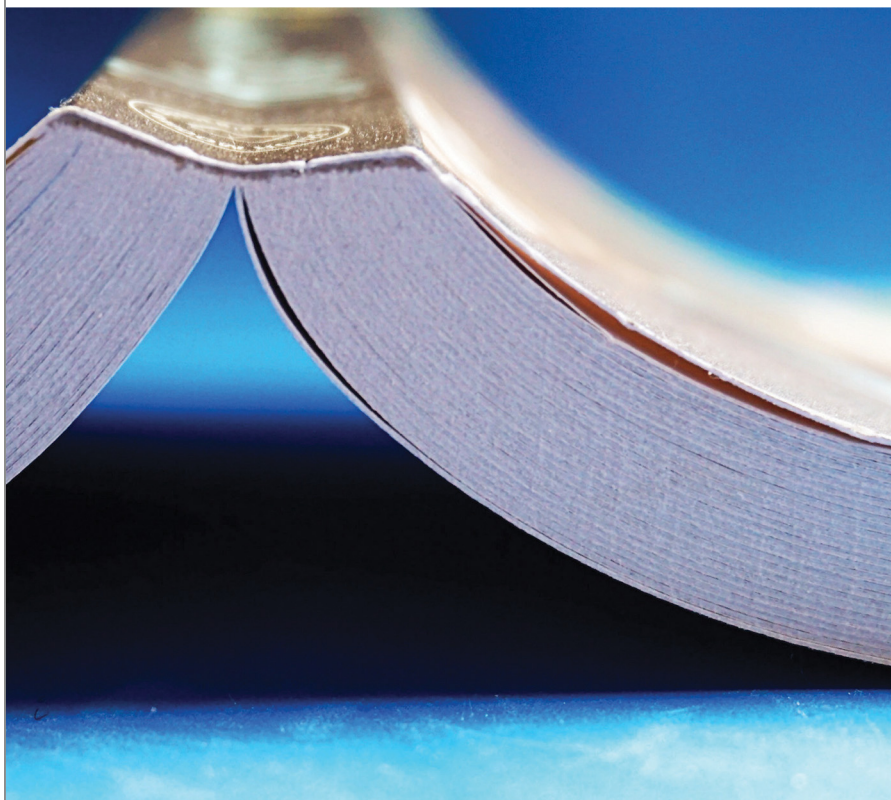


The poetry of Sorley MacLean



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Introduction

Sorley MacLean (1911–1996) is now regarded as one of the greatest Scottish poets of the twentieth century. However, until the 1970s, his verse was known by very few people. In that decade, publication of English translations of his work and the impact of his public readings established him in the eyes of poetry lovers in Scotland, Ireland and England, as well as further afield, as a major poet.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 3 study in [Arts and Humanities](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand the power of MacLean's poetry in its original Gaelic
- give examples of how such poetry engages with historical and cultural change.

1 Sorley MacLean

1.1 British poetry and language

To begin this course, look at the sheet of references linked below. You will see that the list includes books by Sorley MacLean and by two other important Scottish poets, Tom Leonard and Edwin Morgan. Not one title was published in London. None of these writers has ever published a collection of poems in London. Yet the prizewinning work of Edwin Morgan is widely used in Scottish schools, and Sorley MacLean's work has been translated into several foreign languages. By the 1980s, a shift of the centre of gravity of poetry publishing had occurred, with Carcanet and Bloodaxe, based in northern English cities, accounting for a very high proportion of acclaimed new books. The day when one major Scottish writer, Hugh MacDiarmid, languished out of print for years on end, and another, Edwin Muir, relied on the recognition of his quality by T.S. Eliot at Faber, were clearly over. The power of the 'metropolis' in British poetry had significantly weakened. This corresponded to the political weakening of the London centre with the end of empire. Click to open the [sheet of references](#).

In the twentieth century there has, in fact, been a conflict of two forces within British culture – one centripetal, making for a greater standardisation of language and attitudes, the other centrifugal, involving the assertion of national and regional differences within the United Kingdom.

Arguably, imperialism was at its apogee in Britain not before 1914, but from the 1920s through to the 1950s (see Mackenzie, 1984). Geographically the empire was larger than ever. The colonial civil service expanded markedly. And new means of communication – the aeroplane and, above all, radio – drew metropolis and possessions closer. While BBC broadcasts to the empire radiated the metropolitan viewpoint abroad, the BBC at home disseminated the 'BBC accent'. Such eminent Victorians as Gladstone and Tennyson, as early gramophone records show, had strong regional accents (Lancashire and Lincolnshire respectively). Now the bland BBC voice became the badge of respectability. Furthermore, there was a strong drive in education to elevate *English* literature from the 1920s – to impose a canon of Oxbridge approved 'classics' on the captive audiences in schools and universities. It is no accident that 'Hugh MacDiarmid' (the pen-name of C.M. Grieve) began a crusade on behalf of Scottish culture at just that time, nor that one of his chosen platforms was the *Scottish Educational Journal*.

Of MacDiarmid's most important contemporaries in the so-called 'Scottish Renaissance' (a label attached to a very divergent body of work by men who often disagreed strongly with each other), the novelist Neil Gunn wrote in Standard English, as did the poet Muir. But 'Lewis Grassie Gibbon' (J.L. Mitchell) wrote fiction in modified Scots, and – perhaps, in the long run, most momentously – Sorley MacLean proved that Gaelic could be the vehicle for powerful poetry fully engaged with contemporary politics and society.

