stone and cross, it does not obliterate it:

The stone remains, and the cross, to let us know  
 Their unjust, hard demands, as symbols do.  
 But on them twine and grow  
     beneath the dove  
 Serpents of wisdom whose cool statements show  
 Such understanding that it seems like love.<sup>117</sup>

For MacCaig, the Celtic Cross, itself formed of the land, embodies a sea and skyscape, the implicated generations and the contrasts and continuities of their lives. It is a complex poem, reaching out well beyond the usual concerns of iconographers, into a world both more profound and seemingly more directly connected to the cultures from which the carved symbol stones and their successors arose.

The title of MacCaig's poem is important. It assumes the reader will already have a mental image of the type of cross about which he is writing and he feels no need to describe its basic formal characteristics. Even for a commentator such as Donald Meek, whose *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* is highly critical of the concept, the term 'Celtic cross' is not questioned. On occasion, Meek uses quotation marks for the Celtic part of the term, but elsewhere he accepts it and he does not examine its form or meaning.<sup>118</sup>

The number of early stone carvings throughout Scotland which incorporate the symbol of the cross is remarkable – and some of the finest of these survive in the Highlands and Islands. Iona alone is mistakenly reputed to have had 360 crosses. The figure is a conflation of two statistics, but there is no doubt that a number of carved crosses was ordered to be destroyed around 1640 and that this purging of crosses was not confined to Iona.<sup>119</sup>

It is not the purpose of this section to review the considerable body of existing literature on the cross and the Celtic cross in Scotland, though some of that literature will be referred to in what follows. There are also many references elsewhere in this volume to associated social and spiritual continuities and Michael Newton provides a most useful analysis of some of these in *Warriors of*

117. N. MacCaig, 'Celtic Cross', in D. Gifford and A. Riach, eds, *Scotlands – Poets and the Nation* (Edinburgh, 2004), 142–43.

118. D. Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* (Boat of Garten, 2000), 11, 13, 174, 250.

119. J. MacPhail, 'The Cleansing of I-colum-cille', *Scottish Historical Review* Vol. XXII (1925), 14–24; E. M. MacArthur, *Columba's Island* (Edinburgh, 1996), 20.

*the Word*.<sup>120</sup> Rather, this section will approach its title under the general heading of Sculptural Continuities, with specific attention to pre-Christian standing stones, evidence for fertility symbolism, the sign of the cross in Gaelic tradition, the cross and the tree, the significance of the form of the Celtic cross itself, and revival of the Celtic cross. The related geometry is referred to in IV.3.c. Geometry and Number Symbolism.

#### SCULPTURAL CONTINUITIES: CAIRNS

*Càrn* (cairn), is a Gaelic loan-word into English. Cairns are amongst the most ancient monuments in the Gàidhealtachd and are still an important feature of the culture, chiefly in the form of memorial cairns, but also simply to mark the top of a mountain or the route of an important track, as well as being associated with funeral routes (see III.3.d.).

In some cases, a mountain-top cairn may also be a burial or memorial cairn. The *cailleach* (old woman) of *Beinn na Caillich* beside Broadford on the Isle of Skye is supposedly buried under the summit cairn. Pennant reports her as being a giantess from the days of the Fianna, though she has also been identified locally as a Norse princess known as 'Saucy Mary'.<sup>121</sup> The cairn has not been excavated, so no definitive statements can be made about it.

The earliest written evidence we have for a memorial cairn is for Artbranan. It comes from Adomnán's *Life* of Colum Cille and dates from c. 700 AD.

*Ibidemque socii congesto lapidum acervo sepeliunt – and there his companions buried him, building a cairn of stones.*<sup>122</sup>

The cairn associated with Columba himself – *Càrn Cùl ri Èirinn* – may in reality have been a boundary marker rather than the place where Columba turned his back on his own country.<sup>123</sup> However, in one case, the boundary marker became the equivalent of the cairn at The Battle of the Spoilt Dyke at Trumpan in north-west Skye, where the slaughtered MacDonalds were ranged against a drystone dyke, which the MacLeods then toppled over the bodies to save the trouble of burying them.<sup>124</sup>

In 1883, MacDonald Field & Co. of Aberdeen designed the Massacre of Glencoe Memorial. It consists of a 'tall slender Celtic cross rising from a rustic

120. M. Newton, *Warriors of the Word* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2009), Chap. 6, esp. 223.

121. T. Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides* (Chester, 1774), 287.

122. Anderson and Anderson, *Adomnan's Life of Columba* (London, 1961), 274–75.

123. MacArthur, *Columba's Island*, 10.

124. A sung version of part of this story is in F. Tolmie, *One Hundred and Five Songs of Occupation from the Western Isles of Scotland*, repr. from *JFSS* 16 (1911) (Vol. IV Pt 3) (Llanerch, 1997), 200–01.



shaft base, raised on rubble cairn.<sup>125</sup> A similar cross designed by Allan Mollison was erected in Glencoe in the Southland region of New Zealand in 1998.

Amongst many modern cairns, including mortared cairns, is that associated with the clans who fought at Culloden and raised by Duncan Forbes in 1881. Individual clans are remembered by memorial stones. Cairns in memory of individuals include the memorial to Neil Munro at Glen Aray; designed by Dr Colin Sinclair, it was erected in 1935.<sup>126</sup> Sinclair's design brings together the cairn and the Egyptian obelisk. There are similar elements in *Cuimhneachain nan Gaisgeach*, designed by Will MacLean and built by Jim Crawford as memorials to the heroes of the Lewis Land Struggle. One of these, built in 1994 at Balallan, is in the form of a cairn with three entrances and an internal stair; another, built in 1996 at [Aignish](#), is in the form of a split cairn.

#### SCULPTURAL CONTINUITIES: STANDING STONES AND STANDING CROSSES

A stone cross set up in the landscape was, as a simple matter of fact, a standing stone. Pre-Christian standing stones are not infrequently found in association with Christian sites. One such is *Clach na h-Annaid* in *Cille Bhrìghde* (Kilbride), Isle of Skye. The word *annaid* means 'church' but is always associated with the first established church in its area. In the case of the *clach* or standing stone at Kilbride, the church to which it refers is that of Brigid, now no more than an adjacent grassy knoll above her sacred well, *Tobar na h-Annaid*. However, the stone was originally an outlier to a stone circle recycled as a bridge and has simply been adopted by name into a Christian context.<sup>127</sup>

Also adjacent to a Christian site is the standing stone surmounting a hillock beside the cross on Canna. The standing stone at Camusvrachan in Glen Lyon has crosses marked upon both faces, and close by it is a slab with a hole in it, through which the plague was said to have entered. Adomnán is supposed to have placed his crozier in this hole, thereby bringing the plague to a halt.<sup>128</sup> Such continuities find some support in the more recent work of archaeologists such as Martin Carver.<sup>129</sup>

125. <[www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/sc-6876-glencoe-village-massacre-o](http://www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/sc-6876-glencoe-village-massacre-o)>.

126. A. MacKechnie, 'Càrn air a' Mhonadh: Gaeldom's Monuments – Cairns, Crosses and Celticism', in E. McArthur, ed., *Journal of the Scottish Society for Art History* 13 (2008–2009), 31.

127. The original stones, twenty-three in number, can be seen under a bridge over a stream in Kilbride. According to information from Calum MacKinnon (Torrin), the outlier cast its shadow at mid-summer towards the centre of the circle.

128. A. C. McKerracher, 'The Crooked Glen (2)', *The Scots Magazine* (June 1979), 268–69.

129. M. Carver, 'Early Scottish Monasteries and Prehistory: A Preliminary Dialogue', *The Scottish Historical Review* LXXXVIII, 2, No. 226 (October 2009), 339.



*Clach na h-Annaid*, Isle of Skye. Photo © Bonnie Rideout

Finding good, large stones suitable for carving or, indeed, for structural purposes, is not a simple matter. Such stones are frequently recycled.

A significant number of symbol stones are reused prehistoric single standing stones with prehistoric cup-marks, or which may originally have been part of settings of prehistoric henges.<sup>130</sup>

These re-uses were not confined to pre-Christian monuments. Cup marks (usually dated to the late Neolithic) are known on cross slabs from Glamis and Meigle. Stones with Pictish symbols on one face had Christian symbolism carved onto the other and some bear inscriptions in the Pictish ogam alphabet.<sup>131</sup> The alphabetical interpretation is agreed but the meanings derived therefrom are not (see [II.3.c.](#)).<sup>132</sup>

There are also carved stones whose symbolism might be claimed for Christianity but which may well precede and even preclude it. Such is the Llywel stone from Brecknock in Wales.<sup>133</sup> The Riasg Buidhe from Colonsay, referred to

130. G. and I. Henderson, *The Art of the Picts* (London, 2004), 167.

131. E. Sutherland, *The Pictish Guide* (Edinburgh, 1997), 11.

132. J. Higgitt, 'Early Medieval Inscriptions in Britain and Ireland and Their Audiences', in D. Henry, ed., *The Worm, the Germ and the Thorn* (Balgavies, 1997), 67–68, 71.

133. M. Seaborne, *Celtic Crosses of Britain and Ireland* (Botley, 2009), 15.

below, is also a decidedly equivocal example. The *Leac Dubh* 'by which the chiefs swore' was said to have been broken up in the 18th century. It was located at the cloister entrance at Iona Abbey, the surviving one of two such stones. A drawing of the stone suggests the image of a human form upon it.<sup>134</sup>

In the oldest surviving Scottish Gaelic texts entered in the 12th century into the 9th- to 10th-century Book of Deer, the same word *coirthe* as is used for the stone to which the Celtic hero Cú Chulainn is tied is used for a standing stone which acted as a monastic boundary marker.<sup>135</sup>

The image of Cú Chulainn tying himself to a standing stone as he dies from wounds sustained defending his people from an overwhelming army has obvious parallels with Christ's martyrdom on the cross. These associations were not overlooked in Ireland at the time of the Easter Rising of 1916. Oliver Sheppard's famous sculpture of Cú Chulainn is placed in the GPO in Dublin's O'Connell Street, where the Proclamation of the Republic was read out. It is immediately evocative of a descent from the cross or pieta. Given that the cross symbolised the crucifixion of Christ, it inevitably implied an association with Christ's human form.

This necessary association of the form of the cross with the form of a body crucified upon it was particularly obvious in free-standing crosses but present on cross slabs which were also placed in a standing position and carved on both faces. Such crosses, Celtic or otherwise, at a basic level told a story and represented a sacrificial human being.

Standing stones have long traditions of telling stories and representing people. A 9th-century anecdote in the 12th-century Book of Leinster, tells how the great Gaelic epic *Táin Bó Cuailnge* was told to Muirgen by the gravestone of Fergus mac Róig, the information being provoked by the incantation of a poem to the stone:

Gabais Murgen tra láid den líic amail bid Fergus fessin adgladad

*Muirgen chanted a poem to the gravestone as though it were Fergus himself.*<sup>136</sup>

Muirgen is enveloped in a mist for three days and nights, during which Fergus appears to him and recites the whole of the *Táin*.

Such pre-Christian, probably druidic explanations of the power of stones (which might have been construed as miracles or even as events), were not exclusively Celtic, nor were they without their impact upon Christianity. In the Icelandic *Cristne Saga*, Bishop Frederick from the Southern Isles (British Isles)

134. Information provided by Mairi MacArthur from her own and her father's archives.

135. K. Jackson, *The Gaelic Notes in the Book of Deer* (Cambridge, 1972), 32 and 35. R. MacilleDhuibh (Ronald Black), 'The Quern-dust Calendar – Standing stones and Norsemen', *West Highland Free Press* (14 September 2007).

136. E. Windisch, *Die Altirische Heldensage Táin Bó Cuailnge* (Leipzig, 1905), LIII. The spelling is as given by Windisch. Translation by T. Kinsella, *The Tain* (Dublin, 1970), 1.

bursts a stone in which an ancestor was supposed to live, simply by singing at it:

Coðran lézt eige mundo fyrre skíraz láta, en hann visse hvár meirr maette, byscop eða ár-maðr í steinenom. Efter that fór byscop til; steinsens, ok soeng yfer thar til er steinnenn brast í sundr.

*Codran said that he would not let himself be baptized till he knew which was the mightier, the bishop or the ancestor in the stone. Whereupon the bishop went to the stone and sang over it till it burst asunder.*<sup>137</sup>

The concept of a stone having a memory has Biblical precedent in Joshua's raising up of a stone 'for it hath heard all the words of the Lord which he spake unto us: it shall be therefore a witness unto you, lest ye deny your God.'<sup>138</sup> It is not, therefore, too difficult to accept the blend of pre-Christian and Christian ritual connected with stones, implicit in the following incantation collected by Alexander Carmichael:

Dia na gile, Dia na grèine

...

Is mise an clèireach stucanach,  
Dol timcheall nan clach stacanach

*God of the moon, God of the sun,*

...

*I am the cleric established,  
Going round the founded stones ...*<sup>139</sup>

Identifications of stones with people persist into modern times, including the present. In Fetlar in the Shetland Isles, there is a stone circle reputed to be the frozen forms of trowies:

The Hylta Dance is a great tune - a Trowie tune from Shetland, the trows being the little people that live among the hills in Shetland. There's a— the story that goes wi' this is that there's a crofter that's been fishing off the rocks one night, and he comes back home over his croft – he comes upon the trows havin' a dance – dancin' in a ring – they're doin' a ring dance, and with the trowie fiddler in the middle. Now the sun came up on the trows and they all turned to stone - while the crofter was still watchin' this stone circle emerged so we have that still in Shetland – and it's called - in Fetlar

137. *Cristne Saga* 1.4., in G. Vigfusson and F. York Powell, eds and trans., *Origines Islandicae* (Oxford, 1905), 377–78.

138. The Bible, Book of Joshua, Chap. 24, v. 27.

139. A. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* II (Edinburgh, 1972), 168–69.

actually, the island of Fetlar and it's called Hylta Dance.<sup>140</sup>

Likewise, Martin Martin reports of the stones at Loch Carloway in Lewis,

Some of the ignorant Vulgar say, they were Men by Inchantment turn'd into Stones; and others say, they are Monuments of Persons of Note kill'd in Battle.<sup>141</sup>

And John Morisone wrote before that, that

It is left by traditione that these were a sort of men converted into stones by ane Inchanter ...<sup>142</sup>

The name *Na Fir Bhrèige*, given to the standing stones on the slopes of Blashaval on North Uist, translates as The False Men. One legend associates the three stones with three traitors, another with three Skye men who deserted their wives.

These structures still provoke a response. The concrete circle 'Achill-henge' on Achill Island, Co. Mayo, was a wonderfully subversive structure set up by the maverick Joe McNamara, evoking an equally wonderful satiric and ironic appreciation from David O'Dwyer:

Like many profound artistic statements, Achill-henge's impact was immediate, with a striking image of the circle ... It struck a chord not just because of its vast scale (at 4.5m high, 30m in diameter and close to 100m in circumference, it's a big 'un) but also because of the clandestine nature of its construction. This involved 30 trucks being driven from Galway loaded with concrete slabs and a team of workers operating in the gloaming of a late November weekend.

Above all, the structure demands interpretation ... Is it a shrine to the folly of the ghost estates that litter the country and despoil our landscape? Here, echoing both Stonehenge and the Poul nabrone dolmen, in the Burren, Achill-henge takes its lineage from those ancient burial sites, acting as a metaphorical grave for the hubris of our property bubble.

Or is it a modern-day fairy fort, with cold concrete supplanting organic trees?<sup>143</sup>

140. Chris Stout in interview with John Purser, *Scotland's Music*, BBC Radio Scotland Programme 1, broadcast January 2007.

141. M. Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (London, 1716, and Edinburgh, 1976).

142. J. Morisone, *A Description of the Lewis by John Morisone Indweller There* (c.1680), quoted in G. Ponting, *Callanish & Other Megalithic Sites of the Outer Hebrides* (Glastonbury, 2007), 10.

143. D. O'Dwyer, 'Anglo avenger's masterwork could live up Turner Prize', *The Irish Times* (3 December 2011), 18.

#### FERTILITY SYMBOLISM AND THE CROSS

Standing stones, along with pillars and spires, are frequently given phallic significance for obvious visual reasons. This is a particularly well known association in Brittany (see below), but there are at least two striking examples of fertility symbolism directly carved on crosses in the Gàidhealtachd.

The oldest fertility figures known in Scotland are those of the 'Orkney Venus' and a companion figure from Grobust Bay. They have been dated to c. 3000 BC.<sup>144</sup>

More recent, and unequivocally sexual, is the [Ballachulish goddess](#). The alder wood from which this markedly female figure was carved has been radio-carbon dated to around 600 BC. The 1.5 metre tall figure has quartz eyes, a smiling mouth, small but unmistakable breasts, holds her hands on her belly and has a prominent slit for her vulva. These pre-Christian carvings, however, are not without equivalents claimed for Christianity, but with their sexual details ignored. In particular, there is a remarkable figure from Riasg Buidhe on Colonsay, which is described with some delicacy as:

a Latin cross terminating at the top in a bearded human head and at the foot in a fish-like forked tail. It is filled with mouldings which form spirals in the side-arms and curve in the shaft to suggest the legs of a figure.<sup>145</sup>

This stump-armed 'cross' appears to have been a direct inspiration for one of the sets by



Riasg Buidhe, Colonsay, 'cross' side.  
Photo © John Purser

144. <<http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/orkneyvenus>>.

145. I. Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands* (Edinburgh, 2001), 140.



Colquhoun and MacBryde for Ian Whyte and Massine's ballet *Donald of the Burthens* (see IV.3.a.). It is difficult not to view this figure (dated variously from the 7th to 9th century AD) in a somewhat different light: a bisexual image in which the spirals form breasts and the head of the fish the vulva, possibly even a penis entering the vulva. This reading is reinforced by 'the blatant phallic nature of the reverse'.<sup>146</sup> The 'reverse' is indeed blatant and represents a circumcised penis or a penis with the foreskin withdrawn, with detail of the glans clearly in evidence. Fisher neither illustrates nor mentions this 'reverse'.

The carving is made of local epidotic schist and is unlikely to have been imported. It was moved from the settlement at Riasg Buidhe, below which is a small cave with an excellent natural recess and rocks for tying up a boat. There are also two undoubted crucifixion scenes with a naked Christ on the Inishkea and Duvillaun slabs in north-west Ireland, where spirals are placed either side of the groin, suggestive of testicles, and with emphasis on the breasts on the Duvillaun slab. What such features may imply is some kind of continuity of sculptural traditions of the sort put forward by Françoise Henry and referred to in VI.1.a. [Origin Myth](#).<sup>147</sup>

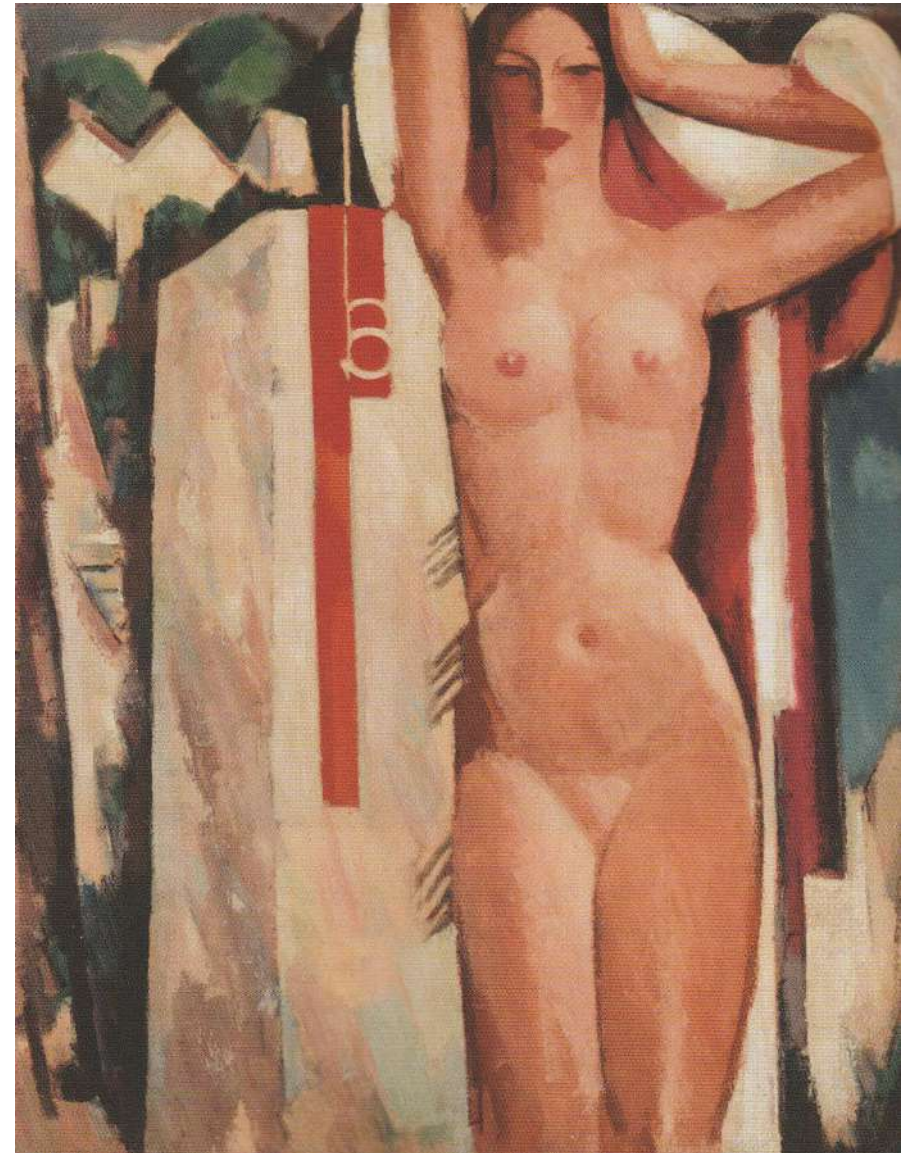
In the 20th century, J. D. Fergusson adopted the same potent imagery in his *Megalithic* of 1931. In this striking painting, his wife Margaret (Meg) Morris is placed naked beside a standing stone. Her mons veneris is shaved, her breasts strong and full. Her right side is shaded, almost invaded by the shadow of the stone and the ogam inscriptions thereon (see II.3.c.). She has been bathing

<sup>146</sup> S. Foster, *Picts, Gaels and Scots* (London, 1996), 97.

<sup>147</sup> F. Henry, *Irish Art* (London, 1965), 203–04.



Riasg Buidhe, phallic side.  
Photo © John Purser



J. D. Fergusson, *Megalithic* (1931)

and holds over her head a red and white bathing robe the belt of which, with its two securing rings, has been carefully draped over the phallic masculinity of the stone. She has divested herself for its reception and the title of the painting tells us so. She and the stone are one.

A further example of a fertility figure, either adopted by or amalgamated with Christianity, can be seen in the unequivocally male genitalia on the cross from North Rona.

This imagery is more readily understood in the light of the fertility associations of Ronan widely acknowledged to this day in Brittany at Locronan. There the Grande Troménie, held every six years at the summer fire festival of Lughnasa, passes by the stone known as ‘St Ronan’s Boat, St Ronan’s Pulpit, or “the stone mare”’. A woman sitting upon it is supposed to be cured of infertility.<sup>148</sup> St Ronan is well established as a fertility god in Brittany, where no surprise was evinced at the presence of genitalia on a cross associated with him. It is worth observing that designations such as ‘cross’ and ‘reverse’ when referring to a stump-armed object such as the Riasg Buidhe, the convex side of which is phallic, are cultural assumptions, not facts.

Not depicted in association with the cross, but commonly incorporated into the structures of some churches, are the Sheila-na-gigs. Sheila-na-gig is a name given to naked carved figures found on churches in Ireland and Scotland and dating from the late medieval period. The term (from at least as early as the 17th century) is either derived from Irish Gaelic *Síghle na gCíoch* or *Síle-ina-Giob* (‘the old hag of the breasts’ or ‘the old hag on her hunkers’). Nakedness is paramount. The legs are splayed, the hands sometimes arranged to display the genitals.<sup>149</sup> There are two such figures on the tower of Rodel church in Harris, along with a carving of



St Ronan's Cross at Eoropie.  
Photo © John Purser

148. Niall Campbell, Duke of Argyll, *A Breton Pilgrimage: The Grand Troménie of Locronan ...* (London, 1914), esp. 20 and the 1st and 5th illustrations. Also D. F. Melia, ‘The Grande Troménie at Locronan: A major Breton Lughnasa Celebration’, *Journal of American Folklore* Vol. 91, No. 359 (January-March 1978), 528–42.

149. E. Kelly, *Sheela-na-Gigs* (Dublin, 1996), 5.

the MacLeod heraldic animal, the bull. One of the figures (on the west wall of the tower) was, however, male: ‘was’ because his penis (which he was holding) was shot off at the request of the Countess of Dunmore by her ghillie.<sup>150</sup> The female figure is on the tower’s south wall. It is this figure which provides the cover image for *An Leabhar Liath – 500 years of Gaelic Love and Transgressive Verse*, which expresses graphically in verse that such visual traditions were and are not isolated phenomena in the culture.<sup>151</sup> There is also a naked female figure above a window on the south wall of the nunnery on Iona; the Kildonan figure in the Isle of Eigg is a doubtful example, but the Taynuilt female figure inserted on the south main wall has an unequivocal hole to represent the vulva. The Craigievar Castle example, probably retained from a late 16th-century phase of the building, is that of a grotesque female. The soles of her feet are pressed against the sides of her face and she exposes her genitalia with her hands.<sup>152</sup>

Such humour abounded in the Gàidhealtachd, as also evidenced by McLagan’s article on Gaelic erotica<sup>153</sup> and John Shaw on ‘What Alexander Carmichael Did Not Print’.<sup>154</sup> Elgin Cathedral boasts a 15th-century monk whose testicles would have been prominently displayed were it not that he was carved on a ceiling vault boss and the genitalia were therefore concealed by the shield he holds,<sup>155</sup> and, from the same period, Glasgow Cathedral’s side chapel includes a figure exposing his buttocks in order to defecate on the devil. Such figures are common throughout Europe, but not (as on the North Rona cross) on the symbol of the cross itself where, even if Christ were depicted naked, it would never be in the apparent absence of all other features. On the North Rona cross, the genitalia are accompanied only by a possible shadowy presence of arms and a head.<sup>156</sup>

There is a further relevant category in the form of carvings of what are assumed to be punishments. These include a fragment from Rosemarkie and

150. J. MacAulay, *Silent Tower* (Edinburgh, 1993), 24–25.

151. Peter MacKay and Iain MacPherson, *An Leabhar Liath – 500 Years of Gaelic Love and Transgressive Verse* (Edinburgh, 2016).

152. M. Maclellan, ‘Facing the future’, *Scotland in Trust* (Spring 2009), 41.

153. R. C. McLagan, ‘Gaelic Erotica’, *Kryptadia* Vol. X (Paris, 1907), 307–08.

154. John Shaw, ‘What Alexander Carmichael Did Not Print’, *Béaloideas* Vol. 70 (2002), 99–126.

155. M. Shelley, ‘The Bawdy Stonemason’s Last Laugh’, *Leopard* No. 361 (December 2009/January 2010), 26–29.

156. A rather more ambiguous figure of a naked woman appears, with pitcher, flask and bowl, above the main fireplace of Kinlochaline Castle. The castle itself was reputedly erected by Dubh-Chal, of the Clan MacInnes. Dubh-Chal is a semi-mythological figure – a ‘black scullion’ whose association with drink would square with the castle’s Gaelic name *Lionnag* – see R. Black, ed., *The Gaelic Otherworld – John Gregorson Campbell’s Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland ...* (Edinburgh, 2005), 394–95.



another from Pittensorn in Perthshire from the mid-8th to mid-9th centuries, the latter showing serpents biting the genitals of two combatants.<sup>157</sup> The bearded figure either holding or hiding his genitals on a fragment of a free-standing cross from Strathmartine in Angus is described as similar to the ‘wrist-holding men whose lustful sins turn them into half monsters’ on the Pittensorn panel.<sup>158</sup> The Strathmartine figure is certainly similar to the figure in the canon tables of the late 8th-century Hiberno-Saxon Barberini gospels, whose genitals are being eaten, but the temptation to interpret these images as purely admonitory should be counterbalanced by the possibility of their being assertively humorous.

What these examples in stone tell us is that the boundaries between Christian and pagan are not always clearly defined. As MacCaig asserts, the meaning of a stone can go much deeper than what has been carved upon it, and for people living within and beyond the Gàidhealtachd with any awareness of their cultural inheritance, many stones have significances far beyond their simple appearance.

#### THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

The use of the sign of the cross in writing in Scotland is first referred to in Adomnán’s Life of St Columba. Finding the folding door of King Brude’s *dùn* closed to him, Colum Cille made the sign of the cross upon it.<sup>159</sup> The Latin reads *crucis imprimens signum*, which is taken by some to mean that he actually marked it on the door.<sup>160</sup> The sign of the cross was in common use for benediction in particular and, as such, was also used for magical purposes to banish evil spirits or restrain wild animals, including the Loch Ness monster.<sup>161</sup>

The nails of the cross feature in a curious legend that they were made especially and that, in the absence of bellows, a tinker woman used her skirt to create a draught. It was forbidden to do this in the Outer Islands, as was turning the peat burning side upwards, as the smith who made the nails is supposed to have done.<sup>162</sup> A related custom was that no metal was put in the ground (therefore no ploughing) on Good Friday.<sup>163</sup>

The sign of the cross was used from very early times as a form of protection,

157. Henderson, *The Art of the Picts*, 155–56.

158. Henderson, *The Art of the Picts*, 192.

159. Anderson and Anderson, *Adomnan’s Life of Columba* (London, 1961), 408–09.

160. Henderson, *The Art of the Picts*, 159.

161. F. E. Warren, *The Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church*, with a new Introduction and Bibliography by Jane Stevenson (Woodbridge, 1987), 145. Also *Adomnan’s Life of Columba*, 227.

162. A. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* III (Edinburgh, 1976), 260–61.

163. Black, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, 549.

notably in the form of a *lorica* or breast-plate poem. In this stanza, from a poem reliably attributed to Muirgú, one of Colum Cille’s successors on Iona between 965 and 981, the symbol is once again associated with the points of the compass (see above).

Cros Chríst sair frim einech  
Cros Chríst síar fri fuined.  
Tes, túaid cen nach n-anad,  
Cros Chríst cen nach fuirech

*Christ’s cross eastwards facing me, Christ’s cross back towards the sunset.  
In the north, in the south unceasingly may Christ’s cross straightway be.*<sup>164</sup>

An interesting relationship between the symbol of the cross and pagan superstition is connected with the granite trough used by pilgrims to Iona cathedral to wash their feet. The trough is marked with a cross but is also known as ‘the cradle of the wind’ for

By blowing on the water, a wind could be brought up from any desired direction.<sup>165</sup>

The discovery in 2012 of a ‘cursing stone’ on Canna which fits the hollow stone at the base of the Canna cross is the first of its kind in Scotland. The cursing stone itself is incised with a simple cross.

#### THE CROSS AND THE TREE

The Cross is ultimately derived from a tree, in fact and in symbolism. On the crosses in Ireland, however, foliage was ‘seldom used’.<sup>166</sup> In any event, the concept of the cross as a tree undoubtedly had a major place in the tradition in Scotland (see [III.2.a](#)):

Mallachadh ort, a chrithinn chrann!  
Ort a chrochtadh Rìgh nam beann.

*Malison be on thee, O aspen tree!  
On thee was crucified the King of the mountains.*<sup>167</sup>

It is also clear that the symbol survived not just as a symbol of suffering and redemption or regeneration, but as a charm:

164. G. Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics* (Oxford, 1956), 32–35 and 186–187.

165. MacArthur, *Columba’s Island*, 67–68.

166. H. Richardson, ‘The Jewelled Cross and Its Canopy’, in C. Bourke, ed., *From the Isles of the North* (Belfast, 1995), 185.

167. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* II (Edinburgh, 1972), 104–05.



Crois na craoibhe ceusda  
 Air creuchd dhruim Chrìosda  
 Dha m' shaoradh bho eucail,  
 Bho ghéige, bho ghisne.

*May the cross of the crucifixion tree  
 Upon the wounded back of Christ  
 Deliver me from distress,  
 From death and from spells.*<sup>168</sup>

Even the fairies could be regarded as occult in this context:

Crois Chrìosd eadar mi 's na sìth  
 Ta stigeadh a mach na steach ...

*Be the cross of Christ between me and the fays  
 That move occultly out or in ...*<sup>169</sup>

Protection from the occult in the form of a sprig of rowan is carved onto a simple home-made, free-standing cross in the graveyard at Kilmarie in the Parish of Strath on the Island of Skye.<sup>170</sup>

The Kilmarie cross dates from the first half of the 20th century and its basic form of a flat stump-armed cross is an ancient one – from as early as the 8th century on North Rona – and relates also to a pair of crosses on Eilean Fhianain on Loch Shiel:

the group of plain crosses on Eilean Fhianain, of probable 18th-century date, is an impressive final expression of a tradition which began twelve centuries earlier.<sup>171</sup>



Cross at Kilmarie Graveyard, Isle of Skye.  
 Photo © John Purser

168. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* II (Edinburgh, 1972), 72–73

169. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* III (Edinburgh, 1976), 262–63.

170. The cross was made by the brother of Murchadh Thearlaich, Neil MacKinnon the piper, and he made it for his mother Margaret Cameron of Keppoch, who died in May 1922.

171. Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture in the Highlands and Islands*, 23, Illustration 86.

Sprig of rowan on cross at Kilmarie Graveyard, Isle of Skye. Photo © John Purser

There is no difficulty in the identification of the rowan at Kilmarie, as rowans are one of the few trees with clear *oppositi foliae*, and the lanceolate shape of the leaves is equally clear. The only other local tree with these characteristics is the ash, but it can be safely assumed that a rowan is intended because rowans are associated with graveyards and protection of houses. They are supposed to keep the souls of the dead at ease and also prevent them from troubling the living.



#### THE CELTIC CROSS

By no means all Scottish crosses are 'Celtic' crosses, but very many of them are, and the mere fact that the term 'Celtic cross' is internationally understood calls for attention in the Gaelic context, though what follows is deliberately inclusive of Pictish and other examples of the form. The term refers to crosses which incorporate a ring or circle – otherwise known as wheel crosses. Of 159 examples of crosses on early Christian monuments in Scotland listed by Romilly Allen, 57 are wheel crosses of which a substantial proportion is Pictish. In addition, Allen lists 12 circular crosses with expanded ends to the arms or with five bosses.<sup>172</sup> Allen's list was made over a hundred years ago but gives a general idea of the frequency of the form – a frequency sometimes ignored in later literature on the subject.<sup>173</sup>

The bringing together of the two symbols of the circle and the cross predates Christianity by many centuries.<sup>174</sup> In the pre-Christian tradition, the circle is

172. J. Romilly Allan, *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland ... Part II* (Edinburgh, 1903), 46–55.

173. M. Herren and S. Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity* (Woodbridge, 2002), makes only one passing reference to Pictish art and then only to the Class I animal forms (p. 19). There is no mention whatever of Pictish cross forms in the relevant section on the cross (ibid., 191–95).

174. J. Streits, *Sonne und Kreuz* (Stuttgart, 1977), transl. by H. Latham, *Sun and Cross* (Edinburgh, 1984), 108–11.

usually taken to represent the sun and/or the cosmos, and the cross represents the human figure and the Tree of Life. Bringing the two together can be interpreted in a number of ways: as representing Man in the cosmos or as indicating the four main positions of the sun at the equinoxes (east and west, left and right) and solstices (south and north, top and bottom). This latter interpretation of the sun wheel may have been derived from the patterns of sun dogs.<sup>175</sup> A beautiful example of a design which would answer that description is on the spherical silver bowl from St Ninian's Isle in Shetland from c. 800 AD. The circle may also be seen as a nimbus or halo – the 8th-century Evangelary of Godesscal shows Christ with a wheel cross nimbus. More prosaically, there may also be a parallel with the Roman garland of victory.<sup>176</sup>

Murdo Macdonald's comments on the persistence of circularity in early visual thinking in Scotland are apposite here and worth quoting extensively:

This tendency in early Scottish forms to pertain to the circular or the spherical seems to reflect an enduring interest in the circle for its own sake. Why has this shape been so persistent in the prehistory and early history of Highland art? The way that stone circles refer to both sun and moon may give us a clue, and Celtic crosses have been seen as having their origin in such cosmic movements also, Christianised versions of sun-wheels.<sup>177</sup> The sun and moon are of evident importance as indicators of day and night, season, time and tide. However, in prehistoric times, they also provided templates of circularity which were hard to find elsewhere. Today we live in a world in which spheres and circles are everywhere. There is an abandoned football against every fence.<sup>178</sup> Prehistoric people did not have such everyday reference points for the circular. With the exception of sun and moon very little could have been perceived as such. And experience of spheres would have been, for example, of the flattened spheres of apples or berries. So when we read of early cultures venerating the sun or the moon, we should remember that in doing so they were venerating the circle and perhaps the sphere.

This fascination with circularity extends into the Christian era. The Peter Stone at Whithorn is an example of a Ninianic ringed cross design dating from the 7th century or perhaps earlier. In this type of cross the ring is

175. N. Pennick, *The Celtic Cross* (London, 1977), 24–25.

176. Herren and Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity*, 192–93.

177. See Jakob Streit, *Sun and Cross: The development from megalithic culture to early Christianity in Ireland* (Edinburgh, 1984).

178. The most common pattern of football is in fact a truncated icosahedron, made spherical by internal air pressure.

engraved around an engraved cross, and that cross is itself composed of the arcs of a circle. Versions of this design can be found also in Raasay, Orkney and Shetland, and much later on a grave slab probably dating from the 14th or 15th century, at Kilmartin in Argyll. A Shetland example is the Pictish cross slab from Papil, now in the Royal Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. The Papil stone's original site was not far from St Ninian's Isle, itself the site of a major find of Pictish metal work, and on several of these objects the ringed cross design can again be found. So this particular, Ninianic, type of the ringed cross is found from perhaps the 7th to perhaps the 15th century. Perhaps the Ninianic cross was more popular among those who spoke a Brythonic Celtic language, such as Pictish. The other type of Celtic ringed cross is closely associated with Gaelic speakers. It has two surviving examples in Scotland which can be regarded as typical, St Martin's Cross which stands outside the Abbey in Iona, and the Kildalton Cross in Islay. St Martin's Cross has short transverse arms. It may be that these were intended to be extended in some way. However, at an early date, this particular short armed form became accepted as appropriate in its own right. This is clear because it is used as a model in Pictish cross slabs, for example at Crieff in particular, and to a lesser degree also at other locations such as Ardchattan. The adoption of the ringed cross on Pictish cross slabs is of considerable interest, not least for the heavily stylised, but quite different, treatments at, for example Aberlemno and Meigle. The Kildalton Cross has more equal arms than St Martin's, and links more closely in style to the collapsed St John's Cross, now reconstructed in the museum at Iona Abbey. These crosses are transformed into the disc headed crosses of the West Highland School of the 15th century, but the old pattern is also retained, for example at Kilmartin, and also as represented on a grave slab at Iona,<sup>179</sup> and the 16th century Clanranald Stone from South Uist.<sup>180</sup>

The cross is essentially a dualistic form with its vertical and horizontal lines. By comparison, the circle, having no beginning and no end, represents Eternity and the wheel of the sun and is not itself dualistic, but when placed around the cross, it can be seen as a form of limitation or at least containment.<sup>181</sup> The combination of the two was widespread in early Christian iconography, with examples as far east as Georgia and, in some instances, apparently borrowing design features from

179. Iona IV (a), on Steer and Bannerman's numbering.

180. M. MacDonald, paper written as background for this publication.

181. H. Whone, *Church Monastery Cathedral: An Illustrated Guide to Christian Symbolism* (Longmead, 1990), 59–62.

decorated metalwork.<sup>182</sup> Brendan Purcell goes so far as to suggest a continuity of perception from the pre-Christian Boyne culture to the high crosses. Referring to the 'cross-in-circle of the cruciform passage graves', he writes:

This key symbol of cosmic integration was still available in the early Bronze Age, and was perhaps still understood and adapted by the builders of the Irish high crosses almost four millennia later.<sup>183</sup>

The Bronze Age example, the Tedavnet gold discs, are thought to represent the sun.<sup>184</sup>

Such cross-in-circle structures are also found in Scotland, Maes Howe being the classic example, with its cruciform interior, but the stone circle at Callanish also combines the two elements. Maes Howe and burial cairns in general are also manifest images of fertility, and it seems likely that there are echoes of that imagery in the phallic form of the Riasg Buidhe cross on Colonsay with its spiral breasts and the genitalia on the North Rona cross, though neither incorporates the circle (see above). It is worth referring here to the strange incised slab from Killeevin in Argyllshire with its pointed, possibly bearded, head reminiscent of that on the Riasg Buidhe, but with hands folded above the belly which may be represented by the two concentric circles below which is an equal-armed cross. Here the circles and cross are kept resolutely separate.<sup>185</sup>

The Celtic Cross, then, is not so much unique in its conception as in the frequency as well as variety of its presentation of cross and circle simultaneously, and in many design aspects which take the whole symbolic conception into new realms. The proposal that this combination was consciously symbolic can scarcely be denied. In the Celtic-speaking west, where there were no actual crucifixions, the cross itself was of necessity a symbol. To place a circle around it involved additional labour and, in the case of the free-standing stone crosses, the addition of the circle required greater skill and patience on the part of the stone carver. Far from acting as supports for the horizontal arms of the cross, the carving of a circle penetrated by holes offers additional opportunities for the stone to break and may have been derived from earlier wooden cross designs.<sup>186</sup> If so, the transference to stone was virtuosic rather than unoriginal.

Comparatively simple in the elegance of its design is the incised cross at Dyce,

182. H. Richardson, 'The Jewelled Cross and Its Canopy', in Bourke, *From the Isles of the North* (1995), 177–86.

183. B. Purcell, 'In Search of Newgrange', in R. Kearney, ed., *The Irish Mind* (Dublin, 1985), 51.

184. See J. Waddell, *The Prehistoric Archaeology of Ireland* (Galway, 1998), 133–34.

185. The Sheela Na Gig Project (<[www.sheelanagig.org/wordpress/](http://www.sheelanagig.org/wordpress/)>) is a useful resource.

186. D. MacLean, 'The Status of the Sculptor in Old-Irish Law and the Evidence of the Crosses', *Peritia* 9 (1995), 149–51.

in which the cross itself is surrounded by, but does not reach, an enclosing circle, itself intersected by four circles of wheel-like character.<sup>187</sup> The whole is highly suggestive of motion – not least motion through time as well as space.

Elaborately carved bosses on crosses, however, are common. These are supposed to imitate aspects of metal and woodwork, representing pins or rivets decorated with jewels and the like.<sup>188</sup> While this may be so in some cases (a notable Pictish example is the cross slab at Shandwick in Ross and Cromarty), the bosses on St Martin's Cross on Iona and the Kildalton Cross on Islay are clearly divorced from any reference to a pinning function, being both far too large and, in the case of the upper and lower bosses, not placed over the intersections. In such circumstances, we should consider alternative explanations. Amongst these is the suggestion that they represent the five wounds (see below), or the enrichment of the cross by embedded jewels.<sup>189</sup>

The spiral motifs which frequently appear on these bosses are suggestive of aspects of the sun. In particular, the west face of the cross at Kilree in County Kilkenny has bosses on each side with spirals unfolding in opposite directions, suggestive of the equinoxes, whereas the lower boss has no associated spiral, suggestive of winter, and the upper boss has a spiral which generates a further spiral above it, suggestive of the power of the sun in summer.<sup>190</sup> The Shandwick cross slab in Ross and Cromarty and the huge central boss on the free-standing cross at Dupplin in Perthshire, carved like a sun with rays, has spirals in opposing directions to left and right. It is surmounted by a double spiral (the sun in summer?) emanating from a zoomorphic design where winter would be represented. Though not incorporated onto bosses, the front of the cross slab from Alyth, Perthshire, with its four spirals in opposing directions, placed between the arms and vertical, may also represent four seasonal aspects of the sun. It is possible that something of this symbolism is to be found in the Sword Dance (IV.3.a. Dance, Ballet and Opera).

As for the single central boss on the cross slab at Fowlis Wester, Perthshire (No. 1), it is surrounded by six surviving bosses of an original eight. Eight refers to the Resurrection and Regeneration (see IV.3.c.). Including the larger central boss, there is a total of 33 such bosses on the wheel-cross slab at Meigle in Perthshire (No. 2) and 56 on the Shandwick cross slab. The artist J. D. Fergusson expresses his sense of their complex significance with joyous eloquence:

187. For mention and illustration of this stone, see Henderson, *The Art of the Picts* (London, 2004), 164–65.

188. Richardson, 'The Jewelled Cross and Its Canopy', in Bourke, *From the Isles of the North*, 177–79.

189. Henderson, *The Art of the Picts* (London, 2004), 138.

190. Streits, *Sonne und Kreuz* (Edinburgh, 1984), 114.



the sculptor-painter is not Saxon, and rather or completely the opposite; he's a pure highland Scotsman, definitely a Celt. He still has great sympathy with Celtic sculpture and on the Celtic crosses there are bosses, round shapes – half-spheres that express for him 'Suns', fullness, open eyes, women's breasts, apples, peaches, health and overflow ...<sup>191</sup>

The circular form is also found on the Campbeltown Cross (c.1380, originally from Kilkivan), MacDougall's Cross at Ardchattan (c.1500), MacLean's on Iona and on the [Oronsay cross](#) (with its Latin inscriptions giving both the name of the patron, Colin MacDuffie, and the mason, Mael-Sechlainn O'Cuinn).

These free-standing crosses demonstrate a continuity which was probably self-conscious, as suggested by Douglas MacLean and Ian Fisher:<sup>192</sup>

The vogue for tall decorated crosses, however, is exceptional in late medieval Britain and Ireland, and most were the work of carvers of the Iona school, active from about the middle of the 14th to the end of the 15th century.<sup>193</sup>

Other features of Celtic significance, such as triskeles (see [IV.3.c.](#)) have also been noted. The triskeles on the Kilnave Cross on Islay; the cross (No. 2) at Dyce, with central triskele, and which shares its Christian symbolism with pre-Christian Pictish symbols; the cross slab at Farr in Sutherland, where the triskele is again centrally placed; and, most notably, triskeles within triskeles on the Chi Rho page in *The Book of Kells* are suggestive of circular motion in both directions. As with the ringed cross and the spiral, so with the triskele. These forms are not unique to Celtic art, but peculiarly characteristic of it.<sup>194</sup> The

191. Margaret Morris, *The Art of J. D. Fergusson: A biased biography* (Glasgow, 1974), 201, and (Perth, 2010), 185.

192. D. MacLean, 'The Status of the Sculptor in Old-Irish Law and the Evidence of the Crosses', *Peritia* 9 (1995), 155.

193. Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture in the Highlands and Islands*, 23.

194. R. and V. Megaw, *Celtic Art* (London, 1996), 56, 112, 167, 174, 249, 253–56.



MacDougall's Cross, Ardchattan (c.1500). Photo © John Purser

triskele is a fundamental element in the highly decorated Armenian Khachkars (or cross slabs): but these make their first true appearance in the 9th century, post-dating examples of Celtic provenance.

An alternative view suggests that the triskele was part of

A wider, developing trend in the late Roman world ... with a growing emphasis on abstract and geometric ornament.

This view notes the development 'along the Roman frontiers and beyond' and concludes that

The adaptation of these late Roman fashions into a local style in the fifth and sixth centuries was a legacy of Rome.<sup>195</sup>

Given the prevalence of such styles along the Roman frontiers, the evidence offered might equally suggest that the decorative influence was in the other direction, making it difficult to accept the conclusion that

Many of the seeds for the later Celtic art in Britain and Ireland – designs such as spirals or triskeles, and the use of silver – were sown in these late Roman styles.<sup>196</sup>

With respect to the use of silver, rare in Scotland prior to the 8th century AD, one might suggest an earlier preference for gold. However, the massive Pictish silver chains were almost certainly made from native silver and, beyond the use of the material, their scale and design is unique.<sup>197</sup> As for the spirals and triskeles, these were known from the Stone Age and, in the form of the carved stone balls, clearly valued through time. There is no need to posit a Roman source for such designs.

#### REVIVAL OF THE CELTIC CROSS AND THE STANDING STONE

There is a very substantial gap between examples of the Celtic cross in the 16th century and the revival of the form in the 19th century. The most obvious explanation is that the iconoclasm of the reformation made any use of symbols such as the Cross, never mind the Celtic cross, less acceptable.

Likewise, the standing stone, being so manifestly pre-Christian, was unlikely to find favour in consecrated ground. However, by the 20th century such religious scruples were overtaken by a desire to reclaim an ancient past. Thus we see what amount to standing stones in the graveyard at Achadh an Allt

195. Martin Goldberg, 'Out of a Roman World, c. AD 250–650', in Hunter, *Celts: Art and Identity*, 160–62.

196. Hunter, *Celts: Art and Identity*, 275.

197. Ian Finlay, *Scottish Gold and Silver Work* (Stevenage, 1956 and 1991), 5.

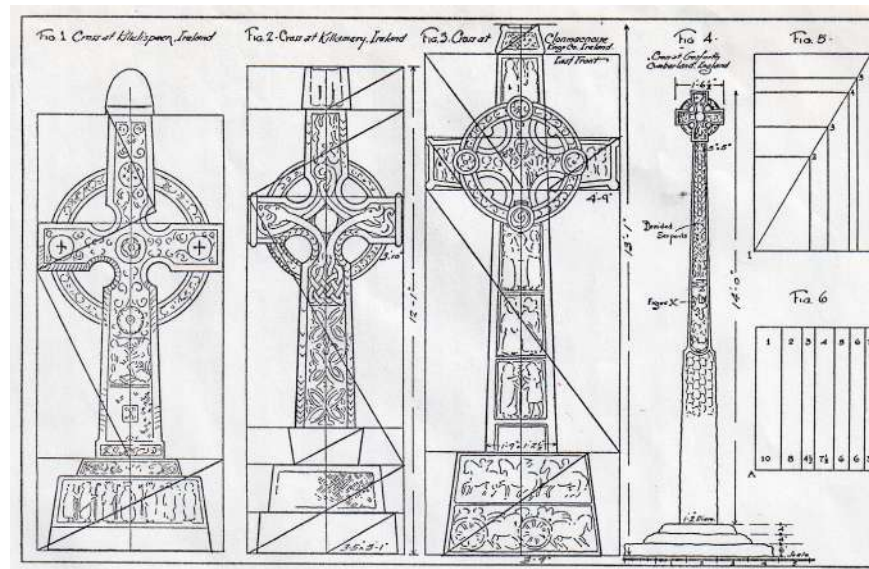
(Achanalt), both free-standing and as the main elements of the enclosure of the Bignold mausoleum. Though originally from Norwich, Sir Arthur Bignold was fluent in Gaelic. Alexander Carrick's war memorials at Lochawe, Killin and Oban are closer to cairns in their visual references. What is clear is their relationship with a pre-Christian culture, with a cup-and-ring marked stone beside the monument at Oban, and the Loch Awe memorial taking the form of a cairn of Cruachan granite on which stands the figure of a soldier of the Argyll and Sutherland regiment.

The graveyard at Cille Choirill near Roy Bridge contains a large number of Celtic crosses, representing a powerful assertion of the symbol in relation to cultural history and status, with the most prominent examples being at the top of the cemetery, known as *Tom nan Aingeal*. This can be variously translated as 'the hillock of the angels' and 'the hillock of the need-fires'. The need-fire was the Beltane fire, and the people buried on this spot are largely clergy, including Bishop Grant (d. 1959), whose Celtic cross is decorated with triskeles, as is that of the Rev. Colin MacDonald, (d. 1955), beside whom the Rev. MacKintosh (d. 1927), the Very Rev. MacKellaig (d. 1960), the Rev. Campbell (d. 1972) and the Rev. MacMaster (d. 1958) all have Celtic crosses surmounting them, each with a central boss. In 2015, this last was decorated anonymously with a wreath of whitethorn (hawthorn) woven through two of the holes of the Celtic cross and tied with white ribbon. Whether this referred to the Crown of Thorns or what other meaning it might import is hard to guess, the plant also being associated with sexuality. Whatever the meaning of the wreath so many years after the death of MacMaster, it was eloquent testimony to the fact that these Celtic revival crosses could be much more than fashionable cultural gestures, continuing to bear with them a deeper symbolism.

In the same graveyard, the circular element of the cross on the memorial stone to Iain Lom (closer in nature to the Pictish cross slab than the free-standing cross) is a wreath of laurel, repeating the combination of the classical pre-Christian honours with a Christian symbol, as used by the Emperor Constantine from c. 317.



Cille Choirill MacMaster Cross with whitethorn wreath. Photo © John Purser



John Cargill, Celtic cross and Pythagorean proposition, from *The Celtic Cross and Greek Proportion* (1930)

It was designed by the architect, John Rhind (not to be confused with his near contemporary the sculptor John Rhind who ... designed the Celtic memorials for Alexander Nasmyth and William Borthwick Johnstone in Edinburgh). Iain Lom's monument is inspired by West Highland work of the 14th or 15th century rather than by the Celtic ring cross, but it takes its place in this Highland setting as an outlier of an impressive group of late 19th and early 20th century Celtic ring crosses of the highest quality.<sup>198</sup>

Phoebe Anna Traquair made her *Altar Cross* of 1901 in the form of a ringed cross with Celtic motifs which 'owed much to her appreciation of medieval sculpture in the Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh'.<sup>199</sup>

This interest in the form of the cross was taken up by the stone carver John Cargill in Chicago in the 1920s. Having to design and cut the many Celtic crosses demanded by the Irish community in the USA, Cargill deduced that they were based upon Pythagorean principles. His further suggestion that some interlaces were a kind of musical notation is pursued in IV.3.b.

Likewise, the Irish stone carver James O'Shea, famous for his work on Woodward's Oxford Museum, produced a fine Celtic cross as a memorial to the

198. M. Macdonald, 'Art, the Highlands and the Celtic Revival', paper given at the ASLS Annual Conference, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, 8–12 June 2012.

199. E. Cumming, ed., *Phoebe Anna Traquair 1852–1936* (Edinburgh, 1993), 72.



writer Talbot Baines Reed, incorporating interlace, spirals, triskeles and a 'cap' of the type seen on several early Irish crosses.<sup>200</sup>

More recently, a general standardisation of monumental sculpture and lettering has led to a reduction in fine work. However, a striking visual exploitation of the Celtic cross is that of the war memorial between Pitlochry and Tarvie, where the ring itself is embedded with poppies. Another striking example is at Kilmarie graveyard on Skye. When the MacDonald family of Elgol lost three sons within three years during the Second World War, the parents commissioned a substantial Celtic cross incorporating interlace. Their fourth son was missing presumed dead at the same time, but did survive. The cost of such memorials would normally be beyond the means of most families, but such an appalling series of losses called for an exceptional response.

In the light of the preceding evidence, MacCaig's poem quoted at the opening of this section covers the archaeological and visual evidence with extraordinary insight, breadth and depth of comprehension. 'The implicated generations' have indeed 'unmapped / Into abstraction such a territory.' JP

#### IV.2. ARTEFACTS

##### IV.2.a. CLOTHING AND TEXTILES

[Multicolour and Monotone in Clothing; Tartan and the Kilt; The Disclothing Act; The Militarisation of Highland Dress; Demilitarisation of the Kilt; Other Items of Dress; Women's Dress; Textiles; Embroidery; Conclusion](#)

Is math thig boneid ghorm air chùl borb an cogadh,  
Còta gearr is fèileadh is na slèistean nochdte ...

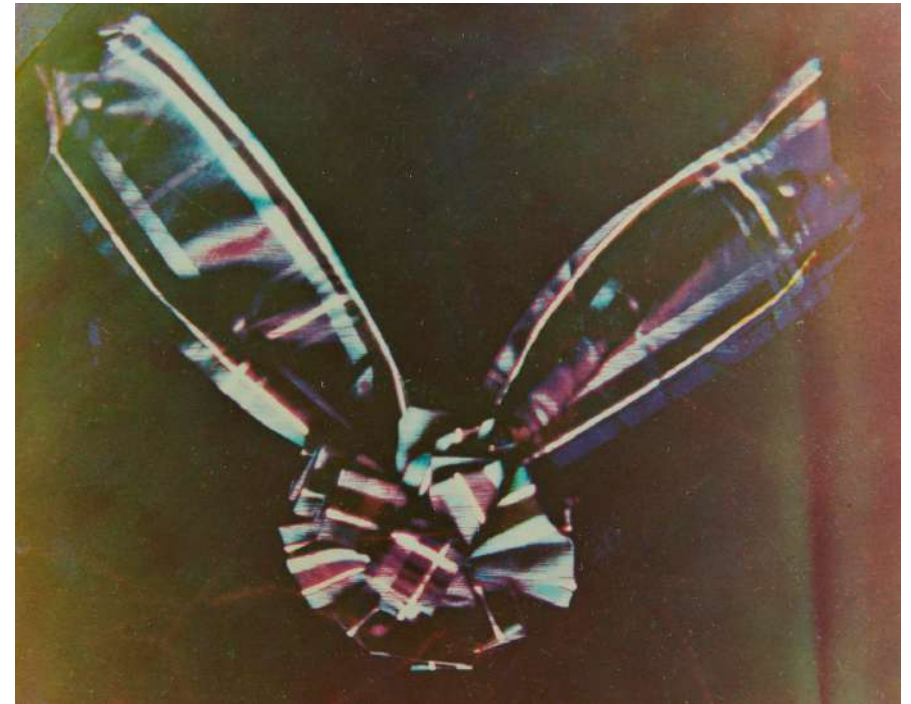
*Splendid is the blue bonnet over wild locks in war-time,  
the short coat and the kilt, leaving the thighs naked ...*<sup>201</sup>

The first ever colour photograph was taken in 1861 by the Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell. He chose to photograph a tartan ribbon, as though for him at least, this historic event called for an image which itself almost defined colour.

Some Scottish artists chose very deliberately to wear the kilt. They included William Gillies (1898–1973), Cadell (1883–1937) and the two outstanding Scottish

200. The cross is near the south-east corner of the Abney Park Cemetery in Stoke Newington. Baines died in 1893.

201. John Lorne Campbell, *Songs of the Forty-Five* (Edinburgh, 1933, repr. 1984), 250–51.



*Tartan Ribbon* (1861), the earliest colour photograph. Photo James Clerk Maxwell  
© The Board of Trustees of the Science Museum, London CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

modernists, Colquhoun (1914–1962) and MacBryde (1913–1966).<sup>202</sup> J. D. Fergusson's cover design for *Scottish Art and Letters* makes use of a square check that echoes tartan and his chapter entitled 'Scotland and Colour' in his *Modern Scottish Painting* (1943) takes tartan as its starting point.<sup>203</sup> MacBryde not only wore the kilt, he made it the subject of one of his paintings – 'The Red Kilt', first exhibited in 1943.<sup>204</sup> Colquhoun, who had been commissioned to visit a Hebridean cloth factory by the War Artists' Advisory Committee in 1944, was also influenced by tartan:

Combinations of strong tones of green, sharp reds and acidic yellows gave his new work a quality reminiscent of the colours of the brighter tartans of his native Scotland.<sup>205</sup>

202. J. Soden, 'William Gillies: An artist's visual record of the Highlands in the 1920s and '30s', paper given at Highland: Image and Performance, Uinneag dhan Àird an Iar Seminar (4 September 2008); and R. Bristow, *The Last Bohemians* (Bristol, 2010), 107.

203. J. D. Fergusson, *Modern Scottish Painting* (Glasgow, 1943), 84–88.

204. R. Bristow, *The Last Bohemians* (Bristol, 2010), 358.

205. Bristow, *The Last Bohemians* (Bristol, 2010), 174.



In this section, we consider this tartan iconography and the importance of colour in Highland clothing. We trace the long history of tartan and the kilt, from its prehistoric antecedents to its militarisation in the 18th century and its adoption both by high fashion and counter-culture today. The clothing of Highland women is described, particularly with regard to the arisaid and to headgear in marking marital status. Finally, we look at the different textiles and staples in use, whether in reality or in the imagination: wool, linen, silk and satin, nettle, bog cotton and metal thread in embroidery.

#### MULTICOLOUR AND MONOTONE IN CLOTHING

It is clear from both imaginative and factual accounts that colour has always been of great importance to the Gaels of Ireland and Scotland in matters of status, identity and, not least, beauty. Before the arrival of bright crockery in the 19th century, textiles would make for the only colour in the smoke-stained interiors of houses and it is clear that bright clothing and white linens were prized. Many women's songs admire their subjects in colourful clothing, in particular in red:

O is maith thig dhuit breacan  
air a lasadh le càrnaid ...

*It is well you suit tartan  
lit up with scarlet ...*<sup>206</sup>

Women too appear to have dressed colourfully, borne out by Bishop John Lesley's description of Highland women in 1578 'wearing an embroidered gown to the ankles, under a mantle of different colours, with bracelets and medallions as their chief ornaments.'<sup>207</sup> The same love of colour is seen in the furnishings of the great houses (see the next section) and in Martin Martin's description of the Martinmas cavalcades when 'women present the men with a pair of fine garters of divers colours'<sup>208</sup>

It is evident that hierarchies and identities were associated with colours, a tradition that can be seen in the literature, in law tracts and poetry, and surviving to the present day in the association of tartans with different clans. The *Táin* and other tales constantly describe elaborate and colourful garments. Though fictitious, they are evidence of a love of colourful clothing in early Medieval times, if not in

206. From 'Marbhrann do Mhac Gille Chaluim Ratharsaidh' (Elegy for Mac Gille Chaluim of Raasay), who drowned in 1671, in C. Ó Baoill and M. Bateman, eds, *Gàir nan Clàrsach* (Edinburgh, 1994), No. XXXII, 156–57.

207. Quoted in Anita Quye and Hugh Cheape, 'Rediscovering the Arisaid', *Costume* 42 (2008), 7.

208. Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland* (1698; Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1999; repr. 2010), 58.

prehistory. In *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, Cú Chulainn's festive raiment is described as 'a fitted purple mantle, fringed and fine ... a brooch of light gold and silver decorated with gold inlays ... a fretted silk tunic, a warrior's apron of dark-red royal.'<sup>209</sup> In the *Annals of the Four Masters*, Anno Mundi 3664 is cited as the first year of the reign of a pre-Christian king who invented coloured clothing and who decreed that the number of colours worn should denote a person's rank:

He was called Eochaidh Eadghadhach because it was by him the variety of colour was first put on clothes in Ireland, to distinguish the honour of each by his raiment, from the lowest to the highest. Thus was the distinction made between them: one colour in the clothes of slaves; two in the clothes of soldiers; three in the clothes of goodly heroes, or young lords of territories; six in the clothes of ollavs; seven in the clothes of kings and queens.<sup>210</sup>

Another source says the *ollamh* was allowed to wear a cloak of crimson bird feathers and carry a wand of office.<sup>211</sup> In the 8th-century *Voyage of Snedgus and MacRiagla* part of the king's oppression of the Men of Ross (in Ireland) which led to them killing the king was his denying them coloured raiment.<sup>212</sup> Irish law tracts of the 8th century codify the colours and fringes allowed to under-kings of the kings of Munster<sup>213</sup> and to fosterlings:

The children of the free-man grade wore yellow, black, white and blay-coloured. Red, green and brown were the colours of the noble grade. Purple and blue were reserved for royalty.<sup>214</sup>

Yet it seems that monotone clothing could also carry positive connotations. A 17th-century account of the inauguration of the Lords of the Isles describes the white clothing of the incoming chief, which was then cast to the poet, another truth speaker:

He was clothed in a white habit, to shew his innocence and integrity of heart, that he should be a light to his people and maintain the true religion. The white apparel did afterwards belong to the poet by right.<sup>215</sup>

209. Kinsella 1969, 158.

210. *Annals of the Four Masters*, Anno Mundi 3664: <<https://celt.ucc.ie//published/T100005A/index.html>>.

211. S.v. *fili*: <[www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com)>.

212. Whitley Stokes, 'The Voyage of Snedgus and Mac Riagla', *Revue Celtique* IX (1888), 14–25.

213. Myles Dillon, *Lebor na Cert/The Book of Rights*, ITS Vol. 46 (Dublin, 1962).

214. Bronagh Ní Chonail, 'Fosterage: Child-Rearing in Medieval Ireland', *History Ireland* 5, No. 1 (Spring, 1997), 28 Stable: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27724427>>.

215. MacPhail, *Highland Papers* (1914), quoted in Michael Newton, *Warriors of the Word* (Edinburgh, 2009), 133.

Likewise, the first named MacCrimmon was known as *Fionnlagh na Plaide Bàine* 'Finlay of the White Plaid', perhaps suggesting a link with a priestly or warrior caste.<sup>216</sup> Quye and Cheape conclude from the disapproving tone of an early 17th-century comment on the white plaid of the Earl of Sutherland's daughter that an individual of noble birth was 'not behaving with the customary flamboyance.'<sup>217</sup>

#### TARTAN AND THE KILT

What tartan represents is still hotly debated, as shown in *From Tartan to Tartanry: Scottish Culture, History and Myth* (2010), edited by Ian Brown. He compares the complexity of its place in the fabric of the nation's self-image with the complexity of its design, for meanings constantly evolve, whether of words or images. For some, tartan represents the distinguishing dress of a downtrodden culture and people. For others, it is the dress of the establishment and of an army engaged in the ploys of the British Empire. Some critics, like Colin McArthur in *Scotch Reels* (1982), see in tartan only a damaging myth leading directly to the low self-regard engendered by the Kailyard and the music hall. Others lament the commercialisation and invention of tartans as part of the 'endearment of Scotland', firstly by Queen Victoria and then by the tourist industry. But just as its connotations of rebellion led to its proscription in the first place, so has its place remained in the counter-culture, contrasting with the sobriety of men's conventional dress.

Tartan is the ultimate example of variegated clothing. Hugh Cheape suggests that the native taste for variegated clothing was heightened by Renaissance dress taste to include new dress styles and new colours such as scarlet and green, the very 'tones that distinguish tartan when it emerges as the Highland 'habit' in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries'.<sup>218</sup>

A common misconception is that traditional tartans were woven only with the muted colours of vegetable dyes. Recent scientific analysis on 18th- and early 19th-century tartans preserved by the National Museums of Scotland have shown that quality tartans at least were strongly coloured and that Scotland had long been importing dyestuffs. Madder had been imported from as early as the 12th century, and woad and cochineal from the 15th and 17th centuries, respectively. Analysis of the tartans themselves and of the accounts of the kilt makers William Wilson and Sons of Bannockburn showed the wide use of imported dyes alongside native plant dyes. The

216. H. Cheape, 'The MacCrimmon Piping Dynasty and its Origins', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* LXII (2000–2002) (Inverness, 2004), 8–9.

217. Quoted in Anita Quye and Hugh Cheape, 'Rediscovering the Arisaid', *Costume* 42 (2008), 7.

218. H. Cheape, 'The MacCrimmon Piping Dynasty and its Origins', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* LXII (2000–2002) (Inverness, 2004), 8–9.



Plate from Burt's *Letters from a Gentleman in the North of Scotland* (1754), showing four ways of wearing the plaid. Public domain

insect-based dyes, cochineal and lac, were used to produce scarlet (the *càrnaid* that for Donnchadh Bàn indicated the brightness of tartan in general); the timber dyes, flavin and old fustic, produced yellows; and indigo and woad produced blue.<sup>219</sup>

The derivation of the word tartan has always been uncertain, but recent research suggests that it shares a derivation with the Gaelic word *tarsainn* meaning something criss-crossed.<sup>220</sup> In 1618, the word *tartan* is written of as though it were derived from Gaelic: ... *a warm stuff of divers colours, which they call tartane* ...<sup>221</sup> This sits well with the Gaelic equivalent, *breacan* (derived from *breac* 'speckled'). *Breacan* refers both to the material, tartan, and to the plaid, a length of the material about twelve yards long. The plaid could be worn roughly-gathered by a belt round the waist and either drawn up and pinned over the left shoulder or doubled over the belt. Worn in this way, the *breacan* was known as *feileadh* meaning 'folding'. The *feileadh beag* or kilt is the modern version where the pleats are permanently sewn in. Four different ways of wearing the plaid are illustrated above, including its use by a woman in the form of the arisaid where it is draped from the head.

Tartan and the wearing of the kilt are sometimes associated negatively with 'tartanalia', implying a fake and commercially-driven tradition of recent invention.

219. Anita Quye and Hugh Cheape, et al., 'An Historical and Analytical Study of Red, Pink, Green and Yellow Colours in Quality 18th- and Early 19th-Century Scottish Tartans', in Jo Kirby, ed., *Dyes in History and Archaeology* 19 (2000).

220. Cheape, *Tartan: The Highland Habit* (Edinburgh, 2006), 11.

221. J. Taylor, *The Pennyles Pilgrimage* ... (London, 1618).



Academic historians have also allowed prejudice to colour their work. A classic case is Trevor Pringle's essay 'The privation of history: Landseer, Victoria and the Highland myth.'<sup>222</sup> With respect to Highland dress, Pringle writes of the continuing 'tensions of the eighteenth century when such items of apparel were prohibited by Georgian statutes', but these prohibitions were long over by Victoria's day. Pringle fails to mention that the Jacobite Risings were by no means universally supported in the Highlands, and he also follows Hugh Trevor Roper's assertions when he writes of 'Prince Albert's adherence to the tartan and kilt, the invention of an English Quaker in 1727'. The discussion below will seek to establish the long tradition of both variously-coloured woven cloth and the style of clothing in which it was used.

We have evidence from thousands of years ago of tartan setts in association with Celts, which the researcher Elizabeth Barber proposes are the direct European prototypes of Scottish tartan.<sup>223</sup>

... the overall similarities between Hallstatt plaid twills and recent Scottish ones, right down to the typical weight of the cloth, strongly indicate continuity of tradition. The chief difference is that the Hallstatt plaids contain no more than two colors (although a few three-color cloths turned up that were not plaid), whereas the Scottish tartans are generally multicolored.

... we do know, first, that the Hallstatt folk must have been proto-Celts and thus Indo-European, since their culture developed directly into the La Tène culture, which the Romans encountered and recorded as linguistically Celtic. Second, the striking similarities between the plaid twills of Hami and Hallstatt greatly strengthen the case for the Celtic and Hami weavers arising from the same ancestral tradition. Though lying four thousand miles apart, they parallel each other too closely for sheer chance.<sup>224</sup>

The supporting evidence and reasoning for the above is ultimately concerned with the material found on the Mummies of Ürümqi, in north-west China. The mummies date from the 2nd millennium BC and were naturally preserved in their graves in the desert of the Tarim Basin. They are Caucasoid in appearance with blond and red hair, and the Indo-European origin – at least of the men – is confirmed by genetic analysis. Connections with Tocharian and therefore proto-

222. T. R. Pringle, 'The Privation of History: Landseer, Victoria and the Highland myth', in D. Cosgrove and D. Stephens, eds, *The Iconography of Landscape* (Cambridge, 1989), 142–61.

223. E. Barber, *The Mummies of Ürümqi* (London, 2000), 137–45.

224. Barber, *The Mummies of Ürümqi*, 138 and 144.

Celtic are also discussed and a proposition that the similarities of the genes and Hallstatt textiles suggest a west-east migration of nomads in the Bronze Age.<sup>225</sup>

The earliest remnant of handspun woollen textile from Scotland was discovered at the Oakbank Crannog in Loch Tay and was dated to c. 500 BC. 'It was woven in a 2:1 twill which is very fine and a strong type of cloth, sometimes still used to make kilts.'<sup>226</sup>

Our earliest depiction of tartan is from about 200 AD, from the remains of a triumphal arch built by the Emperor Caracalla in the ancient Moroccan city of Volubilis, in the south-west corner of the Roman Empire. On the only surviving part of a statue of the Emperor – a three-foot long piece of his cape in the museum of Rabat – there appears the figure of one of his captives, described by Dr Fraser Hunter of the National Museum of Scotland as:

an early depiction of that great national stereotype, the long-haired Caledonian warrior. The giveaway is the checked leggings – the first-ever depiction of tartan. It has been carved into the bronze, and inlaid with different bronze alloys and silver to give a remarkable impression of the textile, its colour and texture. The leggings or trews are relatively skin-tight and you can see the definition. The legs are two different patterns. ... This guy is a captive, a prisoner from the vicious campaigns of Severus and Caracalla (*Scotland: Rome's Final Frontier* – BBC2 Scotland).



The Falkirk Tartan, from the same period as Caracalla's captive, is held in the National Museums of Scotland. It was found near Falkirk and is of the basic black and white tartan weave similar to that still in use and known

Tartan trews depicted on the bronze statue of the Emperor Caracalla, c. 200 AD. Photograph by and courtesy of Fraser Hunter.

225. John Noble Wilford, 'Mummies, Textiles Offer Evidence of Europeans in Far East', *New York Times*: <[nytimes.com/1996/05/07/science/mummies-textiles-offer-evidence-of-europeans-in-far-east.html](http://nytimes.com/1996/05/07/science/mummies-textiles-offer-evidence-of-europeans-in-far-east.html)>.

226. N. Dixon, *The Crannogs of Scotland* (Stroud, 2004), 155.



as the 'shepherd's plaid'.<sup>227</sup> The Orkney Hood (dated between 250–640 AD) is a complex garment with tablet-woven bands showing an interest and sophistication in ornamental weaving. Of dark brown and black wool, it is 'woven as a 2/2 herringbone twill, with a tablet-woven band sewn along the bottom edge, and a second band with a fringe sewn to the bottom edge of the first'.<sup>228</sup>



*The Falkirk Tartan*, early 3rd century AD.  
© National Museums Scotland

The word *tartan* was in use by 1500<sup>229</sup> and in 1538 it is used with specific reference to the Highlands: 'Item, for iii elnis of Heland tertane to be hois to the Kingis grace'.<sup>230</sup> An adjacent entry in the Lord High Treasurer's accounts for a 'heland coit' for the king describes it as 'variant cullorit', implying a connection between Highland fashion and variegated colours. In 1581, George Buchanan (one of Europe's leading academics and probably a native Gaelic speaker) wrote of the Highlanders:

They use party-coloured garments, and especially striped plaids, preferring of all colours, the purple and blue (*purpureum ac caeruleum*). Their ancestors wore party-coloured plaids, variously striped, which custom some of them still retain.<sup>231</sup>

That the colouring and style of the Scottish Gaels' clothing was distinctive is made clear by the following passage from Ó Clerigh's *The Life of Aodh Ruadh Ó Domhnaill* describing Dòmhnall Gorm's troops in the service of Ó Domhnaill in Ireland in 1594:

Ba suichnidh on ietsomh hi tréchumuscc Fer Fene la saine a narm 7 a nerraidh a naladh 7 a nerlabhra ar asedh ba hégdudh dhóibh dianechtair breacbruit ioldathacha i forciupal gó nesccataiv 7 oircnib a cresa tara náirdnibh allamuigh dia mbrataibh.

*They were recognised among the Irish soldiers by the distinction of their arms and clothing, their habits and language, for their exterior dress was*

227. H. Cheape, *Tartan: The Highland Habit* (Edinburgh, 2006), 8–9.

228. Ritchie, 'Clothing Among the Picts', *Costume* (London, 2005), 33.

229. See 'Symmie and his Brother', stanza 3, in D. Laing and J. Small, *Select Remains of the Ancient Popular and Romance Poetry of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1885), 314.

230. *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland* VI, 436.

231. J. Watkins, ed., *Buchanan's History of Scotland* (London, 1822), 11.

*mottled cloaks of many colours with a fringe to their shins and calves, their belts were over their loins outside their cloaks.*<sup>232</sup>

There remains confusion between regional varieties of tartan and their subsequent attachment to specific family names. Given the territorial nature of the clans – evident to this day by a glance at the Highland telephone directory, the confusion is understandable, but its commercial exploitation does not negate the fundamental realities from which the varieties of tartan emerged. Martin Martin, a native Gaelic speaker from Skye writing in the late 17th century, shows how provenance and people cannot be separated as the cause for variation in tartans:

The Plad wore only by the Men, is made of fine Wool, the Thred as fine as can be made of that kind; it consists of divers Colours, and there is a great deal of Ingenuity requir'd in sorting the Colours, so as to be agreeable to the nicest Fancy. For this reason the Women are at great pains, first to give an exact Pattern of the Plad upon a piece of Wood, having the number of every Thred of the Stripe on it ... Every Isle differs from each other in their Fancy of making Plads, as to the Stripes in Breadth, and Colours. This Humour is as different thro the main Land of the Highlands, in-so-far that they who have seen those Places, are able, at the first View of a Man's Plad to guess the Place of his Residence.<sup>233</sup>

In James Philip's Latin panegyric epic *The Grameid* of 1689, MacNeill of Barra is described as follows:

Tot chlamyde intextos ostentat et ille colores  
Sole quot adverso curvata in nubibus iris.

*He displays as many colours woven into his plaid as the rainbow in the clouds shows in the sunlight.*<sup>234</sup>

This could be taken as panegyric hyperbole, but the context is one in which other tartans are described more soberly and with a sense of the inalienable relationship between the wearer and the tartan.

The warriors on the Pictish stone Kirriemuir (No. 2) are wearing lengths of cloth as their outer garment, the precursor of the plaid of later times, draped

232. Walsh and C. Ó Lochlainn, eds, *The Life of Aodh Ruadh Ó Domhnaill by Lughaidh Ó Clerigh* (Dublin, 1948).

233. M. Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland* (London, 1703 and 1716; Edinburgh, 1981), 207–08.

234. A. D. Murdoch, ed. and trans., *The Grameid: An heroic poem by James Philip* (Edinburgh, 1888), 145.

Richard Waitt, *Kenneth Sutherland, 3rd Lord Duffus* (c. 1712). National Galleries of Scotland: <<https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/2313/kenneth-sutherland-3rd-lord-duffus-d-1734-jacobite>>



over or around the shoulders according to whether the wearer is on foot or on horseback.<sup>235</sup> In the plaid, Highlanders had been wearing a form of the kilt from at least the mid-16th century, for which we have several contemporary illustrations. The supposed invention of the kilt by Thomas Rawlinson (birth and death dates not known) is purely anecdotal.<sup>236</sup> There is clear visual evidence for the 'phillabeg' (derived from *fèileadh beag*) in the portrait by Richard Waitt of Kenneth, Lord Duffus (c. 1712), which precedes any possible claim for Rawlinson.<sup>237</sup> Portraits such as Waitt's of William Cumming (1714) and Wright's of Sir Mungo Murray (mid-1680s) confirm the established use of tartan. They also confirm a change in the way the plaid was worn, the *fèileadh-bhreacain* or the 'kilted plaid' being replaced by the *fèileadh beag* or 'small kilt', equally clear (see above) in Edward Burt's illustrations in his *Letters* written in 1725–1726.<sup>238</sup>

#### THE DISCLOTHING ACT

If further proof is needed of the naturalness and long establishment of Highland dress, it can be found in the poetry that arose from the Disclathing Act of 1747 and its repeal in 1782. Duncan Bàn McIntyre's 'Òran don Bhriogais' (Song to the Trews) of 1747 and 'Òran don Èideadh Ghàidhealach' (Song to the Highland Garb) of 1782 are powerful statements of support for the traditional wearing

235. Ritchie, 'Clothing Among the Picts', *Costume* (London, 2005), 33.

236. It is derived from a letter from Ivan Baillie of Abriachan, written in 1768 and published in the *Edinburgh Magazine* (March 1785).

237. Cheape, *Tartan: The Highland Habit* (Edinburgh, 2006), 25, and in conversation with John Purser.

238. E. Burt, *Letters from a Gentleman in the North of Scotland* (1st pub. 1754). See H. M. Chichester, 'Burt, Edward', *Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 1995).

of tartans (*na breacain*) and kilt (*fèileadh*), with the colour red (*càrnaid*) an important factor.<sup>239</sup> It is also clearly bound up with identity:

Chan fhaod sinn bhith sulasach  
On chaochail ar culaidh sinn,  
Chan aithnich sinn a-chèile  
Là fèille no cruinneachaidh.

*We may not be jubilant  
since our clothes transfigured us:  
we do not know one another  
on a day of fair or gathering.*

'Òran don Bhriogais'<sup>240</sup>

Also celebrating the repeal of the Disarming Act was William Ross, in his 'Òran do Mharcas nan Greumach agus don Èideadh Ghàidhealach' (A Song to the Marquis of Graham and to the Highland Dress). Here he speaks of the repeal as having caused a sudden craze for plaids and tartans:

Thàinig fasan anns an Achd  
A dh'orduich pailt' am fèileadh.

*A fashion's come in with the Act  
Which ordered plaids in plenty.*<sup>241</sup>

Another example of the iconic importance of the kilt to the Gaels themselves was Patrick Grant's refusal to wear anything else when at the age of 108 he was introduced by the Earl of Panmure to George IV in 1820. Patrick was the last surviving Jacobite who had fought at Culloden and he remained a Jacobite to the end. Carrying a seven-foot long pike, he appeared in tartan jacket, kilt, brogues with brass buttons and a blue Glengarry bonnet with an eagle's feather, which he refused to remove in the King's presence until he was graciously awarded a pension.<sup>242</sup> Similarly, Henry Raeburn's portrait of Neil Gow (c. 1793) shows him in tartan trews, tartan once more being permitted but its fashioning being more mainstream. It is true that Sir Walter Scott, in encouraging George IV to wear a kilt in 1822, was manipulating public sentiment, but that does not invalidate the

239. A. MacLeod, *Orain Dhonnchaidh Bhàin* (Edinburgh, 1978), 10, 12, 14, ll. 134, 175, 207.

240. Angus MacLeod, ed., *Orain Dhonnchaidh Bhàin/The Songs of Duncan Bàn MacIntyre* (Edinburgh, 1952), ll. 141–44.

241. J. L. Campbell, ed., *Highland Songs of the Forty-Five* (Edinburgh, 1984), 282–83, ll. 41–42.

242. R. MacIlleathain, 'Litir do Luchd-ionnsachaidh', *West Highland Free Press* (11 April 2008), 18.

reality that Highlanders habitually wore tartan in various forms and that it was, from the earliest evidence, distinctive.

#### THE MILITARISATION OF HIGHLAND DRESS

There is a lingering dismay in Scotland to this day as to how the distinctive dress of the Highlanders, proscribed because of the rebelliousness to the Crown of a small proportion of their number in a small corner of the British Isles, became part of the iconography, not only of the Scottish soldier in general but also of the British Army as a whole.

After the Disarming Act of 1746, the Highland regiments were the only outlet for young Highland men raised in a militaristic society to wear the kilt, bear weapons and exercise clan loyalty. In addition, enlisting was one of the few professions open to them, as attested by many songs. As the centuries wore on, the reputation of the Highland regiments engaged in the Indian Mutiny, the Seven Years' War, the Crimea and World War I became legendary and their uniforms became iconic. As the Highlands simultaneously became depopulated through clearance and emigration, we find Lowland soldiers being recruited and donning Highland garb. The Highland regiments in their kilts are the subject of several famous paintings such as 'The Thin Red Line' by Robert Gibb, depicting the 93rd Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders in their red jackets and Glengarry bonnets stopping an attack by Russian cavalry at the Battle of Balaclava in 1854, and 'The 51st Highland Division Plan El Alamein' by Ian Eadie.<sup>243</sup>

It was part of the tragedy of World War I that, though the kilted Highland regiments looked handsome, the kilt was very impractical for trench warfare,



Robert Gibb, *The Thin Red Line* (1881). National War Museum, Edinburgh Castle

243. <<https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/the-51st-highland-division-plans-el-alamein-184959>> – accessed 21 May 2010; <[http://www.allempires.com/article/index.php?q=The\\_Scottish\\_Highland\\_Regiments](http://www.allempires.com/article/index.php?q=The_Scottish_Highland_Regiments)>.

collecting lice and fleas in the pleats, and the frozen hems lacerating the backs of the knees. However, Dòmhnall Chorùna's song from the period only mentions the fine appearance of the soldiers:

Tha mi duilich, cianail duilich  
A luchd nan èilidhean tartain,  
A luchd nan gartanan sgàrlaid,  
'S duilich leam nach fhaod sibh dùsgadh,  
Sibhse, luchd nan glùinean àlainn.<sup>244</sup>

*I am sad, desperately sad, O people of the tartan kilts and the red garters, I am sad that you cannot wake up, you people of the fine knees.*

In 2006, all the Scottish regiments were combined to form one Royal Regiment of Scotland. Though the individual battalions of the new regiment were allowed to keep their regional names as a form of compromise to this 'rationalisation', the clinching argument as to the significance of the Highland military tradition is that the iconography associated with the uniform of the new regiment is more Highland than Lowland. This is clear above all in the retention of the kilt, making every Scottish soldier a 'kilted Jock'. Though the tartan is termed Government IA, it is developed from that of the Black Watch, first formed in 1745. The Glengarry is still worn, decorated, in accordance with tradition, with the tail feathers of the blackcock, the lion rampant and the saltire. As we have seen, both the lion rampant and the saltire are symbols of the Gaelic Scots. Walter Bower and George Buchanan report on the saltire first being seen when the Scots and Picts were fighting against the English at Athelstaneford. The lion rampant relates to the three lions borne on the shield of Milesius, whose sons Clann Mhíl were the first Gaels to come to Ireland and thence to Scotland, and so were the progenitors of the house of Canmore.<sup>245</sup>

#### DEMILITARISATION OF THE KILT

There have been some moves to reclaim the kilt as non-militaristic dress. James Archer's portrait of Professor John Stuart Blackie of 1874 shows him in his dark Victorian suit 'swathed in the wonted plaid'. His eccentric dress is a sign of the solidarity this Lowland professor of Greek felt for Highland culture. He campaigned both for the rights of crofters and for the first Chair of Celtic at Edinburgh University. The fashion designer Alexander McQueen (1969–2010)

244. Fred MacAulay, ed., *Dòmhnall Ruadh Chorùna* (Loch nam Madadh, 1995), 25.

245. John O'Hart, *Irish Pedigrees: Or the origin and stem of the Irish nation* (Genealogical Publishing Company, 1989), 55; Graham Bartram, 'The Story of Scotland's Flags', *Proceedings of the 19th International Congress of Vexillology* (York, 2001), 167–68 – accessed 5 April 2017.



used tartan counter-culturally in his two shows 'Highland Rape' (1995) and 'Widows of Culloden' (2006–2007), using a McQueen red, black and yellow sett. In the first of these, apparently violated models in torn and revealing garments trimmed with tartan represented the ethnic cleansing of the Highlands by Cumberland's army after the '45. In the second, more circumspect tartan garments quoting from later fashions – a Victorian ball gown, trousers and 1940s dresses – showed the commodification of Scotland all over the world. This was historical comment through fashion. McQueen himself then appeared at the opening of an exhibition 'Anglo-mania: Transgression in British and American fashion' in belted plaid, tailcoat and American West tie.<sup>246</sup>

Another unconventional take on Highland dress is Kate Macpherson's roadkill sporrans. Based near Beaulay, she makes sporrans from roadkill casualties such as foxes, badgers and pheasants, using traditional skills of taxidermy and saddlery (she is not allowed to use otter, wildcat or beaver as they are protected species). Her art simultaneously honours Highland dress and the animals, whose beauty is thus not wasted.<sup>247</sup>

The late Gordon Duncan and Martyn Bennett and other 'Celtic Rock' and fusion bands have re-appropriated tartan and the kilt, not as the dress of Andy Stewart singing on the TV at New Year but as something belonging to their own generation. Martyn Bennett would sometimes perform on stage, kilted, bare-topped and with dreadlocks.



Martyn Bennett performing kilted and bare-topped. Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh. Staff photo (January 1995)

#### OTHER ITEMS OF DRESS

In addition to the belted tartan plaid, the later tailored and shortened kilt and tartan trews, we have evidence of a number of other styles of Highland clothing. The huntsmen on Alasdair Crotach's tomb in Rodel are wearing the *lèine-chròic* (the saffron-dyed, padded and pleated linen tunic that was the battle dress of

246. See Jonathon Faiers, 'McQueen and Tartan': <<http://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/features/2011/mcqueen-and-tartan>> – accessed 2 April 2017).

247. Polly Pullar and Mary Low, *Fauna Scotica* (Edinburgh, 2012), 253–54.



Huntsmen wearing the *lèine-chròic* on Alasdair Crotach's tomb (1528)

© Crown Copyright: HES

the Gaels in medieval times), while the huntsman on Alexander MacMillan's cross at Kilmory is wearing a hood with liripipe.<sup>248</sup>

The man praised in 'Craobh an Iubhair' (The Yewtree) wears a 'suit of clothes of blended colours' – *deise chothlamaidh* – and a fine-spun shirt of Galway linen.<sup>249</sup> Later, there is also the 'dun shirt of the church' – *gùn odhar na h-eaglais* – for the shaming of fornicators.<sup>250</sup> In a poem from the mid-16th century, Gill'Easbaig Caimbeul, earl of Argyll, is described as wearing an embroidered satin shirt as an amulet and brown satin breeches under his armour, and gold shoes:

Le séan buaidhe fán mbeirt ghaisgeadh  
gabhuis léinidh shéaghuinn shróil,  
d'uaim ghrinn budh dheacra do dhéanamh,  
go sgim ealtan éanuigh óir.

Triobhus donnsróil gan chlaon ccumtha  
cuirther uime, móide a mhuirn;

248. Steer and Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture in the West Highlands* (Edinburgh, 1977), 57.

249. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire* (Edinburgh, 2007), No. 80.

250. 'Laoidh an Tàilleir', in R. Black, ed., *An Lasair: Anthology of 18th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse* (Edinburgh, 2001), No. 17.

ceann an t-sluaigh ó Inbhear Abha,  
go sduaim inghean bhrogha Buidhbh.

Gabhuis tráth fan troightheach mboinngeal  
dá bhróig chumtha uachtair óir,  
nach bacann léim lúith no lámhaigh:  
a chéim cúil ní tháruidh tóir.

*As a charm for victory under his armour  
he puts on his beautiful satin shirt  
of fine needlework, hard to accomplish,  
a flock of birds embroidered in gold.*

*Breeches of brown satin without false shaping  
are put upon him, greater his cheer;  
head of the host from Inverawe  
from the dignified daughter of Badhbh's fort.*

*Two shapely shoes now with golden uppers  
he has put on his fair-soled feet  
that hinder not a leap of limbering nor casting,  
pursuit never overtook his backward step.<sup>251</sup>*

A change in dress styles is evident in An Clàrsair Dall's complaint about extravagant clothing in 'Òran do MhacLeòid Dhun Bheagain'.<sup>252</sup> The young chief Ruairaidh, unlike his father, is a product of the schooling system set out in the Statutes of Iona of 1609 and his ambitions are turned away from Gaelic culture. The poet complains how the get-up of even his page – in doublet and hose, a cloak, a shop-fashioned belt, a golden bugle and silver-tipped bow – will have cost as much as a mart and will cause rents to rise. The chief's servant, whose parents tilled the land, goes about as dapper as a duke.

The traditional headgear of the warriors was the blue bonnet, and poetry often makes a lateral allusion to the number of warriors thronging a hall by the number of blue bonnets hung on the pegs (*air staing*). Alasdair Ranaldson MacDonell, 15th chief of Glengarry, introduced Glengarry bonnets, worn by most Scottish regiments and pipers to this day. These hats were traditionally finished either with chequered borders, black ribands or with the blue-black

251. From 'The Headship of the Gaels is Good Charter', in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 24, ll. 117–28.

252. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach* (Edinburgh, 1994), 205.

plumes of the black grouse, as seen in his portrait.<sup>253</sup> The *gillean maola dubha* (black bald lads) were the lowest order of retainers employed by a chieftain, their low status indicated by their lack of headgear.<sup>254</sup>

It was seen above that Gilleasbuig Caimbeul had a pair of gold shoes. Shoes appear as a luxury item in a song from the middle of the 16th century, when a Mull woman engaged in a *spaidsearachd* or flyting describes the inhabitants of Lochaber as churls in calfskin hose and hairy sandals who hide stolen meat under their kilts. The Lochaber woman retorts that, on the contrary, her men wear hose, tailored jackets, silks stockings and black polished welted shoes of English leather.<sup>255</sup>

The use of the shoe as a receptacle marked the outlaw. Fearchar mac Iain Òig must use his plaid as a towel and his shoe as a cup.<sup>256</sup> The same motif occurs in a verse attributed to the Earl of Mar as he wandered after defeat at the second battle of Inverlochy (1432):

Is math an còcaire an t-acras,  
Is mairg a nì talcais air biadh,  
Fuarag eòrn' à sàil mo bhròig  
Am biadh as fheàrr a fhuair mi riamh.

*Hunger is a good cook,  
Woe to him that would disdain any dish,  
This barley gruel in the heel of my shoe  
Is the best food I've ever had.<sup>257</sup>*

#### WOMEN'S DRESS

John Lesley, Bishop of Ross, writing in 1578, describes the *earasaid* 'arisaid' as a plaid about three yards by two, worn by women as an overdress.<sup>258</sup> It appears to have gone out of fashion in the 18th century, after which time such garments may have been used as blankets for beds. They tended to be striped rather than chequered and could be worn pulled up over the head or draped back from the shoulders and fastened by a brooch at the neck and by a belt at the

253. Pullar and Low, *Fauna Scotica*, 25.

254. Newton, *Warriors of the Word* (Edinburgh, 2009), 127.

255. See 'A' Ghriadach Dhonn', in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 83.

256. 'Chaidh moill air mo lèirsinn': <<http://tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/25278>>.

257. I. F. Grant, *Highland Folk Ways* (London, 1975), 132.

258. In *De origine, moribus et rebus gestis Scotorum* (Rome, 1578). For a longer discussion on the arisaid, see Quye and Cheape, 'Rediscovering the Arisaid', *Costume* 42 (2008), 1–20.

waist. They tended to be made of finer material than men's plaids and were often of muted colours – see pictures from R. R. McIan and James Logan, *The Clans of the Scottish Highlands* (1845–1847).

Perhaps it is because women are usually envisaged indoors that so little mention is made of the arisaid, an outdoor garment. An isolated mention occurs in the well-known song 'Tha Tighinn Fodham Èirigh', in praise of the Clanranald chief Allan of Moidart (who was later mortally wounded at the Battle of Sheriffmuir, 1715):

'S iomadh maighdeann bharrasach,  
Dom math a thig an earasaid,  
Eadar Baile Mhanaich  
'S Caolas Bharraigh a tha 'n dèidh ort.<sup>259</sup>  
*There are many lovely maidens,  
Whom the arasaid becomes,  
Between Balivanich  
And the Sound of Barra who long for you.*

There is some suggestion that the arisaid was the clothing of married women, but the excerpt above clearly refers to unmarried women. Martin Martin and other commentators refer to it as a garment of the past, even in the 17th century. Gradually its place was being taken by smaller shawls known as a *tonnag* or *guailleachan*, by 'duffel cardinals' and, later, by tailored coats. An attempt was made to revive the wearing of the arisaid or at least to revive the term in a book from 1938 on the correct wearing of Highland dress, when it seems to refer to a much smaller silk shawl.<sup>260</sup>

The Rev. John Lane Buchanan described the dress of women in the Western Isles in 1782 in his *Travels in the Western Hebrides*:

The women wear long or short gowns, with a waistcoat and two petticoats,



James Basire, *A Lady in the Highlands of Scotland* (1745), wearing the Arisaid. Out of Copyright, National Galleries of Scotland: <<https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/70786/lady-highlands-scotland>>

259. Black, *An Lasair*, 49.

260. Thomas Innes of Learney, *Tartans of the Clans and Families of Scotland* (1938), 70, quoted in Quye and Cheape, 'Rediscovering the Arisaid'.

mostly of the stripes or tartan ... except the lower coat is usually white. The married wives wear linen mutches, or caps, either fastened with ribbons of various colours, or with tape straps, if they cannot afford ribbons. All of them wear a small plaid, a yard broad, called *guilechan*, about their shoulders, fastened by a large brooch.<sup>261</sup>

Hugh Cheape describes the arisaid as 'high colour, high quality and high fashion'. By contrast, the clothing worn by the lover of Seathan mac Rìgh Èireann is light:

Cha ghiùlaininn ach beag èididh:  
còta ruadh mu leth mo shlèisne,  
criosan caol-dubh air mo lèine

*I'd wear only scant clothing:  
a russet coat around my thigh,  
a narrow black girdle around my shift.*<sup>262</sup>

This is a secret love where material advantage counts as nothing – she goes on to say she would sooner sleep with Seathan in a ruin than in an upstairs room in a bed of silk and satin. However, there are many love songs where the lover is vaunted as a provider and these give us a sense of the material culture of the times. Society was partially nomadic and it is typical that pride had to be vested in portable items rather than in architecture and portraits. In 'Ailein Duinn', Anna Chaimbeul praises Ailean about 1788 for having brought her expensive pieces of fine linen, a handkerchief of spotted silk and ribbons for tying her hair.<sup>263</sup> A century earlier, the singer of 'Bothan Àirigh am Bràigh Raithneach' (The Shieling in Brae Rannoch)<sup>264</sup> praises her husband for bringing back from the fair a belt and comb, gloves with gold tips, a wrought handled knife, a fillet and a kertch and a purse, while he wears hose, soft shoes with laces and a navy London coat. Dòmhnall MacInnes, a tailor, promises a girl a silk gown, a cloak, satin ribbons and a ring if she becomes his sweetheart.<sup>265</sup>

In a picture from Pennant's *A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides in 1772* of women working at the quern, the distinction between married and unmarried women is clearly visible in their headdress. The distinction is between the mutch cap of married women and the *stiom* or

261. Quoted in Quye and Cheape, 'Rediscovering the Arisaid', 8.

262. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 327.

263. Black, *An Lasair*, 278–79.

264. Catherine Kerrigan, *An Anthology of Scottish Women Poets* (Edinburgh, 1991), 25.

265. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 352.





Moses Griffith, *Women at the Quern* (detail) from Pennant's *A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides* (1772). Public domain

headband of unmarried women. Preceding the use of the mutch cap, married women wore the *brèid* 'kerchief' from the morning after their marriage.

The song 'Tha Tighinn Fodham Èirigh' mentioned above, makes a distinction between the maidens in the arisaid and the married women 'with tight pulpit-shaped kerchiefs' – *Brèid chaol an càradh crannaig orr*.<sup>266</sup> The sister of Iain Garbh indicates both married and unmarried women with the same headdress code:

'S iomadh bhaintighearna bhrèid-ghil  
bhios gu deurach gad chumha,  
agus stiomach òg uasal  
nach bu dual bhith fo mhulad.

*Many a white-kertched lady  
will lament you tearfully  
and many a young snooded one  
that was not wont to be sorrowful.*<sup>267</sup>



Richard Waitt, *The Henwife* (1706), to illustrate the *brèid*. Public domain

266. Black, *An Lasair*, 48–51.

267. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 19.

A woman who has been raped in the song 'Dh'èirich mise moch Didòmhnach' complains that her assailant has scorned her headband, as a code for her maidenhood:

Bhagair e mo lèine a shròiceadh,  
Rinn e liadan beag' am chòta,  
Chuir e stiom mo chinn na h-òrdan –  
chunnaic thu, Rìgh! nach b' i chòir i?

*He made to rip down my bodice,  
and left rents in my clothing,  
and my headband disordered –  
you saw, Oh King! how he scorned it.*<sup>268</sup>

The word *brèid* allowed the 18th century poet Uilleam Ros some wordplay from its two meanings of 'kerchief' and 'sail'. In 'An t-Òran Eile' (The Other Song), he describes the woman he loves, Mòr, as leaving him both under sail and as a married woman:

'S e dh'fhàg mi mar iudmhal air treud,  
mar fhear nach toir spèis do mhnaoi,  
do thuras thar chuan fo bhrèid  
thug bras-shileadh dheur om shùil.<sup>269</sup>

*What has left me apart from the flock,  
like a man with no interest in women,  
is your sea-voyage wearing a kertch/ under sail  
that brought tears flowing swift from my eye.*

Most women in the Highlands covered their heads out of doors – still very much the case in Margaret Fay Shaw's photographs taken in South Uist in 1935 – so the lack of headdress is a poignant detail in 'Cumha Hiortach' (St Kildan Lament).<sup>270</sup> The singer notes that a woman, rushing to her son who has fallen from the rocks to his death, omits to put on her kerchief – a detail echoed in John Blake McDonald's painting of 'Glencoe' of Maclain's distraught wife.

#### TEXTILES

In weaving tartans, a distinction was made between the hard plaids woven from combed yarn and the softer fabrics made with carded yarn. The dyeing of the yarn was executed before the weaving and was generally considered to be

268. Catherine Kerrigan, *An Anthology of Scottish Women Poets* (Edinburgh, 1991), 34.

269. Black, *An Lasair*, 316–17.

270. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 55.

the hardest part of the process. The patterns for the weaver were set up by the woman of the house on a *beart deilbh* or framework. Drugget was an indigo-dyed mixed linen and wool material, brightly striped on a blue ground, used exclusively for women's skirts, for the arisaid and for the smaller shawls that took its place. Indigo was also used for blue-checked blankets. Cloutie, not unique to the Highlands and made from old materials woven into a cotton warp, was used for quilts. Small looms were used for making garters and braids and white stockings were knitted from cotton, both privately and commercially. Tweed manufacture originated in the Borders and was not introduced to Harris until 1844, but it utilised indigenous skills of dyeing and mixing colours to become a mainstay of the economy and a regular part of the dress of the humble and the gentry. The English word 'tweed' is said to be derived from a misunderstanding of Scots 'tweel' (English *twill*) as referring to the River Tweed, but more probably it is derived from Scots 'tweedle' meaning 'twilled cloth' in English. The wool is dyed ('dyed in the wool') before being spun, which means that the yarn itself can then be spun from different coloured wool. The proportion of undyed to dyed wool is predetermined by weight to obtain the desired hue. Harris Tweed is the world's only commercially produced handwoven tweed. Traditionally the colours of tweed, *clò mòr*, were muted in contradistinction to tartan, but in recent years much more colourful tweeds have been produced by the likes of Breanish Tweed in Lewis. The traditional patterns include Plain and Overcheck twill (the latter being overlaid with a large check design in a different colour), Plain and Overcheck Herringbone, Barleycorn, Striped, Houndstooth or Dogstooth and Checked.

Linen had been produced in the Highlands since early times for use as sheets, shrouds (the first article made by a woman after her marriage<sup>271</sup>), kertches and the *lèine-chroich* 'saffron shirt' used as a battledress. Whether the *lèine-chroich* was actually dyed with saffron or some other yellow dye has been discussed, because saffron – the stamens of the non-native autumn crocus – was exorbitantly expensive.<sup>272</sup> During the 18th century, the production of linen became an industrial rather than a domestic affair, with the appearance especially in Perthshire and Cromarty of large retting pools and skutching mills, the yarn then spun in the villages. The industry was very important until cotton imports started to take the place of linen in the mid-19th century.<sup>273</sup>

As silk rarely survives the centuries, much of our evidence for its use comes from the literature. A rich variety of material is implied by a poem of 1310

271. Michael Newton, *Warriors of the Word* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2009), 181.

272. Kass McGann, 2000: <<https://reconstructinghistory.com/to-dye-a-saffron-colour/>> – accessed 12 January 2016.

273. I. F. Grant and H. Cheape, *Periods in Highland History* (London, 1987), 236–39.

describing the accommodation on board Eoin MacSuibhne's fleet making for Castle Sween on which women in sun bowers have high beds with speckled rugs of silk and sendal at their disposal.<sup>274</sup> Silk, often russet, is the usual dress of the ladies in the drinking halls of praise poetry.<sup>275</sup> Silk and satin are described as coming from Galway or Spain: the boat mentioned in the song 'Mac Iarla nam Bratach Bàna' has *cupla de shìoda na Gailbhinn* (ropes of Galway silk) and *shìoda reamhar ruadh na Spàinne* (sumptuous red satin from Spain).<sup>276</sup> Silk is also the textile par excellence of the Otherworld. This is from a poem in the book of the Dean of Lismore:

Iongnadh m'eachtra, 's mé ar ndeaghailt ré m'fhileadhaibh,  
ó ríoghbhruigh mhór go síodhbhruigh sróil do mhinfhearaihbh.<sup>277</sup>

*Marvellous was my adventure once I had separated from my poets,  
from a great royal residence to a silken fairy residence belonging to Little Men.*

There is some evidence in literature of bog cotton or *canach* being used as a material but it is not certain whether this is any more than a literary trope. In one example, Gràinne had clothing made of bog cotton to elude Diarmaid's prohibition that she should not come to him clothed or naked.<sup>278</sup> A tale, 'Na trì lèintean canaich' (The three shirts of bog cotton) was recorded in 1962 from Pàdruig Moireasdan, in which a sister frees her three brothers from a spell that has turned them into ravens by weaving each a shirt of bog cotton. Each took nine months to make, and she bore a child that mysteriously disappeared at the completion of each shirt. When she was about to be burnt under suspicion of killing the three children, the three brothers appeared with them, having taken them so their sister could get on with the weaving of the shirts.<sup>279</sup> This precaution is perhaps a measure of the impracticality of spinning bog cotton, though we know that it was used as a stuffing for pillows. In one version of the tale, nettle takes the place of bog cotton. Nettle fibre was used as a textile in the Highlands till the 18th century and throughout northern Europe, as is evinced by a German term for muslin, *Nesseltuch*.<sup>280</sup>

274. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 33.

275. See, for example, 'Beinn a' Cheathaich', in Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 134.

276. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 7 and 41.

277. W. Gillies, 'A Poem on the Land of the Little People', in Sharon Arbuthnott and Kaarina Hollo, eds, *A Grey Eye Looks Back: A Festschrift in honour of Colm Ó Baoill* (Ceann Drochaid, 2007) 38.

278. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV (London, 1891), 52.

279. 'Na trì lèintean canaich', in Pàdruig Moireasdan, *Ugam agus Bhuan* (Steòrnabhagh, 1977), 16ff.

280. D. C. Watts, *Dictionary of Plant Lore* (Amsterdam, 2007), 379.



The literature has a strange fascination for fur, perhaps suggesting it was not much used in clothing. ‘Fear nan Cochulla Craicinn’ (The Lad with the Skin Coverings)<sup>281</sup> and the smith in ‘Duan na Ceàrdaich’ (The Lay of the Smithy) are dressed in skin or fur. While the mixed-fur clothing of ‘Fear nan Cochulla Craicinn’ is remarkable enough to give him his name, the smith’s clothing – a skin helmet – appears undesirable and is described as being covered with rust spots.<sup>282</sup>

#### EMBROIDERY

*Carmina Gadelica* preserves a number of prayers said at the time of setting the loom for a new web of cloth, because the material would have the potential



Imagined embroidery in John Duncan, *Tristan and Iseult* (1912). Photo credit: Museums & Galleries Edinburgh, City of Edinburgh Council

281. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV, 231.

282. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV, 64, 159, 225, 260.

to stand between the wearer and harm.<sup>283</sup> It appears that embroidery too was understood to be protective. The songs give numerous examples of noblewomen being involved in decorating their kinsmen’s garments especially with birds. Embroidery probably involved metal threads, appliqué and printing with flowers.<sup>284</sup> This last process, *liosradh*, is described by Fr Allan (1859–1905) in *Words and Expressions from South Uist and Eriskay* as the ‘process of polishing fine woollen cloth and stamping flowers on it by passing [it] through hot iron plates’. He continues that *aodach tarrainn* is no longer made in Uist as ‘the struggle for existence is too sharp’. There are many allusions to such activity in the songs. Cairistiona, a noble-woman, perhaps at the time of the Lordship, is described by her nurse cutting, sewing and decorating luxury clothing:

Bha mi bliadhna 'n cùirt an rìgh leat,  
'S ged chanainn e, bha mi a trì ann –  
Fuaigheal anairt 'g gearradh shìoda,  
'S a' cur grinne air lèintean rìomhach.<sup>285</sup>

*I spent a year with you in the king's court,  
though I would say it, I spent full three there,  
sewing linen, and cutting silks,  
and decorating handsome shirts.*

The verses describing Gill'Easbaig Caimbeul's satin shirt, embroidered with gold birds *as a charm for victory* have already been quoted in this section. In his song of unrequited love, ‘Tha mo chridhe mar chuaintean’ (My heart is like oceans), Zachary MacAulay (c. 1667–c. 1737) also mentions the embroidery of birds in gold thread:

Meòir ghrinn-chaol dham b' àbhaist cur grèis  
Air seudan le òr-shnàth  
Dealbh ìomhaigh gach eòin is gach gèig.

*Graceful fingers used to embroidering  
With jewels and gold thread  
Stitch the image of each bird and branch.*<sup>286</sup>

It is clear that shrouds and banners required extensive decoration and there is the suggestion that bags for musical instruments were also embroidered (see IV.2.c.). A singer expresses regret that her foster brothers are

283. See *Carmina Gadelica* I, 300–09.

284. I acknowledge this as the suggestion of Frances Forrest.

285. Kerrigan, *An Anthology of Scottish Women Poets*, 43.

286. Black, *An Lasair*, 8–9, ll. 69–72.



buried in thin linen shrouds devoid of ribbons, satin and the embroidery of gentlewomen.<sup>287</sup> John MacCodrum describes Clan Donald as *buidheann nan seòl 's nan sròl dathte* (the clan of the sails and the coloured satin), satin being a byword for banners. Banners would have to be sewn with their heraldic designs, for example with the lion, red hand, ship and salmon on the banner of Allan of Moidart, the subject of 'Tha Tighinn Fodham Èirigh'.<sup>288</sup> Part of the poet's praise for his sweetheart is her ability to 'make him a shirt as elegant as any in MacLeod's land'.

Rinn thu mo lèine cho grinn,  
Ri h-aon a bha an sgrì' Mhic Leòid.<sup>289</sup>

These comments accord with Jenifer Ní Ghrádaigh's study of embroidery or *lámtorud* 'handwork' in medieval Ireland as the highly valued art and preserve of aristocratic women, both lay and religious. A needle alone was worth one ounce of silver. As women cherished the bodies of their menfolk in embroidered clothing, so did the Church cherish the body of Christ in embroidered altar vestments. (Surprisingly, Otta Swire mentions the embroidery of church vestments as the work of men who lived in a circular, subterranean house, *Taigh nan Druineach* 'the house of the embroiderers', near the church at Kilbride in Strath in Skye.<sup>290</sup>) Needlework was associated with virtue. The 12th-century *Lebor Brecc* states that Mary made the seamless purple tunic that Christ was dressed in when mocked as King of the Jews. The *Annals of the Four Masters* reports in 1157 that Derbforgaill gave a gold chalice and cloths to the nine altars of Mellifont Abbey in Co. Louth. St Patrick asked St Brigid to produce him the robe with which he would rise to eternal life (*Vita I*, §56–58), suggesting that the garment as well as the saint's body were incorruptible. The virgin Ercnait was the maker of clothes for Colum Cille and his disciples, according to the 12th-century notes to the 8th-century *Féilire Óengussa* which states that her name means 'embroideress', for *ercat* in the Old Gaelic is now *rinnaiagecht* 'drawing'.<sup>291</sup>

Ní Ghrádaigh points out the similarity between metalwork and embroidery, especially in the use of filigree, the term *órshnáithe* (gold-threaded) being used for 'embroidered'. The value of 100 ounces of silver cited in the *Annals of Ulster* as the worth of church vestments lost in the river by the

287. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 138.

288. Black, *An Lasair*, 48–51.

289. 'Òran do nighean àraid', in Raoghall Donullach, *Orain le Raoghall Donullach* (Inbhirnis, 1821), 30–31.

290. Otta F. Swire, *Skye: The Island and its Legends* (London and Glasgow, 1961) 222–23.

291. W. Stokes, ed., *Féilire Óengusso Céili Dé* (London, 1905), for 8th January 34–35, 42–43.

Archbishop of Armagh in 1118 also suggests the use of thread made of precious metals.<sup>292</sup> Some of the terms attached to embroidery – *aiste* (pattern), *rinnaiagecht* (drawing) and *cumtuch* (shrine) – are also used of poetic metre and metalwork, and Ní Ghrádaigh concludes, 'It is likely that [Irish embroidery] was as complex and as meticulously composed as the metalwork, or indeed the metrical poetry, that remains to us'.<sup>293</sup>

The figures of the Virgin and the Evangelists in the Book of Kells wear a variety of textiles of different material, design and weave, often with coloured borders and patterns of three clustered dots or checks. The most remarkable example is the figure of St Matthew in the Book of Durrow in red and gold checks – but whether we can extrapolate from the imagined dress of saints to evidence of native embroidery and tartan is debateable.



St Matthew in the Book of Durrow, in red and gold checks

## CONCLUSION

Photographs taken in the 1950s and '60s in South Uist and Eriskay by Paul Strand and a local doctor, Kenneth Robertson, show people dressed almost indistinguishably from the rest of rural Britain. The men are in jerseys tucked into trousers, protected by overalls, with a tweed jacket worn on top, with boots and a flat cap often at a jaunty angle; the women are in headscarves and floral pinnies over skirts and blouses with a cardigan worn on top; the boys and girls are in shorts and skirts with hand-knitted jerseys. Most men are clean-shaven and some of the younger men and women have fashionable haircuts. What is occasionally distinctive is the cable and gansey knits of the men's jerseys and the lacily knitted black or white shawls of some of the oldest women. Even at weddings, kilts are completely absent apart from on the piper. The clothing is warm, practical and protected from dirt at a time when a lack of

292. Jenifer Ní Ghrádaigh, 'Mere Embroiderers? Women and Art in Medieval Ireland', in *Reassessing the Roles of Women as 'Makers' of Medieval Art and Architecture*, 2 vols (Leiden and Boston, 2012), Chap. 3, 93–128.

293. Ní Ghrádaigh, 'Mere Embroiderers? Women and Art in Medieval Ireland', 118.

electricity still made laundry a laborious process. Zipped and denim clothing is only just beginning to appear.<sup>294</sup> The assimilation of a people in terms of clothing was almost complete.

