

SIR JOHN RHŶS MEMORIAL LECTURE

## Scottish Gaelic Traditional Songs from the 16th to the 18th Century

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SCOTTISH GAELIC POETRY has fairly complex and diverse origins, with different traditions interacting over the centuries. It is often difficult to date the early stages of these traditions, but easier to identify their eras of major influence and subsequently of decline. Without attempting a detailed account of this literary history it will be useful to give a brief summary, and later to discuss interactions of the various strands with the body of verse that forms the central topic of this paper.

Scottish Gaelic poetry is part of the wider Gaelic tradition that encompasses poetry in the Gaelic languages of Ireland and Scotland. These languages have a common origin, but began to diverge in the sixth to ninth centuries AD. Irish sources are much fuller for the medieval and pre-medieval periods, and the Scottish Gaelic traditions are often engulfed and obscured because of this, but it is important to recognise both the common origins and the areas of divergence.

With regard to literature the common origins are most clearly discernible in the tradition of classical or bardic verse which was already established in Ireland by the twelfth century, and begins to build a Scottish profile by the thirteenth century. This verse had earlier ancestors of various kinds, but we need not explore these here. The verse was the product of a professional class of poets, and already by the twelfth

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The original Gaelic quotations are not generally given in the body of the paper. Where there are published versions of these the references are given in the Notes. Gaelic versions from MS or oral sources are given in the relevant notes.

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century (possibly much earlier) poetic dynasties were being established, and fairly rigid procedures governed the language and metrics used. Some of the rule-books used still survive. Bardic schools were set up in various parts of Ireland, and on a smaller scale in Scotland, and the poets were usually identified with particular chiefs or clans, often filling the roles of panegyrists or elegists, but also in many cases having a wider and more intimate involvement with these pinnacles of power.

The poets' literacy sometimes extended to Latin also, and their involvement sometimes spread to other areas, e.g. those of religion, law, history and medicine. Thus we find some bardic families represented in more than one literary or professional area, normally specialising in one main activity, but occasionally combining e.g. religious and poetic, or historical and poetic activities. The MacMhuirich bardic family in Scotland provides examples of this kind.

This MacMhuirich bardic dynasty can be traced back to an Irish poet who moved to Scotland about AD 1215. His Scottish descendants continued to produce classical verse until the first half of the eighteenth century, and the Irish line (Ó Dálaigh) had a similarly lengthy reign. Contacts between the bardic practitioners in Ireland and Scotland continued to be strong until the seventeenth century, with Scottish bards sometimes attending bardic schools in Ireland, and Irish bards visiting Scottish Gaelic chiefs and fellow-poets.

This long-lasting tradition established a wide range of styles and formulae, particularly in the realm of praise poetry, and it was natural that some of these influences spread to other, less formal, kinds of verse, either as clichés or as triggers for individual adaptations of the earlier images. In respect of this spread of influences, it is important to realise that the classical poetic styles were sometimes taken up by the chiefs and their families and contacts, and also that a less strict and more populist class of poets seems to have adapted these styles to use for poems on heroic themes related to the legends about Cu Chulainn and Oisean. These less strict, and less restricted, poetic activities found a wider audience, and in turn influenced the poetic activities of a wider public.

Later we will look in some detail at the ways in which such influences surface in Gaelic traditional songs of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.

The spread and dilution of the classical bardic techniques can be considered briefly at this stage. It is likely that surviving examples represent only a fraction of what once existed. There are isolated instances of

poems by clan chiefs or their spouses. We have one surviving poem, probably dating from the early 1470s, and ascribed to Aithbhreac Inghean Corcail, wife of a MacNeill of Gigha. She uses the classical metre and style for her love-elegy, and three stanzas quoted in translation may give the flavour of this poem:

Lips whose speech made pleasant sound,  
in every land beguiling all,  
hawk of Islay of smooth plains,  
lion of Mull of the white wall.

...

Poets came from Dùn an Oir,  
and from the Boyne, to him whose hair  
was all in curls, drawn by his fame;  
to each he gave a generous share.

Slim handsome hawk of Sliabh Gaoil,\*  
who satisfied the clergy's hopes,  
salmon of Sanas of quiet streams,  
dragon of Lewis of sun-drenched slopes.<sup>1</sup>

(\* in Knapdale)

Three short poems are ascribed to a woman named Iseabal Nì Mheic Cailéin, probably the wife of the first Earl of Argyll (fifteenth century also). One of these is openly sexual, and another seems to imply a longing for an illicit relationship.<sup>2</sup>

A third example is a love-song ascribed to Eachann Mòr Maclean, chief of the Macleans of Duart in Mull, who married Mary MacDonald, daughter of an Islay chief about 1520. This is in vernacular Gaelic, but seems to retain some of the imagery of the more classical love-songs. The lady is compared to the foam on clear water, the side of a swan on a swift-flowing stream, a jewel bright as snow-drift, and so on.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately the earliest versions we have of this poem are in eighteenth-century manuscripts.

