Gaelic poetry and the British military, 1756-1945

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Although military activity features prominently in different strands of earlier Gaelic poetry (see, e.g. McLeod 2007, Gillies 1991), the participation of Scottish Gaels in the British army from the Seven Years' War (1756-63) to the end of the Second World War in 1945 can be said to form a distinct political and literary chapter. From the middle of the eighteenth century onwards, Scottish Highland soldiers played a vital role in the expansion of the British Empire, and their achievements and experiences are reflected in a large and diverse corpus of Gaelic verse relating, directly or indirectly, to campaigns in Europe, America, Africa and beyond. Some of this poetry was composed by soldier-poets who were thickly involved in conflict, more from a range of poets who remained at home. While there are occasional undertones of dissent or disquiet, the great bulk of this poetry simply celebrates military triumphs and the broader military ethos, even if, at its best, verse of this kind can be vigorous, powerful and dramatically expressive, communicating all the furious intensity of warfare. Overall, there is very little questioning of the imperial enterprise in general or the role of the Gael within it; indeed, participation in the imperial military was central to the assimilation and 'Briticisation' of Scottish Gaeldom (see Withers 1988). Thus, although it is possible to locate and highlight some occasional dissonant notes, doing so may give a misrepresentative presentation of what is actually a very largely unvariegated corpus.

The first imperial conflict to produce a significant amount of Gaelic poetry was the Seven Years' War of 1756-63, particularly its North American theatre, which culminated, with the capture of Québec in 1759, in British acquisition of the former French territories in what is now Canada (for some representative texts see Newton 2001: chapter 4). From this point onwards, all the major wars fought by the British Empire involved the participation of Highland regiments and with it the composition of Gaelic verse. For example, a diverse range of material survives from the American War of Independence (1776-81), most of its expressing the Loyalist viewpoint. This material differs strikingly from the Irish Gaelic corpus of this period, in which all British reverses are vigorously celebrated (see Morley 2002, 2005). A particularly striking Loyalist text is the Argyll poet Donnchadh Ceanadach's (Duncan Kennedy) ''S e

cogadh dubh deurach na h-èirigh a-mach' ('The sad, ill-fated war of the revolution'), a lengthy and passionate denunciation of the rebels composed *c*. 1781. For Ceanadach tha American rebels are 'dream fhuilteach nan creuchd / A chlaoidh 's a shàraich am pàrantan fhèin' ('violent, blood-stained people / Who ravaged and oppressed their own parents'), guilty of 'na h-uilteachan cuinnsear bu phuinnseant' bha riamh / An aghaidh Mòr-Bhreatainn' ('the most poisonous, daggered deeds that ever were done / Against Great Britain') (Newton 2001: 149-62).

Two outstanding examples of Gaelic military verse of a 'celebratory narrative' kind emerged from the early stages of the Napoleonic wars (1798-1815): 'Blàr na h-Òlaind' ('The Battle of Holland'), describing the British victory at Egmond aan Zee in 1799, and 'Òran air don Bhàrd a Dhol air Tìr san Èiphit' ('A Song by the Poet After Going Ashore in Egypt'), describing the successful landing of British troops near Alexandria in 1801 (Black 2001: 354-61; Meek 2003: 298-303). Both were composed by the Morar poet Alasdair MacFhionghain's (Alexander MacKinnon) (1770-1814), who fought in both battles as a member of the Gordon Highlanders. Detailed and spirited as these poems are, it could not be said that they give any attention to any underlying political issues, or to challenge the imperial authorities in any way; they differ in this respect from the earlier Gaelic poetry relating to the Jacobite risings, which often features detailed political argumentation and tactical analysis (see, e.g., Gillies 1991). The Crimean War of 1853-6 also engendered a significant amount of 'celebratory narrative' verse, due in particular to the prominent role of the Scottish general Sir Colin Campbell (1792-1863), who was connected to a prominent Islay family on his mother's side (see, e.g. Meek 2003: 304-15). The focus on individual commanders like Campbell is typical of the Gaelic poetry relating to the British Empire, as many of the tropes of earlier Gaelic verse, most immediately the panegyric clan poetry of the seventeenth century, provided a pre-existing literary framework that could be readily adapted to this new context, with the imperial general now taking the place of the clan chief (Maciver 2009).