Despite the common accusations of fakery in the history of the tartan and the kilt, it is hoped that a convincing story has been told here of a people's love of colour and checks dating back to the 3rd century, with the Falkirk Tartan and the depiction of a Caledonian captive on Caracalla's cloak. Now the kilt has become an icon of all of Scotland rather than of the Highlands alone. It has become men's preferred dress for busking, weddings and balls, graduations, international rugby matches and New Year celebrations. This is true too of the younger generation of Highlanders, whose fathers would have associated Highland dress with the gentry. Too good, too colourful, too daring for Scotland alone, both tartan and tweed are used by the high fashion industries of Japan and France. What better proof is there of the continuing evolution of tartan's place in iconography than its appearance in the opening ceremony of the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow in 2014? There, with self-deprecating humour, this most macho of materials seemed to stand for social justice in matters of disability, ethnicity and sexuality. Its fight continues.

MB & JP

#### IV.2.b. JEWELLERY, TALISMANS AND HOUSEHOLD GOODS

[Jewellery](#); [Early Examples](#); [The Conservatism of Technique and Aesthetic](#); [Jewellery in Literature](#); [Ring Brooches](#); ['Reliquary' Brooches](#), [Pendants and Shrines](#); [Talismans](#); [Conclusion](#)

[Household Goods](#); [The Furnishings of the Wealthy](#); [The Furnishings of the Black House](#); [Indoor Craftwork](#); [Rope Making](#); [Household Goods Made Outside the Home](#); [Drinking Cups](#); [Conclusion](#)

#### JEWELLERY

It is not surprising that, as in other languages, a lot of endearments in Gaelic – *àilleagan*, *eudail*, *dèideag*, *leug*, *seud*, *tasgaidh* – are also terms for jewels and treasure. What is surprising is that one of these terms, *eudail*, also means 'cattle' and that another, *seud*, also means 'warrior'. The endearments show what was valued in an agrarian, martial society: the cattle as the basic source of wealth, warriors as the defenders and winners of that wealth, and precious stones as things of beauty and signs of wealth, certainly, but also as instruments of protection and

294. Paul Strand, *Tir a' Mhurain: The Outer Hebrides of Scotland* (2nd edn; New York, 2002); Kenneth Robertson, *Dualchas Àraid agus Prìseil/A Unique and Precious Culture: The Changing Face of South Uist and Eriskay* (Kershader, South Lochs, 2009).

healing. For a society that believed that disease and misfortune had supernatural rather than natural causes, often transmitted through human agency, jewellery, as well as being a marker of prestige and wealth, was important for its talismanic properties, if indeed the distinction should be made at all between control of wealth and of supernatural powers.

#### EARLY EXAMPLES

Gold was never as plentiful in Scotland as it was in Ireland in the Wicklow Mountains, but granules would be washed from the soil in Sutherland, around Strontian and around Wanlockhead and Leadhills and Crawford Muir in the south. Jewellery of exquisite beauty has been found in Scotland dating from around 2000 BC, among it the Migdale Hoard, an early Bronze Age find at Skibo Castle that includes several pairs of armlets and anklets, a necklace of forty bronze beads, ear pendants and bosses of bronze and jet buttons. Other early finds are an archer's wristguard studded with gold rivets found at a burial cist at Culduthel, Inverness, and the bronze Torrs Pony-cap and Horns found at Kirkcudbright with sophisticated La Tène decoration from about 200 BC. The Stirling Hoard, discovered in 2008, consists of four gold torcs and a necklace made between 300 and 100 BC.

Metal working appears to have been widespread in prehistoric times: nearly every excavated site has given evidence of moulds for castings, tongs, glass beads or crucibles. The range of jewellery which included armlets and *lunulae* in earlier times became narrowed in historical times to consist largely of brooches for closing both men's and women's dress, rings and the chains which marked chieftainship.<sup>295</sup> The St Ninian treasure from about 800 AD, the hidden wealth of a Pictish noble or ecclesiastic, contains twelve brooches, a spoon and hanging bowls, all with zoomorphic decoration.



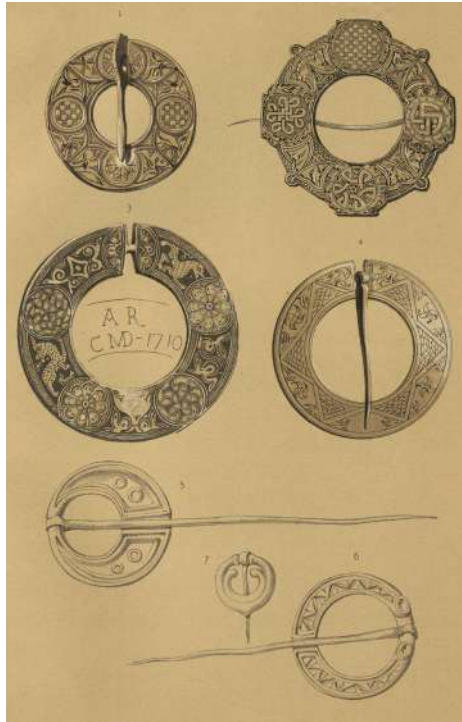
Pictish treasure from St Ninian's Isle, Shetland (c. 800 AD). National Museums Scotland

295. Ian Finlay, *Scottish Gold and Silver Work* [1956], revised by Henry Fotheringham (Avon, 1991), 6; for the account of nine gold chains in the *sithean* of Sgreuchag, see J. G. Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld* [1900], ed. Ronald Black (Edinburgh, 2005), 499.

## THE CONSERVATISM OF TECHNIQUE AND AESTHETIC

There is a remarkable conservatism of technique and aesthetic in the production of brooches. Metal dice or wax shapes were used to make clay moulds, the wax melting out during the firing of the mould. Then metals melted in crucibles were poured into the moulds. The surface of the metal could be decorated with filigree scrolls of wire, metal granules, repoussé hammering or niello (a metallic inlay requiring lower temperatures than enamel), or it could be engraved with plant and animal ornament set between medallions of knotwork. Semi-precious stones such as quartzes, along with corals, amber, glass beads and pearls, could be mounted in sockets on the brooches. Grids and compasses were used and brass casts were silvered or tinned.<sup>296</sup> Apart

from the reliquary brooches discussed below, there is a clear aesthetic continuum between the ornamentation of carved stones and manuscripts and the metalwork of jewellery, religious shrines, weapons, targes, powder and drinking horns. We have seen in the previous section that embroidery, utilising metal threads, also shared many of the features of metalwork (and poetry).<sup>297</sup> Intricate design tends to be worked in panels with strong contrasts between unworked and worked surfaces; circles and spirals are very common, the circles infilled with knotwork, with foliaceous and zoomorphic motifs. While the detail is minute, harmony rather than symmetry or uniformity is achieved, the overall impression being one of movement. However, while the designs on jewellery were probably intentionally conservative, they differed



Penannular brooches showing continuity of design between four 18th-century and three prehistoric examples. James Drummond, *Ancient Scottish Weapons* (1881), Plate XLIV

296. Lloyd Laing, *Later Celtic Art in Britain and Ireland* ([1987]; Shire, 1997), Chap. 2.

297. Jenifer Ní Ghrádaigh, 'Mere Embroiderers? Women and Art in Medieval Ireland', in *Reassessing the Roles of Women as 'Makers' of Medieval Art and Architecture*, 2 vols) (Leiden and Boston, 2012), 118.

from other forms of metalwork in the incorporation of writing which also had an important talismanic role (as discussed in II.3.a.).

## JEWELLERY IN LITERATURE

*The Annals of the Four Masters* report Anno Mundi 3656 as the year that gold was first smelted in Ireland, and that it was Uchadan, an artificer of the Feara Cualann, who first covered goblets and brooches with gold and silver. The same source gives an etymology of Emain Macha as *eó mhuin Macha* 'the neck brooch of Macha', referring to the tale that she had used her brooch to mark out the plan of the fort, which is indeed brooch-like in its circular design studded with poles.

It is a commonplace of the panegyric code to comment on the brooches of women in the drinking halls as a sign of the wealth of the patron. Gold and jewels were likewise part of the acceptable payment of poets, and a disgruntled poet threatens his patron John Stewart, saying it would be better to give him jewels than suffer the damage of satire.<sup>298</sup>

A poem by the Scottish poet *Fearchar Ó Maoil Chiaráin* of about 1500 praises the addressee Mòr by saying that a brooch of gold would befit her more than her brooch of blackthorn.<sup>299</sup> The tales of the Fenians describe Blaoghaire being buried with a ring on each of his fingers as befits a king, while another tale describes the seven pins (*na seachd deilg*) required to hold Oisean's coat together, when he was being starved by his daughter.<sup>300</sup> The vast majority of surviving Highland jewellery consists of just such pins and brooches for fastening plaids.

## RING BROOCHES

Ring Brooches, both annular and penannular – the gap in the ring making it easier to swivel the pin to the back – mark an uninterrupted tradition of over 1000 years, stretching from the Hunterston brooch (overpage), probably made at Dunadd around 800 AD, to the 18th century. Some brooches were plain while others were decorated with filigree, scrollwork, enamel and stones. McIntyre North's *Book of the Club of True Highlanders* (1881) illustrates the 'Celtic safety-pin' or *dealg* (Plates X and XII) and suggests that such brooches are represented by the Pictish symbols of the crescent and V-rod and the 'spectacles and zigzag'.

298. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire* (Edinburgh, 2007), No. 20, l. 54.

299. 'I mBrat an Bhrollaigh Ghil-Se', in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 47.

300. John Gregorson Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV (London, 1891), 82 and 100.





The Hunterston Brooch (c. 800). Public domain

Examples survive in brass, silver and gold, those of brass up to 7 inches in diameter and those of gold being rather smaller.

Drummond reports that the pins of the earlier examples are square in cross-section, while the later ones are round and considerably shorter and that they often include writing. The Latin names of Jesus, two of the Magi and a Fate and Jesus's final word, *consumatum*, appear on the back of the gold ring brooch that belonged to the Ballantynes of Kames in Bute. However, it is on the front of the octagonal Mull brooch that the letters ANAN and IHCN (for Ihesus Nazareus) appear. In later examples, the writing degenerated into diagonal lines in niello.<sup>301</sup> Isobel Grant believes this deterioration in the design of ring brooches coincides with the fall of the Lordship. Whether comprehensible or not, the Latin writing on ring brooches marks their other function as talismans, protecting the wearer from disease and ill-wishers. The potency of the words would of course be reinforced by the metal, the round form and probably by any foliaceous and zoomorphic designs.

At the end of the 18th century, the Rev. John Lane Buchanan, impressed

301. Finlay, *Scottish Gold and Silver Work*, 41.

'Spectacles and zigzag' on a Pictish stone at Aberlemno. Catfish Jim and the soapdish at English Wikipedia / <CC BY-SA>

by the skills of the average Highlander, describes how many could turn their hand to making a brooch, buckle or ring for his favourite female.<sup>302</sup> Isobel Grant describes brooches on St Kilda that were made by travellers from spoons, coins and even from part of a modern doorknob.<sup>303</sup>

Though not of Highland manufacture, 'Luckenbooth' brooches with two intercepting hearts bought in the luckenbooths of Edinburgh were popular in the Highlands from the 18th century and were often given as engagement presents.



#### 'RELIQUARY' BROOCHES, PENDANTS AND SHRINES

A different aesthetic, owing more to Renaissance tastes than to the ring brooches discussed above, is exhibited by three great 'reliquary' brooches. These brooches are surmounted by a big quartz crystal which comes off to reveal a cavity which would have held a relic. The quartz is surrounded by turrets topped by pearls or coral and are mounted on discs ornamented with niello and filigree. The great brooches of Lorne, Lochbuie, Glenyon, Ugdale in Kintyre and Ballochyle on Holyloch, Cowall, were owned by families over many generations and all date from the 16th century. However, the quartz crystals that surmount them had probably been treasured as amulets or set into shrines long before they were made into brooches.<sup>304</sup> The manufacture of the Ballochyle brooch can be dated to 1602 in Glasgow. Hugh Cheape suggests that they were probably all made by burgh goldsmiths, their owners seeking to enshrine their amulets in the best way available.<sup>305</sup> This accounts for their departure from a Celtic aesthetic to something of greater symmetry, bulky ostentation and stasis. Renaissance in style, their talismanic purpose however is Highland. This would explain the

302. John Lane Buchanan, *Travels in the Western Hebrides 1782-90* (London, 1793), 83, 87.

303. I. F. Grant, *Highland Folk Ways* ([1961]; London, 1975), 247-48, 329.

304. Finlay, *Scottish Gold and Silver Work*, 46-47.

305. Hugh Cheape, 'From Natural to Supernatural: The Material Culture of Charms and Amulets', in Lizanne Henderson, ed., *Fantastical Imaginations: The Supernatural in Scottish History and Culture* (Edinburgh, 2009), 79.



The Glenlyon Brooch. Public domain

warrior Alasdair MacColla, a century later, is reported to have had a *clach bhuidhe* which forecast the outcome of battle.<sup>306</sup>

While some crystals were mounted on great reliquary brooches, others were encased in silver bands and hung on chains, to allow them to be dipped into water with an appropriate form of words so the water could be used in protective or healing lustrations on man or beast. This was the case with the Clach Dearg of Ardvorlich, the Keppoch Charm and the *Leug* of Lorne or 'the Luck of the Stewarts of Ardshiel' (the English 'Luck' approximating in sound and meaning to the Gaelic *Leug*). William Shaw's Gaelic dictionary of 1780 defines *leug* thus: 'In the highlands a large crystal of figure somewhat oval, which priests kept to work charms by water poured upon it ...' The definition accords with accounts by Martin Martin and John Ramsay of Ochertyre of egg-sized stones to which special powers were attributed. The latter additionally mentions the power of locomotion of the



The Clach Dearg of Ardvorlich, from James Young Simpson, *Archaeological Essays* Vol. 1 (1872), 212. Public domain

306. Cheape, 'From Natural to Supernatural ...', 77.



The Monymusk Reliquary (8th c.), probably from Iona and possibly the Brecebennach of St Columba. Public domain

*leug* in possession of McDougall of Lorne which had flown home affronted at being stored in a woosack. We have met this sort of animism and outrage before ascribed to wells.

The reliquary brooches and pendants described above demonstrate a clear overlap between the functions of jewellery as beautiful markers of wealth and as talismans. The overlap exists in the relics of the church, for example in the Monymusk reliquary, St Fillan's and St Moluag's croziers, and the Guthrie and Kilmichael Glassary bell shrines, where spiritually valued wood, bone and old metal are encased in the physically valued, the spiritual and the physical, each lending power to the other. It becomes impossible to distinguish between the power of the relic and the encasing shrine. Indeed, by metonymy, conjunction alone would be enough to transmit the power of the relic to the shrine.



## TALISMANS

Edward Lhuyd gives a list of items used as amulets. The list roughly conforms to details given by Martin Martin and J. G. Campbell.<sup>307</sup> In addition to the quartz stones described above, other stones, remarkable for their colour – perhaps agates or aggregates – or for their form – perhaps pierced like the stone of the Brahan seer – were used as amulets and talismans, to ward off evil and to attract good fortune. Fossils were prized as amulets against sudden death, lightning and toothache. The teeth of the fossilised fish *Lepidotus* were known as toadstone, *clach losgain*, which was thought to come from the head

of a toad by Pliny the Elder, Shakespeare and the Gaels. ‘Thunderbolts’, the fossilised guards of the Belemnite mollusc, were believed to be cast down by thunder and to protect against storms. Clearly the work of human hands but issuing from the earth, prehistoric spindle whorls (known as adder stones), flints and arrow heads (elf shot), axes (celts), amber beads and stone balls all had talismanic properties.<sup>308</sup> Among the articles exhibited by the Archaeological Institute in Edinburgh in 1856



Example of *Àirnean Mhoire* or ‘Mary’s Kidneys’.  
Photo © Ragnhild Ljosland & Christopher Gee

was a necklace of bloodstone ‘esteemed as of special efficacy, like the eagle-stone or aetites, in child-birth’.<sup>309</sup> Molucca seeds, brought by the Gulf Stream from the West Indies, were called *Àirnean Mhoire* ‘Mary’s Kidneys’ and were also used as a charm by women during childbirth, and as ‘fairy eggs’ they were kept as amulets against the evil eye.<sup>310</sup>

It is notable that all these talismanic objects were perceived to come from

307. Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, ed. Donald J. Macleod ([1698]; Edinburgh, 1994), 115; John Gregorson Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, ed. Ronald Black (2005; 1st pub. in 1900 as *Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland*), 14 and 29.

308. Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, xvii.

309. G. Black, ‘Scottish Charms and Amulets’, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 27 (1892–1893), 516. Black’s quotation comes from p. 138 of the exhibition catalogue.

310. Margaret Fay Shaw, *Folk Songs and Folklore of South Uist* (Aberdeen, 1986), 13; J. F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* Vol. I ([1860–1864]; Hounslow, 1983), i.

underground or from the great unknown of the sea or sky, or to have formed within the body of a toad, snake, snail or otter – all animals that are somewhat ambiguous in terms of their domain between earth and water, above or below ground. The objects were perceived as coming from the Otherworld, the seat of the dead and of regeneration, and could therefore be used as a countercharm against human agencies.<sup>311</sup> The metal and the semi-precious stones sometimes used to adorn such charms likewise have their origins in the earth, as did the lead hearts that were ‘turned against illness’. It is possible that the circular form of all the brooches mentioned above is a further indication of the harnessing of propitious sunwise powers that can counter the malevolent.

## CONCLUSION

So jewellery takes on meaning additional to our modern notions of beauty of design and value of material, additional even to the symbolic meaning of medieval lapidary lore. In the belief in the medical properties of certain stones, Gaelic culture shared the Classical and Arab learning of authors such as Dioscorides, Avicenna and Galen, whose *materia medica* were amply quoted in Gaelic medical MSS, such as Adv. MS 72.1.3 of 1478, belonging to the Beaton. Perhaps we should look to the biblical description of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:18–20): ‘And the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones’ as the inspiration for Gaelic examples of castles or boats covered in jewels. It occurs in ‘Am Bròn Binn’, when Arthur spies a castle of precious stones, *clacha buadhach*, below the waves.<sup>312</sup> A more extreme example of jewels as conduits of fortune is the poem addressed to Tomaltach, Lord of Moylurg, in the Book of the Dean of Lismore, where both the gem-studded walls and the loch at Tomaltach’s castle are seen as *buadhach* ‘virtuous’ or ‘propitious’, the water perhaps, as we saw above, transmitting the powers of the gemstones.<sup>313</sup> In the lore surrounding Gaelic jewellery, it seems three things are at work: the techniques and aesthetics of prehistoric art, the lore of Classical and medieval lapidaries and a Gaelic belief in the Otherworld as the source of regeneration that can protect the wearer from ill.

## HOUSEHOLD GOODS

Our sources for the household goods of the Gaels are firstly the museums of Scotland and the specialist museums such as I. F. Grant’s folk museum in Kingussie (now removed to Newtonmore), the West Highland Museum in Fort

311. Cheape, ‘From Natural to Supernatural ...’, 84.

312. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 57, l.24.

313. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 21, ll.44 and 51.





Intact houses at Garenin, in Lewis. Photo Dorothea Witter-Rieder <CC BY-SA 3.0>

William, the museum of Island Life at Kilmuir in Skye and some houses kept intact like those at Garenin in Lewis. Grant's *Highland Folk Ways* and the definitions and drawings supplied by Dwelly's Dictionary are very useful. Gaelic songs, stories and ethnographic descriptions, travellers' accounts and paintings from the 18th and 19th centuries and photographs and film by the likes of Paul Strand, Kissling and Margaret Fay Shaw from the 20th century give further evidence of Highland interiors.

#### THE FURNISHINGS OF THE WEALTHY

Traditional Gaelic song refers to the households of the wealthy, making allusion to certain objects as a sign of the chief's good taste, hospitality and wealth, in particular to ornate drinking vessels and an abundance of candles. 'Òran Mòr Sgorabreac' gives a picture of the accoutrements of a laird's house in the latter half of the 17th century in the Nicolson stronghold at Sgorrybreck in the north-east of Skye. The song describes the hall as being wide and generous for the entertainment of warriors and for dancing, with white tables (presumably decked with linen) with gold candlesticks, silver cups and pewter quaichs, and the floor is swept so smooth that an apple could reel on it.<sup>314</sup> This is all in marked distinction to the wooden drinking vessels and trodden earth floors of humble households, dusty or muddy according to season, with lighting provided by ineffective, smoky cruises burning smelly fish or mutton oil, or by slivers of dry, turpentine-rich fir

314. Anne Lorne Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2006), 37–38.

roots known as fir candles, dug out of the peat. Candles, indeed, were such a luxury that Elizabeth Grant of Rothiemurchas (1797–1886) and her sisters practised their harp and pianos in the dark.

Iain Lom evokes a brightly-lit scene in Dòmhnall Gorm's drinking hall, the generosity of the chief encoded in the number of blue bonnets hanging on the stand and of burning candles:

Gur lionmhor bonaid ghorm air staing ann  
is coinnle chèire laiste an lanndair.

*Many the blue-bonnet hanging on the stand there  
and wax candles lit in lanterns.*<sup>315</sup>

Mention of gaming boards, musical instruments such as the organ and virginals (*òighcheol*), the jewellery and clothing worn by the women and the display of weapons, armour and saddlery give further evidence of the prosperity engendered by the chief's rule.

Hugh Cheape warns against looking on Highland material culture of the 17th century with preconceptions about remoteness and poverty. On the contrary, the confidence of the period is evident in the adoption of Renaissance styles in architecture and costume. For example, Castle Tioram, the Clanranald stronghold in Moidart, contained both a grand reception room and a smaller domestic room for women, comparable to the *sala* and *camera* of a Palazzo Medici. The accounts of the Dunvegan household for silk, satin and velvet, lace and buttons of gold and silver and doublets for the page speak of the same confident participation in European contemporary fashion, even if this was scowled upon by the poet An Clàrsair Dall for increasing the rents of the tenantry (see IV.2.a.). Also comparable with European castle life are the tapestries in Dunvegan mentioned by Martin Martin and the silk wall hangings from Kilchurn Castle on Loch Awe, now in the National Museum of Scotland.<sup>316</sup> Recent restoration at Beldorney Castle near Huntly, where the poet Sileas na Ceapaich lived after 1713 with her husband Alexander Gordon of Camdell, has revealed wall paintings, one of an ear-ringed man playing the lute.<sup>317</sup>

However, Boswell and Johnson on their travels to the Highlands in 1773 were constantly disappointed by the standard of the housing of the wealthy. They complain that Armadale Castle was suitable for a tenant but very poor for a chief, and, though Breacachadh Castle in Coll was 'well-wainscoted', there was nothing

315. 'Tàladh Dhòmhnail Ghuirn', in Catherine Kerrigan, *An Anthology of Scottish Women Poets* (Edinburgh, 1991), 20.

316. See H. Cheape, 'The Poet as Historian', *History Scotland* Vol. 13, No. 1 (January 2013); Fred T. MacLeod, 'Notes on the Dunvegan Charter Chest', *TGS* XXVIII (1912–14), 199–209.

317. Personal communication with Mark Wringe.

'becoming a chief about it'. They were witnessing the general move in the 18th century among the wealthy from castles to houses of two storeys, but some gentlemen nevertheless lived in 'huts' of one storey like the poor. Johnson said that none of these houses was 'spacious or splendid' and that rooms tended to become 'heterogeneously filled' by provisions that had to be stored over long periods. The frequency of visitors too accounted for a lack of cleanliness in such houses.<sup>318</sup>

I have seen no houses in the Islands much to be envied for convenience or magnificence, yet they bear testimony to the progress of arts and civility, as they shew that rapine and surprise are no longer to be dreaded, and are much more commodious than the ancient fortresses.<sup>319</sup>

Of the remaining fortifications he says that, 'as they are the productions of mere necessity, they are built only for safety, with little regard to convenience, and none to elegance or pleasure'. Thus, he was very much surprised to find a *cloacina* or 'necessary house' in the tower of Brochel Castle in Raasay. The 'little regard to convenience' is borne out by Boswell's description of the original entrance to



Entry to Dunvegan Castle entailed a boat journey. Image: <[www.ambaile.org.uk](http://www.ambaile.org.uk)>

318. Ronald Black, ed., *To the Hebrides: Samuel Johnson's Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* [1775] and *James Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* [1778] (Edinburgh, 1984), 125, 196–97, 319.

319. Black, ed., *To the Hebrides: Samuel Johnson's Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, 397–98.



Interior, Cawdor Castle

Dunvegan castle being from the sea, so that entry from the land entailed a boat journey.<sup>320</sup>

We see a clear transformation reflected in the architecture of the 18th century from a chief regarding his fighting men as the most potent sign of his wealth to standards more closely approximating those in the rest of Britain, particularly after the Disarming Acts of 1746 rendered a standing army useless and illegal. In the eastern Highlands some mansions, as opposed to defensive fortifications, had been built as early as the 17th century. For instance, Miltoun of Tarbat (built 1685–1687) had plasterwork by Dunsterfield, who had just completed work at Holyrood, and sash windows within a decade of their appearance anywhere in Britain. Elegant, classical mansions such as Culloden House and Foulis Castle were built around the Moray Firth, their influence to be seen in the bow windows of local farmhouses.<sup>321</sup> The 19th-century baronial style of the castles of Dunrobin, Ardrross, Douneray and Carbisdale was of course a Romantic reference to defensive architecture, rather than a reality.

Regarding the change from fortification to gentrification on the west coast, even Boswell and Johnson were pleasantly surprised by Dunvegan Castle and

320. Black, ed., *To the Hebrides: Samuel Johnson's Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, 399, 162, 231.

321. Joanna Close-Brookes, *Exploring Scotland's Heritage: The Highlands* (Edinburgh, 1986), 73.



Raasay House. Boswell describes the former as the best house in Skye. The dining-room had marble tables, a screen with prints and family portraits; the drawing room, though not large, had a good carpet, a table and prints of the seasons from Bowles (a London printmaker) and a copy made by Lady Macleod of *The Ruins of Rome*. This room, he says, had formerly been the bedchamber of the chief, Ruairidh Mòr, chosen because the sound of the waterfall 'disposed him to sleep'. Boswell found himself 'quite at home' in his bedchamber there with its old-fashioned bed, closet and chest of drawers.<sup>322</sup> In Raasay House they 'found nothing but civility, elegance, and plenty'. Johnson describes the carpet being rolled up for dancing, which was followed by a supper for thirty-six people and singing by the ladies of 'Erse' songs. Boswell goes on to describe the 'genteel order' of the tea and coffee upon the table and the number of beds in some of the rooms which allowed the family to entertain so extensively.<sup>323</sup>

After Boswell and Johnson's time, the remodelling of Dunvegan Castle in 1790, costing £3,940, constituted a new wing, new windows, ornamental ceilings, a fireplace and repair of the old tower.<sup>324</sup> However, about the same time, Faujas de Saint-Fond, a French geologist travelling in the Highlands, found MacNab in Dalmally still living in a two-roomed house, buried several feet into the earth for warmth. He remarked, as did Johnson, on the necessity for storage space, for the second room was full of food, dairy, clothing, linen, whisky and peat.<sup>325</sup>

Furniture was fairly sparse in the grand houses because of a lack of wood, craftsmen and poor communications.<sup>326</sup> What little mahogany furniture there was had to be imported from London until around 1760 when furniture shops opened in Edinburgh. Nevertheless, the craze for 'oriental' furniture, lacquered in black with gold ornamentation, had reached the grand houses in the Highlands by the 17th century. There is a description of japanned ware at Doune, Rothiemurchas.

Cloth was easier to come by than furniture. Linen was in plentiful supply, both home-produced and bought, and it was normal in the great houses to

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322. Black, ed., *To the Hebrides: Samuel Johnson's Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, 231–32.

323. Black, ed., *To the Hebrides: Samuel Johnson's Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, 241 and 153.

324. Marjorie Plant, *The Domestic Life of Scotland in the 18th Century* (Edinburgh, 1952), 31–32.

325. Barthélemy Faujas de Saint-Fond, *Travels in England, Scotland, and the Hebrides: Undertaken for the Purpose of Examining the State of the Arts, the Sciences, Natural History and Manners, in Great Britain: Vol. 1* (London, 1799), 295 – accessed 11 January 2017.

326. I. F. Grant and Hugh Cheape, *Periods in Highland History* (London, 1997), 162.

renew tableware every day. The Book of the Thanes of Cawdor describes the large hall at Cawdor Castle in 1716 decorated with arras hangings. Tapestries, curtains, bed hangings and covers of velvet, drugget, camlet and tafety were displayed in colourful combinations. One bedroom was decked out in red and white, another had blue wall hangings and purple and yellow bed curtains, while the bed and wall hangings in the tower hall were in orange.<sup>327</sup> As it was typical all over Scotland for people to entertain in the bedrooms, these arrangements would have been seen to good avail. Reception rooms were also used as bedrooms and Smollett says that in the castles on the west coast it was not uncommon for a dozen of the laird's retainers to bed down in the great hall at night. In the manse at Creich, Dornoch, box beds lined one wall of the parlour, with their shutters painted attractively in blue. The nobility also had 'standing' or four-poster beds, sometimes with a truckle bed stored below which could be drawn out for a servant.

It was during the 18th century that the furnishings of the grand houses really began to diverge from the arrangements of the peasantry. Invereray Castle was unusual in having stoves installed, large bronze vases on pedestals.<sup>328</sup> Earlier, the tableware of rich and poor alike had been made of wood or horn, but pewter and china – often blue and white delftware – became common in the big houses from around 1750. The Laird of Kilravock near Inverness imported pewter and copperware by boat from Edinburgh in 1704. Like European nobility in general, Highland aristocratic families had crockery especially made in China and emblazoned with their coats of arms. Sets survive bearing the crests of the Grants, MacIntoshes, Camerons and MacDonalds, and a set belonging to Sir Archibald Campbell of Inverneil can be seen in the West Highland Museum. The West Highland Museum reports that such dinner sets were specially made for the European market at the factory on Ching-te-chen, in China, and decorated with the clan's arms. After about 1820, such work was taken over by Worcester china in England.

Sometimes pewter sets were used for the first course and china for the second course. Huge punch bowls and tea sets were commonly on display. At the beginning of the 18th century, it was usual for a traveller to carry his own knife and fork and, perhaps, after cutting his meat, to pass the cutlery on to his wife and continue to eat with his fingers.<sup>329</sup> However, later that century, the big houses started to buy multiple sets of cutlery and, in response, silver cutlery was made in Inverness from the mid-18th century.

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327. Plant, *The Domestic Life of Scotland*, 39.

328. Plant, *The Domestic Life of Scotland*, 58.

329. Plant, *The Domestic Life of Scotland*, 44.



## THE FURNISHINGS OF THE BLACK HOUSE

I.F. Grant sees it significant of Highland society that a folk style was developed in neither furnishings nor clothing. She describes how all styles could be seen in all social classes. Though houses were basic, they could contain exotic and expensive objects. Fine imported chairs, abandoned by emigrating tacksmen, would sometimes make their way to humble houses; the same chairs were imitated by local craftsmen, though the legs were kept shorter to avoid the smoke that hung in chimneyless black houses. Grant refers to the Inverness-shire and Sutherland chairs, each using naturally bent wood, the former for the sides and the latter for the top rail of the back of the chair. Hugh Cheape has shown that even a straw chair, *sunnaq*, could be made to imitate the style of the castle. High quality objects such as snuffboxes, punch bowls and fine china dining sets found their way into humble Highland homes brought back by Highlanders on military duty or involved in the East India Company. Grant refers to some chieftains who, while owning a castle, preferred to live in a house.

There is surprising agreement of detail between descriptions and depictions of unimproved black houses. In 1893, the Rev. Iain MacRuairidh described the household furnishings of the tailor of Geàrraidh-Bo-Stig in Benbecula:

Cha robh de dh'arnais ann an taigh Mhìcheil ach dà leabaidh – leabaidh mhòr agus leab' àrd; sreath chlach mu choinneamh an teine, agus sgrath rèisg air an uachdar gu beinge; trì sunnagan connlaich, loban gu gleidheadh shìl; ciste gu gleidheadh mhine; coidhean gu gleidheadh ime; noigean gu bleoghan bhainne, miosair shuidheachaidh no dhà; crannachan is loinid is ròineachan; spàl-ladhair gu fighe nam plataichean; corc-ràsair gu marbhadh agus gu gearradh na feòla; dà chuaich fhiodha agus dà spàin adhairc .... Bha 'n àrnais a rèir an latha agus na linn anns an robh iad beò. Ach an dèidh a h-uile cùis, eadar na bha Micheal a' dèanamh a dh'aitheach agus na bha an Tàillear a' cosnadh, maille ri maruinn spreidhe, cha robh dìth no deireas orra latha deug sa bhliadhna.<sup>330</sup>

*The only furniture in Michael's house consisted of two beds, a big bed and a high bed, a row of stones in front of the fire with an earth divot on top to make a bench; three straw chairs, a woven basket for holding grain, a chest for holding meal, a vessel for holding butter, a noggin for milking, a dish or two for settling the milk; a churn and whisk and ròineachan(?); a horn spool for plaiting mats; a razor set in a cork for killing and for cutting up the meat; two wooden quaichs and two horn spoons ... The furnishings were in keeping with the times in which they lived, and for all that, between what Michael cultivated and what the tailor earned, along with keeping cattle, they wanted for nothing any day of the year.*

330. TGSIX XIX (1893–94), 32.



'Inside of a weaver's cottage in Ilay'

Thomas Pennant, *Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides* (1772)

However, similar conditions had caused James MacDonald to observe more acidly in his *General View of the Agriculture of the Hebrides or Western Isles of Scotland with Observations on the Means of their Improvement* (1811) that

At least seven thousand of the natives of Lewis know nothing of a chimney, gable, glass window, house flooring or even hearthstone ... and what we call their furniture is ... wretched and scanty beyond description.<sup>331</sup>

Paintings and drawings of Highland interiors during the 18th and 19th centuries by such artists as David Allan, Landseer, David Wilkie, John Phillip, Alexander Kay, R. R. McLan, Marion Webster and Kathryn Ellice, William Simson and William Dyce accord well with these descriptions. The family of three or so generations are gathered round a fire made on the earthen floor whose smoke escapes through a hole in the roof. A three-legged pot or griddle is suspended over the fire around which fish are drying. The people wear colourful Highland dress, the older women in mutch caps and the unmarried girls with hair fillets. The furniture is scant, consisting of a bench, stools and table. There is evidence of the activities carried out indoors – implements for carding, dyeing and spinning, for basket and boot making, and of pastimes signalled by shinty sticks and the pipes.

331. Quoted in MacLeod, *From an Antique Land*, 114.

Anne MacLeod, however, in *From an Antique Land*, says that such paintings conformed to an archaising meta-narrative, to a 'general obsession with craft and culture, elegising the losses engendered by the levelling tendency of modernity'.<sup>332</sup> She shows how artists deliberately depicted outmoded customs such as the use of the distaff rather than the spinning wheel, in an attempt to emphasise the distinctiveness of the way of life and to bolster a Romantic belief in the idyllic quality of the simple life. She contrasts the abhorrence expressed for such housing by earlier 18th-century travellers like Burt and Pennant with the later artists' delight in select details of the Highland interior as encoding such virtues as social and cultural cohesion, self-sufficiency and wholesomeness. What Anne MacLeod describes as stereotypical for genre paintings was nevertheless still typical of unimproved Highland housing in the 20th century, at least in the islands. An account given by Am Puilean, Aonghas Caimbeul, of the house where he was born in 1903, translated here, places the same emphasis as the painters on the centrality of the fire and of work, though there is slightly more furniture:

It was the sort of dwelling-house that was common throughout Lewis at that time, a long black house with a thatch roof held in place with ropes and stone weights. It was divided into three parts. The upper end was the bedroom or the *cùlaist*. There were three box beds against the back wall, a row of chests on the other side and a table and a chair or two in the middle of the floor. The middle part of the house was called 'the fire'. Living and work, food preparation and eating, women's work (carding, spinning and cleaning), men's work (repairing fishing nets, making heather and straw ropes), activity and leisure, talk and visitors and every sort of to-ing and fro-ing that was part of the daily life of the people at that time was centred on that place and issued from it.

The fire was in the middle of the floor with a bench on either side, a low and a high stool, and perhaps a chair or two at the table. That was pretty much the sum of the furniture. On the other side of the partition that divided 'the fire' from the lower end of the house was a passageway known as the *stall*. The outer door was opposite this, with the *stall* door leading off to the barn. At the lower end of the house were the cattle and hens and, for some of the winter, a pen of wedders. Behind the partition was the peat recess, water barrel, pans, pails and peat creels, among other things.<sup>333</sup>

332. Anne MacLeod, *From an Antique Land: Visual Representations of the Highlands and Islands 1700–1880* (Edinburgh, 2012), 119.

333. Aonghas Caimbeul (Am Puilean), *A' Suathadh ri Iomadh Rubha* (Glasgow, 1973), 3–4.

Both the negative views of the improvers and the more positive views of the painters and native commentators are flip sides of the same physical reality, discussed more dispassionately by I. F. Grant. The fire formed the centre of the house providing warmth, light, heat for cooking and essential drying for the sods of the roof, which if allowed to become water-logged would cave in. Where peat was not available, dried cow dung, straw or seaweed might be burned, as it was on Heiskir. The partitions in a black house did not extend as far as the ceiling in order to allow light and warmth to reach throughout the building. (This is noted by Dorothy Wordsworth, on tour in the Highlands in 1803, when commenting on the firelight on the rafters of the room where she slept.) With improvement, the fire was moved first from a stone hearth in the centre of the room to a fireplace in the dividing wall between the living and sleeping rooms surmounted by a *similear crochaidh* or wooden hanging chimney, and then to a hearth in the gable end of the house.

A black metal pot would be suspended on a chain, *slabhraidh*, from the rafters or from a 'swee' or crane in the hearth. Girdles for making oatcakes and scones were also thus suspended. Ovens did not figure apart from in castles, but meat was cooked in the ashes in lidded pot ovens. The earliest cauldrons were made of riveted bronze plates but were replaced by cast iron pots that stood on three short legs. Such iron pots figure in songs and stories, as they were often the sole means of cooking. The song 'Chaidh moill air mo lèirsinn' (mentioned earlier in the context of drinking from the shoe) was sung by a man outlawed for seven years for killing a factor who had removed the family's cooking pot and cow in lieu of rent.<sup>334</sup> Being heavy and made of metal, these pots could also be used as a weapon. Isobel Grant says the last wolf in Scotland was said to have been killed by a woman armed with such a pot. 'A Ghaoil na dèan cadal idir' is a warning song disguised as a lullaby in which the singer warns her lover that his life is in danger, but that he can defend himself with the cooking pot under the bed:

'S a ghaoil na dèan cadal idir,  
ghràidh na dèan cadal trom,  
cuir do làmh a-staigh fon leabaidh  
's gheibh thu coire-goil fod cheann.<sup>335</sup>

*Love, don't sleep at all,  
darling, don't sleep heavily,  
put your hand in under the bed  
and you'll find a cooking-pot under your head.*

334. A. L. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2005), 226.

335. <<http://tobarandualchais.co.uk/gd/fullrecord/85706>>.



Seating was provided by a mixture of chairs, stools and benches, *sèistean* or *beingean*, the last of which sometimes contained storage too. Paintings of the period correctly show seating round the fire to be very low to avoid the pall of smoke. As described by Am Puilean above, three box beds were lined up on one wall in the *cùlaist* and often another was in the living room, which sometimes had another bed built into the thickness of the wall – a nuke bed – for guests. The panelling or curtains around the beds afforded privacy and kept the bedding clean from soot-laden drops, *snighe*, falling from the thatch. In earlier times, a shelf above the bed served this purpose. The sleeping arrangements described by Boswell in the late 18th century in a house in Screapadal in Raasay were a bedstead for the man and wife and places marked by stones and padded with straw for the servants.<sup>336</sup> Children would sit on stones by the fire, though the men of the household had a wooden bench and the women stools. It is often remarked that seats and beds were allocated to certain members of the family and not shared with guests. Seats by day often served as beds by night. Sometimes they were mounds of earth by the fire; sometimes stone or wooden cots by the wall filled with straw or heather roots for padding and insulation. An Ciaran Mabach's song 'Ge socrach mo leaba, b' annsa cadal air fraoch' (Though my bed is comfortable I would sooner sleep on heather), made in Edinburgh at the end of the 17th century, probably refers to this practice rather than to sleeping outside.<sup>337</sup> In support of this, there are descriptions of Highlanders taking bedding off the bed to sleep on the floor.

It will be noted that an absence of clay in the Highlands meant there was virtually no indigenous pottery beyond the occasional hand-moulded *cnagan* used for storing oil or milk. Crockery became a favourite item to be brought back by men and women working in the herring industry of the 19th century, while 'Russian' sugar bowls or Khokhloma ware, made of wood painted red, black and gold, were brought back by men trading with fishermen from the Baltic. These would be proudly displayed on the newly fashionable dressers. Other 'sites for beautification' were the shelf above the fireplace, the window sill and the ledge formed by the inner side of the wall as the roof rested on the infill between double walls. The shelf above the fireplace might be trimmed with scalloped newspaper and decked with wally dogs. The earth floor was sometimes covered with sand or rugs made from rags or skins. A piece of Nottingham lace might cover the window and the interior walls might be limewashed or covered with

336. Black, ed., *To the Hebrides: Samuel Johnson's Journey to the Western Islands*, 155–56.

337. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach: Anthology of 17th Century Gaelic Poetry* (Edinburgh, 1994), 176.



Interior of an Inverness-shire cottage. Image: <[www.ambaile.org.uk](http://www.ambaile.org.uk)>

sacking and newspaper. Grant mentions the practice of arranging white pebbles on the window sill or even right round the house and suggests this might have had prehistoric connections. It perhaps equates with the circular walls round graveyards and other saining practices (further discussed in Chapter VI).

Paul Strand's and Kenneth Robertson's photographs show later interiors from the 1950s and '60s. The fire is still very much the centre of the older houses, now encased in a cast iron stove such as the Modern Mistress. The dressers hold plates and religious tokens; the mantel pieces above the stoves, hung with a drying rod, display wally dogs, tins and postcards; the windows may have lace curtains and a potted geranium on the sill; and the walls are sometimes decorated with wallpaper and hung with pictures of the royal family, calendars and, in Catholic households, pictures of the Sacred Heart or of the Pope. Such loyalty to the British establishment may strike some as strange, considering the harsh treatment of the Gaels by central government, particularly in the 19th century, and the systematic marginalisation of their culture. However, the huge sacrifice of men in both World Wars and in the wars of Empire, and perhaps lingering notions of sacral kingship, mean that Gaelic identity in Scotland, unlike Gaelic identity in Ireland, is deeply loyal to the Crown.

#### INDOOR CRAFTWORK

Isobel Grant describes the home as a 'universal workshop', the women involved in everything to do with *calanas* (work with wool and linen), using carding



combs, spinning wheel (after its introduction in 1745) or distaff, the *crois-iarna* or 'thread-winder' and the *dealbh-àrd* 'warping frame'; the men involved with fishing gear and rope making, and the children with knitting or perhaps cutting the pith from rushes for use as wicks. Wicker baskets – themselves home produced – would hold wool at different stages of processing. In the more distant past, the whittling of arrows would have been a task carried out round the fire. Ronald Black has suggested that the arrow thus became a ready image for song-makers, perhaps as a metaphor for pain or as a sign of a chief's weaponry. (Some tasks could also be accomplished when walking outside. Women are pictured spinning with a distaff or knitting while fetching peats or going to gut herring, using a wooden knitting needle holder or leather knitting belt to brace the idle needle under the arm or at the waist.)

#### ROPE MAKING

The same Rev. Iain MacRuairidh, whose account of the tailor's house at Geàrraidh-Bo-Stig is quoted above, describes making rope and sacks in Benbecula about 1850:

An latha nach biodh e 'n comas do dhaoine an aghaidh a thoirt a-mach air doras, gheibheadh iad obair gu leòr anns na taighean. Bhiodh gach fear, ach fear ainneamh, a' snìomh shìoman. Bha am pailteas de mhuran ri fhaotainn; agus an uair a bhiodh e seachdain no dhà sgaoilte ann an àite tioram, blàth, ghabhadh e snìomh na shìoman caol, grinn ... An àite nam pocannan a tha nis tuilleadh is lìonmhor anns gach ceàrn dhen Ghàidhealtachd, b' iad na plàtaichean-muillinn a bh' aig gach tuathanach beag a bh' anns an dùthaich. Chunnaic mise mòran dhiubh air an snìomh 's air am fighe 's air fuaigheal ... Agus mun cuairt a' bheòil aca bha sia cluasan, mar a theirteadh ris na dulan leis am biodh na beòil aca air an dùnadh.<sup>338</sup>

*Any day when people weren't able to go out of doors, there would be plenty to do indoors. Everyone, almost without exception, would be busy making rope. There was plenty of marram to be had, and after it had been spread out to dry for a week of two in a warm, dry place, it could be twisted into fine thin rope ... Instead of the bags that are now so plentiful all over the Highlands, small farmers would use mill sacks made of plaited mats. I've seen lots of them being twisted, woven and sewn together ... And round*

338. 'O Chionn Leth Cheud Bliadhna', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* XXIV, 385; with thanks to Hugh Cheape.

*their mouth there would be six 'ears' as the loops were called by which they'd be drawn closed.*

The association of spinning yarn or rope with spinning a tale is common to several Indo-European languages but Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair might well have been speaking literally when he said, 'Bheir mi nis a' corra-shìomain dhut fhèin, gus am faigh mi tuilleadh gaoisid' (I'll pass the rope-twister to you till I find more horse-hair/material).<sup>339</sup> The motif of making rope from sand as a byword for an impossible task may similarly have crept into stories from the context of rope making in the ceilidh house.<sup>340</sup>

There is a poignant scene in *Deireadh an Fhoghair*, Tormod Caimbeul's marvellous evocation of a vastly reduced crofting village from around the middle of the 20th century, when the words of a half-forgotten song are sought and found in a toolbox. The unsung song lying with the unused tools in the darkness speak eloquently of the loss of a community that existed through collaboration.<sup>341</sup>

The Highlanders used professional weavers and tailors for the making of their clothes, but most utensils, with the exception of those made by smiths and travellers, were made at home. Straw and wicker were worked at home for storage of dry goods in baskets and bags, for partitions, furniture and even plates. Dwelly names and illustrates various vessels woven from different materials for holding grain: *ciosan*, *sasag*, *loban*, *rùsgan*, *mùdag* (standing three feet tall with an open dish at the top) and *seic*, a bag made of reeds capable of holding two bolls of meal, whose mouth could be closed up by a drawstring looped through its handles (as described by MacRuairidh, above).

Roger Hutchinson's book, *The Weaver of Grass*, is about Angus McPhee (1916–1997) from South Uist, who was shell-shocked in the Second World War. Rope making, common in Angus's youth for use in harness, fishing gear, thatching etc. became his self-therapy and self-expression over fifty years' of silence and mental illness. His work – outsize garments woven from grass and hidden in the grounds of the hospitals in Inverness and Dundee – was 'discovered' in the 1970s by the art therapist Joyce Laing. It was exhibited at the Third Eye Centre in Glasgow as an example of *Art Brut* or 'Outsider Art', but it could equally well be described as a Gaelic art. Rope making is seen as such by Caroline Dear, an artist

339. Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, 'The Lyon in Mourning', I, 332; with thanks to Hugh Cheape.

340. E.g. in 'Obair, obair, Fhearchair', Fearchair gets rid of the fairies whom he has called in to thresh his corn by sending them to the shore to make ropes of sand: <<http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/fullrecord/101089/1>>.

341. Tormod Caimbeul, *Deireadh an Fhoghair* (Edinburgh, 1979), 65–66.



Angus McPhee's outsize garments woven from grass. Photo by Bob Frith

working in Skye whose work we have already mentioned and who made ropes out of fifty plants, some conventionally used and some not, in a project called 'Entwined/*Suainte*'.<sup>342</sup>

#### HOUSEHOLD GOODS MADE OUTSIDE THE HOME

Travellers made various wooden staved vessels used as cups, bowls, milk cogs, churns, cheesers and wash tubs. Sometimes these were 'feathered' to stop warping, with slivers cut away from the stave and bent out to interlock with the feathers of the adjacent stave. Travellers also specialised in spoons made in a mould from heated horn, and lanterns, colanders and brooches from tin. The entire process of making a colander from a sheet of tin can be seen in Timothy Neat's film of 1979, *The Summer Walkers*.

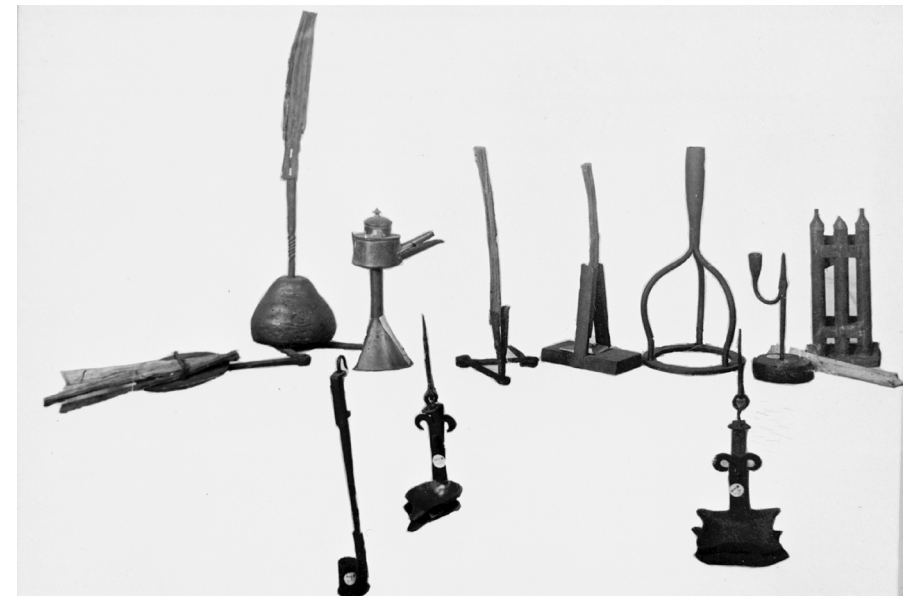
Blacksmiths made the household implements for use with the fire, in cooking and lighting (the *cruisies*, *crùisgein*, candle-sticks, *coinnleirean*, and clips, *gillean-dubha*, for holding pinewood tapers in the wall). Perhaps we should see the decorative practices used in ironwork and firedogs as reflecting the peculiar pride taken by smiths in their work and the respect accorded since

<sup>342</sup>. <<http://www.carolinedear.co.uk/projects/entwined-suainte>>.



A collection of objects made and used by travellers in Scotland.

Image: <[www.ambaile.org.uk](http://www.ambaile.org.uk)>



*Cruisies* (*crùisgean*), candle-sticks (*coinnleirean*) and clips (*gillean-dubha*) for holding pinewood tapers. Image: <[www.ambaile.org.uk](http://www.ambaile.org.uk)>

earliest times to that profession. Pokers might be decorated with a double spiral; tongs were given to a new bride to mark her as the mistress of the household; cauldrons were often three-legged and girdles decorated with a variety of motifs. The iron tools made by smiths occur again and again in the folklore as a protection against fairies. For instance, a tailor halts the progress of a changeling by throwing his shears at him. In the proverb ‘Eadar a’ bhaobh ‘s a’ bhuarach’ (between the witch and the cow fetter) – equivalent to ‘between the devil and the deep blue sea’ – it would be far better if the iron cow fetter separated the speaker from the witch.

We have a snapshot of a smith in Iain a’ Ghobha, John MacDonald (1902–1985), whose smithy in Ardvassar in Skye has remained intact since his death. He practised several arts – metal and woodwork, piping and tradition bearing – and maybe there was nothing unusual in this. First he was kept busy making and repairing agricultural tools, especially ploughs, with metal his clients would often bring with them to the forge. After the advent of the tractor, he turned to domestic utensils, griddles, pokers, tongs and decorative weather cocks (to be seen at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig and the Isle Ornsay Hotel). A wrought iron animal that would not be out of place in the Book of Kells – somewhere between a dog and a lion – remains in his smithy, perhaps for the filial or handle of a gate. Iain a’ Ghobha was famous for his *spealan gobhlach*, or forked scythes, with handles made from a single piece of naturally branching wood. A set of pipes made from laburnum wood testifies to his skills both as a woodworker and as a piper. The forge was a meeting place and we see him as a tradition bearer, teaching youngsters the pipes and noting down tunes for them to practise. Inspired by meeting Sir Iain Noble in 1974, he started to keep his accounts in Gaelic. His skills came from both sides of the family, from his father who was a smith and from his mother whose brother Calum Mòr was a piper and scholar. In former times, Iain a’ Ghobha’s skills would have been used in the manufacture of swords and armour, jewellery and quaichs. It appears that some of the mystique of the smith – who in the 7th and 8th-century Old Gaelic law tracts carried the highest honour price among the craftsmen<sup>343</sup> – still attended the profession. He was a key person in his community, an artist with a critical and creative mind, and with skills in metal and woodwork, music and language. He had a concern for the transmission of his culture and made both practical and decorative objects with a fine attention to detail.

#### DRINKING CUPS

The feasts of the chiefs are typified by drinking from cups rather than

343. Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin, 1988), Chap. 2.

feasting from plates and it is always the former that are recognised as ‘sites of beautification’ in terms of materials and decoration:

Cuirn is cuaich is copáin chumhdaigh  
i gcúirt líonmhoir Locha Cé;  
ibhthear fíon san chonnphort chnuasaigh:  
is longphort ríogh uasail é.

*Horns, quaichs and engraved goblets  
in the thronging court of Loch Cé;  
wine is quaffed in that place of garner:  
it is the palace of a noble king.*<sup>344</sup>

For Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh in the 17th century, it is the sound rather than the sight of the drinking cups that evoke MacLeod’s hall: *far am bu tartarach gleadhraich nan còrn* ‘where the clatter of drinking horns was thunderous.’<sup>345</sup> Muireadhach Albanach in the 13th century cites drinking-horns, implying feasting in general, among the things he would give up for the sake of the Virgin:

Gan sbéis i gconaibh ná i gcrodh,  
ná i sgoraibh, a ghéis ghlan,  
easbhaidh chorn cáich is a gcon,  
orm is a sgor mbláith ‘s a mban.

*With no regard for hounds or herds  
or studs of horses, O white swan,  
or others’ drinking-horns and stock,  
without their women and their dogs.*<sup>346</sup>

It is clear that drinking cups had a ritual significance in inauguration and betrothal or *rèiteach* ceremonies, not to mention Holy Communion.<sup>347</sup> But their significance goes back to prehistoric times with drinking cups found in graves at Vix, Hallstatt and Kleinsperge in Baden Württemberg where they probably provide archaeological evidence of the Indo-European ritual of a woman of high status confirming the rightful king with the offer of a drink. The Gaelic name, *Medb*, is cognate with the Vedic name *Madhavi*; both mean ‘the intoxicating

344. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 21.

345. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, 136–37.

346. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 6, 30–31.

347. Newton, *Warriors of the Word* (Edinburgh, 2009), 178.



one', and both women were kingmakers.<sup>348</sup> In the story 'Tochmarc Étaíne' (The Wooing of Étaíne), Eochaidh, the king, selects as a wife the woman best at serving drink. Seen in this light, *Meadh Meadha* 'mead vessel' makes sense as the name of Muireadhach Albanach's wife in the 13th century.

Returning to Scotland, the decoration of cups shows the significance society attached to drinking, whether ritualistic, contractual or simply pleasurable. The Inchgowan Pictish stone (perhaps a fake), now in the National Museum of Scotland, shows an old mounted warrior drinking from a horn tipped with a bird's head which mockingly looks down on the drinker.<sup>349</sup> Alasdair MacDonald, Lord of the Isles (d.1449) sent the Irish poet Tadhg Ó hUiginn an unsolicited gift of a gold cup or *còrn* which occasioned the poem 'Fuaras aisgidh gan iarraidh', in which he implies a ritual of communal drinking:

An deoch do cuirtheá sa gcoirn  
i dtigh óil airgnigh Loghoirn  
ní bhíodh ann aga hibhe  
acht clann ríogh nó ridire.

*The drink you used to pour in the cup  
in the plundering drinking hall of Logharn,  
only the children of kings and knights  
would be there to imbibe it.*<sup>350</sup>

The magical significance of drinking – and of smiths – is understood in an account of Fionn mac Cumhaill's conception. Fionn was conceived in the heat of battle when his father Cumhall went for a drink at a smith's house. There he was offered a drink, if he could take it, from a vessel with seven or nine flutes which had to be closed with the fingers while the mouth closed over the last. While he was drinking, water spouted out through one of the flutes, splashing the smith's daughter who became pregnant. (The Fenians of course had their own iconic cup of victory, *Còrn nam Buadh*).<sup>351</sup>

Drummond illustrates a collection of ceremonial wooden drinking vessels or 'methers', carved from a single piece of solid wood. Many are square at the rim and round at the base and have four handles, carved from the same piece of wood, and stand between 6 and 12 inches high. The handles sometimes

348. Professor John Waddell, Emeritus Professor of Archaeology at Galway University, Lecture 5: 'The Goddess of Sovereignty', the Rhind Lectures (Society of Antiquaries in Edinburgh, 2014); and Georges Dumézil, *The Destiny of the King* (Chicago, 1988), 81–84.

349. For illustration, see <[nms.scran.ac.uk/database/record.php?usi=000-100-043-517-C](http://nms.scran.ac.uk/database/record.php?usi=000-100-043-517-C)>.

350. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 17.

351. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays*, 16 and 135.

protrude from the base of the cup to form legs.

All Drummond's examples are made of plain wood, except the one known as the Dunvegan cup, a MacLeod heirloom kept in Dunvegan castle. Its wooden bowl is elaborately decorated with silver plate and filigree, niello and inlay, with sockets for gems or for beads of glass or coral, and the feet, in the form of human legs, are shod with shoes. A Latin inscription reads *Katharina Nig Ry Neil Uxor Johannis meg Macguire, principis de Fermanae me fieri fecit anno Domini 1493* (Katharina, daughter of King Neil, wife of John, grandson of Macguire, prince of Fermanagh, had me made in the year of the Lord 1493). Between the cup's first-person address in this inscription and its shod feet, we



Methers, from Drummond, *Ancient Scottish Weapons* (1881), Plate LII

may have another example of the animism of objects such as boats, musical instruments and weapons that we suggest originates in the source of their constituent materials. The wooden bowl, however, may be much earlier than its 15th century silver encasing and is said to have belonged to Niall Glundub, the 10th-century Irish king of Cénel nEóghain. There are several accounts of how it came into MacLeod ownership. The MacLeods of Dunvegan and Harris and the MacDonalds of Sleat lent support to Aodh Ruadh Ó Domhnaill in opposing Elizabeth I's dominance in Ireland in 1594. They helped lay siege to the castles of Enniskillen and MacCostello in Co. Mayo. The cup may have been given as a gift to MacLeod at that time by a MacNeill chieftain. However, a couple of legends give the cup fairy origins, recounting how it was stolen from a fairy feast by a herdsman, Lurrán, at the time of Malcolm, the 3rd MacLeod chief (1296–1370).<sup>352</sup>

The Dunvegan cup is not to be confused with Rory Mòr's drinking horn, made from an ox horn with silver mount, which contained about two pints to be drunk off in one draft by each successive MacLeod chief as he reached

352. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dunvegan\\_Cup](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dunvegan_Cup)> – accessed 15 May 2010.

manhood. The silver rim has seven imprinted medallions containing beasts and patterns. It is variously believed to belong to the 10th and the 16th century.

#### CONCLUSION

What is distinctive about the jewellery, talismans and household goods of the Highlands and how do they figure symbolically in the Gaelic imagination? The ring brooch displays a continuity of style and method of manufacture that lasted over two millennia, if the longer pin of prehistoric examples is allowed, or over one millennium if not. Continuities in the style of decoration can be observed between metal, manuscript illumination and stonework. There is a strong overlap between brooches as beautiful but functional objects and their use as talismans. Being made of metal, the brooch shares the earthly origins of many other talismanic objects – fossils, prehistoric flints and attractive stones such as quartzes, agates and bloodstone – all conducting a protective force from the earth. Some quartzes were prized over many centuries, perhaps firstly in a shrine, before being fashioned into a reliquary brooch, Renaissance in style but Gaelic in purpose.

Various continuities can be observed in the household goods, not least that between the furnishings of the humble and the wealthy, for there was no distinct peasant style. We find styles of furniture in the black house mimicking those of the castle, albeit made from humbler materials with shorter legs (to sit below the smoke). This could be seen to reflect the general belief that the chief's noble blood flowed in the veins of all his clansmen. The housing of the humble was also a workshop for the domestic manufacture of textiles, rope and objects made of wood, willow or hazel wands and horn. Metal utensils for cooking and the fire had to be manufactured outside the home by a smith and were especially prized. We see an enduring fascination with iron, from the cauldrons of Tuatha Dé Danann and the Fenians to pokers traditionally being given to brides.

Until the mid-18th century many of the wealthy lived in the same sort of housing as the humble, but with some fine furnishings. Boswell's and Johnson's report of stepping from Indian cotton sheets onto a wet mud floor in Ulva is typical of the contrast.<sup>353</sup> About this time, the wealthy started to acquire china dinner sets and multiple sets of cutlery, oriental lacquered furniture and colourful furnishings and tapestries. It was distinctive of the well-off households, nevertheless, to be overcrowded by the necessity to accommodate both stores and guests.

353. R. Black, ed., *To the Hebrides: Samuel Johnson's Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland (1775) and James Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides (1778)* (1984), 196 and 364.

There is also a marked continuity in the importance attached to drinking vessels, which appear to have represented kingship in the prehistoric graves of Hallsatt and which are decorated so ornately – apparently for shared drinking – in numerous Highland examples. Reflecting this, a single allusion to a drinking cup in poetry refers at once to the chief's fitness for rule. MB

#### IV.2.c. MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

[Introduction; Rock Gongs; Bronze Trumpets – Loughnashade, Ard Brinn and Carnyx; Quadrangular Handbells; Triple Pipes – Heaven or Hell?; Pan Pipes; Clàrsach, Tiompan and Cruit; The Later Medieval Clàrsach; The Clàrsach as Modern Icon; The Highland Bagpipes](#)

#### INTRODUCTION

Ata an saoghal & gach beó-chreatuir da bfuil ann, na chlarsigh: An duine, sé is Claireseoir & duanaire, chum moladh an mor-Dhia mirbhùileach do sheinm; & ata Daibhidh do ghna mar fhear don chuideachd bhias marso ag caoin-chaint gu ceòlmhar ma nard-Rí.

*The world & every living creature in it is a harp: Man, he is Harper & poem-book, for singing the praise of the marvellous great God; & David is always one of the company who thus speak gently and musically of the high-King.*<sup>354</sup>

Thus the Rev. Robert Kirk introduced his version of The Three Fifties – The Psalms of David – which he published in 1684. This imaging of the world as a musical instrument had its roots in Pythagorean and neo-Platonic theory, which found expression in a sonnet of William Drummond's only a few years previously, commencing,

God, binding with hid tendons this great All,  
Did make a lute which had all parts it given;  
This lute's round belly was the azur'd heaven,  
The rose those lights which he did there instal;  
The basses were the earth and ocean;  
The treble shrill the air; the other strings  
The unlike bodies were of mixed things ...<sup>355</sup>

354. Robert Kirk introduction to the Psalms 1684, quoted in R. Black, 'Gaelic Religious Publishing 1567–1800', in Ó Baoill and McGuire, eds, *Caindeal Alban, Scottish Gaelic Studies XXIV* (Aberdeen, 2008), 80.

355. William Drummond, *Commendatory Verses: On the Book*.

In Scotland, including in the Gàidhealtachd, lute and *clàrsach* often shared a repertoire and performers might even play both instruments.<sup>356</sup>

What the preceding quotations indicate is that, while the primary function of musical instruments is to make sound, their appearance has often been of fundamental importance. This is as true of the Gaelic-speaking world as any other and some of the most remarkable, even iconic, images in the Gaelic and wider Celtic culture are those of musical instruments, as on the cross slab at Aldbar, Angus. The *clàrsach* and *piob mhòr* (Celtic harp and Highland bagpipe) are the classic examples. Others, such as the Celtic carnyx discovered in north-eastern Scotland, share totemic imagery with Gaelic mythology or, in the



Aldbar *clàrsach* (8th-9th century). Photo © Tom Gray

356. J. Purser, *Scotland's Music* (Edinburgh, 2007), 115–16.

case of the rock gongs, have had a continuous and significant presence in the Gàidhealtachd from the Stone Age to the present day.

Stone carvings of Pictish and Gaelic provenance from the 8th and 9th centuries feature a remarkable number of musical instruments and musicians – a subject not directly addressed in an otherwise comprehensive study of the carvings as art.<sup>357</sup> Most frequent in appearance are various harps, almost all triangular framed, but there are also images of trumpeters, horn players, triple-pipe players, a drum and cymbals.<sup>358</sup> There are also possible images of lyre-type instruments, though these are surrounded by doubts.<sup>359</sup>

The early depictions of the *clàrsach* demonstrate a high level of observation, allowing reconstructions to be made with reasonable confidence.<sup>360</sup> A beautiful carving of a later medieval *clàrsach* on the 15th-century grave slab at Keills in Knapdale, Argyll, even includes the decorative features found on surviving Gaelic harps such as the Queen Mary and Lamont harps, now held in the National Museums of Scotland.<sup>361</sup>

The association of the *clàrsach* with blind Ossian led to many images of Ossian with a 'harp' by artists of the Romantic period, such as Runciman, Barry and Ingres. They are not notable for their accuracy. Ingres' harp frame looks too weak and in Runciman's depictions the strings are shown running in the wrong direction – from tuning pegs to fore-pillar rather than from tuning pegs to sound box. Such instruments would make very little sound. These failures of observation continued into the 20th century for, while Robert Tait does seem to have looked at a harp before illustrating it, Robert Burns, in his illustration for the ballad of Sir Patrick Spens, repeats the same fundamental error as Runciman.<sup>362</sup> Although the harp has a more prominent part in mainstream fine art than the bagpipe, both are treated with reverence, for example in James Drummond's illustrations (see pp. 375 and 378) for Joseph Anderson<sup>363</sup> and McIntyre North's illustrations in *Leabhar Comunn*

357. G. and I. Henderson, *The Art of the Picts* (London, 2004).

358. Purser, *Scotland's Music*, 33–36.

359. J. Purser, 'Listening to Picts', in E. Hickmann, I. Laufs, R. Eichmann (Hrsg.), *Studien zur Musikarchäologie IV*, *Orient-Archäologie* 15 (Rahden, 2004), 223.

360. For instance, the work of William Taylor and Ardival harps, amongst several manufacturers.

361. For images of the harp on the Keills grave slab and the Queen Mary and Lamont harps, see Purser, *Scotland's Music*, 16 and Plates XII and XIII.

362. J. Purser, 'Sir Patrick Spens as It Is Sung', in C. Willcocks, ed., *Sir Patrick Spens* (DoubleBridge Press, 2014), 77.

363. J. Anderson and J. Drummond, *Ancient Scottish Weapons* (Edinburgh and London, 1881).



*nam Fìor Ghàiel* (both from 1881). The Queen Mary and Lamont harps were studied, measured, drawn and reconstructed with considerable accuracy at the beginning of the 20th century by Joseph Armstrong,<sup>364</sup> and Karen Loomis has recently made what she accurately describes as ‘a forensic study’ of the Queen Mary Harp.<sup>365</sup> The *clàrsach* has also direct associations with poetry, as evidenced by the titles of Derick Thomson’s *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* and Niall Mac Leòid’s *Clàrsach an Doire*.

If the harp has become primarily associated with Ireland, the bagpipes have gained a like status in Scotland, notwithstanding the fact that both instruments are known, made and played in many parts of the globe. That two such small countries should have, as it were, appropriated first rights to the imagery associated with these instruments is remarkable. On the other hand, the Celts’ love of music is established internationally as well as at home:

Chan eil e soirbh Ceilteach a sgaradh bho dhuine eile, ach tha briathras agus ceòl agus gaol Nàduir a’ Cheiltich ’ga chur air leth ann an ealain có-dhiù.

*It is not easy to distinguish a Celt from someone with another background; but the Celt’s verbal virtuosity, his music and his love of Nature set him apart in art at least.*<sup>366</sup>

Music and love of nature go hand in hand in the Gàidhealtachd, as do music and the Otherworld – the latter the subject of independent study.<sup>367</sup> The association of music and musical instruments with the Otherworld, and with the features of the landscape which suggest the Otherworld, gives them an additional visual significance. These landscape features are frequently liminal spaces, a subject pursued in [V.1](#).

#### ROCK GONGS

Musical instruments have a visual significance which goes back not just through centuries but through millennia, for, although rock gongs are not in themselves artefacts, they were used as musical instruments, and their situations, functions, adoption into Gaelic culture, and the presence of rock art on the surfaces of several examples, justify their inclusion.

364. R. B. Armstrong, *The Highland Harp* (Edinburgh, 1904).

365. Karen Loomis and Lore Troalen, *The Queen Mary Harp: A ‘forensic’ study of the musical instrument* (University of Edinburgh, n.d.).

366. Somhairle MacGilleathain, in R. Black, W. Gillies, R. Ó Maolalaigh, eds, *Celtic Connections* Vol. I (East Linton, 1999), xxi and xxiv.

367. K. Ralls-MacLeod, *Music and the Celtic Otherworld* (Edinburgh, 2000).

Rock gongs (known throughout the world) are naturally resonant and only require that they be struck or even rubbed to emit a pitched sound. Their use in Scotland appears to date back to the Stone Age but they have undoubtedly retained something of their significance into modern times. The rock gong at Port Appin is stated to have been used in former times to give warning of bad news.<sup>368</sup> Some rock gongs are incorporated into structures dated to the late Neolithic. Examples from Aberdeenshire include two of the Easter Aquhorthies recumbent stone circle stones,<sup>369</sup> and the recumbent stone at Arn Hill has a group of six small quarter circles cut into it and is itself a rock gong, with a smaller rock gong resting against it. The site was recorded and sensitively drawn by Frederick Coles in his survey of such monuments for the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.<sup>370</sup>

Several of these rock gongs have names showing that their potential function was still understood; they are ‘the iron stone’ at Arn Hill,<sup>371</sup> ‘the singing stone’ at Ballater, ‘the bell stone’ at ‘Ringing Craig’ near Cabrach,<sup>372</sup> and *clach a’ choire* (the kettle stone) at *Baile Pheudrais* on Tìree.<sup>373</sup> This last is still a focus of ritual behaviour – weathered coins, once present in a depression on the top, being modern votive offerings. It is said that if the rock gong on Tìree were ever to be moved or broken, the low-lying island would sink back beneath the waves.<sup>374</sup> Another legend has the rock contain a crock of gold and also states that, if the rock is broken, the island will sink.<sup>375</sup> The great lighthouse architect Alan Stevenson wrote a sonnet in 1842 dedicated ‘To the “Ringing Stone” at Balaphetrish, Tyree.’<sup>376</sup> The rock was sufficiently significant to be named *Kory-Finmackoul* on Timothy Pont’s map of 1580–1590. In modern Gaelic, this would be *Coire Fhinn mhic Cumhaill* and refers to the Celtic legendary

368. ‘The Ringing Stone’, in *Tales of Argyll* (Lismore and Appin edn, Argyll Branch of the British Red Cross Society, 1981).

369. The third and fifth stones counting clockwise from the recumbent and its flankers are clearly resonant.

370. F. Coles, ‘A report of stone circles in Aberdeenshire: Ironstone’, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 36, 571–574.

371. J. McDonald, *Place Names of West Aberdeenshire* (Aberdeen, 1899).

372. McDonald, *Place Names of West Aberdeenshire*, 289.

373. E. Beveridge, *Coll and Tìree: Their Prehistoric Forts and Ecclesiastical Antiquities ...* (Edinburgh, 1903), 115.

374. N. Newton, *The Shell Guide to the Islands of Britain* (Newton Abbot, 1992), 145.

375. Fagg, *Rock Music*, 86 – but R. Black, ed., *The Gaelic Otherworld – John Gregorson Campbell’s Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands ...* (Edinburgh, 2005), 397, states that Fagg’s source for this legend is not correct.

376. Quoted in full in Lynn, *The Lighthouse on Skerryvore* (Dunbeath, 2015), 121.



Balaphetrish ringing stone. Photo © John Purser

hero and giant Finn MacCool. A postcard of the rock identified in chalk on the stone as 'Ringing Stone Tiree 1918' was issued in the Robertson Series III. This rock gong features many cup marks and there are cup marks on a rock gong on the southern slopes of *Sidh Chailleann* (Schiehallion in Perthshire) – the fairy hill of the Caledonians.<sup>377</sup>

The rock gong at Ballater has a relief pattern, using the whole length of the rock, suggestive of an arrow. It is visually striking but it is also impossible to determine whether the hand of man has had any part in its appearance.<sup>378</sup>

A reference to what appears to be a rock gong in Barra known as *Clach a' Ghlagain* (meaning 'rattling' or 'talking') is also associated with a prophecy – in this case that of Mac a' Chreachaire, who declared (amongst other requirements) that when this stone was found, Kisimul castle would become *càrn dhruideachun* – a cairn for thrushes.<sup>379</sup> Part of *Clach Oscar* (Oscar's stone)<sup>377</sup>. This rock, identified as resonant by the present author, is situated roughly at NN750554.

<sup>378</sup>. The Ballater rock gong is at NO29970162 (OS Map 37). Catherine Fagg suggests the marks are glacial grooves (C. Fagg, *Rock Music* (Oxford, 1997), 82), but one of the lines is proud of the surface and, taken as a whole, they are difficult to reconcile with any kind of glacial activity.

<sup>379</sup>. Black, *The Gaelic Otherworld – John Gregorson Campbell's Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands ...*, 144.



Ballater rock gong. Photo © John Purser

at the head of Loch Slapin on the Isle of Skye, which is broken into three large rocks, is also a rock gong (see [I.3.c.](#)).

#### BRONZE TRUMPETS – LOUGHNASHADE, ARD BRINN AND CARNYX

Between the Stone and Iron Ages in the Gàidhealtachd, there are few surviving musical artefacts of high status, though the magnificent Bronze Age horns found in Ireland were very probably also known in Scotland.<sup>380</sup> The late Bronze Age bridge for a stringed instrument from High Pasture Cave, and a parallel object from the same period from Loch Tay, strongly imply that this is merely a reflection of the state of our knowledge rather than the musical condition of our forebears (see below). In the period 200 BC–200 AD, the Irish Loughnashade horn and the Carnyx found in north-eastern Scotland (both made of beaten bronze) are near contemporaries from the late Iron Age. They have many similarities in their manufacture and come from cultures which we know to have been in contact with each other. On the basis of parallels with the Torrs pony cap and Battersea shield, it has been suggested that the surviving Loughnashade horn was Brythonic in manufacture.<sup>381</sup>

<sup>380</sup>. Purser, *Scotland's Music*, 25–27.

<sup>381</sup>. R. and V. Megaw, *Early Celtic Art in Britain and Ireland* (Princes Risborough, 1994), 23.

If similar instruments are referred to in stories such as *Táin Bó Fraích*, then we have a clear literary tradition of the status not only of the instruments but also of the musicians (see II.2.a.):

Mórfesser cornaire leo co cornaib órdaib agus argdidib, co n-étaigib ildathachaib, co mongaib órdaib sidbudib, co lennaib étrachtaib.<sup>382</sup>

*There were seven horn players with them, with horns gilded and silvered, wearing many-coloured garments; their hair was fairy yellow, and they wore shining mantles.*

This is not to imply that the carnyx was known in Ireland, but merely to suggest instruments such as the Loughnashade horns would have been able to fulfil similar musical functions and had high status. The point to note here is that these instruments and their players had a very strong visual, even sculptural, presence and, in the case of the carnyx, this is reflected in its appearance in other art forms.

#### THE DESKFORD CARNYX

The carnyx is a trumpet-type instrument, some two metres in length, held vertically and made largely of beaten bronze. The refinement of its manufacture, including the use of bronze and brass as contrasting colour elements at the ‘bell’ end in the form of a totemic wild boar’s head, has been closely studied.<sup>383</sup> The fineness of the workmanship, the thinness of the metal (which had a marked effect on the acoustics of the instrument) and the incorporation of structural riveting into the design ‘which mimicked flesh folds of the boar’s head’ required an enormous amount of preparation and the making of special tools. The stylisation of the lie of the hair surrounding the eyes is managed with superb rhythmic control, and the whole reconstruction required – and found in John Creed – a craftsman of the highest calibre, who wrote,

<sup>382</sup> W. Meid, ed., *Táin Bó Fraích* (Dublin, 1974), 2.

<sup>383</sup> F. Hunter, ‘The Carnyx in Iron Age Europe’, *The Antiquaries Journal* 81 (2001), 77–108. S. Piggott, ‘The Carnyx in Early Iron Age Britain’, *The Antiquaries Journal* 39 (1959). F. Hunter, *The Carnyx in Iron Age Europe: The Deskford carnyx in its European context*, 2 vols (Mainz, 2019). J. Purser, ‘The Sounds of Ancient Scotland’, in E. Hickmann, I. Laufs, R. Eichmann (Hrsg.), *Studien zur Musikarchäologie* II, *Orient-Archäologie* 7 (Rahden, 1998) 325–36. C. Maniquet, ‘Le sanctuaire laténien et gallo-romain des ‘Arènes de Tintignac’ (Naves-Corrèze) et la découverte d’un dépôt d’armes et d’objets gaulois exceptionnels’, in Both, Eichmann, Hickmann and Koch (Hrsg.), *Studien zur Musikarchäologie* VI, *Orient-Archäologie* 22 (Rahden, 2008), 59–76.



Deskford Carnyx reconstruction. Photo © National Museums of Scotland



As a visual artist, it has a particular attraction for me, as being the only instrument I know of where visual appearance is as important as sound.<sup>384</sup>

It has been suggested that the famous image on the Gundestrup bowl, which shows instruments of the type of the late Iron Age Deskford Carnyx, relates to the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* or Cattle Raid of Cooley.<sup>385</sup> Bull sacrifice is also a theme common to the bowl and tale. This tale, known throughout the Gaelic-speaking world, has echoes through the centuries, as does the totemic character of the wild boar, so magnificently represented on the Deskford carnyx (see III.3.c.).

We know from *Táin Bó Fraích* (The Cattle Raid of Fraoch) that

A chornairi iarum remisium dochum in dúine. Sennait di conid abbad tricha fer di sainchaemaib Ailella ar sirechtaí.<sup>386</sup>

*His horn-players went in front of him into the dun. They blew so that thirty of Ailill's finest men died of ecstatic grief.*

Fraoch then hears the lament of his mother and her people – the people of the *síth*, the fairies – and he is taken into their mound and returned whole. From this event, as the story itself says, ‘comes the Fairies’ Lament of the musicians of Ireland’:

Atnagat a ngol oc dul úad co corastar na dáini bátar isind liss tar cend. Is de atá golgaire bad síde la áes cíuil Hérenn.<sup>387</sup>

The manuscript tradition of *Táin Bó Fraích* is early medieval Gaelic, but the story is based on much older material. As Meid states, ‘It would seem therefore that the archetype ... has faithfully preserved the text and the language of an Old Irish original,’<sup>388</sup> declaring that ‘Judging from the archaisms in this text ... the date of composition can hardly be later than 750, indeed it may be as early as 700.’<sup>389</sup>

Many of the motifs in the Cattle Raid of Fraoch are ancient and widespread and might reasonably be associated with a scene such as that on the Gundestrup

384. J. Creed, ‘Reconstructing the Deskford Carnyx’, in E. Hickmann, I. Laufs, R. Eichmann (Hrsg.), *Studien zur Musikarchäologie II*, Orient-Archäologie 7 (Rahden, 1998) 347–49.

385. G. S. Olmsted, ‘The Gundestrup Version of *Táin Bó Cuailnge*’, *Antiquity* L (1976), 95–103 and Figs 1–9. Also G. Olmsted, ‘The Earliest Narrative Version of the *Táin*: Seventh-century poetic references to *Táin Bó Cuailnge*’, *Emania* 10 (1992), 5–17.

386. Meid, *Táin Bó Fraích*, 9.

387. Meid, *Táin Bó Fraích*, 10.

388. Meid, *Táin Bó Fraích*, xxv.

389. Meid, *Táin Bó Fraích*, xxv.

bowl, which features [carnyx players, warriors and a possible healing ceremony](#) associated with the Otherworld. A further interesting point is the lavish horse harness and the careful plaiting of the horses’ tails, which is paralleled by the lavish accoutrements of Fraoch’s horses, whose harness included little bells.

It is possible that the warriors processing in front of the carnyx players on the bowl are singing. A 16th-century Gaelic text, containing parts of the original 6th-century *Amra Choluimb Chille* by Dallán Forgaill, describes the Fenian warrior band’s manner of singing. They too have a silver bowl:

Bái aisti ingnad acu intansin, in cétfér no teghad astech dib is he no thinnsganad tosach na duaíne do gabáil, ocus in fer dédinach no frecrad dó, agus no geibdis uile iarsin. Ocus coire acu ... .i. caire finnaircit esede ocus ix slaprada creduma as gach caire díb, ocus bacán óir for gach slabraid ... ‘Coire Sainti’ do rádh friss, iarsinní no ibtís linn sainithi as, ocus in nónbur ba ferr don cléir béus a[c] cantain chiuil uime cein bitís ac gabáil na duaíne.

*At that time they had a strange peculiarity, the first man of them who went into a house would commence to chant the beginning of the song, and the last man would answer him, and then they all would chant together. And they had a cauldron ... It was a cauldron of white silver, and there were nine chains of white bronze out of every cauldron, and on every chain a hook of gold ... it was called Coire Sain[i]ti because they used to drink linn sainithe a ‘pleasant ale’ out of it, and the nine best men of the company were still singing a melody around it while (the others) were chanting the poem.*<sup>390</sup>

Combining all this evidence: from c. 200 BC, the Gundestrup bowl with warriors, cauldron and three carnyx players whose instruments resemble and can even imitate the sound of wild boar; from c. 0 AD at High Pasture Cave, the mixed burial of foetal human and pig bones and a wild boar skull, in a ritual context in a district whose totemic animal is the wild boar (see III.3.c.); from c. 200 AD, the Deskford carnyx with wild boar image including moving jaw and tongue; from 575 AD the totemic imagery of the Knocknagael boar; from c. 600 AD, the Celtic warrior band described with a silver cauldron; one is left with a powerful impression of interconnectedness and of continuity.

In a poem to St Brigid, thought to have been written by Orthanach, Bishop of Kildare, in the first half of the 9th century, we have a description of horns being sounded in battle on the Hill of ‘Alenn’ under which many a king is buried. The reference to the sound travelling ‘over hundreds of heads’ is suggestive of these long vertically held bronze instruments.

390. W. Stokes, ‘The Bodleian *Amra Choluimb Chille*’, *Revue Celtique* XX (1899), Appendix, 422–23. The text is in MS Egerton 1782.

Gáir a ilaig iar cach mbúaid  
im chúail claideb, comtaig drend;

bríg a fian fri indna gorm,  
gloim a corn cor cétaib cend.'

*The shout of its triumph after each victory round a tangle of swords, a fiery encounter; the strength of its mercenary bands against the great battle array, the shriek of its horns over hundreds of heads.*<sup>391</sup>

However, horns could also be played sweetly, as in this poem, attributed to Muireadhach Albanach Ó Dálaigh, 'which would mean it was already composed by the thirteenth century':<sup>392</sup>

Scéalaigheacht ann, duanaigheacht scol, fianaiigheacht;  
cabhlaigheacht chiúil, chornaigheacht chiúin is cliairaigheacht.

*(There is) story-telling there, recitation of poems of learned poets, fian-lore; harp-playing by way of music, gentle horn-playing and choral singing.*<sup>393</sup>

This poem was included in *The Book of the Dean of Lismore*,<sup>394</sup> and its attribution to Muireadhach Albanach, reputed ancestor of the Scottish MacMhuirich bardic family, adds to the significance of horn-playing in a Scottish Gaelic context. That continuity is also experienced in some of the earliest Christian artefacts found in Scotland – the iron and bronze bells, some of which are still in use today.

#### QUADRANGULAR HANDBELLS

If there is one class of artefact which it is proper to describe as uniquely Celtic Christian in its provenance, it is that of the quadrangular handbells of the 8th to 9th centuries AD, found extensively in Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Brittany. In early medieval Gaelic poetry and prose, they feature as potent and not necessarily welcome symbols of Christian faith. A poem from the 11th century reads thus:

Ach, a luin, is buide duit  
Cáit 'sa muine i fuil do net,

391. D. Greene and F. O'Connor, eds, *A Golden Treasury of Irish Poetry* (London, 1967), 68 and 70.

392. W. Gillies, 'A Poem on the Land of the Little People', in S. Arbuthnot and K. Hollo, eds, *Fil súil nglais/A Grey Eye Looks Back: A Festschrift in honour of Colm Ó Baoill* (Ceann Drochaid, 2007), 33.

393. *Ibid.*, 39.

394. E. C. Quiggin, *Poems from the Book of the Dean of Lismore* (Cambridge, 1937), 64–65.

A díthrebaig nád clinn cloc,  
Is binn boc síthamail t'fet.

*Blackbird, it is well for you  
wherever in the thicket be your nest,  
hermit that sounds no bell,  
sweet, soft, fairy-like is your note.*<sup>395</sup>

This kind of cultural prejudice survived for many centuries. Thus, in the poem 'Is fada anocht i nOil Finn' from the early 16th-century Book of the Dean of Lismore, we read:

Deireadh na Féine fuair nós,  
is mé Oiséan mór mac Finn,  
ag éisteacht ré gothaibh clog:  
is fada anocht i nOil Finn.

*The last of the Fian,  
great Ossian, the son of Fionn,  
listening to baying of bells:  
the night in Elphin is long.*<sup>396</sup>

The prejudice went further. Bells are intimately associated with the clergy, as revealed by a reciter speaking of the male organ as *an clag* and of its movement as a 'call', which gave rise to 'the following scandalous suggestion':

Ding, dang, dearaidh, buail do chlag a chleirich,  
'S ma tha ding eile ann, cuir ann [*sic*] fang eile e.

*Ding, dong derry, strike your bell O cleric,  
And if there is another ding in it, put it in another cattle fold [or hole].*<sup>397</sup>

However, to a follower of Christ, as this 9th-century poem reveals, the bell was sweet and associated with sexual denial:

Clocán binn  
benar i n-aidchi gáithe  
ba ferr lim dul ina dáil  
indás i ndáil mná baíthe.<sup>398</sup>

395. J. Carney, *Medieval Irish Lyrics* (Portlaoise, 1967 and 1985), 82–83.

396. N. Ross, *Heroic Poetry from the Book of the Dean of Lismore* (Edinburgh, 1939), Ballad IV, 10; translation from D. Thomson, *An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry* (Edinburgh, 1989), 105. See A. Cameron, *Reliquiae Celticae* I, 2–3.

397. R. C. McLagan, 'Gaelic Erotica', *Kryptadia* X (Paris, 1907), 307–08.

398. G. Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics* (Oxford, 1956 and 1977), 4.

*Sweet little bell  
That rings in the windy night  
I'd sooner be with you  
Than to be meeting with a wanton woman.*

The quadrangular appearance of these iron Celtic handbells is distinctive, as is the method of their manufacture:

Il est ainsi évident que les zones d'influence de l'Église insulaire n'étaient pas seulement caractérisées par des coutumes communes – l'usage des cloches à main, en l'occurrence – mais également par des techniques [de fabrication] similaires.<sup>399</sup>

It is thus evident that the zones of influence of the insular church were not only characterised by shared customs – the use of hand-bells in this instance – but equally by similar techniques [of manufacture].

There is evidence that some of the iron bells were dipped in bronze, perhaps even in gold.<sup>400</sup> Some of these bells are still playable. They called monks to prayer and to the refectory; they announced arrivals, banished evil spirits, cured diseases (especially of the skin, and many more besides). Such was the significance of the bells that they gave their name to one of the unique structures associated with the Celtic church: the round towers, whose name in Gaelic is *cloithech* – bell house. Experiment with the Little Dunkeld bell, rung at the top of the Brechin round tower, demonstrated that the bell was best and furthest heard when rung inside as opposed to through one of the top windows.<sup>401</sup>



Fortingall iron handbell (8th c.; stolen 2017).  
Photo © John Purser

399. C. Bourke, 'Les cloches à main de la Bretagne primitive', *Bulletin de la Société Archéologique du Finistère CX* (1982), 341.

400. J. Purser, 'Hand-bells of the Celtic Church in Scotland', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness LXIII* (2002–2004) (Inverness, 2006), 268 and fn 2.

401. Purser, 'Hand-bells of the Celtic Church in Scotland', 267–91.

We read of what could befall such structures from the Annals of Ulster for the year 949 (alias 950), a year of unusually heavy oak mast:<sup>402</sup>

Cloict(h)ec(h) Sláne do loscad(h) do g(h)allaib(h) At(h)a Cliat(h).  
Bac(h)all ind erlama agus cloc ba dec(h) di clocaib(h), Caenec(h)air  
ferleigind, agus soc(h)aide mór imbi, do loscad(h).

*The belfry of Slane was burned by the Foreigners of Ath-cliaith. The crozier of the patron saint [St Erc], and a bell that was the best of bells, [and] Caenechair the lector, [and] a multitude along with him, were burned.*

The quadrangular appearance of the bronze bells is also distinctive, but the Scottish bronze bells have a feature unique to, and apparently determined by, their design – namely that their quadrangular form is irregular. The result is that, if the bell is rung so that the clapper strikes different faces, three notes (but not four, for reasons which remain obscure) can be heard from the same bell,

according to which face is struck. As this feature is shared by at least four of these bells, we may assume it was deliberate and might well symbolise the concept of the Trinity – the three in one.<sup>403</sup>

A bishop of Brechin (A. P. Forbes) drew attention to a 'phallic' design on the bell handle of St Fillan's bell (the Bernane bell).<sup>404</sup> The design could indeed be phallic or snake-like. In the former case, it might relate to the phallic elements on St Ronan's cross and the Riasg Buidhe (see IV.1.c.); in the latter, to the snake-like design on the forepillars of the Queen Mary and Lamont harps.

These bells, along with other sacred



Forteviot bronze handbell (9th c.).  
Photo © John Purser

402. *Annals of Ulster*, 468–469, f.50ba.

403. Purser, 'Hand-bells of the Celtic Church in Scotland', 267–91. The question has been asked as to why there are not four different notes, one for each face. Insufficient measurement and analysis has been undertaken to answer the question with confidence. The shorter sides are less divergent in surface area, but the thickness of the metal of each face would also affect the pitch, and this has yet to be accurately assessed.

404. A. Forbes, 'Notice of the Ancient Bell of St Fillan', in *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (10 January 1870), 273.



objects, were, and in some cases still are, in the custodianship of a *deòir* or dewar.<sup>405</sup> The word has become a name, Scotland's first First Minister, Donald Dewar, being an example of a Dewar who was well aware of the meaning of his name.<sup>406</sup> In the Gàidhealtachd, the name is MacLeòra (*MacGille Dheòradha*).<sup>407</sup> The bells were also protected by bell shrines, made for them some centuries later. The Guthrie and Kilmichael Glassary bell shrines both bear images of Christ crucified, their importance emphasised by the workmanship in this most powerful of Christian images.

Giraldus Cambrensis tells us that handbells were still venerated in Wales and Ireland at the end of the 12th century:

I should not omit to mention also that the people and clergy of both Wales and Ireland have a great reverence for bells that can be carried about, and staffs belonging to the saints, and made of gold and silver, or bronze, and curved at their upper ends. So much so that they fear to swear or perjure themselves in making oaths on these, much more than they do swearing on the gospels.<sup>408</sup>

The handbells have retained their significance through the centuries, borne out by their survival not only in museums but in or close to their original sites.

#### TRIPLE PIPES – HEAVEN OR HELL?

If the quadrangular handbells were unique to the Celtic church, so too was the combination of triple pipes and plucked stringed instruments. Triple pipes, in the form of a drone and two chanters, each pipe with its own reed, appear on the late 8th-century St Martin's Cross in Iona, on the Lethendy and Ardchattan cross slabs and the Monasterboice (Muiredach's) and Clonmacnoise high crosses, dating from the early 10th century, the last two in Ireland. No actual instruments have yet been found, but they clearly parallel the Sardinian launeddas. The launeddas is still played today, but it has a history going back to the Bronze Age and it is not associated with stringed instruments.

However, on five much later depictions of triple pipes, such associations are

405. For instance, the Rev. Tom Dick, minister at Dunkeld, told the present writer that he was handed over his responsibilities as dewar of the Little Dunkeld bell, with all due ceremony by his predecessor.

406. Personal communication with Donald Dewar on Buchanan Street Underground platform.

407. R. Black, 'The Quern-dust calendar', *West Highland Free Press* (9 November 2007).

408. J. J. O'Meara, ed., Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland (Topographia Hibernica c. 1188)* (Reading, 1988), 108, 116. See also S. Craig, *The Marden Bell* (Museum Resource & Learning Centre, Hereford, 2012).

known: one in the 12th-century York Psalter;<sup>409</sup> another in a 12th-century English bestiary;<sup>410</sup> and a third in a 13th-century Spanish manuscript, *Cantigas de Santa Maria*.<sup>411</sup> A fourth, from the early 13th century, is a stone carving at St John, Hawkchurch, in Devon, and shows a goat playing triple pipes opposite a ram playing a fiddle.<sup>412</sup> This image would, of course, reinforce the assertion that the triple piper on Muiredach's cross is playing for the devil.<sup>413</sup> Finally, there is a carving of a triple piper in Westminster Cathedral.

The association of pipes with the devil and Pan, and with a lower aesthetic and moral class in the mythology, religion and even law in many parts of medieval culture, is unchallenged. However, triple pipers are shown in the Scottish and Irish



Ardchattan cross slab, *clàrsair* and triple pipe player (9th c.). Photo © Tom Gray

contexts without any such clear association. On St Martin's Cross, the musicians face each other; on the Ardchattan stone, the three musicians are depicted on the same side and with the same (?clerical) hoods; on the Lethendy stone, they are playing immediately beneath two clerics. There too, the musicians face each other and play simultaneously – as they do on the Monasterboice cross, the piper also being placed on a zoomorphic chair (suggesting high status) and with his back to the devil. The depiction on the Clonmacnoise cross is in the context of the desert saints, St Paul and St Anthony. Images of this theme appear on Pictish cross slabs, notably that at Nigg where they are depicted with two lions and a raven providing food. Do these two creatures relate to the two interlaced creatures on the Canna cross which have been speculatively interpreted as a form of notation (see IV.3.c.)?

By the time the early Gaelic laws were being formulated, we see the classically derived hierarchy of strings over wind partly in operation, the *cruit* player being the

409. Glasgow University Library, Hunterian Add.f.11.

410. Oxford, MS Bodl 602 f.10r.

411. Madrid, Real Biblioteca del Monasterio, MS B.1.2, f.49v.

412. J. & G. Montagu, *Minstrels & Angels* (Berkeley, 1998), 24.

413. G. Ramsey, 'The Triple Pipes on Irish High Crosses: Identification and Interpretation', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 61 (2002), 31–33.

only entertainer with an honour price, according to the *Uraicecht Becc*. However, the 8th-century *Bretha Nemed déidenech* accords an honour price (*eneclann*) to the piper also,<sup>414</sup> and in any case it could be that these rankings were primarily designed to fit in with imported Christian hierarchies which were not necessarily universally accepted.

What is meant by the various instrumental designations in the Bible in whatever version or language is not that clear, but what is clear is that a variety of instruments and dance are referred to in the psalms as a proper part of praising the Lord. One can only read Psalm 150 as being deliberately all-inclusive and, it being the ultimate psalm of the three fifties, it must have carried considerable weight with the Gaels. Finally, it has been suggested that the word *ceòl* is possibly derived from the Latin for a pipe.<sup>415</sup> In these circumstances, it seems likely that the Gaelic speakers of Ireland and Scotland valued the pipes highly and were reluctant to yield them a lower status under a Classical influence imported with Christianity and not obviously in accord with Holy Scripture.

One can equally extend these doubts to the English manuscript sources. For instance, if it is a devil playing the triple pipes on the Canterbury bestiary, who is it, if not a devil, playing the harp behind him?<sup>416</sup> What then is one to make of their supposedly opposed status? And how can one separate out the triple piper on the York Psalter from the rest of the musicians accompanying David?<sup>417</sup> As for the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, the evidence is unequivocally in support of the pipes being used in honour of the Virgin, which puts them in direct association with notions of absolute purity.

A 10th-century Gaelic description of the making and significance of ‘forked’

414. F. Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin, 1988 and 1991), 64, fn 198.

415. A. MacBain, *An Etymological Dictionary of the Gaelic Language* (Glasgow, 1896 and 1982), 80. *Piob* > *cìob* > *cìol* > *ceòl* is a rough-and-ready way of following the possible transition. However, the etymology remains obscure and Fergus Kelly, amongst others (pers. comm.) has suggested it is a native word.

416. MS Bodl 602, f.10r.

417. Anne Buckley’s doubts as to whether the York Psalter shows a triple piper or a pan piper are not convincing (A. Buckley, ‘Music-related Imagery on Early Christian Insular Sculpture: Identification, context, function’, *Imago Musicae* VIII (1991), 180–81). She states that the shortest pipe is to the player’s left; but the true relative lengths of the pipes is obscured by the problematic positioning of the hands. If it is a pan piper, he has only three pipes and is holding them at an angle which would make it impossible for him to activate their air columns. In any case, it seems clear that these pipes are in his mouth, not held against his lower lip; nor is there any sign of a device to guide the air from the mouth to the ends of the pipes such as one sees on the Whithorn stone carving of pan pipes.

pipes can be found in *Inní diatá cuslinn Brighde agus Aidhed mic Dhíchoíme*.<sup>418</sup> This is a version of the widespread story of the King with Ass’s Ears, in which the king’s secret is made known to a plant (reed or tree) which subsequently reveals it to a musician, through the medium of a musical instrument. The musician is then impelled to reveal the secret in the presence of the King.<sup>419</sup> In this Gaelic version, Mac Dichoime collapses under the burden of keeping the secret, which he has discovered when shaving the king. Three streams of blood soak into the ground from his nostrils and mouth and, from these, three saplings subsequently grow. When Mac Dichoime revisits the site, he sees the trees and makes pipes out of them:

Luid immorro [mac] Dichoime cosna flescaibh iar d[t]ain, co ndergenai cuisind ndégabhail díb.

*Then Mac Dichoime went to the saplings and made a double pipe from them.*

However, later in the tale, triple pipes are mentioned as an alternative:

At-berat araile dno conad buinne tregabail do-ronadh donaib chuisslennaib tredaib, ro-fassater triasin run.

*But others say that from the three-forked saplings that grew from the secret [divulged by the three streams of blood] a triple pipe was made.*<sup>420</sup>

Besides revealing that triple and double pipes were both known to the 10th-century scribe, the story reveals both the pagan power and Christian status of their music. The scribe also records a version of the story which has St Brigid splitting up the pipes and giving away two of them. This suggests that their status meant more to her than their music. She retains one pipe as an equivalent of a bishop’s staff, indicating clearly its visual significance and also asserting her episcopal status. Mac Dichoime, however, dies of grief without his instrument and the music it made.<sup>421</sup>

418. Edited in part and with translation by K. Meyer, in *Otia Merseiana* 3 (Liverpool, 1903), 46–54. The full text is given in R. Thurneysen, ‘Die Flöte von Mac Dichoeme’, *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* XIX (1933), 120.

419. A comprehensive study of the story was made by Gaél Milin in a doctoral thesis, ‘Beroul et le Conte AT 782 du roi aux marques animales’, Université de Haute-Bretagne (Rennes 2) (1989). Milin has, however, omitted any reference to the latter part of the story as provided by Thurneysen.

420. R. Thurneysen, ‘Die Flöte von Mac Dichoeme’, *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* XIX (1933), 120.

421. J. Bisogni, ‘Flutes, pipes, or bagpipes? Observations on the Terminology of Woodwind Instruments in Old and Middle Irish’, in *Early Medieval Ireland and Europe: Chronology, Contacts, Scholarship: A Festschrift for Dáibhí Ó Cróinín* (Turnhout, 2015),

The story counteracts any suggestion that the musical instruments depicted on Irish and Pictish stones were merely copied from pattern books, psalters or other iconographic sources. It also suggests that, just as for bagpipes today, their status in an ecclesiastical context was equivocal. However, in the wider Gaelic context, reed instruments retain as high a status as any musical instrument can claim and it is suggested here that the iconography associated with triple pipes commonly acknowledges their acceptance as appropriate for the praise of God.

#### PAN PIPES

The only evidence of pan pipes in the Gàidhealtachd is the carving on a cross slab at Whithorn, dating from c. 1000 AD, showing a musician playing pan pipes. Whithorn is in Dumfries and Galloway and would have been substantially Gaelic-speaking when the image was carved. There is also the unprecedented discovery of a set of presumed wooden pan pipes from a *fulacht fiadh* in County Wicklow in Ireland dating from c. 2100 BC. They are eight in number and clearly graded in length and bore.<sup>422</sup> Finally, in Vincenzo Galilei's *Dialogue on Ancient and Modern Music* (1581), in Palisca's translation, Galilei states of the Syrinx or Panpipes that 'The form is similar to the wing of a bird or to a little pipe organ. Its invention is attributed to the Celts.' A footnote refers the reader to 'Julius Pollux in ch.2' and then to Pollux's *Onomasticon* 4.10., which dates from the 2nd century AD.<sup>423</sup> Pollux's suggestion may relate as much to some of the legendary material associated with Pan and the Arcadians and there is no reason to suppose that he was writing about insular Celts. Nonetheless, a reference such as this from 2000 years ago at the very least alters our geographical perspective in relation to the potential origin of such instruments and makes the Wicklow Pipes find and the Whithorn carving somewhat less anomalous.

#### CLÀRSACH, TIOMPAN AND CRUIT

The evidence for stringed instruments in the Gàidhealtachd goes back at least 2,500 years. A recent discovery at *Uamh an Àrd-Achaidh* (High Pasture Cave), at *Cille Bhrìghde* on the Isle of Skye, of a wooden bridge for a six- or seven-stringed instrument has been dated to the late 6th to 5th century BC. This makes it the oldest of such artefacts discovered in Western Europe, although

422. S. O'Dwyer, *Prehistoric Music of Ireland* (Stroud, 2004), 141–45.

423. C. Palisca, trans. and ed., *Dialogue on Ancient and Modern Music by Vincenzo Galilei* (New Haven, 2003), 365.

images of lyres from the Hallstatt culture precede it by two or three centuries.<sup>424</sup>

With the bridge were discovered other fragments of charred wood, one being a possible corner of a lyre-type instrument, and parts of a human skull. All had been scorched and only survived because they were deliberately placed at or near the



Bridge of stringed instrument (c. 500 BC), *Uamh an Àrd-Achaidh*. Photo © Graeme Lawson

transported from a different hearth. The implication may be that the skull was that of the owner/player of the instrument and that the person – the sex is not yet determined – and the instrument were a motivation for the fire. The bridge, about two thirds of which survive, has notches for the strings, which are all in the same plane. The strings must therefore have been plucked or struck. They could not have been bowed and, in any case, this is far too early a period for any likelihood of a bowed string instrument. A 2nd-century BC stone carving from northern Brittany clearly depicts a seven-stringed lyre and may give an indication of what the *Uamh an Àrd-Achaidh* instrument was like, although the presence of the double yoke (possibly a capo) on the Brittany carving remains controversial.<sup>425</sup>

A possible 'bridge' for carrying the strings of a plucked string instrument was found at the Oakbank crannog on Loch Tay. It is reliably dated to c. 500 BC and, in the absence of any alternative theory as to its function, may be taken as a kind of companion to the High Pasture Cave bridge. The Oakbank object, however, is more akin to a modern guitar 'bridge' in that it has no arch or feet.<sup>426</sup>

Other finds of parts of stringed instruments include a possible tuning peg from An Gnìp (Cnìp) in Lewis (1st century BC to 1st century AD) and possible

424. C. Reichlin, 'Instruments and their Music from the 5th Century BC in Classical Greece', in E. Hickmann, I. Laufs, R. Eichmann (Hrsg.), *Studien zur Musikarchäologie* V, *Orient-Archäologie* Band 20 (Rahden, 2006), 241. Also, *Préhistoire de la Musique* (Nemours, 2002), 119–23; H. Roberts, 'Reconstructing the Greek Tortoise-shell Lyre', *World Archaeology* 12, No. 3 (February 1981), 303–12.

425. *Préhistoire de la Musique* (Nemours, 2002), 120–22. *Le Carnyx et La Lyre* (Besançon-Orléans-Évreux, 1993–1994), 38–39.

426. 'Beyond the Carnyx: Recent Developments on Scottish Music Archaeology', in Kolltveit and Rainio, eds, *The Archaeology of Sound, Acoustics and Music: Studies in Honour of Cajsa S. Lund* (Berlin, 2020), 282 and 287–89.



peg and wrest planks from Skaill in Orkney, the latter probably Pictish.<sup>427</sup>

The placing of the *Uamh an Àrd-Achaidh* instrument, along with skull fragments, deliberately placed on the top of the fire residue, suggests that they were of considerable importance. That importance was sustained through many centuries.<sup>428</sup> In particular, the context of other organological evidence for the existence of stringed instruments in Scotland from Castle Sween and Finlaggan on Islay suggests the instruments were used in high status environments.<sup>429</sup> The 9th- to 10th-century *Scéla Cano* provides literary evidence for the significance of stringed instruments in the same region of the Gàidhealtachd as *Uamh an Àrd-Achaidh*. It describes the retinue of Cano MeicGartnáin (whose main residence was probably Dùn Cana on the Island of Raasay)<sup>430</sup> and it includes 50 gillies, each carrying a tiompan. The word *tiompan* is also used to designate a small rounded hill and appears in several place-names in Scotland, as well as the word being used to refer to the buttocks.<sup>431</sup> It is clear from this usage that tiompan suggests a rounded form and was commonly used to translate *tympano* and *tympanis* in Latin versions of the psalms. It seems likely, then, that any instrument designated by this term had a rounded form to the back or body of the resonating chamber. The form of the tiompan, indeed what precisely the word designates, is still under discussion, but certainly designates a sweet-sounding plucked string instrument.<sup>432</sup>

427. S. Buteux, 'Settlements at Skaill, Deerness, Orkney', in *The University of Birmingham* (1997), BAR British Series 260 (1997), 114, 116, 100–01; and F. Hunter, 'Bone and Antler', in I. Armit, *Anatomy of an Iron Age Roundhouse, The Cnip Wheelhouse Excavations* (Edinburgh, 2006), 136–51. J. V. S. Megaw in Appendix 1 of J. N. G. Ritchie, 'Iron Age Finds from Dùn an Fheurain, Gallanach, Argyll', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 103 (1970–71), 106–07: microscopic examination by Graeme Lawson ('A Lyre Bridge of the Early Iron Age from High Pasture Cave, Scotland, 1: Archaeology, Organology and Purpose', in *Studien zur Musikarchäologie* XI (Rahden, 2019), 215–16)) makes this identification extremely doubtful.

428. G. Lawson, 'Musical relics', in Mitchell, Murdoch and Ward, *Fast castle Excavations 1971–86* (Edinburgh, 2001), 114–16 and 213. D. Bishop, 'Die älteste Leier Nordeuropas einer germanischen Siedlung in Bremen-Habenhausen', in E. Hickmann, I. Laufs, R. Eichmann (Hrsg.), *Studien zur Musikarchäologie* III. Orient-Archäologie 10 (Rahden, 2002), 215–36, esp. 223–24. However, the chronological list of archaeological evidence for lyres omits all the Scottish examples.

429. K. Sanger and A. Kinnaird, *Tree of Strings* (Temple, 1992), 64–65.

430. D. MacLean, 'Maerubai, Applecross and the Late Pictish Contribution West of Druimalban', in D. Henry, ed., *The Worm, the Germ and the Thorn* (Forfar, 1997), 174–75.

431. R. Cox, 'Scottish Gaelic *Sannda* and its Aliases', *The Journal of Scottish Name Studies* 4 (2010), 79.

432. Purser, *Scotland's Music*, 35 and endnotes. Purser, 'A Lyre Bridge of the Early Iron Age from High Pasture Cave, Scotland: 2. The Context: Environmental – Perceptual – Symbolic – Cultural, and its Implications', *Studien zur Musikarchäologie* XI (Rahden, 2019), 265–80. This includes consideration of the relevant etymologies.

Fithchell for muin cach gilla[i] co feraib óir 7 airgid; timpán créda i(n) láim chlí in gilla[i]; da mílchoin ar slabra[i]d airgit ina láim deis.<sup>433</sup>

*On the back of each gillie, a chess-board with its men of gold and silver; in his left hand a bronze tiompan, in his right hand, two deerhounds on silver leads.*<sup>434</sup>

The number of instruments may be exaggerated, but 26 bronze horns were found in a single hoard at Dowris, representing an enormous expenditure in bronze. MacGartnáin was on his way to Ireland and the extent of artistic interaction between Scotland and Ireland, particularly in relation to high status objects such as musical instruments and brooches, is underlined by written and material sources, with early Gaelic writings such as Cormac's *Glossary* and an 8th-century law tract specifically mentioning Pictish brooches.<sup>435</sup>

#### THE LATER MEDIEVAL CLÀRSACH

Some mention is given above of early medieval depictions of triangular framed chordophones, primarily in Pictish carvings and, as the subject is covered elsewhere, it will suffice to say here that such images were prominent.<sup>436</sup> The *clàrsach* (harp) has since the days of Henry VIII been the symbol of Ireland. However, the actual instrument portrayed (the Trinity College Harp) was probably made in Scotland, where two undoubtedly Scottish *clàrsachs* survive from the same period and probably the same 15th-century workshop.<sup>437</sup> This does not mean that the traffic in harps was one way. A poem written by Giolla Críost Brúlingeach in the mid-15th century requests from an Irish chieftain as reward:

Cláirseach ar leath dom dhán damhsa  
tabhair mar iarraim, a rí;

433. D. Binchy, ed., *Scéla Cano Meic Gartnáin* (Dublin, 1975), 2, ll.35–37.

434. The translation is the author's. Thurneysen translates *créda* as 'tin', but the more usual and more likely meaning is 'bronze', referring either to bronze decoration on the instrument and/or to its strings. 'Die 50 Diener: Wämse von gelber Seide mit Silber; am Halse jedes Dieners ein fithchell (Brettspiel) mit Figuren (Steinen) von Gold und Silber; in der linken Hand des Dieners ein zinnemes timpán (Harfe), an seiner rechten Hand zwei Jagdhunde an silberner Kette.' R. Thurneysen, 'Eine irische Parallele zur Tristan-Sage', *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* 43 (1924), 389.

435. G. R. Isaac, 'A Note on Cormac's Pictish Brooch', *Journal of Celtic Linguistics* 9 (2005), 73–82. E. Colmán and C. Swift, 'English and Pictish Terms for Brooch in an 8th-Century Irish Law-Text', *Medieval Archaeology* XLVIII (2004), 31–48.

436. J. Purser, *Scotland's Music* (Edinburgh, 2007), 14–15.

437. Sanger and Kinnaird, *Tree of Strings*, 63–66.

*A remarkable harp for me, for my poem,  
grant to me as I ask, O king.*<sup>438</sup>

The poet probably came from the Galbraith family of harpers, one of several such families, including the MacMhuirich family of bards. The name MacWhirter derived from *Mac Cruitir* means Son of the Harper, though here too care must be taken as the term *clàrsach* is sometimes clearly distinguished from *cruit*, as in the following passage, where the latter is translated as 'lute':

Nuair théid i mach, seinnear cruit dhi  
Seinnear clàrsach nan teud druidte.

*When she goes out lute's played for her,  
Harp with tightened strings entoned too.*

From the same stanza of this waulking song, which may date from as early as the 1630s, comes a line which has defied translation:

Tha loingeas air a' cholbh chuilce,<sup>439</sup>

*Colbh cuilce* means a 'shoot or column of reed' or reed pipe. *Loingeas* undoubtedly means a fleet or group of vessels and follows upon a previous stanza of maritime imagery; but it is possible that this is a natural mistake for *loinneas* which would mean 'dexterity'. It is suggested here that the line would then translate as 'There is dexterity on the reed pipe' and thus introduce the musical imagery that appears in the last two lines of the stanza quoted above.

The significance of stringed instruments is also reflected in place-names, which include *clàrsach* as well as *cruit* as in *Dùn Cruit* (see V.1.) and in *tiompan*, for which see above.

Harp and harpers were also proverbial, even marking the distinction between maker and performer:

Dhèanadh Eoghan clàrsaichean  
Nan cuireadh càcha ceòl annt.

*Eoghan would make harps  
If others would put melody to them.*<sup>440</sup>

438. W. McLeod and M. Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire* (Edinburgh, 2007), 120–21.

439. D. MacCormick, A. McDonald, J. Campbell and F. Collinson, *Hebridean Folksongs* Vol. I (Inchnadamph, 1969), 92–93 and 173–74.

440. A. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* Vol. II (Edinburgh, 1900 and 1984), 251.

Beauty was a fundamental aspect of the manufacture of harps and George Buchanan wrote of the Gaels of Scotland that

their grand ambition is to adorn their harps with great quantities of silver and gems, those who are too poor to afford jewels substituting crystals in their stead.<sup>441</sup>

The tradition of decorating musical instruments is international, but the above quotation indicates just how significant this visual aspect was for the Gaels. It was a tradition of long standing in the culture, as in this passage, again from the *Táin Bó Fraích*:

Crottbolg di chrocnib doborchon impu cona n-indenam do phartaing foa n-indenam di ór agus argut. Bíann n'errad impu a mmedón; ba gildir snechta. Sella dubglassa inna medón aide. Bruit lín gildir fían ngéssa imna téta. Crota di ór agus arccut agus findruine co ndelbaib nathrach agus én agus mílchon di ór agus arccut. Amal no glúaistís na téta sin, immreithis na delba sin iarum inna firu imme cúaird.<sup>442</sup>

*They had harp-bags of otter-skins covering them, with red ornament overworked with gold and silver. Deer-skin around them in the middle as white as snow, with dark grey spots in the centre. Coverings of linen, white as the plumage of swans around the strings. Harps of gold and silver and white bronze with figures of serpents and birds and hounds on them in gold and silver. When those strings moved, the figures would move all about.*<sup>443</sup>

The riches of this description are borne out to some degree by subsequent evidence. A poem from the 13th century by Giolla Brighde Albanach (literally the Scottish servant of Brigid) shows that the beauty of the harp was valued equally in Ireland and Scotland. The poem is in praise of one of the O'Briens of Thomond, and the harp is in Scotland and is not to be returned at any price:

mac allmurdaig ni ragaib  
an slabradaig siodamail!

