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Author(s): Iain Macdonald

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Iain Macdonald (University of Glasgow)

In his essay 'Real People in a Real Place', Iain Crichton Smith, who grew up in Bayble on the Island of Lewis, notices the delicateness with which people from the islands of Scotland perceive their position within Scotland:

> To grow up on an island is to grow up in a special world. Many of the books that I have read on the Hebrides, however, make this world appear Edenic and unreal: others suggest that the islander is a child who appears lost in 'the real world', and even invent for him a language which was never spoken by anyone. It is easy to assign the islander to this misty, rather beautiful world, and leave him there if one first of all succeeds in making that world unreal, and its inhabitants unreal, off the edge of things, a noble savage with his stories and his unmaterialistic concerns. After all, is he not a Celt, and are the Celts not meant to be rather vague, impractical, poetical, not at all like "us," who succeed in both admiring and patronising the natives, simultaneously accepting that it would be nice to be poetic (and after all the islanders are nice) and also believing that such niceness is not after all suitable to the world in which we live (Crichton Smith, 1986, p.14).

What Crichton Smith is saying is not that the islanders are misrepresented, but rather, that they are misrepresented as *being* misrepresented. For example, a man from Barra in the Western Isles is likely no more misrepresented than a man from Dover in the south of England. There are many respected novelists, poets, artists and musicians lauded for presenting the voice of a particular place, and the Highlands and islands of Scotland – through their history and folklore,

in particular – lend themselves to be hijacked by such artistic romance. It is extremely rare to find the 'true voice' of any place as depicted through art. Any 'true voice' is very rarely authentic, and almost never true. What is clear from Crichton Smith's essay is that there are people of every temperament in every place. Islands, however, provide us with very real geographical borders which enable us to clearly distinguish, or set apart, the life and people there as somehow more interesting or curious because it is distant, or remote, or on the fringe. Though, of course, a place is rarely remote if one lives there.

Of course, the Scottish Islands differ from other parts of Scotland because of the once mighty Gaelic culture, which founded Alba. Gaelic was the language of a large percentage of her population until relatively recently, the remnants of which are now almost unique to the Hebrides. Gaelic has slowly retreated behind these borders over the centuries, suggesting a culture on the fringe, geographically, but also on the fringe in terms of its very existence, indicating a plurality of meanings for this idea. Perhaps then, something like: 'Gaelic and the Islands: geographically on the fringe, but culturally on the edge of existence' would be a more fitting concept to consider.

It is necessary, of course, to also examine the geographical Highlands, but more particularly the ever-decreasing area of the Gaelic-speaking Highlands, or the Gàidhealtachd, the borders of which have also been fiercely beaten back over the years. Indeed, it is interesting to note that Gaelic was spoken widely across Scotland, and far more recently than many people perhaps care to realise.

Arguably, geographically (and until relatively recently) the Highlands were even more inaccessible and on the fringe than the islands. Throughout literary Highland Romanticism, the Highlands have been depicted as remote, mysterious, and dangerous. To take one of the more famous examples, think of Edward Waverley's exhilaration

upon first stepping on to the foothills with Evan Dhu. The mountainous Highland terrain can seem more exciting and uncertain than the islands, and can certainly lay claim to having been internationally portrayed as such in romantic adventure stories. They can be geographically different, but the islands and the Highlands are both a traditional stronghold of Gaelic culture**,** and this is where Fionn Mac Colla fits in. Despite the fact that he did not write about the islands specifically, he wrote about Gaelic, and if a culture transcends its current boundaries through a particular art form, this should not render it irrelevant to the 'heartland'. Conversely, shared language and culture can connect places as geographically distant as Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, for example, to the islands of Scotland.