An important outcome of MacDiarmid's renaissance was the growing widespread adoption of a pluralistic view of language and culture in Scotland. MacLean's first pamphlet was produced jointly with Robert Garioch (1909–81), who wrote in Lowland Scots (*Seventeen Poems for Sixpence*, 1940). But neither was necessarily more 'radical'

or more 'Scottish' in attitude towards language than their friend Norman MacCaig (*b.1910*), Edinburgh-born but of Gaelic extraction, whose work is in elegant Standard English. The existence of fully accepted alternatives makes Standard English itself experimental! Other poets who have followed through the breach made by MacDiarmid include Edwin Morgan (*b.1920*), who writes as he pleases, in English, Scots and languages of his own invention.

Morgan's 'First Men in Mercury' can be read as a witty parable about language and imperialism. There are two voices. The leader of the Earth men seeks to communicate with the Mercurians. At the outset, his Standard English is calm and assured:

– We come in peace from the third planet.

Would you take us to your leader?

– Bawr stretter! Bawr. Bawr. Stretterhawl?

– This is a little plastic model

of the solar system, with working parts.

You are here and we are there and we are now here with you, is this clear?

– Gawl horrop. Bawr. Abawrhannahanna!

Faced with Mercurian truculence, the Earth man moves into pidgin:

– I am the yuleeda. You see my hands,

we carry no benner, we come in peace.

The spaceways are all stretterhawn.

– Glawn peacemen all horrahanna tantko!

Tan come at 'mstrossop. Glawp yuleeda!

Atoms are peacegawl in our harraban.

Menbat worrabost from tan hannahanna.

Eventually it is the Mercurian who speaks assuredly, the Earth man who mouths gutturally:

– Banghapper now! Yes, third planet back.

Yuleeda will go back blue, white, brown

nowhanna! There is no more talk.

– Gawl han fasthapper?

– No. You must go back to your planet.

Go back in peace, take what you have gained
but quickly.

– Stretterworra gawl, gawl...

– Of course, but nothing is ever the same,
now is it? You'll remember Mercury.

(Morgan, 1982, pp. 259–60)

This represents in miniature, one might say, the process by which the colonised learn to handle the English language better than their increasingly muddled and demoralised former masters. But the poem also suggests the situation in Morgan's home city, Glasgow, where a proletarian version of Scots is spoken that the English (and even many Scots) profess to find uncouth and incomprehensible.

Attempts to impose 'BBC Standard' through the educational system, on Glaswegians (or Geordies, or Liverpoolians, or Aberdonians) replicate the efforts of British colonialists educating elites to serve them in Africa. Nothing brings out the ruler–ruled factors of distance and domination better than the following poem in Glaswegian by Tom Leonard (b.1944):

Unrelated Incidents

(3)

this is thi
six a clock
news thi
man said n
thi reason
a talk wia
BBC accent
iz coz yi
widny wahnt
mi ti talk
about thi
trooth wia
voice lik
wanna yoo
scruff, if
a toktaboot
thi trooth
lik wanna yoo
scruff yi

widny thingk
it wuz troo.
jist wanna yoo
scruff tokn.
thirza right
way ti spell
ana right way
ti tok it. this
is me tokn yir
right way a
spellin. this
is ma trooth.
yooz doant no
thi trooth
yirsellz cawz
yi canny talk
right, this is
the six a clock
nyooz. belt up.

So resistance to the south-eastern metropolis within the United Kingdom is not by any means conducted solely in the surviving Celtic languages.

Nevertheless, Sorley MacLean's work in Gaelic is particularly apposite to our theme of 'end of empire'. From the sixteenth century, the drive of rulers in London (and Edinburgh) against Celtic cultures in the British Isles wore an aspect of cultural genocide. You may be aware of the animus displayed by that pioneer of Standard English, Edmund Spenser, against the Gaels whose land he was stealing in Ireland. At about the same time, James VI of Scotland attempted to colonise Lewis, in the Gaelic-speaking Hebrides, with Lowlanders. As Scottish Gaelic-speakers see their own history, they were deprived of their land, through the nineteenth century 'clearances' of people in favour of sheep and deer, by English and Anglicised capitalists, following which attempts to extirpate Gaelic culture intensified. Through acculturation and emigration Gaelic, a language once spoken over most of Scotland, is now reduced to some 80,000 speakers, chiefly resident in the Isles. Gaels find it easy to compare the fate of their people with those of West Indian Caribs, North American Indians and Australian Aborigines. Sorley MacLean, as the most famous of living writers in Gaelic, therefore represents not only a poetic tradition, but also direct resistance to capitalist imperialism. To use the language is to reject the empire and the muscle-bound metropolitan state which has survived it.

But that cannot be the only reason for using it. Protest can be expressed in English. Through that medium it will reach more readers. Why should a small language have any right to survive? What would be lost if it disappeared? After all, tongues spoken across the whole land mass from Ireland to Bangladesh have evolved from one used in the Volga basin less than 5,000 years ago. During that relatively brief time uncountable languages have died out as the groups which have used them have succumbed to new or more successful cultures. Even endurance into the age of print technology did not preserve

Cornish – or Pruzzian, which was spoken in part of Eastern Europe until the eighteenth century.

Pruzzian was commemorated by the German writer Joannes Bobrowski (1917–65) in a poem which seems (to me) largely to answer my question. The italicised words are among the surviving fragments of that tongue:

Dead Language

He with the beating wings
outside who brushes the door,
that is your brother, you hear him.

