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Publication date:
2007

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Citation for published version (APA):
Frater, A. (2007). *Mairi nighean Alasdair Ruaidh*. Paper presented at Crossing the Minch, Isle of Skye, .

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MÀIRI NIGHEAN ALASDAIR RUAIDH

Who was Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh? When was she born? Where did she live? When did she die? The answer to all of these questions is the same...it depends on who you ask!

We could even ask the question “*Was* Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh?”, as some would have us believe that even the name was not her own.

Her name is recorded in some traditions as Fionnghal, with Màiri being the name of the woman who accompanied her on her travels, putting tunes to, and singing, the songs that Fionnghal composed. However, it is possible that the confusion arises from the patronymic *Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh*, and not from the singing companion, even if she did exist. Fionnghal nighean Alasdair Ruaidh was a poetess from the north of Skye, whereas Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh was from Harris, although she may have spent some of her life at Dunvegan. It is not improbable that there were two red-haired Alasdairs belonging to the Clan MacLeod, living at roughly the same time on different islands, both of whom had daughters who composed songs, and thus the doubt over the name of Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh can be dispelled quite convincingly.

James Carmichael Watson tells us that Màiri was reputed to be related to the chief of the clan, and adds:

“...in Bernera of Harris it is even said that Sir Norman’s regard for her was due to his knowing that her blood was not inferior to his own.” (Watson:1965, p. xii)

This is corroborated to some degree by Martin Martin, in his notes on Hiort in his *Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*. Watson tells us that Màiri’s brother Neil was MacLeod’s factor for St. Kilda (1965, p. xvii), while Martin elaborates:

“The isle is the Laird of MacLeod’s property...he bestows the isle upon a cadet of his name, whose fortune is low, to maintain his family, and he is called steward of it.” (Martin:1999, p. 175)

In his *Late Voyage to St. Kilda*, Martin names the steward as Alexander Macleod, who, given the date of Martin’s visit in 1697, was possibly a nephew of Màiri’s.

Màiri was born in Rodel in the south of Harris. She remembered Sir Ruairidh Mòr Macleod, who died in 1626, and his name frequently crops up in her songs. It appears that she was fostered for a time in Uilinnis in Skye as a young girl, and that one of Ruairidh Mòr's milkmaids was her foster-mother, or muime. If this is true, we could say that she was born around the year 1615. She was still living in 1705, when she composed an elegy for Sir Norman MacLeod of Berneray, who died in that year, so she certainly had a long life. In fact, some traditions state that she died at the age of 105.

The life of Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh, and where she spent most of it, is still a matter of dispute. Harris is generally accepted as her birthplace, and also the place where she is buried, but the island on which she spent her adult years is in doubt. As Alasdair MacNeacail puts it [*Gairm*: 1953, pp. 55-56.]:

Is aithne do na h-uile gum bheil dà àit ag agairt còrach air dùthchas Màiri Ni'n Alasdair Ruaidh – na Hearadh agus an t-Eilean Sgiathanach... Chan eil eileanaich eile ann as còrdte r' a chèile na na Hearaich agus na Sgiathanaich, agus chan iongnadh sin, agus an dlùth dhàimh a bha eatorra le bhith fad iomadh linn mar luchd-leanmhuinn do 'n cheann-feadhna – Mac Leòid na Hearadh. Is e an t-aon nì a chuireadh eatorra, agartas le taobh seach taobh a thogail air dùthchas Màiri Ni'n Alasdair Ruaidh.

Anns an t-Eilean Sgiathanach, tha i a ghnàth air a sloinneadh air an àit ris an abrar an Draighneach, baile-fearann air taobh siar an eilein. Air fad agus leud na Hearadh theirear leis gach aon gum b' e sin ainm an àit anns an d' rugadh i, ged nach eil àit fo'n ainm sin air àrainn na dùthcha no eadhon an eilean eile air taobh siar na h-Albann.

[Everyone knows that two places lay claim to Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh. – Harris and Skye... There are few islanders as cordial towards each other as Harrismen and Skyemen, which is no surprise, given the close links due to being for centuries ruled by the one chieftain – MacLeod of Harris. The one thing that could come between them is where Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh belonged.

In Skye, she is always named for the place known as Draighneach, on the west side of the island. Throughout Harris, people say that that is the name of the

place where she was born, although there is no place by that name in the area, nor indeed in any other island on the west of Scotland.]

Watson tells us that Màiri's father was said to be from Drynoch, so the confusion may arise from his birthplace being ascribed to his daughter also.

