

MODERNISING THE ISLANDS: IRISH AND SCOTTISH GAELIC FICTIONS

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Abstract: The islands of Ireland and Scotland are geographically peripheral to the mainlands. Yet they occupy a significant part of both literatures. This may well be because they are perceived as being the least Anglicised, the least dominated by the cultural beasts from the east. For most of the last century this was certainly true. The Irish and Gaelic island literature of both countries was for the most part documentary rather than imaginative during that time. This is not to say that it was not sifted through powerful and individual minds, but just that they did not set forth to invent new or alternative worlds. They are often seen, with a wee little bit and often a dollop of justification, as social documents. As these islands have become as much part of what we call the modern world as anywhere else, writers have been forced to do something else rather than just describe. They had to use their imaginations. This essay examines this journey.

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Let us talk about islands.

They loom large and inevitable in any discussion of Irish and Scottish literature. They also loom small in geographical cultural discussions as places apart. They can be apart for many reasons, the most obvious for not being part of the main, being on the edge. This marginality can be seen as romantic and backward on the one hand, or being exciting and primitive on the other, and/or being both authentic and/or barbaric depending on what way someone wants to look at it.

As places apart with limited populations they have had a greater impact on Irish and Scottish literatures than their size should warrant. John Millington Synge's *The Aran Islands* (1907) made an impact on Anglo-Irish literature at the height of the Irish revival and the islands inspired some of his greatest plays. Liam Ó Flaithearta (Liam O'Flaherty), a native of Aran, wrote both lovingly and savagely of his own place in novels, short stories, and poetry in both Irish and English. Brendan Behan, although a Dubliner through and through, was inspired by both the Blasket Islands and Aran. One could argue that island life was the most important theme in the works of Máirtín Ó Direáin, who was a looming figure in Irish-language poetry for much of the twentieth century. A recent novel by Tadhg Mac Dhonnagáin *Madame Lazare* (2021) uses island life as a background to a story of exile, terror, mystery, and the Holocaust. Just about every writer of Scottish Gaelic in modern times has an island connection to such an extent that we would struggle to find pure mainlanders in the broad canon.

There were 34,219 people living on 24 offshore islands in Ireland according to the census of 1841. The latest census of 2016 records 8,756, only 0.13% percent of the population, and this includes islands with a bridge connecting them to the mainland, like Achill Island, or maybe Cobh Island close to Cork city which could be reached with a hop, a step and a jump before a bridge was constructed in the eighteenth century. Scottish islands, on the other hand, of which there are 93 inhabited ones, have a population of 103,000, which amounts to just over 2% of the population.¹ So, we are not comparing like with like, and do not pretend to.

On the other hand, the islands of Scotland and of Ireland have often been seen as the repository and well of the purest and most unsullied forms of the Irish and Gaelic languages, and thus, as a kind of ideal source for the best, most perfect, least corrupted and unanglicised version of speech. The bishop of Cork, writing to Eamon de Valera, argued in 1937 that the islands "should be saved for the nation."² Most of the prominent islands of Ireland, Aran Galway, Arranmore Donegal, Tory, and Cape Clear are still Irish-speaking, or partly so, just as many of the important Scottish islands on the west coast are still Gaelic-speaking or largely so.

And as we know, many of the books seen as classics of Irish or of Gaelic, upheld as examples of uncorrupted prose, untainted by the whiff of a puff of a stink of outside influences, come from the islands. I refer, obviously, to the great autobiographies of the Blasket Islands, or to *Saoghal a' Treobhaiche* (The Life of a

¹ Diarmuid Ferriter, *On the Edge: Ireland's Off-shore Islands: A Modern History* (London: Profile Books, 2020) 3-4.

² Ferriter, *On the Edge* 6.

Ploughman, 1972) by Angus McLellan or more accurately Aonghus Beag mac Aonghuis 'ic Eachainn Mac 'ill 'Ialain, or *A' Suathadh ri Iomadh Rubha* (Touching on Many Points, 1973) by Aonghas Caimbeul.

