

## *Notes on sea-imagery in seventeenth century Gaelic poetry*

The imagery of a century's poetry is a vast subject in which generalisation is extremely difficult, or some would say impertinent. This is especially true of a century of the richness and variety of the 17th century in Gaelic poetry, and I therefore limited the title to 'sea imagery', though I am taking a glance now and then at imagery of other kinds. Also I have given the title 'Notes' in order to indicate that the treatment does not claim to be exhaustive or systematic.

I am using this vague and questionable word 'imagery' in the widest sense and in a double sense: first, in the very widest sense to connote the sensuous embodiment or setting of thought and feeling in language; and second, in the more restricted sense of those figures of speech like Metaphor and Simile, which are not primarily devices of style depending on the arrangement of the words.

It is on record that when one of the intelligent and accomplished daughters of Dr Hector MacLean, of the noted manuscript, translated some Gaelic poetry to Johnson and Boswell, they were not at all impressed by the 'images' (one of them used the word); but, of course, that proves nothing or, if it proves anything, it proves only that Miss MacLean's selections predominated in auditory images not susceptible of translation; and when one thinks of the relative poverty of imagery in their own admired 18th century English poetry, one would not accept Johnson and Boswell as reliable witnesses. I should hesitate to say which is the finer poem, the Blind Harper's 'Oran Mór MhicLeòid' or the anonymous popular song 'Ailein Duinn, a nì 's a nàire'. Quite obviously, it would be relatively easy to 'put across' in translation the vivid visual imagery of 'Ailein Duinn', but no translation would ever hope to give the slightest indication of the marvellous auditory images of 'Oran Mór MhicLeòid'; and very probably Miss MacLean chose to translate poems of the Oran Mór type, with their far greater literary prestige, rather than the more easily translatable popular or 'sub-literary' song. At any rate, Johnson's own treatment of the words and imagery of one of the most magnificent

soliloquies of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* puts him pretty well out of court as a witness.

Nevertheless, there has long been a vague feeling that Gaelic poetry is richer in its appeal to the ear than to the eye; in other words, that while the sound of Gaelic poetry is astonishingly rich, varied and resonant in sensuous and emotional effect, the visual appeal is not normally so satisfying. This has led to the charge that the Gaelic poet frequently sacrifices many other things for the sake of the sound; that the Celt loves words for their own sake; but, oddly enough, the implications of Matthew Arnold's famous 'natural magic' are the very opposite. The most noted foreign doctors obviously agree.

A predominance of the sound effect would normally be expected as an overflow from the metrically over-elaborate virtuosity of medieval and 16th century poetry; and in 17th century and in post-17th century vernacular poetry it is obvious in many ways; and I think the generalisation can be made: that the more self-conscious and literary the poetry is in the 17th century, and in the 18th too, the more does the auditory effect dominate all the rest. Indeed, the long processions of adjectives so frequent in later 17th century and in all 18th century Gaelic poetry is substantially a reduction to the absurd of this sound-loving verbiage; but such processions are very rare in the popular song-poetry, which clearly indicates that they are a result of too much rather than too little 'art'. It must be admitted that a great deal of Alexander MacDonald's, Duncan Macintyre's and William Ross's verse suffers from this. Not that there are not hundreds of examples of the contrary. For instance, to take the big comprehensive and small particular images together, what big images could excel the simultaneous visual and auditory effect of

Monadh fada réidh,  
Cuile 'm faighte féidh,  
Soilleireachd an t-sléibh  
Bha mi sònrachadh.

*Long unbroken moorland,  
retreat where deer were to be found,  
the brightness of the moorland  
I marked most of all.*

Or what little image could excel the effect of the spring

Tighinn 'na chuartaig o'n ghrinneal  
Air slinnein Beinn Dórain.

*Coming eddying from the gravel  
on the shoulder-blade of Ben Dórain.*

To me the first equals the large visual and emotive effect of Byron's glimpse of the Alps:

I saw their thousand years of snow  
On high; their wide long lake below,  
And the blue Rhone in fullest flow.

And the second excels in exactness of visual impression, with accompanying rhythmic satisfaction, the most wonderful small image I can think of in Tennyson. When MacDonald talks of 'ràimh 'gan sniomh ann an achlaisean àrd thonn' there is such a powerful visual and physical effect that sensuousness can go no further: one can see and feel the oar almost breaking. But MacDonald too, like Macintyre, frequently makes the sound roll on further than the eye can follow, while Ross makes a curly golden head liquefy in glorious noise:

Gur bachlach dualach cas-bhuidh cuachach  
Càradh suaineis gruaig do chinn.

*Ringletted, wavy, yellow-wreathed, curly  
the twisty set of the hair of your head.*

Indeed, I feel that Ross, most of all, tends to achieve his effects almost completely through the sensuous medium of sound; but what effects they often are! Last year the young Lewis poet, Iain Crichton Smith, referred memorably to the 'infinite resonance that is in William Ross'; I think an admirable piece of criticism in a nutshell.

