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Strands of Politics in the Poetry of Sorley MacLean: Exploring the Symbol of the Skye Stallion in a Scottish and European Context

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In the late 1930s the pubs on Rose Street in Edinburgh (such as Milnes and the Abbotsford Bar) were a hotbed of political and literary debate among the Scottish literati. The poets who frequented these pubs became known as the ‘Little Kremlin’ such was their reputation as advocates of Soviet ideas. The Gaelic poet, Sorley MacLean, was at the centre of many of these meetings and MacLean’s long political poem, ‘An Cuilithionn’, which weaves the local symbols of his own native landscape of Skye into a European, and indeed, worldwide, context, could be viewed as the product of MacLean’s political development during this time. ‘An Cuilithionn’ was composed in 1939, in seven parts, with MacLean envisioning himself standing on the peaks of the mountain, looking out from Skye to the whole of Europe. This essay demonstrates three points: the reality of MacLean’s political understanding of events in Europe; the fact that locally based ‘Gaelic’ symbols in ‘An Cuilithionn’ have a Socialist dimension; and the likelihood that MacLean’s poetry during the late 1930s interacted with his political ideals to the point of becoming almost inseparable.

Correspondence Between MacLean and Young

In Iain Crichton Smith’s 1973 essay, ‘The Poetry of Sorley MacLean’, Iain Crichton Smith asserted that, ‘there is no evidence of much other than emotional commitment [to Communism].’ He

added, ‘In this he is unlike MacDiarmid who does give the impression that he has actually *read* some of the texts.’(1973, p.39). However, MacLean’s correspondence to Douglas Young, the eminent Classicist and one of the father-figures of the Modern Scottish Literary Renaissance, proves otherwise. These letters, which are contemporary with ‘An Cuilithionn’, include discussion of Marxist texts and various political theories. Even before the letters are considered, MacLean shows he has thought deeply about Marxist philosophy in relation to ‘An Cuilithionn’, writing in the introduction to the poem that ‘The first two parts of the poem were made by June 1939, when I was closest to Communism, although I never accepted the whole of Marxist philosophy, as I could never resolve the idealist-materialist argument.’ (1999, p.63). Unlike Douglas Young, who, as a Scottish nationalist, resisted conscription during WWII, MacLean signed up to the army because his hate of fascism overrode any Communist principles he held. He wrote to Young early on in the war:

I am full of sorrow that I should not be with you and Hay rather than with the people I am with but I cannot. I loathe and fear the Nazis and fear is the more dynamic emotion than contempt (National Library of Scotland, Acc 6419, Box 38b).¹

In other words, he did not take this decision lightly. On the 1st October 1940 MacLean argued out his case to Young:

As for my conscience, well! Am I being a traitor to Scotland and more so to the class struggle? Am I just in the army because I haven’t the courage to object? All I can say is that I have such an instinctive loathing and fear of Nazism and such a distrust of its demagogy that I

¹ I would like to thank the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland for permission to publish extracts from the Sorley MacLean-Douglas Young correspondence.

cannot accept for myself the [?] of refusing to resist it even with the co-operation of English imperialist capitalism (Acc 6419 Box 38b).

To a certain extent, a development in MacLean's belief system can be viewed. During his university days, MacLean was preoccupied with an idealistic form of socialism centred on a Promethean ideal (Acc 6419 Box 38b), but by this point his ideas had moved towards a dilemma of whether it was better to be a man of action or inaction. Many years after the war MacLean wrote in an essay that:

Ian Lom's famous words to Alastair MacDonald "You do the fighting and I'll do the praising" I consider disgusting, however expedient they might have been to the exigencies of the situation, and however wise they might have been in the long run. I could not have been an Ian Lom at Inverloch or an Auden in America in 1939 (1985, p.12).