Laurio he says, water,
a bow, colourless, deep.

He came down with the river,
drifting around mussel
and snail, spread like a fan
on the sand and was green.

Warne he says and *wittan*,
the crow has no tree,
I have the power to kiss you,
I dwell in your ear.

Tell him you do not
want to listen –
he comes, an otter, he comes
swarming like hornets, he cries,
a cricket, he grows with the marsh
under your house, he whispers
in the well, *smordis* you hear,
your black alder will wither,
and die at the fence tomorrow.

What Bobrowski's poem suggests powerfully is that in our modern environments we are haunted by extinct languages. Only an extreme sentimentalist could argue that one language alone is appropriate to any one environment. But the fact is that cultures abiding for some time do create a language especially for the settled place. This has important implications for literature, especially for poetry. As a poet from Orkney, George Mackay Brown, has put it:

If words become functional ciphers merely, as they are in white papers and business letters, they lose their 'ghosts' – the rich aura that has grown about them from the start, and grows infinitesimally richer every time they are spoken.

They lose more; they lose their 'kernel', the sheer sensuous relish of utterance... We are in danger of contenting ourselves with husks. For example, nowadays we say 'it rains'. The old Orkney men had a range of words for every kind and intensity of rain – a driv, a rug, a murr, a hagger, a dagg, a rav, a hellyiefer. This is a measure of how language has coarsened in a generation or two.

(Brown, 1973, pp. 21–2)

A fortiori, Mackay Brown's point applies to Gaelic. To lose the language would be to lose not only the Gaels' sense of their own history and culture, which is conveyed in its oral and sung traditions, but also the meaning of places, the 'character' of landscapes. MacLean's distinction had been not only to conserve but to extend the significance of Gaelic; to give tradition and locality new 'aura', and language fresh purchase on experience.

1.2 Grasping Gaelic

Activity 1

Please read the following poems by Sorley MacLean (linked below): 'The Turmoil', 'Kinloch Ainort', 'Heroes', 'Death Valley', 'A Spring', and 'She to Whom I Gave...'. Some of the poems have both Gaelic and English versions presented (the English versions are by MacLean himself).

As you read through each poem, please consider the following questions:

- (a) Looking at the Gaelic, do you see patterns in the verse that are not reproduced in English – likely assonance, for instance?
- (b) What strikes you about MacLean's handling of landscape?

Click to view the poem ['The Turmoil'](#)

Click to view the poem ['Kinloch Ainort'](#)

Click to view the poem ['Heroes'](#)

Click to view the poem ['Death Valley'](#)

Click to view the poem ['A Spring'](#)

Click to view the poem ['She to Whom I Gave...'](#)

The audio (which is presented in [Section 2](#)), in which Sorley MacLean is recorded in conversation about these poems with Iain Crichton Smith, should enable you to check your own answers to these questions against two cardinal authorities. (Crichton Smith is a most distinguished poet and novelist in both Gaelic and English. His translation of MacLean's book *Dain do Eimhir*, published in 1970, was a landmark in MacLean's belated public recognition.) But before you listen to the recording, you probably need to know more about MacLean and the Gaelic that he uses.

1.3 MacLean's Celtic roots

MacLean was born in 1911 in Osgaig, a small township on the Isle of Raasay, adjacent to Skye, the larger island where he went to school. His childhood was dominated by a majestic landscape. The woods of Raasay and the peaks of the Cuillin Hills on Skye are as central to his poetic universe as the hills of Cumbria to Wordsworth's. His father and mother combined work on a small croft with a tailoring business. The latter was severely hit by the great depression of the 1930s, and the family's relative poverty had a powerful effect on MacLean's early life. He studied English literature, not Celtic, at Edinburgh University because it offered better job prospects, and after he took a first class degree, he trained as a teacher so that he could help to support his family, rather than going to Oxford and Cambridge as a research student. He returned to Skye as a teacher, then moved on to the Isle of Mull, and then back to Edinburgh in 1939. In late 1940 he entered the Army. He was wounded three times in the North African campaign – the third experience at the Battle of El Alamein ended his war, since many of the bones in his feet were broken. After convalescence he returned to teaching English in Edinburgh, but in 1956 he went as headmaster to Plockton Secondary School in Wester Ross, a post from which he retired in 1972. For the greater part of his life, he was a hard-pressed and devoted teacher. Most of his poetry was produced in his twenties and thirties, during a long-term crisis when love affairs and politics tortured him equally.

MacLean was powerfully affected in the 1930s by his admiration for the poetry in Scots of Hugh MacDiarmid, whose close friend he became. Just as MacDiarmid brought into the faltering tradition of Scots verse the consciousness – philosophical and political – of avant-garde Europe, so MacLean revolutionised Gaelic poetry.

Gaelic, of which there are Scots and Irish variants, has the longest continuous literary tradition of any European tongue. It was in no sense a primitive or undeveloped medium. Elaborate verse forms and complex patterns of rhyming (both internal rhyme and end-rhyme) were nourished by a very rich vocabulary. Its lexicon was adequate, in the 1930s, to express a modern consciousness: 'I've invented a neologism once or twice, but very few', MacLean has said (in Ross and Hendry, 1986, p. 216). It would seem, though, that MacLean's handling of the tongue owes less to his deep reading in the published Gaelic tradition of 'high' poetry than to oral influences.