*No son of a foreigner shall obtain  
The graceful, gem-set, fairy instrument!*

441. J. Watkins, ed., *Buchanan's History of Scotland* (London, 1822), 6.

442. Meid, *Táin Bó Fraích*, 4, ll. 91–98.

443. M. E. Byrne and M. Dillon, eds, 'Táin Bó Fraích', *Études Celtiques* II (1937), 4, with slight alterations taken from G. Henderson, 'The Geste of Fraoch and the Dragon', in J. F. Campbell, ed., *The Celtic Dragon Myth* (Edinburgh, 1911), 5–6.

Gille Brighde Albanach even goes on to praise the harp as ‘This tree from the woods of Erin’ above his own beloved woods of Scotland.<sup>444</sup>

In addition to the application of gems, early references to gold and silver, suggestive of gold and silver strings, have been until recently assumed as fictions to enhance the beauty and value of the instrument. The following passage from the *Sanas Cormaic* – Cormac’s Glossary (c. 9th century) – may well refer to the use of gold strings, the ends of the strings curling away from the tuning pegs.

conaccatar ingillai remeperthe, ba hóclach comoing órbuidi caissidir  
carra menncrott.

[they saw] that he was a young hero with golden-yellow hair curlier than  
cross-trees of small harps.<sup>445</sup>

The curliness of the hair may refer to the way in which a string is curled round its tuning peg and its spare free end is also curled.

A reference to ‘goldin glittering strings’ in John Burel, *The Description of the Queens Maiesties Maist Honorable Entry into the Toun of Edinburgh upon the 19. Day of Maii, 1590*, may well be relevant.<sup>446</sup>

Organs and Regals thair did carpe,  
With thair gay goldin glittring strings,  
Thair was the Hautbois and the Harpe,  
Playing maist sweit and pleasant Springs:

Neither organs, regals nor oboes have strings, so the reference is to the harp, the word order being dictated by the exigencies of rhyme and versification. In the early 17th century, a poem in praise of the harp by the harpist Piarais Feiriteár has a reference to gold strings which seems unequivocal:

No noble or lord ever got as good a harp for playing  
The gold-stringed useful woman ...<sup>447</sup>

Here the harp is personified as a woman whose golden hair is the strings.

444. E. O’Curry, *On the Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish* Vol. III (Dublin, 1873 and 1996), 272–73.

445. W. Stokes, ed. and trans., ‘On the Bodleian Fragment of Cormac’s Glossary’, *Transactions of the Philological Society* 1891–94 (1893), 149–206; the pages referred to here are 36–37 of a *separatum* with its own pagination.

446. Published in *Watson’s Choice Collection* (Edinburgh, 1977), 6.

447. Quoted on liner notes for *Cruit go nÓr/Harp of Gold*, CMCD 0706.

Another passage from the 18th-century Gaelic poet Duncan Ban McIntyre supports the simile:

Do chuachfhalt bachlach casbhuidhe dlùth,  
Gu h-aamlagach daithte, làn chaisreag is lùb,  
'Na chiabhannaibh cleachdach am pleatadh gu dlùth,  
Air snìomh gu léir mar theuda-ciùil.

*Thy wavy hair in ringlets, and compact, yellow curls,  
is crinkly, bright-hued, full of spirals and loops,  
in braided tresses and close-woven plaits,  
the whole intertwined like strings of instrument.*<sup>448</sup>

Could such passages be taken literally as well as metaphorically? Gold wire was undoubtedly available – a piece was discovered at Dunollie Castle, dating from between the 7th to 9th centuries AD and there is a suggestion it was used in the art of embroidery (see IV.2.a.).<sup>449</sup> The American clàrsair, Ann Heymann, was the first to use gold strings, prompted by the difficulty of tuning the bass strings of a replica of the Trinity College harp and their poor sonority. The clue to the use of gold for the bass came from the passage in the *Táin Bó Fraích* quoted above. The results fully justified the experiment:

The replica instrument used for this recording was made by David Kortier in 1999 ... *Cruit go nÓr* ran through my mind as I began the ‘ceremony of the raising’, winding 18 carat red-gold around the lowest peg. There had been little support for this ‘fool’s dream’ – but the gold took the tension easily, producing an exceptionally rich double bass FF... Nine months later, over nine hundred pounds of string tension have transformed the willow soundboard into a pregnant belly. Appreciative fingers wander over this bulging miracle; they also explore the bee-hive soundholes and drawn-in sides. But most of all, the fingers can’t resist the strings – brass in the treble, silver in the midrange and gold in the bass.<sup>450</sup>

Even for the modern musician, seeking a practical solution to an acoustic problem, the appearance of the instrument becomes a vital part of its appreciation. It is once more anthropomorphised as a woman, now pregnant with sound, as is the womb itself in other contexts (see I.2.a.).

This sense of continuity with a remote past is totally unforced. The simple  
448. ‘Oran do Leanabh Altram’, in A. MacLeod, ed. and trans., *Orain Dhonnchaidh Bhàin* (Edinburgh, 1952), 124–25.

449. L. and J. Laing, *The Picts and the Scots* (Stroud, 1993), 93.

450. Ann Heymann, liner notes for *Cruit go nÓr/Harp of Gold*, CMCD 0706.





The Lamont *clàrsach* (15th c.). Photo © National Museums of Scotland

fact of the changing shape of the soundboard is the prompt. Likewise, the figure of a serpent, described in the same 8th-century text, is found carved on the forepillar of the Queen Mary and Lamont harps, both dating from the 15th century.

The imagery on the Queen Mary Harp has been convincingly described as inspired by Christian iconography. On its four roundels (see pp. 375 and 378) are carved lion, griffin, dragon and unicorn, the latter standing over a wyvern or snake, which it appears to be feeding with a salmon. Behind the snake's eyes on the forepillar are carved the letters 'D.O.' – *Deo Oblata* – offered to God:

This, along with the large number of crosses which are included in the design, strongly suggest that this harp was made for a religious purpose, or for a layman with some ecclesiastical connection.<sup>451</sup>

The heyday of the *clàrsach* was, however, coming to a close. In 1609, the Statutes of Iona outlawed peripatetic bards and musicians and determined to plant Protestant ministers in all Highland parishes, and that heirs of Highland chieftains be sent south where they 'may be found able sufficiently to speik, read and write Englishche.' This erosion of the culture was gradual. *Clàrsairs* continued to be employed in the households of chieftains such as the MacLeods of Dunvegan, and some continued their peripatetic practices, frequently crossing from Scotland to Ireland and vice versa. But the kind of patronage that could afford to pay for really expensively made and decorated instruments was gradually lost in the 17th and 18th centuries, and much of the *clàrsach's* iconic significance was taken over by the increasingly prominent Highland bagpipes (see below), and its repertoire increasingly performed on the fiddle.<sup>452</sup> That is not to say that all memory of the instrument and its significance was lost.

451. Sanger and Kinnaird, *Tree of Strings*, 60–61.

452. Daniel Dow's *Ancient Music of Scotland* of 1776, and James Oswald's *Caledonian Pocket Companion* of the 1750s both contain *clàrsach* music to be performed on the fiddle.

#### THE CLÀRSACH AS MODERN ICON

The Queen Mary harp was highly prized and has been depicted time and again as an exemplar of beauty and craftsmanship. Notably, John Duncan placed it in the hand of *The Sleeping Princess*; indeed, he provided sketches of the instrument for a reconstruction for the poet Bessie MacArthur, who was a member of the Clarsach Society. Today several *clàrsairs* have reproductions of this magnificent instrument, strung with brass, silver and gold strings.

The vignette for Alexander Campbell's *Albyn's Anthology* of 1816 includes a *clàrsach* or Celtic harp, set against a rock face, almost as though it had grown out of it. Perhaps this was a compliment to the tastes of Sir Walter Scott, to whom Campbell was music tutor. Scott was particularly fond of the *clàrsach* and James Hogg reported that his daughter Sophia:

loved her father so ... I shall never forget the looks of affection that she would throw up to him as he stood leaning on his crutch and hanging over her harp as she chaunted to him his favourite old Border Ballads or his own wild Highland Gatherings ...<sup>453</sup>

At least, in this vignette, the strings are running more or less in the right direction. Over a hundred years later, Robert Burns was to depict an instrument which would basically have made no sound at all,<sup>454</sup> and Phoebe Anna Traquair's *The Progress of the Soul* (1893–1902) shows a plucked stringed instrument of improbable form and absurdly spaced strings which, when broken, remain as rigid as the thorns under the musician's feet. Strings so rigid would be unplayable with the fingers and would scarcely produce any sound, unless they were hammered. Of course, the work is profoundly symbolic and it is unreasonable to expect too literal a representation, but to anyone with a rudimentary understanding of musical instruments, this one would strike a false note, were it capable of producing any note at all. In 1912, Traquair's painting of *Pan* with his double pipe missed the chance of showing triple pipes, by then recorded in the visual literature.<sup>455</sup> Traquair did respond to Celtic imagery (see IV.1.c.), but it is disappointing to note a general failure to respond to the existing and highly sophisticated representation of musical instruments from Scotland's early middle ages.

With the Celtic revival of the late 19th century, there came a renewed interest in making fine harps. Makers included John Glen and Robert

453. Quoted in A. Munro, "Abbotsford Collection of Border Ballads": Sophia Scott's Manuscript Book with Airs', *Scottish Studies* 20 (1976), 93.

454. R. Burns, *Scots Ballads* (1939), 'Musicke' for Sir Patrick Spens.

455. For reproductions of the relevant paintings, see E. Cumming, ed., *Phoebe Anna Traquair 1852–1936* (Edinburgh, 1993), 34–35 and 88.

Buchanan. John Glen's workshop produced high-quality examples modelled on the 15th-century originals, one of which is in the Kingussie Highland Folk Museum. A less well-made, but not unimpressive example from an unknown maker is the 'Poltalloch Harp' now in the West Highland Folk Museum in Fort William.

This revival has continued into the 21st century, with several *clàrsairs* reviving the skills of playing with the fingernails, as well as harp makers producing reconstructions of some of the early harps, such as Davy Patton's replica of the Queen Mary harp, with beautiful carving on apple wood, and with brass fittings and 18 carat gold strings.<sup>456</sup>

But the instrument itself is also undergoing development, with many aspects of its design, including the production of electronic harps, giving rise to new forms and also new ideals of appearance. How these will be viewed in terms of their visual significance remains to be seen.

#### THE HIGHLAND BAGPIPES

In terms of Scottish and, more specifically, Highland identity, the only candidate seriously to challenge tartan as the most powerful icon is a musical instrument. Highland scenery, Highland whisky, Highland food products all have their undoubted place, but it is the Highland bagpipes, understood as a total aural and visual experience, that most immediately identifies the culture of the Gaels. Whether this is a good or bad thing is not at issue here, but the fact of the instrument's visual significance is in itself remarkable.

Like the *clàrsach*, it is expensive to make and troublesome to maintain, but it is also the object of decorative attention in the form of the turning of the drones (made of costly hardwoods), and the materials used for the joints are often silver, ivory or walrus, and pride is taken in the finish of the workmanship. The bag of the pipes is frequently covered in tartan and the drones themselves are usually decorated with tassels or with tartan streamers. But beyond these widely evident features, the visual impression of the instrument is essentially dependent upon the costume and bearing of the player. The construction of bagpipes is discussed in Hugh Cheape's recent *Bagpipes: A National Collection of a National Treasure* as well as in other studies such as the tradition of making and playing of small pipes in the Gàidhealtachd on both sides of the Atlantic, with, for example, a chanter made out of ash wood, reed of oat straw

456. This harp was made in 2006–2007 and has been recorded by Simon Chadwick on *Clàrsach na Bànrìghe*.

and bag of sheepskin.<sup>457</sup> Decker Forest, following traditional practice in South Uist, has also demonstrated that one can make an excellent chanter and reed out of the humblest of local materials.<sup>458</sup>

Whether expensively or cheaply produced, the iconography of the bagpipes varies from magnificence to satire. In a number of the early illustrations of bagpipes, the player is a pig. The connection of the pig with music, evidenced in the carnyx, is continued, often with satirical intent in relation to the bagpipes. Images of pigs playing bagpipes are not uncommon. But as pigs were reputed to be lovers of music, satire is not necessarily implied in every such image. Melrose Abbey has a carving of a pig playing bagpipes, dating from the 15th century, possibly executed by French masons.<sup>459</sup> A mid-16th-century version of the *Metrical Dindsenchas* has an ornamental letter M in the form of a pig playing bagpipes with a bass and tenor drone.<sup>460</sup> The poem which this letter initiates has an indirect relationship with the image. It describes a vision of black birds coming over the sea:

rochansat ceól cen chobra

...

Ba leór do brón in betha  
a nglór is a ngarb-gretha

*they sang a joyless strain ... It was a world of grief to hear their calling,  
and their hoarse cries*<sup>461</sup>

The connection of pigs and bagpipes is also sustained in poetry, this example coming probably from the late 16th century:

457. H. Cheape, *Bagpipes: A National Collection of a National Treasure* (Edinburgh, 2008); T. Falzett, 'Aspects of Indigenous Instrument Technologies and the Question of the Smallpipe in the Old and New World *Gàidhealtachds*', *ROSC* 22 (2010), 176–95.

458. J. Decker Forest, 'The Making of Bagpipe Reeds and Practice Chanters in South Uist', in J. Dickson, ed., *The Highland Bagpipe: Music, History, Tradition* (Farnham, 2009), Chap. IV.

459. S. Cruden, *Scottish Abbeys* (Edinburgh: HMSO, 1960), 65–66.

460. Royal Irish Academy MS D.ii.2, f.34r. For brief discussions of the image, see B. Breathnach, *Folk Music and Dances of Ireland* (1971), 73–74; B. Breathnach, 'The piping pig', *An Piobaire*, Sraith 11 (2) (Mean Fomhair 1978), 2; and S. Donnelly, *The Early History of Piping in Ireland* (Dublin, 2001). E. Bunting, *The Ancient Music of Ireland* (Dublin, 1840), 59, also refers to this image, following Charles O'Connor's misdating of the MS as c.1300. The mid-16th-century date is derived from Maurice O'Clery's signature on f.88v and from the spelling. See E. Gwynn, *The Metrical Dindsenchas Part V* (Dublin, 1935 and 1991), 7.

461. E. Gwynn, *The Metrical Dindsenchas Part III* (Dublin, 1913 and 1991), 256–59.

Èatroman muice o hó,  
Air a shéideadh gu h-an-mhór,  
A' cheud mhàla nach raibh binn  
Thàinig o thùs na dilinn.

*The bladder of a pig, o hó,  
blown up to burst,  
was the first discordant bag,  
to come before the Flood.*<sup>462</sup>

Some of the jibes against the pipes may have been prompted by fear. The Highland bagpipes are the most powerful-sounding of any such instruments and they are held upright, with the drones pointing straight into the sky, rather than flopping over an arm or a knee. Such a manner of carrying the instrument is, of course, essential if you are to march with it.

As for the function of the pipes, the early references all demonstrate that they were used in warfare to incite the men, from at least as early as the 1513 *Blàr Floddan* (The Battle of Flodden):

They trumpetts full trewly: they tryden together,  
Many shames in that showe: with their shrill pipes:  
heauenly was their Melody: their Mirth to heare,  
how the songen with a showte: all the shawes over!<sup>463</sup>

The same is asserted of the function of the pipers in 1547 at *Blàr Gleann Ruagaire* (The Battle of Pinkie):

Les Eccosois sauvages se provocquoyent aux armes par les sons de leurs  
cornemeuses.<sup>464</sup>

George Buchanan, writing in 1582, states of the Highlanders that 'Instead of a trumpet, they use a bagpipe.'<sup>465</sup> And in 1598 Alexander Hume was duly impressed by the sound:

Caus nichtelie the weirlie nottis breike, On hieland pipes, Scottes and  
Hybernicke.<sup>466</sup>

462. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, 278–79.

463. Percy Folio I, 278.

464. Jean de Beaugué, *L'Histoire de la guerre d'Ecosse* (Paris, 1556), written in 1549.

465. G. Buchanan, *History of Scotland* (see Watkins, p.16). Preface for Monro's *Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*.

466. A. Hume, *The Triumph of the Lord after the Manner of Men* (1598).

While this may suggest possible distinctions between Highland, Scots and Irish pipes, it is more likely to mean that both the Irish and Scots had 'hieland' or Highland pipes. In any event, they were loud and warlike and were also used outdoors for funerals. The Rev. James Kirkwood, writing in about 1699, actually describing them as great pipes:

the Piper plays after the corps with his great pipe.<sup>467</sup>

The piper is traditionally well dressed and of upright bearing – the latter again a necessity if the pipes are to stay resting against the shoulder, but also so that the diaphragm and lungs have maximum freedom, and the player, if not marching, frequently adopts a carefully measured and dignified walk, especially in the performance of *piobaireachd* or *ceòl mòr*.

The status of the piper was already clearly established by the time of the Battle of Worcester in 1651, in which the Duke of Sutherland's piper, John MacGyurmen, had been voted the best and stood without removing his bonnet. When Charles I came across to see who this was, he gave MacGyurmen a kiss of his hand – hence the famous *piobaireachd* 'Thug Mi Pòg bho Làimh an Rìgh' (I Got a Kiss of the King's Hand).<sup>468</sup>

These attributes carry with them a long history – a history which involved the pipes at one time being treated as an instrument of war and, in 1746, occasioning the hanging of a piper for being in possession of bagpipes. But that history also involved the raising of the Highland regiments in the latter part of the 18th century and, from then on, the image of the piper was once more associated with leading men into battle.<sup>469</sup>

'Cogadh no Sìth' (War or Peace) 'is the battle *piobaireachd par excellence* and probably has been so for some hundreds of years.'<sup>470</sup> It was played in 1813 at the Battle of St Pierre, by a piper of the Gordon Highlanders. He was killed before he could finish, but a second piper took up the theme and was also killed. A third piper then carried it on and completed it. Likewise at Quatre Bras, Kenneth MacKay of the 79th Cameron Highlanders played 'Cogadh no Sìth' outside the defensive square as the French charged.

467. J. L. Campbell, ed., *A Collection of Highland Rites and Customes Copied by Edward Lhuyd from the Manuscript of the Rev. James Kirkwood* (1975), 86–87.

468. See Purser, *Scotland's Music*, 160.

469. See H. Cheape, *The Book of the Bagpipe* (Belfast, 1999), for a useful brief history and a variety of images of pipes and pipers.

470. A. Haddow, *The History and Structure of Ceol Mor* (Glasgow; privately printed 1982), 148.





Statue of Piper Millan at Coleville-Montgomery. Billmillinfan / CC BY-SA

Lucky too was Bill Millin, who played the pipes marching up and down on the beaches at the Normandy Landings at the request of his commander Lord Lovat (see III.3.c.). Such apparently insane heroism is more readily understood when one knows the words which inspire the opening phrases of the *ùrlar* of 'Cogadh no Sìth':

Is comadh leam 's comadh leam, cogadh no sìth,  
Marbhar 'sa chogadh no crochar 's an t-sìth mi.

*It's all the same to me, war or peace.*

*In war they'll kill me, in peace they'll hang me.*

Literally hundreds of images of pipers in action have been produced. In the late 19th century, at least four artists – Robert Gibb, S. Berkeley, Richard Woodville and Edward Hale – painted the scene of Piper Findlater winning the VC at the storming of the Dargai Heights. Findlater's pipes themselves are held in the National Museums of Scotland. In the early 20th century, *The War Illustrated* featured a piper with tartan bag and ribbons flying from the drones, stepping out firmly past a fallen comrade.<sup>471</sup>

Colin Wells, in his interesting *A Brief History of History* and writing about the late 18th- early 19th-century influence of Scott, declares that

The Highland warrior wrapped in his tartan kilt, marching to the stirring sound of bagpipes – this iconic figure is a fantasy, and his associated emblems were either fantasies themselves (like the kilt), or at best marginally significant recent arrivals elevated to symbolic status only much later (like the bagpipe).<sup>472</sup>

Wells's misapprehensions are avowedly based on the work of Hugh Trevor-Roper and Eric Hobsbawm, neither of whom appears to have any real knowledge of the proper sources. Wells has subsequently accepted that his sources were inadequate.<sup>473</sup>

The image of the piper has indeed been romanticised, but this has been done largely in the form of the novel, and to hold the novel to account for any lack of accuracy or perspective is to misunderstand its nature and function. When Turner magnificently illustrated *Waverley*, he showed the piper inspiring the clans on top of Calton Hill when, in the novel, they gather on Arthur's Seat<sup>474</sup> – but neither Scott nor Turner was producing an historical document, rather they were concerned to give a lively impression and in this they manifestly succeeded.<sup>475</sup>

In peace time as well as in war, the piper is used as an icon of clan values

471. *The War Illustrated* Vol. 3, No.65 (November 1915), front cover.

472. C. Wells, *A Brief History of History* (Guilford, 2008), 225.

473. Email to the author (1 August 2011). The matter is excellently dealt with by Coinneach MacLean in 'Hugh Trevor-Roper and the Little Kilt', *Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig* 9 (2019), 227–38.

474. The painting is *Edinburgh – March of the Highlanders*, Tate Britain Collection, No.4953.

475. Vivien Williams discusses the literary references to the bagpipes in her thesis for the University of Glasgow. I am much indebted to her for access to her research.

and connections with the land. The identification of the bagpipes with the environment is referred to in Emblems and Totems (III.3.c.), but is also given expression in Romantic literature:

The boat in a moment is a bagpipe; and not only so, but all the mountains are bagpipes, and so are the clouds. All the bagpipes in the world are here, and they fill heaven and earth. 'Tis no exaggeration – much less a fiction – but the soul and body of truth. There Hamish stands stately at the prow; and as the boat hangs by midships on the very point that commands all the echoes, he fills the whole night with the 'Campbells are coming,' till the sky yells with the gathering as of all the Clans. His eyes are triumphantly fixed on ours to catch their emotions; his fingers cease their twinkling; and still that wild gathering keeps playing of itself among the mountains – fainter



Gordon Duncan, CD cover *Just for Seumas*

and fainter, as it is flung from cliff to cliff, till it dies away far – far off – as if in infinitude – sweet even and soft in its evanescence as some lover's lute.<sup>476</sup>

These values and associations were often sustained in distant countries, as in the advertisement for the Waipu Caledonian Society's Annual Gathering and Sports on 1st January 1907. The piper is shown with the wind blowing his beard, his kilt and large sporran and, of course, the lengthy red streamers from his drones. He is set against a Highland landscape and surrounded by thistles, a lion rampant and vignettes of Highland sports, but it is the piper who dominates.

This kind of imagery can also be the cause of embarrassment. Not all pipers wish to be permanently associated with either the full dress image or with its frequent military connotations. The cover of the late Gordon Duncan's justly famous CD, *Just for Seumas*, shows Duncan standing in full Highland dress with the pipes in playing position. He has a decidedly quizzical expression, as much as to say to his audience, 'Why do I have to dress like this?' Beside this image, he is shown in T-shirt and jeans seated on beer crates, with his pipes at rest against his arm. He is looking thoughtful and relaxed.

Gordon Duncan's CD both honoured and broke piping conventions, and the deliberate imagery of its cover carries with it a question of how we truly wish to envisage not just the piper, but the whole culture which the piper symbolises. It is not a question which is easily answered. A move towards the demilitarisation of piping by another leading exponent, Allan MacDonald, asserts the frequent and early connections between *piobaireachd* and song, and Martyn Bennett did much to demythologise the bagpipes, bringing them into a contemporary world of acid house dance music. However, the heroic imagery of the piper gathering the clan, inspiring courage in time of war or giving expression to personal and communal grief remains as powerful as ever across the centuries and across the globe. JP

#### IV.2.d. WEAPONS, ARMOUR AND CHARIOTS

[Drummond's Ancient Scottish Weapons; Descriptions of Weapons; Targes; Swords; Dirks; Powder Horns; Guns; Axes; Arrows; Armour; The Magic of Weapons; Weapons in Christian Metaphor; Bearing Weapons for the Empire; Chariots and Spears; Conclusion](#)

Cuim' an ceilinn air càch  
 Gu bheil agam dhut gràdh nach mùth;  
 'S beag an t-ioghnadh ged thà,  
 Nuair a chithear fod armaibh thù.

<sup>476</sup>J. Wilson, *Recreations of Christopher North* Vol. I (Edinburgh, 1868), 385.

'S math thig dag a' ghleòis dhearbht'  
 Agus sgiath nam ball meanbha dlùth',  
 Mar ri claidh'mh a' chinn òir  
 Air crios daingeann a chòir mo rùin.

*Why should I hide it from others  
 that I love you with unaltering love;  
 that is no surprise  
 when you are seen in your armour.*

*Well you suit a pistol of certain aim,  
 and the targe with the tiny close-set studs,  
 along with the gold-hilted sword  
 on the neat belt around my love's waist. ('Iain Ghlinn' Cuaich')<sup>477</sup>*

Whether in love song or professional panegyric, the allure of weapons in the Gaelic imagination is clear. The singer of 'John of Glenn Quoich' (above) pays careful attention to the pistol, targe and sword that adorn her lover. Their description declares not only his position as a warrior and a huntsman, but also his wealth and taste. The mention of the pistol (*dag*) means the song cannot be earlier than its introduction to the Highlands in the middle of the 17th century, or later than 1746, after which the bearing of arms was proscribed.<sup>478</sup> Iain Lom, in his song 'Òran do Dhòmhnall Gorm Òg', spends seven out of twenty-six three-line verses in praising his subject's choice of sword, shield, helmet, dirk, gun, bow and arrows. The sword is 'blue-bladed', a sign of its being made of steel; the flexible, embossed bow is made of yew wood; and the arrows are tailed with goose feathers, fixed in their place with wax. Giolla Crìost Brùilingeach pictures his subject, Tomaltach, Lord of Moylurg (d. 1458), armed on horseback:

Sleagh fhada ag an mhìlidh mhaiseach,  
 Mac Diarmada Muighe hAoi;  
 sgiath eangach ar chuairt na gcuradh,  
 searrach suaic ar fulang faoi.

*A long spear is wielded by the lovely hero,  
 MacDiarmada of the Plain of Aoi;  
 a cornered shield he bears on exploit,  
 a well-trained colt carries his weight.<sup>479</sup>*

477. Anne Lorne Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2006), 359.

478. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 359.

479. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire/The Song-book of the Pillagers* (Edinburgh, 2007), No. 21, ll. 73–76.

Whether a love song or a vernacular or a professional praise poem, weapons are an essential element, their qualities reflecting those of their owners.

#### DRUMMOND'S ANCIENT SCOTTISH WEAPONS

The year 1881 saw the publication of *Ancient Scottish Weapons*, a folio book of detailed and exquisite illustrations by James Drummond RSA (1816–1877).<sup>480</sup> They support minutely the martial world of the Gaels glimpsed in the three quotations above and in hundreds of other songs, poems and tales. Closely studied embossed targes are seen on its pages, blue swords with wrought handles, dirks, pistols and muskets, axes and glaives. Joseph Anderson, who wrote the accompanying notes, points out that Drummond's illustrations are of objects of proscription and neglect. The possession of weapons was made illegal by the Disarmament Acts of 1716, '25 and '46, after which many weapons were melted down or adapted for different purposes (we hear, for example, of targes used to cover butter churns). Drummond, then, is remarkable not only for the execution of the illustrations, but also for preserving so fragile a historic record and for pulling that record together from specimens that were in the hands of many different individuals. The illustrations offer a rare and precious view of a richly decorative style that in some aspects goes back to the Book of Kells and that was borne of a martial pride that goes back to the Celts on the Continent. The weapons show a continuity of artistic tradition in their interlace, zoomorphism, foliaceous scrolls and geometric design common to book illumination, stone carving, tooled leather and the metal work of bell shrines, brooches and powder horns. Drummond also surveyed brooches, musical instruments and agricultural and domestic implements to which we will return. The importance of his work cannot be overestimated in our endeavour to understand the visual in Gaelic culture in general and for showing the martial pride invested in beautifully made weapons in particular.

In a heroic society, much was vested in weapons. They were a form of portable and visible wealth. As we have seen, the sword is a common motif on gravestones, representing the martial pride of a society where *cliù*, fame earned on the battlefield, was the key to immortality, at least in the memories of men. (The point is made by the Early Welsh poet Aneirin, composing in Edinburgh around 600, who states that the warriors of Y Gododdin preferred death on the battlefield to death in old age, exactly because it guaranteed lasting fame.<sup>481</sup>) The frequency of battle runs in Fenian tales shows the excitement and pride

480. Drummond, *Ancient Scottish Weapons* (Edinburgh and London), 1881.

481. K. H. Jackson, *The Gododdin: The Oldest Scottish Poem* (Edinburgh, 1969).



engendered by arms. The following is from the lay ‘Conn, Mac an Deirg’ (Conn, Son of the Red):

’S chuir e a sgiath bhucaideach  
air a làimh chli,  
’s a shlacanta curanta,  
cruaidh chloidheamh  
na làimh dheis.

Sin thòisich an dà laoch  
bu dealbhaiche,  
chuireadh an talamh  
air bhalla-chrith,  
sgoltadh nan sgeana sgiath  
sgoltadh nan sgiathan sgleò,  
a’ dòrtadh na fala mòire,  
o làimh imeachdaich a chèile.  
Trì dithean gun cuireadh iad dhiubh,  
dìth teine dan armaibh,  
’s dìth cailce dan sgiathaibh,  
’s dìth fal’ agus feòla  
dan cneas agus dan cith-cholainn.<sup>482</sup>

*He took his embossed shield in his left hand, and took his thrashing, valorous,  
steel sword in his right hand.*

*Then the two most handsome warriors began; the earth was made to tremble  
all over; splitting of the polished shields, splitting the noisy/hazy(?) shields,  
shedding much blood from the ever-moving hands of each. Three losses they  
would execute: the loss of fire from their weapons, the loss of caulking from  
their shields, the loss of flesh and blood from their skin and from their whole  
bodies.*

As weapons metonymically represented their owners – we saw Drummond’s suggestion (in IV.1.b.) that the various swords depicted on grave slabs might actually have identified their owners<sup>483</sup> – we find weapons, like people, could become objects of satire. Donnchadh Bàn satirises his chief’s ancestral sword

482. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV (London, 1891), 130 and 124–25.

483. Drummond, *Monuments in Iona and the West Highlands*, 3 and 15.

with which he fought at the Battle of Falkirk.<sup>484</sup> It is black and rusty, blunt and gapped, with a twist in its neck; it is as heavy as a caber and has bruised his thigh. It has no inherent luck or fortune. Part of the satire may have come from Donnchadh Bàn’s embarrassment at having lost it in the fray, but, by association, it reflects the ingloriousness of the Hanoverian cause in the poet’s eyes. ‘Sgian Dubh an Sprogain Chaim’ (The black-bladed knife of the crooked tuft) is the satire of a dirk in sexual terms acquired in a blindfold game of dirk-swapping.<sup>485</sup> The knife is described as a black-bladed, wry-necked wedge protruding from the grey fibres of its willow handle, and Ronald Black suggests that the poet, Lachlann MacKinnon (1665–1734), may be satirising his second wife.

#### DESCRIPTIONS OF WEAPONS

Below we will describe the various weapons themselves, from surviving examples, from stone carving and illustrations and from texts.

#### TARGES

Rather than being shaped like a heating iron, Highland targes are typically circular, about twenty inches in diameter, made of two sheets of light wood set across the grain and covered in calfskin, with a central boss to which a spike could be attached, surrounded with smaller bosses or thin sheets of perforated brass through which crimson silk might be exposed. The leather is everywhere tooled and studded with a range of geometric and foliaceous designs. They are recognisably similar to those targes described in 18th-century poetry with ‘neat studs’: *Sgiath laghach nam ball grinn*, or red and green whorls: *sgiaith amalach dearg is uaine*.<sup>486</sup> A poem from the 13th century describes the shield of Dòmhnall mac Raghnaill mhic Shomhairle, the eponymous ancestor of Clan Donald, as having a yellow snake round its edge with its tail in its mouth.<sup>487</sup> Another is emblazoned with a purple griffon, another with a star.<sup>488</sup> Drummond too illustrates targes variously emblazoned with a double-headed eagle, a galley, fish, lion and star. In poetry, targes are often described as being *meallach* ‘embossed’ or *eangach* ‘notched’, a reference to the riveted brass cones and pyramids we see

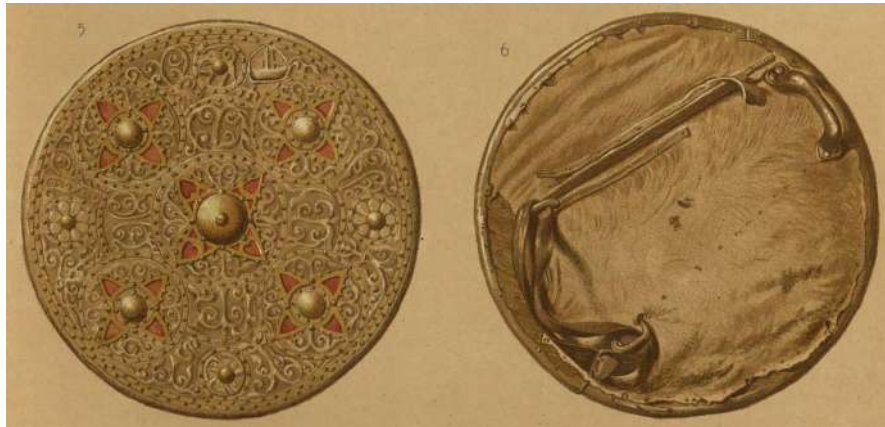
484. ‘Òran do Bhlàr na h-Eaglaise Brice’ (Song on the Battle of Falkirk) in Angus MacLeod, ed., *Orain Dhonnchaidh Bhàin/The Songs of Duncan Ban MacIntyre* (Edinburgh, 1952).

485. Ronald Black, *An Lasair: Anthology of 18th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse* (Edinburgh, 2001), 12.

486. Black, *An Lasair*, 34–35, ll.110 and 83, and 26.

487. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 15, v. 4.

488. McLeod and Bateman *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 24.



Targes of wood and leather, front and back, showing handle, arm-strap and sheathed spike for screwing into the central boss. James Drummond, *Ancient Scottish Weapons* (1881), Plate I (detail)

in Drummond's illustrations. Shields are ranged along the gunwales of the fleet that attacked Castle Sween in 1310, apparently with the spikes attached to the central bosses:

cliath theann dhaingeann do cholgaibh,  
foireann sgiath ré bordaibh bárc.

*a dense fence of blades and a rank of shields  
are being fixed to the planks of the barques.*<sup>489</sup>

But after the Disarming Act, Boswell wrote that there was 'hardly a target to be found in the Highlands'. He described how they were made to serve as covers for buttermilk barrels, 'a kind of change like beating spears into pruning hooks'.<sup>490</sup>

#### SWORDS

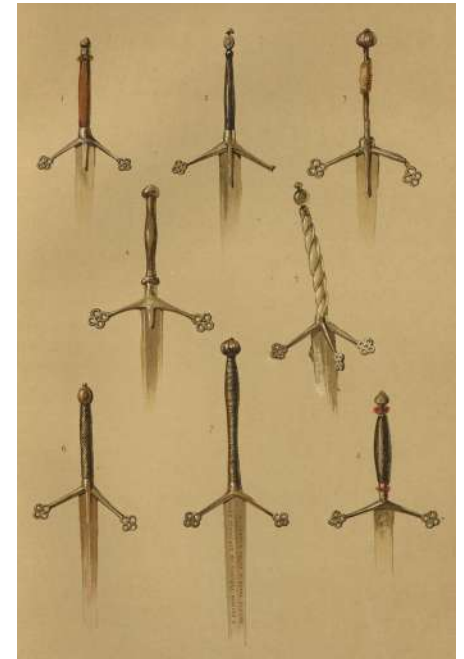
There are three distinct types of sword seen on effigies and grave slabs, and described in poetry. Swords prior to c.1500 are derived from Norse models. They are single-handers, with a distinctive lobed pommel, and downward sloping quillons. After that time, the claymore (from *claidheamh mòr* 'big sword'), derived from German models, appears. It was a double-hander and had quatrefoil ornaments on its quillons. Unlike the single-handed swords, it was carried on the back. It too typically had downward sloping quillons and a conical

489. McLeod and Bateman *Duanair na Sracaire*, No. 33, v. 6.

490. R. Black, *To the Hebrides: Samuel Johnson's Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775) and *James Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1778) (Edinburgh, 1984), 235.

Two-handed swords with inclined quillons ending in quatrefoils and variously shaped pommels. James Drummond, *Ancient Scottish Weapons* (1881), Plate XV

pommel. Examples are illustrated by Drummond and are seen held vertically by stone effigies of the West Highland school of sculpture and in the drawing of the Campbells of Glenorchy at the end of the 16th century in the *Black Book of Taymouth*. Pre-17th-century poetry makes frequent mention of swords, the blades being of steel, slender and hard-tipped, and the hilt being decorated with red-gold, gold and ivory.<sup>491</sup> In an 18th-century poem, the word *Spàinneach* 'Spanish' alone denotes a sword, which corresponds with Drummond's illustrations of broadswords from Farara (Ferreira in Spain), with their basket hilts, double-edged blades and prominent ribs.<sup>492</sup>



#### DIRKS

Joseph Anderson, writing in Drummond's *Ancient Scottish Weapons*, describes the Highland dirk, drawing attention to its ornately decorated handle:

The Highland dirk is distinguished from all other weapons of the same kind by its long triangular blade, single-edged and thick-backed, and by its peculiar handle, cylindrical, without a guard but shouldered at the junction with the blade, the grip swelling in the middle and the pommel circular and flat-topped. Its most characteristic feature is the carving of the handle which is invariably in one style of knotwork ...<sup>493</sup>

This observation is very much supported by the attention paid in the poetry to the decoration of the haft: Giolla Críost Brúilingeach, mentioned above, describes the red-hafted dirk hanging on a belt of tooled leather belonging to his

491. McLeod and Bateman *Duanair na Sracaire*, Nos. 21 and 33.

492. See Black, *An Lasair*, 83, l.2 and Drummond, Plate VIII and p.19.

493. Joseph Anderson in Drummond, *Ancient Scottish Weapons*, 20.



Highland dirks with wooden handles richly carved with interlace. James Drummond, *Ancient Scottish Weapons* (1881), Plate XVIII (detail)

Irish patron: *Sgian chaisdearg ar an chrìos chumhdaig*, while Gill'Easbuig, a 15th-century earl of Argyll, has a knife with a handle of gold, and the girl in 'Bothan Àirigh am Bràigh Raithneach' (c. 1700) boasts of the knife her lover has brought her from the fair.<sup>494</sup>

#### POWDER HORNS

Powder horns were made of a flattened cow horn, closed at the bottom with wood and plugged at the top, often with a lead mount. Anderson writes that 'no portion of the Highlander's equipment appears to have been more highly prized or more beautifully decorated'. Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh praises Sir Norman MacLeod of Berneray about 1675 for his weapon stand, stocked with measure and horn – *miosair is adharc*.<sup>495</sup> Mention of the powder horn *adharc fhùdair*, however, is relatively rare, its existence more often implied by the well-primed guns.

494. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, Nos. 21, l. 69, and No. 24, l. 144; and Catherine Kerrigan, *An Anthology of Scottish Women Poets* (Edinburgh, 1991), 24–25.

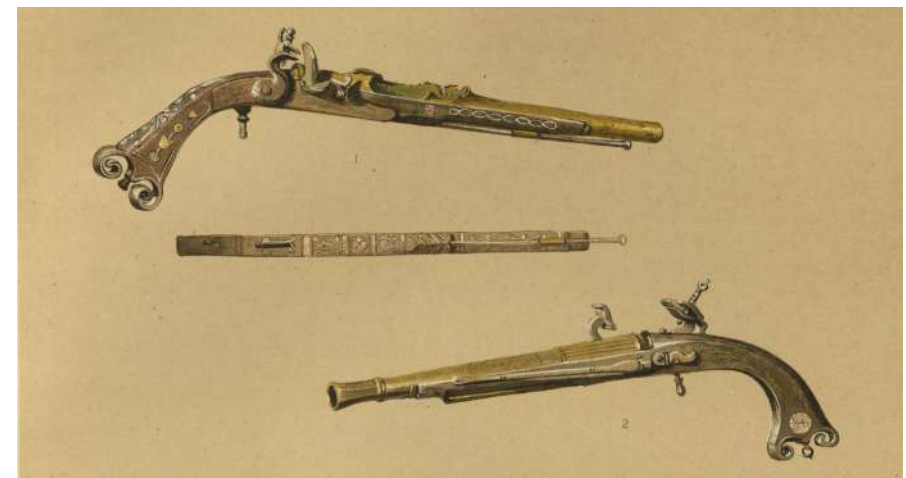
495. W. Watson, *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig* ([1918]; Inverness, 1976), 196.



Flat Highland powder horns with rich ornamentation. James Drummond, *Ancient Scottish Weapons* (1881), Plate XXII (detail)

#### GUNS

Drummond illustrates both pistols and muskets. Pistols – *dagaichean* – 'always remarkable for the excellence of their manufacture and the beauty of their decoration', were designed for use with one hand. Their butts might be lobed, globose or shaped like a ram's horns and, as they were made entirely of metal,



Pistols (*dagaichean*) with flintlocks, ram's horn butts, ornamented barrels, inlaid stocks and, in one case, an octagonal muzzle. James Drummond, *Ancient Scottish Weapons* (1881), Plate XXVI (detail)



they could be intricately ornamented all over. An anonymous lament for Rob Roy praises his gold-headed pistol on the finest of belts: *dag a' chinn òir air a chrìosan bu bhòidhche*.<sup>496</sup>

Muskets – *cuilbhearan* (from English ‘culverin’) – were much longer, generally over five feet, dearer and plainer than the pistols, with the decoration confined to the flintlock, muzzle and stock, which might be fluted or inlaid with mother of pearl. The heavily armed hero of ‘Mo Robairmeach Gaolach’ (My Beloved Brigand) has a gun as well as a pair of pistols on a silver-banded belt:

Nam biodh siud agadsa: claidheamh is targaid,  
gunna bheòil-laghaich – do roghainn a dh’arm iad –  
's paidhir mhath phiostal fo chrìos nam bann airgid,  
's leannan tè òig thu, cho bòidheach 's tha an Albainn.

*When you have your sword and targe with you,  
and a sweet-mouthed gun – your choice of weaponry –  
and a good pair of pistols beneath a silver-banded belt,  
you're every girl's sweetheart, as handsome as any in Scotland.*<sup>497</sup>



Muskets (*cuilbhearan*) with flintlocks and triggers, the butts, stocks and barrels ornamented with inlay and carving. James Drummond, *Ancient Scottish Weapons* (1881), Plate XXIX (detail)

496. Black, *An Lasair*, 146.

497. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 15.

Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh mentions a range of firearms in her praise of Sir Norman's armoury in ‘Luinneag MhicLeòid’, emphasising their costliness and readiness.<sup>498</sup> It would appear that the MacKinnons of Strath were particularly famous for their ‘well-maintained guns / that do not misfire when they're needed’:

Luchd chuilbheirean gleusta  
'N àm feuma nach diùlt.<sup>499</sup>

Donnchadh Bàn describes the marvellous adaptation of the deer of Beinn Dòbhraìn to their natural habitat and, in equal detail, he describes the gun used by Pàdraig the gamekeeper. Despite every instinct of the deer, the sophisticated mechanism of the gun and the expertise of the stalker are enough to outmatch them:

'S culaidh ga chur eug –  
Duine dhèanadh teuchd,  
Gunna bu mhath gleus  
    an glaic òganaich;  
Spor anns an biodh bèarn,  
Tarrann air a ceann,  
Snap a bhuaileadh teann  
    ris na h-òrdaibh i;  
Ochdshlisneach gun fheall,  
Stoc den fhiodh gun mheang,  
Lotadh an damh seang  
    is a leònadh e;  
'S fear a bhiodh mar cheàird  
    riutha sònraichte,  
Dh'fhòghnadh dhaibh gun taing  
    le chuid seòlainean.

*The means to slay him are –  
a man capable of a feat,  
a gun in proper trim  
    in a youth's hand;  
a flint that had a cleft,  
a screw fixed on its head,  
cock that would smite it hard  
    against the hammers;*

498. Watson, *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig*, 197.

499. Black, *An Lasair*, 46; see also p. 121, ‘Moladh Cabar Fèidh’.

*eight-sided trusty barrel,  
stock of flawless wood,  
which would wound the slender stag  
and disable him;  
and one who by vocation  
specialised in them,  
who would, in spite of them, outmatch them  
with his strategies.<sup>500</sup>*

The gun can appear as the hunter's companion. Tormod MacNeacail (b. 1798) of Sgorrybreck left Skye firstly for Canada and then Australia as a result of the tightening of poaching laws that criminalised the hunt (see III.3.a.). The hunt was an integral part of Gaelic culture and represented all that was noble and free: deer, land and hunter. In 'S gann gun dìrich mi chaidh' (It's unlikely I will ever climb), MacNeacail says he will not take his slender gun hunting again, the one with which he has spent many a day sitting on a knoll.<sup>501</sup> Lachlann mac Theàrlaich Òig talks of his dog and gun as his only companions as he walks the hills considering the deaths of his kinsmen.<sup>502</sup>

Donnchadh Bàn plays with the idea of the gun as his lover in 'Song to the Musket', which reflects his change of occupation from forester to member of the Edinburgh City Guard, with its attendant loss of romance but gain in security. He is forsaking the sweetheart of his youth, Nic Còiseim, named after the man from whom he had bought it and with whom he has roamed all over Argyllshire, for the wealthy Edinburgh dowager Seònaid, daughter of George, with whom he will earn a good livelihood. In 'Song to a Gun named Nic Còiseim', he remembers the first gun as his hunting companion, who brought him great joy but not enough of an income to live off:

*Horó, mo chuid cuideachd thu,  
Gur muldach leam uam thu,  
Horó, mo chuid cuideachd thu,  
'S mi dìreadh bheann is uchdanan,  
B' ait leam thu bhith cuide rium  
'S do chudrom air mo ghualainn.*

500. 'Moladh Beinn Dòrain', in Angus Macleod, ed., *Orain Dhonnchaidh Bhàn* (Edinburgh, 1952), 196–225.

501. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 255.

502. Black, *An Lasair*, 30.

*Horo, my own comrade,  
in thy absence I am doleful;  
Horo, my own comrade,  
when I climbed peaks and hill slopes  
it was a joy to have thy company  
and thy weight upon my shoulder.<sup>503</sup>*

Dòmhnall Ruadh Chorùna (1887–1967) likewise personifies the gun as a lover, when contrasting being woken by the birds in the early morning to go out hunting with being woken by his enemy's gun in the trenches of the First World War. It was indeed his love of the gun that had led him into an unhappy marriage with 'Mòrag' for King George's dowry:

*'S e gaol na mosgaid a dh'fhàg  
fo ghlas-làmh aig a' Chrùn mi –*

*An gaol a thug mi nam òige  
a bhith 'n-còmhnaidh ga stiùireadh –*

*Ach nuair a rinn mis' a pòsadh  
nochd rium bròn air a cùlaibh*

*'S thàinig mulad nam fhianais  
's chan iarramaid fhaotainn*

*Nuair fhuair mi 'n tochradh o Sheòras  
leis an ògbhannaich chaoil ud ...*

*It's the love of the musket  
that has hand-cuffed me to the Crown –*

*The love I had in my youth  
for taking aim with her always –*

*But when we were married  
grief reared up behind her*

*And a sorrow beset me  
that we'd never have sought*

*When I got King George's dowry  
with yon slender bride ...*

*'Cha b' e gunna mo nàmhaid'<sup>504</sup>*

503. Black, *An Lasair*, 226–27.

504. Black, *An Tuil* (Edinburgh, 1999), 142–43.

## AXES

The axe, in its various forms of bill, glaive and halberd, is a much more primitive weapon than the sword and gun, used by the common soldier rather than the chief. This is reflected in its lack of ornamentation. The blade was made of iron mounted on a wooden staff. The halberd combined the spear and axe; the blade of the glaive was long and thin and projected from the pole; the bill and the Lochaber axe had a shorter blade and a hook. The poetry too portrays it as a weapon of the masses rather than as the prestigious weapon of a chief. Gill'Easbaig Caimbeul, a mid-16th-century earl of Argyll, is depicted protected by a hedge of axes while he himself carries a sword and shield:



Halberds with spear-shaped spikes, axe-shaped blades and back hooks, and a Lochaber axe with a longer blade and a hook. James Drummond, *Ancient Scottish Weapons* (1881), Plate XXXIII (detail)

Iadhar uime duimhneach d'ògbhuidh  
 an dáil deabhtha ar diúltadh síodh;  
 fál tuagh is lámha gan loige  
 don t-sluagh dhána is groide gníomh.

*Round him crowd a press of young warriors  
 ready for battle having refused peace;  
 a hedge of hatchets and axes without weakness  
 have the bold band of speedy deeds.*<sup>505</sup>

While Gill'easbuig is described here as 'a firm sword for upholding order' – *cloidheamh cruaidh cosnamh an lach* – it is significant that a satirised chief in another poem is 'the bone-axe' – *an chnámhthuagh*.<sup>506</sup> The nickname *Tàillear Dubh na Tuaigne* 'the Black Tailor of the Axe' given to Dòmhnall, an illegitimate

505. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 24.

506. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 24, l. 193; No. 38, l. 58.

son of Eòghainn, 14th chief of the Camerons of Lochiel (d. 1553), reflects something of his reduced status as well as his skills with the battle-axe.

## ARROWS

One of the most detailed descriptions of arrows occurs in 'Saighdean Ghlinn Liobhainn', probably from 1603.<sup>507</sup> The quiver is described as being made supple with wax from Galway; the arrows have bat-like wings made from silk and tail feathers of the eagle, while silk from Ireland has been wound round the swelling shafts by the fletcher in Glen Lyon. Whether or not this detail reflects the manufacture of arrows round the fire at the time of composition as Ronald Black suggests, it certainly reflects a consuming interest in beautifully made, refined weapons which were the outward expression and means of maintaining the heroic ideal. The ability of the hero to pull the bow string back to his ear so as to release the arrow with such force that it embeds itself up to the flanges in an animal's flank is a frequent demonstration in 17th- and 18th-century poetry of the subject's athleticism, his ability to provide and his taste in expensive weapons.



## ARMOUR

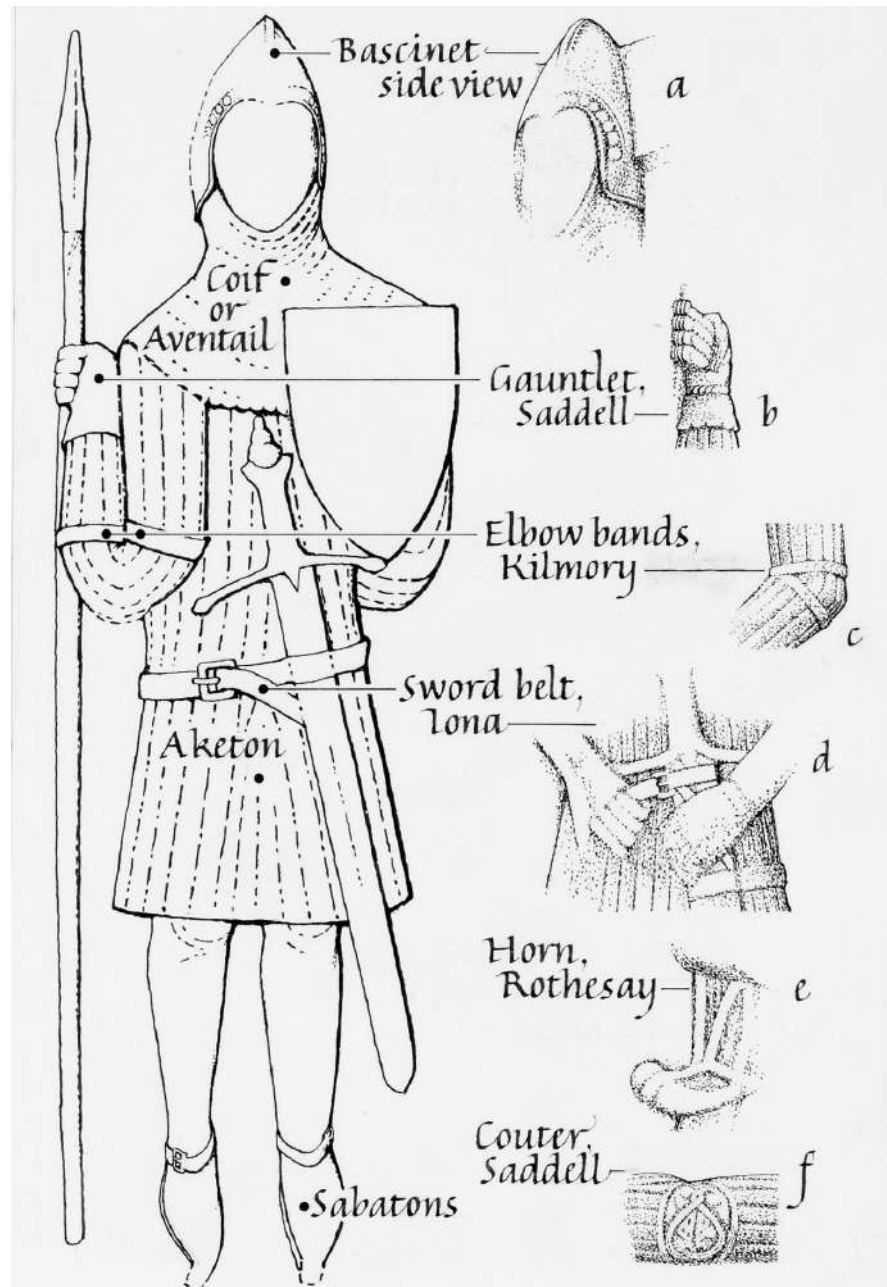
The effigy of Bricius MacKinnon from the second half of the 14th century is both typical of West Highland effigies and exceptional in its artistry. The figure is depicted in a pointed and keeled bascinet or helmet worn over an aventail of chainmail which protects the neck and shoulders. The body is protected by a knee-length, long-sleeved aketon or surcoat made of leather which would be stuffed in pleats. The legs are protected by plate, the feet by pointed sabatons, and straps round the ankles suggest spurs. The hands are gauntleted: the right hand holds a spear and the left a shield, and a sword is thrust below the belt. Small variations occur in other effigies, in the way the aketon is closed, whether gauntlets are worn, in the keel of the helmet and the placing of the hands – in the absence of a shield, both may be placed on the sword.

Three sorts of body armour appear on the stone

Effigy of Bricius Mackinnon, from James Drummond, *Sculptured Monuments in Iona and the West Highlands* (1881), Plate XL

507. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach: Anthology of 17th Century Gaelic Poetry* (Edinburgh, 1994), 68.





Annotated drawing of armour. © Crown Copyright: HES

sculptures: the hauberk made of chain mail, the habergeon of quilted linen or canvas and the aketon of leather. They reach to the knee and are sometimes

divided to allow for leg movement. The quilted habergeon is probably the 'manifoldly sewed ... yellow warr coat which among them is the badge of the chieftain' commented on by John Major in 1512, and the 'leni croich' (*lèine chròic*, the saffron-dyed shirt) worn by people of distinction in the islands mentioned by Martin Martin. Anderson remarks on the lack of variation in armour as evinced by stone sculpture between the 14th and 16th centuries, which he attributes to a lack of commerce in the Highlands.<sup>508</sup> Steer and Bannerman, however, say that while heavier armour became common in Europe, the Highland chieftains continued to favour older styles, not from cultural isolation, relative poverty or pride in the armour of the ancestors, but because the older, lighter style better suited Highland warfare.<sup>509</sup> Moreover, it may be that the older styles conformed better to the idea of a warrior. Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair too described the crew of Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill in 1751 clad in chain mail and armed with bows and arrows, all of which had become an anachronism (see IV.2.e.).

Some developments in armour can be traced in the details given in both poetry and stone carving. Eoin MacSuibhne in the early 14th century is praised for having, 'A protective breastplate of shining chain mail / instead of a wadded shirt with brown plates':

Niamhrach díon do lúirich threabhraidh  
ar sgáth chotúin na sgiath ndonn.<sup>510</sup>



Bascinets come in after 1350. Around 1500, the sword changes from a pommel sword with pointing down quillons to the claymore as is seen in a drawing by Dürer (overpage) from 1521. Plated armour came in about the same time, illustrated well on the monument to the MacDougalls in Ardchattan Priory, where father and son appear respectively in chainmail and plated armour, laced at the side with leather thongs. Two

Captain Robert Campbell (1630-1696) wearing plate armour, by an unknown artist. Photo credit: National Trust for Scotland, Drum Castle, Garden & Estate

508. Drummond, *Ancient Scottish Weapons*, 7.

509. Steer and Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture in the West Highlands* (Edinburgh, 1977), 28.

510. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 33, ll. 101-02.



MacLeod effigies at Rodel wear plated armour, as does Campbell of Glenlyon in a portrait by an unknown artist. A haubergeon was worn below the plate; the legs too were encased and poleyns were worn at the knees. Plate rendered the shield redundant.

Poorer soldiers appear in the drawing by Dürer and in an anonymous etching of Scots (or Irish?) mercenaries in the Service of Gustavus Adolphus during the Thirty Years' War about a hundred years later.<sup>511</sup> Dürer's illustration shows two gentlemen and their three retainers. One of the gentlemen is armed with a spear and dagger, the other with a sword, bow and arrows and dagger. They both wear helmets; one wears a padded tunic, the other a tunic of chain mail. Their three retainers, by contrast, wear no armour over their tunics. Two carry axes and a horn, the other a sword. The anonymous etching shows four figures in loose



Albrecht Dürer, *Gaelic Gallowglasses and their kern* (1521)

fitting bonnets and a variety of tartan clothing and weapons. Two carry bows and quivers, a third carries a musket and the fourth apparently a stick, though the caption mentions long knives also. One wears a knee-length tunic of tartan with a shirt below; another a corselet with tartan pantaloons and hose, while the other two, one of whom is bare-footed, wear plaids. Taken together, these illustrations

511. See 'In solchem Habit gehen die 800 In Stettin angekommen Irländer oder Irren', in Gordon Menzies, *In Search of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2001), 133.



Anon., *Scottish Soldiers in the Service of Gustavus Adolphus*

suggest that armour was not to be afforded by the poor foot soldier and that while gentlemen were heavily armed (as they also appear to be in stone effigies, poetry and songs), the poorer soldier might have just one sort of weapon.

'The Headship of the Gaels is Good Charter' is an anonymous poem addressed to Gill'Easbaig Caimbeul, one of the 16th-century earls of Argyll, in which the poet champions Argyll's leadership of the Gaels in the vacuum left in the wake of the Lordship of the Isles. Over twelve four-line verses, the poet gives an account of Gill'Easbaig going into armour: first he puts on his satin shirt, satin breeches and shoes with golden uppers; then the embroidered hauberk with gold collar, the Norwegian corselet, the mailcoat, cape and girdle; then he takes up his dirk with gold handle, his sword, notched shield, helmet with a satin seal embroidered with birds, and then his spear. The poem, like a painting, is a record of his armour and weaponry and, like them, it is made to impress and intimidate. The poet concludes his description of the armed chief with:

Ní éir ó shin aon 'na aghaidh  
do bhéir taobh ré cabhair chliar.

*Thenceforth no-one will rise against him  
who has respect for poets' praise.*<sup>512</sup>

512. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 24, ll. 167–68.

## THE MAGIC OF WEAPONS

In addition to the impressive appearance and costliness of Gill'Easbaig's armour in the above poem, the poet states that his shield (and shirt, see IV.2.a.), both decorated with birds, have supernatural powers for victory and protection:

Gabhuis go gliaidh Giolla Easbuig  
 a n-aice an chuilg sgáth an sgéith;  
 budh réalta sluaigh go séan bhfoghla  
 buaidh a h-éan d'a comhdha a ccléith.

*Gill'Easbaig has taken for the fighting,  
 next to the sword, the shelter of a shield;  
 a star for a host, a portent of pillage,  
 the virtue of its birds to save him in strife.*<sup>513</sup>

Metal accrued associations with the supernatural, not only for its use in weapons but also because it was miraculously extracted from the earth – from ores or bogs in the case of bog-iron. Military supremacy depended on increasingly sophisticated metal work and so smiths, as we have seen, were held as workers of magic throughout the Indo-European world.<sup>514</sup> In contrast to Fletcher's and MacKinnon's satirised black-bladed weapons quoted above, the blades of weapons are generally praised for being blue, that is for being made of steel. In the tales, *claidheimh solais* 'swords of light' appear, the motif perhaps arising from swords of bronze. They belong to supernatural beings and may reflect a time when colonising Goidelic tribes to Ireland had metal-working powers superior to the resident tribes. The Gaels used iron while the autochthonous tribes, who were thought of as gods and fairies, still used bronze. In any case, it was widely believed that the fairies had no iron power, prehistoric flint arrow heads being held to be their 'elf shot'. Iron, therefore, was believed to protect against them and against the evil eye. A keeper told John Francis Campbell that he had been asked to fire off his gun over a cow to break a spell with its iron.<sup>515</sup> For the same reason, people often took an oath on their iron dirks.

In the Fenian tales, even the lesser characters are identified with specific weapons. The *Muileartach*, a sea giantess, has a loop of iron, surmounted as with a crook on *An Trostan Beag Druimneach* 'the little ridged staff' (which undermines

513. From 'The Headship of the Gaels is Good Charter', in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanair na Sracaire*, No. 24, ll. 117–20 and 149–52.

514. Recent work using phylogenetic modelling for tracing the common ancestry of stories have found that stories of the type 'The Smith and the Devil', where a blacksmith sells his soul to gain supernatural powers, go back to the Bronze Age: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-35358487>>: accessed 20 January 2016.

515. J. F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* Vol. I (Hounslow, 1983), lxviii.

the theory above about the supernatural not having iron).<sup>516</sup> Baoighre, the son of the King of Sorcha, has a ridged shield – *sgiath druimneach*<sup>517</sup> – and the Fenian banners are named *Maol nan Dòrn* (Bare Fists), *Geur Iomlan* (Compete Sharpness), *Sguab Ghàbhaidh* (Terrible Sheaf) and Fionn's own banner, *A' Ghil-Ghrèine* (The Sunbeam).<sup>518</sup> This last was weighted with gems and required nine times nine men to carry it upright with gold chains in front of Fionn. Cú Chulainn acquired the *gae builg* (a returning foot-operated javelin for use in water) from the female warrior Scathach in Skye. Its origins made it unique in Ireland and made him pre-eminent among those he had to fight. When Cú Chulainn unwittingly fights his own son, Conlaoch, the boy purposefully throws his weapon, blunt end first, at his father (*an coinneamh na h-earraich*), while his father kills him by throwing his weapon point first (*an coinneamh a roinne*). Later, Cú Chulainn was killed by his own spear, as his father had been killed by his own shield, and as Fionn's father was killed by his own sword when Arcai Dubh, on wounding him, exchanged weapons in return for carrying him to a safe place and then turned on him.<sup>519</sup> Mac an Luinn, Fionn's sword, was made for him by his maternal grandfather, who tempered the blade in the blood of the first living thing that entered the smithy – a dog. In 'Duan na Ceardaich' or the 'Lay of the Smithy', the sword is retempered in the otherworldly forge of the one-legged smith Lon mac Liobhainn by four four-armed smiths. This time the sword has to be retempered in human blood and this happens to be the blood of his mother.<sup>520</sup> Mac an Luinn was a sword that never left a remnant from its blow – *nach d'fhàg riamh fuigheal beum* – and never required a second blow, and so cut right through to Fionn's leg through seven divots of turf when Garaidh was beheaded, knowingly and by his own request, with his head lying on Fionn's thigh. Such phrases were a shorthand for the audience to a barrage of heroic images and values.

Fionn's knife, shield and hammer – *iodhach*, *sgiath* and *òrd* – variously call out to his warrior band when he is in danger. His knife called out when he was within an inch of his life from Conan, and his shield called out when he was hard pressed in the House of the Yellow Field.<sup>521</sup> Fionn's weapons are sentient, interactive, named beings, an animism shared by other weapons said to thirst for blood or to channel propitiousness.

516. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays*, 135 and 146.

517. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays*, 97.

518. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays*, 111.

519. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays*, 16.

520. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays*, 13, 21, 59 and 161, and <[www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/fullrecord/20686/1](http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/fullrecord/20686/1)>.

521. J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays*, 196 and 235.



## WEAPONS IN CHRISTIAN METAPHOR

St Paul's analogy of 'God's armour' against the powers of darkness (Eph. 6:10–17) has been a source of imagery to sermon and literature alike, from early medieval times to the 18th-century evangelical awakenings. St Paul speaks of the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit. God and the devil, joined by the world and the flesh, are at war for the soul of man. The soul is weak and easily dominated by the bestial appetites of the body, but can be protected by spiritual armour.

Two 8th-century poems, 'Nuall Fir Fio' and 'St Patrick's Lorica', use this Christian image of the breastplate, even if some of the protective forces are clearly pagan (see II.3.a.).<sup>522</sup> Some 800 years later, a poem in the Book of the Dean of Lismore, 'Seacht saighde atá ar mo thí', visualises the seven deadly sins as seven arrows thrown by the devil at the very parts of the body most prone to each. The arrows endanger the eternal life of the soul, but, as with the *loricae*, prayer and Scripture provide a physical barrier:

Cuirim Paidir aoinMheic Dhé  
is Cré na nOstal go beacht  
eadram agus guin na n-arm  
is cóig salm nó sé nó seacht.

*I carefully place the Apostles' Creed  
and the Prayer of God's only Son  
between me and the wounding of those darts  
and five, six or seven psalms.*<sup>523</sup>

Dùghall Bochanan in the aftermath of Culloden made a direct and overt comparison between the warriors, both Hanoverian and Jacobite, 'fighting like ants over a broken stick' and the warrior of the spirit fighting for the eternal life of the soul. His poem 'An Gaisgeach' is a redefinition of what it is to be a warrior.<sup>524</sup> His call to arms is very close to St Paul's:

'S i 'n fhìrinn ghlan as clogad dà  
is gràs a' chreidimh aig' mar sgiath;  
's e 'n sgrìobtar naomh a chlaidheamh geur,  
's e mhisneach ta gu lèir an Dia.

*Pure truth is his helmet  
the grace of faith, his shield;*

522. 'Two Loricae', in John Carey, *King of Mysteries, Early Irish Religious Writing* (Dublin, 2000), 127ff.

523. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanair na Sracaire*, No. 8.

524. Dùghall Bochanan, *Dàin Spioradail* (Glasgow, 1946), 37–39.

*holy scripture is his sharp sword  
and his trust is all in God.*<sup>525</sup>

For soldiers, such an analogy would have been much more than a figure of speech. With the proscription of arms of 1747, both sides had to relinquish the view of themselves as warriors. Bochanan and others tried to reinterpret the world for them in Christian terms and, for this erstwhile martial society, weapons could make the link.

## BEARING WEAPONS FOR THE EMPIRE

We have discussed in our section on tartan (IV.2.a.) how Gaelic martial pride was channelled into the service of the Empire after the proscription of arms in 1746. While the soldiers of the Black Watch enforced the proscription, they themselves carried musket with bayonet, broadsword, pistol and dirk. Conscription gave to the Highlanders employment and the right to carry arms and to the British state it gave 'cannon fodder'. At one time a fifth of the British Standing Army was made up of Highland regiments. Màiri Mhòr proudly said:

Cò nach tugadh gnùis  
agus cliù sna h-uile dòigh  
do luchd nam breacan dubhghorm,  
nan lùirichean 's nan sròl?  
Oir cha robh leud a ghrunn  
air a chunntas san Roinn Eòrp'  
thog uiread riamh a dhiùlnaich  
ri Eilean cùbhr' a' Cheò.

*Who would not give countenance  
and praise in every way  
to those of dark blue tartans,  
of flags and armour plate?  
For there never was a quarter  
in Europe, of like size,  
which reared as many stalwarts  
as the fragrant Misty Isle.*

'Eilean a' Cheò'<sup>526</sup>

It was an irony not missed by 19th-century poets that sons fought for Britain while their parents were being cleared off the land. Seonaidh Phàdraig/John Smith (1848–1881) makes this point in 'Spiorad a' Charthannais' (The Spirit of Kindliness),

525. Bochanan, *Dàin Spioradail*, 39.

526. Donald Meek, *Caran an t-Saoghail/The Wiles of the World, Anthology of 19th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse* (Edinburgh, 2003), 368–69.

by juxtaposing a verse describing Highland soldiers winning the Battle of Waterloo with another, describing their parents being burnt out of their houses in order to turn their land into a playground for the rich.<sup>527</sup> Again and again, poets of that time ask where Britain will get her soldiers, having scattered the population that had produced such fine specimens of manhood, skilled in the use of arms and agile on rough terrain.<sup>528</sup> Archibald Campbell gives the fullest critique of a culture that had been abused, exploited and humiliated for the benefit of the ruling sectors of society, observing that the descendants of the very people who had protected the realm were now disinherited, sweeping the streets of the cities.<sup>529</sup>

The image of the fierce Highlander loyal to the Crown and British state has dominated Highland politics far more than any nascent radicalism borne of the wrongs of history. Gaelic poets gave the effort of the First World War their full support, even in the face of gas and trench warfare.<sup>530</sup> It was not until the Second World War that war was questioned at all. Sorley MacLean's left wing politics made him analyse every war as a 'mad delirium' created to benefit the rulers.<sup>531</sup> George Campbell Hay not only lamented the killing of the innocent among the allies and enemy alike, but also the destruction of Europe's material culture through bombardment.<sup>532</sup> The figure of the warrior, however, who can unite thought and action in one self-sacrificial action, remains a heroic ideal for both poets. Hay uses it to inspire young nationalists to take to the mountain ridges of political aspiration to protect the population in the glens. For MacLean, it was his failure to live up to that ideal, by not fighting in the Spanish Civil War, which denied him the reward of love.<sup>533</sup>

#### CHARIOTS AND SPEARS

War chariots appear on a number of Irish High Crosses, though their particular characteristics have been treated as developments from Roman or even Chinese practice.<sup>534</sup> As a footnote to this section, we would like to argue the contrary: that

527. Meek, *Caran an t-Saoghail*, 362–65.

528. For example, see Uilleam MacDhùnlèibhe, 'Fios chun a' Bhàird', in Meek, *Caran an t-Saoghail*, 47ff.

529. 'Òran air Cor na Gàidhealtachd', in Meek, *Caran an t-Saoghail*, 342–47.

530. See the poetry of Dòmhnall Ruadh Chorùna, 'Òran Arras', 'Òran a' Phuinnsein', 'Tha mi duilich, cianail, duilich', in Black, *An Tuil*, 122–39.

531. 'Glac a' Bhàis', in Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh, *Nua-Bhàrdachd Ghàidhlig/Modern Scottish Gaelic Poems* (Edinburgh, 1976), 127, vv. 4–5.

532. See 'Bisearta', 'Truaighe na h-Eòrpa', 'Dleasnan nan Àirdean', in MacAmhlaigh, *Nua-Bhàrdachd Ghàidhlig*, 122–25, 137.

533. See especially MacAmhlaigh, *Nua-Bhàrdachd Ghàidhlig*: 'Gaoir na h-Eòrpa' and 'An Roghainn'.

534. See Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland* (Bonn, 1992), 380–81.

the technology associated with chariots was learned by the Romans from the Continental Celts and that war chariots were used by the prehistoric peoples of Scotland.

A burial chariot from c. 400 BC with iron chassis, axle and wheels was excavated in 2001 at Newbridge near Edinburgh:

A chariot like this would be the Ferrari of the Iron Age, and suggests someone important was buried there. This chariot is unique in Scotland and extremely rare in Britain. The best parallels are in France and Belgium, showing the wide-ranging contacts at the time.<sup>535</sup>



Reconstruction of the Newbridge chariot.  
© National Museums Scotland

The Newbridge chariot is one of the earliest examples of shrunk-on tyres, which may even be interpreted as a British invention.<sup>536</sup> As a burial rite, it can be compared with La Tène chariot burials:

Newbridge can be usefully compared and contrasted with the few other early La Tène chariot burials known outwith their normal territory ... Its burial rite speaks of contacts with and openness to Continental developments, especially of La Tène A ...<sup>537</sup>

At the battle of Mons Graupius, 83 AD, the Caledonians are reported by Tacitus as using chariots:

The intermediate space between both armies was filled with the charioteers and cavalry of the Britons, rushing to and fro in wild career, and traversing the plain with noise and tumult ... Their first impression struck a general

535. *Archaeo News* (27 March 2001): <<https://www.stonepages.com/news/archives/000113.html>>.

536. F. Hunter, 'Discussion', in Carter, Hunter, Smith et al., 'A 5th-century BC Iron Age Chariot from Newbridge, Edinburgh', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 76 (2010), 31–74.

537. Hunter, 'Discussion' and 'Interpreting the Newbridge Burial', in Carter, Hunter, Smith et al., 'A 5th-century BC Iron Age Chariot from Newbridge, Edinburgh', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 76.

terror, but then their career was soon checked by the inequalities of the ground, and the close-embodied ranks of the Romans.<sup>538</sup>

The existence of chariots can be inferred from a number of terrets (guides for the reins) found in Caledonia from the early centuries AD. Amongst other finds relating to horses, a brooch refashioned from what was probably a piece of horse harness of the late 8th or early 9th century is decorated with a triple spiral and could have come from Iona.<sup>539</sup> A discovery in 1829 of a probable chariot burial at Ballindalloch is known only from a letter to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.<sup>540</sup> No dating is possible, but this site in Morayshire may suggest a link with proto-Pictish or Pictish horse-drawn vehicles.

While there are no images of war chariots in the Scottish archaeological record, drawings of a now lost stone carving of a wheeled vehicle drawn by two horses shows a cart with an awning protecting two passengers.<sup>541</sup> The horses have braided tails, the driver sits in front of the covered area, the reins are knotted and the wheel has a dozen spokes. The stone came from Meigle in Perthshire and the horses appear to have the same gait as is shown on other Pictish stones (see III.3.a.).<sup>542</sup>

Chariots figure early in Gaelic culture as instruments of war. In the *Táin*, Cú Chulainn challenges Maeve's invading army to leap a fallen tree in their chariots:

Benaid Cú Chulainn omnai ara ciunn i suidiu, & scríbais ogom inna tóeb.  
Iss ed ro boí and, arná dechsad nech secce co ribuilsed eirr óen-charpait.

Fo-cerdat a puiplea i suidiu, & do-tíagat dia léimmim inna cairptib. Do-fuit trícha ech oc suidiu & bristir trícha carpat and.<sup>543</sup>

*Cú Chulainn fells a tree in front of them and wrote an ogam inscription on its side. It read: no one should pass by it, unless a warrior in his chariot would leap it. They set up their tents there and began jumping it in their chariots. Thirty horses fall and thirty chariots are broken.*

538. A. Murphy, 'The Life of Cnaeus Julius Agricola', in *The Works of Cornelius Tacitus* (London, 1830), 611–12.

539. L. Laing and J. Laing, *The Picts and the Scots* (Stroud, 1993), 53.

540. Hunter, 'Discussion', in Carter, Hunter, Smith et al., 'A 5th century BC Iron Age Chariot from Newbridge, Edinburgh', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 76.

541. A discussion of the various artists' work, as well as reproductions of the relevant drawings, is in J. N. Graham Ritchie, 'Recording Early Christian Monuments in Scotland', in D. Henry, ed., *The Worm, the Germ and the Thorn: Pictish and related studies presented to Isabel B. Henderson* (Forfar, 1977), 119–28.

542. Laing and Laing, *The Picts and the Scots*, 62–63. Also <<http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/30839/details/meigle/>>.

543. John Strachan, *Stories from the Táin* (Dublin, 1928; 2nd edn revised by Osborn Bergin), 26.



Chariot from Meigle, from J. Stuart, *Sculptured Stones of Scotland* Vol. 1 (1856), Plate LXXVI

*Carbad*, Old Gaelic *carpat*, is the Gaelic for a war chariot, the term probably referring to the wicker construction of parts of the vehicle. It became a loan-word in Latin as *carpentum* (wagon) and hence English 'carpenter'. English 'car' is also derived from Old Gaelic *carr*, meaning a cart or wagon. Any wheeled vehicle is advantaged by properly made roads, for which there is prehistoric and early Gaelic evidence (see III.3.d.). Moreover, Old Gaelic laws related to charioteers (who are ranked with the same privileges as their employers), chariot makers (who are freemen with an honour price of three *séts*, equal to one and a half milch cows) and chariots, all serve to indicate the importance of the chariot, for which a technical vocabulary survives.<sup>544</sup> Their significance lasted well into the Christian era, with an entry for 811 AD in the *Annals of Ulster*, with travelling Gaelic monks referring to them and saints being saved from chariot accidents by miracles.<sup>545</sup>

Recent cross-disciplinary work by Raimund Karl has convincingly demonstrated a close match between Iron Age and Early Medieval chariots. Karl refers only in passing to the discovery of the burial chariot at Newbridge in Edinburgh and makes no reference to any other Scottish evidence.<sup>546</sup> However, in the light of the evidence above of chariots in Scotland and the intimate connections between Scottish and Irish Gaelic culture, it is reasonable to apply Karl's deductions about the relationship between Iron Age and Early Medieval chariots to Scotland also.

544. F. Kelly, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin, 2000), 496–99.

545. Karl, 'Iron Age Chariots and Medieval Texts: A step too far in "breaking down the boundaries"?'; *e-Keltoi, Journal of Interdisciplinary Celtic Studies*, 7–8: <[www4.uwm.edu/celtic/ekeltoi/Vol.umes/Vol.5/5\\_1/karl\\_5\\_1.html](http://www4.uwm.edu/celtic/ekeltoi/Vol.umes/Vol.5/5_1/karl_5_1.html)>.

546. R. Karl, 'Iron Age Chariots and Medieval Texts: A step too far in "breaking down the boundaries"?'; *e-Keltoi, Journal of Interdisciplinary Celtic Studies* <[www4.uwm.edu/celtic/ekeltoi/Vol.umes/Vol.5/5\\_1/karl\\_5\\_1.html](http://www4.uwm.edu/celtic/ekeltoi/Vol.umes/Vol.5/5_1/karl_5_1.html)>.



Amongst weaponry associated with chariots were spears and these appear to have had a design element which allowed them to function as rattles.<sup>547</sup> Dio Cassius, writing in the 3rd century AD, describes the Caledonians as using a 'short spear with a bronze apple at the end of the shaft which is designed to make a loud noise when shaken and thus terrify the enemy'. A number of knobbed spearbutts would seem to authenticate Cassius. They have been found throughout Scotland: Traprain Law, Dunmore Vault on Tiree, Dunagoill by Inverurie in Aberdeenshire and the Broch of Harray in Orkney.<sup>548</sup> They also appear on later Pictish stones.<sup>549</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

At every level – the physical and ideological – martial pride is an essential key to Gaelic culture and weapons are the vehicle of its evocation and expression. One mention of a blue-bladed sword or of a gun that never misfired or of a bow string pulled back to the ear brings into mind a host of associated scenes and values. At the physical level, this pride is expressed in the costly materials and beautiful workmanship of weapons and armour, especially swords, targes and powder horns. At the other end of the scale, the crudest weapons – the axes – are not decorated and were the equipment of the poorest soldiers. When it comes to gravestones, praise poetry and satire, an equation (through metonymy) can be made between sword and owner, the quality of the weapon reflecting its owner. Effigies of warriors are always in full armour, and hunters too are depicted as if for battle, for armour and weapons constituted ostentatious wealth and portable property. For students of military history, change in sword style and armour can be traced on grave slabs and, in surviving examples, from single-hander to claymore and from padded aketon to plated metal.

Many weapons were named, both in reality and in the tales. This animism (which they share with boats and musical instruments) should probably be understood as reflecting the animism of the earth from which their metals came. In any case, their being made of iron gave them powers against the fairies who were believed not to possess this expertise. This scenario perhaps reflects the relative metallurgical skills of the Goidelic and the pre-Goidelic peoples of Ireland.

Despite the Acts of Proscription and the ignominies of clearance, the martial ethos remains strong in Gaelic society and so the armed warrior remains a ready metaphor for any struggle. MB & JP

547. B. Raftery, 'Knobbed Spearbutts of the Irish Iron Age', in B. G. Scott, ed., *Studies on Early Ireland: Essays in Honour of M.V. Duignan* (Dublin, 1982), 75–76.

548. B. Raftery, *La Tène in Ireland* (Marburg, 1984), 121.

549. Val Turner, 'The Mail Stone: An incised Pictish figure from Mail, Cunningsburgh, Shetland', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquities of Scotland* 124 (1994), 315–25, 321.

#### IV.2.e. BOATS<sup>550</sup>

[Types of Boat; Boats as Part of the Setting of Folksong and Folktale; Boats and the Panegyric Code; Heroic Boats in Folksong and Folktale; Witch Crafts; Boats in Early Monastic Texts and other Religious Contexts; Boats as Symbol and Metaphor; Modern Boat Iconography; Conclusion](#)

Là dhomh 's mi 'm beinn a' cheathaich,  
ruagadh nan caorach 's gam faighinn,  
's ann agam fhìn a bha 'n sealladh:  
gun deach bàta Chloinn Nìll seachad,  
a' bhirlinn dhubh 's i seòladh gu h-aighearach ...

*One day when I was on the misty mountain,  
chasing sheep and catching them,  
I saw a wonderful sight:  
the ship of Clan MacNeill passed by  
the black galley, sailing joyfully ...*

'Beinn a' Cheathaich'<sup>551</sup>

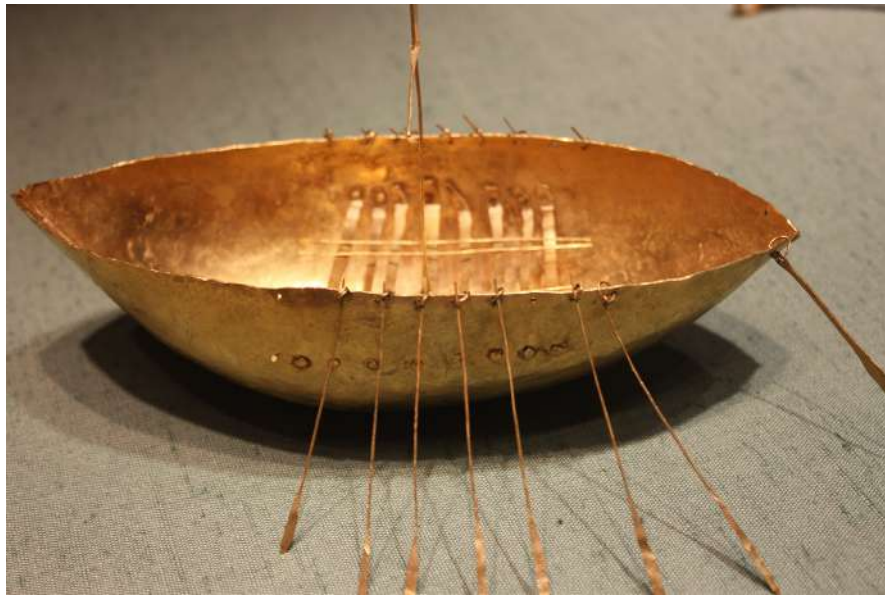
The joyous song quoted above was composed in the 17th century by the poetess Nic Iain Fhinn on watching MacNeill of Barra's galley approaching Kisimul Castle. Boats came to epitomise life and the heroic struggle. They sail between life and death and several blessings for their safe-keeping survive.<sup>552</sup> They also involve a great deal of expense, workmanship and manpower to sail them. Their preciousness is expressed by the 18 cm long, Iron-Age boat of gold found at Brighter in Northern Ireland (overpage) with its eight rowers' benches, mast, oars and detachable rudder. (It will be remembered it was 'a little boat of bronze with gilt oars' that bore Cú Chulainn's son from Scotland to Ireland.<sup>553</sup>)

550. A version of this section has been published as 'Boats in the Gaelic Imagination', in *Caindel Alban: Festschrift for Donald Meek*, ed. Nancy McGuire and Colm Ó Baoill, *Scottish Gaelic Studies* XXIV (Aberdeen, 2008).

551. From 'Beinn a' Cheathaich', in Anne Lorne Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2006), 133–34.

552. See Carswell's translation of Knox's liturgy, ed. R.L. Thomson, *Foirn na nUrrnuidheadh* (Edinburgh, 1970); Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* I, Nos. 118–21 (Edinburgh, 1906); and Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's 'Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill', in Thomson, *Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair: Selected Poems* (Edinburgh, 1996), 139–65, and Thomson, *An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry* (London, 1974), 139, 173 and 180.

553. Thomas Kinsella, *The Táin* (Oxford, 1970), 39. From 'Aided óenfir Aife': *Co n-acatar in mac cucu iarsind fairci & luingine chrédumai fo suidiu & rámada dí-órdai ina láim*.



Miniature gold boat (1st c. AD), found at Broighter.  
National Museum of Ireland, Dublin. Photo by Ardfern – Own work / [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)

#### TYPES OF BOAT

The Highlanders depended on boats for ferrying people to crannogs, castles, graveyards, monasteries and island retreats. Boats were necessary too for the transport of cattle, people and freight between islands, for pilgrimage, warfare and cattle reiving. It is, however, surprising how little they were required for fishing until the 18th and 19th centuries which had hitherto been achieved by catching fish in a weir, by net across a river or by spearing. I. F. Grant describes the three basic sorts of vessels first used in the Highlands: a sort of canoe made from a hollowed out log, the *curach* or coracle made from hide stretched over a wooden frame, used by monks of the early Middle Ages, but still in use in the 19th century on the River Spey; and the Highland galley made from overlapping wooden planks and bearing a woollen sail.

Galleys could move fast with three men to an oar and were slim enough to engage in warfare in narrow straits. They were at one time extremely numerous, Somerled possessing a fleet of 160 and Donald Dubh amassing 180 at Carrick Fergus in 1545, but during the 17th and 18th centuries the Crown destroyed many to limit the power of the chiefs.<sup>554</sup> Unfortunately, no wreck of a Highland galley has yet been found, but the ship on Alasdair Crotach's tomb at St Clement's,

554. I. F. Grant, *Highland Folk Ways* ([1961]; London, 1975), 250–55.

Rodel, gives a clear illustration of what the *long* or *birlinn* was like. Of this last example, Steer and Bannerman say:

The gudgeons and pintles by which the rudder is fastened to the hull, the traveller securing the yard to the mast, the robands on the yard-arm, the reef-points, the oar-ports and the extra stitching that binds the edge of the sail are all meticulously drawn and must have been copied from one of the galleys of MacLeod's fleet.<sup>555</sup>

Gavin Parsons has shown that Highland galleys were very similar in construction to the Norse ships of some seven centuries earlier, recovered from the burials at Gokstad and Oseberg in Norway. The hull was built up from overlapping planks or strakes, which rose steeply from the keel and curved outwards into a spacious hull. The strakes were nailed from the outside and clinched with a metal disc or rove on the inside. The main difference



Galley or *birlinn* (with unfurled sail) on Alasdair Crotach's tomb (1528), at St Clement's,  
Rodel © Crown Copyright: HES

555. Steer and Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture in the West Highlands* (Edinburgh, 1977), 182.



between the Norse and Highland galleys was that the former had a curved stern with a steering oar to starboard, while the stern of the latter was straight to accommodate a fixed rudder, clearly visible on many grave slabs. Indeed, a continuum of design can be traced from the Norse ships, through the Highland galleys, to traditional boat building to this day in Ness and Grimsay and in Scandinavia.<sup>556</sup> This type of boat remained in use in the Highlands long after it was replaced on the Continent and in England by the three-masted boat. Steer and Bannerman suggest this was not a mark of the relative poverty of the Highlands but of the convenience of a ship which could be rowed or sailed and which could navigate shallow as well as deep waters. One such boat was reported as still plying Loch Shiel in 1734.<sup>557</sup>

The galley is a common motif in West Highland monumental sculpture where it appears both heraldically on shields and as a motif on crosses and grave slabs (see IV.1.b).<sup>558</sup> The different schools of carving practised variations



Graffiti of galley on the church of Kilchattan, Luing. © Copyright M. J. Richardson and licensed for reuse under the Creative Commons Licence

556. Gavin Parsons, 'The Birlinn and the Bard', Chap. 10, in Camille Dressler and D. W. Stiùbhart, eds, *Alexander MacDonald, Bard of the Gaelic Enlightenment* (Isle of Lewis, 2012).

557. *Scottish Studies* V (1961), 96–99.

558. Steer and Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture*, 180–83.

in design, principally in whether the sail was depicted open or furled. The Kinrye school tends to depict galleys with furled sail and includes men, while the Oronsay school always shows the sail open. Stone carvings give no indication of the colour of sails, but the verbal record does. They are described as brown (*donn*) or tanned from bark (*cairtidh*),<sup>559</sup> or bright (*geal* or *bàn*) or *breac*, which may mean 'spotted' or 'multicoloured' in the Fenian lays, or may refer to the chequered appearance of reef points in the sail. The galley also appears as a motif in graffiti on the outside north wall of Kilchattan church on the island of Luing and on a rock near Creagan,<sup>560</sup> as decoration on a targe and on the stock of bagpipes from 1409.<sup>561</sup> As a heraldic emblem, Reginald, son of Somerled, is recorded as having adopted the design before 1207, the MacKinnons before 1400 – as evinced by the shield carried by the effigy of Bricius MacKinnon in Iona<sup>562</sup> – and the MacLeods during the 16th century.

As fishing developed so did other sorts of vessels, but it is hard to know exactly what form they took as the prints of them made by Slezer, Fitler and Daniel in the 17th and 19th centuries may have been influenced by depictions of galleys. Captain Washington's illustrations in his report of 1848 show fishing boats with straight stems and sloping sterns from which nets were lowered. After the opening of the Caledonian canal in 1822 and with the advent of east-coast fishermen coming for the herring, east-coast styles such as the Moray Firth Scaffie and Zulu are seen to influence boat building on the west coast, in the Loch Fyne Smack (overpage) and *Bàta Geàrrloch* of Lochbroom, with lug and jib sails, raked mast and deckhouse, frame of steamed ash and planks of larch.<sup>563</sup> Fishing boats were made locally until the 1920s, and a few continue to be so, by the Stewarts in Grimsay, North Uist, and in Ness and in projects in Plockton, 'Am Bàta',<sup>564</sup> and Bernisdale, Skye. In 1992, *Àileach*, a reconstruction of the Rodel galley, was made by the McDonald brothers of Moville in Donegal and sailed to the west coast of Scotland.<sup>565</sup>

559. E.g. 'Dheànainn sùgradh an àm dùsgaidh / ri maighdinn ùir nan siùil chairtidh', in Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 41; see also McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 33, ll. 14: *bhàrc na mbréideadh ndonn*.

560. *Inventory of Argyll* Vol. II (Edinburgh, 1975), 144 and 298, Figg. 132 and 248.

561. James Drummond, *Ancient Scottish Weapons* (Edinburgh and London, 1881), Plate I, Fig. 5 (targe) and Plate XLVII, Fig. 1 (bagpipe).

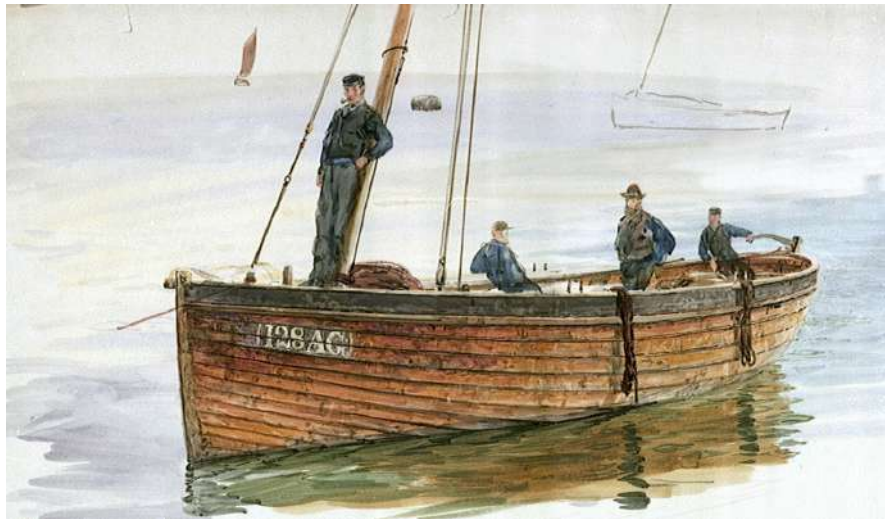
562. Steer and Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture*, 24.

563. Grant, *Highland Folk Ways*, 270–75. See <<http://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/12611.html>> for an illustration of a Loch Fyne skiff.

564. <<https://plocktonhighschool.wixsite.com/amploc/am-bata>>.

565. Wallace Clark, *The Lord of the Isles Voyage* (Naas, 1993).





*The Fisher Lass* (a Loch Fyne skiff). National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, Caird Collection

Edward Dwelly and Seòras Chaluum Sheòrais<sup>566</sup> have done great work in collecting the terms used by Gaelic speakers to describe parts of boats. Their meticulous work exemplifies how a culture names what it finds significant; it need hardly be said that now, in an age of fibreglass boats, most of these terms have become obsolete, and therefore these nomenclatures are all the more precious as an account of how boats were made. However, this section is concerned less with the construction of boats as with their place in the Gaelic imagination and iconography.

#### BOATS AS PART OF THE SETTING OF FOLKSONG AND FOLKTALE

Inevitably boats were part of the everyday life of an island people and their appearance in folksong perhaps needs no further comment. However, because the boat is sighted long before people meet and long after people part, it comes to be associated with the emotional wake. Boats are seen fetching Cairistiona, not for her wedding, but to take her for burial:

Chì mi luingeas air Caol Ìle,  
's iad ag iarraidh Cairistìona,  
Chan ann gus banais a dhèanamh  
ach a cur san talamh ìseal.

As the only means of communication between islands, the boat itself is a symbol of communication – potential, absent and achieved. The lack of white

<sup>566</sup> George MacLeod, *Muir is Tìr* (Steòrnabhagh, 2005).

sails on the horizon is an ominous sign for a girl awaiting her lover's or brother's return.

'S tric mo shùil air an fhàire on àirde ud shuas  
feuch am faic mi brèid glè gheal là grèine sa chuan.  
'Chan e caoidh Mhic Shìridh'

The story is told about Mòr Bhàn in St Kilda who was courted by a nobleman from Islay. When he approached the island to take her away, the islanders mistook his fleet for the pressgang and hid. The nobleman searched the island and finding no one, presumed plague had killed them all. When the islanders ventured out, Mòr Bhàn recognised the crest on her lover's receding sail and realised she had lost him for good.<sup>567</sup> Kenneth Macleod reports that the *Fearra-long* (a wild ship) was seen as an omen by women looking out for men at sea. If seen with a red light, it presaged a safe return; if seen with a white light, it denoted death. It was believed to uplift mourners and take them to keep those lost at sea.<sup>568</sup>

#### BOATS AND THE PANEGYRIC CODE

For the clans of the western seaboard, seafaring episodes become worked into the panegyric code in a way that is not generally true of Irish praise poetry. An early and spirited example of the heroism of seafaring is the lament 'An Iorram Daraich' (The Oak Ship's Oar Song). In this lament to Eòin MacDhòmhnaill, killed in battle in 1585, seafaring is the dominant vehicle for expressing the subject's heroic qualities, hunting and plundering of cattle being mentioned only briefly. His control of the crew and the ship in the most demanding conditions gives ample scope to the poetess to extol his masculinity. He is at the helm quaffing wine with the ship's rigging tested to the utmost:

M' eudail is m' euraig is m' ulaidh  
Luchd nan leadan dubh' is donna  
Dhèanadh an fhairge a phronnadh,  
Dhèanadh a darach a sgoladh,  
'S a dh'òladh fion dearg na thonnann,  
Thogadh creach bhàrr motach Thomman.

*My treasure, my ransom and riches  
are the people of the black and brown ringlets  
who'd give the sea a good thrashing*

<sup>567</sup> Calum MacFhearghais, *Hiort far na Laigh a' Ghrian* (Steòrnabhagh, 1995).

<sup>568</sup> Coinneach MacLeòid, 'Duatharachd na Mara', in William. J. Watson, *Rosg Gàidhlig: Specimens of Gaelic prose* (2nd edn, Glasgow, 1929), 28–29.

who'd give her timbers a good rinsing,  
and drink red wine in its billows,  
and lift plunder from the moss of Tomman.<sup>569</sup>

There are many other examples. Maighread nighean Lachlainn describes Sir Iain MacLean of Duart as *Cuilean leòmhann nan long siùbhhlach* (the lion cub of the swift vessels).<sup>570</sup> Iain Lom, recounting a list of allies, includes 'Mac Mhic Ailein from over the sea / with his swift lean ships of oak'.<sup>571</sup> In praising John of Moidart, he contrasts his white sails with the gloomy sea:

Iain Mùideartaich nan seòl soilleir,  
Sheòladh an cuan ri là doilleir.<sup>572</sup>

In 'Òran do Dhòmhnall Gorm Òg', a poem in praise of Dhòmhnall Gorm of Sleat, Iain Lom turns from a description of (i) the chief's weapons to (ii) a sailing episode with a change of rhythm from upbeat to downbeat which reflects the oar strokes:

(i)	(ii)
A Dhòmhnail an Dùin, Mhic Ghilleasbaig nan tùr Chaidh t' eineach 's do chliù far chàch	Long ga seòladh, Crith air sgòdaibh, Stiùirbheirt sheòlta theann.

The sailing episode then leads to the drinking episode in a uniquely organic manner:

Creach ga sròiceadh,  
Feachd na tòrachd,  
'S fir fo leòn nan arm.  
Long ga seòladh,  
Crith air sgòdaibh,  
Stiùirbheirt sheòlta theann.  
Beucaich mara  
A' leum ri daraich,  
Sùigh gan sgaradh teann.  
Cha b' i an fhàsag  
Ri sruth tràghaidh

569. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire* (Edinburgh, 2007), No. 79, 456.

570. Maighread nighean Lachlainn, in Colm Ó Baoill and Meg Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach* (Edinburgh, 1994), 212.

571. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, 165.

572. Iain Lom, 'Blàr Inbhir Lòchaidh', in Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, No. XX.

'S muir na ghàir fo ceann.  
Thig loingear le gaoith  
Gu baile nan laoch  
Gad a bhitheadh na caoiltean garbh,  
Gu talla nam pìos  
Far am faramaich' fion,  
Far am falaichear mìle crann.

*Cattle plundered, | a host pursuing, | and men wounded by arms.  
A ship sailing, | sheets quaking, | helm straining, set on course.  
Roaring of the ocean, | rushing at her timbers, | billows being cloven through.  
She was no pea-pod | against the ebb-tide, | sea booming beneath her bows.  
With a fair wind a fleet | comes to the home of the youths | even though the  
narrows were rough, | to the hall of cups | where wine-quaffing makes din, |  
where a thousand bets are concealed.*<sup>573</sup>

The sailing episode in another of Iain Lom's songs, 'Iorram do Bhàta Mhic Dhòmhnail' (An Oar-Song for Sir James MacDonald's Galley),<sup>574</sup> extends to fourteen verses and was probably the model for Mac Mhaighstir's Alasdair's 'Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill'. Iain Lom describes the ship, *An Dubh-Chnòideartach* (The Black one of Knoydart) and her crew of Sir James' retainers *in extremis*. The oak ship is sailing from Sleat in Skye to Uist, under sail and rowed by powerful, shouting men; she is capacious, high-bowed, watertight and well riveted. She is no 'rusted, bulging tub', no 'ramshackle old crate'; her crew 'no fragile pygmies':

Cha bu brùchag air meirg i ...  
Cha bu chrannlach air muir i ...  
Cha b' iad na lucharmainn mheanbha.

Technical words abound for different parts of the ship (*brèid, tonnag, èarrach, èarrlainn, cupaill*), but the focus is on making her an icon of the heroic ethos. Action and intention are perfectly united as with the deft, instinctive movements of a warrior or an animal.

A battle incitement by Artúr Dall Mac Gurcaigh from the early part of the 14th century describes a fleet of ships making ready for a sea battle in an attempt by Eoin MacSuibhne of Knapdale to retake Castle Sween from the Stewarts of Menteith. We see the same pride in the beauty and quality of the ships' armoury as in any description of a warrior's battledress:

573. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, No. XIX.

574. Annie MacKenzie, *Òrain Iain Luim* (Edinburgh: Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 1964), 102ff.

Do chlaidhmhibh go n-ór is déada  
eagar bhárc na mbréideadh ndonn;  
i n-arradh cliath do ghaithibh gealgha,  
sgiath ré fraithghibh leabhra long.

Ar sgáth sgiath ar scúdaibh breaca,  
brugh starrach corcra cloch n-óir;  
bronnadh ad gcaomh is coiléar  
ar taobh na slat roighéar róimh.

Gaithe gorma i ngualnaibh luathbhárc,  
long 'gá líonadh i n-arradh trácht;  
cliath theann dhaingeann do cholgaibh,  
foireann sgiath ré bordaibh bárc.

'Dál Chabhlaigh ar Chaistéal Suibhne'

*The brown-sailed barques are furnished  
with swords of ivory and gold;  
alongside a rank of bright spear-points  
shields are attached to the ships' sides.*

*Projecting behind shields on painted cutters,  
a scarlet deck-house with jewels of gold;  
fair helmets and neck-pieces festooning  
the sharp jutting yard-arms' sides.*

*Blue spears in the swift barques' shoulders,  
a longship being loaded beside the shore;  
a dense fence of blades and a rank of shields  
are being fixed to the planks of the barques.*

*'A Meeting of a Fleet against the Castle of Suibhne'<sup>575</sup>*

Battling against an angry sea, the fleet carries ladies as well as warriors. It is tempting to read the poem as evidence of ships with deckhouses. Donald Meek however suggests that the depiction of the boats may not be entirely realistic, the poet drawing on the Norse motif of departing warships.<sup>576</sup> Whether realistic or not, the poet's intention is clear: to let the ships display the mettle and confidence of their owners through the description of weapons and the sumptuous decoration of the deckhouses in red, gold and jewels.

575. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanair na Sracaire/The Song-book of the Pillagers* (Edinburgh, 2007), No. 33.

576. Donald E. Meek, 'Ships and Boats in the Gaelic Literary Record, 1200–1700', paper given to the Scottish Medievalists' conference, Musselburgh (2009): <<https://meekwrite.blogspot.com/2013/03/maritime-studies-ships-and-boats-in.html>>.

The Viking ships had figureheads on the stem posts, but the Highland galleys appear to have borne both figureheads and pennants or vanes. One of the three ships in the graffiti on the church in Luing has a figurehead – perhaps of a deer – as do some of the Iona galleys. The literary record makes no mention of figureheads, but there are references to flags and banners:

Badhbh Shuibhne is a threóir toghtha,  
duille shróill chorcra ós gach crann.

*Suibhne's raven, with its power enabled,  
a red satin pennant on every mast.<sup>577</sup>*

Steer and Bannerman suggest that the pronged ends to the posts at the prow and stern of the Rodel Galley might have been used as crutches for the masts or fixtures for pennants, vanes or figureheads. The first suggestion may be borne out by the same poem:

a gcroinn óir ar bhordaibh aca  
ré h-ardach dóibh i gcarraibh cuain.

*their golden masts resting on crutches,  
ready to be raised in swirling seas.<sup>578</sup>*

#### HEROIC BOATS IN FOLKSONG AND FOLKTALE

The heroic galleys of panegyric are outshone by those imaginary boats of folksong and folktale. Dòmhnall Gorm's nurse imagines the boat her noble charge will have in adulthood with rudder and masts of gold and a well of wine. 'At whatever port he calls in Scotland, there will be feasting, mirth, sporting and laughter, beatings with shoes and blisters on palms':

Na, cò long ud steach air an eirthir?' ...  
Ta long Dhòmhnail Òig, mo leanabh-sa ann:  
Tha stiùir oirre is dà chrann eile dheth  
Tha tobar fiona anns an deireadh aic'  
'S tobar fionuisge sa cheann eile dhith  
Ga b' e cala a bheil thu an Albainn  
Gum bi mire ann, cluichd is gàire,  
Bualadh bhròg is leòis air deàrnaibh ...  
'Tàladh Dhòmhnail Ghuirm'<sup>579</sup>

577. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanair na Sracaire*, No. 33.

578. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanair na Sracaire*, No. 33, ll.47–48.

579. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, No. VIII.



While the Highland galleys resembled the Viking ships in having a single mast, the extravagance of folksong allows them two or three masts. The galley praised in *An Duanag Ullamh* 'The Finished Verses', belonging to Cailean Malach, third earl of Argyll (d.1529), appears to have had three sails,<sup>580</sup> while the boat belonging to Mac Iarla nam Bratach Bàna had two:

Bha stiùir òir oirr' is dà chrann airgid ...  
's cupla de shioda na Gailmhinn.

*She had a golden rudder and two masts of silver ...  
and ropes of silk from Galway.*<sup>581</sup>

In Fenian tales, seafaring runs picture the boat with spotted or speckled sails, a high mast where birds shelter, in a fierce wind that is described as 'gentle' despite its uprooting trees, the boat cleaving the ocean with a stem that could cut through a grain or stalk of oats, exposing all manner of sea creatures eating each other below. Fionn simultaneously attends the boat in the stern, prow and middle. In beaching runs the boat is dragged up the shore seven times its own length and upturned over the oars, masts and sails so no one can launch it.<sup>582</sup> Such are the building blocks of oral composition, established in the tradition and potent with association.

#### WITCH CRAFTS

While boats were normally praised as an icon of heroism as seen above, there are two extraordinary satires of boats in the Book of the Dean of Lismore (1513–1536), 'Créad í an long-sa ar Loch Inse' (What ship is this on Loch Inch?) and 'Tánaig long air Loch Raithneach' (A ship has come on Loch Rannoch), by the bard MacIntyre.<sup>583</sup> The ship on Loch Inch is depicted in bad weather; she is made not of wood but of leather with beetle wings for boards; she is badly riveted, unseaworthy and has no anchors. She is crewed by a large body of drunken, broad-rumped, singing women. The poet's verdict is that she should be driven out of the loch into the sea. In the second poem, the ship on Loch Rannoch is named as *Long na ndrochbhan* (the ship of evil women) and is purported to

<sup>580</sup>. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 66.

<sup>581</sup>. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 6. See also 'Tàladh Dhòmhnail Ghuirn' (*gu bheil stiùir òir oirr' | trì chruinn sheilich* 'she has a golden rudder and three masts of willow'), 11.

<sup>582</sup>. John Gregorson Campbell, *Waijs and Strays of the Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV (London, 1894), 140, 177, 244 (seafaring runs); 176, 212, 213 (boat-beaching runs).

<sup>583</sup>. W. J. Watson, ed., *Scottish Verse from the Book of the Dean of Lismore* (Edinburgh: SGTS, 1937), 218 and 224ff.

belong to MacCailéin, chief of clan Campbell. While a boat of leather is not inconceivable, this second boat is composed of unlikely materials: planks of bramble leaves, rivets of bramble thorns, stringers of rushes, cables of barley husks etc. The crew of naked women with dyed palms shamelessly expose themselves on the mast. The boat is recognised as being harmful and hostile (*urchoideach, ionnsaightheach*), her crew as belonging to Lucifer (v. 17). Despite the impossible construction of the boat, the smallness of the crew and the fierceness of the storm, she is making speedy and pernicious progress. This is clearly a supernatural boat crewed by witches. It brings to mind traditional tales of witches going to sea in sieves<sup>584</sup> or eggshells,<sup>585</sup> who catch unnatural amounts of fish by unnatural means, e.g. 'An Tàilleir agus na Mnàthan Iasgaich' (The Tailor and the Fishing Wives), told by Pàdruig Moireasdan. The satires fit well with the Book of the Dean of Lismore's theme of misogyny and may owe something to the international motif of boat satires which appears in Sebastian Brandt's *Das Narren Schyff* of 1494 and which has been shown to have influenced other work in Gaelic, such as *Pairlement Chloinne Tomáis*.

Other traditional tales of witchcraft speak of the uneasy relationship perceived between women and boats: Lewis witches kept a Heisgeir ship stormbound in port;<sup>586</sup> MacLean of Duart's daughter was able to will a passing ship onto the rocks, but, unable to save it, was burnt by her father when he thus understood she was being educated in the Black Art;<sup>587</sup> the maids in waiting of a future bride, fearing redundancy, flew out as ravens to the approaching ship in an attempt to drown the bridegroom, but failed because of the presence of a MacMhuirich on board also skilled in the Black Art;<sup>588</sup> still in the twentieth century, fishermen were known to return home if they met a red-haired woman on their way to the boats.

#### BOATS IN EARLY MONASTIC TEXTS AND OTHER RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS

Adomnán wrote the Life of St Columba in Latin about 697 to mark the hundredth anniversary of the saint's death and to boost his reputation tarnished by his

<sup>584</sup>. Pàdruig Moireasdan, *Ugam agus Bhuam* (Steòrnabhagh, 1977); an English version in A. J. Bruford and MacDonald, *Scottish Traditional Tales* (Edinburgh, 1994).

<sup>585</sup>. John Gregorson Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, ed. by R. Black (Edinburgh, 2005), 180.

<sup>586</sup>. 'The Three Knots', in A. J. Bruford and MacDonald, *Scottish Traditional Tales* (Edinburgh, 1994), No. 83a.

<sup>587</sup>. 'Duart's Daughter', in Bruford and MacDonald, *Scottish Traditional Tales*, No. 82.

<sup>588</sup>. 'Dark Lachlan and the Witches', in Bruford and MacDonald, *Scottish Traditional Tales*, No. 84.

out-moded dating of Easter.<sup>589</sup> Passing references to boats and voyaging are numerous, as Colum Cille's monastery was on an island. Boats of different size and form emerge but their description is only incidental to Adomnán's main purpose of demonstrating the powers of Colum Cille. The boat becomes a visible proof of his ability to calm the waves, as did Christ.

The boat in which Colum Cille travelled up Loch Ness to see King Bridei had a single sail (Book II, 34). Despite the crew's hesitation, the saint causes this boat to sail at 'a marvellous speed' into the contrary wind raised by the wizard Broichan, thereby demonstrating the superior force of Christian over pagan powers. The boat in which Cormac Ua Liatháin sailed fourteen days 'beyond the reach of human exploration' to a place 'from which they might not be able to return' had a keel and was covered in a skin which was in danger of being pierced by a plague of 'loathsome little creatures', which also encumbered the oars (II, 42). Colum Cille perceives the danger from Iona and causes the wind to blow from the north and bring them home.<sup>590</sup>

Adomnán's description of Cormac Ua Liatháin's three attempts to find a 'place of retreat in the ocean' (I, 6 and II, 42) is our earliest account of *peregrinatio pro Christo*, the typically Celtic monastic practice of penance by leaving home and kin, in imitation of Abraham following God's command to leave the home of his fathers (Genesis 12:1). The theme of the clerical sea pilgrimage became formalised in the literary genre of the *Immram*, 8th-century accounts of events purporting to have taken place in the 6th and 7th centuries. A certain amount of detail about seafaring and the construction of boats can be gleaned from these texts. The wicker-framed curragh covered in three bull hides is a common motif. In *Iomramh Churraig Húa gCorra*, it serves to show how much the chance to gain salvation through pilgrimage was valued, as this is the price the wright asks for his labours:

As i comuirli doronsat, aroili saer ba cara doib boi isin tir do tabuirt cucu, 7 curach trecodhlaidi do denumh doib. Doronad in curach cur'bo hurrlumh treabardaingin he. Is e dona luach roiarrustar in saer ar denumh in curuigh, a leagan fein leo isin curuch.

'Iomramh Churraig Húa gCorra', §33

589. Adomnán of Iona, *Life of St Columba*, transl. by Richard Sharpe (Harmondsworth, 1995).

590. Adomnán, in *Life of St Columba*, also describes Colum Cille turning a contrary wind so that twelve small boats and curraghs being rowed together, dragging oak timbers to Iona for building and repairs, could return under sail (II, 45). He forces another boat leaving Derry for 'Britain' back into port, so the sailors could pick up Librán, a monk to whom they had refused passage. They are then rewarded with a favourable wind (II, 39).

*This is the resolve [the Húi Corra] formed: to bring to them a certain wright who was a friend of theirs and who was in that country and to build for them a three-skinned boat. The boat was built so it was ready, strong and staunch. This is the price which the wright asked for building it: that he himself should be allowed with them in the boat.*<sup>591</sup>

Another motif is the lowering of the sail or the shipping of the oars as the crew relinquish any control over their boat and throw themselves fully on God's mercy:

Lottur iarum ina curuch 7 rogabsat ar imrumh, 7 ro-batur 'ga imradh cia leth noraghdais. 'An leth a mbera in gaeth sinn,' ar an t-eascab. Iarsin nos-tocbat na ramhada cucu isin curuch, 7 nos-idhbratar iat fein do Dia.

