

‘Committed and Confessional’: Sorley MacLean’s Poetry of World War Two

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In an essay entitled ‘Scottish Arts and Letters: The Present Position and Post-war Prospects’, Hugh MacDiarmid cites MacLean, by then recovering from wounds sustained during the Battle of El Alamein, as one of the most promising poets from the younger generation of Scottish poets (1943, p.145). MacDiarmid is not praising MacLean’s war poetry, which at that point was mostly still in draft form, but MacLean’s ‘The Cuillin’, which began with the vision of ‘a very long poem...radiating from Skye and the West Highlands to the whole of Europe’ (MacInnes 1986, p.138). Unsurprisingly, although it was ‘The Cuillin’ that MacLean substantially repudiated and abandoned after the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, MacDiarmid chose to praise it in 1943 as ‘not only a magnificent evocation of the Hebridean landscape but of the whole tumult of history and human hope’ (1943, p.147).

MacLean occupied a privileged place among MacDiarmid’s literary friends and the younger Scottish poets of the period. Not only did MacLean act as MacDiarmid’s Gaelic correspondent, providing literal English translations of the poems of Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair and Duncan Ban MacIntyre for MacDiarmid’s 1940 *The Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry*, he is also spoken of in bardic and panegyric terms by MacDiarmid in his autobiography, *Lucky Poet*. The young MacLean and George Campbell Hay are said to have revitalised the ‘Scottish Muse’, a crucial step forward in MacDiarmid’s struggle for Scottish culture through and after the war, termed the ‘kulturkampf’:

The freeing once more of the winter-locked ground,
The new springing of flowers, another rig turned-over,
Dearg-lasrach bho'n talamh dubh na h-Alba,
Another voice, and another, stirring, rippling, throbbing with
life,

Scotland's long-starved ears have found. (MacDiarmid 1943, p.359)

MacDiarmid viewed the bloom of his own post World War One literary strivings for Scotland in positive, organic and crucially Gaelic terms. The renaissance conceived by MacDiarmid in 'the trenches of WW1...leapt lustily into life in WW2' (1943, p.153) and the existence of poets like MacLean and Hay helped to prove MacDiarmid's prognostications that the leading poetic language of Scotland would be Gaelic, repudiating Edwin Muir's claim that contemporary Scottish poetry was only viable in English: 'the cultivation of Lallans has been merely a stage in the breaking away from English and return to Gaelic' (MacDiarmid cited in Hay 2000, p.43).

In this light MacLean seems to be MacDiarmid's ideal poet for Scotland, a vital link between both MacDiarmid's WW1 generation and his own, being of age to be inspired by but also question MacDiarmid's work and gain his admiration through his tortured engagement with the Spanish Civil War. Many MacLean scholars, such as Joy Hendry, are quick to remind us that 'the two poets were in similar positions, and achieved similar things.'

MacDiarmid revivified Scots, dragging it from the Kailyard and Celtic Twilight 'into the 20th Century, MacLean did the same for Gaelic and Gaelic poetry' (Hendry 1986, p.15).

Dain do Eimhir (1943) and 'The Cuillin' are widely regarded as Sorley MacLean's master-works, and both, from the polished but anguished lyrics of *Dain do Eimhir* to the unfinished vision of 'The

Cuillin' are deeply permeated with a fear and loathing of Fascism through its incarnations in the Spanish Civil War and onto the North-African battlefields of World War Two. These works occupy much of the criticism of Sorley MacLean's poetry and both are products of not simply a struggle with the rise of Fascism but a 'quarrel fundamentally with myself' which was 'intensified and accelerated' by the war (MacLean cited in Heaney 1986, p.3).

These works can be viewed as moral, aesthetic and ideological interrogations that take place before the poet encountered the bloody realities of war. They are products of flux, revision and change. His war poetry is the test of his earlier work written during the Spanish Civil War, when MacLean finally gets the chance to fight and this experience profoundly affects his earlier convictions. John Herdman has said that much of MacLean's finest work comes from 'the collision between the ideal and the actual, between aspiration and limitation, between the finite and the infinite', and in his war poems he is 'clearly not one who has his head in the clouds' (1986, p.165).

