At The Rainbow's End: The Natural World In The Gaelic Spiritual Verse Of The Rev. Duncan Maclean (1796-1871), Glenorchy

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My first acquaintance with the Gaelic verse of the Rev. Duncan MacLean came as a memorable surprise. During the 1990s, I was Professor of Celtic at the University of Aberdeen, but, in spite of the title, the job seemed to entail much more in the way of administration than of real scholarship. Because of the ceaseless demands of bureaucracy, I rarely had the opportunity to visit the Queen Mother Library just across the road from the Taylor Building in Aberdeen. One afternoon, however, I had just sufficient spare time to reach the library and to explore a few of its Gaelic shelves. It was a pleasure to browse its nineteenth-century Gaelic material, in which I had a special interest. Most of the books were unassuming volumes in brown or green or blue covers, as was the common style of that period. Titles were equally unassuming, as was exemplified fully by a small volume called *Gaelic Hymns D. MacLean* on its front cover. The title page was a little more revealing: *Laoidhean agus Dàin. Le Donnachadh Mac-Gilleadhain, Ministeir na h-Eaglais Saoire ann an Gleannurchaidh* ('Hymns and Poems. By Duncan MacLean, Minister of the Free Church in Glenorchy'). In this instance, however, it was clear from the neatly-tooled cover, with a patterned border and gold lettering, that a conscious effort had been made to add dignity to the design. It had been printed in Glasgow in 1868 by the eminent Gaelic printer and publisher, Archibald Sinclair, 62 Argyle Street, with the support of MacLachlan and Stewart in Edinburgh, and smaller publishers in Oban, Inverness and Stornoway.

Until that point, I had never heard of the Rev. Duncan MacLean or even been aware of his Gaelic verse. As I perused the book, I was captivated immediately by its contents, and I will always remember standing by that book-shelf, engrossed in exploring MacLean's introduction and poems. I had expected to find what some unsympathetic critics have termed 'versified dogma', but what might more fairly be called 'metrical sermons', in keeping with the style of much nineteenth-century Gaelic religious verse. Instead, I found a variety of poems and songs and more profoundly meditative pieces which carried a strong Christian message, but had been fashioned in a skilfully artistic manner, drawing much of

their imagery from the natural world of Perthshire and Argyllshire. The composer clearly did not suffer from an overdose of what I have sometimes called 'evangelical gnosticism', which ignores the reality that we human beings have been placed in a physical environment which speaks of the power of the Creator God. For me, this was indeed a pot of literary gold at the end of the rainbow, an image which MacLean used to good effect in one of his poems, discussed below.

IDENTIFYING THE POET

Who, then, was the Rev. Duncan MacLean, whose verse I have described elsewhere as 'one of the hidden jewels of the nineteenth century'?[1] True to his love of the natural world and of his own family patch, MacLean included in his anthology a fine poem entitled 'Sealladh o Mhullach Shròn a' Chlachain' ('View from the Summit of Sròn a' Chlachain'), which rooted him firmly in his native heath.[2] Sròn a' Chlachain is an eminence which rises above and to the west of Killin, and it provides a commanding view of the village of Killin itself, Loch Tay, and the surrounding countryside. The poem is in the traditional Gaelic style of a farewell, a leave-taking, in which MacLean, who had climbed to the top of Sròn a' Chlachain, surveys his native landscape, and reflects on the many changes which have occurred since he had been raised there as a boy. His deep empathy with the landscape flows out of every line, like the River Dochart itself, which, having surged boisterously through rapids, meets the River Lochay, and is tamed in a matrimonial 'embrace' with the other stream:

'S mi am shuidh' air an tulaich, air mullach an aonaich,
Gun duine am chuideachd, gu buileach am aonar,
Tha smaointeannan iomadh air m' anam ag aomadh
Bha fada nan cadal, ach innseam an t-aobhar.

As I sit on the hillock at the summit of the slope,
With no other company, completely on my own,
Thoughts in profusion descend upon my soul,
Thoughts that were long dormant, but let me give the reason.

Tha mo shùil air Loch Tatha 's gach faileas as bòidhche
A chì mi na bhroilleach, mar chaoin-uchd caomh-òighe,
Mar leanabh na chadal am madainn na h-òige –
A ghaoth, buin gu caomh ris mun caochail a ghlòir-mhais'!

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1 Meek, 'Gaelic Literature in the Nineteenth Century', 265.
2 MacLean, *Gaelic Hymns*, 98-100.

My eye rests on Loch Tay and every most beautiful shadow
That I see on its breast, like the smooth bosom of a beautiful maiden,
Like a child asleep in the morning of youth –
O wind, deal with it gently lest its glory should perish!

Tha 'n sealladh tha sgaoil' air gach taobh agus làimh dhiom
Làn maise mar b' àbhaist, gnùis nàdair gun sgraing oirr',
Na coilltean cho ùrar, luchd-ciùil air gach crann diubh,
Len ceilearan siùbhlach – mo rùn-sa gach àm iad!

The view which extends on each side and direction
Is full of beauty as always, nature's face is unscowling,
The woods so refreshing, musicians on their every branch,
With their fluent melodies – they are my joy every time!

Tha Dochard na dheannaibh a' teannadh gu Lòchaidh
An coinneamh a chèile, bean bheusach chiùin chòmhnard,
'S nuair thig i na ghlacaibh 's a naisgear iad còmhla,
Grad thrèigidh a bhuirb' e, is strìochdaidh a mhòrchuis.

Dochart surges at speed as it approaches the Lochay,
To encounter his spouse, the mannerly, smooth, gentle lady,
And when she is embraced and they are bonded together,
Suddenly his roughness departs, and his arrogance yields.

MacLean goes on to depict the splendour of Glen Dochart and Glen Lochay, with their slopes and hollows, rivers, plains and birdlife. Against those unchanging scenes, he sets the transience of human life, and reflects on the disappearance of those near and dear to him, but pre-eminently his parents:

Tha smùid o thaigh m' athar a' dìreadh mar bha i
Na cearclaibh 's na dualaibh rèir a duail is a nàdair,
Ach cà bheil an t-athair a dh'altraim mi tràthail?
Is caomhag nam mnathan, cà bheil i, mo mhàthair?

The smoke from my father's house rises as always,
In circles and twists, in accord with its nature,
But where is the father who nurtured me early,
And that dear one among women, where is she, my mother?

Such leave-taking verse, with its nostalgic underlying note of *Ubi sunt*? ('Where are they [now]?'), is not uncommon in nineteenth-century Gaelic or English literature. While imbued with some of the softer sentiments

of the wider British Romantic movement, often wedded to landscape, MacLean's poem acquires its strength and memorability from its close observation of nature and its intimate pinpointing of familiar places, districts and landmarks – Disher, Ben Lawers, Kinella, Achamore, Killin, Ben Leimhinn, and Breadalbane. To these places and their personal associations, he bids a fond final farewell, with a profound sense that he too is 'moving on':

Slàn leis na sruthain mum faicte an t-iasgair!
Slàn leis na mòintean 's am faighte am fiadhach!
Slàn leis na slèibhtean, 's Beinn Lèimhinn, mo chiad ghràdh!
Slàn le Bràghaid Albainn sam b' ainmeil sìol Dhiarmaid!