'Iomramh Churraig Húa gCorra', §42

*Then they went on board their boat and began to row, and they were thinking whither should they go. 'Withersoever the wind shall take us,' says the bishop. Thereafter they shipped their oars and offered themselves to God.*<sup>592</sup>

Leaving the outcome of a voyage to God was recommended by Adomnán in his tract *Cáin Adomnáin* as a way of deciding difficult judgements such as kin-slaying or murders committed by women. God would decide whether the castaway (*muircoirthe*) was to be lost at sea or to be washed up on a foreign or familiar shore.<sup>593</sup> The motif also occurs in *Imrum Snedhghusa ocus Mic Ríagla* (The Voyage of Snedgus and Mac Ríagla), when Colum Cille advises the brother of a murdered Irish king to cast the perpetrators of the crime on the sea rather than burn them alive. The men survive to do sufficient penance to gain salvation.

The 8th-century Kilnaruane pillar stone in Bantry, Co. Cork, has a rare depiction on its south-east face of a curragh being rowed by four men, with a fifth in the helm manipulating a steering oar (overpage). The stem is surmounted by a cross and the boat is surrounded by three further crosses as it rises obliquely.<sup>594</sup>

591. Whitley Stokes, 'The Voyage of the Húi Corra', *Revue Celtique* XIV (1893).

592. Stokes, 'The Voyage of the Húi Corra', *Revue Celtique* XIV (1893); see also 'Imrum Snedhghusa ocus Mic Ríagla', *Revue Celtique* IX (1888), §14, 15–25: *Lecam ar n-imrum do Dia, 7 tabram ar rama inar nói*. (Let us leave our voyage to God, and let us put our oars into our boat.)

593. Clancy, 'Subversion at Sea', in Jonathan Wooding, ed., *The Otherworld Voyage* (Dublin, 2000).

594. Harbison, *Guide to the National Monuments of Ireland* (Dublin, 1970), 57, No. 436 and OS 1/2" 24. National Grid Reference: V 98 48.



Kilnaruan pillar stone, Bantry, Co. Cork (8th c.) (rotated 90° clockwise). Image © Anthony Weir/Tom FourWinds: <<http://www.irishmegaliths.org.uk/crosspillars2.htm>>

The image may represent Christ stilling the waves or it may represent five monks bound for heaven through the practice of *peregrinatio pro Christo*.

In the *Life of St Columba*, Adomnan attributes Cormac's failure to find an island retreat to the inclusion among his crew of a man who had left against his abbot's wishes (I, 6). The correct constitution of the crew becomes a motif not only in the *Immrama*, where a ship must be rid of supernumeraries before her journey can succeed, but also in taboos against women on board ship that persist to the twentieth century.

In these early texts, the boat constitutes a means of penance and hence of salvation and a sign of reconciliation to God's will, whether in the direction and outcome of a penitential voyage or in the fate of a castaway. In contrast to the war chariots (see IV.2.d.), the boat came to stand for the religious life. Beccán of Rum praises his contemporary, Colum Cille, for his love of ships that allows him to go into exile, abandoning chariots, falsehood and 'fame's steel bindings'. Then, in an extraordinary metaphor, Beccán calls him 'a ship of treasure, a sea of knowledge' – *Ba bárc moíne / ba muir n-eccnai*.<sup>595</sup>

The metaphor of the boat bearing man over the sea of life to the distant shore of heaven is common in the large body of Classical Gaelic religious verse from Ireland from around 1200 to 1650. It is highly probable that such verse was informed by the international preaching repertoire whose motifs would have been known throughout the Gaelic world. The sea may be calm or choppy, representing either the abundance of Christ's grace or His anger, an ambiguity made much of in this period. Devils in the form of sea monsters aim to upset the boat, but help may be sought in the physical presence of Mary or Christ

595. 'Tiughraind Bhécáin', in Clancy and Markús, *Iona: Poems from a Celtic Monastery* (Edinburgh, 1994), 157–60:

*he abandoned chariots, loved ships, foe to falsehood  
sun-like exile, sailing, he left fame's steel bindings.*

in the boat. The poets bring various aspects of the scheme of redemption into the metaphor. The boat may be sailing in the sea of Christ's blood, which both enables the boat to cross to heaven and threatens to swamp it. Various saints can assist, Mary often taking the helm, but the boat is manned by an unruly crew of vices, the five senses and the body. The boat may be Christ's heart itself, bearing mankind through love over the sea of God's justified anger; the lance becomes the mast and Christ's wounded arms the oars.<sup>596</sup> Christ has set up a net of love to capture our boat which should cleave to the coast of Mary.<sup>597</sup> Mary may be present sitting at the helm, or she may constitute the sails or mast or the boat itself which bears us to the afterlife. The boat may be sailing on the floodtide of her grace; she is the net erected to catch mankind. Just as a boat preserves life on the sea while permitting travel, these metaphors point to supernatural powers which will save the immortal soul and let it travel to heaven. It would be strange if the part played by penance in the ocean in the early church had not influenced this extended metaphor.

A continuation of some of these images is to be noted in *Carmina Gadelica*. 'Beannachadh Cuain / Ocean Blessing' is a request for a blessing both for a specific voyage (v. 1) and for the voyage of life, 'that we may reach the land of glory' (v. 2). In these poems, as in Classical Gaelic poetry, God or the saints are invoked as a physical presence in the boat:

Cò iad air failm mo stiùir ...  
Peadail, Pàl is Eoin mo Rùin ...  
Crìosda na shuidhe air mo stiùir,  
Dèanamh iùil dhan ghaoith a deas.

*Who are they on the tiller of my helm ...,  
Peter, Paul and John the Beloved;  
Christ is sitting on my helm  
guiding us into the wind from the south.*<sup>598</sup>

The boat is presented atomistically, a blessing sought for each named part (as are the different components of houses or looms in similar prayers beseeching a blessing for daily activities).<sup>599</sup> This tendency for enumeration is long-lived in the Gaelic tradition, recalling early prayers for protection such as St Patrick's

596. Lambert McKenna, *Dán Dé* (Dublin, 1922), 40, 22; and *Aithdhioghlum Dána* (Dublin 1939 and 1940), 63, 35.

597. Meg Bateman, 'The Themes and Images of Classical Gaelic Religious Poetry', unpublished PhD thesis (Aberdeen, 1990), Sections 1.18 and 4.2.1.

598. 'Riaghlaire nan Sian', in Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* I, 330.

599. Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* 1 (Edinburgh, 1928), 231–333.



*Lorica*.<sup>600</sup> Here, each part of the boat is commended for safe-keeping through being named:

Beannaich ar sgioba agus bàt,  
Beannaich gach acair agus ràmh,  
Gach stadh is tarruinn agus ràc,  
Ar siùil-mòra ri crainn àrd  
Cùm, a Rìgh nan dùl, nan àit ...

*Bless our boatmen and our boat | Bless our anchors and our oars, | Each stay and halyard and traveller | Keep in their place, O God of the elements, | Our mainsails attached to our tall masts.*<sup>601</sup>

In the 19th century, Fr Allan MacDonald worked the symbol of the ship of the Church into a waulking song, 'An Eaglais'.<sup>602</sup> The wright is Christ, the timbers humility, the helmsman Peter. The ship of the Church (a symbol as old as the 6th century, when Columbanus used it in correspondence with the Pope) stands in contradistinction to all other ships, for this ship cannot be blighted by the weevils of pride that sink worldly ships like the fallen angels.

#### BOATS AS SYMBOL AND METAPHOR

Metaphor is not common in Gaelic (as discussed in [II.2.d.](#)), but the ship cannot resist it as we saw above in Beccán's praise of Colum Cille as a 'ship of treasure'. Iain Lom describes Charles II, after Cromwell's rise to power, being 'like a ship on the top of the ocean / without rudder or oar or port'.<sup>603</sup> In the context of the massacre of Glencoe, he uses the foundering ship again as a metaphor for the destruction of the clan after the loss of its leaders:

Leum an stiùir far a claginn  
Le muir sùigh 's gun sinn achainteach dhò,  
Dh'fhalbh na croinn 's na buill bheairte  
Is leig sinn ualach na slaite air an sgòd.<sup>604</sup>

*The rudder has leapt from its socket | in a high sea but not at our request, |*

600. See John Carey, 'Two *Loricae*', *King of Mysteries* (Dublin, 2000).

601. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* I, 324–26.

602. Donald Meek, *Caran an t-Saoghail* (Edinburgh, 2003), 288.

603. 'Òran cumhaidh air cor na rìoghachd', in Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, No. XXVI, 130, v.7: 'like a ship on the top of the ocean / without rudder or oar or port'.

604. 'Murt Ghlinne Comhann', by Am Bàrd Mucanach, in *Co'-Chruinneachadh de dh'Orain agus de Luinneagaibh Thaghte Ghae'lach* (Edinburgh, 1813), 111.

*the masts have gone and the halyards | and the boom we let fall against the sail.*

Murchadh Mòr mac mhic Mhurchaidh (d. 1689) has two poems of sustained boat metaphor. 'Torram na Sgiobaireachd' (Song of Seafaring) – also known as 'An Làir Dhonn' (The Brown Mare) – favourably contrasts the exhilaration of sailing with the inconvenience of travel by horseback. 'Is Garbh a-nochd an Oidhche rim Thaobh' (Rough is the Night Without) makes comparisons between sailing and marriage.<sup>605</sup> The boat, symbolised by the mare in the first poem, becomes the symbol for the wife in the second.

In the first poem, Murchadh sees his ship as a mare who needed no mash or spurs to speed him to a place of hunting.

Siod i agam mo shaoidh,  
'S i na ruith air a' ghaoith  
Gun bhioraibh ri taoibh 's i folbh.<sup>606</sup>

He describes the workmanship of the vessel (the tightness of her planks and riveting) and her 'cry under sail' – *a gàir fo sheòl*. She is a yew tree and a dense pine – *iùbhrach shochrach a' chuain ... giuthas dosrach nam buadh fo sheòl* – the density of branches now becoming the density of masts. The trees from which boats were made (oak, yew and pine) were all classified among the noble trees and an object made from these trees would inherit their virtues even when reduced to timbers. (The motif of the animation of the tree extending to its timbers also occurs in Keating's tale of Labhruidh Loingseach, when a harp made of a willow sings out the secret that had been disclosed to the tree.<sup>607</sup>)

Murchadh Mòr is said to have composed the second poem, when, as a widower, he was urged to marry again. He is alone on a rough night while everyone else's ships are under sail. The ship he once sailed takes on womanly characteristics: she was shapely, gentle, without haughtiness, with a foam circlet in her mast.

'S minic a shiùbhlainn an sàl  
lem iùbhraich bhig bhàin gun ghaoth.<sup>608</sup>

605. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, Nos. XXX and XXXI.

606. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, No. XXX.

607. Geoffrey Keating, *Stories from Keating's History of Ireland*, ed. Osborn Bergin (Dublin, 1930).

608. Ó Baoill and Bateman, *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, No. XXXI.

*Often did I sail the sea  
without wind with my fair little boat of yew.*

Though he is lonely, he rejects the acquisition of another boat which might be long-sheeted and unstable, unfit for himself and a crew of three. In his bereavement, his heart takes on the qualities of the heaving sea outside. In contrast to the analytic structure of panegyric poetry, this poem is extraordinary in its sustained metaphor of sailing and its implied eroticism.

When Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair began his long poem 'Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill' in 1751, describing a voyage from South Uist to Carrickfergus, the galley he describes – and the bows and arrows, chain mail and equipment of the crew – had already become an anachronism. Ronald Black has suggested that the ship's survival of the storm through the skill of the crew is an allegory of the survival of Gaelic culture through the devastating military and cultural upheavals of the '45.<sup>609</sup> The ship returns to Ireland as if to draw strength from the place of origin of the Gaels, setting out auspiciously on the 1st of February, the beginning of spring in the Celtic calendar. Though the sailors are armed, there is no battle: they are symbolic of the battle with the elements. The poem gives a supreme example of the galley as a heroic symbol of skill, strength, co-operation and sacrifice. Equally clear is the animism the poet lends the ship as she treads the ocean, whinnying, laughing and groaning, and throws her roves *in extremis* and is relieved, like a horse, by the slackening of her tackle.<sup>610</sup> Sorley Maclean's poem 'Am Bàta Dubh' (The Black Ship)<sup>611</sup> finds the Highland boat as perfect and as consummate a symbol as any Homeric boat. The poem is pre-eminently a poet's sizing up of a symbol: in the boat, form and function are effortlessly one – without the agony of spirit that being human entails. Boats appear throughout his verse as a glitter of sails – *lainnir sheòl air linne ghrianaich* – in the poem 'Camhanaich' (Dawn),<sup>612</sup> as they did to Iain Lom, but their beauty belongs to the girl; it is she who articulates all beauty. Sorley refers to the Cuillin both as an inverted boat and as a boat on the horizon.<sup>613</sup> The collocation between boat and hill is inherent in the language, where *druim* means 'keel' or 'ridge', as is seen in the toponym, *Druim nan Ràmh* 'the ridge

609. Black, *An Lasair: Anthology of 18th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse* (Edinburgh, 2001), 469–74.

610. Many other songs personify boats as some sort of animal, reinforced no doubt by animal-like terminology such as *sròn*, *gualann*, *druim*, *beul* (nose, shoulder, back, mouth), in contrast to the English boat-specific terms prow, bend in the bow, keel, gunwale.

611. Sorley MacLean, *O Choille gu Bearraidh/From Wood to Ridge* (London, 1989), 38.

612. MacLean, *O Choille gu Bearraidh*, 156.

613. See, for example, MacLean's poem 'Uamha 'n Òir'.

or keel of the oars' in the Cuillin, where three strong oblique lines suggest oars propped up against an upturned boat. He also makes reference to *Long nan Daoine* 'the Ship of the People' in the poems 'Gaoir na h-Eòrpa' (The Cry of Europe) and 'An Cuilthionn' (The Cuillin, Part VI). This was a byname for the *William*, chartered by a MacDonald and MacLeod chief in 1739 to kidnap their own people to sell them as indentured servants in North Carolina. She symbolises man's exploitation of man, against which Sorley sets the expansive experience of love in the first poem and the indomitable human spirit in the second.

'Fo Sheòl'<sup>614</sup> is an exhilarated love poem. Sailing is the objective correlative for being effortlessly engaged with the beloved. MacLean wishes the journey were endless. The poem resonates with the feelings about boats of older Gaelic poems. The sea laughing under the prow and the joy of sailing recall many 17th-century praise poems, while the presence of the girl recalls Murchadh Mòr. Sorley is ennobled by this pursuit; action and thought are one. He is in triumphant control of the boat, with one hand on the tiller and the other wound round the sheet, while his heart is in the control of the girl, held by her rope of hair. The poem is simultaneously modern and traditional. The criss-crossing of reference and referent may be modern, but the boat in her physical detailing and in her resonances is traditionally Gaelic.

MacLean's poem 'An Saothach' (The Ship)<sup>615</sup> evokes the once glorious ship of the Gaelic hegemony, now lying on her side, wrecked and rotting. In the poet's view, Christianity, the exploitation of the 'English' empire, Calvinism and landlordism have all contributed to her downfall. Now their hold is weakening on her, but the crew that the poet longs for, that would take the ship to sea again, is nowhere to be seen. The red dawn in the final line suggests that Marxism might be the new order that would galvanise the Gaels to take their ship to sea again. Whatever the faults of a too systematic symbolism, the poem resonates both with the proud image of the traditional galley in full sail and with the exquisite pain of the folksong in MacLean's hope for a ship that does not exist, and this one, perhaps uniquely, is described as yellow rather than the black or grey traditionally ascribed to boats.

#### MODERN BOAT ICONOGRAPHY

The boat continues to be a potent symbol in modern iconography. William McTaggart's 19th-century paintings of transparent people round the shores of Kintyre capture the precariousness of their existence dependent on fishing. His depictions of ships in such paintings as *The Coming of St Columba* and *The*

614. MacLean, *O Choille gu Bearraidh*, 150.

615. MacLean, *O Choille gu Bearraidh*, 28.



William McTaggart, *The Sailing of the Emigrant Ship* (1895). Photo Antonia Reeve, National Galleries of Scotland: <<https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/5138/sailing-emigrant-ship>>

*Sailing of the Emigrant Ship* are never in the foreground. It is as if momentous happenings for man are dwarfed by the scale of nature.

*Cranngal* (2006), a sculpture by Arthur Watson and Will Maclean, looks out to sea from Sabhal Mòr Ostaig in Skye. It is a bronze casting of the willow framework of a curragh, with the tools for its completion lying by its side. Similar in appearance and siting to the stainless-steel sculpture *Sólfar* (Sun Voyager) of 1990 in Reykavik, its cultural connotations are quite different. While Jan Gunnar's sculpture is a powerful image of the hope with which the Norse moved west to new territories, *Cranngal* is striking in its fragility, which nevertheless suggests



*Cranngal* (2006) by Will Maclean and Arthur Watson, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Isle of Skye. Photo © Murdo Macdonald

that the Gaelic culture that came with Colum Cille's curragh can be repaired and restored.

Boat motifs are used as logos by several modern businesses. The motif of the curragh appears as the logo for Cló Iar-Chonnachta (The West Connacht Press), carried upside down by three men whose legs protrude below it. It is also the logo of Curach Bhán Publications in Berlin, the image taken from the Kilnaruan Pillar Stone in Bantry.<sup>616</sup> The publishers Acair Ltd, based in Stornoway, are named for and have the logo of an anchor. The Highland Galley is still a very attractive piece of iconography and has gained modern usage in the logos, for example of Birlinn Books in Edinburgh and Comhairle nan Eilean (the Western Isles Council). Now, as earlier in heraldry and song, it evokes a mixture of dynamic freedom, history and pride.

In Eriskay, the bar is named *Am Politician*, after the boat that went down in 1941 on the island of Calvay in the Sound of Eriskay. Made famous by Compton Mackenzie's book and the film *Whisky Galore*, the event provided the islanders with plenty of free whisky. In the same island, the altar of 'St Michael of the Sea' (1903) is supported by the bow of a lifeboat swept off the *HMS Hermes* on a mission near St Kilda, while the church bell was salvaged from the German warship *Derflinger* in Scapa Flow.<sup>617</sup> All three are doubtless symbolic of the seafaring economy of the island, but they are redolent of deeper strands in Gaelic culture. *Am Politician* conjures the high glee brought in by the tide at a time when all luxuries were scarce.

The sea both took and gave to the islanders. The boat below the altar may have connotations of Christ as a fisher of men, of the voyage of life, or of the way the early Gaelic monks sought out a remote island – *terra repromissionis sanctorum* – which would make them worthy of heaven. And the bell, taken from the enemy's warships, is a seal on the Christian tenet of forgiveness after a war which took a disproportionate number of men from the Islands.

The altar of St Michael of the Sea (built 1903), Eriskay. Photo © <[www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk](http://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk)>



616. The publisher is Daniel Bűchner, who gives the following reference to the pillar: OS 1/2" 24. National Grid Reference: V 98 48.

617. Francis Thompson, *Uists and Barra* (Newton Abbot, 1999), 85–86.



## CONCLUSION

A boat's ergonomically clean lines, the darkness of its tarred timbers and the brightness of its sails, and its spirited fragility set against the hugeness and ferocity of the ocean have excited the eye from the time of Beccán of Rum in the 6th century to Sorley MacLean in the 20th. It has become a potent image and symbol of power in the Gaelic tradition, appearing in poetry, clan crests and on scores of grave slabs, which give an indication of the appearance of these single-masted, Norse-derived galleys. In poetry, they often seem to share the animation of the trees from which their timbers were hewn or of the horses with which they are compared.

With a heavy reliance on boats for pilgrimage, trade, burials, raiding and warfare, but strangely not so much for fishing, boats were often the last sign of a departing loved one, and so become part of the context of love songs and laments. In folksong and in panegyric, the subject sailing at speed with his crew in a galley becomes a set piece. In Fenian folktale and ballad, the galleys are made of exotic materials with sharp prows and three rather than one mast. Where there is pride, there can also be shame, and the boat, like people and weapons, can also be satirised.

A Gaelic proverb states that 'drowning is the end for every boat' – *Is crioch a' bhàta bàthadh*. Being so vulnerable, supernatural concerns surround them about women and the evil eye. In the early monastic tradition, boats, especially currachs, were seen as a means to salvation by those who would do penance, and as an indication of God's will when the oars were drawn in or when a miscreant was cast away. Boats have represented marriage, the Gaelic hegemony and the ship of state, and historical boats such as the *William*, *Iolair* and *Metagama* are simultaneously symbols and the reality behind terrible events in Gaelic history. MB

## IV.2.f. STONE CARVING, METALWORK, BOOKS

[Introduction](#); [The Pictish Context](#); [Stone Carving](#); [Stone Carving Techniques](#); [Metalwork](#); [Books](#)

## INTRODUCTION

One of the most perceptive explorations of the continuities between different artistic media in western Europe, ranging from stone to vellum, from the Stone Age to the medieval, is that of Françoise Henry.<sup>618</sup> As with many subsequent

618. F. Henry, *Irish Art* (Ithaca, 1965, 1967, 1970).

studies, her focus of attention was on Ireland, but in recent years evidence from the Scottish Gàidhealtachd and the significance of Pictish artwork have found a more prominent place in research and publication. Amongst these are Armit's *The Archaeology of Skye and the Western Isles*, Henderson and Henderson's *The Art of the Picts* and Harding's *The Archaeology of Celtic Art*. What follows attempts to draw together some of that evidence with particular relevance to the visual in the Gàidhealtachd. How far back in time we choose to project the validity of that name is not considered here. The approach is from the standpoint of accepting that the Scottish Gàidhealtachd has a necessary geographical continuity and demonstrable genetic and cultural continuities, referred to in many of the preceding sections.

It is only relatively recently that the Gàidhealtachd has been the subject of intensive archaeological study, and the attendant discoveries carry many implications. Finds such as those of the bronze La Tène fragment (see below) and the lyre bridge at *Uamh an Àrd-Achaidh* from c. 500 BC (see [IV.2.c.](#)), the manufacture of gaming pieces at Bornish in South Uist (11th–12th century AD) and the Viking ship burial at *Port an Eilein Mhòir* on Ardnamurchan (10th century AD) have all been made within the last decade or so. Discoveries such as those at Ness of Brodgar in Orkney, which in 2008 revealed a major temple complex from around 3500 BC, have dramatically altered our assessment of the society which built it, and these discoveries should naturally impinge upon our assessment of the related stone circles, whether on Orkney, Lewis or elsewhere. The excavation of a pre-agricultural temple complex at Göbekli Tepe in Turkey (c. 10,000 BC) challenges the assumption that only agrarian communities had the social capacity to erect large monuments. There, access to a wide variety of game and wild grains and pulses enabled a hunter-gatherer community, developing into a pastoral one, to build and sustain substantial ritual structures.<sup>619</sup> In the Orcadian and Hebridean context, the less rich vegetative environment would have been compensated for by access to the riches of the sea. Alongside the stone circles and cairns of the Stone Age, the discovery of polished stone mace heads and carved stone balls from a spread of sites indicates cultural connections across the whole of the north of Scotland.

Radical changes in our understanding are as significant for much more recent periods. For example, a better awareness of Gaelic culture, both written and oral, has led to reassessment of iconic objects such as the Lewis chessmen. These pieces have been prize exhibits in the British Museum and the National

619. Trevor Watkins of the University of Edinburgh has made these points cogently in a paper given in Turkey (6 October 2012): <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAkedr2674](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAkedr2674)>.



Lewis chessmen Celtic style designs. © National Museums of Scotland

Museums of Scotland, and recently six of them have been housed on long loan from the British Museum in the new Lews Castle Centre in Stornoway.

It was only recently that suggestions that such pieces were unlikely to have been intended for and used in the Gàidhealtachd, never mind made there, have been replaced by more informed judgments.<sup>620</sup>

The most obvious explanation for the hoard should be that it belonged in Lewis to a person, and in a society, which valued its contents as gaming pieces. Indeed, it is significant that, within Britain, the only other ivory chessmen of similar quality to those from Lewis also have West Highland provenances. One is a knight, of walrus ivory, dated to the mid-13th century. It is now in the collection of NMS, but prior to 1782 belonged to Lord MacDonal of Sleat, Skye. It may have been found in 1763 during the drainage of Loch St Columba (also known as Loch Monkstadt) in Kilmuir Parish. The other, now lost, is a king, carved from the tooth of a sperm whale, clearly in the same tradition as the Lewis kings, but datable on stylistic grounds to the 16th century. It came from Dunstaffnage Castle, near Oban (Argyll and Bute), by the 16th century a possession of the Campbells.

The authors conclude that

The richness of the hoard indicates a pursuit of fashionable and long-held

620. D. Caldwell, M. Hall and C. Wilkinson, 'The Lewis Hoard of Gaming Pieces: A Re-examination of their Context, Meanings, Discovery and Manufacture', in *Medieval Archaeology* 53 (2009), 155–203.

gaming practice on the Isle of Lewis. Possession of such playing equipment would have imbued its owner with considerable status.<sup>621</sup>

This perspective is backed up by the literature which, in a 9th- to 10th-century Middle Gaelic text, describes fifty servants travelling from the Island of Raasay, each carrying a chess board with its pieces.

Fithchell for muin cach gilla[i] co feraib óir 7 airgid;<sup>622</sup>

on the back of each gillie, a chess-board with its men of gold and silver;<sup>623</sup>

The number of fifty is probably exaggerated and symbolic, but were it only three or four (there being enough for four chess sets in the Lewis hoard) it would be sufficient to indicate the presence and status of such games long before the Viking dominance of the western seaboard – a presence and status which continued through the Viking period and with strong Viking influence. There is no reason, however, to doubt that the pieces were made of or coated with gold and silver. Many centuries earlier, new evidence is altering our perspectives:

Perhaps the most interesting and tantalising is the decorated sheet [metal] fragment HPC0067 [High Pasture Cave]. The chased and repoussé curvilinear decoration identifies this as a piece of Celtic or La Tène art, with a series of non-concentric curved motifs, one subdivided into two trumpet-like forms ... The significance lies in the presence of such decorated metalwork in Atlantic Scotland, where it is otherwise exceedingly rare (MacGregor 1976). This is not necessarily because the area lacked contacts or fine metalworking traditions: our picture is biased because societies in Atlantic Scotland did not have a tradition of metalwork hoarding at the time (Hunter 1997). This is compounded by the poor survival of sheet metalwork compared to cast items; the thin but wide spread



La Tène style fragment from *Uamh an Àrd-Achaidh*, Skye. Photo © Graeme Lawson

621. R. Butter, *Kilmartin* (Kilmartin, 1999), 64; A. Ritchie, *Scotland BC* (Edinburgh, 1994), 58–59; D. Caldwell, M. Hall and C. Wilkinson, 'The Lewis Hoard of Gaming Pieces: A Re-examination of their Context, Meanings, Discovery and Manufacture', *Medieval Archaeology* 53 (2009), 155–98.

622. D. Binchy, ed., *Scéla Cano Meic Gartnáin* (Dublin, 1975), 2, ll.35–37.

623. R. Thurneysen, 'Eine irische Parallele zur Tristan-Sage', *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* 43 (1924), 389.



of La Tène brooches in Atlantic Scotland shows the inhabitants were linked to wider trends, and this fragment is a valuable corrective to the existing picture.<sup>624</sup>

Such gradual reassessments give point to approaching the creative contribution from the prehistorical and historical perspectives of the Gàidhealtachd.

The title of the section describes its subdivisions, but these should be read with the following in mind:

It is an essential fact about Insular art that book painting, stone sculpture, and metalwork shared exactly the same design precepts and motifs, and that we can legitimately supplement gaps in the one from what we know of the others.<sup>625</sup>

To this we may add Ní Ghrádaigh's observations on the similarities between metalwork and embroidery (see IV.2.a.).

While aspects of script and ogam have been discussed above (II.3.b. and II.3.c.), stone carving, metalwork (also discussed in IV.1.b.), books and their illumination represent what many would consider the highest visual achievements of any Celtic artists. Celtic art has been widely debated by experts from many disciplines, but, if we are indeed to look anew through the window to the west of this book's title, then it is possible that we can look anew at such masterpieces as the many stone carvings distributed throughout the Gàidhealtachd, as well as manuscripts such as the Book of Kells, almost certainly produced on Iona in the Gàidhealtachd.

#### THE PICTISH CONTEXT

Artistic output on Iona, whether in stone or on vellum, emerged in an environment with its own pre-existing artwork. Stones with purely Pictish symbols on them (usually designated as Class I or A) were to be seen on the Outer Hebrides – on Pabbay to the south-west, Benbecula to the west,<sup>626</sup> the Inner Hebrides to the north<sup>627</sup> – and at Dunadd (the 'capital' of the Scottish kingdom of Dalriada, to the south) there is a decidedly Pictish carving of a wild boar (see III.3.c.).<sup>628</sup> The recent

624. F. Hunter, draft report on the High Pasture Cave copper alloys (22 May 2015), by kind permission of the author.

625. G. and I. Henderson, *The Art of the Picts* (London, 2004), 224.

626. A stone from Strome Shunnamul, Benbecula (now in the National Museums of Scotland), was found prior to 1870 – see I. Fraser, *The Pictish Symbol Stones of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2008), 136.

627. On Skye from Dun Osdale, Tote and Fiskavaig, and also on Raasay.

628. I. Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands* (Edinburgh, 2001), 152.



Pabbay symbol stone (6th c.). Photo © John Purser

discovery of Pictish symbols on a stone at Trusty's Hill in Galloway increases the area of Pictish influence substantially.<sup>629</sup>

That the arriving Christians were well aware of these symbol stones is shown on the most south-westerly of them, made of the local Pabbay stone, with its flower and crescent and V-rod symbols surmounted, but not overlaid, by a cross.<sup>630</sup>

The same applies to the crescent and V-rod and 'tuning fork' symbols on the stone from near Raasay House (on the island of Raasay), which are surmounted – but again not overlaid – by a cross with attached scroll representing the Chi Rho symbol.<sup>631</sup> On the island of Eigg, the reverse of a panel carved with a Pictish hunting scene was reused as a cross slab, with IHU XPI in half-uncial letters with pronounced serifs at the top.<sup>632</sup> This would suggest a sense of continuity and the penning style suggests the possibility of a scriptorium on the island. This contrasts

629. <[www.gallowaypicts.com](http://www.gallowaypicts.com)>.

630. Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture*, 106.

631. Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture*, 103.

632. G. and I. Henderson, *The Art of the Picts* (London, 2004), 206: and Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture*, 93.



with the likelihood that St Donnan and his monks were martyred by Picts, according to one legend on the orders of a Pictish queen from Glenuig.<sup>633</sup>

The interaction of Gaels and Picts was both deliberate and extensive. It was promoted by the introduction of Christianity with all its attendant imagery, primarily by Gaelic-speaking people. Dallán Forgaill, in the famous *Amra Choluimb Chille*, places Colum Cille as far east as the River Tay;<sup>634</sup> Bede refers to his conversion of the Picts,<sup>635</sup> Adomnán tells of Colum Cille's visit to Skye where he converted a Pictish household to Christianity through the medium of an interpreter,<sup>636</sup> and he describes Colum Cille's conversions in Inverness and elsewhere. Adomnán himself travelled to these areas and a bell which is quite possibly his, is still *in situ* at Innerwick in Glen Lyon (see IV.2.c.). The Tay valley and Inverness were in the heart of Pictland and Scottish-born saints such as St Catroe of Metz were certainly connected with the area.<sup>637</sup> These Gaelic-Pictish interactions were reflected extensively in the arts and, in particular, in books and stone carving.<sup>638</sup>

Did the stones influence the books or the books influence the stones? If the former, then any close correspondences would suggest that, if not the artists themselves, then skilled draughtsmen acting as intermediaries had travelled to see the stones. Henderson argues for both directions, citing close correspondences between Pictish carving probably inspired by the Lindisfarne Gospels and proposing a Pictish route of transmission to the Book of Kells.<sup>639</sup> Some of the relationships are striking in their individuality, notably that of the devil in the Book of Kells (f.202v) and a probable devil on the St Vigean's slab.<sup>640</sup> Others indicate a clear influence of the earliest Pictish Class A carvings on subsequent manuscript depictions. The Knowe of Burrian eagle and the Ardross wolf (both dated to the first half of the 7th century) have clearly influenced the eagle on Corpus MS 197B (early 8th century) and the calf symbol for St Luke in the Echternach Gospels

633. The Annals of Ulster record the martyrdom for the year 617. The Martyrology of Aengus provides the legend of the queen from Glenuig. See Alfred Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men* (London, 1984), 108.

634. T. Clancy and G. Márkus, *Iona* (Edinburgh, 1995), 104–05 (I, 1.5), 112–13 (VIII, ll. 5–6) and 119.

635. J. Giles, ed., *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of England* (London, 1903), Chap. IV, 113.

636. A. and M. Anderson, *Adomnan's Life of Columba* (London, 1961), 396–97.

637. Alan MacQuarrie, *The Saints of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1997), 205.

638. A. Ritchie, *Iona* (London, 1997), 60–61.

639. I. Henderson, 'Pictish Art', in Whitelock, McKitterick and Dumville, eds, *Ireland in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1982), 105.

640. C. Bourke, 'The Iconography of the Devil: St Vigean's, Eassie and the Book of Kells', *The Innes Review* 58, No. 1 (Spring 2007), 95–100.

(late 7th to early 8th century).<sup>641</sup> The Strathpeffer eagle stone provides another candidate for comparison.

There has never been any doubt that the 9th- to 10th-century Book of Deer was the product of the Celtic monastery of Deer in Aberdeenshire, despite its eastern location. Although the marginalia are in Gaelic, the artwork is generally thought to be Pictish rather than Gaelic, but, as we have seen, the Pictish world extended far west, linguistically as well as monumentally.

In addition to Pictish stones, the 9th-century cross on Canna is Pictish influenced,<sup>642</sup> as is the cross slab at Ardchattan – the latter with particular respect to the musicians whose cowls parallel those of the riders on the St Madoes cross slab. So too is the Book of Kells, for which see below. Such interactions were inevitable and also deliberate, as evidenced by Adomnán's Life of Colum Cille, describing his journeys into Pictish territory. As for the Book of Deer itself, its scribe wrote at the end (f.85), not in Latin nor (alas) in Pictish, but in Gaelic:

Forchubus caichduini imbia arrath inlenbrán aratardda bendacht foranmain intruagáin rodscribai.<sup>643</sup>

*be it on the conscience of each person who reads this fine little book, that they say a blessing for the soul of the poor wretch who wrote it.*

In the 11th century, another scribe wrote the foundation story of Deer into the Book of Deer. He too wrote in Gaelic on the recto of f.3, asserting the Iona connection:

Columcille acus Drostan mac Cóosgreg adálta tangator áhí marroalseg Día aoníc Abborddobóir ... [p. 19]

*Colum Cille and Drostan son of Cosgrach, his pupil, came from Hy into Aberdour, as God had shown them ...*

Much was lost as a consequence of the Viking raids from the early 9th century onwards. Recent excavations at Tarbat Ness reveal the likely presence of a monastic settlement with nearby workshops and evidence of fine metalworking and the production of vellum such as pumice stone and pebbles for smoothing and stretching it.

The rare survival of a carved Latin text from Tarbat implies that this monastery had the capacity to produce books in an accomplished Insular script.<sup>644</sup>

641. G. Henderson, *From Durrrow to Kells* (London, 1987), 76–78.

642. Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture*, 19.

643. K. Jackson, *The Gaelic Notes in the Book of Deer* (Cambridge, 1972), 8.

644. S. Foster, *Picts, Gaels and Scots* (London, 1996), 96, illustrated on 25.

Such is the evidence that the site has been described as ‘An Iona of the East’, but the site is in the Pictish heartlands, and excavations also reveal that the complex was comprehensively destroyed, probably by the Vikings in the 9th century.<sup>645</sup>

An important monastic site which has yet to be seriously investigated is that at Applecross, founded by Maelrubha of Bangor (c. 642–722) in 672, who is associated with many place-names. Applecross was also thought to have been sacked by the Vikings. The presence there of a fine carved cross slab and of parts of others related in style to finds at Tarbat Ness, along with evidence of hide preparation and medieval metalworking found at the nearby broch site, would all suggest that there remains much to be discovered.<sup>646</sup> A bronze strap end was found in 1994 at the Ashaig cemetery on Skye. Ashaig is opposite Applecross and is where Maelrubha is reputed to have preached. The strap end is highly decorated on both sides with interlacing foliated patterns, possibly from around the 11th century, and could well have been part of a catch for a book satchel, rather than part of an item of clothing.<sup>647</sup>



Ashaig, Isle of Skye, strap end. Photo © Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre

645. M. Carver, ‘An Iona of the East: The Early-medieval Monastery at Portmahomack, Tarbat Ness’, *Medieval Archaeology* 48 (2004), 1–30.

646. Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture*, 87–90. Applecross Broch Community Archaeology Project Project: <[https://librarylink.highland.gov.uk/LLFiles/260701/full\\_260701.pdf](https://librarylink.highland.gov.uk/LLFiles/260701/full_260701.pdf)>.

647. Personal communication from Martin Wildgoose and from Dualchas. See <[www.ambaile.org.uk/en/item\\_photograph.jsp?item\\_id=73497](http://www.ambaile.org.uk/en/item_photograph.jsp?item_id=73497)>.

Material evidence from other countries, as well as written evidence for the existence of works of art in the Gàidhealtachd now lost, destroyed or removed, needs also to be taken into account. For example, a shrine for Colum Cille, taken from Iona to Ireland, is known to have been in existence in 825, when it is referred to in the Annals of Ulster. According to Walafrid Strabo, it was composed of precious metals. Parallel artefacts ‘ornamented with snake-and-boss ornament which has artistic links with both the Book of Kells and the Pictish cross slab at Nigg, Easter Ross’ may have come from Iona.<sup>648</sup>

Books also were moved and others were copied and survive only in Irish sources.<sup>649</sup> As Mark Zumbühl has asserted:

A considerable amount of literature must have been produced by Scottish Gaels, either at home or elsewhere, but very little survives from the early (or indeed most of the central) Middle Ages.<sup>650</sup>

Such evidence as we have is patchy. The 9th- to 10th-century ‘Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin’ is very probably a Gaelic verse tale from Scotland, though it survives only in the *Leabhar Buidhe Leacain*, written around 1390.<sup>651</sup> Interpolations in the *Saltair na Rann* are also likely to have their source in Scotland,<sup>652</sup> ‘A éolcha Alban uile’ is largely concerned with Scottish king lists<sup>653</sup> and aspects of the *Suibne Geilt* cycle of poems, not to mention the whole premise of the tale, are derived from Scottish/British material (see III.1.d.).<sup>654</sup>

Pictish artwork is evident on a number of portable objects found in the Gàidhealtachd, notably the Pictish hanging bronze bowl from Castle Tioram

648. R. Ó Floinn, ‘Insignia Columbae I’, in C. Bourke, ed., *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba* (Dublin, 1997), 137–38. Also I. Fisher, ‘The Monastery of Iona in the Eighth Century’, in F. O’Mahony, ed., *The Book of Kells, Proceedings of a Conference at Trinity College Dublin, 6–9 September 1992* (Aldershot, 1994), 45.

649. B. Hudson, ‘Scottish Texts in Irish Manuscripts’, paper given at the Testing the Pen conference, University of Aberdeen, 16–17 August 2004. I am grateful to Professor Hudson for providing me with a typescript of this paper.

650. M. Zumbühl, ‘Contextualising the *Duan Albanach*’, *Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig* 3 (2006), 11.

651. Hudson, ‘Scottish Texts in Irish Manuscripts’. Also C. Ó Baoill, ‘Inis Moccu Chéin’, *Scottish Gaelic Studies* XII, Pt II (1976), 267–70.

652. The king list commencing at line 2349 gives special prominence to Kenneth II of Scotland. See W. Stokes, ed., ‘Saltair na rann’, in *Anecdota Oxoniensia* (Oxford, 1883), 34.

653. Zumbühl, ‘Contextualising the *Duan Albanach*’, 11–24.

654. J. and W. MacQueen, ‘Vita Merlin Sylvestris’, *Scottish Studies* 29 (1989). K. Jackson, ‘A Further Note on Suibhne Gelt and Merlin’, *Éigse* VII, Part II. K. Jackson, ‘The Motive of the Threefold Death in the Story of Suibhne Geilt’, in *Féil-sgríbin Eóin Mic Néill – Essays and Studies presented to Professor Eoin MacNeill* (Dublin, 1960), 535–50.

in Argyllshire from around 700 AD, and the Erchless pendant from Beauly in Inverness-shire.<sup>655</sup> The massive bracelets, stylistically related to the Deskford carnyx, cited as an exemplar of Celtic art,<sup>656</sup> the enigmatic plaques and the exquisite penannular brooches from Tummel Bridge in Perthshire and St Ninian's Isle in Shetland, or the Pictish-style comb and pin from Bornais in South Uist, help build a picture of widespread artistic activity in a variety of forms. But the main evidence with respect to the Pictish context is that of stone carving.

#### STONE CARVING

Stone carving in the Gàidhealtachd survives in profusion and extends into modern times. What follows here refers only to some of the earliest manifestations, as discussion is spread over several sections of this book, notably [III.2.a](#). The Symbol of the Tree, [III.3.a](#). Hunting, [III.3.c](#). Emblems and Totems, [IV.1.b](#). Grave Slabs, [IV.1.c](#). Cairns, Standing Stones and Crosses, and [IV.2.c](#). Musical Instruments.

Dating from c. 4000 BC and amongst the earliest and most extensive examples of any kind of artwork in Britain are the cup and ring markings of



Kilmartin cup and ring marks. Photo Copyright Kilmartin Museum Company Limited

655. G. and I. Henderson, *The Art of the Picts*, 92–95.

656. F. Hunter, 'The Carnyx in Iron Age Europe', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (2001), 95. See also [IV.2.b](#). in this volume.

the Kilmartin valley in Argyllshire, of which the largest group 'forms the greatest concentration of carvings known in the British Isles.'<sup>657</sup> Recent work at Achabreck has revealed a further significant group of cup and ring carvings, adding to the significance of the site.<sup>658</sup>

These carvings, being, for the most part, on constantly exposed bedrock or on standing stones, such as S1 at Nether Largie at Kilmartin, have been a part of the visual vocabulary for millennia, and they include motifs such as the double spirals on S10 at Temple Wood. These double spirals also feature in passage grave art from as far away as New Grange and Knowth in Ireland. Opposite spirals, similar to those at Achabreck near Kilmartin, feature on the [Westray](#) and Eday manse stones from Orkney. The Westray stone was discovered in 1981 and came from the tomb at Pierowall. While it is clearly related to passage grave art found at New Grange and Knowth, it also has distinctive features.<sup>659</sup>

The dating of cup and ring markings cannot be precise, but certainly spans a period from as early as 4000 BC and possibly up to 1000 BC. These markings are both numerous and wide-spread,

Their overall distribution stretches from Galloway to Shetland and they are part of a widespread tradition of rock art in Britain, Ireland, Brittany and north-west Spain ...<sup>660</sup>

These connections take on additional artistic significance in the context of the latest finds at the Ness of Brodgar in Orkney, which include numerous examples of stones used in a complex of very substantial structures, and dressed, apparently, for decorative purposes. In addition to dressed stones, significant finds include stones and pottery that have been chosen for their natural colouring or painted with reds and yellows, and the tools for preparing paint have also been speculatively identified. There are also examples of pots formed out of two types of clay, or with contrasting surface colours made from the application of grey slip. The complex itself seems to have been in use between 3500 BC and 2000 BC, within the date range of the cup and ring markings, raising the likelihood of further artistic connections along the seaboard.

From a similar period to the cup and ring markings come the Neolithic carved stone balls. The function of these, of which there are over 400, is not

657. J. Ashmore, *Neolithic and Bronze Age Scotland* (London, 1996), 59.

658. Kilmartin Museum Archaeology, Achabreck III, Rock Art Excavation: <<http://www.kilmartin.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Achabreck-DSR-Text.pdf>> – accessed 22 February 2017.

659. N. Sharples, 'Excavations at Pierowall Quarry, Westray, Orkney', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 114 (1984), 105.

660. Butter, *Kilmartin*, 64; A. Ritchie, *Scotland BC* (Edinburgh, 1994), 58–59.





Loch Lochy carved stone ball

known. They are not found as grave goods. Examples of such stones from the Gàidhealtachd include a particularly fine one found at the southern end of Loch Lochy some time before 1881. Others come from Skye, Harris, Dalabrog and Bornish townships in South Uist, and from Lewis, Arran, Iona, Castle Sween and Dunadd. One such stone 'long in the possession of a family in Knapdale, and ... now in Tiree' was used for medicinal purposes and was known as *clach a' ghreimich* – the gripe stone. A companion stone of the same size was used against the evil eye.<sup>661</sup>

The geology of the carved stone balls is varied, but their forms are geometrical, and this is further considered in IV.3.c. Geometry and Number Symbolism. Quite apart from any geometrical significance, the finest of the carved stone balls are remarkable works of art – among some of the most beautiful objects from the Stone Age, anywhere. They are unique to Scotland, and are testimony to an early interest in abstraction and number. As to their function, perhaps the most sensible suggestion to date is that of Jeff Nisbet who proposes that they were portable symbols of skill carried by professional stone carvers as proof of their

661. R. Black, ed., *The Gaelic Otherworld* (Edinburgh, 2005), 224.

abilities.<sup>662</sup> Such a function would explain the absence of any signs of usage, the rare occurrence of clear contexts for the finds, the variety of skills exhibited and the distribution pattern which places the vast majority of them in areas of high fertility and particularly in Aberdeenshire, where Pictish stone carving was later to flourish and where the massive recumbent stone circles predominate.

Replication of some of the Neolithic stone balls using only tools available at the time has demonstrated that the more complex designs could have taken up to a hundred hours to complete. However, though an unequivocal Neolithic context has been found for the stone balls from Skara Brae and Ness of Brodgar, it is possible that a number of them were made in later periods.

#### STONE CARVING TECHNIQUES

In the extensive discussion of stone carving in Scotland in general, never mind the Gàidhealtachd in particular, relatively little attention has been given to the actual techniques of carving themselves. No inventory of tools appears to have been drawn up and there is little acknowledgment of the unforgiving nature of stone as a medium, particularly when employed for low relief work, in which a single error towards the end of the work can ruin the entire design with virtually no possibility of correction. Mary Ann Gelly has briefly discussed the likelihood of an improvement in metallurgical technology in the 9th to 10th centuries AD in Ireland, which would certainly have allowed for better tools, properly tempered; and this observation may have some relevance to the dating of the carvings.<sup>663</sup> If, as she suggests, the improved technology came with Viking influence, there is a real possibility that it reached Scotland at least as early, if not earlier. The tools she has identified include points and drills, but many different sizes and types of chisel must have been in use for the finer work.

What is abundantly clear is that the stone carvers, both of the early Christian period and of the later school which flourished from the 14th to 16th centuries, were capable of producing in stone virtually whatever effect they wished. Within the overall form, combinations of high and low relief and varieties of patterning produce an astonishing variety of textures. Sculptors commonly texture their work by leaving different types of tool mark on the surface: coarse hair indicated by lines left by the point, finer hair by the use of claw bits, still finer surface finish with light chiselling and gouging, and gentle abrading with rifflers of various forms. The sculptural traditions examined here, however, used design, pattern and depth of cut to produce texture rather than a variety of tool markings. Tool

662. <<http://www.scottishheritagehub.com/sites/default/files/u12/CarvedStoneBalls.pdf>> – accessed 8 November 2015).

663. M. A. Gelly, 'The Irish High Cross: Methods of Design', in C. Bourke, ed., *From the Isles of the North* (Belfast, 1995), 157–58.

markings suggesting finer textures within the main texture may well have been apparent when the stones were first carved, but since most of them have been outdoors for anything between 600 and 1200 years in a wet and windy climate, it is not surprising that such evidence is scanty. What is surprising is the durability of the work in such circumstances. One need only look at the erosion of 19th- and even 20th-century gravestones to see the consequences of inferior work and poor choice of stone. The early and late medieval stone carvers knew better.

The stone used, however, did not allow of fine polishing. There is a reason for this. Most stones capable of taking a polish will not withstand the effects of weathering for long and, although marble was available on Iona and Skye, it was not likely to yield pieces large enough and of sufficient structural integrity to be useful for a free-standing cross or a slender cross slab. Granite will, of course, take a polish but the nature of the grain means it cannot be used for the kind of intricate relief work found on the Pictish stones. An analysis by G. H. Collins of the petrology of the stones can be found in Steer and Bannerman.<sup>664</sup>

Allied to the skill of the craftsmen was an equally impressive geometrical awareness (possibly including number symbolism and Pythagorean proportion), which can only have been transferred to stone by a combination of superb draughtsmanship and innate awareness on the part of the stone carvers themselves. Gelly suggests that drawings were made onto the stone 'as this appears to be how many panels of carving were begun.'<sup>665</sup> Perhaps more likely is that they had drawings beside them. Drawing on areas of fine carving is very quickly obscured by dust.

In modern times, two outstanding stone carvers have commented upon the skill of their forebears. One was the famous Hugh Miller of Cromarty who, on seeing William Ross's drawings of Pictish cross slabs, including those of the greatest complexity (amongst them Nigg, [Shandwick](#) and Hilton of Cadboll), wrote:

He told me he had spent a fortnight in tracing out the involved mathematical figures, curves, circles, and right lines – on which the intricate fretwork of one of the obelisks was formed, and in making separate drawings of each compartment, before commencing his draught of the entire stone. Looking with the eyes of the stone cutter at his preliminary sketches, from the first meagre lines that formed the ground work of some involved and difficult knot, to the elaborate knot itself, I saw that, with such a series of drawings before me, I myself could

664. G. H. Collins, Appendix I, 'The Petrology of the Late Medieval West Highland Monuments', in K. Steer and J. Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture in the West Highlands* (Edinburgh, 1977), 195–200.

665. Gelly, 'The Irish High Cross: Methods of Design', 158.

learn to cut Runic obelisks, in all the integrity of the complex ancient style, in less than a fortnight.<sup>666</sup>

The other stone carver was John Cargill, who, a century later, put forward his own approach to the design of Celtic crosses – an approach which took into account both proportion and number symbolism, as well as the possibility of music transcribed as interlace (see [IV.1.c.](#), [IV.3.b.](#) and [IV.3.c.](#)).<sup>667</sup>

#### METALWORK

Notwithstanding their own ground-breaking survey, scholars such as the Hendersons have expressed a need for a broad reassessment of Pictish metalwork. They also draw attention to the assumptions built into existing terminology with, for instance, Insular being conflated with Irish.<sup>668</sup> Back in the 12th century, Giraldus Cambrensis, referring to the shared origin myth of the Irish and Scots in his *Topographia Hibernica*, states:

The northern part of Britain is also called Scotia, because it is known to be inhabited by a people which was originally propagated by Gaidelus and Scotia. The affinity in language and culture, as well as in weapons and customs, to this day bears out this fact.<sup>669</sup>

Giraldus's reference to weapons and customs indicates a geographical awareness with respect to culture and particularly material culture which is not always in evidence today.

The need for a broad reassessment goes beyond a strictly Pictish context, for the histories of mining and metalwork in Scotland, never mind in the Gàidhealtachd, have yet to be written. Fraser Hunter has reappraised his work on metalwork hordes, stating that

In general the evidence for Iron Age depositional traditions in the Atlantic is focussed on the domestic arena, and they are likely to have been the preserve of the immediate social group, perhaps the family.

Hunter himself cites the exception of a bronze cauldron found at Kyleakin, and the extent of ritual deposition and feasting at *Uamh an Àrd-Achaidh* (also on Skye) offer a further alternative to a domestic scenario.<sup>670</sup>

666. H. Miller, *My Schools and Schoolmasters* (1854; Edinburgh, 1993 and 2002), 210.

667. J. Cargill, *The Celtic Cross and Greek Proportion*, and C. G. Blake, *Celtic Art*, 1930.

668. G. and I. Henderson, *The Art of the Picts*, 118, also 121.

669. J. J. O'Meara, *Gerald of Wales: The History and Topography of Ireland* (London, 1988), 98–99.

670. F. Hunter, *The Carnyx in the European Iron Age* (Mainz, 2019), I, 82.

The fame of the metalwork objects now held in the National Museum of Ireland is such that similar material from Scotland has been somewhat eclipsed, but the significance of metalwork in Gaelic tradition should not be underestimated. Something of that significance has already been addressed in IV.2.d. Weapons, Armour and Chariots with respect to the period from the late medieval onwards, and examples have been cited above with respect to the Pictish context. Iona and Dunadd were certainly centres of fine craftsmanship<sup>671</sup> and there is a number of fine brooches exhibiting a wide range of cultural influences, including the Dunbeath and Hunterston brooches, both with design features found on the Ardagh chalice and the Derrynaflan paten. It has even been suggested that these last two may have been made in Iona, given the similarity between the bird-nest bosses on the Iona crosses and the Ardagh chalice, and design elements on the Derrynaflan paten with Pictish counterparts.<sup>672</sup>

Two entries in Cormac's *Glossary* (c. 9th century) referring to brooches (see IV.2.a.), combined with the material evidence, give further proof of artistic interaction between Scotland and Ireland, if such were needed:

*Catit no Cartait .i. delg .i. berla Cruithnech .i. delg ara cuirir[h]er a chos.*<sup>673</sup>

*Catit* or *Cartait*, i.e. a brooch, i.e.[from] Pictish language, i.e. a brooch which turns away its fastener.<sup>674</sup>

Cormac Bourke has drawn attention to other parallels and distinctions in brooch design with respect to the Delg Aidechta – a brooch known only through literary reference in the form of, if not doubling as, a stylus or pen. 'Any stylus might serve *ad hoc* as a dress-fastener'. Bourke suggests that this brooch (which exists only as a description) was a kite brooch and, while the Hunterston brooch is pseudo-penanular, the two 'might almost be variations on a theme.'<sup>675</sup>

A particularly fine example of metalwork is that of St Fillan's crozier, the outer silver gilt casing of which is also known as the *quigrich* or *coygerach* from Gaelic *coigreach* (pilgrim). The inner crozier dates to the 11th or early 12th century and is of bronze decorated with the darker niello in typical West Highland style. This was in the care of the traditional family of dewars as late

671. L. and J. Laing, *The Picts and the Scots* (Stroud, 1996), 158–61.

672. L. and J. Laing, *The Picts and the Scots*, 158–61.

673. K. Meyer, *Sanas Cormac* (Dublin, 1912), 25.

674. G. R. Isaac, 'A Note on Cormac's Pictish Brooch', *Journal of Celtic Linguistics* 9 (2005), 73–82; E. Colmán and C. Swift, 'English and Pictish Terms for Brooch in an 8th-Century Irish Law-Text', *Medieval Archaeology* XLVIII (2004), 31–48.

675. C. Bourke, 'A Note on the Delg Aidecht', in C. Bourke, ed., *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba* (Dublin, 1997), 185 and 190.

as 1432, King James III having formally recognised their right in 1487. St Fillan's crozier exhibits a field of lozenges, typical of croziers, but whether the earlier version of it is the one illustrated on the 13th-century seal of Dunkeld Cathedral, is not known. It has been suggested that the crozier on the seal represents that of St Columba, known as the *cathbhuidh* or 'battle winner', a notion perhaps related to St Brigid (see IV.2.c.). Cormac Bourke proposes that the extremity at a different angle was an 8th-century development designed as a reliquary and points to a 12th-century cast bronze 'crozier drop' found by Loch Shiel – and probably related to the same site, *Eilean Fhianain* – as St Finnan's bell.<sup>676</sup> This object is decorated with 'the bust of a king', but which king and where it fits in with the story of metalwork in the Gàidhealtachd remains to be discovered.<sup>677</sup>

Some of the earliest designs have been carried through from prehistory to the present day – notably in leather work, such as sporrans, but also on brooches, quaichs, knife handles and the like. When the Gaelic-speaking traveller, Willie MacPhie, made a pea strainer out of cut tin and solder, the pattern of the holes punched in it was made by compass and is almost identical with that on the base of one of the silver bowls found on *St Ninian's Isle*, Shetland.<sup>678</sup>

Gaelic tradition, however, offers us some of the earliest written evidence for the significance of metalwork, which features heavily in the mythology, in the Old Gaelic law, in surviving Fenian lays and in innumerable traditional Gaelic tales. The focus of attention has been on Ireland, but the legal provisions surrounding the status and conduct of artists and artisans will have pertained equally in the Gàidhealtachd, not least given the lengthy history of exchange between Ireland and western Scotland with the Dalriadic Kingdom straddling the Sea of Moyle or North Channel. Evidence to support this is offered by Steer and Bannerman,<sup>679</sup> and Douglas MacLean in his study of the status of the sculptor in Old Irish law suggests that O'Cuinn

still found his own noble calling of the *sáer* worthy of mention in his c. 1500 signature inscription on the cross he made and the cloister he remodelled at Oronsay Priory.<sup>680</sup>

676. C. Bourke, 'Insignia Columbae II', in Bourke, *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba*, 174–76.

677. See <[nms.scran.ac.uk/database/record.php?usi=000-100-067-711-C](http://nms.scran.ac.uk/database/record.php?usi=000-100-067-711-C)>.

678. T. Neat, *The Summer Walkers* (Edinburgh, 1996), 95; and G. and I. Henderson, *The Art of the Picts*, 109, illustration on 151.

679. Steer and Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture in the West Highlands*, 145.

680. D. MacLean, 'The Status of the Sculptor in Old-Irish Law and the Evidence of the Crosses', *Peritia* 9 (1995), 155.



Oronsay is one of the Inner Hebrides. The term *sáer* is usually translated as ‘wright’ and implies origins in woodworking, though it was carried forward into stone working. Just as the legal status of the *sáer* was invoked through many centuries, so we may reasonably assume was that of the smith, whose status, skills, legal rights and obligations – in fact anything that might be deemed relevant to ironworking – are comprehensively laid out by Brian Scott in his *Early Irish Ironworking*.<sup>681</sup>

A vivid picture of a smithy, albeit a supernatural one, is given in *Duan na Ceàrdaich* ‘The Lay of the Smithy’, in which Fionn’s sword has to be reforged. At least nine recordings of this ballad have been made from traditional Gaelic singers.<sup>682</sup> In *Leabhar na Fèinne*, a composite version of forty-six stanzas is given, and John MacDonald’s sung version (recorded in 1934) is given in Margaret Fay Shaw’s *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist*.<sup>683</sup> Three swords are forged and named *Fead*, *Faoidh* and *Éigheach* (Whistle, Cry and Shout), and Daorghlas’s face is *cho dearg ri gual’ an daraich* (as red as oak embers). Daorghlas is the one whose strength has spoilt a steel anvil – a possibility the consequences of which were covered by law, as superbly and wittily presented by Brian Scott.<sup>684</sup>

Fascinating archaic elements in Fenian lays survive uniquely in the Gàidhealtachd. Thus in ‘Duan na Muiligheartaich’, the sword of the ogress with cropped red hair seems to be in flames and Fionn mac Cumhaill’s spear points are bedewed with her blood.

Bha taobh a guailleadh ri bun  
'S bha braon dha fuil air na fraochan.

Cha do mharbh i ach an Fhinn.

...

'S thug an gobha leis a brìgh  
Go Iar Leómhann, an t-àrd-rìgh.

*... the side of her shoulder drooped and a drop of her blood fell on the tips of the heather. None slew her but the Fenians ... and the smith took away her essence to the Lion of the West, the High King.*<sup>685</sup>

The mention of a high king places the origins of this lay in a remote past and

681. B. G. Scott, *Early Irish Ironworking* (Belfast: Ulster Museum, 1990).

682. See *Tobar an Dualchais*.

683. J. F. Campbell, *Leabhar na Feinne* (London, 1872), 65–67. M. F. Shaw, *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist* (Edinburgh, 1999), 29–32.

684. Scott, *Early Irish Ironworking*, 19off.

685. A. Bruford, ‘The Singing of Fenian and Similar Lays in Scotland’, *Ballad Research Dublin 1985* (Dublin, 1986), 62–63; also *Scéalamhráin Cheilteacha* (Dublin, 1985), 31–33.

the vocal line places it within what might be described as a musical genre particularly associated with this type of lay.<sup>686</sup> In the present context of metal work, the emphasis on the weaponry is significant, as is the honour of taking the trophy of her essence to the high king being given to the smith.

#### BOOKS

The Book of Kells is universally accepted as a *ne plus ultra* of book illumination of the period. It is consistently referred to as Irish and its name irrevocably links it with Ireland, yet a substantial majority of scholarly opinion favours Scotland as the place of its production.<sup>687</sup> It can scarcely have been the sole production of that scriptorium and, as indicated above, Iona was surely not the sole scriptorium in Scotland.

We have discussed some of the social and economic implications of assigning the Book of Kells to the Iona scriptorium in III.3.e. The suggestion that not only the Book of Kells but also the Book of Durrow were probably made on Iona adds to the island’s significance and is broadly supported by recent scholarship, including Bernard Meehan, Keeper of Manuscripts at Trinity College Dublin:

It seems, as scholarly opinion retreats from the views of those enthusiastic for a Northumbrian origin, that the Book of Durrow should be placed, as traditionally assumed, firmly in a Columban milieu. The colophon on folio 247v can be accepted, almost at face value, as evidence of this ... Iona retains a claim on the grounds of Durrow’s textual links with the Book of Kells, which was the work of that scriptorium. One possible scenario is that the Book of Durrow left Iona when that community moved after 807 to Kells, and that it went from there to Durrow.<sup>688</sup>

Meehan bases his suggestion partly on the work of George Henderson, former Professor of Medieval Art at Cambridge University. The colophon itself asserts that the book was early in its history ‘in the hands of a community which wished it to represent a direct link with Columba.’<sup>689</sup> Acknowledging the significance of the links with Northumbria, including the fact that after the Synod of Whitby in 664 Colman left Lindisfarne for Iona with thirty English monks in addition to his own Irish community, Henderson remarks:

If the conventional date of Durrow, c. 675, has, however, to be accepted,

686. J. Purser, *Scotland’s Music* (Edinburgh, 2007), 82–83.

687. Felicity O’Mahoney, ed., *The Book of Kells: Proceedings of a conference at Trinity College Dublin, 6–9 September 1992* (Dublin, 1994). See also Ragnall MacilleDhuibh, ‘Relic of the Western World’, *West Highland Free Press* (6 June 1996).

688. B. Meehan, *The Book of Durrow* (Dublin, 1996), 22.

689. Henderson, *From Durrow to Kells*, 55.

then we could reasonably see the Gospel-book as undertaken on Iona as a boost to Columban confidence at that time, rather than as a product of the uncertain and shifting cultural conditions existing, say, at Lindisfarne in the same period.<sup>690</sup>

In addition to the Book of Kells and the Book of Durrow, with Pictish beasts in the vertical borders of f.192v, there are significant artistic links between the Echternach and Corpus Gospels and Pictish stone carving:<sup>691</sup>

The Echternach Gospels shows expertise and conventions that are evident also in the Durham Gospels and Corpus MS 197B ... it is in the context of Egbert's activities, battling on, until 718, for the acceptance of the Roman tonsure on Iona, that the rare and peculiar features of the Roman-tonsured *Imago hominis* of the Echternach Gospels makes sense. It is in this context that we can understand a most interesting element in the design of the Echternach and Corpus Gospels, namely the largely unadulterated Pictish character of their calf and eagle symbols.<sup>692</sup>

These suggestions are taken up by Laing and Laing,<sup>693</sup> and Carl Nordenfalk claimed that the painter of the Echternach Gospels 'in his drawing of the Lion and the Calf ... followed the more heraldic animal design which he knew from the sign script of the Picts.'<sup>694</sup> Isabel Henderson, in particular, has demonstrated the strength of the relationships between Pictish art and the Book of Kells.<sup>695</sup> Scholars have even gone so far as to suggest a name for the designer of the book – Connachtach, abbot of Iona, referred to in the Annals of Ulster as an eminent scribe.<sup>696</sup>

When the Annals of Ulster described what is now known as the Book of Kells as *Soiscela mor Colum Cille* 'the great gospel of Columkille', *prim mind iartair domain* 'the chief relic of the Western world', they were clearly associating the book with Colum Cille himself. Scholars would not wish to date even its inception within his lifetime, the late 8th to early 9th century being broadly accepted; but its association with the scriptorium which he surely founded there, and its relationship with

690. Henderson, *From Durrow to Kells*, 55.

691. Henderson, *From Durrow to Kells*, 76–79.

692. Henderson, *From Durrow to Kells*, 95.

693. L. and J. Laing, *The Picts and the Scots* (Stroud, 1996), 153–56.

694. C. Nordenfalk, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting* (London, 1977), 22.

695. I. Henderson, 'Pictish Art', in Whitelock, McKitterick and Dumville, eds, *Ireland in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1982), 79–105. Also, G. and I. Henderson, *The Art of the Picts* (London, 2004), Chap. 2, 31–58.

696. S. Lewis, 'Sacred Calligraphy: The Chi Rho Page in the Book of Kells', *Traditio* 36 (1980), 158.



Book of Durrow f.192v (c. 675). Photo © Trinity College Dublin



aspects of Pictish art, place its artists in the context of the Scottish Gàidhealtachd:

Iona, then, was one of the great centres of innovative sculpture and manuscript illumination.<sup>697</sup>

As the culmination of a development of writing and illumination, the scriptorium from which the Book of Kells emerged must have been active for some time. When the Books of Durrow, Echternach and Lindisfarne were executed in the last decades of the 7th century, they fell within the lifetimes of St Adomnán of Iona, King Aldfrith of Northumbria (who had an Irish mother and was educated in Iona) and Egbert who had been living among the Irish and the Picts and whose devotion to the cult of Colum Cille was such that he remained on Iona until his death in 729.<sup>698</sup>

Those years of production lead into the period of the Book of Kells and overlap the period when Pictish relief cross slabs were exhibiting a control of geometrical design and Christian symbolism at least as fine as that on any of the high crosses from Iona or Ireland and, given the nature of stone as a medium, even the books themselves. But any claim that due attention be given to the geographical and cultural context of Iona is likely to fall on deaf ears. Thus, De Hamel, in accepting that the Book of Kells might well have been produced on Iona, states that this 'does not undermine the absolute Irishness of the manuscript, for it was an exclusively Irish community on an island accessed from Ireland, not yet classified by modern political borders.'<sup>699</sup>

Iona was not the only scriptorium in Scotland from which books of similar quality may well have emanated, but the fact that none of the books which survive from Iona is housed in Scotland has prejudiced the assessment of the artistry of the community which supported their production. In the major exhibition *Celts, Art and Identity* organised jointly by the National Museums of Scotland and the British Museum, the Book of Kells, though referred to, was not exhibited, nor does the accompanying book consider Iona as its provenance, only that

The style fuses influences from Britain, the Germanic world and the Mediterranean.<sup>700</sup>

This is true, but the emphasis of the statement subsumes the Picts and the Scots into Britain, omits Ireland and directs the reader away from the place of production and its other artworks. The exhibition book focusses on fusion on the

697. Laing and Laing, *The Picts and the Scots*, 158.

698. Henderson, *From Durrow to Kells*, 93–94.

699. Christopher de Hamel, *Meeting with Remarkable Manuscripts* (2016), 139.

700. Fraser Hunter, Martin Goldberg, Julia Farley and Ian Leins, 'In Search of the Celts', in *Celts: Art and Identity* (London, 2015), 23.

one hand and diversity on the other and, in this, offers a welcome corrective to the more extreme nativist and Celto-centric views. However, Gaelic – the language spoken by a substantial proportion of the makers of the artefacts illustrated, including the Book of Kells – is referred to only twice in the following terms:

Some of the labels include unfamiliar words in Gaelic.

... the Gaelic-speaking populations of Ireland who also settled in pockets along the western seaboard of Britain, especially the west of Scotland.

The settlement theory with respect to the kingdom of Dalriada has been cogently challenged (see V.2.b.) and, in any case, the eastern kingdom of Dalriada can hardly be described as a mere pocket. Nowhere in the book is any reference made to the contemporary evidence of complexity of design in Gaelic poetry, whether from Scotland or Ireland, nor is the substantial use of Gaelic in early Christian writing acknowledged. Both of these might reasonably find a place in discussion of the development of artistic styles.

Let us remember, then, that the production of these masterpieces arose out of a community of Gaelic-speakers for whom a love of beauty and scholarship was paramount. Beccán mac Luigdach, writing in the Inner Hebrides in the 7th century, lists the many self-denials of St Columba, but the arts are not to be denied; rather, they are highlighted as measures of the highest of our human achievements:

Dún mo uäd ... Techtaiss liubru ... Ar seirc léigind ... Columb canmae ... riaruib imbaiss, ima-comairc cách fo-n-gniäm.

*Safeguard of my creativity ... manuscripts he owned ... in concern for learning ... Colum, we keep singing ... him we are serving through poetry's injunction which invokes him.*<sup>701</sup>

JP

### IV.3. MIXED MEDIA

#### IV.3.a. DANCE, BALLET AND OPERA

[Introduction](#); [Dance and Environment](#); [Character Dances](#); [Acrobatic Dances](#); [From Country Dance to Ballet](#); [Opera](#)

#### INTRODUCTION

While it is generally accepted that there was no indigenous tradition of drama in the Gàidhealtachd, John MacInnes has drawn attention to traditions of

701. W. McLeod and M. Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire* (Edinburgh, 2007), 4–9.



mumming<sup>702</sup> and quotes the minister of Glenelg, writing in 1764:

The Highlanders, at their festivals and other public meetings, acted the poems of Ossian. Rude and simple as their manner of acting was, yet any brave or generous action, any injury or distress, exhibited in the representation, had a surprising effect towards raising in them corresponding passions and sentiments.

This section looks at the relationship between dance, dance music and the environment in the Gàidhealtachd. It continues with evidence of character and acrobatic dances, some depicted in knotted figures in early medieval Celtic artwork, and considers the relationship between all of these and the development of a specifically Celtic ballet. The section concludes with a brief consideration of Gaelic or Gaelic-influenced opera and drama.

#### DANCE AND ENVIRONMENT

Is there a case for looking at the general characteristics of a nation's music and dance in relation to its environment? Does more mountainous country engender more wide-ranging melodies, characterised by disjunct rather than conjunct motion and more athletic forms of dance? With respect to music, these are questions which merit study in their own right but, in this section, they are considered as aspects of dance, dance being, in many respects, a visual response to music.

The rugged terrain of the Gàidhealtachd, with its bogs, crags, streams and gullies, requires agility – particularly the ability to jump. As Dr Johnson observed:

[The Islanders'] strength is proportionate to their size, but they are accustomed to run upon rough ground, and therefore can with great agility skip over the bog, or clamber the mountain.<sup>703</sup>

There is evidence from a variety of sources that a number of Scotland's dances and their music reflect this agility and that these are particularly associated with the Highlands. The following comments, with one exception, are by non-Scots. Thomas Morley, in 1597, points out the distinctiveness of the Scottish jig:

And I dare boldly affirm that look which is he who thinketh himself the best descanter of all his neighbours, enjoin him to make but a Scottish Jig, he will grossly err in the true nature and quality of it.<sup>704</sup>

702. Quoted in John MacInnes, 'The Gaelic Literary Tradition', in Michael Newton, ed., *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes* (Edinburgh, 2006), 178.

703. Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands ...* (London, 1974), 75.

704. R. A. Harman, ed., *Thomas Morley A Plain & Easy Introduction to Practical Music* (London, 1952), 298.

Circa 1599, Shakespeare has Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* describe wooing as 'hot and hasty, like a Scotch jig, and full as fantastical.' In 1611, John Florio in *World of Words* defines *chiarantana* as 'a kinde of Caroll or song full of leapings like a Scottish gigge'. These characteristics are still in evidence in the later 18th century with Dr Johnson declaring on Raasay, 'nor did ever fairies trip with greater alacrity',<sup>705</sup> and Boswell on the same occasion noting that 'Malcolm bounded like a roe'.<sup>706</sup> Edward Topham, reporting in his *Letters from Edinburgh* (1774–1775), remarks:

You know 'tis a custom in London for some of the principal Dancing-masters to have balls for their benefit; but here it is a general thing, from the one most in vogue, to the humble teacher of a reel to the drone of a bagpipe Each has his ball and his public at a particular season of the year in the Assembly Room ... the Dancing-masters enliven the entertainment by introducing between the minuets their High Dances (which is a kind of Double Hornpipe) in the execution of which they excel perhaps the rest of the World. I wish I had it in my power to describe to you the variety of figures and steps they put into it. Besides all those common to the hornpipe, they have a number of their own which I never before saw or heard of: so amazing is their agility, that an Irishman, who was standing by me the other night, could not help exclaiming in his surprise that 'by Jesus, he never saw children so *handy* with their *feet* in all his life.'

In the 19th century, Queen Victoria 'took a sincere and supportive interest in Scotland's culture and languages ... advising the Duke of Atholl to employ a Gaelic-speaking nursemaid so that the language would not be lost.'<sup>707</sup> This interest extended also to dance. Even in her old age, Queen Victoria was susceptible to the Ghillies Ball, as her disgruntled Private Secretary reports:

I found some asperity at my absence. Explanations ensued, culminating in my dancing a Hooligan with the Queen.<sup>708</sup>

The Ghillies Balls 'were somewhat rowdy affairs attended by shouting. License was granted to the staff, and no comment was made if gait was unsteady or soup spilt at table.'<sup>709</sup> The Hooligan is the 'Hoolachan' or Reel of Tulloch. Dictionaries seem to have failed to pick up on this version of the name of the

705. John MacInnes, 'The Gaelic Literary Tradition', 52.

706. John MacInnes, 'The Gaelic Literary Tradition', 267.

707. M. Bennett, 'Step-dancing: Why we must learn from past mistakes', *West Highland Free Press* (14 October 1994), 21.

708. D. Duff, ed., *Queen Victoria's Highland Journals* (Exeter, 1980), 220.

709. Duff, *Queen Victoria's Highland Journals*, 220.

dance as a possible origin for the word 'hooligan', for which they find no sure ancestry. This at any rate, appears to be its first use, and may be a debased reflection of the liveliness of Highland dancing so widely observed through the centuries. One of the leading experts on Highland dance, James MacDonald Reid, has commented:

The changeover from a society which is formed by its environment to one that reforms its environment is so thoroughly completed in Scotland that it is easy to forget that until very recently it was unusual to see a man in Scotland without a woollen cap or hat. Until the construction of road networks (which was not even begun in the Highlands until the 1730s) the customary footwear used in the Scottish countryside was made under the assumption that the feet will get wet and that nothing could prevent it ...

Reid goes on to refer to Captain Edward Burt's report (see III.3.a.) on how clothing, transport and architecture were peculiarly devised to deal with persistent rainfall, steep, rocky hills, unbridged streams and innumerable bogs and concludes:

It is vital in the understanding of the dance customs of Scotland – and of the Highlands especially – that they evolved within such an atmosphere.

After referring to the clockwise motion of concentric circles in Northern hemisphere dance, Reid continues:

Another example is that of footsteps. In a flat terrain, the heel always lands on the ground first while walking; in a hilly country that is not necessarily the case. But it is noticeable that the folk dance steps of flat regions, such as most of Hungary and Poland, use the heel for the main beats, while those of mountain communities tend to concentrate on the ball of the feet.<sup>710</sup>

Some care, however, is required with the terminology as well as conclusions derived from footwear. Mats Melin points out that 'Hebridean Dancing' and 'Highland Dancing' are by no means synonymous and points to the existence of step dances which have lost their character through being performed with soft-soled shoes.<sup>711</sup>

Such caveats aside, does the music for Scottish dance demonstrate any

710. James MacDonald Reid, unpublished paper on dance for the Sabhal Mòr Ostaig Struathan project.

711. M. Melin, 'Hebridean Dancing', *Scotland's Dances: A review of the 1994 Conference on the Diversity of the Scottish Tradition of Dance, Stirling 25/26 October 1994*, 18.

relevant characteristics? George Emmerson points out that 'the Irish reel is of a smoother rhythmical structure than the Scottish', and the characteristic Scotch snaps and other dotted rhythms of the strathspey reel imply energy, emphasis and even elevation – they give a 'lift' to the rhythm. These characteristics are imported into the music of the jig, many jigs being derived from the preceding reel or strathspey – as Oswald's mid-18th-century *Caledonian Pocket Companion* amply demonstrates. In addition, the ever-present use of the double tonic gives a blatant, almost seismic vertical shift to the music, over and over again. The double tonic is a simple structural and harmonic device in which the entire tonal basis of the music is shifted down a tone and then up again. It is the equivalent of climbing down and back up a step of the geological strata of a cliff face.

The music of the reel was primarily developed in Scotland. The dance, however, has many similarities to the *bouffée* and may have originally developed from some common French source.<sup>712</sup> Scottish reels are economical of space because when danced indoors, where the fire was centrally placed on the floor of the main and (frequently only) room, there was no opportunity for expansive movement. The same held true even in some of the Highland castles whose halls could never have accommodated anything approaching a ballroom. Even dancing outdoors required a patch of good, level, dry ground, and it is possible that a *tulach* or small, green, smooth-topped hill was used for the Reel of Tulloch. Its specific characteristics, involving turning on the arm rather than a travelling step, mean that it can be danced on uneven ground and in awkward spaces and outdoors on *na tulaich* – a notion not entirely rejected in Donald Mclean's account of the 'The Reel of Tulloch in Fact and Fiction'.<sup>713</sup>

One exception which is fiction drawn out from fact is George MacDonald Fraser's classic and hilarious story *The General Danced At Dawn*, whose various editions have occasioned at least two splendid cover illustrations.<sup>714</sup> Eightsome reels are common even in small village halls – sixteensomes are not unheard of – but Fraser's tale ends with an improbably heroic hundred-and-twenty-eightsome, danced by the headlights of military jeeps in the North African desert, which is indeed spacious enough. Seemingly improbable, but seriously reported by Aelred of Rievaulx, is that the Scottish army were preceded by jongleurs and dancers at the Battle of the Standard in 1138.

Dancing, Highland or otherwise, in the Scottish regiments, with its associated formal wear at regimental dinners, went beyond entertainment. It was a requirement for promotion in the Pipes and Drums of the 1st Battalion

712. Reid, unpublished paper on dance.

713. D. McLean, 'The Reel of Tulloch in Fact and Fiction', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* LIX (1994–1996), 118–28.

714. G. Fraser, *The General Danced at Dawn* (London, 1976), 76–87.

The Black Watch and officers were expected to be highly proficient.<sup>715</sup> Dance was also used to keep men fit:

... in a typical six-step Highland Fling, a dancer will jump vertically 192 times, while performing complicated and intricate footwork, and using the muscles from head to toe. Highland dancing is therefore akin to sprinting, with dancers using fast-twitch muscle, which is also required by soldiers.<sup>716</sup>

Although the reel is normally economical of space, it is far from being economical of energy. Reel steps are of two basic sorts, the *ceum coisiche* and the *ceum siubhail* (setting and travel step). These mirror the nature of verse and chorus in that the setting steps (the ‘verses’) may change, but the travel step (the ‘chorus’) is always the same. Most steps are based upon combinations of step and hop, the hop often involving a slight jump, the foot not bearing the dancer’s weight being frequently pointed stiffly forward or shaken, the foot itself even reaching knee height. The arms are often raised above and forward of the head, particularly by men in the travelling step, in the position known as *caber fèidh* (the stag’s antlers). Putting these elements together, it is clear that a well-executed reel requires strength, stamina and agility. The dancing master Francis Peacock, writing in 1805, particularly admired the skills of students from the Highlands and Western Isles in the reel.<sup>717</sup>

A lively debate has, however, been taking place with respect to the origins of dance in the Gàidhealtachd, with the more ‘nativist’ view of William Lamb challenged by Michael Newton’s focus upon the influence of French and other aristocratic dance forms in élite Highland culture:

These new dance forms (and poetic phrases which depict them) are a reflection of, and rely upon, a particular form of material culture found only in élite habitations: wooden floors. In these recurrent oral formulae, *urlar-déile* / *ùrlar-clàraidh* / *bòrdaibh*, all indicating wooden flooring, appear in association with the dance, demonstrating not only the refined manners of the dancers as an aspect of their aristocratic background and training, but also the material signs of wealth in the form of domestic architecture. Anyone who has spent much time dancing can appreciate

715. D. Anson, ‘Military Traditions’, Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust *Newsletter* (June 2000), 6.

716. K. Duncan, *Introduction to Highland Dancing*: <<https://electricscotland.com/dance/intro.htm>>.

717. E. Hood, ‘The First Scottish Choreographer’, Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust *Newsletter* (Spring 1998).

the difference between a sprung wooden floor and a hard floor and the kinds of dance afforded by these differing materials. Beyond this, some texts imply that the wooden floor is a better resonator for percussive dance effects.<sup>718</sup>

Images of typical Highland dances vary from a number of 18th-century paintings by David Allan (1744–1796) of penny weddings and the like to the innumerable photographs of competitive Highland dancing in Scotland, North America and Australasia, the latter promoting considerable athleticism. This athleticism is also present, though to a much less marked degree, in Allan’s *Highland Wedding at Blair Atholl* (1780), which shows all the dancers on their toes, the men with arms raised and a kilted dancer performing a kind of back kick. It is possible that this characteristic is the back kick playfully mocked in ‘The Flying Betwixt Polwart and Montgomery’ of 1582.<sup>719</sup> A similar scene is depicted in his *A Highland Dance* of about the same date, but David Allan’s images of dance and illustrations for songs and ballads have yet to be fully researched.<sup>720</sup>

An entertaining contemporary caricature of the daughters of Sir James MacDonald being taught dancing by Mr Strange at Hopetoun House reinforces Newton’s claims for considerable interaction between Highland and Lowland aristocrats.



David Allan, *A Highland Dance* (c. 1780), National Galleries Scotland: <<https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/21917>>

718. M. Newton, ‘*Dannsair air ùrlar-déile thu*: Gaelic evidence about dance from the mid-17th to late 18th century Highlands’, *International Review of Scottish Studies* 38 (2013), 57.

719. ‘The Flying Betwixt Polwart and Montgomery’, in H. Wood, ed., *James Watson’s Choice Collection of Comic and Serious Scots Poems* Vol. I (Edinburgh, 1977), Part III, 22.

720. Dr Katherine Campbell has undertaken research into Allan’s work. See K. Campbell, ‘Visualising Scots Song: an approach through the work of David Allan (1744–1796)’, paper given at the Scots and Gaelic Song Conference, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, June 2010.





David Strange giving a Dancing Lesson at Hopetoun House to the MacDonald girls

In addition to the evidence put forward so far, there is a number of character dances which imply a good deal of agility, if not something close to acrobatic skill.

#### CHARACTER DANCES

In 1804, Alexander Campbell published his six-volume poem 'The Grampians Desolate'. In a thirteen-page endnote he gives details of dances that 'made part of the amusements or mirthful exercises of the Gael,' giving historical and other details with directions in Gaelic as well as English, dividing the dances into four classes of one, two, three or more dancers, with the fourth group being 'Dances of character or dramatic cast.'<sup>721</sup> Several of the dances he describes in Class 1 are also character dances:

*A Chraig Leith*, is danced by one man with a *flaughter-spade*, who sings at the same time, telling how he fared after his day's *darg*, or labour. – Is this the same sort of dance mentioned in '*The Complaynt of Scotland*,' called '*the speyde*?' ... *A' Cuthaich chaoil dubh*, is a kind of wild fantastic dance that requires great strength and agility to go through the various steps and movements, and is danced by one man.<sup>722</sup>

Campbell goes on to describe 'Crait an Dreathan' (the wren's croft) giving form

721. Alexander Campbell, *Grampians Desolate: A Poem* (Edinburgh, 1804), 257–70.

722. Campbell, *Grampians Desolate*, 263.

and text of this comic song performed to the bagpipes and ending with the solo male dancer displaying his tartan:

Nuair thainig mi da-thaigh, rinn Fionghul Donn agam fhein an Cach-ta so damh; agus chuir i an dearg an' cridh ghuirm, agus an gorm an' crithe 'n uaine, agus cearsle dhubh na cheann deire, agus chaithe mi mar sud fhein i.

*When I came home, my own brunette Flora made this tartan here; and she put the red into the heart of the blue, and the blue into the heart of the green, and a clue of black at the end, and I wear it as you now see.*<sup>723</sup>

Anne Stapleton has observed that Campbell's work reflects an assertion of the Scottish national characteristics of dance which grew during the first part of the 19th century.<sup>724</sup>

A dance originating in Strath in the Isle of Skye and still danced in Eigg in the 1950s is *An Dannsa Mòr*. In the chorus section, the twelve all-male dancers join hands with arms straight, just below shoulder height, and extend their right legs into the centre of the circle thus formed and hop round on the left foot. It is suggested that the rotation of the dancers imitates a mill wheel, the words being put into the mouth of a miller's daughter. The dance also incorporates a gesture mimicking throwing up the mill dust referred to in the accompanying song.<sup>725</sup>

With the 'Ruighle nan Coileach Dubha', the 'lekking' of black grouse cocks was imitated in an unusual setting step, with each partner bobbing up and down by taking turns to kneel on one knee while their partner set to them.<sup>726</sup> The 'Dannsa na Tunnag' (The Duck's Dance) was an even more demanding form of the reel, involving dancing on one's hunkers and shooting one leg out to the side – a style now almost exclusively associated with Cossack dancing, which is equally a test of endurance. In 'Dannsa na Tunnag', however, one was permitted to push other dancers over, though they might resume until exhaustion defeated them.<sup>727</sup> Other dances associated with creatures include the 'Marbhadh na Béiste Duibhe' (The Killing of the Otter) and 'Cath nan Coileach' (The Bickering of the Cocks).<sup>728</sup> The

723. Campbell, *Grampians Desolate*, 265–68.

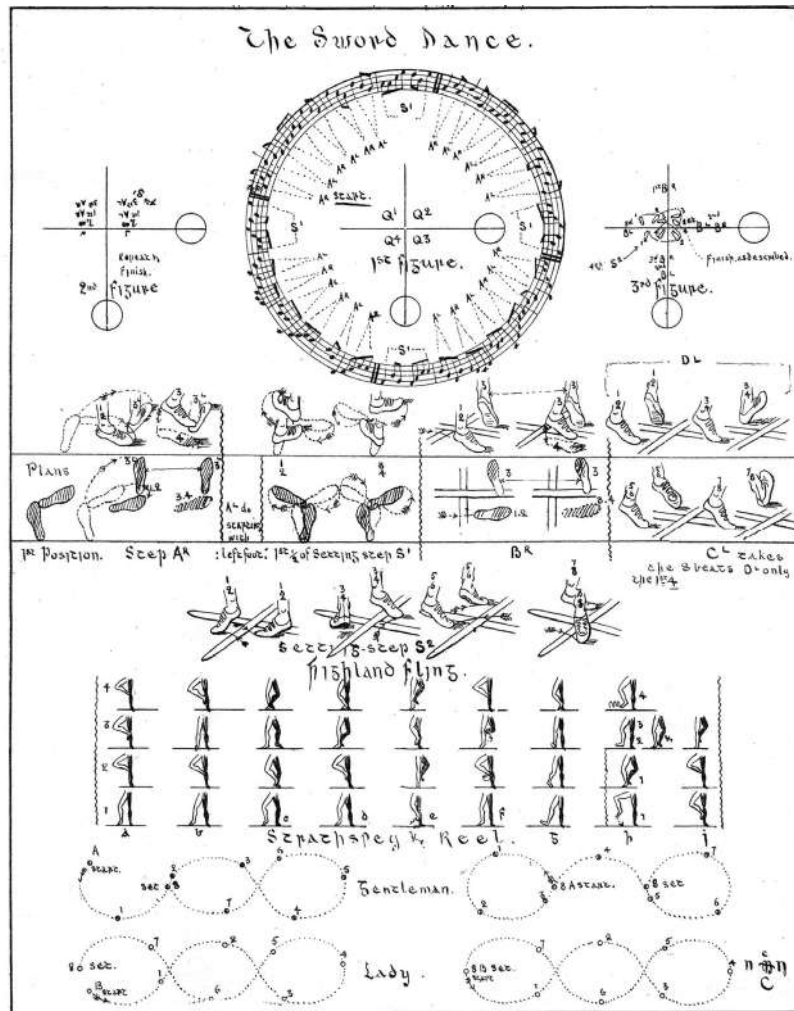
724. Anne McKee Stapleton, *Pointed Encounters Dance in Post-Culloden Scottish Literature* (Amsterdam, New York 2014), 59–61 and ensuing chapters.

725. J. and T. Flett, 'Some Hebridean Folk Dances', *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* 7, Part 2 (1953), 120–24. Also J. and T. Flett, 'Dramatic Jigs in Scotland', *Folk-Lore* LXVII and LXVIII (London, 1957), 84–96.

726. Reid, unpublished paper on dance.

727. J. and T. Flett, 'Some Hebridean Folk Dances', 119–120. See also 'Eigg War Dance', *Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust Newsletter* (Winter 1997/98).

728. J. and T. Flett, 'Some Hebridean Folk Dances', 112–27. Also, J. and T. Flett, 'Dramatic Jigs in Scotland', 84–96.



*Leabhar Comunn nam Fìor Ghael* (1881), Plate LXVII

present author has witnessed a male dancer, when it was his turn to step into the centre of the circle, apparently imitating a salmon caught in a net.

The solo Sword Dance perhaps represents the ultimate in skill and agility. It used to be danced clockwise to the tune of 'Gille Chalum', usually in bare or stockinged feet, with the sharp edges of the blades facing up. It is rarely thus performed, as they are few indeed who are good enough to risk it. The *Leabhar Comunn nam Fìor Ghael* of 1881 has a diagram of the Sword Dance and the Highland Fling, though the feet are shown lightly shod.<sup>729</sup>

The movement across and back and across the cardinal points made by the

729. C. North, *Leabhar Comunn nam Fìor Ghael* II, Plate LXVII, 75.

crossed swords, and continuing round in a sunwise circle, is suggestive of the form of the Celtic cross, and the whole might be seen as symbolic of triumph over adversity, but what its origins were is not known, though legends enough abound.

Many of the examples given so far now survive only as memories and without any adequate account of the actual steps. The following is the chorus of a character dance 'in which a *làn-chaibhe*, or *flaughter-spade*, used in cutting turf, was introduced'.<sup>730</sup> Creag Liath is on a farm at Gallovie near Grantown-on-Spey.

Sìor-bhuain cùlaig, Sìor-bhuain cùlaig,  
Sìor-bhuain cùlaig, Air a' Chreig Léith  
Thusa 'g a gearradh, Mise 'g a rùsgadh,  
Sìor-bhuain cùlaig, Air a' Chreig Léith

*Yourself cutting it, myself skinning it, cut the peat for the back of the fire, on Creag Léith.*

The *cùlag* was a large flat peat placed at the back of the fire to help keep it in. As *cùlag* can also refer to 'one who rides behind another on horseback, generally a woman sitting sideways behind a man' and also the 'Back stroke from the horn of a ram' and a 'Stroke with the back of the hand',<sup>731</sup> such a dance could have given rise to many amusing postures and interactions. John Shaw refers to a 17th-century source for female dancers accompanied by a violin and appearing along with Gaelic satirists and storytellers.<sup>732</sup>

John MacInnes has proposed connections between dance and certain classes of *òrain luaidh* or waulking songs,<sup>733</sup> and Michael Newton has gathered evidence for the association of dance with wakes and with rituals of fertility and regeneration.<sup>734</sup> Both authors consider possible sources in mainland European dance and there is every reason to accept that there was a great deal of interchange. Scottish jugglers – a term likely to have covered acrobats, dancers and musicians – are recorded in Spain in 1384, and it is worth pointing out that Arbeau's 1588 account of the Scottish branles makes mention both of their variety and musical distinctiveness.<sup>735</sup> No doubt the traffic in dance was in many directions.

730. T. Sinton, *Poetry of Badenoch* V, 4.

731. E. Dwelly, *The Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary* (Glasgow, 1901–1911 and 1977), 297.

732. John Shaw, 'What Alexander Carmichael Did Not Print', *Béaloideas* 70 (2002), 101–02.

733. J. MacInnes, 'Gaelic Song and the Dance', in M. Newton, ed., *Dualchas nan Gàidheal* (Edinburgh, 2006), 248–64.

734. M. Newton, 'Dancing with the Dead', in McLeod, Fraser and Gunderloch, eds, *Cànan & Cultar/Language & Culture: Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig* 3, 215–34.

735. J. Purser, *Scotland's Music* (Edinburgh, 2007), 76 and 119–20.

## ACROBATIC DANCES

A fascinating line of research being pursued by Alan Nowell suggests that some of the forms of interlace in manuscripts and stone carvings are related to dance.<sup>736</sup> Nowell takes a particular image of men with interlocked legs and arms from the Book of Kells and relates it to a dance which has survived in Wyresdale in North Lancashire. Extending this relationship to other similar designs in the Book of Kells – on Muiredach's Cross, the Togherstown bronze mount, the Kells Market Cross, the Bobbio Gospels and the Pictish Meigle 26 recumbent stone – he has then offered possible reconstructions of them in three dimensions, with three or four dancers.

The correspondences are not exact but they are remarkable. A dance with suggestive parallels is 'An Dannsa Mòr', referred to above, but one might also include 'Cath nan Coileach' in which the dancers held crossed hands with their partner's, creating a compact star figure retained throughout the dance, which included a setting step, a travel step, a backward step thumping and hopping and, finally, a pivot step for a rapid spin of the circle.



Meigle Stone 26, detail

As Nowell points out himself, there may be an element of humour included in these images as, assuming they do represent dancers, then what was already improbably complex in the actual surviving dance becomes well-nigh impossible in the image. On the other hand, jugglers and the like were not unknown in the early medieval period<sup>737</sup> and may have been able to execute even the most demanding of these human knots – and all the three-person dances were recreated at three days' notice by male dancers at the New Zealand Gàidhealtachd 2017, without any difficulty or mishap.

One 'dance' which should not go unmentioned on account of its visual significance was devised for a group of pipers to protect Scotland from a Northern Queen, by a truly extraordinary trick recorded in *The Saga-Book of the Viking Club*:

The king of Lochlin's daughter was in the habit of coming to Scotland every

736. A. Nowell, 'An Insular Dance: The dance of the Fer Cengail?', *Archaeology Ireland* (Summer 2005), 36–39. NB the publication wrongly identifies the author as Newell.

737. See, for instance, the entertainers listed as proper to, but absent from, King Bres's hospitality, namely 'poets, bards, lampooners, harpers, pipers, hornblowers, jugglers, fools and athletes'; see W. Stokes, 'The Second Battle of Moytura', para. 36, i, *Revue Celtique* XII, 68–69.

year to set fire to it. She came in a glass apparatus. She used to send word beforehand that she was coming. Yet the people of Scotland were unable to keep her from doing harm. They were very anxious to catch her, but she was too wily for them. After every other plan had been tried in vain it was agreed upon that eighteen pipers should be got together, and that every two of them should face each other, and that the nine couples should stand around so as to form a circle. They were all to play the same tune together, and as the tune was being played each piper was to keep moving round – always facing his partner, so as to make one large circle, formed of nine smaller moving circles. The sight and sound would surely attract the king of Lochlin's daughter. The sight and sound did attract her, and she was seen in her glass gear hovering right overhead, evidently listening to the pipes and gazing at the strange sight beneath. She also began to go round and round. This made her dizzy, and she fell in her glass gear right into the middle of the pipers and was dashed to pieces. The woods of Scotland were safe ever after.<sup>738</sup>

While such a story is fanciful in the extreme, the potential presence of otherworldly forces at a wedding was genuinely feared. In the 'Ruithleadh Ghoid' or Stealing Reel, the newly-married couple would separately slip out of the dance in order to avoid their being stolen by the fairies. This precaution was also taken on occasion for the bridesmaid and best man.<sup>739</sup>

Before proceeding to country dance and ballet, there is a further style of dancing which, though less visually extravagant, can be equally complex, and this is Highland step dancing. Here the dance is essentially a solo which follows the music closely with a series of steps, derived from a common stock of (in one case) up to sixty different steps, but the order of which may be improvised. Recently this form of dancing has become associated almost exclusively with the Cape Breton style which uses hard-soled shoes and relies considerably on the sound they produce on a hard floor. This style, which avoids arm movement, is virtually indistinguishable from the step dance style of French-speaking Quebec. But step dancing in Scotland and also in Newfoundland did not necessarily rely on hard shoes and floors, and the authenticity of the revival of this style is still being debated, though there is no doubt that it was once widely practised in Scotland in one form or another.<sup>740</sup>

Michael Newton quotes a poem by Raonaid nighean mhic Néill MacDonald,

738. The Rev. A. McDonald, 'The Norsemen in Uist Folklore', *Saga Book of the Viking Club* III (1901–1903).

739. J. and T. Flett, *Traditional Dancing in Scotland* (London, 1964), 47.

740. M. Bennett, 'Step-dancing: Why we must learn from past mistakes', 21, and Reid, unpublished paper on dance.



describing a visit to Skye in the late 18th century, including ‘the action of beating the feet on wooden floors to produce a percussive effect, possibly the first reference to step-dancing in Scottish Gaelic literature’:

Far am biodh na fleasgaichean  
A' breabadh air an ùrlar;  
'S pìob mhór nam feadan bras ann  
Ri caismeachd air gach taobh dhiubh.

*Where the lads would be kicking on the floor; and there would be the great bagpipe of the lively chanters playing to the procession on each side of you.*<sup>741</sup>

#### FROM COUNTRY DANCE TO BALLET

The romanticism engendered by Gaelic folklore and Highland landscape can be credited with a crucial role in the very beginnings of classical ballet, in the form of *La Sylphide*, whether in Taglioni or Bournanville's choreography. Both owed their origins to Charles Nodier's *Trilby, ou Le Lutin d'Argail* of 1822. Nodier wrote about his travels to Loch Lomond and the Trossachs and shows a rhapsodic interest in Gaelic place-names, dress and culture.<sup>742</sup> His fairy tale is set in the Highlands, as are all the versions of the ballet. *La Sylphide* was, in its day, revolutionary in its use of *en pointe* and short skirts to show off the legs of the dancer. It in turn inspired *Les Sylphides*, though the latter has no story line. The lead role was, however, premiered by Anna Pavlova (see below) in 1909.

It was early in 1923 that Miss Jean Milligan cofounded the Scottish Country Dance Society, now enjoying Royal status. Its work of standardising and regulating country dance has had a profound effect and its success has been phenomenal. Miss Milligan used her position as a trainer of teachers in Physical Education to impress her own ideas upon her numerous students. The shoes worn had to be dancing pumps; positions were based on classical ballet and the publications of the Society, still much in use today, dictated the proper method of execution. Scottish country dancing gives enormous pleasure to many thousands and the patterns of movement in some of the more complex dances, when gracefully executed, are both a pleasure to take part in and to watch, but in general they reflect more modern urban values and, in the ceilidh hall, are frequently brought back down to earth, though without necessarily losing all grace or agility. Nonetheless, the relationship with ballet was not a wholly artificial one. We have seen how Scottish

<sup>741</sup> M. Newton, 'Dannsair air ùrlar-déile thu: Gaelic evidence about dance from the mid-17th to late 18th century Highlands', *International Review of Scottish Studies* 38 (2013), 69. The quotation comes from the *MacDonald Collection of Gaelic Poetry* (Inverness, 1911), 113. The translation is Newton's.

<sup>742</sup> Charles Nodier, *Promenade from Dieppe to the Mountains of Scotland*, translated from the French (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1822).

dance traditionally uses the ball rather than the heel of the foot and how elevation has played a prominent part in both the jig and the reel. Classical ballet has at its heart the notion of antigravity. Leaps are fundamental to it, especially for the male dancers. As for a possible parallel with Highland dancing, we have none other than Anna Pavlova making this comparison:

She told me that she had been studying it carefully and had come to the conclusion that Highland and ballet dancing had the same base. She even demonstrated ballet movements to me and showed the corresponding movement in the Highland fling. With a heritage like that, she said, the Scots ought to be good ballet dancers. It will be interesting to see whether the new Scottish ballet can come up to her opinion.<sup>743</sup>

The 'new Scottish ballet' was formed in 1937 by the Scottish composer, Erik Chisholm. It was succeeded by the Celtic Ballet, founded by the dancer/choreographer/artist Margaret Morris. Chisholm's ballet *The Forsaken Mermaid*, composed for the former company, was the first production of its successor. One of the proposed ballets by Chisholm, composed but never produced, was called *Piobaireachd*, and included two sections based upon *ceòl mòr*, which Chisholm ultimately used for the basis of his *Pictures from Dante*.<sup>744</sup> The story of these companies has been told elsewhere;<sup>745</sup> but their creation not only gave an opportunity for Scottish dance forms to find a place on the ballet stage, but also for Scottish costume and set designers to reflect aspects of Celtic or at least Highland culture in a context from which they had largely been excluded.

The work of Taylor Elder and Crosbie, as well as Morris herself, brought a new modernist approach to Celtic subject matter. Original costumes for *The Forsaken*



Taylor Elder, *Seaweed Maidens* (c. 1940)

<sup>743</sup> Unidentified Glasgow newspaper cutting, Chisholm Papers, Box 14, 109.

<sup>744</sup> J. Purser, *Erik Chisholm, Scottish Modernist 1904–1965* (Woodbridge, 2009), 102–11.

<sup>745</sup> J. Purser, 'The Celtic Ballet: Ballet, Baton and Brush in Search of Peace in Time of War', *Journal of the Scottish Society for Art History* 13 (2008–2009), 7–15. Also Purser, *Erik Chisholm*, Chapp. 5 and 6.

*Mermaid* are kept in the Fergusson Gallery in Perth and show a sensitivity to colour and material which, coupled with the now-faded applied paint, is expressive in its own right. A video of the Mermaid's Dance, using Morris's original choreography and danced in the original costume, shows just how effective was the combination of music, dance and design.

Morris was the first exponent of the Isadora Duncan method of dancing, which broke many social taboos, involving near-nudity, dancing barefoot and freedom of costume and movement that were in direct opposition to the classical ballet ideals of the time. Duncan was inspired by Greek art and Morris also integrated visual art into her work, in cooperation with her husband, J. D. Fergusson, both of them bringing a thoroughly modernist approach to their work.

The same modernist approach was brought to Ian Whyte's ballet *Donald of the Burthens*, produced at Covent Garden in 1951. The scenario comes from 'Domhnall nan Cual', a Gaelic folk tale collected by the Rev. James MacDougall, published in 1910, and followed closely by Massine.<sup>746</sup> The ballet includes a waulking song and mouth music and concludes splendidly with orchestra and bagpipes playing 'The Reel of Tulloch'. The choreography was directed by Massine who developed a new combination of Highland dancing and ballet, with traditional steps supervised by John Armstrong and Elma Taylor. Equally significant, from the visual point of view, were the outstanding sets and costumes by Robert Colquhoun and Robert MacBryde. Alexander Grant was Donald and Beryl Grey took the demanding role of Death.

The role of Death involved terrific leaps, turns and twists in quick succession. Dressed daringly for the time, from head to foot in flame coloured body tights, Beryl Grey flashed across the stage like a beam of angry light receiving a tremendous and deserved ovation.<sup>747</sup>

Streamlined in scarlet tights she dances with angular, disjointed movements such as might be expected of a skeleton – austere and brittle. Miss Grey executes this long and strenuous role with amazing speed and vitality.<sup>748</sup>

Sets and costumes made use of motifs derived from 'a primitive and megalithic Scotland'.<sup>749</sup> It seems clear that the [Riasg Buidhe](#) on Colonsay was the direct

746. The Rev. J. MacDougall, *Folk Tales and Fairy Lore* (Edinburgh: Grant, 1910), 68–73.

747. Debra Boraston, Dame Beryl Grey, DBE: <[http://henrymoorestudio.co.uk/dbpr/beryl/bg\\_biog.html](http://henrymoorestudio.co.uk/dbpr/beryl/bg_biog.html)>.

748. Eric Johns writing in *The Stage*, quoted in D. Gillard, *Beryl Grey, a Biography* (London, 1977).

749. Photographic review feature in *The Illustrated London News* (22 December 1951), 1045.



Colquhoun and MacBryde, set design for Whyte and Massine's *Donald of the Burthens* inspiration for 'the standing stones of an ancient Scotland' set design shown in *The Illustrated London News* feature on the ballet, of December 1951.

The lower part of the right-hand stone is almost identical with the cross and the implied sexuality of the imagery no less clear (see [IV.1.c.](#)). If they had not seen the cross *in situ*, Colquhoun and MacBryde could have seen an illustration of it in Allen and Anderson's study of early Christian monuments.<sup>750</sup> Given the subject matter of the ballet, it seems highly likely that they would have researched such sources, as they had been advised by Jankel Adler.<sup>751</sup> MacBryde wrote in 1946 that

Pictish art has interested me as later Celtic for twelve years and I have found much in later Scots painting of 17th & 18th century. The dramatic quality of this work is particularly Scots and follows naturally native feeling as in Dunbar, Henryson and the Ballad Makers ... Like Colquhoun, I am a young student with a passion for my own Scots & a desire to perpetuate our plant in the European bouquet.<sup>752</sup>

750. J. Romilly Allan, *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland ... with an Introduction by Joseph Anderson*, Part III (Edinburgh, 1903), 396.

751. R. Bristow, *The Last Bohemians: The Two Roberts – Colquhoun and MacBryde* (Bristol, 2010), 160.

752. R. MacBryde, undated letter to Michael Ayrton, 'London, Friday', quoted in Bristow, *The Last Bohemians*, 189.



Although MacBryde uses the word 'Scots' in the above, he was certainly very conscious of his Gaelic background, whether dancing a Highland reel or singing Gaelic songs he learnt from his mother.<sup>753</sup> Colquhoun and MacBryde are well-established clan names and 'the two Roberts' could be aggressively Scottish, wearing kilts and, in their own way, living a parallel bohemian life to that of the Scottish composer and critic Cecil Gray, for whom see below.

One of those best qualified to review *Donald of the Burthens* was Margaret Morris. Her script for the BBC Scottish Home Service programme *Arts Review* (the broadcast was on the 6 January 1952) shows her deep appreciation of what might have seemed to her an unfair rival, with all the facilities of a vast organisation which she had never enjoyed.

My first impression – as I came into the darkened circle at the dress-rehearsal; was of being enveloped in lovely sound and colour, and of a vivid scarlet – the figure of Death insistant and dominating – running through the pinks and greys and blues. Then I was conscious of relief that it was all on a level of Fantasy – and that there were no real Tartans, and no attempt to suggest more realistically the serious Scottish characteristics. The Kilt, in saffron and other colours, was made good use of, but worn over tights ... Massine ... told me he hoped to create something with the Scottish dance, as he had done with the Spanish, this I feel he has. (With the expert advice of Mr. Armstrong and Miss Alma Taylor) Massine has combined the Highland steps with the ballet technique, creating a new dance idiom.<sup>754</sup>

In an interview with Dame Beryl Grey, the present author was told that the Highland dancing on the ball of the foot presented the dancers with many challenges and many blisters, but that its agility was highly respected.

*Donald of the Burthens* has never been revived and the same applies to *The Forsaken Mermaid* and other Celtic ballets. McGuire's highly successful *Peter Pan*, commissioned for Scottish Ballet, brought a Scottish writer's scenario and an occasionally Highland musical idiom to the ballet stage in 1989, with matching choreography by Graham Lustig. But there is much left to be developed in this idiom, as well as much more research needing to be undertaken before we can claim to have thoroughly explored a world of dance, sets and costumes that draws fully and knowledgeably on the environment and dance traditions of the Gàidhealtachd.

753. Bristow, *The Last Bohemians*, 14 and 147.

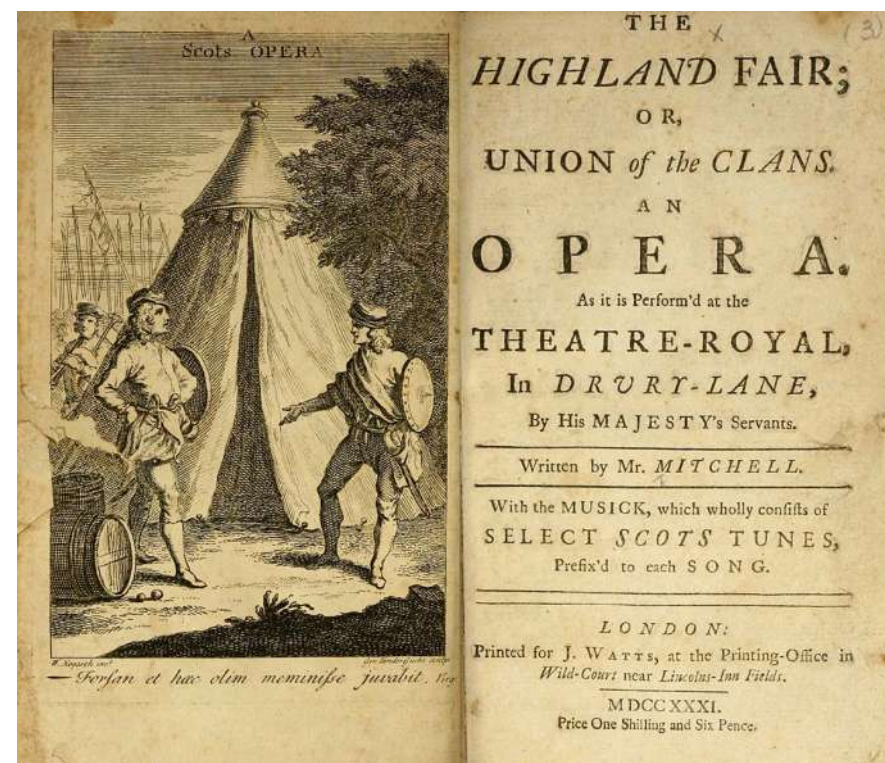
754. M. Morris, Typescript for BBC Scottish Home Service programme *Arts Review* (broadcast 6 January 1952, 7.00–7.30pm), Margaret Morris Archive, Fergusson Gallery, Perth. See also Margaret Morris, *My Life In Movement* (1969, and Garelochhead 2003), 161–65.

That said, the multimedia *Hiort* made powerfully expressive use of the cliffs of Lewis, standing in for those of *Hiort* (St Kilda). The *Hiort* cliffs are the highest in the British Isles but their use would have presented too many logistical problems. The relevance here was that the community that lived on *Hiort* depended very largely on the skill of the men gathering birds and eggs from the cliff faces, using ropes, as well as exhibiting great skill in free climbing.

#### OPERA

The world of opera was, at one time or another, fascinated with Scottish, and specifically Highland, subject matter.

An early example is that of Joseph Mitchell's ballad opera *The Highland Fair; or, Union of the Clans* which was performed and published in 1731. The performances were at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, London, and the whole was introduced by a discussion between a Critick and the Poet. The former demands justification from the Poet for the piece. The justification is made at two levels. First, that of novelty of 'the Musick, Manners and Dresses of the Country' and, second, the



Frontispiece and title page, Mitchell's *The Highland Fair* (1731).  
National Library of Scotland <CC BY 4.0>



reconciling of opposing factions. The Poet is then asked, 'Wou'd not the *Lowlands of Scotland*, have furnish'd you richer Materials?', to which the reply is 'But not have given me so just an Occasion to show the ancient Temper, Spirit, Customs, Manners, and Dresses of my Countrymen ...'<sup>755</sup> The implication here is that the Highlands and their attendant clan system represent Scotland in some primal way.

By the 1760s, the influence of Macpherson's *Ossian*, followed by the novels of Sir Walter Scott, extended into operatic extravaganzas on the continent of Europe, with vast orchestras and ranks of harps. Lesueur asked for ten on-stage harps and got eight for his *Ossian* (Paris, 1804), but was compensated for this restraint by being enrolled by Napoleon in the *Légion d'Honneur*. Macpherson's original text envisages a hundred harps.<sup>756</sup> These enthusiasms were taken up by many European artists and composers.<sup>757</sup>

Scottish artists also responded to the Ossianic craze; however, north and west of the English channel, with the exception of Shield and Reeve's *Oscar and Malvina* (Covent Garden, 1791), there was no significant operatic or balletic response to Macpherson. Neither composer was Scottish, the harper employed was John Erhard Weippert and the piper was an Irishman, O'Farrell, playing the Union pipes. Scottish composers who might have made use of such sources ignored them. John Thomson based his most successful opera *Hermann* on an Austrian romantic tale,<sup>758</sup> and MacKenzie's *Colomba* is set in Corsica. It was not until MacCunn and Drysdale came on the scene that Scottish composers turned their attention to Celtic subject matter and that an opportunity arose for this to be reflected in sets and costumes.

MacCunn and Drysdale's Celtic operas were to libretti by the Marquis of Lorne, Queen Victoria's son-in-law. Both the Marquis of Lorne and his wife Louise were artistic – Louise was a sculptor of considerable, if conventional skill. But MacCunn's *Diarmid* had sets and costumes which owed more to classical Greece or to some sort of amorphous mythology than to anything that might seem to relate directly to the time and location of the scenario.<sup>759</sup> Drysdale's *Fionn and Tera* was never produced.<sup>760</sup>

755. Mitchell, *The Highland Fair: Or Union of the Clans* (London, 1731), Introduction.

756. J. MacPherson, *Fingal* (Dublin, 1763), 69.

757. R. Fiske, *Scotland in Music* (Cambridge, 1983), 31–54.

758. Purser, *Scotland's Music*, 252–53.

759. See *The Sketch* (10 November 1897) and *The Illustrated London News* (13 November 1897) for black and white photographs of the costumes and a set for *Diarmid*.

760. M. Harris, *The Life and Work of (George John) Learmont Drysdale (1866–1909)*, Honours degree thesis, University of Glasgow Music Department (1998), 66.

Cecil Gray composed an opera on the subject of Deirdre of the Sorrows, but his *Deirdre* was never produced, nor was his opera *The Temptation of St Anthony*. It was based upon Flaubert's original and, remarkably for its time, was conceived as a possible television opera, focussing upon spectacular visual effects called for in the score in Gray's own sensual translation of the original Flaubert,<sup>761</sup> but what visual form Gray's conception of *Deirdre* might have taken is not known (see [I.3.a.](#)).