The big problem with these books often was that while the language was perfect, poetic, pristine, the life as described was poor, primitive, and piss-miserable. The contrast of what islands might mean to various people can be seen in Dr Johnson's trip to the inner Hebrides in 1773, where he said that on the one hand the people lived an "antiquated" life, and were often "of peculiar appearance" (although he said this without irony when we think about himself), and on the other hand that the religion of Iona "advances us in the dignity of human beings," and that "Iona may be sometime again the instructress of the west (western regions)."³

The artistic challenge is, how to turn the admittedly wonderful language, the child of a changing culture, into a vehicle for describing a different kind of life, or to put it another way, how to modernise life in these erstwhile so-called out-of-the-way places while retaining something of the flavour of their distinctive island ambience?

The first generation of these books was not a problem. They were autobiographical. They claimed to describe life just as it was. Tomás Ó Criomhthain boasted that he invented nothing.⁴ Whether others did or not is a separate question. But they are not novels. They are not in the business of creating fictional worlds. And again, while I do not want to minimise the differences between Scottish and Irish island fiction – and they are many – there are striking similarities between their depictions of premodern life, customs, and mores.

I will give short brief examples. In Tomás Ó Criomhthain's great *An tOileánach* (The Islander, 1929), he is introduced to his wife on one page, marries her on the next, she gives birth to ten children on the same page, and dies on the opposite leaf.⁵ While this might seem like cruel male indifference, we find that Catríona NicNeill from Barra in her *Mo Bhrògan Ùra* (My New Shoes, 1992) discovers that it was time for her to get married, just like that – "Aig deireadh na bliadhna 1940 bha dùil agam pòsadh" [at the end of the year 1940, I felt I should get married], and she mentions a man whom she knew from her island since she was a young

³ Ferriter, *On the Edge* 11, 12.

⁴ Tomás Ó Criomhthain, *An tOileánach*, ed. An Seabhadh (Dublin, Clólucht an Talbóidigh, 1929) 263.

⁵ Tomás Ó Criomhthain, *An tOileánach* 161-63. The more recent definitive edition edited by Seán Ó Coileáin (2002) is even worse. His wife's death is only referred to in Appendix 2, and that is just because it appeared in the first edition.

girl: “Bha an soitheach air a robh e ‘na bhosan ri tighinn ar ais mun am sin.” [The boat on which he was a bosun was coming back around this time.]⁶ That’s about it. He vanishes from view just as quickly as he appeared. Ealasaid Chaimbeul is even more blunt. In her *Air mo Chuairt* (My Journey, 1982) she announces: “Sann thainig e nis fainear dhomh pòsadh, oir bha mi suas am bliadhnachan.” [I noticed it was now time for me to get married, as I was getting on in years.]⁷ No wooing here rough or smooth, no expensive dinners in a fancy restaurant.

This ‘traditional’ view of marriage is common to all these autobiographies. They are not riveting love stories. Cupid does not draw back his bow. There is a classic account in Peig Sayers’s autobiography when she is working as a servant girl in Dingle. Her father arrives unexpectedly one day and announces that he has found a man for her to marry:

Níor mhór an mhoill an cleamhnas úd a dhéanamh, faraoid. Ní raibh ann ach “Téanam” agus “Táim sásta.” Tháinig m’athair chugam anall.
“Tóg suas do cheann,” ar seisean, “an raghaidh tú don Oileán?”

[That match didn’t take long to arrange. It amounted to “Let’s go” and “I’m happy.” My father came over to me.

“Lift up your head,” he said, “will you go to the Island?”]⁸

She then said that whatever he wanted she was happy with as well.⁹ I can imagine the reaction of one of my daughters if I proclaimed that I had found them a man!

Whatever we understand as modernity is not like that, as we know. Our question is, how does the writer treat the irruption of this ‘modernity’ into this traditional life... and I am using these words with great looseness. How is island life depicted through more recent lenses than that of direct biographical narrative account?

It is an oversimplification, of course, to totally divorce the autobiography and the novel. A very early novel *Eachtraí Mara Phaidí Pheadair as Toraigh* (The Sea Adventures of Paidí Pheadair from Tory) by Séamus Mac a’ Bhaird, himself a Tory

⁶ Catriona NicNéill, *Mo Bhrògan Ùra: Sgeulachd a Beatha Fhéin, ann am Barraigh, aig an Iasgach, an Glaschu ‘s an Sasainn* (Glasgow: Gairm Publishing, 1992) 69. All the translations from Irish or Scottish Gaelic in this article are my own.