I am, however, dealing especially with sea imagery in 17th century poetry, too big a subject in itself. I think that two things mainly contribute to make the sea bulk even bigger than one would expect in Scottish Gaelic poetry. It is clear that for centuries the main focal point for the bards of Gaelic Scotland was the court of the Lord of the Isles, and after the decline of the Lordship of the Isles, the Campbells, MacKenzies, MacLeods, MacLeans could by no means be called inland powers. Then, because Gaelic has been preserved longer in the islands and on the west coast, more island and west coast poetry, especially of the more popular kind, has been preserved from oblivion. From the quality of the mainland poetry that has survived, it is quite obvious that it was in no way inferior to the island and coastland poetry, but the longer continuance of Gaelic in the islands and on the

west coast makes us have relatively more poetry in which the sea is prominent. Naturally the consciousness of the presence of the sea will vary, from a general feeling of its presence to a vivid detailed and intense sensuousness, but nearly always one is aware at least of the geographical setting. Sometimes it is only a passing glance at the geographical setting, as in the following examples:

Gun tiginn an taobh seo  
Dh'amharc Dhiùraidh á Sgarbaidh.

*That I should come to this place  
to look on Jura from Scarba.*

Cill Ma-Ruibhe fo sgéith a' chuain.  
*Kilmaree under the wing of the bay.*

Beir mo shoraidh thar chaol  
O nach cluinn iad mo ghlaodh.

*Bear my greeting over kyles  
since they will not hear my cry.*

Sgeula leat, a ghaoth a deas,  
Seirbhe do ghàir na 'n domblas,  
Gun fhuaim sìthe leat a steach  
Air chuan Sgìthe, mo léir chreach.

*You bring a tale, south wind,  
more bitter your speech than gall,  
no sound of peace (coming) in with you  
over the sea of Skye, my loss of losses.*

Tha do thalla gun smùid  
Fo charraig nan sùgh.

*Your hall is smokeless  
under the wave-beaten rock.*

Ri fuaim an taibh  
'S uaigneach mo ghean.

*At the sound of the (Western) sea  
sad and lonely my mood.*

Chì mi luingeas an Caol Ile  
Tighinn an coinneamh Cairistiona.

*I see ships in the Sound of Islay  
coming to meet Cairistiona.*

Doilleir dorcha air oidhche rèda  
Chàidh do bhàt thar Rudha Rònaidh,  
Dol troimh na caoil a null a Bhròchaill  
A dh'amharc air maighdean an òr-fhuil.

*Dim and dark on a frosty night  
your boat went past the head of Rona,  
going through the kyles over to Brochel  
to see the girl of the golden hair.*

But it is never quite the geographical setting alone. One senses nearly always the emotional charge behind the words: the sea setting may be quite neutral but it is difficult to feel it quite neutral in an example like:

Gu talla 'n fhir fhéil,  
Ceann-uidhe nan ceud,  
Cill Ma-Ruibhe fo sgéith a' chuain.

*To the hall of the generous one,  
destination of hundreds,  
Kilmaree under the wing of the bay.*

Note how the predominant auditory effect of this image, a great one in its way, is magically transformed to a visual effect in the last line. Obviously, Kilmaree was to Griogar Og MacGriogair a name to conjure with; one cannot imagine that the generosity of the Mac-kinnon chief was all that was to it; surely the beauty of the geographical setting — and Strathaird is wonderfully beautiful — has something to do with it.

I have begun with sea images that are as near emotional neutrality as a poetic image can be; indeed one of them could be regarded as not neutral but hostile. Mary MacLeod is lamenting that now her only music is the sound of the sea, not the pipe of the MacCrimmons:

Ri fuaim an taibh  
Is uaigneach mo ghean;  
Bha mis' uair nach b'e siod m'abhaist;  
Ach piob nuallanach mhór

Bheireadh buaidh air gach ceòl  
Nuair a ghluaist' i le meòir Phàdraig.

*At the sound of the sea  
sad and forlorn my mood,  
I was once when that was not my wont;  
but a great loud resonant pipe  
that would excel all music  
when it was moved by the fingers of Patrick.*

The resonance and onomatopoeia of the image belies the apparent implicit hostility: it as if the great sound of the sea, so briefly and imaginatively evoked, is yet inferior to the great music of Patrick. There is thus a subtle ambivalence about it, which is all the more emotive because of its reticence. Otherwise the image is a very good example of the evocative power of sound, in which all Gaelic poetry, and not least 17th century poetry, is peculiarly rich, and the whole contrast is well brought out by the rather beautiful and very evocative image of the 'sea-divided Gael' in the grim and powerful poem 'Mac Neachdainn an Dùin' which must be almost exactly contemporary with Mary MacLeod's 'Ri fuaim an taibh':

'S iomadh bàt agus long  
Tha le fonn a' dol thairis  
Eadar Eirinn an t-slàigh  
'S dùthaich bhòidheach Mhic Cailein.

*Many a boat and ship  
is cheerfully going over  
between Ireland of the host  
and the beautiful land of Mac Cailein.*

These lines are especially effective as a counterpoint to the evil passions of men and women which pervade this great and terrible poem.