Clear instances of continuing classical influence on language and metre appear in some seventeenth-century poems by the Mackenzie lairds

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from D. S. Thomson, *An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry* (Edinburgh, 1990), pp. 53–4. The Gaelic Text is in W. J. Watson, *Scottish Verse from the Book of the Dean of Lismore* (Edinburgh, 1978), p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> Watson, *ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>3</sup> D. S. Thomson, *The MacDiarmid MS Anthology* (Edinburgh, 1992), p. 120.

of Achilty in Ross-shire,<sup>4</sup> and there are numerous instances of poems from the seventeenth century in which the language conforms more to vernacular Gaelic, but the metrics and themes and images are still clearly linked to the classical poetry. This is sometimes referred to as semi-bardic verse, and is associated with poets who act as bards or close friends to chiefs e.g. Roderick Morrison, the Blind Harper who praised, and sometimes criticised, members of the MacLeod of Dunvegan family in the late seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup> Even as late as the eighteenth century, we find the leading Gaelic poet of that era, Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, familiar with some of the work of the bardic poets but forging new and independent styles.<sup>6</sup>

New styles had been appearing on a fairly wide front in seventeenth-century Gaelic verse, with the three-line stanza becoming very popular, and later in the century extended rhyming stanzas with variable line-count. Some women poets became prominent in the clan-praise context, and we can see a considerable widening of political commentary, notably in the verse of Iain Lom MacDonald. This development continued in the eighteenth century, especially in the poetry of Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair and Rob Donn Mackay. The prominent poets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are sometimes highly literate, but a good number of them seem to have operated almost entirely in the oral context. This was the case with two very prominent eighteenth-century poets, Duncan Bàn Macintyre and Rob Donn. Both had quite large outputs, and in both instances it was friendly clergymen who committed their poetry to paper. Such instances give some support to the later view that Gaelic literature was predominantly oral, and this view is often peddled by contemporary writers who do not know their literary history. There are, however, many impressive instances of highly developed oral skills, whether we think of Rob Donn adapting in great detail his fellow poet's poem of Summer (by Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair) to produce his own poem on Winter, or whether we select from the large number of examples of poetry and fiction culled from oral recitation from the seventeenth to the twentieth century.

We can now begin to concentrate on the central topic of this paper, the Gaelic traditional songs dating from the sixteenth to the eighteenth

<sup>4</sup> W. J. Watson, *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig* (Stirling, 1959), pp. 217 ff.

<sup>5</sup> W. Matheson, *The Blind Harper* (Edinburgh, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> D. S. Thomson, *Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, Selected Poems* (Edinburgh, 1996).

century, but once again we will find a tangled web of cross-influences, between the poetic traditions that have been briefly discussed, and others that have more obscure origins. And again we will find involved authors from a range of social levels, 'class' levels to some degree, and a mix of literacy and non-literacy.

The origins and development of the kinds of verse we find in these traditional songs are extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to trace in accurate detail. The prestige of the classical bardic work, and the social standing of its practitioners, with their literate background, allowed rather limited recognition of other traditions, and so, early Gaelic manuscripts carry very little evidence of non-classical verse. It is largely from relatively late collections from oral sources that we can trace the earlier examples of traditional verse, and since these collections are mainly late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ones it is hard to date individual items earlier than the sixteenth century. But there is a sufficient body of such datable sixteenth-century items to show that a range of styles and types of song was securely established by then, and this suggests much older origins. The late James Carney, a scholar not afraid of controversy, had argued in a paper published in 1971<sup>7</sup> that some early Irish poems were originally accentual in their metre, belonging to the *ochtfhoclach* form, but later edited into agreement with syllabic metrical patterns, and he links such early accentual metres with 'popular songs of comparatively recent times'. I have earlier argued<sup>8</sup> that the strophic stanza metre which was popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Scotland is closely related to the ancient *ochtfhoclach* metre, usually representing a half-stanza in that metre, and I drew attention to a verse attributed to the Earl of Mar, said to have been composed by him shortly after the Battle of Inverlochy (1431), which may be the earliest surviving example of such strophic verse in vernacular Scottish Gaelic. This instance did not achieve the status of print until the early 1840s, but the evidence for a dogged oral memory in Gaelic tradition is so strong that we need not worry overmuch about the intervening four centuries.

This type of metre was to become the dominant one in seventeenth-century Gaelic verse. It was used by a wide range of poets, some of them, such as Mary MacLeod (Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh) and John

<sup>7</sup> J. Carney, 'Three Old Irish Accentual Poems', *Ériu*, 22 (Dublin, 1971), pp. 23–80.

<sup>8</sup> D. S. Thomson, 'The Poetic Tradition in Gaelic Scotland', *Proceedings of the 7th International Congress of Celtic Studies* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 125–6.

MacDonald (Iain Lom) closely connected with clan chiefs and performing a quasi-professional role in that context, and many others who did not have any such public profile. It is to be expected that this range of poets would be affected not only by the metres of this different verse but by its content and style also.

It is important to realise that this verse was produced by a wide variety of authors, some of them literate, others dependent entirely on oral tradition, some with close connections with the clan hierarchy, some in the professional class (as ministers etc.), and many who seem to have been 'ordinary citizens' of their time, living by hunting and fishing, herding cattle, and housekeeping. The borders between literacy and non-literacy are hard to define in this body of song, and we may be justified in concluding that the oral tradition was already so rich and widespread that it permeated many levels of society.