Thomas Douglas MacDonald adopted the name Fionn Mac Colla - a suitably heroic and patriotic name combining mythical Celtic origin with Highland Clan Warfare. The name is a Gaelicised version of Fionn MacCool, the legendary Hunter-Warrior-seer and central hero of the Fenian Cycle in Old and Modern Irish Literatures, but is also a reference to the feared seventeenth-century Highland warrior Alasdair Mac Colla Chiotaigh Mac Dhòmhnaill also known as, 'The Devastator'. Mac Colla's decision to choose a name which clearly highlighted a recognition of the strong Gaelic ties which linked Ireland and Scotland, serves to demonstrate not only the political direction of his work, but also a statement of its cultural origins. Mac Colla's presence, through writing and campaigning, would greatly contribute to the foundations of nationalist politics, and to the Scottish cultural renaissance, of the twentieth century. His fiction in itself would connect these areas of carefully constructed arguments relating matters of cultural and historical importance, demonstrating the influence that his own developing political and philosophical ideas had on his writing. Among these, it is his assault on the issues surrounding the 'life-

denying' Calvinist doctrines with which he has perhaps become best associated. Connecting the historical to the cultural and political, he believed that 'the close cooperation between church and England destroyed the Celtic heritage of Scotland' (Schwend, 1990, p.341), and, therefore, facilitated the loss of Scottish national sovereignty. These ideas distinguish his early novels from his later work as a cultural thinker (even though these ideas were in development throughout his career), most notably in his book of polemic essays, *At the Sign of the Clenched Fist* (1967), though also in his posthumously published autobiography *Too Long in This Condition* (1975). At times Mac Colla was fierce, wild and provocative, though never less than compelling as a result.

J.B Caird writes in an essay entitled 'Fionn Mac Colla - The Twofold Heritage' that 'Mac Colla's works […are…] concerned with man in relation to the community in which he finds himself, to the tradition and civilisation that have moulded him' (Caird in Morrison, 1973, p.31). This relationship between man and community, or man and culture, and the relationship between place and history, is precisely what Iain Crichton Smith later determined as the examination of 'real people in a real place.' This type of examination is what is so important to the underpinning of the cultural influences in Mac Colla's work.

Aside from commenting on the decline of traditional Gaelic communities through his fiction, Mac Colla often contemplated elsewhere that Gaelic had been in a much more prolific cultural position - more widely spoken in the recent past, for example, than was commonly believed or understood, and that an appreciation of this was crucial in creating the idea of a separate Scottishness. He writes, in *At the Sign of the Clenched Fist*, 'Gaelic gave the nation its unity, despite later incursions of Northern English, it continued to be the national language in almost every part of the country' (Mac Colla, 1967, p.46-

47). MacColla was to become certain that the decline of Gaelic could be ascribed to the rampant growth of Protestantism and he believed, '[…] beyond question that Gaelic was the majority speech of Scotland until the effects of the "Reformation" had made themselves felt, and persisted in certain non-Highland areas practically into modern times' (Mac Colla, 1975, p.105).

He wished in his later writing to challenge and expose the lazy cultural and historical 'truths' concerning the position of Gaelic in Scotland, the myth that Gaelic was an ancient irrelevance and a fringe culture, and he sought to highlight his belief that for Scotland to be mostly English-speaking was an unforgiving psychological state. Gaelic's reach, he rightly claimed, had stretched very comfortably outside of what is routinely considered to be the Gàidhealtachd of today. The following, from Charles W.J. Withers and Kenneth MacKinnon, is an example of just how widespread Gaelic was spoken only 15 years before Mac Colla's birth:

> In 1891 the area of indigenous Gaelic was particularly extensive. In the whole Highland massif (as far east and south as Nairnshire and upland areas of Moray, Banff, Aberdeen, Perth, Stirling and Dumbarton counties) there was an above-average (6.84 per cent) incidence of Gaelic. Buteshire was quite strongly Gaelic (20.7 per cent), and only a short distance separated the great Lowland cities from a Gaelic-speaking countryside. Gaelic predominated in the central Highlands, north-west Perthshire, Badenoch, Strathspey, Lochaber, Loch Ness-side, mainland Argyllshire (except the tip of Kintyre and eastern Cowal), most of Easter Ross (except eastern Black Isle) and throughout Sutherland. Over three-quarters of the population spoke Gaelic throughout the Hebrides, the mainland coasts from Lorne to Strath Halladale and the inland parishes of Fortingall, Laggan, Daviot, Moy, Urquhart and Glenmoriston, Kiltarlity, Kincardine (Ross-shire) and Rogart (Thomson, 1994, p.111).

