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How Do You Solve a Problem Like Màiri?: Nineteenth-Century Gaelic Song, Rewilding, and Audience Creation

Peter Mackay

Màiri Mhòr nan Oran (Mary MacPherson, Big Mary of the Songs) was the most influential Scottish Gaelic songwriter/poet of the late nineteenth century and one of the most high-profile land and language activists of the period. This article examines some of her (incredibly popular) work and the manner in which she weaves contemporary comment, biography, and a reworking of traditional tunes and motifs in a way designed to have social and political impact. It discusses some of her most well-known songs alongside those which have rarely been translated into English, and places these alongside the work of her contemporary Mary MacKellar (bàrd of the Gaelic Society of Inverness), and within the context of debates in the 1870s and 1880s about the future of the Gaelic language and the political campaign for greater rights for crofting communities — and then asks what, if anything, can be learned from this for contemporary debates about land use in the Highlands of Scotland.

If Màiri Mhòr nan Oran (Mary MacPherson / Big Mary of the Songs / Màiri nighean Ian Bhàin) poses problems for readers in the twenty-first century (and it is the contention of this article that she does), then they are problems at once of genre, language, and category, but also of superabundance or excess. She might, at first glance, appear a useful resource with which to think through various issues that are pressing in the contemporary world, given the accumulated weight of the 150 years in which her words have been memorized, her songs have been sung. She was the most celebrated Scottish Gaelic songwriter of the last three decades of the nineteenth century and the period in which she was composing, the 1870s to 1890s, was one of widespread discussions of land use and land ownership, and the tensions between communities and ideological desires for 'improvement' or change; a period, in other words, with some parallels to the debates about rewilding in our own time, or the wider pressures that come from thinking of the relationship between the human and the natural in the face of the climate crisis.

Màiri herself also provides a model for ways of resisting centralizing power, of imagining community reinvigoration and renaissance. She was the pre-eminent poet of the Highland Land League, on the stump for the pro-crofter MP Charles Fraser MacIntosh, writing satires and songs of praise, encouraging protests and inciting protestors, challenging the power exerted from afar by Westminster (or indeed by Inverness); and her songs were engagedly political, composed about and on behalf of a marginalized, disenfranchised community, and celebrating the natural world (and cultivated land) of the Isle of Skye from positions of love, loss, and exile. She also, however, causes various complications for us in how we read or evaluate her work today. It is, often, a hugely enjoyable and unrepentant mess, in which the political and the personal, the hyper-local and the international, merge, or in which she will — against all expectations — veer off from her topic to settle personal scores. And although she is among the most celebrated of Scottish Gaelic songwriters, it is often for a small selection of her songs, or indeed a small selection of the verses in individual songs. She is often, as she was at the time, too much: too big, too boisterous, too resistant to categorization or easy analysis.

This is in part because of the manner in which her career as a songwriter began, which is part of her well-worked self-mythologizing.[1] The basic outline of her life is well

[1] Much of the biographical detail I present here comes from Donald Meek's excellent *Màiri Mhòr nan Òran: Taghadh de a h-Òrain* (Big Mary of the Song: A Selection of her Songs), which is published in Gaelic only. I also draw on the work of Sheila Kidd and the PhD thesis of Priscilla Scott at different points. See, in particular, Sheila M. Kidd, 'Burning Issues: Reactions to the Highland Press during the 1885 Election Campaign', *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, 24 (2008), pp. 286–307; Priscilla Scott, '"With heart and voice ever devoted to the cause": Women in the Gaelic Movement, 1886–1914' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2014) <http://hdl.handle.net/1842/9913> [accessed 11 February 2025]; Màiri Mhòr nan Òran, *Màiri Mhòr nan Òran: Taghadh de a h-Òrain*, ed. by Donald E. Meek, 2nd edn (Scottish Academic Press, 1998), hereafter *MM*. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated; *Caran an t-Saoghail (The Wiles*

established, if some of the crucial details remain unclear. Màiri Dhòmhnallach (MacDonald) was born in Skye in the early nineteenth century, sometime between 1818 and 1821, and was raised in the parish of Sgeabost. She left the island in the 1840s, and married Isaac Mac a' Phearsain, who was a cobbler and then a chimney sweep in Inverness. They had six — or by some accounts seven — children together (one of whom died in infancy). Isaac died of meningitis aged 55 in 1871 and this left Màiri having to raise and support her family by herself; she duly went into service. What happened next is well known in the Gaelic world. As Màiri's own poems and reports in the press at the time make apparent, she was accused of theft from her employer — indeed of stealing some items while her employer's funeral was taking place. The missing items were found at the top of Màiri's chest, and she was sentenced to forty days in prison. (Donald Meek plausibly suggests that Màiri had been lent by her employers, the Bollands, to nurse at the sickbed of their friend Harriet Turner, who was ill with and would die of a fever (*MM*, p. 24).) Màiri's own story — and the story that has found great support among Gaelic speakers — was that another servant, from the Lowlands, who had taken against Màiri, stole the items and framed her. Màiri was freed through the intervention of influential friends in Inverness society, but this was a disgrace that infuriated her, and made her turn, seriously, to verse (it was likely that she had previously been a singer and tradition bearer, but not a composer of her own songs). As the end of her song 'Eilean a' Cheò' (The Isle of Mist) makes clear, personal humiliation fed her writing: ''S e na dh'fhuiling mi de thàmailt | A thug mo bhàrdachd beò' ('It's what I suffered of disgrace | that gave my poetry life') (*MM*, p. 110).

