Sorley Maclean's 'Hallaig': a note

In 1846 John MacLeod, the chief of the MacLeods of Raasay (styled in Gaelic 'Mac Gille Chaluim') sold the island to a pious gentleman from Edinburgh whose name was George Rainy. Rainy in effect introduced the Clearances to Raasay. Between 1852 and 1854 the entire population of twelve townships, ninety-four families in all, were driven from their homes, the majority of them being forced to emigrate to the Colonies. One of these townships was Hallaig.

Hallaig lies on the eastern side of Raasay, overlooked by Dùn Cana, the highest hill on the island. From the Dùn Cana ridge the land falls dramatically in great terraces of rock and sweeping green plateaus down to the sea. It is a heroic landscape, in some ways reminiscent of the east of Skye, round the Stoer rock, but different in scale and line, a remote place of haunting stillness and emptiness that was once full of the sound of human voices.

The memories that cling to the very name of Hallaig cannot but have a special poignancy for Sorley Maclean, for in these townships of Raasay untold generations of his own people lived and died. Interestingly enough, one of the Maclean families of that area (probably Screapadal) makes a brief appearance in the pages of James Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson in 1773*. Boswell's account of his visit to the homestead is the merest vignette but is vivid enough to give us a fleeting glimpse of what this modestly prosperous Gaelic community of small farms was like. By a curious coincidence, it was exactly a hundred years after the final destruction of that community that Sorley Maclean composed 'Hallaig'.

The rubric 'Time, the deer, is in the wood of Hallaig' is not a quotation from another poem but a separate line composed at the same time as 'Hallaig'. It is clear that the deer that is killed by love's bullet is Time itself. This reminds us at once of another poem, Edwin Muir's 'The Road'.

There is a road that turning always
Cuts off the country of Again.
Arches stand there on every side
And as it runs Time's deer is slain,
And lies where it has lain.

Sorley Maclean's poetry is often preoccupied with the nature of time, as may be seen most clearly in the great metaphysical love poem 'A face haunts me', translated by Iain Crichton Smith in *Poems to Eimhir* (No. LVII). The concern with time is manifest in 'Hallaig' also, and not only in the final statement. The entire poem projects a vision which is tragic and redemptive. Tragic in that the reality of time, of history, what actually happened in that particular place, Hallaig, 'the heartbreak of the tale', is inescapable. Redemptive in that destructive time is itself destroyed in the vision of love that transmutes experience into the timelessness of art; but tragic, too, in that this transcendence is bounded by mortality. While the poet lives, it is implied in the last verse, the vision will remain; time will be arrested; but only for a measure of time.

This dialectical movement, so very characteristic of Maclean's mind, can be followed throughout the structure of the poem, at different levels of analysis. In the most general terms, it expresses that intersection of time with the timeless already mentioned. And so, while the sabbath of the dead reigns in Hallaig, the dead live again. So, also, 'the endless walk'. These antitheses can be multiplied. For instance, two types of tree stand in contrastive roles – the great pines of the south-western sector of Raasay and the deciduous woods that are simply part of the island's natural features. But although the birch and rowan and hazel – especially the birch – are the prime symbols of the poem, and at one level symbol only, they also, at another level, have their existence in an organic landscape. It is this organic nature that puts them as symbols at the farthest possible remove from allegory. To add one more paradox, that fact undermines the poet's fear that his vision is limited by his mortality.

For the landscape is a Gaelic landscape. A feeling for landscape, for nature in general, is very old in Gaelic poetry, stretching back beyond the Scottish vernacular to the Scoto-Irish literary traditions of the early Middle Ages. In one of the Scottish developments, landscape, delineated through its place names, and community, delineated through the personal names of its heroes, are both celebrated in one complex

whole. In the erosion of Gaelic society and identity this framework was virtually destroyed and nature poetry, in common with other kinds, became increasingly open to outside influences. Broadly speaking, the dominant influence in the process was English Romanticism, especially from 1872 when compulsory education (in English only) was imposed, and an 'educated' Gael was more likely than not to be illiterate in his own tongue. In such depressed social and cultural circumstances, the inevitable result was a poetry that always tended to sentimentality.

Nevertheless, something of that traditional apperception that links people and landscape in one humanised environment remained alive in the Gaelic view of the world, and from it 'Hallaig' draws part of its strength and its poignancy. Yet equally palpable is the Romantic sensibility of the poem. What Sorley Maclean has done here, as elsewhere in his poetry, is to fuse these disparate elements of two cultures in an utterly new statement which is emotionally subtle and powerful, unsentimental, and wholly Gaelic. Through his genius, both the Gaelic sense of landscape, idealised in terms of society, and the Romantic sense of communion with Nature, merge in a single vision, a unified sensibility.

In noting these exterior relationships the focus, of course, must always be on the finished product itself. 'Hallaig' is a living Gaelic poem – a true and realistic poem – because it synthesises the manifold variety of the modern Gaelic mind. Moreover, the final distillate of this compound experience is so pure that although 'Hallaig' is obviously a poem of great sophistication, it can also, because it completely avoids the esoteric, be described as a poem of great simplicity and innocence.

This could not be achieved without a superb technical accomplishment, but the technique is so effortless, so much part of the total statement of the poem, that even to call it brilliant seems incongruous. Beneath that even surface, variegated but indivisible as water, the Gaelic reader is aware of a profound depth of pathos and yearning: such a sense of completion at the symbolic level, such a sense of incompletion at the level of history. 'Hallaig' is a strange compound of dialectic and dream.

How much of all this is conveyed in translation, each English reader must judge for himself. He will at least be able to trace the different levels of the poem and the complications of its imagery. It is these demonstrable complexities that make 'Hallaig' a most remarkable

artefact. It is its undemonstrable complexities that make it a great poem.

Postscript

This was originally written in support of Prof. Geoffrey Dutton's proposal to award Maclean an honorary doctorate from the University of Dundee.