

A Gaelic Songmaker's Response to an English-speaking Nation

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The human experiences of the Gaels can be traced in the instinctive, inveterate and spontaneous compositions of the bards; ...they react to every major event affecting the lives of their community, and their songs mirror their folk-history (Bloomfield and Dunn 1989:67).

I: The Bardic Tradition

Iain MacNeacail [John Nicolson] was born on the Isle of Skye into a culture that places a high premium on verbal dexterity, observation, and quick wit. He is one of the last of the *bàird bhaile* [village bards], the local poets who were often requested, indeed expected, to make songs, both serious and satirical, for the local *céilidhean* [visiting sessions or informal house visits]. The *bàrd bhaile* [village bard] was an important figure in Gaelic society for centuries and remained so until well after the Second World War. These unpaid, unofficial poets were the *de facto* spokesmen and -women for their communities and as such wielded considerable power over both their neighbors and public opinion. For this society a song was, and to some extent still is, very much a functional and practical piece, an essential element of communication seamlessly integrated with other types of human expression. To mainstream Western society on the other hand, a song, whether old or new, is well outside accepted norms of daily social interaction; to most, it is an anomaly, while to the *bàird bhaile* and their communities, it is not. Only in the present century has Gaelic society's ancient emphasis on song and poetry as the usual form of emotional expression begun to break down.

The roots of this functional and oral songmaking tradition in Scotland date back to the coming of the Gaels of Ulster to their colony of Dal Riada in southwest Scotland in the sixth century A.D. The "professional bard" or "poet" in this early period was actually a songmaker,

since most Gaelic poetry until the present century was meant to be sung; indeed many of the Gaelic words for “verse” (e.g. *luineag*, *rann*, and so on) have implications of melody. These highly trained and skilled songmakers composed orally, to extremely difficult metrical patterns. (It is said that bards used to lie in the dark with a heavy stone on their stomachs as an “encouragement” to composition, though perhaps it was more of an incentive to finish!¹)

As far as we know, these paid bards were always men, as composing poetry was not then considered a seemly occupation for a woman. There are records of several women, most notably Sileas na Ceapaich [Julia (MacDonald) of Keppoch] and Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh [Mary (MacLeod) daughter of Red-haired Alasdair] in the seventeenth century, performing the functions of bards.² Unfortunately, there are no known records that payments were made for their services in anything other than kind, suggesting that professional status was not conferred upon them. And even in this century there are several traditions, found in the Western Isles of Scotland, that these women were buried face down, an acknowledgment (or punishment) of their bardic (i.e. unwomanly) activities. It seems that even then, under the nominally more egalitarian Gaelic Law, there was no equal pay for equal work! Despite this professional prejudice, however, it must be pointed out that much of extant Gaelic vernacular verse is thought to be by women.

The most highly trained of the professional songmakers in the employ of a chief were composers primarily of eulogies, elegies, and other praise poems for the nobles of the clan. They were also, following the conflation of the different ranks of court poet of the Classical period, the keepers of genealogical knowledge in the clan system. Between these two duties of praise (implying present legitimacy of the ruler based on his heroic behavior) and genealogy (implying historical legitimacy), the songmaker was in a unique position of influence within the normal corridors of political power. He was, as a result, second only to the Clan Chief in terms of the status accorded him by others.

There was of course a danger that the songmaker would simply act as a sort of publicity agent because he was in the Chief’s pay. In fact, it was often the bard who held the upper hand, so great was the Chief’s fear of

¹ See Martin (1884:116) for a description of these bards learning to compose at a bardic college.

² Their poems are available in collected editions. See Ó Baoill 1972 and Watson 1934.

satirical condemnation in song. Public image was and is an important consideration for any leader, especially a Clan Chief. Technically his empowerment was hereditary but, practically speaking, it was largely based on a good reputation among his subjects. A scathing, rapidly spread satire was therefore a thing to be feared. This is easily believable when we consider how valuable a word-of-mouth recommendation must have been in the absence of academic transcripts, diplomas, and the other “immutable” proofs of virtue we have today. Furthermore, the Chief's health was at risk, since there are several reports in Scottish oral tradition of people breaking out in boils as the result of a satirical blast.

The bards' professional status lasted until the Jacobite defeat at Culloden in 1746.³ In the following centuries the Highlands were mercilessly colonized culturally, and to some extent physically, by the English government and its armies. The people's confidence in their own culture and language was systematically undermined through educational propaganda until, by the late nineteenth century, they themselves considered the Gaelic language a hindrance to upward mobility; to learn English and to leave the Islands was considered “what was needed to get on in the world” (Smout 1986:219). Gaelic society was methodically crushed in a concerted effort at ethnocide that continues to this day.

The Statutes of Iona in 1609 had required the Chiefs to educate their sons in Lowland schools and so, by the early nineteenth century, the aristocracy was heavily anglicized; they had become no more than absentee landlords (and English-speaking at that). The Chiefs needed cash to maintain their newly acquired expensive London lifestyles; the people, no longer militarily necessary as a measure of wealth and power, were systematically cleared from the land, making way for the more profitable (and less troublesome) sheep. Having been moved to the shoreline, the inhabitants were forced to gather and burn kelp for the landlords, who sold the resultant potash for use in English and Lowland industry. With the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815, however, inexpensive supplies of potash became available from Spain and the kelp market collapsed. Cattle prices

