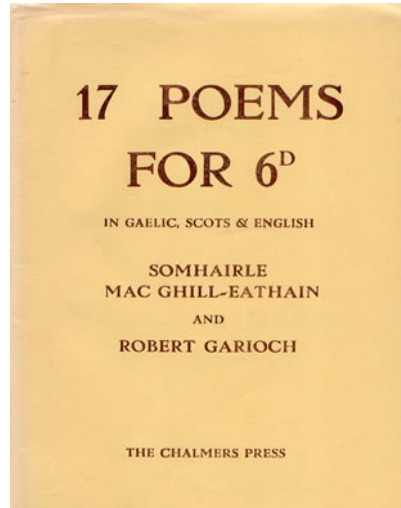


**On 17 Poems for 6d in Gaelic, Scots & English  
by Sorley Maclean (with Robert Garioch) (1940)**

Ken Cockburn



**Preface**

This essay was one of eight written for the Scottish Poetry Library's website, offering an introduction to 20th century Scottish poetry by considering the work of the eight poets represented in the painting [Poets' Pub](#) (1980) by Alexander Moffat. Covering the decades from the 1920s to the 1990s, a collection by each poet is considered in detail under the headings The Book, The Title, The Decade, A Contemporary Reading and Further Reading.

1920s, Hugh MacDiarmid, *Sangschaw*

1930s, Sorley MacLean, *17 Poems for 6d: in Gaelic, Scots and English*  
(with Robert Garioch)

1940s, Sydney Goodsir Smith, *Under the Eildon Tree*

1950s, Norman MacCaig, *The Sinai Sort*

1960s, Edwin Morgan, *The Second Life*

1970s, Robert Garioch, *Doktor Faust in Rose Street*

1980s, George Mackay Brown, *The Wreck of the Archangel*

1990s, Iain Crichton Smith, *Ends and Beginnings*

The essays were written in 2003 by Ken Cockburn for the Scottish Poetry Library's website, where they were available from 2004 until c.2010. They are presented here with some abridgements, corrections and amendments.

## The Book

MacGhill-Eathain, Somhairle (MacLean, Sorley) and Garioch, Robert

*17 poems for 6d*

(Edinburgh: Chalmers Press, 1940)

Soft cover, 28pp

In his later publications the Gaelic form of the name was given as MacGill-Eain.

The book – effectively self-published by Robert Garioch – was published in 'late January or early February 1940', and 'a second, corrected edition appeared a couple of months later', although the date of the first edition is given as 'December 1939' in Christopher Whyte's edition of *Dain do Eimhir* (2003). The copy referred to here is the second edition.

Although the poems by each author are interspersed throughout, on the contents pages they are listed by language and author:

in Scots by Robert Garioch;

in Gaelic by Somhairle Mc Ghill-eathain ;

in English by Robert Garioch.

There are six poems in Scots, and two in English, by Garioch; eight poems in Gaelic by MacLean; and a Scots translation by Garioch of one of MacLean's poems (the other seven appear in Gaelic only).

## The Decade – 1930s

Sorley MacLean described his personal situation in the 1930s in 'My Relationship with the Muse' in *Ris a' Bhruthaich: The Criticism and Prose Writings of Sorley MacLean* (Acair, 1985).

My mother's long illness in 1936, its recurrence in 1938, the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, the progressive decline of my father's business in the Thirties, my meeting with an Irish girl in 1937, my rash leaving of Skye for Mull late in 1937, and the events of Munich in 1938, and always the steady unbearable decline of Gaelic, made those years for me years of difficult choice, and the tensions of those years confirmed my self-expression in poetry not in action... Munich and the unparalleled heroism and self-sacrifice of Communists in the Spanish Civil War almost made me a communist in 1938... Just after Munich,

indirect approaches were made to me to accept a Territorial commission in the Eighth Argylls. I was tempted, but replied: 'Not while this government (Chamberlain's) is in power'.

## A Contemporary Reading

*Note: in this essay the English form of the poet's name, Sorley Maclean, is used. The author has no Gaelic; quotes from the work use the English translations made by Maclean himself.*

Published in early 1940, the booklet contains eight poems MacLean wrote from 1932 to the last days of the decade, and marked the first time he had gathered some of his poems together. They include an extract from a long poem, 'The Cuillin', written in 1939, with which he soon became 'politically as well as aesthetically disgusted', as well as five poems from the sequence *Dain do Eimhir* (*Songs for Eimhir*), though one is not acknowledged as such here. The two remaining poems are a poem about the Isle of Skye, not his native island but one he knew well, and where he worked from 1934-7; and the first poem that MacLean wrote in Gaelic.

The complete *Dain do Eimhir* sequence comprises 60 poems written between 1931 and 1941. An edition was published in 1943, while in later collections of MacLean's work the sequence became fragmented, with individual poems grouped with other poems according to theme or date. The sequence in its entirety was published for the first time in 2002 in a volume edited by Christopher Whyte, who discusses some of the reasons MacLean was reluctant to prepare such an edition during his lifetime. The overall theme of the sequence can be summarised as the conflict between (unrequited) love for an individual and the urgent need to take action against the forces of destruction, particularly fascism, at work in the world.