Gaelic had been a major language in Scotland as recently as the early twentieth century, and Mac Colla believed that its fate was inextricably linked to any moves towards political independence at a time when Gaelic faced steep decline and nationalism was stirring throughout Europe.

Mac Colla's natural gift for prose and his commitment to his philosophy and ideals led him to pursue a career with which he may not have always been entirely satisfied or even happy, though his sheer ferocity of political and cultural conviction determined that a devotion to his history, his country and his people, was not only necessary but unavoidable. 'I was a born writer. By which I do not mean that I had a desire, or itch to write or an ambition to be known as a writer - on the contrary, writing has always caused me intense suffering and being well known intense embarrassment' (NLS dep. 265/17).

Mac Colla is not known as a poet. He published four books during his life; two full-length novels, *The Albannach* (1932) and *And the Cock Crew* (1945), a short novel *Scottish Noel* (1958), and a book of political and philosophical polemic essays, *At the Sign of the Clenched Fist* (1967). He also published articles and further essays on the state of the Gaelic language in the 1930s as well as short stories, poems, letters and haiku in Scottish literary magazines, mostly during a brief resurgence of popularity in the early 1970s. His autobiography *Ro Fhada Mar So a Tha Mi* (Too Long in this Condition) was published in the months after his death in 1975.

Mac Colla's style was to become characterised by his promotion of Gaelic culture and the deconstruction and examination of Scottish history, as well as Scotland's psyche, religion, and loss of sovereignty. These main themes are so complexly interwoven that it is beyond the scope of this essay to convey the significance behind Mac Colla's reasons for doing this. However, it is important to note that Mac Colla

has, conversely, been accused by some of being over-cautious with his religious arguments to the point of exhaustion, in order to avoid accusations of religious bias. Others accuse Mac Colla of being so obsessed with the idea that the seeds sown at the Reformation grew to uproot Gaelic and end Scottish sovereignty that it came to define his work.

As Fionn Mac Colla saw it, Gaelic had not had its important place at the heart of Scotland fictionalised or imagined in the eighteenth century when the adoption of Highland/Gaelic culture as a national symbol romanticised the history of the 'noble savages' who dwelt there. Gaelic was, rather, a language and a culture which had had its genuine place at the heart of Scotland removed and transplanted with a false representation or, as has been demonstrated by Crichton Smith, 'a language that was never spoken by anyone' (Crichton Smith, 1986, p. 13). Notably, kilts, bagpipes, heather and the rugged Highlands – all of the easily transposed cultural determiners – have come to represent Scotland internationally, but the Gaelic language has not. Language is a far more difficult creature to export, but it is also a dangerous identifier, and a weapon against any sort of cultural imperialism. As Mac Colla notes in an early essay:

> […]language is the very crux of the whole matter. It is idle and windy nonsense to deny the fact, and indeed it is everywhere implied in the invariable and undisguised haste which the conqueror shows the conquered. And in the (sometimes desperate) attempts made by the conquered to retain the native tongue. There you have a tacit admission of the importance of language to peoples – having it they can never be destroyed, and if conquered they will rise again; losing it, they disappear' (Mac Colla, 1933, p.6).

Gaelic culture exists and existed - but not as it is presented or as, perhaps, it appears today.

Mac Colla's themes develop from his first novel *The Albannach* (1932), through his most successful work *And the Cock Crew* (1945), to the final work of fiction published in his lifetime, *Scottish Noel* (1958). In *The Albannach*, Gaelic culture is embraced by the anti-hero Murdo Anderson and he uses it as a cultural tool to overthrow the oppressive and, in Mac Colla's own words, 'Nay-Saying' Presbyterian Church elders who have taken from the community the spark of life that a joyous traditional culture both fuels and embodies. Music and poetry are celebrated as a window through which another Gaelic world can be celebrated. In *And the Cock Crew*, Mac Colla moves back chronologically to examine the initial wave of the Free Church through the Highlands and the part it played in facilitating the Highland Clearances. In *Scottish Noel*, he writes from the perspective of two priests embroiled in different sides of the Reformation Wars. The tone of his work becomes more sombre – some might say more bitter – as he presents his thesis on how the Reformation facilitated the 1707 Union of the Parliaments, suppressed a Gaelic culture which left it open to an evangelical religion, and which in turn helped to facilitate the Highland Clearances.