A similar crossing of social borders is apparent in the song-tradition of Lowland Scotland. Thomas Crawford, in his book *Society and the Lyric*,<sup>9</sup> emphasises this point, claiming that 'Not merely knowledge of popular songs, but even active composition of songs in the popular style, was part of the very texture of daily life in upper-class households' (p. 50), while from the eighteenth century, *at least*, there was a sufficient spread of literacy to allow the chapbooks and broadsheets to extend this influence. Crawford also argues that Scottish and English popular songs were closely connected at every level. This argument does not extend significantly to Gaelic song, but there are instances of apparent contact between Gaelic and Lowland Scottish song, and the crossing of class barriers within Gaelic song tradition is well demonstrated.

A striking feature of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Gaelic songs is the prominence of female authorship. We saw a couple of instances of female authorship in the classical verse tradition, and the seventeenth century has a crop of notable women poets. In songs collected from traditional sources the authors are sometimes named, as where the McLagan manuscripts of the second half of the eighteenth century ascribe songs to 'Nian Fir an Bharra bhric' (daughter of the Laird of Barr Breac), or 'Do Mhac Mhic Ailein le a mhnaoi fèin' (to MacDonald of Clanranald by his own wife). Other songs have less specific ascriptions, such as 'By a girl to her sweetheart'. 'An Iorram Dharaich' (The Rowing-song of the oak galley) is a pre-1585 song, per-

<sup>9</sup> T. Crawford, *Society and the Lyric* (Edinburgh, 1979).

haps composed by a relative or foster-nurse of the person celebrated, Iain Og MacDonald of Castle Camus, whose mother, according to the evidence of the song, was of the family of the MacLeod chiefs in Lewis. The figure of the nurse/foster-nurse/foster-mother occurs frequently in these songs, one of the most notable instances being the song to Mac Iain 'ic Sheumais, a MacDonald warrior who was badly wounded at the Battle of Càirinis in North Uist in 1601. The author of this song is referred to as Nic Còiseam, and the song has a remarkable combination of passion, tenderness, and exultation.

It will help to define this range of songs if we select a series of short quotations or references from the ones just mentioned, before going on to look at other examples of female authorship. The song by the daughter of the Barr Breac laird seems to be addressed to a young loved one who was a clergyman or preparing for that calling.<sup>10</sup> She recalls his sweet kisses and learned talk (in Gaelic, English, Greek, and Latin), and dreams he is about to marry someone else. Then she recalls, or dreams up, river-side meetings of a very intimate nature, but ends by wishing him well in his coming marriage to the sweet-eyed modest one. It seems a perfect story for the tabloids, but it came too early for them.

The song 'By a girl to her sweetheart' has a Rannoch (Perthshire) location, and the girl looks forward to presents her sweetheart will bring: a coat of London nap, a belt from Edinburgh, a kerchief from Dunkeld.<sup>11</sup> These presents are apparently to be bought with the proceeds of cattle spoils from the Mearns and sheep from Caithness, brought to Rannoch.

The pre-1585 'rowing-song' celebrates the MacDonald hero's hunting skills and his sailing skills: 'the creak of the oars was music for you'. He and his men would drink red wine in waves and carry off spoils (of cattle etc.) from the moors. The song is peppered with references to particular features of the chief's galley.<sup>12</sup>

The 1601 song for the MacDonald who was badly wounded at the Battle of Càirinis describes his wounds:

The blood of your noble body  
was on the surface of the ground.

The blood of your fragrant body  
was seeping through the linen.

<sup>10</sup> McLagan MS No. 58 (in University of Glasgow Library).

<sup>11</sup> McLagan MS No. 92.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, Vol. 5, ed. Angus Matheson (Edinburgh, 1954), pp. 16 ff.

I myself was sucking it  
until my breath became choked.

The landscape and the elements reacted to his wounding:

The skies rained heavily  
and the clouds shed tears.

The ferns turned brown  
and the rushes lost their foliage.<sup>13</sup>

The author goes on to list MacDonald's noble connections, with the King of Lewis (i.e. the MacLeod chief), the chief of the Harris MacLeods and MacDonald of Clanranald.

Many of the poems are anonymous, but the content strongly implies female authorship, for example in giving detailed descriptions of the loved one, whether sweetheart, lost sweetheart, or dead partner. Some have a much lighter tone, as in the case of the Skye song where the girl is a little bewildered by the flow of suitors, but suspects that her father is encouraging them, as they bring some welcome liquor to help in the negotiations. It was customary to gain the father's consent, though in this case the girl hopes that her favourite Skipper will come in time to save her from these unwelcome attentions.<sup>14</sup>

There is a smaller class of dialogue poems, usually naming 'He' and 'She'. Probably most of these have single authorship, sometimes literate rather than oral, and they can draw on the rhetoric of different models. In one such poem the male wonders if the girl has royal blood in her, while the female sees in the young man's complexion the glow of withering nettle or of bracken turning russet after the coming of early snow.<sup>15</sup> Dialogue poems of this kind seem to have been popular especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

A rather different instance of verse dialogue occurs in a poem composed about AD 1600, recording the savage murdering of several MacVicar brothers in North Uist by Hugh MacDonald of Sleat (Skye). A sister of the murdered brothers was apparently the author, and the poem has a rather bitter exchange between her and her mother. The daughter suggests that her mother's grief does not match her own, and the mother responds:

<sup>13</sup> Gaelic text in *An t-Oranaiche*, ed. Archibald Sinclair (Glasgow, 1876–9), pp. 131–3.