If MacLean is a 'tradition-bearer' and feels the pride of 'the big men of Braes', his heroism, along with his poetry, must be different from them. MacLean admits as much in his critical writings when he expresses his 'disgust' at the Gaelic filidh customs of poets like Iain Lom, whose function was to 'do the praising' of the valor and fighting of Alastair MacDonald (1985a, p.12). For MacLean, poetry of war is a poetry 'of commitment' that must be in some way 'confessional if it is to be true to the existentialist choice' (1985a, p. 12). In essence, in approaching Maclean's war poetry one must consider both the poet's psychological and ideological fight with himself as well as the physical conflict. In this Herdman is right to remind us that MacLean's heroism is not the unblemished self-

sacrifice of his early martyred heroes such as James Connolly (1868 - 1916), the Scottish-born Irish Republican and John Cornford (1915 - 1936), the young poet who was the first fighter to die in the Spanish Civil War, but Jung's hero from *Symbols of Transformation*: 'the hero is a hero just because he sees resistance to the forbidden goal in all life's difficulties and yet fights that resistance with the whole-hearted yearning that strives towards the treasure hard to attain and perhaps unattainable – a yearning that paralyses and kills the ordinary man' (1986, p.175).

Coming back from the war with a cache of ten new poems, MacLean felt that all of his old beliefs had been shaken to the point of breaking and was faced with the political choice between 'Labour and SNP'. His experiences were the making of MacLean the teacher and educational campaigner and reformist for Gaelic but they helped to bring about the end of MacLean's belief in the Red Army, and his turbulent lyrical poetry of that period. One of the great assets of peace that MacLean fought for is education and the promulgation of Gaelic beyond the new ideological horizon MacLean found himself confronting during the war, his major new cultural horizon is to be seen in the reinvigoration of Gaelic poetry and the campaign for Gaelic in education. MacLean's early poetry is grounded in political fervor and the lyrical ego, whereas his later war poetry, having been ideologically tested, applies the heroic ego to other, and as we shall see, unexpected recipients. MacLean's preponderant mood shifts also from enmity and anger to a more practical vision of what, if any, good is to come out of the war. MacLean, and many other young poets of his generation, realised that the end of World War Two marked the dawning of a great new potential horizon, where education, poetry, and in MacLean's case Gaelic, would play key

roles in shaping a new Scotland. Although MacLean's teaching and campaigning commitments created long periods of personal poetic silence, referred to as the 'ratreuta' that Christopher Whyte has postulated can 'be detected in his own poetry in the decades following the war' (2011, p. xxiii), his legacy and impact on Scottish culture must be understood in terms not only poetic but also political and educational, and the ways in which each of these aspects feed into each other.

There are two distinct strands of war poetry written by MacLean, the first dealing with the war conceptually as a backdrop often imbued with a retributive edge and an anger directed at an unidentified but 'lying, depraved woman' (MacLean 2011, p.192) and the more effective later war poetry written while the poet was in action in North Africa where he deeply interrogates his own beliefs. There is a pattern to the poetry of this period moving from the politically engaged love poetry of the 1930s through to the bitter poetry written on the cusp of war, ending with the poet willingly heading into the dangers and horrors of artillery warfare, a poetry of lyrical peaks that wavers between *eros* and *thanatos*. The poet, deceived by the muse of his love poetry, writes these confessional and interstitial war poems before putting himself in danger by fighting in the war. The moving but austere later war poems that emerge as a result of this process mark a new maturity in MacLean's work where the impetuous and aggrieved love poet faces a form of ego death in the war. In a theatre of war, all of his values are challenged and revised, and the injured poet, after a long convalescence, experiences a poetic and existential rebirth. This poetic re-casting accurately reflects the physical realities of MacLean's war. He volunteered for the army in 1939 but was persuaded to wait for subscription in 1940

before finally being wounded seriously during the Battle of El Alamein in November 1942. MacLean spent the rest of the war in recovery and was formally discharged in 1944 to resume civilian life as a teacher in Edinburgh. One of the most representative of his transitional poems is the quatrain ‘Knightsbridge, Libya – June 1942’, translated into English by MacLean and collected in the most definitive edition of his Gaelic originals and translations *Gheal Leumraich – White Leaping Flame* (2011):