There are, of course, hundreds of examples, especially in the popular poetry, of such images, in which the sea is mainly a briefly noted and, generally, emotionally neutral part of the environment; but one can never be too sure of the emotional neutrality or detachment, for the images are generally too beautiful in themselves to indicate indifference to the sea: a typical one is the beginning of the song 'Gura muladach sgith mi':

Gura muladach sgith mi  
'S mi liom fhìn 'san tìr aineol,

Anns an h-eileanan Diùrach,  
 'S mór mo dhùil ri dhol thairis.  
 Chì mi 'm bàta troimh'n chaolas,  
 Tha mo ghaol oirre dh'fhearaibh;  
 Tha mo leannan 'ga stiùireadh,  
 Lùb ùr a' chùil chlannaich,  
 Lùb ùr a' chùil chùbhraidh,  
 'S toigh liom fhìn do chaol mhala.

*Sorrowful and weary am I,  
 alone in a land of strangers,  
 in the islands of Jura,  
 how I expect to go over the sea!  
 I see the boat going through the kyles,  
 my love of men is on her,  
 my lover is steering her,  
 the strong young man of the thick hair,  
 the strong young man of the fragrant hair,  
 I like your thin eye-brow.*

To attribute indifference or neutrality in the face of the natural environment is a very dangerous thing, even in images when the sea is ostensibly only a thoroughfare for the beloved's ship or boat; even in those it is a road to a loved land, to 'dùthaich bhòidheach Mhic Cailein', or

. . . a null a Bhròchail,  
 A dh'amharc air maighdean an òr-fhuil.  
 . . . over to Brochel,  
 to see the girl of the golden hair.

To take a parallel example with mountain images: love of the mountains for their own sake is quite explicit in Duncan Macintyre and in Byron and in Western European poetry generally from about 1780 onwards, but round about 1600 it is no less unmistakable in the Gaelic poetry of Dòmhnall MacFhionnlaigh nan Dàn. Unlike Donnchadh Bàn and Byron, Dòmhnall MacFhionnlaigh does not, as far as I can remember, make a single overt declaration of his love of the mountains in his great poem, 'Oran na Comhachaig', but surely it is as instinct with unspoken love as 'Beinn Dórain' and the Third Canto of 'Childe Harold' are with declared love. As with the mountains, so with the sea. I think the imagery of 17th-century Gaelic poetry has the whole emotional gamut.

I have begun with images on the face of it emotionally neutral or as

near neutrality as can be, but I think that they alone (and there are hundreds, even thousands, of them in the literary and folk poetry of the 17th century) would indicate a sensitive awareness of the physical environment, and a great love, if not ostensibly of the sea itself, certainly of its islands and coastlands. Think of the vast number of references in poetry collected in Uist to the other Clan Ranald islands — Rum, Eigg, Canna; or in the mainland Clan Ranald poetry, to Uist itself.

A very natural corollary of this, especially in the earlier poetry of the 17th century, and in the poetry of the late 16th century, was the glorification of the chief's galley or galleys, and, in the poetry of the early 17th century especially, the images picturing the galley retain much of the traditional paraphernalia of the mediaeval court poetry, even the hyperboles about the masts of gold and silver, and about the well of wine in the stern and the well of fresh water in the other end. In most poems of that type the sea is merely the setting or thoroughfare, and the galley might almost be a state barge on a river, so much is the stress on the hyperbolic embellishments and so little on the struggle with the elements. Probably the most famous of all Scottish Gaelic poems of this type is the 16th-century 'Tàladh Dhòmhnail Ghuirn'. In far more poems the sea is evoked as a worthy foe or at least a splendid battleground for hardy heroes and tough ships, and the images are not hyperbolic conventions but sensuously and acutely realised. Such images are notable in late 16th-century poetry, as in the *iorram* in honour of Iain Og MacSheumais, the noted MacDonald warrior killed in Mull in 1585, and the father of the still more famous Dòmhnall Mac Iain Mhic Sheumais:

M'eudail a dh'fhearaibh nan àlach,  
Nuair a dheigheadh tu gu d' bhàta,  
Siod an obair nach biodh càrr dhut:  
Bhiodh do ghillean anns an àlach  
Bhiodh tu fhéin air stiùir do bhàta,  
Fear curanta treubhach làidir.

*My treasure of the oar-bank men,  
when you went to your boat,  
that would be no wrong work for you:  
your young men would be on the oar-bank,  
you yourself at the rudder of your boat,  
a brave strong man as your people were.*

Or again:



M'eudail a dh'fhearaibh na seòltachd,  
Nuair a shineadh tu ri seòladh  
Ghlacadh i eadar na sgòide,  
Cneadan a cléithe bu cheòl dhut,  
Stiùir 'na déidh 's fear treubhach eòlach  
'Ga stiùireadh 'san iùl bu chòir dhi.

*My treasure of the men of skill,  
when you began to sail her  
she was held between the sheet-ropes,  
the groans of her oarbank were your music,  
a rudder behind her and an experienced man, brave like his people,  
steering her in the direction that was right for her.*

The emphasis here is still on the stout ship and heroic sailors, not on the sea itself; but as the century progressed and the poetry became more popular, the environment is more stressed, often with brief powerful evocation:

Fliuch an oidhche nochd 's gur fuar i,  
Ma thug Clann Nèill druim a' chuain orr,  
Luchd nan ro-seòl 's nan long luatha,  
'S nan ulagan cruinne cruaidhe,  
'S nam brataichean dearga 's uaine,  
'S nan claidheamhna geura cruadhach  
Nach laigh smal orr' anns na truaillean.