³ One of the last of the professional songmakers was John MacCodrum, an expert satirist whose songs were collected, edited, and translated by William Matheson (1938). The volume also contains interesting biographical material, including some of the financial details of being a professional bard (xxiv-xxv). The poetry of other professional bards of this era is also well-represented in collections such as *Eachann Bacach and other MacLean Poets* (Ó Baoill 1979), *Bardachd Shilis na Ceapaich, c. 1660-c. 1729* (Ó Baoill 1972), *Orain Iain Luim* (MacKenzie 1964), and *Bàrdachd Gàidhlig* (Watson 1959), to name just a few.

also fell at the same time due to freer access to continental markets, leaving the crofters, newly converted to a cash economy, without a cash income and starved of land on which to grow their food. Emigration then became the landlords' new solution to the overcrowding caused by their own misappropriation of land.⁴

The Chiefs could no longer afford to keep a professional song-maker, even had they desired, and the makers themselves, no longer benefiting from a system of patronage, ceased to find praise poetry such an interesting form of composition. The emphasis of bardic vernacular verse shifted to nature poetry. The eighteenth century saw a great flowering of this genre through the efforts of poets like Alasdair Mac Mhaighsteir Alasdair [Alexander son of the Minister Alexander (MacDonald)], Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir [Fair-haired Duncan MacIntyre], and others, many of whom are now anonymous.

While beautiful and often technically brilliant, many of the later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century nature poems talk in paradisiacal terms of the pre-Clearance Highlands, often mistakenly blaming the sheep for the devastation, rather than the people's own kin: the landlords. This self-deception arises in part from the paternalism inherent in the clan system; the people entrusted much of the responsibility for their welfare to the chief, who was in most cases a relative.⁵ In addition, the Gaels' self-esteem and sense of the value of their culture was by this time almost nonexistent. Little wonder, then, that they did not rebel against both their blood ties and a system that taught that authority was right and beyond the question of ordinary folk.

This unprotesting mind-set held sway through the vast emigrations caused by the worst of the Clearances (ca. 1820-70) and the potato famines of the 1840s. A further shadow was also cast over the free expression of Gaelic song-poetry by the evangelical revivals that swept the Highlands in the mid-nineteenth century, teaching that this world was no more than a "vale of tears" and song a "mere vanity" therein. As the modern Gaelic poet Somhairle MacGill-eain [Sorley MacLean] puts it, "Gaelic song poetry

⁴ See Hunter 1976 for an exhaustive and moving study of the people's transition from clansmen to crofters. Hunter also has an extremely valuable and extensive bibliography. For a brief introduction to the Clearances and summaries of some of the major turning points of the 150-year crisis, see Thomson 1983.

⁵ While this was the norm, it was not always the case. In some cases, a tenant willing to declare loyalty to a particular chief was free to do so. He was then able to assume the clan name if he so wished.

degenerated to a feeble wail and to a feebler pietism" (1985:107-8).⁶

The end of that devastating century, however, brought the dawning of a new age; a little vigor returned to Gaelic verse as poets like Dr. John MacLachlan of Rahoy and especially Uilleam MacDhùnlèibhe [William Livingston] put a new life in the poetry. For popularity and influence, however, the composer of the late nineteenth century who undoubtedly stands out is Mary MacPherson, or Màiri Mhór nan Oran [Big Mary of the Songs], as she is known throughout the Highlands. About nine thousand lines of her poetry, which includes some stinging anti-landlord criticism, were noted down from her recitation by a Mr. John Whyte and published in 1891. The editor, Alasdair MacBheathain [Alexander MacBain], says in his introduction (1891:xiii-xiv) that though she

can read her own poetry in print, she cannot write it. . . . And she has at least half as much more of her own, and twice as much... floating [i.e., then current in oral tradition], unpublished poetry, mainly that of Skye and the Western Isles.

Clearly her memory was astonishing, and MacBheathain's mention of it is an indication of the value that Gaelic society places on a good memory.⁷

Crofters' conditions improved slightly with the 1886 Crofters' Holdings (Scotland) Act, by which this group was granted such minimal rights as security of tenure. The focus of the Gaels' land agitation was then no longer so sharp, and the poetic outcry against the profiteering landlords abated to some extent.⁸ Filling this relative void of poetic activity, a new

⁶ MacGill-eain [Sorley MacLean] is known to most European and world audiences as a major award-winning literary poet, but he is also a tradition-bearer with a great first-hand knowledge of Gaelic song and its traditions. This rich background suffuses practically all of his own poetry.

⁷ William Matheson echoes this appreciation in his edition of the songs of John MacCodrum where he says that one person "might know thousands of lines of poetry, together with a large number of prose tales" (1938:xix).

⁸ The Act improved the rights of the tenantry vis à vis the landlords by granting security of tenure and the right of inheritance, and by establishing a Land Court for the fixing of fair rents. Unfortunately, however, it did not provide a solution to the crofters' main grievance: land shortage. No attempt was made, at that point, to reappportion the fertile former common-grazing lands that had been usurped by many Landlords. The Land League and other crofters' resistance organizations, therefore, did not see the legislation as

tradition appears: the aforementioned *bàird bhaile*. Local bards were not, of course, a new development, but a perceived upswing in the activity of the tradition can be traced to three factors: (i) the absence of a strong formal tradition that might have overshadowed the work of these less established local poets; (ii) the growth, following the clearance of the rural Highlands, of large Gaelic communities in cities such as Glasgow, providing a new synthetic community in which the local poet's observation was needed,⁹ and a newly literate urban population that also had access to the large numbers of Gaelic books that were beginning to emerge;¹⁰ and (iii) the establishment of the *Mòd* competitions in which local poets were provided with a platform for their material.

