ISSN 1755-9928 (Print)
ISSN 2753-3298 (Online)

Journal of
Scottish Thought

Research Articles

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Volume 8, Issue 1
Pp: 32-42
2016
Published on: 1st Jan 2016

1495
ABERDEEN
UNIVERSITY PRESS

’S Dòcha / Dòchas – Maybe / Hope: A 2034 look at Gaelic poetry of the ’14

Pàdraig MacAoidh

Looking back with the hindsight of 20 years at Gaelic culture in the run up to the 2014 referendum, it is clear this was the period of the most fervent political activity and discussion in the language for (perhaps) hundreds of years. On radio and on television, there was broad-ranging, informed, analytical and heated debate about the pros and cons of the arguments of the Yes campaign and Better Together, to an extent not normally political seen in the Gaelic media, not least because of the difficulties of finding high-level spokespeople for each of the political parties in Scotland (something that was not an issue during the referendum campaign, given the divisions within the Gaelic-speaking community). The maturity and level of debate also came in spite – or perhaps in part because – of the fact that Gaelic itself was not part of the argument: during the referendum campaign both Gaelic and Scots were largely depoliticised, and issues relating to the languages tended to be set aside, as when policy announcements about funding for Gaelic broadcasting during the campaigning period were warmly greeted by both sides, but not claimed exclusively by either. This may be because neither side wanted to appear ‘un-Scottish’ and so opposed to these markers of identity; equally, however, it was clear that many language activists who favoured the Yes campaign toned down the importance of what might be considered narrow or excessively traditional markers of Scottish identity, for fear of ‘scaring the cuddies’.[1] Certainly, there was no single ‘Gaelic’ voice with regards to the referendum; instead, during the referendum campaign there was clear evidence that Gaelic had not sunk to the status of a meta-language, only capable of discussing – at a political or social level – Gaelic itself, but that it could be used successfully and powerfully to sway, shape and stymie currents of political opinion.

However, if the referendum campaign showed the maturity and reach of the Gaelic media, then it also showed that any Gaelic poetic response to

[1] My introduction builds on arguments made as part of the papers and discussions at the ‘If Scotland’ conference; I owe thanks to those who participated in the discussions, but any errors or infelicities in the argument are my own.

the referendum was tentative even about being ambiguous. There was little Gaelic poetry explicitly directed towards the referendum, and when poets did write about the vote, they tended to evoke 'an alternative present that wasn't actually happening' (to adapt Catriona MacDonald's description of historical speculation as exploring an 'alternative past that never happened'): 'Scotland as nation' was approached obliquely, if approached at all. This could be considered as an outcome of the de-political status of Gaelic mentioned above, or indeed of as a condition of poetry itself: the truths poetry tells are, after all, 'slant', and not a response to yesterday's or today's headlines. However, there was some poetry written about or – perhaps more accurately – in the context of the referendum. In the months running up to September 2014 I contacted various Gaelic poets – some established, some new – to ask if they had published (or even written) any poems addressing the vote and the campaigns. Four poets provided me with poems: all of these poets were male, with a – perhaps significant – ratio of three learners of the language to one native speaker (this is not a large or representative enough sample to draw any reliable overarching conclusions about the state of Gaelic poetry in 2014, but that isn't going to stop me).

Looking back on these poems, what they share is a sense that the referendum campaign – and local and national politics in general – must be set aside larger, global concerns. Gaelic political poetry is often also a pastoral poetry, tied up with the landscape, and the changing fortunes of the landscape (as in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Clearance poetry that focused on the effects of the clearances on the landscape – the presence of sheep in the Highlands, for example – rather than on the political undercurrents and machinations that had led to these changes). This is true of the poetry of the referendum also; in particular, images of the 'state of the nation' are placed in the context of climate change, environmental disaster or global forces outside anyone's control, for poets who were sympathetic to both sides of the referendum campaign.