<sup>14</sup> D. S. Thomson, *The MacDiarmid MS Anthology* (Edinburgh, 1992), p. 54.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 204–6.

If they are your brothers, they are my sons,  
 it was from the bottom of my womb they dropped,  
 it was on my knee they got comfort,  
 it was my linen smock they wetted,  
 it was the milk of my breast they swallowed.<sup>16</sup>

Although we have a large number of love-songs in traditional Gaelic verse, the level of sexual innuendo is quite low. There are, of course, many sexual references, but generally these are emotional rather than provocative in any way. In the earlier ‘classical bardic’ tradition there are a few instances of sexually explicit verse, and the eighteenth-century poet Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair exploited this theme prodigiously. It is prominent also in Lowland Scots verse, and was taken up with some enthusiasm by Robert Burns. David Craig, in *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People 1680–1830*<sup>17</sup> thinks that Lowland Scottish verse was too largely confined to local entertainment, pub-life, humour and satire connected with local events, and some of these restrictions can apply to Gaelic vernacular verse also, but apparently not on the same scale. In Welsh there is quite a strong strain of erotic verse, dating mainly from the fourteenth to the early seventeenth century, and showing both the influence of the trained poets and of foreign, especially French, imports. This tradition is discussed by Dafydd Johnston in his *Medieval Welsh Erotic Poetry*.<sup>18</sup>

The wide range of verse traditions discussed, and the similarly wide range of practitioners, whether professional or amateur, male or female, literate or non-literate, all had an input into the Gaelic verse associated with the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. We can now look in closer detail at this verse, drawing attention to the various influences that surface in it, analysing its forms, and attempting to define its overall poetic quality. Although many influences and characteristics are shared by the anonymous poets and those who have left their names on a larger body of work, we shall be concerned mainly with the poems and songs collected from traditional sources, and largely in the eighteenth century. Some of these have named authors, often with only one or two songs ascribed to them, but they fit easily into the general traditional category.

There is a long tradition of praise poetry, spanning the classical and

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, Vol. 5, pp. 10–14.

<sup>17</sup> D. Craig, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People 1680–1830* (1961), e.g. ch. 1.

<sup>18</sup> D. Johnston, *Medieval Welsh Erotic Poetry* (Cardiff, 1991), pp. 19–25.

the vernacular modes. The professional poets produced many poems celebrating the careers, marriages, and deaths of their patrons, and building up a fund of images and tropes and more detailed scenarios which ring the appropriate bells for their readers or listeners. These are often copied or modified, some of them becoming clichés, and some of them passed from the classical to the more vernacular tradition. A famous Irish expert on classical poetry, Osborn Bergin, once stated bluntly ‘All court poetry is more or less tainted by the voice of insincerity and formalism’.<sup>19</sup> We can accept the general drift of this censure, but be prepared to make quite a lot of exceptions to it.

Muireadhach Albanach Ó Dálaigh, the ancestor of the line of MacMhuirich professional poets in Scotland, addressed a flattering poem to an Irish patron in the 1220s or so.<sup>20</sup> He asks for patronage from the chief of the ‘bright and modest countenance’, and goes on to call him a succession of legendary names: ‘O Cu Chulainn for feats! Osgar for contention! Ó Duibhne of the hardy stealth, for beauty, for wooing, for liberality’, and he ends with this stanza, translated:

Let me go to my own land, O smooth-skinned Donnchadh  
Cairbreach, to Scotland of the woods and the grass, of  
the feasts, the hills and the isles. I will visit Ireland  
again; not from thee do I depart. . . .

Fortunately we have an emotional and personal poem of Muireadhach’s, an elegy for his wife of twenty years, with direct and moving passages e.g.

She was one of my two feet, one of my sides—her  
countenance like the white-thorn; none belonged to her more than  
to me, she was one of my eyes, one of my hands.  
She was the half of my body, the fresh torch; harshly  
have I been treated, O King; I am faint as I tell  
it—she was the very half of my soul.<sup>21</sup>

Muireadhach’s descendants, and poets of other bardic families, continued the tradition of praise, using elaborate analogues which are intended to set their patrons in the ancient web of history and legend, and often these passages can be tedious and insincere. The seventeenth-century semi-bardic and clan poets continue to use related techniques, sometimes bringing their own originality into play, as in the case of the

<sup>19</sup> *Journal of the Ivernian Society*, Vol. 5 (Dublin, 1912–13), pp. 153–66 and 203–19.

<sup>20</sup> Osborn Bergin, *Irish Bardic Poetry* (Dublin, 1970), pp. 108 ff.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

Maclean poet Eachann Bacach, in his elegy for Sir Lachlan Maclean of Duart, who died in 1648:

Your stock went back to King Pharaoh,  
 who was able to fable it,  
 MacMhuirich or Ferguson?  
 A tree that lasted an age,  
 that put roots down in Scotland,  
 a branch helped at Harlaw,  
 your co-name, our treasure, still lives.<sup>22</sup>

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries we find the praise-poets exploring new techniques. These are probably affected by the different range of verse techniques and constructional patterns which come into prominence at this time. We can take as one example a group of poems and songs associated with the Clan MacGregor.