In a review of Mac Colla's autobiography, Alan Bold takes issue with Mac Colla's representation of Scottish history: 'There is a time, he would have us believe, when Gaelic was the national language, when Scotland basked in a glow of independence, when individuality was applauded' (Bold in Morrison, 1975, 26), and this is the view of Mac Colla's work which has, on the whole, prevailed. However, when Mac Colla says that Scotsmen sensed a loss, or that 'there had once been a glory' (Mac Colla, 1975, p.20), he does not necessarily allude to a golden age of Gaeldom, even though the evidence is available to anyone who wants to discover just how widespread and recently, for that matter, Gaelic was spoken throughout much of Scotland. Rather,

Mac Colla argues that Scotland had lost an integral part of its history. To his mind, Scotland had lost its sovereignty and it had lost a language which was representative of, and instrumental to, the nation's sovereignty. In a long sequence in *And the Cock Crew,* the protagonist, a Free Church minister, debates the history of Scotland with the rival he ousted 20 years before, the atheist bard and one-time leader of the local community, Fearchar:

> How was it possible for England that time to get our Parliament so easily to sign away the freedom of their country which their forefathers had valued above everything and always given their lives to preserve? Why were traitors so many in a nation so devoted to freedom? It was because there had begun amongst us those that were not altogether Albannaich for they had forgotten the language of their forefathers… and taken on an English language, with English ways. Now a man who speaks English and is English in his ways will begin to feel like those whose language he speaks, and it is his own countrymen that will seem like foreigners to him, for their ways are strange and he does not understand their language. And so it was easy for them to be traitors and betray the nation's liberties, for as they themselves were already English in a sort it became much less easy for them to see good reason why they should not also be subjects of England, more especially if they could profit by it…If they had been Albannaich, true Albannaich, who had never forgotten our language and the ways of our forefathers, they would not have sold those liberties for their lives, for they would have known that to be English and the subjects of England was for them the same thing as to cease to be (Mac Colla, 1945, p.92).

Mac Colla's assertion is that language, culture, even sovereignty are so interlinked and symbiotic, that in order to remove one aspect it is necessary to destroy the others.

In 1941, Mac Colla moved with his young family to take up a teaching position in the Western Isles. He taught on Benbecula for four

years, before moving to Barra where he remained until 1967. When he first graduated as a teacher in 1925, aged nineteen, he immediately applied to be placed in Laide in Wester Ross so he could experience at first-hand a place where Gaelic was still the primary tongue. However, his experiences in the Western Isles less than two decades later only served to further diminish his spirits. He described his 20 years in the Western Isles as 'a never-ending horror of totally schizoid activity' (Mac Colla in Morrison, 1973, p.27), as he felt he was complicit in what he considered the de-Gaelicising of the children there. While he was living in the islands, he wrote *Scottish Noel* (1958) along with short stories and poetry. The islands were also where he began his political work, *At the Sign of the Clenched Fist,* his attempt to bring together the themes which he had been developing over the previous 40 years.

Among his poems is 'Ecumaniacal' 1972. The poem deals with Mac Colla's themes of Gaelic culture, religion and loss of sovereignty, though it serves, perhaps, as a clear argument against the more widely-held criticism that Mac Colla's work only attacked the Protestant Church and that he laid all of Scotland's ills at its door.