In Aonghas MacNeacail's 'alba, air adhart' [scotland, forward], for example, Scotland is addressed from 'the edge of space', a viewpoint which highlights the country's precariousness:

> air chlàr mór an t-saoghail
> na d' àrainn bheag shuarach
> de chreag shneachdach paisgt
> ann am fillidhean d' éilidh feòir

is an gluasad mu do chòrsa
mar gun robh thu air bhog
ann an amar braoin beirme

[on the great chart of the world, | in your paltry small domain | of snowy rock wrapped | in the pleats of your grassy kilt | and the motion around your coast | as if you were afloat | in a basin of fermenting foam][2]

The 'kilt' is, as later sections of the poem make clear, an identity that has been imported and woven with other features to form part of the 'tale' of Scotland. Here, it is imbricated into the land of Scotland itself, a land that is not only 'beag shuarach', but awash in a 'braoin beirme' [fermenting foam] that threatens to swamp it. The poet feels that he himself could bring about the end of anything of value in this country:

air d' fhaicinn as iomall fànais
shaoilinn nan laighinn mo bhròg ort
gum prannainn na bha mùirneach
ann a' seanchas do chuislean

[observing you from the edge of space | i feel that should my boot fall on you | i might crush what was beloved | in the narrative of your veins]

'Seanchas' has a historical dimension absent from the English 'narrative'; it can also cover folklore, storytelling or a saga. What is at stake here, in other words, is the continued 'story' of Scotland: the story Scotland tells itself, and through which it creates itself in the process of that telling. But if there is optimism about the possibilities of Scotland in this poem, then it is tentative, based on awareness of the 'aimhreit' ['discord'] that has characterized much of that story. The task of the poet at the end of the poem is to find a resolution for what is irreconcilable, 'réite eadar aon is neoni' [the concord between one and zero]; the poem's final suggestion is that this will come from past experiences of difficulty, the hard won knowledge of 'tuisleadh' ['stumbling'] and 'spàirn' ['struggle']:

[2] Thanks are due to Aonghas MacNeacail for permission to publish part of the poem alongside his own translation.

suidh aig do sgrìon ri solus coinnle
rannsachadh réite eadar aon is neoni

an sgleò bhriathran doillearach
eadar an sgoil-callaid agus
callaid na sgoile glainne

tha tuigse agad air tuisleadh
tha tuigse agad air spàirn

[sit at your screen by candlelight | researching the concord between one and zero | | the cloud of darkened words | between the hedge-school and | the glass school's hedge | | you have a knowledge of stumbling | you have a knowledge of struggle]

On one hand, MacNeacail's politics appear clear (and MacNeacail has elsewhere spoken out passionately in support of Scottish independence): there is a future for Scotland in which its story encompasses the various strands of its own past, but in which England does not feature other than as part of that 'braoin beirme' [fermenting foam] around Scotland's coasts (the imagery of the poem almost suggests Scotland is an island). This is balanced, however, by the open-endedness of the poem, and the sense of fragility, difficulty and multiplicity that is – for the poem – necessarily contained in any notion of 'Scotland'.

For Marcas Mac an Tuairneir, meanwhile, a sense of fragility or precariousness comes from a fear that Scotland's past could 'poison' the present. In 'Staoim' ['Tin'], Mac an Tuairneir reimagines the ship of state as a rusting hulk:

Long
Rongach
Teas Mheadhan locha,
Cuairticht' le cnoic,
Gun dòrnaidh na mara.
Ri siùdan nan tuinn,
Le acair staoin' thruime.
Adhlaicte gu domhainn;
Teadhrachadh dhan bhonn.

> [A ship | Decrepit, | Far out in a loch, | Surrounded by hillocks, | Without sight of the sea. | To the roll of the waves, | With a heavy tin anchor. | Buried below; | A tether to the deep.][3]

This is a ship of state that is self-delusional and static: in front of the boat is 'faire na teachdail' [the future's horizon], on which each star represents 'dèidh do-ruigheachd' [an unattainable whim]; the crew themselves are made of tin:

> Cionarra uile, is gagach gach fear.
> A' togail aon luaidh, le ràcadh an ranndan;
> Seòladairean cumhang, gun comas air ceapag.

> [Identical all, and stuttering each one. | Singing the same song, repeating their verses; | Stenotic sailors, unable to improvise.]

And it is the anchor, the symbolic rootedness in the past, which has brought about the 'stenosis', the narrowing of the heart. The anchor is

> Àrsachd aillseach
> A nimhich a sgioba
> A chuir na thosd
> Òran binn staoin'.

> [A cancerous archaism | That poisoned her crew | That silenced, forever, | The sweet song of tin.]