⁷ Ealasaid Chaimbeul, *Air mo Chuairt* (Stornoway: Acair 1982) 38. I have given an account of these autobiographies in Alan Titley “Ravelling Narratives: Irish and Scottish Life Stories Compared,” in *Ulster and Scotland 1600-2000: History, Language and Identity*, ed. William Kelly and John R. Young (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004) 161-70.

⁸ Peig Sayers, *Peig* (Dublin: Comhlacht Oideachais na hÉireann, 1970 [1936]) 124.

⁹ Sayers, *Peig* 125.

islander, is a case in point. We are not certain when it was first written, but it appears that he wrote a version of it at the very end of the nineteenth century, and revised it sometime in the 1920s but it was only published for the first time four years ago, and reads much more like a fictional life story of a sailor who wandered the world.¹⁰ It is strikingly similar to the life of John MacLeod, edited by Calum MacFhearghuis, titled *Suilleabhan* (1983) as the protagonist was given a nickname after the great Irish-American boxer, John L. Sullivan. And, of course, Muiris Ó Súilleabháin's *Fiche Blian ag Fás* (Twenty Years A-Growing, 1933) could equally be treated as a novel since genres often merge depending on how you want to read them.

The first Gaelic novel I ever read from cover to cover was Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn / Iain Crichton Smith's *An t-Aonaran* (The Loner, 1976). I had intended translating it into Irish, but I was told that somebody else was doing it already. Somebody else is still doing it already. It is a beautifully simple account of how a stranger, the loner, the individual, the *aonaran*, comes to live, or maybe just to visit, an island community and how his presence completely disrupts its way of life, simply by being there. He is, we are told, like a shadow across the village. Different people invest their dreams, or hopes, or failures in this man who resides in a tent on the edge of the community. Even though he never speaks in the novel, and we don't know anything about him, it is all about him and the way he has punctured the way of life of what Máirtín Ó Cadhain used to call "the local organic community."¹¹

Pádraig Ua Maoileoin is one of the few Irish writers to successfully use folklore to underpin or to infuse the modern novel. Both *Bride Bhán* (Fair Bridget, 1968) and *Fonn a Níos Fiach* (Where There Is a Will, There's a Way, 1978) would have been called magic realism if the phrase had become fashionable at the time and taken up by Irish critics who follow the crowd. On the other hand, he could also write a plonker. A case in point is his novel *Ó Thuaidh!* (1983) which literally means "northward" but is in reality in this context a kind of war cry, like "Up and at ya!" "Wouldn't doubtcha!" ("I would not doubt you" in standard English) or something. It centres around two typical Ua Maoileoin characters, one by the name of Iarrann [Iron], a local hard man who in later life learns the joys of hooking up with young visiting tourist women, and the other is Bod-Bod, which can only be translated and not loosely as "Penis-Penis" or "Prick-Prick" (which he is). The island comes in, because Bod-Bod wants to buy the Great Blasket and turn it into – wait for it – a nudist colony. He dreams of visitors romping around on the strand stark naked bollocko and frolicking in the foam. While this might be a naturist's fantasy for

¹⁰ Séamus Mac a' Bhaird, *Eachtraí Mara Phaidí Pheadair as Toraigh*, ed. Aingeal Nic a' Bhaird, Caoimhín Mac a' Bhaird, and Nollaig Mac Congáil (Dublin: Arlen House, 2019).

¹¹ Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *Páipéir Bhána agus Pháipéir Bhreaca* (Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 1969) 9.

the south of France or some Greek island, the weather on the Blasket Islands might be a bit of a downer in all senses of that word. Maybe when global warming hits up even more it might be an upper and a runner, but it is not a great business proposition at the moment.

While the run of autobiographies in Ireland and in Scotland do place an emphasis on the 'traditional' life, it would be wrong to treat them as places cut off from the world. One big difference is that in the Scottish autobiography, the writer often goes abroad, certainly leaves his/her island, and then returns. The Irish in contrast, when they leave, they usually stay left. Also, because the Scottish islands are bigger and actually have towns or villages, they are more successful at depicting a broader society with a greater variety of people, because that is what they are. But even in the Irish ones, they are very much aware of a world outside themselves, particularly of America on the Blaskets, the Conamara islands and Aran, just as the Donegal islands see Scotland as part of their world.