Farewell to the streams where you would once see the fisher!
Farewell to the moorlands where once there was hunting!
Farewell to the uplands, and to Ben Leimhinn, my first love!
Farewell to Breadalbane, where Diarmaid's famous seed flourished!

The poem may have been composed shortly before his book was published in 1868, a mere three years before his death at the Free Church Manse, Glenorchy, on 26 December 1871 'in the 76th year of his age and the 50th of his ministry'.[3]

EDUCATION, FORMATION, AND MINISTRY

In sharp contrast to MacLean's heartfelt poem, the Old Parish Register for Killin blandly records that he was born to Archibald McLean and Sarah McKay at 'End of Dochart', and noted his baptism on 4 July 1796 as their 'lawful Son bap. Called Duncan'.[4] Nothing is known about his schooling, but his warm reference in his leave-taking poem to 'the school-house [which remained] without change or mutation', in spite of the flight of its pupils like bees leaving the honey-comb, suggests that he was educated initially at the local school in Killin.

Little is recorded about MacLean's spiritual formation, but strong evangelical movements were evident in Perthshire in the early nineteenth century, and it seems likely that these bore fruit in his life. As a young man, he had listened to the powerful preaching of the Rev. John MacDonald (1779-1849), 'The Apostle of the North', who visited Perthshire

3 *Brechin Advertiser*, 2 January 1872.
4 OPR Births 361/Killin 273.

regularly. In his elegy on Thomas Chalmers, MacLean refers to the lasting effect of MacDonald's oratory:[5]

B' òg a chual' mi do theagasg,
Ged bu bheag dheth a thuig mi da bhrìgh;
Gidheadh thàin' e dhachaigh
Is shàth e mar shaighead am chrìdh';
Rinn an dùrachd a nochd thu,
An gràdh bha ad labhairt 's ad chainnt
Orm drùdhadh a lean rium,
'S am bharail a leanas gach àm.

I was young when I heard your preaching,
Although I understood little of its essence;
Yet it bore home upon upon me,
And, like an arrow, thrust itself into my heart;
The passion that you showed,
The love in your speech and your talk,
Sank into me in a lasting manner,
And, in my opinion, will always remain.

After his schooling, MacLean proceeded to the Universities of Aberdeen and Glasgow, and was first ordained as a missionary minister at Benbecula in 1823, translated to Salen, Mull, in 1828, then to Kilbrandon, Argyll, in 1835, and finally to Glenorchy in 1837, to which parish he was presented by the Duke of Argyll. He had evidently become uneasy with patronage by the mid-1830s, as his surviving correspondence shows his concern that parishioners should be consulted in his call to Kilbrandon. He was soon to become a participant in the Disruption, Signing the Act of Separation and Deed of Demission in 1843, he became a minister of the Free Church of Scotland, and in December wrote to the Marquis of Breadalbane, the proprietor of the Glenorchy estate, with a view to obtaining a manse at Croft Brackly.[6]

As a minister, MacLean gained a reputation for hard work and eloquence. The *Oban Times* reported in June 1871 that 'the venerable Rev. Mr Maclean of Glenorchy conducted divine service in the Free Church [in Oban] in the morning [of the previous Sunday]', and continued:[7]

5 MacLean, *Gaelic Hymns*, 24.

6 Biographical, bibliographical and other references relating to MacLean are assembled conveniently in https://www.ecclegen.com/ministers-mac2

7 *Oban Times*, 3 June 1871.

> Mr Maclean is now enjoying a month's holiday in Oban, a luxury which, we believe, he has seldom indulged in through the long course of his ministerial career. Mr Maclean's numerous friends will be glad to learn that, though advanced in years, he continues to be hale and hearty and to preserve the fervid eloquence and power of mind for which, in his younger days, he was so justly admired.

GAELIC LITERARY BACKGROUND

When Duncan MacLean was a young man, Killin and its surroundings were a Gaelic-rich area, strongly associated with Gaelic literature, most notably through the translation of the Gaelic New Testament, published in Edinburgh in 1767. The translation was attributed chiefly to the Rev. James Stewart, parish minister of Killin, who was part of a wider 'Killin Circle' of prominent literary figures.[8] MacLean, who mentions Killin parish church in his leave-taking poem, would have been brought up with an inevitable awareness of such important Gaelic literary activity in the district. He would have known that the Gaelic New Testament had been seen through the press in Edinburgh by a native of Strathyre, namely Dugald Buchanan (1716-68), the spiritual poet who became the Forfeited Estates' schoolmaster at Kinloch Rannoch, and who may well have contributed significantly to the process of translation.[9] Buchanan is one of four Gaelic poets noted in the preface to MacLean's *Gaelic Hymns*.[10] Buchanan made extensive use of the imagery of the natural world in his verse,[11] and his influence can be detected in some of MacLean's compositions.

Beyond religious prose and verse, MacLean was thoroughly familiar with the celebration of the natural world in the secular Gaelic compositions of Donnchadh Bàn nan Òran ('Fair-haired Duncan [MacIntyre] of the Songs', 1724-1812), a native of Druim Liaghairt, Glenorchy, whom he describes in his 1843 account of the parish of Glenorchy and Inishail for the *New Statistical Account of Scotland*.[12] As MacLean notes, MacIntyre composed a major panegyric poem on the beauties of Beinn Dòbhrain (Ben Doran), rising above Bridge of Orchy, where he was once a gamekeeper.[13] MacIntyre later composed a leave-taking song, 'Cead Deireannach nam Beann' ('Final Leave-taking of the Bens'), when, having moved

8 Meek, *Dugald Buchanan*, 11-20.
9 Meek, 'Evangelicalism, Ossianism, and the Enlightenment'.
10 MacLean, *Gaelic Hymns*, 7.
11 Thomson, *Eighteenth Century Gaelic Poetry*, 139-43.
12 MacLean, 'Glenurchy and Inishail', 83, 94-95.
13 Thomson, *Eighteenth Century Gaelic Poetry*, 62-71.

to Edinburgh in 1766, he visited the mountain and the surrounding area for the last time on 19 September 1802.[14] We may wonder whether MacIntyre's song was in MacLean's mind as he composed his own farewell to Killin and its environs.

MacIntyre's portrayal of the natural world was part of a wider poetic trend in Gaelic composition in the eighteenth century. Its principal exponent was the dynamic and irrepressible Ardnamurchan poet, Alexander MacDonald (c. 1690-c. 1770), whose depictions of summer and winter set a trend. Professor Derick Thomson noted:[15]

> There were native Gaelic models for seasonal description, but he [MacDonald] developed the genre in a detailed and individual way, one of his favourite techniques…being the use of a series of adjectives ending in *-ach*, which often produce a compressed and vivid characterisation… His seasonal songs were to provide the clear models for a series by other eighteenth-century poets, from Duncan Bàn MacIntyre to Ewen MacLachlan at the end of the century.

MacDonald's adjectival technique is detectable in some of MacLean's verse on seasonal themes, discussed below.