Over the years there have been a number of good collections of *bàird bhaile* poetry—e.g., *Dòmhnall Ruadh Chorùna: òrain is dain le Dòmhnall Dòmhnallach a Uibhist* (Dòmhnallach 1969), *Sporan Dhòmhnail* (Mac an t-Saoir 1968), *Sguaban Eòrna: Bàrdachd is Dàin le Iain MacDhòmhnuaill* (MacDhòmhnuaill 1973), *Na Bàird Thirisdeach* (Camshron 1932)—and they

the great landmark that we often consider it today. See Hunter 1986 for comprehensive detail.

⁹ A perfect example of a poet in this new urban role is Dòmhnall Ruadh Phàislig [Red-haired Donald of Paisley], who made many songs on local issues within the Gaelic community in Glasgow. See Mac an t-Saoir 1968

¹⁰ In the nineteenth century, most rural villages in the Highlands had voluntary schooling programs run by the church, which taught reading and writing in Gaelic for the purposes of religious education. “At this time,” wrote the Swiss traveler Louis Necker de Saussure in 1822, “there is scarcely a village in the Highlands where children do not learn to read and write in Gaelic and the Holy Scriptures are in the hands of every Highlander” (90). The Free Church of Scotland alone opened 596 schools between 1851 and 1869, but unfortunately, with the coming of the Education (Scotland) Act in 1872, making school attendance to the age of fourteen compulsory, they were either closed down or transferred to state control (Durkacz 1983). All children were then taught to read and write only English and, by the late nineteenth century, “the Highlander himself was strongly and consistently against the use of Gaelic as a school language” (Durkacz 1977:19). Despite prohibitions against, and in some cases corporal punishment for, using Gaelic, a number of young scholars applied the same basic principles learned in the reading of English to the Gaelic of the Bible, small books of Spiritual songs, and the Gaelic newspapers and periodicals that were becoming available in inexpensive popular editions. A new literate class of Gael had been created.

continue to appear.¹¹ Unfortunately, collections like these and those of professional bardic poetry usually elucidate only the factual background to the bards' topical and occasional songs. In the process they almost wholly neglect the social function of the songs and the thought processes of their composers (probably partly due to the posthumous nature of many of these collections). In recent years, the School of Scottish Studies at Edinburgh and other university folklore departments have gone some way toward correcting this oversight of context with publications such as the LP and booklet *Calum Ruadh, Bard of Skye* made by Danish musicologist Torkild Knudsen (1978). In Knudsen's recordings, Calum Ruadh MacNeacail [Red-haired Malcolm Nicolson], a Skye bard of classical style, reflects on his methods of composition and selection of subject matter. The emphasis is on the bard's own impressions of his technique and, while it is a valuable contribution, the social contexts of the functional songmaker are still under-investigated.¹²

II: The Gaelic Songmaker

The Isle of Skye on the west coast Scotland has produced its share of songmakers in the last few centuries: the lyrical Uilleam Ros, Niall MacLeòid, Màiri Mhór (whose village, if she were to be called a village bard, would have to be the entire *Gàidhealtachd* [Gaelic region], wherever Gaels were downtrodden), and more recently Bàrd Ghrialain [the Bard of Grialain], Aonghas Fleidsear [Angus Fletcher], Calum Ruadh Nicolson of Braes and Iain "An Sgiobair" MacNeacail [John "Skipper" Nicolson].¹³

An Sgiobair is one of the last of the *bàird bhaile*, still making songs at the age of eighty-eight. He made his first song at the age of fourteen about a shortage of tobacco at the end of the First World War and he can

¹¹ A further selection appears in the bibliography. It is not intended as a comprehensive list.

¹² My Ph.D. on Iain "An Sgiobair" MacNeacail, also of Skye, while including a good deal of straightforward collection of unrecorded material, focuses primarily on the poet's own thought processes and especially on the social function of his songs and song-making, as seen from his own and others' perspectives. It will also discuss his poetry in relation to that of the *bàird bhaile* in much greater detail than I have space for here.

¹³ These two Nicolsons are not related; the surname is one of the most common in Skye.

still sing all six verses of it. “I thought anybody could make a song! But I don’t know,” he says, not so much belittling his talent as indicating how natural he considers a life filled with song.¹⁴ Gaelic society is filled with song, and so Nicolson has become well known in his native village, and beyond, as a bard. Between the wars Nicolson often made a new song, sang it at a *céilidh* or two, and then it would be forgotten as it ceased to be topical or as a new issue presented itself: “they were for the time being, just.” Since the topics were often ephemeral, a song usually had a short working life. Sometimes, however, it would prove popular and be taken up by local people and learned, sung, traded, and taken to other parts of Skye and further afield.

In those days, between the turn of this century and the Second World War, the *céilidh* was a daily event.

Well, [on] the winter nights you wouldn’t mind maybe walking a couple of miles up over to a house in [the next village] or something like that... and maybe three or four or five or six, maybe eight at times [would be there].

They would gather at the *taigh céilidh* [the visiting house for that day] to share songs and stories old and new, news, tales of unusual occurrences, and debate: “to pass the time” during the winter nights (SA89.25.B8), which in Skye can be as long as sixteen hours. It is in this context of lively community that Nicolson has spent most of his life:

Aye, but that was the custom you know at [that] time; you had nights in the house. You’d always be there and somebody would have something queer [i.e., funny] to say and you would get at them for doing it. . . . Well, I would be here tonight and another house tomorrow; you got [to] go round the place, you know. . . . And the rest of the boys would be following suit. . . . Aye, except Sunday. Oh yes, well, we had church on Sunday. We had to. . . go there anyhow (SA88.64.A10).

