PLACE-NAMES IN MODERN SCOTTISH GAELIC POETRY

PIOTR STALMASZCZYK

The significance of place-names in Celtic, especially Irish, literature has been extensively discussed in numerous studies.[1] Though an important feature of older poetry, the usage of geographical names is employed also in contemporary verse, not only in Irish, but also in Scottish Gaelic, as illustrated by the following short fragment from Derick Thomson's poem *Leannan m' òige* ('Sweetheart of My Youth'):[2]

> *Mùirneag an toiseach Ògmhios,*
> *is Mèalaiseal is Mòinteach Shuardail,*
> *is Loch nan Ruigheannan a' snìomh*
> *a ghàirdeanan mu mo chom.*
>
> Mùirneag in early June,
> and Mèalaiseal and Swordale Moor,
> and Loch nan Ruigheannan with its arms
> clasped round me.

The preoccupation with places may be viewed as a broader awareness of the geographical setting, a point extensively discussed by Sorley MacLean (1985) in connection with the consciousness of the presence of the sea in the seventeenth-century Gaelic poetry. MacLean, the most important and influential twentieth-century Scottish Gaelic poet, in numerous poems inquired into problems of identity and psycho-physical location. A prominent example is his famous poem *Hallaig*, a long vision poem rooted in Gaelic history and culture, which is "at once historical and hallucinatory" (Heaney 2002). The imagery of trees and land of the dead is used to show the desolation of Gaelic culture and difficult problems with its renewal (MacLean 1991: 226-227):

> *Tha bùird is tàirnean air an uinneig*
> *troimh 'm faca mi an Àird an lar*
> *'s tha mo ghaol aig Allt Hallaig*

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[1] *Cf.* Kiely (1982), Mac Cana (1988), Mac Mathúna (1989-91), Ó Cuív (1989-90), Sheeran (1988), Stalmaszczyk (1991-93; 2005; 2009). This note develops ideas presented in Chapter Five of Stalmaszczyk (2005). I wish to thank Iain MacPherson for his illuminating comments and corrections (including consistent modernisation of spelling), and to Maxim Fomin for encouragement.

[2] From MacAulay, ed. (1987: 163); English version by the poet himself, p. 162.

'na craoibhe bheithe, 's bha i riamh
eadar an t-Inbhir 's Poll a' Bhainne,
thall 's a bhos mu Bhaile-Chùirn:
tha i 'na beithe, 'na calltuinn,
'na caorunn dhìreach sheang ùir.

The window is nailed and boarded
through which I saw the West
and my love is at the Burn of Hallaig,
a birch tree, and she has always been

between Inver and Milk Hollow,
here and there about Baile-chuirn:
she is a birch, a hazel,
a straight, slender young rowan.

Hallaig is an actual place on the east side of Raasay, a deserted township, a "ghost clachan north of Beinn na Lice" (Heaney 2002), and the poem refers to an historical event: in June 1854, 129 residents of Raasay, 40 of them from Hallaig, were cleared leaving the island for Australia. The places mentioned in the poem are very much local, but at the same time they gain a more universal dimension.[3] In a short essay on the poem John MacInnes (1987: 7) observed that:

> In a somewhat similar way the place-names exist in more than one dimension. For all their archetypal magic they are the names of real places. They give the poem a mundane strength and reality.

Hallaig gives a profoundly pessimistic vision of the world, it also shows how MacLean treats nature in his poetry. The theme is further explored in *Coilltean Rathasair* ('The Woods of Raasay', 1940), another long poem set in his native island of Raasay, with the moving invocation in the middle of the poem (MacLean 1991: 176-177):

Coille Ratharsair,
m' ionam, labharag:
mo chiall cagarain,
mo leanabh cadalach.

The wood of Raasay,
my dear prattler,
my whispered reason,
my sleeping child.

[3] Pádraig Ó Fuaráin (2007: 233) notes in his essay on landscape in MacLean's poetry that "Over a hundred places in Skye and Raasay are named in the poetry […] and each place is associated with an event of the past or is used as image or symbol". The *Register of Gaelic placenames in the poems of Sorley MacLean* lists no fewer than 158 names, *cf.* Sealy (1986).