Subsequent operas of particular relevance to the Gàidhealtachd include Judith Weir's *The Vanishing Bridegroom* (1990), which engages with Gaelic legend and makes some use of the language. William Sweeney and Aonghas MacNeacail's *An Turas* (1997) and Alasdair Nicolson and Aonghas MacNeacail's children's opera *Sgàthach* (1997) were both based upon Gaelic legend and sung in Gaelic. The visual significance of these works within the context of dance and drama in the Gàidhealtachd has yet to be studied. JP

#### IV.3.b. MUSICAL STRUCTURES: WEAVING, ROTATION AND CIRCULARITY

[Introduction](#); [Visual Mnemonics](#); [Structural Connections between Verse, Music and Tartan](#); [Conventional and Traditional Notations of Bagpipe Music](#); [Interlace Notation](#)

##### INTRODUCTION

Hienhòdrò hihìòdin Hiharin hiharin Hien dre hedehò Hienhòdrò hihìòdin.  
Hienhòdrò hihìòdin Hiharin hiharin Hienòdin hien dreò Hihòròdò  
hìhòròdò

Above are the opening lines of the *canntaireachd* or sung notation of the classical music of the Highland bagpipes known as *piobaireachd* (pipe music) or *ceòl mòr* (the big music). These lines of *canntaireachd* commence the *ùrlar* or 'ground' for a piece of music known as 'Bodaich Dhubha nan Sligean' (The Old Men of the Shells). As with conventional music notation, anyone literate in the notation can hear the music in their head and even reproduce it vocally. *Canntaireachd* is a uniquely Gaelic solution to a problem of accurate transmission, a solution which crosses the formal boundaries of the arts as well as the assumed boundaries of the senses. Deeply imbued with Gaelic culture, the poet Norman MacCaig crossed the boundaries of music and geology:

761. See Cecil Gray, *The Temptation of St Anthony*, vocal score (London: Chappell & Co., 1954), Analytical and explanatory notes ... following title page.

I listen with my eyes and see through that  
 Mellifluous din of shapes my masterpiece  
 Of masterpieces:  
 One sandstone chord that holds up time in space  
 Sforzando Suilven reared on his ground bass.<sup>762</sup>

Singing canntaireachd is all very well for a piper and listening with his eyes was all very well for Norman MacCaig, but can we underpin this sense of structural interconnection across media with more than poetic vision, as we were able to in the case of Celtic crosses, with the aid of a poem by the same poet? Many of our musicians, Irish and Scottish, had to see with their ears (see I.1.b.). Music was a profession which offered talented blind people opportunities less available to them in other professions, but it is now shown that it can enhance latent musical abilities.<sup>763</sup> Many harpers and pipers were named as *dall* (blind), Am Piobair Dall (Iain Dall MacKay, the composer and author of ‘Cumha Choire an Easain’), being amongst the most famous.<sup>764</sup> As Maoilios Caimbeul wrote of him:

Chitheadh tu le do sprùdan  
 ged a bha do shùilean gun sholas  
 bu mhòr na dealbhan bhiodh a’ dannsa  
 nuair dhòrtadh meall den cheòl bhod chorraig.

*You had digital vision although your eyes were dark: many’s the picture  
 would dance when a shower of music would pour from your fingers.*<sup>765</sup>

Campbell is writing in the same spirit as the portrayals of blind Gaelic musicians, as in the Frontispiece to Simon Fraser, with Ruairidh Dall Morison on the left being crowned with a laurel by a muse – but this subject is covered more fully in I.1.b. In fact, all musicians literate in music have habitually to listen with their eyes and see with their ears. It is a kind of acquired synaesthesia.

Music is regarded by many as being an abstract art and representing it on vellum or paper has long presented musicians with major challenges. The development of Western staff notation, which only really began in the 8th to 9th centuries AD in response to the development of polyphony, took

<sup>762</sup> N. MacCaig, *Moment Musical in Assynt* from *The White Bird* (London, 1973).

<sup>763</sup> Oliver Sacks, *Musicophilia* (Basingstoke and Oxford, 2007), 160–64, and (in an updated paperback edn: New York, 2008), 171–76. Such observations were being made as early as 1793 by Thomas Blacklock in *Poems by the Late Reverend Dr Thomas Blacklock; together with an essay on the education of the blind* (Edinburgh, 1793), 245.

<sup>764</sup> B. Mackenzie, *Piping Traditions of the North of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2003), 200–01, 327–34.

<sup>765</sup> M. Caimbeul, ‘Am Piobaire Dall’, *Breac-a’-Mhuiltin* (Dublin, 2007), 296.

place in parallel with the development of Celtic monastic art and religious philosophy – in the latter case, that of Scotus Eriugena. The earliest known piece of written three-part music was noted down by a Gael, Cormac, in the 12th century.<sup>766</sup> The development of notation is ongoing and has resulted in a sophisticated visual counterpart to the music, both in terms of its horizontal and vertical elements, and is even the subject of aesthetic presentation in books such as John Cage’s *Notations*.<sup>767</sup>

That said, staff notation is and always was a shorthand. Visual signs are not and can never be synonymous with aural experience. This is as true for the thousandth interpreter of a Bach suite for unaccompanied ‘cello as it is for the player of *piobaireachd*. It is also true of the various acoustic methods of representing sound such as that of exciting sand on a piece of glass by drawing a bow against the edge of the glass. Some of the resultant patterns are claimed to have been carved onto bosses in Roslin Chapel in the 15th century. More recent was the invention of the harmonograph by Professor of Mathematics Hugh Blackburn (1823–1909) of Glasgow University. He was the husband of Jemima Blackburn (see III.2.b.) and he built (and spent most of his summers in) Roshven House in Moidart, where the great acoustician Hermann von Helmholtz was his guest.<sup>768</sup> Today we have computerised visual representations of what is heard which are so minute in their accuracy that we can edit out fractions of notes, alter their pitch, advance or retard their motion, reform their texture and change the colour of their sound. Such methods of displaying the acoustic waveforms generated in any performance or recording have a direct causal relationship with the sound source. We can hear the shape of it or visualise the beat of the conflicting waveforms, as when bagpipe drones are not quite in tune – an effect which Calum Johnston splendidly demonstrated vocally and verbally when imitating a piper getting his drones in tune.

Bha e ’g innse nuair a shéideadh e suas i, ’s a chluinneadh sibh na duis  
 air fad a’ gearrain ’s ‘a bhó a bhó a bhó a bhó a bhó a bhó’ a bh’ aca ’s  
 theannadh i sin ‘a dhuine ’dhuine ’dhuine ’dhuine ’dhuine ’dhu—’ gus a  
 robh iad air fad air an aon leagadh.<sup>769</sup>

<sup>766</sup> See J. Purser, *Scotland’s Music* (Edinburgh, 2007), 44, 54–56, 62. A. Buckley, ‘Music and Musicians in Medieval Irish Society’, *Early Music* Vol. XXVIII, Issue 2 (May 2000), 179.

<sup>767</sup> J. Cage, *Notations* (West Glover VT, 1968).

<sup>768</sup> R. Fairley, *Jemima* (Edinburgh, 1988), 68.

<sup>769</sup> Liner notes for *Scottish Traditon 13 Calum & Annie Johnston*, School of Scottish Studies (Greentrax Records): CDTRAX 9013D, CD2 Track 4.

Here the words *bhó* (alas) and *dhuine* (o man) are semantically appropriate but are primarily used onomatopoeically. The vocabulary attached to music is commonly associated with time and mood, but it is normal to speak of ‘tone colour’ and (in many musical contexts) of ‘texture’, implying a shared, even inherent, synaesthesia among musicians over and above the acquired synaesthesia of musical literacy. In specific relation to colour, the alignment of dissonances and assonances in Andean traditional flute music with the spectrum of vivid colours and deliberate clashes, make direct parallels between music and textile.<sup>770</sup> These give some independent justification for raising the subject of visualising music in a Gaelic context, not least because it is one of primarily oral transmission.

#### VISUAL MNEMONICS

In an oral culture, memory is vital and the various techniques used to assist it have many visual elements. It is likely that ogam was used in such a way (see II.3.c.) and for any lengthy piece, be it sung, spoken or instrumental, a sense of structure is crucial. As that structure only unfolds through time, it has to be visualised if it is to be anticipated. It is no paradox that the bards deprived themselves of vision to seek inspiration, for visualisation requires an absence of distraction.

The cultivation of memory is not only a matter of acquiring mnemonic techniques, but also that of embedding clues in the structure of that which is to be memorised. Many songs start the following stanza by repeating the last line, or a part of it, from the preceding stanza. Many incorporate a refrain or chorus which allows the singer time to recall the next line. In dance music, where the basic structures are relatively simple, traditional musicians can play for hours by memory without repeating a tune – and this is especially evident in group situations where a corporate memory reinforces each individual’s memory, and vice versa. Quite frequently, these memory stimuli are given by a visual gesture, a particular movement with the bow or a display of the fingering to whoever needs the reminder, and most commonly a raising of the chin to indicate a concluding section. To traditional musicians, it is the equivalent of ‘read my lips’ and, at any session of traditional music, the musicians will be seen keeping an eye out for what each one of them is doing physically. There is nothing unique about this; it is simply that it is widely prevalent in Gaelic culture in which orality is still the norm.

The basic structures of dance naturally follow those of the music, but,

<sup>770</sup> Urszula Jorasz, as mediated by Anna Gruszczynska-Ziółkowska, *Detrás del silencio – La música en la cultura Nasca* (Lima, 2013), esp. 173–77.

within the set number of beats per section, the patterning has its own sets of variants. This is true also at the micro as opposed to macro level in the music. In Scottish traditional music – and notably in the patterning of notes in the reel – the basic ways of breaking up a chord are more varied than in classical music, which tends to stick with a single format.<sup>771</sup> Just as the dancers in a foursome reel weave different patterns with their four bodies, so do the musicians with the four notes of a standard broken chord in duple time. One does not need to write this down to visualise it, but the previous section discusses possible depictions of dancers in books such as the Book of Kells and on Pictish stones.

#### STRUCTURAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN VERSE, MUSIC AND TARTAN

A more detailed and illustrated version of this section is available in *Rannsachadh nan Gàidhlig* 8.<sup>772</sup> However, as the paper is in Gaelic, its essence is given here in English.

Structural connections between verse and music are fundamental in song, and in Gaelic tradition they are carried to virtuosic heights in *piobaireachd* song such as ‘Moladh Beinn Dòbhrain’. Such connections can also be more humbly expressed and are embedded in Gaelic culture at every level. Even an apparently simple song can be remarkably sophisticated. The words for a lullaby, ‘Giulan geal-o’, for a young MacKinnon chieftain are rich in structured assonance and alliteration, including *aicill* rhyme, as is the norm in traditional poetry. The simple ABA«A» structure of the music has direct parallels with the verse. The poem envisages the child becoming a man and climbing the mountains. The shape of the music, rising and falling, pictures the subject matter. The highest note is always accorded a narrow vowel, but the theme of return at the end of the refrain is paralleled in the music by the use of a retrograde or reverse of the opening phrase A.

Vertical transposition, inversion, retrograde and retrograde inversion are standard techniques in musical composition. At both micro and macro level, they are often used intuitively and need not be exact. They can be envisaged as a mirror image or a rotation.

Similar analyses demonstrating varieties of transposed, inverted and retrograde forms can be conducted for other traditional songs and for the music of the late 13th-century Scottish Inchcolm Antiphoner. Inchcolm in the Firth of Forth was a daughter house of Dunkeld and was dedicated to Colum Cille.

<sup>771</sup> Purser, *Scotland’s Music*, 18.

<sup>772</sup> Meg Bateman agus John Purser, ‘Uinneag dhan Àird an Iar: leanailteachd crutha ann an dùthchas nan Gàidheal’, *Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig* 8 (2016), 1–29.



A1 Tuis Pater **laudibus** (7)

B **Laxet chorus lora.** (6<sup>2</sup>)

C1 Sit ton**is** **im**pnid**ic**is (7)

A2 **Concorde canora.** (6<sup>2</sup>)

D Nam per tua **merita** (7<sup>1</sup>)

C2 **Credimus salvari** (6<sup>2</sup>)

A2 Post **facta funerea** (7<sup>1</sup>)

B **Tecumque beari.** (6<sup>2</sup>)

C3 **Evovae** (6)

Music Structure  
A B C A  
D  
C A B C

*Tuis Pater* structural analysis, Inchcolm Antiphoner (c. 1300)

In the ferial antiphon *Tuis Pater*, unique to the manuscript, the chant has essentially 4 elements, 3 of them balanced round the central element imploring for redemption through Columba's merits. The musical structure makes cross-currents with the poetic structure, including the Evovae, and thus binding the whole together.

There are similar later examples in Scottish Gaelic being composed well into the 17th century, but we only have tunes for a few of these. The tune for *An Duanag Ullamh* was copied from an 18th-century manuscript.<sup>773</sup> It reflects the alternation between 8 and 4 syllables, but requires rhythmic freedom to match the poetic stresses – a thing by no means impossible and discussed ably by Virginia Blankenhorn.<sup>774</sup> However, the melodic structure is tight and it too uses

773. For discussion of this poem, see W. McLeod, 'Caimbeul Poetry of the Sixteenth Century', in J. Williams, ed., *Fresche Fontanis* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2013), 236–41. For an edition, see W. McLeod and M. Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire* (Edinburgh, 2007), 372–87.

774. V. Blankenhorn, 'Observations on the Performance of Irish Syllabic Verse', *Studia Celtica* XLIV (2010), 135–54.

inversion and retrograde. As we have seen, Lachlann MacMhuirich's poem of 1749 makes the potential parallel of poetic structure with weaving explicit:

Figheadóir mise cheana  
Dealbhann na dáin ghlégheala;  
Ó m' oide grin do dhul dinn  
Gach dán do dheilbh do fhighinn.

*I'm a weaver already  
Who weaves very splendid poems;  
Since my careful tutor left  
I should weave each poem he warped.*<sup>775</sup>

Besides highly structured sung verse, we also have highly structured instrumental music. *Piobaireachd* or *ceòl mòr* is a form peculiar to the Gàidhealtachd. The structure can be readily analysed in 'Cumha Mhic Fhionguin' (MacKinnon's Lament). At its simplest it is an AABA BBAB structure. Its second half is, as it were, a mirror image structurally of its first. Barnaby Brown calls this a 'woven' structure and identifies it as the most common of *piobaireachd* structures. Such a basic structure represented, for example, by the colours red and green would produce a simple but pleasing tartan by simply applying it to both warp and weft.

#### CONVENTIONAL AND TRADITIONAL NOTATIONS OF BAGPIPE MUSIC

Western musical notation is spurned by many traditional musicians in the Gàidhealtachd, who see it as restrictive, inaccurate and incomplete and even damaging to their ability to play or sing by ear or by heart. This is particularly evident when it comes to notating *piobaireachd* or *ceòl mòr*. One of the earliest images of *ceòl mòr* comes from the *MacFarlane Manuscript* of 1740 and is composed for fiddle. Mostly it fits the bagpipe scale, and it is clear that it is based on repetitive figures and expands in the form of increasingly active variations. The same is true of the fiddle *piobaireachd* 'Marsail Lochinalie' from James Oswald's *Caledonian Pocket Companion* of the 1750s. Even when a piper starts to use staff notation for *piobaireachd*, as did Joseph MacDonald in 1760, it looks similar. But as in fiddle *piobaireachd*, many of the cuttings are omitted, and these are much more than decorations. They are structurally functional.

Basically, it is difficult to get staff notation to reflect the realities of the pitch and rhythmic values of *piobaireachd*. However, the Highlanders had solutions. The best known of these is *canntaireachd*, though we have no knowledge of when it first came into use. In the Campbell *canntaireachd* from about

775. Lachlann MacMhuirich?, 'Figheadóir Mise', in Ronald Black, ed., *An Lasair* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2001), 200–01.

1815, *piobaireachd* is set out in words and lines like poetry, and the words are specially devised to represent the notes and the manner in which the cuttings are applied to them. However, *canntaireachd*, like the Gaelic language itself, had and has no centralised norm and, when first presented to the Highland Society, the Campbell *canntaireachd* was not properly understood by those unfamiliar with piping tradition. In 1822, Donald MacDonald states that

So little idea seemed formerly to exist of the mystery of noting down the Pipe Music, that in a sort of College or Academy for instruction on the Great Highland Bag-Pipe, existing not many years ago in the Island of Skye, 'the teachers made use of pins stuck into the ground instead of musical notes.'<sup>776</sup>

Joseph MacDonald refers to the music being measured off on the fingers and it may be that the pegs marked off the phrases in the music as the piper walked, as pipers do to this day. The misunderstanding of *canntaireachd* may also have arisen simply because it was an oral tradition which was not usually written down. Cultural barriers may also have been a contributing factor to its misunderstanding. The phrase in Scots *That's all hidorum-hodorum* means 'that's just rubbish' but it refers directly to *canntaireachd*, which is anything but rubbish and capable of conveying complex bagpipe music orally and without having to get a full set of pipes going.

It was General Thomason who first suggested that there was another way of understanding the nature and form of *piobaireachd*, though his own shorthand notation did not really follow his own advice:

I very soon came to the conclusion that the piobaireachd was the music of poetry and not of prose, and that as poetry it must be written if ordinary mortals were to be set the task of learning it by heart.

I have not now the shadow of a doubt as to every piobaireachd being the music of a poem.<sup>777</sup>

Canntaireachd is also highly economical and reflects the economy of the underlying structure of many pieces of *ceòl mòr*, as seen here in the *canntaireachd* for the variations of 'Cumha MhicFhionguin'.

Himdaridto Himdaridto Himdaridta Himdaridta  
 Himdaridto Himdaridto Himdaridta Hiharin  
 Hindaridto Hindaridta Hindaridta Hihorodo  
 Himdaridto Himdaridto Himdaridta Hiharin

776. D. MacDonald, *A Collection of Ancient Martial Music of Caledonia* (1822), 3.

777. C. S. Thomason, *Ceol Mor Notation* (East Indies, 1893; and East Ardsley, 1975), v and viii.

Hindaridto Hindaridta Hindaridta Hindaridta  
 Hindaridta Hindaridto Hindaridta Hihorodo  
 Himdaridto Himdaridto Himdaridta Hiharin  
 Hindaridta Hindaridto Hindaridta Hihorodo

In the case of 'Brosnachadh Arla' or incitement to the battle of Harlaw (1411), which may well date from the same century as the battle, the tradition bearer Allan MacDonald chose the *ùrlar* of 'Cogadh no Sìth' as the most appropriate vehicle for the words. Both words and music, with their insistent alliterations and assonances, make a natural match. To quote Gerard Murphy:

Evincing a mentality akin to that of the ancient continental Celtic metalworkers, who used to alter almost beyond recognition the classical patterns borrowed by them, Irishmen of the seventh and following centuries, both in their Latin and vernacular poetry, subtilized the continental rhyme-patterns and introduced the native ornament of alliteration into the metre borrowed by them.<sup>778</sup>

For 'Irish' we would be better to read 'Gaelic'. The culture was Gaelic and the languages were Gaelic and Latin. The places where that culture flourished were Ireland and Scotland. The 'Brosnachadh' is a remarkable Scottish Gaelic example and what is immediately apparent is the use of alliteration. This is not just an alphabetical poem in which the first stressed word of each couplet starts with the next letter of the alphabet, as in 'Altus Prosator' attributed to St Columba, this is a poem in which virtually every adjective in each couplet alliterates with the same letter.

A Chlanna Cuinn, cuimhnicibh  
 Cruas an am na h-iorghaile:  
 Gu h-airneach, gu h-arranta,  
 Gu h-athlamh, gu h-allanta,  
 Gu beòdha, gu barramhail,  
 Gu brioghmhor, gu buan-fheargach,  
 Gu calma, gu curanta,  
 Gu cròdha, gu cath-bhuadhach,  
 Gu dùr is gu dàsannach,  
 Gu dian is gu deagh-fhulang ...

*Children of Conn, recall now courage in time of combat: be attentive, audacious, agile, ambitious, be bold, beautiful, brawny, belligerent, contumacious, courageous, clever; combative, deliberate, destructive, deadly...*<sup>779</sup>

778. G. Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics* (Oxford, 1977), xv.

779. D. S. Thomson, 'The Harlaw Brosnachadh', in Carney and Greene, eds, *Celtic Studies: Essays in Memory of Angus Matheson* (London, 1968), 147–69.

This is undoubtedly poetry as equally concerned with its sound value as it is with its meaning. Examples of this insistent alliteration can be found habitually in Classical Gaelic poetry and in the poetry of Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, notably in 'Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill', and the musical equivalent of such insistences are very much in evidence in 'Cogadh no Sith'. The first descending three-note phrase is repeated a tone higher, then at its original pitch and so on, followed by eight identical echoing beats. The Harlaw 'Brosnachadh' and 'Cogadh no Sith' are extreme examples but offer an initial clarity in the process of appreciating structures that went much further than alliteration, just as the structures of *ceòl mòr* go much deeper than simple repetitions.

These structures can be represented as formal patterns which do not depend upon their being heard. In the case of *canntaireachd*, the representation consists of words and the words consist of syllables. Is there a regular syllabic count? And is there much evidence of 'rhyming' (repeating) sections, whether at the beginnings, middles or ends of lines? The answer to both is frequently 'yes'.

The *piobaireachd* 'Cumha MhicFhionghuin' (MacKinnon's Lament) has, as we have seen, an AABA BBAB structure. It is simplest and also more traditional to represent the structure of the music as expressed in *canntaireachd*. As shown above, *canntaireachd* consists of meaningful words, but they do not have any semantic meaning.

In this example, they are set out in long lines which divide into short octo- and hepto-syllabic lines. By colour coding the 'words' we can see the structure quite clearly. In the *ùrlar*, there are ten 'words' or elements.

1.	A1	Hioendam	hioendam	hiotradin	(hiotradin)
		1	1	2	(2)
2.	A2	Hioendam	hioendam	hiotrao	hiharin
		1	1	3	4
3.	B1	Hioendam	haendan	chetradin	hihorodo
		1	5	6	7
4.	A2	Hioendam	hioendam	hiotrao	hiharin
		1	1	3	4
5.	B2	Hioendam	haendan	chehiotra	hioendam
		1	5	8	1
6.	B3	Haotroa	haendam	chetradin	hihorodo
		9	10	6	7
7.	A2	Hioendam	hioendam	hiotrao	hiharin
		1	1	3	4
8.	B4	Hiotradin	hioendam	haendan	hihorodo
		2	1	5	7

- A-lines 1, 2, 4, 7 have identical 1st halves and 2, 4, 7 are wholly identical.
- B-lines 3, 5, 6, 8 share paired elements not heard in 1, 2, 4, 7.
- Lines 3, 5 'rhyme' their first 2 'words' (the equivalent of disyllabic internal rhyme) and these also rhyme with the middle of Line 8.
- Lines 3, 6 'rhyme' their last 2 'words' (the equivalent of disyllabic end rhyme), the 2nd rhyming with the last of Line 8.
- Line 1 ends with the same syllable that starts Line 8.
- All but two lines start with the same sound.
- Only the 6th line has sounds that are not in any other line. This line starts at a structural point very close to the Golden Mean.
- The variations are based upon or rather abstracted from the *ùrlar*.

As regards the continuity of such structures, we can only go back as far as the 18th century for written evidence, though internal evidence allows us to identify similar structures in *piobaireachd* which are widely accepted as of much earlier date.

Sometimes cited in relation to *piobaireachd* is the 1613 Ap Huw manuscript, which gives us a harmonic structural bedrock based on late medieval Welsh harping practice, probably related to bardic and musical practice beyond the borders of Wales. In this manuscript, structures following the same basic patterning found in *piobaireachd* are present but represented by the numerals 1 and 0, a form of binary code. This binary code can represent varying sequences of alternating chords a tone apart – the 'double tonic' which is at the basis of hundreds of traditional Scottish melodies, as well as being a significant factor in *piobaireachd*.<sup>780</sup> In essence, the 1s and 0s interweave in a variety of patterns. The effect in music is similar to the effect in poetry of alternating lines of, say, 7 and 8 syllables, but with many available patterns of alternation. What this tells us is that there is clear evidence in Celtic tradition of structural principles being laid down in totally abstract formulae, including techniques of inversion or retrograde.

#### INTERLACE NOTATION

The proposal by John Cargill in the 1920s that some irregular interlace patterns in early medieval manuscripts and stone carving may represent a kind of musical notation is complex,<sup>781</sup> controversial and unproven, though supporting

780. B. Brown, 'Scottish Traditional grounds', *Piping Today* 38, Part I (2009), 44–47; 'Maol Donn', *Piping Today* 39, Part II (2009), 20.

781. J. Cargill, 'Notes on the Old Cross at Canna', in C. G. Blake, ed., *The Celtic Cross and Greek Proportion* (Chicago, 1930).



and additional evidence has been offered by Travis<sup>782</sup> and the present author, the latter with respect to the significance of the opening letter of the Psalms – the B of Beatus in the late 11th-century Psalter and Martyrology of Rhygyfarch, the interlace with which it is associated yielding melodies related to each other and to the syllable count of the text.<sup>783</sup> The attention given to the initial letter of the psalter is natural and finds expression in a phrase from the law tracts – *bélre bán biait* (the white language of the Beatus).<sup>784</sup> To these proposals there remains, however, a fundamental objection, namely that nobody has yet reversed the process by creating an interlace which reads cogently as a melodic line. To create an interlace with a given number of intersections to match a given syllable count is not too challenging, but it is another matter to create one which makes melodic sense, no matter how accommodating the potential idiom.

However, it has taken long enough for artists to divine the methodology of their predecessors of a thousand years in devising interlace, and even now there is no absolute agreement as to the methods used. It is therefore worthwhile making note of a possible relationship between some irregular interlaces and music, in the certain knowledge that if the matter is not investigated further nothing more will be discovered. JP

#### IV.3.c. GEOMETRY AND NUMBER SYMBOLISM

[Archaeological Evidence; Geometry in Texts and Illumination; Early Evidence for Use of Number Symbolism in Gaelic Culture; Number Symbolism in Celtic Art and Its Classical Origins; Number Symbolism in Gaelic Storytelling](#)

##### ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Perhaps the earliest examples of clearly geometrical thinking in Scotland are those of the Neolithic carved stone balls (see pp. 298, 698). So geometrical are some of these that it has been claimed for a number of them that they represent the five solid regular figures.<sup>785</sup> This would argue for a very early and highly

782. 'Old Celtic Design Music', in J. Travis, *Miscellanea Musica Celtica*, Musicological Studies Vol. XIV (1968), 66–78.

783. J. Purser, 'Ogam and Interlace Notation, Fact or Fiction?', in E. Hickmann, I. Laufs, R. Eichmann (Hrsg.), *Studien zur Musikarchäologie V*, Orient-Archäologie Band 20 (Rahden, 2006), 305–18.

784. Laws I 16.4 Comm. – see [electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language](#) under *biait*.

785. Or the five Platonic solids – the tetrahedron, cube, octahedron, dodecahedron or icosahedron – in which each regular polygonal face is the same shape.

sophisticated understanding of fundamental forms<sup>786</sup> and such suggestions have been questioned, as has the tendency of commentators to write only about the most elaborate examples, thus according them cult status.<sup>787</sup> What cannot be doubted is the sense of a more generalised geometrical regularity, without which no amount of artistic skill on the part of their makers could have produced such results with numbers of faces or knobs varying from 3 to 160. It is worth considering that such geometrical awareness might be related to the geometrical awareness undoubtedly required in the layout of large structures such as stone circles, round houses and brochs, discussed below.

It has long been argued by followers of Alexander Thom that the designers of the Neolithic stone circles had a good grasp of geometry. Thom's work was controversial in its day but, increasingly, evidence has been uncovered to support it, notably in Euan MacKie's *Alexander Thom and British Prehistory*.<sup>788</sup> In addition to exact circles, Thom measured ellipses and ovoids, concluding that they had been delineated geometrically rather than by eye or even chance. MacKie demonstrated the accuracy of just such a plan at Cultoon on Islay, in which the long axis of the ellipse points to Slieve Snacht in County Donegal. This ellipse has an eccentricity of one half and was based upon a unit of length used with considerable accuracy. MacKie argues that similar techniques were used in setting out the ground plan of brochs.

If MacKie's argument is correct, we have an obvious continuity of architectural design based upon geometrical skills. Far from being surprising, this should be obvious to anyone who has attempted to lay out a ground plan for a major structure. A builder's eye may be remarkably accurate, but when it comes to setting out post holes or foundation stones for structures several metres in diameter, geometry was always available, certainly useful and probably essential. That said, the eye is an ultimate arbiter and the frequent and skilful use of asymmetry in stone carving and book illumination shows that their designers were far from bound by geometrical necessities.

Implicit in the design and execution of the vast majority of the free-standing crosses and cross slabs is geometry, which necessarily involves proportion and to which number symbolism is relevant. It is not easy to draw a perfect circle freehand. Compasses were certainly used and, in carefully

786. R. Lawlor, *Sacred Geometry* (London, 1982 and 1997), 96–97.

787. A. Young, 'Scottish Carved Stone Balls: Past and Present Perspectives', in *Newsletter of the Ellon and District Historical Society* No. 16 (October 2008).

788. E. MacKie, 'Alexander Thom and British Prehistory', lecture delivered in 2013 for Megalithomania.

balanced tapered cross slabs such as Foulis Wester No. 2 and Aberlemno, angles must have been subtended and considerable planning must have been involved in the basic subdivision of available space. Principles of symmetry are applied in specific areas and not in others. The ring cross on Meigle No. 2 is wholly symmetrical, but the Shandwick and Dupplin crosses are basically symmetrical horizontally, but differ vertically. The foot of the Shandwick cross is, as in most cross symbols, longer than the head, but the Dupplin cross has a taller, tapered head and the vertical designs are not symmetrical. No doubt some ad hoc decisions were taken in response to the exigencies of any particular stone, but the virtuosity and variety of the treatment (which, in stone-carving terms, is hard to exaggerate) has yet to be fully understood, and to what extent these spatial planning decisions extended into the later West Highland school of stone carving has not been closely studied.

#### GEOMETRY IN TEXTS AND ILLUMINATION

Bruce-Mitford has been claimed to have come closest to understanding the geometry of the constructional methodology, as seen in his analysis of one of the carpet pages (f.24r) of the Lindisfarne Gospels.<sup>789</sup> What he elucidates is a virtuosic use of circles and parts of circles of differing diameters.<sup>790</sup> In 1930, the Chicago stone carver John Cargill, busy carving Celtic crosses, worked on their [Pythagorean proportions \(IV.1.c.\)](#),<sup>791</sup> and Nordenfalk has this to say of Celtic illumination:

Thanks to its geometric regularity this controlling framework strikes the eye immediately. By contrast, the ornamental fillings are ... at first sight difficult to disentangle. However, on closer inspection they too follow an orderly scheme – carefully worked out with compass and ruler ... Calculated down to their smallest details, they are sometimes as complex as any mathematical group theorem.<sup>792</sup>

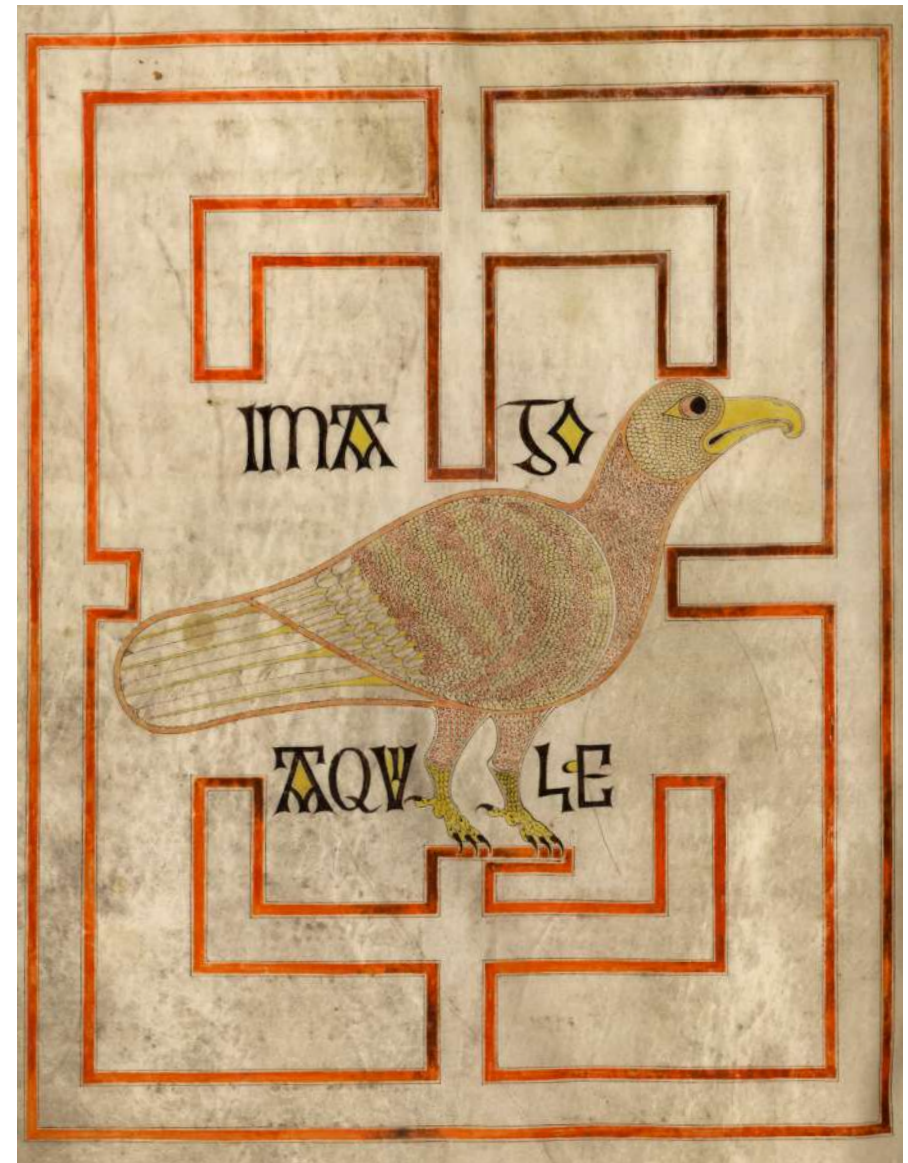
In the work of Robert Stevick on both poetry and book illumination, we see a scientific approach to design and proportion in which compass rotation is fundamental. Stevick includes number symbolism and echoes the outstanding

789. R. Stevick, *The Earliest Irish and English Book Arts* (Philadelphia, 1994), Chap. 9, and p. 147.

790. Kendrick, Brown, Bruce-Mitford et al., *Evangeliorum Quattuor Codex Lindisfarnensis* (Olten & Lausanne, 1956 and 1960).

791. J. Cargill, *The Celtic Cross and Greek Proportion*; and C. G. Blake, *Celtic Art* (1930).

792. C. Nordenfalk, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting* (London, 1977), 16.



Echternach Gospels, Eagle of St John. Gallica Digital Library

work of John MacQueen.<sup>793</sup> Of particular interest is his analysis of the use of the Golden Mean in the *Imago aquile* page of the Echternach Gospels.<sup>794</sup>

793. J. MacQueen, *Complete and Full with Numbers* (Amsterdam and New York, 2006).

794. Stevick, *The Earliest Irish and English Book Arts*, 59–63.

Stevick's Index of Proportions may seem daunting to the point of dismissal of its historical relevance. But one has only to look at the complex proportions in Boethius's *De Musica* to see that Stevick would be hard put to it to outdo Boethius. The *De Musica* was the standard theoretical music textbook throughout the Middle Ages, its first and best redactions being from Gaelic scribes in Northern France in the 9th century.<sup>795</sup>

In 1903, Romilly Allan observed:

It is characteristic of the Celtic treatment of the symbol of the cross both in Scotland and Ireland that the form is subjected to artistic variations, breaking the baldness of its outlines into sweeping curves ...

In similar vein, Nordenfalk comments:

More than any other style of decoration, with the possible exception of the fully fledged Moslem arabesque, Hiberno-Saxon art aims at kinetic effects ... The 'music' produced by all these different types of pattern is very different from the tonality of Classical decorative art.<sup>796</sup>

Interdisciplinary comments such as these can be revealing. Cargill also proposed connections between interlace and music notation (see IV.3.b.). It is in part the mastery of curvilinear geometry that gives to the art of the Gàidhealtachd its rhythmic flow and its sense of continuity and a sense of balance, which nevertheless does not depend on symmetry but rather proportionality.

#### EARLY EVIDENCE FOR USE OF NUMBER SYMBOLISM IN GAELIC CULTURE

Ionnlaime do bhasa  
Ann am frasa fiona,  
Ann an liu nan lasa,  
Ann an seachda siona,  
Ann an subh craobh,  
Ann an bainne meala,  
Is cuirime na naoi buaidhean glana caon,  
Ann do ghruaidhean caomha geala ...

*I bathe thy palms  
In showers of wine,  
In the lustral fire,  
In the seven elements,*

795. C. M. Bower, *Fundamentals of Music ... Boethius* (New Haven and London, 1989), xlii.

796. C. Nordenfalk, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting* (London, 1977), 17.

*In the juice of the rasps,  
In the milk of honey,  
And I place the nine pure choice graces  
In thy fair fond face ...*<sup>797</sup>

This traditional Gaelic blessing on a young girl invokes number symbolism to add to its effect, not perhaps self-consciously, but simply as part of a long tradition of such usage. Just how far back that tradition goes and how significant it has been in Gaelic culture is the subject of what follows.

Human beings can recognise the number of members in a set up to about 9 without having to write them down or break them up into subsets, not least in an oral tradition. The ear is the guide and the same holds true for musical metres which rarely extend beyond 9 rhythmic units (occasionally 12), though these may be simultaneously understood in subsets of 3 or 4, depending upon the pace of delivery and/or the choices made by a conductor. In other words, any number significance in syllabic counting can readily be appreciated by ear as well as eye and the two operate in tandem.

Number symbolism underlies religious symbolism in both the pre-Christian and Christian eras, with respect to the divisions of the year (see I.2.b.) and in terms of what was considered propitious or otherwise. Thus, in the 8th-century *immrama*, attempts at finding an island for penance are foiled by the presence of supernumeraries in the crew, that is, of persons additional to the number designated by the druids. Máel Dúin, for instance, by allowing his foster-brothers to join the seventeen members of crew permitted by the druid Nuca, was blown away from the island on which he intended to avenge his father's murder.<sup>798</sup> This suggests that the druids, like the Greek philosophers, professed the mystical importance of numbers that we see in later Gaelic culture.

At a geographical level, Bourke and O'Reilly have shown that 'I' (both letter and number) is used by Adomnán to represent Iona in its insular unity as well as its name, Ì. The letter 'i' (*iota*) represents the numbers 1 and 10, as well as being the initial letter, uniqueness and wholeness of Jesus. When Columba had pointed out the single omission in Baithéne's copy of the Psalter of the letter 'i',<sup>799</sup> he was echoing Christ when he declared in the Sermon on the Mount that

797. A. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* Vol. I (Edinburgh, 1983), 6–7

798. See Whitley Stokes, *Revue Celtique* IX and X (1888–1889), 'The Voyage of Mael Duin's Boat'; and Clancy, 'Subversion at Sea', in Jonathan M. Wooding, ed., *The Otherworld Voyage* (Dublin, 2000), for other examples of supernumeraries.

799. Adomnán, *Life of St Columba*, Book I, Chap. 23.



'Till heaven and earth pass away, one *iota* or one *apex* shall not pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.<sup>800</sup>

These almost teasing cross-references would have been a natural component in the general discourse of highly educated people, whether as wordplay, number symbolism or actual image of a displaced letter – as in the Book of Kells f.278r where the last 'i' in *principies* has been inserted to make good a scribal error.

In the form of gematria, number is associated with various alphabets – notably Hebrew, but also Latin, German, English and ogam. In the case of this last, the alphabet is organised in groups of five and each letter necessarily has a number within its group (see II.3.c.).

By the mid-7th century, the Irish author Anonymus ad Cuimnannum was including multiplication tables in order to assist readers in understanding number symbolism.<sup>801</sup> The early Gaelic law tracts show clear evidence of a pre-Christian poetic grading system being embodied in and aligned with Christian values on the basis of number, aligning the poetic and ecclesiastical grades on the number 7, interestingly not the popular number in the rest of the Western church:

The popularizing of the notion of seven ecclesiastical grades seems to have been accomplished chiefly by Insular, more particularly by Irish scholars, who were fascinated by the theological significance of numbers ...<sup>802</sup>

In Eriugena's *Versus Iohannis Scotti ad Karolum Regem*, the numbers 4, 8 and 12 ('twice six') are the significant ones. He makes references to the symbolic divisions of the year, in relation to the zodiac, the seasons, the months and how,

Through such divisions, 'round which the seasons course,  
That is by means of octaves ... is victory ordained.

He develops this theme into one incorporating the music of the spheres and the musical scale 'with tones arranged by eights', the whole devolving into a panegyric on the Incarnation.<sup>803</sup>

800. Cormac Bourke, 'Corporeal Relics, Tents and Shrines in Early Medieval Ireland', in *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* Vol. 74 (2017–2018), 118–29.

801. D. Ó Cróinín, 'Donatus, Finit Amen', *Peritia* 2 (1983), 310.

802. R. E. Reynolds, "'At Sixes and Sevens" – and Eights and Nines: The Sacred Mathematics of Sacred Orders in the Early Middle Ages', *Speculum* LIV (1974), 671.

803. M. Herren, ed., *Iohannes Scotti Eriugena Carmina* (Dublin, 1993), 116–19.

The late 8th-century *Liber de Numeris* is a Hiberno-Latin text giving examples of the Christian significances attached to numbers, and it may be that the syllabic regularities attached to specific verse forms and assigned to specific poetic grades had additional meanings. A page in a 16th-century Gaelic medical manuscript in the National Library of Scotland shows a *rota* of four concentric circles for the calculation of golden numbers.<sup>804</sup> The strict counts of syllabic metres or *dán díreach* used by the professional poets in the Classical period give another instance of the importance of number. The commonest metres were *deibhidhe*  $2(7^x + 7^{x+1})$ , *rannaigheacht mhór*  $2(7^1 + 7^1)$ , *rannaigheacht bheag*  $2(7^2 + 7^2)$  and *séadna*  $2(8^2 + 7^1)$ , their formulae showing the number of syllables in each line of the couplet, and the number of syllables following the last stress, repeated in each verse.<sup>805</sup> In a stress-timed language, the imposition of a syllabic count is artificial, with a basis more arithmetic than auditory.

In Niall Mòr MacMhuirich's poem 'Do Ruaidhri Mòr Mac Leòid' (c. 1613), sportive use is made of number. The poem opens and closes with the number 6 (*sé*) and the concluding verse reads:

Fiche meisge linn gach laoi  
nochar leisge linn ná lé;  
fiú (i) neart ar mbeathaidh do BHÍ,  
ceathair, a TRÍ, (a) seacht le sé.

*We were drunk 20 times a day; he was no more loathe than we; it was a worthwhile boost in our lives, 4 and 3 and 7 and 6.*<sup>806</sup>

These numbers are necessary in adding up to 20 and forming internal rhyme and end rhyme within the strict hepto-syllabic verse form of *rannaigheacht mhór* – as indicated in the typefaces above – and fulfilling the requirement of *dúnadh* 'closure' by which a poem ends as it begins.

The common use of hepto- and octo-syllabic lines might be considered from a symbolic as well as structural point of view and, more importantly, the same consideration might be given to the numbers of lines in a stanza and in a whole poem.

804. R. Black, "'The Nine": A Scottish Gaelic charm in the North Carolina State Archives', *The North Carolina Historical Review* LXXXIV, Number 1 (January 2007), 55

805. For more detailed discussion and exemplification of the bardic metres, see E. Knott, *An Introduction to Irish Syllabic Poetry of the Period 1200–1600* (Dublin, 1957); and Cáit Ní Dhomhnaill, *Duanairecht: Rialacha meadarachta fhilíocht na mbard* (Dublin, 1975).

806. C. Ó Baoill and M. Bateman, eds and trans., *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, 20–21, 64–67, 219.

There remains much to be done on this subject with respect to Gaelic. For instance, the 7th-century poem 'Fo Réir Choluimb', by Beccán mac Luigdech, begins and ends with the same line – the serpent biting its own tail. But, we ask, is it coincidence that the poem is 171 lines in length, the number mirroring this common concluding device?

In the 7th-century *Auraicept na n-Éces* (The Scholar's Primer), the Greek and Hebrew alphabets are given with their numerical significances. 'Cantemus in Omni Die', written on Iona by Cú Chuimne around 700 AD in praise of Mary and Christ, ends its 13 stanzas and 52 lines with a specific reference to the significance of letters, as follows:

Christi nomen invocemus  
angelis sub testibus  
ut fruamur et scripamur  
litteris celestibus.

*Let us call on the name of Christ,  
below the angel witnesses,  
that we may delight and be inscribed  
in letters in the heavens.*

We suggest that the significance of the numbers here is that 13 represents Christ as leader of the apostles, and 52 is (in the Latin alphabet) the number value of Christ's name: IESU (9 + 5 + 18 + 20). This gives at least circumstantial evidence for the use of gematria by Cú Chuimne.

Likewise we find that the 121 lines of 'Fo Réir Choluimb' evoke another form of the name of Jesus – this time Johoshua ha Meshiach (64 + 5 + 52 in the Hebrew Lesser Canon) or Jesus the Messiah.

The earliest manifestations of interest in number symbolism are contemporary with the earliest surviving manuscript evidence.

Hiberno-Latin exegesis of the mid-7th to early 9th century was heavily orientated towards number symbolism.<sup>807</sup>

An extended 11th-century gloss of a Gaelic tract on the Mass is full of it<sup>808</sup> and David Howlett and John MacQueen have explored its extensive use in

807. J. Cronin, 'The Evangelist Symbols as Pictorial Exegesis', in C. Bourke, ed., *From the Isles of the North* (Belfast, 1995), 114.

808. See glosses on The Stowe Missal, in W. Stokes and J. Strachan, eds, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* (Cambridge, 1903), xxvii–xxviii and 252–55. In this tract, there is reference to the 'nine households of heaven'.

early medieval and renaissance Scottish works.<sup>809</sup> Robert Stevick has pursued similar quests with respect to early Anglo-Saxon literature.<sup>810</sup>

#### NUMBER SYMBOLISM IN CELTIC ART AND ITS CLASSICAL ORIGINS

Numerology (the belief that number is not just symbolic but can be efficacious and has mystical if not divine origins) overlaps with number symbolism in varying degrees and circumstances. What is presented here should be assessed with this uncertain distinction in mind.

Plato considered numerology the highest level of knowledge, capable of revealing the essence of cosmic harmony, while Nicholas de Cusa saw numbers as the best way to approach Divine Truth. Pythagoras saw numerology as connecting music and architecture, and de Saint-Martin considered that created beings would return to the First Cause in the same way as numbers return to unity.<sup>811</sup> This accords very much with Eriugena's universalism and, in this context, it may not be impossible that early Celtic Christian art gave expression to the idea of mathematics providing the basis for the variety of forms of the created Word. The mathematical basis for the spiral and knotwork of early manuscript illumination and artwork cannot be denied, though its interpretation is bound to be conjectural. Numerology would appear to have been an important element in pagan learning too, in keeping with the numerical sophistication required of their astronomical observation and calendar making (see IV.1.c. and I.2.b.).

Many of the symbolic significances of the Greek Chi Rho symbol in the Book of Kells have been ably discussed by Suzanne Lewis.<sup>812</sup> Her work refers to number symbolism with respect to X (Chi) considered as the number 10, proposing a possible source in Plato's *Timaeus*.<sup>813</sup> The Pythagoreans considered 10 to be the most perfect number, imagined as the equilateral triangle formed from rows 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 pebbles, and therefore it was no coincidence that it formed the initial of Christ. Lewis also points to use of the number 8 as a

809. J. MacQueen, 'Neoplatonism and Orphism in 15th c. Scotland', *Scottish Studies* 20, 69–89; D. Howlett, 'The Structure of de Situ Albanie', in S. Taylor, ed., *Kings, Clerics and Chronicles in Scotland, 500–1297* (Dublin, 2000), 124–45; and D. Howlett, *Caledonian Craftsmanship – The Scottish Latin Tradition* (Dublin, 2000).

810. R. Stevick, *The Earliest Irish and English Book Arts* (Philadelphia, 1994).

811. Gheerbrant, Chevalier and Brown, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* (London, 1996), 706–08.

812. S. Lewis, 'Sacred Calligraphy: The Chi Rho Page in the Book of Kells', *Traditio* Vol. 36 (1980), 139–59.

813. Lewis's reference (p. 143) to *Timaeus* 8.36 should read 6.36.





Book of Kells carpet page, f.33r. © Trinity College Dublin

reference to the Resurrection, the number symbolising the eight days of Passion week and also the number of Regeneration – hence the frequency

of octagonal baptismal fonts. The Book of Kells carpet page (f.33r) has, as its essential structure, a cross with eight massive roundels.

It may well be significant that the Greek cross with its foot bar has 6 terminals and 2 crossing points, totalling 8.<sup>814</sup> In the *Timaeus*, Plato describes the structure of the universe as a kind of cross built from the intersection of lines representing respectively the square and cube of 2 and the square and cube of 3, thus 2, 4, 8 : 3, 9, 27. Odd numbers were regarded as masculine; even numbers as feminine.<sup>815</sup> The cube was the form of three-dimensional perfection (the Holy of Holies was a perfect cube) and the first masculine cube is 27 and the first feminine cube is 8. The difference or balance between them is 19. Thus 19, being the gnomon of 3 cubed and 2 cubed, was used to represent the perfectly proportioned human.<sup>816</sup> Plato describes the construction of the universe – and of the human body – on these very principles. A possible example of this lies in the fact that the 6th-century *Adiutor Laborantium* – a prayer that Christ may bring the supplicant to heaven and ascribed plausibly to Colum Cille – is 27 lines in length.

This distinction between odd and even numbers with its term at 3 cubed, representing body in three dimensions, is inherent in the *Timaeus* and elucidated by Crantor,<sup>817</sup> Stobaios and Aristotle.<sup>818</sup> Aristotle's understanding of this distinction will have been familiar to most medieval scholars. All of this was intimately related to music and its Pythagorean origins were well understood.<sup>819</sup> Plato himself constructed the World Soul on principles used for constructing a musical scale.<sup>820</sup> Boethius approves Plato's connection,<sup>821</sup>

814. See Megan M. Hitchens, 'Building on Belief – The use of sacred Geometry and Number Theory in the Book of Kells, f.33r' (1996): <[www.lochac.sca.org](http://www.lochac.sca.org)> – accessed 16 May 2014.

815. 'Since the uneven numbers are considered masculine and the even feminine ...' – see W. H. Stahl, *Macrobius. Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* (New York and London, 1952), 192–93, quoted in J. MacQueen, 'Neoplatonism and Orphism in 15th c. Scotland', *Scottish Studies* 20, 72.

816. R. Lawlor, 'Ancient Temple Architecture', in *Rediscovering Sacred Science* (Edinburgh, 1994), 81–102.

817. See D. Lee, ed., *Plato Timaeus and Critias* (London, 1971), 46–48; W. R. Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus* (London, 1923), 86; and J. James, *The Music of the Spheres* (St Ives, 1993), 44–48.

818. See J. Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy* (London, 1908), 34–36.

819. See, for example, Higden's *Polychronicon* of 1495 f.101, in which the Pythagorean story of the hammers and anvils and his use of the monochord to demonstrate ratio is expounded in the standard terminology – Dyapason . Dyapente etc.

820. D. Lee, ed., *Plato Timaeus and Critias* (London, 1971), 48 fn 1.

821. C. Bower, ed., *Boethius, Fundamentals of Music* (New Haven and London, 1989), 2.



and equally well known was Macrobius's early 5th-century *Commentary* on the *Somnium Scipionis* in which these very numbers are related directly to musical intervals.<sup>822</sup>

The transmission of Plato's concept to the Western Celts is well attested, often through the means of treatises on music which theorists connected intimately with the structure of the universe, hence the various theories from Pythagoras to Newton of 'the music of the spheres'. The musical theory available to the Celts of the west was not inconsiderable. Isidore of Seville's *De Musica* and *De prima divisione Musicae quae Harmonica dicitur* were available in Ireland and Scotland by the late 7th century,<sup>823</sup> of both of which countries Isidore was well aware, and the oldest known manuscript of his *Etymologies* was probably written in Ireland before 650.<sup>824</sup> The earliest extant sources of Boethius' 6th-century *De Institutione Musica* date from the 9th century and, as we have seen, are most notably from Northern France. This was an area and a period of major intellectual input from Celtic monks and scholars – in particular, Scotus Eriugena at the court of Charles the Bald. It was an Irish scribe of the school of Eriugena who produced one of the best versions of Boethius – one of the few with an understanding of the Greek text within it and richly endowed with glosses.<sup>825</sup> We also know that Chalcidius's 6th-century preface and Latin translation of Plato's *Timaeus* was copied by a scribe of Glendalough in Ireland in the 11th to 12th century.<sup>826</sup> We may reasonably assume, then, that Plato's figure was known and understood among the Gaels. As, centuries later, Henryson has it:

This mirry musik and mellefluat,  
Compleit and full of nummeris od and evin,  
Is causit be the moving of the hevin.<sup>827</sup>

822. Stahl, *Macrobius. Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, 192–93. Dungal, Sedulius Scotus and Scotus Eriugena had extracts from Macrobius or commented extensively on his works, including the *Somnium Scipionis* – see Kenny, *Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical* (Dublin, 1997), 540, 567 and 574, respectively.

823. T. Clancy and G. Markus, *Iona* (Edinburgh, 1994), 220–21. Reference is made to Isidore's remarks on music, as well as to Cassiodorus, Jerome and other commentators, in an 8th-century Old Irish treatise on the Psalter, which answers a large number of questions related to the psalms (Meyer 1894, 21, 35).

824. Clancy and Markus (1994), 221 and fn 34.

825. Bower (1989), xlii.

826. F. J. Byrne, *1000 Years of Irish Script* (Oxford, 1979).

827. R. Henryson, *The Tale of Orpheus and Erudices His Quene*, stanza 32.

The significance of the number 19 was known to Boethius and Boethius was known to Henryson and, it can be safely assumed, was known to the Renaissance Scottish composer Robert Carver, whose 19-part motet *O Bone Jesu* was composed for the feast of the Holy Name.<sup>828</sup> It is here that we reach the relevance of the numbers 8, 27, and 19 to the Chi Rho pages of early Celtic illuminated manuscripts, for the Chi Rho *is* the Holy Name.

To any astronomer and calculator of the date of Easter,<sup>829</sup> 19 is known as the most readily observed lunar cycle – the Metonic cycle – since it occurs up to three times within a reasonable lifespan. It marks the time between concordances of the lunar and solar years and has both practical and symbolic meaning. In declaring himself to be 'The Light of the World',<sup>830</sup> Jesus invokes that symbolism. Even the name IESU invokes it, for, using gematria of the Lesser Latin Alphabet, as we have seen, the name IESU adds up to 52, the number of weeks in the year.<sup>831</sup> So IESU is the year and 19 is the number of years between the concordance of the two principal lights of the world. 19 is also the hexagonal number of 3 (with 6 + 12 dots arranged round a central dot in a hexagonal lattice) and as such represents the Trinity in combination with the earth – the hexagon having been frequently used to represent the sphere of the earth.

The number 8 we have already seen referred to as symbolising the Resurrection and this is what it may signify on that page in the Book of Kells, so its presence in the designs of the Chi Rho cannot necessarily be attributed to its other significance as the 3-dimensional aspect of the feminine. Care has to be taken with such theories. Lewis's reference to the 8 large circles decorating the terminals of the *Crux gemina* in the Book of Kells is not the only way of looking at this figure, for the lowest terminal is provided with an extra circle, and the use of circles to terminate the letters is not uniform in its use of numbers across other Insular gospels. If, however, we find 8 associated with the numbers 27 and 19 in the overall design, then there is a case to be made for its inclusion in a scheme of number symbolism which adds a new layer of meaning to our understanding of these great mystical images. Additionally, the ancients relished accumulations of significance.

828. Boethius's *De Institutione Musica* 'became the most widespread theoretical treatise on music in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance' (Bower, 'Boethius', in *The New Grove* (1980), Vol. 2, 845). Boethius tells the story in abbreviated form in Book III, Song XII.

829. The date of Easter has always been problematic, notably at the Synod of Whitby, as recounted by Bede.

830. The Gospel according to St John, Chap. 8, verse 12.

831. I am indebted to David Howlett for drawing my attention to the fact that IESU adds up to 52.

The Durrow Chi Rho is of particular interest in that a number of loops is used to fill up space below the right hand lower terminal of the X. The number of these is 10. Below the R there are two such lines of similar strokes, the upper of 8, the lower of 9, which latter appears on the same line on the page as the line of 10. By variously adding these three lines, we get most obviously the numbers 19 and 27, but also 18 and 17 by adding the smaller numbers. These simple space-filling devices are found in many places in the manuscript and it is suggested here that the numbers may have been selected for their symbolic resonance. Further down the page we find a line of 40 loops preceding the name of Joseph. It is a possible reference to the 40 days which had to elapse before Mary could be 'purified' and present Jesus at the Temple. As part of a wider study, Heather Pulliam has published a table outlining parallels between biblical number symbolism and the Book of Durrow.<sup>832</sup>

We can find similar evidence in the Echternach Chi Rho. The first line of loops within the text immediately preceding the name of Joseph numbers 19. The top two lines of loops in the right-hand column, immediately preceding the name Joseph, number 13 and 14, giving a total of 27.

Any scribe or illustrator has to plan how space is filled and there is very likely to have been a consciousness of how many such loops will fit into a given space. The suggestion here is that the numbers could have been manipulated with very little effort for symbolic purposes.

The St Chad (or Lichfield) Chi Rho has an extraordinary complex of peltas with interlocking spiral discs, which, beyond the basics, appears to be without any obvious schematic form. The space is filled with virtuosity and exuberance, but why are some larger, some smaller, some expanding in sequence, some connected, some isolated? One thing at least can be said: there are 27 such spirals within the embrace of the space on the right hand of the X.

Twelve symbolises the apostles – a symbolism annually evoked in the production of simnel cakes, only with eleven marzipan balls, as Judas is traditionally omitted. A larger ball is sometimes placed at the centre to represent Christ. On the cross slab Meigle No. 2, the central larger boss is surrounded by eight smaller ones and four damaged bosses in the corners – a possible twelve. Four groups of three bosses, arranged in triangular form, are

832. Heather Pullman, 'Cognition, Colour and Number in the Book of Durrow and Other Insular Gospel Books', in Rachel Moss, Felicity O'Mahony and Jane Maxwell, eds, *An Insular Odyssey, Manuscript Culture in Early Christian Ireland and Beyond* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017), 155. <<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:BookDurrowChiRoPage.jpg>>, <<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/bnf-the-echternach-gospels>> (2nd image), <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lichfield\\_Gospels#/media/File:Lichfield\\_monog\\_Christ.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lichfield_Gospels#/media/File:Lichfield_monog_Christ.jpg)>.

near the top of the recumbent stone from Meigle No. 26 and Henderson and Henderson include this in a brief excursion into number symbolism.<sup>833</sup>

As with book illustration, so with stone carving. Structural decisions with respect to design and layout had to be taken in advance and the numbers of any particular shape or symbol chosen and calculated with respect to the available space. Occasional errors are discoverable, but that is hardly surprising in such complex work. What cannot be denied is that numbers were chosen and it would be quite extraordinary if they had not been chosen with some understanding of their meaning, whether through Classical or other religious precedent, or through the traditions of the society in which these beautiful works of art were produced. Some of these traditional meanings in Gaelic verbal culture are considered in the following concluding section.

#### NUMBER SYMBOLISM IN GAELIC STORYTELLING

In the world of the international *Märchen*, numbers make connections between events and can express causality, and they can add to the verisimilitude of a tale by being very specific. We can perhaps speak of a language of numbering. In this section, the visual nature of traditional tales is discussed in terms of their linear construction and cinematographic style. 'Formulistic Numbers', as indexed in the Aarne-Thompson list of motifs, are pervasive in Gaelic tradition, three, seven, nine and twelve being particularly common.<sup>834</sup> This symbolism mirrors similar usage in the world of international *Märchen*, in which numbers make connections between events and can express causality.

Three is the most common magic number in encapsulating the hypostasis of primordial forces in the Trinity of Christianity, the Triple Jewel of Buddhism and the triad of creator, preserver and destroyer represented by Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva in Hinduism. The Classical pantheon too envisaged the triad of Zeus, Poseidon and Hades as the gods of heaven and Earth, the sea and the Underworld. The arrangement of creator, preserver and destroyer in Hinduism is clearly shared by the Celtic goddess figures in their manifestations as maiden, mother and crone and the three parts to the war goddess Morrigan. This arrangement was again reflected in the structure of both Hindu and early Celtic society, with their priestly, warrior and agricultural castes. Tricephalic sculptures such as those found at Netherton near Wishaw in Lanarkshire,<sup>835</sup>

833. G. and I. Henderson, *The Art of the Picts* (London, 2004), 199–200 and 138–139.

834. A. Matheson, ed., Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica VI* (Edinburgh, 1971), 177–178, lists all such references.

835. Anne Ross, *A Pagan Celtic Tricephalos from Netherton, Lanarkshire* (Edinburgh, 1974).



Triskele at centre of Farr Pictish cross slab.

Photo © Tom Gray

and Corleck, Co. Cavan – both from the Iron Age period – give further evidence of the importance of triads, and, just as the Trinity was symbolised for Saint Patrick by the trefoil shamrock, so we hear it invoked in the three-in-one pitches of the 9th-century Scottish bronze handbells (see IV.2.c.). Visually speaking, triskeles, triquetras and the triple-loop knot (known as the Stafford knot) are ubiquitous in both the early Christian stone carvings and book illumination.

Here, it may be interesting to look at the numerical basis of one traditional tale, *A' Mhaighdean-Mhara* (The Sea Maiden); see II.2.d.<sup>836</sup> The cosmology of this story is based on the number three: in particular, the beast having three heads and a tripartite form as a maiden, beast and crone. The number also makes connections between the three brothers, dogs, horses and trees, and between the three animals at the carcass. It underlies causality when these three animals – a dog, falcon and otter – bring down the three animals – the hind, raven and trout – which enclose the beast's soul, representing the triad of land, sea and air. Perhaps the

sea maiden is suffering a triple death, typical of Celtic tradition, as suffered by Merlin and many others. It also underlies patterns of power: she claims the

836. J. F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (1860–1864; facsimile Hounslow, 1983), Vol. I, No. IV.

boy three times; only the third sword can withstand the boy's strength; only the third brother withstands the wiles of the crone and so is able to save his brothers.

After the fisherman fails to deliver his son to the sea maiden after three years, she gives him two further periods with him, of four and seven years. These numbers are significant too. The sequence itself may represent the three of heaven and the four of Earth, making the seven of the fulness of the universe, from which we should understand that the sea maiden will have to move on to another tactic to get the boy. Four represents totality in the four cardinal points and four winds, the four quarters of the earth (when the globe is cut longitudinally and latitudinally), the four Evangelists, the four living creatures and four horsemen of the Book of Revelations, the four elements of natural philosophy and the four humours of Classical and medieval medicine. Multiples of four likewise symbolise totality, and sixteen (as four squared) is a dangerous number symbolising 'exaggerated pride and unbridled lust for power'.<sup>837</sup> Significantly, therefore, sixteen is the number of apples thrown by An Ceathairneach Caol Riabhach as stepping stones into the sea to let him cross from Scotland to Ireland.<sup>838</sup> It is the number of ladies who wait on the king's daughter in 'Gille nan Cochla Craicinn' (The Lad with the Skin Coverings) and the number of maidens that come to wrestle with Fionn in 'The House of the Yellow Field'. Sixteen (as two to the fourth) is an exaggerated form of the feminine principle.

Five can refer to saining and to sacred circuits (see Campbell, *Carmina Gadelica* II, 36–37, 40–41) and to the wounds of Christ naturally associated with the Cross. For example, five prominent bosses adorn the west face of the Kildalton cross on Islay.<sup>839</sup> But little examination has been undertaken on this topic, notwithstanding the fact that, whether painted or carved, every design, form or image that was in any way duplicated, whether to make a pattern, or in some other manner, had to be counted and measured, and implied early decision-making in the planning process.

Seven represents fulness. It occurs forty times in the Book of Revelations and was considered to be the number of the planets, heavens, colours in the rainbow and days in each phase of the moon. In the *Timaeus*, seven is a number that generates itself, not being the multiple of other numbers. In the Gaelic tales, seven is the second most common number after three. It is the

837. Gheerbrant, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, 886.

838. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* Vol. I, 309.

839. I. Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands* (Edinburgh, 2001), 138–39.



number of strands of the sleeping Garaidh's hair pegged down by the Fenian women in 'Brugh Farala', and the number of hides, bundles of twigs and clods of soil placed on Fionn's thigh in a vain attempt to protect him from his own sword when he beheads Garaidh whose neck is stretched on his leg. In boat-beaching runs, it is the number of lengths a boat is dragged up on the shore, and the number of years and days Fionn's boat was tarred and caulked.<sup>840</sup> In these examples, as with Plato, it seems to represent completeness.

Nine is important as being three squared. Fionn as a child was taught to swim over nine waves by his aunt.<sup>841</sup> This is the same as the number of waves beyond which Clann Mhíl retire in Lebor Gabála, representing the distance of exile, before gathering their strengths to take Ireland. Oscar at the battle of Gabhra has a seven- or nine-times charmed spear – *sleagh nan seachd/naoi seun*.<sup>842</sup> Nine is the number of cow fetters conventionally evoked in oaths:

tha mi a' cur mar chroisean 's mar gheasan ort 's mar naoi buaraichean  
na mnà sìth ...<sup>843</sup>

*I put it on you as crosses and spells, and the nine fetters of the fairy women*

...

It was the name of a charm because it constitutes the Trinity multiplied by itself.<sup>844</sup> It was the number of half-days the men of Ulster were rendered incapable of fighting in 'Táin Bó Cuailgne' due to Macha's curse that they should suffer birth pangs in time of crisis. It is also the number of Muses and the number of choirs of angels.

Numbers allow the audience to make patterns and to relate events to one another. The feast at the end of 'The Lad with the Skin Coverings' lasts for seven days and seven nights and was the second biggest feast enjoyed by the Fenians, while the feast at the end of 'Fionn and Bran' was the fourth biggest.<sup>845</sup> A hero may be secured with *ceangal nan trì chaoil* or *ceangal nan còig chaoil* (the tying of the three or five 'smalls'), the tying of the wrists to the waist, with the possible addition of the ankles. *Leum nan trì eang* or *leum nan ceithir eang*<sup>846</sup>

840. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV, 165, 168, 176, 206.

841. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV, 24.

842. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV, 35.

843. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV, 233 and 236; and cf. 219.

844. Black, "'The Nine': A Scottish Gaelic charm'.

845. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition*, 224 and 274.

846. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition*, 229 and 253.

is a leap of the three or four hooves, a leap made without a run, a feat which may be a prerequisite to claiming a princess or reaching shore.

Large numbers are used impressionistically for effect in traditional stories and song:

Ged fhaicinn còig mìle  
air chinnt gur tu b' fheàrr leam ...

*Were I to see five thousand men  
you'd be my favourite ...*<sup>847</sup>

A proverb that states *Co-dhaltas gu ceud, càirdeas gu fichead* 'relationships based on fosterage extend to a hundred degrees, those based on kinship to twenty' also uses numbers impressionistically to emphasise the relative strength of bonds of fosterage and blood.<sup>848</sup>

Fifty (*caogad*) men are required to hold each of the nine chains attached to Fionn's standard.<sup>849</sup> Eight and eight score ships – *ochd agus ochd fichead* – are required to take the ransom for the Muileartach to the smith of the sea.<sup>850</sup>

Numbers can indicate thoroughness, as when Fionn's shield is heard to cry out over the five fifths of Ireland or when three thirds of the blind Oisean's sight is returned to him.<sup>851</sup>

The interest in numerology included ritual. Margaret Fay Shaw, for example, describes the boys at Hogmanay passing their torch three times round the housewife's head to ascertain her survival the following year, whereupon she presented them with three bannocks from the meal chest.<sup>852</sup> Three was also the number of circuits made of holy wells on feast days. Following Plato and Augustine, Western civilisation started to think in binary systems of spirit and matter, good and evil. It may be that in its remoteness on the edge of Europe, the Celtic civilisations have preserved the importance of threes. Welsh and, to a lesser extent, Gaelic had a tradition of thinking in triads, for example *Giomach, rionnach is ròn, trì seòid a' chuain* 'a lobster, a mackerel and a seal, the three heroes of the sea'.<sup>853</sup>

847. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 335.

848. Alexander Nicolson, *Gaelic Proverbs* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1996), 170.

849. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition*, 113, 136 and 146.

850. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition*, 144 and 154.

851. 'Fionn an Taigh Bhlàir Bhuidhe', in Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition*, 84, 235 and 237.

852. Shaw, *Folk Songs and Folklore of South Uist*, 23.

853. Shaw, *Folk Songs and Folklore of South Uist*, 33.

Such tripartite thought, representing a crustacean, a fish and a mammal, creates no hierarchy and in avoiding polarisation can symbolise the wholeness of creation as expressed in the forms of triskeles, triquetras and other symbols popular in Celtic art and implying circularity and motion. But these are topics taken up in other sections of this book.

JP

## V MARKING PLACE, 'RACE' AND TIME

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we examine three major discourses that have shaped the Gaels' understanding of their place in the landscape, among other peoples and in time. In *Geographical Marking: Place-names and Geographical Vocabulary*, place-names, sometimes borne out by archaeology, reveal what was significant in the landscape in regard to topography, history and myth.

Despite recent claims that the concept of the Celt is an 18th century 'reification', the evidence presented under *Ethnic Marking* identifies certain characteristics – sacred and secular, linguistic and visually manifest – that may be seen to constitute a cultural continuum dateable from as early as the 9th century and lasting to the present day.

*Temporal Marking: Circular Time* looks at the cultural tension between a Christian view of linear time stretching from the Creation to the Second Coming and an older pagan view of circular time conditioned by seasonal and calendrical repetition. The different perceptions are revealed, for example, in the absence of a Gaelic myth of cosmogenesis and in stories of time passing at different rates in this world and the Otherworld.



## V.1. GEOGRAPHICAL MARKING: PLACE-NAMES AND GEOGRAPHICAL VOCABULARY

Introduction; Sacred Sites; Mythological Names; Land Usage and Land Forms; Mountaineering

The intention of this section is primarily to draw attention to the continuing importance and vitality of place-names in the Gàidhealtachd. An overview of the history of mapping is given in I.3.d. and John Murray's *Reading the Gaelic Landscape* provides much useful information, including statistical analyses and grid references.<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The Gaelic-speaking world enjoys a long history of verbal mapping through the use of place-names – in Gaelic, *dindsenchas*. The historic lists found in *dindsenchas*, with their attendant marginalia and more official commentaries, vary from being useable today to being wholly fantastical. They indulge in etymological speculations on a grand scale and they trace the history of mythological events with the kind of determined enthusiasm which led to the discovery of Troy. It has been suggested that they contain a substantial stratum of pre-Christian elements,<sup>2</sup> and place-name lore is an important feature of mythology (as in 'Táin Bó Cuailnge' and 'Agallamh na Senórach'), bardic practice (as in 'Òran na Comhachaig') and the Suibne poem cycle (see III.1.d.), and as an element of military training for which geographical knowledge is paramount.<sup>3</sup> In their way, these place-names constitute a kind of archaeology of the landscape and are substantially based upon visual imagery derived from specific events.

More recently, these quasi-scholarly exercises have been replaced by folk etymology, itself succeeded by renewed scholarly interest and debate, exhibiting an equally scholastic interest in etymology, nowadays based upon a much firmer understanding of language evolution.

The Gaelic place-names of Scotland give one of the clearest indications of how the Gaels saw their land. We have the signified and the signifier, the land and the name, together, and can see, for example, if there is a difference between the shapes of hilltop implied by *bidean*, *stob*, *aconach* etc. A place-name functions at two levels: it refers to a place, but additionally it has a meaning, a language and a context in time. If these secondary factors are discernible, it can also help map a culture. A map is like a palimpsest with many layers of cultural

1. J. Murray, *Reading the Gaelic Landscape* (Dunbeath, 2014).

2. T. J. Westropp, 'Notes and Folklore from the Rennes Copy of the "Dindsenchas"', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Vol. IX of the 5th Series, Vol. XXIX of the Consecutive Series (Dublin, 1899), 21–27.

3. K. Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: An introduction to the sources* (Ithaca, 1972), 166–67.



Gaelic place-names map. Copyright © Roy Pedersen

meaning, embodying different languages, names of mythological characters, tribes, wild and domesticated life, human settlement and land usage. Some names are merely descriptive, others are figurative. Within the wider context of

Scotland, Gaelic place-names map the extent of Gaelic settlement, layered over Pre-Indo-European, Brythonic and Pictish names. Interpenetrating the Gaelic names are the names left by the Norse, especially along the seaboard. To the south and east of the Gaelic hegemony lie Anglian and a few Cumbric names.<sup>4</sup>

Nicolaisen has shown the extent to which the Gaels have settled in Scotland by his maps plotting the common place-name elements *baile* and *achadh* (township and field).<sup>5</sup> Together they cover most of the map, with the exception of the Northern Isles, the Lothians and the Borders, showing that Gaelic has been spoken, no doubt at different times, throughout most of Scotland. The Gaels came into a populated landscape and took on many existing names, for a name does not have to be comprehensible to be usable. It is then no stranger that the origin and meaning of the names Lewis, Harris and Uist are obscure than that they belong to Innse Gall 'the islands of the foreigners', though they constitute the Gaelic heartland today. Gaelic names can preserve the names of the P-Celtic tribes they encountered: the Orcs in Arcaibh or Orkney; the Cats in Cataibh, Sutherland; Meatae in Dunmyat; the Caledonians in *Dùn Chailleann* (Dunkeld); and the British in *Dùn Breatann* (Dumbarton). Gaelic place-names show how Scotland was viewed: *A' Gharbh-Chrìoch* are the Rough Bounds; *gall* was used of any foreigner, so *Gallaibh* is Caithness, referring to Norse settlement, while *Na Machraichean Gallta* are the Lowlands, referring to Anglian settlement, and *Gall-Ghàidhealaibh* (Galloway) was seen as a place of mixed Gaelic and Norse blood. *Earra-Ghàidheal* 'the Coast of the Gaels' marked Argyll, where the first Gaelic colony was set up, named Dalriada after the place they had left in Ireland. Banff, Earn and perhaps Atholl were also named by Gaels in memory of Ireland, after the three sovereignty goddesses, *Banbha*, *Fótlá* and *Éire*. The name Alba itself means white and referred to Britain as a whole, perhaps because of the white cliffs of Dover, though the occurrence of snow in the Scottish Highlands might be equally significant. *Druim Alban*, Drumalban, was seen as the ridge of the landmass, which suggests a northern bias to the perceived location of Alba. The *Monadh Liath* is the grey mountain range, the *Monadh Ruadh*, the red.

#### SACRED SITES

Sacred sites tend to be maintained or adapted by incoming populations and so the names of rivers have retained their goddess connections, some of them, such as Tyne and Naver, even pre-Celtic. The element *Nemeton*, in names such

4. See especially W. F. H. Nicolaisen, *Scottish Place-Names* (London, 1976), and W. J. Watson, *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (Edinburgh and London, 1926 and 1986).

5. See D. Thomson, *Companion to Gaelic Scotland* (London, 1983), 232.

as Duneaves, Navity and Rosneath, mark pre-Christian sacred sites, while sacred mountains are marked with names such as *Sìdh Chailleann* (Schiehallion) 'the fairy hill of the Caledonians' and *Beinn Shianta* 'holy mountain'. The place-names on Schiehallion are discussed by John Murray in *Reading the Gaelic Landscape*.<sup>6</sup> Early Christian sites are marked by the element *cill* from Latin *cella*, a monastic cell, while Dysart comes from Latin *Desertum*, marking a place where monks would retire from the world like the desert fathers. Appin comes from *Abdaine* 'abbey' and *annaid*, as in Achnahannet, marked a patron saint's church. *A' Chomraich* (Applecross) and *Tèarmann* as in Termit mean sanctuary. Places where mass was said may show the element *aifreann* as in Inchaffray or *iobairt* (sacrifice) as in Ibert, both in Perthshire. The many places with the element *papa*, e.g. Pabbay, Bayble, Payble etc. show where the Norse found monks or a church.

The Christian pursuits of the laity are recorded in names such as *Ceum nan Sòthach*, which is the path the Soay people took after sailing across from their island to *Glen Scaladal* to walk across the Strath peninsula to church at *Cille Maolrubha*; *Bealach an t-Sleuchdaidh* 'the path of genuflection' refers to the point on the road at which communicants at Kilmore in Sleat first caught sight of the church and travelled the last part of the journey on their knees.<sup>7</sup> The word *cille* regularly indicates an early Celtic foundation and many such sites are either close by or identical with pre-Christian sites.

#### MYTHOLOGICAL NAMES

Mythological names (see III.1.a.) show how stories about Fionn mac Cumhaill, Cú Chulainn and the Gaelic Otherworld were pictured as having taken place in the Highlands. Glen Etive for example abounds with place-names relating to Deirdre and the sons of Uisneach, which have been gathered and commented upon by Dr R. Angus Smith, amongst others.<sup>8</sup> Deirdre's fort is pointed out at *Dùn Diordail*, while her lover Naoise hunted in Coille Naois. The Parallel Roads of Glen Roy are called *Rathaidean na Fèinne* 'the roads of the Fenians'; a hill outside Portree is *Suidhe Fhinn* 'Fionn's Seat'. Slamannan and Clackmannan commemorate the sea god *Manannan mac Lir*, as does the Isle of Man. A full list of such place-names throughout the Gàidhealtachd would demonstrate not only the association of places with legend, but also the extent of correspondence between landforms and the visualisation of the relevant stories (III.1.a.). It appears, for example, that Fenian sites are in wild territory which fits with their reputation as living outside the tribe. In the Parish of Strath and Sleat on the

6. J. Murray, *Reading the Gaelic Landscape* (Dunbeath, 2014), 22–26.

7. Information from Elgol and Torrin Historical Society and from Mairead Dhòmhnallach.

8. R. A. Smith, *Loch Etive and the Sons of Uisnach* (London, n.d.).







that they frequently refer to a particular shape of hill which may parallel the shape of the *tiompan* – a plucked stringed instrument of uncertain form (see IV.2.c.). In the case of *Dùn Cruit* on the Treshnish Isles in Argyllshire, the rock stack so named has all the appearance of a quadrangular, stringed instrument. Harpers' and other professionals' lands were named as such, so that in visual terms harps were present not only as objects and in imagery, but in connection with the land itself. Amongst such names are *Peighinn a' Chlàrsair* (the harper's pennyland) at Torroisig in Mull and the four merklands in South Kintyre held by the MacGhille Sheanaich family of *clàrsairs*.

These cannot, of course, be dated any earlier than late medieval times, but it may not be insignificant that, over the hill from *Uamh an Àrd-Achaidh*, where the oldest artefact from a stringed instrument in Western Europe was recently discovered (see IV.2.c.), is the place-name *Leac a' Chlàrsair* 'the *clàrsair*'s stone'. There are also many place-names associated with pipes and piping, particularly caves such as *Uamh an Òir* (see IV.2.c.), and these would help fill out the existing picture of the distribution of the instrument.

Regarding the appearance of the land, Gaelic is rich in geographical terms. One can enter a *coire* (corrie) or walk on the *machair* (machair), use a *bealach* (pass) instead of a *làirig* (longer, less steep pass), or ascend a *ligh* (steep, grassy slope), a *leth-shithean* (half-hillock or steep slope),<sup>12</sup> or a *leitir* (evenly-graded slope rather steep for cultivation) as opposed to a *leathad* (slope or declivity), a *bràigh* (brae) or *bruthach* (steep-sided hill) or a *leac* (slope formed of terraced layers of rock).

One may climb a *cnoc* (little rounded hill), a *tom* (round hillock or knoll, usually steeper than a *cnoc*), a *tullach* (similar to a *tom* but more likely to have a flattish top) or a *tòrr* (a more rugged hillock). *Tom na Banais* in Glen Roy was so named because, being a flat-topped hillock, it was suitable for dancing at weddings.<sup>13</sup>

Aiming higher, one may follow a *righe* (arm of a hill), traverse a *druim* (ridge) as opposed to a *bearradh* or an *aonach* (sharp ridge) or *cìr* (crest); to reach the summit of a *maol* (a rounded bare hill), a *meall* (great shapeless hill), as compared with a *creag* (a cliff or craggy top), a *cruach* (stack-shaped mountain), a *sgùrr* (sharp pointed top), a *bidean* (sharpish top), a *beinn* (more generalised name for a mountain), a *càrn* (a cairn-like top) or a *sliabh* (moorland or grassy mountain).

In so doing, one experiences specific realities for which a vocabulary mostly drawn from other specific realities has been developed. *Coire* also means 'kettle' and is applied to corries because of the similarity of form. *Machair* is derived

12. A. Forbes, *Place-Names of Skye* (Paisley, 1923), 342.

13. J. F. and T. M. Flett, *Traditional Dancing in Scotland* (London, 1964), 46.

from words meaning 'flat land' but applies to a much more specific type of flat land, bordering the sea, often overlying sand dunes and rich in grass and flowers. *Bealach* is ultimately related to a Sanskrit word for 'mouth'. *Druim* means 'back'. *Aonach*, in this usage, is possibly derived from *aon* for 'one', implying a ridge too narrow for two to walk beside each other – as in the *Aonach Eagach* in Glencoe. *Cìr* means a 'comb' and implies an extremely sharp and narrow ridge, as in *Cìr Mhòr* on the Island of Arran; and *maol* means 'bald'.

Each of these words is long established in the Gaelic vocabulary; most are in common usage. Corrie, machair, bog, crag, cairn, ben and bealach are loan-words into English (the last perhaps only among climbers and hillwalkers), and it is possible that *bràigh* (brae) is a loan-word into Scots and English, the derivations given in the OED and MacBain being less than persuasive.

There is a rich terminology associated with wetlands (see III.3.d.). *Fèith* is one of many words derived from imagery of the human body (see III.1.a.). Its meaning of 'sinew' or 'vein', applied to the landscape, means channels in the bog and, by extension, to the bog itself.<sup>14</sup>

Sometimes a word may apply to a state of mind but be used almost exclusively in a geographical context. In such cases, the look or feel of a place becomes internalised, as with the word *uaigneach*, meaning 'lonely, remote or difficult of access'. *Coire Uaigneach*, leading up from Loch Slapin to Blaven, is such a one. However, Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh, in 'Crònán an Taibh', uses it to express her personal loneliness, albeit in association with the sea.

Ri fuaim an taibh / Is uaigneach mo ghean.<sup>15</sup>

*At the ocean's sound my mood is forlorn.*

The word is also used in the title of 'Sgéal Uaigneach ar Chéile ...' (A Secret Tale of the Companion of ...) – the title is incomplete.<sup>16</sup> This usage from the early 16th century, extending loneliness or remoteness to secrecy, suggests that the word also had a bardic function. It was also applied to marks of grace – *comharraidhean* – the reality or virtue of which was closely related to the privacy of the practices which were rewarded by Grace. Such grace was earned *as an uaigneas* 'in the secret place'.<sup>17</sup>

Knowing place-names can also help establish a person's credentials. A girl had been kidnapped by raiders and taken abroad. After some years, a chieftain from Skye happened in his travels to come to where she was in slavery. Her

14. R. MacIlleathain, 'Dualchas Coitcheann', *The Nature of Scotland* (Autumn 2009), 31.

15. J. Watson, ed., *Gaelic Songs of Mary MacLeod* (Edinburgh, 1982), 44–45.

16. N. Ross, *Heroic Poetry from the Book of the Dean of Lismore* (Edinburgh, 1939), 92.

17. D. MacLeod, 'Gaelic Spirituality', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* LXV (2006–2009), 25.

abductors were plotting to kill the chieftain and she used the place-names to reassure him of her sincerity in warning him to leave the house.

Cille mo Ruibhe fo sgeith a' chuain,  
Camus Fhionnairidh fhuar nam beann,  
Robasdan a' choirce ghlais,  
'S ann leam a b' ait a bhith ann.

*Kilmarie under the wing of the ocean,  
Camusunary in the cold shadow of the bens,  
Robasdan of green oats,  
I would be happy to be there.*

On account of the place-names and the appropriate descriptions which she gave to them, the chieftain believed her and insisted on taking her back with him; so, for once, the story ended happily.<sup>18</sup>

#### MOUNTAINEERING

Given the mountainous nature of the Gàidhealtachd, it is not surprising that it has been the cradle of many great mountaineers, as well as being at the forefront of the development of mountaineering as a sport. As we have seen in I.3., dealing with geographical realities, the geology, geography and climate offer a remarkable variety, including serious challenges from ice and snow.

As rock climbing and hillwalking have developed as pastimes and into sports, so they have both absorbed some of the existing place-name vocabulary and introduced new terms, derived largely from alpine terminology, crag from *creag* and corrie from *coire* being rare examples of Gaelic loan-words into international mountaineering vocabulary. But the sense of discovery and adventure that gives so much pleasure to mountaineers can often ignore the knowledge, experience and history of the people who themselves live and lived in the mountains. Duncan Ban MacIntyre's 'Moladh Beinn Dòbhrain' is not only a great poem about a mountain, its flora and fauna, and about hunting, it is also evidence of a close physical interaction between humans and the whole mountain and its neighbours, as is the anonymous 'Tha sìor Chóineadh am Beinn-Dórain'. The ability to climb is a common motif in praise poetry and love songs such as 'Iain Ghlinne Cuaich':

Cha b' e 'n giullan bochd truagh  
Ris na tharrainn mi suas mar fhear,  
Ach an t-òigear deas ùr,

18. Colonel Lachlan Robertson kindly gave the present writer a copy of this unpublished story.

Cas a dhireadh nan stùc-bheann bras,  
Dhèanadh fuil air an driùchd  
Leis a' ghunna nach diùlt an t-srad.<sup>19</sup>

*The man who attracted me  
was no wretched poor lad,  
But the fresh, skilful youth  
Whose leg would scale the steep peaks,  
Who would spill [the deer's] blood on the dew  
With the gun that never refused the spark.*

This is not evidence of discovery but of birthright.

It is impossible to assess just how many place-names have been lost to us through the replacing of the native population and their stock with shepherds and sheep. Shepherds have long been regarded as the true informants with respect to the mountains, but they were frequently Scots speakers imported from the south and would have had to learn the routes and passes, as well as the names, from a much-diminished population, increasingly denied access on the grounds that they might be poaching. Thus, Norman Nicholson was obliged to leave Skye around 1825 because, as he says in the famous song attributed to him,

'S gann gun dìrich mi chaoidh  
Dh'ionnsaigh frithean a' mhonaidh;  
'S gann gun dìrich mi chaoidh.

Fhuair mi litir à Dùn Èideann  
nach fhaodainn fhèin nis dhol don mhonadh.

'S gann gun dìrich mi chaoidh  
Dh'ionnsaigh frithean a' mhonaidh;  
'S gann gun dìrich mi chaoidh.

'S tric a mharbh mi fiadh nan stùc-bheann  
Air mo ghlùin 's mi lùbadh m' uilinn.

'S gann gun dìrich mi chaoidh  
Dh'ionnsaigh frithean a' mhonaidh;  
'S gann gun dìrich mi chaoidh.

Ach on dh'fhàs an lagh cho làidir,  
'S fheàrr bhith sàbhailt' o gach cunnart.

19. This version from *MacTalla* Vol. 5 (1896), No. 48, 8 – available online from [dasg.ac.uk/text/81005.pdf](http://dasg.ac.uk/text/81005.pdf).

'S gann gun dirich mi chaidh  
 Dh'ionnsaigh frìthean a' mhonaidh;  
 'S gann gun dirich mi chaidh.

*Sadly I'll give up climbing to the wilds of the moorland. Sadly I'll give up climbing. I got a letter from Edinburgh warning me not to tramp the moorland ...*

*Often I killed the deer on the high hills, kneeling with bent elbow. But because the law is now so strong it is best to be safe from every danger.*

Sorley MacLean was to quote that poem in 'An Cuilthionn' as an image of despair.<sup>20</sup> Evidence such as this, along with the evidence relating to hunting and which goes back centuries (see III.3.a.), makes it clear that the mountains were frequented and must have been named, and it is equally clear that the human relationship with the landscape was economic as well as aesthetic.

With the advent of the Romantic era and the cult of the wilderness came a new interest, initially purely recreational but ultimately developing into the highly competitive and technically driven sport of rock climbing, a sport not without its own economic influence. The Highland Mountain Club of Lochgoilhead was founded in 1815. Lord Inverclyde founded the Gaiter Club in 1849. The Cobbler Club – the first true mountaineering club in the British Isles – was founded in Glasgow in 1866 and the Perthshire Mountain Club was started in 1875.<sup>21</sup> The Cairngorm Club was founded in 1887 on the summit of Ben Macdhuì and is still active, and the Scottish Mountaineering Club, founded in 1889, is regarded as the senior mountaineering institution in Scotland. To rock climbing one may now add orienteering, fell running, mountain biking and other such sports, a native cyclist of Skye, Danny MacAskill, having achieved a personal iconic status in his spectacular ride and video *The Ridge*. The Highlands of Scotland were and are a natural breeding ground for such developments.

The vocabulary of rock climbing is not confined to place, mountain and route names. Many rock climbers are also writers and photographers and have attempted to record their experiences, visual, physical, psychological and philosophical. What they have to write about the Scottish Highlands deserves respect, for such people have earned their intimacies with the landscape in a school in which ignorance of, for instance, the geology can sponsor death.<sup>22</sup>

20. S. MacLean, *An Cuilthionn*, Earrann IV, ll. 31–32, in C. Whyte, ed., *An Cuilthionn 1939 & Unpublished Poems* (Glasgow, 2011), 70–71.

21. R. Clark, *The Victorian Mountaineers* (London, 1953), 186.

22. A useful brief account of geology and mountaineering in Glencoe can be found in the National Trust for Scotland's *Glencoe* (Edinburgh, 2015), 28–43.

Best known of the Scottish rock climbing writers was W. H. Murray, who also published extensively on the Hebrides and on the landscape of the Highlands in general. His work was paralleled by the photography of B. H. Humble, with whom he often climbed. Many of Murray's descriptions have no need of photography, not least his winter ascent of Liathach, against which he was rightly warned by an old stalker who, typically, personified the mountain as a woman and was outraged at the intention to climb in such conditions.<sup>23</sup>

Still an iconic figure in Scottish rock climbing is Hamish MacInnes, who invented the Terrodactyl ice tools partly in response to the special requirements of ice climbing in Scotland.

It is probably safe to say that the roots of modern ice climbing go back to Scotland in the late 1800s ... where the object of the exercise was to ascend a short, hard icefall or gully for no other reason than to complete it. The usual highlight of such a climb was the entertainment provided by the climber's penetration of the top cornice.<sup>24</sup>

W. Naismith's *Snowcraft in Scotland* was published in 1893 and the north face of Ben Nevis was and remains one of the world's classic environments for ice climbing. The face is also famous for classic rock routes such as Tower Ridge, first ascended in 1894 by a team led by Professor Collie; Observatory Ridge was climbed solo by Harold Raeburn – the father of Scottish climbing – in 1901 and in 1920 as an ice climb.<sup>25</sup>

Ben Nevis, Buachaille Etive Mor, the Cuillin and many other mountains and groups of mountains in Scotland enjoy iconic status in the climbing world. Hamish MacInnes (see above) was one of those involved in the filming of the famous sword fight on the Cìoch in the film *Highlander*. To Paul Nunn, also part of the filming, this was a betrayal of the mountains whose peculiar nature in the Cuillin of Skye takes him towards the edge of what is expressible in words:

Rain-blasted craggy heights in remote coires [sic] can never become Klettergarten, or Ecoles des escalades.

Obsession with the sacred shows, an illusion of wholeness in a natural theatre – indefensible philosophically in a shattered world. So be it ... Uncustomized rock in high corries is a temple greater than any built by man, essential to more than climbers, a Calling for those who know.<sup>26</sup>

23. W. H. Murray, *Undiscovered Scotland*, 145. The whole account of the climb in which they saw their Brocken Spectres is very fine.

24. G. Hattingh, *Top Climbs of the World* (London, 1999), 128.

25. Hattingh, *Top Climbs of the World*, 128 and 130.

26. Nunn, 'Skye Wars', in C. Bonington, ed., *Great Climbs* (London, 1994), 62.



However, when it comes to describing the filming, for Nunn even the sunset becomes commercialised in what he sees as an act of betrayal:

Of course the sunset fight scene in *Highlander*, Sean Connery's cinematic pastiche of modern and medieval, survives. Two swordsmen, an older ex-Olympic specialist and young stuntman ... were fitted with pianostring stunt wires to hidden harnesses, one up his kilt. A slip would have seen them suspended upside-down on vertical Cioch side walls, perhaps minus their privates. Another camera came and Tony filmed, from a slot in the rockwall behind, as the sun did a clichéd 'sickening goldie' over Glen Brittle.

A number of peaks in the Cuillin of Skye have been named after those who are presumed to have first ascended them, or in honour of well-known climbers. Thus, Knight's Peak is named after Professor Knight of St Andrews, *Sgùrr Alasdair* and its neighbour *Sgùrr Thèarlaich* are named after Sheriff Alasdair Nicholson and Mr. Charles Pilkington, and *Sgùrr Thormaid* after Professor Norman Collie. But it is likely that these peaks had been named long before, by hunters and by cleared communities such as that at Rubh' an Dùnain, and the names lost with emigration.

These names, be they modern or from the older Gaelic tradition, take their place with magnificent visual and oral rhetoric in the poetry of Sorley MacLean. The present writer has knelt beside MacLean looking over a Scottish Mountaineering Club map of the Cuillin, the elevation indicated by beautiful hatching rather than by contours, while MacLean almost sang the names, each one carrying with it the image of its own peculiar wonder, each one familiar to him from his climbing days. 'An Cuilthionn' (the Cuillin) is the name of his longest poem and its visual vocabulary records the physical reality, the implicit drama and the individual characters of the mountains that are a part of that drama. It is a drama which both involves and transcends history:

Ròs dubh a' Chuilithinn ghuinich  
dearg le fuil cridhe an duine;  
ròs ciar na h-eanchainne glaise  
dearg le tuar na fala braise;  
ròs geal tuigse nan saoi  
dearg leis an fhuil gun chlaoidh;  
ròs dearg misneachd nan laoch  
thar mullach shlèibhteann 'na chaoir.

*The black rose of the sharp-wounding Cuillin*  
*Red with the blood of man's heart;*  
*The dim rose of the grey brain*  
*Red with the hue of the impetuous blood;*  
*The white rose of philosophic intellect*  
*Red with the unoppressed blood;*  
*The red rose of hero courage*  
*Aflame above mountains' summit.*<sup>27</sup>

The meaning of the name *An Cuilthionn* (The Cuillin) remains disputed, the least likely but most romantic suggestion being that it is derived from the name of the Gaelic hero Cú Chulainn. *Cuilionn* meaning 'holly' could be accepted as relevant on account of the prickly shape of the ridge – but the thought that hollies on the lower slopes might have occasioned the name stretches the sparse evidence. A third possibility is that it is a Norse name and derived from *kjölen* meaning 'keel' and applied to ridges which have the appearance of the keel of an upturned boat.<sup>28</sup> A more certain example of Scandinavian origin is that of 'Meabost' in Ben Meabost – the hill of the 'middle steading' – and there are very many similar examples, particularly names of mountains that would have been important landmarks for navigation. Askival and Halival in the Cuillin of Rum are obvious examples.

Some writers, such as Raymond de Carbonnières in his *Voyage au sommet du Mont Perdu*, would maintain that mountain names provide not only an etymological history but also a history of ideas.

Respectons les mots et leur descendance, puisque la généalogie des mots n'est pas moins que l'histoire des idées.<sup>29</sup>

*Let us respect the words and their etymology, since the genealogy of words is no less than the history of ideas.*

One ironic example of ideas generating a place-name, which then generated another idea and equally famous place-name, is that of Lochnagar. 'Dark Lochnagar' of Byronic fame derives its name from the Gaelic *Loch na Gàire*, meaning either 'the loch of the outcry' or 'the loch of the cry of the wind' (see

27. S. MacLean, *An Cuilthionn*, Earrann IV, ll. 31–32, in C. Whyte, ed., *An Cuilthionn 1939 & Unpublished Poems* (Glasgow, 2011), 106–07.

28. Colin B. Phillips, in M. Slessor, *The Island of Skye* (Edinburgh, 1981), 42–46.

29. L. F. Ramond de Carbonnières, 'Voyage au sommet du Mont Perdu', *Journal des mines* 83 (de thermidor an XI, 1802), 236.

1.3.c.). *Loch na Gàire* is in a high and deep corrie but, however dark, it could scarcely be any darker than its namesake, Lochnagar Crater at La Boisselle in the Somme. It is now a private war memorial. Precisely how it came to be so named is not clear – whether after the tunnel created to lay the mines in WWI in 1916, or perhaps because the effect of creating a man-made corrie was anticipated from the start. In any event, the crater became, and remains, the largest non-nuclear man-made explosion and crater of all time. The original meaning of crater (Greek *krater*) is that of a wine bowl. The shape implied is much the same as that of Gaelic *coire* – corrie or kettle, a vessel for heating water.

By no means all place-names should be thought of as being of ancient derivation, as demonstrated by the names of some of the peaks of the Cuillin, cited in the section on mountaineering. Some names are clearly derived from industrial work, such as iron working and the production of charcoal to that end. Aonghas MacCoinnich lists almost 30 place-names in Ross-shire associated with such workings, which were active in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. In these the colour term *ruadh* is used to refer to iron-bearing rock, as well as for a steep stream, whereas the colour term *dearg* is used for a smithy, *Ceàrdach Dhearg*, and for a river, *Abhainn Dearg*. Two terms are derived directly from English – *mèinne* (mine) and *fùrnais* (furnace) – and the presence of southerners is noted in *Creagan an t-Sassanach (sic)* and *Cladh nan Sassanach*, indicating that there were enough of them to require their own cemetery.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, each generation produces its own place-names and whether they last or not depends upon many random factors. Thus *An Cleite* at *Port Dùn Liath* in Strath, is locally known as ‘George’s Point’ because George Lamond kept his boat and gear there. A man much liked and respected, who is to say whether his name may not remain attached to that point for many generations, even if he never makes it onto a map? JP

## V.2. ETHNIC MARKING

### V.2.a. MAPPING THE WORD ‘CELTIC’

[Introduction: Scholarship or Wishful Thinking?; Post-classical Uses of ‘Celt’ and ‘Celtic’; Edward Lhwyd and John Toland; John Toland \(1670–1722\); Conclusion](#)

#### INTRODUCTION: SCHOLARSHIP OR WISHFUL THINKING?

In discussion of Celtic art, the term ‘Celtic’ is frequently taken for granted by practitioners and art critics, but its acceptance is questioned by scholars working

30. A. MacCoinnich, “Cleiffis of Irne”, in McLeod, Fraser and Gunderloch, eds, *Cànan & Cùltar/Language and Culture, Rannsaichadh na Gaidhlig 3* (Edinburgh, 2006), 148.

in a number of fields. Outside linguistic usage, references to peoples, things and thoughts ‘Celtic’ have long been disputed. Ian Armit made a cautious venture into the field with his book *Celtic Scotland*, covering a period from 1000 BC to 500 AD. This was ‘the first general book to be written about this period since Joseph Anderson’s *Scotland in Pagan Times: The Iron Age* in 1883.’<sup>31</sup> The arguments gather around the term ‘Celtic’ in linguistic, ethnic, archaeological, territorial, cultural and trading contexts. Many of these thorny issues are given excellent treatment by Evans and by Megaw and Megaw in 1999 – the latter account mercifully laced with humour. Megaw and Megaw are particularly apposite here, for their ultimate concern is with art and archaeology, in which they were followed by Harding.<sup>32</sup> All four authors conclude with an assertion of the validity of the term ‘Celtic’ in various applications, subject to a number of cautions. Further cautions, more directly related to changing critical methodologies, are at the basis of a collection of papers published in 2002, entitled ‘Identifying the “Celtic”’.<sup>33</sup> Michael Newton has also usefully discussed the problems relating to ‘Celticity’.<sup>34</sup>

Kim McCone, in his Myles Dillon Memorial Lecture of 2008, comes to the conclusion that the term ‘Celtic’ does indeed have value ‘not just for languages spoken over at least three millennia but for the peoples who spoke them and, in some outstanding cases, are still speaking them.’<sup>35</sup> He also demonstrates that the continental Celts used the word ‘Celt’ to describe themselves.<sup>36</sup> McCone traces the decline of the use of the word and also points out that there is no evidence from the early Classical records that the inhabitants of Scotland and Ireland, never mind England and Wales, ever called themselves Celts. However, he also remarks that

Whatever their numbers, Celtic-speaking immigrants patently succeeded in establishing their tongue in both Britain and Ireland at the expense of that or those of their earlier inhabitants, and at least some further cultural

31. I. Armit, *Celtic Scotland* (London, 1997), 15.

32. D. Ellis Evans, ‘Linguistics and Celtic Ethnogenesis’, and R. and V. Megaw, ‘Celtic Connections Past and Present’, in Black, Gillies and Ó Maolalaigh, eds, *Celtic Connections* Vol. 1 (East Linton, 1999), 1–18 and 19–81, respectively. D. W. Harding, *Celtic Art* (London, 2007).

33. J. Nagy, ed., *Identifying the ‘Celtic’* (Dublin, 2002).

34. M. Newton, *Warriors of the Word* (Edinburgh, 2009), Chap. 2 and in particular pp. 56–57.

35. Review of K. McCone, *The Celtic Question ...*, by Joseph Nagy, *Speculum* Vol. 86, Issue 1 (2008), 241–42.

36. K. McCone, *The Celtic Question: Modern Constructs and Ancient Realities* (Dublin, 2008), 2–7.

features seem likely to have been equally successful. Consequently ... it seems reasonable to posit the survival of elements inherited from proto-Celtic culture in medieval Ireland and relevant parts of Britain and Brittany.<sup>37</sup>

More recently, the authors of 'In Search of the Celts', in *Celts: Art and Identity*, attempt to diffuse the issues by using the term 'Celtic arts' in place of 'Celtic art' or 'the art of the Celts':

No consistent style unites these arts across two and a half millennia: it would be surprising if it did. Rather, we see a repeated habit of synthesizing and modifying external sources of inspiration, transforming Mediterranean naturalism to more abstract styles, and drawing on and reinventing older motifs.<sup>38</sup>

'Synthesizing and modifying external sources of inspiration' are common to all but the most isolated cultures, but in pointing out a predilection for 'more abstract styles' and the use of 'older motifs', the authors point to stylistic traits which they are happy to identify within the context of both the book and the exhibition *Celts: Art and Identity* which it accompanied. As their book's final sentence expresses it, "Celts" are complex'.<sup>39</sup>

Additional questions arise with respect to concepts of nationhood, nations and nationality and these are peculiarly relevant to the situation of the Gaels. Proinsias MacCana has tackled these with scholarly decorum with particular relevance to Ireland and Wales, but it is interesting that the quotation with which he chooses to conclude his Introduction is taken from Robert the Bruce's address of the very early 14th century to the Irish. It claims that the Scots and Irish

share the same national ancestry and are urged to come together ... by a common language and by common custom ... so that with God's will our nation [*nostra nacio*] may be able to recover her ancient liberty.<sup>40</sup>

In 1307, Donal O'Neill supported this assertion in a remonstrance of the Irish chiefs to Pope John XXII, describing Ireland as *Major Scotia* and Scotland as *Minor Scotia*.<sup>41</sup> But MacCana's study makes very few references to Scotland,

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37. McCone, *The Celtic Question ...*, 46–47.

38. Hunter, Goldberg, Farley and Leins, *Celts: Art and Identity* (London, 2015), 31.

39. Hunter, *Celts: Art and Identity*, 278.

40. MacCana, *The Cult of the Sacred Centre* (Dublin, 2011), 15–16.

41. Shead, Stevenson and Watt, eds, *Scotichronicon by Walter Bower* Vol. 6, Book XII (Aberdeen, 1991), 402–03.

although he could have found many parallels from the Scottish Gàidhealtachd to support his general thesis, which, to paraphrase crudely, proposes that a sense of social, even 'national', identity can be as readily based upon shared mythological and cultural roots as it can from political unification. McCone points out that the Bruce (himself of mixed Gaelic and Norman descent) claimed a completely different set of ethnic connections to gather support from the Welsh and made no attempt to bring the different origin myths under one Celtic heading. But one might question whether he is right to claim that

Their failure to invoke a Celtic pedigree shared by Gael and Briton alike, which would have suited their overall aims to perfection, bears eloquent testimony to the absence of any such notion in their day.<sup>42</sup>

Scotland, with Picts, Britons and Gaels, had intimate connections with both sides of the Celtic-language division between P- and Q-Celtic and, given that much of Scotland south of the firths of Clyde and Forth had been Welsh- (early British-)speaking up to the 1100s, and was the home of the oldest Welsh poem, 'The Gododdin', and various other poems from the *Hen Ogledd* (Old North), some of the commonalities across the linguistic boundary must have been obvious. In effect, the realpolitik of the Bruce's day might very well have wished to ignore any shared perceptions in favour of a more focussed appeal. Just such manipulations of sentiment occur today in the context of the movement for Scottish independence, each side of the debate choosing to emphasise its own perceptions, and the Welsh and Irish assemblies and Scottish parliament sometimes asserting common ground, sometimes distancing themselves from each other.

With respect to overall perceptions of the unity or otherwise of the Celtic languages, the authors of *Celts: Art and Identity* incline towards Koch's model of the Celtic languages having their origins in the European Atlantic seaboard and spreading eastward through the Bronze and Iron Ages. But they emphasise that

It is their diversity that is striking, not their unity.<sup>43</sup>

This diversity can only be clearly demonstrated from the early medieval period onwards and the comment ignores the fact that the Celtic languages are a separate and readily identifiable group with characteristics not evident in other Western European languages (see [II.1.a.](#)). Saint Columba did indeed require an interpreter on a visit to Skye, where, presumably, Pictish was spoken, but Columba came from Donegal and it is likely that there were many bilingual speakers available in Scotland, well able to recognise their commonalities.

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42. McCone, *The Celtic Question ...*, 21.

43. Hunter, *Celts: Art and Identity*, 29.



Moreover, as Walter Skene pointed out over a century ago, the conclusions drawn from this single instance are much too broad. Columba conversed freely with King Brude, his messengers and with Brude's druid, Broichan.<sup>44</sup>

#### POST-CLASSICAL USES OF 'CELT' AND 'CELTIC'

However, this section addresses one simple matter: the appearance and application of the word 'Celt' or words derived from it in post-Classical times and suggests that, in the light of examples given below, there is a need to reconsider how the word 'Celtic' came to be applied and consider the possibility that the connections between Gaelic culture and Celtic language were understood rather more clearly than has been hitherto assumed.

The archaeologist Simon James wrote 'no-one in Britain or Ireland called themselves 'Celts' before 1700', and credited the concept of the insular Celts to Edward Lhwyd.<sup>45</sup> There are three early references to Celts and Celtic attributes which challenge those assertions.

The first is that of Prudentius of Troyes. Writing in opposition to Scotus Eriugena's *De divina praedestinatione* of 850–851, Prudentius comments on Eriugena's *celtica eloquentia* or Celtic eloquence.<sup>46</sup> In the context of parallel criticisms of Gaelic scholars of the time as *vaniliquus et garrulus* (vain and garrulous), this clearly is intended to identify Eriugena as a Celt. Whether he agreed with it or not, Eriugena must have known that he was being thus identified, for Prudentius's response was part of an ongoing and serious controversy. Prudentius's understanding of what it was to be a Celt is here primarily motivated by a characteristic of thought and expression rather than by linguistic identity or location. In other words, it is not derived from earlier Classical sources, but represents a perception current in the 9th century. Columbanus himself, in a letter to Pope Boniface written in 613, boasted 'for among us it is not who you are but how you make your case that counts.'<sup>47</sup>

We also know that Eriugena was self-consciously Irish, as his personal use of that name tells us. Prudentius's use of *celtica* in this case has to refer to a perception of Ireland as Celtic and eloquence as a Celtic characteristic. Given that, in the same passage, Prudentius refers also to Gaul and Hibernia, he

44. Walter Skene, *Celtic Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1886), Vol. I, 198.

45. S. James, 'Did the Ancient Celts Exist?', *The Scotsman* (13 March 1998), 15.

46. Prudentius of Troyes, 'De praedestinatione contra Joannem Scotum', in *Patrologia Latina* CXV, 1194a, quoted in D. Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena* (Cambridge, 1989), 33.

47. T. Ó Fiaich, *Columbanus in His Own Words* (Dublin, 1990), 82.

must have intended some wider concept, a concept which he expected to be recognised and understood.<sup>48</sup>

In the late 16th century, the scholar George Buchanan, who was almost certainly a Gaelic speaker, provides us with what is a more scholarly use of the word 'Celtic' in his *History of Scotland* published in 1582:

But the Irish, and the colonies sent from them, being derived from the Celtae, who inhabited Spain, it is probable that they spoke the Celtic tongue.<sup>49</sup>

Buchanan also refers to Classical authors on the Celtae, mentioning Pomponius Mela, a Spaniard, asserting that 'the Celts do inhabit from the mouth of the river Douro, as far as the promontory, which they call Celticum or Nerium, that is, Cape Finisterre.' It is clear from this that Buchanan understood Classical authors to be referring to something akin to a large tribe or race of people and that he identifies the Celtic language group with the race and that the Irish 'and the colonies sent from them' (in which he includes Scotland) are derived from this grouping.<sup>50</sup> Buchanan's 1582 reference to the Celts cannot, therefore, be dismissed as a mere derivation from Classical sources. It is of interest in this context that the origin myth of the Scots, tracing a route from Egypt via Spain and Ireland (see [III.3.c.](#) and [VI.1.a.](#)), has some justification in the genetic record, a record which identifies through the male 'Y' chromosomes, a shared genetic inheritance with the peoples of



George Buchanan Memorial, Greyfriars Churchyard, Edinburgh © Copyright [Kim Traynor / CC BY 2.0](#)

48. Prudentius of Troyes, 'De praedestinatione', in *Patrologia Latina* CXV, 1194. The passage reads as follows: 'Te solum omnium acutissimum Galliae transmisit Hibernia, ut quae nullus absque te scire poterat, tuis eruditionibus obtineret: sed absit, ut Celtica eloquentia tot tantisque fluviorum exundationibus debriata tuas nubilationes admittat, quamvis Christianae humilitatis eminentia, alterutro charitatis officio vicissim suppeditari minime prohibeat: imo, undecunque commodum duxerit, alternatim, quae recta sunt, exhiberi percenseat.'

49. J. Watkins, trans. and ed., *Buchanan's History of Scotland ...*, Book II, 1582 (London and Paris, 1843), 41.

50. Watkins, *Buchanan's History of Scotland ...*, Book II, 42.

Wales (especially in the uplands), the Irish and the inhabitants of the south and west of England, as well as with the Basques.<sup>51</sup> In addition, there is a possible linguistic link between the Paleohispanic language, Tartessian and Gaelic which would reinforce the legendary and subsequent accounts.<sup>52</sup>

Equally significantly, in the year following Buchanan's publication, the Scottish philosopher Alexander Dickson wrote

Et enim si Celtarum replicentur ânales, et excitentur historiae, multò antè in Druidum schola viguisse reperias.

*For if you consult the annals of the Celts and read the history books, you will discover that it was thriving long before in the school of the Druids.*<sup>53</sup>

Dickson was writing here in the context of a philosophical discussion of memory and its role in thought. His statement suggests that he not only knew of but had read Celtic annals and that these were connected with Druidic schools of some antiquity and that the art of memory was a vital aspect of Druidic teaching. In other words, Dickson had a concept of a Celtic way of thinking which he believed to be very ancient.

Buchanan clearly held similar opinions. He observes that 'the Britons and Gauls maintained the same worship; they had the same priests, or Druids, generally the like of whom were in no other country'. In case it be thought that Buchanan is merely echoing classical authors and that the references cannot be further extended to Ireland and Scotland, it should be noted that he continues:

Also, the same kind of priests, or sacrists, called by both of them Bards, were in great honour, both amongst the Gauls and Britons. Their function and name do yet remain amongst all those nations which use the old British tongue ... many of their customs yet remain; particularly in Ireland, where they have undergone the least change.

It is also clear that Buchanan had personal experience of bards, remarking that

The nobles, when visited by them, receive them honourably, and dismiss them with gifts. They make verses, and those not inelegant ones, which the rhapsodists recite, either to the better sort, or to the vulgar, who are

51. D. Browne and S. Hughes, eds, *The Archaeology of the Welsh Uplands* (Aberystwyth, 2003), 121–22.

52. J. Koch, 'Tartessian, Europe's Newest and Oldest Celtic Language', *History Ireland* (March/April 2009), Vol. 17/2, 17–20.

53. A. Dickson {Dicson, Dicsono}, *De Umbra Rationis & Judicii, Sive De Memoriae Virtute Prosopopoeia* (London, 1583), 37. Translation by Dana Sutton.

very desirous of hearing them; and sometimes they sing them to musical instruments.<sup>54</sup>

Presumably Buchanan and Dickson were understood by their readers who, in the case of Buchanan, were undoubtedly numerous and influential, including Edmund Spenser (see below) and Sir Francis Bacon.<sup>55</sup> In the case of Dickson, they were at least influential in that Giordano Bruno was of their number and was living in London at the time, and that Dickson's work provoked at least two published responses from academics.<sup>56</sup> Such was its significance that it was republished in 1597 under the title *Thamus*, in which form it was read by Henry Percy, ninth Earl of Northumberland, was available with Bruno's works in Poland and evoked the admiration of the Jesuit Martin del Rio.<sup>57</sup>

Whether Buchanan's and Dickson's opinions were or are justified is not under discussion here, but the fact that they held such notions indicates a sense of continuity of thought which Buchanan accepts and relates to oral tradition, and which Dickson chooses to describe as Celtic and which he relates to surviving texts. These will surely have been insular texts.