At the *céilidh*, oneupsmanship would be the order of the day. As one

¹⁴ All quotes, unless otherwise stated, are drawn from my fieldwork with Iain MacNeacail. They may be found on the following tapes in the School of Scottish Studies’ S(ound) A(rchive) at the University of Edinburgh: SA85.86, SA88.63-65, SA89.25-28. Ellipses indicate editing and tightening, square brackets indicate word(s) added for clarity. Italics in brackets indicate “stage directions” that describe Nicolson’s movements or emotions that are not expressible in writing alone. In quotes where conversation is shown, IM = the informant Iain MacNeacail; MB = Margaret Bennett of the School of Scottish Studies; and TM = Thomas McKean of the Departments of Celtic and Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh.

villager put it to me,

one was as good as the other at cutting each other. One would say something smart and the other would say something smart, and that would be going on all day!¹⁵

These evenings were clearly an important and regular feature of village life and, while they certainly occur less frequently than they used to, they are not yet dead; when I asked at what point did they stop, Nicolson's response was quick: "Oh, they never stopped yet!" Even today on long winter nights, the people *céilidh* [visit], though not on the same scale:

Well, they're not what they were, you know; television and everything has brought things to a halt now. . . . That was the only way, before you had the wireless or anything. . . . That was the ways of the Highlands and the Islands all through; that was the custom. They were quite happy at that time. . . . They weren't rich financially in any way, but they had so much they did [i.e. they were so busy] and they were quite happy with it. Not what they are today! (SA89.25.B8).

The *bàird bhaile*, whose witty, intelligent repartee was so popular at the *céilidhs*, made songs about anything: songs of love and emotion, songs about local history, elegaic songs, and biting satires that, without naming names, left no one in doubt as to who was being lampooned. "They were feared of me making a song to them," Nicolson says. "Maybe myself and a neighbor were cast out on [i.e., disagreeing or feuding about] something, and that was enough" (SA88.64.B7-B8). The power of satire does not appear to have dimmed since the days Mary MacLeod raised boils with a song.

In this tradition the satirist-poet is often a sort of social conscience for the village, drawing attention to misdeeds of all sorts for all to see. Villagers become quite wary of stepping out of line, lest they draw his attention, for what amounts to public ridicule awaits them, with the added attraction that it is singable and catchy: gossip set to music, if you will. One neighbor recalls an exchange that started with Nicolson making a satire on a local woman. She then threatened to make an *aoir* [satire or cursing song] on him in retaliation, unless he corrected his slight with a good song

¹⁵ Interview with Peter Stewart, 5.5.90.

about her. He responded favorably and so was spared the *aoir*.¹⁶ The use of satire as a means of social control was, apparently, a two-way street. One's reputation in the area could live and die in song.

The effect of this sort of heated exchange was tempered by other types of song, e.g., songs of exile, like *'Nuair 'sa mhadainn 's mi 'g éirigh* ["In the morning as I rise"] about his years working away from Skye on the mainland; songs of love, like *Òran do Mhàiri* ["A song for Mary"]; or songs about local events, like *Òran Bliadhna Ùire* ["A New Year's song"]. While satire was certainly a release for potentially damaging tensions in a small island community, the bard was also looked to as a chronicler of memorable local events and characters—a sort of vernacular version of the court bard. Between them, Nicolson and another local Skye bard, the late Aonghas Fleidsear seven years his senior, made songs about the iron horse (in this case a bicycle), political questions, affairs of the heart, amusing local issues, and even myxomatosis!¹⁷ To Nicolson, song is an expression of emotion and of the need to communicate. It is used, as Brendán Ó Madagáin says of Gaelic song (both Irish and Scottish), "on occasions when feelings were such that ordinary speech was inadequate" (1985:143). Ó Madagáin goes on to state that this function has "largely been lost to characteristic Western society" (*ibid.*). Nicolson, however, retains it as part of his daily life.

An Sgiobair [the Skipper], as Nicolson was nicknamed when he first went to school in 1908, composes entirely orally.¹⁸ Although he can read and write English and has taught himself to read and write Gaelic, he remembers the many songs he has made over the last seventy years without the aid of written texts. He discusses this skill with typical modesty and understatement:

¹⁶ This incident was recounted by Peter Stewart and relayed to me in a letter by Margaret Bennett, 12.11.89.

¹⁷ Myxomatosis is a disease that was introduced to Scotland following World War II to control rabbit populations. It has decimated large numbers of animals, but also leaves many crippled and weak.

¹⁸ He says this particular epithet was chosen because he "wore a sailor suit and sued to be around boats and such like," but also, perhaps, because of his slightly authoritarian manner. The tradition of nicknaming is strong in Gaelic society, and may arise from the fairly rigid "rules" for the naming of children after immediate ancestors and the relatively localized concentrations of surnames. See Dorian 1981 for a good discussion of Scottish Gaelic *farainm* [nickname] traditions.

- IM: Well yes, now and again something would come, but they were forgotten; [they were] only for the time being just.
- MB: Did you write them down?
- IM: No, no, probably it would come at me as I was walking up the road. . . . Ach I just was picturing something in my mind, making a picture of it and putting words to rhythm. No, I never write anything.
- TM: And did you change them after you finished them?
- IM: No. No, but they were only just for the time being and [then] that was all forgotten, you know (SA88.64.B5).