Here MacLean opens with 'Tri Slighean' ('Three Ways'). Although originally conceived as part of the *Dain do Eimhir* sequence, it is not acknowledged as such here: in Whyte's edition it appears as poem XV. It is dedicated to Hugh MacDiarmid, whose poetry, particularly the short lyrics of *Sangschaw* and *Penny Wheep*, MacLean greatly admired. The two met in 1934 and struck up a firm friendship. The 'three ways' of the title are, firstly, that of MacDiarmid, which MacLean declares himself unable to follow; secondly, English / American Modernism, which he is capable of following, but does not wish to, because of his own experience and background: and thirdly, the landscape and politics of his native islands, his anguish at the Civil War in Spain, and his

love. It follows Garioch's 'Prologomena', a lighter, sometimes sharply humorous, but often disdainful, poem. Writing in Scots is seen as an oppositional position in itself, without being underpinned, as in MacDiarmid's work, by a wider philosophy of renewal; and certainly (despite name-dropping Eliot and Nietzsche in the first stanza) Garioch does not engage seriously with the wider cultural and political situation of the day. In 'Tri Slighean', MacLean also falls into the trap of dismissing too easily contemporary trends; while he felt sincerely that MacDiarmid's lyric achievements were beyond what he could achieve as a writer, the opposition he sets up between himself and 'Eliot, Pound, Auden, / MacNeice, Herbert Read and their band' feels more of a deliberate positioning, even a pose, and one wonders, reading the poem today, about its necessity and validity. Even here, however, at the end of the poem, there are elements of the passion and personal anguish more tellingly expressed elsewhere.

It is followed by 'An Cuilthion: Opening of Part II', an excerpt from a long poem in seven parts, which MacLean wrote between spring 1939 and 1 January 1940. It is a passionate, defiant poem which links the landscape and history of the Isle of Skye with the great political and ideological struggles then ravaging the world. The extract printed here comprises lines 1-92 of Part II. The Cuillin mountain range on Skye is presented as a symbol both of the terrible destructive forces active in the world, but also of strength, unyieldingness and beauty. After initially describing the mountains as a lover, the imagery develops to embrace the great biblical themes of destruction and redemption. A long description of storm clouds is followed by a calmer mood, with lines of mourning for the exile and poverty of the island's people. There is beauty also, but (unlike in the 'Eimhir' sequence), the beloved is invoked only briefly. The extract ends on an elegiac note which, in the continuation of the poem, is immediately broken by an invocation of the defiant rising of the Asturian miners in Spain prior to the outbreak of the Civil War.

After two poems by Garioch which have an entirely different scale and setting - the games of children in the city - comes the first acknowledged 'Eimhir' poem, no. 29, 'Coin is Madaidhean Allaidh' ('Dogs and Wolves'). This echoes the harsh imagery of the 'Cuillin' extract, but the creatures run 'across eternity, across its snows' rather than through any specific landscape, and there are no contemporary political references. An apparently simple poem, which MacLean wrote suddenly and without revision on 20 December 1939, very shortly before publication, interpretation is nonetheless difficult. The 'dogs and wolves' of the title are seen as the poet's 'unwritten poems'. To present one's poems, or the process of writing poetry, as dogs hunting an

elusive prey would seem to be a relatively conventional (if old-fashioned) metaphor; as would the dogs as the slaving hounds of fascism hunting down the values of civil society. But to compare one's own 'unwritten poems' to these hunting dogs has a disconcerting effect. Why do the poems remain unwritten: an inability, or a refusal, to write? Or are they the poems of the future which will be, but at present have not been, written? The poem is undeniably dramatic, yet what is being dramatised is open to question. The poet is overwhelmed, 'the onrush seizing my mind', and this is a 'hunt without halt, without respite'; but the dogs are 'the mild mad dogs of poetry', an odd description given the intensity of the hunt in the rest of the poem. As for the prey, this is revealed only gradually: 'quarry... beauty... beauty... white deer... deer', and only towards the end of the poem, after which the dogs are not again directly mentioned. If the ending restates the hunt rather than the isolated or escaped deer, the achieved poem nonetheless finds an equilibrium between the fierce energy of the dogs and the untouchable beauty of the deer.

Another poem in which landscape is animated follows – 'Ant-Eilean: Do 'nt-seachdnar' ('The Island: to the Seven'). Like 'The Cuillin' this refers specifically to Skye, here by way of a litany of place-names, but like 'Dogs and Wolves' the landscape is abstracted, the whole island being pictured as a bird upon the sea. It is in part an incantatory praise-poem, yet its ending is deeply pessimistic. Its mention of the Cuillin is simple and unthreatening, especially compared to the extract from the eponymous long poem. The island is described first as 'great beautiful bird of Scotland' with which the sea itself is in love; however a mood of loss, sadness and decline takes over and the poem ends with an image of 'the great dead bird of Scotland'. While the poem lacks the defiance of 'The Cuillin', or the passion of the 'Eimhir' poems, the breathtaking beauty which is invoked can perhaps be considered a partial redemption for what has been lost.