MacNeacail goes on to put the case for the bardess having been born, and mainly resident, in Skye, using quotations from her songs as evidence. This view is supported by John MacKenzie, in *Sàr Obair nam Bàrd Gaelach*, who assumes that Màiri was a member of the chief's household at Dunvegan. The Rev. William Matheson (TGSI, vol. XLI, p. 18) also favours Skye as Màiri's residence, placing her under the patronage of Iain Breac at the same time as An Clàrsair Dall, Roderick Morison.

The conclusions drawn by these respected scholars would surely convince us that Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh was resident at Dunvegan for the greater part of her life, were it not for the equally impressive arguments in favour of Harris, particularly the island of Berneray, as not only her childhood home, but also where she spent most of her adult life. John MacInnes notes that "there is a persistent oral tradition that she was a nurse, not in Dunvegan, but in the household of Sir Norman MacLeod of Bernera" (SGS 11: p.6), but he qualifies this by pointing out that Màiri "may, of course, have lived at different times in both houses". However, MacInnes provides linguistic evidence for Màiri having been brought up in Harris rather than Skye:

This occurs in the rime sequence of verse one of *Crònán an Taibh*...where the substitution of *sean*...for...*siud* restores the rime. (*Taibh/ ghean/ sean*). *Sean* is the modern Harris pronunciation of the demonstrative; this is never used in the Gaelic of Skye, nor judging from what little we know of the history of Gaelic dialects is it likely to have been used in Màiri's time. (SGS 11: p.6)

Of course, the conclusion that Màiri spoke the Gaelic of Harris rather than that of Skye does not prove that she spent most of her time there, only that, as is generally accepted, she was born and brought up there. A more convincing argument for Màiri having stronger ties with Harris than with Dunvegan is given by Alexander Morrison (CMM: 1954), who casts doubt on the information given by John MacKenzie:

[MacKenzie] took no trouble to acquaint himself with the genealogy of the MacLeods of Harris and Dunvegan. In 1790, Douglas of Glenbervie, after much exhaustive research, compiled invaluable works on the genealogies of Highland families. These were available to John MacKenzie, and a perusal of them would have prevented serious shortcomings in his own work. It is also equally certain that they might have led John Mackenzie to make a search in the Island of Berneray, Harris, for any traditions about Sir Norman MacLeod, who was the generous patron of Mary MacLeod as he knew full well. These omissions were responsible for MacKenzie's belief that Sir Norman MacLeod was a chief of the MacLeods of Harris and Dunvegan, and that he therefore resided in the Castle of Dunvegan.

(CMM: 1954, p. 134)

Morrison cites the evidence of Berneray man, Alexander MacLeod, "a man of great intelligence and a veritable mine of information on Harris in general and Berneray in particular", who:

was of the opinion that the great bardess was born on the island of Berneray. He was, however, quite emphatic on the point that she was both the nurse and bardess in Sir Norman's household of Berneray. He could actually point out the site of her house which was in close proximity to Berneray House. It is called *Tobhta nan Craobh* and sometimes *Tobhta Màiri*.

(CMM: 1954, p. 135)

Morrison adds to this with some information about Berneray House, the residence of Sir Norman MacLeod:

About the middle of last century the old historic house was demolished, and only a small building survived, now used as a barn... These historic buildings were all grouped together in the district of the Island, known as Baile – a name still in current use. It occurs in the poetry of Mary MacLeod... and on each occasion the late professor James Carmichael Watson translates it as "homestead", but it clearly means the district where Berneray House was located.

(CMM: 1954, p. 135)

The case is then made for Berneray House, and not Dunvegan Castle, being indicated in Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh's *An talla bu ghnàth le Mac Leòid*, citing evidence from Dr. Norman MacLeod which shows that:

both Sir Norman MacLeod and his brother, Sir Roderick MacLeod of Talisker, were born at Baile in the Island of Berneray. Their father, Sir Roderick Mòr MacLeod, must have had a mansion house on the Island at least in the first decade of the seventeenth century.

(CMM: 1954, p. 136)

Morrison goes still further, using the Dunvegan papers to show that:

the mansion house was occupied on occasions as late as June 1630. In that year a summons of reduction and improbation was served on Iain Mòr MacLeod, son of Sir Roderick Mòr MacLeod. Attached to the summons is a certificate by the messenger stating that the message had been safely delivered at "John McCloyd's mansion house in Berneray..."

These facts plainly prove that the mansion house in Baile, later occupied by Sir Norman MacLeod, was occupied by such Chiefs of the Clan MacLeod as Sir Roderick Mòr MacLeod and his son Iain Mòr MacLeod. It could therefore, with propriety, be accurately described as 'An talla bu ghnàth le Mac Leòid' [MacLeod's wonted hall].