Though I am today against the breast of battle,
Not here my burden and my extremity;
Not Rommel’s guns and tanks,
But that my darling should be crooked and a liar. (MacLean 2011, p.192)

While many of these poems take place inside the poet’s troubled thoughts, they are beginning to be enacted in tangible places, clearly marked, naming specific places and people, such as Rommel and the desert – ‘between El Ragil / and bloody Eleut El Tamar’. However, the enemy remains simply ‘the Nazis’ in these earlier poems and the poet’s conscience has not been disturbed by the actualities of war captured in his later poems. For instance, ‘If I Go Up To Yonder Town’ captures the poet’s dilemma in a poem that seems to owe much to an American blues song of the period, a popular genre of music on wartime radio, suggesting that although Gaelic poetry has proud and sometimes rigid bardic and balladic roots, it is also, in MacLean’s hands, porous to the influences of the times in order to remain relevant and up to the challenge of documenting an event that affects all nations:

I went down to yonder town
With the sentence of death in my hand
Written with two wrongs:
The great wrong of the Nazis
And the great wrong of her misery. (MacLean 2011, p.176)

These early war poems remain physically untested by the war and are torn by the almost equally powerful push and pull factors of love, or a love denied, and the exigencies of a commitment to fight Fascism.

Before being wounded in battle, MacLean wrote to MacDiarmid, in February 1942, to delineate the new direction his poetry ‘must’ take: ‘I must transcend the shameful weaknesses of petty egotism and doubts and lack of single-mindedness that now disgusts me in much of my own stuff’ (Manson 2011, p.317). While MacLean was to say repeatedly in interviews that he came back from the war, ‘loathing all my own poetry and for many years poetry all together’ (1970, p.10) these rhetorical statements seem to hide the full picture of what was perversely not a pessimistic but positive outlook and vision. In the same letter to MacDiarmid, MacLean writes ‘if I survive this fracas, I will certainly cut away everything that deters me from a complete devotion to Scottish poetry’, and although MacLean was to despair about the war, ‘I should have said that the political scene is rather terrifying than hopeless, for... capitalism and imperialism are doomed, and I can imagine that ten or twenty or perhaps even five years hence may be times of great hope’ (Manson 2011, p.280).

Although MacLean’s involvement in the war can be seen as a creative and mental baptism of fire causing him to shed the sloughs of his earlier lovelorn lyricism for a more adequate expression of the strivings of the war, it can also be seen as a development of that earlier love. Having gone through the war, he can no longer torment himself with speculation about fighting and earns a form of poetic kudos for doing so, as Marshall Walker writes that, ‘if you dodge the call to righteous arms in the Spanish Civil War, don’t expect to get the girl’ (1997, p.264). Competing factors after the war meant that MacLean could never truly pursue his work with a pure ‘single-

mindedness'. For the brief and violent period of MacLean's war, however, his work turned against 'the polemics against fascism' in favor of a 'resigned wisdom and compassion for the living and the dead of either side' (Watson 1984, p.447) that is more congruent with his life-long humanism.