He composes when walking along or engaged in some other rhythmic activity, “just as long as [the words] are coming in rhythm,” he says, as if producing complex rhymes was effortless. Effortless or not, *céilidh* participants were discriminating and if the local bards’ poetry was not up to standard, “the locals would soon criticize you on that” (SA89.28.B9).

It is often the case that traditional songmakers set new words to old tunes. For proof of this, one only has to look at almost any collection of traditional-style Gaelic songs, such as *Clarsach an Doire* (MacLeòid 1975), *Songs and Poems in the Gaelic Language* by Rob Donn MacKay (1829), or *The MacLean Songster: Clarsach na Coille: A Collection of Gaelic Poetry* (Sinclair 1881), where nearly every song is preceded by the words “air fonn...” [to the tune...] followed by the name of a melody (either Highland and Lowland). Bloomfield and Dunn mention emigrant Gaels in the new world making new songs “cast in the old pattern and set to old tunes” (1989:68). This seems to have been the case for English-language songmakers as well, as a glance at almost any broadside from the British tradition will reveal: “to the tune of. . .” or “sung to the air. . .” Even in English-speaking North America, the habit continues. For example, Edward D. Ives, in writing about Prince Edward Island satirist Larry Gorman, says, “a traditional song-maker creates new words to old tunes” (1964:159).

Nicolson does not *consciously* select a tune to which he will fit words, although the basic contours of his melodies are drawn from a pool of songs that were popular on the *céilidh* scene between the wars. In his composition process the melody arises as a derivative of the rhythms of the words; it is a re-creation that uses the contours of a particular traditional tune as a point of departure. “In the aesthetic world of the traditional singer,” writes Anne Dhu Shapiro referring to Nicolson, “this is indeed composition; refashioning the Gaelic tune to fit the new text makes a

completely new entity” (1985:411).¹⁹

Even the use of melody itself is not a deliberate decision, but a necessity that arises out of the need to communicate. It is an essential vehicle for the words that formalizes the communication, giving certain signals to the listener that s/he is receiving a distilled message. To communicate most effectively, then, a message or poem *must* be sung. Referring to a modern Gaelic writer, Nicolson maintains, “You can’t sing a single one of his songs, how can he be a poet!”²⁰ To be a true poet, in his eyes, you must make songs.

Nicolson makes a series of subconscious decisions while making a song, so that the music “goes with the rhythm, with the syllables” (SA89.28. B7). As MacGill-eain, a modern European poet thoroughly conversant in Gaelic song tradition, has so neatly described it, “the song-poet is walking the tightrope of meter without being conscious of it, [making] ineffable melodies rise like exhalations from the rhythms and resonances of the words” (1985:112, 106). The songmaker, according to the Gaelic scholar John MacInnes, begins the melody wherever s/he likes, but is then faced with a limited number of choices for the next note. The next note brings fewer options, the next even fewer, and, by the time the first line is complete, s/he is practically locked into the rest of the song according to the ground rules of traditional melody.²¹ There is almost the sense of a “tone language” type connection between certain syllables and pitch. In other words, the choice of vocalic sound and rhyme scheme almost demands certain pitches and progressions of melody. It is important to emphasize that to the Sgiobair the music is *not* a separate concern. It is not the primary concern, but it is an essential one.

One of the more remarkable aspects of An Sgiobair’s songmaking is his spontaneous composition. By this I do not mean to imply *instantaneous* composition, because his songs are never off the cuff, but a fully formed song, usually topical, could be made on short notice and sung before an event was over. One such occasion was an evening when the local lads

¹⁹ She goes on to say that, “In fact, the use of old tunes with new texts may well be one of the principal means by which, over time, whole families of related tunes are spawned” (411). This seems a very likely solution to the problem of the origins of the huge “tune families” found in the British Isles and related traditions.

²⁰ Interview 12.9.88.

²¹ Expressed in a discussion following a seminar I gave at the School of Scottish Studies, 15.5.90.

were gathered for a good *crack* [chat] at *taigh an t-Saighdeir* [the Soldier's house]. At eleven p.m., however, the host decided to utilize the assembled manpower to slaughter a ram.

Well, as they were doing the thing, you know, I start[ed] thinking. [They] were discussing it. I started composing you know, what was going on, you know, putting [it] in rhythm and when I went, you know, before I left, I had the song made! [*claps hands*] "Oh well," he said to me, "it's a good recipe." [*laughs*] That was the only thing he said about it! The other boys were vexed. (SA89.25.B11)

In his choice of rhyme schemes, rhythms, form, and melody, Nicolson has much in common with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gaelic poets; he is an oral songmaker of great skill with a thorough understanding of his poetic tradition, embracing a wide range including nature, elegaic, panegyric, and narrative poetry, as well as satirical verse. His memory is such that he can sing both the first song he ever made (at age fourteen) and a seven-verse traditional song only heard three or four times. This ability serves him well, as he will often answer a question in general daily conversation by reciting verbatim a verse (or five for that matter) by one of his favorite song-poets of the last three centuries, especially the great Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir and the Skye songmakers Uilleam Ros and Màiri Mhór nan Oran.

"Oh yes, they love their Duncan Bàn," remarked Gaelic scholar John Shaw. It is Mac an t-Saoir against whom Gaelic oral songmakers and tradition-bearers measure other bards, a regard that may be due to the fact that MacIntyre's long complex poems were composed entirely orally, since he was not able to read or write.²² That a non-literate bard should win greater respect from tradition-bearers than any other, including the highly literate Mac Mhaighsteir Alasdair, is an indication of the premium that Gaelic song-tradition places on a good memory. By quoting these bards as authorities in response to a question, Nicolson shows not only the quality of his memory, but the importance of song in his life; the answer is in song.

