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11. Niall MacLeòid, Bard of Skye and Edinburgh

MEG BATEMAN

This paper looks at the effect that crossing the Highland line had on the work of Niall MacLeòid. He was born in Glendale in Skye in 1843 and at the age of twenty-two he moved to Edinburgh where he remained till his death in 1913. A rare opportunity for examining the influence of life in the Lowlands on his work is afforded by his father and brother also being poets, who remained culturally attached to Skye. It was my fellow post-graduate student at Aberdeen University in the 1980s, Anne Loughran, who first suggested making this comparison between Dòmhnall, who was born in the eighteenth century, and his sons, Niall, the Edinburgh tea-merchant, and Iain, the sailor, who some would rate more highly than his famous brother.¹ Changes in poetic taste are clear in the work of the three poets in the same family, spread over two generations and three centuries, with their different lifestyles, urban, rural and maritime. It will be seen that the requirement to produce songs for the Gaelic diaspora in Lowland cities made for a different sort of song from those produced to entertain and edify a Highland community.

I know of no other Gaelic poet who has suffered such a dramatic fall in reputation as Niall MacLeòid. Nowadays many consider him facile and superficial.² Derick Thomson and Dòmhnall Meek have compared him unfavourably with Màiri Mhòr, criticising him for a softness of focus and lack of political engagement with the Clearances and Land Wars. While Màiri Mhòr shared a platform with politicians such as Sir Fraser MacIntosh, Niall spoke in generalities from a distance. While Màiri Mhòr's poetry is passionate and gutsy, Niall is criticised for the simulation of emotion with little heightening of language.³ Yet in 1892 Dr MacDiarmid wrote: 'Niall is probably the best known and most popular poet living,'⁴ and John N. MacLeod, addressing the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1917, described Niall's collection, *Clàrsach an Doire*, as 'co-chruinneachadh cho binn blasda tomadach 's a chaidh riamh an clò' (*as sweet, pungent and weighty a collection as had ever been printed*).⁵ At the time of his death in 1913,

Donald MacKinnon, professor of Celtic at Edinburgh University, referred to Niall as one of the three foremost Gaelic writers of his time:

Since Duncan McIntyre died, no Gaelic poet took such firm hold of the imagination of the Highlanders as Neil Macleod was able to do ... There is a happy selection of subject. The treatment is simple, unaffected. You have on every page evidence of the equable temper and gentle disposition of the author – gay humour or melting pathos; happy diction; pure idiom; exquisite rhyme ... and the melody of versification.⁶

Derick Thomson has said ‘Niall Macleòid would seem to be the example *par excellence* of the popular poet in Gaelic, and he more than any other became part of the pop culture of his time.’⁷ It may be easier to try to account for Niall’s popularity in his own time than to give a final assessment of the worth of his poetry.

The social conditions which Niall encountered in the Lowlands were very different from those of the ceilidh house in the townships of the Highlands. For the first time Gaelic speakers from all over the Highlands were meeting socially at dances in the cities of the Lowlands. While traditional songs had alluded to specific communities and places, a new sort of song was required for the Lowland gatherings that would evoke a common background and identity through some sort of generic neighbourhood and landscape. The new urbanisation of the Gaels made new demands on their poets: pieces were required for the annual gatherings of Gaelic societies, and after 1893 for singing at the Mod, for encouraging the Gaelic language, and for historical pieces, arising from a new self-consciousness about being a Gael.⁸

While the characters and places of Niall’s father’s and brother’s songs were known to the people of Glendale, in Niall’s songs characters and place become every community and every place. This accounts in large measure for the vagueness of Niall’s verse, so different from the traditional exactitude of Gaelic verse.⁹ His songs were required to entertain, to be easily memorable and immediately understandable, without the length, complexity of argument or of vocabulary, or the specificity of emotion seen in the work of his father and brother and other traditional poets.

Niall's father, Dòmhnall nan Òran, was born in 1787,¹⁰ his life therefore overlapping with Uilleam Ros's and Dùghall Bochanan's, while Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair and Donnchadh Bàn were only a couple of generations older. He escaped the press-gang by working as a road-tax collector, which took him all over Skye. Like Robert Burns and Alexander Carmichael, his work allowed him to collect poetry and stories. Some of these he published with his own poetry in *Orain Nuadh Ghaelach* in 1811, with the financial help of four MacLeod tacksmen.¹¹ He emigrated to America, perhaps as a result of the death of his sweetheart at the age of twenty-one and his boredom with fishing as a livelihood, but returned fifteen years later. In 1839 when he was fifty-two he married Anna MacSween of Glendale and they had a family of ten. He published another book at the end of his life in 1871, but we are to understand from mention of manuscripts in the possession of his widow that a lot more of his work has been lost.

