

## Monthly Review December 2016

### SORLEY MACLEAN IN THREE LANGUAGES

*Ó Choill go Barr Ghéaráin – Na Dánta, Somhairle MacGill-Eain*, Paddy Bushe, Coiscéim, Dublin, 2013. (20 Euros).

*Ar Lorg Shomhairle – Tracing Sorley's Footsteps*, a documentary (DVD, 56 minutes) by Éanna de Buis, Fis Productions ([www.fisproductions.ie](http://www.fisproductions.ie)) (15 Euros or £12).



This is a review of a translation from Scottish Gaelic into Irish Gaelic, but it also presents a way through: a film with sub-titles in English.

According to the 2011 censuses, in Scotland about 60,000 people speak Gaelic every day, and about 90,000 have some knowledge of it. In Ireland (including N.Ireland) about 100,000 people speak Gaelic every day, and about 1.3 million have some knowledge of it.

Some people maintain that Scottish and Irish Gaelic have become two languages, with a degree of similarity such as that between Low German and Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese, Danish and Norwegian. But Irish Gaelic ('Gaeilge') speakers in Ulster, facing Scotland, may understand Scottish Gaelic ('Gaidhlig') at least as well as Munster Gaelic (Cork, Kerry) which has a markedly different stress system and whose speakers call their language 'Gaolainn'.

As an example, here are some versions of 'I am / I am not'.

Scottish Gaidhlig: Tha mi / Chan eil mi

Ulster Gaeidhlic: Tá mé / Chan fhuil mé

Standard Gaeilge: Tá mé / Níl mé

Munster Gaolainn: Táim / Nílim

There is a continuum of different Gaelics from the Western Isles of Scotland down through Ireland from North to South. Nevertheless I have spoken to older people on the Dingle peninsula in Kerry who claim to have conversed fairly easily with fishermen from the Western Isles many years ago, and even now some Irish Gaelic speakers watch BBC Alba in Scottish Gaelic and muddle along with it. (Like me, they particularly enjoy the sheep-dog trials).

The written languages have diverged, however, over centuries, and spelling reforms have differed. An Irish reader faced with Scottish Gaelic finds unrecognisable spellings and unknown words. And the sound of Sorley MacLean chanting his poems is foreign – whether it is in a different language or a dialect. Yet MacLean is probably the greatest (to use that vulgar word, but there is no other) poet in Gaelic (Scots and Irish) of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I don't think any of his contemporaries in Scottish Gaelic match him. In Irish Gaelic, his rough contemporaries Seán Ó Ríordáin and Seán Ó Tuama match him in individual poems but each wrote much less, and on narrower themes. The most outstanding poet in Irish Gaelic, 'Biddy Jenkinson' (a pseudonym) is in a class of her own. She refuses to have her poems translated into English, the one way in which Gaelic poets (of either country) take their place on the world literary stage. MacLean's place on the stage is assured via his own translations (into English prose) in his collection *Ó Choille gu Berradh / From Wood to Ridge* (Carcanet, 1989), and by the larger collection with translations *Caoir Gheal Leumrach / White Leaping Flame* by Christopher Whyte and Emma Dymock (Polygon, 2011).

The Irish poet (in both Irish Gaelic and English) Paddy Bushe has now translated most of MacLean's poems into Irish Gaelic in *Ó Choill go Barr Ghéaráin* (2013). Note, this is the same title (although the contents are slightly different) as *Ó Choille gu Berradh* and the titles in themselves can give the English speaking reader an inkling of how the two languages or dialects differ.

So now the larger population of Gaelic speakers in Ireland can read MacLean in their own language – and compare the translation line by line with the original: Bushe puts the Scottish Gaelic on the left hand page, the Irish Gaelic on the right.

By my reckoning, as a middling speaker of Irish and competent reader of both Irish and Scottish Gaelic, Bushe has done an excellent job. And the bonus is that Bushe's son

Éanna is a film maker, and with Bushe's wife Fíona has made a DVD film, almost an hour long, sub-titled in English throughout. Since both Scottish and Irish Gaelic are spoken in the film, it is in effect trilingual.

In the film Bushe visits Skye, including the small island of Raasay where MacLean was born, the settlement of the Braes where he lived in later years, and the terrible remains in the form of crumbling stone walls and collapsed ditches of the Highland Clearances which caused such anger in MacLean and in his poems. His *Dáin do Eimhir / Poems to Emer* is one of the great sequences of love poems. But Bushe, like Whyte and Dymock, gives new emphasis to Maclean's political anger in his long poem *An Cuilithionn* (the title is written the same in both Scottish and Irish). In the film Bushe, a vigorous man in his sixties, tramps the Island of Skye. He even climbs the towering Cuilinn mountains which MacLean could see from the place of his birth and his later life, chanting parts of *An Cuilithionn*. He struggles through thickets, squelches through bogs, and clambers over stone walls as the Atlantic pounds below cliffs, in the company of the Scottish Gaelic poet Meg Bateman (who speaks in Irish) and converses in Scottish Gaelic with MacLean's friend Aongheas McNeacail and others. The landscape is spectacular. The background music of solo pipes and violin is moving.