²² His finished songs were written down by the Rev. Donald MacNicol from the poet's dictation, further "revised and rewritten by the poet's first editor, Dr. John Stuart, minister of Luss" and printed during his lifetime (MacLeod 1952:xxvii). Their good state of preservation in oral tradition may be due to their appearance in popular printed collections such as *Sàr-obair nam Bàrd Gaelach* [*The Beauties of Gaelic Poetry*], assembled by Alexander MacKenzie (1840). On the other hand, it is also possible that editors like MacKenzie made their selections based on which songs were popular at the time. It is now almost impossible to say which is the case.

III: The Response to an English-speaking Nation

In recent decades, as Skye has shifted from a crofting economy (largely dependent on subsistence farming and barter) to a cash economy (increasingly dependent on tourism) and the number of English-speaking incomers has increased to flood proportions, Nicolson has seen his village, his island, his language, and his culture ebb away in a flood of anglicization. Tour buses, Members of Parliament, Lords, and Clan Chiefs all weave their way down Nicolson's two-mile side-road (often getting stuck in his driveway) to visit him in his role of "bard to the Clan Nicolson." Though there is no professional position, An Sgiobair has been given that title by the Clan Chief. What are the implications of these changes in the fabric of society, to a man for whom song is such an essential form of everyday expression?

Recently, in response to English-speaking incomer's queries about the content of his Gaelic songs, and about the history of the Gaels and the Isle of Skye, Nicolson has started to respond in English, but in the medium in which he feels most comfortable—that of song. A song is, as we have seen, a language of daily communication in which he is fluent, rather than the set piece it is for most singers and listeners. It has been a primary mode of social interaction in his culture for centuries.

He has made two types of English song to date: the praise poem (a type often found in Gaelic tradition) and the narrative song (a much rarer type).²³ By answering in song he is, in fact, closer to his beloved bards in motivation and skill than he will ever admit. Not only is he performing much the same social function, but he is doing it in a foreign language and culture. Here he explains why he made *The Highland Clearances* in English:

There were so many coming about here and asking questions,... and did I know anything about the Highland Clearances? They came from Canada, New Zealand too, and Australia, and they were asking...“how did this happen?” and things like that. . . . Well, I was putting... together... what I heard of [i.e., from] old people. Well, I heard quite a lot from my father, you know. In age now he would be over a hundred and fifteen anyhow [i.e., born before 1870]. Well, he remembered quite a lot of the Clearances then, because his own aunties went over to Canada, [they] had to go. So that's how I thought of putting that together. (SA86.85.A1)

²³ See Ross 1957 for a discussion of the classification of Gaelic song.

In this song, unlike many of the makers of the spineless “Clearance Poetry” of the nineteenth century, Nicolson lays the blame directly at the feet of the “devilish type of landlords” and the politicians responsible for the crofter’s plight. He tells the Skye-men’s story in heroic terms, as befits the descendants of a warrior race:

The Highland Clearances

[Nicolson’s tempo throughout is very flexible, but in this verse the quarter-note value is 125-130 per minute. His key of C# Major is rendered here as A Major.]

A time will come, a time will go, but ne'er for- got- ten be it, the
High- land Clear-ance that de- prived our land of stal- wart he- roes ()

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>2. They were men of great renown
for liberty and freedom
and all they gained as a reward
was exile without reason</p> <p>3. The land was wrenched out of their grasp
their homes were burnt to cinders.
No more evil could befall our race,
by devilish type of landlords.</p> <p>4. Prime Minister Gladstone was to blame
with his evil clique around him
sent one thousand marines to Skye,
the people there to hound them.</p> | <p>5. The Skyemen gallantly did stand,
as always did to foe-men
and didn't yield an inch to them,
but routed all before them.</p> <p>6. The final end to the dispute
was by Commission Royal—
that the land be graced by gallant men
that won such fame and glory.</p> <p>7. Though wounds may heal, the scars
remain
and so it's with the Highlands;
the men that made our nation great,
gain nothing but remembrance.</p> |
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The emphasis of this paper is not musicological, but I will discuss some aspects of *The Highland Clearances* in those terms.

The first verse alone is sufficient to indicate the tune, as Nicolson varies it only slightly throughout the song. Unfortunately, the printed page does not convey his fluid, rocking style, nor does this notation adequately describe the pitches of the human voice. This transcription is necessarily an

approximation of what he sings.²⁴

I have tried to show the rhythm as An Sgiobair sings it and have omitted a time signature because he varies the pulse depending on the phrase; for example, in the third line he speeds up considerably for “the Highland Clearance. . . .” Commas above the staff indicate where the singer takes a breath and pauses (for approximately half a beat). The schwa indicates where he characteristically achieves release of the final “-s” sound with an extra syllable on the same pitch. An Sgiobair treats the rhythmic structure as a flexible skeleton around which he works, maintaining the overall pattern, and increasing the tempo considerably — from 125-130 beats per minute in the first verse, to 175 beats per minute in the last. His pitch remains steady throughout and his voice is confident, despite a slight quaver. Though he is eighty-eight years old, one can still hear elements of the strong, high, and moving tenor of the earliest recordings in the archives of the School of Scottish Studies (ca. 1950).