In the early 1940s MacLean and others did not have the information that is now available about Stalin and Soviet atrocities. While 'An Cuilithionn' deals with issues which are universal and relevant to any time or place irrespective of specific politics, making the poem still meaningful to modern readers, it is perhaps inevitable that MacLean would become embarrassed by some of his opinions from this period of his work. However, in the late 1930s, MacLean put his faith in the Soviet power because he viewed it as the strongest force against Fascism as well as being an intellectual power to challenge what he viewed as the capitalist and colonial powers of the West. He wrote to Young:

The Bolshevik achievement in the past twenty years must be unparalleled morally, just as it is perhaps unparalleled physically. It is I think the [sic] by far the greatest thing hitherto recorded in history that the courage, self-sacrifice and achievement of a non-theistic, non pie-in-the-sky humanist optimism should

completely overshadow the German inferiority complex neurosis and all other myths (Acc 6419 Box 38b).

MacLean's hope and faith in Communism remains steadfast throughout his service in the British army. On 3rd August 1941 he wrote to Young:

The most desirable result would be that Britain and Germany should smack one another and enable Russia to impose Communism on Europe. I have not lost my belief that Jo [Stalin] and Dimitrov have done all that is possible for socialism but I never thought they were omnipotent...The British empire is relatively a ramshackle business and would dissolve of itself. The only positive progressive forces that I can see are Russia and China (Acc 6419 Box 38b).

While MacLean's opinion of Stalin changed considerably – he wrote in his introduction to 'An Cuilithionn' that 'the behaviour of the Russian Government to the Polish insurrection in 1944 made me politically as well as aesthetically disgusted with most of it.'(1999, p.63) – his faith in the concept of a 'Red Army' did not alter. This is why the Red Army is referred to in the published version of 'An Cuilithionn' but all mentions of Stalin that were present in the manuscript of 'An Cuilithionn' have been excised. In November 1941 MacLean is still hopeful that the influence of the Red Army will spread across Europe. He wrote to Young in November 1941:

To me, now as before, everything depends on the Red Army. I want their victory [...] and if the Red Army holds out I think there will be many Red armies (Acc 6419 Box 38b).

His feelings here are connected to what he says in 'An Cuilithionn'. In Part I of the poem he writes:

'S gus an tig an t-Arm Dearg còmhla
 le caismeachd tarsainn na Roinn-Eòrpa
 drùidhidh iorram na truaighe
 air mo cridhe 's ir mo bhuadhan. (1999, p.74).

*[And until the whole Red Army comes
 battle-marching across Europe,
 that song of wretchedness will seep
 into my heart and my senses] (1999, p.75).²*

For MacLean, the Red Army symbolises energy, hope and a sense of movement, despite the negative connotations which would later become attached to the Red Army after Soviet atrocities became more widely known. Energy reverberates throughout 'An Cuilithionn' and is perhaps best exhibited in MacLean's symbol of the Skye Stallion, which holds the same sense of hope that MacLean equates with the Red Army in his letters to Young. The Stallion appears as a symbol of MacLean's own local landscape of Skye (it is a topographical feature in Waternish, Skye, although far removed from the Cuillin itself). The Stallion then becomes more universal as the poem progresses, emerging from the depths of the landscape before ascending to the heights of the Cuillin. He is associated with the sea and is rugged in appearance due to actually being a representation of the great sea-cliff of Waternish. MacLean makes this clear in the manuscript of the English translation in a footnote – 'The Stallion or wild Stallion is the magnificent sea-cliff at Waterstein used as a symbol of the heroic conception of Skye in Scotland.' (MS 29559, f.15). By the time 'An Cuilithionn' was published the footnote had been removed but it is clear from the descriptions of the animal as 'rocky' and 'craggy' that the Stallion is a part of the landscape which has taken on a life of its own:

² All translations are by Sorley MacLean

Bha roghainn nan each móra creagach
 a' bocal air Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh,
 leum an Eist mhór fhiadhaich
 tarsainn iomallan nan crìochan; (1999, p.96).

*[The choice of the big craggy horses
 was bounding on Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh,
 the great wild Eist leaped
 across the utmost bounds of the land;]* (1999, p.97).