The poem is a critical attack on the established Church and its representatives who pushed their own agenda, and he likens their sermons to propaganda, 'it's our own particular Goebbels-ian Truth/i e a Colossal Lie/ so oft repeated it has become / the only Truth we know…'(Mac Colla, 1972, 9) He is not referring to a Christian Lie (he was a Roman Catholic convert though he had been brought up in the Plymouth Brethren faith and had even served, ostensibly, as a united free Church Missionary to Palestine in the early 1920s). Rather, Mac Colla was a firm believer that the great Lie was preached by the negators, the tenth-rate bums, or as MacDiarmid called them, 'the inferior Hordes' (Gunn in Pick, 1987, p.19) who had always been determined to assert their mediocrity on to the rest of the world. Mac

Colla drew comparisons between Communism, Fascism and the Church and it is these people, theses 'Gnyaffs' (who he felt he had encountered all his life, in the Church, in politics and in the education system) who are the targets in his work. It is unfair and simplistic to criticise Mac Colla's themes without taking this context into account. The writer John Herdman who has edited some of Mac Colla's unpublished work has written that '"Gnyaff" was one of Mac Colla's favourite words and that he found himself perpetually beleaguered by this species, which he believed to be always vigilantly on the alert to frustrate him and put him down because of its instinctive hostility to his innate distinction of mind…' (Herdman, 1999, p.21). Of course, as the saying goes, just because 'you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you'.

In 'Ecumaniacal' then, Mac Colla criticises not the Church, but the subjective nature of preaching. He uses the names Reverend Father X and the Reverend Mister Y, and he attacks men of their ilk for the destruction of Gaeldom and loss of Scottish Sovereignty which led him to declare that Scotland had lost what should have developed into 'the most brilliant national culture in history' (Mac Colla, 1967, p.204) without the slightest hint of irony.

> […] Unknown thousands of Scots
> anxious to do the right
> would swither in the very voting booth
> remembering having heard
> somewhere
> with authority
> God has disapproved of the SNP
> and swithering would send Scotland and all our hopes
> down the Liblabatory… (Mac Colla, 1972, 7).

Whether a Priest, a Minister or a complicit and absent Highland Chieftain, it is their utter belief that they are in the right – that they

know history – that they claim the right to impose their views onto their congregation or subjects which Mac Colla saw as a key contribution to the initial lack of resistance to the Highland Clearances and the terminal decline of the Gaelic language and culture. Resistance, perhaps, is the luxury of the few. The long poem concludes:

> Mister Y did you suppose
> Gaelic was so nearly dead
> no one would have known that poem
> not one or two to understand
> how deeply your tongue deceived
> but maybe I am wrong
> unfair
> maybe the Reverend Mister Y
> did not set out with conscious and express intent
> to deceive the multitude
> gaping at him in the Box
> and send them in the wrong direction
> looking for the Soul of Scotland
> and incidentally for their own
> which is certain to be found in the same place
> maybe before coming to the second verse
> he juist
> happened to stop
> mise nach creid
> Father X and Mister Y
> lovely men
> what lovely men
> with such authority upon the Box
> or Mister X and Father Y
> for all is equal nowadays
> down here where we are
> tha sibh air an aon ramh ri cheile
> you are pulling together on the self-same oar
> your efforts have the same effect.
> Scotland in its Box
> Nailed wi Scripture
> in falseness treason and lies
> the Kirks united at last (Mac Colla, 1972, 12).

Religion is seen by many critics as Mac Colla's major lasting theme, and 'Ecumaniacal' is a very tame example of what he often described as the argument with himself. A poem of two stanzas which appeared in *Scotia* in 1972, entitled 'Cet animal est mechant: quand on l'attaque il se defend', is again clearly based on religion, but it manages to address what seems today like Gaeldom's almost eternal struggle with religion and nation:

> Ulster- where the hard men
> with blood in their minds
> brush their hard hats
> and in their bowler hearts
> will the Gael to die
> and the Gael are precisely as vicious
> as the animal which
> when attacked
> defends itself (Mac Colla, 1972, 4).

Gaelic, then, surely, is Mac Colla's main concern and his most potent and important theme. Religion is a theme because it became involved in Gaelic's story. Nation became involved, because Mac Colla saw Scotland as – initially perhaps – a Gaelic nation.

Finally, a late untitled poem appeared in *Scotia Review* in 1973 and highlighted Mac Colla's clear belief in what Scotland's future needed to be, with a knowing appreciation of what he considered to be its problems, both historical and contemporary:

> To some who are too nice in their judgement
> of what is necessary to be done for Scotland
> to support the S.N.P
> I at least didn't prance off the field
> in presence of the enemy
> mounted on my ego (Mac Colla, 1973, 17).

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