In the second half of the sixteenth century, and well into the seventeenth, the Clan MacGregor were steadily losing lands and power to the aggressive Clan Campbell, who were taking over extensive territories in Perthshire. The MacGregors had been very prominent in central Perthshire, around Loch Tay and in Glen Lyon in particular. Two MacGregor brothers were responsible for the compilation of the Dean of Lismore's manuscript collection of Gaelic verse in the first half of the sixteenth century, and this collection includes several poems by a professional bard to the Chief of the MacGregors at that time.<sup>23</sup> The persecution of the MacGregors was to escalate over the seventeenth century, with many of them abandoning their surname, but others continued to fight back, and retain their place in history, as Rob Roy was to do in the eighteenth century.

In 1570 Gregor MacGregor of Glenstrae was beheaded at Taymouth, at the east end of Loch Tay, on the orders of Sir Colin Campbell of Glenorchy, and his widow, a Glenlyon Campbell who had defied her family by marrying a MacGregor, composed a lament for him. This song, 'Griogal Cridhe' (Beloved Gregor) is still sung in Scotland. Three stanzas are quoted here in translation:

A curse on gentles and on friends  
 who have grieved me so,

<sup>22</sup> C. Ó Baoill, *Eachann Bacach and other Maclean Poets* (Edinburgh, 1979), p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> W. J. Watson, *Scottish Verse*, pp. 126 ff.

who caught my darling unawares  
and captured him by guile.

...

They placed his head on a block of oak,  
and spilt his blood on the ground;  
had I but had a cup then  
I'd have drunk of it my fill.

...

I have no apples left now  
though all the others have;  
my apple, fragrant and shapely,  
lies low on the ground.<sup>24</sup>

The reference to drinking the blood of the dead loved one occurs in quite a wide range of Scottish Gaelic songs, and also in a famous Irish song dating from the early 1770s.<sup>25</sup> The 1570 song is in quatrains, with the metrics retaining some of the formality of classical verse, but its emotional power may owe more to the vernacular tradition.

Other MacGregor songs from the period *c.*1570 to *c.*1620 use a less formal, more impressionistic style, and use rhyming couplets. They give us vivid impressions of the traumatic events, set against the older cultured background. One of these was apparently composed by a badly wounded MacGregor, who waits to hear news of his clansmen. He has already heard of some of them:

Great red-haired MacGregor was there, whose hand was hard behind  
his sword,  
and great mirthful Gregor, the chief of our household.  
O son of the laird of Strathardle, the bards used to visit you;  
you would play the harp, and play backgammon willingly,  
and you would make the fiddle sing, inciting women to dance.

...

This arrow from the battle-field has lodged in my hide:  
an arrow penetrated my thigh, a crooked ill-fashioned shaft.

...

<sup>24</sup> Gaelic text in W. J. Watson, *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig*, pp. 244 ff.

<sup>25</sup> For a more extended discussion see D. S. Thomson, 'The Blood-drinking Motif in Scottish Gaelic Tradition', in *Indogermanica et Caucasica* (Berlin and New York, 1994), pp. 415–24.

The company above the village on Sunday was not a talkative one,  
and I shall not laugh merrily, when I rise or when I go to rest.  
Little wonder: I am left alive when the folk of my house are dead.<sup>26</sup>

The song ends on that dramatic note, one that has become all too familiar to us in late twentieth-century Europe and other parts of the world.

Another MacGregor poem, dating probably from the early years of the seventeenth century, refers to the many deaths of clansmen, and gives advice to act with great caution:

I give you advice,  
if you will take it from me:

When you go to the bar  
drink only one drink.

Take your dram standing  
and watch your company.

Don't be fussy about the vessel,  
take a ladle or a baler.

Take winter to autumn,  
and January to summer.

Make your bed among the rocks  
and sleep lightly.

Though the squirrel is scarce  
there are ways of finding it.

Though the hawk is noble  
it is often taken by treachery.<sup>27</sup>

The spareness and sharp focus of these lines again have a dramatic effect.

We have seen the love-theme surfacing in several of the poems referred to. Naturally this is a dominant theme in verse, and takes many forms, appearing in laments and elegies, as we saw, but frequently in courting-songs and songs of desertion. The range is quite wide, including jocular as well as deeply serious songs, formal and spontaneous pieces. There is probably a predominance of female authorship, but male authors have a memorable input also.

The theme of loss is a common one, and the nature of the loss is often

<sup>26</sup> Gaelic text in Watson, *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig*, p. 242.

<sup>27</sup> Gaelic text in *ibid.*, p. 238.

described vividly, as in the eighteenth-century song by a Perthshire girl. Two stanzas are quoted here:

I gave you my love, not just any love,  
love that burnt into me like fire,  
O my God, woe to her who would give  
deep, deep love to another woman's son.

But were you and I to meet on a moor,  
with no pillow but the holly tree,  
since it is wont to be sharp and wounding,  
I would put my arm, love, under your head.<sup>28</sup>

Another anonymous song, undated and not located geographically, is explicit in a delicate way:

You found me close to the cattle-fold,  
let me home, my dear, as you found me there.

You found me close to the wall,  
let me home, my dear, as I came.

My love is the one who comes prowling,  
though he did not let me home as he found me.

This version of the song is the one I heard my mother sing over sixty years ago. It had come to her through oral tradition. In the sung version the first line of each stanza is sung three times, with slight melodic variations, making a song of three quatrains. A number of our lyrical love-songs are short and fairly tightly controlled, and this can increase their emotional impact.<sup>29</sup>

In some songs there is a much more extended treatment, with a mix of the memorable and the mundane. I can offer a small selection of

<sup>28</sup> Gaelic text in D. S. Thomson, *The MacDiarmid MS Anthology*, p. 25.