The symbol of the Stallion is most pronounced in Part V but he has already been mentioned before this. In Part III MacLean connects the Stallion to the events in Glendale and Braes where the people rose up to challenge the authority of the landowners – it was an inspiring event during an oppressive period of Highland history and for this reason the power and energy of the Stallion is a fitting symbol. However, MacLean shows that more events such as the Battle of the Braes are needed if the Stallion is to rise up from oppression and impotency and reach his full power. MacLean shows that history has not been kind to his people and that it is only now, at the time of composing 'An Cuilithionn', that the Stallion can rise up to his full strength due to the presence of Communism which is moving across Europe. The symbol of heroism has been heard of in Braes and Glendale but apart from this MacLean hints that the Stallion is largely unheard of in other parts of Scotland and that it is from other countries that it must emerge:

An deach innse dha na Dalaich
 mar thachair dhan each lùthmhor allail?
 An deach innse anns a' Bhràighe
 dìol an ainmhidh mheanmnaich làidir?
 Chualas anns an Ruis 's 's na h-Innsean
 san Fhraing 's le muillionan na Sìne,
 ach cha d' ràinig am fios Alba, (1999, p.88).

*[Have the Dale men been told
 of the fate of the powerful renowned horse?*

*Has there been told in Braes
the fate of the mettlesome strong horse?
It has been heard in Russia and in India,
in France and by the millions of China;
but the news has not reached Scotland,]* (1999, p.89)

This stanza is the strongest indication that the Stallion not only symbolises heroism for MacLean, but a specific brand of Socialist heroism, since the countries that MacLean mentions above have all had chapters of revolutionary left-wing politics in their own history. Part V, in which the Stallion makes his most pronounced appearance, is the lyrical peak of ‘An Cuilithionn’ and thus the Stallion can be viewed as a central symbol. He represents energy and power directed in a positive way in the eyes of the poet. He challenges the Establishment that MacLean mistrusts so much. The Stallion is an embodiment of MacLean’s desire for a surge of energy to move the world out of the bourgeois bog. He writes:

Sìod ort fhéin, Aigich lùthmhoir,
prannaidh tu bùirdeasachd nam fùidsean, (1999, pp.96-98).

*[Here’s to you, mighty Stallion,
You will pound and smash the pimps’ bourgeoisie,]* (1999, pp.97-99)

The Stallion’s Movement on the Peaks of the Mountain

The Stallion, with his entrance in Part V, moves from peak to peak on the Cuillin and the route he takes deserves attention in relation to the overall sense of movement inherent in the poem. The Stallion is first glimpsed on Sgurr a’ Ghreadaidh:

Bha roghainn nan each móra creagach
a’ bocail air Sgurr a’ Ghreadaidh (1999, p.96).

*[The choice of the big craggy horses
was bounding on Sgurr a’ Ghreadaidh,]* (1999, p.97)

His size can be imagined when MacLean writes:

Chuir e chas air Sgurra nan Gillean
's e prannsail air bàrr a' Bhidein, (1999, p.96).

*[He put his foot on Sgurr nan Gillean
while he was prancing on the Bidean,] (1999, p.97).*

In other words, the Stallion is able to be on Sgurr nan Gillean and the Bidean at the same time – these two peaks are relatively far apart and hint at the sheer mythic size of the Stallion. This is no normal-sized animal but instead a vision matching the sublime landscape of Skye, and in particular the magnificent Cuillin range. So far the Stallion has been moving in a clockwise sweep around the mountain peaks and this direction is continued when he jumps from this area of the Cuillin to Sgurr na h-Uamha and then to Blaven, Garsven and Sgurr an Fheadain. While MacLean himself has claimed that the Stallion symbolises the heroic presence of Skye in Scotland and also stands for the force of Socialism, which MacLean would like to see sweep across Europe and reach Scotland, the Stallion also mirrors the poet's own energy and drive in relation to his hopes for Scotland and the rest of the world. The Stallion moves from peak to peak, but throughout 'An Cuilithionn' it becomes evident that the Skye landscape is a miniature of the world itself, suspended in a mythic environment containing all of space and time. Therefore, in a figurative sense, the Stallion could be said to be moving around the whole of the world, spreading his energy and power to heroes from all periods of history. For this reason MacLean can connect him with the struggle of the Glendale men as well as the political power of an emergent force of twentieth-century Socialism. The Stallion is the energy which is required for any historic struggle, and it is no coincidence that he rises up to the heights of the Cuillin, since the

Cuillin also symbolises heroic strength in the poem. This movement on the mountain which adds the sense of hope that begins to develop in the latter parts of ‘An Cuilithionn’.