Dòmhnall is a traditional poet: he acts as a clan poet in praising the chief and in evoking a bird, in the traditional manner, to recount the past glories of the clan. He uses satire as a means of social control, sometimes to mock but sometimes to marshal righteousness to correct wrong-doing. He is highly literary and moves easily between genres, whether comic village verse, praise, satire, love, nature or religious verse. Sometimes he composes to entertain, but equally he composes to caution and exhort. Most of his poetry is passionate and personal with a range of metre, diction and vocabulary.

Niall was the oldest surviving child of Dòmhnall's and Anna's offspring. He moved to Edinburgh in the 1860s to join the tea firm of his cousin Roderick MacLeod, for whom he worked as a travelling salesman. In 1889 he married Katie Bane Stewart, a schoolteacher and daughter of a schoolteacher of Kensaleyre, Skye,¹² and they settled and raised a family at 51 Montpelier Park in Bruntsfield, Edinburgh.

MacKinnon spoke of Niall's 'equable temper and gentle disposition', and it seems he was different from his father and his brother, both in outlook and personality. Dòmhnall and Iain both had a strong streak of nonconformity; Niall on the other hand was essentially a conformist. It should be noted, though, that an early poem 'Còmhradh eadar Òganach agus Oisean', composed when he was twenty-five, demonstrates a forcefulness and anger at the state of the Gaels rarely seen in his later work:

Tha na Gàidheil air claonadh om maise
 Is air aomadh gu laigse ann am mòran:
 Thug iad riaghladh an dùthcha 's am fearainn
 Do shluagh do nach buineadh a' chòir sin ...¹³

*The Gaels have declined in their fineness
 and have yielded to weakness in many matters:
 the rule of their land and country
 they have handed to a people with no right there ...*

Anne Loughran has suggested the wider family background might account for the difference between his youthful poetry and his songs of middle-age. His aunt, Dòmhnall nan Òran's sister Marion (Morag), married Iain Bàn MacLeod of Geary in Waternish, and the couple were noted for their piety. One of their sons reached the rank of major in the army and was very active in the Free Church, while his brother Roderick was the tea merchant for whom Niall went to work in Edinburgh. The circumstances of Niall's life, as well as his own inclinations, perhaps meant he had more in common with his cousins' family than with his father and brother.

Iain Dubh was Niall's younger brother by three years, and unlike his father and brother he never published his poems. The contradistinctions between the two brothers may have been exaggerated in local folklore. He was married twice and spent much time away from home as a seaman. In Glendale it was said that he was 'dubh air a h-uile dòigh' ('black in every way'), in hair, skin colour and even in deed. This last comment probably relates to his skills as a conjuror and his powers of hypnosis which would be demonised by the church, but all evidence is that he was a kindly man whose poetry John MacInnes describes as 'strong, realistic, compassionate'.¹⁴ We know of only sixteen poems by Iain, but it is widely held that Niall saved some for posterity by publishing them under his own name in *Clàrsach an Doire*. Ailean Dòmhnallach (former headmaster of Staffin primary school) can be seen making the case for 'A' Bhean Agam Fhìn' being Iain's on YouTube,¹⁵ and certainly its irreverent humour is atypical of Niall. Iain Dubh died of uraemia at the age of fifty-eight and is buried in Montreal, the grass that grows on his grave denying the mythology that it would not.¹⁶

Though Iain does not have the same range of diction or the productivity as his father, he likewise composes from his own experience, describing his life at sea and on land, the landscape of Glendale and situations that arose in his neighbourhood. He does not show the same moral seriousness as his father, but still praises the praiseworthy and satirises the misguided.