There is a more modern turn. Traditional life is dead. There is no more subsistence economy. But people still live on the islands. So, what is an author to do with his or her own community, their life and loves, in a place which is part of the main, but is still often seen as being on the periphery? The depiction of that old life is done, and even dusted, although dust is not something which blows much through the wet islands of Ireland and Scotland. Seal clobbering, seaweed gathering, and mountain gabbling will no more cut the mustard. The challenge was always going to be how to leave the dying embers of the world that is past glowing slightly in the back of the hearth and bring modern life to the foreground using the human imagination as a weapon of invention and recognising that our islands are as much part of the contemporary world as the fashion hubs of New York or the financial gods of the market.

Two authors do this more than most. There are others, but we need to narrow the focus as *tempus fugit* and space is short. I would like to treat of two authors, both islanders, one Irish, one Scottish for whom island life is central to their works, but who have shaped it and turned it and fashioned it to deal with their own imaginative impulses. In the Irish corner we have Proinsias Mac a' Bhaird from Arranmore island off the coast of County Donegal; and Iain F. MacLeòid from Lewis in Scotland. Both of them still live and work on their respective islands.

Mac a' Bhaird has written three novels, all of which deal with the influence of the historic past on the immediate present. *Rún an Bhonnáin* (The Bittern's Secret, 2010) revolves around the secret left behind by Cathal Buí Mac Giolla Ghunna, an eighteenth-century Irish poet, author of the famous poem "An Bonnán Buí." More relevant to our purpose is his second novel *Tairngreacht* (2018) or "Prophecy," as it links Ireland and Scotland together through the person of St Colmcille and the

island of Iona. The prophecy referred to is the prophecy, or the prophecies, of Colmcille, which became common in Irish folklore for hundreds of years. There are many such prophecies with revealing insights, such as that the weather will change, there is trouble ahead, and that floods will come and wet the landscape. He also said that in Ireland “a coach without a head” will appear, which is often interpreted to foretell the coming of the car but is more likely to refer to the Irish football team manager. Nostradamus prophesied that Kim Yung-un from North Korea would die this year, but time is running out.

Two parallel stories run through *Tairngreacht*. One is set in the present dealing with a journalist historian researching the connection between Ireland and Rome, which should be fairly obvious. While he is there, he witnesses a grotesque murder in an explosive third chapter. At the same time the Vatican is attacked by a group calling themselves Céile Dé [The Spouse of God] a fanatical right-wing group of Catholic extremists who believe that the Church has strayed far from its ancient roots and proper teachings, which had been exemplified in the person and life of St Colmcille in the glory days. This is where the past and the present intertwine.

Some chapters tell the story of the saint, and it is not the accepted one. He is not who he appears to be and wrote a confession before he died telling how his good friend Odrhán committed suicide, as against the official story that he sacrificed himself, and that Colmcille felt guilty because he could not forgive his friend for falling in love with a young man on the island. He also admits that he invented a lot of stories about himself, including his version of banishing the Lough Ness monster, which he only did to keep the locals pacified and knowing that a ‘miracle’ would do his mission a power of good. He doesn’t mention his guilt in promoting tacky tourism with thousands of tiny reproductions of the Lough Ness monster in the highlands of Scotland.

This knowledge is deadly, in several senses of that word. The leader of the Céile Dé realises that if this word got out, the saint would be exposed as a quack and a charlatan, and he couldn’t be having this. He feels particularly betrayed because he had often walked on the sacred sod of Iona and felt the presence of Colm Cille there.

The past appears to haunt the present even more threateningly in Mac a’ Bhaird’s most recent novel *Fatwa* (2019), a word which requires no further explication. The central character is a writer who lives on an island which we have to presume is Arranmore in Donegal and who has already written novels. Like many novelists, and particularly in Irish, he is quite peeved, disappointed, crestfallen, and cheesed off that despite his best efforts they have made no noise. They have rarely been reviewed, and if reviewed they were misunderstood. Or showered with clichés. Or smothered with blandness. They have made no splash, no impact, just fallen

into the huge pit of forgetfulness, the everlasting limbo of the Irish novel. This time he says it is going to be different.