The life her poetry has is voluminous. Between 1871 and her death following a short illness in 1898 she composed scores of songs; the edition of her poems brought out in 1891 runs to some 320 pages (in Gaelic only). These songs were taken down from Màiri's dictation in the 1890s and had been composed in the previous two decades during her time in Glasgow and Greenock (in both places she worked as a nurse and midwife) and then in Skye where she lived in retirement. Her songs cover Highland politics, especially the land struggles in Skye and the islands, as well as the life of the Highland communities in the Lowland cities, with a strong mix of nostalgia, celebration (of the Highland and Gaelic societies of the Lowlands, of campaigners, of steamboats), and palpable anger. The anger was in part on behalf of the people of the crofters but was often tinged by her memory of how she felt she herself had been maltreated in Inverness. This is perhaps a matter of genre, as well as of score settling: as Michel Byrne suggests, the combination

of the World): An Anthology of Nineteenth-Century Gaelic Verse, ed. by Donald E. Meek (Birlinn, 2003); *Tuath is Tighearna: Tenants and Landlords: An Anthology of Gaelic Poetry of Social and Political Protest from the Clearances to the Land Agitation (1800–1890)*, ed. by Donald E. Meek (Scottish Academic Press for the Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 1995).

of ‘well-observed lyrical evocations of her native Skye and the expression of personal grievance [...] links her to the anonymous female song corpus of previous centuries’.[2]

Generic or not, personal grievance is undoubtedly central to much of her work. Her most famous account of her trial and imprisonment has the following refrain:

> Tha mi sgìth de luchd na Beurla;
> Tha mi sgìth dhiubh cheart da-rìribh;
> ’S ann leam fhìn gur fhada ’n cèilidh;
> Tha mi sgìth de luchd na Beurla.
>
> (I’m tired of English speakers;
> I’m really tired of them;
> I long for a cèilidh
> I’m tired of English speakers.[3])

This song is primarily concerned with the circumstances of her trial, with its targets the English speakers of Inverness she held responsible for her false imprisonment. She castigates those who gave evidence against her or who did not support her:

> ’N uair thig latha mòr a’ chùnntais,
> ’S a thèid gach cogais a dhùsgadh,
> Bidh iomadh h-aon is crith nan glùinean,
> Reic an crùn le fianais bhrèige.
>
> (When the great day of judgement comes
> And every conscience is awoken
> Every one, with shaking knees,
> Will sell the crown with false witness.[4])

In contrast she celebrates those who supported her: the politician Charles Fraser MacIntosh and the journalist, newspaper editor, and activist John Murdoch (who would be the first publisher of many of her poems).

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[2] Anne Frater and Michel Byrne, ‘Gaelic Poetry and Song’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Women’s Writing*, ed. by Glenda Norquay (Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 22–34 (p. 32) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g0b5jr> [accessed 11 February 2025].

[3] *MM*, p. 60. John MacInnes notes that Màiri is less likely to blame Lowland shepherds than English ones: ‘Màiri always makes the distinction between Goill “Lowlanders” and Sasannaich “English”. She has about a score of references to Sasannaich and though she is not very complimentary to the Gall, she is quite consistent in her view that the Sasannach is the villain’: ‘The Gaelic Perception of the Lowlands’, in *Dùthchas Nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes*, ed. by Michael Newton (Birlinn, 2006), pp. 34–47 (p. 44).

[4] *MM*, p. 60. See also Màiri Nic a’ Phearsain, *Dàin agus Òrain Ghàidhlig* (MacCoinnich, 1891), pp. 225–31.

But this is not just personal score settling; there is a social and cultural dimension as well. Those ‘luchd na Beurla’ (‘English speakers’) involve a broader target:

Tha ar dùthaich ar a truailleadh,
Leis a’ ghràisg tha tighinn mu thuath oirnn;
Chan eil creutair bochd a ghluaiseas,
Nach tèid a chuaradh ’s a reubadh. [...]

Far an robh mòran de dhaoine,
’S ann a tha e ’n diugh fo chaoirich,
Cìobair am mullach gach maoile,
Coin san aonach ’s iad ag éigheach.

(Our country is polluted,
By the rabble who’ve come north to us;
Not a single poor creature moves
That isn’t tormented and torn. [...]

Where there were many people
Everything now is under sheep,
A shepherd on every bare hillock
Dogs barking on the high moors.) (*MM*, p. 63)

The objects of her ire are frequent targets in nineteenth-century Gaelic verse: the sheep and shepherds who are the signs of people being cleared from their homes and homelands to the edges of the moor to scrape their living from bad soil and fishing or to the cities, or overseas. The sheep and shepherds, rather than the owners of the land: the satires often targeted the immediate symbols rather than the underlying causes, whether these be the economic system, the landlords, or the government. (Sheep would be joined by deer as the great bêtes noires of the Highlands, and the deer would be followed by the stereotypical ‘Colonels’ who hunted them, and bought or built hunting lodges for the privilege.)

Gaelic literature in the nineteenth century is often — as in Màiri’s ‘Luchd na Beurla’ (‘English speakers’) — concerned with what we might now term land resources and resource management, mulling over how the land is used and by whom, and the effects that has had on the human population and natural world in the Highlands: clearance, environmental change and destruction, poverty, destitution, and cultural loss. However, it is not only the land that is often presented as a resource, but the Gaelic language itself: it too is ripe for exploitation. A common argument made from the 1870s onwards, even among those nominally supporters of the language, was that it should be allowed to die

while still being used as material for academic study. Alexander Dallas, town clerk of Inverness, argued — while campaigning (successfully) to be on the first committee of the Gaelic Society of Inverness — that 'whilst allowing the language to die, we might so labour as to render essential service to philology and archaeology generally, by contributing our Gaelic share to the common stock of Celtic lore'.[5] (Similar suggestions were made by Eneas Mackintosh, first chairman of the Gaelic Society of Inverness, and by Donald Mackinnon, who would become the first professor of Celtic at Edinburgh.[6])

