

## The twentieth-century Tìr nan Òg

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

EVERY so often I'm asked if there is to be a book of The Quern-Dust Calendar. (After all, there's one of Mary Beith's column, it's called 'Healing Threads', it's published by Polygon at £9.99, it would make a grand Christmas present, and you can find their address at the end of this article.)

The answer is yes, there's to be a book of The Quern-Dust Calendar, but not quite yet. In the meantime I've written a slightly different one. Or rather, a hundred (if not hundreds) of other people have written it, and I've put it together as best I could. It's to be published on 22 November, it's called 'An Tuil: Anthology of 20th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse', it costs £19.99, and the publishers — Polygon again, bless their heart — are offering it to **WHFP** readers at a special pre-publication price of £12.

In 'An Tuil' are 351 poems by 100 Gaelic poets, with facing-page translations into English. The poets are arranged in order of their date of birth, starting with Catherine Macfadyen from Tiree who was born in 1819 and made a lovely poem on how pleased she was to get the Old Age Pension, and finishing with Anne Frater from Bayble who was born in 1967 and made a lovely poem on how to get pregnant out of a bottle. In between them are some male poets too.

At the beginning I've tried to trace the history of Gaelic poetry in the twentieth century, and at the end I've presented the biographies of the hundred poets. A great many people all over the Highlands and Islands (all over the world, even) helped me with this, and I thank them. Some of them even thought the biographies would be more interesting than the poems. That's as may be. Certainly I've learned an awful lot about the Gaelic experience of the twentieth century through compiling them. The biographies say some of the things about people that the poems don't, and vice versa.

What's the 'big story' of Gaelic poetry in the twentieth century? Simply that it's come like a flood, hence the title of the book. Personally I think it's possible to make out four different trends in the four different quarters of the century. First there was a backward-looking romanticism. It was crushed by the horrible reality of the First World War. We can see that in the poetry of Dòmhnall Ruadh Chorùna. Then the Depression and Communism and Fascism and the Second World War added politics to this new realism, bringing us magnificent outpourings of verse from Donald Macintyre, Sorley MacLean, George Campbell Hay. Their verse caused a wonderful renaissance in the third quarter precisely when the language was faltering. The effect was like the tide ripping one way and a gale blowing the other — literary turmoil, lots of satire, wit, existentialism, *angst*. We can see it in the poetry of Derick Thomson, who dominated the third quarter like a colossus. Poets as different as Donald John MacDonald and Iain Crichton Smith were caught up in it too, in very different ways.

Then in the fourth quarter the wind started blowing in the opposite direction. Instead of the pressure of tradition it was the pressure of the big bad world, epitomised by learners — loose cannons whose poetry was the expression of a soul all right but not the soul of Gaelic. This is the situation the biggest names of the fourth quarter, Myles Campbell and Aonghas MacNeacail (both Skyemen), were reacting to, and you can see them being forced on to the back foot. Back to roots. Back to mythology. Back to one strand of romanticism, but not to romanticism itself. Back to Alexander Carmichael, not to Kenneth Macleod.

If there's a way to present all this briefly through the poetry itself it's through the theme of Tìr nan Òg. In the nineteenth century there were still people who believed in a unitary Celtic otherworld that was neither Heaven nor Hell. And the first quarter was full of poets, mostly clergymen, who loved to describe Tìr nan Òg while scrupulously avoiding its implications — above all, Kenneth Macleod:

*Bàs no bròn cha bheò 'nad loinn-thìr,  
Ùir air foill 's air gò . . .*

("Death and grief don't live in your lovely land, / Buried are lies and guile, / Heroes hard-drinking your kindness and spirit, / Happiness swims in the clouds; / Stars upon high by day and by night / Gently shining through mist, / Melodious harpstrings grow in your forests, / O Land of the Young.")

Macleod (1871–1955) was an outstandingly good poet who took a wrong turning. He knew Gaelic tradition as no-one else did, even Sorley MacLean. There are subtle evocations of two specific otherworld themes (the burial of St Oran and the Tree of Strings) even in that one stanza. It's nice but goes nowhere. And if we look at 'Tìr nan Òg' by another clergyman with Skye connections, Neil Ross (1871–1943), things get worse.

*Ach cuin a thig an loinn air ais  
A thàmh air Tìr nan Òg? . . .*

("But when will beauty now return / To stay on Tìr nan Òg? / Or when will native sounds bring out / Dull Echo from his caves? / Old age comes not to Love nor Music / And cannot change their form; / For they've kept the joy of Tìr nan Òg / And their glory will not fade.")

So Tìr nan Òg became a metaphor for love and music, about as real and relevant as Parnassus. What then of a much younger poet, the Rev. Colin Mackenzie (1917–94) from Harris? His 'Tìr nan Òg' ends like this.