<sup>29</sup> The Gaelic text goes:

Ma fhuair thu an lùib na buaile mi (3)  
leig dhachaigh mi, ghaoil, mar a fhuair thu mi.

Ma fhuair thu an lùib a' ghàrraidh mi (3)  
leig dhachaigh mi, ghaoil, mar a thàinig mi.

Mo ghaol am fear a tha cuairteachadh,  
mo ghràdh am fear a tha cuairteachadh,  
mo ghaol am fear a tha cuairteachadh  
ged nach d' leig e mi dhachaigh mar fhuair e mi.

(The lecturer startled the audience by singing the Gaelic version.)

quotations from one such song, attributed to a laird's daughter.<sup>30</sup> The song begins:

Thig trì nithean gun iarraidh,  
An t-eagal, an t-iadach 's an gaol  
(Three things come unasked,  
fear, jealousy and love.)

Stanza 4 goes:

Were I to see you approaching  
and recognise you,  
my heart would rise  
like a beam of sunlight over the mountains,  
And I would promise  
that every wisp of grey hair in my head  
would turn yellow  
like flowers on the bank of the stream.

Stanza 8 begins by referring to the girl who has supplanted her, evidently because she owns more cattle:

My humiliation would be less  
had she been a more deserving person,  
not the dark dung-girl  
who grasps the cow-fetter in her hand . . .

This song has remained quite a favourite one over the last two centuries, but it can be selectively rendered, and the sung versions of these songs seem to have a strong pull not entirely dependent on the words.

Some of the songs with a love theme are more formal and conventional, using clichés of dreams, tears, love-sickness. One such probably dates from the mid-1740s, and is by a soldier, perhaps an officer of the Black Watch which was involved in the Battle of Fontenoy in 1745. The final two stanzas refer to his time in Flanders, when lovely women wearing diamond rings would visit him, soliciting kisses.<sup>31</sup>

Traditional songs and poems with a satirical and/or humorous theme first appear in a late seventeenth-century manuscript (the Fernaig MS), and then in eighteenth-century collections, though no doubt they have much older origins. A mid-eighteenth-century instance depicts the Bailie and the Minister both as tyrants.<sup>32</sup> Fun and satire continue to be the staple

<sup>30</sup> J. Mackenzie, *Sàr-Obair nam Bàrd Gaelach* (Edinburgh, 1877), p. 379.

<sup>31</sup> Thomson, *The MacDiarmid MS Anthology*, pp. 131 ff.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 126 ff.

of much so-called 'village verse', which continued to be prominent and popular right through the twentieth century. This takes various forms, including 'clapping songs', part of the cloth-waulking process, in which the girls express their preference, or distaste, for a variety of suitors, who can be named, or their horror at the thought of marrying an old man who always wears a cap, can't tell a hen from a goose, or thinks snow is sugar.<sup>33</sup>

In this area there are some parallels with Lowland Scottish song tradition as in a song where the girl rejects suitors of various trades e.g. 'I winna ha'e the minister . . . I winna ha'e the mautman . . . I winna ha'e the ploughman'.<sup>34</sup> There are a good many songs about 'Penny Weddings', and 'The Kirriemuir Wedding' probably dates from the eighteenth century, but continues to flourish. The tradition of work-songs, again with a strong social and satirical input, was to some extent shared by Lowland and Highland traditions, but Gaelic has retained a much wider range and greater volume of these songs.

Scotland has a variegated and in some areas a very striking landscape, with its mix of rugged mountains and moors, fertile plains, lochs and seas, and beaches. And it has its own wild life (animal and human), seals, porpoises, eagles, buzzards, deer, and foxes. The Highlands have the more spectacular ingredients in this mixture. It is natural that this should have a strong impact on poets and song-makers over the centuries. The growth of large towns and cities was a late development, so that there was a strongly rural dominance in the population until well into the nineteenth century. The population of Glasgow is estimated as only about 12,000 at the time of the Union in 1707, approximately doubling by mid-century. Its spectacular expansion was to come later.

Nature description and imagery impinges on verse through the centuries, in a variety of ways: description of places and seasons, praise of individuals as hunters, nature references in love-songs. There are some early instances of Nature description in the Classical verse. An elegy for John, chief of the MacDougalls of Lorne, dating from the second half of the fifteenth century, pictures Nature reacting to his death in a variety of ways: 'since he died, no nut has parted from the trees,' and 'A savage wind breaks the woods . . . flocks of birds from the air cannot settle on the high shore.' The powerful currents at Connel, at the mouth of Loch Etive in

<sup>33</sup> *Hebridean Folksongs*, ed. J. L. Campbell (Oxford, 1981), Vol. 3, p. 198.

<sup>34</sup> T. Crawford, *Society and the Lyric* (Edinburgh, 1979), p. 125.