This should perhaps give us — me, in particular — pause. One of the ongoing issues with the study of Gaelic literature is how little discussion of that literature takes place in the Gaelic language itself (apart from some notable, laudable examples).[7] The language of academic discourse is, in the main, English, with Gaelic texts — as in this article — translated and made available as a resource, in effect, to be shared and compared for broader discussions in Scottish literature or nineteenth-century literature (or whatever the period may be). Survey books of Scottish literature tend still to have a limited, if not tokenistic, Gaelic presence: the fact of Gaelic as a living, troubling, disruptive cultural presence in the nineteenth — or twenty-first — century is then muted or marginalized, surrounded by a sea of English.[8] It is such a cultural, and linguistic, suffocation that Màiri laments: it is the presence of the English language (and that parallel cacophony, the barking dogs) that most troubles her. In this, though, Màiri is more willing to draw lines of ethnicity and language than many in the twenty-first century, present author included, would be. The exclusionary nature of Màiri's world view does pose challenges for how we frame debates about rewilding or land or home ownership in Scotland:

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[5] [Account of the First Meeting], *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 1 (1871–72), pp. 1–5 (p. 4).

[6] In an account of the first meeting of the Gaelic Society of Inverness, Eneas Mackintosh is reported to have said, following a lecture by Professor John Stuart Blackie, that 'he thought that Gaelic should be made a matter of study, and that a Professorship should be established; but at the same time that it should be allowed to die out as a spoken language, and give place to the English tongue': 'Lecture by Professor Blackie On Nationality', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 1 (1871–72), pp. 113–20 (p. 120). Donald Mackinnon, meanwhile, would write in 1875 of 'the demise of Gaelic as a positive outcome that could be more rapidly achieved if the language were used tactically in the education system', and suggested that 'the "practical advantages" of replacing Gaelic with English in the Highlands "will more than compensate for the loss sustained through the demise of Gaelic" and stated his "firm conviction that the quickest and most effective method of extirpating the Gaelic language is to make a freer use of it in educating Highland children"'. See Wilson McLeod, *Gaelic in Scotland: Policies, Movements, Ideologies* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020), p. 92, doi: 10.3366/edinburgh/9781474462396.001.0001; and 'Gaelic in Highland Schools', *An Gàidheal*, 5 (1876), pp. 23–28 (pp. 23, 27).

[7] Donald Meek's edition of Màiri Mhòr nan Òran's songs is one such; as, more recently, is the scholarly journal *Aiste*. The vast majority of Gaelic literary history and criticism, however, takes place in English.

[8] A notable exception is *The International Companion to Scottish Poetry*, ed. by Carla Sassi, International Companions to Scottish Literature (Scottish Literature International, 2015). This made excellent use of Thomas Owen Clancy as a Gaelic advisor, and had co-authored chapters for most time periods and topics (to have full representation and informed discussion of Gaelic material).

Tha ar dùthaich ar a truailleadh.
(Our country is polluted.)

Far an robh mòran de dhaoine,
'S ann a tha e 'n diugh fo chaoirich.

(Where there were many people
Everything now is under sheep.)

Not *the* country, but *our* country, and much depends on who that *we* are, who those 'many people' were. Màiri is not celebrating here the idea of community in the abstract, but one of a particular type, with a distinct culture, language, even a historical way of managing the land. She is a great supporter of the idea of the *Gàidheal* as an ethnicity and of a particular Gaelic way of life (her love of the sport of shinty is one of the markers of this, say); and this is certainly a way of life that was more vibrant and distinct in her day, but which is still present, in an attenuated form, in some pockets of the Highlands and islands.[9] What do we do, nowadays, with such an ethnic standpoint, one which will connect a place or land to a particular people (not to humanity as a whole)? Does this lead inexorably towards an anti-immigrant xenophobia? Or is there a legitimate space for concerns about protecting a culture from the surrounding, ever dominant pressures of another culture? But where do our limits lie with this? A television channel, fair enough: but with English or Gaelic subtitles? Gaelic-medium education — but as long as it does not replace English-medium education? Gaelic speakers to have privileged access to any houses for sale in the Highlands? Or just Gaelic speakers with traceable Hieland ancestry? An outright ban on second homes, and free-market economics? A requirement for any rewilding or carbon capture investment in the Highlands to come with local community vetoes on all activity? A new scheme to encourage voluntary migration of Gaelic speakers to Canada (to echo those numerous schemes of previous centuries)? The opposite? A big wall to mark the beginning of the North Coast 500?

One of the charges against contemporary rewilding is the extent to which it often comes as a form of imposition, and neocolonialism, in which policies, plans, wolves, are foisted on a local community without full or real consultation. Or without a chance

[9] Màiri was, in particular, a big supporter of shinty. See her poems for the Glasgow and Greenock shinty clubs: 'Camanachd Ghlaschu, Aig a' Bhliadhn' Uir, 1876' (Glasgow Camanachd at New Year, 1876); and 'Camanachd Ghrianaig, Aig an t-Seana Challainn, 1877, eadar tri fichead de Ghaidheil Ghlaschu agus an t-aireamch ceudna de Ghaidheil Ghrianaig' (Greenock Camanachd, at the old New Year, 1877, between sixty Glasgow Gaels and the same number of Greenock Gaels), both in Nic a' Phearsain, pp. 183–86, 187–90.