*

A sense of the difference in tone between the three poets can be shown in excerpts from poems each made on the subject of sea-faring: ‘Rann Fìrinn do Sheann Bhàta’ (*A True Verse to an Old Boat*) by Dòmhnall nan Òran, ‘Gilleann Ghleann Dail’ (*The Boys of Glendale*) by Iain Dubh, and ‘Duanag an t-Seòladair’ (*The Sailor’s Song*) by Niall. Dòmhnall’s poem purports to be a faithful account of a decrepit ship that he had fulsomely praised in the mock-heroic poem preceding it in his 1811 publication. The boat is compared to a beast and a carcass into which the crew venture at their peril, standing hip-deep in water however fast they bale her out. The planks are badly planed, the nails rusting; she contains nests of slaters and enough grass to feed a cow; her mast is like a piece of charcoal, her sails like wet paper and her ropes like rushes:

Bha i sgallach breac mar dhèile
 Air dhroch lochdradh,
 Bha sruth dearg o cheann gach tàirne
 Mar à Chorcur;
 Mar a bha mheirg air a cnàmh,
 ’S a làr ga grodadh,
 Bha neid na Corruichin-còsag
 Na bòird mhosgain.

An fhàrdach is aognaidh ’s as measa
 Chaidh fo aodach,
 An fhàrdach as truum’ ’s as tric ultach
 Air fear taomaidh;
 Rachadh an eultaidh air h-iteig
 Ro gach taobh dhith,

'S ghearradh tu dh'fheur innte na dh'itheadh
Mart san Fhaoilleach.¹⁷

*She was bald and pitted like dealboards
planed badly,
there was a red stream from every rivet
as if from crimson dyestuff;
just as the rust had consumed her
and her floor was rotting,
there were nests of woodlice
in her musty planking.*

*The worst and most dismal of lodgings
under sailcloth,
the heaviest and most frequent of burdens
to the baler;
birds could take to wing
through her planking,
and in her you could cut enough fodder
to feed a cow in winter.*

The poem (rather than song, for we are told that Dòmhnall spoke his work)¹⁸ was composed about a real event, concerning a local man. However, a certain amount of intertextuality is involved, not only with the preceding praise of the old boat, but also with Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's sea-faring poem, 'Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill', whose language and metrics it echoes, and perhaps also with the boat satires in the Book of the Dean of Lismore.¹⁹ All this very much declares Dòmhnall nan Òran as an eighteenth-century poet himself, deeply conversant with the older culture.

'The Boys of Glendale' is probably Iain Dubh's best known song. It is said he composed it spontaneously, sitting in Pàdraig MacFhionghain's shop in Glendale, as a response to the local lads' questions about life at sea. He gives a realistic and frank account of his experiences of being sworn at by other sailors, of the unpleasantness of the heat, storms, rationing, of burials at sea, and the dangers of women and drink in port.

If he had a half of what he had spent on drink, he would sooner be at home in Pollosgin.

Nuair thèid thu òg 's tu aineolach
A-mach air long nan seòl,
Bidh cùisean dhut cho annasach
Gus am faithnich thu gach ròp;
Gur tric a thèid do mhionnachadh
'S do sgrios chun an Fhir Mhòir,
'S gus an tèid thu dha na cruinn aice
Cho aotrom ris na h-eòin.

Gur iomadh rud a chì thu
Mun till thu far do chuairt,
Gun toir droch lòn do neart asad
'S a' mhaise bha nad ghruaidh;
Chì thu daoine bàsachadh
Gun bhàigh riutha no truas,
Ach slabhraidh mun sliasaidean
'S an tiodhlagadh sa chuan.²⁰

When you set out young and innocent
on a ship of many sails,
everything will seem so peculiar
till you get to know the ropes;
often will people swear at you
and curse you all to Hell,
till you can climb into her masts
as lightly as the birds.

There's many a thing you'll witness
before you return from your trip,
bad food will take your strength from you
and the bloom from your cheeks;
you'll see people dying
shown no tenderness or care,

only chains around their thighs
for their burial at sea.

Niall's 'Sailor's Song' is in marked contrast to the other two. It is not written from personal experience, but is a sentimental set-piece on the separation of a sailor and his sweetheart as the boat sails.²¹ They part with pain and tears and she gives him a lock of her hair to remember her by. While she sleeps in her warm bed, he must climb the masts to rig the sails. Though life is hard at sea, the hope of winning her gives the sailor renewed strength. He asks the wind to convey a message to the girl that, should she wait for him, she will gain her reward. The notion the wind can speak is new to Gaelic, coming through English songs, and perhaps ultimately through Macpherson's Ossian.

Guma slàn don rìbhinn òig,
Tha tàmh an eilean gorm an fheadair,
'S e dh'fhàg mo chridhe trom fo leòn
Nach fhaod mi 'n còmhnuidh fuireach leat.