He resolves to write a novel about the prophet Mohammad, especially before his conversion or revelation of God's word in the Koran. He treats him as a young man, with all the strengths, failures, drives and impulses of young men everywhere, including drugs, sex but no rock and roll. This is dangerous territory, as we know. Chapters of *that* novel appear in this novel, *Fatwa*, so we can read it for ourselves.¹²

It should be said that there are places in the book where the author, Cormac, meets his neighbours and chats about the weather, or fishing, or the neighbours, passages that could be out of any of the traditional island biographies or books of lore. This is true, in particular, at the beginning where I sense that the author is setting us up by depicting the old ways, and the old talk, and the old camaraderie, in order that the shock of the new later in the book will hit us harder. Cormac's own grandfather was a seanchaí, a traditional storyteller and preserver of local lore, which provides us with another link to the past.

Meanwhile there is another strand. A young Irishman, Ben, whose mother is from Libya, and his father an Irish convert to Islam, is doing his Leaving Certificate exam and doesn't give much of a toss for religion. The story develops, however, and he begins to discover his 'roots' and in the easy jargon of the day, he slowly becomes 'radicalised.' He meets a friend who is studying Irish in the first year in UCD and has to read a book before the weekend. It happens to be Cormac's book about Mohammad and the reason he is reading it is because it is short! When asked what it is about, he says, "Ara, prick inteacht as Tír Chonaill ag scríobh fá Mhahamad agus na ragheads." [Some kind of prick from Donegal writing about Mohammad and the ragheads.]¹³

This, we might say, pricks Ben's interest, he searches out a review, gets it translated by Google translate and the story begins to thicken. Having satisfied himself that the book is an insult to the prophet, he gets a small group of like-minded youths together, and they decide to 'punish' the author, although they are divided as to whether they should kill him or just beat the bejaysus out of him... although the idea of Muslims beating the bejaysus out of somebody is rife with contradictions.

Mac a' Bhaird has many strengths as a writer, and one of his best is his ability to hold a plot together, to drive it forward and to bring it to an explosive conclusion,

¹² See, for example, the interchapters between chapters 3-4, 5-6, 8-9, and 15-16. Proinsias Mac a' Bhaird, *Fatwa* (Dublin: Coiscéim 2019).

¹³ Mac a' Bhaird, *Fatwa* 77.

for all the world just like the climax in an action film. The team of would-be assassins search out Cormac in his island and arrive there while a LGBT+ festival is being held, which both terrifies them and gives them some cover. This again, brings out the idea of “a clash of civilisations” in Samuel Huntington’s unfortunate phrase, or more accurately a clash of values. I am referring to his book with the fuller title of *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of the New World Order* (1998) which was more or less out of date as soon as it was published. Without spoiling the conclusion of Mac an Bhaird’s book, it should be enough to hint that, of course, the author does not get killed and the story generates enough tension to keep us gripped to the end. A novel does not just tell a story, of course, but raises all kinds of alternative questions along the way. Mac a’ Bhaird is constantly interrogating the past and its relevance to the present and how that intersection can be either fruitful or dangerous.

Iain F. MacLeòid (Iain Finlay MacLeod) has written six novels in Gaelic as well as plays and scripts. Some do not concern us, although they often have an island theme. It might be pushing it a bit to attach an island theme to his reconstruction of the mutiny on the *Bounty* in his novel, *Am Bounty* (The Bounty, 2008), but it does concern a young man from Lewis who gets conscripted into the navy and lives through the adventures oft described on screen. When I read it first some years ago, I presumed it was entirely fictional. But I learned since that there was a man from Lewis on the *Bounty*, and it may have been this which prompted the novel in the first place. And if we are looking for islands, of course, the novel deals explicitly with Tahiti, and as we know, many of the mutineers ended up on Pitcairn Island at the ends of the earth. *Ìmpireachd* (Empire, 2010) features the island of Manhattan, but this is far beyond our concerns, while *Dioghaltas* (Revenge, 2017) is a straightforward detective/murder novel set on Lewis. Indeed, genre fiction is a very handy way to make a story bring other concerns to life which can be smuggled in without any great fanfare.