for that community to make their own choices and their own (as seen from outside) mistakes. And this brings me back to Màiri, because, although she is a great poet of the natural world, she is not — in any way we would celebrate now — an eco-warrior, but rather a celebrant of the different types of wealth that the Highlands can bring. This includes military power. Màiri echoes Henry Dundas's earlier arguments that the Highland clearances were disastrous because they starved the British Army of ready and willing soldiers: she notes that from Skye alone

> Bha còrr agus deich mile
> Fon Rìgh a ghabh an t-òr.
>
> (There were more than ten thousand
> Who took the King's gold coin.[10])

But the wealth of the Highlands also includes a more extractive relationship to the land. A verse from 'Eilean a' Cheò' (The Island of the Mist) offers up a celebratory slogan which is now in the Makars' Court in Edinburgh:

> Ach cuimhnichibh gur sluagh sibh,
> Is cumaibh suas ur còir;
> Tha beairteas fo na Cruachan
> Fon d'fhuair sibh àrach òg.
> Tha iarann agus gual ann,
> Is luaidhe glas is òr,
> 'S tha mèinnean gu ur buannachd
> An Eilean uain' a' Cheò.
>
> Cuimhnichibh ur cruadal,
> Is cumaibh suas ur sròl;
> Gun tèid an roth mun cuairt duibh
> Le neart is cruas nan dòrn;
> Gum bi ur crodh air bhuailtean,
> 'S gach tuathanach air dòigh,
> 'S na Sasannaich air fuadach
> A Eilean uain' a' Cheò.

[10] *Caran an t-Saoghail*, ed. by Meek, pp. 368–69. All translations from this edition are Meek's own. See Alexander Murdoch, 'Henry Dundas, Scotland and the Union with Ireland, 1792–1801', in *Scotland in the Age of the French Revolution*, ed. by Bob Harris (Donald, 2005), pp. 125–39 (p. 128).

(Remember that you are a people
And stand up for your rights;
Wealth lies beneath those mountains
Where you spent your early life;
Iron and coal are stored there
And grey lead, and gold,
And mines to bring you profit
In the green Island of the Mist.

Remember now your toughness
And hold your banner high;
The wheel will surely turn for you
By the strength and power of fists;
Your cattle will yet have pasture,
And each farmer live in style,
And the English will be banished
From the green-clad Misty Isle.[11])

An extractive economy is acceptable, in other words, as long as it is to the benefit or profit of the 'people', the local community. This is, perhaps, based on realpolitik, but it also shows that Màiri cannot easily — if at all — be used as a representative of a proto-modern ecological awareness; for her, the natural world — and the people of the Highlands — should be considered as resources, and this is part of the way in which their worth should be understood and argued for.

To present Màiri solely as a hard-nosed political operator would, however, be misleading. The Highlands are viewed in Màiri's work primarily through the prism of nostalgia. Hers is a poetry of communal remembrance, restoration, and — the desire for, the hope for — continuity. In the Gaelic in 'Eilean a' Cheò' the imperatives 'cuimhnichibh [...] cumaibh' ('remember [...] keep') use the plural form; they are not a Tintern Abbeyesque remembrance of individual times past (or even of the passing of memory from one individual to another). This song could then be read as a work of 'restorative nostalgia' in Svetlana Boym's words, a work that 'stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home': a home that will be restored, impossibly, when those cattle return to the land after the English have been evicted.[12] However, Màiri's poetry — here and as a whole — is odder than this, and

[11] *Caran an t-Saoghail*, ed. by Meek, pp. 372–73.

[12] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2001), p. xviii.

comes closer, at its most interesting, to a form of 'reflective nostalgia', which for Boym 'thrives in *algia*, longing itself, and delays the homecoming — wistfully, ironically, desperately [...]. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity' (p. xviii). Màiri certainly does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity, whether advocating superquarries and goldmines on the Isle of Skye while celebrating the way of life of her childhood; her celebration of modernity (in spite of her transhistorical longing) is perhaps most clearly seen in her love of the steamship.[13] And there is a good deal of ambivalence, and oddity, to the emotional responses in her songs.

Ultimately, what is to be remembered in 'Eilean a' Cheò' is not Skye, its mistiness and greenness, but Màiri herself, mouldering in the grave:

> Beannachd leibh, a chàirdean,
> Anns gach ceàrn tha fo na neòil,
> Gach mac is nighean màthar
> An Eilean àrd a' Cheò;
> Is cuimhnichibh sibh Màiri
> Nuair bhios i cnàmh fon fhòid —
> 'S e na dh'fhuiling mi de thàmailt
> A thug mo bhàrdachd beò.
>
> (Farewell to you now, my friends,
> In each land beneath the clouds,
> To every son and daughter
> From the lofty Isle of Mist;
> You will remember Mary
> When she is decaying under turf;
> The humiliation that I endured
> Was what gave my poetry life.[14])

Many of Màiri's songs have a similar effect to this: they go on longer and further than you might expect; their message becomes complicated or contradicted by the accumulation of perspectives and registers. If exile is the condition of modernity for the sons and daughters of Skye, what the song offers in the end is not a promise of a return to an eternal land of childhood and plenty, but a jolting injunction to remember Màiri's

[13] Màiri wrote poems in praise of the steamships *Clydesdale* and *Claymore*. See Nic a' Phearsain, pp. 59–60, 107–09.

[14] *Caran an t-Saoghail*, ed. by Meek, pp. 374–75.

personal humiliation, her poetry, and her death. One might expect in songs of this genre a culminating call to political or cultural action.[15] Cultural renewal is, indeed, the thrust of the penultimate verse, with a celebration of the strength of Clan Donald and the work of John Stuart Blackie on behalf of Gaelic. The ending, however, presents a dissonant juxtaposition between those in exile and the personal moment of humiliation that was the impetus for Màiri composing songs: communal disenfranchisement and suffering is under- or overwritten by the unconnected moment of individual injustice; any sense of 'homecoming' is forever deferred, or at least troubled by the veering between third and first person in this final verse.

