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Place names in Scottish Gaelic literature: The case of Sorley MacLean's poetry

1. Introduction

The use of place names (and generally topographical names and geographical names) in literature is a well-known phenomenon. Such practice is deeply rooted in the appropriate national or regional tradition, it expresses the writer's local loyalty, and performs aesthetic and invocative functions. These functions are strictly connected with attachment to place, one of the strongest human emotions [cf. Hannan 1991: 19]. Place names are sometimes invoked in a rather general way, on other occasions they are cited for narrative purposes, in still other instances they become the major concern of the writer, and may lead to the mythologizing of places.

The act of naming makes places distinctive, due to it they become analyzable and identifiable elements of the landscape. Kearns and Berg [2002: 285] even claim that "rather than being entities *in* the landscape, names are a constitutive component of landscape itself." Place names single out portions of the landscape and provide an explicit link between nature and culture. Liam Mac Mathúna [1989–1990: 155] maintains that the crucial cultural role of place-names arises from their function as elements which bind society to its physical environment and help mankind to get to know its physical landscape. He distinguishes two dimensions in which place-names are involved: in the synchronic dimension place-names identify and refer places, in the diachronic one, place-names "link us to our forebears" [ibidem: 157].

According to Donald MacAulay, a prominent contemporary Scottish Gaelic poet, critic and linguist: "In the Gaelic tradition there are many poems and songs about places. These appear also in modern verse, though not in such a high proportion and certainly to a different purpose […]. There is local loyalty often expressed in poems about the poet's native place" [McCaughey 1987: 49], further on MacAulay [1976: 58] observes that naming brings things and people close to home. This short contribution investigates the use and function of broadly understood place names in Sorley MacLean's poetry.

2. Place names in Sorley MacLean's poetry

Sorley MacLean (Somhairle MacGill-Eain) was the most important and influential twentieth-century poet of Gaelic Scotland. He was born in 1911 in Oscaig on the island of Raasay (of the east coast of Skye). Between 1929 and 1933 he read English at Edinburgh University, next he taught in Skye, Mull and Edinburgh. During World War II he served with the Signals Corps in North Africa where he was seriously wounded at the battle of Alamein in 1943. In the years 1943–1956 he was a schoolmaster in Edinburgh, and from 1956 until his retirement in 1972 he was headmaster of Plockton Secondary School in Wester Ross. In the years 1973–1975 he was Writer in Residence at Edinburgh University and next at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the Gaelic college in Skye. Sorley MacLean died in November 1996 in Inverness and was buried on his home island of Raasay.[1]

MacLean's selected poems were published in 1977 as *Reothairt is Contraigh, Taghadh de Dhàin 1932–1972 / Spring Tide and Neap Tide, Selected Poems 1932–1972* (Edinburgh 1977) and collected poems in 1991 as *O Choille gu Bearradh / From Wood to Ridge* (Edinburgh 1991), two further bilingual volumes were edited by Christopher Whyte: *Dàin do Eimhir / Poems to Eimhir* (Glasgow 2002) and *An Cuilithionn 1939 / The Cuillin 1939 & Unpublished Poems* (Glasgow 2011). MacLean's essays, prose writing and criticism were edited by William Gillies, *Ris a'Bhruthaich. The Criticism and Prose Writings of Sorley MacLean* (Stornoway 1985).[2]

In Sorley MacLean's poetry places names link nature and culture; his preoccupation with places may be also viewed as a broader awareness of the geographical setting, a point extensively discussed by the poet in connection with the consciousness of the presence of the sea in the seventeenth-century Gaelic poetry [MacLean 1985]. For the poet, nature has little significance of its own, however, it converges on the individual experiences, as it is people for whom it functions at various levels. This relation between man and nature is very clearly presented in the second stanza of his early poem *Fuaran* 'A Spring' [MacLean 1991: 42–43]:

[1] For a comprehensive critical account of MacLean's achievement, see Mackay [2010]. See also Campbell (ed.) [1991] for a 'celebration on the poet's 80th birthday', and the essays in Ross and Hendry (eds.) [1986]. Some of the issues discussed in this paper were more extensively presented in Stalmaszczyk [2009; 2010].

[2] MacLean's poetry is cited here in both Gaelic and English (in most cases the poet's renderings), following the editions mentioned in the references; the discussion, however, is based predominantly on the English versions. On the dangers of misunderstanding MacLean poetry read 'through' English translations (even the poet's own), cf. Mackay [2010].

Air latha thàinig mi le m' ghaol
gu taobha a' chaochain iomallaich,
chrom i h-aodann sìos ri bhruaich
's cha robh a thuar fhéin tuilleadh air.

[One day I came with my love
to the side of the remote brook.
She bent her head down to its brink
and it did not look the same again.]

Abhainn Arois ('Aros Burn') is a short poem which reverses this relationship and points to the permanence of the outer world and importance of places [ibidem: 48–49]:

Cha chuimhne liom do bhriathran,
eadhon nì a thubhairt thu,
ach Abhainn Arois an àileadh iadshlait
is àileadh roid air Suidhisnis.

[I do not remember your words,
even a thing you said,
but Aros Burn in the smell of honey-suckle
and the smell of bog-myrtle on Suishnish.]

Thus the Gaelic names set up a perimeter of a cultural, historical and topographical area, as in *Creagan Beaga* another of MacLean's poems set in Skye [ibidem: 238–239]:

Tha mi dol troimh Creagan Beaga
ans an dorchadas liom fhin
agus an rod air Camus Alba
'na shian air a' mhol mhin.