But if we are looking for a genre novel which takes us into the heart of the themes we have been discussing it has to be Iain F. MacLeòid’s *Hiort*.¹⁴ “Hiort” is the Gaelic for the island of St Kilda, the most exotic, outlying, distant and terrifying of all the Irish and Scottish islands. It is 64 kilometres north-north-west of North Uist in the north Atlantic Ocean. It has the highest cliffs in the United Kingdom and had been populated for at least two thousand years, until it was abandoned in 1930. A collection of essays published about ten years ago claims that over 700 books or serious articles have been written about the island, making

¹⁴ Iain E. MacLeòid, *Hiort* (Inverness: Clàr, 2021).

it one of the greatest “island growth industries” of all time.¹⁵ Unfortunately, very few of these publications were written by the islanders themselves, and none of those were in Gaelic. It reminds me of W.B. Yeats’s advice to John Millington Synge when he said to him that he should go to the Aran Islands to express a way of life which had never been expressed before. This would have been news to the Aran islanders who thought they had been expressing themselves quite well, thank you very much sir, all those years.

There is one non-fiction book in Gaelic *Hiort: Far na Laigh a’ Ghrian* (St Kilda, Where the Sun Sets, 1995) by Calum MacFhearghuis and it is quite comprehensive.¹⁶ There are also some tales, songs and lore preserved in the archive of the School of Scottish Studies, but these were collected more than twenty years after the island was abandoned.

So, when I saw this book advertising a murder on the island of St Kilda, I was wondering how could there be a murder as the island has been long deserted apart from some researchers and about a million sea-birds of all kinds including puffins and fulmars. MacLeòid solves this by a clever sleight of hand and shift of history. He surmises that the island was never abandoned in 1930, that the people resisted eviction, and for various reasons were left to their own devices ever since, living as a kind of independent republic set in the slapping silver sea. This gives him the chance to set his story in the present day but in a life that is much more like that of the 1920s.

The body of a young woman is found on the Flannan Isles. At this stage you may be sea-sick from island-hopping but we are not finished yet. The Flannan Isles are a small island group about 32 kilometres west of Lewis, and are named after Saint Flannan, an Irish monk of the seventh century who had a small settlement there. The young woman is recognised as being from St Kilda because of her distinctive clothes, and thus, an investigation has to take place.

Two police are sent to the island, D.I. Cameron and Kate St John, but find resistance right from the start. First of all, they have to be quarantined in order to stay on the island at all, they are stripped of their clothes and put into the house where Lady Grange was imprisoned in the eighteenth century. There is a great temptation to be led down side-ways and by-ways as a great deal of the social history of the island is woven into the story as it proceeds. This reference to Lady Grange and her house, or hut more accurately, is to a person who was on the government side during the Jacobite rebellion of Bonny Prince Charlie in the

¹⁵ Bob Chambers, ed., *Rewriting St Kilda: New Views on Old Ideas* (Balallan: Islands Book Trust, 2011) 2.

¹⁶ Calum MacFhearghuis, *Hiort: Far na Laigh a’ Ghrian* (Stornoway: Acair, 1995).

1740s, but unfortunately her husband was on the other. It seems they didn't get on anyway, so a gang of her husband's friends kidnapped her, whisked her away and deposited her on St Kilda for seven years.¹⁷ It was a new twist to the tale of brutal kings solving their marriage problems by incarcerating their wives in convents during the Middle Ages.

Our intrepid police officers find it difficult to make any headway in their investigations as people refuse to talk to them, but, and otherwise we would have no story, some wisps of dissatisfaction come their way and they make slow progress. There is another famous tale out of St Kilda from the seventeenth century where one man who has come down to us as Ruaraidh Mòr am Mealltair, or Roderick the Imposter (as described by Martin Martin in his book *A Late Voyage to St Kilda*, published in 1698) dominated the island for several years until he was exposed as a chancer. He pretended to have met John the Baptist while he was out on the mountain and claimed that the saint taught him a special magic language which was particularly effective in making barren women, or women who were finding it difficult to have a child, to conceive. The only snag was this prayer could only be administered by him when the woman was alone with him in the privacy of her own house. You can see where this is going. He was eventually done down and packed off to prison on Skye, but it remains an interesting parable of how one strong person could terrorise a community.¹⁸

There is a character just like him in *Hiort*, also named Ruairidh. And he also liked 'helping' young women, including, as they learn, the girl who went missing and was murdered. The story begins to reel itself out after this. But again, we see the device of using the past to mesh with the present as if one was a palimpsest of the other. Our new Ruairidh gets banished because of suspicions of his behaviour, and he is put to the pea-green sea in a boat as a punishment, letting God be the judge. I have heard of similar tales in Irish folklore about letting people to their fate if they have disobeyed the mores of the community. Ruairidh, however, gets lucky and is cast up on the island of Boraraigh adjacent to Hiort, but even more forbidding. And if you think we are finished with islands we are not.