This ambiguity of address — with her speaking of, and also as, Màiri — suggests that an acute, and even anxious, awareness of her audience is embedded into the production of her songs. The concluding 'Beannachd leibh, a chàirdean' ('Farewell to you now, my friends') may serve to create and imagine an audience rather than being ready made for it, while also in the process taking leave of it. This is perhaps testament most of all to Màiri's flair for the dramatic, and how that becomes central to the voice of her songs; it certainly was apparent in her own — less ambiguous — political acts. Sheila Kidd has drawn our attention to a report from the *Scottish Highlander* newspaper from 16 October 1885:

> Mrs Macpherson, the Skye poetess, having arrived here some weeks ago in the yacht 'Carlotta' [...] on her departure last Friday night by the 'Claymore' she was accompanied to the quay by almost every man in the place, to whom she sang and recited with untiring effort, during the time she awaited the arrival of the steamer, her most appropriate pieces for the occasion, to the great appreciation and amusement of the crowd. At her request, copies of the *Scotsman*, *Courier* and *Northern Chronicle* were committed to the flames of a large fire lighted for the purpose, the ashes being afterwards carefully gathered and buried on the beach below high-water mark; the Poetess herself supplying the refreshments for the 'funeral'. This was done to show the hate and contempt in which these organs of their oppressors are held by their people.[16]

Iain Crichton Smith — with some justification — complained that Màiri's work often came too close to 'duilleagan falbhach a' phàipeir naidheachd' ('the ephemeral pages of a newspaper').[17] But this went alongside an understanding of the power of ephemeral

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[15] In 'Fios chun a' Bhaird' (A Message for the Poet) by William Livingston (1808–1870), for example, the repeated refrain suggests a politically urgent act of witnessing of the effects of the clearances: 'Mar a fhuair 's a chunnaic mise, | Thoir am fios seo chun a' Bhàird' ('Just as I found and as I saw, | Take this message to the Poet'): *Caran an t-Saoghail*, ed. by Meek, pp. 48–49.

[16] Quoted in Kidd, p. 286.

[17] Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn, 'Ath-Sgrùdadh: Bàrdachd Màiri Mhòr Nan Òran', *Gairm*, 132 (1985), pp. 321–27; see *MM*, p. 49.

messages to whip up crowds, to change and harness sentiment: if all news is ultimately local news, then the same might be true of Highland politics in the 1870s and 1880s, where the locality was all important (as a glance through the issues of the *Scottish Highlander*, with its hyper-specific political details, shows). And there have been so few Gaelic writers as well attuned and connected to, and active within, their own local politics as Màiri Mhòr. These messages could be — as we shall shortly see — visual as much as poetic or dramatic, but they were also often tapping into a shared political animosity (as here) or a store of cultural associations, and using these to direct, or trouble, her audience's response.

As Donald Meek points out, one of the things that distinguishes Màiri Mhòr from contemporaries, such as her fellow Skye poet Niall MacLeòid (Neil MacLeod) (1843–1913), was the way she largely used extant Gaelic tunes as a basis on which to compose her new songs; MacLeòid, perhaps with an eye on the parlours of Glasgow and Edinburgh, was more likely to use tunes that were popular in the Lowlands (*MM*, p. 36). This, along with the more direct form of address in her verse, also provides quite a different reading (or listening) experience from MacLeòid's songs or, indeed, from the contemporary mistiness of English-language Celtic Twilight poetry: there is less verbiage, ornamentation, or emotional fuzziness. It might be going too far to say that there is a parallel here between the return to an older way of working the land celebrated in some of her verse and the performed return to older Gaelic (rather than English or Scots) musical models; there is no doubt, though, that she worked with embedded cultural associations and signals to work upon her audience.[18]

One of the songs that she was likely to have sung on the pier in 1885 was her 'Brosnachadh nan Gàidheal' (Encitement of the Gael), which encouraged voters to re-elect the Crofter's Party candidate Charles Fraser MacIntosh in that year (she had already helped him get elected in 1874 when he had stood as an Independent Liberal candidate). This was to the tune of a comedic song from earlier in the century, 'Gleachd an t-Seann Dùin' agus an Dùin' Òg' (The Contest of the Old Man and the Young Man), about the competition between a hateful detestable old man and a delightful young man.[19] (Iain Moriston, the composer, was a catechist in Harris, so there may also have been a religious conflict, and rejection of earlier mores, at the heart of his song.) In Màiri's song this tune is put to political use, as a battle between old and new worlds. Although she is aware of what has been lost, her concern is more on the political fight against the laws that allowed the Highlands to be plundered:

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[18] *Dùthchas Nan Gàidheal*, ed. by Newton, p. 362; Scott, p. 216.

[19] Iain Moriston, *Gleachd an t-Seann Duine agus an Duin' Oig* (Gillies, 1853).

Cuiribh Teàrlach suas le cliù,
Oir dhearbh e dhuibh a dhùrachd cheana,
Is gheibh sibh cead air fèidh nan stùc,
Is còir às ùr air bhur cuid fearainn.

Sa cheàrn sna dh'àithneadh dhuinn le Dia,
Chan fhaod sinn triall air sliabh no gainneimh;
A h-uile ni 'n robh smear no luach,
Gun spùinn iad uainn le lagh an fhearainn.

Chan eil bileag gorm no uaine
Far 'n robh dualachas mo sheanar,
Leis na bric tha snàmh fon chuan,
Nach tug iad uainn, a dheòin no dh'aindeoin.