To illustrate the lacuna between MacLean's early and later war poetry, the poetry written before his conscription and the work produced in or immediately after the war, we can compare two conceptually similar poems: 'Heroes' and 'Pride Caused You to Stay'. 'Heroes' is a poem that comes directly out of traumatic war-time experience quickly transformed into poetry and is permeated with MacLean's acute sense of clan heritage and bravery but problematized by the commonality of experience of the ordinary man faced with an extraordinary situation:

A poor little chap with chubby cheeks
And knees grinding each other,
Pimply unattractive face –
Garment of the bravest spirit.
He was not a hit '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. (MacLean 2011, p.204)

Although MacLean expressed his disapproval of Iain Lom's singing of praises in battle, this is an panegyric poem directed at the most lowly and unexpected recipient, 'a great warrior of England' who can take his place with Gaelic heroes and warriors. Robin Fulton has observed that in poems such as 'Heroes', MacLean writes 'some of the most remarkable Gaelic poetry' by using 'very traditional modes' such as

keening and elegy, to accommodate ‘modern topics’ (1989, p.63). MacLean both admires this ‘poor little chaps’ heroism and self-sacrifice but also lives out his own thwarted heroism vicariously in this poem. The abnormality of the fighting and the incongruity of the hero is illustrated and emphasised by MacLean’s use of the hypocoristic pre-modifier, such as ‘little weeping’ and ‘little chap’. The fact that the fallen soldier can never be ‘Alasdair of Glen Garry’ or ‘Gillies MacBain at Culloden’ begins to challenge the traditional Gaelic received notion of the monopoly of bravery. However, this is less a judgment upon the dead than a depiction of the grim actuality and scale of the event, this is happening all around and the poet must carry on fighting.

If we contrast this with an earlier poem such as ‘Pride caused you to stay’ we see a much more unyielding and haughty bardic approach to heroism and fighting. Here, the pusillanimous bombardier and the captain representing the old classes, run off to hide in a hollow while the speaker remains as the standard-bearer of ‘Clan MacLean’. He is inspirited by the thought of the landscape of Mull ‘and the meadows around Loch na Keal’ so that:

When the bullets came in a hail,
bubbling up in the bare sand,
he remembered Inverkeithing –
there was inflexible valour in his spine. (MacLean 2011, p.432)

The heroism of this poem is much more hermetic and exclusive than the democracy of heroism shown in ‘Heroes’, seeming closer to ‘ruinous pride’ and showing the rigid mindset of the traditional poetic modes MacLean inherited and reinvigorated during World War Two. Iain Crichton Smith has written that ‘typical of his war poetry is his freedom from hatred of the enemy, whom he sees as involved like himself in a common catastrophe’ (Smith 1986a, p.128) but there is a

feeling when contrasting this earlier work that this mentality had to be earned in a very hard way. The fact that he holds onto both a respect for bravery in others and an *amore-propre* for his own involvement shows that his sense of creative identity is robust enough to survive the attrition of war.

MacLean's compassion for the fallen ordinary soldier is crucial in 'Death Valley' where the speaker's ideological 'detestation of fascism' (Macrae 2007) is confronted with the body of a dead boy soldier, an image that reduces all of the cant and humbug of honour in battle to the human cost in terms of the lives of young men. Again, MacLean is too troubled by the scene to simply fight in it, and instead takes the stance of percipient 'frustrated man of action' (Fulton 1989, p.63), confronted by the breakdown of his absolute abhorrence of Nazism into the microcosmic horror of *this* particular poet on this battlefield looking upon *this* dead German soldier, one of too many to compute. The poem is partisan in its continued hatred of the Nazi doctrine but revelatory in its sympathy for the 'ordinary' men who must die in the pursuit of such ideologies:

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 of mishap,
his innocence or malignity,
he showed no pleasure in his death
below the Ruweisat Ridge. (MacLean 2011, p.206)

MacLean frequently delves back into history as viewed from a Scottish or Highland lens, and fighting in the desert against an oppressive and imperialist power is a 'variation on the violence of

Highland history' (Smith 1986c, p.49). This is precisely what Iain Crichton Smith means when he writes that in MacLean's war poetry particularly, 'a Gaelic poet can stand by a corpse in Africa and by writing about a dead German soldier, he can bring the weight and power of his own tradition' to the situation (1986b, p.53).