Bushe, who is originally from Dublin but has lived most of his life in Kerry, speaks a mainly Munster Irish in which the stress on many words is shifted from the first syllable (where it usually is in both Scottish and other dialects of Irish Gaelic) to the second or third. Since the lines of MacLean's poetry, like most Gaelic verse, have strong stress beats, this makes the translation (as spoken by Bushe, as well as written) just as springy and emphatic as the original. That it works makes a point. The two Gaelics of Skye and of Munster are as much cousins as any other Gaelics. And the power of MacLean's poems comes through in them all.

So far as I can see Bushe opts for what the American theorist of translation Lawrence Venuti calls 'domestication' as distinct from 'foreignization'. That is, he aims for the best writing possible in the target language and does not slacken this in the interest of reproducing aspects of the source language. For example Bushe prefers 'synthetic' to 'analytic' verb forms – as in (see above) 'Nílim' rather than 'Níl mé.' The synthetic forms are older and usual across centuries of poetry in Gaelic, although in spoken Irish Gaelic they survive mainly in Munster. In MacLean's poem *Ma theid mi suas do 'n bhail' ud shuas / If I go up to yonder town*, the wonderful line 'Sgriobh mi fhìn i air mo chridhe' – 'I myself wrote it on my heart' ('it' being a death sentence) – contains the analytic form: 'Sgriobh mi', literally 'Wrote

I'. This could be translated into Irish Gaelic as 'Scríobh mé' – very close to the source text. But Bushe uses the synthetic form: 'Scríobhas féin í ar mo chroí'. In using 'Scríobhas féin' instead of 'Scríobh mé féin' he avoids the assonance of the two 'é' sounds (which exists in the source text also, as two 'í' sounds), resulting in a line with more subtly varying sounds than the original.

My analysis here is rather technical but I hope it illustrates Bushe's tough-minded insistence on arriving at the best possible poem in Irish Gaelic. I suspect that Maclean, being equally tough-minded, would have approved.

MacLean wrote to Hugh MacDiarmid in 1940: 'Whatever is deficient in my verse it has in Gaelic a rhythm and auditory sensuousness that pleases myself. This, of course, cannot be translated. I do not strive after imagery. Usually a lyric comes to me quite spontaneously as a whole and then I don't blot a line.'

Luckily, given the closeness of Scottish and Irish Gaelic, translation from one to the other *is* possible. The originals and the translations look something like this (followed by MacLean's own translation into English prose) in the beginning of MacLean's great poem *Hallaig*:

'Tha tim, am fiadh, an coille Hallaig'

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

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

'Tá am, an fíá, i gcoill Hallaig'

Tá claracha agis tairní ar an bhfuinneog  
trína bhfaca mé Aird an Iar  
is tá mo ghrá-sa ag Alt Hallaig  
ina crann beithe, mar ab ea riamh

idir an tInbhir agus Poll a' Bhainne,  
thall is abhus cois Bhaile-Chùirn:  
beith is ea í, agus coll,  
caorthainn chaol dhireach úr.

‘Time, the deer, is in the wood of Hallaig’

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-chuirm:  
she is a birch, a hazel,  
a straight, slender young rowan.

In Bushe’s reading of this in the film, his Munster accent is gently apparent where he pronounces ‘tairní’ with a stress on the second syllable (instead of only on the first) but for me this reinforces the fact that a poem is sounded in the head or the voice of the person who writes or reads it, and each person is different.

MacLean wrote in an essay that ‘Metrically Gaelic can do anything English has done, but the metric of the great bulk of Gaelic poetry is impossible in English.... Gaelic has a unique capacity for expressing varieties and shades and changes of emphasis, which English can never approximate.’

This applies to Irish as well as to Scottish Gaelic, and although the differences in vocabulary make an exact rendition in Irish Gaelic of the original rhythms in Scottish Gaelic impossible, Bushe with the ear and the linguistic vigour of the true poet provides variations on MacLean’s original in which it loses little or none of its power, and indeed here and there it gains. Even if you know no Gaelic, the DVD is a treat. And the book is a treat as well for those who know some of either Gaelic.

**Seán Haldane**