Ma thog neach eisir ann an cliabh
No maorach ann am meadhan mara,
Thèid an cur fo ghlais 's for dhìon
Le laghan diongmhalt' dìon an fhearainn.

Faodaidh gu bheil a' chainnt seo garbh,
Ach 's tric tha 'n fhìrinn searbh ri labhairt —
Chaidh luingeas-chogaidh 's sluagh fo airm
A dhìon 's a theàrmann lagh an fhearainn.

(Send Charles up with honour
As he's proved his goodwill before,
And you'll get rights on the deer of the peaks,
And new rights on your land.

In this nook that God has decreed for us
We can't travel on hill or sand;
Everything that had value or worth
they plundered from us with the land laws.

There's not one blade — green or blue
that was traditionally my grandfather's
with the trout swimming in the sea
they didn't take from us, with or without consent.

If someone took an oyster in a creel,
or shellfish in the open sea
they'd be arrested and imprisoned
from the strong laws to protect the land.

Maybe this speech is too harsh
but the truth is often bitter to speak —
warships and armed soldiers were sent
to protect and defend the land laws.) (*MM*, p. 191)

Màiri is clearly on the side of the crofters who had a pitched battle against soldiers under the command of Sheriff Ivory, and supported by the gunboat *The Assistance* (all of which took place in November 1884 in Glendale on the Isle of Skye), and she could crow (in another song, 'Òran Beinn Lì' (The Song of Ben Lì)) that one of the leaders of the crofters, Tormod Stiùbhart — known as Parnell — was found to have been slandered by Ivory and wrongly imprisoned, with Ivory subsequently being fined: there was a sense that even the law might, however slowly, be turning to their side (*MM*, pp. 204, 207). What the song shares with 'Gleachd an t-Seann Dùin' agus an Dùin' Òg', for those who recognize the tune, is a celebration of generational change. The old man of the earlier song offers only shame, brutality, and deception, while the young man provides redemption from this, as well as care, protection, clarity, and even weaponry: 'Seann duine a dalladh mo shuilean | 'S an duin' og toirt dhuibh nan lannan' ('The old man blinded my eyes | And the young man gave them blades').[20] There is no (misty) nostalgic return pined for in Màiri's song, no return to the 'old', but a sense of a futural change for the better: even if this means, as at the end of the song, financial support for emigration to Manitoba.

'Brosnachadh nan Gàidheal' shows Màiri as a celebrator and a gloater, as a political operator, as a campaigner; someone involved in challenging and changing the law through political and direct action. It is very much the poem of a public figure, performing on the 'Gaelic Platform', as Priscilla Scott describes her, who carefully created an image of herself that veered from the (literally) homespun to the prophetic (p. 211). These images, taken from the 1891 edition of her work, are the most famous of Màiri and have a wonderful mix of the authentic (the spinning) and the stagy (the painted backdrop) (*Figs. 1*, 2).

[20] Moriston, p. 10 (I have retained original orthography). The song may have particularly appealed to Màiri because of its repeated use of images of condemnation, liberation, and the enabling of speech or breath: ''N sean duine gam fhagail muchaidh. | San duin og toirt luith's do m'anail' ('The old man left me suffocated. | And the young man gave strength to my breath'); 'Thug an seann duin mi fo dhiteadh | 'S shaor an t-og mi le daor-cheannach' ('The old man had me condemned | And the young freed me, dearly bought') (p. 11).

Fig. 1: 'A' Chuibhle Shnìomh' (The Spinning Wheel), from a photograph by D. Whyte, Inverness, in Nic a' Phearsain, *Dàin agus Òrain Ghàidhlig* (MacCoinnich, 1891), p. 80.

Fig. 2: 'A' Chuigeal' (Spinning), from a photograph by D. Whyte, Inverness, in Nic a' Phearsain, *Dàin agus Òrain Ghàidhlig* (MacCoinnich, 1891), p. 192.

Màiri is not afraid to look straight through the camera, as it were, offering a glimpse of the force of her personality: she is active, not passive, with a sense of contained confidence and skill which almost becomes forceful defiance. If there are visual echoes of Queen Victoria in the first image, this is a Victoria who has been rendered natively Highland, and interpreted personally by Màiri: she was wearing a tartan that she had devised and spun herself.

Her appearance, as in these images, in her own tartan was not unusual. The report of the first royal national Mòd (held in Oban in 1892) describes her thus: 'Mary MacPherson, the famous Skye poetess, appeared on the platform, and sang her ancient songs to thunders of applause. She also made a speech on this occasion, clothed from head to foot in tartan of her own making.'[21] Unusually, among the competitors in the Mòd, Màiri also sang her own songs (as well as, or making them seem, 'ancient' ones). The spinning wheel connects her, as Priscilla Scott notes, with particular images of the prophetess, perhaps nowhere more so than in an account from the *Liverpool Mercury* of the Highland Convention at Bonar Bridge in 1886:

> Just prior to the commencement of business, an incident quite dramatic in character occurred, which had an almost thrilling effect upon the sensitively emotional Gaels assembled together in obedience to the call of patriotism. The well-known Skye poetess, Mary MacPherson, was observed to enter the hall, and was immediately greeted by plaudits and some cries in Gaelic. She responded by reciting an apostrophe in verse in the same language — which surely is the language of fervency — welcoming delegates to the meeting, and urging them to a brave stance on behalf of their kinsmen in distress. Her appearance as she paced the whole length of the hall with uplifted hands — her plaid of Macpherson tartan, disposed to show to advantage her tall, large-proportioned figure — was striking in the extreme. Her voice was full and sonorous for a woman, yet wanting in none of the finer inflections of the feminine vocal organs, and gave her action an almost sybiline [*sic*] effect which was not without its influence upon that portion of her auditory — the smaller portion — who did not understand the Gaelic language.[22]

There is a potent symbolism in Màiri's public performances of herself: the weaving of different threads of Highland culture into her own tartans, which are then turned into a form of political messaging; the 'fervency' of her language which has an impressiveness even to those who do not speak it.