The closest MacLean comes to issuing a battle-cry is in 'Going Westwards' where the poet approaches the war with the heavy freight of personal and national history upon his shoulders. 'Going Westwards' represents the breaking-away from MacLean's early love poetry, as he carries the shame of his love and the deceiving honour of which he is the inheritor. MacLean contrasts the local with the universal, the landscape of home with the 'Desert' which is the end-point of 'mankind's extremity' and evokes previous sites of conflict to conclude that this is the furthest mankind has come to and is a measure of the gravity of the occasion. MacLean's point is that although he holds no hatred for fellow men, the banner under which they fight must be stopped and brought down, with an understanding of its abhorrent, inhuman significance:

Guernica itself is very far
from the innocent corpses of the Nazis
who are lying in the gravel
and in the khaki sand of the Desert.
There is no rancor in my heart
against the hardy soldiers of the Enemy,
but the kinship that there is among
men in prison on a tidal rock
waiting for the sea flowing
and making cold the warm scene;
and the coldness of life is
in the hot sun of the Desert. (MacLean 2011, p.198)

The last two lines above are arguably one of the most powerful uses of antithesis in the poetry of World War Two, capturing both the heat of the scene and the enormous cruelty Fascism represents that

MacLean often claimed was ‘the denial of all humanity’ (1970, p.11). Death in battle, like in the war poetry of Hamish Henderson, has rendered all men, Nazi or otherwise, into the ‘innocent’ victims of a malevolent ideology. The twin drives of MacLean as combatant and chronicler of events are re-affirmed in the final two stanzas, where the cause of the war is solidified in terms of personal history and unshakeable commitment:

But this is the struggle not to be avoided,
the sore extreme of humankind,
and though I do not hate Rommel’s army,
the brain’s eye is not squinting.
And be what was as it was,
I am of the big men of Braes,
of the heroic Raasay MacLeods,
of the sharp-sword Matheson of Lochalsh;
and the men of my name – who were braver
when their ruinous pride was kindled? (MacLean 2011, p.200)

The heroism of MacLean’s heritage and the immediate amoral exhilaration of war is captured here, but there is a tinge of doubt at such inherited bellicosity, as the pride of the ‘big men’ is ultimately ‘ruinous’, injecting the poem with a self-awareness and irony lacking in Gaelic war verse of the past. Rommel recurs throughout these poems almost synecdochially as a symbol of all that is wrong with the conflict, and as a folkloric war-lord. In her introduction to MacLean’s 2011 *Collected Poems*, Emma Dymock writes that in a poem such as this we see that ‘a person is not static and through interpersonal relationships and an active experience with the external world the poet can gain self-knowledge’ (2011, p. xliii). In this light, MacLean is not simply an easy inheritor of the Highland history that leads up to his part in this particular battle. His past and identity must remain fluid and under constant re-appraisal and interrogation. MacLean is aiming for an overview of the global implications of the fight, not

simply the personal adrenalin-rush of preparing to fight. In doing this he ‘fuses traditional Gaelic music with European content’ (Smith 1986b, p.70).

MacLean’s unique perspective comes across strongly in his poem ‘Move South’ which dramatises the Eight Army’s planned counter-attack on the Africa Corps which resulted in the loss of 6,000 lives of Allied soldiers. MacLean is quick to remind the reader that the racing of the blood at the coming of war is a folly to which one cannot give much credence and that making grand claims before a battle is tantamount to inviting defeat:

South, south to Bir Hacheim,
tanks and guns at high speed,
there was a jump and kick in the heart
and a kind of delight –
it was the battle joy –
as one heard in the tale,
not knowing if it was a lie.
Going south in the morning
to meet the Africa Corps –
we’ll soon reach the French
and put a stop to big Rommel! (MacLean 2011, p.202)