*A' chuideachd ghasd' tha cruinn an sin ri ceòlraidh,  
Le sgeula gaisgeachd, fion, is dàin 'gan seinn . . .*

("The splendid company that's gathered there for melody, / With tales of heroism, wine, and poems being sung, / To seek through roaring waves and gloomy hills / The path which only the best heroes tread; / And through the elements I come to welcome and salute / The chieftain, and in my place I sit.") So Mackenzie's Tìr nan Òg turns out to be

nothing more romantic — or eschatological — than the Isle of Bute, where he won the Bardic Crown in 1952, and his ‘best heroes’ are the Crowned Bards of the past.

Well, it’s realism, of a sort. Tìr nan Òg as the land of Love and Song had become the land of Zavarone’s ice-cream with the Mod in town. In fact a decade and a World War had already gone by since Sorley Maclean had satirised Tìr nan Òg, Kenneth Macleod and the whole ‘folklore tendency’. Wrote Sorley:

*Théid mi thun nan Eileanan  
is ataidh mi le m’ bhaothalachd . . .*

(“I will go to the Isles / and inflate with my vapidty / about fairy mounds in Canna and Eigg, / about the wailing of seals in Eriskey, / about ‘clarsachs’ and the Isle of Barra, / about Blue men and Catholics, / about ‘black’ houses and white strands, / about Tìr nan Òg and the Speckled Barge . . .”)

This was in a poem called ‘The Road to the Isles’, the title of a song and a book by Macleod, and MacLean sums up in those words the contents of ‘The Songs of the Hebrides’, in which Macleod had helped Marjory Kennedy-Fraser make Gaelic song (of a kind) acceptable to Edinburgh drawing-rooms. The translation is MacLean’s own, and I get the feeling from it that it was Macleod and Kennedy-Fraser who had given the words ‘clarsach’ and ‘black house’ to the English language.

MacLean called his first collection ‘Dàin do Eimhir’ after the wife of Cù Chulainn and peopled his poems with figures from Gaelic history and pre-history. In other words he used mythology, but not folklore. The poets of the third quarter used neither, and Derick Thomson issued a ‘Warning to Folklore Worshippers’:

*Air Oidhche Shamhna  
iarraidh mi ort do cheann a chur ann am baraille . . .*

(“On Hallowe’en / I’ll ask you to put your head in a barrel / and leave me to eat my apple . . . / On Hallowe’en / when you consign our summer to the grave, / do not call our winter spring.”) But he could not help but be interested in the afterlife, and his Heaven of the Elect sounds like the original Tìr nan Òg without the name:

*Bha a’ bheatha sin  
gu bhith maireannach . . .*

(“That life / was to be everlasting . . . / It would be sweet / with butter and fish, / and good company, / hymns and psalms, / favours under the blanket / and porridge in the morning.”) That was published in 1982; things were changing, and by 1986 Donald John MacDonald had no inhibitions about seeing the Catholic afterlife, at least, as Tìr nan Òg.

*Chì mi bhuam an garradh-crìche  
'S geata Tìr nan Òg! . . .*

(“I can see the distant march-dyke / And the gate of Tìr nan Òg! / Out of the mist of times gone by / The seer was able to prophesy / That this ferry was on the horizon / Between death and life.”)

By the end of the century, MacNeacail was writing poems about Beltane and librettos about mythological partners such as Cù Chulainn and Sgàthach and Diarmaid and Gràinne (the latter with a drugs message), while — showing just how far it had all come — Myles Campbell paid a cheeky visit to the otherworld in a wonderful prose-poem called ‘Agus mar sin car a’ Mhuiltein’. Here is a bit of it. *Agus dhùisg mi aon uair eile / an turas seo ann am bàta . . .* “I woke up once again / this time in a boat / with the little man sitting in the stern / and he said / ‘You will not be here tomorrow’ / ‘O bless you’ / I said / as if I knew where I was / or where I would be the next moment / and I laughed / but he said / ‘Your year is to be up / tomorrow you will be back in Ostabhaig.’

“And though I felt harassed / I looked around me / and I was on a peaceful loch / as peaceful as Paradise / and there was a rainbow on the horizon / above the trees / and there was a waterfall tumbling down from high rocks / slowly / negligently / as if it were for ever / and I was going to speak / going to speak to the little green man / but he wasn’t there / in his place was the beautiful girl / gentle and calm was her smile / and she seemed as if she were a part of the water / and I felt calm too / as if I were a part of nature / natural as was nature / as was the water / in the waterfall / forever falling / in the same place / and this girl said / the girl with love in her eyes / ‘You will accept it’ / and I said / ‘I will accept what?’ / and she said again in the same calm voice / ‘You will accept it / accept the flood / accept the calmness / accept the otherworld people / and accept human beings.’

“And her blonde hair over her shoulder was gleaming / and I made a motion to touch her / made a motion to put my hand in hers / but she disappeared . . .”

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