Argyll, are apparently influenced by his death: 'A flood-tide sweeps over the hills after John's death: it is one of its portents; there is no foam on the sea, on the surface of the bays around Connel.'<sup>35</sup>

Interest in Nature description shows in the vernacular poetry in a variety of ways, one aspect of it culminating in a long succession of poems on the seasons in the eighteenth century. The main innovator here was Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, who has two surviving poems of this category, on Summer and Winter. This poet was well aware of the native Gaelic tradition, and builds on it, but was also influenced by the poems of the Lowland poet James Thomson on *The Seasons* which were appearing, with expansions, in the 1720s and 1730s. Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair produced highly detailed and strongly structured poems on this theme,<sup>36</sup> and was followed by a succession of eighteenth-century Gaelic poets including Duncan Bàn Macintyre and William Ross. This cult, old and new, may have impinged on James Macpherson when he was constructing his so-called translations, *Fingal* and *Temora*, around 1760, but Macpherson exaggerates and dramatises the tradition to excess, although this did not apparently undermine his reputation, especially in Europe.

To glance at a later development of the tradition of natural description, when large concentrations of Highland emigrants established themselves in Lowland cities, in the nineteenth century especially, this produced a large number of poems and songs in praise of the places they had left, so that there are quite extensive collections of songs in praise of Islay, Mull, Skye, Lewis, etc., some over-nostalgic but others bringing into sharp focus the characteristics of these places and their communal life.

Returning again to the body of vernacular verse from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, we can look at some of the ways in which Nature description is developed there. A sixteenth-century poem from Lochaber, 'Oran na Comhachaig' (The owl's song) has a lot of natural description, with the sounds of eagles, cuckoos, swans, and descriptions of stag, hind, and calf: 'the sharp-featured hind with elegant legs', who is 'the mother of the lively, delicately-speckled calf, and wife of the clean calm-eyed husband'. The description of the animals continues for several quatrains, and

<sup>35</sup> W. J. Watson, *Scottish Verse*, pp. 168, 172.

<sup>36</sup> D. S. Thomson, 'Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's Nature Poetry and its Sources', in *Gaelic and Scots in Harmony*, ed. D. S. Thomson (Glasgow, 1990), pp. 95-115.

is followed by description of various aspects of hunting, as well as features of the landscape, including Ben Nevis.<sup>37</sup>

The theme of the hunter is a fairly dominant one, sometimes used in praise-poems of prominent people, and frequently in love-poems by women, where the hunter's handsomeness and strength are described, often with detailed references to where and what he is hunting. The range of reference is naturally more intriguing than a modern description of a visit to Tesco or Safeway would allow. In a poem from the McLagan collection, probably dating from the seventeenth century, and with an Inner Hebrides location, the list of game hunted includes the swan, the barnacle goose, the blubber-lipped seal, the roe-buck, the eagle, the grouse, and the hind.<sup>38</sup>

A wide range of Nature reference is characteristic of the love-poetry generally, whether the authors are male or female. Love-encounters are frequently located in isolated country places, moors, woods, shielings, so it is natural to include some description of these locations. Descriptions of female beauty are regularly associated with Nature references. Lips are red as raspberries, the colour and texture of skin is compared to foam on the sea or the side of the swan or snow on the hill or cotton grass or the ptarmigan's feathers which turn pure white in winter. Cheeks are red as the rose, or the apple high on the tree. Kisses are as sweet as honey or figs or cinnamon. Rural love-making is associated with the sounds and movements of birds and animals:

The cuckoo and wood-pigeon  
make music for us in the trees,  
the deer at their rutting  
awaken us with their bellowing.<sup>39</sup>

Occasionally Nature description is used in less complimentary ways, as where a girl's cunning is compared to the fox's:

Lord, the fox is cunning  
when it visits the glen,

<sup>37</sup> Gaelic text in J. Mackenzie, *Sàr-Obair nam Bàrd Gaelach*, pp. 17–20. For discussion, see R. A. Rankin, 'Oran na Comhachaig', in *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Glasgow*, 5 (Glasgow, 1958), 122–71, and 'Place-Names in the *Comhachag* and Other Similar Poems', in *Scottish Gaelic Studies* (Aberdeen, 1998), pp. 111–30.

<sup>38</sup> Song entitled 'Siud, a Rìgh, gur trom m' èire', in McLagan MS 67.

<sup>39</sup> This song appears in McLagan MSS 94 and 140. The Gaelic text of the lines quoted here goes:

Bhiodh a' chuthag 's an smùdan  
A' gabhail ciùil duinn air chrannaibh,  
Bhiodh am fiadh anns a' bhùireadh  
Gar dùsgadh le langan.

it gives its pup a knock  
and draws blood from the young roe,  
its tooth is so sharp . . .  
that it could split the holly bush  
at the edge of the burn.<sup>40</sup>

In another song a girl compares herself to the thrush which has been driven from its nest by the woodpecker:

I am the thrush from the cold family-nest (?)  
and that man over there is the woodpecker.<sup>41</sup>

Another girl who has been rejected by her former lover, who is a skilled hunter, wishes she were in his company under a variety of guises:

Alas that I am not the gun on which you would put the lock,  
alas, O God, that I am not the rough ground on which you would kill  
the deer.

. . .

Alas, O God, that I am not the plaid which you brought back from the  
fair.  
When you returned from the rain I would be folded under your arm.<sup>42</sup>

This instance helps to show the flexibility that authors could bring into play in adapting standard formulae.