Buchanan, as a man closely acquainted with Gaelic and a probable Gaelic speaker, would certainly have known the Gaelic word *draoidh* in one form or another, either from oral or written tradition, and he more or less equates the druids with the bards of his day.

Dickson, being a native of Kirkton of Errol in Perthshire,<sup>58</sup> is less likely to have spoken Gaelic. However, Errol was about twenty miles distant from the boundary between Gaelic and Scots speakers in 1500.<sup>59</sup> It was also in the diocese of Dunkeld where, earlier in the century, 'a knowledge of the Irish tongue' was a distinct asset.<sup>60</sup> Dickson will certainly have been well aware of Gaelic and quite possibly knew of The Book of the Dean of Lismore, compiled in eastern Perthshire between 1512 and 1526 (and, in the 18th century, known to James

54. Watkins, *Buchanan's History of Scotland ...*, Book II, 39.

55. For example, Sir Francis Bacon, letter to the Lord Chancellor, touching the history of Britain: Letter XXII, in *The Works of Francis Bacon ...* (London, 1730), Vol. IV, 565–66.

56. See R. Blackwell and de R. Lucca, eds, *Giordano Bruno, Cause, Principle and Unity* (Cambridge, 1998), 28, in which Dickson is one of the main proponents of Bruno's views and with whom he had a close friendship.

57. F. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London, 1992 and 2010), 277 and notes.

58. J. Durkan, 'Alexander Dickson and S.T.C. 6823', *The Bibliothek* Vol. 3, Number 5 (1962), 183.

59. M. Newton, *A Handbook of the Scottish Gaelic World* (Dublin, 2000), Illustration 3, between pp. 160–61.

60. See J. Purser, *Scotland's Music* (Edinburgh, 1992), 97, which quotes extensively from Alexander Myln's *Vitae Dunkeldensis Ecclesiae Episcoporum* of 1517.

Macpherson of Ossian fame). The Book of the Dean of Lismore includes oral versions of poems influenced by east Perthshire Gaelic and provides substantial evidence for interaction between bards and their patrons in Perthshire and Argyllshire, as well as demonstrating that Irish-Scottish literary contacts (in Gaelic) were being well maintained.<sup>61</sup>

One of the poems from this book – ‘Ar Sliocht Gaodhal ó Ghort Ghréag’ (the race of Gaels from the land of Greece) – is a *brosnachadh* or poem of incitement to battle addressed to the Earl of Argyll, probably immediately before the Battle of Flodden.<sup>62</sup> Not only does the poem claim a common Greek origin for the Irish and Scottish Gaels, personified by Lugh (see stanzas 1, 5 and 11), but it specifically unites them racially in opposition to strangers (*ar Ghallaibh* – see below – does not specifically refer to ‘Saxons’ as the translation states) and does so in the name of Lugh, who is a mythological figure of pan-Celtic significance, as evidenced by place-names such as Lyon, London and Carlisle:

Cia nois ar aithris an fhir  
fhóirfeas Gaoidheil ar Ghallaibh,  
rér linne, mar do-rinn Lugh  
taobhadh a chine ó anghuth?

*Who now, in that man's wise, will succour Gael from Saxons, in our time, as  
once Lugh aided his race against reproach?*<sup>63</sup>

In the face of such unequivocal racial claims and antagonisms in the mind of the anonymous author, it is hard to sustain any notion that his audience would have no feeling for or understanding of his appeal to their prejudice. Moreover, although the word *gall* applied to strangers in general – including Gauls – it was never used for insular Celts.<sup>64</sup>

The fact that the word ‘Celtic’ is not used in this context does not in any way undermine the reality of the sentiments and the sense of racial unity founded upon a shared mythological basis, as evidenced also in the writing of John Carswell. When Carswell translated the Book of Common Order into Classical

61. D. Thomson, ‘Dean of Lismore, Book of’, in *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland* (Oxford, 1983), 59.

62. Debate as to whether it was indeed the Battle of Flodden is discussed by M. MacGriogair, ‘Ar sliocht Gaodhal ó Ghort Gréag: An dàn ‘Flodden’ ann an Leabhar Deadhan Lios-mòir’, in G. Munro and R. Cox, eds, *Cànan & Cultar/Language & Culture, Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 4* (Edinburgh, 2010), 23–37. See also W. MacLeod, ‘Caimbeul Poetry of the Sixteenth Century’, in Williams and McClure, eds, *Fresche Fontanis* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2013), 232–36.

63. W. J. Watson, *Bàrdachd Albannach o Leabhar Deadhan Liòs-Moir* (Edinburgh, 1978), 158–61.

64. Newton, *Warriors of the Word*, 51.

Gaelic (published in 1567), his prefatory comments reveal that the racial, territorial, linguistic and philosophic perceptions of Celt and Gael referred to just over a decade later in Buchanan and Dickson, were perceived as a threat to the Christian faith of the Reformed Church. This threat was based on both oral and written predilections and firmly rooted in Celtic mythology, given here in Thomson’s translation.

And great is the blindness and darkness of sin and ignorance and of understanding among composers and writers and supporters of Gaelic, in that they prefer and practise the framing of vain, hurtful, lying, earthly stories about the Tuatha De Danann, and about the Sons of Mil, and about the heroes, and Fionn mac Cumhaill with his Fianna, and about many others whom I shall not number or tell of here in detail, in order to maintain and advance these, with a view to obtaining for themselves passing worldly gain, rather than to write and to compose and to support the faithful words of God and the perfect way of truth.<sup>65</sup>

The complaint was well founded. Even in semi-religious verse of the 17th century, we find the Celtic heroes of the past invoked alongside Classical and biblical heroes:

Cè nis neart Shamsoin  
No saothair Iorcla laisde  
Neart Chonchullin chleitghil  
Cè Ector no Achill.<sup>66</sup>

*Where now is the strength of Samson  
Or the labours of illustrious Hercules  
Or the strength of bright-crested Cuchullin  
Where is Hector or Achilles?*

Carswell’s protest strongly implies that such legendary material was a part of the culture to the extent that it could take a kind of moral or philosophical precedence over Christian concerns. Indeed, when in the early 16th century An Barùn Eóghan MacCombaigh lists what he would give to regain his health, the list consists solely of items of Gaelic legendary value, including the sword and horn of Fionn mac Cumhaill, and associated with Celtic gods such as the horse studs, steeds and trumpets of Manannán.<sup>67</sup>

Round about this period, words such as ‘Druid’ and ‘Celt’ were sometimes

65. R. L. Thomson, ed., *Foirm na n-Urrnuidheadh* (Edinburgh, 1970), Appendix I, 179–80.

66. Gille Bhrìde, ‘Crosanachd’, in G. Henderson, ed., *Leabhar nan Gleann* (Edinburgh, 1898), 223.

67. W. MacLeod and M. Bateman, *Duanaire na Scraicair* (Edinburgh, 2007), 357–59.



emerging from the studies of Classical authors rather than from native sources.<sup>68</sup> Vincenzo Galilei writes of the panpipes that ‘its invention is attributed to the Celts.’ However, Galilei would appear to have drawn this information from Pollux’s *Onomasticon* 4.10, which dates from the 2nd century AD.<sup>69</sup> This reference is discussed further in IV.2.c. Musical Instruments.

Mention should also be made here to references to plants assigned a Celtic provenance, in particular *Spica Celtica*<sup>70</sup> which appears in an Anglo-Saxon Herbal Glossary from 12th-century Norman Latin, compiled by Archbishop Laud in 1635.<sup>71</sup> However, just what was understood by *Celtica* in these contexts is not easily determined and the references may ultimately be traceable to Dioscorides. In the late medieval period, British sources with mentions of the Celts – including William of Poitiers in the 11th century, Bartholomeus Anglicus in the first half of the 13th century and Ralph Higden in the mid-14th century<sup>72</sup> – refer only to Celtic tribes in Belgium, France and Spain and cannot be used to support any sense of Celtic identity within the British Isles. However, two modern scholars are happy to entitle the product of their considerable research into plants and people in Scotland *Flora Celtica*<sup>73</sup> and the term ‘Celtic rainforest’ has been coined as a simple and coherent way of identifying a geographical reality (I.3.a.).<sup>74</sup>

The English writers Spenser and Milton both used the word ‘Celtic’ somewhat ambiguously.<sup>75</sup> They were writing respectively at the end of the 16th century and the middle of the 17th. But both had read and admired Buchanan, and Spenser knew from that reading and from his own experience of Gaelic

68. S. Piggott, *The Druids*, 123–27.

69. C. Palisca, trans. and ed., *Dialogue on Ancient and Modern Music Vincenzo Galilei* (New Haven, 2003), 365.

70. Thus in Dioscorides, but also known as *Nardus Celtica*, *Valeriana Celtica* and in other forms.

71. Information from Mary Beith, who suggests that Anglo-Saxon had very few words for plants and adapted many from Celtic sources.

72. See R. E. Latham, *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (London, 1981). William of Poitiers (died before 1087), *Gesta Willelmi ducis Normannorum et ... Regis Anglorum* c. 1075 (Paris, 1952), I, 30; Bartholomeus Anglicus (alias de Glanville fl. 1230–1250), *De proprietatibus rerum* (Cologne, 1472), XV, 66; Ralph Higden, *Polychronicon* 1352 (Royal Society, 1856–1886), I, 27, 270.

73. W. Milliken and S. Bridgewater, *Flora Celtica, Plants and People in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2004). *Celtica* is also an accepted identifier for animal species such as *Leptomera Celtica* and *Onchidella Celtica*.

74. M. Coleman, ‘Celtic rainforest’, *The Nature of Scotland* (Summer 2011), 61–63.

75. E. Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, Booke II, Canto X, verses 5 and 29; and J. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book I, l. 521, and *Comus* l. 60.

in Ireland that he was living in a Celtic-speaking country.<sup>76</sup> What is more, he was aware of the antiquity of Gaelic literature.<sup>77</sup> Spenser also encountered the bards and bardic verse which he had had translated and to which he accorded as much value as could reasonably be expected in the circumstances.<sup>78</sup> Milton is usually interpreted as using ‘Celtic’ to refer to France, although the line ‘And o’er the Celtic roam’d the utmost isles’ seems to suggest the Hebrides, to which he refers by name in *Lycidas*.<sup>79</sup>

#### EDWARD LHWYD AND JOHN TOLAND

What strongly suggests an ongoing relationship with Buchanan’s use of the word ‘Celtic’ is the commendatory Latin poem by Andrew Frazier, which Edward Lhwyd published in his *Archaeologica Britannica* in 1703. There, Frazier hails Lhwyd as Buchanan’s successor, making special reference to the origins of words. That this is more than a linguistic connection is clear from Frazier’s invocation of Scotia as an *Antiqua tellus* ‘ancient earth’ – which possibly originally read *Nativa tellus* ‘native soil’.<sup>80</sup> In the context of Lhwyd’s work and his frequent use of the word ‘Celtic’ with respect to language, there seems little doubt that it was already well understood as a connecting linguistic and cultural adjective. Frazier was possibly the Rev. Andrew Fraser, (c. 1605–1711) who served in Lochgoilhead and Rothesay. If he were not a Gaelic speaker himself, he must have been made profoundly aware of the Gaelic of his parishioners.

#### JOHN TOLAND (1670–1722)

By the early 18th century, earlier references to the Celts take on an even wider-ranging cultural significance, both religious and philosophical, in the works of John Toland, whose *The History of the Celtic Religion and Learning ...* (pre-1722) has a title which speaks for itself and which explicitly refers to all those who speak a Celtic language.<sup>81</sup> Toland had read Buchanan’s *History* and was a native Gaelic speaker from the Inishowen peninsula who could also read Old Gaelic. He became a Protestant, probably shortly before he came to study at

76. W. Renwick, ed., *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (Oxford, 1970), 40.

77. Renwick, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, 38–40.

78. Renwick, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, 75.

79. Milton, *Lycidas*, l. 156.

80. D. Evans and B. Roberts, *Edward Lhwyd Archaeologica Britannica* (Aberystwyth, 2009), 70–71.

81. J. Toland, *The History of the Celtic Religion and Learning: Containing an Account of the Druids, Or the Priests and Judges, of the Voids, Or the Diviners and Physicians, and of the Bards, Or the Poets and Heralds, of the Ancient Gauls, Britons, Irisch and Scots* (published posthumously, 1726), 45–46.

the University of Glasgow, so his interest in Celtic religion was also informed by a post-Reformation Scottish theology,<sup>82</sup> as well as by his manifest interest in folklore, as evidenced by his heavily annotated copy of Martin Martin's *A Description of The Western Islands of Scotland*.<sup>83</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

What the above evidence suggests is that there was a continuity of cultural awareness and identity amongst Insular Celts, on occasion referred to specifically as Celtic, by them or others, which was based upon a complex of perceptions, ranging from the 9th-century caricature of the gift of the gab, to a shared linguistic and racial identity, a specific literature and a shared mythology.

What this means for the frequently used term 'Celtic art' is that the basic concept of a Celtic identity, that goes beyond language, can be traced across many centuries, independently of the visual artistic evidence itself. Megaw and Megaw, mentioned at the start of this section, were primarily concerned with demonstrating the validity of the term 'Celtic art' with respect to Iron Age Europe. Support for its use with respect to Insular art is to be found throughout this book, in the form of particularities and continuities of style.

That said, whether the term 'Celtic' was often applied by early Celtic writers to their own culture is of minor importance. The continuity of a culture does not require the use of a specific word to demonstrate its reality, and, even if we confine the use of the word 'Celtic' to cover the Celtic language group (both P and Q), any attempt to divorce that undisputed reality from a sense of cultural connection remains problematic. As McCone concludes,

The remaining question of whether a corresponding 'Celtic' cultural continuity may legitimately be posited on occasion at least can be answered with a cautious 'yes'.<sup>84</sup>

JP

#### V.2.b. VISUAL ASPECTS OF A CELTIC CHURCH

[A Celtic Church: Definitions](#); [The Celtic Church: Material Culture: Architecture](#); [Material Culture: Sculpture](#); [Material Culture: Sacred Objects](#); [The Celtic Tonsure](#); [Benediction](#); [Protection](#); [The Celtic Church: Liturgical Practice](#); [The Celtic Church Inheritance: Roman Catholic or Protestant?](#)

82. Des Maizeaux, 'An Abstract of the Life of the Author', *A Critical History of the Celtic Religion & Learning ...* (Arbroath, 1813, reprinted from the edition of 1726).

83. Martin Martin, *A Description of The Western Islands of Scotland* (London, 1716); Toland's copy is of the 1716 edition and its call number in the British Library is BL C.45.c.1.

84. McCone, *The Celtic Question ...*, 46.

Given that much of the artwork associated with the word 'Celtic' is manifest in Christian contexts, ranging from script and illumination to metalwork, sculpture and architecture, this section will focus primarily on the relevant material culture. However, it is necessary to confront the ongoing debate as to whether there was such a thing as a Celtic church. What follows is not submitted as some kind of proof, but it is offered as a form of justification for supporting the concept, as the visual evidence makes a major contribution to the debate.

#### A CELTIC CHURCH: DEFINITIONS

Just as there is resistance to the use of the word 'Celtic' to describe shared cultural perceptions amongst Celtic-speaking peoples, so the idea that there was such a thing as a Celtic church is disputed by some scholars.<sup>85</sup> Of course, if the latter-day effusions of pseudo-Celtic religious tourism are to be equated with the concept of a Celtic church, the target is a relatively easy one and has been struck with accuracy by Donald Meek. Meek's target, however, is not overtly that of a Celtic church but that of Celtic Christianity. Much depends upon what initial definitions are used. If a centralised organisation is regarded as a necessary defining element, then there was indeed no such thing as a Celtic church. It has never been in the nature of Celtic society to centralise.<sup>86</sup> Likewise, one may search in vain for early evidence of use of the word 'Celtic' to describe the church in Celtic-speaking countries, but the fact that the term 'Celtic church' is a post-Reformation phenomenon in no way devalues the intrinsic sense in its use with respect to the early churches in Scotland, Ireland, Wales and Brittany. Nor need 'Celtic Church' refer at all times to the church in all the Celtic-speaking areas. Some distinctive practices were primarily associated with the Gaelic-speaking church but, on the other hand, distinctive artefacts such as the handbells are found in all four countries.

Whether regional or supra-regional, such trends do not have to be defined as breakaway churches in the post-reformation sense, even though that would hardly be uncharacteristic of Britain, or of Scotland in particular.<sup>87</sup>

Some of the related issues are ably discussed by Thomas O'Loughlin, who points out that scholars are quite happy to refer to North African, Gaulish, Latin and Byzantine theologies but that no such parallel term has evolved in any depth in Celtic studies. O'Loughlin suggests that the whole debate surrounding the

85. T. Clancy and G. Markús, *Iona* (Edinburgh, 1994), 8–9. D. E. Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* (Boat of Garten, 2000).

86. MacCana, *The Cult of the Sacred Centre* (Dublin, 2011), discusses this issue extensively.

87. M. Carver, 'Early Scottish Monasteries and Prehistory: A Preliminary Dialogue', *Scottish Historical Review* LXXXVIII, 2, No. 226 (October 2009), 333–34.

idea of distinctiveness of the Celtic church implying opposition to the Roman church is based upon a single logical error:

Ignoring the fact that before any phenomenon can be specifically (*species*) different, it must be generically (*genus*) common, and it is only on the basis of this common *genus* that we have a basis for comparison; and this carried with it the awareness that every instance of a *genus* is specifically different from every other. In short, when we compare historical phenomena we must assume that distinctiveness equals individuation, not opposition.<sup>88</sup>

What follows here proposes that a Celtic church can be identified by a considerable number of distinctive features. Its organisation was based on monastic centres rather than bishops' sees and the bishops themselves were peripatetic rather than localised and their succession was frequently based upon clan. However, their main functions – such as ordination – were naturally present, and Warren points out an interesting distinction with respect to the administering of the Eucharist.

This custom of joint celebrants in the case of priests, and of a single celebrant in the case of a bishop, is peculiar to the Celtic rite, no similar practice existing in any other country or at any other time.<sup>89</sup>

In the Celtic-speaking countries, there was a particularly strong interest in the eremitic tradition derived from North Africa, celebrated in the persons of St Martin of Tours and Sts Paul and Anthony of the desert, who feature on early Christian stone carvings in Scotland and Ireland, notably on the Nigg and St Vigean's cross slabs and on Muiredach's cross at Monasterboice and the South Cross at Castledermot, both in Ireland. The Nigg cross slab is surmounted by the two saints jointly breaking bread, thus reflecting what Warren interprets as Celtic custom. The eremitic tradition is also reflected in a distinctive architecture, of which many examples can still be seen, and which are discussed below (see also [IV.1.a.](#)).

The number of *peregrinati*, in essence using exile as a form of martyrdom, was noteworthy, and related to this eremitic tradition was the more general theme of martyrdom, which took a number of forms, usually expressed as 'red', 'white', and 'blue' (or 'green'). Red martyrdom meant a violent death for Christ. White martyrdom represented exile. Blue martyrdom was particularly related to penance for wrong-doing. None of these was unique to the Celtic church, but

88. T. O'Loughlin, "A Celtic Theology": Some Awkward Questions and Observations, in J. Nagy, ed., *Identifying the 'Celtic'* (Dublin, 2002), 57, and, more generally, 49–65.

89. F. E. Warren, *The Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church*, with a new Introduction and Bibliography by Jane Stevenson (Woodbridge, 1987), 129.

what seems to have been distinctive was the manner in which the penitent was treated. On mainland Europe, the penitent was subjected to constant degradation and life-long humiliation. Hardly surprisingly, it did not recruit many penitents. The Celtic church's approach, though extremely harsh by modern standards, was somewhat more forgiving.<sup>90</sup>

The Celtic church had, for many generations, a separate date for Easter (see below and [I.2.b.](#)); favoured a particular form of the central symbol of Christianity: the ringed cross (see [IV.1.c.](#)); designed and made a particular type of handbell and of free-standing bell tower (see [IV.2.c.](#)); pursued certain peculiarities in the order of service and the division of the day and choice of appropriate prayers; practised daily rather than annual confession; and made early and extensive use of the vernacular – Gaelic – both for secular poetry and prose, divine poetry and prose, commentary and many other functions. Distinctions of doctrine, even philosophy, are discussed elsewhere (see [VI.2.](#)).

The Celtic monks preferred their unique form of tonsure from ear to ear, possibly imitated from the Druids (see below), and they developed a distinctive script (see [II.3.b.](#)), accompanied by a richness of artistic embellishment unparalleled in Christian art (see [IV.2.f.](#)). To this we might add the burning of a paschal fire, celebrating mass facing east and the practice of carrying tiny psalters.

This list of distinctive characteristics and artefacts cannot easily be dismissed, and to use 'Celtic' to identify them makes scholarly sense and has been used by many scholars, including even sceptics such as Clancy and Márkus in the title of their book, *Iona – The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery*.

In contrast to Meek, and Clancy and Márkus's work, Mackey's *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity* speaks for itself, and scholars such as Warren and Stevenson feel no need to justify the title *The Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church*. Kenney's seminal work, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical*, is cautious enough to entitle its lengthy third chapter *The Irish Church in the 'Celtic' Period* but is prepared to state that

The term includes the Churches of other Celtic lands – where, as the rather scanty evidence seems to indicate, a similar ecclesiastical organisation existed – but the representative Celtic Church is the ancient Church of Ireland.<sup>91</sup>

Kenney is concerned only with literary sources, amongst which he has subsumed those almost certainly composed and produced in Scotland, including

90. C. Stancliffe, 'Red, White and Blue Martyrdom', in Whitelock, McKitterick and Dumville, eds, *Ireland in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1982), 21–46.

91. J. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical* (1st pub. 1929; Dublin 1997), 156.



Adomnán's *Life of St Columba* and all the other productions of Iona. He does not, of course, deal with the artistic and architectural evidence referred to below.

More recently, Herren and Brown have given cogent support to the idea of a Pelagian Celtic church from the early 5th to the early 7th century. Their work pays considerable attention to the visual influence of Pelagian or related tenets:

We suspect that the apparent hiatus in the creation of sumptuous religious art for Christian use in the fifth to late seventh centuries and the absence of images of Christ in the common Celtic Church is due to Pelagian-based strictures against luxury combined with their literal interpretation of the scriptural injunctions against imagery.<sup>92</sup>

The problem of definition is compounded by the indiscriminate use of 'Irish' to describe the church and even the language in Scotland. Thus,

The speakers of Celtic languages – British, Irish and Picts – had no more contact with each other than with the Anglo-Saxon peoples or people from the continent, except by force of geography, and they had no conception that they were related to each other, even distantly.<sup>93</sup>

The omission of the Scots from the above is hard to understand. The force of geography was, of course, fundamental – hence the Christianisation of much of Scotland from the west, never mind the influences from Ireland and Scotland on the church in Northern England, or their relationships with Wales, manifest for example in the material culture. *Scotia* still meant Ireland as well, and the term used to describe Gaelic-speakers either side of the North Channel was *Scotti*. Adomnán himself uses it of Scots in Britain, referring to 'King Oswald ... during his exile among the Scots' (in Iona) and 'the Picts and Scots of Britain, who are separated from each other by the Dorsal mountains of Britain.'<sup>94</sup> So too does Bede, describing the monks of Iona as *monachi Scotticae nationis* 'those monks of the Scottish nation'.<sup>95</sup> The kingdom of Dál Riata, the largest part of which was in Argyllshire, extended across the North Channel into Ulster: its people were the Scots, and they were no more to be wholly identified with the rest of Ireland than they were to be identified with the rest of Scotland.<sup>96</sup> The widely-accepted model of a Scottic invasion of Argyllshire from Ulster spreading north and eastward via Dál Riata has been cogently challenged on archaeological and linguistic grounds.

92. M. Herren and S. Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity* (Woodbridge, 2002), 18.

93. Clancy and Markus, *Iona*, 8.

94. W. Reeves, ed. and trans., *Life of St Columba* I, I, and II, XLVII (Edinburgh, 1874), 77.

95. J. Giles, ed., *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of England* (London, 1903), 289.

96. See R. Sharpe, 'The Thriving of Dalriada', in S. Taylor, ed., *Kings, Clerics and Chronicles in Scotland, 500–1297* (Dublin, n.d. – post 1999), 50 and 52.

An alternative model of a linguistic boundary between Goidelic and Brittonic, formed by the Scottish Highlands rather than the Sea of Moyle (or North Channel), has been suggested.<sup>97</sup>

The close relationships between the Scots of both parts of Dál Riata extended into Pictland. The 9th- to 10th-century 'Scéla Cano' describes Cano MeicGartnáin (whose main residence was probably Dùn Cana on the Island of Raasay)<sup>98</sup> travelling to Ireland with a considerable retinue from Skye. While his father was a king of the Picts, his grandfather was a king of the Scots. Such cultural mixing found magnificent expression in stone carving and book illumination – subjects discussed elsewhere.

'Hibernensis' was available (and was used occasionally) to specify the Irish exclusively, and Johannes Scotus named himself Eriugena (derived from 'Eriú' meaning 'Ireland' and based on Virgil's use of *Graiuigena* meaning 'Grecian by birth') to make sure the distinction was understood. Gaelic had been spoken in the south-west of Scotland for generations and nobody could argue that the Irish and Scottish Gaels were unaware of their linguistic, geographic and genetic relationships, evidence for which is found centuries later in Robert the Bruce's letter to the Irish, cited in V.2.a. Mapping the Word Celtic. In this section, *Scotti* is therefore rendered as 'Scots' and the language and culture as Gaelic.

Nor can the Gaels have been unaware of these relationships when they met on foreign soil. Dicuil and Cú Chuimhne may have come from Iona, and it has even been suggested that Jonas and Stäfa on Lake Zurich were named by a Celtic monk in memory of Iona and Staffa.<sup>99</sup> Romance may here be taking the place of knowledge, but it is not beyond reason to suppose that monks from Iona, inspired by a desire for white martyrdom or displaced by the Viking raids, brought their memories with them to major Celtic monasteries such as that of St Gall, no great distance from Jonas and Stäfa.

#### THE CELTIC CHURCH: MATERIAL CULTURE: ARCHITECTURE

In a book such as this, with a primary focus upon the visual, the existence of material evidence unique to the early Christian church in Celtic-speaking countries has a particular significance. Such evidence is readily available but only occasionally included in discussion of the concept of a Celtic church. The evidence falls broadly into three categories: architectural, sculptural and sacred objects.

97. E. Campbell, 'Were the Scots Irish?', *Antiquity* 75 (2001), 285–92, esp. 290–91.

98. D. MacLean, 'Maelrubai, Applecross and the Late Pictish Contribution West of Druimalban', in D. Henry, ed., *The Worm, the Germ and the Thorn* (Forfar, 1997), 174–75.

99. Charles-Louis-Fleury Panckoucke visiting Iona 1830 – see *Voyage Pittoresque aux Îles Hébrides* (Paris, 1831).



Cashel on Canna. Photo © John Purser

Architecturally, the three most obviously distinctive forms, common to at least two of the Celtic-speaking countries, are the *clochán* 'beehive hut', the cashel and the free-standing round tower.<sup>100</sup> The term *clochán* survives in Gaelic as *clachan*, meaning a small settlement usually with a church (see IV.1.a.).

Beehive huts have an almost iconic status, particularly in south-west Ireland on Skellig Michael and close to the Blasket Islands. Less well known are the beehive huts on Eileach nan Naomh in the Firth of Lorne and the remains of those at Aberdaron in Wales. The name in English is derived from the shape of the structures, being similar to that of the old-fashioned straw bees' skep. Beehive huts are made entirely of drystone and have corbelled rooves. They have a single entrance, but occasionally they may interconnect, such as those on Eileach nan Naomh (see IV.1.a. also for images).

Remains of beehive huts in what was a cashel at Eilean Chaluim Chille in Kilmuir on Skye have also been identified, and the remains of what was very probably a large beehive hut can be seen in the cashel on the Island of Canna.

On a similar scale is the circular structure at St Blane's monastery in the south of Bute in Argyll. Here, there is evidence of the commencement of corbelling,

100. There is reference to a round tower having been built in the 7th century at Ploabennec in Brittany, on the orders of St Tenenan – see Margaret Stokes's *Early Christian Art in Ireland* (Dublin, 1887 and 1932), 46 and 48. This tradition, however, is recorded in the 17th century by Albert Legrand and his sources have yet to be verified. Illustrations of mainland continental round towers in Stokes's book are of later date.

and the monastic settlement has two circular graveyards within the overall context of a cashel-like enclosure (see below).

Other types of drystone cell, with corbelled rooves but rectangular form, are to be found in Ireland and Scotland. Notable amongst these are the Galarus oratory in County Kerry, the cell of St Ronan on North Rona, and *Teampall Beannachaidh*, literally 'the temple of blessing', on the Flannan Isles, the last two being in the Outer Hebrides.

The term 'cashel' (Gaelic *caiseal* or *caisteal*) is used to describe monastic settlements enclosed by a wall, usually circular. The most famous of these is known internationally simply by that designation – Cashel, in County Tipperary. There are cashels on Canna in the Inner Hebrides and at Kilpatrick in south-west Scotland.<sup>101</sup> The modern wall surrounding the church and graveyard at Govan Old Parish Church probably echoes a similar monastic enclosure, as may that at Tullich in Aberdeenshire, but to what extent these were genuinely defensive walls (as the word *caisteal* would imply) seems to vary according to



St Ronan's Chapel and Cell, North Rona. Photo © John Purser

101. See I. Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands* (Edinburgh, 2001), 101, and J. A. Balfour, 'Notice of a Cashel, An Early Christian Settlement at Kilpatrick, Arran', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (13 December 1909), 90ff.

the situation. What is common to such walls is that they are roughly circular in form. One might expect traces of such a cashel on Iona, but the architecture of the monastery there has been closely studied by Finbar McCormick and suggests its *vallum* was exceptional in not being round. The evidence, however, is too sketchy to draw anything but the most generalised conclusions.<sup>102</sup>

Brechin Cathedral appears to have been built on an early Celtic Christian site. It is enclosed by a *ráth*, or protective earthen rampart, similar in function to the cashel, and close by were Kilmoir and Botherkil, both of which incorporate the Gaelic word *cill* from Old Gaelic *cell* and ultimately from Latin *cella*. The word literally means a cell but from very early times came to mean a church or monastic settlement, as many such were built on the sites of Christian hermits' cells. It is from this word that the surname MacKellar is derived, a *cealloir* being the superior of a monastery. That a *cealloir* could have a son (*mac*) is not a moral outrage as the rule of celibacy was only introduced in the 12th century. The presence of the *cill* element in place-names is commonly accepted as implying a Celtic origin and is widespread throughout Scotland and Ireland.

As for the free-standing round towers, of which an example is to be found at Brechin, their name in Irish Gaelic is *cloigtheach* 'bell house'. The handbells would have been rung from the top of the tower where the small windows would allow the sound to carry a fair distance. The round towers were also refuges, so the bells may well have been used in times of danger as well as, naturally enough, to call monks to prayer.

The Brechin round tower is a bell tower and is one of only two such in Scotland, the other being at Abernethy. Though St Magnus's Church on Egilsay in Orkney also has a round tower, which was originally finished with a conical stone cap, according to Eric Fernie it comes from a different, North Sea tradition, the tower having been built as an integral part of the church, whereas the Celtic bell towers were built separately, as at Glendalough and Devenish Island in Ireland.<sup>103</sup> In the case of the Brechin tower, like its Irish counterparts, its height is approximately twice its circumference at the base. The Battle of Largs Memorial is a straightforward imitation of this tradition, being erected in 1912 by public subscription, in the mistaken belief that such structures were primarily look-out towers. It was designed by James Sandyford Kay.

There is plenty of evidence that these round pencil-shaped towers were indeed bell towers, the term *cloicthech* having been in use in the 11th and 12th centuries when the towers were being built, although building probably

102. F. McCormick, 'Iona: The Archaeology of the Early Monastery', in C. Bourke, ed., *Studies in the Cult of St Columba* (Dublin, 1997), 45–68.

103. E. Fernie, 'The Church of St Magnus, Egilsay', in B. E. Crawford, ed., *St Magnus Cathedral and Orkney's Twelfth Century Renaissance* (Aberdeen, 1988), 140.

commenced in the early tenth century. It has been suggested that because these round towers post-date the handbells, the quadrangular handbells would probably not have been used in them and that the towers were designed to house much larger conventionally shaped bells operated by ropes.<sup>104</sup> If this is true, it is remarkable that there is no archaeological evidence to support it. Not one bell of conventional 'bell-shape' form survives from the period, nor is there any evidence of framing to support such a bell or bells in any of the surviving towers. It is true that bell metal for the larger type of bell imagined to have been used is precious material and might very well have been recycled, but it is hard to believe that not one has survived. Likewise, though most of the towers have had their tops damaged and reconstructed, it seems extraordinary that no material evidence for a bell frame contemporary with the original towers has yet been discovered.

The time gap between the making of Celtic handbells and the building of the towers is a matter of debate. The earliest reference to a round tower dates from 948 and mentions repairs.<sup>105</sup> Round bell towers were therefore already reasonably well established in the first half of the 10th century. As we have seen (IV.2.c.), there are two types of Celtic handbell and both are quadrangular. The forged, folded, lapped and riveted iron sheet bells date from around the 8th century and the cast bronze handbells probably date from the 9th century. They mark a very substantial acoustic advance on the older iron handbells. Might not the new more resonant and corrosion-free bells have been in part the stimulus for building fine bell towers?

These observations notwithstanding, the function of the bell towers is still much debated, but the fact of their being named as such must surely be granted primary status. That they were and are impressive monuments in terms of their height and engineering is patently obvious and, as such, the desire to impress or, perhaps more spiritually relevant, aspire is equally undeniable.<sup>106</sup> But these are not mutually exclusive functions. On the contrary, given the importance attached to the handbells, any suggestion that the bell towers went far beyond their requirements misses the importance of the bells themselves as relics that had a voice that could still be heard centuries after their manufacture, which was sometimes attributed to the saints with whom they are associated, and which later occasioned the making of elaborate bell shrines (see below).

104. R. Stalley, 'The Irish Round Towers', in C. Hourihane, ed., *From Ireland Coming* (Princeton, n. d.).

105. Personal communication from Peter Harbison.

106. See, for example, C. Corlett, 'Interpretation of Round Towers: Public appeal or professional opinion?', *Archaeology Ireland* Vol. 12, No. 2, Issue No. 44 (Summer 1998), 24–27.



## MATERIAL CULTURE: SCULPTURE

The cross is the central image of Christianity and the ringed cross known most commonly as the 'Celtic cross' is given a sub-section to itself (see [IV.1.c.](#)). Suffice it to say here that the frequency of use in Celtic-speaking areas of this distinctive form (whether free-standing or carved onto a cross slab) can only serve to support the distinctiveness of the church in those areas.



Strata Florida triskeles (c. 1200). Photo © John Purser

In addition to the basic symbol of the cross, the subject matter and manner of carving upon them, whether free-standing or slab, is also suggestive of shared religious preoccupations. The prevalence of David imagery is particularly significant, as are the depictions of the desert fathers Sts Paul and Anthony. These topics are addressed in [IV.2.c.](#)

A particularly interesting cultural statement is the carvings of triskele-like spirals on the west doorway of Strata Florida Cistercian abbey church in mid-Wales. In all, eight of them adorn the main arch and are the only form of embellishment. Spirals and triskeles are common on Celtic crosses, but their appearance in such a prominent situation on the main building of a monastery is possibly unique and would certainly be surprising were it not that the Cistercians in Wales were eager to assert their Welsh credentials, becoming a Welsh-speaking order, and the abbey being closely associated with other aspects of Welsh culture.<sup>107</sup>

There remains much work to be done in terms of collating such evidence. For instance, it has been claimed that the Scottish artist E. A. Hornel gathered 'Celtic' carvings from the ruins of Dundrennan Abbey (also a Cistercian foundation) to his garden at Broughton House.<sup>108</sup> But these carvings have yet to be identified, never mind analysed. Hornel went through a phase of Celtic influence, notably in the famous joint painting with George Henry of *The Druids Bringing Home the Mistletoe* (1890).

## MATERIAL CULTURE: SACRED OBJECTS

Material survivals of the early Celtic church have been discussed by Stevenson<sup>109</sup> and (with specific reference to St Columba) by Ragnall Ó Floinn and Cormac Bourke.<sup>110</sup> Further discussion can be found in [IV.2.f.](#) Stone Carving, Metalwork and Books. Likewise, the iron and bronze handbells of the early Scottish church are discussed in more detail in [IV.2.c.](#) Musical Instruments.

Although the Scottish handbells exhibit some unique characteristics, they are basically of the same class as the quadrangular handbells of Ireland, Wales and Brittany. These bells are unique to the Celtic church, the only other clear example being that of the Celtic monastery of St Gall in Switzerland, where the bell has subsequently been mechanised and painted. Likewise, [bell shrines](#)

<sup>107</sup> Personal communication from Dr Meredydd Evans and Professor David Austin. Donald Meek also points out the readiness of the Franciscans to fit in with existing Irish cultural dispositions: Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity*, 203.

<sup>108</sup> I. Gale, 'Stones among the flowers', *Scotland in Trust* (Summer 2012), 59.

<sup>109</sup> J. Stevenson, Introduction to Warren, *The Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Churches*, xc–xcvi.

<sup>110</sup> C. Bourke, ed., *Studies in the Cult of St Columba* (Dublin, 1997), 162–92.

appear to be unique to the Celtic church, the two surviving ones in Scotland bearing crucifixions and dating from the 13th century, emphasising a continuity of significance which is underlined by the bearing of the Bernane or St Fillan's bell at the coronation of James IV.<sup>111</sup>

Associated with the bells are the pastoral staffs of the saints. In the case of St Fillan's staff, it is no longer visible having been more than once richly encased in silver and gold. Of particular interest, however, is the staff of St Moluag, still under the guardianship of its dewar. Just as the bell had a dewar (see IV.2.c.), so did the staff or *bachall*. The word comes from Latin *baculum* meaning a staff and the dewar of St Moluag's staff,



St Moluag's *bachall*, held by its late dewar Alastair Livingstone. Photo © John Purser

Niall Livingstone, is in a line of Livingstones stretching back unequivocally to the 16th century and possibly to the 6th-century days of Moluag himself.

The Barons of Bachuil still live on Moluag's island of Lismore and are also Coarbs of St Moluag – heirs to the abbot in his ecclesiastical functions and abbatial mensal territory. As such, they have precedence over the bishop for, uniquely outwith the Crown, they are appointed by Lord Lyon King of Arms *baron par la Grâce de Dieu*. At his inauguration, the bishop is supposed to precede Baran a' Bhachail (Baron Bachuil), the place of honour being further back in the procession. The bishop also touches the *bachul* itself.<sup>112</sup> This ongoing tradition marks the continuity of the distinctive monastic emphasis in the organisation of the Celtic church.

The c. 8th-century Monymusk Reliquary is sometimes assigned the honour of having been borne at James IV's coronation (see above), one of two hinges for a strap surviving, although what it originally contained is not known. However,

111. F. C. Eeles, 'The Guthrie Bell and its Shrine', *Proceedings of Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (10 May 1926), 409–20.

112. Information from Brigadier John MacFarlane and from Alasdair Livingstone, late Baron Bachuil.

the claim that the [Monymusk Reliquary](#) is the same as the Brecebennach which housed Colum Cille's relics cannot be substantiated. What is known is that it exhibits strong Pictish elements in its design – elements echoed in a similar reliquary in Bologna and quite possibly of Pictish manufacture.<sup>113</sup> A late 7th- or early-8th-century reliquary was found in the 1960s concealed in the abbey of San Salvatore on Monte Amiata. While de Hamel's initial reaction was that 'one might assume that the reliquary was Irish', he claims the absence of garnets in Ireland and the presence of glass preclude the identification.<sup>114</sup> Michael Ryan, on the other hand, asserts that the reliquary 'clearly stems from the insular milieu' and leaves an 'Irish', a 'northern Britain' or a 'Continental monastic foundation' as possible sources.<sup>115</sup> Garnets are not uncommon in Scotland and glass has been found at the Pictish site at Rhynie, so the object should at least be considered in a Pictish context. The relationship between shrines and tents is referred to in [IV.1.a](#). Social space and architecture.

How Pictish or other objects found their way to distant places is discussed by Julia Smith, who cites in particular the scene depicted on the inscribed 'hostage stone' from Inchmarnock, in which a person carrying what appears to be a house-shaped reliquary is led away by sea-borne warriors.<sup>116</sup>

Books and their illumination are also the subject of separate study ([IV.2.f](#)). In the present context, it can be stated simply that they are amongst the most iconic images of Celtic art, however rich and varied their multiple sources. The two most sacred objects of the Christian religion must surely be the Cross itself and the Word of God presented in a book. Biblical exegesis and the culture of making beautiful books were central to the culture of the Celtic church and were carried by the *peregrini Scoti* to Europe where they continued their manufacture to produce the famous libraries of St Gallen and Bobbio. They may not constitute a church as such, but in seeking to justify the concept of a Celtic church, they provide powerful supporting evidence.

#### THE CELTIC TONSURE

One of the most fundamental forms of human recognition is that of appearance and representatives of the church in Celtic-speaking areas do seem to have been distinctive in aspects of their appearance (see [IV.2.a](#)). But, while the wearing of white by St Columba and other Celtic monks – attested to by Adomnán for

113. G. and I. Henderson, *The Art of the Picts* (London, 2004), 115–16 and 223–24.

114. Christopher de Hamel, *Meeting with Remarkable Manuscripts* (UK, 2016), 93–94.

115. Michael Ryan, 'A House-shaped Shrine of Probable Irish Origin', in *Festschrift in Memory of Joseph Raftery*, 150.

116. Julia Smith, 'Portable Christianity: Relics in the Medieval West (c. 700–1200)', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 181 (2012), 159–61.



example – cannot be asserted as definitive, the Celtic tonsure was sufficiently definitive to have aroused major controversy. It is brought to mind in the Gaelic-speaking world by the use of the word *maol* (bald) which (in its various spellings through the centuries) is used as part of a name for some early Celtic religious figures, as it describes their shaven heads. Thus Maelrubha – the tonsured, red-head of Applecross and Skye (d.722), Maelruain (d.792) and Maelduin the voyager. *Maol* is also used to describe a round-topped, bald-headed hill (V.1.) as well as hornless cattle (II.1.c. and III.2.b.).

The controversy surrounding the Celtic tonsure is recounted by Bede in the year 731, only nine years after Maelrubha's death. The tonsure assumed by Maelrubha was also used in Spain and in Brittany from where, sometime before 590, it had spread to a Saxon colony at Bayeux. This Celtic tonsure was interpreted by Christians adopting the Roman tonsure as being heretical and was condemned by the fourth Council of Toledo because they believed it imitated the tonsure of Simon Magus, the first heretic. Simon Magus was himself a magician but, when outdone by Peter, offered money to acquire the same skills – hence the word 'simony'.<sup>117</sup>

It is absurd to imagine that the Celtic tonsure was deliberately adopted in imitation of a man vilified in the Acts of the Apostles. When Abbot Ceolfrid wrote to King Nechtan of the Picts around the year 710, suggesting that this was indeed the case and that even Adomnán, whom he admired, defended his hairstyle despite its supposed heretical origins, we can only assume that we are reading the opinion of a propagandist. As George Henderson comments with respect to another of the Roman tonsure propagandists:

It is in the context of Egbert's activities, battling on, until 718, for the acceptance of the Roman tonsure on Iona, that the rare and peculiar features of the Roman-tonsured *Imago hominis* of the Echternach Gospels makes sense.<sup>118</sup>

We suggest a more likely explanation of the Celtic tonsure, which would account for Ceolfrid's accusations while allowing the Celtic monks some genuine intelligence, is the possibility that this hairstyle was a druidic one and was adopted as a symbol of religious integration, as well as an assumption of the former priestly status of the earlier religion. *Magus* means magician and was a

<sup>117</sup> According to Dr J. Higgitt (2nd International Conference on Insular Art, Edinburgh, 1991), there is a possible depiction of Simon Magus being brought to his death by the prayers of Sts Peter and Paul on St Vigean's No.7 (Class III, c. 9th c.), but Henderson and Henderson's suggestion that the saints are Paul and Anthony and the contrast is between the sharing of bread and a pagan bull sacrifice seems much more plausible (*The Art of the Picts* (London, 2004), 140–42).

<sup>118</sup> G. Henderson, *From Durrow to Kells* (London, 1987), 95.

word commonly used by the Latins to describe a druid. 'Druid' is also used in the Gaelic Bible to describe the Magi:

Agus an uair a rugadh Iosa ann am Betlehem Iudea, ann an làithibh Heroid an rìgh, feuch, thàinig druidhean o'n àird an ear gu Ierusalem ...<sup>119</sup>

and to describe Simon Magus:

Ach bha roimhe sin duine àraidh 's a' bhaile sin d'am b'ainm Simon, a ghnàthaich druidheachd ...<sup>120</sup>

The druidic origins of the Celtic tonsure is suggested as early as the late 7th century in Tírechán's memoir of St Patrick, referring to the *airbacc giunnae*, or frontal tonsure, as druidic (*magica*).<sup>121</sup>

The Britons were accustomed to shave the whole head in front of a line drawn from ear to ear, instead of using the coronal tonsure of the Romans. This, though there is no real evidence that it was the practice of the Druids, was nicknamed tonsura magorum.

Later, the Roman party jeered at it as the tonsura Simonis Magi, in contradistinction to their 'tonsure of St Peter'. This is mentioned in the passage attributed, probably wrongly, to Gildas.<sup>122</sup>

In fact there is some doubt as to the precise nature of the tonsure, which could have been completely shaved at the back or, as with the Pictish figure carved on a stone block at Rhynie, have short hair at the sides, long hair at the front, but shaven from forehead to crown.<sup>123</sup> It has even been proposed that it was of triangular shape with the apex towards the front of the head, but not

<sup>119</sup> An Soisgeul a-réir Mhata II: 1.

<sup>120</sup> Gníomharan VIII: 9.

<sup>121</sup> W. Stokes and J. Strachan, eds, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* II (Cambridge, 1903), 45. See also E. James, 'Bede and the Tonsure Question', *Peritia* 3 (1984), 87. James rightly states that the passage in Tírechán's memoir does not in itself make any link between pagan and Christian tonsure, but in conjunction with the other evidence he presents (including Bede) and the citations in E. G. Quin, *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (Dublin, 1990), 361, under *giunnae*, and the undoubted reality of the controversy, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that, if the Celts were merely 'perpetuating an older system which had long been obsolete elsewhere' (C. Plummer, ed., *Venerabilis Baedae opera historica* (Oxford, 1896), II, 354), the system was itself druidic.

<sup>122</sup> K. Knight, 'The Celtic Rite', in *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*. See A. Haddan and W. Stubbs, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 1869), I, 112–13.

<sup>123</sup> N. Venclová, 'The Venerable Bede, druidic tonsure and archaeology', *Antiquity* 76 (2002), 458–71. Henderson, *From Durrow to Kells*, 49–51.



reaching the forehead.<sup>124</sup> What, however, is not in doubt is that it was distinctive and was deliberately associated by its critics with pre-Christian magic in the person of Simon Magus.

#### BENEDICTION

Even today the fundamental action of benediction is sometimes made in a consciously Celtic manner, with the thumb touching the fourth finger (the thumb counting as the first finger), and the second, third and fifth fingers extended to symbolise the Holy Trinity.<sup>125</sup> This is the Eastern manner, still used for example in the Armenian church, and serves to underline the connections between Celtic and Eastern Christian traditions.<sup>126</sup> Early examples are found in the Four Gospels of Saint Gall and in the Codex Aureus, where both Saint Mathew and the angel in the tympanum clearly present this gesture.

#### PROTECTION

Another aspect of the Celtic church, which survived in the form of traditional prayers in the Gàidhealtachd into the late 19th century, was that of the *lorica* or breastplate, in which the saying or singing of a prayer would act as a kind of cloak of protection. These *loricae* survive uniquely in Celtic Christian contexts and are discussed more fully in [IV.1.c.](#) and [IV.2.d.](#) They may even have their origins in pre-Christian prayer or invocation. Calvert Watkins and Kuno Meyer have argued that 'Nuall Fir Fio' is the Christianising of druid prayer.<sup>127</sup> In terms of the visual, it has been pointed out that images of Christ with a breastplate are to be found from the Calf of Man stone cross and the Irish Athlone Crucifixion Plaque.<sup>128</sup> Just such an image is also claimed for the top of the reverse side of the Elgin cross slab.<sup>129</sup> The spirals which apparently form breasts on the Riasg Buidhe cross slab – if such it is (see [IV.1.c.](#)) – parallel the spirals on the Athlone plaque. However, images of Christ are rare in the early sculptures, possibly reflecting a higher degree of iconoclasm, and the Elgin identification is not entirely clear.

#### THE CELTIC CHURCH: LITURGICAL PRACTICE

That there was a shared liturgical practice between the Celtic churches in Britain

124. D. McCarthy, 'On the Shape of the Insular Tonsure', *Celtics* XXIV (2003), 140–67.

125. Information from the Rev. Robert Breaden.

126. Warren, *The Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church*, 100.

127. 'Two Loricae', in John Carey, *King of Mysteries, Early Irish Religious Writing* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000).

128. Herren and Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity*, 255–56. Henderson, *From Durrow to Kells*, 83–84.

129. Henderson and Henderson, *The Art of the Picts*, 44 and 129.

and Ireland is clear from Wilfrid's remarks with respect to the Easter controversy, as reported by Bede in 731:

... except only these and their accomplices in obstinacy, I mean the Picts and the Britons, who foolishly, in these two remote islands of the world, and only in part even of them, oppose all the rest of the universe.<sup>130</sup>

In a decree of the Saxon bishops, even Scottish and British bishops are brought together as 'other', the validity of their powers of ordination being disallowed:

Qui ordinati sunt a Scotorum vel Britanorum episcopis, qui in Pascha vel tonsura Catholicae non sunt adunati Ecclesiae: iterum a Catholico episcopo manus impositione confirmantur.

*Such as have received ordination from the bishops of the Scots or the Britons, who in the matter of Easter and tonsure are not united unto the Catholic church, let them be again by imposition of hands confirmed by a Catholic bishop.*<sup>131</sup>

The ill-feeling generated by the controversy was one of long standing. Columbanus wrote about it to Pope Gregory the Great in 600.

Know that by our teachers and the old Irish philosophers and computists most skilled in making calculations, Victorius not alone was not accepted, but was thought worthy of derision or pity rather than authority.<sup>132</sup>

These differences of scientific opinion were followed up in another letter from Columbanus, sent to Pope Boniface in 613. It is decidedly admonitory and highlights a fundamental difference of approach to discussion, in which it is clearly implied that rank and status must give way to quality of argument. The letter commences:

Doleo enim, fateor, de infamia cathedrae sancti Petri

*I grieve, I confess, for the disgrace of St Peter's chair*

and continues with

*pardon me for my treatment of such rugged passages, as a historical account of the events permits me to omit nothing from my inquiry, and the freedom of*

130. J. Giles, ed., *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of England* (London, 1903), 156.

131. *Decret. Pontific. MS.cap 9. De communicatione Scotorum et Britonum, qui in Pascha et tonsura cotholici non sunt*, quoted in Ussher, 'A Discourse of the Religion Anciently Professed by the Irish and British', *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher* Vol. IV, 351.

132. Quoted in Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical*, 191.

*my country's customs, so to speak, was in part the cause of my boldness. For among us it is not who you are but how you make your cause that counts.*<sup>133</sup>

In a council at Macon in 623, Agrestius brought up a number of objections to the Rule of Columbanus, the chief of which referred to the Irish churches' use of collects and prayers unparalleled in other branches of the church – *collectarum multiplici varietate celebrarent*.<sup>134</sup> Two of Scotland's most important saints (Moluag d.592 and Maelrubha d.722) came from Columbanus's monastery at Bangor, Co. Down, and will have been thoroughly aware of the issues.

The disagreements over Easter and the tonsure continued after the Council of Whitby (664), not just in Iona (only converted to the Roman Easter in 716 and tonsure in 718), but in Wales and Northern Ireland.<sup>135</sup> They had lasted over two hundred years and were of sufficient seriousness for Bede to report them at length in 731. As late as 800, the controversy was still sufficiently relevant to form part of a hagiographical account of St Munnu, in which his own adherence to the older date cannot be tested because Munnu is deemed so holy that God will ensure any test results in his favour.<sup>136</sup>

The Book of Deer, widely accepted as a Scoto-Pictish production of the 9th century, contains an office for the Communion of the Sick (possibly in a slightly later hand), which conformed to similar offices in Irish sources but deviated considerably from any Roman model.<sup>137</sup> That this distinctive practice is paralleled in manuscripts quite widely separated in terms of distance, is surely significant. Reference has also been made above to distinctive practices in the administration of the Eucharist.

That there were other distinctive practices appears from Chapter 2 of Turgot's early 12th-century *Vita Sancte Margarete*. These included a different date for the commencement of Lent (because of the difference in dating Easter) and an unknown barbarous rite (*nescio quo ritu barbaro*) in the celebration of the mass. As Dr Maxwell has pointed out, in 12th-century Latin this does not refer to actions but to words and most probably refers to the use of the vernacular –

133. T. Ó Fiaich, ed., *Columbanus in His Own Words* (Dublin, 1974), 80–85.

134. Quoted in Warren, *The Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Churches*, 96.

135. Ussher, 'A Discourse of the Religion Anciently Professed by the Irish and British', Vol. IV, 351–55.

136. J. F. Nagy, *Conversing with Angels and Ancients* (Dublin, 1997), 1–3.

137. Warren, *The Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church*, 164. Warren writes of a generic difference between the Petrine Liturgy and the Celtic Services preserved here in the Scottish Book of Deer and in the Irish Books of Dimma, 169, Mulling, 172, Stowe Missal, §14, St Gall MS.1394, 177.

though whether Gaelic or Scots is not known.<sup>138</sup> Margaret's husband, King Maol Chaluim mac Dhonnchaidh (Malcolm Canmore), was a native Gaelic speaker and ruling over a nation which was at that time substantially Gaelic speaking.

Margaret's initial success in 'reforming' the practices of the church in Scotland did not extinguish a strong sense of independence. In the early 13th century, a group of clergy (including two bishops and an abbot) loyal to the Columban tradition came over from Northern Ireland, destroyed the Benedictine monastery on Iona and replaced its abbot with one of their own choosing. This intervention was despite the fact that the Benedictine monastery had been founded by Reginald, the son of Somerled. The intervention was temporary but significant enough to be recorded in the Annals of the Four Masters for the year 1203.

While the destruction of the monastery on Iona was undertaken by a group from Ireland, there remained a strong sense of religious identity and practice in Scotland associated with the Scottish church and especially its Celtic saints. In IV.1.a., we discuss how that identity was expressed as late as the 20th century and in a Protestant context, in Chalmers's design for the Presbyterian Church in Canna, which, in its simplicity and with its round tower, clearly recalls the early monastic period.

A manuscript of considerable importance with respect to the continuity of the Celtic Church is the Inchcolm Antiphoner, produced on Inchcolm in the late 13th or early 14th century. The 15th-century historian Walter Bower was abbot of Inchcolm Abbey and very probably knew and even sang from this manuscript. He was certainly aware of the fact that Colum Cille was the patron saint of his abbey and that Dunkeld (to which some of the relics of Colum Cille had been brought centuries earlier) was his mother church. The close relationship of the texts with Adomnán's *Vita Columbae* and their parallel structures in the Bangor Antiphoner place this manuscript at the heart of Celtic Christian studies. One may also add that the manuscript contains chants, the words of which strongly assert a sense of national identity directly associated with the figure of Colum Cille himself:

Pater Columba decus morum  
 Suscipe vota famulorum  
 Te laudantem serva chorum  
 Ab incursu Anglicorum  
 Et insultu emulorum.

*Father Columba, glory of our tradition, preserve this choir; which praises you, from the incursions of the English and from insolent imitators.*

138. W. D. Maxwell, *A History of Worship in the Church of Scotland* (London, 1955), 28–29.



'Os Mutorum', Inchcolm Antiphoner. University of Edinburgh Library

In the chant 'Os Mutorum', the identity is explicit.

O Columba, spes Scotorum  
 Nos tuorum meritorum  
 Interventu beatorum  
 Fac consortes angelorum.

*O Columba, hope of the Scots, make us through the intervention of your merits, associates of the blessed angels.*<sup>139</sup>

This sense of national identity found trenchant expression in an edict of a later Gaelic-speaking king, James IV, who put out a decree defending the status of 'our awin Scottis use', demanding punishment of any who imported religious books following the by then long-established Salisbury rite, itself somewhat anomalous.

And als it is divisit and thocht expedient be us and our counsall that in tyme cuming mess bukis, manualis, matyne bukis and portuus bukis efter our awin Scottis use and with legendis of Scottis sanctis as is now gaderit and ekit be ane reverend fader in God and our traist counsalour Williame, bischop of Abirdene, and utheris, be usit generally within al our realme als sone as the sammyn may be imprentit and providit; and that na maner of sic bukis of Salusbery use be brocht to be sauld within our realme in tym cuming ... under pane of escheting of the bukis and punising of thair persons, bringaris thair of within our realme in contrar this our statut, with al rigour as efferis.<sup>140</sup>

139. EUL MS 211.iv, f.3v.

140. M. Livingstone, *Register of the Privy Seal of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1908), No. 1546, 223–24.

By any standards, this is a remarkable decree and is clearly motivated by nationalist sympathies, if not specifically Celtic ones. Echoes of the British church also survive in the late 13th- or early 14th-century Sprouston Breviary, containing chants for St Kentigern, the patron saint of Glasgow, affectionately referred to as Mungo (dear friend).<sup>141</sup> These might be seen as being of peripheral interest, were it not that they relate closely to the legend of Merlin through Vita Merlin Silvestris, which brings Merlin and Kentigern together and which appears to have been developed into the legend of Suibne Geilt, which is discussed separately in III.1.d. These chants were still in use in the 16th century, as remarked upon by Sir David Lindsay in the 'Papingo'. He addresses himself to King James V, albeit in the manner of a humorous moral fable in which every conceivable obsequy is brought to bear, including the Sarum usage banned by James's father and the Highland coronach:

And we sall serve *Secundum usum Sarum*,  
 And mak you saif: we fynd Sanct Blase to borgh,  
 Cryand for yow the cairfull corrynogh.

And we sall syng about your sepulture,  
 Sanct Mongois matynis, and the mekle creid ...

Even after the Reformation, we read in a letter to the Lords of the Exchequer of the 10th March 1635, that King Charles I promised funds for the repair of 'the Cathedrall Church of Icolmkill', though the Civil War appears to have put paid to the project. Given that all the most important ecclesiastical centres in Scotland were far removed from tiny Iona, this can only be interpreted as a cultural gesture.

#### THE CELTIC CHURCH INHERITANCE: ROMAN CATHOLIC OR PROTESTANT?

Attention can be drawn here to a line of self-conscious allegiance to the concept of a 'Celtic church' in the British Isles – one directly associated with Protestant claims and connected to an underlying tendency towards iconoclasm (see IV.1.a. and VI.2.). Archbishop Ussher is an obvious example from the early 17th century, with his assertive distinctions between the early church in Ireland, Scotland and Wales and the church of Rome. Ussher's *A Discourse of the Religion Anciently Professed by the Irish and British* demonstrates a clear sense of cultural continuity, in which he includes the Scots:

And whereas it is known unto the learned that the name of Scoti in those elder times (whereof we treat) was common to the inhabitants

141. Purser, *Scotland's Music*, 53–54.



of the greater and lesser Scotland (for so heretofore they have been distinguished), that is to say, of Ireland, and the famous colony deduced from thence into Albania: I will not follow the example of those that have of late laboured to make dissension betwixt the daughter and the mother, but on account of them both, as of the same people.<sup>142</sup>

Previous Q-Celtic speaking authors to whom Ussher refers include Scotus Eriugena, the Irish Augustine, Sedulius and Marianus. But he is as vehement against the Pelagian heresy as he is against the claims of Rome.

Ussher's assertions are echoed by a much later Irish scholar. Professor George Stokes gives a lively account of 'Anglicising and Romanising the church of Dublin'<sup>143</sup> leading eventually to the exclusion of members of the Celtic church, as Stokes understood it, from serving in the Anglo-Norman church in Ireland – an ethnic exclusion which culminated in a Papal Bull of 1515 banning any

Irishman, by nation, manners, and blood, who should not be admitted in the said Cathedral Church of St Patrick any royal dispensation not withstanding.<sup>144</sup>

Stokes was Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Trinity College Dublin and his writings are well supported by documentary evidence. He had his counterparts in Scotland. Nigel MacNeill, publishing in the same year as Stokes (1886), makes a similar complaint:

In order to reach the heart of this Church, we must pierce through that belt of ecclesiastical and religious darkness which Papal Rome wove round the body of our national life during the four centuries which preceded the Reformation.<sup>145</sup>

With direct visual relevance, writing in 1865 Thomas McLauchlan contrasted Augustine choosing Canterbury and Paulinus York with Colum Cille on Iona, Aidan on Lindisfarne and Baithean on Tiree, as a

142. C. R. Elrington, ed., *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher. D.D.* (Dublin, 1847–1864), Vol. IV, 239.

143. G. Stokes, *Ireland and the Celtic Church* (London, 1886 and 1892), 314ff., esp. 320.

144. G. Stokes, *Ireland and the Anglo-Norman Church* (London, 1892), 377–78.

145. N. MacNeill, *The Literature of the Highlands*, 120–21, quoted in Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity*, 116.

fit emblem of the ambition of one religious system, and the humility and self-denial of the other.<sup>146</sup>

The 8th Duke of Argyll held not dissimilar views, while ensuring that Iona Abbey and its precincts were open to worshipers from all Christian faiths when he gave them to the Scottish nation.<sup>147</sup> The Rev. Lamond, writing in 1913 in the Parish of Strath, Isle of Skye, underlines the claims of the Church of Scotland to represent the true inheritance of the early Celtic church when he refers to post-Columban churchmen as

formalists who affected what the Iona monks would have called 'modern ideas'. They were up-to-date, imperially minded, proud of their alliance with far distant Rome. Ritualists they were, in the worst sense of the term – pressing upon the conscience of the church external trivialities as if they were eternal realities.<sup>148</sup>

Whether these perceptions were justified or no is one thing; the fact is that they existed and represent a strand of thinking of some significance. Common to them all is an antagonism to the concept of a distant and centralised authority:

To take one example, it appears to me that the 'Men' of the Evangelical Movement have been assigned a position which they do not seem to occupy when we view them from within Gaelic tradition. There they do not form the homogeneous social institution that the English appellation connotes. In actual fact *na Daoine*, originally at any rate, simply denotes 'the laymen', usually 'the laymen of the common people', in contrast to the clergy of the Established Church, who on the whole were drawn from the upper strata of Gaelic society and whom these evangelical laymen almost invariably opposed.<sup>149</sup>

For good or ill, this opposition to centralisation remains a fundamental distinction between Presbyterianism in particular and Roman Catholicism. Visually speaking, it was deliberately dramatised on the island of Canna (see above), and one has only to compare the relative extravagance of both

146. T. McLauchlan, *Early Scottish Church* (1865), 221, quoted in Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity*, 116.

147. The 8th duke of Argyll, *Iona* (London, 1871), 18ff.

148. The Rev. D. M. Lamond, *Strath: In Isle of Skye* (Glasgow, 1913, and Portree, 1984), 45.

149. J. MacInnes, 'Religion in Gaelic Society', in M. Newton, ed., *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes* (Edinburgh, 2006), 434.

exterior and interior of a Roman Catholic church with the relative restraint of a Presbyterian one to appreciate that the visual in the Gaelic-speaking world has theological ramifications as obvious today as yesterday. JP

### V.3. TEMPORAL MARKING: CIRCULAR TIME

[Introduction](#); [Circular Christianity](#); [Circular Models of Time and the Perceived Movement of the Sun](#); [The Backward Look](#); [The Incorporation of the Past into the Present](#); [Naming](#); [The Head Cult and Ancestor Worship](#); [The Presence of the Ancestors](#); [Memory and Landscape](#); [Monuments](#); [The Forward Look](#); [Conclusion](#)

#### INTRODUCTION

Tha mi 'n dùil, tha mi 'n dùil,  
 'N uair a bhios a' ghrian 'dol fodha,  
 Chì iad mi a' stiùireadh 'n iar,  
 Null a dh'Uibhist air a' chearcall;  
 O cearcall a' chuain,  
 Gu bràth bidh i a' tionndadh  
 Leam gu machair geal an iar  
 Far an do thòisich an latha.

*I expect, I expect,  
 When the sun is going down,  
 To be seen steering west  
 On a circular course to Uist;  
 Oh the cycle of the ocean  
 Constantly turning,  
 Taking me to the bright western machair  
 Where my day started.*

'Cearcall a' Chuain' (The Cycle of the Ocean) by Runrig

In this popular song composed by Rory and Calum MacDonald for Runrig, there is a clear image of the course of life, like the course of the sun and the ocean, being circular.

Throughout this study, we have suggested that the aesthetic of circularity so common in Gaelic art – seen for example in the *dùnadh* of Classical Gaelic verse by which a poem closes as it began, in *ceòl mòr* in its repeated return to the *ùrlar* or ground, or in Celtic never-ending knotwork – reflects an understanding of the circular nature of time. We have discussed the absence in

Gaelic mythology of an account of the creation or destruction of the cosmos. The common belief that time hardly passes in the Otherworld persists in many stories of people venturing into a fairy mound for a few minutes only to find on their return to the temporal world that all their generation have died. It is the theme of the song and piping tune, 'Uamh an Òir' (The Cave of Gold): *Bidh clann òga nam fir thaighe / mus till mis' à Uaimh an Òir* (Little children will be the heads of household / before I return from the Cave of Gold). Circularity seems to be central to the cosmology of Robert Kirk in the 17th century (of which much more will be said in [VI.2](#)):

'Tis one of their [the fairies'] tenets that nothing perisheth, but (as the sun and year) everything goes in a circle, lesser or greater, and is renewed and refreshed in its revolutions.<sup>150</sup>

#### CIRCULAR CHRISTIANITY

In this section, we will look at how a circular pagan model of time, based on the annual renewal of nature, was combined with the linear aspect of time in Christianity by which death entered the world with Adam's transgression: 'Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned' (Romans 5:12). It has already been suggested that the ringed Celtic cross synchronises the circular and linear models of time in Christianity. Christ, as both Alpha and Omega, the Word made flesh and the Judge of the Second Coming, closes the circle. There is also a Gaelic version of a lost apocryphon of the Seven Heavens by which dragons recycle lost souls by swallowing and defecating them to allow them another attempt to gain salvation.<sup>151</sup> It is not surprising then to find the Irish theologian John Scotus Eriugena making an effort in the 9th century to recast Christianity in a circular form. His thinking is discussed in detail in [VI.2](#). The church never approved of stories of the living dead, of restless souls returning to haunt the earth or of time passing at a different rate in fairy knolls, because these ideas ran contrary both to the linear trajectory of time and to the duality of matter and spirit inherent in Christianity. Earth was for the corporeal; heaven was for the spirit.

The Christian iconography of West Highland sculpture depicts the fulfilment of the Old Testament in the New with the resulting rebirth of the soul. The concept of Pefiguration, by which 'types' in the Old Testament foreshadow Christ, was common to the medieval church as a whole, but it is interesting to

<sup>150</sup> Robert Kirk, *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* ([1691]; originally published Stirling 1933; this edition Dover, USA, 2008), 52.

<sup>151</sup> Jane Stevenson, 'Ascent through the Heavens, from Egypt to Ireland', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 5 (Summer 1984).

see it was the organising principle in the choice of scenes on Gaelic high crosses. In the four arms of the Kildalton Cross in Islay, for example, there appear the Virgin and Child, reminding man of the possibility of salvation afforded through Christ's incarnation, Cain killing Abel, David saving the sheep from the jaws of the lion and Abraham preparing to sacrifice Isaac. Abel, the sheep and Isaac all prefigure the sacrifice of Christ. The Cross is decorated with serpents and peacocks which, by emerging from their sloughed skins and regrowing their feathers, signify rebirth.



William Johnstone, *A Point in Time* (c. 1936). National Galleries of Scotland. Presented by Mrs Hope Montagu Douglas Scott (1971). © William Johnstone

#### CIRCULAR MODELS OF TIME AND THE PERCEIVED MOVEMENT OF THE SUN

The Borders artist William Johnstone returned from California to Scotland in the 1930s to explore the primitivism he had first admired in Navajo art and which he then saw in Picto-Celtic art. *A Point in Time* (c. 1936) in the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art depicts the individual's experience of time, neither as a straight line nor as a circle but, as Duncan MacMillan writes, with the 'running line of historical Celtic art', which contours an undulating, enclosing, cloth-like landscape.<sup>152</sup> In using the word 'Celtic', Johnstone and MacMillan were alluding to the swirling rhythmic lines of La Tène art seen in such objects as [the Torrs Pony Cap](#), the Battersea shield or the Desborough mirror.

152. Duncan Macmillan, in Derick S. Thomson, *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland* (Oxford, 1983), 14.

It has been suggested that such lines represent the circadian movement of the sun, the designs sometimes including the heads of birds who drag the sun across the sky. The sun pillar found at Tara and the sun wheel below the mound at Navan, the symbolism of burial cists visited annually by the sun's rays, the spirals going in opposite directions carved on the Pierowall Stone on Orkney, and carved stone balls in Scotland, all suggest that time was experienced on a circular basis in prehistoric times. In our section on Divisions of the Year ([I.2.b.](#)), we presented calendrical evidence for time being experienced on a circular basis by the Celts on the Continent and in Gaelic culture. The predictable synchronisation of the cycles of the sun and moon every thirty years are seen in the 2nd century Gaulish calendar found at Coligny. A Beaton medical MS of the 15th century reproduces a 3rd-century Egyptian device for the calculation of Easter, made from rotating discs of paper with a gnomon in the form of the angel seen by Pachomius (overpage).<sup>153</sup> Burial cairns penetrated by the sun at the winter solstice promising the renewed growth of spring give a strong indication of circular time, as does the ritual associated with Taigh nam Bodach in Gleann Caillich in Perthshire, of bringing the family of dumb-bell shaped stones, closed up in their hut at Samhain, out at Bealltainn.

The Gundestrup cauldron (150–50 BC), though possibly of Thracian workmanship, seems to depict Celtic ideas of circular time. The eight plates on the outside of the cauldron are thought to depict gods and goddesses, perhaps involved in sacrifice. The five plates on the inside are more complex. Taken individually or together, four of these plates show the circular clockwise movements of men and beasts, generally eastwards at the upper level and westwards at the lower level. Only the goddess and the horned god look outwards and only they are flanked by animals moving in opposing directions. It is suggested here that the cauldron might depict Iron Age ideas about animal and human life being



Pierowall Stone from Westray, Orkney (c. 3000 BC). P.J. Ashmore, *Neolithic and Bronze Age Scotland* (1996), 64

153. *Innes Review* 19 (1968), 172–73.





The Pachomian Angel in Adv.MS.72.1.2, for calculating Easter (early 16th c.), probably belonging to the Beaton's in Skye. National Library of Scotland / [CC BY 4.0](#)

balanced between the physical and spirit worlds by sacrifice (indeed, the central interior plate depicts a bull sacrifice). The connection between sacrifice and rebirth may be supported by the presence of wheels and foliage, the latter of



The Gundestrup Cauldron, showing clockwise and anticlockwise movement on interior plates. [Rosemania: 121249312 / CC BY 2.0](#)

which Farley and Hunter propose may represent blood.<sup>154</sup>

A similar exchange of spirit and body may be denoted by La Tène compass work, where positive and negative motifs are alternately left blank or picked out in cross-hatching. Above, we mention this style in the context of the movement of the sun. The two are related because the clockwise semicircles could represent the sun's daytime journey over the physical world, while the anti-clockwise semicircles could represent the sun's nightly journey over the spirit otherworld.

La Tène compass work on The Desborough Mirror (50 BC–50 AD). © The Trustees of the British Museum



154. Julia Farley and Fraser Hunter, *Celts: Art and Identity* (London, 2015), 269.

The circular movement of the sun, moon and stars, with their daily, monthly and annual deaths and rebirths, was seen to reinforce and bear out the belief in the death and reincarnation of the soul. Julius Caesar describes the belief of the druids in reincarnation:

The cardinal doctrine they seek to teach is that souls do not die, but after death pass from one to another; and this belief, as the fear of death is thereby cast aside, they hold to be the greatest incentive to valour. Besides this, they have many discussions touching the stars and their movements, the size of the universe and the earth, the order of nature, the power and majesty of the immortal gods, and they hand down their lore to the young men.<sup>155</sup>

The individual human life can also be seen as circular, as we are generally aligned by the Gaelic language with our right to the south, our left to the north, facing eastwards, and our end, like the sun's, in the west. Excavation on a prehistoric wheel house in South Uist suggests that the inhabitants followed the sun both in their daily work (doing morning work in the eastern quadrant and sleeping in the western quadrant of the house) and in their life's work (burying the dead under the foundations in the northern quadrant).<sup>156</sup>

Circular time remains a theme in 18th-, 19th- and 20th-century Gaelic poetry. In *The Visual in Literature* (II.2.d.), we discussed how An Clàrsair Dall, John Roy Stewart and Màiri Mhòr all make use of the image of the wheel of fortune, envisaged in the Gaelic tradition as the circling of the sun bringing alternate warmth and cold. The second sight should maybe be understood as a view of recurrent events in circular time rather than as a view into the future in linear time.<sup>157</sup>

Circularity is suggested by shape-shifting, when individuals – Étain, Tuan MacCarrill or The Children of Lir – could undergo a series of transformations before returning to their human form. Circularity is important in the *immrama* or voyage literature of the 8th century (further discussed in VI.1.b.), in which monks, setting out on a penitential voyage, return to where they started, completing both a physical and a spiritual circuit. This was not only for the sake of literary posterity but more importantly to illustrate the principle of renewal through forgiveness. If they are to remain 'alive, until Doom' in a state without sin, they have completed a temporal circuit in reattaining man's pre-

<sup>155</sup>. *De Bello Gallica*, Bk VI, 13.

<sup>156</sup>. Mike Parker Pearson, Niall Sharples and Jim Symonds, *South Uist: Archaeology and History of a Hebridean Island* (Stroud, 2004).

<sup>157</sup>. Kirk, *The Secret Commonwealth*, 54.

Lapsarian state. The Gaelic writer and poet Angus Peter Campbell brought out *Invisible Islands* in 2006, a novella in English based loosely on the circular form of the voyage literature. It suggests that humanity, while believing in linear time and pursuing perfection, in reality does not progress but goes round in circles. In English, we might think of a journey as taking us somewhere, but the Gaelic word is *cuairt* 'circuit', emphasising the return. It was Rory and Calum MacDonald's understanding in the verse with which we open this section that man's life is essentially a circuit which leads back to where it began.

#### THE BACKWARD LOOK

*Cianalas* 'homesickness' is a common emotion in Gaelic poetry in which *émigrés* long for the Highland communities of their youth, and the theme has a long history. The 11th-century verse beginning *Fil súil nglais* (A blue eye turns back)<sup>158</sup> encapsulates this emotion as it describes Colum Cille's last view of Ireland at the point of his self-imposed exile in Scotland. The prone mood of abject longing for a lost golden age became the hallmark of James Macpherson, as can be seen in the frontispiece of his *Fingal* of 1762, with the ancient Ossian lying below a tree on which his harp hangs. Various writers – David Hume, Sorley MacLean, Derick Thomson and Malcolm Chapman among them – have dismissed this atmosphere as an 18th-century invention, predicated on the way the 'Celt' was constructed by Romanticism. Chapman has spoken of the cultural imperialism by which the minority culture is dragooned into the discourse of the majority culture.<sup>159</sup> In this case, he saw Macpherson and his followers providing a post-Enlightenment and an increasingly industrialised Britain with some handy noble savages to live out their fantasies of man's unschooled nature. To add insult to injury, it was then imitated by other Gaels who started to represent themselves as epitomising those very features of non-aggression that sped the emasculation of their culture in the aftermath of Culloden. It is easy to see how an aesthetic based on nostalgia for past glories and current passivity was both a comforting and a self-fulfilling prophecy to a people undergoing the massive dislocation, both physical and cultural, involved in clearance, famine and emigration. It was against the escapism provided by this sort of poetry that Sorley MacLean railed in articles like 'Realism in Gaelic poetry' and 'Poetry of the Clearances'.<sup>160</sup> He and other poets of his generation reacted to the soft focus of the Celtic Twilight by scrutinising

<sup>158</sup>. Gerard Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics* (Oxford, 1956), 64 (and quoted at II.2.d.).

<sup>159</sup>. Malcolm Chapman, *The Gaelic Vision in Scottish Culture* (London, 1978).

<sup>160</sup>. Sorley MacLean, *Ris a' Bhruthaich: Criticism and prose writings*, ed. William Gillies (Stornoway, 1985), 15ff. and 48ff.



their own times with unveering clarity. They insisted that in the native Gaelic aesthetic, nature did not illustrate man's condition, send messages, have a soul or form a basis for ethical conclusions. By contrast, they say, Gaelic poetry is concrete, objective, exhaustive, never introspective and deals in realism.

However, these concrete, objective and exhaustive details are usually selected to prove the favourable relationship with nature on which man's wellbeing was predicated. Moreover, it is possible to show that the backward look of Colum Cille and 'Ossian' is far from unique in the culture and that the incorporation of the past into the present is a prime concept in Gaelic thinking. Indeed, Fionn's insistence on not looking back as he sets out is so unusual as to prove the rule.<sup>161</sup>

#### THE INCORPORATION OF THE PAST INTO THE PRESENT

We have already mentioned Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's 'Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill' in the context of allegory in *The Visual in Literature* (II.2.d.). Here, it is interesting to note that the allegory takes the form of a return voyage by the Scottish Gaels after the destruction of the '45 to the place of their origins in Northern Ireland. Though the ship is damaged by storm on the crossing, the implication is that the crew will rest, recuperate, repair the ship and return replenished.<sup>162</sup> The voyage is circular, as the crew return to source to bring it into the present.<sup>163</sup>

As early as the Convention of Druim Cett of 575, Colum Cille, recognising the importance of poets to remembering, voted against their expulsion from Ireland. The backward look can be traced most clearly in literature, as over and over again, and especially at times of crisis and accelerated change, an attempt is made to gather the lore of a disappearing era. Alexander Carmichael wrote at the end of his preface to *Carmina Gadelica* that his five volumes were a 'stone on the cairn of those who composed and of those who transmitted the work'. This makes the memorial nature of such ingathering explicit.

'Táin Bó Cuailnge' is itself an attempt in Christian times to record many pagan tales as a continuous epic. 'Agallamh na Senórach' (The Colloquy of the Ancients) and 'Buile Shuibne' (The Madness of Sweeney) – both 12th century – preserve Fenian and pagan material within a Christian framework. Nagy has suggested that the otter that retrieves Ronan's psalter from the water in the

161. John Gregorson Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV (London, 1891), 193.

162. Black, *An Lasair*, 469–74.

163. For a fuller discussion, see Meg Bateman, 'The Bard and the Birlinn', Chap. 9, in Camille Dressler and D. W. Stiùbhart, eds, *Alexander MacDonald: Bard of the Gaelic Enlightenment* (Isle of Lewis, 2012).

latter tale is a figure for St Moling's retrieval of Suibne's nature lore.<sup>164</sup> In both these tales, heaven is accorded to the erstwhile pagan heroes and some argue that the pagan content is merely a vehicle for the introduction of Christian themes. However, the substantiality and beauty of the pagan material in comparison to the brevity of the Christian framework suggest that it was deemed worthy of preserving in its own right. Whatever the verdict, pagan lore has been brought into the present.

In Scotland, the Book of the Dean of Lismore was collected between 1516 and 1532 in Perthshire at the very border of Highland and Lowland culture and aimed to be all-inclusive of Gaelic material. Poems within that collection lament the passing of the Fenians and the passing of the Lordship of the Isles, a *sine qua non* to the flourishing of the arts.<sup>165</sup> The Fernaig Manuscript of 1693 was collected in a small Episcopalian enclave in Wester Ross; the Eigg Collection of 1755 was collected in the wake of the '45. The controversy over Macpherson sparked the collection of surviving heroic ballads in works by the Rev. James McLagan (1728–1805), the Rev. Donald MacNicol (1735–1802) and others. John Francis Campbell and Alexander Carmichael made their collections in the 19th century when Gaelic society was breaking up. The Gaelic grammars of Shaw (1778) and Alexander Stewart (1801) constitute a backward look at a point of linguistic disintegration. At the same time, traditional Highland music was being written down and collected, for example by Daniel Dow (1776), Patrick and Joseph McDonald (1784), Robert Petrie (1790–1805) and Captain Simon Fraser (1816).

As we have seen, poets have used various personifications to deplore the passing of traditional ways: the land (Coire an Easa and Blaven) speaks for Am Piobaire Dall and Uilleam Ros; birds (an owl and a thrush) for Dòmhnall MacFhionnlaigh nan Dàn and MacCodruim; Echo for An Clàrsair Dall and Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh. The appeal to what is right is made through something even more fundamental than the tradition:

Tha Mac-Talla fo ghruaim  
san talla 'm biodh fuaim a' cheòil,  
's ionad tathaich nan cliar  
gun aighear, gun mhiadh, gun phòit,  
gun mhìre, gun mhùirn,  
gun iomrachadh dlùth nan còrn,

164. Joseph Falaky Nagy, *Conversing with Angels and Ancients: Literary myths of medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 1997).

165. "S fada a-nocht i nOil Finn", in N. Ross, *Heroic Verse from the Book of the Dean of Lismore* (Edinburgh, 1939), 8, and 'Ní h-éibhneas gan Chlann Dòmhnail', in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire* (Edinburgh, 2007), No. 29.



gun phailteas ri dàimh,  
gun mhacnas, gun mhànrán beòil.

*Echo is now subdued  
in the hall where music was heard,  
in the place visited by bards  
now without joy, without pleasure or drink,  
without sport, without play,  
without drinking horns lined up in rows,  
without generosity to learned men,  
without affection, without song.*<sup>166</sup>

Tormod Caimbeul has looked at the end of cultural continuity in his novel from 1979, *Deireadh an Fhoghair* (The End of Autumn). It fictionalises an isolated community of three old people. Aware that the knowledge of generations will go with them, one of the characters, Coinneach, longs for a visit from an academic who might collect the Gaelic names for insects, fish and plants he constantly rehearses in his mind, in the hope of some possibility of continuity, or at least of the preservation, of the past in the present.

#### NAMING

In naming, whether by clan surname, Christian name or patronymic, the past is recreated. Most Scottish clans – including the MacDonalds, MacDougalls, MacKinnons and MacLeans – only emerge in the 12th and 13th centuries, under the influence of feudalism, with their land held ultimately from the king. However, the clan was perceived as an ancient kin group and the backward look led members of the lowliest stratum to believe they were related to the nobility and to conduct themselves accordingly. The nobility was certainly more visible and formed a higher proportion of society than was normal in other cultures<sup>167</sup> and many visitors to the Highlands commented on the proud bearing and participation of the peasantry in the aspirations of their leaders. This can be seen in the heroic ethos of their folk songs and in the pride taken by young women in the noble blood of a love child in such songs as ‘Iain Ghlinn Cuaich’.<sup>168</sup> Though it is indisputable that shifting patterns of clientship and the taking of surnames over the period up to Culloden were founded as much on the need for protection as on a common ancestry, a certain amount of

166. See ‘Òran Mòr MhicLeòid’, in A. L. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2006), 155–56.

167. Michael Newton, *Warriors of the Word* (Edinburgh, 2009), 127.

168. A. L. Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, 358–59.

interbreeding between nobility and peasantry, as evinced by the 18th-century poets Rob Donn and Sileas na Ceapaich, would make the blood tie between chief and people increasingly a reality.<sup>169</sup> Whatever the surnames that came to be adopted, they generally refer to a common ancestor rather than to a trade (the surnames *Mac an t-Saoir*/*Macintyre* ‘the son of the joiner’ and *Mac a’ Ghobhainn*/*Smith* being rare exceptions).

Given names are chosen by the widespread practice of *togail an ainme* (raising the name), by which children are named after their grandparents or a recently deceased relative. The rigour of the system can give rise to several siblings bearing the same name or to girls bearing feminised male names such as Angusina, Andrewina or Michaelina. To this day, the individual is defined locally by patronymic or *sloinneadh* rather than by surname or even Christian name. This was true also of the styles used of some chiefs, such as Mac Iain for the chief of the Glencoe MacDonalds, and Mac ‘ic Ailein for the chief of Clanranald, which emphasised the founding father regardless of the interceding generations or present incumbent.<sup>170</sup> With a similar stress on the past, the Gaelic for ‘cousin’, *co-ogha* ‘fellow grandchild’, looks back to the common grandparents rather than across to members of the same generation. The Irish terms for first, second and third cousins (*col ceathar*, *seisear* and *ochtar*) likewise count the steps back to their common set of progenitors. Though a chieftain is often praised for being a fresh shoot, the nobility of the tree from which it sprouts is enhanced by age.

#### THE HEAD CULT AND ANCESTOR WORSHIP

The persistent interest in heads and skulls in Celtic culture also demonstrates a desire to maintain links with the past through the ancestors, for knowledge was held to reside in the head, whether living or dead. Evidence of a head cult is seen from earliest times, for instance in the niches for heads in the gate at Roquepertuse and Entremont and in the accounts by classical writers such as Diodorus Siculus and Livy of the Galls’ practice of embalming heads as trophies and decorating skulls as drinking vessels. Heads, horned or crowned with leaves, are a very common motif in La Tène and Iron Age Celtic art.<sup>171</sup> Celtic

169. Martin Rackwitz, ‘Travels to Terra Incognita: The Scottish Highlands and Hebrides’, in *Early Modern Travellers’ Accounts c. 1600 to 1800* (New York and Munich, 2007), 41; see Rob Donn, ‘To Lady Rae and her Maid’, in Hew Morrison, ed., *Songs and Poem in the Gaelic Language by Rob Donn* (Edinburgh, 1899), 258, and Sileas na Ceapaich, ‘An aghaidh na h-Oba Nodha’, in Black, *An Lasair*, 22ff.

170. Newton, *Warriors of the Word*, 166–69.

171. Anne Ross, *The Pagan Celts* (London, 1970, 1986), 121–23.

literature shows the continuation of the cult in the ability of severed heads to remain alive, to prophesy, entertain and protect. The most famous example is in the Middle Welsh tale of Branwen in the *Mabinogion* when Bran, wounded in war, asks his men to decapitate him and then proceeds to entertain them at an Otherworld feast.<sup>172</sup> His head, buried in London, was believed to protect Britain from invasion as long as it was left undisturbed.

Heroes of the Ulster cycle would also sit down at a feast entertained by a severed head. The chant of severed heads (*dichetal di chennaib*) at a feast is a motif in Fenian tales too and relates to the mantic chanting learnt by poets as part of their poetic art (see [I.1.c. \*Imbas forosnai\*](#)). John Gregorson Campbell records an account of a man who was haunted by an old woman after proposing marriage to her skull in church and of a tailor who was haunted by a man whose skull he had kicked.<sup>173</sup>

We have various accounts of severed heads in Gaelic history. The severed head of the Irish harper Diarmaid Ó Cairbre, who had cut the throat of his patron Aonghas MacDhòmhnaill, heir to the Lordship of the Isles in 1490, is addressed by Eoin, Dean of Knoydart:

Cha truagh liom fád ghruaig ghreannaigh,  
 ná gaoith ghleannaigh dá gairbhe,  
 cha truagh liom gad id ghiallaibh,  
 a chinn Diarmaid Uí Chairbre.

*I do not pity your unkempt tangles,  
 however stormy the glen wind blowing through them;  
 I do not pity the withe between your jawbones,  
 O head of Diarmaid Ó Cairbre.*<sup>174</sup>

In 1598, the head of John Drummond was placed by his murderers on his sister's table at Ardvorlich and fed with the cold supper she was serving them, a story retold by Walter Scott in *A Legend of Montrose*.<sup>175</sup> In 1665, Iain Lom took the heads of the seven men implicated in the Keppoch murders to Invergarry Castle and presented them to the chief of the MacDonalds of Glengarry. Livy describes similar scenes of the Galls returning from war with their enemies' heads tied to their horses, and Cú Chulainn too is described brandishing heads. It is no surprise that Iain Lom and the heads were said to converse, one

172. Gwynn and Thomas Jones, *The Mabinogion* (London, 1975), 39.

173. J. G. Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, ed. Ronald Black (1st pub. 1900 as *Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland*; Edinburgh, 2005), 127 and 280.

174. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire* (Edinburgh, 2007), No. 37.

175. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stewart\\_of\\_Balquhiddar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stewart_of_Balquhiddar)> – accessed 5 March 2013.

of them telling him that he had left a girl pregnant with a child who would revenge them.<sup>176</sup> When Iain Lom heard the heads rattling in a creel on his way to Inverness to gain magisterial approval for the deaths, he said, *Ud ud, nach còrd sibh, nach còrd sibh, 's gur cloinn chàirdean sibh* (Now, now, won't you agree, as you're all related).<sup>177</sup> The place where he washed the blood off the heads, known as *Tobar nan Ceann* (The Well of the Seven Heads) by Loch Oich, is marked by a monument erected by Col. Alasdair Ranaldson Macdonell, 15th Chief of Glengarry, in 1812. By contrast, the Enlightenment Edinburgh Whig Lord Cockburn, unmoved by the venerability of the head cult, was disgusted by the commemoration of so barbaric a practice.<sup>178</sup>

Ancestral knowledge represented by the skull, combined with the power of water, remained a cure for epilepsy into modern times. Many wells had associations with skulls, sometimes carved on the retaining wall or deposited within the well (see [III.1.b.](#)). Mary Beith reports a case as late as 1909 of an epileptic travelling from Edinburgh to Lewis for the cure of a drink from a *copan-cinn* (a skull-cup). A discussion of the animism of the severed head is continued in [VI.1.c.](#)

#### THE PRESENCE OF THE ANCESTORS

Prehistoric monuments were a constant reminder of the pre-Gaelic inhabitants of the land who were believed to live on in them, firstly as the pagan gods and latterly as the living dead. Some of this is a metaphor for different sorts of development – topographical, agricultural, technical and social – but it also shows a desire for a strong link with earlier civilisations and peoples. It is manifest in the way the Gaels thought about their own identity, with origins among the oldest and most prestigious cultures of the known world, including the Egyptians, Scythians, Greeks, Jews and Spanish through Gaodhal Glas, son of Scota, Pharaoh's daughter. This origin myth, preserved in *Lebor Gabála* (The Book of Invasions), is discussed in greater detail in [VI.1.a.](#) Here, it is enough to stress that in addition to their own lineage, the Gaels looked back to the six invasions of Ireland that preceded their own arrival from Spain as Clann Míl. We know that the seanchaidh present at the inauguration of Alexander III in Scone in 1249 recited the king's ancestry all the way back to Míl, making

176. <[http://macdonnellofleinster.org/page\\_13v\\_macdonell\\_of\\_keppoch\\_pa.htm](http://macdonnellofleinster.org/page_13v_macdonell_of_keppoch_pa.htm)>.

177. Annie MacKenzie, *Òrain Iain Luim* (Edinburgh: Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 1964), 274.

178. 'I was surprised by seeing that brutal obelisk still standing near Invergarry Castle ...', in David Douglas, *Circuit Journeys by the Late Lord Cockburn* (Edinburgh, 1889), 109; North Circuit, 1841.





The *Seanchaidh* reciting Alexander III's ancestry at his coronation. From a late medieval manuscript of the *Scottichronicon* by Walter Bower. Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 171, f.206

a claim for a continuity between the first Gaels to come to Ireland and the Scottish Crown.

Rites of passage often took place in the presence of the ancestors, seen in the practice of taking marriage vows on burial mounds and of swearing by the Black Stones in the graveyard in Iona. Martin says the stones took the place of the Great Seal for the Lord of the Isles, who swore that 'he would never recall those [land] rights which he then granted'. Their description as black referred not to the colour of the stones but to the consequences of perjury.<sup>179</sup> James VI's choice of Iona for the ratification of his Statutes of 1609 by captured chiefs took sly advantage of their respect for an oath sworn in the presence of their ancestors.

Nowhere was this seen more clearly than at the inauguration of a new chief at the funeral of the preceding chief. Inauguration frequently took place on a mound incorporating the dead, in the centre of the territory in the presence of the living and the dead. A sacred tree might similarly make a connection with the past of the tribe and their land. The new chief would be presented with the sword of his ancestors as a sign of his continuing responsibility for the protection of the tribe. He would be physically raised on a cairn, but this, and the white garb he was soon to pass to the poet, emphasise the transitory nature of his occupation of the position.<sup>180</sup>

#### MEMORY AND LANDSCAPE

'The idea that the land we live in and belong to is not just a landscape, but a deeply peopled, storied place, is integral to Gaelic and indigenous understandings of the world.' So wrote Iain MacKinnon in explaining the term *dùthchas*.<sup>181</sup> In 1578, all but one of the worshippers in the church of Trumpan in Waternish in Skye were burnt alive by MacDonalds from Uist. The survivor raised the alarm in Dunvegan from whence help came and all the attackers were killed as the low tide prevented their escape. Their bodies were piled against a wall which was pushed over on top of them. Both church and parts of the dyke still stand testimony to *Là Milleadh a' Ghàrraidh* (the Battle of the Spoiling of the Dyke). In 1845, the people of Glencalvie, Sutherland, were cleared by Gillanders, factor to Major Charles Robertson of Kindeace. They sheltered briefly in the churchyard of Croick while they looked in vain for alternative land. Some scratched a

179. Martin, Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, ed. Donald J. Macleod ([1698]; Edinburgh, 1994), 288; and Black, *To the Hebrides: Samuel Johnson's Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland and James Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (Edinburgh, 2007), 381ff.

180. Newton, *Warriors of the Word*, 132–35.

181. Iain MacKinnon, 'history in our memories/*eachdraidh nar cuimhne*', unpublished PhD thesis in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ulster, 78.





'Glenalvie people the wicked generation', Croick church. [cc-by-sa/2.0 © Ibn Musa: - geograph.org.uk/p/5684672](https://www.geograph.org.uk/p/5684672)

memorial of sorts on the diamond panes of the east window, commemorating both their plight and their understanding that clearance was the wages of sin: 'Glen Calvie people, the wicked generation' and 'Glen Calvie people was in the churchyard here May 24th 1845'. It is said that Gillanders's grave became strewn with stones and refuse, as a memorial of the people's contempt of him. These two tales show how in traditional society the site of an event became its own marker, rehearsed in place-name lore.

In any area of the Highlands, the landscape would have given ample reminders of the past in a range of place-names and associations with natural and man-made features. The density of such features may be demonstrated with the example of the island of Eigg whose community have made every effort to preserve such information that ties the past to visible markers.<sup>182</sup> Pre-Gaelic inhabitants are evinced by an Iron Age fort and a Pictish stone. There are many early church sites: Kildonnan commemorates Donnan who was martyred there in 617, whose pillow, a large boulder north of the church, demonstrates his asceticism. There are holy wells dedicated to Colum Cille and Catherine and a high cross from the time of the Lordship in the churchyard. *Cachaileith nam Marbh* is the path taken by funeral corteges, and cairns mark the place where a famous piper died in the 18th century and where biers were laid on the way to

<sup>182</sup> See the website of Comann Eachdraidh Eige or the Egg History Society.

the graveyard. The former agricultural activities of the islanders can be seen in their peat-cuttings, their shielings and *Coire na Fala* (Blood Corrie), where cattle were bled for meal puddings. Reminders of violence and tyranny survive. *Uamh Fhraing* is the cave where the population were suffocated in a clan feud with the MacLeods in the 17th century. *Clach Alasdair* is a rock from which a man leapt to escape the press-gang; and, in the ruins of Grulin, are the remains of a village cleared in 1853. Laig Farm is associated with Ranald MacDonald, Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's son, who published the *Eigg Collection of Gaelic Songs* in 1776. The Norse presence survives in a Viking burial and in the names of two Norse giants, Huisdal and Hasdal, and in the large boulder said to be the latter's limpet hammer. Fairy belief is seen in such names as *Sithean na Caillich*, *An t-Sithean* and *Lòn nan Gruagach*. *Loch Nighean Dhùghaill* commemorates a girl said to have been eaten by a waterhorse. The enterprise of landlords can be seen in the quern stones broken in the 18th century to force tenants to use the mill; their enterprise can be seen again in the 19th-century Clanranald Pier, built for the export of kelp. In 1997, a natural stone pillar, perhaps once a cross, was re-erected at Pier Hill to mark the community buyout of the island.

#### MONUMENTS

At one time, every part of the Highlands would have been as alive as Eigg to the past, but with the disruption of Gaelic society over the last couple of centuries, our only recourse is to more self-conscious reminders of the past. There has been a tendency from the 19th century onwards to raise funds, either through individual benefactors or public subscription, to commemorate the Gaelic past. A new literacy has made notation meaningful, culminating in erection of detailed interpretation boards, often with a nod to Gaelic, by such bodies as the Forestry Commission, Scottish Natural Heritage and Ceumannan Tròndairnis.

The obelisk marking Tobar nan Ceann (The Well of the Seven Heads), mentioned above, commemorating an event of the 1660s, was not erected until 1812. Likewise, the decision to commemorate Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir who died in 1812 was taken at a meeting in Glasgow in 1855. A 44ft high rotunda that looks over Loch Awe on the old military road between Inverary and Dalmailly designed by Rothead was built in 1859, and an obelisk was erected on his grave in Greyfriars churchyard, Edinburgh. Dùghall Bochanan, who died in 1768, is commemorated in Kinlochranoch by an obelisk erected in 1855. The monuments marking the graves of Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn and Iain Lom, who died in 1560 and 1709, respectively, belong to the 19th and 20th centuries. A century or so after the land raids and the crofters' struggle for land law reform in Lewis, Will Maclean was commissioned in 1994 to produce three monuments – *Cuimhneachain nan Gaisgeach* – at the initiative of Angus



Will Maclean's cairn commemorating the Aignish Riot of 1888. [cc-by-sa/2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/)  
© M. J. Richardson: [geograph.org.uk/p/3523709](https://geograph.org.uk/p/3523709)

Macleod MBE. These are in Balallan, commemorating the Park Deer Raid of 1887, at Point, commemorating the Aignish Riot of 1888, and at Back, commemorating the Gress Raids of 1920. Cairns of course had been built since prehistoric times as burial mounds, to rest coffins and to mark the places people had dropped dead (and where nothing had been given out at Hogmanay). Will Maclean's Land Raid monuments deconstruct them to form expressive abstract shapes, as in the jagged half-cairns at Aignish, reflecting the confrontation between crofter and marine armed with fixed bayonet.

The form taken by recent memorials to clearance and emigration range from boulders to bronze statues. The monument at Badbea was erected by David Sutherland, the son of an emigrant to New Zealand from the stones of his father's house. The one in Lamlash, Arran, consists of three big boulders and the one at Helmsdale, *The Emigrants*, is a bronze of a family group, the father looking outwards towards the family's new destination, his son looking towards him for reassurance and the mother looking back, *cas a' falbh is cas a' fuireach* 'with one foot leaving, the other remaining'. All these



Gerald Laing, *The Emigrants*, Helmsdale (2004). Photo © Neil Campbell  
monuments include memorial plaques, in marked contrast to the unmarked cairns and places whose significance was once remembered locally.

#### THE FORWARD LOOK

As naming and monuments bring the past into the present, prognostication and the second sight bring the future into the present. In a circular model of time, the future might be construed as already in existence and therefore visible to seers. Eilidh Watt's formulation (see [I.1.a.](#)) was that the future was still in the loom. It has been suggested that the Iron Age double or triple heads with multiple pupils may depict both the prophetic and the backward look, toward descendants

Netherton Tricephalic sculpture in Kelvingrove. Image Credit: Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum





and ancestors.<sup>183</sup> A backward look in the Gaelic tradition often becomes a forward look when the sinking sun rises. Sacred trees, burial mounds, fires, feasting and drinking all mark rites of passage because they emphasise our transitory occupation of repeating roles in an ongoing process. This is signalled by a married woman's first task being the making of her shroud.<sup>184</sup> The tree was a perfect symbol for continuity. A chief inaugurated by a tree represented both his links to the past and the clan's hopes for the future. We are told by James Ramsay of Ochtertyre in the late 1700s that a baby's first food was often the sap of an ash tree representing its participation in the tree of life, a hope echoed in the marital blessing that a young couple would live to see their great grandchildren.<sup>185</sup> Anne Grant of Laggan spoke of the Highlander as having a very strong sense of connection both to his forebears and to his future:

No Highlander ever once thought of himself as an individual ... In the most minute as well as the most serious concerns, he felt himself one of the many, connected together by ties of the most lasting and endearing. He considered himself merely with reference to those who had gone before, and those who were to come after him; to these immortals who lived in deathless song and heroic narrative; and to these distinguished beings who were born to be heirs to their fame and to whom their honours, and perhaps, their virtues, were to be transmitted.<sup>186</sup>

The tragic gestures of John Watson Nicol's *Lochaber No More* or Gerald Laing's *The Emigrants* or Runciman's *Ossian* in Penicuik House seem somewhat alien to older Gaelic culture, because Gaelic culture often turns tragedy into something glorious. This could be said of other heroic societies – of the Spartans combing and decking their hair with ribbons before certain defeat against the Persians, or Y Gododdin around 600 preferring death on the battlefield to death in bed because of its guarantee of everlasting fame. Indeed, there is something glorious about the 'tragic death tales' of the Children of Lir, the Children of Uisneach and of Diarmaid at the hands of Fionn in Glen Shee, because they die heroically, sealing their fame. Even in the most personal of tragedies, for example Mòr Chaimbeul describing the beheading of her husband in 1570, pathos quickly turns to revenge.

Peter Berresford Ellis attributes the 'bright, happy spirit [that] pervades even

183. Anne Ross, *The Pagan Celts*, 123.

184. James Logan, *The Scottish Gael, or Celtic Manners as Preserved among the Highlanders* (Edinburgh, 1876), 375, quoted in Newton, *Warriors of the Word*, 181.

185. Newton, *Warriors of the Word*, 174 and 181.

186. Anne Grant, *Essays on the Superstitions of the Highlanders of Scotland* (London, 1811), 51.

the tragedies' to the doctrine of rebirth.<sup>187</sup> It is a different philosophy from the centrality given to man by the Sophist Protagoras in his statement that 'Man is the measure of all things' and by the emphasis on the individual in subsequent Humanist thinking. William McTaggart's transparent people in paintings such as *The Coming of St Columba*, *The White Surf* and *The Emigrants' Ship* are in marked contrast to the solid figures that appear in Highland scenes by Tom Faed, Raeburn and Landseer. It is as if the Gael McTaggart senses that individual lives are fleeting moments from the perspective of the enduring landscape. Their transience accords with the comment, *Fhuair thu sealladh, ach cha d' fhuair thu gealladh* (You got a glimpse, not a promise), said to parents of an ill child in the mid-20th century in East Sutherland.<sup>188</sup> Sorley MacLean's view of human existence is similar but darker when he speaks of the Cuillin rising *air taobh eile duilghe* (on the other side of sorrow). The land endures while finite human lives endlessly repeat their cycles of cruelty and oppression:

Thar lochan fala clann nan daoine,  
thar brèidteachd blàir is stri an aonaich,  
thar bochdainn, caitheimh, fiabhrais, àmhghair,  
thar anacothroim, eucoir, ainneairt, àraidh,  
thar truaighe, eu-dòchais, gamhlais, cuilbheirt,  
thar ciont is truaillidheachd, gu furachair,  
gu treunmhor chithear an Cuilitheann  
's e 'g èirigh air taobh eile duilghe.

*Beyond the lochs of the blood of the children of men,  
beyond the frailty of the plain and the labour of the mountain,  
beyond poverty, consumption, fever, agony,  
beyond hardship, wrong, tyranny, distress,  
beyond misery, despair, hatred, treachery,  
beyond guilt and defilement: watchful,  
heroic, the Cuillin is seen  
rising on the other side of sorrow.*<sup>189</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

In this section we have seen a tendency in Gaelic culture towards a circular model of time, based on the annual renewal of nature and the perceived movement of the sun. The model, it is suggested, shaped the opposing curves of La Tène

187. Peter Berresford Ellis, *Celtic Myths and Legends* (London, 2002), 19.

188. Personal communication with Nancy Dorian.

189. 'An Cuilithionn' (The Cuillin), in C. Whyte and E. Dymock, eds, *Sorley MacLean Collected Poems* (Edinburgh, 2011), 414–15.



art and was fundamental enough for Gaelic theologians to make Christianity fit to a circular timescale with everything returning to source. Reincarnation was an inevitable consequence of circular time, conditioning the fearlessness of the pagan Gaels in battle and the heroic ethos. It is suggested that it may have provoked a certain lightness about human existence in the ever-repeating cycles of nature. It is probably the best model to explain belief in the second sight.

Norman MacLean (1936–2017), a Gaelic comedian, writer and piper, described the consciousness of an educated Western man as being 'horizontal' while that of the Gael was 'vertical'.<sup>190</sup> With this, he was comparing the educated Western man's breadth of knowledge about the contemporary world with the Gael's wealth of historical detail that still informs the present. We have looked at numerous examples of the cultural endeavour to bring the past into the present: the preservation of pagan lore in Christian frameworks; naming practices which raise the name of the ancestors; repeated ingathering of materials at times of stress and a belief in a lost Golden Age long before nostalgia became a feature of Romanticism; the associations kept alive in place-name lore; inaugurations in graveyards in the presence of the ancestors; the ancient head cult and the belief that the pre-Gaelic tribes of Ireland lived on as the living dead. MB

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190. Timothy Neat, *The Voice of the Bard* (Edinburgh, 1999), 290.

## VI COSMOLOGY

### INTRODUCTION

In Models of Existence we look at how the Gaels have understood their place in the world and universe. It is significant that the pagan Gaels, as far as we know, had no creation myth (though they had a story of their own emergence as a people and of their arrival in Ireland).

It is suggested in A Celtic Philosophical Thread? that a continuum of thought is discernible among Gaelic theologians over perhaps a millennium. This is manifest, for example, in an inability to consider the world totally fallen, in the respect for unknowing and in a rejection of a hierarchy of life forms.

In Structure we ask if these attitudes have any bearing on the visual culture. Answers to the affirmative are suggested by the attempt by John Scotus Eriugena in the 9th century to shape linear Christian time to the circularity of pagan time, by which the created world continuously emanates from and returns to the wellspring of God. Is this the same circularity as is seen again and again in the structures of the buildings, poetry and music of the Gaels? Similarly, could the blank areas in metal and stone work correlate with the shamanic *imbas forosnai* of the bards and the *via negativa* of monastic practice? An understanding of the interconnectedness and interwoven nature of all things may have given rise to an aesthetic of maximal variety – achieved through transposition, rotation and inversion – with minimal means. As seeing is no neutral act but is always culturally determined, we suggest that these aesthetic structures may both reflect and mediate a particular perception of the world. A concluding case study of Glen Etive examines the density of cultural allusion still in evidence in one relatively small area of the Highlands.

## VI.1. MODELS OF EXISTENCE

## VI.1.a. ORIGIN MYTH

[Introduction; Origin Myth of the Gaels; Gaelic Origin Myth and the Visual Arts](#)

## INTRODUCTION

Thriall bhur bunadh gu Phàro.

*Your origins went back to Pharaoh.*<sup>1</sup>

Thus, in 1649, did Eachann Bacach remind his MacLean patron of his lineage as a Gael.

For the Gàidhealtachd, there are two subjects suggested by the title Origin Myth. The first is the quasi-historical origin myth of the Scots or Gaels – the origin myth of a people. The other is that of a myth about the origins of a place, whether a country, the earth or whatever was conceived of as the universe. This latter is usually taken to imply a creation myth, with the further implication of a beginning in time. Both topics are pursued below. We conclude with a discussion of some of the effects these have had on the visual arts in Scotland as a whole.

## ORIGIN MYTH OF THE GAELS

The invasion mythology of Ireland is known in various forms: from the 8th-century Auraicept na nÉces and 11th-century Lebor Gabála in Ireland, from Giraldus Cambrensis's 12th-century *The History and Topography of Ireland* and, of course, from several Scottish sources, e.g. the 10th-century Pictish Chronicle, the 11th-century 'Duan Albanach' and John of Fordun, Walter Bower and Hector Boece in the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries, respectively. [When Alexander III was inaugurated](#) in 1249, his genealogy was recited to fifty-six generations starting with Pharaoh's daughter Scota.<sup>2</sup> To this day the Royal Standard of Scotland shows the Lion Rampant, indicating the Scottish monarchy's descent through Kenneth MacAlpin from Míl whose sons were the first Gaels to come to Ireland. Míl was said to have killed three lions in Africa and to have borne them on his shield. When his two sons and grandson divided the lands of Ireland between them, they each retained one of these lions. Malcolm III (1058–1093) was probably the first Scottish king to use the

1. 'A' Chnò Shamhna', in Colm Ó Baoill, ed., *Eachann Bacach and Other Maclean Poets* (Edinburgh, 1979), 14–15. Ó Baoill (p. 167) dates the poem to 1649.

2. J. Bannerman, 'The King's Poet and the Inauguration of Alexander III', *Scottish Historical Review* LXVIII (1989).

rampant lion in his insignia.<sup>3</sup> James IV, the last Gaelic-speaking King of Scots, kept a lion in Stirling Castle.

According to the myth, the Gaels were connected to the Egyptians through Pharaoh's daughter Scota, from whom they believed their name *Scoti* to be derived. She married their eponymous ancestor Gaidheal Glas, son of an Athenian king to whom the Gaelic language was committed when it was made from *Gortaighean* (the universal language) at the tower of Babel. The descendants of Gaidheal Glas were exiled from Egypt and wandered for 450 years before settling in Spain, from where Íth saw Ireland from a tower.<sup>4</sup> Íth and the eight sons of Míl sailed to Ireland and, since overcoming Tuatha Dé Danann at Tailtin (Teltown), they became largely dominant. Current genetic research suggests that what has been presumed to be a pseudo-history may represent a memory of settlement from the Iberian peninsula.<sup>5</sup>

This origin myth of the Gaels, to which the Scots as a whole were to subscribe, is also referred to in [III.3.c. Heraldry, Emblems and Totems](#) in the context of Lia Fáil or Stone of Destiny. The stone was supposedly Jacob's Pillow, thus adding biblical authority to its significance. This myth is fundamental to the very existence of Scotland, being cited in the Declaration of Arbroath, which claims an origin for the Scots in greater Scythia, journeying through the Tyrrhenian Sea (the Mediterranean) via the Pillars of Hercules (the Straits of Gibraltar) and Spain. This being the journey taken by Scota and her husband Gaythelos (Gaidheal Glas) in the myth, there is no doubt that the origin myth of the Gaels is being used to justify the claim for independence of the nation itself. The myth resurfaces in Gaelic literature through the centuries. Here, in a late 16th-century poem, an Irish bard commends the Scottish Gaelic chieftain in asserting his rights over the territory of Antrim.

Cia an t-éinrí áirimhthear lionn  
Nár ghabh airdcheannas Éirionn,  
Ó Cholla go Gaidheal nGlas,  
Más laoidheadh orra an t-eólas?

*Can we count a single king  
Who did not accept the headship of Ireland*

3. John O'Hart, *Irish Pedigrees: Or the origin and stem of the Irish nation* (Genealogical Publishing Com., 1989), 55.

4. R. A. S. MacAlister, *Lebor Gabala Erenn: The Book of the Taking of Ireland*, Irish Texts Society Vol. II, 33, 43, 79.

5. Bryan Sykes, *Blood of the Isles* (London, 2006). Stephen Oppenheimer, *The Origins of the British* (London, 2006).



*From Colla to Gaidheal Glas,  
If mentioning them gives guidance?*<sup>6</sup>

The Gaels believed themselves to be the seventh wave of invaders of Ireland, each succeeding wave perhaps representing beliefs about earlier influxes of settlers from the Continent – the Fir Bolg, for example, may be a vestige of the Belgae – and various stages in social and technological attainment such as kingship, clearing forests and using iron. Whatever the basis in fact or fiction, the mythology pictures the gradual progress of human order over the chaotic forces of nature; hence the banishing below the ground or over the sea of Tuatha Dé Danann (the defeated, foregoing inhabitants of Ireland) represents an uneasy truce with nature and the mythological ancestors.<sup>7</sup>

Their Irish, and ultimately Greek, Scythian and Egyptian, origins were a matter of pride to the Gaels in Scotland. Ireland was looked to as the source of their culture, as testified by such names as Elgin, Earne and Banff, derived from the names of the Irish sovereignty goddesses Ériu and Banbha. The MacDonalds in particular recited their Irish links to Conn of the Hundred Battles and Colla Uais,<sup>8</sup> and Scottish poets would travel to Ireland for their education and make reference to pan-Gaelic heroes such as Lugh. Eachann Bacach, quoted at the beginning of this section, claims Egyptian ancestry for the Gaels. Likewise, probably on the eve of the Battle of Flodden (1513), the Earl of Argyll is reminded of his Greek ancestry in an incitement to fight for his Gaelic lineage as Lugh, one of Tuatha Dé Danann, had fought against the Fomorians:

Ar sliocht Gaodhal ó Ghort Gréag  
ní fheil port ar a gcoimhead,  
dá dteagmhadh nach b'aordha leat  
sliocht Gaodhal do chur tharat ...

Ghiolla Easbuig nach d'eitigh d'fhear,  
is tú an Lugh fá dheireadh;  
a Iarla Oirir Ghaoidheal,  
bí id churaidh ag commaoidheamh.

*The race of Gaels from the land of Greece  
will have no place in their power*

6. W. McLeod and M. Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire* (Edinburgh, 2007), 138–39. This is but one of many examples – see for instance the same work, 240–41ff.

7. Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts*, translated by Myles Dillon (Turtle Island Foundation, 1982).