An àm dhuinn dealachadh Dimàirt,
Gun fhios an tachair sinn gu bràth,
Gun d' iarr mi gealladh air mo ghràdh,
'S a làmh gum biodh i fuireach rium.

Ach thusa, ghaoth, tha dol gu tuath,
Thoir leat mo shoraidh seo gum luaidh,
Is innis dhi, ma bhios mi buan,
Nach caill i duais ri fuireach rium.²²

*Farewell a while to the lovely maid
who dwells in the green grassy isle;
what left my heart wounded sore
is that I can't always bide with you.*

*When on Tuesday we did part,
not knowing if we'll meet again,*

*I asked my love to make a pledge
that she would keep her hand for me.*

*But you, O wind, that travels north,
take my greetings to my love,
and tell her that, if I survive,
she won't lose out if she waits for me.*

Many further comparisons could be made between the poets in songs about love and nature.²³ Again and again we see Dòmhnall and Iain composing from personal experience for a community of which they were a recognisable part, in the same way that Iain Lom, Donnchadh Bàn or Uilleam Ros are recognisable in their songs. By contrast, Niall addresses a generalised Gaelic audience with poems from which he is largely absent as himself. Rather he is a ventriloquist, producing songs to express different sorts of people, often as part of an emotional set-piece. He speaks for an emigrant leaving Skye, for a widow burying her only child, and a man burying his sweetheart – none of his own experience nor closely imagined.²⁴ Niall is the generic poet, a figure in his own fantasies. In ‘Màiri Bhaile-Chrò’ for example, the speaker gets lost in the mist in the heights and meets a girl who offers him a bed for the night in her humble dwelling. He swears his undying love for her, yet there is no expectation of their meeting again. It is an idyll evoked by cows, birdsong, flowers and dew, and should perhaps be read as a fantasy of escapism – even of virginity. As the walled garden was to the European medieval love-lyricist, so is the girl by herself in a remote sheiling to the Victorian, yet in reality the sheiling was a place for communal activity. The most palpable part of Niall’s personae is his nostalgia.

Not only is the poet a generic, so also are the characters who appear in his songs – the old maid and old bachelor, the sailor and the sweetheart, the drunk, the widow burying her only child, the man and his wife, Anna. Of necessity, Niall’s Lowland Gaelic community is largely imagined, but for a few prominent individuals such as John Stuart Blackie, the professor of Greek who raised money for the first chair of Celtic, or Dr Morrison who had a shop in Edinburgh where Gaels were wont to meet. How interesting it would be to get more of a picture of the experiences of nineteenth-century Gaelic communities in the Lowlands. If it is to be found anywhere, it is in

the periodicals of Caraid nan Gàidheal, and later in the songs of Dòmhnall Ruadh Phàislig (Donald Macintyre, 1889–1964). Apart from a few poems for Highland gatherings, Niall’s main purpose was to provide songs of escapism, of evocation of the homeland. He lacked Gaelic models for depicting city life and we should probably look for English language models for what urban scenes he does depict (e.g., ‘Taigh a’ Mhisgeir’ and ‘Dòmhnall Cruaidh agus an Ceàrd’): Victorian idylls and sentimental verse, the songs of Robert Burns (Niall uses the Scotch Standard Habbie stanza), Chartist songs and the literature of the Temperance Movement,²⁵ of which Niall was himself a member.²⁶

As his brother, Iain Dubh, spoke of his own experience at sea, it is also he who suffers pangs of homesickness in ‘Mo mhàthair an Àirnicreap’; he, whose shoes are eaten by his mother’s heifer, he who has to carry home a drunken publican.²⁷ To underline his presence in his songs, six of his surviving songs include his name to vouch for their truth.²⁸ As he is a real personality, so too are the characters who appear in the songs: his wife who worries about his drinking, (‘O Anna na bi brònach’), Ruairidh Chalum Bhàin and Calum Ros in ‘Oran A’ Cheannaiche’, who take more than their share of ling, crabs, and lobsters (see vv 5–6); Dòmhnall Grannd, whom he satirises in ‘Aoir Dhòmhnail Ghrrannda’ for cutting boughs from a tree in the graveyard, and whose sister Catriona he must then mollify in ‘Òran Catriona Ghrrannda.’ Iain’s songs are quirky, closely observed and risk unusual flights of the imagination. His portrayal of the drunken Edinburgh publican in ‘Tost Dhòmhnail an Fhèilidh’ is a good example:

Ged ghabh mi fhìn air spraoi gun chiall,
 Bha d’ ìomhaigh a’ cur eagal orm,
 Nuair a laigh thu air a’ *charpet* sìos
 Mar chearc ag iarraidh neadachadh,
 Thuit an sgian a bha gad dhìon
 Le d’ shliasaid a bhith cho leibideach,
 Do dhà dhòrn bheag a-null ’s a-nall
 A’ sealltainn dhomh mar bhogsaiginn.²⁹

*Though I went myself on a senseless spree,
 your own appearance frightened me,*

*when you lay down on the carpet
like a hen wanting to nest,
the knife fell that protected you,
as your thighs had grown so shaky,
with your two fists going back and forth
showing me how I ought to box.*

If Dòmhnall nan Òran sometimes fulfilled the role of praise poet to Macleod (in ‘Smeòrach nan Leòdach’ and ‘Marbhrann do Chaiplean Alastair MacLeòid, ann a’ Bhatain’), he was also a village poet, making poetry to commemorate events, to entertain, and to commend and chastise. Rob Donn makes an obvious comparison with Dòmhnall from the same century. Dòmhnall’s earliest extant poem, composed when he was fifteen, ‘Rann Molaidh do Thaigh Ùr’, is a satire on an ostentatious house built by one of his father’s friends, whose splendour, the young poet suggests, will have the effect of overwhelming the guests and frightening them away.³⁰

Much more serious is his satire against the church elders of Lonmore who refused to baptise his infant on the grounds that he was not himself converted (‘Chan eil thu iompaichte dhà sin’). Dòmhnall vents his anger by correcting what he sees as the pharisaic power of the elders. It was said that he knew most of the Bible by heart³¹ and, in an overwhelming array of biblical citations, he gives examples of those who have withheld God’s grace, among them the foolish virgins, Balaam, and the prodigal son’s brother. The elders are named, and he says they look as if they have been kissed by death. They should be careful that they do not get caught out by their own judgementalism, like Haman in the book of Esther, who was hanged on the gallows he had built to kill Mordechai.³² This shows Dòmhnall at the height of moral indignation, with a complexity of allusion and argument never encountered in the work of his sons.

That Niall deals in generalities while Dòmhnall and Iain deal in specifics is as true of their handling of people as it is of place. Niall’s famous song, ‘An gleann san robh mi òg’ (‘*The glen where I was young*’), is about a beautiful but generalised place that could evoke the homeland of any Gael in the Highlands. Dòmhnall and Iain are more typical of the tradition in evoking a specific landscape through placenames familiar to a local audience. It is the specific sight of Àirnicreap seen at a distance from his ship that awakens

Iain's longing; and it is playing with the concepts of the strangely named headland, An t-Àigeach (*The Stallion*), and the stack, An Ceannaiche (*The Merchant*), that provides the material of a further two songs.

While the humour in Dòmhnall's and Iain's poems arises from the situations in which they find themselves, Niall's humour is that of the music-hall and its stock characters. John N. MacLeod and Professor MacKinnon, quoted at the beginning of this paper, praise Niall for his delicacy of sentiment and exquisite humour, which, they say, differentiated him from other poets.³³ By today's standards of political correctness, this same humour can sometimes seem in poor taste. The old maid is a figure of fun, desperate for any man, poor, blind or coloured ('Oran na seana-mhaighdinn'); the teuchter, Dòmhnall, makes a trip to Glasgow, and under the influence of drink, is decoyed by a pretty girl to a den of thieves ('Turus Dhomhnuill do Ghlascho'); while a poor drunk dies from his wounds and a cold after being set upon by a demonic crew of tinkers, men, women and children ('Dòmhnall Cruaidh agus an Ceàrd').

But Niall's father's humour is full of social comment. One poem mocks a local cottar for acting above his station when he got a loan of a horse to take him home.³⁴ In another, the potato is personified as a cheerful fellow in a jacket, and praised for its ability to feed both rich and poor and to clean the ground, and that it doesn't need chewing and is a good missile to throw at a thief.³⁵ Iain's song for Catriona Ghrannda is so specific to the circumstances that produced it that its humour would be lost on an audience who lacked the background knowledge that Catriona was neither beautiful nor a good singer.