*Wet this night and very cold,  
if Clan Neil have taken to the ridge of the sea,  
the men of the great sails and the swift ships,  
and the hard round pulley-blocks,  
and the red and green banners,  
and the sharp steel swords  
on which no stain lies in the scabbards.*

The sense of heroic struggle is, however, more explicit in the imagery of others, where the evocation of environment is brief and powerful, as in one of the songs on the death at sea of Iain Garbh Mac Ghille Chaluum of Raasay:

Bha mi uair nach do shaoil mi  
Ged is faoin bhith 'ga agairt  
Gun rachadh do bhàthadh  
Gu bràth air cuan farsainn  
Fhad 's a dh' fhanadh a stiùir dhi  
'S tu air cùl a buill bheairte

Dh'aindeoin ànradh nan dùilean  
 Agus ùpraid na mara;  
 'S fhad 's a dh'fhanadh ri chéile  
 A cuid dhealgan 's a h-acfhuinn  
 'S a b'urrainn dhi géilleadh  
 Do d' làimh thréin air an aigeann.  
 Ach 's i 'n doineann bha iargalt  
 Le gaoith 'n iar-thuaith 's cruaidh fhlasan,  
 Thog i 'mhuir 'na mill dhùghorm,  
 Smuais i 'n iùbhrach 'na sadan.

*I was once when I did not think,  
 though it is vain to claim it,  
 that you would ever be  
 drowned on an open sea,  
 while the rudder stuck to her  
 and you behind the ropes of her tackle,  
 in spite of the distress of the elements  
 and the uproar of the sea;  
 while there remained together  
 her block-pins and tackle  
 and she could respond  
 to your strong hand on the ocean;  
 but it was the surly forbidding tempest  
 with north-west wind and hard showers,  
 it raised the sea in dark-blue hills  
 and smashed the galley in little fragments.*

This poem has been ascribed, apparently without much reason, to Mary MacLeod, while there is a poem on the same theme undoubtedly by Mary. In Mary's own poem the picture of struggle is briefer but strongly evocative:

Mo bheud 's mo bhròn  
 Mar dh'éirich dhò:  
 Muir beucach mór  
 A' leum mu d' bhòrd,  
 Thu fhéin 's do sheòid,  
 Nuair reub ur seòl,  
 Nach d'fhaod sibh treòir  
 A chaitheamh oirr.

*My loss and pain  
 what his fate was:  
 a great roaring sea  
 leaping about your board:*

*that you and your heroes,  
when your sail was torn,  
that you could not lay  
your strength on it!*

Of the two, Mary MacLeod's 'great roaring sea leaping about your board' has greater originality; powerful as the imagery of the other poem is, it has not quite the startling freshness of the great Mary's two lines:

Muir beucach mór  
A' leum mu d' bhòrd.

In both, the auditory and the visual is combined; but the anonymous poem seems to me to have double movement: of a ship going strongly, and then of a ship overwhelmed. Mary's has only the brief moment of the overwhelming, but with a strangely vivid force. Both seem to me to have a very strong tactile sensuousness.

Indeed tactile and dynamic sensuousness is very remarkable in 17th-century sea imagery. A dynamic sensuousness is generally just another name for a realisation of some movement in sound and rhythm. The *locus classicus* of such in Gaelic sea poetry is Alexander MacDonald's 18th-century poem, the 'Birlinn of Clan Ranald', but the same quality is splendidly achieved in much 17th-century poetry, as in two famous ones: Iain Lom's 'Iorram Dharaich' and Murchadh Mór Mac Mhic Mhurchaidh's 'Làir Dhonn'.

There is evidence that one may have suggested the other, as both have the horse-ship contrast, but MacKenzie's poem is more personal, probably more acutely felt than MacDonald's, which is so much the glorification of the chief and his ship, in the older style. Still Iain Lom's poem, too, contains brief and splendid evocations, images of splendid visual and auditory impact:

Cha bu mharcach eich leumnaich  
A bhuinnigeadh geall réis ort  
Nuair a thogadh tu bréid os cionn sàile.

Nuair a thogadh tu tonnag  
Air cuan meanmnach nan dronnag  
'S iomadh gleann ris an cromadh i h-eàrrach.

Nuair a shuidheadh fear stiùir oirr'  
An àm bhith fàgail na dùthcha  
Bu mhear ruith a' chuain dhùghlais fo h-eàrrlainn.

Cha b'iad na lucharmuinn mheanbha  
Bhiodh m'a cupail ag èaladh  
Nuair a dh'èireadh mór shoirbheas le bàrlinn;

Ach na fuirbirnich threubhach  
As deise dh'iomradh 's a dh'èigheadh  
Bheireadh tulg an tùs cléith air ràmh bràghad.

Nuair a dh'fhalaichte na bùird di  
Is nach faighte làn siùil di  
Bhiodh luch-tighe 'sior lùb air a h-àlaich.

'S iad gun eagal gun éislean  
Ach ag freagradh d'a chéile  
Nuair thigeadh muir bheucach 's gach àird orr'.

