

SORLEY MACLEAN

MA(Edin), HonLLD(Dund), HonDLittCelt(NUI), HonDLitt(Edin,Glas), HonDUniv(OU), HonDUniv(Grenoble), FRSL, HonFRIAS, HonFEIS

Sorley MacLean was born at Osaig in the Island of Raasay on 26 October, 1911, and died in Inverness on 24 November, 1996. He was the second child in a family of five brothers and two sisters who all went on to Higher Education and distinguished themselves as scholars, teachers and doctors.

Of his forebears, the Macleans had lived in Raasay for a number of generations, but were believed to have come ultimately from Mull, most probably after a sojourn in North Uist. His father's mother's family were Mathesons who originally came from Lochalsh on the mainland. His mother's people were Nicolsons from Skye, and MacLeods of Raasay origin who had moved to Skye.

The world in which he grew up was one in which the Clearances and Land Wars were living memories, and the Highland land question was as live an issue as were the affairs of Britain and the Empire. Questions of religion, and of religious politics, were equally important. At the same time, there was no shortage of piping, poetry and songs in Sorley's family and neighbourhood in his formative years. From this social and intellectual amalgam he derived his idealism, his love of music and learning, his admiration for brains, brawn and physical beauty, and his passion for lore and genealogy.

After an early childhood in which his most cherished memories included fishing expeditions with his Aunt Peigi, where his rowing was rewarded by her songs, he went on to Portree High School. Here he immersed himself in British and European history and in English and (written) Gaelic literature. He proceeded in 1929 to Edinburgh University, where he studied English Literature at the feet of Herbert Grierson and also attended the Celtic classes of W.J. Watson. In some ways his closest affinities were with the Highland set, which at that time included such luminaries as Angus and Willie Matheson, James Carmichael Watson, and Kitty MacLeod. But it was also a time of discovery in English literature, as he became exposed to the teachings of Eliot and Pound; while the company of James Caird and George Davie helped to nurture a deepening sense of engagement in Scottish and European politics.

Graduating in 1933 with a First in English, Sorley could have gone on to further study at Oxford, as his elder brother John (who was a Classical scholar) had gone on to Cambridge and Vienna. Instead, he opted for a teaching career - not least because of the need to help provide for his younger brothers and sisters - and started in Portree in 1934 after completing his stint in Moray House Training College.

Leaving Portree, Sorley taught briefly in Tobermory Secondary School (1937-8). He found Mull - the ancestral home of the Clan Maclean before they were ground down by Campbell pragmatism and imperialism - a depressing experience, and was glad to return in January 1939 to Edinburgh to a position in the English Department in Boroughmuir High School. Having returned to the Capital, he soon found himself drawn into the literary circle of Douglas Young and his associates, which included George Campbell Hay, Norman McCaig, and especially Robert Garioch (Alastair Sutherland), whose Scots poems appeared beside MacLean's Gaelic ones in the latter's first publication, *Seventeen Poems for Six-pence*. (1940)

The threat of war was already looming before Sorley left Tobermory. It brought challenges of conscience which were answered variously by Young, Hay and McCaig. Sorley joined the Signals Corps in 1940 and was posted to North Africa on active service the following year. Seriously wounded at El Alamein in November 1942, he was invalided home to Scotland. He was eventually discharged from Raigmore Hospital, Inverness, in August 1943 and returned to his teaching post at Boroughmuir. It was at this time that *Dàin do Eimhir*, the volume which established his reputation as a major poet, came out, having been prepared for the press during his absence by Douglas Young.

The following year he met Renee Cameron, whom he married in 1946. In 1947 he was promoted Head of English at Boroughmuir. He and Renee occupied a comfortable Queen Street flat, whose proximity to Milne's Bar and the Abbotsford Bar made them a popular resort for their literary friends, including MacDiarmid, McCaig, Goodsir Smith and the rest. Their eldest daughter was born. In many ways a settled Edinburgh life seemed to beckon. Nevertheless, MacLean had cherished the desire to return to the North-west, and this was achieved when he was appointed Headmaster of Plockton High School in 1956. Here he quickly became an institution, teaching everything, knowing every scholar in the school, promoting shinty, and crusading for proper recognition for Gaelic in the school curriculum. The Headmaster's house became, inevitably, a popular resort for local tradition bearers and a wide circle of literary and other visitors from further afield.

Warned by the relatively early death of his elder brother John (who had also ended up as a Highland headmaster, as Rector of Oban High School) and with the demands of teaching and administration making writing well-nigh impossible, Sorley retired in 1972. Not long after that, however, he found himself drawn into a new and congenial sort of educational experience, first as the Creative Writing Fellow at Edinburgh University (1973-5) and then as Filidh ('Poet') at the then embryonic Gaelic College at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig (1975-6).