There are marked formal contrasts between the three poets. Niall produced a standard product – almost two-thirds of his poems are between six and nine verses long.³⁶ This is considerably shorter than the average length of his brother's and father's work, and of traditional song-poetry in general. The city ceilidh with a structured list of performers perhaps had greater time pressures than the ones in the Highlands. Niall's regularity of rhyme and rhythm also makes for easier memorisation and execution than the more conversational rhythms of Iain's and Dòmhnall's poetry. Niall's metres were praised by Sorley Maclean as being 'exquisite in modulation and even in general technique', but were criticised by Derick Thomson who made a connection between their rhythmic regularity and their lack of surprise,

shock, and tension.³⁷ In his thinking too, Niall follows simple formulas. Very often he describes the land, then the nostalgia it awakens, and closes with a rallying call for recovery, or with a didactic message on the fragility of life. All of Niall's poems are rounded off with some clear message or conclusion, but because Iain's songs were aimed at a known audience, they are often not self-explanatory, as was seen in the case of Catriona Ghrannda above, and end abruptly. 'Mo Mhàthair an Airnicreap' describes Iain's dangerous life at sea and his longing for home. His audience would have understood what lay behind his envy of Finlay who had stayed at home.

Nach sona dhuts', a Fhionnlaigh,
Gun do dh'ionnsaich thu cur is buain.³⁸

*Weren't you lucky, Finlay,
that you learnt to sow and reap.*

The three have a distinctly different tenor to their language. Dòmhnall's poems can have an eighteenth-century density and exuberance of language. We saw this in his seafaring poem above. His poem to a grassy hillock in Glendale called Tungag is typical of Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's nature poetry – and even quotes from it – while his 'Dàn a' Bhreitheanais' on the Day of Judgement brings Dùghall Bochanan to mind. In Niall there is a limited centralised vocabulary and a new Victorian prettiness combined with the influence of MacPherson. Love swims in the face of Màiri Bhaile-Chró (v 6); the sun dries a daisy's tears ('Do Neòinean'); the wind laments lost warriors and the departed population ('Fàilte don Eilean Sgitheanach' and 'Muintir a' Ghlinne Seo' v 5). This is quite different from the rocks, An t-Àigeach and An Ceannaiche, speaking to Iain Dubh, because the wind had never spoken in Gaelic before James MacPherson's time, while the rocks had been talking since the Lia Fáil.

However, for all his advocacy of non-violence in the Land Wars, for all his lack of understanding of Highland history, and his unwarranted hope for the restoration of the population and their language in the Highlands, Niall was more politically aware than either his brother or father who, I think, make no mention of the Clearances. Sorley Maclean has written in this regard:

Niall MacLeod ...had no deficiency in intellect, and his fine sensitive nature reacted keenly to the tragedy of his people, but he was incapable of expressing a militant ardour ... incapable of bitterness and incapable of the adequate expression of strong indignation, and he saw human life as sad whether the sorrow was of a particular or universal nature.³⁹

MacLean points out that ‘Poetic sincerity is not the same thing as moral sincerity,’ so although Niall wrote poetry in which he expressed indignation at the treatment of the Highlanders, Sorley felt that they were not as convincing as his poems of nostalgia.

In conclusion, though Niall might be said to have created a new genre of emigré verse, it is important to recognise those places where he still worked within the Gaelic tradition. In writing elegies for prominent city Gaels, Niall fulfilled the traditional role of the Gaelic poet, by commemorating the dead and holding up their virtues to others. Just as his father had used tree imagery in his Lament for Captain MacLeod, and Iain had satirised his neighbour for cutting branches from a tree growing in Cille Comhain cemetery to protect his kale patch from sheep, so too does Niall use tree imagery to praise not a warrior but the academic, Professor Blackie:

Ghearradh a’ chraobh bu torach blàth,
 ’S a dh’àraich iomadh meanglan òg,
 Bu taitneach leam a bhith fo sgàil,
 ’S mo chàil a’ faotainn brìgh a lòn.⁴⁰

*The tree of fruitful blossom has been felled,
 which nurtured many a young shoot,
 it was my delight to be in its shade,
 my appetite nourished from its fruit.*

Niall seeks seclusion to enable him to experience the beauty of the Highland landscape without the evidence of the Clearances (e.g., in ‘Ri Taobh na Tràigh’). The idyll of seclusion and of finding comfort and companionship in nature is at least as old in Gaelic as the hermetic poetry of the sixth to the ninth centuries, and the traditions of Suibhne Geilt of the ninth to the

twelfth centuries. However, the emptiness of the Highlands is itself a sign of Clearance, so the beauty of the Highlands becomes at once synonymous with their sadness.