Wider non-Gaelic influences were at work too, shaping MacDonald's work and that of others, including MacLean. Chief among these was the seasonal poetry of James Thomson (1700-48), a Scot from Ednam who became a tutor and writer in London, and whose work was first published between 1726 and 1730.[16] No less potent as a highly creative catalyst on both sides of the Border were James Macpherson's 'translations' of the 'epics' of the legendary Gaelic poet, Ossian, which gained controversial attention in Britain, Ireland, and Europe after 1760. Macpherson, a native Gaelic speaker from Badenoch, was also greatly admired by literary-minded Gaels, who responded positively to his portrayal of the Highlands as the homeland of Fingal and his warriors. His descriptions of the Highland landscape imparted a transformational glow to former perceptions of the region, and helped to develop broader romantic interpretations of the natural world in prose, poetry and art. Gaelic-speaking ministers were among Macpherson's most ardent admirers and defenders, and MacLean appears to have been one of their number. [17] He refers to the Highlands as 'tìr nam Fiann' ('the land of the Fian/Fingalian warriors') in

[14] Meek, *Caran*, 6-15, 395, 476.
[15] Thomson, *Eighteenth Century Gaelic Poetry*, 13, 20-31.
[16] Sambrook, *Seasons*, xxi-xxii.
[17] Meek, 'The Sublime Gael',

a poem which forms the *envoi* to his 1868 book,[18] and he thought that 'the Hesperides of Ossian' was located near Lochawe.[19]

MACLEAN'S PRE-1868 PUBLICATIONS

Duncan MacLean seems to have developed an early and timely interest in Gaelic literature, and specifically the composition of Gaelic verse. By the late 1820s, he had honed his skills sufficiently to be able to provide poems for the pioneering Gaelic minister, the Rev. Dr Norman MacLeod (*Caraid nan Gàidheal*, 'The Friend of the Gaels'), an 'Ossianic' enthusiast who was the founding father of Gaelic periodical literature, aimed at Gaelic speakers who had become literate through the various Gaelic school initiatives, but lacked appropriate Gaelic reading material.[20] MacLean's first published poems were accepted for MacLeod's innovative journal, *An Teachdaire Gae'lach* ('The Gaelic Messenger'), which appeared between 1829 and 1831. In the order of their publication in *An Teachdaire Gae'lach* (*ATG*), and in their subsequent positions in *Gaelic Hymns* of 1868 (*GH*), these poems were:

'Dàn don Bhogha Fhrois' ['Poem to the Rainbow'], *ATG*, II (June 1829), 42-43: 'Am Bogha Frois', *GH*, 41-42

'Ceòl' ['Music'], *ATG*, III (July 1829), 68: *GH*, 49

'Dàn don Bhìoball' ['Poem to the Bible'], first part, *ATG*, V (September 1829), 115: 'Am Bìoball', *GH*, 43-45

'An Nallaig' ['Christmas'], *ATG*, IX (January 1830),189-90: 'Latha Nollaig', *GH*, 30-31

'An t-Sàbaid' ['The Sabbath'], *ATG*, XVI (August 1830), 78-80: 'Latha 'n Tighearna' ['The Lord's Day'], *GH*, 50-52

'An Crìosdaidh gabhail a chead den t-saoghal' ['The Christian taking his leave of the world'], *ATG*, XVII (September 1830), 103: 'An Crìosdaidh air Leabaidh a Bhàis' ['The Christian on his deathbed'], *GH*, 33-35

'Laoidh' ['Hymn'], *ATG*, XVIII (October 1830), 123: *GH*, 89 (translation of a hymn by Bishop Reginald Heber – see 'The 1868 anthology' below)

18 MacLean, *Gaelic Poems*, 9.
19 MacLean, 'Glenorchy and Inishail', 86.
20 Kidd, 'Early Gaelic Periodicals'.

'Dàn don Bhìoball' ['Poem to the Bible'], second part, *ATG*, XXII (February 1831), 239-40: *GH*, 46-47.[21]
It is evident from an editorial note introducing the second section of 'Dàn don Bhìoball' that the Rev. Norman MacLeod esteemed his contributions highly.

MacLean published his poems under the penname, *(Am) Fìor Ghael* ('[The] True Gael'), which is indicative of his strong identification with Gaelic culture. In fact, he was supportive of the *An Teachdaire Gae'lach* to the extent that he composed a substantial poem welcoming the (personified) 'Messenger'. He celebrated the 'Messenger's' potential for strengthening Gaelic customs and traditions at a time when the Gaelic population was being thinned noticeably by emigration, with a profound sense of loss for both the wider culture and for individuals like himself, who witnessed the departure of the former inhabitants of certain parts of the Highlands – an elegiac theme which found eloquent expression in his poem, 'Tuireadh an Fhògarraich' ('The Keening of the Exile').[22] As he saluted the 'Messenger', he imagined a family gathered round their fireplace while reading the new journal.[23] In associating himself so firmly with *An Teachdaire Gae'lach*, MacLean was clearly of a similar mind to MacLeod, and MacLeod's encouragement must surely have strengthened his literary aspirations.

Publications by MacLean in the later 1830s have not yet been traced, but he was active in the 1840s. In 1848 he produced a small book, *Cumha an Diadhair Urramaich Dr Thomas Chalmers a chaochail anns a' bhliadhna 1847 agus Dà Dhàn Spioradail Eile* ('Lament for the Reverend Divine Dr Thomas Chalmers who died in the year 1847 and Two Other Spiritual Poems'), printed in Glasgow by Duncan MacVean. The 'Lament' was also the first item in *GH*.[24] The two other 'spiritual poems' were 'Rabhadh don Mhuinntir Neo-iompaichte' ('Warning to Unconverted People'), reprinted in *GH*,[25] and 'An Tuil' ('The Flood'), reprinted as the second item in *GH*.[26]

By the late 1850s, MacLean had earned a sufficiently high reputation to act as a judge of other poets' outputs. In 1857, the 'Rev. Duncan MacLean, Glenorchy; Rev. Dr Smith, Inveraray; and the Rev. Duncan Macnab, Glas-

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21 I am deeply indebted to Dr Sheila Kidd, University of Glasgow, for supplying these references.

22 MacLean, *Gaelic Hymns*, 101-4.

23 *An Teachdaire Gae'lach,* VI [September 1829], pp. 133-35. Kidd, 'Early Gaelic Periodicals'.