One recurring argument in the nineteenth-century verse, especially poems relating to the Clearances, is that the Gaels deserve better treatment given their military service to the Empire, or once cleared will not be available to serve in future. Again, though, this is rather less than a challenge to the principle of Empire itself. An atypically incisive

example of such rhetoric can be found in the Lewis poet Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn's (John Smith) (1848-81) powerful 'Spiorad a' Charthannais' ('The Spirit of Kindliness'), composed in 1874, at the beginning of the Land Agitation:

A bheil neach beò san linn seo
leis an cuimhn' an latha garbh
's na chuireadh an cath uamhann —
Waterloo nan cluaintean dearg?
Bu tapaidh buaidh nan Gàidheal ann,
nuair dh'èirich iad fo'n airm;
ri aghaidh colg nan treun-fheara
gun ghèill ar nàimhdean garg.

Dè 'n sòlas a fhuair athraichean
nan gaisgeach thug a' bhuaidh?
Chaidh taighean blàth a' charthannais
'nam baidealaich mu'n cluais;
bha 'm macaibh anns an àraich
's iad a' teàrnadh tìr gun truas;
bu chianail staid am màthraichean,
's am fàrdaichean 'nan gual. . . .

A Bhreatainn, tha e nàireach dhut,
ma dh'àirmhear ann do sgeul,
Gun bhuin thu cho mì-nàdarrach
ri t'fhìor-shliochd àlainn fhèin;
an tìr bha aig na gaisgich ud
a theasairg thu 'nad fheum,
a thionndadh gu blàr-spòrsa
do na stròdhailich gun bheus.

Is anyone presently alive
who recollects that awful day,
on which was fought the fearful fight —
Waterloo of the bloody plains?
A fine victory was won by Gaels
when they rose in battle-arms;
faced with the blade of bravest men,
our fierce foes yielded fast.

What joy came to the fathers
of those who won the fray?
The warm homes of kindliness
towered round their ears in flames.
Their sons were on the battlefield
to save a heartless land;
their mothers were in the saddest plight,
and their homes reduced to ash. . . .

O Britain, it is a disgrace,
should we recount your tale,
relating how hard you dealt
with your own and truest race.
The land that those heroes had,
who saved you in your straits,
has now become a field of sports
for those wasters without morals.

(Meek 2003: 362-5)

Even in the context of the First World War, there is little obviously 'anti-war' rhetoric of the kind so familiar in the English canon, whether poems that emphasise the pointlessness or disproportionate cost of particular actions or works that challenge the very concept of war itself. This is true even of the work of Lewis-born Iain Rothach (John Munro) (1889-1918), one of the most remarkable Gaelic poets of the twentieth century. In his 'Ar Gaisgich a Thuirt sna Blàir' ('Our Heroes Who Fell in Battle'), Munro speaks of death and sacrifice and foreboding, but with contemplative serenity rather than anger:

'S iomadh fear àlainn òg sgairteil,
ait-fhaoilt air chinn a bhlàth-chrìdh,
tric le ceum daingeann làidir,
ceum aotrom, glan, sàil-ghlan,
dhìrich bràigh nam beann mòra,
chaidh a choinneamh a' bhàis
tric ga fhaireach' roimh-làimh –
a chaidh suas chum a' bhlàir;
's tha feur glas an-diugh 'fàs
air na dh'fhàg innleachdan nàmh,
innleachdan dhubh-sgrios an nàmh a chòrr dheth.

Many a handsome young man full of energy
Openly welcoming from the warmth of his heart,
So often with step firm and strong,
Step light, fresh and clean-heeled,
Who climbed the slope of high mountains,
Who went to face death –
Often sensing it beforehand –
Who went up to the battlefield;
And green grass grows today
On what enemy devices left
On what enemy devices of total destruction left over.

(Black 1999: 215-6)

Two of the most distinguished Gaelic poets of the twentieth century, Somhairle MacGill-Eain (Sorley MacLean) and Deòrsa Caimbeul Hay (George Campbell Hay), each composed a number of important poems arising out of their experiences fighting with the British Army in North Africa in the Second World War. Of these, MacGill-Eain's celebrated 'Latha Foghair' ('An Autumn Day') certainly challenges the value of war in general and the way in which the powerful use it for their ends. Following a graphic description of a German soldier's corpse rotting in the sun, surrounded by flies, MacGill-Eain asks:

An robh an gille air an dream
a mhàb na h-Iùdhaich
's na Comunnaich, no air an dream
bu mhotha, dhiubh-san

a threòraicheadh bho thoiseach àl
gun deòin gu buaireadh
agus bruaillean cuthaich gach blàir
air sgàth uachdaran?

Ge b' e a dheòin-san no a chas,
a neoichiontas no mhìorun,
cha do nochd e toileachadh 'na bhàs
fo Dhruim Ruidhìseit.

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 or mishap,
his innocence or malignity,
he showed no pleasure in his death
below the Ruweisat Ridge.