Though MacLean cannot sing, his family were musically gifted. From his earliest years he was devoted to the songs of his people. 'I am convinced', he wrote, 'that Scottish Gaelic song is the chief artistic glory of the Scots, and of all people of Celtic speech, and one of the greatest artistic glories of Europe'. He referred, in particular, to the songs 'of the two and a half centuries between 1550 and 1800 – the songs in which ineffable melodies rise like exhalations from the rhythms and resonances of the words'. He detected in them 'the simultaneous creation of words and music' (*Ris a' Bhruthaich*, 1985, p. 106). You will notice, listening to the recording, that his manner of reading his verse is highly declamatory. Many who have heard him have found the sound of his verse immensely moving, though they are without Gaelic. It has been inferred that he wrote poetry of such oral power precisely because, frustratingly, he could not sing. Yeats, whose verse certainly influenced MacLean, also declaimed his verse in an incantatory fashion, and was 'tone deaf'.

Another important influence on MacLean was the Free Presbyterian Church, dominant in the Gaelic-speaking areas after it split from the Free Church of Scotland in 1893. Though at a very early age MacLean rejected its doctrines in favour of socialism, he defends it against Lowlanders and others who sneer at its strict practices, which include a complete

prohibition of social and private pleasures on Sunday. Unaccompanied Gaelic psalm singing, fiercely passionate, is a feature of Free Presbyterian worship and MacLean has paid tribute to the powerful tradition of Gaelic preaching. Scholars have shown that much of his own poetry is saturated in the vocabulary of this strenuous, sincere and deeply emotional tradition.

2 Sorley MacLean recorded

2.1 Before the recording

Now you have the opportunity to listen to the recordings of Sorley MacLean. I hope you will find that it brings to life the poetry that you have looked at on the page, and that it helps you to grasp some of the differences between Gaelic and English that affect MacLean's translation of his own work, as well as elucidating particular references that may have puzzled you. Perhaps the best plan, if you have time, will be to listen to each section once, and then go through them again, stopping and restarting as you take notes on particular points.

The discussion of the poems will deal with them only as they appear in English.

2.1.1 Aims

The aims of these recordings, in which Sorley MacLean is interviewed by Iain Crichton Smith, are to:

- (a) help you to sense the power of MacLean's poetry in its original Gaelic;
- (b) assist your understanding of the English texts of the poems, translated by MacLean himself.

2.1.2 The poems

Your reading in this course has already prepared you to some extent, but please read the following poems (both the English and Gaelic versions are given) which are discussed in the recordings, and then listen to the recordings.

Kinloch Ainort

A company of mountains, an upthrust of mountains
a great garth of growing mountains
a concourse of summits, of knolls, of hills
coming on with a fearsome roaring.

A rising of glens, of gloomy corries,
a lying down in the antlered bellowing;
a stretching of green nooks, of brook mazes,
prattling in the age-old mid-winter.

A cavalry of mountains, horse-riding summits,
a streaming head long haste of foam,
a slipperiness of smooth flat rocks, small-bellied bare summits,

flat-rock snoring of high mountains.

A surge-belt of hill-tops,
impetuous thigh of peaks,
the murmuring bareness of marching turrets,
green flanks of Mosgary,
crumbling storm-flanks,
barbarous pinnacles of high moorlands.

Ceann Loch Aoineart

Cómhlan bheanntan, stóiteachd bheanntan,
córr-lios bheanntan fásmhóir,
cruinneachadh mhullaichean, thulaichean, shiéibhteán,
tighinn 'sa' bheucaich ghábhaidh.

Eirigh ghleanntan, choireachan údlaídh,
laighe 's a' bhúirich chrácaich;
sineadh chluaineagan, shuaineagan srúlach,
briodal 's an dúbhlachd ársaidh.

Eachdraidh bheanntan, marcachd mhullaichean,
deann-ruith shruthanach cáthair,
sleamhnachd leacannan, seangachd chreachainnean,
strannraich leacanach árd-bheann.

Onfhadh-chrios mhullaichean,
confhadh-shlios thulaichean,
monmhar luim thurraidean mársail,
gorm-shliosán Mhosgaraidh,
stoirm-shliosán mosganach,
borb-bhíodan mhonaidhean árdá.

A Spring

At the far edge of a mountain there is a green nook
where the deer eat water-cress,
in its side a great unruffled eye of water,
a shapely jewel-like spring.

One day I came with my love
to the side of the remote brook.

She bent her head down to its brink
and it did not look the same again.

I reached the distant little green
many a time again, alone
and when I looked into the swirling water
there was in it only the face of my treasure-trove.

But the glens were going away
and the pillared mountains were not waiting for me:
the hills did not look
as if my chanced-on treasure had been seen.

Fuaran

Tha cluaineag ann an iomall sléibh
far an ith na féidh lus biolaire;
'na taobh suil uisge mhór réidh,
fuaran leugach cuimir ann.

Air latha thainig mi le m' ghaol
gu taobh a' chaochain iomallaich,
chrom i h-aodann sios ri bhruaich
's cha robh a thuar fhéin tuilleadh air.

Rainig mi a' chluaineag chéin
a rithist liom fhéin iomadh uair,
agus nuair choimhead mi 'san t-srulaich
cha rogh ach gnuis té m' ulaidh innt'.

Ach bha na glinn is iad a' falbh
is calbh nam beann gun fhuireach rium,
cha robh a choltas air na sléibh-tean
gum facas m' eudail ulaidhe.