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[21] 'The Mod at Oban', *Leeds Mercury*, 5 September 1893, quoted in Scott, p. 211.

[22] 'The Highland Convention at Bonar Bridge', *Liverpool Mercury*, 29 September 1886, quoted in Scott, pp. 216–17.

There is something disconcerting about this 'sibylline' effect even on those that do not speak the language. Gaelic could then become an empty or overwrought symbol, rather than a medium for any nuanced or complex political (or other) messaging. The risks are perhaps more apparent in the twentieth century, when Gaelic writers and activists came to be speaking, primarily, to an audience that did not speak the language: this would later also be true for Sorley MacLean, one of the greatest twentieth-century advocates of Màiri's, almost a hundred years later. Seamus Heaney responded to hearing MacLean read, at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in the 1970s, by saying it

> had the force of revelation: the mesmeric, heightened tone; the weathered voice coming in close from a far place; the swarm of the vowels; the surrender to the otherness of the poem; above all the sense of bardic dignity that was entirely without self-parade but was instead the effect of a proud self-abnegation, as much a submission as a claim to heritage.[23]

As I have argued elsewhere, it is unsettling that an audience which listens to MacLean reading in a language they cannot understand still, as in Duncan Glen's poetic reminiscence of MacLean reading in Cambridge, 'cheer and cheer'.[24] What is troubling becomes clear in James Campbell's 1981 review of MacLean's *Reothairt is Contraigh*, as he claims

> there is a meaning which comes through MacLean's oral delivery which transcends semantics. It may be similar in kind to the meaning sometimes communicated by melody or by tone of voice, yet it is more than that — for MacLean, who descends from a line of distinguished Gaelic singers and tradition-bearers, brings to his oral performance the entire history of his people, and the music in his verse has its source somewhere in the authority of Calvinist religion, the ancient Celtic concern with landscape, and the sufferings and forced emigrations which resulted from the Highland Clearances. These and other historical facts and folk memories are all present each time he reads from his own work.[25]

How can one person — in their voice — repeat the 'entire history of [their] people', even if that 'people' can be defined? With the emphasis on the meaning of MacLean's *sounds* (rather than his words) — or of Màiri's fervency rather than her argumentation — we are in the territory of the Celtic Twilight, or of Macpherson's Ossianic poems where

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[23] Seamus Heaney, 'Introduction', in *Sorley MacLean: Critical Essays*, ed. by Raymond J. Ross and Joy Hendry (Scottish Academic Press, 1986), p. 2. See Peter Mackay, *Sorley MacLean* (Research Institute for Irish and Scottish Studies, 2010), p. 21.

[24] Duncan Glen, 'A Journey into Scotland', *Lines Review*, 108 (1989), pp. 30–35 (p. 33).

[25] James Campbell, 'High Tide', review of *Reothairt is Contraigh*, *New Statesman*, 20 October 1981, pp. 20–21 (p. 20).

Gaelic culture is gestured at, or highlighted as an absence, rather than confronted as a living presence.

Whether or not it is due to a prophetic quality, 'fervency', or her carefully cultivated self-image, it is true that Màiri's songs have lasted longer in terms of cultural currency than those of many of her contemporaries. A useful comparison can be made between Màiri's fame and reputation with that of Mary MacKellar (1836–1890). MacKellar was named the bàrd to the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1876, but her work — although important in its day, in Scott's words, 'in encouraging a wider appreciation of Gaelic culture' — has suffered in subsequent evaluations of the period; this is not least because it did not share Màiri's 'interest in the contemporary situation in the Highlands, and on the land question in particular', focusing instead on the Gaelic heroic past.[26] On MacKellar's death Màiri wrote an elegy for her which suggests at least professional respect (it is unclear if they had much or any personal acquaintance), but also a particular focus on the public nature of MacKellar's poetry and role as poet.[27] In recognition of her role as bàrd to the Gaelic Society, MacKellar is 'Bean-chomuinn nam bàrd' ('Female fellow of the Poets'), known 'gach àit thèid Gàidhlig a luaidh' ('wherever Gaelic is celebrated'), and the song as a whole is a standard exercise in marking MacKellar's 'onair' ('honour') and 'cliù' ('reputation').[28] There is, though, perhaps an unexpected emphasis on the role of costume and dress in how reputation is maintained and created. Màiri suggests,

> Cha bu mhath leam bhith'n còt,
> Am bròg, an osan, no'm brèid,
> Na chuireadh ort sgleò.
>
> (I wouldn't like to be the coat
> The shoe, the stocking or the headscarf,
> That would put a blemish on you.[29])

Màiri was careful not just in the literal but also figurative clothing she adopted; and the manner in which the two poets would reuse tunes from previous Gaelic songs

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[26] Scott, pp. 144, 148. For more on Mary MacKellar, see Scott, pp. 114–17, 144–55; and 'Mary MacKellar, Bard and Senachie', *Highland Monthly*, 2 (1890–91), pp. 434–40.

[27] See Màiri Mhòr nan Òran, 'Cumha Do Mhàiri Chamshron, Bana-Bhàrd Nan Camshronach', *Scottish Highlander, and North of Scotland Advertiser*, 30 October 1890, p. 5; Nic a' Phearsain, pp. 313–14; and Scott, p. 154.