24 MacLean, *Gaelic Hymns*, 11-26.

25 MacLean, *Gaelic Hymns*, 63-67.

26 MacLean, *Gaelic Hymns*, 26-30.

gow' were the judges in a competition organised by the Glasgow Celtic Society 'for the best Gaelic poem (not to exceed 100 lines) on the military services of the Highland regiments during the late war'. First Prize of £5.5/- was awarded to 'William Livingstone, tailor, Dale Street, Glasgow', a prominent Gaelic poet.[27]

As far as is known to date, no Gaelic sermons by MacLean have survived. However, a taste of his prose style is provided by his introductions to his 1848 volume and also his 1868 anthology. These show that he had a rich Gaelic vocabulary, teaming with synonyms, and a talent for thinking in figurative terms. In the introduction to the former, he writes:[28]

> O! Thigeadh don chlàrsaich bhith da-rìreadh fonnmhor, labhar, agus milis, is don chlàrsair a thogadh am fonn a bhith teòma, deas-làmhach, a chuireadh cliù agus moladh an diadhair urramaich an cèill air chòir; cha chùis nàire no maslaidh le fear an dàin ged thilgt' air gun tàinig e fada, ro fhada, goirid san ionnsaigh dhàna a thug e.
>
> *O! It would befit that harp to be indeed tuneful, eloquent, and sweet, and the harper who raised the melody to be skilful and nimble-handed, that would articulate properly the renown and praise of that reverend divine; it would be no reason for reproach or shame upon the poet though he should be accused of falling far, very far, short in the bold endeavour on which he had embarked.*

His command of English style is more than evident in his contribution to the *New Statistical Account*, where he indulges his love of the natural features of the parish of Glenurchay and Inishail, including the valleys and rivers running eastwards to Perthshire.[29]

THE 1868 ANTHOLOGY

MacLean's 1868 anthology begins with an introduction which argues his case for composing hymns. He appeals to the precedent of earlier centuries, from the songs of Deborah, Baruch, Hannah, Samuel, David and Solomon in the Old Testament, to the hymns of Martin Luther at the time of the Reformation – *laoidhean brìoghmhor, blasda Lutheir* ('Luther's meaningful, tasteful hymns') – which inspired and encouraged people in difficult times. The value of hymns in a specifically Gaelic context was demonstrated by the compositions of Dugald Buchanan, Strathyre and Kinloch Rannoch, the Rev. James MacGregor (1759-1830), from Port-

[27] *Inverness Advertiser*, 8 December 1857.
[28] MacLean, *Cumha*, iv.
[29] MacLean, 'Glenurchay and Inishail', 82-103.

more (Comrie parish), the Rev. Dr John MacDonald, minister of Ferintosh, and John Morrison (c. 1796-1852), the Harris blacksmith. Though referring to these poets, he dismisses the idea that he regarded himself as the equal of his Gaelic predecessors. His book was produced in the belief that its contents might be useful to others. He and poetry had been 'courting' for many years, and, had he been ambitious, he would not have waited until he was going grey and balding before publishing his book. MacLean sends his volume on its way with an appropriate poem of blessing, a form of *envoi* attested in the first Gaelic printed book, published in 1567, namely John Carswell's Classical Gaelic translation of John Knox's *Book of Common Order*.[30] This demonstrates MacLean's deep scholarly familiarity with Gaelic literary conventions, as well as with spiritual and other forms of verse.

The 1868 anthology gathers all MacLean's previously-published verse, but adds a significant amount of fresh material composed by himself. Near the end, it also includes a small selection of hymns and poems which he had translated or adapted from the works of Isaac Watts (1674-1748), Augustus Toplady (1740-78), Henry Kirke White (1785-1806),[31] and (Bishop) Reginald Heber (1783-1826), perhaps best known as the composer of the hymn, 'All things bright and beautiful'. MacLean translated noticeably more specimens of White and Heber, with a preference for Heber.[32] This is important in demonstrating the external, non-Gaelic influences to which he was exposed, predominantly from the Romantic group of English hymn-composers of the early nineteenth century.[33] Like his predecessor Dugald Buchanan, who was a significant translator of earlier English verse, and who also made extensive use of imagery drawn from the natural world, MacLean operated within an intertextual and bilingual English/Gaelic context, and was doubtless influenced by English models. Through them, he may have absorbed some of the principles of the wider Romantic movement, which commonly used features of the landscape to carry the feeling, mood or thought of the composer, though he did not lack Gaelic precedents.

It is certainly noticeable that MacLean's verse has a strong personal dimension, more revealing of the self than is normal with most Gaelic composers of hymns, and much more evidently imbued with an attachment to the physical environment. However, his own compositions, tempered by his knowledge of Gaelic literature, are very different from the

30 Thomson, *Foirm na n-Urrnuidheadh*, 13, 181.
31 Fulford, *Henry Kirke White*.
32 MacLean, *Gaelic Poems*, 80-91.
33 Watson, *The English Hymn*, 300-34.

English hymns of the Romantic period, as they contain much more specific pictures of the natural world than the rather generalised and occasional references to landscape characteristic of the latter.

RAINBOW, FLOOD AND STREAM

MacLean's use of natural images in his verse takes different forms, depending on the subject. When employing nature in what may be termed a broadly didactic role in his longer poems, he often chooses a single theme or image which he develops as an integral part of the composition, but with different emphases as befits his message. This can be demonstrated with reference to three examples. The first of these presents the poem in its entirety, but the following two provide only a selection of verses from each poem.

Am Bogha Frois[34]
The Rainbow

A chuspair àlainn, ghràsmhoir, òrbhuidh,
Urrais àird air slàint' is còmhnadh,
Biodh d' fhiamh ghàire ort an còmhnaidh –
eall an gràdh orm ri uchd dòrainn.

Beautiful, grace-filled, golden object,
Lofty warrant of salvation and succour,
May you wear your smile for ever –
Look on me with love when I face trouble.

Nuair a reubas stoirm an t-adhar,
Cur nan dùil air mhire-chatha,
Laigheas oidhch' air uchd an latha,
Faiceam soillse do ghnùis fhlathail.

When a storm tears the sky to pieces,
Stirring the elements to battle-ardour,
When night lies upon the day's breast,
May I see the glow of your noble countenance.

Cuir an cèill dhomh, theachdair' dhìleis,
Gealladh aoibhneach Dhè na fìrinn;
Innis dhomh am briathraibh mìne
Chaoidh nach sgriosar sinn le dìle.

[34] MacLean, *Gaelic Poems*, 41-42.

Expound to me, faithful messenger,
The joyful promise of the God of truth;
Reassure me, in gentle words,
That we will never [again] be destroyed by a flood.

Nuair chìthear thu, dhrochaid bhòidheach,
Crocht' os cionn nan tuilte mòra,
Seallam-s' ort san àm le sòlas
Mar an ròd gu rìoghachd na glòire.

When you are visible, beautiful bridge,
Suspended above the mighty torrents,
May I look upon you then with solace
As the road to the realm of glory.

Seallam ort, a choroin sgiamhaich,
Mar ro-eàrlais air Mac Dhia dhuinn,
Chleith na fheòil àrd ghlòir a Dhiadhachd
Rin sìor sheallam ri àm diachainn.

May I look at you, lovely crown,
As the guarantee of God's son on our side,
Who hid in his flesh the high glory of his Divinity,
[And] to whom I may always look in time of trouble.

Nuair bha mi 'm leanabh aotrom, gòrach,
Dearc le iongnadh air do bhòidhchead,
Dh'innseadh dhomh, mar sgeul gun sgleò e,
Nan glacainn thu, gum mealainn stòras.

When I was a light-headed silly youngster,
Looking in wonder at your beauty,
I was told, as a tale untarnished,
That, if I'd catch you, I'd revel in wealth.

O raon gu raon 's tric chuir mi 'n ruaig ort,
'S an dòchas bhaoth gun tugainn buaidh ort,
Ach char is mheall thu mi gam bhuaireadh,
Mar iomad faileas faoin on uair sin.

From field to field I often chased you,
In foolish hope that I could win you,
But you deceived and tricked me with your tempting,
Like many a vain shadow since that time.