[I am going through Creagan Beaga
in the darkness alone
and the surf on Camus Alba
is a sough on smooth shingle.

Tha 'n guilbirneach 's an fheadag
ag éigheach shìos mu 'n Chùil,
's an earraidheas air Sgurr nan Gillean,
Blàthbheinn, 's a' ghealach gun smùr.

The curlew and the plover
are crying down about the Suil;
and south-east of Sgurr nan Gillean,
Blaven, and the stainless moon.

Stràcadh na soillse air clàr mara
o Rubha na Fainge sinte tuath,
agus an sruth an Caol na h-Airde
a' ruith gu deas le lainnir luaith.

The light levels the sea flatness
from Rubha na Fainge stretched north,
and the current in Caol na h-Airde
is running south with swift glitter.]

Similarly, in *Feasgar Samhraidh: Linne Ratharsair* ('A Summer's Evening: The Sound of Raasay') the names around the Sound of Raasay confine far more than just the physical area, they are tokens of common memory:[3]

An ròs eadar Beinn Dianabhaig
Agus Cruachan Suidh Fhinn,
Currac aotrom air Glàmaig,
Ainmeachas curraice air Blàthbheinn,
Sruth an lìonaidh an Caol na h-Àirde,
Luasgan 's lainnir air a' Chlàraich.

[The rose between Beinn Dianabhaig
And Cruachan Suidh Fhinn
A light cap on Glamiag
Just a hint of a cap on Blaven
The filling tide in Caol na h-Airde,
A sparkling surge upon Clarach.]

[3] In Black (ed.) [1999: 332–333]; the poem was first published in *Poetry Scotland* in 1949, English translation by Ronald Black.

3. Identity and different aspects of location

In numerous poems MacLean inquired into problems of identity and psycho-physical location. A prominent example is his famous poem *Hallaig*, a long vision poem rooted in Gaelic history and culture, which is "at once historical and hallucinatory" [Heaney 2002]. The imagery of trees and land of the dead is used to show the desolation of Gaelic culture and difficult problems with its renewal [MacLean 1991: 226–227]:

Tha bùird is tàirnean air an uinneig	[The window is nailed and boarded
troimh 'm faca mi an Aird an lar	through which I saw the West
's tha mo ghaol aige Allt Hallaig	and my love is at the Burn of Hallaig,
'na craoibhe bheithe, 's bha i riamh	a birch tree, and she has always been
eadar an t-Inbhir 's Poll a'Bhainne,	between Inver and Milk Hollow,
thall 's a bhos mu Bhaile-Chùirn:	here and there about Baile-chuirm:
tha i 'na beithe, 'na calltuinn,	she is a birch, a hazel,
'na caorunn dhìreach sheang ùir.	a straight, slender young rowan.]

Attachment to place may lead to the mythologizing of place names. This is not the case of *Hallaig*, nor MacLean's poetry in general. Hallaig is an actual place on the east side of Raasay, a set of deserted homesteads, a "ghost clachan north of Beinn na Lice" [Heaney 2002], and the poem refers to an historical event: in June 1854, 129 residents of Raasay, 40 of them from Hallaig, left the island for Australia. The places mentioned in the poem are very much local, but at the same time they gain a more universal dimension.[4] In a short essay on the poem John MacInnes observed that: "In a somewhat similar way the place-names exist in more than one dimension. For all their archetypal magic they are the names of real places. They give the poem a mundane strength and reality" [MacInnes 1987: 7].

The multidimensionality of place names once again shows their linking potential, their power to bind nature and culture. In MacLean's poetry the places and their names are local, however, their 'archetypal magic' provides the universal dimension.

Hallaig gives a profoundly pessimistic vision of the world, it also shows how MacLean treats nature in his poetry. The theme is further explored in *Coilltean Rathasair* ('The Woods of Raasay', 1940), another long poem set in his native island of Raasay, with the moving invocation in the middle of the poem [MacLean 1991: 176–177]:

Coille Ratharsair,	[The wood of Raasay,
m' oinam, labharag:	my dear prattler,
mo chiall cagarain,	my whispered reason,
mo leanabh cadalach.	my sleeping child.]

[4] The *Register of Gaelic placenames in the poems of Sorley MacLean* lists no fewer than 158 names, cf. Sealy [1986].

The wood symbol present in the above poem, also prominent in *Hallaig*, and other poems by MacLean, stands for "our symbol-system – the trees we plant and those we inherit forming the landscape which in turn forms us" [McCaughey 1987: 154].

4. Conclusion

Malcolm Chapman [1978: 77] observed that "nature is never simply there, but has to be appropriated by man in order to be used by him, whether figuratively or physically." Sorley MacLean's poems quoted in this note clearly demonstrate that place names are often used as means of appropriateness of nature, and that this is one of their major functions in Gaelic poetry, together with the aesthetic and invocative functions.

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(Summary)

This note discusses the functions of place names in Scottish Gaelic literature, focusing on the poetry of Sorley MacLean, the most important and influential twentieth-century Gaelic poet. It is demonstrated that the usage of place names fulfills a number of different functions, including the aesthetic and invocative ones. MacLean's poetry shows how place names provide literary means of binding nature with culture.

Słowa kluczowe: nazwy miejscowe, poezja gaelicka, Sorley MacLean.
Key words: place names, Scottish Gaelic poetry, Sorley MacLean.