We can look at a more extended quotation from a poem which draws on a wide range of images, from Nature predominantly. This is an eighteenth-century song, in eight-line stanzas, in which the author recounts his loss of a sweetheart he had hoped to marry. I recorded this song from a Skyeman,

<sup>40</sup> This song appears in McLagan MSS 77 and 135(b). The Gaelic text of the lines quoted here goes:

Rìgh, gur carach an sionnach  
Theid air thuras d' an ghleann,  
Bheir e baite d'a chuilean  
Agus fuil às a' mheann,  
Gum bheil fhiacail co guineach  
Is i fuireach 'na cheann  
'S gun sgoilteadh i 'n cuileann  
Bhiodh air uileann nan allt.

<sup>41</sup> In McLagan MS 129(a). The Gaelic text goes:

'S mise 'n truid on ghinidh fhuair,  
'S gur h-e 'n duin' ud shuas an t-snag.

<sup>42</sup> *Hebridean Folksongs*, 3, pp. 120–1.

Duncan Beaton, in 1950. It begins with a reference to the ‘swan of the seas’ which has eluded him:

Resting in bed on my elbow  
 I get neither sleep nor rest,  
 I see the swan of the seas  
 always being taken from me;  
 though I had encircled her with my net  
 and was edging her towards the shore,  
 my hook is unbaited.  
 Ah! my song is vain.<sup>43</sup>

In the next three stanzas there are references to the deceit of Judas, and the girl’s broken promise of marrying the author. He then goes on to compare her to the grouse in the grove, and the flower in the garden, and to describe himself as a tree stripped of its fruit, a hard-drinking drunkard, a soldier without a sword, a blacksmith without a hammer, a hunter without a gun, and a hound that has lost its power of scent.

In the final two stanzas he brings together a striking range of Nature images to illustrate his loss and disillusion and dejection:

Slippery the grip on the salmon’s tail,  
 or on the hind-leg of the deer,  
 or on the fins of the porpoise—  
 my grip was the most slippery of all.  
 To grasp the side of a ship  
 were just as easy a thing to do  
 as to grasp the hand of the black-hearted girl  
 who deceived me for seven years.

Pity him who set his heart  
 on the deer-skin with its hair;  
 though you might catch the deer by the antler  
 do not set your heart on its hide;  
 nor lay up expectation  
 for the seal at the water’s edge,

<sup>43</sup> The Gaelic text goes:

’S mi air m’ uilinn sa’ leabaidh,  
 O cha chadal cha tàmh,  
 Chì mi eala nan cuantan  
 Ga toirt bhuam air gach làmh.  
 ’N dèidh mo lion a chur m’an cuairt dì  
 ’S mi ga gluasad chum tràigh,  
 ’S ann tha mo dhubhan gun bhiathadh,  
 O gur diomhain mo dhàn.

nor for the cunning little fox  
though your hound were near it.<sup>44</sup>

The author of this song is not known, and its location is hard to define, though the references in it suggest a mainland location not too far from the coast. There is no sense of strain in the use made of images: they seem to belong naturally to the author's mode of thought. This may be the product both of his way of life and of his traditional inheritance of song, and probably this was the case with many of the authors of songs in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.

It would of course also be possible to make a detailed selection of poems and songs from our period which are somewhat trite and repetitive, over-working traditional formulae, and lacking in overall structure. The tradition of song-making was clearly so strong that it attracted people of various talents, and no doubt local loyalties and connections enabled some of these songs to survive. There is also some danger of distortion from purely oral preservation of early songs. This can often be seen where we have versions of songs collected at different times and in widely separated locations, some apparently retaining their original shape and focus, and others suffering from memory lapses and adaptation to a different age or environment. This body of verse can have other restrictions also, being sometimes over-focused on legendary, historical, localised, and landscape-dominated images, though the emotional force of many of the songs breaks through the more formal barriers of tradition, and this force is often greatly enhanced by the airs.

<sup>44</sup> The Gaelic text goes:

Grèim air earradh a' bhradain  
No air choise-deiridh a fiadh,  
No air sgiathan na muic-mara  
Leam bu shleamhainne dhiabh.  
Grèim air chliathach na luinge  
Is ceart is ionnan an gnìomh  
'S air làmh na dubh-chaile  
Rinn mo mhealladh seachd bliadhn'.

'S maing a chuireadh a dhòigh  
Anns a' chalg th' air an fhiadh.  
Ged gheibh thu grèim air bhàrr cròic air  
Na cuir do dhòchas 'na bhian,  
No às a ròn an cois tuinneadh  
Na cuir idir do dhùil,  
No às an t-sionnach bheag charach  
Ged robh e fagus 'gad chù.

The incidence of songs and poems which rise well above an unambitious 'norm' is quite high, and is probably to be associated with the diversity of literary origins we have been exploring, and with the high profile that verse in Gaelic has maintained over many centuries. The poems and songs that make the strongest impact arise out of deep emotions, and are tightly structured, sometimes in respect of metrics, sometimes in respect of imagery. The control of vivid visual imagery, interlocked with the emotional drive behind the poem, and conjoined with a spare, non-indulgent structural plan, produces the most striking examples of the sixteenth- to eighteenth-century verse. In these we are probably justified in seeing the powerful combination of traditional highlights with individual poetic genius. A good number of outstanding songs have survived the hazards referred to earlier, giving us a landscape of sixteenth- to eighteenth-century song and poetry that has preserved its peaks as well as its ridges and valleys and moors.