8. See McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 17, 'Fuaras Aisgidh gan Iarraidh'.

*if you should think it no disgrace  
to ignore the Gaelic lineage ...*

*You, who never refused request,  
you are the Lugh of the present;  
O Gill'Easbaig, earl of Argyll,  
become an exulting champion.*<sup>9</sup>

It is interesting to note a change in attitude to the desirability of a connection to Norse ancestry. We see it celebrated in a 13th-century poem praising Donald, the eponymous ancestor of Clan Donald, for both his Gaelic and Norse ancestors, and in a 14th-century poem praising MacSween warriors as Norsemen: *Lochlannaigh is ármuinn iad*.<sup>10</sup> However, the memory of fear of Viking attacks survives in some Fenian tales and, in time, the Norse connection came to be ignored by all clans but the MacLeods.<sup>11</sup>

The myth of the descent from Scota is not the only origin myth of the Gaels. The myth of Tuan MacCarrill seeks, or has been manipulated to seek, an origin in the children of Noah; but what makes his story truly significant is not so much its account of successive waves of invaders to Ireland or its link-up with biblical genealogy, but the series of transformations across species undergone by Tuan in order that he may live long enough to provide the account (see II.1.b.). As this ambiguity of life forms is manifest throughout much of Celtic art, we may legitimately consider the latter in the light of Tuan MacCarrill's own origin myth. Françoise Henry has noted this relationship:

With Christianity, God was substituted for the wizard of old times, but the notion of perpetual transmutations remained unchanged.<sup>12</sup>

Henry refers specifically to MacCarrill. However, as she tends to use Irish and Celtic almost interchangeably, it is worth drawing attention to these matters more specifically in the context of the Scottish Gàidhealtachd.

One of the most obvious ambiguities of life forms is that sustained in the emblems and totems of the clans. These, however, could be seen as constituting their own clan-based forms of origin myth, in which the *sluagh* or people is a tribe rather than a nation. These totemic memories are more obviously

9. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 36.

10. MacLeod and Bateman, No. 33, l.12.

11. 'Domhnall mac Raghnaill, Rosg Mall', in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, No. 15; see also Introduction, 'Gael and Norse'. A late example is the poem by Iain Dubh Dhòmhnail nan Òran, 'Aoir Dhòmhnail Ghrannda', in which Donald Grant is persecuted for disturbing the sleep of the dead by the ghost of a Norse prince, the first person to be interred in Kilchoan in Glendale.

12. F. Henry, *Irish Art* (London, 1965), 211.

sustained in Scottish than in Irish Gaelic culture and are subject to separate study in III.3.c. However, although the relationship between people, place, plant or creature is often sufficiently close to amount to a shared identity in literature, they are not depicted with any such ambiguity in the visual heraldic tradition. For such ambiguities one must look to the artwork from the products of the Iona scriptorium, in which the hierarchies proposed in the origin myth of the book of Genesis are seemingly subverted.

In Genesis, Adam and Eve are given dominion over the earth. Is it significant that images of Adam and Eve are notable for their near total absence in the stone carvings of Scotland, whether from Pictland or the Gàidhealtachd? And is the more widespread insular tendency to give less emphasis to the standard forms of Christian iconography attributable to something more than iconoclasm, whether pre- or post-Reformation?

... – for example, scenes of the Nativity, Baptism, Ministry and Passion of Christ – are rare in Pictish art, although they are not over plentiful in the whole span of Insular art, as it survives, compared with the very solid coverage of the same themes in Carolingian art.<sup>13</sup>

The origin myth of Christ (upon which his Resurrection is predicated) shares features with the experience of St Finnian in the company of Tuan MacCarrill, or the appearance of the god Lugh at the door of a *dùn*. In Gaelic literature, Lugh parallels aspects of Christ as healer (he heals Cú Chulainn night after night), hero (he fought alongside Míl) and saviour, as in this early 16th-century poem:

Cia nois bar aithris an fhir  
Fhóirfeas Gaoidheil ar Ghallaibh,  
Rér linne, mar do-rinn Lugh  
Taobhadh a chine ó anghuth?

*Who now in imitation of that hero  
Will deliver the Gaels from outsiders  
In our times, as did Lugh  
Standing by his race against insult?*<sup>14</sup>

In the light of the above, one might reasonably suggest that pre-Christian, including pre-biblical ideas and images of the origins of the Gaels remained very much alive, well into post-medieval times. They certainly did in the mind of Jack Yeats when he wrote:

There was a wise woman once. Keep that to yourself and don't forget it ...

13. G. and I. Henderson, *The Art of the Picts* (London, 2004), 145 and fn 118.

14. McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire*, 242–43.

'Was her name by any manner of chance Eve? I said ...' 'No,' the fountainy woman said to me. 'She came from a different strain. She passed by Eve in a whirlwind and left her chewing her apple.'<sup>15</sup>

He had already set the scene for this in the context of an entire people:

Where there is Romance there is the grain, the seed of the charlock bui, the wild gold weed of a free sovereign people growing. It was in Mother Eve's Garden and when the snake came sliding he circled it. He knew his match, my friend.<sup>16</sup>

For Jack Yeats the hero is not Lugh, a god of the people skilled in all things; the hero is a 'free sovereign people growing' – by which he undoubtedly means the Irish, although the people of the town in his novel *Ah Well* are of a different order from post-Lapsarian man as they have eaten of the Tree of Life but not the Tree of Knowledge.<sup>17</sup> Yeats's novel anticipates Carney's proposal that the everlasting apple given to Conlae in Echtrae Chonlai represents the fruit of the Tree of Life.<sup>18</sup>

What strikes one here is the parallels with the origin myths referred to above and with a poem from Immram Brain (The Voyage of Bran), of 8th-century origin. Here the Afterworld is described by a Christian monk as one in which there was no original sin at all.

Cluithi n-aímin n-inmeldag  
Aigdit fri fin nimbordad,  
Fir [is] mná míne, fo doss  
Cen peaccad, cen immorbus ...

Fil dún ó thossuch dúili,  
Cen aíss, cin oirphthi n-úire;  
Ní frescam dembethangus;  
Nín-táraill int immorbus.

*Shaded by a bush, men and gentle women play a pleasant delightful game in regard to ... ? without wrongdoing, without sin ...*

*Since creatures began there is a fort without age, without withering (?) of freshness; we do not expect ...; original sin has not touched us.*<sup>19</sup>

15. J. Yeats, *Ah Well* (London, 1942 and 1974), 45.

16. Yeats, *Ah Well*, 7.

17. See J. Purser, *The Literary Works of Jack B. Yeats* (London, 1991), esp. Chapp. 1 and 12.

18. J. Carney, 'The Deeper Level of Early Irish Literature', *Capuchin Annual* (1969), 162–65.

19. G. Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics* (Oxford, 1956 and 1977), 94–95.

While Kim McCone interprets virtually all such evidence as derived from and motivated by Christian values,<sup>20</sup> Murphy is happy to classify this poem as 'Secular' and 'Otherworld', by which he does not mean Heaven.

It is of interest that these myths seek not merely to root themselves in biblical precedent, but almost to subvert it. The concept of Original Sin does not allow of any sentient beings prior to Adam and Eve with whom humans could converse or interbreed, nor does it make room for any such beings prior to the Fall, but belief that there were such beings who had somehow survived untainted by Original Sin was not without precedent.<sup>21</sup> Such beings are there because they belong to a different belief system. When Connlae is seduced by a fairy woman to a land 'where there is neither death nor want nor sin', it is to a place which necessarily sidesteps the biblical origin myth to accommodate an alternative mythology. That the fairy woman is made to foretell the coming of Christianity only serves to underline the distinctions.<sup>22</sup> The persistence of such beliefs underlie the Tuan MacCarrill myth and these to some extent survived into later Medieval times in the story of Suibne (see III.1.d.).<sup>23</sup> As Carey puts it,

The radical idea that the old gods are unfallen humans survived in Ireland throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>24</sup>

One might assert the same of the Scottish Gàidhealtachd, not least with respect to the parallels between 'Òran na Comhachaig' and 'The Hawk of Achill', tales from Scotland and Ireland in which creatures of preternatural age provide an opportunity to explore the remotest past, in similar manner to that of Tuan MacCarrill.

#### GAELIC ORIGIN MYTH AND THE VISUAL ARTS

The illustration in Bower's *Scotichronicon* of Scota and Gathelos on their journey from Egypt is probably the earliest image of the origin myth of the Gaels.<sup>25</sup> Bower's own account, though based on Fordun, is particularly significant in the context, as he was abbot of Inchcolm and will have been conversant with the *Inchcolm Antiphoner* with its strong Iona connections (see V.2.b.). Walter Bower's *Scotichronicon* was written out in a fair copy in the 1440s and amended under Bower's own supervision.

20. K. McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth, 1991), Chap. III, esp. 79–80.

21. J. Carey, 'The Irish Vision of the Chinese', *Ériu* XXXVIII (1987), 73–79.

22. T. Cross and C. Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales* (London, 1935), 488–90.

23. Carey, 'The Irish Vision of the Chinese', 78–79.

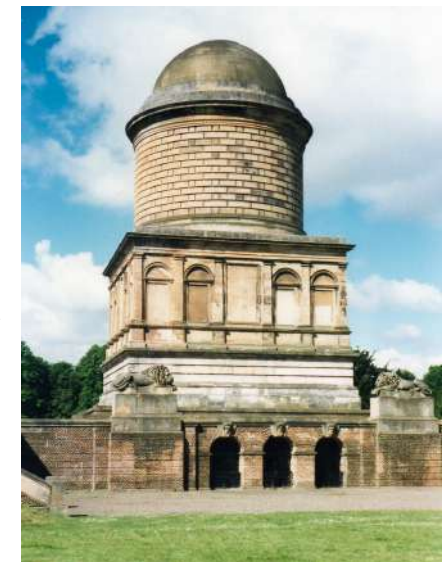
24. J. Carey, *A Single Ray of the Sun* (Andover, 1999), 36.

25. Bower's *Scotichronicon*: Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 171, f.14v.

Whether the origin myth of the Gaels has any basis in reality or not, it does find a remarkable expression in one of the most significant architectural structures in Scotland. The structure itself was neither commissioned nor designed by Gaels but, in all its essentials, it is entirely predicated upon their myth.

The Hamilton Mausoleum (completed in 1858) is, in many respects, not just a homage to the myth, but an attempt to recreate its significance in real terms. It is a Masonic structure – its architect was a leading Freemason – which reflects the enormous interest in Egyptology at that time, but also Masonic interest in the great builders of Egypt and their gods; hence Mozart's Masonic opera *The Magic Flute* (of just a few years earlier) extols Isis and Osiris. The Hamilton Mausoleum was consciously designed to bring to some kind of fruition that perceived connection with the origin myth of the Scots, its apparent purpose being to propel the soul of the 10th duke of Hamilton into communion with the astral status of his forefathers amongst the Egyptian gods. The conception is fanciful in the extreme but nonetheless significant for that. The dukes of Hamilton, as the premiere peers of Scotland, saw themselves as directly descended from Scota, the daughter of a Pharaoh, and therefore descended from the product of the union of Isis and Osiris, the tears of the latter being symbolised by the annual flooding of the Nile, for which the 10th duke substituted the Clyde. This belief in a connection with the Pharaohs was not confined to Hamilton dynastic ambitions; as we have seen, it was referred to in an elegy of Eachann Bacach, composed in 1649 on the death of the chieftain of the MacLeans.

The crypt of the 10th duke's family mausoleum was designed to be flooded annually by the Clyde and the upper part of the structure was designed as a circumcised penis, thus intending to emulate the arousing effects of the tears of Isis on her brother's mutilated corpse.<sup>26</sup> What is relevant here is that the origin myth of the Gaels clearly retained its significance through many centuries, even to the point of the building of a hugely expensive structure, whether merely symbolic or intended to realise greater ambitions.



Hamilton Mausoleum.  
Photo © John Purser

26. J. Purser, 'The Womb of Sound', in E. Hickmann, I. Laufs, R. Eichmann (Hrsg.), *Studien zur Musikarchäologie* III, *Orient-Archäologie* 10 (Rahden, 2002), 27–38.





J. D. Fergusson, *Danu, Mother of the Gods* (1952).  
Fergusson Gallery, Perth and Kinross Council

But there were other perceptions, perceptions in which the mother of the gods was not Osiris but Danu. When John Duncan Fergusson (1874–1961) painted *Danu, Mother of the Gods* in 1952, he painted a woman with a cloak and dress of many colours. But she is not standing at the portals of some great temple, and her dress is far from being classical or Egyptian.

Rather, she stands in a mountainous landscape. Her upraised forearms and hands allow the cloak to mirror the shapes of the mountain peaks behind her and the pointed shapes of the trees which cling to the mountainsides. She is in the foreground but she seems to be as tall as the mountains, whose rocks reveal many soft subtleties of colour. Her gesture and stance are those of peace and acceptance, the palms facing forward, one foot slightly in advance of the other, one thigh exposed from hip to toe, her smile kindly though enigmatic. Behind the fork of her body is a blue loch and the place of her vagina is a peacock blue-green, as though symbolising the relationship between earth and water as the source of fertility. As her dress falls from her hips, so its brilliant variety of colours breaks up into multitudinous fragments like the flowers of the earth. She is, perhaps, wearing the cloak that Eithne so desired – the robe symbolising her son Colum Cille, yet to be born (see I.3.a.), except that Danu's lineage is as old as the hills and long before Christianity. Certainly the image of the many-coloured cloak has its biblical parallel with Joseph's dream coat but, in this 11th-century secular poem, it seems to have had an alternative source:

A-tá tipra 'sin tsíd trell  
Cona tri cócetaib breclend,  
Ocus delg óir cona lí  
I n-óe cecha breclenni.

*In that fairy dwelling there is also a well which holds thrice fifty many-coloured cloaks, and in the corner of each many-coloured cloak is a gleaming brooch of gold.*<sup>27</sup>

A many-coloured cloak in the form of a druidic robe finds mention in *Immacallamh in Dá Thuarad* (The Colloquy of the Two Sages), which dates from between the Viking invasions and the 9th-century Sanas Cormaic (Cormac's Glossary). The young druid Néde, who is studying in Scotland, hears a strange sound in the wave and casts a spell on it, which reveals that his father has died and the father's druidic robe has been given to Ferchertne:<sup>28</sup>

Tri datha na tugnigi .i. tugi do ittib én ngel ar medón: frosbrechtrad  
findruine for ind leith ichtarach dianectair, agus fordath fororda for ind  
leith uachtarach.

27. Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics*, 110–11.

28. W. Stokes, 'Colloquy of the Two Sages', *Revue Celtique* XXVI (1905), 8–9, 12–13.

*Three were the colours of the robe, to wit, a covering of bright birds' feathers in the middle: a showery speckling of findruine on the lower half outside, and a golden colour on the upper half.*

Stokes points out the comparison between this and a passage in Cormac's Glossary:

It is of skins of birds white and many coloured that the poet's toga is made from the girdle downwards, and of mallards' necks and crests from the girdle upwards to the neck.<sup>29</sup>

In Fergusson, then, we are released from the necessity of establishing a racial lineage in accordance with biblical or Egyptian origins. The origin is the landscape and the goddess is our own. JP

#### VI.1.b. THE OTHERWORLD AND ITS INHABITANTS

[Introduction](#); [Fairies Derived from Ancestor and Goddess Worship](#); [Conduct of Fairies](#); [Songs about Fairies](#); [Accounts of the Otherworld](#); [Mushroom Cult?](#); [Survival of Belief](#); [Conclusion](#)

#### INTRODUCTION

Bha 'n solas bu bhoillsgeile a chunnaic sùil duine riamh aca nan àiteachan-còmhnaidh; bha 'n ceòl bu bhinne a chuala cluas riamh aca; agus a rèir mar a chuala sinn, bha iad anabarrach dèidheil air a bhith a' dannsa. Shaoileadh daoine gum bu chòir dhaibh a bhith anabarrach toilichte le 'n staid; oir cha robh a bheag de thrioblaidean cumanta na beatha seo a' cur dragh orra ... Ach ged a bha a' chùis mar seo, bha farmad gu leòr aca ris na daoine bu bhochdainne crannchur a bh' air an talamh gu lèir.<sup>30</sup>

*They had the brightest light that eye ever saw in their dwellings, the sweetest music ear ever heard, and, according to reports, they were exceptionally fond of dancing. You would suppose them to be perfectly contented with their state, for none of the common difficulties of this world troubled them ... But be that as it may, they envied folk of even the most wretched lot in the whole world.*

The Rev. Iain MacRuairidh, writing at the end of the 19th century, goes on to explain that the cause of the fairies' envy of even the most wretched of humans

29. Stokes, 'Colloquy of the Two Sages', 13.

30. The Rev. Iain MacRuairidh, 'Seana Bheachdan', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* XXII (1898), 127.

was their parlous state in which salvation was impossible.<sup>31</sup> Their envy was the reason they were feared, for envy – whether of a person's children, cattle or possessions – could, without any obvious agency, take the goodness out of them.

Robert Kirk gives an account of the fairies in 1691 in *The Secret Commonwealth*, reputedly gleaned from several different informants. He refers to them as 'subterraneans' or 'astral bodies' and gives several different accounts of their origins in both pagan and Christian belief. He refers to them variously as bad angels, 'pendulous souls' destined for Hell, the dead awaiting reunion with their bodies at the Second Coming, restless souls needing to divest themselves of a secret and as the astral doubles of living people seen by seers. He describes their occasional visibility at twilight, their bodies being like 'condensed Cloud'. While churchyards were often built beside ancient burial mounds, Kirk reports the belief that the churchyards had come first and that the fairy hills had appeared later to accommodate the astral bodies of the dead before the Second Coming:

And for that end (they say) a mote or mound was dedicate beside every churchyard to receive the souls till their adjacent bodies arise, and so become as a fairy-hill, they using bodies of air when called abroad.<sup>32</sup>

In his preface, he states that his purpose in writing the essay is to 'suppress the impudent and growing atheism of this age'. He does this in two ways: in



Doon Hill 'fairy hill', from Kirk's grave, Aberfoyle.  
Photo © Seán Purser

31. The Rev. Iain MacRuairidh, 'Seana Bheachdan', 125–40.

32. Kirk, *The Secret Commonwealth* (Dover, 2008), 55.



showing the biblical status of the seers who can see these invisible people and in demonstrating the pernicious intent of the ‘subterraneans’ on man. While some ministers would not tolerate any talk of the Otherworld, which they saw as belonging outwith Christianity, it is clear that Kirk sought to accommodate it and saw a lack of belief in the spirit world of all kinds as part of atheism.

Kirk describes fairy houses, invisible to normal eyes, in hillocks and mounds next to graveyards and brilliantly lit by lamps requiring no fuel. He describes their weapons of stone rather than metal, with which they can ‘smite without pain’. They are themselves invulnerable to man’s weapons yet they fear cold iron as it points to the north and to hell. They eat little but take the goodness – ‘the most spiritous matter for prolonging of life’ – out of food. In this way, they have been seen eating beside a voracious man who nevertheless remains thin. Their clothing is of tartan and their speech consists of whistling. In behaviour, they are restless and nomadic, moving on quarter days and ‘ever readiest to go on hurtful errands’. Like MacRuairidh, Kirk reports that towards man, they show envy, spite, hypocrisy, lying and dissimulation.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, the fairies were demonised as channels of inexplicable ill fortune. They were imputed with the abduction of mothers, babies and children who died or failed to thrive, and of being the succubae of men seduced by unsuitable lovers. Their shot, with its near-invisible entry wound, was the cause of unexplained illness or lack of productivity in cattle. Vulnerable people were sained against their attack.

#### FAIRIES DERIVED FROM ANCESTOR AND GODDESS WORSHIP

There was no place in Christianity for any gods but Jahweh as the first two Commandments make explicit (‘You shall have no other gods before me ... You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God ...’), and so the pagan gods and the ancestral dead retreated to their megaliths and cairns and were rarely seen. A tale collected in Iona in 1931 draws out the parallel survival of prehuman beings alongside ourselves:

Ghabh e iongantais agus thuir e, ‘Cò às a thàinig thu?’ Thuir e, ‘Cha tàinig mi dhe chloinn Adhaimh agus cha bhuin mi dhut agus dhan dream bhon tàinig Abraham, ach bha mi an seo mus robh duine eile.’ Agus thuir e, ‘Chuir thu mi à mo dhachaigh.’ ‘Tha mi duilich,’ thuir e, ‘tha mi duilich. Cha robh mise a’ ciallachadh sin idir,’ thuir e, ‘s e dìreach an crann gun do bhuaile air clach.’<sup>34</sup>

33. Robert Kirk, *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* [MS 1691] (originally published 1815; this edition Dover, USA, 2008), 51, 54, 56.

34. M. Macleod Banks, ‘A Hebridean Version of Colum Cille and St Oran’, *Folklore* Vol. 42, No. 1 (31 March 1931), 55–60; available from <[jstor.org/stable/1256410](http://jstor.org/stable/1256410)>.

*He was shocked and he said, ‘Where did you come from?’ He said, ‘I didn’t come from the children of Adam and I don’t belong to you and to the folk that Abraham came from, but I was here before any of them.’ And he said, ‘You put me out of my home.’ ‘I’m sorry,’ he said, ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that at all,’ he said, ‘it was just that the plough hit the stone.’*

The fairies are seen in favourable terms in ‘Echtrae Chonnlaí’ (The Adventure of Connlae) from the early medieval King Cycle which gives a literary description of the Otherworld as a place without sin or death and a place of plenty and of peace. The dual meaning of *síd* as ‘fairy mound’ (i.e. the Otherworld) and as ‘peace’ was made much of by Irish commentators and the Otherworld was seen as a place of good influence. Kingship to men was granted and upheld by the Otherworld through the attribute of *fír flathemon* ‘the king’s truth’. By pleasing the sovereignty goddess through correct judgement, peace and plenty would be granted to the kingdom. (We see the converse in the ritually decommissioned kings from prehistoric times preserved in bogs near their inauguration sites in Ireland<sup>35</sup> and in the downfall of King Conaire after he gave false judgement concerning his foster brothers in the medieval story of the Destruction of Ua Derga’s Hostel.)<sup>36</sup>

The view of the inhabitants of the Otherworld is also positive in a poem in the Book of the Dean of Lismore (quoted in IV.2.a. in the context of the Otherworld as a ‘silken fairy residence’). The poet Aodh describes the Kingdom of the Little People as a place where hospitality and entertainment abound, and where there is no ageing, falsehood or envy.<sup>37</sup> Iubhdán and his tribe are exceptionally small; his poet is smaller than a man’s fist and his wife could sleep in a glove. His court surpasses the best scenes of human drinking halls; it is floored with eggshell and thatched with feathers; it has a hundred and one doors and three hundred women.

In Lebor Gábála (The Book of Invasions), the sons of Míl, arriving in Ireland for the first time, are greeted by the three sovereignty goddesses, Éire, Banbha and Fótla. They prosper because they recognise the goddesses as the spirits of the land with whom they must reach accord. Lebor Gábála describes the six races that inhabited Ireland before the arrival of Míl and the Gaels (see Origin Myth VI.1.a.). They included giants (the Fomorians), Fir Bolg (the ‘men of the bags’, who might be a folk memory of an invasion of Belgae) and Tuatha Dé

35. Matt McGrath, ‘World’s Oldest Bog Body Hints at Violent Past’: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-24053119>>.

36. Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, ‘The Semantics of “Síd”, *Éigse* XVII (1977–1979), 137–55.

37. *Iongnadh m’eachtra, ‘s mé ar ndeaghailt ré m’fhileadhaibh*; see William Gillies, ‘A Poem on the Land of the Little People’, in Sharon Arbuthnot and Kaarina Hollo, eds, *A Grey Eye Looks Back: A Festschrift in honour of Colm Ó Baoill* (Ceann Drochaid, 2007).



Danann, the tribe of the goddess Danu. The Gaels variously fought them and propitiated them. Vanquished, they departed either below the ground to the subterranean cairns of prehistoric builders that are often still referred to as fairy mounds, or overseas to some island in the west. Some islands still have strong associations with these pagan gods: in Scotland, Skye is associated with Scáthach, Raasay with Canu, Tiree with Cailleach Bheara and, in Ireland, Tory Island with Balor and the Fomorians, and Inis Meáin with Aonghas, chieftain among the Tuatha Dé Danann, where his fort still stands. Bull Island off the Kerry coast was considered the isle of the dead, as was Hy Breasail or 'Brasil', a mythic island, nevertheless depicted on a map as late as 1572 by Abraham Ortelius.<sup>38</sup>

The pagan gods were not creators but personifications of the earth, representatives of untamed nature and different stages in agriculture and civilisation; one carries an axe to make fields from the forest, another gives out laws. The Dagda 'the good god' is not morally good but good at many things including eating enormously and having sex, the root of fertility. Though the gods are not moral exemplars, man's observation of hospitality and right judgement is essential to gaining their cooperation, which is tantamount to the



Dùn Cana on Raasay was associated with the god Canu. Donald Macauley / CC BY-SA

38. <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brasil\\_\(mythical\\_island\)#/media/File:Ortelius\\_1572\\_Ireland\\_Map.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brasil_(mythical_island)#/media/File:Ortelius_1572_Ireland_Map.jpg)>.

fertility of the land. The land is where the divine resides, so there is no division between the physical and the spiritual. The gods and goddesses, and later the fairies, give an animism to the earth: they are the spiritual element that unites the manifest forms of nature.

There is an uneasy truce between man and the land. Temporarily under his control, the land and the gods are still a potentially destructive force. Man's attitude to them was one of propitiation rather than worship or adoration, this reflected in later attitudes to the fairies such as leaving them a share of the milk or the harvest. The efforts of the druid class sought to propitiate the gods and the chief was hemmed round with various, apparently arbitrary taboos or *geasa*. *Geasa* become rules peculiar to individual heroes in the literature, such as Cú Chulainn or Fionn mac Cumhaill, and may take the form of a prohibition against sleeping in the same bed twice, or eating the meat of a dog or speaking to a red-headed man at sunset. These were translated as the correct observance of fairies.

An account is given (at III.1.a. and III.1.b.) of how the goddess was envisaged in the feminine form of the land, especially in the untamed wilderness, in the names of rivers and in the sea. The connection between goddesses and rivers was still meaningful in the 13th century when Muireadhach Albanach recommends Alún, the earl of Lennox, as a suitable mate to the River Leven.<sup>39</sup> There is a particular sense of sacredness surrounding trees, wells and fairy mounds which all stretch down into the earth, the place where the goddess causes regeneration. We have pre-Celtic representations of the earth goddess in the 'Ballachulish goddess', a female figure in oak with quartz pebbles for eyes from about 600 BC and in the dumb-bell stones of Taigh nam Bodach in Glen Cailleach. Her veneration is apparent in the ritual shafts found by Pennant on the banks of the Almond, Perthshire, and possibly the shrine at Arthur's O'on on the River Carron in Stirlingshire.<sup>40</sup>

Although no formalised text of Dinnshenchus exists for the Highlands as it does for Ireland, there is much lore that links the gods – often euhemerised as heroes – to particular places, most famously Clann Uisneach to Glen Etive, Fionn to Glenlyon and Diarmaid to Glen Shee. We have seen in the parallel Roads of Glen Roy or Cailleach Beur's residence in the rocks of Tiree how large-scale natural features of the landscape which resemble outsized human artefacts were identified with the former gods. Prehistoric remains likewise were linked to the gods, for example a field containing a burial cairn in Glenelg is known as

39. "Is saor do leannan, a Leamhain", Your lover is noble, O Leven', in Michael Newton, *Bho Chluaidh gu Calasraid* (Acair, 1999), 42.

40. Derick S. Thomson, ed., *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland* (Oxford, 1983), 257ff.



The distinctive double wall of a broch, *balla nam fianntaichean*, at Dun Telve, Glenelg. Photo © Meg Bateman

*Imir nam Fear Mòra* ‘the field of the big men’ and the distinctive double wall of brochs was known as *balla nam fianntaichean* ‘Fenian masonry’.<sup>41</sup>

So the Otherworld is beside us, glimpsed at those liminal times and places when our hold on the visible and temporal world is weakened, e.g. at twilight, at Bealltainn (between seasons) or Samhain (between the old and new year), at the threshold of a house or in a ford in a river. Its inhabitants emerge as hags (*cailleachan*), Fenians, giants (*famhairean*), the river sprites Eiteag and Cuachag, the Blue Men (*na Fir Ghorma*) in the strait between the Shiantas and Lewis, and of course as the fairies in all their variety as fallen angels, pagan gods and the dead.

#### CONDUCT OF FAIRIES

As fallen angels, some fairies are desperate for the fluids of humans so that they may gain souls and regain entry to heaven. They appear as lovely young girls (*glaitigean*) and sleep with hunters in their bothies only to drink their blood, or they substitute themselves as changelings (*tàcharanan*) for human babies to acquire human milk.<sup>42</sup> Not the diminutive creatures of Victorian tales, they are human-sized, but, carrying no weight, they have a distinctive fairy gait known as *siubhal sìthe*. Saying *Is leatsa seo, is leamsa sin* ‘This is yours, that is mine’, while throwing something at an *oiteag shuaigh* (the whirlwind that marked the fairies’ passing), was a sure way to make them drop a person they were stealing.

In general, they are extremely sociable, given to dancing and merriment, but there are solitary types too: the *each uisge* or water-horse who lures maidens

41. Otta Swire, *Skye: The Island and Its Legends* ([1951]; Edinburgh, 2006), 189, quotes A. R. Forbes *Place-Names of Skye*, that when the cairn was opened in the presence of the then minister of Sleat, it was found to contain the bones of huge men; Alexander Nicolson, *History of Skye*, ed. Cailean MacLean (1930; Lewis, 2012), 2–3.

42. See, for example, ‘The Glengarry Fairy’ (about a changeling) and ‘The Sreathdearn Hunter and the Witch’ (about a blood-sucking hag) in James MacDougall, *Folk Tales and Fairy Lore* (Edinburgh, 1910), 116 and 230ff.

onto his back and then drowns and devours them in his pool (Aberfeldy is named after a waterhorse called Pealladh); the water bulls of Loch Awe and Loch Rannoch; the *bean-nighe* or washerwoman presaging defeat when seen laundering the blood-soaked shirts of warriors before a battle; the *ùruisg* or brownie who is a helpful fairy, taking control of cattle; the selkie, half-seal, half-human, who comes to shore and may be retained as a wife or husband as long as the sealskin is withheld.

#### SONGS ABOUT FAIRIES

In Gaelic cosmology, the dead in the form of fairies are able to communicate with the living and to act among them. It is probable that this belief influenced the cult of saints in Christian cosmology, who continue to be influential after death and to whom appeal can be made (see VI.1.c.).

Several songs are put in the mouths of fairies. In one, ‘Mo thruaighe, mo chlann O haoiro o, Bean eile nan ceann’ (Alas, my children, in the charge of another woman), a dead mother tries to warn her husband of the abusive way his new wife is treating their children. In another, ‘Tha cnoc mòr shìos ud is ùrlar farsaing aige’ (There is a hill down below with a generous floor), a dead mother enquires about her children and describes the cleanliness of the fairy mound with its many nursing mothers and well-tended children.<sup>43</sup>

Martin Martin mentions the custom of changelings being laid in graves on quarter days to which the parents would go the next morning in the hope of finding their own children returned to them.<sup>44</sup> This appears to be a legitimised form of infanticide, of which the song ‘Cumha an t-Sìthiche’ (The Fairy’s Lament), also known as ‘Òran an Eich-uisge’ (The Song of the Waterhorse), may be another example. In this song, the fairy man or waterhorse upbraids the human mother for neglect when she leaves their baby on the hillside in the hope of attracting him home:

A Mhòr a ghaoil, till ri d’ mhacan ...  
 ‘S i an taobh geal donn rug a mac dhomh  
 Ged nach caomh a rinn i altram.

*O Mòr, love, go back to your little son ...  
 she was the bright noble body that gave birth to my son,  
 though she did not nurse him kindly.*<sup>45</sup>

43. The Rev. Archibald McDonald, ‘Religion and Mythology of the Celts’, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* XIX (1893–94), 37–49, esp. 41–43.

44. Anne Ross, *Folklore of the Scottish Highlands* (Stroud, 2000), 103.

45. The Rev. Archibald McDonald, ‘Religion and Mythology of the Celts’, 37–49, esp. 41–43.



## ACCOUNTS OF THE OTHERWORLD

Christian monks, aware of the pagan traditions about Tìr nan Òg, preserved visions of the Otherworld in various forms of literature. The poem 'A Bé Find' (Fair Lady Will You Go with Me?) is a poem from the late 9th century in which Midir describes his home, the Otherworld, to Étaín, the queen of the King of Tara, in the hope that she will leave her husband for him. He explains that in the Otherworld, now invisible to man through our sin, there is no possession and that sex is not a sin because its inhabitants are not descended from Adam.<sup>46</sup> A continuity of this vision of the Otherworld is seen over a thousand years later in *Reconciliation of Oberon and Titania* (1847) by Sir Joseph Noel Paton, whose mother was from the Highlands. Of this painting, Hugh Cheape says, 'The fairies abound in erotic detail, the propriety of which would have been called into question were it not for the licence of midsummer madness and enchantment'.<sup>47</sup>



Sir Joseph Noel Paton, *Reconciliation of Oberon and Titania* (1847).  
National Galleries of Scotland

46. Poem 41 in Gerard Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics* (Oxford, 1956).

47. Hugh Cheape, 'The World of a Nineteenth-Century Artist in Scotland', *Review of Scottish Culture* 3 (1987), 83.

Voyage literature preserves visions of the Otherworld, albeit in a distinctly Christian allegory. Four accounts survive of these penitential voyages, the most famous being 'Navigatio Sancti Brendani', in Latin. The others are in Gaelic. Their basis is Christian allegory but doubtless they are formed by two additional strands: seafaring lore and pagan beliefs about the Otherworld. The voyages describe the crew, perils at sea and the different sorts of islands encountered on the way. It is hard to know whether accounts of sea monsters, coagulated seas, glass mountains, glass pillars and mountains of fire are natural or supernatural motifs. Could the foregoing be hitherto unknown sea life, icebergs, geysers and volcanoes or are they descriptions of the Otherworld? The distinction between the natural and the supernatural is not made by the pre-scientific mind. As a form of Christian allegory, the voyage literature depicts islands in the west representing heaven, hell, purgatory, and the places of penance frequented by monks. It is interesting that all these places are on the earth, not above or below the globe, or transcendent. In pre-Christian belief, the Otherworld was held to be across water, an island of eternal youth, of jewelled trees, of women and bird song. It is this view that clearly informs the depictions of heaven in voyage literature such as 'The Voyage of Snedgus and Mac Riagla'.<sup>48</sup>

In 'The Story of Ossian' as heard by Alasdair 'Brian' Stewart from his grandmother (b. 1847) in Lairg, Oisean takes his lad out to the hill and gets him to dig a hole and look into it. The lad sees the most beautiful big dog catch the biggest stag he has ever seen. He cooks it for Oisean who regains his youth. They then catch a fledgling blackbird for the boy to eat. One of its legs is so heavy it breaks the table where it is laid.<sup>49</sup> Typically, this story sites the Otherworld under the ground, the passage of time does not exist (for Oisean's youth is immediately restored on eating its venison) and the superior size of dog, deer and blackbird is a clear indication of the superior state of the world before the Fall. Many other folktales involve the hero descending into caves, holes and graves as he moves progressively nearer his destiny: self-sacrifice may be involved, but more particularly in this context, the hero gains access to the strengthening and rejuvenating powers of the Otherworld.

In a poem from c.1750 by Ailean Buidhe MacDougall, 'Òran molaidh Cruaich Narachain', a song in praise of Cruaich Narachain in Argyll, the Fenians are seen in their mansion in the hill among the angels. Not only are the pagan Fenians now in heaven, so too is heaven apparently on earth, the Otherworld and heaven equated with one another as they were in the *Immrama* a thousand years earlier:

48. *Revue Celtique* IX, 1888.

49. Bruford and MacDonald, *Scottish Traditional Tales* (Edinburgh, 1994), 171–76; Gaelic version in *Tocher* 29, 292–301.



'S i siud a' Chruach bha ainmeil,  
 An taigh foirmeil bh' aig an Fhèinn,  
 Len teaghlach mòr bha aincheartach  
 'S len gillean meanmach treun.  
 Bha dusan taigh san talla ud,  
 Anns gach rùm dà aingeal deug,  
 'S b' e 'n cunntas an àm an garaidh  
 Mu gach aingeal fear is ceud.<sup>50</sup>

*That was the Summit renowned  
 as the illustrious home of the Fenians,  
 with their great skilful household  
 and their spirited young men.  
 There were a dozen houses in that hall,  
 with twelve angels in each room,  
 and when aroused, their number  
 round each angel was a hundred and one.*

#### MUSHROOM CULT?

It has been suggested that the druids may have participated in the mushroom cult common to Northern Europe and Asia.<sup>51</sup> It would be overly reductionist to explain the Otherworld only as the remnants of psychotic experience, but possibly it lent certain motifs. *Amanita muscaria* or fly agaric has distinct white spots on a red cap. It is curious that the foods of the Gaelic Otherworld – apples, berries, hazel nuts and salmon – are typically described as being red and white. Otherworld animals are also typically red-eared and white-bodied.<sup>52</sup> The red, white and black oystercatcher (*gille-Brighde*) is named as the servant of Brighde. Its colouring alone makes a claim for the saint being derived from the Otherworld goddess of the same name. Fly agaric grows particularly well in birch woods. We could speculate that the white serpent found by St Fillan at the base of a birch in Kilillan (see III.2.b.), and possibly the spotted serpent held by the horned god on the Gundestrup Cauldron, are linked by tree and spots to fly agaric.

50. Patrick Turner, *Comhchruinneacha do dh' orain taghta Ghaidhealach* (Duneidionn, 1813), 216.

51. Erynn Rowan Laurie and Timothy White, 'Speckled Snake, Brother of Birch: *Amanita Muscaria*: Motifs in Celtic Legends': <<http://www.seanet.com/~inisglas/AmanitaArticle.pdf>> – accessed 20 January 2016.

52. See, for example, the hound in 'The Man in the Cassock', in Bruford and MacDonald, *Scottish Traditional Tales*, 153.

Typical Otherworldly experiences, such as journeys, trances, alteration in the perception of time and space, shapeshifting, and the acquisition of knowledge through dreams, closely resemble shamanistic practice associated with the use of fly agaric. The seer's practice described in Cormac's Glossary (9th century) of chewing the raw flesh of cat, pig or dog in the divination practice known as *imbas forosnai* might refer to chewing the red cap of the mushroom. Similarly, the brightness ascribed to the Otherworld, by both the Rev. Iain MacRuairidh and Kirk (with which we open this section) could be a reflection of the extreme sensitivity to light induced by the mushroom.

#### SURVIVAL OF BELIEF

Recorded in North Uist in the 1970s, Pàdruig Moireasdan (1889–1978) speaks of the futility of disabusing many old people of their belief in the Otherworld and its inhabitants and reports that his contemporaries in his youth saw much more than they would speak of.<sup>53</sup> His stories of the supernatural concern *taibhsean* or ghosts, *manaidhean* or omens and the fairies. His ghost stories concern souls who cannot proceed to heaven before something is put right on earth. For example, a packman's *taibhse* returns to point to his hidden remains and to a new house as proof that he has been robbed and murdered and the house built on the ill-gotten gains. Moireasdan describes some people setting out with a ladder to fetch a stirk. The appearance of a *manadh* in their midst is an omen that they will return bearing one of their own number on the ladder. Another tale concerns a young woman who is to keep baking in a fairy mound until the meal chest is emptied. She bakes for a year before she learns that, if she stops returning the *fallaid* or left-overs to the chest, it will empty and she will be able to go home.<sup>54</sup> All of these



Norman Shaw, *sidhe-riser* (2001), with kind permission of the artist

53. Pàdruig Moireasdan, *Ugam agus Bhuan* (Steòrnabhagh, 1977).

54. Pàdruig Moireasdan, *Ugam agus Bhuan*, Nos. 17, 19, 22 and 16.

stories describe encounters between the living and the dead with Otherworldly time running non-linearly, doubling back in the *taibhse* stories, jumping forwards in the *manadh* stories and going slowly in the stories of fairy knolls.

John MacInnes quotes the frequent reaction of his informants when asked if they believe in fairies. They say they do not see them any more because they, rather than the fairies, have changed.<sup>55</sup> Am Puilean says it is electric lighting that dealt the death blow to sightings of the supernatural.<sup>56</sup> MacInnes sees the fairies and the Otherworld as negotiating the place of the ego and the unconscious within the individual: the fairy world gives a place to the irrational, asocial and creative in man. Ronald Black, in his introduction to *The Gaelic Otherworld*, emphasises the social usefulness of fairy lore in explaining mental illness, congenital defects and abuse.<sup>57</sup> We would like to suggest additionally that the fairies are mythical mediators between man and nature. We have seen a continuity between the pagan gods and earth goddesses and the fairies, fallen angels, the living dead, supernatural animals, heroes and saints of more recent times. With that continuity comes a fluidity in the delineation between life forms, between the past and the future, between benevolence and malevolence and between creativity and destruction. The presence of the dead among the living can be frightening, thrilling or even comforting. At some level, the Otherworld and its inhabitants are a corrective to our myopic vision of our human dominance of the world.

It is interesting to note that Sorley MacLean, that modernising poet who introduced European symbolism into Gaelic literature, is also so embedded in the Gaelic tradition that his great poetic visions can probably only be fully understood in the context of the Otherworld. He sees the dead as trees in Hallaig at twilight and encounters his *co-choisiche* or *Doppelgänger* on the bareness of the Cuilinn ridge. Most markedly of all, he draws out the connection between the gift and cost of creativity from the legend of *Uamh an Òir*. The piper earns immortality for his art at the cost of his own life at the hands of 'the green bitch of death' in the Cave of Gold. What makes his art immortal is its revelation of the deathlessness of nature arising from death: '*s gum b' e ghall' uaine am bàs* 'that the green bitch was death'.<sup>58</sup> We have a song from Sorley's kinsman, Calum

55. John MacInnes, *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes*, ed. Michael Newton (Edinburgh, 2006), 460.

56. Aonghas Caimbeul (Am Puilean), *A' Suathadh ri Iomadh Rubha* (Glasgow, 1973), 38.

57. Ronald Black, ed., Introduction to *The Gaelic Otherworld* (Edinburgh, 2005), esp. xxxiv–xl.

58. See 'Hallaig', 'An Cuiltheann' and 'Uamh an Òir', in Somhairle MacGill-Eain, *O Choille gu Bearradh/From Wood to Ridge* (London, 1991).



Norman Shaw, *tirnanalog* (2019), with kind permission of the artist

Ruadh Nicolson of Braes, a traditional poet, who attributed an Otherworldly origin to his 'Òran an t-Sithiche' (fairy song), recorded by the Danish folklorist Thorkild Knudson in 1967.<sup>59</sup> In this song, Calum Ruadh describes a fairy lover coming to his window during the night and offering him a magic stick for his croft work and eternal happiness with her in Raasay. The song has a modern touch, in that she promises he will win the gold medal at the Mod with the words she gives him, but the association of the Otherworld with creativity is as old as the Gaelic tradition.

#### CONCLUSION

The world known to man and the Otherworld glimpsed in the wilderness are two ways of seeing the world, the one from our socio-historical perspective, the other mythopoeically from the timeless perspective of the natural cyclical forces of death and regeneration. The idea grew up that it was Adam's sin that generally veiled the Otherworld from our view. Adam's sin makes our life finite and therefore linear and so skews our vision away from the cyclical time of nature. Normally, we see only through human spectacles, in Kant's formulation, but the Otherworld reminds us of another reality.

59. <[tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/51402/2](http://tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/51402/2)>.





Jack Yeats (1871–1957), *Those Others*

While Christianity conceived of a heaven and hell outwith this world, for the pagan Gaels, there were no extraterrestrial worlds. Tír nan Óg or the Otherworld was firmly established on this world as an island in the ocean to the west, in the earth or in fresh water, as evinced by deposits left for the gods in caves, shafts, rivers and lochs. This makes a clear cosmological divide between the conventional Christian system where the living and the dead belong to two distinct realms of matter and spirit and the pagan one where matter and spirit coexist on earth, as the living and the dead, and as physical nature and its essence.

The community of the living dead on Earth was often referred to as *am bail' ud thall* 'yonder homestead', painted by Jack Yeats in 'Those Others', in which a goat stops to let the dead cross its path. The popular song 'The Bonnie Banks of Loch Lomond' is based on a belief in the living dead. It is set after the '45, in the words of a man who is to be executed. His spirit will reach home 'by the low road' of the dead quicker than his friend, who has been pardoned, can travel by 'the high road' of the living. MB

#### VI.1.c. PAGAN AND CHRISTIAN INTERPLAY

[Introduction](#); [Assimilation of Pagan Sites](#); [Accommodation of Pagan Practice: Solar Observance](#); [The Assimilation of Pagan Gods as Saints](#); [Accommodation of Practice: the Animate Forces of Growth and Decay in the Earth](#); [Inauguration, Oaths and Charms](#); [The Evil Eye, Saining and Boundaries](#); [Syncretism: Heaven on Earth, Universalism and the Immanence of God](#); [Demonisation of the Fairies and Surviving Pagan Practice](#); [Revisionism: the Environmental Movement and Modern 'Celtic Christianity'](#); [Summary](#)

#### INTRODUCTION

A bheil thusa coimeas do shailm  
Ri Fionn-ghabhail nan arm nochd?  
A chléirich, cha tàmailteach leam  
Ged sgarainn do cheann o do chorp.

*Do you compare your psalms  
To Fionn-recitations about bared weapons?  
Cleric! I would not reckon it a disgrace  
To separate your head from your body.*<sup>60</sup>

Annaid near Waternish in Skye is a curious example of pagan and Christian interplay. In 1773, Boswell and Johnson were taken to see it, their guide, MacQueen, believing the remains of a boundary wall and some buildings there to be a temple to the goddess Anaitis, a victory goddess known to Pliny. He had described the site to Pennant as being a place designed for the worship of the earth and he gave the goddess the other names, Bendis and Diana. He believed there were four places of worship to this goddess in Skye, wrongly taking the element *annaid* to be a personal name rather than a generic referring to an early church site of any sort abandoned during the 9th to 10th century.<sup>61</sup> It occurs in many place-names, for example Longannat, Craigannet and Ernanity.<sup>62</sup>

60. From 'Manus', in J. G. Campbell, *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV (London, 1891), 107 and 109.

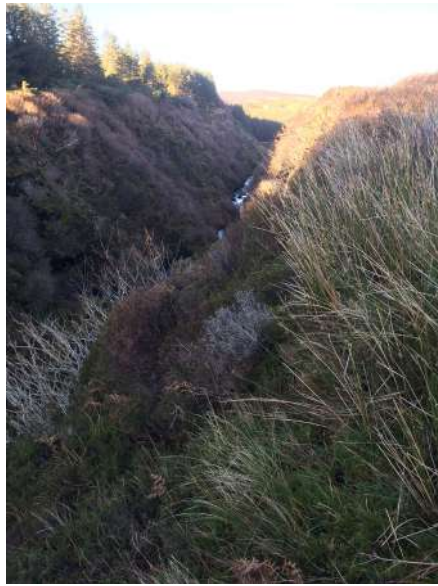
61. See W. J. Watson, *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* ([1926]; reprinted Dublin, 1986), 250–54; R. Black, *To the Hebrides: Samuel Johnson's Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland (1775) and James Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides (1778)* (Edinburgh, 1984), 241–42 and fn 258.

62. Other examples in Skye of the same element *annaid* are *Clach na h-Annaid* and *Tobar na h-Annaid* in Strathaird.



The Waternish site constitutes an interesting nexus of beliefs. Set on a high bluff at the confluence of the Bay River and a burn,<sup>63</sup> it appears to have been firstly a pagan water site which was then utilised as a church and burial ground and lastly as a shieling. (Another marker of the area's supernatural water associations is the nearby Fairy Bridge, known in Gaelic as *Beul-àtha nan Tri Allt* 'the ford of the three streams'.) When the church at Annaid fell into disrepair, its pagan associations re-emerged and it became a place of burial for babies who had died before baptism.<sup>64</sup> Having no hope of salvation within the Christian scheme of redemption, their burial in a pagan site would offer an alternative destiny for their souls in the pagan Otherworld, a practice paralleled by many other children's burial sites in prehistoric remains in Scotland and Ireland.

The quotation at the head of this section, noted by John Gregorson Campbell in the late 19th century, reflects a certain tension between the pagan and the Christian. It comes from the Fenian lay, 'Manus' in which Oisean expostulates at St Patrick for rating the recitation of psalms over the recitation of heroic deeds. A similar point is made in a late ballad version of *Acallamh na Senórach*, when St Patrick condemns the Fenians to hell and Oisean and Caoilte defiantly say they that would rather be in hell with Fionn than in heaven without him.<sup>65</sup> But such comments are rare and the Christianising of Gaelic culture took place with very little resistance. The process led to an amalgamation of pagan and Christian cultures which forged the Gaels new creative possibilities and a new identity. The pagan religion, with its class of druids, its interest in tripartite gods, genealogy and in life after death, evinced by grave goods and the insouciance of warriors in battle, was well placed to accept similar institutions and beliefs in



Annaid, near Waternish, Skye.  
Photo © Meg Bateman

63. NGR NH34035481 Landranger OS Map 23, Grid Reference 26:52.

64. <<http://canmore.org.uk/event/659418>> and verification with locals.

65. Myles Dillon, 1972, *Early Irish Literature* (Chicago, 1948), 40.

Christianity. The great flourishing of the arts in the early medieval period must surely be interpreted as the flowering of the union of two religions.<sup>66</sup>

Pagan lore was maintained and preserved throughout the Christian period, the Fenians even being granted salvation posthumously. Carswell complains in his introduction to *Foirm na n-Urrnuidheadh* (1567) of people preferring tales of the pagans to Scripture (V.2.a.). Far from being despised as heathens, pagan heroes were held as dear as any Christian saint, their existence verified by their supposed residence in various prehistoric structures. Deirdre and Naois are imagined in Dùn Diordail, an Iron Age fort in Glen Etive; Sgàthach and Aoife in Dùn Sgàthaich in Skye (at least by James Macpherson); and the Fenian army in Glen Lyon. Similarly in Ireland, the prehistoric burial mounds of Brug na Bóinne (Newgrange), Emain Macha (Navan Fort) and Rath Cruachain (Rathcroghan) were imagined as the forts of the Dagda and his son Oenghus, of Conchubhar and of Ailill and Medb in 'Táin Bó Cuailgne'.

In this section, we will look at the assimilation of certain aspects of paganism into Christianity and the demonisation of others, at the syncretism of both religions and finally at the revisionism of paganism in recent times in the environmental movement and in modern 'Celtic Christianity'.

#### ASSIMILATION OF PAGAN SITES

We have already discussed individual aspects of the sacred sites of Kilbride, Kilmartin and Glen Lyon, but in drawing them together we hope to show a continuum of sanctity stretching over several millennia from the pagan to the Christian, expressing beliefs about the relationship between society and the land, between life and death and day and night. In many cases the pagan belief structures are further evinced in Continental archaeology.

In Strath, in Skye, in an area where limestone and basalt meet, we have High Pasture Cave, the mountain Beinn na Cailliche, the place-name Kilbride with the standing stone *Clach na h-Annaid* and associated well, the slabs of a stone circle now built into a bridge and the site of the church of Kilbride and nearby finds of a handbell and font.<sup>67</sup> Solar symbolism is evinced by the entry of sunlight into High Pasture Cave at Imbolc; the site of the cave was both a place for cremation and washing away of human remains into the stream that enters the cave and of honouring a female deity, evinced by the offerings of pig meat, beads, a cow (found inside the cave) and the [vulva-like form](#) of the waterwashed limestone itself. Both the hill name and the parish name commemorate the earth goddess,

66. See, for example, Kathleen Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1966).

67. <[canmore.org.uk/site/11450/skye-kilbride-st-bridgets-chapel](http://canmore.org.uk/site/11450/skye-kilbride-st-bridgets-chapel)>.

first as the hag and then as the Christianised saint Brigid. The standing stone *Clach na h-Annaid* might be seen as the male principle penetrating and laying claim to the female principle of the land.

Kilmartin Glen in Argyllshire is a prime example of a prehistoric, sacral landscape with a range of cup and ring-marked stones, henges, a linear cemetery of at least five cairns and standing stones, speaking of ritual processions, circumambulations, high status burials with grave goods and solar and possibly lunar observation. Within historical times, the Iron Age fort of Dunadd, marked by a footprint and with a basin, boar and ogam on its top, became an inauguration site of the Gaels. Later, Kilmartin became a Christian site with important carved grave stones. Loch Awe was said to have been created when the Cailleach let her well on the top of Cruachan overflow, an earth-shaping story not so different from the story in the *Dinnshenchus* of the River Boyne being created when Boand went widdershins around Nechtan's well. A female buried with a pottery cauldron at the Glebe cairn may mark the importance of the female principle's confirmation of the rightful king with a drink (IV.2.b.). Below this same cairn are concentric circles, perhaps focusing on an *axis mundi* or in imitation of the sun.

A third and final example is Glen Lyon and Fortingall in Perthshire where an ancient *bile* – the yew at Fortingall – comes together with prehistoric forts later associated with the Fenians, Glen Lyon (possibly named for the sun god Lugh) and Gleann Cailleach, in which the solar ritual of taking the Cailleach and family out of her house at Beltane and replacing them at Samhain is still maintained. She and her family are made of river-worn stones, as are the stones at Newgrange and the stone on the gate pillar of the church at Fortingall. Later, the Cailleach and her family were reassociated with St Meuran and his disciples and Glen Lyon came to be associated with St Adomnán or Eoghannan as he is known in Perthshire, whose bell and cross can still be seen at Inverwick and Camusvrachan. The word for a pagan sanctuary, *nemeton*, is retained in the name of a farm and estate, Duneaves, near Fortingall. The element appears in many other place-names such as Roseneath, Nevay, Navidale, Dalnavie and Navity, and many become the sites of later churches.<sup>68</sup> The name 'Fortingall', derived from Gaelic *Fartairchill*, contains the element *cill*, and means 'the church at the foot of the escarpment'. The church was dedicated to Coeddi, Bishop of Iona, and was probably founded directly from Iona about 700. It is claimed that Pontius Pilate was born under the yew tree, his mother accompanying a Roman legion on expedition.

All three sites, Kilbride, Kilmartin and Glen Lyon, become important Christian centres, the first two associated with St Brigid and St Martin, and the

68. Watson, *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland*.



The Glebe Cairn, Kilmartin. Otter / CC BY-SA

last associated with St Adomnán and St Meuran. To the pagans, they had been sacral landscapes for burial, inauguration and feasting, and for sun, earth and water worship which took place in the vicinity of their *axes mundi* in the form of standing stone, cairn and yew tree.

#### ACCOMMODATION OF PAGAN PRACTICE: SOLAR OBSERVANCE

We have already discussed in I.2.b. how the early Christian church fitted itself round the feast days of Celtic mythology – Imbolc becoming St Bride's Day (1st February), Beltane becoming the Day of the Holy Cross (3rd May), Lughnasa becoming Lammas (1st August) and Samhain All Saints' Day (1st November). The summer and winter solstices became St John's Day and Christmas Day. The sun was celebrated in the fire rituals that accompanied all these quarter days, when household fires were extinguished and relit from a 'need fire' (*teine-èiginn*), a fire rekindled by the friction of special woods often using a wheel device. The Church practice of extinguishing all light on Maundy Thursday and kindling a new fire at the Easter Vigil marking Christ as Sol Invictus was introduced into Europe by Gaelic *peregrini scoti* in the 6th–9th centuries and is a direct borrowing from the pagan fire festivals. Quarter days were a particularly dangerous time to give kindling away, as this constituted a loss of the vital force and a broaching of boundaries. The countless examples of sunwise movement still observed in the Highlands is another remnant of sun worship.

As we have seen (in III.3.b.), the sun's movement also gives the notional

orientation of the person in Gaelic, facing east with the south to the right, the autumn of death in the west and the cold of night, hell and the sinister to the left. Perhaps in recognition of this pagan orientation, some Christian graves at Ardnagross in Westmeath face west (towards Tír nan Óg)<sup>69</sup> rather than east in expectation of the Second Coming. But perhaps they are the graves of the clergy whom it is still conventional to bury facing their flocks. The grave of St Fillan in the graveyard at Killilan, Kintail, is aligned north-south, which is hard to explain unless it is simply for identification.<sup>70</sup>



Grave of St Fillan, Killilan, Wester Ross.  
Photo © Meg Bateman

#### THE ASSIMILATION OF PAGAN GODS AS SAINTS

The goddess Brigid became a saint of the same name and there is evidence for the pagan god Lugh becoming Sts Martin, Maol Ruibhe and Michael. By 'becoming', we mean that they structurally occupied the symbolism and rituals associated with those gods. Healing wells commemorating saints are likely to have formerly been part of a pagan water cult. The well and chapel at Kilbride described above is a likely site for this sort of exchange. In the Foreword, we discussed how the Gaelic name for the oystercatcher, *gille-Brighde* 'the servant of Brigid', preserves a particular way of seeing thousands of years old, the white chevrons on the edge of its wings linking the bird in pagan times to the goddess – if the archaeologist Marija Gimbutas is right.

Máire MacNeill's *The Festival of Lughnasa* (1962) identified the rituals common to the seasonal festival in honour of Lugh, a god of light, order and craftsmanship. These include bull sacrifice, the ascent of a hill, the building of towers, bonfires, fighting and sexual licence. We see bull sacrifice, bonfires, fighting and sexual licence observed on the feast day of Maol Ruibhe, which some sources give as 27th August, not so far from 1st August. We have quoted the Presbytery of Dingwall's

69. Barbara Percival, 'From Paganism to Christianity', 25: <[www.academia.edu/448782/From\\_Paganism\\_to\\_Christianity](http://www.academia.edu/448782/From_Paganism_to_Christianity)> – accessed 21 May 2015.

70. See 'St Fillan and the white snake', told by Duncan Matheson 'Stalker', in Bruford and MacDonald, *Scottish Traditional Tales* (Edinburgh, 1994), 290; and <[canmore.org.uk/site/12026/killilan-st-fillans-church](http://canmore.org.uk/site/12026/killilan-st-fillans-church)> – accessed 8 February 2019.

disgust at a bull sacrifice taking place as late as 1695 by one Hector MacKenzie in the hope of obtaining a cure for his wife from the god Mourie. If it is true that rituals in honour of the saint took over rituals honouring Lugh, it may be the case that the strikingly shaped hill *Slioch*, beside Loch Maree (Loch Maol Ruibhe) in Wester Ross, was the site of ritual ascent to observe the sun's rising or setting, in honour of the sun god.<sup>71</sup>

The sacrifice of a bull or some other totem animal was an attempt to join human society to the regenerative natural force. When the animal was consumed, the whole tribe ingested or participated in the mysterious dynamic of life, as the pig bones at High Pasture Cave testify. In Christian times, we see this practice persist in the sacrifice and consumption of cattle at the feasts of St Martin in addition to Maol Rubha. Contrary to Máire MacNeill's explanation above, F. Marian McNeill associates the cult of Maol Ruibhe with the moon god Ra. As the old moon is followed by the new moon, so do horned animals come to symbolise the crescent moon and rebirth. St Martin in some ways becomes one with the bull sacrificed and eaten by the tribe in his honour, in an act of propitiation and, more importantly, of participation with the divine. The horned Celtic god Cernunnos and the Dagda with his cauldron are clear personifications of the generative principle, the horns adding to the former's later identification with the devil.

St Michael was the patron saint of the culdees, chosen by their founder St Maelruan of Tallaght, and was seen as a protector of people at sea. Alexander Carmichael calls Michael 'the Neptune of the Gael'. There are many dedications to St Michael all down the Western seaboard – in North and South Uist, in Eriskay and Bute, and at those other places of retreat, Mont St Michel and Skellig Michael. The mysterious penile Riasg Buidhe stone, now at Colonsay House, was found at Kiloran, Colonsay, an early medieval graveyard and chapel, where a Christian Viking ship burial contained, among other grave goods, a pair of scales, the emblem of St Michael.<sup>72</sup> St Michael is often depicted as an armed warrior who will protect the righteous from the Antichrist at the hour of their death (Revelations 12:7–9). Could the Riasg Buidhe figure be St Michael with his shield or scales represented by the spirals on the chest and his connections with the sea recalled in his fish tail?

In Scotland, the harvest festival of Lughnasa (1st August) moved to St Michael's day (30th September) and, with it, many of the attributes of the pagan god Lugh became associated with the saint, giving an excellent example of Christian and pagan interplay.<sup>73</sup> Both are warriors and are pictured with weapons, with which Lugh kills Balar (whose fading eye is seen in the equinoctial sun) and with which

71. Philip Coppens, *Land of the Gods* (Amsterdam, 2007).

72. <<http://www.colonsaychurches.org/text/The%20Saints.htm>>.

73. Anne Ross, *Folklore of the Scottish Highlands* (Stroud, 2000), 139.



Michael will kill the Antichrist. While, according to Caesar, Lugh acted as a guide to the Celts on the Continent, Michael is a guide to those at sea and on their path to paradise; both are gods or patrons of fertility and both their festivals celebrate the horse. Perhaps there is an echo between the clear form of the penis on the Riasg Buidhe stone and the cult of picking carrots by women and girls for the celebration of Michaelmas, marking the harvest and fertility. Many of these traditions are found in the prayer 'Micheal nam buadh' in *Carmina Gadelica*, in which Michael protects, guides, rides a white horse and is even addressed as a god, *brian*.<sup>74</sup> Martin Martin reports that cavalcades were part of the celebration of Martinmas, and Carmichael reports that the carrots were exchanged with sayings such as *piseach dha mo bhroinn* 'progeny for my womb', and that at the cavalcades or *odannan*, men and women raced bareback using dried seaweed as a whip, again recalling the sea.

Not only were some of the pagan gods euhemerised as saints, it seems probable that the Celtic cult of calling on immanent gods gave rise to the Christian cult of the saints. It was in 317 that Eusebius is reported as exhorting Christians to 'do for their martyrs what the pagans did for their heroes and demi-gods – honour them, pray to them and make vows to them.'<sup>75</sup> The common association of Celtic saints with animals (for example St Brigid with cows, St Colum Cille with a white mare and a crane, St Caoimhín with a blackbird and St Gall with a bear) may be derived from a pagan cosmic piety in which all of nature was seen as animate and as partaking in the divine. (However, the man, lion, ox and eagle associated with the four Evangelists have quite a different provenance, being based on the 'living creatures' round God's throne in Revelations 4:7.)



John Duncan, *St Columba Bidding Farewell to the White Horse* (1925). Public domain

#### ACCOMMODATION OF PRACTICE: THE ANIMATE FORCES OF GROWTH AND DECAY IN THE EARTH

Pre-Celtic standing stones, often standing beside a well, are probably symbols of the phallus and the generative force. Their sacral significance

74. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* 1 (Edinburgh, 1900), 198–211; faic Dwelly, s.v. *brian* (5).

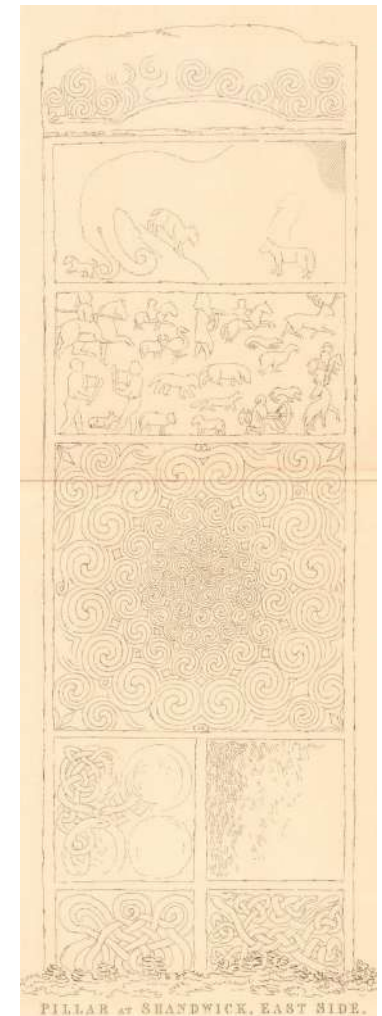
75. F. Marian McNeill, *The Silver Bough: Scottish Folklore and Folk-Belief* (Glasgow, 1957), 50.

was maintained by the pagan and Christian Gaels when they became sites of inauguration like *Lia Fáil* or the Stone of Scone, *gruagach* stones where libations of milk were given to the fairies in an act of respect to the earth and the ancestors, and fertility and healing stones, often kept in churches and graveyards. An ailing child, for example, would be passed through a hole in the stone known as *Gàrradh Tholl* in Brahan Wood near Dingwall.<sup>76</sup> We should probably look on the great standing crosses as a Christianisation of standing stones, their power coming from the godhead rather than the earth.

The transferability of symbols must be partly responsible for the relative ease of the transition from paganism to Christianity. The spirals and triskeles of pre-Celtic and pagan art, probably representative of the sun's movement, that appear for example on the megalith at Newgrange or the Westray and Eday Stones from Orkney, later adorn Christian art, for example at Shandwick, Easter Ross. Salmon, serpents and nuts were probably pagan symbols of regeneration and virility and survive as Christian symbols of the same. The pagan symbols of the detachable soul, the bird in flight and the moth emerging from the chrysalis, are seen in the Book of Kells, the association of the bird with the soul giving rise to certain taboos against killing swans for fear of killing the ancestors.

The rituals associated with harnessing propitiousness and saining from injury in a world of animate forces is the overriding concern of much traditional practice. We have discussed the sunwise movement round wells, harbours, graveyards etc. and the significance attached to the new moon, the commonest of all Pictish symbols, at the sight of which people turned a penny for luck, *peighinn pisich*. In Christian times, the belief in animate forces continued which were

Spirals on the back of the cross at Shandwick, Easter Ross (c. 800). *Archaeologia Scotica* IV (1857)



76. McNeill, *The Silver Bough*, 90.

petitioned alongside the persons of the Trinity and the saints. Misfortune in health, battle and lifespan were hard to account for. In the face of the fickleness of nature, people felt empowered by a belief in reading signs, seeing patterns in numbers and observing ritual and calendrical superstitions which might be *rathadach* or *rosadach*, i.e. indicative of good or ill fortune.

#### INAUGURATION, OATHS AND CHARMS

In inauguration rites, oath taking and charms we have a clear indication of the survival of pagan ideas of harnessing the propitiousness of the earth. *Banais rige* 'a king's wedding' is the term for inauguration used in the Annals of Connacht in 1310 and well reflects the contractual relationship between human society and the land involved in ruling. We have seen how inaugurations were carried out into medieval times on mounds – at Dunadd or Scone, for example – in the presence of the ancestors and at the *axis mundi* of the tribe. The supposed Stone of Destiny which lay below Elizabeth II's throne when she was crowned in 1953 still symbolises the same as it (or another stone of the same name) did to Fergus mac Erc – a mutual accord between the monarch and the land going back to Clann Mhíl in Ireland. Its symbolism was potent enough to make Edward I steal it in 1296 and for Scotland to petition successfully for its return in 1996.

Throughout this study, we have noted how almost any part of the earth is a manifestation of a life force, and so we find rivers, stones (as with the Stone of Scone above), plants and animals vested with sacred significance, a form of synecdoche where the part represents the whole. Many babies died unnecessarily in St Kilda as the rite continued of rubbing the newly cut umbilicus with soil from the hearth, and soil was often a baby's first food. A similar combination of the power of the earth and supernatural Christian power accounts for the sanctity of St Fillan's stones in Killin and the Black Stones in Iona used for swearing oaths. Lord Napier describes the township clerks of recent times taking their oath standing on the soil with bare feet, and it was on bare feet that people traditionally observed pattern days in their circumambulation of holy wells:

The crofter having been appointed Constable takes off his shoes and stockings. Uncovering his head, he bows reverently low, and promises in presence of heaven and earth, in presence of God and men – *Am fianais ùir agus adhair, am fianais Dè agus daoine* – that he will be faithful to his trust. In some places the elected Constable takes up a handful of earth instead of uncovering his feet.<sup>77</sup>

If the force of life can be identified and harnessed, it can protect against the

77. Napier, *Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the Condition of the Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands and Island of Scotland* Vol. V (Edinburgh, 1884), 214.

powers of death and decay. Dòmhnall Gorm's nurse evokes natural powers as well as Christ to protect her erstwhile charge:

Gu robh neart na cruinne leat,  
neart na tairbhe as àirde leumas ...  
neart na stoirm 's na toirmghaoith reubaich,  
neart nan dùl is chlanna-speura ...  
gach aon dhiubh siud is neart mhic Dhè.

*May the might of the universe be with you,  
the might of the bull which leaps highest ...  
the might of the storm and rending cyclones,  
the might of the elements and heavenly hosts ...  
all of those things and the might of God's Son.*<sup>78</sup>

Many plants, harnessing the power of the earth, are used in rituals of saining, divination and the protection of beasts and people. *Carmina Gadelica* gives instances of their being harvested in the name of Christian saints, while others, such as the dandelion, plantain and pearlwort, carry the names of saints: *beàrnan Brighde, cuach Phàdraig* and *torrannan* (named for St Taran). The Christian sites of Kildare, Darrow, Moville and Derry, in Ireland, and of Iona, Coshieville beside Fortingall, and Tomnahurich, by their names alone give evidence that they were sited at places known for their sacred trees. There is a strong link between pagan and Christian tree lore when St Serf threw his staff across the Forth and it became an apple tree, the ambrosial food of both the Otherworld and Eden – St Serf founded his church at Culross.<sup>79</sup>

#### THE EVIL EYE, SAINING AND BOUNDARIES

The simple statement *laigh sùil air* 'an [evil] eye fell on it' was given as an explanation for any failure to thrive. It was believed possible to draw milk from another's cow by pulling a tether rope or 'milking' the pot-chain and to hurt people and stock remotely by a look with the evil eye or by use of a *corp crèadha*. Fear of being a channel for the evil eye led to an aversion about asking about numbers of stock or children and, if a child were praised, the speaker would simultaneously assert disinterest with *cha laigh mo shùil ort ach 's tu tha fàs mòr* 'I won't lay an eye on you but how big you're getting'. If a stranger stepped over

78. 'Tàladh Dhòmhnail Ghuirn', in Anne Lorne Gillies, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2006), 12–13.

79. The place-names Kildare, Darrow and Derry are derived from a word for the oak, Iona and Tomnahurich from a word for the yew, and Moville and Coshieville from the word *bile* 'sacred tree'. Arthur Bernard Cook, 'The European Sky-God', *Folklore* 18, No. 1 (1907), 33.

fishing equipment, he would retrace his steps to be seen to undo any malice he might have wished on the owners at sea.<sup>80</sup> It was said that envy could split stones, *gun sgoilteadh am farmad na clachan glasa*. A story to this effect is recounted by the Rev. Iain MacRuairidh of Snizort in Skye about a man who countered a neighbour's praise of his ploughing with self-deprecation and who was able to observe the strength of the neighbour's concealed ill wishes in the stone that lay split in the furrow.<sup>81</sup> A recent instance of belief in the evil eye was given by the vet Donald John MacLennan at Old Corrie in Skye with respect to a crofter in the north of the island, who maintained it had caused the injury of his cow.<sup>82</sup> The following is an example of a written charm worn to protect the wearer from the baleful effects of another's envy:

Air an t-sùil bhig  
agus air an t-sùil mhòir,  
air a' chridhe a chì 's nach beannaich.

*Upon the little eye / and upon the big eye / upon the heart  
which sees and blesses not.*<sup>83</sup>

The opposite, propitiousness, could also be directed through the eye, as is seen in a prayer in *Carmina Gadelica*: 'Beannaicheadh mo shùil na chì' (Let my face bless what it sees).<sup>84</sup>

Favourable forces could be transmitted through contact or by metonymy. In this way, water was efficacious in saining which retained the virtues of the sun through being boiled on a need-fire, or in which a coin or sacred stone had been submerged. We have several accounts of stones being rubbed on people and cattle to protect them from disease and the evil eye. Examples are the stone fonts mentioned

*Corp crèadha*, lit. 'clay body' or voodoo doll from Inverness-shire. © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford



80. The Rev. Archibald McDonald, 'Religion and Mythology of the Celts', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* XIX (1893–1894) 46.

81. The Rev. John MacRury, 'Briathran nan Daoine 'dh' fhalbh', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* XX (1894–1896), 141–51, esp. 147–48.

82. D. J. MacLennan, 'Transcript of a talk ... given 25.2.97', in *Comunn Eachdraidh Ealaghol agus na Torran Newsletter* 1 (Autumn 1999), 5th page of transcript.

83. Ronald Black, "'The Nine': A Scottish Gaelic charm in the North Carolina State Archives", *The North Carolina Historical Review* LXXXIV, Number 1 (January 2007).

84. A. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* 3 (Edinburgh, 1976), 266–67.



*Teampall Mholuaidh*, Moluag's Church (13th c.), Eoropie, Lewis. Zenit / CC BY-SA

by Carmichael of the early churches (probably of St Barr) in Pabbay and St Mary on Berneray, off Barra.<sup>85</sup> Such stones which originally held prophylactic powers from the earth now possessed them through their association with a saint.

Likewise, 'cloutie trees', like the one at Munloch in the Black Isle, transmitted first the power of the sacred well beside which they grew to which was added the spiritual power of a saint, in this case Curetan or Boniface. The 'clouts' hanging off such trees belong to the sick and show a form of metonymy by which people can be healed when something belonging to them comes into contact with a potent source of healing. The same was observed by Captain John Dymes, who visited Lewis in 1630. He reports that many people were brought to St Moluag's church, Teampall Mholuaidh, in Eoropie, Ness, in the hope of healing, and that those who could not reach the church 'were wont to cut out the portion of their lame arms or legs in wood with the form of their sores and wounds thereof and send them to the saint where I have seen them lying on the altar of the chapel.'<sup>86</sup>

Saining often took the form of drawing boundaries, very often circular in form. These might be demarcated by words (as in the loricae discussed at II.3.a.), urine which combined the forces of water, salt and the colour yellow, or by threads which could be red or blue, and knotted for particular intensity and perhaps include a piece of rowan, also a potent force of life because of the red

85. Ben Buxton, *Mingulay: An Island and its People* (Edinburgh, 1997), 242–43.

86. Captain John Dymes, *Description of Lewis* (1630), published in W. C. Mackenzie, *History of the Outer Hebrides* (London, 1903), 592.



of the berries. Left-over food or water thrown out of the house between sunset and sunrise would leave a person open to misfortune because they broached the boundary. It was the broaching of the boundary between old and new meal (by returning the left-overs to the meal chest) that allowed the fairies to hold a girl captive in a fairy knoll in a tale told by Pàdruig Moireasdan (see in VI.1.b.).

**SYNCRETISM: HEAVEN ON EARTH, UNIVERSALISM AND THE IMMANENCE OF GOD**  
Pagan belief is seen merging with and changing Christian belief. Pagan thought persists into Christian times in the placing of Tìr nan Òg, and therefore heaven, on an island in the west. The description in the *imrrama* of Enoch and Elijah and the successfully shriven being ‘alive until Doom’ is an interesting and logical consequence of pagan and Christian interplay. Death may be the wages of sin, but if the penitent fulfil their penance on earth, they too, like the inhabitants of the Otherworld that exists outside the temporal world, will remain alive until Doom.

We get a little information from Classical writers about the beliefs of the pagan Celts from whom we can trace a belief in the sky being upheld by a column. Strabo in his Geography says they believed in the immortality of the earth and of the soul, and that the only thing they feared was the sky falling on their heads.<sup>87</sup> This fear has recently been attributed to the impact of a meteor sometime between 465 and 200 BC which caused the crater of the Chiemsee in Bavaria.<sup>88</sup> Gaidoz suggested that a gloss in the *Liber Hymnorum*, ‘amal bíte da cholba i n-domun, sic Brigid ocus Patraicc i n-hErenn’ (thus were the two columns of the world, that is Brigid and Patrick), can be linked to the pagan belief in the world being upheld on columns and the sky being upheld by the tree of life.<sup>89</sup> The author of ‘Altus Prosator’, perhaps St Columba, speaks of the globe ‘held up by the strong hand of almighty God’.<sup>90</sup> The ubiquitous tree imagery of Gaelic poetry and a Fenian tale echo the image of support for the sky:

Dh’èirich Ridire Chlaidhimh sin, agus thuir e gun dèanadh an talamh lag na bhonn ’s an t-adhar nead na cheann, ’s nach bu cheum tillidh dha ’gus am faigh mi èirig Fhinn’.

*Then the Knight of the Sword stood and said that the earth would make a hollow in the sole of his foot and the sky a nest in the crown of his head*

87. Strabon, VII.3, 8. Perhaps his informant was playing with Strabo’s credulity.

88. <<http://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=2146413288>>.

89. Henri Gaidoz, ‘La cosmologie celtique’, *ZCP* 1 (1897), 27–28.

90. Clancy and Márkus, *Iona, The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* (Edinburgh, 1994), 48–49.

*before his footsteps would return, ‘Until I revenge Fionn’s injury.’<sup>91</sup>*

We have discussed the druidical belief in reincarnation in the context of shape-shifting (II.1.b.) and circular time (V.3.). We see a much later accommodation of reincarnation and circular time by ministers such as Robert Kirk and Iain MacRuairidh. Kirk, writing in 1692, is in complete agreement with the druids in understanding the immortality of the dead to be a direct consequence of the circular motion of all things which are ‘renewed and refreshed’ in their revolutions.<sup>92</sup>

It is possible that some belief in reincarnation is to be seen in the request of the poet Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn (d. 1560) that he should be buried in Cille Choirill (in Glen Roy), face down in the hide of the last stag he shot, looking south towards Loch Trèig. His directions to his daughter have been recorded in folklore:

‘Agus seo agad m’ iarratas,’ thuir e. ‘Sin agad an damh mu dheireadh a thilgeas mise. Agus ’s e seo e. Feannaibh e agus cuiribh an t-seiche aige air dòigh agus thèid mo thìodhlaiceadh an seichidh an daimh sin ann an Cille Choirill. Is na cuiribh air mo dhruim idir mi. Ach cuiridh mi m’ aghaidh air Loch Trèig is air na monaidhean air a bheil m’ inntinn a’ siubhal a h-uile latha.’<sup>93</sup>

There is a doctrinal difference between paganism and Christianity in the place accorded to the individual. In Christianity, the stress is on the individual: the good shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep to look for the hundredth and ‘the very hairs of your head are all numbered’. There is much made of the differences between people, and Jesus has come, not to bring peace, but to set the sword between father and son.<sup>94</sup> He says a place is prepared only for some of us in His Father’s mansions (John 14:2). Paganism, by contrast, stressed the interconnection of all things – apparent in shape-shifting and the transmigration of souls. In the social order too, it could be argued from the Early Irish law tracts of the 7th–8th centuries that the tribe rather than the individual was the basic unit, the tribe paying or being compensated for the individual’s conduct and the individual’s status varying according to his position in the tribe.<sup>95</sup> In the Christian theology of the anonymous author of the 9th-century ‘In Tenga Bithnua’ and of

91. J. G. Campbell, *Wives and Strays of Celtic Tradition* Vol. IV, 243 and 251.

92. Robert Kirk, *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* (completed 1691, 1st pub. 1815; Dover, USA, 2008), 52.

93. <<http://calumimaclean.blogspot.co.uk/2013/09/hunter-bard-donald-mackinlay-of-lays.html>>.

94. Matthew 18: 12, 10: 30 and 35.

95. Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin, 1988).

John Scotus Eriugena, the pagan commonality is maintained in the doctrine of *apokatastasis* or universalism, by which the whole world is to be saved, not just the righteous. A pagan belief in circular time and the sacredness of the world appears to have influenced the thinking of two 9th-century Irish theologians as to who and what is to be saved.

The surviving monastic poetry of monks who left the hubbub of monasteries to live in the wilderness speaks of awe at the wonder of Creation. It is probably a reflex of the respect accorded to nature by the pagans and their sense of the land having a presiding presence which led to the development of a sense of the immanence of God and the saints in Gaelic Christianity. God's 'hawk-perching hand' makes a good example of His immanence, preserved in a verse by a Norse-speaking Hebridean helmsman in the Vinland Saga:

I pray the blameless monk-prover,  
Our Father, my journey to further;  
Heaven's lord, may he bless and let hover  
His hawk-perching hand over my head.<sup>96</sup>

It may have been the recent pagan intellectual background of Ireland that led John Scotus Eriugena to be drawn to translate the work of the Christian neo-Platonist, Dionysius the Pseudo Areopagite, whose work, in construing the physical world as part of the emanation of God, allowed matter to incorporate a spiritual element (see VI.2.).

#### DEMONISATION OF THE FAIRIES AND SURVIVING PAGAN PRACTICE

It was seen in the section on the Otherworld that the Church demonised the fairies – the euhemerised pagan gods and the living dead – as the Fallen or Neutral Angels and spoke of their envy of humanity in their desire for a soul to let them regain entrance to heaven (see VI.1.b.). They were thus triply demonised: as gods in a system which only permitted one God; as revenants who should no longer have been wandering the earth; and as the angels who sided with Lucifer and who exemplified envy, one of the seven deadly sins. Kirk describes their ability to take the goodness out of milk:

What food they extract from us is conveyed to their Homes by secret paths, as some skilful women do the Pith and Milk from their Neighbours' Cows into their own Chief-holde through a Hair-tedder, as a great Distance by Airth Magic, or by drawing a Spicket fastened to a post, which will bring Milk as far as a Bull is heard to roar.<sup>97</sup>

96. A. Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men* (Edinburgh, 1984), 173.

97. From Kirk, *The Secret Commonwealth*, quoted in McNeill, *The Silver Bough* I, 106.

In the medieval Irish tale 'Táin Bó Fraích', Ailill and Medb's house is placed at Cuachan (Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon) beside a famous entry to the Otherworld, Uamh na gCat (the cave of cats). The symbolism is clear: the king and queen's house represents human order while the Otherworld represents the chaos of nature. This cave was associated in other tales with warrior initiation rites and prophecy but in 'Cath Maige Mucrama' it is referred to as *dorus Iffrenn na hÉrend* 'Ireland's door to hell'.<sup>98</sup> What was a place of earthly spiritual powers has become a demonic place in the Christian context. Similarly, in the Isle of Skye, some believed that the Piper's Cave at Harlosh, the Cave of Gold at Dubaig and MacCoitir's Cave near Portree were connected with each other and ultimately with hell. Their interconnection is demonstrated by the MacCrimmon Piper and his dog entering the cave at Harlosh and his dog running out, hairless, from the cave at Dubaig.<sup>99</sup>



MacCoitir's Cave, high up on second bluff. Photo © Meg Bateman

98. John Waddell, *Archaeology and Myth: An Exploration* (The Rhind Lectures, 2014, for the Society of Antiquaries, Edinburgh), available on YouTube: lecture 3 'In Pursuit of the Otherworld'.

99. Otta Swire, *Skye: The Island and Its Legends* (London and Glasgow, 1961) 167–68.

The demonisation of surviving pagan practice, particularly by the Protestant church, is part of pagan and Christian interplay. Christianity, which makes a clear demarcation between the physical and the spiritual, could countenance neither the animism attributed to the physical world by the pagans nor a spiritual realm on earth inhabited by the dead and other spirits. Seers were also problematic because only God can know what is yet to come. Any honouring of the earth was seen as the worship of false idols which is against the Second Commandment. As one of the seven deadly sins is lust, the celebration of nature's powers of regeneration in the sexual freedom of seasonal festivals was reinterpreted as gratuitous licentiousness, the very thing that had caused Adam's downfall.

Following Pope Innocent's decree against witches in 1484, the remnants of paganism came to be associated with the medieval witch cult, which itself was a mixture of paganism and a parody of Christianity with a fascination for the forbidden. The earth goddess in her form as a hag, personifying unruly nature, is confused with the harmful medieval witch. A tale collected by Calum MacLean relates that Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn (whose burial in a stag's hide is mentioned above) was granted the gift of bearing no smell by the hag of Ben Breck, *Cailleach Bhò a' Bheinne Bhrìc* (sic), in return for his not taking her white hind.<sup>100</sup> She is described as a witch, *bana-bhuidseach*, but her living in the wilderness and her herding of the deer in place of cattle make her conform to the type of the goddess. The animals which had represented the sacred quality of the earth also became demonised as the familiars of witches such as Gormshuil of Moy, Doideag of Mull and Cas a' Mhogain Riabhaich of Glencoe.<sup>101</sup> Witches were seen going widdershins, the smoke from their chimneys blowing against the wind and their practices causing drownings and defeat in battle. A concern with the black arts was internalised in the Gaelic tradition as *an sgoil dubh*. Ancestor worship was reinterpreted by the Church as necromancy and the quarter days that had celebrated the fertility of the earth and the movement of the sun were termed witches' Sabbaths.

#### REVISIONISM: THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT AND MODERN 'CELTIC CHRISTIANITY'

Many modern writers and artists make it their business to reconstruct what they see as a pagan world view in which neither the world nor man is degenerate; indeed nature is given a spiritual dimension and honoured as an integral whole. Some, like Iain Crichton Smith, Aonghas MacNeacail and Norman Shaw, were themselves brought up in the Free Church. Aonghas MacNeacail in 'chunnaic

100. <<http://calumimaclean.blogspot.co.uk/2013/09/hunter-bard-donald-mackinlay-of-lays.html>>.

101. McNeill, *The Silver Bough* I, 150.

mi am measg nan ubhal thu' (i saw you in a garden of apples) contrasts his view of his mother as a nurturer and a tender of apple trees with the Church's view of her as a sinner thrice condemned – by Original Sin, by being a woman and therefore a temptress like Eve at the apple tree, and by not being one of the Elect through a personal encounter with Christ. The artist Norman Shaw (pp. 58, 857, 859) in his interest in Ossian and his 'resoundings', reanimates nature (as it was when represented by fairies or goddesses), giving it thousands of voices and echoes. Far from the world having fallen, Iain Crichton Smith makes a plea for even the rubbish of this world being seen as holy and the stuff of art.<sup>102</sup>

Whether the earth is seen as animate or inanimate has enormous implications for the environment. It is not by coincidence that the industrial revolution started in the Christian, and particularly Protestant, parts of the world, where the possibility of power as the knowledge of nature was first formulated by Francis Bacon. The arguments are often rehearsed: in the Christian context, Adam had been given *carte blanche* by God to utilise the earth for his needs and, with the Christian contempt for the physical and condemnation of any gods but Jahweh, the physical environment came to be regarded as man's storehouse of resources rather than an integral being in itself.<sup>103</sup>

We should see the environmental movement and modern Celtic Christianity partly as revisionism and partly as a product of pagan and Christian interplay, as conventional Christians, feeling uncomfortable with the lack of spirituality accorded to the earth, seek to find it in a different Christian tradition. The Irish theologian Noel O' Donoghue has written, 'Just as Christianity became wedded to *logos* in Hellenism, and to authority and law in Romanism, it became wedded to nature and the natural world, in all its various levels and regions, in the Celtic world view'.<sup>104</sup> It is proposed that the empathy for nature among the Gaelic saints has its roots in the teachings of the druids, and in particular in their teachings of reincarnation. We have already discussed in this study how Christianity in the Gaelic world differentiated itself (as it did all over the Christian world) by taking on some aspects of the indigenous culture with which it had contact: in this case, a particular set of attitudes to nature formed by the pagan view of sacral kingship by which the physical world was the sentient consort of the king. Nature could not lose her sentience overnight to the Manichaean view of the evil of matter.

102. See Aonghas MacNeacail, *laoidh an donais òig* (Edinburgh, 2007); Murdo Macdonald, Lesley Lindsay, Lorna Waite and Meg Bateman, *Sealladh às Ùr air Ealain na Gàidhealtachd/Rethinking Highland Art* (2013); and 'An Guth' (The Voice) in Mac a' Ghobhainn, *Na Guthan* (Glasgow, 1990).

103. Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature* (New York, 1989 and 1998).

104. Noel O'Donoghue, *The Mountain behind the Mountain* (Edinburgh, 1993), 15.



There is a debate (discussed in V.3.) about whether pagan lore, for example in *Acallamh na Senórach* or *Buile Shuibne*, was preserved by monks merely as a vehicle for introducing Christian ideas or on its own merit.<sup>105</sup> We find monks again preserving pagan (and Christian) learning during the Penal Times in Ireland, when they took MSS for safekeeping to Louvain and Antwerp, often at considerable risk to their persons. An interest in syncretism would not be exceptional when we think of the sustained interest throughout the Middle Ages in hermeticism. What is undebatable is that there is a stream of world-affirming texts – this is not to deny that they survive alongside much that is world denying – which preserve an older formulation of man's relation to nature which was not suggested again until James Lovelock proposed the Gaia Theory in the 20th century. The pagans saw a figure of nature, sometimes resentful, sometimes pleased at being man's consort; Lovelock, a biochemist and environmentalist, saw the integrity of systems working in nature which self-regulate, like an organism, to maintain equilibrium.

The immanence of God in Creation and the interpenetration of the spirit and the material in the world-view of early Gaelic Christianity under the influence of paganism is constantly surprising to a Christianity formulated by Augustine's Platonic ideas with its strict separation of spirit and matter. Modern revisionist 'Celtic Christianity' has tried to redress the fear of and disdain for the physical with early texts in which the beauty of the created world was at least as strong an instigation to holiness as the fear of the sensuality it might inspire. While, for Augustine, the world allows the 'lust of the eyes' to distract the soul from God, for Gaelic poets the world could inspire holiness:

Go ro bheannachainn an Coimdhe  
con-ig uile,  
neamh go muintir gráidh go ngloine,  
tír, tráigh, tuile.

*I would bless the Lord Almighty  
who maintains all:  
heaven with its pure, loving orders,  
land, shore and water.*<sup>106</sup>

105. Dr Ann Dooley, University of Toronto, would argue for the former, while John Carey in *King of Mysteries* (Dublin, 2000), 22, argues that the monks were 'both inward-looking and outward-looking' and had 'a faith that there is room in God's world for all in which we find value'.

106. See Allan Fitzgerald, ed., *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Cambridge, 1999), 260; 'Meallach Liam Bheith i n-Ucht Oiléin', in McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na Sraicaire* (Edinburgh, 2007), No. 15.

F. Marian McNeill ended her chapter on magic in *The Silver Bough* in 1957 with these words:

The magical attitude in human affairs appears to be an unconscionable time a-dying but if the human race is to progress, the substitution of a rational – and spiritual – attitude must become one of the major tasks of the post-war world.<sup>107</sup>

The 'magical attitude in human affairs' decried by McNeill expresses the animism which is such a distinctive part of Gaelic folklore and which persisted into Christian times, albeit encoded as ancestor, fairy and even devil lore. It speaks of a world where man participates in the physical alongside other creatures, where nature is conceived of in its entirety and where the living only hold a passing sway on the world.

#### SUMMARY

This section has looked at the accommodation of pagan beliefs into Christianity in the adoption of the great seasonal festivals as Christian festivals and the cults of many pagan gods becoming associated with Christian saints. (Indeed the very practice of beseeching saints may have started as a pagan practice of calling on immanent nature gods.) The pagan interest in harnessing the natural forces of growth and deflecting the natural forces of decay were picked up in various Christian charms and saining practices which often included the name of a saint along with a metonymic token of the earth. In addition to the accommodation of pagan practice and symbol, there is a degree of syncretism by which pagan attitudes are seen to shape the thinking of Christian theologians, particularly regarding the immanence of God and the doctrine of universalism by which the whole world is to be saved. The Church could tolerate belief in the fairies neither as the euhemerised pagan gods nor as the living dead and so they were demonised as the Fallen Angels. As such they embodied envy, and beliefs about them and the evil eye fell together. Revisionist readings of the pagan influence on early Gaelic Christianity relating to the environmental movement and to modern 'Celtic Christianity' find a precedent for respecting and celebrating nature very different from the Enlightenment model of inert matter following a set of physical laws. Fairy lore and the marriage of king and land at inauguration are still useful metaphors for man's and nature's reciprocal relationship, and for the degree of respect man should accord to nature if both are to survive. MB

107. F. Marian McNeill, *The Silver Bough* I, 99.

## VI.2. A CELTIC PHILOSOPHICAL THREAD?

[Introduction](#); [Pelagianism and Free Will](#); [Miracles and Rationality](#); [Pantheism and Metaphysics](#); [Spirit, Matter and Motion](#); [Things and Words](#); [Conclusion](#)

## INTRODUCTION

... there is no formal boundary between myth and reality, between this world and the Otherworld. Imbued with spiritual significance, it was to this extent a religious art. But it was equally essentially a social and political art, a medium through which identity could be asserted. In sum, Celtic art was fundamentally embedded in Celtic society, custom and belief.<sup>108</sup>

In thus concluding his *The Archaeology of Celtic Art*, Dennis Harding felt it necessary to assert what should be the most natural assumption with respect to any identifiable culture. We have mapped the word 'Celtic' in [V.2.a.](#); and the study of the visual in the Gaelic-speaking world throughout this book has been leading towards a consideration of what might be a Celtic mindset, a term used by Harding. Suggestions that there exists such a mindset (exemplified in 'corroboration', which is a fundamental aspect of Scottish law) have been made in [II.1.a.](#)

In this section, such questions are pursued in more overtly philosophical terms and it may be that the study of a potential Celtic philosophical thread will help clarify our vision, not least when expressed as visually as in the following:

To those who would prefer a religious sketch of our parish, I would explain that at first I had indeed thought to weave a sacred story from the few golden threads of religion, as I could unravel them from the rough web of profane history. But as all colours were in the loom of life – bright and dark, good and bad, joyful and sad – I thought it best to present the whole chequered pattern, as, under God's eye, it was woven.<sup>109</sup>

That quotation from the Rev. Donald Lamond's Preface to his account of his parish of Strath in the Isle of Skye was first published in 1913. If one is willing to dignify his pleasant metaphor with the word 'philosophy', what place might his view find in the history of thought amongst the Gaels in general? If God saw that His creation was 'very good', at least before the Fall, then might it not actually be so, given that 'the whole chequered pattern' was woven under God's eye? Lamond (1867–1942) uses a metaphor reaching out to a cosmic vision which includes the dark, the bad, the sorrowful and the profane, and in which the image

108. D. W. Harding, *The Archaeology of Celtic Art* (London, 2007), 274.

109. The Rev. D. Lamond, *Strath in Isle of Skye* (Glasgow, 1913; Portree 1984), iii.

goes beyond all the simplistic responses to tartan – the 'chequered pattern' – to a vision not unlike that of Eithne's dream (see [I.3.a.](#)), implying the possibility of beauty in the whole. Lamond's thoughts echo those of Plotinus and Eriugena, but what evidence do we have that theologians, philosophers and others who might have applied their minds to such matters in the Gàidhealtachd might represent some kind of continuity of ideas and with such deep roots?

Fundamental to such issues is the apparent dichotomy between faith and revelation on the one hand and reason on the other. Such debates benefit (or suffer) from the specialised vocabulary of much theological and philosophical language. Between philosophy and theology, the distinction itself is open to criticism. English and Latin are the languages in which such discussions are most frequently pursued by Gaelic speakers.

The philosophers and systematic theologians who actually spoke and/or studied Gaelic are not numerous but they are significant. They include Scotus Eriugena (c. 800–c. 877), George Buchanan (1506–1582), Robert Kirk (1644–1692), John Toland (1670–1722), Archibald Campbell (1691–1756), James Oswald (1703–1793), Adhamh MacFhearghuis (Adam Ferguson, 1723–1816), Alexander Geddes (1737–1802), Daniel Dewar (1788–1867), Donald Baillie (1887–1954) and John Baillie (1886–1960). Their published works are not in Gaelic, but they will have heard and, in some cases, have delivered many a sermon in Gaelic, and we should not presume that such sermons would have been devoid of theological and philosophical content. Nor should we assume that their congregations, whether literate or illiterate, were theological or philosophical innocents.

When the old school Rev. Murdo MacDonald preached to Rob Donn MacKay (1714–1778) in Gaelic on the impossibility of justification through works, Rob



Scotus Eriugena on an Irish £5 note

Donn, for all his profound respect for MacDonald, did not agree.<sup>110</sup> Rob Donn's was a broader church. From the late 17th and into the 18th centuries, the increasing influence of the deists could be said not just to have inspired, but also to have reflected a growing readiness to examine beliefs. Thus we find Toland converting from Roman Catholicism to Presbyterianism and ending up a Pantheist, and the great poet and son of a minister Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair (c. 1695–c. 1770) starting life as an Episcopalian, continuing as a Presbyterian and ending up as a Roman Catholic. The catechists (of whom Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair had been one) may have drummed the Calvinist Westminster Confession of 1646 into the heads of their parishioners, but clearly knowing and teaching something is not the same thing as believing in it or acting upon it, as evidenced by the moving confessions of Dugald Buchanan (1716–1768).

Pursuing these questions involves discussion of philosophy and philosophers outwith the world of the Gaels, as well as Gaels who did not speak the language, but it will return to the Gàidhealtachd itself and the Rev. Lamond. In the process, some of the basic concerns of this book's focus on the visual in Gaelic culture will be touched upon. Many of these have been addressed in previous sections discussing geography, imagery, social space, mapping the word 'Celtic', the Celtic Church, and so on. It is from these as a whole that this section is derived and it asks whether their implications might lead us to detect anything resembling a Celtic philosophical thread across the centuries.

One might initially suggest that any such thread would be of a radical hue, given the fate suffered by those such as Pelagius, Eriugena, Duns Scotus, Alexander Dickson and John Toland, never mind the mild opprobrium attached to others such as Archibald Campbell. Giordano Bruno had Dickson as his amanuensis and wrote of him as

that erudite, honest, affable, polite and faithful friend Alexander Dicsono, who proposes the subject of the debate, and whom the Nolan loves as his own eyes.<sup>111</sup>

Pelagius, Eriugena and Bruno were all described as heretics; Duns Scotus' name gave rise to the word 'dunce'; Dickson's work was vilified in print; Toland was banished both from his native Ireland and his domicile of England; and Bruno was burnt at the stake in Rome. Significant links between these philosophers are demonstrated below. All, with the exception of Bruno, came from an Insular background.

110. I. Grimble, *The World of Rob Donn* (Edinburgh, 1979), 41–42.

111. R. Blackwell and R. Lucca, eds, *Giordano Bruno Cause, Principle and Unity* (Cambridge, 1998), 20. Lucca alone is responsible for the translation and editing of *Cause, Principle and Unity*.

#### PELAGIANISM AND FREE WILL

Pelagianism and pantheism are amongst the accusations thrown at some of the above and are still regarded by orthodox Christians as heretical. Both terms have modified forms in Semi-Pelagianism and Panentheism. In opposition to Pelagianism, Semi-Pelagianism accepted the doctrine of Original Sin and the necessity for divine Grace, but acknowledged man's capacity to work towards his salvation. Pantheism (which is not to be confused with simple nature worship) is 'the doctrine that the world as a whole, nature in the widest sense, is identical with God'.<sup>112</sup> Panentheism proposes that the world is wholly dependent upon God and that all things are in God, though not wholly identifiable with God.

The first and most notorious of Celtic philosophers was Pelagius (c. 354–c. 418), who came from a disputed background perhaps best defined by the term Insular Celt. Bede described him as British<sup>113</sup> but Jerome described him as a Scot.<sup>114</sup> Pelagius denied Augustine's doctrine of Original Sin and did not accept the need for a special act of Grace, over and above God's ever-present Grace. Rather, Pelagius laid emphasis on the power of human will and asceticism and the value of women learning to read and interpret scripture.<sup>115</sup> His writings and influence were transmitted by Sedulius Scottus and others to the Celtic church, informing penitential practices such as peregrinatio pro Christo (III.1.b. and IV.2.e.).<sup>116</sup> Pelagius's views are still regarded as heretical in the Western Church. Recently, his significance has been given scholarly re-evaluation in Michael Herren and Shirley Ann Brown's *Christ in Celtic Christianity*. Their geographical focus is 'the Celtic areas of the British Isles', which they define as modern Wales, Cornwall and areas now in northern England, and Ireland 'with its extensions into Iona'.<sup>117</sup> Scotland as a whole and the Pictish Christian material therein, with its widespread iconographic significance, is not discussed. This is a pity, as it is highly relevant to the Pelagian iconoclasm to which they frequently draw attention, claiming of the Irish church that Pelagian iconoclasm was 'deeply rooted in its psyche'.<sup>118</sup> This is a claim which has to be balanced against the very

112. T. Mautner, ed., *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* (2000), 407.

113. J. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical* (1st pub. 1929; Dublin, 1997), 162–163.

114. Jerome, Prologue to the first book of *Commentary on Jeremiah*, c. 415, quoted in Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland*, 162.

115. T. De Bruyn, *Pelagius's Commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford, 1993), Introduction, esp. 23; M. Forthomme Nicholson, 'Celtic Theology: Pelagius', in J. Mackey, ed., *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh, 1989), 386–413.

116. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland*, 661–63.

117. M. Herren and S. Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity* (Woodbridge, 2002), 1.

118. Herren and Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity*, 206.



probable depictions of the Almighty and Christ in the Book of Kells, which George Henderson persuasively interprets within an apocalyptic context.<sup>119</sup>

That said, visually speaking, the vast majority of the cross slabs and free-standing crosses in Scotland is devoid of images of Christ. Their absence is so widespread and pervasive that suggestions that the evidence for depictions of Christ was all destroyed by Vikings or later post-Reformation iconoclasts are hard to sustain. These crosses (as we have seen in [IV.1.c.](#) and [V.2.b.](#)) have plenty of images of humans and of biblical figures, which strongly suggests that the concern was to avoid depicting the Deity in the form of Christ. Can we attribute this to an artistic, theological or even philosophical predilection with roots in Pelagianism? As we have seen ([II.1.a.](#)), George Bain attributed this iconoclasm to pagan laws, claiming that only the dead were depicted on Pictish stones, but (besides the images mentioned above) the Book of Kells also includes images of the temptation and arrest of Christ, so the Pelagian iconoclasm can hardly have been all-pervasive.

Certainly, in the religious Gaelic poetry recorded in the Book of the Dean of Lismore, the portraits of Christ and his mother Mary are as intimate as those of a lover, describing Christ with ‘grooved yellow hair’ as

Mac malachdhubh dóigheal donn

*A dark-browed, bright-handed Son*

twisting and curling Mary’s hair, with her fair pap in his palm, suckling her smooth white breast, and she kissing his soft foot and hand. Mary’s pregnancy is described in terms of animal beauty:

Do bhrú aníos ba lomlán leat,  
mar bhíos a bhronnlár ’san bhríoc,  
An Coimdhe ’s gan loighe lat,  
Mac Moire do-roighne riot.

*Your belly rises up full  
like the belly of the trout;  
Without ever lying with you  
the Lord made Mary’s Son.*

The immediacy of the imagery in no way displaces the mystery of Christ’s conception. Rather it echoes the imagery of the great illuminated gospels with their interactions between humans and creatures. Mary’s humanity is not diminished by comparison with a trout, but rather her beauty and her place in

119. G. Henderson, *From Durrow to Kells* (London, 1987), 157–59.

the whole natural world is extolled by the image. She is described as a golden apple tree new-grown, her hair luxuriant, rippling like grain in a field and her fecundity is as chaste as that of the fecundity of nature:

munab ionnraic do bhrú, a Bhean,  
ní headh cnú ar fionnshlait i bhfíodh.

*if your womb, Lady, is not chaste  
no nut on bright branch grows in the wood.*<sup>120</sup>

What might Duns Scotus have made of such an extraordinarily poetic theology? All Christians held to the concept of the virgin birth, but the controversial concept of the immaculate conception – that Mary herself was conceived without sin – was argued for strenuously by Duns Scotus. Was it, then, acceptable to think of her in such fleshly terms? The poem is contemporary with the philosopher. Might his own inheritance have included anything of this nature, or might he have justified it as being within a more classical Boethian tradition in which philosophy found a voice in poetry? Not only in Boethius, but also in Scotus Eriugena, poetry gives voice to mystery, here, once more, with respect to the Virgin birth:

O felix FACTEP, diuinam sustinet ignem:  
Virtutis radius solidatur COMATE sacro.

*O blessed belly, which sustains a flame divine.  
A miraculous ray is made solid in your flesh.*<sup>121</sup>

This emphasis on light emerging out of the darkness of the womb relates to the Celtic day beginning at dusk (see [I.2.a.](#)). Scotus Eriugena’s 9th-century focus is on Christ, but Marian sentiments similar to those from the 13th century are found in a poem by Maol Domhnaigh mac Mhaghnuis Mhuiligh (Maol Domhnaigh son of Magnus of Mull) from the early 16th century, again from the 16th-century Book of the Dean of Lismore. In this next example, Mary is seen as wholly kin to the poet and humanity in general and can therefore put an obligation on her Son and call upon His mercy, because that is how Gaelic society operated as reflected in the laws relating to kinship and obligation. Indeed, her power is such that she is almost set against her own Son, as though she had inherited the characteristics of a female divinity more powerful than that of the male and as though the old laws relating to mutual obligation should set aside the Christian law of Judgement and Doom:

120. Muireadhach Albanach Ó Dálaigh, ‘Éistidh Riomsa, a Mhuire Mhór’, in M. Bateman and W. McLeod, *Duanaire na Sracaire* (Edinburgh, 2007), 26–27.

121. M. Herren, ed. and trans., *Iohannis Scottis Eriugena Carmina* (Dublin, 1993), 88–89.

Ná léig ceart do chor fána anmain,  
 Abair nách cóir is cóir lat  
 Ó tá fearg Dhé ris gach duine,  
 Ná hearb mé, a Mhuire, réd Mhac.

*Do not let my soul be brought to justice,  
 say that in your opinion the law is not fair;  
 since every man evokes God's anger,  
 do not entrust me, Mary, to your Son.*<sup>122</sup>

She is described as 'the fortress of Eve's children against the anger of Jesus at Doom ... a woman who makes bold with God.' Another woman of whom it might be said 'she makes bold with God' is the poet Anna Nic Ealair. Composing around 1800, she describes Christ as though he were her lover:

'S ann a thug thu dhomh do ghaol  
 Fo dhubhar craobh an aiteil;  
 As comh-chomunn do rùin  
 Ann an gàradh nan ubhall.

*You gave me your love  
 in the juniper's shadow  
 and the company of your regard  
 in the garden of apples.*

She even has to call out *Cùm air do làmh a charaid* ('friend, stop your caresses').<sup>123</sup>

On the other hand, in his poem quoted above, Maol Domhnaigh mac Mhaghnuis Mhuiligh accepts the inherent sinfulness of mankind but seeks redemption from a human rather than a divine source. One senses here a mind frightened by and struggling against the concept of Original Sin. These kinds of impassioned appeals to the Virgin appear to have survived into modern times, there being many examples in Alexander Carmichael. But while they may seek an alternative route to redemption – through kinship rather than justice – they put little emphasis on human will as a part of the process.

However, Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism never wholly lost their hold on the minds of leading philosophers. Scottish philosophers such as Duns Scotus (c.1266–1308) and William Manderston (c.1485–1552) held similar views with respect to the significance and power of the human will as did the

122. Maol Domhnaigh mac Mhaghnuis Mhuiligh, 'Ná Léig mo Mhealladh, a Mhuire', in Bateman and McLeod, *Duanair na Sracaire*, 34–35.

123. 'Luinneag Anna Nic Ealair', in Bateman, Crawford and McGonigal, eds, *Scottish Religious Poetry* (Edinburgh, 2000), 152–53.

Pelagians, and Scotus was accused of Pelagianism.<sup>124</sup> It has been suggested that Duns Scotus studied in Benbecula at *Teampull na Trìonaid*, at Carinish. The evidence is, unfortunately, sketchy, referring to an inscription in an unspecified Bavarian church.<sup>125</sup> Even if verified, its significance would require a good deal of untangling, not least since Duns Scotus was twice buried, on the first occasion (according to Sir Francis Bacon) a catalepsis having been mistaken for death.<sup>126</sup> But the possibility of a connection with *Teampull na Trìonaid* is worth mention in the hope that others may follow it up. The question arises, in any event, as to what was the source of Duns Scotus's and Manderston's views on free will and Grace? Could they have arisen out of a residual predilection in the Celtic church, or in pre-Christian belief or in a tradition of religious bardic verse quoted above? Scotland in the late 13th century yet retained many aspects of the Celtic church, whether in its saints and the services (including literature and music) and feast days associated with them, as in the Inchcolm Antiphoner, and these observances were reinforced much later by James IV (see [V.2.b.](#)).

Alexander Broadie describes Duns Scotus as writing 'with energy and fire when love was the reality he was dealing with'.<sup>127</sup> He sees Scotus's influence throughout Scottish philosophy and across centuries and, on the same subject of the will, he proposes a connection between the philosophy of Duns Scotus and that of Thomas Reid (1710–1796).<sup>128</sup>

One might add Broadie himself as proof of his own thesis and, in proposing for Duns Scotus 'Faith as the space of philosophy', Broadie opens the doors of philosophy to a world beyond the cloisters of the professionals, a world in which the power of human will to enable love can find expression in forms which lead us beyond philosophy to that which it hopes to reach. Such an approach finds cogent expression in the Gaelic invocations for the company of God and the angels for protection through the night:

124. A. Broadie, 'William Manderston and Patrick Hamilton on Freewill and Grace', *Innes Review* XXXVII, No. 1 (Spring 1986), 30 and 32.

125. Sometime in the 1920s or 1930s, a Dr Norman MacDonald wrote the following in an article/chapter entitled 'Trinity Temple, Carinish, North Uist – Its abiding influence in the realms of culture and romance': 'A friend of mine, one of the most distinguished of our modern Celtic scholars, visited the Continent of Europe a few years ago, when, in an old church in Bavaria, he found the tomb of Duns Scotus, and there, written on the stone, he read that Duns Scotus received his education in Trinity Temple, Carinish.'

126. Sir Francis Bacon, *Historia Vitae et Mortis*, in *The Works of the Lord Bacon* Vol. II (London, 1730), 178.

127. A. Broadie, *The Shadow of Scotus* (Edinburgh, 1995), 7.

128. A. Broadie, 'The Scotist Thomas Reid', *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* LXXIV, 385–407.

Laighim sìos a-nochd,  
 Le Moire mhìn is le Mac,  
 Le Màthair mo Rìgh,  
 Tha gam dhìon o gach lochd.

Cha laigh mi leis an olc,  
 Cha laigh an t-olc leam,  
 Ach laighidh mi le Dia,  
 Is laighidh Dia leam.

Dia agus Moire agus Micheal caon,  
 Agus crois nan naodh aingeal fionn  
 Gam dhìon mar Thri is mar Aon,  
 Bho chlàr m' aodainn gu faobhar mo bhuinn.

*I am lying down tonight,  
 With Mary mild and with her Son,  
 With the Mother of my King,  
 Who is shielding me from harm.*

*I will not lie down with evil,  
 Nor shall evil lie down with me,  
 But I will lie down with God,  
 And God will lie down with me.*

*God and Mary and Michael kindly  
 And the cross of the nine angels fair,  
 Be shielding me as Three and as One,  
 From the brow of my face to the edge of my soles.<sup>129</sup>*

The reciprocal nature of love is central to this invocation, but it is not without its deeper religious symbolism. The proper for the Feast of St Michael refers to the nine orders of angels, we, humanity, being the tenth to replace the fallen angels. So in the poem St Michael is to be one of the guardians of the whole fragility of the human form when asleep, vulnerable from top to toe but protected by an alternative Trinity (God, Mary and Michael) which spans the gap between God and humanity – Michael, the archangel, one of whose orders in the form of Lucifer had sinned; and Mary, the human born without sin. The number three had long been a favourite in Celtic and pre-Celtic symbolism: multiplied by itself, it reaches into the heavenly orders. Whether these evocations were conscious or simply habitual, their significance cannot be gainsaid. Even  
 129. A. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* I (Edinburgh, 1900 and 1983), 88–89, with minor alterations. This is but one of many similar invocations collected in the 19th century, from Protestants as well as Catholics.

a theologian as orthodox as Daniel Dewar was ready to join Dr Johnson in allowing that ‘The poetry and *sceuldachs* [legends] of even those degenerate times’ had the ‘happy effect’ of advancing us ‘in the dignity of thinking beings’ and awakening curiosity, thereby preserving us from ‘total inactivity of mind’. Amusingly, he then concedes that

Viewed in this light, the quibbles of the schoolmen, and the trifling disputations of a Thomas, and a Scotus, have not been without their use.<sup>130</sup>

Returning to the more traditional representatives of philosophy while still engaging with the approachability of the Deity – for such is at least distantly implied by Pelagianism – what further evidences can we find amongst the Gaels for such leanings?

Archibald Campbell was charged with Pelagianism in 1735. His views were seen as opposing the Augustinian and Calvinist view that Divine Grace was absolutely essential to any form of Redemption as mankind was corrupt through Original Sin and by nature sought Evil.<sup>131</sup> Campbell’s defence was successful and it marks an early stage in the acceptance of a role for philosophical reasoning in theological debate.<sup>132</sup> His father was a Succoth Campbell from Cowal and Archibald was minister of Larbert and Dunipace joint parish from 1718–1731, some seven miles from the border between Gaelic and Scots speakers. McCosh has Campbell serving in what was then a Gaelic-speaking parish in Tarbert, Stirlingshire, close to Succoth itself.<sup>133</sup> It is possible he served there also.

Campbell maintained that ‘self-love is the natural motive for morally virtuous actions’. His distinction between different forms of self-love might well have had an influence upon David Hume’s similar position in Appendix II of the *Enquiry*.<sup>134</sup> For Campbell, the higher form of self-love is necessary even to God the Creator and, therefore, the Creator must love His creation, including

130. D. Dewar, *Observations on the Character, Customs, and Superstitions of the Irish* (London, 1812), 73–74.

131. C. Maurer, draft chapter, ‘Doctrinal Issues Concerning Human Nature and Self-Love and the Case of Archibald Campbell’s *Enquiry*’, *Intellectual History Review* 26.3 (2016), 359ff.

132. A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London, 1988), 245–47.

133. J. McCosh, *The Scottish Philosophy* (London, 1975, Hildesheim 1966), 89. Tarbert is in the civil administration of Dunbartonshire, but the parish was in Stirlingshire. For Gaelic/Scots boundary in 1746, see M. Newton, *Bho Chluaidh gu Calasraid* (Stornoway 1999), 6–7. However, Margaret Batty in the ODNB says he was ordained to the linked parishes of Larbert and Dunipace in 1718.