For the poet, nature has little significance of its own, however, it converges on the individual experiences, as it is people for whom it functions at various levels.[4] This relation between man and nature is very clearly presented in the second stanza of his early poem *Fuaran* ('A Spring'; MacLean 1991: 42-43):

> *Air latha thàinig mi le m' ghaol*
> *gu taobh a' chaochain iomallaich,*
> *chrom i h-aodann sìos ri bhruaich*
> *'s cha robh a thuar fhèin tuilleadh air.*
>
> One day I came with my love
> to the side of the remote brook.
> She bent her head down to its brink
> and it did not look the same again.

Abhainn Arois ('Aros Burn') is a short poem which reverses this relationship and points to the permanence of the outer world and importance of places (MacLean 1991: 48-49):

> *Cha chuimhne leam do bhriathran,*
> *eadhon nì a thubhairt thu,*
> *ach Abhainn Arois an àileadh iadshlait*
> *is àileadh roid air Suidhisnis.*
>
> I do not remember your words,
> even a thing you said,
> but Aros Burn in the smell of honey-suckle
> and the smell of bog-myrtle on Suishnish.

Angus Peter Campbell's poem *Gearraidh na Mònadh à Smeircleit* ('Garrynamonie from Smerclate') is a litany-like list of house-names from South Uist:[5]

> *Taigh Fhionnlaigh,*
> *taigh a' Bhadhlaich,*
> *taigh Aonghais a' Cheanadaich* (…)
>
> Finlay's house,
> the Benbecula man's house,
> Angus son of the Kennedy's house (…)

closed by the following lines (from the Scottish Gaelic version of the *Nicene Creed*):

[4] In accordance with Iain Crichton Smith's remark that "nature simply reflects the man who sees it" (Smith 1961: 175).
[5] From Black, ed. (1999: 674-675).

Mar a bhà,
's mar a thà,
's mar a bhitheas.

Fad saoghal nan saoghal.

Amen.

As it was,
is,
and will be.

World without end.

Amen.

The permanence of place, as opposed to transitoriness of human life, manifest in the above modern Scottish Gaelic poems, echoes to some degree an old Irish genealogical tract:[6]

Ind ráith i comair in dairfedo,
ba Bruidgi, ba Cathail,
ba Aedo, ba Ailello,
ba Conaing, ba Cuilíni,
ocus ba Máele Dúin.
Ind ráith d'éis cach ríg ar úair,
ocus int slúaig, foait i n-úir.

The fort beside the oak-grove
it was Bruidge's, it was Cathal's,
it was Áed's, it was Ailill's,
it was Conaing's, it was Cuilíne's,
and it was Máel Dúin's.
One by one, the kings sleep in the earth
and the fort still endures.

According to another prominent contemporary Scottish Gaelic poet and critic, Donald MacAulay (1987: 49):

> In the Gaelic tradition there are many poems and songs about places. These appear also in modern verse, though not in such a high proportion and certainly to a different purpose (...) There is local loyalty often expressed in poems about the poet's native place.

[6] The Irish text is from Carney (1967: x-xi), see also the comments in Murphy ([1998]: xvi). Carney's translation into English omits one line, hence the version above is a compromise between Carney's rendering and the literal translation by Kuno Meyer, given in Murphy ([1998]: xvi, n. 1).

The sense of loyalty very often expresses itself in poems about the poet's native place, but it also may be extended to the whole of Gaeldom, as exemplified in the poem *A' Ghàidhealtachd* ('The Gàidhealtachd / The Highlands') by Coinneach MacMhanais:[7]

Ùrnaigheann aig a' bhòrd ann an Scalpaigh
Òrain is bàrdachd anns an t-Òb
Dannsa is deoch air an Tairbeart
Radio nan Gaidheal ann an Steòrnabhagh
Deasbad ann an Taigh-Òsta Chrois
Cuimhneachadh ann an Uibhist a Tuath
Fealla-dhà ann an Griomasaigh
Ceanglaichean-teaghlaich ann an Uibhist a Deas
Aoigheachd ann an iomadh àite
agus Run Rig na mo chluasan air feadh an turais.

Prayers at the table in Scalpay
Songs and poetry in Leverburgh
Dance and drink in Tarbert
Radio nan Gaidheal in Stornoway
Discussion in the Cross Inn
Memories in North Uist
Sport in Grimsay
Family connections in South Uist
Hospitality in many places
and Run Rig in my ears throughout the journey.