(CMM: 1954, p. 136)

The occupation of Berneray House by the chiefs of MacLeod does not prove that Màiri was more attached to the family of Sir Norman of Berneray than that of Dunvegan, but Morrison uses the evidence of her surviving songs to strengthen his case:

Readers of Mary MacLeod's poetry cannot fail to notice that a considerable number of her poems – and that the best – is devoted to Sir Norman MacLeod of Berneray, and his son, John of Contuillich... In striking contrast to this is the paucity of poems on the Chiefs of Dunvegan. There is not one eulogy or lament for such fine and noble chiefs as Iain Mòr and Iain Breac. Indeed there are only two compositions which can be connected with certainty to the Chiefs of Dunvegan. These are *Cumha do Mhac Leòid* and *An Crònán*...

(CMM: 1954, p. 136)

This argument is made all the more convincing if we compare the works of Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh with those of her contemporary, Roderick Morison, the Blind Harper, whom we know to have been a member of Iain Breac's household at Dunvegan. Morison's songs are full of praise for Iain Breac and, in *Òran do Mhac Leòid Dhùn Bheagain*, full of criticism of his son and successor, Roderick; Màiri's songs either ignore these two chiefs, or just mention them in passing, which would hardly be politic if she was a member of the household of Dunvegan. It does seem strange that the main focus for her attention and praise is Sir Norman of Berneray if we are to believe that her patron and benefactor was actually Iain Breac.

Alexander Morrison then gives his interpretation of another of MacKenzie's comments in *Sàr Obair*:

John Mackenzie stated that he had heard one of Mary's poems in which she stated that she had nursed "five lairds" of MacLeod and "two lairds" of Applecross. Professor Watson attempts to identify these lairds. The five "lairds" of MacLeod, he writes "were, it may be, Roderick the fifteenth chief, who was under eighteen when his father died in 1649; his younger brother Iain Breac; Iain Breac's sons, Roderick and Norman; and Norman's son, Norman. The two "'lairds' of Applecross", he continues, "we must suppose to be Iain Molach, who succeeded his father Roderick in 1646, and his eldest son Alexander". In the absence of the actual words of the poem, we can only regard these statements as pure conjecture. Is there any proof that these "five lairds" were "five chiefs" of the MacLeods? After all, John MacKenzie was mistaken in making Sir Norman MacLeod the Laird and chief of the MacLeods. Might not MacKenzie's "five lairds" be the five sons of Sir Norman MacLeod of Berneray – John of Contuillich, James, Alexander of Unish, Norman and William of Berneray and Luskintyre? As for the "two lairds" of Applecross, might not this be MacKenzie's rendering of "Mac Choinnich"? The Campbells of Harris, the foster brothers of Sir Norman MacLeod of Berneray, were styled "Mac Choinnich" in the seventeenth century. Professor Watson ingeniously tries to explain the designation of "Tormod nan trì Tormod" to whom this song is addressed. He says that the three Normans were Norman, the eighteenth chief, Sir Norman of Berneray, and Norman, father of Sir Roderick Mor. Clearly this identification is not convincing. The only sensible explanation of the phrase "Tormod nan trì

Tormod” is that it refers to a Norman who was the son of Norman, who was the son of Norman. In the genealogy of the Berneray family, we find a Norman who answers this description, and in no other MacLeod family, thereby proving that this lost poem was composed on that family.

(CMM: 1954, p. 137)

The MacLeod Estate Accounts, for the period during which Màiri was alive, give further support to Morrison’s claim that she was a resident of Berneray rather than Dunvegan:

They prove conclusively that the Chief of Dunvegan was no “mean tyrant”...Time and again, the searcher comes across...disbursements and gratuities from the Estate to widows, orphans, and “insolvent” persons...throughout the accounts Mary MacLeod, who was certainly alive and was probably well over eighty years of age at the time, is not once mentioned. Surely if she had been so “closely and honourably associated” with Dunvegan Castle as a “nurse and bardess” during the chiefship of “five lairds”, she would not be forgotten by a household at once so compassionate and at the same time so mindful of long and faithful service. The satisfactory conclusion is that she had no connection with Dunvegan, and that, as the nurse and bardess of Sir Norman MacLeod of Berneray, she was already well provided for by her patron.