Ach ged mheall thu mi am bharail,
'S nach do chùm thu rium do ghealladh,
Ged a chaochail glòir do ghathan,
'S ged a sgaoil iad feadh an adhair,

But although you deceived me in my notion,
And you did not keep your promise to me,
And though your rays' glory faded,
And though they scattered through the sky,

Dearcam ort, 's na ceileam uam e,
'N Tì nach trèig mi ri uchd cruadail,
'N Tì bheir slàinte dhomh is sòlas,
S leis nach meallar chaoidh mi 'm dhòchas.

May I gaze upon You, and let me not hide it,
[As] the One who will not forsake me when facing hardship,
The One who will give me salvation and solace,
And in whom my hope will never be deceived.

Nuair bhios tuiltean brùchd' air m' anam,[35]
'S tonnan buaireis a' dol tharam,
Le sùil creidimh riut an còmhnaidh,
Ìos', bi dhòmhs' ad bhogha dòchais.

When the floods surge over [are heavy on] my soul,
And waves of trouble sweep across me,
With the eye of faith resting on you always,
Jesus! Be to me a rainbow of hope!

An Tuil[36]

The Flood

Tha ghrian anns na h-àrdaibh ag èirigh gun ghruaim,
'S an saoghal bu shàmhach a' dùsgadh à shuain;
Tha ceòlraidh na coille a' gleus' an cruit chiùil,
Cur fàilt' air a' mhadainn le aighear is sùnnd.

---

35 trom air m' anam ('heavy on my soul'), *ATG* 1829.

36 MacLean, *Gaelic Poems*, 26-36. The trigger for this composition may have been a flash flood, which sometimes occurred in the Highlands, most notably in August 1829, when a 'Muckle Spate' struck the Spey valley (Lauder, *Great Floods of August 1829*).

The sun in the skies has no frown as it rises,
And the quiet world awakens out of its sleep;
The musicians of the wood are tuning their harps,
Welcoming the morning with joy and good cheer.

Tha maise a' Chèitein air rèidhlean nam beann,
Air coille nam badan, 's air lagan nan gleann;
Sgaoil samhradh na maise a bhrat air gach taobh,
'S air aghaidh a' chruinne tha gean agus aoibh.

The beauty of May is on the slopes of the bens,
On the wood with its clumps, and the hollow of the glens;
The summer of splendour has spread its coat on each side,
And the face of the world shows joy and goodwill.

Tha choille a' lùbadh fo dhriùchd a' mhìos Mhàigh,
Barr-ghuc air gach fiùran, 's gur cùbhraidh am fàil';
'S am barra nan ògan tha còisridh nam fonn,
Len ribhide ceòlmhor, 's len òrain nach trom.

The forest is bending under the dew of May's month,
With buds on each sapling, and the fragrance is sweet;
On the tops of the branches is the choir that is tuneful
With their musical reeds, and no sombre songs.

Noah tells of the impending flood, and builds his boat in readiness, but nobody listens. People are having fun and pleasure, when suddenly the weather changes.

Ach dhorchaich an latha, tha 'n t-adhar fo ghruaim,
Tha cuantan a' beucaich, 's gur dèistneach am fuaim;
Tha 'n talamh a' clisgeadh, 's a' briosgadh gu bhonn,
Bhrùchd an cuan thar a' chladaich le sadraich a thonn.

But the day has suddenly darkened, and the sky has grown surly,
The oceans are roaring, and their sound is horrendous;
The ground is now trembling, and shaking to its foundations,
The sea has surged over the shoreline with the wallop of its waves.

Chaidh sgaoileadh gu h-obann sa chomann bha baoth,
O! Is ìosal an cridhe bha mireag rin taobh;
Ri mionaid na h-uaire ghlac uamhann is fiamh
An saoghal, mo thruaighe, dh'fhàs suarach mu Dhia.

The light-headed company has been suddenly scattered,
And Oh! Downcast is the heart that danced by their side;
In a mere minute, fear and terror have captured
The world that – alas! – had grown indifferent to God.

Tha 'm bàs ann air mhire, a' milleadh 's a' sgath,
A' sàthadh gun tioma 's gach cridhe a ghath;
Mar iolair an fhàsaich, le àbhachd gun truas,
Ag òl a sheachd sàth de bhlàth-fhuil nan uan.

Now death is there dancing, spoiling and cutting,
Thrusting its merciless shaft right into each heart;
Like the eagle of the wilds, with its pitiless pleasure,
Drinking its seven-times fill of the warm blood of the lambs.

Tha 'n dìle a' sgaoileadh gu h-aognaidh 's gu bras,
An dòchas nach faoin e gum faodar dol às;
Tha 'n òige 's an aois ri saothair gun stàth,
À glacaibh an aoig ud cha saorar gu bràth.

The flood is now spreading, so swift and so deadly,
Hoping that it isn't so weak that anyone will escape;
Youth and old age make an effort that's hopeless,
As none will ever escape from that killer's clutches.

The final verse of the poem invests the Ark with a New Testament nuance:

Ach faic i an Àirc air bharra nan sùgh,
Gun chombaist, gun acair, gun acfhainn, gun siùil,
A' gabhail a cùrsa fo stiùireadh Mhic Dhè,
'S i torrach le dòchas an òg chruinne-chè.

But look at the Ark on the tops of the billows,
Without compass or anchor, without tackle or sails,
Maintaining her course with God's Son to guide her,
And pregnant with the hope of the freshly-made world.

Uisge na Beatha[37]
The Water of Life

'S e Eòin fhuair an sealladh,
An sealladh ro-ghràsmhor,

[37] MacLean, *Gaelic Poems*, 35-38, based on *Revelation*, 22: 1.

An sealladh do-labhairt,
An sealladh ro-àghmhor,
Nuair o chathair na Trianaid,
Na fhianais 's na làthair,
Bhrùchd uisge na h-abhainn
Sa bheil glanadh is slàinte!

What a vision John had,
A most gracious vision,
An unspeakable vision,
A most splendid vision,
When from the throne of the Trinity,
In his presence before him,
The river's water surged forth,
With its cleansing salvation!

An abhainn neo-thruaillidh,
Nam buadhan nach fàilnich,
Gun ghoinne air uisg' innt'
'N tart earraich no samhraidh,
Na h-ìocshlainte dhrùidhteach
Dh' anam ciùirte is cràiteach
Nì ghlanadh is ionnlaid
Is iompach' gu slàinte.

The unpolluted river
Of unfailing virtues,
With no lack of water
In spring's drought or summer's,
Providing a penetrating balm
For the pained troubled soul,
To cleanse it and wash it,
And turn it to saving health.

'S cha shruthan beag suarach,
'S uisge ruadh troimhe chèil' ann,
No tàchar dubh mòintich,
Gun bheòshlaint, gun èifeachd,
Losgain 'g iomairt an smàg ann,
'S nithibh gràndа is dèistneach,
Ach fìor-uisge fallain, gun ghainne, gun èirig.

It's no mean little trickle,
Containing brown curdled water,
Or moor's black choking weed,

Without effect or sustenance,
Or frogs crawling in it,
And dirty detestable matters,
But true healthy water, abundant and free.