There are darker forces at work on St Kilda, and darker secrets lurking in the person of the chief detective D.I. Cameron. He always wanted to be a policeman, although something that happened to him as a young man not only racked his conscience, but also threatened his career. It happened, of course, on an island, yet another one. He was part of the community of men who went out from Lewis

¹⁷ See Margaret Macaulay, *The Prisoner of St Kilda: The True Story of the Unfortunate Lady Grange* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2009).

¹⁸ MacFhearghuis, *Hiort* 34-36.

every year to the island of Sula Sgeir to harvest gugas. Gugas are the chicks of gannets which nest on this rock, because it is not much more than a rock, and are seen as a delicacy (I am told) on Lewis. I am also told they are an acquired taste which probably means they taste like yuck. The people of Nis in Northern Lewis have a licence to kill 2,000 of these birds, which they do every August. It creates a massive outcry among bird lovers everywhere and there have been many attempts to stop it.

One of these attempts was made by a lone objector when D.I. Cameron was busy harvesting the birds. A row erupted and the objecting idealist got killed. Murdered, more accurately. While Cameron had nothing to do with it, he did witness it. He is conflicted about what he should do, but is threatened, cajoled, pressurised in keeping his mouth shut and ends up being one of three people who buried the murdered man... where? On another island. The island of Ronaigh!

Our concern here is not with the plot, but that the novel in a very clever way manages to recreate elements of the life of St Kilda as it was in the past. It also puts into the mouths of some of the islanders what is special about their place, or alternatively why they might want to leave it.

When the investigators question one young girl about life on the island, she goes into one long eulogy about the place. They have learned about the outside world and don't like it. They have heard about the wars. How so many were killed in the first big one. They have plenty to eat, are entirely self-sufficient. Very happy since they gave up the idea of leaving. They don't have to work for anybody or get out of bed for anybody. They don't pay taxes. They are content with their lot in life: "Chan eil airgead a' ciallachadh càil an seo, agus tha daoine a' coimhead as dèidh a chèile bhon latha a bheirear sinn gu latha ar bàis." [Money means nothing here, and people look after one another from the day they are born until they die.] And then she goes on:

Chan eil duine le acras ar an eilean, chan eil duine gun àite far an laigh iad airson cadal. Ma tha duine tinn, bidh sinn bidh sinn a' dèanamh leighisean dhaibh. Tha an t-eilean gar dìon. Agus tha sinn a' dìon an eilein. Chan eil thusa 's dòcha gar choimhead, ach 's e rud prìseil a th' ann. Sonas.

[Nobody is hungry on the island, everybody has a place to lay their head. If somebody is sick we try to cure them. The island protects us and we protect it. It is likely that you don't see it, but it is a very precious thing. Happiness!]¹⁹

¹⁹ MacLeòid, *Hiort* 72.

Sounds like paradise. Sounds like the ideal for many people. And yet, others didn't see it that way. Thus, the novel sets up a debate in our imaginations about our purposes, our own ambitions, our values, what we want. It is a debate which islands can often provoke, maybe because they are manageable, and we see the big questions of life writ small but writ large with clarity.

You may shudder when I tell you that Iain MacLeòid's final novel in the mix, *An Sgoil Dhubh* (The Black School, 2014), has to do not with one island, but with lots of them! Fortunately, they are all imagined places, they are all fantasy. This is a book which could be classified as fantasy, or even science fiction, as it not only plays with time, but also with worlds. These worlds are situated on different islands, and one has to pass through a different dimension, which may be in a well like in *Alice in Wonderland*, or through a door like in C.S. Lewis, or in a mound of the Sidh, or on a boat, or through mind-bending, or just by plain old magic. There are old books which have to be interpreted anew, people from the world of the dead who seem to be pretty much alive, creatures from the frozen world who may be hot-blooded enough.