She To Whom I Gave...

She to whom I gave all love
gave me no love in return;
though my agony was for her sake,
she did not understand the shame at all.

But often in the thoughts of night
when my mind is a dim wood
a breeze of memory comes stirring the foliage,
putting the wood's assuagement to unrest.

And from the depths of my body's wood,
from sap-filled root and slender branching,
there will be the heavy cry: why was her beauty
like a horizon opening the door to day?

An Te Dh'an Tug Mi...

An té dh' an rug mi uile ghaol
cha tug i gaol dhomh air a shon;
ged a chiurradh mise air a sailleabh
cha do thuig i 'n tamailt idir.

Ach trie an smuaintean na h-oidhch'
an uair bhios m' aigne 'na coille chair,
thig osag chuimhne 'g gluasad duillich,
ag cur a furtachd gu luasgan.

Agus bho dhoimhne coille ehuim,
o fhriamhach snodhaich 's meangach meanbh,
bidh eubha throm: carson bha h-aille
mar fhosgladh faire ri latha?

Heroes

I did not see Lannes at Ratisbon
nor MacLennan at Auldearn
nor Gillies MacBain at Culloden,
but I saw an Englishman in Egypt.

A poor little chap with chubby cheeks
and knees grinding each other,
pimple unattractive face –
garment of the bravest spirit.

He was not a bit "in the pub
in the time of the fists being closed,"
but a lion against the breast of battle,

in the morose wounding showers.

His hour came with the shells,
with the notched iron splinters,
in the smoke and flame,
in the shaking and terror of the battlefield.

Word came to him in the bullet shower
that he should be a hero briskly,
and he was that while he lasted
but it wasn't much time he got.

He kept his guns to the tanks,
bucking with tearing crashing screech,
until he himself got, about the stomach,
that biff that put him to the ground,
mouth down in sand and gravel,
without a chirp from his ugly high-pitched voice.

No cross or medal was put to his
chest or to his name or to his family;
there were not many of his troop alive,
and if there were their word would not be strong.
And at any rate, if a battle post stands
many are knocked down because of him,
not expecting fame, not wanting a medal
or any froth from the mouth of the field of slaughter.

I saw a great warrior of England,
a poor manikin on whom no eye would rest;
no Alasdair of Glen Garry;
and he took a little weeping to my eyes.

Curaidhean

Chan fhaca mi Lannes aig Ratasbon
no MacGill-Fhinnein aig Allt Eire
no Gill-Iosa aig Cuil-Lodair,
ach chunnaic mi Sasunnach 'san Eiphit.

Fear beag truagh le gruaidhean pluiceach

is gliinean a'bleith a chéile,
aodann guireanach gun tlachd ann –
comhdach an spioraid bu tréine.

Cha robh buaidh air “san tigh-osda
'n am nan dorn a bhith 'gan dunadh”,
ach leoghann e ri uchd a' chatha,
anns na frasan guineach mugach.

Thainig uair-san leis na sligean,
leis na spealgan-iaruinn bearnach,
anns an toit is anns an lasair,
ann an crith is maoin na haraich.

Thainig fios dha 'san fhrois pheileir
e bhith gu spreigearra 'na dhiulnach:
is b'e sin e fhad 's a mhair e,
ach cha b'fhada fhuair e dh'uine.

Chum e ghunnachan ris na tancan,
a'bocail le sgriach shracaidh stairnich
gus an d' fhuair e fhein mu 'n stamaig
an deannal ud a chuir ri lar e,
bial sios an gainmhich 's an greabhal,
gun diog o ghuth caol grannda.

Cha do chuireadh crois no meadal
ri uchd no ainm no g'a chairdean:
cha robh a bheag dhe fh dime maireann,
's nan robh cha bhiodh am facal laidir;
's co dhiubh, ma sheasas ursann-chatha
leagar moran air a shailleabh
gun duil ri cliu, nach iarr am meadal
no cop 'sam bith a bial na h-araich.

Chunnaic mi gaisgeach mor a Sasuinn,
fearachan bochd nach **laigheadh** suil air;
cha b' Alasdair a Gleanna Garadh –
is thug e gal beag air mo shuilean.

Death Valley

(Some Nazi or other has said that the Fuehrer had restored to German manhood the 'right and joy of dying in battle'.)

Sitting dead in "Death Valley"
below the Ruweisat Ridge
a boy with his forelock down about his cheek
and his face slate-grey;

I thought of the right and the joy
that he got from his Fuehrer,
of falling in the field of slaughter
to rise no more;

Of the pomp and the fame
that he had, not alone,
though he was the most piteous to see
in a valley gone to seed

with flies about grey corpses
on a dun sand
dirty yellow and full of the rubbish
and fragments of battle.

Was the boy of the band
who abused the Jews
and Communists, or of the greater
band of those

led, from the beginning of generations,
unwillingly to the trial
and mad delirium of every war
for the sake of rulers?

Whatever his desire or mishap,
his innocence or malignity,
he showed no pleasure in his death
below the Ruweisat Ridge.

Glac a' Bhais

(Thubhairt Nasach air choireigin gun tug am Furair air ais do fhir na Gearmailte 'a' choir agus an sonas bas fhaotainn anns an araich'.)

'Na shuidhe marbh an "Glaic a'Bhais"
fo Dhruim Ruidhiseit,
gill'og 's a logan sios m'a ghruaidh
's a thuar grisionn.