Dol timchioll Rudha na Caillich  
Bu ro-mhath siubhal a daraich  
Ag gearradh shrutha gu cairidh Chaoil Acuinn.

Dol gu uidhe chuain fhiadhaich  
Mar bu chubhaidh dhut iarraidh  
Gu Uibhist bheag riabhach nan cràghiadh.

Cha bu bhurchag air meirg i  
Fhuair a treachladh le h-eirbheirt  
Nuair a thigeadh mór shoirbheas le gàbhadh;

Ach an Dubh-Chnòideartach riabhach,  
Luchdmhor àrd-ghuailleach dhìonach,  
Gur lionmhor lann iarainn m'a h-èarraich.

*It is not the rider of a leaping horse  
that would win a wager of a race against you  
when you raised a sail above the sea.*

*When you raised a mantle  
on the spirited ridgy sea,  
to many a glen she would lower her keel.*

*When a steersman sat on her  
in the time of leaving the land  
the run of the dark-grey sea was gleeful about her stern.*

*They were no puny manikins  
who crouched about her shrouds  
when a great wind rose with high seas;*

*but the heroic giants  
expert in rowing and shouting  
who would bend the fore oar at the head of an oarbank.*

*When her boards were hidden  
and her sail could not fill  
the household men always bent on her oarbank.*

*Fearless and hale  
responding to each other  
when a roaring surge came on them from any airt.*

*Going round the Headland of the Cailleach  
her oakwood moved surely  
splitting the current towards the yare of Kyleakin.*

*Going on the voyage of the stormy sea  
as it was your way to desire  
to little brindled Uist of the sheldrakes.*

*No little rusted smutty one  
battered by her movement  
when a great wind rose with its danger;  
but the brindled Black One of Knoydart  
capacious, high-shouldered, water-tight,  
with many an iron rove about her keel.*

Murchadh Mór's poem is less consistently splendid than Iain Lom's, but now and again there is a touch in it of greater originality and subtlety, something of a specialised nautical delight:

*Cha b'ionann 's mo shaoi  
Ri grinneas na gaoith  
Gun bhioran r'a taoibh 's i folbh.*

*Not so my brave one  
with the wind that was right,  
with no stab in her side as she went.*

And again:

*Chan iarradh i moll  
No fodar no pronn  
Ach sadadh nan tonn r'a sròin.*

*She would not ask for chaff  
or fodder or mash  
but the spray of the waves against her nose.*

It seems to me that the shorter phrases of Murchadh's strophes with their ultimate stresses are finer rhythmically even than Iain Lom's,

which is saying much, but Iain Lom's visual sensuousness is better, except for one or two touches where Murchadh seems to hit something beyond Iain Lom's reach, something indicative of a greater personal knowledge and a more personal reaction.

Imagery expressive of heroic struggle, triumph and joy is very common in all 17th century sea poetry, though it does not bulk so big in many single poems as in Iain Lom's 'Iorram Dharaich' and Murchadh Mór's 'Làir Dhonn'. It is not, however, as common as the sea imagery in the poems that are primarily laments for the drowned. There are so many of them and so many of them are wonderful poems that it is impossible to deal with all the types of imagery in this kind of poem alone. Very frequently those images are sharply sensuous and piercingly poignant.

The image of the person looking out to sea is common, looking for a boat or for the right boat. One of the four or five poems extant on the death, in 1671, of Iain Garbh of Raasay begins:

Seall a mach, an e 'n là e,  
'S mi ri feitheamh na faire;  
Leis an luasgan th'air m'aigne  
Chan eil an cadal 'na thàmh dhomh.

*Look outside — is it day? —  
as I wait for the horizon;  
with the unrest of my spirit  
sleep is no rest for me.*

Indeed, the image of looking out to sea, especially at day-break, sometimes seems to indicate tragedy and disquiet not necessarily connected with drowning. In a most poignant lament for the death of children not by drowning, a mother says:

A nighean ud thall  
A bheil thu t'fhaireachadh?  
Seall a mach,  
A bheil a' ghealach ann,  
No 'm faod am bàta  
'Taobh a theannadh ruinn.

*Girl over there,  
are you awake?  
Look out to see  
if there is a moon,  
or if the boat can  
come near us.*

In this poem, both in Mr Craig's version and as my brother Calum got it, there is no apparent connection between the boat and the death of the children. The looking out for the boat seems an image of disquiet and anguish, perhaps of a despairing seeking for relief or distraction. Whatever it is, it is very moving and even haunting in its context. Commoner, of course, is the image of this type:

Cha tig bàta mu'n rudha  
Nach tig snigh' air mo ghruaidh.

*No boat comes round the headland  
but a wetness comes on my cheek.*

Or the person may be watching from the eminence, the bare cold eminence, 'o'n tulaich luim fhuair'. In the poem found in Strath in Skye and containing the Strath and Mull name Mac Sìri, the watching image has a marvellous beauty:

Ach am faic mi seòl bréid-gheal  
Latha gréine 'sa' chuan,  
Ach am faic mi siùil bhàna  
Tigh'nn gu h-àrd air bhàrr stuadh.