Here, MacLean is channelling the imagined voice of a head-strong soldier excited at the thought of battle and convinced of victory. The intoxication of the scene is swiftly undercut by the crushing reality of internecine warfare, and a tone almost eschatological in its asseverations:

Before midday the shells,
novel birds in the sky;
we did not reach the French at all.
a quick stop was put to our race. (MacLean 2011, p.202)

MacLean is certainly far removed from the paeans to war and heroism of Iain Lom that he finds so ‘disgusting’ and shows his movement towards the confessional and pessimistic in his work. While defeating fascism remains the moral absolute, MacLean does

not try to glamourize or praise the ways in which the Allies might achieve this end. Instead, he remains faithful to ‘the perpetual dilemma of the existentialist choice’ (Ross 1986, p.92). One of MacLean’s most sobering war poems in its sense of loss and futility is ‘An Autumn Day’ which quickly goes against the bucolic intimations of its title. However, this poem manages to be something different than the lyrical cry against the horrors of war, for although the speaker has ‘six dead men at my shoulder’ he looks back upon his Free Presbyterian Highland heritage and brings it to light in a modern context:

One Election took them
and did not take me,
without asking us
which was better or worse:
it seemed as devilishly indifferent
as the shells. (MacLean 2011, p.208)

It must be remembered that although MacLean eschewed religion he did admire Gaelic preachers for ‘it is perfectly clear that he would not be the kind of poet that he is if he had ignored the impassioned eloquence of the church’ (MacInnes 1982, p.16). Even the landscape, one of the great emotional and psychological compasses of MacLean’s work, offers false comfort to the soldiers:

In the sun, which was so indifferent,
so white and painful;
on the sand which was comfortable,
easy and kindly;
and under the stars of Africa,
jewelled and beautiful. (MacLean 2011, p.208)

These are cosmic and universal landscapes but here mankind has been pushed to its limits. Implied within this is a vision of the end of the world if Fascism is not stopped, all the way out in the North African desert. This poem marks the extreme point into which MacLean’s landscape vision would reach, from the initially melancholy love

poems at the start of the war to the hard-bitten and grimly ontological and ideological ‘An Autumn Day’ where the unbelieving poet remains not one of the Elect but stays alive and continues to fight despite all he has seen.

There is a world of difference and distance between these poems, separated by merely a couple of years. The transition is from a conceptual and political stance involving personal belief and guilt to an acceptance of a common human, yet harrowing reality. MacLean’s growing disillusionment with poetry in the war, his feeling that ‘the golden lyric’ had become a ‘frail defense’ (Ross 1986, p.94) is understandable, given the poet’s vulnerability in the desert.

While poems such as ‘An Autumn Day’ are enduring records of the poet’s mental state and endurance during the war, there are others that show some of the depth and violence of his political convictions that would come to be tested. After the war, MacLean would spurn Communist credo in favour of more national level, home-based reformist politics offered by the S.N.P and Labour, but a vestigial belief in the force of Communism over Fascism remained. For MacLean, Fascism, even consigned to history and text-books after the war, continued to be the ‘denial of humanity’ (MacLean 1970, p.11) whereas a pure and un-perverted belief in the societal benefits of Communism was ‘an affirmation of humanity’ (MacLean 1970, p.11). Douglas Sealy has noted that for MacLean, subsequent occupations by the Red Army such as that during the Prague Spring in 1968, represented a ‘bitter draught for the poet’ (Sealy 1986, p.73). By the time of writing ‘An Autumn Day’ MacLean had become disenchanted with the untested political certainties of his earlier manhood. He was forced to look to issues at home and ways in

which he could build upon the defeat of fascism to construct a place for Gaelic in post-war Scotland.

The fervor and unrepentant polemics of the late, unpublished poem ‘Stalin’, seems to defend his brutality in the cause of the greater good. We must bear in mind the operative phrase ‘others say’ in this poem which seems sympathetic to both sides of the argument, a dialectic that shows the great dilemma imposed on MacLean’s belief as a result of the war and its aftermath.