[28] Nic a' Phearsain, p. 314. The most famous previous use of the phrase 'Bean-chomuinn'comes in a more amatory context, in Duncan Bàn MacIntyre's 'Moladh Beinn Dorain', where he describes how a stag would like to meet his 'Bean-chomuinn os n-ìosal'; Angus MacLeod, MacIntyre's first editor, demurely puts this as showing how he 'longs for a tryst | with his love mate in private'. See *The Songs of Duncan Ban Macintyre*, ed. by Angus MacLeod (Scottish Academic Press for the Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 1952), pp. 210–11.

[29] Nic a' Phearsain, p. 314.

gives a sense of ways in which this might be more than just a comment on clothing (important though that is too). MacKellar's 'Òran air a' Bhan-Rìgh Bhictoria' (Song on Queen Victoria), originally published in the fourth number of the magazine *An Gàidheal* in 1872 (the year of Màiri's 'humiliation') is both sentimental and imperial in its approach, as she joyfully places Victoria in the Highland landscape:

> 'S a' mhaduinn shamhraidh cha b' ann 'n a seòmar
> A gheibhte a' bhan-tighearna 'tha mi 'seinn,
> Is grian a' dòrtadh gu boisgeil bòidheach
> A gathan òrbhui' air ceo a' ghlinn,
> Ach 'gabhail sòlais 's an ùrachd ghlòrmhor
> 'S ag éisdeachd ceòlruidh nan èoinean binn'
> Le ribheid shiùbhlaich a' cur na smùid dhiubh
> Mu thimchioll lùchairt nam baideal grinn'.
>
> (On a summer morning, not in a room
> Would be found the queen of whom I sing,
> With the sun pouring, flashing, lovely,
> Its gold-yellow beams on the glen's mist,
> But taking the joy and glorious freshness
> And listening to the sweet song of the birds
> With nimble reeds giving it laldy
> Around the palace of the elegant battlements.[30])

Whether through cognitive dissonance or cultural reinforcement, this song, the journal — and her 1880 collection — tells us, should be sung to the air of 'Coire Cheathaich' (Misty Corrie).[31] This points the reader, or singer, in two different directions, to two different well-known tunes in Gaelic, both associated with earlier songs by the poet Duncan Bàn MacIntyre (1724–1812): 'Òran Cumha a' Cheathaich' ('Song of Misty Corrie') and 'Cumha Coire a' Cheathaich' ('Lament for Misty Corrie').[32] Both could work with MacKellar's lyrics, but have quite different resonances. The first celebrates the fecund luxury of the corrie, and its nobleness: ''S e Coir' a' Cheathaich an t-aithir priseil | 'S an t-àite rìoghail mu 'm bit' a' sealg' ('Misty Corrie is a precious valley | And a royal place round which the hunt was held').[33] The second, however, laments how the

[30] Mairi NicEallair, 'Oran Air a' Bhan-Righ Bhictoria', *An Gàidheal*, 1 (1872), pp. 92–93 (p. 92).

[31] Mary MacKellar, *Poems and Songs: Gaelic and English* (MacLachlan & Stewart, 1880), p. 1.

[32] *Songs of MacIntyre*, ed. by MacLeod, pp. 164–83.

[33] Ibid., pp. 168–69. Translation by editor.

landscape has changed under the control of a destructive 'baron' who does not respect the old hunting customs:

'S Mac Eóghainn t' ann an dràsda,
Mar chlach an ionad càbaig,
An àite na bh'ann.

(And MacEwan, who lives there now,
Is like a stone in lieu of cheese,
In place of those who have been there.[34])

Which of these MacKellar's singers and interpreters choose as the tune means a lot for how this song can be interpreted: as a celebration of a continued 'royal' lineage in the Highlands (by no means against the grain of much Gaelic poetry of the time, in which the monarch or military leader has taken the historical poetic place of the clan chief); or as a coded lament against the change that has befallen the Highlands. It is a stretch, though, to read it in this second manner; in Màiri's songs, however, this was the dominant strain.

Or at least *a* dominant strain. For Màiri is, as I have been arguing, often excessive, and her verse does not stop at the political or the polemic. Perhaps the most appealing thing about her songs is the way in which there is a hint of erotic attraction to the land as well as a more strategic political re-evaluation of it. Perhaps her most well-known song, and one of those still most often sung, is 'Nuair a bha mi Òg' (When I was young). Here nostalgia is not politically weaponized (as may be the case elsewhere in her work), but eroticized, with a lightness of touch that cannot be matched by the birds giving it laldy around Balmoral; the focus is primarily on the individual response to the natural world, not the historical weight it might hold:

Nuair bha mi gòrach a' siubhal mòintich,
'S am fraoch a' sròiceadh mo chòta bàn,
Feadh thoman còinnich gun snàthainn a bhròg an,
'S an eigh na còsan air lochan tàimh;
A' falbh an aonaich ag iarraidh chaorach,
'S mi cheart cho aotrom ri naosg air lòn,
Gach bot is poll agus talamh toll,
Toirt 'na mo chuimhne nuair bha mi òg.[35]

[34] Ibid., pp. 174–75. Translation by editor.
[35] Nic a' Phearsain, pp. 28–29.

(When I was heedless traversing moorland,
and the heather tearing my white petticoat,
through mossy tuffets, with no thread of footwear,
and ice in pockets on stagnant lochs;
as I looked for sheep and crossed the upland,
I was just as light as a snipe on a field —
each rent and bog and hole-pocked marshland
remind me now of when I was young.[36])

[36] *Caran an t-Saoghail*, ed. by Meek, pp. 20–23.