*So that I may see a ketch-white sail  
on a sunny day on the sea,  
so that I may see white sails  
coming high on the top of waves.*

Richest of all in metaphor are the images of the drowned bodies, as in the next examples:

'S duilich liom do chùl clannach  
Anns an fheamainn 'ga luadh.

*Sad, sad am I that your thick hair  
is being waulked in the sea-weed!*

'S mise 'bhean bhochd  
A th'air mo sgaradh  
Mur h'e Leódhas mhór ur cala;  
Mas e 's bobhstair dhuibh a' ghaineamh,  
Mas e 'n t-slaodach 's aodach-tarruing,  
Mas e na sgairbh ur luchd faire.

*I am the miserable woman  
who is cut to the heart*

*if great Lewis is not your harbour;  
if the sand is your bolster,  
if the serrated seaweed is your pall,  
if the cormorants are your watchmen.*

Fhaoileag bheag thu, fhaoileag mhar' thu,  
Fhaoileag a shnàmhas gach cala,  
Thig a nall is innis naidheachd,  
Càit an d'fhàg thu na fir gheala?  
Dh'fhàg mi iad 'san eilean mhara,  
Cùl ri cùl is iad gun anail,  
*Beul ri beul, a' sìleadh fala.*  
Gair e mise th' air mo sgaradh  
Ma tha ur leabaidh anns an fheamainn,  
Mas e na ròin ur luchd faire,  
Na reultan àrd ur coinnlean geala  
'S ur ceòl fìdhle gaoir na mara.

*Little gull, gull of the sea,  
gull that swims every harbour,  
come over here and tell a story,  
where have you left the finest of men?  
I left them in the island in the sea,  
back to back and without breath,  
mouth to mouth, dripping blood.  
It is I who am heart-broken  
if your bed is in the seaweed,  
if the seals are your watchmen,  
the high stars your white candles,  
and your violin music the scream of the sea.*

Obviously many poems contain variants of the same image. The candle metaphor of the penultimate line has a finely detailed variant in one of the 'Iain Garbh' poems:

Tha na staimh dhut 'nan lannir,  
Ann an clachan gun tràghadh.  
*The sea tangles are your torches  
in an ebbless graveyard.*

There are so many great laments for the drowned in Gaelic poetry, and so many of those that can be historically placed are of the 17th century that is tempting to ascribe to that century some that may be far earlier and many that are later. It may be said that the characteristic style is 17th century, even in a poem like 'Ailein duinn,



shiùbhlainn leat', which is evidently of the 18th century. There is in it, however, no image or expression that could not be of the 17th century, in fact that is not paralleled in poems demonstrably of the 17th century, except perhaps:

M'achanaich-sa, Rìgh na Cathrach,  
Gun mi dhol an ùir no'n anart,  
An talamh toll no àite falaich,  
Ach 'sa bhad 'san deach thu, Ailein,  
Ged a b'ann 'san liadhaig fheamann,  
No am broinn na muice mara.

*My supplication, King on the Throne,  
that I do not end up in dust or linen,  
in a hole in the ground or in a hiding place,  
but in the place where you went, Allan,  
though it were in the sea-tangle leaves,  
or in the belly of the whale.*

Laments for the victims of the sea are very common, but in one famous poem the speaker is the victim, the famous "S i 'bhean iadaich thug a'n tràigh mi", a poem localised in many places from the Butt of Lewis to Kerry. I imagine that this song is older than the 17th century, but I think it took its present form in the great century and a half between 1600 and 1750. It is famous for its poignancy of feeling and sharp intense visual imagery:

Mo chòta bàn am bàrr an t-sàile,  
Mo chuailean donn feadh na làthchadh.

*My petticoat on the top of the brine  
my brown hair amongst the soft sea-shore clay.*

There is a most intense visual sensuousness combined with piercing feeling in the unavailing cry:

Sin do chas dhomh, sin do làmh dhomh.  
*Stretch your foot to me, stretch your hand to me.*

I cannot think of any other poem where the speaker is the victim in such circumstances, nor can I think of any other poem of greater poignancy.

Gaelic folklore ascribed to the sea the counterpart of everything on land, and thus one expects poems of fairy fantasy to have their

counterparts in like sea poetry, but, unless I am much mistaken, there are not nearly so many poems of the supernatural on sea as on land. One thinks of the many fairy poems, as, for example, 'A phiùthrag 's a phiuthar', 'A Mhór, a ghaoil', 'Fhuair mi lorg an dóbhrain duinn', and one cannot think of nearly as many poems of the supernatural in or on the sea. Yet the old prose stories, with their verse runs, had their sea monsters, such as 'A' Mhuileartach', and in many others the cave by the sea is the scene of weird events, as in the story of Conall Mac Rìgh Cruachain. Is it that the prose tale normally enshrines more archaic traditions, or what is it? For example, there are many prose accounts of the work of witches causing the death of Iain Garbh Mac Ghille Chaluim, but in none of the five poems on his death extant is there any mention of witches, though there is a tradition that it was the chief witch concerned in his death who made at least one of the laments, when she repented. She had been his foster-mother but had been bribed to drown him by the jealous MacDonald chief. It is a fact that by the 17th century the popular poem is less extravagant in imagination than is the prose tale. The most notable example of the supernatural theme I can think of in poetry that looks like the 17th century is the strange mermaid song:

Gur e mise chunnaic iongnadh:  
 Sa' mhadainn mhoich 's mi 'g iarraidh chaorach,  
 Chunnacas gruagach chuailein chraobhaich  
 'S i 'na suidh air sgeir 'na h-aonar;  
 Trusgan gorm oirr' air son aodaich  
 A measg maoraich èalaidh na tràghad.  
 Ach cha b'fhada sìod a' caochladh:  
 Thog i 'ceann 's gun d'rinn i straonadh;  
 Sheall i ormsa thar a guailne,  
 'S och mo thruaighe, mar a thachair:  
 Chaidh i 'n riochd na beiste maoile  
 Shnàmhas an cuan mar an fhaoileig,  
 Sgoilteas an tonn air gach taobh dhìth  
 Troimh Chaol Mhuile, troimh Chaol Ile,  
 Troimh Chaol Othasaidh Mhic a Phiotha;  
 'S chàidh i sin air a fiaradh  
 Gu eilean riabhach na gaineimh,  
 Gu tìr fharsainn nam fear fialaidh  
 'S an sgeir mhóir nach gluais a' ghaillionn.

*It is I who saw a wonder:  
 one early morning, looking for sheep,  
 I saw a girl with flowing hair  
 sitting on a sea-rock alone;*

*with a blue mantle as clothing  
among the creeping shell-fish of the shore.  
But that was not long in changing:  
she raised her head and was startled;  
she looked at me over her shoulder,  
and — alas, alas, the thing that happened! —  
she took the shape of the blunt-headed monster  
that swims the sea like a seagull,  
that splits the wave on each side of her  
through the Kyle of Mull, through the Kyle of Islay,  
through Kyle Oronsay of MacPhee;  
and then she went veering to the brindled island of the sand,  
to the wide land of the generous men  
and the great rock unmoved by tempest.*

It is true that the last six lines I have quoted are heard in versions of other poems, such as 'Moch Di-luain, ghabh i 'n cuan'. If the poem can be taken as a piece as I have heard it, it is a good example of contrasted imagery, the small detail of 'maorach èalaidh na tràghad' standing against the great sweeps of the course through the famous kyles and to the large vagueness of 'tìr fharsainn nam fear fialaidh' and the 'sgeir mhór nach gluais a' ghaillionn'. Is it Ailsa Craig or 'Roc á Barraidh fo thuinn'? Is the 'tìr fharsainn' Ireland or the fabulous Isles of the West?

In his famous and beautiful essay 'Duatharachd na mara' the late Dr Kenneth MacLeod concentrates on the supernatural in sea imagery, and many of the verse examples he gives would be better placed in the 17th century stylistically than in any other century, as for example:

Chunnacas fearra-long mhór a raoir,  
Solus oillt is éig 'na crann,  
'S thuig mi gun robh m'aon mhac òg  
Fuar fo spòig a' chuain ud thall.

*I saw last night a great (?) phantom ship,  
a light of horror and death in her mast,  
and I understood that my one young son  
was cold under the paw of yonder sea.*

There is no doubt, however, that the origin of this supernatural imagery is far older than the 17th century, although many verses quoted probably took their final form in the 17th century. At the beginning of the same essay, Kenneth MacLeod notes the greater intensity of sea-imagery than most other kinds of imagery and puts it

down mainly to the folk nature of most sea poems, saying that the known bards generally avoided the sea, and implying that in the known bards intensity was frequently lost in excessive wordiness and other rhetorical effects, but he also finds a greater intensity in the very nature of sea poetry. In general, I agree, especially with his first thesis, the superior intensity of what is loosely called 'folk poetry', and I think there is something in the second thesis too. Besides the phantom ship, the legendary monsters, the seal, swan and 'Tir fo Thuinn', Dr Macleod is dealing with themes and images of very great antiquity; in general, the supernatural is older than the 17th century, and I do not think that its imagery is characteristic especially of the 17th century. Still, the 17th century is so great a watershed in Gaelic poetry that almost everything that is older than it, at any rate in orally transmitted poetry, has been linguistically modified during the 17th century.

Most of the poems I have mentioned are in some way or other primarily poems of the sea. What of sea imagery in poems only remotely connected with the sea, or not at all connected as far as we can tell? One would expect the sea image in such poems to be less detailed, less exact, and more conventional, and that is generally the case. About 1600 'Oran na Comhachaig', a poem of the mountains and of hunting, has the converse of the antithesis in Iain Lom's and Murchadh Mór's poems quoted:

Cha mhinig a bha mi 'g éisteachd  
 Ri séitrich na muice mara,  
 Ach 's tric a chuala mi móran  
 De chrònanaich an daimh allaidh.

*I was not often listening  
 to the blowing of the whale,  
 but I often heard much  
 of the bellowing of the wild stag.*

Following closely is the famous contrast, in which an implied delight in the sea is said to be excelled by the greater joy of the hunt:

Is aoibhinn an obair an t-sealg,  
 Aoibhinn a meanmna 's a beachd;  
 Gur binne a h-aighear 's a fonn,  
 Na long is i a' dol fo bheairt.