This poem could be read as a critique of nationalism and the narrowing that comes with static, repetitive versions of national identity (especially if you relate this image to the ship of state as I have been doing). However, its scope is also broader than this: it can be seen to question any narrow, atavistic form of identity – national or otherwise – that serves to restrict individuality, difference and creative freedom.

Similarly, Mac an Tuairneir's 'Ola' [Oil] is explicit in its opposition to walls and lines that divide people – 'Loidhnichean nach tig am bàrr | Air làraich na

[3] Thanks to Marcas Mac an Tuairneir for permission to publish extracts from his original poems and his own translations.

tìre | Ach air mapaichean ùr on chlò' [Lines that don't appear | On the scars of the land | But on maps, hot off the press] – but its logic can also be extended beyond this, with its suggestion that no-one should really expect to 'own' oil, since it doesn't spell 'ar n-ainmean | Air suail na fairge' [our names | On the swell of the tide]. Although one could put a political agenda onto 'Ola', it is more flighty, shiftier than you would find in poetic propaganda; indeed, what Mac an Tuairneir's poems remind us is that there are questions beyond the confines of the referendum debate that should be attended to. If you attempt to build a fairer, more equitable future on lessons learnt from the past do you not risk being narrowed or poisoned by that past, in ways you may well not even notice? And in the rush to evaluate just how much oil there is in the North Sea, and thereby to calculate the (im)possibilities of independence, should we not first seriously ask whether that oil is actually 'ours' to extract in the first place?

Images of environmental poisoning are used more lightly (and party-politically) in Liam Crouse's 'Gun dàinig mise on Choille Ghruamaich' [I have come from the gloomy wood], a reworking of a famous song by Iain MacLean (Bàrd Tighearna Cholla) on his first impressions after having emigrated to North America. A native of Rhode Island, Crouse has made the opposite journey to MacLean, and the 'gloominess' of the wood he encounters in the Scotland is more the result of emigration policy than the harsh environmental conditions:

> Fhios gun robh còir 'am a bhith a' snòtadh
> An robh droch bholadh fleòdradh mun cuairt;
> Cò leis an coire, an deamhain Tòraidh
> An òinid ghòrach 's a chòmhlan nan truaill.
> Ma choilean an rùn, 's a gheibh an dùrachd,
> Gun reach an dùthaich na mhùthadh truagh,
> Ach tha mi 'n dùil gum faigh e cùl-thaobh
> Dar gheibh sibh iùl-dùthch' san ùine uaibh.
>
> [I know I should have been sniffing | to see if a bad smell was floating around; | who was responsible but the Tory devil | the stupid idiot and his polluting gang. | If their desire's fulfilled and they get their wishes | the country will be sorely altered, | but I hope that he'll be turned back | soon, when your country takes a new tack.][4]

[4] Thanks to Liam Crouse for the original poem; the translation is my own.

The 'pollution' in Crouse's poem is political, and so too is the solution: a new direction for the country, and with it the possibility – in an independent Scotland – for a more generous immigration policy.

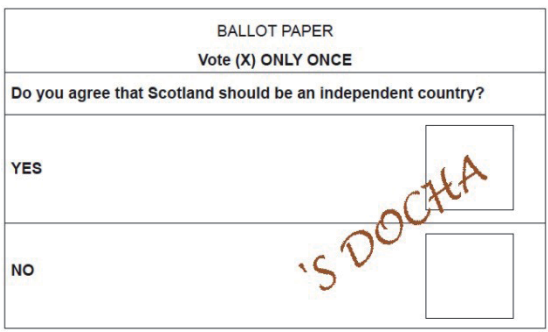
If Crouse's poem bespeaks displacement, Daibhidh Eyre's concrete poem 'X' expresses the linguistic 'disenfranchisement' of Gaelic speakers, who weren't able to vote in their own language, and instead had to use a symbol that doesn't even appear in their language. The two lines of the poem could be translated as 'we will use X under protest' and 'although there's no X in Gaelic':

This is a convoluted 'X', and not just because the reader has to choose which way to read the poem. The 'X' of the poem is not just that of the ballot box, but also the abstract mathematical 'x' of uncertainty, and the 'X' of anonymous action, affirmation and negation; the political act that it suggests is then a complicated and conditional one – it is to some extent a sign that critiques its own imprinting, an act of radical uncertainty.