The places mentioned in the above poem are connected with the *Gàidhealtachd* (as opposed to 'The Highlands' since a' Ghàidhealtachd and The Highlands are no longer co-terminous), the area of traditional Gaelic culture and language. Thus the Gaelic names set up a perimeter of a cultural, historical and topographical area, as in *Creagan Beaga* another of MacLean's poems set in Skye (MacLean 1991: 238-239):

Tha mi dol troimh Chreagan Beaga
anns an dorchadas leam fhìn
agus an rod air Camus Alba
'na shian air a' mhol mhìn.

Tha 'n guilbeirneach 's an fheadag
ag èigheach shìos mu 'n Chùil,
's an earra-dheas air Sgurr nan Gillean,
Blàth Bheinn, 's a' ghealach gun smùr.

Stràcadh na soillse air clàr mara
o Rubha na Fainge sìnte tuath,

[7] From Campbell, ed. (1991: 84-85).

agus an sruth an Caol na h-Àirde
a' ruith gu deas le lainnir luaith.

I am going through Creagan Beaga
in the darkness alone
and the surf on Camus Alba
is a sough on smooth shingle.

The curlew and the plover
are crying down about the Suil;
and south-east of Sgurr nan Gillean,
Blaven, and the stainless moon.

The light levels the sea flatness
from Rubha na Fainge stretched north,
and the current in Caol na h-Àirde
is running south with swift glitter.

Similarly, in *Feasgar Samhraidh: Linne Ratharsair* ('A Summer's Evening: The Sound of Raasay') the names around the Sound of Raasay confine far more than just the physical area:[8]

An ròs eadar Beinn Dianabhaig
Agus Cruachan Suidh Fhinn,
Currac aotrom air Glàmaig,
Ainmeachas curraice air Blàth Bheinn,
Sruth an lìonaidh an Caol na h-Àirde,
Luasgan 's lainnir air a' Chlàraich.

The rose between Beinn Dianabhaig
And Cruachan Suidh Fhinn
A light cap on Glamiag
Just a hint of a cap on Blaven
The filling tide in Caol na h-Àirde,
A sparkling surge upon Clarach.

The use of topographical names fulfils not only an aesthetic function, but it is also deeply rooted in the tradition, expresses the writer's local loyalty, and performs an invocative function. Place-names are sometimes invoked in a rather general way, on other occasions they are cited for narrative purposes; in still other instances they become the major concern of the writer. Another feature is mentioned by MacAulay (1976: 58), who observes that naming brings things and people close to home.

The above insights are confirmed by E. Estyn Evans (1973: 66), who, talking about Irish habitat, heritage and history, mentions the existence of a pagan

[8] In Black, ed. (1999: 332-333); the poem was first published in *Poetry Scotland* in 1949, English translation by Ronald Black.

sense of communion with all nature running through the ancient tales and inspiring outstanding lyrical poetry.[9] Yet, as observed by Proinsias Mac Cana (1988: 320), the name:

> [I]s not always a mere index of the place; it can produce its own resonance which may in turn colour and enhance the reality, transforming it into something which is not quite of this prosaic world.

Names give places a sense of permanence, however, the ties linking the two may, with time, become loose. Ian MacDonald's poem *Ainmeannan* ('Names') touches upon this issue:[10]

Aonranach ainmeannan àiteachan
aig an stad sinn an dràsta 's a-rithist,
air an astar fhada eadar dà fhàrdaich
no eadar dà shaogal:
iadsan gun chaochladh
ge b'e cò 'n taobh a thèid sinne –
suas no sìos, samhradh no sian,
falbh no tighinn.

Lonely the names of places
at which we stop now and then,
on the long trail between two dwellings
or between two worlds:
they unchanging
whichever way we go –
up or down, summer or storm,
coming or going.

Malcolm Chapman (1978: 77) observed that "nature is never simply there, but has to be appropriated by man in order to be used by him, whether figuratively or physically". Poems quoted in this note clearly demonstrate that place-names are often used as means of appropriateness of nature, and that this is one of their major functions in Gaelic poetry.

University of Łódź,
Poland

[9] Evans writes about the 'pagan sense of communion with nature', however, as observed by Maxim Fomin (p.c.), the love for creation embedded into early Irish nature poetry is intrinsically Christian. Hence, usage of names and reference to features of landscape may be interpreted as a device combining, rather than juxtaposing, the two traditions.

[10] In Black, ed. (1999: 620-621); the poem was first published in the Gaelic literary journal *Gairm* in 1980.

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