*A joyous work the hunt,  
 joyous its spirit and perception,  
 more melodious its zest and mood  
 than a ship going under its rigging.*

is the implied joy in the ship an individual touch, or is it a measure of the prestige of the ship in Gaelic poetry before 1600? The conventional sea images are fairly common, the flowing tide of prosperity, and the ebb tide of adversity. Pòl Crùbach says of the ship of Iain Mór Mac Leòid in 1649:

Gur mór an sruth-tràghaidh  
Thàinig air fir Innse Gall.

*How great the ebb-tide  
that has come on the men of Innse Gall!*

1 Eachunn Bacach says of the disaster of Inverkeithing in 1651:

Och, a Mhuire, mo chràdh  
Mu Chloinn Ghill-Eain nam bàrc,  
Mo chreach mar tha 'n tràghadh seachad oirbh.

*O Mary, my pain  
about Clan Gillean of the ships,  
it is my ruin that the ebb has gone past them.*

1 the Ciaran Mabach's famous elegy on the death of his brother, Iain Mór of Sleat, in 1678, the sea tragedy is a metaphor for overwhelming death:

Ormsa rug an t-anrath cuain,  
Chuaidh mo riaghailt uam air chall;  
Mo sgeul duilich 's mo chàs cruaidh:  
'S nì buan gun bhuinnig a th' ann.

Dhlomsa thug an t-eug a' chis  
Is léir dhut, a Rìgh, mar atà;  
Ormsa rug gàir-thonn nan sian,  
Gun sìth ach dòruinn gu bàs.

Cha robh stiùir no seòl no slat  
No ball beirte a bha ri crann  
Nach do thruis an aon uair uainn:  
Mo thruaigh-sa, an fhras a bh'ann.

*I am seized by the distress at sea,  
my compass is lost to me;  
my sad tale and my hard extreme:  
it is a lasting thing without gain.*

*Death has taken its toll of me,  
you see, o King, how things are;*

*the roaring wave of the elements has seized me,  
with no peace but only sorrow till death.*

*There was no rudder, sail or yard  
nor rope of tackle to a mast  
that the one hour did not sweep from me:  
my misery, the shower it was!*

The Ciaran Mabach's imagery is obviously a metaphorical extension of what is, on the whole, rather conventional, but expressed in stately and restrained language, with a noble kind of poignancy. But scattered throughout the folk poetry are sea images, sometimes of startling originality. In a version of the famous 'Chailin òig, an stiùir thu mi?' among the many similes for the fickleness of women we find this one:

*Luaithe an aigneadh na 'ghaoth Mhàrtainn,  
No muir-tèachd air leacan bàite.*

*Swifter their mind than the Martinmas wind  
or jelly-fish on flagstones under the sea.*

This seems to me a complex and subtle image. Sometimes the forlorn condition is symbolised by the 'eilean mara'. Indeed the separation from kith and kin and hereditary splendour is again and again, either literally or figuratively, placed in such an island:

*Muladach mi 's mi air m'aineol,  
'S mi 'm aonar an eilean mara,  
Gun chuideachd ach dithis leanabh —  
Caitriona bheag agus Anna —  
'S na geòidh fhiadhaich a' dol seachad;  
Faodaidh iad sin 's a bhith fallain:  
Tha mo shealgair donn fo'n talamh.*

*Sad and homesick in a land of strangers,  
alone in an island in the sea,  
with no company but two young children —  
little Catriona and Anna —  
and the wild geese passing;  
they may do that and be unharmed:  
my brown-haired hunter is under the ground.*

In the famous song to Dòmhnall Mac Iain 'ic Sheumais, Nic Còiseam bewails that he is immured in Eriskay, 'eilean ìosal eadar Niall agus Ailean', 'eilean ciar gun fhiar gun fhasgadh' — perhaps just

an expression of resentment that the great MacDonald warrior did not get his due from the chief of Sleat, a feeling noticeable in other traditions, but it is very much in line with the general attitude to the 'eilean mara', a poor forlorn place, often a symbol for forlorn separation, the last place. Hence it is frequently the place one would share with a lover, the test of great love. Thus it occurs among the imaginative hyperboles of the great song of Seathan:

Chaithris mi là am bàrr nan cranna leat,  
Chaithris mi tràth 'san tùrr fheamann leat,  
Chaithris mi oidhche air sgeir mhara leat,  
Chaithris, a ghaoil, is liom cha b'aithreach e,  
Mi an cirb do bhreacain bhallaich,  
Siaban nan tonn sìor dhol tharainn.

*I was awake for a day in the tree-tops with you.  
I was awake for a time in the sea-wrack with you,  
I was awake for a night on a sea-rock with you,  
I was, my love, and I was not sorry,  
in the fold of your speckled plaid,  
the drift of the waves the whole time going over us.*

Sometimes, however, the associations are the converse: the 'eilean mara' is not necessarily a bad place, only a strange land of strangers. Thus it is in the poem containing one of the most haunting evocations of the Outer Isles in poetry:

Seòladh leat gu tìr a' mhurain:  
B'àird a chluinntè fuaim na tuinne,  
Fuaim an t-siabain ris a' mhuran.

*Sailing with you to the land of the marram:  
loud the noise of the sea,  
sound of the sand-drift against the marram.*