By now, with their three daughters away from home, Sorley and Renee had moved to Braes in Skye, to a site with a magnificent view across the Sound of Raasay - fittingly to a house which turned out to have been built by one of his Skye forebears. Imaginatively extended, this house became his headquarters for the rest of his life. From here he sallied forth to respond to the international invitations which burgeoned enormously, as the extraordinary qualities of his Gaelic poetry became known, through translation, to a world-wide audience.

His writing had started much earlier, of course. As a schoolboy who was deeply affected by the English romantics and at the same time gripped by almost all Gaelic literature (which was of course predominantly a verse literature), he had decided quite early on that poetry was his medium. At University he wrote in English and Gaelic, but eventually dropped English. MacDiarmid's Scots lyrics had a powerful effect on MacLean, and MacLean's rare originality was acknowledged by the older poet.

As is well known, the flow of MacLean's poetry in the 1930s was tied up with periods of intense personal emotion and mental ferment. External stimuli included political issues: the rise of fascism in Europe, the effects of the Depression at home, socialism and nationalism, and of course the depopulation of the Highlands and decline of the Gaelic language. The works included in the series of 'Poems to Eimhear' are the chief monument to his creativity in the 1930s. In 1939 he began work on an extended poem entitled *An Cuilthionn* ('The Coolin'), with the intention of comprehending all these themes in a grand statement comparable to MacDiarmid's *The Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. But this was never completed, on account of political re-thinking, personal events, and the onset of war; only parts of *An Cuilthionn* were issued during his lifetime.

At that stage, although he had powerful literary advocates, MacLean's writing was known mainly within his own circle, where its intellectual, modernist, international perspectives were well understood and its strength and originality recognised. The publication of *Dàin do Eimhir* in 1943 was a milestone in Gaelic literature. Two generations of Gaelic writers have testified to the cathartic moment that they got to grips with *Dàin do Eimhir*, with its *avant garde* illustrations by William Crombie and its wartime paper and print: the revelation that Gaelic could support fully modern, wholly adult literature was just as astonishing as the powerful message and impact of the verses themselves.

To the lyrics of the Thirties were added a distinguished group of War poems from the 1940s. The extraordinary *Hallaig* (which gave the lie to his own judgement that William Livingstone's *Fios chun a' Bhaird* was 'the last word on the Clearances'), is the best known representative from the 1950s of an *oeuvre* that continued to be added to until his eighties. His contributions to *Four Points of a Saltire* (1970) and *Nua-Bhardachd Ghàidhlig* ('Modern Gaelic poems', 1972) and especially the selected poems contained in *Reothairt is Conntraighe* ('Spring-tide and Neap-tide', 1976), which contained his own luminous translations, brought his work to the wider, non-Gaelic-speaking audience. This process has undoubtedly helped to foster the confidence which was a precondition for the renaissance of Gaelic writing we have seen since the 1970s, and equally to encourage numbers of non-Gaels to discover and enjoy Gaelic literature.

To know or meet Sorley MacLean was an unforgettable experience. He was extraordinary in his erudition in Highland history and genealogy, in his magnanimity and loyalty, in his speaking and reading manner, and (until he was persuaded to desist from driving) in his histrionic exposition of Highland toponymy from behind the driver's wheel. His literary judgement was underivative and (apart from a small number of notorious blind-spots) flawless. His historical sense was profound. Like many a Gael, he had an abiding respect for scholarship. Even in his last years he delighted in scholarly discourse and argument, as was evident from his thorough-going participation in the Tenth International Congress of Celtic Studies in Edinburgh in July 1995.

He was a great family man, and not just in the genealogical sense of the word. He took great pride in the achievements of his daughters and their families. The grief he experienced at the untimely death of his second daughter Catriona was profound indeed.

His own view of 'self' surfaces in *Dol an Iar* ('Going West'), composed on the brink of a decisive encounter in the North African desert, when the prospect of battle at last drags him free from the agonies and contradictions of personal and political dilemma that have been dogging him. Facing the purifying fire of battle, what remains is:

tha mi de dh' fhir mhór' a' Bhràighe,	I am of the big men of the Braes,
de Chloinn Mhic Ghille Chaluim threubhaich,	of the heroic Raasay MacLeods,
de Mhathanaich Loch Aills' nan geurlann,	of the sharp-sword Mathesons of Loch Alsh;
agus fir m'ainme - có bu tréine	and the men of my name - who were braver
nuair dh' fhadadh uabhar an léirchreach?	when their ruinous pride was kindled?

WILLIAM GILLIES