'S ionann 's tobar nan gleanntan
'S nam beanntanan fàsail,
Nach tiormaich san t-samhradh
Ged thig cranntachd is blàths oirnn,
A bhrùchdas gun ghainne
Mar ghloinne cho àillidh,
An tobar om brùchd siud,
Am bùrn a tha slàinteil.

It is like the well of the glens
And the desolate mountains,
Which will not run dry in summer,
Though searing wind and heat hit us,
But which pours unrestricted
As beautiful as glass,
The well from which surges
That health-giving water.

Tha 'n abhainn seo treòrach
Don mhòr-chuan on tàinig,
An cuan sin gun chladach,
An cuan sin gun tràghadh,
An cuan sin gun lìonadh,
Cuan sìorraidh a' ghràidh sin,
Tha neo-chrìochnach san Diadhachd,
'S tha 'n Crìosd na mhuir slàinte.

This river leads on
To the great ocean of its source,
That ocean without shore,
That ocean unebbing,
That ever-full ocean,
That eternal ocean of love,
Which is unending in the Godhead,
And is in Christ a sea of salvation.

MUSIC AND MEDITATION

In his shorter, more lyrical compositions, MacLean prefers to create a matrix of different natural sights and sounds. In his poem 'Ceòl' ('Music'), these are presented as inferior to the surpassing beauty of the music of spiritual activity. This composition, very consciously crafted, offers its own rich internal melody of rhyme and assonance, the cohesive repetition of key words and phrases, and a change of perspective at precisely its mid-point:

Ceòl[38]
Music

'S binn caoirean nan caochan an aonach nam beann,
Nuair tha 'n latha a' sgaoileadh air aodann nan gleann;
'S binn osna na gaoithe, 's gur aobhach a toirm,
Air ciùineadh don doininn, 's air cadal don stoirm.

Sweet the murmur of streams on the slopes of the bens,
When daylight is spreading on the face of the glens;
Sweet the sigh of the wind, and joyful its noise,
When the tempest has stilled, and the storm is asleep.

'S binn co-sheirm na coille, nan doire, 's nan stùc,
'S ro-ghasda an ceòl e san òg-mhadainn dhriùchd;
O, 's taitneach ra chluinntinn geum laoigh tighinn on chrò,
'S binn gàirich na tuinne, is bàirich nam bò!

Sweet the chorus of the forest, the groves, and the peaks,
A most splendid music in the early morning of dew;
O, how pleasant to hear the calf's cry from the fold!
How sweet the wave's laughter, and the lowing of cows!

'S binn naidheachd air caraid chaidh fada air chuairt,
'S cha seirbhe guth leannain dh'fhàs banail is suairc;
'S ro-blasda guth màthar làn blàiths agus gaoil –
Mar cheòl iad nach àlainn, nach càirdeil, nach caomh?

How sweet to have news of a friend who has travelled afar,
And, no less, the voice of a sweetheart grown womanly, kind;
How very sweet the voice of a mother full of warmth and love –
As music are these not beautiful, tender and dear?

[38] MacLean, *Gaelic Poems*, 49.

Ach tha ceòl ann as uaisle na bhuadhaibh gu mòr,
'S tha fuaim ann as binne 's as grinn' air gach dòigh;
Tha pongan as mìls' ann nach dìobair gu sìor
Gach ceòl rinn thu sòlasach an ear no an iar.

But there is a melody much more noble in quality,
And a sound more pleasant and sweeter in every way;
There are notes more melodious that will never forsake
The music that [truly] cheered you in east or in west.

Nach milis mar cheòl e, nach bòidheach, nach binn,
Guth chlag madainn Dòmhnaich, nach sònraichte grinn?
Na fuinn ud ro-àlainn tha fàilteach' an lò
A bheannaich an t-Àrd-rìgh gu slàinte nan slògh?

Isn't the voice of a bell on a Sunday morning
A sweet music, beautiful, tuneful and especially fine?
[And] those very lovely tunes that welcome the day
That the High King ordained, the people to save?

Nach binn a' chruit-chiùil ud, nach rùnach gach iall,
An cridhe trom brùite ag ùrnaigh ri Dia?
Nach taitneach mar cheòl e, nach bòidheach 's nach caoin,
Guth a mholaidh, a shòlais, a dhòchais, a ghaoil?

Isn't this [also] a sweet harp, and desirable in every way,
The bruised burdened heart engaged in praying to God?
Isn't this [too] pleasant music, both beautiful and gentle,
The voice singing his praise, his joy, his hope and his love?

This was a theme which MacLean pursued similarly in 'Latha 'n Tighearna' ('The Lord's Day').[39] There he rejoices in the quietness of the Sabbath, broken only by the hearty notes of the lark, the robin, and the thrush, and the appropriately melodious singing of worshippers who have glimpsed the glory of God. At day's end, all creatures retire to rest, leaving a pervasive silence, perhaps occasionally interrupted by the soft sighs of the wind in the foliage, the gentle sound of the streams, and the sweet music of a religious song or hymn.

[39] MacLean, *Gaelic Poems*, 50-52.

THE CYCLE OF THE SEASONS

Although MacLean often focuses on particular themes with a selection of images carrying a specific meditative or exhortatory message, he also presents his word-pictures within wider reflections on the changing seasons. Doubtless influenced by Dugald Buchanan's poem, 'An Geamhradh' ('Winter'), and also by the rich legacy of eighteenth-century Gaelic verse describing the seasons of the year, most notably in the poems of Alexander MacDonald, he depicted death as the ultimate winter, but with the prospect of renewal:[40]

Speuran gruamach, gaothaibh fuaimneach,
Sranna nuas o chruach nam beann,
Loch is fuaran, 's alltan luaineach,
Nan lic fhuar gun fhuaim, gun chainnt;
Theich am breac gu làr na linne,
Theich am fiadh gu srath nan gleann;
Uan no meann chan eil ri mireag,
Cuach cha ghoir an coill' no crann.

Gloomy skies and noisy winds
Rumble down from mountain tops;
Loch and spring, and meandering stream,
Are cold, soundless, voiceless slabs;
The trout has fled to the pool's bottom,
The deer has fled to the glens and strath;
No lamb or kid are sporting,
No cuckoo calls from wood or tree.

Feuch eòin an t-slèibh 's an cinn fo sgèith
Gam falach fèin an còs nam bruach,
A' ghrian neo-shùnndach mu èirigh,
Ach na leum gu dol na shuain;
Bàs na bliadhna leinn ge cianail,
Cha chùis iargain e no bròin;
Bheir grian an àigh is dealta blàth
Gach nì gu 'n àbhaist is gu 'n nòs.

See the birds of the moor, their heads under their wings,
Hiding themselves in the nooks of the banks,
The sun unenthusiastic about rising,
But eagerly hastening to go to sleep;
Though the death of the year should be sad to us,

[40] MacLean, *Gaelic Poems*, 56-60.

It is no reason for yearning or sorrow;
The sun of splendour and warm dew
Will restore everything to its accustomed habit.