II

This idea of both giving and retaining political consent at one and the same time, in the same act, gained traction among Gaelic speakers in the run-up to the referendum and in its aftermath. In particular it influenced the grassroots 'S Dòcha / Dòchas movement, believed to have originated in a then-illegal cannabis farm in Argyll (*'S Dòcha* is the Gaelic for 'Maybe'; with some juggling it becomes *Dòchas* – 'Hope'). This movement – in its first incarnation – encouraged people to express themselves on the ballot paper for the referendum not with

an 'X' – since there isn't one in Gaelic – but with the non-committal "S Dòcha' [Maybe]. In 2014 and the subsequent referenda – the period of *la referendum siempre* – these votes became more important, as the totals grew ever closer, and the counts came to depend upon such 'hanging chad' papers. A minor academic discipline developed in interpreting these ballots. The following example was generally understood to represent someone who had made the 'journey' from 'No' to 'Yes', but was still not 100% (but was to be counted as a 'yes'):



Whereas this next example was understood to represent someone whose 'journey' was still not complete and whose vote was discounted (their use of a home-made ballot paper considered balanced by their more accurate use of grammatical accents):

After the jubilation / despondency [delete as appropriate] following the final, official result, the 'S Dòcha movement developed an artistic life beyond the voting booth. Early concrete poems based on 'S Dòcha tended to explore the

way the radical uncertainty of 'S Dòcha could metamorphose into Dòchas (the Gaelic for 'hope'), and vice versa. In the late 2020s it was common to see variations of this metamorphosis published in magazines and then, laterally, painted in public spaces around the country. These are from Taynuilt and Benbecula in 2021, and the side of the Wallace Monument the following year:

'S DÒCHA	XXXX'S DÒCHAXXXXXXX
ÒCH	XXXXXXÒCHXXXXXXXX
SÒCH'DA	XXXXXXSÒCH'DAXXXXX
ÒCH	XXXXXXÒCHXXXXXXXX
D'ÒCHSA	XXXXXD'ÒCHSAXXXXXX
ÒCH	XXXXXXÒCHXXXXXXXX
SÒCHA'D	XXXXXXSÒCHA'DXXXXX
ÒCH	XXXXXXÒCHXXXXXXXX
ÒCH	XXXXXXÒCHXXXXXXXX
'	XXXXXXXX'XXXXXXXXX
ÒCH	XXXXXXÒCHXXXXXXXX
ÒCH	XXXXXXÒCHXXXXXXXX
DÒCHAS	XXXXXDÒCHASXXXXXX

With the shift from paper to site-specific renderings of the 'poem', the 'S Dòcha artworks moved from being 'concrete poems' to 'concrete' explorations of the landscape, in a way that tapped into the environmental concerns expressed in other Gaelic poetry of the period, and also served to critique any notions of

the 'inscription' of the landscape reflecting, in any easy way, a Heideggerian sense of belonging. These explorations built upon the work of Ian Hamilton Finlay; indeed, one of the early examples of 'S Dòcha concretism literally built on, and 'repurposed' Hamilton Finlay's work, in – apparently – a deliberately crude and anti-aesthetic fashion:

As with the printed concrete poems, whether this work suggests a journey from hope to uncertainty or vice versa depends entirely on your direction of travel.

If the vandalism of Hamilton Finlay's work rightly brought widespread and almost universal condemnation, then 'S Dòcha's greatest success – both critical and commercial – came with their next act of 'repurposing', the reshaping of an iconic Sutherland monument into an installation entitled 'Can you hear this in Hell, Patrick Sellar?':

This piece was controversial enough, and showed enough multi-disciplinary collaborative potential, to attract the financial support of both Creative

Scotland and a newly incorporated stakeholder, Hope Conglomerates. With their support, the next – and final – 'S Dòcha installation was fully publically funded, with the private company bearing the costs for clearing the debris from the site at Roineabhal on Harris:

This symbol of the frailty, durability and marketability of hope is now, outside of a few archived little magazines, all that remains of a remarkable period in Gaelic literature. If nothing else – and indeed it suggests little else – the 'S Dòcha movement serves as a reminder that – as always – you have to be careful what you hope for.