Judging by the number of people who knew the eighty-eight poems in *Clàrsach an Doire* by heart,⁴¹ and by the demand for this book, which has run to six editions, it is clear that the Gaels have relished Niall's songs, whatever late-twentieth-century critics may say. People appreciate their shortness, their easy performance owing to their simple language and rhythms, their availability in book form and their ability to stand alone without explanation. They were a mass-produced product for the Gaels working in the industries of the Lowlands when they came together socially. In such a situation they would not want the songs of protest and anguish that were part of land league rallies; rather they wanted a balm to heal the wounds of recent history, of Clearance and war.⁴² The social function of Niall's poetry was to give people, who historically would have felt little commonality, a group identity, based on a shared Highland upbringing, a shared language, and a shared nostalgia and concern for their homelands. Niall's songs expressed, and were shaped by, the closeness and affection that were the glue of such gatherings. But without their music, the words of songs live only a half-life.⁴³ We should be careful about judging Gaelic song as poetry, nor should we forget that Niall's work may have worked all the better for its relative simplicity. The fusion of melody with easy-flowing versification in the evocation of an idyll would have given thousands a sense of pride in their past, a sense of common purpose and optimism about their new lives.

Notes

1. I. MacAonghais, 'Bardachd Iain Duibh Mac Dhomhnaill Nan Oran' in *Gairm* 82 (1973), pp. 113–21 (p. 113) and D. Thomson, *An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry* (London: Gollancz, 1974), p. 233.
2. Ian MacLeod in D. S. Thomson (ed), *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland* (1983), p. 183–84.
3. Donald Meek, 'Gaelic Poets of the Land Agitation' in *TGSI*, 49:309–376 (1974–76), pp. 312–15; and D. Thomson, *An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry*, pp. 224–233.
4. R. C. MacDiarmid, 'Donald MacLeod, the Skye Bard – His Life and Songs', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Glasgow* (Glasgow: Archibald Sinclair, 1888), vol 1, pp. 18–33 (p. 22).
5. John N. MacLeod, 'Dòmhnall nan Òran: Am Bàrd Sgitheanach', *TGSI*, 29 (1917), pp. 119–33, p. 125.
6. Donald MacKinnon ('Neil MacLeod'), *Celtic Review*, vol 9 (1913–1914), pp. 151–56 (pp. 153–54).
7. Thomson, 1974, p. 232.
8. See *A' Chòisir Chiùil*, parts 1–4, for songs by Niall Macleòid prescribed for the Mod.
9. See for example Sorley Maclean 'Realism in Gaelic poetry' in *Ris a' Bhruthaich*, ed. W. Gillies.
10. R. C. MacDiarmid states that he was born in 1787 (*TGSG*, 1:18).
11. A comparison can be made here with Iain MacIllEathain, Bàrd Thighearna Cola (1787–1848), a contemporary of Dòmhnall's, who also collected songs and published them with his own in 1818 before leaving for Canada (my thanks to Rob Dunbar for this information).
12. Listed in the 1889 Register of Marriages for the District of Blythswood in the Borough of Glasgow.
13. Neil MacLeod, 'Còmhradh eadar Oganach agus Oisean', *Gailig (An Deò-Gréine)* 18 (1922–1923), pp. 58–59, and 77–78, v 18.
14. John MacInnes, quoted by Ian MacLeod (Dingwall) in Thomson (1983), *Companion to Gaelic Scotland*, p. 183.
15. www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRp4oAdhoGU (accessed 12 February 2014).
16. Ross, James, 'Iain Dubh mac Dhòmhnail nan Òran', BBC Radio, 3:2:64.
17. Domhnul MacLeòid, *Orain nuadh Ghaelach maille ri beagain do cho-chruinneachadh urramach na 'n aireamh* (Inbhirnis: Eoin Young, 1811), p. 151, vv 3–4.
18. R. C. MacDiarmid, 'Donald MacLeod, the Skye Bard – His Life and Songs', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Glasgow* (Glasgow: Archibald Sinclair, 1888), vol 1, pp. 18–33, p. 23.
19. See A. MacDonald and A. MacDonald, *Poems of Alasdair mac Mhaistear Alasdair* (1924), pp. 370–401 and W. J. Watson (ed) *Scottish Verse from the Book of the Dean of Lismore*, SGTS 1937, p fol 218 and 224.
20. MacAonghais, in *Gairm*, 82 (An t-Earrach, 1973), pp. 114–115, vv 2 and 5, libcat.uhi.ac.uk/search%7ES14?/c891.63+GAI/c891.63+gai/-3,-1,,E/browse
21. It should be noted that Aonghas Dubh MacNeacail thinks that this is one of those poems by Iain Dubh published under Niall's name.
22. N. MacLeòid, *Clàrsach an Doire* (1883), p. 28.
23. A comparison of love poems could be made between 'Litir Ghaoil ga Freagairt' by Dòmhnall, 'O Anna, Na Bi Brònach' by Iain, and 'Màiri Bhaile-Chrò' by Niall; and of