But others say
your understanding
surpassed all other men’s
that your capacities were inexpressible,
that you saw coming
the crazed army of the Nazis
and Europe in its entirety
subjugated by capital,
with Christ’s mask
on some of their banners;
that you murdered now
in the interests of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow.
(MacLean 2011, p.440)

MacLean fights but does not speak of killing. Instead, he lingers on the battlefield to see the human cost that such extreme beliefs bring about and his response is compassionate, troubled and pessimistic. Nevertheless, he remains overall autochthonous to Scotland and the Highlands, keeping in mind what Hugh MacDiarmid called ‘the great end in view’ (McCaughey 1989, p.153) of the rewards of peace. On the evidence of the war poems, MacLean’s understanding of necessity is not that of Stalin’s, but it is one that causes him to remain until he is nearly fatally wounded during the Battle of El Alamein. MacLean in World War Two finally gets to fight Fascism, after all of the self-flagellation of his *Dain do Eimhir* lyrics about being held back by financial, emotional and familial issues. This does not drive him to

glory in killing the enemy, nor does it cement his already deeply engrained political beliefs – it shatters them and forces MacLean to look ever deeper into his own mind and the state and culture of Scotland.

Almost immediately after the war MacLean is hailed as a life-giver to the ‘moribund art’ of Gaelic verse in the bi-lingual Scottish miscellany of arts in English and Gaelic *Alba* (MacKenzie 1948, p.65). In the same volume, scholars write that the Education Act of 1945 heralds a brighter future for Scotland, where teachers can take ‘full advantage of the sensible modern attitude to education’ (1948, p. 12). MacLean in this sense, directly after being demobilised from the army, is a modernizing and life-giving force in two aspects of Scottish culture: poetry and education. This validates his commitment to opposing Fascism.

MacLean’s war poetry is the difficult and trenchant fruit of personal growth from the breakdown of abstract political convictions and guilt in his earlier verse to a poetry that has seen and confronted the horrors of war and extremist ideology. This later war poetry, although shaken, haunted and existentially troubled remains one of ‘commitment’ and ‘confession’ (MacLean 1985a, p.12). The belief in the underexplored potential of Gaelic remained constant throughout MacLean’s pre, early and later war poetry which led him to confront and try to surpass two separate new horizons. His first horizon was the breakdown or interrogation of his impassioned but abstract younger political beliefs which were problematized in a deeply humanistic way by the physicality and actuality of the war. He revitalised many rigid Gaelic and bardic traditions in order to make his poetry relevant to this epoch-making event, and it was only by understanding the tremendous human cost of the war that he realised

his gift for, and faith in, Gaelic must be used for the aspirations of peace after the war. MacLean's new fight centred on the recognition of Gaelic as a language equipped not only for poetry, but for any issue in the world. The fight to see Gaelic recognised as an official educational language was a fundamental part of MacLean's existential horizon, shifting during and after the war from the rhetorically political sphere to the committedly and pragmatically social and cultural.

MacLean's words of praise for MacDiarmid at the latter's posthumous address on the occasion of the unveiling of the Hugh MacDiarmid Memorial outside Langholm on 11th August 1985 could easily apply to the speaker's work, particularly that of World War Two and the new world he found himself in both mentally and physically after that conflict:

A man sending back messages from a forward observation post on the frontiers of consciousness, and they are words that can set a human situation against the great universe with resonances and rhythms for which the first Scots word I can think of is 'uncanny'. And his messages are such that the high frequencies are transformed in language to what I and many more recognise as truth and profundity, the kind of truth that Matthew Arnold called 'high seriousness.' (1985, p.4)

Bringing his speech to a close, MacLean extolled MacDiarmid as a 'teacher' of MacLean's generation, a calling fulfilled also by MacLean in his many years as a poet and educator:

...he taught my generation, and I daresay many of this generation too, not a little but mountains and mountains of things about the human spirit. (1985, p.4)

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