MacLean's next three poems are all taken from the 'Eimhir' sequence: nos. IV, XIV and III. No. IV (later titled 'Gaoir na h'Eorpa / The Cry of Europe', but here untitled) comprises six stanzas each of four lines. Addressed to the beloved, the first is a statement that her beauty is equal to 'the disgrace of our day', that her kiss is untainted by it and so, in a sense, overcomes it. Yet the remaining five stanzas each take the form of a question, unanswered except by what has preceded, as if this statement has failed to convince. How can individual romantic love be morally justified given the need for action to oppose the destructive forces of fascism and capitalism? Love, with its strength, resistance, hope and necessity is a valid response to such a situation but only when that situation is faced and articulated also; love as a

realisable ideal, as an entry to a moral and metaphysical dimension otherwise closed. While fifteen years earlier in *Sangschaw* MacDiarmid presented a vision of humanity liberated from God and capable of realising in this liberation its own metaphysical potential, MacLean has to struggle with the reality of human action lacking an underlying moral or intellectual foundation resulting in barbarism.

At the centre of no. XIV 'Reic Anama' ('The Selling of a Soul') is a paradox; the achieving of a state of grace through an apparent contradiction. There is for the poet a double, and opposed or conflicting, unrequitedness - on the one hand, love, and on the other, action in the world. Love both hinders, and provides the energy and the underlying reason, for action. This lack of resolution is a feature of the poems from the 'Eimhir' sequence, and is what gives them their strength: a tension between the insistent demands of individual love and collective action, which cannot both be realised and each of which is devalued by ignoring or dismissing the other. What is achieved from this is the poem, a statement in ordered language of an irresolvable conflict, the very articulation of which is a statement of hope

The last 'Eimhir' poem is no. III (later titled 'Am Buaireadh/The Turmoil', but here untitled), which, despite this subtitle, proposes less of a conflict between love and action than do the previous poems. A translation into Scots by Robert Garioch appears on the opposite page.

The four love poems by Garioch which precede the three 'Eimhir' poems are again on a different scale: the unrequited love of 'Eros' seems rhetorical rather than desperate, while 'Quiet Passage' and 'Ghaisties' deal with the physical pleasures of requited love. Resonance between the work of the two poets is achieved most successfully with these two poems and the 'Eimhir' poems. Garioch's poems are grounded in particularities, and in a sense offer the practice to MacLean's theory, the body to the mind. Elsewhere Garioch's poems seem wilfully slight and short-sighted compared to MacLean's passionate vision.

MacLean closes with 'A' Chorra-Ghritheach' ('The Heron'), the first poem which he wrote in Gaelic, and which made him decide to write poems in that language rather than in English, as he had done up to that point. Given its chronology, it has opened MacLean's two major collections, but also in terms of its mood and subject it makes a good opening poem: 'a mind restless seeking', the awakening of an active enquiring spirit which has not yet found its object of attention in the world. Here, however, it is MacLean's final contribution, and after the earlier stressful dramas, it offers an image of calm

watchfulness, as if acknowledging that the state of intense engagement previously articulated must at times be suspended.

## Further Reading

Somhairle MacGill-Eain (MacLean, Sorley) and Garioch, Robert  
Poems in Scots and Gaelic, from '17 poems for 6d'  
Audio-tape: the poems are read by the authors and Norman MacCaig.  
(Glasgow: Scotsoun, [198-?])

Somhairle MacGill-Eain (MacLean, Sorley)  
O choille gu bearradh (From Wood to Ridge)  
Collected Poems in Gaelic and in English translation  
(Manchester/Edinburgh: Carcanet/Birlinn, 1999)  
This edition includes corrections not in the previous editions of 1989 and 1991.  
Includes preface by the author and notes.

Somhairle MacGill-Eain (MacLean, Sorley)  
Dain do Eimhir  
Edited by Christopher Whyte  
(Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2002)  
Includes an introduction and commentary on each poem, with a dating letter and an autobiographical text.  
Poems in parallel English and Gaelic text.

MacLean, Sorley, 'MacDiarmid 1933-1944' in Scott & Davis (ed.), *The Age of MacDiarmid* (Mainstream, 1980)  
This essay outlines Maclean's view of the political situation during the late 1930s.

Ross, Raymond J., & Hendry, Joy (eds.)  
Sorley MacLean: critical essays  
(Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986)  
Essays on MacLean's work by various contributors. Includes a register of Gaelic placenames found in his poems. Introduction by Seamus Heaney. With line drawings by William Crosbie and maps by Douglas Sealy. With sketch of the poet on the front cover by J.R. McWilliam and back cover photograph of the poet.