(MacGill-Eain 1977: 121-3)

As a committed anti-fascist, however, MacGill-Eain had no difficulty fighting on behalf ot the British Empire in this particular conflict.

On the whole, it would be fair to say that there is relatively little sense of a specifically Gaelic perspective on Empire in this corpus; the Gaelic poetry of Empire reflects the largely assimilationist political identity of Scottish Gaeldom in the modern period. In other words, there is little if any sense in this verse that the Gaels saw themselves as differentiated from their fellow Britons, that they somehow had a different perspective (or indeed responsibility) by virtue of their history or culture. Gaelic distinctiveness lay in the special contribution of the Highland regiments and the supposedly martial nature of the Gael, not in a different political vision or ideology. A particular striking text here is 'Smuaintean air Mòrachd Ìmpireachd Bhreatainn' ('Thoughts on the Greatness of the British Empire') by the Ullapool-born Aonghas Moireasdan (Angus Morrison), published in 1929, by which time the sun was already beginning to set on the British Empire:

An t-eilean beag a' boillsgeadh anns a' chuan
Mar sheud ro phrìseil sgapas foidhneal uaith',
Mar lòchran deàlrach tilgeil solas-iùil
Do mhuilleanan air seachran cuan an t-saoghail;
Do mhuirichinn sgaoileadh iad air raon is bheann
Mun iadh a' ghrian an sliochd gum faighear ann
Is aitreabh thogadh leo is bailtean mòr'
Le laghan ceart gun fiaradh clì on chòir,
Le grìd is spìd air taille dìchill chruaidh;
Ge cruaidh an gleac, gu diongmhalt' ràinig buaidh,
Gun chosnaich daoine borba 's coille 's fonn,
An colann slàn 's an inntinn làn de chonn –
Ged fhuair iad freumh is sìol an dùthaich ùir,
Air am màthair Breatainn cha do thionndaidh cùl.

The little island sparkling in the sea
Like priceless jewel that sparkles far and wide,
Like shining lantern casting guiding light
On millions scattered across the oceans of the world;
Your offspring have been spread on hill and plain
Until where sun encompasses their progeny is found
And homesteads built by them and cities too
With proper laws unbending from the right
With excellence and energy resulting from sound diligence;
Though hard the struggle, triumph was firmly reached,
They conquered savages and wood and land,
Their bodies healthy and their minds replete with sense –
Yet for all their roots and seed in pastures new,
On their mother Britain they've not turned their back.

(Black 1999: 36-7).

It would be challenging to find much in this text that expresses a specifically 'Gaelic' perspective or would have been in any way out of keeping with what one might expect from an Englishman of the period writing in English.

A final poet of note in the context of Empire is the Mull-born Donnchadh MacDhunlèibhe (Duncan Livingstone) (1877-1964), whose perspective is distinctly different from Moireasdan's, although again, not specifically 'Gaelic'. Although he fought in the Boer War (1899-1902) as a youth, his principal literary contribution is the poetry he composed many decades later, in the last years of his life, dealing with decolonisation and the bitter legacy of apartheid in South Africa, where he spent all his adulthood from 1903 onwards, following a very brief return to Britain following his injury in the war. His best-known poem is the ventriloquistic 'Bean Dubh a' Caoidh a Fir a Chaidh a Mharbhadh leis a' Phoileas' ('A Black Woman Mourns her Husband Killed by the Police'), composed following the notorious Sharpeville Massacre of 1960. In his 'Feasgar an Duine Ghil' ('The Evening of the White Man'), MacDhunlèibhe wrote:

Tha an saoghal gu iomallan nis fo dhaorsa an duine ghil – ach èist an fhuaim:
Na fir dhathte 'n geall air saorsa, is sgìth de dhaorsairean thar chuain.
Tha Breatann mhòr an èis a cutadh; earball an pheucaig is e spìont . . .
A dhuine ghil, is e do dheasgainn a chuir atmhoireachd san taois;
Dh'fhalbh do latha, chiar ort feasgar; an oidhche dùnadh nis air t' aois.

The world to its fringes is now enslaved by the white man – but listen to the sound:
Coloured men are seeking freedom and tired of masters overseas.
Great Britain's gutted like a fish; the peacock's tail's been plucked . . .
O white man, it's your yeast that put swelling in the dough;
Your day has gone, dusk has fallen on you; night's now closing on your era.

(Black 1999: 72-5).

MacDhunlèibhe's was an isolated voice. The great majority of Gaelic verse, from the eighteenth century onwards, was enthusiastically pro-British and pro-Empire, and there is no significant evidence that Gaelic poets saw any connection between their own difficult history and the experience of colonised peoples in other parts of the world.

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