Smaoinich mi air a' choir 's an agh
a fhuair e bho Fhurair,
bhith tuiteam arm an raon an air
gun éirigh tuilleadh;

air a' ghreadhnachas 's air a'chliu
nach d'fhuair e 'na aonar,
ged b' esan bu bhronaiche snuadh
ann an glaic air laomadh

le cuileagan mu chuirp ghlas'
air gainmhich lachduinn
's i salach-bhuidhe 's lan de raip
's de spruidhlich catha.

An robh an gille air an dream
a mhab na h-ludhaich
's na Comunnaich, no air an dream
bu mhotha, dhiubh-san

a threorakheadh bho thoiseach al
gun deoin gu buaireadh
agus bruillean cuthaich gach blair
air sgath uachdaran?

Ge b'e a dheoin-san no a chas,
a neoichiontas no mhiorun,
cha do nochd e toileachadh 'na bhas
fo Dhruim Ruidhiseit.

2.2 Background and recordings

Sorley MacLean, 1911–98, is now regarded as one of the greatest Scottish poets of the twentieth century. Until the 1970s, his verse was known by very few people. In that decade, publication of English translations and the impact of his public readings established him in the eyes of poetry lovers in Scotland, Ireland and England, as well as further afield, as a major poet.

Yet, curiously, this impact depended on work that mostly derived from a very specific conjunction of personal and political factors in the 1930s and 40s. A contemporary of Auden, of the major French Communist poets Éluard and Aragon, and of the great Chilean Communist, Pablo Neruda, MacLean somehow vaulted the generations to speak compellingly (in particular) to young Scots, mostly non-Gaelic-speakers, preoccupied with questions of home rule and nationalism in the era of Heath, Wilson, Callaghan and Thatcher. A passionate anti-imperialist of the forties made sense to Scottish patriots in the seventies.

Attempts have been made to present MacLean as pre-eminently the author of the poems addressed to an idealised 'Eimhir', a mythical Celtic beauty – a great poet of love whose politics were merely accidental and sentimental. This will not do.

His feeling for his own people, their culture, and the landscape of his childhood; his unhappy, frustrated love affairs in the late thirties with two women, one Irish, one Scots; and his passionate hatred of Fascism, capitalism and imperialism, formed one nexus of intense feeling. MacLean's cardinal political heroes were the Edinburgh-born Marxist, James Connolly, commemorated so powerfully by Yeats as a hero of Dublin's Easter Rising of 1916, and his fellow-clansman John MacLean, the Glasgow schoolteacher whose Marxist evening classes influenced many workers in the years of the so-called 'Red Clyde' (1915–19), who was hailed by Lenin as a great ally, and who was preaching for the cause of an independent Scottish Workers Republic before he died, in his prime, in 1923.

The crux of his crisis in the late 1930s was this: because he felt compelled to earn money as a teacher for his family, he could not obey his impulse to fight for the Republican side in Spain against Fascism. Iain Crichton Smith has argued, regarding MacLean's work of this period, that 'there is a sense in which the Spanish Civil War does not form the background to these poems, but is the protagonist. The test of whether or not to go to Spain was a deep test of who he was, and therefore a test of the quality of his love' (Ross, R.J. and Hendry, J. eds, 1986, *Sorley MacLean: critical essays*, Scottish Academic Press, p. 49).

2.2.1 The recordings

Click 'play' to listen to the interview with Sorley MacLean (Part 1, 7 minutes).

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Interview with Sorley MacLean - Part 1](#)

Click 'play' to listen to the interview with Sorley MacLean (Part 2, 8 minutes).

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Interview with Sorley MacLean - Part 2](#)

Click 'play' to listen to the interview with Sorley MacLean (Part 3, 9 minutes).

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Interview with Sorley MacLean - Part 3](#)

Click 'play' to listen to the interview with Sorley MacLean (Part 4, 5 minutes).

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Interview with Sorley MacLean - Part 4](#)

2.3 After the recording

It follows that sorting MacLean's poems out by 'themes' entails the risk of disguising the tight interlocking of 'Politics', 'Love', 'Landscape', 'War' and 'History' in all his poetry down to 1945. Nevertheless, for convenience's sake, I will do this.

2.3.1 Politics

MacLean was a socialist from the age of twelve, and a Marxist by the late 1930s, when he believed that the Soviet Union and the Red Army were the only agents that could defeat Fascism. However, he never joined the Communist Party, and by 1944 events in Poland had thoroughly disillusioned him about Stalin and the Soviet Union. One reason why he could never commit himself fully to Communism seems quite clear: he retained from his Calvinist heritage a deep pessimism about human nature and human action which recoiled from glib prophecies of a coming socialist paradise.

Please now look again at 'The Turmoil', linked below. You will see that it begins by reconsidering (but not dismissing) 'Christ's suffering', moves on to dismiss the 'vapid dream' of the Celtic Arcadia – 'land of story' – and finally presents a contest between the beauty of a fair-haired woman (an Irish friend, who never realised that the shy MacLean loved her, and married someone else) and the claims of politics. Politics involve pain – the plight of the poor is like 'a bitter wound' – 'anger', another strong feeling, and 'intellect', identified with Lenin. The last word, 'anger', seems to be directed against the 'cloud' cast by beauty as well as the 'poverty' suffered under capitalism.