- nature poems between ‘Òran do Thullaich Ghlais ris an Abrar “Tungan” by Dòmhnall, ‘Òran an Àigich’ by Iain, and ‘An Gleann san robh mi òg’ by Niall.
24. See ‘Cumha Eilean a’ Cheò’, ‘Bàs Leinibh na Bantraich’ and ‘Cumha Leannain’. A different sort of ventriloquism is evident in ‘Tobar Thalamh Tholl’ which he wrote for a specific old woman when moving away from the well that had served her for many years.
 25. Dòmhnall Meek, ‘Gaelic Poets of the Land Agitation’ *TGSI* 49, 1974–76, pp. 309–76, (p. 316).
 26. Dòmhnall Meek, ‘Gaelic Poets of the Land Agitation’.
 27. ‘An gamhainn a bha aig mo mhàthair’ and ‘Tost Dhòmhnail an Fhèilidh’.
 28. His name appears in ‘Anna Nic Leòid’, ‘Gillean Ghleann Dail’, ‘Mo Mhàthair an Àirnicreap’ and ‘Òran a’ Cheannaiche’ and he vouches for the truth of ‘Òran do dh’Fhear Husabost’ and ‘Tost Dhòmhnail an Fhèilidh’.
 29. Source: www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/9862/8 sound file, v 5 (accessed 12 February 2014).
 30. Domhnul MacLeòid, *Orain nuadh Ghaelach maille ri beagain do cho-chruinneachadh urramach na ’n aireamh* (Inbhirnis: Eoin Young, 1811), p. 173.
 31. John N. MacLeod (1917), p. 127.
 32. D. MacLeòid (1871), p. 3.
 33. John N. MacLeod (1917), p. 125, and MacKinnon (1913), p. 155.
 34. ‘Òran Mhurchaidh Bhig’ (*ONG*, p. 42).
 35. ‘Òran Molaidh a’ Bhuntato’ (*ONG*, p. 96).
 36. Though they vary in length between three and twenty-two verses (the latter in couplets), the vast majority (59/88 – almost two-thirds) are between six and nine verses long, six being the commonest.
 37. MacLean (1985), p. 69 and Thomson (1974) p. 232.
 38. Cairistiona Mhàrtainn, *Òrain an Eilein* (An t-Eilean Sgitheanach: Taigh na Teud, 2001). p. 19.
 39. MacLean (1985), p. 68.
 40. MacLeòid (1975), p. 187.
 41. A note in Malcolm MacFarlane’s hand-writing among his papers says that there are many who know all Niall’s songs, and that he had never written or set a poem to music that wasn’t executed with finesse:
- Is dìomhain a bhi leughadh eiseimpleir air bàrdachd Niall. Cha’n urrainn da bhi nach eil moran dibh a tha eolach oirre air fad. Cha d’ rinn e ordu-seinn no dàn nach eil math agus tha cuir fìor ghrinn. Nam b’fhear seinn mi sheinninn òran. (NLS Acc 9736/65: miscellaneous notes and fragments in red ink on a strip of paper 6 x 1 inch).
42. I must thank Mairead Bennett for this point.
 43. The phrase comes from Gerda Stevenson, a singer-songwriter herself.

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References are given below to sources at time of writing, but all the poems by Niall, Dòmhnall nan Òran and Iain Dubh mentioned in this paper are now available in Meg Bateman with Anne Loughran (eds), *Bàird Ghleann Dail/The Glendale Bards: a selection of songs and poems by Niall MacLeòid (1843–1913), his brother Iain Dubh (1847–1901) and father Dòmhnall nan Òran (c.1787–1873)* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2014).

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