134. C. Maurer, ‘What can an Egoist say against an Egoist? On Archibald Campbell’s Criticisms of Bernard Mandeville’, *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 12.1. (2014), 1–18.



mankind. The underlying principle is Love. Does this mean that God is eternally present in the whole of the creation through Love? Potentially, it should, for it implies that the whole of creation, including humans, partakes of the Divine and, in that sense, and in our interactions with what is outwith ourselves, we have potential access to God, whose Grace can scarcely be less than equally pervasive. This certainly gives the impression of Pelagian influence, especially when Campbell states:

So that when a Man cooperates with those kind Intentions of the *Deity*, to render his Creatures happy, he cannot but recommend himself to the divine Acceptance, as one who savours his *Interest*, and therefore as a fit Object of his Beneficence, whom he cannot but reward from *Self love*.<sup>135</sup>

On this reasoning, God is impelled to reward virtue and this clearly circumvents the normal operations of divine Grace. However, if one attempts to link Campbell's thinking with the legacy of Duns Scotus, Campbell, with his optimistic view of human nature, offers no role for the will and only uses the word in a pejorative sense. Likewise, in the mind of the Gaelic-speaking theologian James Oswald, human will was unreliable and wayward<sup>136</sup> – wilful. In both cases, we are probably dealing with different interpretations of the meaning of will. Oswald attempted to cling to rationality, suggesting that no rational human could deny self-evident truths. His stance implies moral imperatives but he gives no rational basis for their assumption. The result is that his assault on the men of feeling (who attempted one way or another to incorporate human instinct at a more visceral level than that of rationality) fails on the very grounds upon which it is supposedly raised. He has been accused of a form of dualism and, if the accusation is fair, then he represents a very different philosophy from that espoused by most Gaelic-speaking thinkers.

#### MIRACLES AND RATIONALITY

Such issues as the explanation of miracles, the nature of Original Sin and the operation of Grace were of great interest to the educated Gaelic-speaking community. A number of significant Gaelic-speaking philosophers attempted to rationalise belief in Christianity by rationalising miracles. The earliest of these is Augustinus Hibernicus. Writing 'On the Miracles of Holy Scripture' in 655, he argued that as Creation had been completed and perfected no further natural laws were possible for the accomplishment of miracles. Miracles then were not a breach of the natural laws, but a change in governance. Augustinus Hibernicus

135. A. Campbell, *An Enquiry into the Original of Moral Virtue* (Edinburgh, 1733), Treatise II, Section VIII, 432.

136. G. Ardley, *The Common Sense Philosophy of James Oswald* (Aberdeen, 1980), 80–81.

also mocks the druids for suggesting that their forebears 'flew through the ages in the form of birds', thereby breaking natural laws.<sup>137</sup> Given that the 9th-century *Historia Brittonum* declares that the Picts were reputed to have brought to Ireland

every spell, charm, sneeze and augury by the voices of the birds, and every omen<sup>138</sup>

we may assume that there were druids in Scotland with the same notions. Indeed, according to *Immacallamh in Dá Thuarad* (The Colloquy of the Two Sages), which dates from between the Viking invasions and the 9th-century Sanas Cormaic (Cormac's Glossary), Irish druids came to Scotland for their training<sup>139</sup> and Scottish druids were certainly known in Ireland.<sup>140</sup> The Scottish Gaels, therefore, need not be excluded from these debates.

Faced with the statement that Moses's staff turned into a serpent and was devoured by other serpents, Augustinus Hibernicus declares that it was not a real change but only the similitude of change. This may seem dodgy thinking to us, but it has been claimed of him that he

systematically applied a relatively coherent cosmology to solve scriptural problems that cosmology had itself raised.<sup>141</sup>

137. Irish Augustine, Book I, Chap. XVII: *Sed si Omnia, quae de terra facta sunt, in alterutrum mutari vicissim conceduntur; hoc est, ut animal in arborem, panis in lapidem, homo in volucrem verti posset concedatur; nihil ex his firmiter possit intra suae naturae terminus permanere, et ridiculosis magorum fabulationibus dicentium in avium substantia majores suos saecula pervolasse, assensum praestare videbimus ...* Carey translates this as 'But if it be conceded that all things made from earth can be changed into one another by turns – as for instance animal to tree, bread to stone, man to bird – then none of them could remain firmly within the bounds of its own nature. We would seem indeed, to give assent to the laughable tales told by the druids, who say that their forebears flew through the ages in the form of birds; and in such cases we would speak of God not as the Governor, but as the Changer (*Mutator*) of natures. Far be it from us to do so, lest we believe that after the first establishment of the natures of all things he made anything new, or not contained by its own nature. For "there is nothing new under the sun," nor can anyone say, "Behold, this is new" (Ecclesiastes 1: 9–10).' (J. Carey, *King of Mysteries* (Dublin, 2000), 58).

138. J. H. Todd and A. Herbert, eds, *Irish Version of Nennius* (Dublin: Irish Archaeological Society, 1848), XXVIII, 124–25 and ll. 151–52, 144–45.

139. Whitley Stokes, 'Colloquy of the Two Sages', *Revue Celtique* XXVI (1905), 9.

140. C. Plummer, *Lives of the Irish Saints* (London, 1922 and 1968), 319–20 (NB not 329 as cited in J. Carey, 'Irish Parallels to the Myth of Odin's Eye', *Folklore* 94.ii (1983), 218, fn 10).

141. C. Anderson, 'Divine Governance, Miracles, and Laws of Nature in the Early Middle Ages: The *De Mirabilis sacrae scripturae*', unpublished DPhil thesis, University of California, quoted in T. Duddy, *A History of Irish Thought* (London, 2002), 17.

Augustinus Hibernicus's concept of God as a continuing Governor of the creation is echoed in a 12th-century Gaelic poem from Scotland:

Go ro bheannachainn an Coimthe  
con-ig uile.

*I would bless the Lord Almighty  
who maintains all.*<sup>142</sup>

However, Adomnán of Iona, in his *Vita Sancti Columbae*, focuses his attention on Columba's miracles while suggesting that their ultimate significance lies in the purity of his spirit which also allowed him to understand some of the deepest mysteries of the scriptures.<sup>143</sup> In his *De Locis Sanctis*, Adomnán uses an empirical approach to solve problems of contradiction in the Holy Scriptures.<sup>144</sup> He was naturally well aware of his own *locus*, with many Pictish contacts, but living in Scotland did not prevent him from having a world view or from writing a highly influential work (albeit derived from the work of the ship-wrecked Belgian bishop Arculf) about places far distant from his own. Bede leaned heavily on Adomnán's work in his own *De Locis Sanctis*.

A desire to rationalise miracles also emerges in the work of Eriugena, who states quite clearly that the resurrection of the body does not depend upon an act of Grace, but is the consequence of the 'operation of natural causes' and is not by 'miracles'.<sup>145</sup> One may see parallels between this position and that of the Irish Augustine and, of course, that of Pelagius.

Several of Eriugena's ideas were condemned at the councils of Valencia in 855, Langres in 859, Rome and Vercelli in 1050 and Paris in 1225. His *Periphyseon* was declared heretical by the Councils of Vercelli in 1050, Rome in 1059, by Peter of Corbeil in 1210 and by a Papal bull of Pope Honorius in 1225; it was banned at Sens in 1255 by Honorius II and in 1585 by Gregory III and was then placed on the Index Librorum Prohibitorum, where it remained until 1966 when the Index was abolished. The frequency and persistence of these condemnations indicate both his importance as one of the greatest early Medieval Christian philosophers and his perniciousness to the established theology of the Catholic Church. What is also

142. W. McLeod and M. Bateman, *Duanaire na Sracaire* (Edinburgh, 2007), 16–17.

143. C. Stancliffe, 'Adomnán of Iona and his Prose Writings', in T. Clancy and M. Pittock, eds, *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh, 2007), 113.

144. T. O'Loughlin, 'Theology, Philosophy and Cosmography', in Clancy and Pittock, *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, 117–118. See also J.-M. Picard, 'Bede & Adomnan as Historians', *Peritia* 3 (1984), 50–70.

145. Larminie, partial translation of the *Periphyseon* Book V, 902C, National Library of Ireland MSS 290–291.

remarkable is that he was mocked with the same terminology that had been used to mock Pelagius, their work in both cases being described as Scottish, which in this context means Gaelic:

Scotorum pultibus praegravatus – *heavy with Scottish porridge*<sup>146</sup>

Scotorumque pultes – *Scottish porridge*<sup>147</sup>

The first insult was that of Jerome, writing in 415–416. The second, from Councils in 855 and 859, deliberately echoes the first, demonstrating a perceived link between lines of thought amongst Celtic speakers, extending over 400 years. Pelagius's nationality is uncertain, but Jerome's 'Scotorum pultibus' would suggest Pelagius was perceived as a Gael. Hincmar, bishop of Laon, criticised his nephew for using 'Gaelic and other barbarities', possibly taught to him by Eriugena.<sup>148</sup>

John Carey has suggested interesting possible links between Augustinus Hibernicus, the anonymous author of *In Teanga Bithnua*, Gaelic mythology and Eriugena.<sup>149</sup> Even if Eriugena's ideas remained influential, in that they were undoubtedly controversial, can they be said to have had any significance for later Gaelic thinkers? It will be suggested below that they can.

A critical and rational approach to biblical studies also emerges in the work of George Buchanan, who went so far as to suggest that, in studying Paul's Epistles,

... it is necessary to consider not only his words, but also when he wrote them, to whom, and why.<sup>150</sup>

John Toland was to pursue a similar approach in *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696).<sup>151</sup> Toland had certainly read Buchanan's *History*, to which he refers in his annotations of Martin Martin, and in his *Nazarenus* he had high praise for Buchanan and was as ready to subject the scriptures to rational and historical scrutiny:

146. Jerome, Prologue to the first book of *Commentary on Jeremiah*, c. 415, quoted in Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland* (Dublin, 1997), 162.

147. Report of the Councils of Valence (855) and Langres (859), quoted in Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland*, 578.

148. J. Sirmond, ed., *Hincmari, archiepiscopi remensis, Opera duos in tomos digesta ...* Vol. II, 547. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland*, 590. Kenney translates Hincmar's 'Scottica' as 'Irish'.

149. Carey, *A Single Ray of the Sun*, 87–104.

150. R. Mason and M. Smith, trans. and ed., *George Buchanan's Law of Kingship* (Edinburgh, 2006), 112.

151. J. Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious* (London, 1696).

In *Nazarenus* he anticipates the so-called 'higher criticism' in placing early Christianity firmly in a Jewish context.<sup>152</sup>

Attempts to rationalise miracles resurface in 17th-18th-century Gaelic Scotland. Such rational approaches reached some remarkable conclusions, including that of John Craig (1663–1731), whose probability theory predicted that, through such factors as the number of witnesses to an event and its transmission through time and place, the story of Jesus would reach zero probability in 3150. The rational analysis of miracles was to reach its apogee in the work of David Hume who, like Augustinus Hibernicus, was not prepared to countenance violence against the laws of nature:

No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish.<sup>153</sup>

Hume was soon confronted by George Campbell who maintained that Hume's argument failed on the grounds of Campbell's assertion that the most important aspect of determining the authenticity of testimony was the number of witnesses. Here Campbell might have found cause to turn down the Rev. Robert Kirk's ingenious explanation for the rare appearances of fairies. Seeking to justify belief in their existence (on his own behalf, not just as an observer of his parishioners), Kirk declares,

But diverse of that Secret Commonwealth may by permission discover themselves as innocently to us who are in another State, as some of us men do to Fishes which are in another Element, when we plunge and dive into the bottom of the seas, their native region.

This is in the same tradition, if not quite the manner, of Augustinus Hibernicus. Even the mathematician Colin Campbell (see below) was prepared to acknowledge that

There may be many higher degrees of beings above ours, and not exposed to our perception.<sup>154</sup>

George Campbell is thought to have developed his ideas while serving as minister (1748–1757) of Banchory Ternan East church – a Celtic foundation still

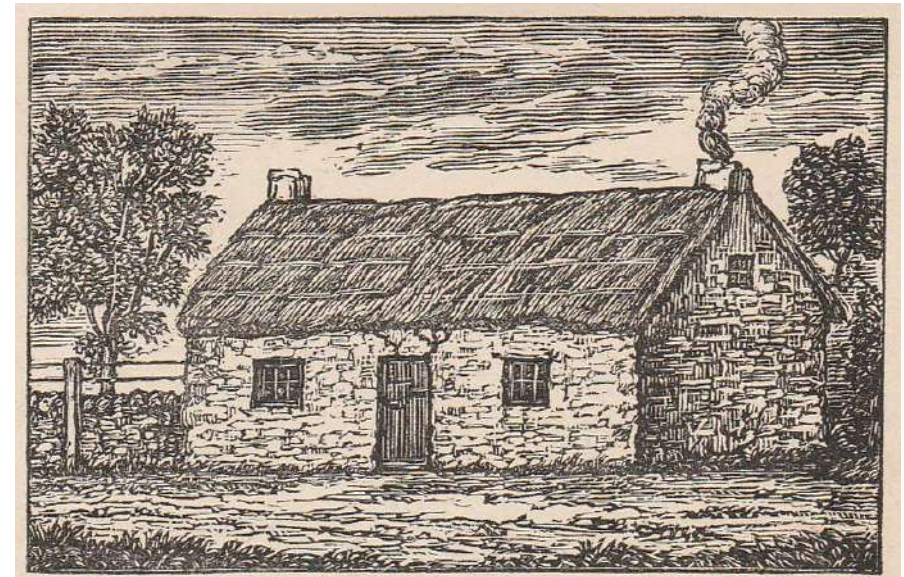
152. D. Berman, 'The Irish Freethinker', in McGuinness, Harrison and Kearney, eds, *John Toland's Christianity not Mysterious* (Dublin, 1997), 228.

153. D. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, X.1.91.

154. C. Campbell, 'Of the Trinity of Persons in the Unity of Essence', the second of two tracts privately printed by Professor Campbell Fraser in 1875 and 1876 (Edinburgh University Library, Dd 8.91, 19 (original MS Dc 6.99)).

housing St Ternan's bronze quadrangular handbell. It is likely, then, that he was inducted as dewar of the bell, with its attendant legendary powers (see IV.2.c.). But Campbell was a rationalist and rationality was central to the development and spread of Newtonian ideas, which owed a good deal to members of the Scottish Gaelic community. Amongst these were ministers of religion, presumably well aware of the theological implications of Newton's work, for which see below. What this movement towards rationality would inevitably confront was the insistence upon the primacy of Faith which was the central feature of Calvinism and central to the Presbyterian churches in Scotland.

The piteous self-examinations of Dugald Buchanan (1716–1768) give evidence of the profound struggles of mind engendered by Calvinist doctrines. At one point in his *Confessions*, Buchanan hopes for release from his fears when briefly seduced by Arianism, Deism and Socinianism. Arianism held that Christ was not of the same substance as the Father and was rejected at the Council of Nicaea in 325. Deism denied the necessity of Revelation and was first clearly proposed by John Toland in his *Christianity not Mysterious*. Socinianism rejected the divinity of Christ and the doctrine of Atonement, holding that those who follow Christ's virtues will be granted salvation. In this, it might be seen as a revival of Pelagianism. Such attempts to rationalise Christianity were common in Enlightenment circles in the 17th and 18th centuries. What is of interest here is how they were received in the Gàidhealtachd.



*Dugald Buchanan's Cottage*, from Sinclair, *Reminiscences of the Life and Labours of Dugald Buchanan* (1875)



The form in which Dugald Buchanan appears to have encountered some of these ideas is in Duncan Forbes's *Some Thoughts Concerning Religion, Natural and Revealed, and the Manner of Understanding Revelation: tending to shew that Christianity is, Indeed very near, As Old as the Creation*.<sup>155</sup> Duncan Forbes (1685–1747) was an outstanding Lord Advocate and, though he spent a small fortune supporting the Whigs against the Jacobites, endeavoured to exercise mercy at every opportunity. Perhaps his early days in Inverness, close to which he was born, and his later management of the Duke of Argyll's estates, gave him a sympathetic insight into the Gaels, an insight which Buchanan, also on the Whig side, possessed by right of birth and language.

A further issue arises with respect to Traducianism – the belief that each human soul was created by the parents along with the body. This was a view held by the leading Gaelic preacher from Arran, the Rev. Archibald Cook (1775–1865).<sup>156</sup> The more orthodox reformist position was that God created each human soul, which would naturally imply God's continuing involvement in Creation. Traducianism, however, was able to support the idea of Original Sin more readily, either through all man's seed descending from and being corrupted by Adam and Eve, or simply because of human imperfection irrespective of its ultimate source. A special case had, of course, to be made to exempt Christ from the full implications of this view.

Dugald Buchanan's rejection of the more rational approaches of these religious movements, despite their temptations for him, reflects his evangelistic enthusiasms and his profound sense of vulnerability, both physical and mental. In this, he echoes Colum Cille and, as has been pointed out elsewhere, Dante. The cultivation of the concept of fear with respect to the individual human soul, which culminates in the late medieval period in the work of Dante, has its roots in the Old Testament, but has more than once been claimed as having been developed by and from the visionary literature of the Celtic church in the Gaelic-speaking parts of the world.<sup>157</sup> The *Altus Prosator*, probably by Colum Cille, the *Fis Adamnáin* and other visionary texts, including Brendan's *Navigatio* all concern themselves at various stages with judgement, guilt and punishment, and the

155. L. MacBean, *Buchanan, the Sacred Bard of the Scottish Highlands – The Confessions of Dugald Buchanan* (London, 1919), 178–79. Duncan Forbes's work is the nearest in title to that given by Buchanan. It had already entered a 3rd edition in London by 1743.

156. N. Campbell, *One of Heaven's Jewels ...* (Stornoway, 2009), 228–30.

157. C. S. Boswell, *Irish Precursors of Dante* (London, 1908), which includes a translation of the 10th–11th century *Fis Adamnáin* with which Dante has several significant parallels, although these were probably transmitted indirectly. Also E. Vance, review of W. Otten, *The Anthropology of Johannes Scottus Eriugena*, *Brill Studies in Intellectual History* 20 (Leiden, 1991): <[http://antology.rchgi.spb.ru/Iohannes\\_Scotus\\_Eriugena/links2.htm](http://antology.rchgi.spb.ru/Iohannes_Scotus_Eriugena/links2.htm)>, 6.

theme is presented in some of the high crosses, notably that of Muiredach. In Buchanan's imagery, we engage powerfully with that Dantesque poetic imagery:

'N sin cruinnichidh gach cos 'us làmh,  
Chaidh chur san àraich fad o chéil:  
'S bi'dh farum mòr a' measg nan cnàmh,  
Gach aon diubh dol nan àite féin.

*Each limb, each member – foot and hand, that ever buried were in land or sea or battle-field, shall come together. Loud is the noise among the bones, each coming to its place.*<sup>158</sup>

Buchanan's 'Latha a' Bhreitheanais' (Day of Judgement), from which that quotation comes, is well within the tradition of Celtic visionary literature and its concluding doctrine of Grace is anything but Pelagian. His place in the story of Celtic philosophy is on that side which believed in Original Sin, Hell, Judgement and all their implications. Why Evil exists in such a vision is never satisfactorily explained in truly Christian terms: the whole burden of its existence is placed upon Man, and the legend of the Fall is its primary justification.

When the Irish author and painter Jack Yeats wrote,

The knowledge of Good and Evil! Without blasphemy, I hoped that Christ had died that we might forget it,<sup>159</sup>

he confronted the issue head-on. This is an extraordinary and profoundly disturbing remark. If we are to forget such knowledge, we will have somehow to free ourselves from the assumed role of external observers, seeing our own nakedness and feeling shame for it. Jack Yeats hopes that Christ's sacrifice would have freed us from that concept – that we might forget our original sin, for it has been atoned for already.

Were such a thing possible, then, his ideal is a state of innocence, and it has worrying implications. Do we not try to inculcate in our children and in our society a sense of values which is roughly divided into right and wrong, and which is ultimately enshrined in laws and upon which we sit in judgement and for which we mete out rewards and punishments? Is not Yeats recommending a kind of moral anarchy? What, after all, is the alternative? If we had not eaten of the Tree of Knowledge or developed the capacity for reflection on such matters in some sort of evolutionary process, would we not be like the wild beasts, leading Hobbesian lives – 'nasty, brutal and short'?

One possible way out of the dilemma was that of the Rev. Robert Kirk, for,

158. The Rev. A. Sinclair, *Reminiscences of the Life and Labours of Dugald Buchanan ... with his Spiritual Songs ...* (Edinburgh, 1875), 91, 154.

159. Jack Yeats, *And to You Also*, 107.

beyond the legend of the Fall, Kirk makes use – not for the first time – of the further legend of the revolt of Lucifer and, thereby, justifies the existence of beings intermediate between angels and sinful mankind, never mind the denizens of Hell.

The concept of Original Sin is still profoundly embedded in the preaching of Presbyterian ministers in the Gàidhealtachd even in the 21st century. But it is too easy to brand such men with the same brand mark. The Rev. Pàdraig Grannd (Peter Grant, 1783–1867) composed in the same tradition as Dugald Buchanan, certain of Original Sin, fervent in his warnings like some spiritual look-out in the crow's nest. His magnificent *An Dachaidh Bhuan* is still sung (to an equally magnificent tune also used for love songs) and its consciousness of the transitory nature of life is nothing if not philosophical. But Grant is equally certain of the reality of redemption, as expressed in his moving and visionary hymn placed in the mouth of a dead child, 'Òran mu Leanabh Og'. Grant claimed in the hymn that though the child was tainted by Original Sin, it was nonetheless blameless, and this, combined with the certainty of its instant redemption, got Grant into trouble with *Na Daoine* (The Men).<sup>160</sup> *Na Daoine* were 'a spiritual elite' drawn from 'elders, catechists, schoolmasters and missionaries' perhaps 'deriving ultimately from the medieval Gaelic learned orders'. They had considerable power within the Gàidhealtachd and some 'were said to possess gifts of prophecy'.<sup>161</sup> Their significance underlines the statement made above that we should not assume that congregations were theological or philosophical innocents and that only the ministers had any claim to such interests, and John MacInnes underlines this with his assertion that in essence the men were members of the laity.<sup>162</sup>

What Grant expressed in hymns, John Baillie (1886–1960) expressed through philosophy. Baillie was born in Gairloch, steeped in Gaelic, the son of a minister and nurtured in a Calvinist world and deeply influenced by Barth. He is insistent on an eternally pervasive Atonement:

Just, then, as Christians speak of the eternal Son of God, so also they must speak of an eternal atonement;

Baillie goes on to quote his brother Donald – also a theologian:

160. Grannd, 'Oran mu Leanabh Og', in D. Meek, ed., *Caran an t-Saoghail* (Edinburgh, 2003), 272–79 and 442.

161. D. Meek, 'Men, The', in N. Cameron, ed., *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh, 1993), 558–59.

162. J. MacInnes, 'Religion in Gaelic Society', in M. Newton, ed., *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes* (Edinburgh, 2006), 434.

Nor can we forget that God's work of reconciliation still goes on in every age in the lives of sinful men, whose sins He still bears.<sup>163</sup>

The doctrine of the Elect, in such a view, may be unsustainable. John Macquarrie agrees with Ronald Gregor Smith that 'John Baillie was a Celtic mystic' for whom God was immanent rather than transcendent.<sup>164</sup> Shades here of Eriugena's pantheism, with God present in Creation.

It would also be wrong to imagine that these concepts were never questioned by the communities addressed by the stricter divines. The story of St Odhrán would suggest that they were indeed questioned. Odhrán offers himself as a living sacrifice under the foundations, to secure the future safety of Colum Cille's building programme – a standard element throughout Europe right up to modern times, though more recently in the form of a live or dead animal. Colum Cille accepts and Odhrán is buried alive. This part of the story dates back to the Middle Irish Life of Colum Cille, with manuscript versions surviving from the early 15th century.<sup>165</sup> But there is a significant aftermath which survives only in the oral tradition. Colum Cille, out of curiosity about the afterlife, digs Odhrán up after three days and asks him what it is like on the other side. Odhrán replies:

Ni bheil flathas mar a theireas,  
Ni bheil ifhreann mar a thubhras,  
Ni bheil saoi mar suthann sona,  
Ni bheil daoi dona duthann.

*Nor is heaven as is alleged,  
Nor is hell as is asserted,  
Nor is the good eternally happy,  
Nor is the bad eternally unhappy.*

To this decidedly unorthodox account, Colum Cille replies:

Ùir! ùir air sìul Òdhrain,  
Mu'n dùisg e 'n còrr carmaisg,  
Dh' fhios oi'm a thoir dhan chuideachd,  
Dh' fhios toi'm a thoir dha bhraithraidh.

*Earth! earth on the eye of Oran,  
Before he wakes more controversy,*

163. J. Baillie, *The Sense of the Presence of God* (Oxford, 1992), 195. Baillie's Gaelic background is emphasised by his cousin Isabel Forrester in 'A Cousin's Memories', *Christian Devotion – Addresses by John Baillie* (London, 1962).

164. J. MacQuarrie, *Paths in Spirituality* (London, 1979), 124.

165. M. Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry* (Dublin, 1996), 211.

*Lest scandal should be given to the faith,  
Lest offence should be given to his brethren.*<sup>166</sup>

According to Alexander Carmichael ‘versions of this tradition were taken down in places widely apart.’<sup>167</sup> A slightly different rendition of Colum Cille’s reply was given by ‘Fiona MacLeod’:

Ùir, ùir, air sùil Òdhrain! mun labhair e tuille còmhradh.

*Earth, earth on Oran’s eyes, lest he blab further.*<sup>168</sup>

It might just be possible to understand this story as an endorsement of Colum Cille and a criticism of Odhrán, but it takes a good deal of mental ingenuity to explain why it was necessary to tell it at all and, if so, why it receives no mention in the hagiography, where its function as an endorsement of Colum Cille might have been somehow promoted. What seems more likely is that there was always a residual questioning of the belief in a Last Judgement and its consequences. It is also possible that Colum Cille was not as popular as might be supposed. Ronald Black has suggested as much in an article entitled ‘The Unlikeable Irish Statesman’, admitting that when he presented his ideas at University College Cork they ‘went down like a ton of bricks’.<sup>169</sup>

One could also suggest that a profoundly rational approach to the miraculous was balanced by a readiness to accept the continuing and living presence of the Creator in the whole of the creation – a concept which borders on pantheism and which relates to the dispute amongst Newtonians as to whether Motion was essential to Matter.

#### PANTHEISM AND METAPHYSICS

M. Rousselot speaks of him [Eriugena] as wandering on the mountains of Scotland, or by the banks of the sea which washes the Hebrides ... M. Rousselot has no facts to support him in making Scotland the native country of Eriugena; but he has many probabilities. It seems natural to believe that so great a metaphysician belonged to the race which is pre-eminently metaphysical.<sup>170</sup>

John Hunt, from whose ‘Essay on Pantheism’ the above quotation comes, was born at Bridgend, in the Parish of Kinnoul in Perthshire, in 1827. He graduated from St

166. A. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* II (Edinburgh, 1972), 339–40.

167. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* II, 338. See also G. Henderson, *Survivals in Belief among the Celts* (Glasgow, 1911), 282–83.

168. F. MacLeod (William Sharp), *Iona* (1910, and Edinburgh, 1991), 66.

169. R. Black, ‘The Unlikeable Irish Statesman’, *West Highland Free Press* (10 June 2005).

170. J. Hunt, *An Essay on Pantheism* (London, 1866), 145 and footnote.

Andrews in 1847 and became a Doctor of Divinity there in 1878. Most of his life was, however, spent as a cleric, priest and theologian in the Church of England. His misguided wish to locate Eriugena in Scotland should not obscure his views on Eriugena and on pantheism in general, which are remarkably liberal. His reading is extensive and in tracing the history of pantheism, he identifies several of the threads referred to here, including Duns Scotus and Giordano Bruno, and he describes John Toland (overpage) as

a man of great reading and great intellectual powers, but deficient in the ordinary wisdom of the world. The publication of this book was simply a freak of his erratic genius.<sup>171</sup>

Hunt’s judgement of the *Pantheisticon* may have some justification, but he might have given more attention to Toland’s criticism of Spinoza. However, what is of interest here is Hunt’s identification of the people of the Highlands and Hebrides as ‘pre-eminently metaphysical’. Although Hunt spent his ecclesiastical life very largely in England, he must have had some acquaintance with the Gaels. It is possible that he had read the theological and philosophical works of Daniel Dewar (1788–1867). Dewar was a native Gaelic speaker, born in Glen Dochart, who became Professor of Moral Philosophy at King’s College, Aberdeen, in 1815. On his return from missionary work in Strontian and serving as a minister in Glasgow (1819–1832), he was appointed Principal of Marischal College, Aberdeen (1832), and Professor of Church History (1833). It was at that time that the famous physicist James Clerk Maxwell became his friend and son-in-law, and it is almost certainly through him that Maxwell ended up with a copy of D. M. Connell’s treatise (in Gaelic) on Gaelic Astronomy,<sup>172</sup> which appeared in 1856.<sup>173</sup>

Dewar knew both the Highlands of Scotland and the Gaelic-speakers of Ireland intimately and compares and contrasts their characteristics partly referring to the influence of the physical environment:

There is a vast contrariety in the scenery of the Highlands to that of Ireland. That of the one is wild, and rugged, and sublime, calculated to cherish a deep toned thoughtfulness: that of the other is hilly and beautiful, but not generally bold, and seems less adapted to elevate the imagination, or to increase the tender pensiveness of the heart.<sup>174</sup>

171. Hunt, *An Essay on Pantheism*, 191 (footnote).

172. Donnachadh Conall, *Reul-Eòlais* (Edinburgh, 1856).

173. Flood, McCartney and Whitaker, *James Clerk Maxwell: Perspectives on His Life and Work* (Oxford, 2014), 36.

174. D. Dewar, *Observations on the Character, Customs, and Superstitions of the Irish* (London, 1812), 29.





John Toland, Frontispiece from U. G. Thorschmid, *Versuch einer Vollständige Engländische Freydenker-Bibliothek III* (Cassel, 1766)

We may search in vain, however, for any signs of pantheism, Pelagianism or indeed anything resembling unorthodox opinion in Dewar's works. Well over a thousand pages of *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* and over seven hundred pages of *Divine Revelation: its Evidences, External, Internal, and Collateral* reveal a philosopher ready to state that Hegel is a pantheist and that 'Pantheism is in reality atheism'.<sup>175</sup> Dewar relates pantheism to rationalism and, interestingly, confronts that topic of ancient concern – miracles:

Miracles, which it was alleged Christ never professed to work, nor the sacred historians to record, were explained away as natural occurrences.<sup>176</sup>

Dewar goes on to argue cogently against Hume's position on miracles, reaching a position which one might fairly describe as similar to the positions held by Kirk and Martin. Here is a man who comes from a culture deeply imbued with traditions of second sight and the like, who, like Kirk and Martin, is not prepared to discredit his sources:

The diffidence in testimony, which is the result of experience, is a diffidence not in testimony in general, but in the testimony of dishonest men.<sup>177</sup>

It would be interesting to know what Dewar's opinion of Augustinus Hibernicus would have been, but it is also interesting to note that he defends the authenticity of the Gospels partly on the grounds that their linguistic character reflects the linguistic situation of the Apostles:

where Chaldee or Syriac was the vernacular tongue, and whose knowledge of the Greek language was acquired ... Thus ... a Highlander whose native language is Gaelic, and to whom that language is most familiar, would be apt to mix Gallicisms with his conversation or writing in English.<sup>178</sup>

This suggests a cultural awareness in Dewar's work which is not without parallels with that of Adam Ferguson. This growing awareness of the need to consider anthropological and sociological factors with respect to the 'common sense' apprehension of the existence of the Deity has an early expression in the work of James Oswald, but might be considered an extension of the work of Martin Martin and also of Archibald Campbell. Campbell goes so far as to adopt

175. D. Dewar, *Divine Revelation; Its Evidences, External, Internal, and Collateral* (London, 1854), 166.

176. Dewar, *Divine Revelation*, 168.

177. Dewar, *Divine Revelation*, 163.

178. Dewar, *Divine Revelation*, 123.

the position of a heathen in an attempt to approach his material from more than one standpoint.

With Alexander Campbell Fraser (1819–1914), we come to a man born and raised in Ardchattan, a son of the manse, whose ‘family inheritance was Celtic.’<sup>179</sup> Within and conscious of the Gaelic world, but influenced by his mother’s Anglican leanings, he was unable to come to terms with the Gaelic language. As he himself puts it:

Natural reserve among strangers was increased by what Celts consider culpable ignorance of Gaelic, the key to the life of the Lorne peasantry. Gaelic is interesting to the philological specialist, and the language is full of the poetry and romantic story of the Highlands. But with no exceptional linguistic faculty, and no urgent need for exercising it in that way, I grew up almost as ignorant of Gaelic as of Chinese.<sup>180</sup>

The opening chapter of his *Biographia Philosophica* provides a fascinating and knowledgeable account of Lorne, including examples of the breadth of thinking and reading available in the district, not least from his ‘metaphysical aunt’ who supported the Pelagian and Arminian heresies and introduced young Alexander to John Locke. But he saw little place for Gaelic in philosophy:

The mystical enthusiasm of the Celt is apt to react against the cold severity of Baconian induction of experience and logical conditions of proof; and intense tribal patriotism is averse to cosmopolitan views of life. Gaelic literature contains little that is directly auxiliary to science, or in affinity with philosophical speculation, unless through the fondness of the Celt for problems of Calvinistic theology and for ecclesiastical differences.<sup>181</sup>

This somewhat dismissive reaction to the undoubted theological preoccupations of the Gaels in the 18th to 19th centuries may reflect his sense of being unforgiven for not having acquired what was in truth his native language. But his own ‘mystical enthusiasm’ is apparent in his life’s work and, in a quiet way, revealed by the motto he chose for the title page of the *Biographia: ut hora sic vita* (as an hour so is life). It is a motto commonly found on sundials and is well within the traditions of Dugald Buchanan and Patrick Grant; in Grant in the notable lines from *An Dachaidh Bhuan* (The Eternal Home):

Tha rabhadh garbh ann bhith deas gu falbh às,  
On tha ’n taigh talmhaidh gu tighinn a-nuas.

179. Alexander Campbell Fraser, *Biographia Philosophica* (Edinburgh, 1904), 6.

180. Fraser, *Biographia Philosophica* (Edinburgh, 1904), 34.

181. Fraser, *Biographia Philosophica*, 35.

*It is a harsh warning to be ready to leave life  
As this house on earth is certain to fall.*

However, Fraser’s theism is nothing if not open-minded. Theism, in contrast to Deism, allows for a continuing role for the Creator in sustaining the Universe; it is common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and Fraser’s approach includes a thoroughly respectful reading of Spinoza and Hume. He thought highly of the eighth Duke of Argyll’s *The Philosophy of Belief* and no doubt thought well of the duke’s support for the radical and influential theologian John McLeod Campbell (1800–1872), whose early views on ‘universal pardon’ cost him his place in the ministry. His later views on the Atonement are still regarded as having ‘an inevitable tendency to eschatological universalism’ – in other words, approaching the universalism of Eriugena.<sup>182</sup>

A latent Pelagianism can be found near the end of the *Biographia Philosophica* in which Fraser seems to be appealing to something not very far removed from Alexander Campbell’s idea of God’s own self-interest. He has argued for a rational assumption of the necessity of a moving spirit behind the universe and essential to its creation and sustenance. In attempting to align this with punishment as part of a process towards the ultimate unifying of God’s creation, he tries to answer his own question, ‘Can manifested Evil be consistent with the presupposition that Omnipotent Goodness is at the heart of the whole?’<sup>183</sup> In the following pages, Fraser does not really answer this question, but takes refuge in a metaphysical conception of a universe permitting choice being superior to a universe without such choice, and the whole being beyond comprehension but uncontradictory – just as infinite time is beyond comprehension but we can still use our watches.

In *Philosophy of Theism*, he tackles the problem of miracles, eventually subsuming them within the total ‘miracle’ of God’s having created the Universe:

If God is miraculously revealed in the sense that the natural is finally developed into supernatural revelation, then the superficial antithesis of nature and supernatural disappears.<sup>184</sup>

Behind all this speculation lies, for Fraser, the necessity of trust:

May not Christianity, in its wonderful historical evolution, with its claim to be the universal religion, and Philosophic Theism with its deductions from its rational implicate of God’s perfect love of good, and of divine

182. N. R. Needham, ‘Campbell, John McLeod’, in N. Cameron, ed., *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh, 1993), 130.

183. Fraser, *Biographia Philosophica*, 307.

184. Alexander Campbell Fraser, *Philosophy of Theism* (Edinburgh, 1899), 303.



desire to make all persons good, as the indispensable ground of even ordinary trust in the natural and moral world, harmonise with one another?<sup>185</sup>

Fraser briefly surveys the history of pantheism, declaring Eriugena to be a pantheist and making mention of Toland. It is, however, in concluding his lecture on pantheism that Fraser offers a hostage to that which he is attempting to oppose:

We shall proceed ... to inquire whether theistic faith is not as much at the bottom of our moral experience of the infinite reality as physical faith in the order of nature is at the bottom of our physically scientific experience ... You may call this pantheism if you please, but it is pantheism accommodated to man's moral and religious revelation of the reality in which he lives and moves and has his being.<sup>186</sup>

The emphasis in the philosophical writings of John McLeod, Alexander Campbell, Alexander Fraser and George Campbell (the eighth duke, 1823–1900) is towards a liberal approach which, while eschewing pantheism, is at no great distance from it. Fraser writes thus:

Philosophy developed out of theistic faith was thus taken as the true *via media* between atheism and pantheism. It excluded atheism by the *reduction ad absurdum* of total Nescience, or intellectual and moral paralysis, which atheism involves. It excluded pantheism because the human Omniscience which pantheistic rationalism implies, in like manner, forms its *reductio ad absurdum*.

God's omniscience is indeed central to pantheism, but the implication of human omniscience as consequent upon pantheism and to which Fraser has recourse is hard to substantiate. Indeed, his choice of formulas to describe atheism, pantheism and theism reads almost like an apology for the failure of humans to be omniscient, which no pantheist ever claimed:

*In tenebris semper* might be the formula of Atheism; *In Luce Divina* that of Pantheism: *In tenebris Lux* was the intermediate formula of Theistic Philosophy.

Fraser ends his *Biographia Philosophica* with a quotation from Berkeley defying scepticism and one from Amos Bronson Alcott, which he introduces revealingly:

It was connection rather than contrast. It was connection that resembles

185. Fraser, *Biographia Philosophica*, 327–28.

186. Fraser, *The Philosophy of Theism*, Lecture V, 162.

'the subtle progress by which, both in the natural and moral world, qualities pass insensibly into their contraries, and things revolve upon each other'.<sup>187</sup>

He allows Alcott the last words, advancing westward with the sun 'to the country of Everlasting Life'. This reads as though it were the Gaelic afterlife of *Tìr nan Òg*, and the resolution of opposites, of connection rather than contrast, accords with many of the observations in these pages. This sense of being part of a greater unified whole, shared by these remarkable Argyllshire philosophers, may be in part environmental. These men were born, raised and frequently worked in an environment of astonishing beauty to which they themselves frequently refer. Moreover, that sense of the transitoriness of life – *ut hora sic vita* – which tends to provoke religious speculation, is itself commonly provoked by an environment subject to dramatic weather and not infrequently hostile to life. If, for these particular men, Gaelic was not central to the articulation of their thoughts, it seems reasonable to propose that the Gaelic-speaking world and the environment of which it is a part and to which it responds most certainly was.

#### SPIRIT, MATTER AND MOTION

The connections between philosophers and theologians who were either Gaelic speakers, or who engaged with the Gaels of Scotland, exhibit elements of radicalism mostly carefully contained within an orthodox matrix. There were others, however, for whom orthodoxy was never going to act as a deterrent.

In *V.2.a.*, some examples were given of the use of the word 'Celtic' in quasi-philosophical contexts, involving Scotus Eriugena, Buchanan and Dickson with his friend Bruno. But can we find any further traces of a connection between these references to Celts? There is no doubt that Giordano Bruno had read Eriugena,<sup>188</sup> and, though we do not have any proof that Dickson had read Eriugena, there are many hints that he had. He was clearly influenced by the concept of the *via negativa* – hence the title of his work, *De Umbra Rationis et Iudicii* (On the Shadow of Reasoning and Judgement). He speaks of the mind 'existing within the shadow of the light', 'a shadow also resides within the light,' and so on. Later in the work, this idea is put to direct use as a kind of metaphoric memory aid. As Dana Sutton puts it:

a shadow is an image employed in lieu of something to be remembered (what [Dickson] calls a 'subject') which is itself too abstract or difficult to generate an eidetic image such as can be stored in an imaginary mnemonic 'place'

187. Fraser, *Biographia Philosophica*, 334–35. Alcott, who is quoted, was the father of the author of *Little Women*.

188. D. W. Singer, *Giordano Bruno His Life and Thought* (New York, 1968), 80–81 and 141.



(receptaculum). Thus, for instance, the ‘shadow’ or image of a sword can be employed to represent the abstract idea of justice ...<sup>189</sup>

Dickson was also ready to embrace a pantheistic philosophy, as in the following generously inclusive passage, using a deductive methodology influenced by *via negativa* practices:

Ecce ut ipsum infinitum, incomprehensum, ab effectis ostenditur. Infinita sunt huius generis exempla, unde, quasi ex vestigiis et sigillis, Deum ipsum, et aeuum [sic] et mundum, et tempus, et generationem, gentium etiam quos diximus deos, omniaque omnino quae quidvis effecerint opportune repetere possis.

*You see how He, being infinite and incomprehensible, is made manifest in His works. There are countless examples of this kind by which you can handily deduce from traces and signs, as it were, God Himself, eternity, the universe, time, generation, the so-called gods of the pagans, and everything else that has created anything.*<sup>190</sup>

Dickson’s epitaph, published by Thomas Murray in his *Naupactiados* of 1604 shows clearly that others perceived Dickson in such pantheistic terms:

This small tomb doesn’t hold Alexander Dickson  
Who held Sky, Earth, Ocean and the World.  
Neither Sky, Earth, Ocean nor even the World is big enough  
To be a tomb for Worthy Alexander.  
For Sky, Earth, Ocean and the World are free.<sup>191</sup>

The various words used to describe what is proposed here as a connecting philosophical approach to the relationship between spirit and matter, range from animism, through panpsychism and panentheism, to pantheism.<sup>192</sup> They

189. Dana Sutton, *Alexander Dickson, De Umbra Rationis et Iudicii* (1584): <[www.philological.bham.ac.uk/dickson/](http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/dickson/)>, revised 30 August 2012.

190. A. Dickson, *De Umbra Rationis & Iudicii, Sive De Memoriae Virtute Prosopopoeia* (London, 1583), 62. Translation by Dana Sutton. A manuscript essay on Prudence by Dickson remains to be studied in relation to the foregoing. Prudence (foresight) was a Cardinal (direction-changing) Virtue.

191. T. Murray, *Naupactiados* (London, 1604), 46.

192. Animism: the belief that material objects and the physical environment are imbued with some kind of soul or spirit. Panpsychism: according to which a mental element is present in everything that exists. Panentheism: the doctrine that all things are in God. In contrast to Pantheism, the world is not identified with God, but is seen as intimately dependent on God. Pantheism: the doctrine that the world as a whole, nature in the widest sense, is identical with God. (Definitions from T. Mautner, ed., *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* (London, 2000).

are all relatively modern words, Toland being the first to use the word Pantheist. Pantheism is the doctrine that the world as a whole, nature in the widest sense, is identical with God. For Eriugena, *natura* included God and creation. To many Christians, this is heretical and has the potential to undermine any proposed hierarchy of being which places Man at the top, because to the pantheist God is in everything, not in Man alone. Pantheism also undermines the dualism inherent in the separation of Spirit from Matter. Here mention might be made of the great Irish philosopher George Berkeley, for whom the concept of God as Governor sustaining the Creation (though not making of him a pantheist)

strikes a pantheistic chord in these lines which suggest that God is all-supportive and omnipresent, immediately and fundamentally operative in the world around us ...<sup>193</sup>

John Toland/Seán Ó Tuathaláin (1670–1722) was born in County Donegal and converted from Roman Catholicism to Protestantism in his teens, subsequently studying at Glasgow and Edinburgh universities. He was a native Gaelic speaker and fluent reader of Old Gaelic, to which he makes many references, quoting from old manuscripts. Of the influence of Bruno on Toland there is no doubt, as Toland very probably translated Bruno’s *Spaccio della Bestia Trionfale* and is credited with gathering Bruno’s works and instigating their translation and circulation, his interest extending from 1698 to as late as 1720.<sup>194</sup> Toland must therefore have been aware of Dickson’s existence and significance, as Dickson has a leading role in Bruno’s *De La Causa*.<sup>195</sup> Moreover, in his correspondence with Leibniz on the subject of Giordano Bruno,<sup>196</sup> Toland shows considerable awareness of the circle around Bruno and Sir Philip Sidney, at the time when Dickson was attending his patron Robert Dudley and his patron’s nephew, Philip Sidney, at the English court.<sup>197</sup>

With respect to any potential awareness of the work of John Scotus Eriugena, Toland refers to him alongside Aquinas as much less obscure than

193. Thomas Duddy, *A History of Irish Thought* (London, 2002), 136ff.

194. S. H. Daniel, *John Toland, His Methods, Manners, and Mind* (Montreal, 1984), 184; and J. Champion, *Republican learning* (Manchester, 2003), 31–32.

195. Interestingly, Toland’s library does not include any works by Bruno – unless they be those unlisted and kept in a closet along with his own manuscripts. It has been suggested that this was where he kept subversive material, in which category Bruno (and indeed Dickson) would belong – see J. Champion, ed., Appendix 4: ‘Toland’s Books’, in *John Toland Nazarenus* (Oxford, 1999), 303.

196. The correspondence is reproduced in an Appendix to A. Paterson, *The Infinite Worlds of Giordano Bruno*, Springfield 1970, 166–192.

197. J. Durkan, ‘Alexander Dickson and S.T.C. 6823’, in *The Bibliothek* Vol. 3, Number 5 (Glasgow, 1962), 183.

their 'sectarians', by which he means their followers, and much less obscure than Bruno.<sup>198</sup> Toland also possessed a work (unspecified) by Nicholas of Cusa (who recommended Eriugena to his students), but whether he classed him as an obscure sectarian of Eriugena is not certain. Toland had also read Buchanan of whom he wrote,

he shows wonderful penetration and judgment; besides that he had the advantage of understanding the ancient Irish (absolutely necessary in these disquisitions which the greater part of the rest had not).<sup>199</sup>



D. Y. Cameron, *The Hill of the Fairies*

A readiness to engage with the language of Gaelic was certainly evident in the work of the Rev. Robert Kirk, and not only through his translations of the Bible and the metrical Psalms. Kirk 'went to his own herd' in 1692 and of significance here is his having written *The Secret Commonwealth* a couple of years before, at a time when Toland was completing his studies at Glasgow and Edinburgh universities.

When in London in 1689, Kirk had met and conversed with Bishop Stillingfleet, who refused to believe in apparitions and second sight, but was later equally opposed to To-

land's insistence on the rationality of faith. There is no evidence that Toland knew of Kirk's *The Secret Commonwealth*, though it remains a possibility. He would undoubtedly have questioned if not vilified Kirk's researches, just as in his annotated copy of Martin Martin he vilified Martin's accounts of second sight; but these self-same annotations suggest a fascination with and knowledge of such material as Kirk and Martin Martin had gathered.<sup>200</sup>

Toland's own publications straddle many opposing views and, as John Kerrigan has noted,

198. ONB MS 10390, f.391, referred to in S. H. Daniel, *John Toland, His Methods, Manners, and Mind* (Montreal, 1984), 184.

199. Champion, *John Toland Nazarenus*, 228.

200. Toland's entries are in his personal copy of Martin Martin's *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland ...* (London, 1716), BL C.45.c.1.

the make-up of the archipelago out of distinct, interpenetrating zones situated men like Robert Kirk, ... as connectors and mediators, and facilitated the rapid shift of writers out of one belief system into another – as in the case of John Toland, who moved from the Gaelic Catholicism of rural Donegal, through the Ulster-Scots Presbyterianism of Derry, and higher education in Glasgow and Edinburgh, into freethinking pantheism.<sup>201</sup>

In any event, when Toland (almost echoing Dickson's Epitaph) wrote of himself,

Sol mihi pater est, mater Terra, Mundus patria, omnes Homines cognate[.]

*The Sun is my Father, the Earth my Mother, the World's my Country, and all Men are my Relations[.]*<sup>202</sup>

he went further than Eriugena's epiphanic vision might have allowed – and yet not so very far. In proposing himself as a kind of child of the solar system, he extends the nature of his own being into a potentially infinite universe. Eriugena's vision of the divisions of nature is not limited to a single universe:

Ni mirum cum naturalis ista divisio in omnibus universitatibus in infinitum uniformiter servetur.

*No wonder, for this division of nature persists uniformly throughout all the universes to infinity.*<sup>203</sup>

Commentators have noted this anticipation of Bruno's supposedly revolutionary proposal of infinite solar systems.<sup>204</sup> Toland subscribed to the same notion in the *Pantheisticon*:

There are other innumerable Earths, making their revolutions ... about their own Suns.<sup>205</sup>

But infinity can also be conceived of in the opposite direction, for in the same work he also remarks on

*a Reproduction of Things into their own Parts, which can be cut and*

201. J. Kerrigan, *Archipelagic English: Literature, History, and Politics 1603–1707* (Oxford, 2008), Chap. 12.

202. J. Toland, *Pantheisticon ...* (Cosmopoli, 1720), 21, and (London, 1751), 33.

203. I. Sheldon-Williams and L. Bieler, *Iohannis Scotti Eriugena Periphyseon, Liber III* (Dublin, 1981), 621 A, 30–31.

204. D. Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena* (Cambridge, 1989), 259–60.

205. Toland, *Pantheisticon* (1720), 21–22, and (1751), 34.

divided *in infinitum*, inasmuch as the minutest Thing in Nature can suffer a Division.<sup>206</sup>

Toland further believed motion was essential to matter.<sup>207</sup> If matter is infinitely divisible and in motion, then the implication is that every part of it is imbued with some kind of life. Toland had studied in Edinburgh when David Gregory was teaching Newtonian physics there and Toland very probably read Newton's *Principia* under Gregory's direction.<sup>208</sup> He accepted and was one of the first to spread abroad Newton's physics, but described Newton's definition of matter as 'sluggish, inactive, brute and stupid', arguing that there was more than one interpretation that could be put on Newton's theories.<sup>209</sup> Others have commented upon Toland's criticism of Newton.<sup>210</sup> It would seem that Newton responded to that criticism by drafting a twenty-third query for the revised 1706 Latin edition of his *Opticks*, which reads,

It seems to have been an ancient opinion that matter depends upon a Deity for its laws of motion as well as for its existence. These are passive laws and to affirm that there are no others is to speak against experience ... all matter duly formed is attended with signs of life.<sup>211</sup>

However, Newton never published this draft, perhaps concerned that he might be seen as guilty of pantheistic heresies. Probably for similar reasons, he modified Query 28 of the 1706 edition of his *Opticks*, changing God as comprehending the 'Very Things ... entirely and immediately Present within Himself' to 'and comprehends them wholly by their immediate presence to Himself ...'<sup>212</sup> That change from 'within' to 'to' is in essence a reversion from a pantheist to a panentheist position.

David Gregory noted Newton's doubts:

His doubt was whether he should put the last Quare thus. *What the space*

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206. Toland, *Pantheisticon* (1720), 21–22, and (1751), 60.

207. J. Toland, *Letters to Serena* (London, 1704).

208. See McGuinness, 'Newton, Toland, Science and the Status Quo', in McGuinness, Harrison and Kearney, eds, *John Toland's Christianity not Mysterious* (Dublin, 1997), 315, referencing Jacobs in an endnote.

209. See McGuinness, 'Newton, Toland, Science and the Status Quo', in McGuinness, Harrison and Kearney, *John Toland's Christianity not Mysterious*, 316.

210. R. Vermij, 'Matter and Motion: Toland and Spinoza', in Bunge and Klever, eds, *Disguised and Overt Spinozism around 1700* (Leiden, 1996), 285.

211. Quoted in McGuinness, 'The Hue and Cry of Heresy', *History Ireland* (Winter 1996), 24.

212. Quoted in McGuinness, 'Newton, Toland, Science and the Status Quo', in McGuinness, Harrison and Kearney, *John Toland's Christianity not Mysterious*, 317–18.

*that is empty of body is filled with.* The plain truth is, he believes God to be omnipresent in the literal sense ...<sup>213</sup>

Given that Toland's radical views were in part derived from reading Giordano Bruno's *Lo Spaccio de la Bestia Trionfante* 1584 ('The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast'), this was indeed dangerous territory<sup>214</sup> – the Roman Catholic Church had burned Bruno to death in the Campo De' Fiori in Rome. It was the same speculative territory which was eventually to lead to Einstein's theory of the relativity of time and space, which Einstein himself described as 'pantheistic', adding Spinoza's name in brackets.<sup>215</sup> In Toland's view, Spinoza failed adequately to define motion, leaving the promptings of God as the only explanation for matter being set in motion while, for Toland, motion was essential to its very existence.<sup>216</sup>

If Newton, perhaps reluctantly, sidestepped the issue of motion being essential to matter, and therefore, in the mind of a Robert Kirk at least, having life within it, there were others in Scotland who were also attempting to deal with the same issue. Alexander Malcolm in his *A Treatise of Musick*, published in Edinburgh in 1721, comes close to admitting motion as being essential to matter, in order to explain the nature of sound:

But observe that it is the insensible Motion of these Particles next to the smallest, which is supposed to be the immediate Cause of Sound; and of these, only those next the Surface can communicate with the Air; their Motion is performed in very small Spaces, and with extreme Velocity; the Motion of the Whole, or of the greater Parts being no further concerned than as they contribute to the other.<sup>217</sup>

Malcolm bases his ideas upon those of the Perrault brothers, especially Claude, but more relevant here is how these ideas are extended in the hortatory verses of Joseph Mitchell, published at the start of Malcolm's *Treatise* – verses which show clearly that he had read the *Treatise*. In the following extracts, it is evident that *Musick* provided the motion essential to bring order to Matter and, significantly, that it is *Musick* that maintains that motion at a cosmic as well as a local level:

At *Musick's* sweet prevailing Call,  
Thro' boundless Realms of Space,

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213. A. R. Hall, *All Was Light* (Oxford, 1995), 151.

214. McGuinness, 'The Hue and Cry of Heresy', 24–25.

215. A. Paterson, *The Infinite Worlds of Giordano Bruno* (Springfield, 1970), 47–49.

216. J. Toland, *Letters to Serena* (London, 1704), 134ff. *Lettres Philosophiques, Quatrieme Lettre* (London, 1768), 177–81.

217. A. Malcolm, *A Treatise of Musick* (Edinburgh, 1721), 6.



The Atoms danc'd, obsequious all,  
 And, to compose this wondrous Ball,  
 In Order took their Place.  
 How did the Piles of Matter part,  
 And huddled Nature from her Slumber start?

...

*Musick*, the best of Arts divine,  
 Maintains the Tune it first began,  
 And makes ev'n Opposites combine  
 To be of Use to Man.  
 Discords with tuneful Concords move  
 Thro' all the spacious Frame;  
*Below* is breath'd the Sound of Love,  
 While mystick Dances shine *Above*,  
 And *Musick's* Power to nether World proclaim.  
 What various Globes in proper Spheres,  
 Perform their great Creator's Will?  
 While never silent, never still,  
 Melodiously they run,  
 Unhurt by Chance, or Length of Years,  
 Around the central Sun.<sup>218</sup>

Mitchell's verses anticipate and embellish Malcolm's historical and scientific approach which contains sections such as 'The Arithmetick of Ratios geometrical; or of the Composition and Resolution of Ratios'.<sup>219</sup> It may well be relevant to point out that George Campbell (see above) studied under Alexander Malcolm at Aberdeen Grammar School from 1729–1734.<sup>220</sup> Malcolm's neo-Pythagorean reassertion of the concept of the Music of the Spheres was certainly not peculiar to Celtic Christian thought, but does appear to be markedly characteristic – indeed, in the Gàidhealtachd, proverbial:

Thig crìoch air an t-saoghal  
 Ach mairidh gaol is ceòl.

*The world will come to an end  
 But love and music will endure.*

218. Malcolm, *A Treatise of Musick*, stanzas II and IV, iv and v.

219. Malcolm, *A Treatise of Musick*, stanzas II and IV, iv and 117ff.

220. J. Sudeman, *Orthodoxy and Enlightenment: George Campbell in the Eighteenth Century* (McGill, 2001), 14.

Despite his comment on Newton, it is not clear whether David Gregory had pantheistic leanings himself. The Mathematical Gregorys were originally MacGregors, descended from MacGregor of Roro. We do not have any evidence that they were themselves Gaelic speakers, though Professor Turnbull wrote of them,

But change of name could not alter their nature; and nothing that civilization, learning, wealth or society could do to modify their disposition was entirely able to eradicate the fighting spirit inherited from their Highland forefathers.<sup>221</sup>

Both David and his uncle James were in regular correspondence with Newton and the same has been asserted of the Rev. Colin Campbell (1644–1726), who was certainly conversant with and supportive of Newton's work, corresponding with James Gregory, Colin McLaurin (1698–1746) and John Craig.<sup>222</sup> Campbell had learnt Gaelic and was an enthusiastic supporter of Edward Lhwyd, for whom he wrote a commendatory poem.<sup>223</sup> Campbell's own writings were naturally directed against what was conceived as atheism, but the fact that he was deeply absorbed in the mystical works of Pierre Poiret (1646–1719) suggests something more complex. For example, Campbell's attitude to the problem of evil might be taken as having a connection (conscious or otherwise) with Scotus Eriugena:

Defect or evil is not a thing, but the want of a thing, and as such is nothing, and nothing is not producible. Infinite power only can preserve a thing which is drawn out of nothing from falling again to nothing; and therefore evil cannot be said to be produced by the Creator, but is a tendency and relapse towards nothing in the creature, and so is not a production by God, but a defection in the creature.<sup>224</sup>

It is likely that he knew the material in the Glenmasan Manuscript which was in the hands of his namesake and near neighbour, Robert Campbell, a forester in Cowal who, like the Rev. Colin Campbell, wrote a commendatory

221. H. Turnbull, ed., *James Gregory Tercentenary Memorial Volume* (London, 1939), 2.

222. It is not known whether Campbell communicated with John Keill (1671–1721), another Scottish Newtonian who asserted Newton's prior claims to the invention of calculus over those of Leibniz. Keill is credited with being the first to experimentally demonstrate some of Newton's conclusions.

223. D. Evans and B. Roberts, *Edward Lhwyd Archaeologica Britannica* (Aberystwyth, 2009), 74–78.

224. C. Campbell, 'Of the Trinity of Persons in the Unity of Essence', the second of two tracts privately printed by Professor Campbell Fraser in 1875 and 1876 (Edinburgh University Library, Dd 8.91, 9; original MS Dc 6.99).

poem for Edward Lhwyd.<sup>225</sup> Colin Campbell's works have yet to be studied but of his own application we can have little doubt, as on moonless nights he was known to lie on his back in the bed of the narrow and steep-sided Allt an Tiomban, the better to see the stars.<sup>226</sup>

Cailean MacLabhrainn – *anglice* Colin MacLaurin – was brought up at Kilmodan and Kilfinnan and was a highly influential Newtonian. McLaurin was the son of a minister and trained for the ministry, but his faith was not to be used by him as a way of avoiding scientific difficulties:

There may be those who assert that bodies try to reach each other not because of an impulse or external force, but as a result of a certain innate force. Others steadfastly take refuge in the immediate power of the supreme Author, but neither is the excessive haste of the latter to be approved, nor the disdain of the former who do not take note of so many testimonies of nature that the cause of gravity is obscure.<sup>227</sup>

#### THINGS AND WORDS

Aligning with this movement towards rational discussion of the nature of the universe was the parallel investigation of the linguistic and legendary past of the Gaels and their current social realities at the turn of the 18th century. If, for instance, we compare the approach of Toland with respect to motion being essential to matter, with the Rev. Robert Kirk we find that Kirk maintained of the Fairy belief that

nothing perisheth, but (as the Sun and Year) everie thing goes in a Circle, Lesser or Greater, and is renewed and refreshed in it's [sic] revolutiones, as 'tis another, That Every Body in the Creatione, moves, (which is a sort of Life:) and that nothing moves but what has another Animall moving on itt and so on, to the utmost minutest corpuscle that's capable to be a receptacle of Lyfe.<sup>228</sup>

Kirk seems to be reaching beyond the fixities of time and place. Time becomes a circle. And his exposition seems to suggest that space is infinitely

225. C. Ó Baoill, 'Robert Campbell, Forsair Choire an t-Sith', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* XXIII (2007), 57–84. D. MacKinnon, 'The Glenmasan Manuscript', *The Celtic Review* (1904–1905), 5.

226. Information from Brigadier John MacFarlane of Taynuilt.

227. I. Tweddle, ed. and trans., *MacLaurin's Physical Dissertations* (London, 2007), 100.

228. S. Sanderson, ed., *The Secret Common-wealth & a Short Treatise of Charms and Spels by Robert Kirk* (Cambridge, 1976), 55–56.

divisible and infinitely alive and that matter is necessarily imbued with motion. We can compare Kirk with Martin Martin:

The Land, and the Sea that encompasses it, produce many things useful and curious in their kind, several of which have not hitherto been mention'd by the Learned. This may afford the Theorist Subject of Contemplation, since every Plant of the Field, every Fiber of each Plant, and the least particle of the smallest insect, carries with it the Impress of its Maker; and if rightly consider'd, may read us Lectures of Divinity and Morals.<sup>229</sup>

This assertion of the importance of the study of nature has a long history in Celtic theology. It echoes Columbanus in his instructions to 'understand the creation, if you wish to know the Creator', asserting the omnipresence of the Creator, including every creature (*et omnem creaturam repleat*), 'creature' being a word derived obviously from the act of creation but, in modern understanding, applied to 'lower' forms of life. Here, then, is no clear hierarchy and Columbanus's experience of ocean travel gives force to his remarks:

Si quis ergo scire voluerit profundissimum divinae cognitionis pelagus, istud visibile ante, si possit, pervideat; et quanto minus cognoscere se noverit de his quae intra mare latent, tanto plus intelligat minora se scire posse de auctoris profunditate; et sicut debet, et decet, minus de creatore quam de creatura tractare praesumat: quia in majoribus idoneus esse non potest, qui prius minora non investigavit; et cui in minoribus non creditur, in majoribus quomodo credendum est? Qui enim, rogo, terrena ignorat, coelestia cur scrutatur?<sup>230</sup>

If then a man wishes to know the deepest ocean of divine understanding, let him first if he is able scan that visible sea, and the less he finds himself to understand of those creatures which lurk beneath the waves, the more let him realise that he can know less of the depths of its Creator; and as he ought and should, let him venture to treat less of Creator than of creature, since none can be competent in the greater if he has not first explored the less.

The same insistences arise in Scotus Eriugena's particular fondness for a quotation from Dionysius the Areopagite, which says,

229. M. Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (London, 1716; Edinburgh, 1981), ix–x.

230. Migne, *Patrologiae Tomus LXXX* (1850): S. Columbanus Abbatis, 251–52.

The knowledge of things that are is the things that are.<sup>231</sup>

Martin also wrote:

We study Things there more than Words ...<sup>232</sup>

For Columbanus, Dionysius, Eriugena and the more modest Martin, 'the Impress of its Maker' allows the material world its share of divinity. When Martin made that assertion in the late 17th century, he did so from the position of a native Gaelic speaker, and as one who had travelled throughout the Gàidhealtachd as a reporter. He was, in a sense, a social scientist and, as a consequence, his empirical approach could no more ignore recording evidence related to second sight than it could the state of the tides in the Outer Isles. Toland describes the Highlanders in not dissimilar terms to Martin:

... the ignorance of vices has had a better effect upon them, than the knowledge of Philosophy upon politer nations. They owe everything to nature.<sup>233</sup>

As for Kirk, it is significant that he attributes his unorthodox ideas to the equally unorthodox fairies, but they are being transmitted to us by an educated divine at a time when such notions were decidedly risky. *The Secret Commonwealth* was written in 1692. Scotland had recently hung a philosophy student in the person of Thomas Aikenhead in 1687 for his heretical utterances, and she had yet to execute her last witches in Inverness in 1706 – though witchcraft remained on the statute books until 1735, punishable by death.<sup>234</sup> But here we come to an interesting fact, namely that

In the Highlands, especially those parts outside the Kirk sessions system, and within the dominance of the clans there was no witch-hunting, or none that reached the records. Gaelic-speaking areas in general provided very few cases although Tain in Ross-shire was an exception to this.<sup>235</sup>

What this suggests is that, in the Gàidhealtachd there was either a greater acceptance of what might be called 'superstition' or else a more rational approach to human behaviour than that which subsisted closer to the centres of power,

231. Eriugena quotes this passage in the *Periphyseon* at 535C, 559B, and refers directly to it in 632D.

232. Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*, viii.

233. J. Toland, *A Critical History of the Celtic Religion and Learning, Containing an Account of the Druids ...* (Arbroath, 1819), 209–10.

234. C. Lerner, *Enemies of God – The Witch-hunt in Scotland* (London, 1981), 35.

235. Lerner, *Enemies of God – The Witch-hunt in Scotland*, 80.

particularly in the kirk. It is likely that *The Secret Commonwealth* was copied by Robert Campbell, referred to above.<sup>236</sup> Acceptance of belief in fairies and their putative origins in a pre-Lapsarian state survived in the tradition into modern times (see VI.1.b.). In such social contexts, we should not see Robert Kirk and Martin Martin as credulous, but rather as being on the same path of rational investigation of the evidence as were the Newtonians.

#### CONCLUSION

Lerner describes *The Secret Commonwealth* as 'a remarkable mixture of neo-Platonic science, Highland mythology and fantasy'.<sup>237</sup> It is interesting that Lerner picks up on the neo-Platonic element in Kirk's work, and in this she is followed by Henderson and Cowan, commenting on the quotation given above that 'Kirk's neo-platonism is in evidence here'.<sup>238</sup>

Such neo-Platonic thinking appears to be woven into the belief systems of the Gaelic-speaking west, not least in the church itself. The weave is not one consciously displayed; rather it is a recurrence of a general philosophical approach which was necessarily marginal because it verged on what was regarded as the heretical. For instance, in 1763 the Rev. Donald MacLeod (Theophilus Insulanus), having expatiated upon

these glorious bodies in the azure fields of aether, the sun, moon, and stars, with their daily and annual revolutions, in the self-same order of rotation,

wonders whether we might not be drawn to

the mythology of some of the ancients, who fancied these stupendous luminaries to be the tabernacles of certain intelligences.<sup>239</sup>

Instantly aware of the danger in which he has placed himself, he continues:

You are not to imagine, from the above paragraph, that I approve of the idolatrous errors of the Sabians, but that I think their mistake more pardonable, than to own no higher principle beyond what is material, and liable to dissolution. If one was to view the earth on which we tread, (in which there is not the leaf of a tree, or stone, without inhabitants); from the highest star visible to us, it would not appear bigger than an atom: And can we imagine those numberless systems that compose the universe, to

236. C. Ó Baoill, 'Robert Campbell, Forsair Choire an t-Sith', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* XXIII (2007), 57–84.

237. Lerner, *Enemies of God – The Witch-hunt in Scotland*, 33.

238. L. Henderson and E. Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief* (East Linton, 2001), 186ff.

239. Theophilus Insulanus (the Rev. Donald MacLeod), *Treatise on the Second Sight* (Edinburgh, 1763), 45.



be void of inhabitants, imbued with souls proper to their state and size; and only made for our sakes, that are so inconsiderable a part of the creation.<sup>240</sup>

The above passage has echoes of Kirk and posits the existence of other inhabited earths in a manner which echoes Bruno, but which has its roots in much earlier philosophical writings such as Plotinus, whose work relates intimately to Eriugena's through Dionysius the Areopagite, and which was translated into Latin by Ficino (1433–1499). Bruno had read Plotinus and attributes knowledge of Plotinus to Dickson.<sup>241</sup> Plotinus's *Enneads* were ultimately translated into the most beautiful of philosophical English by the Irish scholar Stephen MacKenna.

Such neo-pantheistic leanings have never been far from the thoughts of Gaelic divines, even in the more orthodox atmosphere of 19th-century Protestantism. We have seen above how the Rev. John Hunt identified the Gaels as the quintessential metaphysicists. At the conclusion of his book on pantheism, he writes,

... Pantheism is a question of the right of reason to be heard in matters pertaining to religion.

Hunt goes on to conclude that to reject pantheism is unreasonable and would require us not just to give up

... Plato and Plotinus, Origen and Eriugena, Spinoza and Schleiermacher, but S. Paul and S. John, S. Augustine and S. Athanasius.

The context in which he is writing is important here; his polemic is aimed at those for whom revelation is the only essential:

To separate between reason and revelation is to put asunder what God hath joined together. To speak of their harmony is but to enunciate a truism, for revelation is made to reason – that is, it appeals to man as a moral and rational being.<sup>242</sup>

We do not know what connections this Perthshire man might have had with the Gàidhealtachd beyond his declared empathy, but his sense of the history of his subject and of its potential relationship to the Gaels is worth noting.

Though in a less overtly philosophical manner, there is much to suggest pantheistic leanings in the writings of the Rev. Donald Lamont (1874–1958) from Tiree:

240. Theophilus Insulanus, *Treatise on the Second Sight*, 45–46. The Sabians were a monotheistic sect who worshipped in the name of stellar angels.

241. References to Plotinus occur in Bruno's *De la Causa*, in the second and fourth dialogues – R. Blackwell and R. Lucca, eds, *Giordano Bruno* (Cambridge, 1998), 41, 76 and 81. See also S. MacKenna, trans. and ed., *Plotinus The Enneads* (London, 1962), VI.7, and esp. VI.7.11.

242. Hunt, *An Essay on Pantheism*, 379 and 381.

An uair a bha a' ghealag-làir a' cur a guib troimh an talamh bha an reodhadh cho cruaidh is gun saoiladh tu nach tigeadh a sròn gu bràth an uachdar, ach tha am braonan beag beatha a tha anns a' ghealag-làir air a tarraing as an lànachd beatha a tha ann an Dia ...

*When the snow-drop was pushing its little beak through the soil, the frost was so hard that you would never think its nose could reach the surface; but the little bud of life in the snow-drop is drawn from the fulness of life that is in God ...*<sup>243</sup>

Lamont takes this further in a passage which undermines the entire concept of any hierarchy of being:

Tha na h-ainmhidhean 'nan oighreachan air an talamh cho mhaith ri mac an duine, is tha còir as fheàrr aca air, ma tha aois a' daingneachadh còrach.

*The beasts are heirs to the earth as well as mankind, and they have a better right to it, if age/primogeniture confirms right.*<sup>244</sup>

Such thoughts seem to echo in words the wit and candour with which the artists of such as The Book of Kells portrayed the interactions between man and beast, each imbued with as much character as the other and frequently interlocked. These interactions find their place in the shape-changing myths which pervade Celtic mythology, and which find a more sober but no less marvellous place in centuries of Gaelic nature poetry.

A few years later we find the similarly named Rev. D. M. Lamond (quoted near the beginning of this section, and see [IV.1.a.](#)) reluctant to deny a place to anything 'under God's eye'. The reference to 'God's eye' has relevance to a movement which was fundamental to the Scottish Enlightenment and which remains significant in the Gàidhealtachd to this day: Freemasonry.

In [VI.1.a.](#), the connection between the origin myth of the Gaels and Freemasonry is touched on with respect to the Hamilton Mausoleum. Its central section is a perfect cube, thus recalling the perfect cube of the Holy of Holies in the Temple of Solomon. Solomon's Temple was reputedly built without the use of metal and it is said of *Cill an Iubhair* (Killneuir – the Chapel of the Yews) that the stones for its construction were dressed at Killevin so that the sounds of chisels and hammers would not be heard at *Cill an Iubhair* itself.<sup>245</sup>

There is only one belief requirement to become a Freemason and that is a belief in a Supreme Being or Divine Creator. Politics and religion may not be discussed

243. T. Murchison, ed., *Prose Writings of Donald Lamont 1874–1958*, SGTS Vol. 6 (1988), 7, translation by the author.

244. Murchison, *Prose Writings of Donald Lamont*, 15, translation by the author.

245. I. Bradley, *Argyll The Making of a Spiritual Landscape* (Edinburgh, 2015), 30.

in the Lodge. By 18th- and 19th-century standards, this fundamental religious tolerance would appear to embody the philosophy of the deists, John Toland being regarded as one of their leading representatives. However, the deistic antagonism to mystery and revelation would seem to lie uneasily with the rites of Freemasonry and its secret 'priestly' enactments, involving a strict hierarchy and with a long-established connection with the monarchy. It is therefore surprising to note that in Scotland Freemasonry is linked almost exclusively with Presbyterianism, whose system of government is designed to decentralise authority, with even the Moderator of the Church of Scotland holding office only for one year. This seemingly unlikely connection is further underlined by the fact that the Church of Scotland does not regard Freemasonry as compatible with Christianity. The grounds of objection historically have been 'secrecy, gnosticism, deism, the deliberate exclusion of the name of Jesus Christ from Craft Freemasonry prayers, justification by works, and syncretism.'<sup>246</sup>

'Justification by works' can be seen as another form of Pelagianism, as the individual is deemed to have the free will and the ability to choose to be like Christ. It would seem, then, that there were (and are) many people in the Gàidhealtachd willing to compromise the orthodoxy of their Christianity by their membership of Freemasonic lodges. This need not imply that they were themselves inclined to deism – that would be to misrepresent the inclusive ideals of Freemasonry – but it does indicate a willingness to associate with an institution more theologically open-minded than that of the established church of Scotland and its off-shoots in the form of Free Presbyterians.

With respect to Gaelic, a Gaelic-speaking lodge was founded in 1878 and meetings are still occasionally held in Gaelic. To this potential flexibility or inclusiveness, one might add such instances as that of Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, or the Rev. Duncan Blair (1815–1893) who emigrated from Cowal to Nova Scotia and, despite his evangelicism, published articles on the seer Coinneach Odhar (see I.1.a.) and, by virtually personifying Ailsa Craig and Niagara in poetry, continued in a long-standing Gaelic tradition of animating the landscape. More recently, one might find such openness in the ecumenism of John Baillie or of Murdo Ewen Macdonald (1914–2004) – 'Padre Mac' – of Harris.<sup>247</sup>

Macdonald was as rational and down-to-earth a theologian as one could wish for, but he was also driven by personal Hebridean experience to pronounce on the limitations of a mechanistic view of the universe:

... of this I am absolutely certain, the perversity of modern physics and the evidence for psychic communication may not have a profound religious

246. J. Scott, 'Freemasons', in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh, 1993), 340.

247. Murdo Ewen MacDonald, *Padre Mac* (Edinburgh, 2014).

significance, but between them they have utterly discredited an old fashioned materialism and a Newtonian mechanistic universe.<sup>248</sup>

That remarkable polymath, Norman Morrison of Shawbost went so far in 1932 as to ask,

... are we sure that we are to-day absolutely free from paying homage to myths and fables? Can we afford to speak of our ancestors as being simple, foolish and childish for their beliefs in the occult, and for worshipping at the shrine of omens and natural phenomena?<sup>249</sup>

Such tolerance, not least from a man of science as was Morrison, carries with it shades of Kirk's interest in the paranormal, Martin's readiness to report such things and Daniel Dewar's attitude to the evidence for miracles, all referred to above. With a slightly different sense of history and on the subject of matter and spirit, Murdo Ewen Macdonald questioned the tacit assumption that religion's proper sphere was the spiritual and politics' proper sphere the physical. His views on this form of dualism are not only informed by his real life experiences as a POW and as a parish minister, but also by his theological understanding:

The divorce between the spiritual and the secular has its roots deep in antiquity. It goes back to the Manichean heresy with which the great Augustine for a time flirted. It was the belief that the spirit was good and that the body was bad. Persian in origin, in due course it penetrated Christianity. It became so powerful and pervasive that some of the early Church Fathers were openly hostile to sex. Origen got himself castrated .... The Manichean heresy, the exaltation of man's spirit and the denigration of his body is still with us. It sits in every pew in every church in the land. Right wing and Left wing governments are about equally hostile to clerics meddling in politics. This was true of Stalin and Hitler. It is also true of Mrs Margaret Thatcher.<sup>250</sup>

Well into the 20th century, the Church of Scotland still adhered to its Calvinist roots but, just as its representatives were prepared to question those roots from at least the early 18th century, so were they open to its re-evaluation in the 19th and 20th centuries. The proverb quoted above, and repeated below, is often used on gravestones. It was engraved on a bronze plaque left by Donald Baillie to his brother John Baillie, and by John Baillie to Murdo Ewen Macdonald, all three 20th-century theologians, all three sons of the manse and deeply influenced by Gaelic

248. M. E. Macdonald, *Padre Mac: The Man from Harris* (Stornoway, [1992]), 190.

249. N. Morrison, *Mythology and Folklore of Lewis* (Stornoway, 1932), 11.

250. Macdonald, *Padre Mac: The Man from Harris*, 185–86.

culture, though the Baillie brothers were not regular speakers of Gaelic, unlike Macdonald, who was a fluent native speaker.<sup>251</sup>

Thig crìoch air an t-saoghal  
Ach mairidh gaol is ceòl.

*The world will come to an end  
But love and music will endure.*

The same proverb appears on two memorial windows to the Rev. Kenneth MacLeod, one in Gigha's parish church and one in Iona Abbey.

The proverb goes beyond the theology of the immortality of the soul. It avoids the individual. Love and music are manifestations of our humanity, but they are beyond the individual reckonings and judgement that are supposed to come with the world's end. In keeping that proverb cast in bronze close to their hearts, these men looked beyond the strictures of their theology without having to turn against it. It is suggested here that their gentle piety and their



Detail of Gigha Kirk memorial window for Kenneth MacLeod. [The Church of Scotland](#)

251. See D. Fergusson, ed., *Essays on John Baillie and Donald Baillie*, Chap. 16.

inclusive (and frequently ecumenical) approaches are in part the product of their Gaelic cultural roots. Others have made such suggestions:

I think that Ronald Gregor Smith was correct in his judgment when he wrote that 'for all his air of rational caution, John Baillie was a Celtic mystic.' When Baillie argues that God is known as presence rather than by inference, and when he tells us that this presence is 'mediated immediacy', mediated, that is to say, by persons, things and events within the world, then he is stating in theological language the basic conviction underlying Celtic spirituality.<sup>252</sup>

This sense of the immanence of the divine, of a sense that any division between spirit and matter might not be so very great, does not necessarily embarrass rationality with anything more mystical than does a belief in a Divine Creator. The Gaelic philosophers cited above were profound thinkers, several with international reputations as theologians in their own lifetimes and today. Theirs was not the theology of a misapprehended Celtic sentimentalism. Rather it was their quiet courage which found a place for a wider vision than that which they were obliged to express in words, usually in a foreign language, and within the belief systems of a church which they had no desire to distress.

But perhaps it is best to leave such matters to the world of fiction – if such it be – here from the pen of George MacDonald Fraser:

Occasionally there would be an accident, as when the padre, his Hebridean paganism surging up through his Calvinistic crust, swung into the MO, and the latter, his construction undermined by drink and peering through microscopes, mistimed him and received him heavily amidships. The padre simply cried: 'The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!' and danced on ...<sup>253</sup>

JP

### VI.3. STRUCTURE

#### VI.3.a. CONTINUITIES

This book takes its title from a boarded-up window, excluding light and view and symbolising the Clearances, emigration and loss. The imagery of broken physical and social structures has dominated the visual vocabulary of the Gàidhealtachd in recent years, such as a wrecked ship in MacLean's 'An Saothach' and a ruinous landscape of shattered symbolism in Calum Colvin's depictions of Ossian. These

252. MacQuarrie, *Paths in Spirituality*, 124.

253. G. Fraser, *The General Danced at Dawn* (London, 1970), 79.



and their more populist counterparts were a necessary corrective to a historical and cultural narrative which had ignored the stark realities of loss implicit in cultural imperialism. It has been our aim to bring new light to the visual culture of the Gàidhealtachd, but our starting point was also in the dark, with the significance of the physical reality of darkness and light at 57 degrees north, and with the bardic and shamanistic practices referred to in Sight Unseen, such as composing in the dark and *imbas forosnai*.

These practices reflect a readiness to empty the mind to allow something else, a deeper inspiration, to enter from within or beyond the self; they share a common Indo-European root: the Upanishads and Vedas of a much earlier date which also describe the universal principle, Brahman, in terms of negatives. In the Christian religion, the understanding of such practices takes the name of the *via negativa*.

The Cappadocian Fathers had taught in the 4th century that the Creator transcends the Creation and that the essence (*ousia*) of God is unknowable and that He can be known only through his energies (*energeia*). In his sermon 'Concerning the faith', Columbanus, in the 6th century, compares God to an ocean that we cannot cross or fathom (see VI.2. for quotation). It is fruitless to attempt to seek him out intellectually. In recommending faith, confession and examination of the Creation as our only help, he makes a strong link between the *via negativa* and an attention to the natural world as seen in the hermetic practices of his own early Gaelic church, both in Culdee settlements and in the practice of penitential voyaging, later to form the basis of the voyage literature.<sup>254</sup>

We have made the connection in our arguments that the pagan background of Gaelic culture led to an enduring respect for the sacredness of, and consequent affinity with, nature, apparent for example in stories of saints' compassion to animals and the companionship afforded to Suibne by trees and even water. For all that Suibne is a lone crazed figure in a wilderness, his ultimate redemption is essential. Christianity, be it St Kentigern's in Glasgow or St Moling's in County Waterford, had to find its way to accepting or incorporating what Suibne represents. His is the madness of the poet; the darkness of his mind is his inspiration. St Moling saves not only Suibne's soul, but also his poetry.

The *via negativa* finds a parallel methodology in the work of Eriugena, whose view of nature also included the spirit: God does not stand outside Creation but is an integral part thereof. Alexander Dickson, centuries later in his *De Umbra Rationis et Iudicii* (On The Shadow of Reasoning and Judgement), approached the study of memory, which he associated in particular with the druids, from a similar viewpoint. In the 21st century, the *via negativa* was a fundamental

<sup>254</sup>. Sermons of Columbanus, CELT: Corpus of Electronic Texts: a project of University College, Cork: <<https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T201053.html>>. See also VI.2.

element in the mixed media work *Re-Soundings* by Mhairi Killin and Hugh Watt, working between the cataphatic and apophatic, positive and negative, of sound and silence, darkness and light, a late medieval twenty-four hour sundial from Iona measuring that which it cannot measure.<sup>255</sup>

The concept of *energeia* relates directly to the significance of motion as essential to matter which we have demonstrated in the writings of Gaelic thinkers in A Celtic Philosophical Thread? (VI.2.) This sense of motion and of controlled dynamic has its necessary visual consequences which, we have proposed, exhibit continuities from the Stone Age to the 21st century, notably in spirals, S-curves and asymmetry. Their survival, be it in the form of buildings, standing stones, crosses, carved stone balls, brooches with charm stones, bells, even fabric, is remarkable in the extent to which these can still be seen as active parts of the culture, and particularly in its most visible manifestations.

Examples of La Tène styles of workmanship – 'decoration' is scarcely an appropriate term – in which that which is shaped is no more important than that which is not shaped can be found from as early as c. 500 BC on the Isle of Skye with a [fragment of worked bronze](#) typical of the style.<sup>256</sup> The [Torrs Pony Cap](#) and the [Deskford carnyx](#) are more recent well-known examples, and the swirling lines of '[mirror style](#)' art, where the negative space is as important as the positive space, parallel the distinction between being and non-being, knowing and un-knowing, light and dark, of the *via negativa*. Similar contrasts are seen on the blank panels between intricately decorated areas on scabbards, stone carving and book illumination.

These aesthetic choices are inherent in the illuminated pages of the great Gospel books produced in Iona. The S-forms of La Tène art command negative space and imply movement and the [Chi-Rho page](#) in the Book of Kells gives as much attention to the parts that are not the letters as to those which are. The dynamism in the rotational designs of early Celtic manuscripts can be seen as representing the conception of God as energy in the universe. When Carl Nordenfalk wrote of the 'kinetic effects' of Hiberno-Saxon art (see IV.3.c.), he contrasted them with the relative stasis of 'Classical decorative art'.<sup>257</sup>

The exuberance of such 'kinetic' work is often derived from a small repertoire of techniques. A study of the basic structures of the most apparently complex

<sup>255</sup>. Mhairi Killin and Hugh Watt, *Re-Soundings*, with music by John Purser (Stornoway, 2016). Note especially the Introduction by Ruairidh Moireach, and the essays 'Dè Seòrsa Fuaim a tha a' Tighinn à Tùr-Cluig Falamh?' (What is the Sound of an Empty Belfry Chiming?) by Alastair McIntosh and 'Mac-Talla na Samhchaire' (Echoes of Silence) by John Purser.

<sup>256</sup>. The fragment is identified as HP0067. The final report has yet to be completed.

<sup>257</sup>. C. Nordenfalk, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting* (London, 1977), 17.

artworks often reveals a virtuosic application of a few basic motifs, such as spirals and interlace, involving the structural techniques of rotation, inversion, transposition and geometrical proportion. Rotation, inversion and transposition were all techniques employed in both the structure and use of ogam (see II.3.c.), and these techniques were, and continue to be, used in a variety of artistic disciplines. For example, a tartan set is produced by a disposition of different coloured threads rotated and interwoven. The disposition itself is symmetrical, one half mirroring the form of the other or, to express this in musical terms, the second half being a retrograde of the first. We have shown that tartan weave was, to the Romans, iconic of the Caledonians, giving us direct evidence of nearly two thousand years for the use of these basic structural preferences. Similar techniques are used in the construction of *piobaireachd*, for which see IV.3.b.<sup>258</sup>

In the free heterophony of Gaelic psalm singing, although all the singers are essentially following the same basic melodic line, they do so with a degree of independence which has an effect very similar to that of interlace. In the latter, two or more identical lines interweave their identical wave patterns. It is precisely these interweaving techniques which 20th-century Scottish composers have used in attempting to imitate Gaelic psalm singing, both in instrumental and vocal music.<sup>259</sup>

The result is that maximal variety is produced from minimal resources using techniques which emphasise the interconnected and interwoven nature of things, a dynamic order which finds its most natural expression in a pantheistic rather than a hierarchical approach to existence. The many depictions of people and animals, both in illuminated manuscripts and stone carving from the Gàidhealtachd, are not so much concerned with verisimilitude as they are with their incorporation into the patterns of the overall work of art. Creatures, people and words are frequently extended into each other, their body parts and uncials interwoven. Often it is through a humorous eye that we see them, the different species treated equally, without fear or favour.

The significance of the circle in structural and symbolic terms has been asserted in a variety of contexts throughout this work. These include architecture, ritual, music, dance, literature and the symbol of the cross, and are perhaps ultimately reflected in the concept of time. The architectural evidence ranges from Stone Age circles and burial cairns, through Bronze Age wheelhouses with their demonstrable relationship with the circularity of time, to crannogs and

258. Meg Bateman and John Purser, 'Uinneag dhan Àird an Iar: Leanailteachd crutha ann an dùthchas nan Gàidheal', in McLeod, Gunderloch and Dunbar, eds, *Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 8* (Edinburgh, 2016), 1–29. For a summary in English, see IV.3.b.

259. *Salm* (1978) by Lyell Cresswell and *Salm an Fhearainn* (1987) by William Sweeney and Aonghas MacNeacail are outstanding examples.

brochs in use into modern times. The more humble inheritors of these, the ruins of which survive in their hundreds, are the shielings in use well into the twentieth century.

Circular structures are widely evident in Celtic Christian culture. The roundness of the world was described by Colum Cille in his 'Altus Prosatur' from the 6th century, probably self-evident in his own observation of the circular horizon of the sea:

Magni Dei virtutibus appenditur dialibus  
globus terrae et circulus abyssi magnae inditus.

*By the divine powers of the great God is hung  
The globe of the earth, and the circle of the great deep placed about it.*<sup>260</sup>

Celtic Christian graveyards and monastic enclosures are defined by their circularity, as are cashels and beehive huts. As for Christianity's central symbol, the Celtic Cross is found in profusion throughout Scotland and is defined by its addition of the circle.

While the related form of the spiral does not notably feature architecturally, it is prominent in artwork from the megalithic tomb builders through to the 17th century and, in the 20th, present in the work of the Scottish artist Kate Whiteford. The symbolism of the spiral also offers alternatives to the straightforward linear account of the Judaic origin myth. That myth, with which the Bible opens, was imported into the Gàidhealtachd with the Christian faith. It unites both the creation of peoples and of place. Since the majority of the evidence available to us on this subject was written by Christians, one might expect it to figure prominently. On the other hand, many aspects of pre-Christian culture are manifest in the literature, but, in the words of John Carey,

In seeking to understand the pre-Christian background of Irish civilisation we must consider, side by side with the insights afforded by the comparative study of Indo-European, the possible influence of the mysterious but impressive culture of the megalith-builders.<sup>261</sup>

The megalith builders were at least as pre-eminent in Scotland as in Ireland, sharing many styles and techniques, so we may take Carey's comment to apply equally to Scotland, especially as the Gàidhealtachd shares the same mythology within the same Indo-European context. If Carey is right, then the visual significance of the megaliths cannot be ignored. A continuity of their significance

260. Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* (Edinburgh, 1995) 48–49.

261. J. Carey, 'Time, Memory, and the Boyne Necropolis', in W. Mahon, ed., *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* Vol. X (1990), 30.

and influence has been posited in [IV.1.c](#). In support of these significances is the testimony of art in the Gàidhealtachd across millennia. Françoise Henry, ‘the great interpreter of insular Celtic art’,<sup>262</sup> has emphasised this significance, not merely in terms of art, but in terms of belief. Her concluding comments assert that to try and grasp the real significance of Celtic art,

... one has to keep in mind the fact that it still embodies in the Early Middle Ages a persistent prehistoric tradition ... Just as the sculptor of New Grange and the man who carved the Turoe stone interfered as little as possible with the shape of the boulders they were covering with spirals, so the monastic artists long hesitated to deprive their pillars of their natural irregularities ... Their notion of human representation proceeded from the same point of view.<sup>263</sup>

A prime example in Scotland of such representation with minimal intervention is the family of river-carved stones at Taigh nam Bodach representing a human family, and objects such as the [Ballachulish Goddess](#), which might be described as primitive, can also be seen as examples of minimal intervention. Henry sees these characteristics as representative of an alternative world view:

He [man] had not fully accepted the world as something distinct from himself, to be treated objectively ... he establishes certain relations between things, regardless of the normal sequence of cause and effect, and believes that man can alter the normal course of things, reverse it to his will. For an Irishman of the eighth century there were relations between the different parts of the world, between living beings of all kinds and even inanimate things which we, with our scientific categories, are no longer able to understand.<sup>264</sup>

Given the manifest interconnectedness of word and image throughout such books as *The Book of Kells*, it is disappointing that Kim McCone’s *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* does not include Henry’s work in the bibliography, nor does it make any serious reference to the visual arts. The literature, one might assert, should not be considered in such isolation. Nor need we confine these deductions to the experiences of ‘an Irishman of the eighth century’. Henry’s comments could as readily be applied to Pictish stone carving, especially with respect to the Class I stones, many of which are undressed, and to stones said to have healing and other magical properties.

This respect for the organic realities re-emerges in the work of a number of

262. R. and V. Megaw, *Celtic Art* (London, 1996), 6.

263. Henry, *Irish Art*, 203–04.

264. Henry, *Irish Art*, 210–11.

modernist artists such as Mainie Jellett in Ireland and J. D. Fergusson in Scotland, both thoroughly aware of their Celtic and specifically Gaelic inheritance. We have quoted Jellett in [II.1.a](#), with her insistence on a ‘complete organic structure ... controlled by whatever medium the artist chose to employ’. The actual techniques used by Jellett and her contemporaries, Evie Hone and Albert Gleizes, they described as ‘translation and rotation’, paralleling techniques to which we have drawn attention above.

Likewise, we may remind ourselves of Fergusson’s organic vision:

I painted ‘Rose Rhythm’ – going from the very centre convolutions to her nostril, lips, eyebrows, brooch, buttons, background, cushions, right through. At last this was my statement of a thing thoroughly Celtic.<sup>265</sup>

Fergusson’s statement gives equal visual emphasis to the animate and inanimate and, in using the word ‘convolutions’, involves the concept of rotation.

Jellett’s and Fergusson’s search for a visual vocabulary inspired by Celtic art was a search which looked westward rather than back to the comparatively static Greek and Roman classical ideals which dominated so much of European art. Jack Yeats saw it more in terms of a journey:

It was an honour to think that every step was a step nearer the west. Where I am I always want to walk to the west. As well as from a desire to get to an ocean coast, from a wish to be going with the sun.<sup>266</sup>

If you follow the sun you reach Hy Brazil or Tìr nan Òg. The concept of a Land of Youth, floating in the western ocean, is a fantasy of long standing in Gaelic culture, but it is based upon visual realities. Mirages are commonplace and islands are frequently seen ‘floating’, their apparent distances and heights dramatically altered by the bending of light. McTaggart’s vision of Tìr nan Òg is called *Summer Sundown, Tìr nan Òg* and was painted in 1880 (overpage). There is nothing fey about this work. For McTaggart, Tìr nan Òg was in the west of Scotland where he was, on a beach looking westward and, as ever, it is primarily a painting of the sea and sky mirroring each other.

Jack Yeats’s vision of *A Blackbird Bathing in Tìr-nan-Òg* is of a different sort, but it also celebrates nature. A human, perhaps of this world, perhaps of the pre-Lapsarian Otherworld, is lying on his or her front, head supported by the right hand, elbow on the ground. In front, at no distance whatever, a blackbird is bathing with total abandon in a tiny pool in a steep and lovely stream issuing from a large pool above. It is an extraordinary image of the potential oneness of man and nature.

265. Margaret Morris, *The Art of J. D. Fergusson* (Perth, 2010), 98–99.

266. Yeats, Jack, Letter to Padraic Colum (26 June 1918), Berg Collection, NYPL.





McTaggart, *The Paps of Jura* (1902). © Tate Britain / CC-BY-NC-ND

*The Paps of Jura*, by McTaggart painted in 1902, is described by Duncan MacMillan in terms similar to the present authors' understanding:

The mountains of Jura on the horizon are only an incident in the blue distance ... The transience of the waves and the permanence of geology have become equal. Existentially their substance does not differ. All the careful differentiations of the qualities of matter that were such an important preoccupation to the philosophers of empiricism dissolve in a description of experience as continuum or flux. The artist carries to its logical conclusion the removal of the distinction between seeing and knowing that follows Reid's account of the nature of intuition. He responds immediately to experience with action and his painting becomes gesture. McTaggart, like Monet, but drawing on his own intellectual and artistic traditions, reaches through the conventional vision of contemporary painting to an independent and authentic statement of western self-perception at the threshold of modernism.<sup>267</sup>

Self-perception, maybe, but expressed in an unorthodox manner, for there is not a single human being in this painting and the artist's self-perception is not evident at all. What is evident is the absence of self-perception or the sublimation of the part in the whole. There is no ego at work here. It is the *via negativa* of self-

267. D. MacMillan, *Scottish Art* (Edinburgh, 1990), 252.

perception. The painting is virtuosic, but only because it has to be to deal with such a subject; it has no interest in impressing for its own sake. This is a painting of the utmost humility in its homage to its subject matter – the western seaboard of the Gaels.

MB & JP

### VI.3.b. CASE STUDY

We have chosen to conclude with a study covering the district of *Latharna* or Lorne, around Oban, Taynuilt and Loch Awe, Oban being the principal town, a major tourist centre and a place of many ferries, themselves a part of Highland and maritime history.<sup>268</sup> The study brings together and repeats information from previous sections, demonstrating visual continuities in geographical reality, mythology, artefacts and land use. There are, of course, discontinuities, but the extent of cultural continuity is remarkable and much of it finds visual expression.

The study also shows how a culture is mapped onto its landscape and how much of its significance would be lost with the loss of the culture. Every area in the Highlands would have thrown up a similar wealth of detail, even in areas no longer associated with the Gaelic culture. Michael Newton used Gaelic songs and stories to research the Gaelic past of the Lennox and Menteith.<sup>269</sup> Baldwin's work on Strathnaver, Alan Robertson on Tain and district, Calum MacFhearghais on St Kilda and Tim Neat's on the eastern Highlands similarly reconstruct the Gaelic past in areas where Gaelic is no longer spoken.<sup>270</sup> In Lorne, however, Gaelic is still in use.

The district is dominated by the massive granitic Cruachan range, and by three major bodies of water: the freshwater Loch Awe and the sea lochs Etive and Linnhe, the latter leading into the Firth of Lorne, to which the sheltered bay of *Ant-Oban* (the little bay) gives access. The name Cruachan tells us the mountain is conical and the sense of geological time is present in the proverb:

Teirigidh Cruachan Beann, gun dad a dhol ri 'cheann – *Ben Cruachan will waste away, if nothing be added to it.*<sup>271</sup>

Geological time is also expressed in the legend of the Cailleach Bheur who, in forgetting to cap the well on Cruachan one night, caused the flood which created Loch Awe.

268. Nick Robins and Donald Meek, *The Kingdom of MacBrayne* (Edinburgh, 2006).

269. Michael Newton, *Bho Chluaidh gu Calasraid* (Stornoway, 1999).

270. John R. Baldwin, *The Province of Strathnaver* (Edinburgh, 2000); Alan G. R. Robertson, *The Lowland Highlanders* (Tampa, 1970); Calum MacFhearghais, *Hiort: Far na laigh a' ghrian* (Stornoway, 1995); Timothy Neat, *When I was Young: Voices from lost communities in the Highlands and East Coast* (Edinburgh, 2000).

271. Alexander Nicolson, *Gaelic Proverbs* (Edinburgh, 1996), 395.

In Gaelic culture the mountains are not only geological presences, they are personalities, as in *Buachaille Èite Mòr* (The Big Shepherd of Etive) (see III.3.c. and VI.1.). As another proverb, suggestive of echoes, expresses it:

Freagraidh cruachan an iarraidh – *mountains respond to their enquiries.*<sup>272</sup>

Besides being on their standard, *Cruachan!* is the war cry of the Campbells and other clans, invoking the support of the mountain in battle, and the Cailleach Bheur was turned to stone for her forgetfulness and can be seen figured in the landscape.<sup>273</sup> Her story was to find celebrated expression in a sculpture by *Pomeroy*, in which she is depicted in her spring manifestation as a beautiful nymph, though she is also the supernatural hag whose soapsuds are the first snowflakes of winter.

Mythological past and visionary present come together at the Cruachan hydroelectric scheme on the north bank of Loch Awe. This is the site of the world's first pump storage scheme, with the generating turbines acting as pumps in both directions. The hydrology was scarcely understood at the time and the daring of the whole concept and its highly successful realisation drew international attention. Edward McColl of Dumbarton was the first with the concept and James Williamson the man who realised it. The mural in the main turbine chamber makes reference to the legend of the Cailleach Bheur and, symbolically, the pump storage scheme redresses her wrong – and was clearly so understood by its designers.

The deep underground machine hall of the Cruachan pumped-storage scheme (1960–5), for which 330,000 cubic yards of rock had to be blasted out, made a tremendous impression on many architects tending towards Modernism. In 1952, Basil Spence declared that the dams recalled 'the magnificence of Roman architecture'. But in the hierarchical world of traditionalism, it was rather the power stations which were exalted as noble works of architecture.<sup>274</sup>

Noble or magnificent, it is currently proposed to raise the height of the Cruachan dam and double the output of the scheme. Let us hope that the Cailleach Bheur attends to her duties.

Not all continuities are as fanciful. Carrick's Loch Awe-side war memorial is a cairn of Cruachan granite on which stands the figure of a soldier of the Argyll

272. The proverb is used in translation of MacPherson's *Temora* (Dublin, 1863), Book VI, 174.

273. R. A. Smith, *Loch Etive and the Sons of Uisnach* (London, 1879), 53–55. The story is verified in local tradition by Brigadier John MacFarlane, who got it from his mother – personal communication.

274. Glendinning, MacInnes and MacKechnie, *A History of Scottish Architecture from the Renaissance to the Present Day* (Edinburgh, 1996), 415–16.

and Sutherland Highlanders regiment, millions of years of adamantine geology allied to military valour. Likewise, the Neolithic cup and ring marked stone beside Carrick's war memorial at Oban, the standing stones deliberately placed beside Walter Campbell's late 19th-century St Conan's church, and the resiting and re-erection at Taynuilt of the fallen standing stone *Barra na Cabar* in honour of Lord Nelson all invoke the prehistoric in a modern context. The nearby furnace supplied Nelson with cannonballs. St Conan's church, incorporating many different styles from Norman to Romanesque, nevertheless makes reference to Celtic monasticism, not least through its dedicatee, a 7th-century Irish monk, but also in its loch-side setting, its cloisters (though a church of Scotland), its free-standing ringed cross outside the building, and a delight in nature evident in the many animal gargoyles and carvings that adorn the building.

To these deliberate integrations of past and present one may add the remarkable monument to the poet Duncan Ban MacIntyre above Dalmally, commanding an impressive view across Loch Awe. J. T. Rothead, the architect of the Wallace Monument, designed the MacIntyre memorial which was built in 1858 out of rough-hewn granite blocks, uniting classical form with prehistory. The foundation or plinth is rectangular but the main structure is circular: a henge of ten orthostats mounted on three circular steps and surmounted by lintels. Rothead was a pupil of David Bryce, whose work on the Hamilton Mausoleum brought to completion that iconic Masonic structure. Rothead's monument similarly presents a cylinder above a cube: a squaring of the circle or, given its obvious references to prehistoric stone circles, an assertion of circular time over linear time. The memorial is massive and arresting in its simplicity, and its symbolism is profound and truly worthy of the great poet it honours.

Duncan Ban MacIntyre was himself conscious of these mythological resonances, associating the 'stern and prickly thistle' with the wild boar that the Fenian hero Diarmid slew.<sup>275</sup> *Torr an Tuirc* above Lochnell, east of Oban, recalls the same legend. The hog-backed shape of the hill may have suggested the association, but there is also a standing stone nearby, known as *Clach Diarmuid*, where Diarmid is supposedly buried, having been fatally poisoned by the wild boar's bristles. To this day, the clans themselves relate to their mythological origins. The totemic animal of the Campbells is the wild boar. *Clach Diarmuid* is beside the 'Road of the kings' along which the dead monarchs of Scotland were carried on their way to be buried on Iona.

Just to the north of the road, the shores of Loch Etive were for many years home to Deirdre and Naoise with his two brothers – the sons of Uisneach. Deirdre of the Sorrows is well known through the eponymous play by J. M. Synge – amongst many tellings. In 1867, Alexander Carmichael took down the story in

275. MacLeod, *Orain Dhonnchaidh Bhàin*, 266–69, ll. 3932–3939.

Barra from John MacNeill and in the same year the lay, giving a different version, from Donald MacPhie.<sup>276</sup> The Frontispiece of *Deirdire* is by John Duncan and shows her head bent with grief and her black hair like a waterfall behind her interwoven hands. The sites of the dwellings of Deirdre and the sons of Uisneach are still readily identified and were lovingly visited and illustrated by Dr R. Angus Smith in 1879.<sup>277</sup> Among the sites are *Dùn Mac Uisneachan* and *Coille Naoise*, where Naoise used to hunt, and Deirdre's *Grianan* or summer house.

Deirdre and Naoise (Naisi) are said to revisit Loch Etive in the form of two swans and such shape-changing is implicit in many traditions. The chieftains of the Campbells of Lochnell – *Loch nan Eala* (The Loch of the Swans) – are known as 'Lochnell'. A bagpipe lament, 'Cumha Loch an Eala' (*sic*), remembers one of them in this manner, as does the song 'Òran do Oighre Loch-nan-Eala' for the heir General Campbell.<sup>278</sup> A swan is a supporter or crest in the arms of the Lochnell Campbells, for the loch itself is frequented by migratory swans. But there are older resonances here, for at its south-western shore there is a Bronze Age serpent-shaped burial mound from which the three peaks of Ben Cruachan can be seen.<sup>279</sup> Both swan and serpent are associated with Brigid, combining purity, fidelity and the coming of spring, as evocatively painted by John Duncan in *The Coming of Bride* (1917). But the view to Cruachan is a view to the winter aspect of Brigid and the *Cailleach Bheur* of Cruachan.

Bagpipe music often has explicit relationships with the natural environment, and not simply in an illustrative sense as in 'Fuaim Na Tuinne Ri Duntròin' (The Sound of the Waves on the Castle of Duntrune).<sup>280</sup> The *piobaireachd* 'MacDougall's Gathering' opens with repeated notes as the piper turns clockwise to take in the four cardinal points of the compass, symbolically gathering the clan. At *Tom a' Phìobair* (The Piper's Hillock) near Taynuilt, the battle between the MacDougalls and the Campbells was opened by the rival pipers playing from opposing hills. The landscape is alive with more than its own images, it is alive with human images through time. Some have been painted or carved; others are there, by association, constantly in the mind's eye; others again are artefacts incorporating the material of the land with protective charms and craftsmanship. Thus, the crystal charm stones incorporated into the Ugadale and Lochbuie brooches, and most famously the Brooch of Lorne, have retained

276. Alexander Carmichael, *Deirdire* (Edinburgh, 1905).

277. R. A. Smith, *Loch Etive and the Sons of Uisnach* (Glasgow, 1879).

278. The song is on p. 71 of the John MacCallum Manuscript Songbook, courtesy of Brigadier John MacFarlane.

279. See Constance Cummings, *In the Hebrides* (Edinburgh, 1883), facing p. 47 for an illustration of the site.

280. For the song and story connected with this piece, see [IV.1.a](#).

their iconic significance through many centuries. The Brooch of Lorne is made of 97% pure Scottish silver. The 'opaque silica charmstone' is set in a scalloped-edged reliquary, surrounded by eight turrets mounted with Scottish freshwater pearls.<sup>281</sup> Eight is the number of regeneration – hence octagonal baptismal fonts – and also the number of the Beatitudes and a number associated with St Brigid.

What these various echoes of the past, deliberate or otherwise, demonstrate is a complex of relationships between land forms, rocks, gems, plants, creatures and the human population. The culture upon which they draw and continue to depend is largely Gaelic – largely, because when it comes to the society which raised standing stones we cannot claim that their language and culture was even proto-Celtic. What we can claim is that the genetic influence of the Neolithic peoples remains significant and their descendants have been ready to accept their significance in their culture through the millennia.

New religious notions and power play arrived with Christianity and took a determined hold which still retains a grip of sorts. The first recorded Christian 'anointing' of a monarch was that by St Columba in his endorsement of his cousin as King of Dalriada, which took place at Dunadd near Kilmartin, not far south of Oban. The carving of a wild boar on the native rock of Dunadd asserts an alternative hierarchy in which the totemic animal is honoured.

Iona may be a little beyond the reaches of our Case Study, but Lismore is not. Its fertility – Gaelic *Lios Mòr* means 'large garden' – is derived from the limestone which forms much of the island. Lismore was Columba's first choice of island, but St Moluag won the race for it by cutting off a finger and hurling it ashore, thereby occasioning Columba's wrath, expressed in a number of unworthy curses, all of which Moluag turned aside. This might be mildly ludicrous and hagiographical were it not that St Moluag's staff is still held by its traditional Livingston guardians on the island; but the guardian is not called Livingston – his name is Bachul. He is named after the staff, Bachul being derived from Latin *baculum*. The full significance of this hereditary duty is given in [V.2.b](#), where the visual aspects of the Celtic church are discussed, including the so-called cross slab and decidedly sexual Riasg Buidhe. The pagan past has its lively place in the Christian present.

Another relic from nearby is the 8th-century Kilmichael Glassary quadrangular iron handbell with its 11th-century shrine, with Christ crucified on one of its panels; nor is the district without early Christian architectural significance. Just south of Lismore is *Eileach an Naoimh*, the site of two interconnected [beehive huts](#), dating from c. 542 and amongst the oldest surviving Christian structures in northern Europe. The island is the supposed burial place of St

281. See Catherine Gillies's article on the Brooch of Lorne, 2009: <<https://www.dunollie.org/brooch-of-lorn>>.



Columba's mother Eithne, and site of St Brendan's monastery, demonstrating the penitent's ideal of a *terra repromissionis sanctorum* 'land promised to the saints' from which they would rise, fully shriven, at the Second Coming. Both the beehive huts and the original monastic enclosure are circular, and circularity is evident in a number of Christian crosses from the earliest times to the present day. At Ardchattan, both a 9th-century cross with central spirals and the late 15th-century MacDougall's Cross are ringed. So too is a much more recent cross at Dunollie Castle, commemorating the 29th chieftain, Colonel Alexander James MacDougall of the Royal Army Medical Corps, twice mentioned in dispatches and a Commander of St Michael and St George, who died in 1953. And from 1916, hundreds of miles to the south in Hampstead cemetery, a rough-hewn granite Celtic ringed cross surmounts the grave of Hamish MacCunn, composer of the opera *Diarmid* to a libretto by the Marquis of Lorne.

Most of the seats of the clans in Lorne are in ruins. Dunollie is just one of the great coastal castles which are testimony to the importance of sea travel – especially when the birlinn was still in use. The sea connection goes back to early times when Dunadd was originally by the sea, and the names of Duntrune, Dunollie and Dunstaffnage Castles indicate early foundations. Castle Stalker is situated on a tidal island and was one of many MacDougall possessions which passed to the Campbells. Kilchurn Castle was always a Campbell stronghold and is on freshwater Loch Awe; but Loch Awe is a huge body of water and boats would have been fundamental to the castle's working life. The predecessors of some of these castles were either duns (Gaelic for fort) or crannogs – circular lake dwellings unique to Scotland and Ireland. There is a frequency of circular forms, from the cup and ring markings at Kilmartin to the crannog on Dalineun Island in Loch Nell or many of the duns or early forts, never mind the hundreds of shielings in use into the 20th-century, scattered across the land. Circularity is recalled in Rothead's monument to MacIntyre and also in McCaig's Folly in Oban, for all that McCaig's design was inspired by the Coliseum. It is made of granite from the nearby Bonawe quarry.

In contrast to most of the clan castles, the dukes of Argyll's Inveraray Castle is more of a castellated Georgian mansion, designed primarily by the Adam family, who were also responsible, along with Robert Mylne, for the planned town of Inveraray. These were imported architectural ideals which may also be seen to reflect the complex loyalties of Clan Campbell. But although the castle is set back from the sea, Inveraray itself is an important harbour and the town's coat of arms of five herring caught in a net is, according to one expert, 'one of the most remarkable I have ever come across'<sup>282</sup> – and indeed its exclusive attention to basics underlines the maritime economic necessities of the district.

282. Arthur Fox-Davies, *A Complete Guide to Heraldry* (New York, 1909), 88.

The dukes of Argyll appear to have had a keen interest in matters theological, for *The Philosophy of Belief* by the eighth duke, George Campbell, was highly thought of by a leading philosopher from Ardchattan, Alexander Campbell Fraser. He must have agreed with the duke's support of the radical and influential theologian John McLeod Campbell, whose views on the Atonement cost him his place in the ministry. It is interesting that Archibald Campbell's *An Enquiry into the Original of Moral Virtue* (Edinburgh, 1733) was dedicated to the Duke of Argyll and engaged with Eriugena's universalism, suggesting a readiness to accommodate the necessary connection between the material and spiritual worlds. The dedication implies an acceptance on the part of the Clan Campbell chieftain. If this were not exactly radical territory, it was certainly an intellectual world ready to challenge orthodoxy.

Also on the philosophical front, Cailean MacLabhrainn – *anglice* Colin MacLaurin (1698–1746) – was brought up at Kilmodan and Kilfinnan (both place-names commemorating saints of earlier intellectual endeavour). He became Professor of Mathematics at Edinburgh University and was one of the most influential of the Newtonians. His level-headed approach to the problem of gravity should still demand respect. More literally down to earth was Colin Campbell, another Argyllshire philosopher, who was in the habit on moonless nights of lying on his back in the bed of the narrow and steep-sided stream of *Allt an Tiomban*, close to Taynuilt, the better to see the stars.<sup>283</sup> Campbell's attitude to the problem of evil was decidedly liberal and verging on the heretical. He and his near neighbour, the forester Robert Campbell, wrote commendatory poems for Edward Lhwyd's *Archaeologica Britannica* of 1703, aligning themselves with one of the earliest phases of what has been a long-running Celtic revival. These Argyllshire philosophers are discussed at greater length in [VI.2](#).

Earlier we referred to Pomeroy's interpretation of the myth of the Cailleach Bheur. How the environment is perceived by the Gaels themselves has been central to our work, but there have been many visitors who have come to an understanding of that vision which, we have often suggested, goes beyond realism. When Sir D. Y. Cameron painted *Lorne & Ben Cruachan*, he did so with vivid pinks, purples, deep browns and oranges, the mountain not wholly visible, a light yellow shroud of mist on its shoulder. He painted its mystery as well as its presence. A century earlier, Felix Mendelssohn, faced with the rain and damp of Scotland, took to drawing the landscape in grey pencil. His fine drawing of Dunollie Castle exemplifies his technique, which in some ways parallels the sensitive impressionism of his overture *The Hebrides*.

What, then, do we choose to see and how do we see it? An answer, hopefully, lies partly within these pages. There was no view to the west through Sorley

283. Information from Brigadier John MacFarlane of Taynuilt.

MacLean's boarded-up window in 'Hallaig'. The only view open to him was an imaginary one. What Sorley MacLean saw in that darkness – the trees alive as people, with Time, the deer, shot dead that the dream might live – was visionary and transcends the moments of history. What we have attempted is to remove some of the boards on the window to widen the view upon a remarkable culture still very much alive.

JP

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