Click to view the poem ['The Turmoil'](#)

Now please read 'The Cry of Europe', linked below. I think it will seem as obvious to you as it does to me that the answer to the poem's sequence of five rhetorical questions cannot be 'love transcends politics'. The poem's fourth line exemplifies a trait of MacLean's voice which in English appears as wry understatement, undercutting his heady, passionate rhetoric: we will encounter this again.

Click to view the poem ['The Cry of Europe'](#)

The final image of the Slave Ship refers to the horrific event in MacLean's local Gaelic tradition, when in 1739, certain clan chiefs on Skye sold their own people by the shipload into indentured servitude in the New World. Rejection of the British Empire, for MacLean, is the logical outcome of the treatment of his own people by 'Britons', even by those of their own race.

2.3.2 Love

Please now read '[Dogs and Wolves](#)'.

This poem is amazing in its forceful, simple-seeming expression of an extraordinarily complex combination of thought and emotion. The 'dogs and wolves' are the speaker's 'unwritten poems'. Why 'unwritten'? One infers that other matters take priority over love poems. But – 'unwritten' – their latent presence assumes nightmarish form, as if the frustration of being unwritten makes them murderous. They race 'bloody tongued' across 'the hard bareness of the terrible times' – dominating, this implies, the poet's consciousness of embattled Europe and of poverty in Scotland. Yet these are the '*mild mad dogs of poetry*'. Paradoxically, their quest is for gentleness and loveliness. The 'terrible times' deny their release into actual poems: in their hunger they hunt 'without respite'. At the risk of seeming banal – because this is a poem of truly tragic power which can only be the product of abnormally intense feeling – one could say that MacLean voices a frustration such as many people of conscience have felt in many contexts: a craving denied becomes rapacious, silently hysterical, yet the denial must continue.

Now please re-read '[A Spring](#)' and '[She To Whom I Gave](#)', and read '[Spring Tide](#)'.

Intensely lyrical as these poems are, the emotion – 'love' – which they express is involved with conflict, 'shame', regret. MacLean as 'love poet' has been compared with great English poets – with the Shakespeare of the Sonnets, John Donne. But Seamus Heaney's comparison of MacLean with Dante, who created in his poetry a figure, Beatrice, 'who mediates between the heavenly and earthy worlds', seems very shrewd. In MacLean's love poems, Heaney argues, the woman:

... resolves at a symbolic level tensions which would otherwise be uncontainable or wasteful. She is neither an escape from the world of moral decision nor an obliteration of it; she is neither an emblem of heavenly certitude nor a substitute for it. Yet she fills a necessary space in a mind that is ravenous for conviction.

2.3.3 Landscape

You have heard this point discussed on the recording. 'Kinloch Ainort' is a rarity in MacLean's work – a poem ostensibly concerned with nothing but description of natural phenomena. Yet the erotic charge is unmistakable. 'Antlered bellowing' is that of stags in rut. In 'A Spring', however, there is a conflict between love and landscape: the poet, obsessed with the image of his love in the water, is cut off from the glens and mountains which are indifferent to his obsession with her. 'She To Whom I Gave...' quietly evokes an immense tradition in European mythologies involving trees with human beings. Here the speaker's current rootedness is in tension with the 'horizon opening the door to day'. 'Spring Tide' again identifies the speaker with stasis, touched by *movement*, which represents remembered love. The 'ocean', which is incomprehensible, briefly and deliciously floods over the sharp reefs and the 'wrack of grief'.

2.3.4 War

MacLean's love poems present a situation where the speaker is baffled by stasis. He cannot *act*. Frustration in love is involved with political frustration.

Gaelic tradition values men of action – often heroes who died in defeat. The battle cry of the MacLeans, 'Fear eile air son Eachainn' ('Another One for Hector'), recalls the battle of

Inverkeithing in 1651, when the seventeenth chief of the clan, 'Red Hector of the Battles', fell in action. Clansman after clansman rushed in to protect him. Of 700 MacLeans engaged, only 40, it is said, survived.

The remarkable handful of poems which Sorley MacLean wrote about his own experience of battle show the resolution of fierce internal conflict in action. In a war when most British combatant poets produced no more than wry observations, small personal poems, MacLean's work is unique in its combination of stark detail with a convincing overview, and with astonishing moral certainty.

Of 'Heroes' some further discussion will be valuable. One of the inspiring factors in MacLean's contribution to Gaelic morale has surely been his generosity towards other peoples. 'Heroes' pays tribute to an Englishman who displays valour worthy of Gaelic praise.

But as John Herdman has subtly argued (Ross and Hendry, 1986, pp. 173–4), the poem implies a criticism of the Gaelic ideal. The Nazi ideal of soldierly sacrifice is coldly mocked in 'Death Valley'. The little Englishman in 'Heroes' is contrasted with the heroic but stupid Marshall Lannes. I remarked earlier on the trait of understatement in MacLean's rhetoric. We see it again here in the casual word 'biff' to translate the Gaelic expression for the blow that kills the Englishman. Whereas the hero of the 1715 Rising, Alastair MacDonald of Glengarry, was the subject of a famous Gaelic elegy which contains the line, 'you brought tears to my eyes today', the death of the *little* Englishman brings 'a *little*' weeping to MacLean's eyes. This does not derogate his courage. It opposes realism – a gruff businesslike sympathy for the common soldier – to the flowery praises of tradition.

Please now read '[Going Westwards](#)' and '[An Autumn Day](#)' presented below.