Melodically, lines one, two, and four of *The Highland Clearances* are closely related to the chorus of *Té Bhàn an Achaidh Luachrach* [The Fair One of the Rushy Meadow], a song well known in Skye in the first half of this century (there are eight versions in the School archives from different Skye singers). Where the tune varies it is in response to the dictates of Gaelic phrasing and assonance, having been modified through Nicolson’s rhythmic composition system.²⁵

²⁴ I would like to thank Richard H. Gagné, Lorraine Lee-Hammond, and Dr. Peter Cooke for assistance and advice on the transcription.

²⁵ For a discussion of the melody of another one of An Sgiobair’s few songs in English, see Shapiro 1985. One of Dr. Shapiro’s propositions is the existence of several melodic shapes indigenous to the Isle of Skye, which she labels “Skye contours” and which she suggests Skye songmakers unconsciously use as a basis for their compositions. It is difficult to say whether the fact that An Sgiobair fits the postulated contour proves its existence or simply proves that he often uses Skye songs (especially those by Màiri Mhór nan Oran) as models for his own. A tendency Dr. Shapiro discusses is the importance he places on the provenance of a song or tune. This is typical of Gaelic society’s emphasis on history and origin, whether it be genealogical, temporal, authorial, or geographical. In addition, Màiri Mhór and her songs have had a direct influence on Nicolson’s life; not only did his father know her (he gave her frequent lifts from Portree to Uig), but An Sgiobair refers to her conversations with his parents, quotes her songs, and discusses her life more frequently than he does that of practically any other songmaker. Nicolson’s admiration alone would surely go some way toward explaining many similarities between their works. While a “Skye contour” may well exist, to prove its existence we need much broader

Though this song is in English, we must look to Gaelic intonation, phrasing, and poetics to more fully appreciate its complex character. Nicolson has, with his distinctive Highland dialect, unconsciously developed his own form of Highland English poetry, which incorporates linguistic features common in Gaelic verse, especially assonance between long vowels in opposing lines. Since vowel length is not considered a feature of most English speech, its use in an English poem is rare. It is prevalent in Gaelic poetry and is the despair of most translators. Nicolson sympathizes with this:

But what is very strange, you can't get... the interpretation of the Gaelic in English. You can't do it!... You have the Gaelic there, but you can't make it rhyme the same, no. But you can give exactly near the meaning of it, what he means, but you'll not get the word for word. . . . No, it doesn't sound [the same] (SA89.28.B14).

The major Gaelic features of this English poetry are (i) fixed internal assonantal rhyme that appears in the penultimate syllable of lines two and four, usually with a floating parallel in line three (noted below in **bold**), and (ii) moveable internal assonantal rhyme appearing, usually twice, in lines one and three (noted below by underlining).

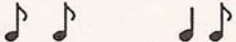
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|--|--|
| <p>1. A <u>t</u>ime will come, a <u>t</u>ime will go,
but ne'er forgotten be it,
the <u>H</u>ighland <u>C</u>learance that deprived
our land of stalwart heroes.</p> | <p>4. Prime Minister Gladstone <u>was</u> to blame
with his <u>ev</u>il clique around him,
send one <u>th</u>ousand <u>mar</u>ines to Skye,
the <u>pe</u>ople there to hound them.</p> |
| <p>2. <u>T</u>hey were men of <u>gr</u>eat renown
for liberty and fredom
and all <u>th</u>ey <u>g</u>ained as a reward
was exile without rea<u>s</u>on.</p> | <p>5. The Skyemen <u>g</u>allantly <u>di</u>d stand
as always did to foe-men
and didn't <u>y</u>ield an inch to them
but routed all before them.</p> |

In this song, as in the few others An Sgiobair has made in Highland English, these rhymes often occur between English vowels that have been uncharacteristically lengthened, e.g., the “be” and the “he-” of verse one. This is partly due to the tune that Nicolson has re-created, which calls for a musical emphasis at the end of each couplet. By using syllables that sound artificially elongated to the Anglophone, however, Nicolson creates “vowel music” similar to that found throughout Gaelic song between that

evidence than a few of Skye's many songmakers, two of whom practically knew each other.

language's genuine long vowels. The composer expects certain types of emphasis, rhyme, and rhythm, based on his lifetime of tradition and the melody he is re-creating, and he molds his English to fit these expectations.

A verbal description cannot adequately convey An Sgiobair's use of Gaelic's rich vowel music and rhyme schemes. Even the transcription above, though it shows some temporal lengthening of "be" and "he-," does not really express the sonority created by just the slightest augmentation of timing and a change in vowel quality, a feature several of the later verses display this feature more prominently. Many English speakers, listening to Gaelic poetry for the first time, are surprised at the concept of long vowels and how long they can actually turn out to be. Further adding to the unfamiliarity is the idea that, in Gaelic, vowel length can create minimal pairs—pairs of otherwise identical words whose meanings are differentiated by the value of the vowel alone, e.g., the words *bata* [stick] and *bàta* [boat]. They are phonetically identical in every way but vowel length, and we can assign the following timings to them:

ba-ta and *bà-ta*.


Another linguistic feature for which Gaelic is known is the *shortness* of some of its unmarked syllables, especially in *puirt-a-beul* [the mouth music or mouth tunes] and in the vocables of the tweed-working songs. This characteristic can be seen in the third measure of many verses of this song in the unusual shortening of some of the English syllables—"that de-" in verse one, "a re-" in verse two, "inch to" in verse five, and so forth.