A similar perspective, with appropriately sun-filled imagery, empowers MacLean's celebration of the preaching of the Gospel in the Highlands and Islands. In his song on 'Craobh-sgaoileadh an t-Soisgeil am Mòrthir agus Eileanan na Gàidhealtachd' ('The Proclamation of the Gospel on the Mainland and in the Islands of the Gàidhealtachd'), he states:[41]

Ach nis on dheàlraich caomh ghrian an àigh oirnn,
Thig latha 's fheàrr oirnn le blàths is sìth;
Thig solas uaipe a sheòlas suas sinn
Le blàths a dh'fhuadaicheas fuachd on chrìdh';
Bidh 'n cridhe seachdte, an cridhe meata,
An cridh' a chleachd bhith gun neart, gun chlì,
Mar chraobh san t-samhradh air triall don gheamhradh,
Le meas nach gann oirr', 's chan fhann a brìgh.

But now, since the kind sun of splendour has shone upon us,
We will enjoy a better day with warmth and peace;
It will radiate light which will guide us upwards
With a warmth which will banish coldness from the heart;
The withered heart, the fearful, timid heart,
The heart which was wont to be without strength or energy,
Will be like a tree in summer, following winter's departure,
With fruit unstinted, and with powerful pith.

MacLean clearly revelled in the resurrecting powers of spring and summer, which he celebrates further in 'Latha Bealltainn' ('May Day', literally 'The Day of Beltane')[42] and 'An t-Earrach' ('Spring').[43] In the former, he pictures the musical and physical delights of the season, and addresses May Day, using the Gaelic adjectival technique (in *-ach*) characteristic of the seasonal verse of Alexander MacDonald, and similarly conveying jocular enjoyment:

Ceud fàilte ort, a Bhealltainn aobhach!
[A] Bhealltainn shnodhach, bhliochdach, ghaolach,
Mhineineach, uanach, laoghach,
A' mireag air gach làimh is taobh dhinn.

41 MacLean, *Gaelic Poems*, 38-41.
42 MacLean, *Gaelic Poems*, 105-07.
43 MacLean, *Gaelic Poems*, 108-10.

A hundred welcomes to you, joyous May Day!
May Day, full of shoots, milky, much-loved,
Kid-adorned, lamb-adorned, calf-adorned,
Sporting on our every side and hand!

In the latter, the 'awakening' of spring is portrayed as releasing the locks and restrictions imposed by winter. So it can be with the soil of the indifferent soul, however hard, and however much in bondage in its current state. MacLean's vignette of the ploughman is particularly memorable:

Tha 'n treabhaich' a' dùsgadh gu sùnndach 's gu moch,
Le chaib' às [a] lèin' dhol a reubadh nan cnoc;
Chaidh an t-seisreach an òrdugh 's gur bòidheach don t-sùil
Na th' aige san amharc an dòchas 's an dùil.

The ploughman wakes early, filled with good cheer,
With spade in hand, and sleeves rolled up, to tear open the hills;
The plough-team has been set in order, and it is a delight to the eye
[To see] what he proposes to do with hope and intent.

Tha 'n sgrìob air a leagadh gu dìreach 's gu rèidh,
An sìol air a chur 's a chliath air a dhèidh,
'S is sùnndach is ceòlmhor an t-òran 's na fuinn
Tha tighinn ad chòdhail 'n àm treabhadh an fhuinn.

The furrow has been laid smoothly and straight,
The seed has been sown, and the harrow follows behind,
And how tuneful and cheery to hear the song and the airs
Which come to meet you at the time of ploughing the soil!

In this instance, however, MacLean may have drawn inspiration and ideas from James Thomson's poem on 'Spring', which offers a similar picture of the husbandman, setting his team to the plough:[44]

Forth fly the tepid airs; and unconfined,
Unbinding earth, the moving softness strays.
Joyous the impatient husbandman perceives
Relenting Nature, and his lusty steers
Drives from their stalls to where the well-used plough
Lies in the furrow loosened from the frost.
There, unrefusing, to the harnessed yoke

[44] Sambrook, *Seasons*, 4.

They lend their shoulder, and begin their toil,
Cheered by the simple song and soaring lark.

TREES AND BRANCHES

Images of nature are prominent in MacLean's two elegies, the one on the death of Thomas Chalmers and other ministers from the Disruption era,[45] and the other on his own daughter, Margaret.[46] In the former, MacLean shows his intimate knowledge of the time-honoured code of similes and metaphors which was integral to formal Gaelic eulogies and elegies. These were commonly centred on the tree, and especially the oak, which was the standard image of the clan chief in secular tradition. Thus, Chalmers' death is likened to the felling of the finest of trees, the apple-tree (representing beauty) and the oak (representing strength), in the context of a landslide:

Thuit abhall a' ghàrraidh
'S an darag a b' àirde sa choill';
Le osag an fhàsaich
Ghrad spadadh gu làr i le maoim.

The apple-tree of the garden has fallen,
And the tallest oak in the wood;
By the gust of the wilderness
It was suddenly struck down by a landslide.

Chalmers is further compared to the eagle in the breadth and height of his knowledge of the works of God and his study of astronomy:

Mar fhìor-eun na h-ealtainn
A' dìreadh am broilleach na grèin'.
Leis an t-sùil a bha beachdail
A' dearcadh air maise nan speur.

Like the true bird [i.e., eagle] of the bird-flock,
Ascending in the bosom of the sun,
With the ever-observant eye
Gazing at the beauty of the skies.

[45] MacLean, *Gaelic Poems*, 11-26. For discussion of the various ministers commemorated by MacLean, see Norman Campbell, 'Gaelic Lament'.

[46] MacLean, *Gaelic Poems*, 111-12.

The metaphor of the tree and its branches is integral to MacLean's deeply moving lament for his daughter Margaret, who died in 1863, evidently in childbirth, as described poignantly in the poem –

Bu chràiteach, goirt an sealladh d' athar
Bhith gur faicinn taisgte còmhla
An leabaidh chaoil maraon nur laighe
Le lèin' anairt oirbh mar chòmhdach.

It was painfully sore for your father to see
You both gathered together
In a narrow bed lying with one another
With a sheet of linen over you as a cover.

This experience of God's *slat* ('chastening-rod') made him weary and sad:

Rinn e briseadh air mo choille,
Gheàrr e meangan a bha nòsar;
Fhuair mi 'n droch an àit' an deagh sgeul
Dh'fhàgas èisleanach rim bheò mi.

It caused a breach within my forest,
It cut a branch that was pleasant;
I received bad news instead of good,
Which will leave me sorrowful all my days.

His hope was in the cleansing power of the Saviour's well of salvation, in which his children were washed – *Ghlanadh sibh an uisg' an fhuarain* ('You were cleansed in the water of the spring'), water which could blot out sins, though they should be as plentiful as *duilleach air na geugaibh* ('foliage on the branches').

HEAVENLY PROSPECTS

While drawing extensively on the images of earth, MacLean was clear that they were no substitute for the glory of Christ or the anticipated beauties of heaven. In 'An Crìosdaidh air Leabaidh a Bhàis' ('The Christian on his Deathbed'), the dying Christian speaks:[47]

Soraidh leat, a shaoghail,
Ni'n caoineam idir thu,
Ged bu mhòr mo ghaol ort

[47] MacLean, *Gaelic Poems*, 33-35.