If you are confused, you have the right to be. There are a lot of new worlds, old gods, young heroes, middle-aged sages, disappearing boats, vanishing characters, resurrected ghouls, passing princes, rediscovered queens, and clashing armies, enough to fill several books of this saga if it was to be filled out. There are hobbits, but they are not called that, games of thrones, but that has been used already, magicians but not as winsome as Harry Potter.

A writer with ambition does well to create an entire new fictional world, but it is difficult to live in it when it is thrown at you altogether in one whirlwind. When people sat down and listened to stories of the Fianna, or of Cúchulainn, or Deirdre and Gráinne, or Am Boban Saor, they have had years of being weaned on those tales. They know who they are. They are inscribed in the language, "chomh marbh le hArt" [as dead as Art], "in ainm Croim" [in the name of Crom], "Oisín i ndiaidh na Féinne" [Ossian after the Fianna]. They have grown up with them. My problem with this novel was being clobbered and flattened and buried by the wealth of detail, by the army of characters flitting past my eyes. It may have been, of course, that I was one of those unfortunates who were prevented from moving from world to world, from island to island. I was one of the banned.

But the invention is prodigious. Fascinating to us is yet again the appearance of people with names we recognise from our own literature. People have gone to school with Sgàthach, a great and vicious Amazonian warrior who was thought to have lived on the Isle of Skye, and her great enemy and lover of Cúchulainn, Aoife, still has a school of war. There is a Queen Meadhbh, the queen of Connacht who instigated the famous *Táin Bó Cuailgne* tale out of jealousy of her husband's

bull. There is a Sgàire, although not Calum Sgàire, of the famous Scottish song. There is an Aonghas, the god of sun and beauty in Irish mythology and a Gormshuil, the blue-eyed witch of Lochaber in Scotland. And a King Conall, of whom there were many. There is the Sith and their fairy mounds, Sidh in its other spelling being the Irish and Scottish otherworld. And Eimhir who is beautiful, obviously, and the daughter of a king, but not the one that Somhairle wrote his *dàin* for.²⁰ Somhairle MacGill-Eain's first significant book of poetry was his 1943 collection *Dàin do Eimhir agus Dàin Eile* and readers would be expected to get the echo.

So, this is, in a way, a very Gaelic and Irish, Irish and Scottish saga or epic written as a modern novel linking our two cultures together in a broth of international fantasy literature and sciency fictive lore. It is as old as it is new, as ambitious as it is confusing. But it does take the idea of islands into a different dimension. And maybe it is saying that islands can indeed be worlds apart and that you do need some special pass to enter them and to appreciate them.

And maybe not everybody can do that, not even those who live on the islands themselves.

The issue of island literature in Ireland and in Scotland can be clammed in or summed up without much fuss. Islands being the last places that were immune from the Anglicising tide from the east were and are often seen as the last and best redoubt of the Irish and Gaelic languages, unsullied by English speech and thought. Although this may raise a smirk, it does contain a vital truth. The language therein and thereof was indeed spared the irruptions of Teutonic and Latinised vocabulary and the ripples of their syntax. It was not surprising, then, that scholars of language went to those island places to experience what they thought might be a purer spring speech. They were not disappointed.

The first generation of Irish and Gaelic island literature was largely documentary. The urban readers wanted to know what it was like, and how its speech met its reality. They were not disappointed either. Autobiographies such as Tomás Ó Criomhthain's *An tOileánach* or Aonghas Caimbeul's *A' Suathadh ri Iomadh Rubha* gave them pristine poetic passionate language cut from their own people and their own personality. There were many others, but the roaring tide had inevitably to give way to a dribble on the shore.

More contemporary island literature surpassed documentary, as that life was gone, and it all had been said. Recent authors felt free to write thrillers or detective stories or science fiction using their islands as the centre of their universe. It is a sign that they have entered what we easily call 'the modern world' but which also means that they are still completely themselves. That is where we are at now, and it is up to our writers to go for it whichever direction it takes them.

²⁰ Iain F. MacLeòid, *An Sgoil Dhubh* (Stornoway: Acair, 2014).

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