The Stallion in Classical Imagery

While the Skye Stallion appears to be a symbol which is firmly located in the local landscape and is thus a highly original creation of MacLean’s, it is possible that the poet was subtly influenced by the idea of Pegasus from Classical Greek mythology. Pegasus has always been linked to water. His name is similar to the Greek, *pege*, meaning ‘spring’ and Pegasus was said to have made water spring from the mountain-side by striking his hooves on the rocks (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1996, p.746). The Skye Stallion is in keeping with this imagery since the descriptions of him in Part V in particular relate him to water:

Eich mhóir a’ chuain,
 mo ghaol do ghruaim;
 eich mheanmnaich
 an t-seana chin chruaidh:
 [...]
 a steud nan cuantan
 ’s tu th’ air mo bhuaireadh,
 ’s mo chridhe luaineach
 le d’ luasgan shùl. (1999, p.98).

*[Great horse of the sea,
 my love your gloom;
 spirited horse
 of the hard old head;
 [...]
 steed of the oceans,
 how you have stirred me,
 and how restless my heart is
 with the unrest of your eyes!]* (1999, p.99).

The Stallion appears as a representation of the great sea-cliff of Waternish, made up of the sea and of the rocky landscape, hence the

description of the bubbling crags becoming hard as rock:

Chunnacas manadh mór is uilebheist,
 an t-Aigeach a' sitrich air a' Chuilithionn,
 éirigh nan creagan a bha builgeadh,
 air an tug an spiorad tulgadh. (1999, p.96).

*[A great portent and a monster was seen,
 the Stallion neighing on the Cuillin,
 rising of the bubbling crags
 that the spirit made to rock.]* (1999, p.97)

In this section, seemingly, the purifying energy of the water, which in the shape of the Stallion has washed away the stagnant bog, hardens to become one with the mountain, brought into being with the effort of the spirit. The sea has always played an important part in the shaping of any island and the Skye coastline is no exception. Just as Pegasus was born from the sea, so too is the Skye Stallion a symbol of the energy which is born from water and rock. As well as Pegasus being linked to water he was also viewed in relation to storms – ‘bearer of thunder and the thunderbolt for wise Zeus’ (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1996, p.746). The image of the Skye Stallion stamping the bourgeois into the bog also suggests the thundering of his hooves:

gheàrr e boc dhe Sgurr an Fheadain
 's e fàgail uamhaltachd na creige
 gus an d' ràinig e 'n càthar,
 a stamp e mar aon pholl-dàmhair. (1999, p.96)

*[he made one bound off Sgurr an Fheadain,
 leaving the wild lonely cliff,
 until he reached the moss,
 which he stamped into one rutting bog.]* (1999, p.97)

Continuing the theme of Classical imagery in relation to MacLean's symbol, writer J.E. Cirlot relevantly mentions the myth of Neptune (the Roman equivalent of Poseidon) with his trident, lashing out of

the waves the horses which symbolise cosmic forces and ‘the blind force of primigenial chaos,’ (1971, p.152). Interestingly, the horse was also dedicated to Mars and the sudden appearance of a horse was thought to be an omen of war (Cirlot 1971, p.152). The relationship of the horse with water, chaos and war is extremely appropriate when MacLean’s Stallion is considered. In ‘An Cuilithionn’ the Stallion comes out of the sea and heralds a period of chaos in which the ‘old order’ of capitalism and colonialism is severely challenged. Part V, in which the Stallion gains his strength and rises up, begins with a description of the dawn of a new age, presumably a Socialist age:

Chuala mi gum facas bristeadh
agus clisgeadh air an fhàire,
gum facas ròs dearg ùrail
thar soaghal brùite màbte; (1999, p.96)

*[I heard that a breaking was seen
and a startling on the horizon,
that there was seen a fresh red rose
over a bruised maimed world;]* (1999, p.97)

The establishment of a Communist regime throughout Europe and beyond could not be put in place without an element of chaos and it is perhaps not too difficult to imagine that MacLean viewed the appearance of the Stallion as a bringer of conflict and a symbol of resistance.