'S ge b' aobhach leam do ghnùis;
Bha uair, ach rinn i caochladh,
Bha d' aogas is do dhealbh
Am bheachd ro mhaiseach, ghaolach,
Ach chaochail i is dh'fhalbh.

Farewell to you, world,
I will not weep for you at all,
Though once I loved you greatly,
And your face was sweet to me;
There was a time, now altered.
When your appearance and your form
Were to me both dear and beautiful,
But that has changed and gone.

Àd thobraichean a b' ùrar,
Àd shruthaibh siùbhlach, dian,
Do dh'òl mi cridheil, sùnndach,
Car ùine mar mo mhiann;
'S ge blasda leam mar bhùrn e
'S ge b' ùrar e dom bheul,
Do tharraing mi dom ionnsaigh
A' ghrùid mar aon ris fhèin.

From your wells that were refreshing,
From your swift and surging streams,
I drank heartily and gladly
For a while just as I wished;
Yet, though I thought the water tasty,
And refreshing to my mouth,
I sucked towards myself
The dregs that went with it,

A bheanntaidh corrach, àrda,
A ghleanntaidh àlainn, gorm,
Soraidh agus slàn leibh –
Tha tràth dhomh nis bhith falbh,
'S ged sgàilear sibh om shùilean
Le ceathach dùmhail bàis,
Cha tuir mi sibh 's chan ionndrainn –
Tha 'm fhradharc dùthaich as fheàrr.

High and sharp-peaked mountains,
Glens so fine and green,
Farewell and goodbye to you –

It is now my time to part!
And though you will be shaded
From my eyes by death's thick mist.
I'll not lament or miss you –
A better country fills my sight.

Nevertheless, MacLean's picture of heaven is of a land which incorporates, in an everlasting context, all the most appealing features of his own natural Highland environment, and excludes the less pleasant:[48]

Tìr an àigh, a' ghràidh 's a' choibhneis,
Tìr tha ghnàth gu soilleir, soillseach;
Tìr nam beannachd, tìr an aoibhneis,
Gun fheum air solus grèin no coinnle.

Land of splendour, love and kindness,
Land that's always bright and shining;
Land of blessings, land of rejoicing,
With no need for light of sun or candle.

Tìr nam fonn nach caill am mìlseachd,
Tìr nan òran de nach sgìthich,
Tìr a' chiùil nach sguir gu dìlinn,
Tìr nan aingeal is nam fìrean.

Land of tunes that never lose their sweetness,
Land of songs of which none will weary,
Land of the music that lasts eternally,
Land of angels and the righteous.

Tìr nan crann nach caill an àilleachd,
Gorm is ùrar bhios gu bràth iad;
Croinn len duilleach a bheir slàinte,
Tìr nan aibhnichean nach fàilnich.

Land of trees which will not lose their beauty,
Remaining green and fresh for ever;
Trees whose leaves deliver salvation,
Land of rivers that are unfailing.

Tìr an t-samhraidh chaoidh a mhaireas,
Tìr gun fhuar-dhealt, gun chlach-mheallainn;

[48] MacLean, *Gaelic Hymns*, 107.

Tìr gun osna, deur, no smalan,
Gun fhuachd geamhraidh no tart earraich.

Land of summer that endures unending,
Land without cold dew, with no hailstones;
Land without sighing, tears or sadness,
Without winter's frost or drought of springtime.

Nach sona iadsan a gheibh còir oirre'!
Feitheamh orr' tha uallach glòire,
Tobraichean tha làn de shòlas –
Mar ri Dia gu sìor an còmhnaidh.

How happy those who will possess it!
Awaiting them is a weight of glory,
Wells that are full of gladness –
Their residence is with God for ever.

CONCLUDING OVERVIEW

Duncan MacLean's output is notable within the wider body of Gaelic spiritual verse for its extensive and consistent use of imagery drawn from the natural world. As he was self-evidently a well-read scholar, his technique is a confluence of several streams which he has used skilfully to empower his poetic mill. The principal feeder-stream is clearly the strong Gaelic tradition of poetry in praise of nature which was the hallmark of the major secular poets of the eighteenth century, most notably Alexander MacDonald and Duncan MacIntyre. Another stream, smaller but no less potent, was contributed by the religious verse of Dugald Buchanan, who was likewise indebted to Gaelic secular models for his use of natural imagery. The range of Buchanan's verse was more restricted, and less revealing of the self than MacLean's, as it was closer to eighteenth-century neo-classical models which did not so readily convey the composer's emotions.

A generation later, MacLean's verse is noticeably more personal in its keynotes than Buchanan's. He was familiar with the moods of Macpherson's 'Ossian', and he probably drew some inspirational water from James Thomson's *Seasons* and the works of English hymn-writers of the so-called Romantic period. Like the output of these composers, MacLean's verse contains an element of more personal reflection, but his intimate familiarity with his own rural context and with previous Gaelic verse models helps him to maintain a firm focus on visual, tactile, and realistic vignettes. In these and in more extensive single-image metaphors,

he utilises the hills and glens, flora and fauna of his native Perthshire as an illustrative and reinforcing picture-board for his spiritual reflections. Nevertheless, he avoids parochialism in his sense of place, with the result that his verse could be understood easily by readers and hearers throughout the wider Highlands and Islands.

MacLean's interaction with the physical world is thus not only more extensive than that of most other Gaelic religious poets, but it is also much more sympathetic and affirmative. While depicting transience, mortality and accountability, he avoids the predominant emphasis on earthly futility and the final judgement, which looms large in Buchanan and many of his post-1800 successors. For MacLean's contemporary, the Rev. Peter Grant (c. 1783-1867) of Strathspey, for example, the physical environment was largely a fleeting, fragile, and temporary stage on the believer's journey to the heavenly city, a 'vale of tears' strewn with thistles and snares, a constant struggle with the world, the flesh and the Devil, offering little or nothing of lasting value.[49] MacLean's enjoyment of his natural surroundings is very obvious, but he is careful to give pre-eminence to the next life and to people's spiritual needs, thus avoiding any hint of deism, pantheism or similar forms of belief which were fashionable among English poets of the Romantic era.

It is evident that MacLean's verse is carefully crafted, reflecting a conscious attempt to produce good-quality poetry, initially for a literary journal, rather than versification which acted solely as a vehicle for a sermon or an exhortation. This may be one of the reasons that his work has been lost in the later twentieth century, as the evangelical constituency of the Highlands and Islands has shown an overriding preference for less 'literary' verse, which, somewhat predictably, privileges spiritual experience and emotion over literary creativity. It is also highly likely that the loss of MacLean's distinctive voice has been hastened by the demise of Gaelic in his native Perthshire, and by a wider failure to appreciate the central importance of that region to the development of Gaelic literature.

Although MacLean's verse has almost disappeared from present-day awareness, it was highly regarded in his own time, and even in 1922 his 'religious poems' were considered to be 'second only to those of Dugald Buchanan and John Morrison, of Harris'.[50] It is to be hoped that, while avoiding any such rankings within a putative and pointless 'league table', the present study will help to restore the Rev. Duncan MacLean to wider attention as a significant Gaelic religious poet, and also as a noteworthy literary artist of nineteenth-century Scotland.

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49 Meek, 'The Glory of the Lamb', 148-49.

50 *Oban Times*, 25 March 1922.

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