Click to view the poem '[Going Westwards](#)'

Click to view the poem '[An Autumn Day](#)'

'Shame', in the first stanza of 'Going Westwards', seems to me to suggest both the misery of the Gael whose culture is demoted and derided, and the more general 'shame' of inhabitants of the British Isles who let their rulers appease Mussolini and Hitler. 'The Clyde' suggests that. MacLean is thinking of the heavy bombing of the burgh of Clydebank in March 1941 – but in his view the poverty of the Clyde region was a crime of imperialism, to be listed along with Nazi atrocities. Dimitrov was a Bulgarian Communist falsely accused in 1933 of setting fire to the German Reichstag.

Guernica, the undefended Basque town bombed by German planes serving Franco in 1937, is also distant from the *innocent* corpses of Nazis in the desert. One reads this as sardonic – dead men can do no harm. The last stanza might at first sight seem boastful. It isn't that. MacLean, for better or worse, whether he likes it or not, comes from a fighting tradition. But the old fighting pride of the MacLeans has been 'ruinous' *on occasion*. Heroism is invoked here, but not uncritically.

'An Autumn Day' deploys irony against another element in MacLean's heritage. The explosives that kill six comrades behave like the Calvinist God, deciding that these shall die – are 'elect' – irrespective of their human vices and virtues, while permitting the poet to survive.

Taking these war poems together, the overview is firm and clear. A necessary war is being fought by a clear-sighted poet. Yet the detail of the conflict suggests irony after irony. As in Greek tragedy, horror precedes calm: horror somehow generates clarity.

2.3.5 History

The census of 1911, the year of MacLean's birth, recorded 200,000 speakers of Scottish Gaelic. Fifty years later, the number had dropped to 81,000. If MacLean's vision is frequently pessimistic, this must surely derive at least in part from the dwindling of the culture and language to which he had committed himself as poet.

Please now read 'A Highland Woman'.

Click to view the poem '[Highland Woman](#)'

The anonymous woman is symbolic of Gaelic history. The view of Jesus here has to be understood in relation to MacLean's view of the role of Christianity in that history. Ministers preached acceptance, on earth, of poverty, of tyrannous landlordism, of Clearances, of mass emigration. It was as if their Christ had seen only the poor of ancient Palestine, and paid no heed to the living poor in the glens.

Please now read 'The National Museum of Ireland' below. It was written in 1970, and is the latest example of MacLean's work in our selection. Of this poem, MacLean explained that 'A Gael, if he is at all a Gael, must love Ireland as well as Scotland' and that he could 'think of no famous soldier who embodies as much as Connolly does my ideals of Gaeldom, socialism, heroism and martyrdom' (Bell, R. ed. 1989, *The Best of Scottish Poetry*, Chambers, p. 112).

Click to view the poem '[The National Museum of Ireland](#)'

The last stanza indicates that it is from the working-class poor that future heroes as great will come. His politics have remained, in essence, revolutionary: his view of history, consciously proletarian.

Please now read 'Hallaig' below. The epigraph is not a quotation but a free-standing line by MacLean himself. The many proper names in the poem are – or were once – full of associations for local people, but we cannot share these. All that we need to know is that Mac Gille Chalum was the name conventionally given to the clan chiefs of the MacLeods of Raasay, an island just off the Isle of Skye. 'Hallaig' balances reality and vision, despair and hope. The first two lines, suggesting that the house on Raasay in which the poet himself grew up is now deserted, are at once opposed by two more asserting continuity through the image of the birch, embodying the Gaelic tradition which MacLean loves. 'The Sabbath of the dead' is a phrase merging vision with actuality. The utter peace and quiet of the strict Free Presbyterian Sunday is not simply a negative phenomenon, a denial of life. An emphatic, wonderful silence is created: broken only by muted convergence of black-coated figures on the churches. The Sabbath of the dead would be even more powerfully silent. The silence which is characteristic of present-day, deserted Hallaig elevates the poet's vision of lost community, consecrates it.

Click to view the poem '[Hallaig](#)'

What does the vision of lost community in 'Hallaig' share with the heroic image of Connolly in 'The National Museum of Ireland'? And with that of the English soldier in 'Heroes' and that of the 'Highland Woman'? I would suggest anti-elitism is the common factor. One could relate this to MacLean's preference for anonymous, orally-transmitted Gaelic song over the more elaborate work of named and printed poets. Unlike Yeats (and unlike Eliot and MacDiarmid), MacLean is profoundly egalitarian. To his cast of mind, empire, and the habits of thought and feeling which go with it – authoritarian, racist, arrogant – are utterly antipathetic. His people were marched over by imperial troops, cleared off their land by their own chiefs, left with a deep mistrust for Established forces which was expressed in the truculent 'freedom' of Free Presbyterianism. MacLean took a step ahead of most of them, rejecting the Calvinist doctrine of election to grace as elitist, while retaining a

puritanical contempt for mere worldly riches and power. Through his work, the oldest literary language of Europe challenges modern bourgeois values with urgent contemporaneity.

2.3.6 Credits

The contributors to the recordings in this course are Sorley MacLean and Iain Crichton Smith; the recordings were produced by G.D. Jayalakshmi for the Open University.

Conclusion

You have now had an opportunity to examine the poetry of Sorley MacLean. This should have helped you gain an increased sense of the power of MacLean's poetry both in the English and in its original Gaelic.

The provision of the English translations and the discussion by the poet himself during the interview with Ian Crichton Smith should have increased your understanding of the English texts.

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