(CMM: 1954, p. 139)

Another of the widely and vaguely known facts about Màiri’s life is that she was banished from MacLeod territory at some point. Although most traditions tell of her banishment, neither the reason for it, nor the location to which she was sent, are known for certain. That Màiri was exiled on the orders of the chief of MacLeod is indicated by the information in *Fuigheall* that the news of her exile being at an end came *O Dhùn Bheagain nan Steud*. However, her return does not seem to have been to Skye:

...she mentions that she intends to voyage “westwards”, obviously to Harris. There is every reason to believe that *Dùthaich Mhic Leòid* was Harris, for in the earliest charters extant the MacLeods are invariably styled “of Harris”.

(CMM: 1954, pp. 138-39)

But this does not automatically point to a recall by Sir Norman, as:

the bardess states that she will see MacLeod, the young Chief of the MacLeods, but does not say where. There is no reason to believe that the Chief was at all times resident in the Castle [of Dunvegan]. He could quite easily have been at the time on a visit to Sir Norman of Berneray.

(CMM: 1954; pp. 138-39)

James Carmichael Watson gives an opposing view of the direction which Màiri's journey took:

The question must arise whether her destination was Dunvegan, the seat of the chief, or Bernera, the residence of Sir Norman. The words [Siùbhlaidh mi an iar] constitute the only tangible evidence for the latter, and we are probably safe in accepting...that her passage was to Skye. Dunvegan would be her natural destination, and especially the abode of the chief is indicated by *dùthaich Mhic Leòid*...for Mary is consistent in applying the proper style MacLeod to the chief alone...

(Watson: 1965, p. 131)

Although Watson argues that “the expression...referring to her passage westward probably does not mean that she was bound for Harris”, his explanation is not wholly convincing:

So far as we know, she set out for Dunvegan from either Sgarbaidh or...Mull. If from the former, the expression can be taken literally only if we suppose it to apply to the first part of the voyage to Dunvegan by way of the Sound of Iona. If we are content to concede to her a poetic licence, the phrase is as well used of a voyage from Aros as of one from Sgarbaidh north through the Sound of Mull; in either case it can only loosely describe the first part of the voyage, which is of course on the whole northwards and not westwards.

(Watson: 1965, p. 131)

The drawback to this theory is that Màiri, on the whole, was not given to using poetic licence. Imagery and metaphor are used in her work, but her songs are honest and straightforward. If she sang of going westwards, it was probably because she *was* heading west; and if she was going in that direction, her destination must have been Berneray rather than Skye.

That permission for Màiri to return came from Dunvegan, although it was to Berneray she returned, points to the reason for her exile being that she incurred the displeasure of the chief for some reason. How this happened is not known, although there are several theories. John MacKenzie states:

She gave publicity to one of her songs, which so provoked her patron, M'Leod, that he banished her to the Isle of Mull under the charge of a relative of his own.

It was during her exile there that she composed...”*Luinneag Mhic Leòid*”. On this song coming to M'Leod's ears he sent a boat for her, giving orders to the crew not to take her on board except she should promise to make no more songs on her return to Skye. Mary readily agreed to this condition of release, and returned with the boat to Dunvegan Castle.

Soon after this a son of the Laird's had been ill, and on his recovery Mary composed a song which...drew on her devoted head the displeasure of her chief, who remonstrated with her for again attempting song-making without his permission. Mary's reply was, “It is not a song; it is only a *crònan*.”

(Mackenzie: 1904, p. 24.)

Mackenzie does not tell us how Màiri angered MacLeod in the first instance, but John MacInnes provides several possibilities:

Modern tradition explains that she was given to composing satirical or even obscene songs...Other explanations are that she aroused MacLeod's jealousy by her songs to Sir Norman of Bernera, or that she over-praised the chief's children – a dangerous practice, liable to bring ill-luck upon them. Watson adopts Mr. Alexander Nicholson's view, “that she was among those dependants who suffered expulsion from Dunvegan under the anglicised régime of Roderick, the seventeenth chief, and that she was restored at the accession of his brother Norman...it would place her exile late in life, for Roderick succeeded in 1693 and died in 1699.” This is a reasonable assumption. W.J. Watson observed that Màiri's *Luinneag Mhic Leòid*, composed while she was in exile, cannot be earlier than 1675...and it could, of course, be much later. (SGS 11; pp. 7-8.)

MacInnes then cites Alexander Morrison's theory:

that the motive for banishing the poetess derived from the attitude displayed by the Commonwealth Government towards supporters of the Stuart cause, among whom the MacLeods were prominent. [Morrison] points out that after the chief of the clan capitulated, in 1656, Norman of Bernera had to leave for the continent; it might therefore “have been deemed politic to exile such a stormy petrel as Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh as well”, for she was Norman’s “most outspoken supporter”.