By virtue of being in Highland English, which reduces the intimidation factor of listening to a foreign tongue, this poem allows the Anglophone to appreciate some of the aural subtleties of Gaelic song-poetry usually missed by non-speakers of the language. Most translations of Gaelic songs by less traditional poets are heavily content-oriented and though they may, in spirit, be accurate reflections of the poet's original concept, they rarely convey a poem's aural feel to the listener. Nicolson's expertise in his native idiom colors his poetry in the language of another culture, even when the language, culture, and idiom are as unrelated as those of English and Gaelic.

By grafting aspects of his fast-disappearing song tradition onto the cultural juggernaut of English, An Sgiobair challenges an attitude that Gaels have been persistently taught to accept—that their language must adapt to English, whether to survive or simply to die gracefully. This idea has been

both figuratively and literally beaten into the psyche of the Gael over the last few centuries. Its influence can be seen in much of this century's Gaelic poetry in the assumption that the culture's poetic tradition must somehow "catch up" to developments in modern European poetry, even to the extent of changing its very nature.

It is clear that Nicolson has no such inferiority complex. Perhaps a bard performing his traditional community function is less susceptible to majority propaganda, because he is expected to be (and is) a little outside the usual. Through his songs he is a source of change and comment, but also a barometer of them. Nicolson, like many other bards, also benefits from a wide knowledge of the depth and wealth of his tradition; he knows that feelings of cultural inferiority are without foundation. On the contrary, he feels that Gaelic is more accurate in speech than English and a more ancient language.

While this sentiment may come across as chauvinistic, it is not without foundation. Most people well acquainted with the Gaelic language feel that it is unmatched for expression of emotion and precision of thought. For example, a central frustration for any would-be translator is the lack of English equivalents for most Gaelic adjectives. Often a single verse of poetry will have numerous adjectives expressing subtle shades of the same meaning. To translate such a verse into English accurately often requires a paragraph of English prose. Even resorting to the dictionary (usually Dwelly's) for each one yields the same English word over and over again.

An Sgiobair's pride in the antiquity of Gaelic is not unfounded either. It is one of the oldest European languages and possesses the oldest written tradition as well. (Nicolson often quotes Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir, who said that Gaelic was the language spoken in the Garden of Eden, and he goes on to ask, "can you prove it wasn't?") Nicolson's pride in his native language is a natural thing. For me, as an outsider surrounded by the aftermath of the Clearances, it is refreshing to see a Gael, long taught by the system to devalue his own language and culture, openly displaying such pride in his birthright.

Nicolson's conviction that there is no better descriptive language in the world is well borne out by the nature poetry of Donnchadh Bàn, Mac Mhaighsteir Alasdair, and others.

There wasn't a vegetable [i.e., plant] in the field or a fish in the sea [that they didn't have a name for]. They say Donnchadh Bàn, he was giving a description of the *bradan*, or the *breac*. . . .

Here Nicolson recites several adjective-packed²⁶ verses of Donnchadh Bàn's long song *Coire Cheathaich* [*Misty Corrie*]. "Well,... tell that to anyone here, and they wouldn't understand a word of it," he says, proceeding to translate the verse. Occasionally there is an obscure word that he does not know, but even so he has an appreciation of difficult language that is typical of Gaelic culture and its sense of tradition.

This crofter, though he finished his schooling at the age of fourteen and was never formally taught to read his own language, can nevertheless recite and translate eighteenth-century Gaelic. "Well, look at the description," he continues, "and that man couldn't read or write his *Gàidhlig* [Gaelic]! But where'd he get it?"

Well, when I go into the language of Donnchadh Bàn and Uilleam Ros here; . . . there's no comparison! I know what a fool I am, compared to them.

Nicolson both appreciates the efficacy of an oral education and wonders that it worked so well.

TM: Do you try to use difficult words [when composing]?
 IM: Ah well no, but I want to go as deep in [the words] as I can. But if I did so local[ly],... they wouldn't understand it, because they[re] working on the surface of Gàidhlig here, compared to what these bards were. Well,... you can't say they were fools! Oh ho [*laughs*], I wish I was one of them!"

Nicolson obviously considers himself to have only a shadow of the virtuosity of the older bards, and yet aspects of his art are comparable and the obstacles just as daunting. Where the eighteenth-century poets' world was being physically dismantled by the Hanoverian Army, An Sgiobair's is undermined daily by an insidious cultural imperialism. On the surface, it may seem that he has made a concession to English incomers by using their language, but it is, for all that, a rather subversive contribution, since the aural feel of the poetry, and the use of the medium of song itself, comes from Gaelic tradition. Nicolson, by his confidence in that tradition, shows us that it has a great deal yet to offer to European culture.

²⁶ This is a technical term used in discussing Gaelic poetry and describes a technique by which bards have long shown off their virtuosity. Using numerous adjectives with subtle shades of meaning in a single verse, they create an extremely precise word- picture. By the time one reaches the end of such a verse, the image is so exact that little is left to the imagination.

Poetic concessions in favor of English are unnecessary to Nicolson. We have already seen that he does not consider most modern Gaelic verse-makers poets at all, for the concepts of poem and song are still largely identical to him. He applies this same unity of song and poem to English, redefining and enriching the interface between the languages. In the process of creating this middle ground of Highland English song-poetry, he gives new life to aspects of both poetic traditions, including his own endangered one. Perhaps even more important, culturally speaking, is the idea of the “song as response”—Nicolson draws on a centuries-old tradition of songmaking as an essential mode of social expression. He makes his oral world more accessible to us and, in the process, restores some of Gaelic Scotland's lost confidence and pride in the face of rapid cultural change.

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