The Mythic Horse

When the symbol of the horse is studied more generally it can be seen that its connection to water and earth is more widespread. Chevalier & Gheerbrant give the following description in their *Dictionary of Symbols*:

A belief, firmly seated in folk memory throughout the world, associates the horse in the beginning of time with darkness and with the chthonian world from which it sprang, cantering, like blood pulsating in the veins, out of the bowels of the Earth or from the depths of the sea. This archetypal horse was the mysterious child of darkness and carrier both of death and life, linked as it was to the destructive yet triumphant powers of Fire and to the nurturing yet suffocating powers of Water (1996, p.516).

MacLean's Stallion certainly corresponds to this description, being connected as it is with water and the rocks and mountains of the Skye landscape. Although it is clear in 'An Cuilithionn' that MacLean views the Skye Stallion as a positive force, the reader is nevertheless left in no doubt that the Stallion is wild and frightening. Horses frequently foretell of death in Greek mythology as well as in European folklore. One reason for this may be that because they are often connected to the depths of the earth they came to be seen as manifestations of otherworldly power. The gloomy pale horse of night is associated with death mainly due to the pale horse of the Apocalypse and the pale horse in English and German folklore (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1996, pp.519-520). The Stallion is mentioned as being pale, perhaps like the rocky landscape of Skye as seen on misty days – 'eich ghlais sgiamhaich/ [*beautiful grey horse*]' (1999, pp.98-99). In addition, in Scottish folklore Kelpies were horse-like water demons who would tempt people to mount them. Once mounted, the Kelpie would pull their riders under the water. Breton folklore also has many stories of underworld horses trying to lead travellers astray or dash them into quagmires or morasses (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1996, p. 520). This point is very significant in relation to MacLean's Skye Stallion since he writes that the Stallion reached the moss 'a stamp e mar aon pholl-dàmhair/ [*which*

he stamped into one rutting bog]' (1999, pp.96-97). The Stallion is seen to win the battle over the morass, conquering it and stopping the suffering in its depths – '*Chail na boglaichean am mealladh/ [the swamps have lost their wiles]*' (1999, pp.98-99). Clearly, if the Stallion in '*An Cuilithionn*' symbolises the potential death of anything, it is the death of capitalism which figures highest in MacLean's purpose in the poem. Therefore, MacLean turns the negative connotations of the death horse into a positive celebration of the imagined end of capitalism – the Stallion is the foreteller of the end of an oppressive era and his journey around the Cuillin results in hope for the future of the world.

Chevalier & Gheerbrant write that the symbol's 'swiftness associates the horse with time and hence with its continuity.' (1996, p.521). For this reason horses are often symbolised as the bringers of fertility and renewal after the harsh times of the winter months in agrarian communities. James Frazer describes an eyewitness account of Irish midsummer celebrations in which a wooden frame with a horse's head was made to 'jump' over the bonfire, thus becoming a symbol of 'all the livestock' and a symbol of plenty in general. This ritual is based on the horse's driving power and dynamism and fits in well with the idea of the turning of the seasons to times of seasonal growth (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1996, p.522). The connotations of land and fertility in relation to horses evokes the mythic horses who were able to make wells spring up by striking their hooves on the earth – in the Massif Central in France there is a whole series of wells attributed to a magic horse who took this route and left wells along the way. In this context the symbol of the horse awakens the land and the water just as it awakens the flowing imagination, creativity, and the driving force of the libido which are associated with these elements. The Stallion is often viewed as an erotic symbol of youth

and ‘the triumph of the life force’ (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1996, pp.522-523). In a general sense MacLean’s Stallion channels this sort of energy – he rises up, becoming a potent force on the Cuillin and stimulating the poet with his presence.

In conclusion, the Stallion is an important symbol – in both social and literary context – throughout MacLean’s ‘An Cuilithionn’. MacLean does not keep his political ideals, as expressed to friends such as Douglas Young, detached from ‘An Cuilithionn’. On the contrary, his socialist beliefs – that the Red Army will revive and re-energise the land –enhance the symbol of the Stallion, giving it another dimension and adding to the richness of its folklore and imagery. The individual strands of politics and poetic vision become difficult to separate in MacLean’s work. MacLean was certainly not the only writer who was experimenting with this sort of fusion during the 1930s and 1940s and when this aspect of the Scottish literati is explored further, it will add to our understanding of Scottish literature, culture and its place in Europe in the past as well as the future.

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