We have no evidence as to the length of Màiri’s exile; it might conceivably have stretched from 1656 to 1675 or beyond. Yet the tone of *Luinneag Mhic Leòid* is not that of a song composed after long years in exile. Nor...do any of the traditional accounts give the impression that Màiri’s exile was so protracted...Mr. Morrison’s conjecture regarding the chief’s motives for banishing her makes good sense. The theory that this was...a political decision can be applied with equal validity even if we think that the exile is more likely to have fallen in the last decade of the seventeenth century. For it is certainly true that the political atmosphere which followed the Revolution Settlement of 1689 was no more favourable to the Gaels than that which prevailed during the time of the Commonwealth. (SGS 11; pp. 8-9)

Rev. Matheson’s theory was that Màiri was exiled for composing the type of songs which were the preserve of male bards, rather than limiting herself to the laments and lullabies which women were permitted to produce, but MacInnes does not wholly agree:

It was not...so much because she was a woman composing the “big songs” that Màiri was banished, as because of the content of these songs. In her panegyric poetry, Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh is quite as strong a propagandist for the Gaelic social order as any *file*; consequently, in the political atmosphere of the time, her activities as a poet could be a source of embarrassment to the chief of the clan. But if she confined herself to songs that did not so explicitly celebrate the traditional virtues to be looked for in the clan leaders – such as songs of normal feminine occupations – then her poetry could be explained away. (SGS 11, pp. 9-10).

From the evidence, I am inclined to agree that Màiri's exile was politically rather than personally motivated, and that she was exiled from, and returned to, the household of Sir Norman MacLeod of Berneray. Given that her exile was not earlier than 1675, it would seem that the accession of William and Mary, and the troubled period which followed, was the reason for her leaving her home. In the songs composed during her exile, Màiri displays no anger or resentment towards her chief, indicating that she was not in his disfavour. She is not anxious or uneasy at the news of her recall, but joyful at the prospect of returning home, showing that she had nothing to fear from MacLeod.

So, this may have resolved some questions about Màiri's life and location, but there is another tradition surrounding her burial which is out of the ordinary. Both Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh and her fellow poetess Mairearad nighean Lachlainn from Mull are said to be buried in a manner, which, in Norse times, was reserved for those believed to have been witches. Why they should have been treated in this way, when the only traditions that have come down to us about them concern their song-making, is a mystery. Perhaps they were considered to have infringed on the domain of the bards, especially by daring, as women, to compose panegyric verse. The hereditary bards are thought to have been the descendants of the druidic order (Bergin: 1970, p. 9), and certain types of verse were credited with having magical powers; so the idea that these two bardesses had some kind of supernatural influence may have arisen from them composing the same kind of poetry as that produced by the bards. They may have been condemned for having meddled in a type of poetry that was considered to be a male preserve, or there could be another reason, more closely linked with the women themselves, as John MacInnes tells us:

Màiri never married; nor, according to some traditions, did Maighread. This in itself is at least eccentric in that kind of society. Both of them, it is said, went around accompanied by a woman who seems to have acted as an assistant, one of whose functions was to make up choruses of vocables, or to set her mistress' song to a melody. Both women, it is said...were buried face-downwards...

There is...[a] tradition which may have a bearing on the matter. Long ago in the Islands, it is said, if a boat went missing, a wise woman was consulted. She was of mature years, unmarried, strong-minded, and she, too,

had an assistant. The woman went to sleep, and while she slept, her spirit went out to search for the missing boat. But, if the wind changed while she was asleep, she lost her reason.

Now this seems to be a fairly straightforward description of a Shamanistic trance and the recovery of hidden knowledge. May it be that some vestige of the poet-seer's practices lingered on in Scotland into the eighteenth century?

(Nicolaisen: 1968; p. 41).

Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh certainly met the criteria required for a *bean-fiosaich*' as described above. Maybe this respected poetess was given the burial of a witch in order to prevent her spirit from walking after she died. However, if it was due to such a superstition that she was buried face-downwards, it is surprising that this is not related in the oral tradition, especially since she was such a prolific and popular bardess. We can only speculate as to the truth of the tradition regarding the way in which she was buried. Perhaps it was on her own instruction, as one tradition states, “[Gus] beul na brèige a chumail dùinte”. (Watson: 1965, p. xix)

Whatever the truth of the matter, it seems that for every theory posited about the life of Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh, from her birthplace, to her home, to the manner of her burial, there is a counter-theory, based on different evidence, and coming to a different conclusion. Maybe one day a piece of evidence will be found to definitively answer all the questions, but until then the debate goes on...

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