

Text, Translation and Context of the Scottish Gaelic Songs in *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (John Mackenzie, GB, 1974)

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Ceiltis is Gàidhlig, Sgoil nan Daonnachdan, Colaiste nan Ealain, Oilthigh Ghlaschu  
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*An Tìr, an Cànan 's na Daoine* ('The Land, the Language and the People') was a Scottish Gaelic slogan reportedly used by the Highland Land League in Skye in the nineteenth century. It can still be seen on the masthead of the *West Highland Free Press*, initially set up as a left-wing newspaper in 1972. It would also be a fitting motto to accompany *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*, John Mackenzie's 1974 BBC TV adaptation of John McGrath's 1973 play of the same name. The film was first broadcast as part of the *Play for Today* series. The play makes quite frequent use of Gaelic song. Indeed, as well as landownership and exploitation, the way in which Gaelic culture was 'systematically destroyed' as a result, is a central concern of both the play and film. We may, of course, question some of the political logic of the play, since it might suggest that Gaelic language and culture were somehow incompatible with capitalism. Be that as it may, the Gaelic songs in *The Cheviot*, play a crucial role in moving that message forward: the perceived value of authentic local Gaelic language, culture and community as opposed to greedy central government and private wealth.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century Gaelic is still spoken as a first language by the majority of inhabitants of some areas of the Western Highlands of Scotland. Gaelic immersion education for children has also very recently become a popular choice for parents in some of the Lowland cities. However, the future of the language in the Hebridean and Highland heartlands can be difficult to judge given the continuing economic deprivation and on-going language shift to English. The play and film focus on the impact of private capital on the Western Highlands of Scotland, an area of the country, where the dominant first language of nearly all, when the play opens in 1746, would have been Gaelic.

*The Cheviot* takes us through the aftermath of the Jacobite rebellion, the clearance of people to make way for cheviot sheep, the establishment of large hunting estates on formerly inhabited land, and the exploitation of oil (portrayed as having done little for the local people). We are told that in terms of oil, 'the west is next', although to date oil extraction has not been developed off the coast of the West Highlands. The narrative of injustice and depopulation, largely for the economic gain of landowners and outsiders, is interspersed with Gaelic songs. The linking of the situation of the land and economy of the Highlands to the language of the Highlands is made explicit. Following the satirical 'Monarchs of the Glen' song sung by Lord Crask and Lady Phosphate of Runcorn we are immediately told the following in the film:

In 1974 there are still 7 million acres of Scotland over which the red deer roam for the pleasure of being shot. Estate owners, business syndicates and German tourist agencies offer shooting holidays in Scotland for up to £100 per day. In the eighteenth century speaking the Gaelic language was forbidden by law. In the nineteenth century children caught speaking Gaelic in the playground were taken into the school and flogged. In the twentieth century the children are made to deride their own language because English is the language of the ruling class, because English is the language of the people who own the Highlands and control the Highlands and invest in the Highlands. Because English is the language of the Development Board, the Tourist Board, the Hydro Board, the Forestry Commission, the County Councils and the Lewis Development Fund. The people who spoke Gaelic no longer owned their land. The people had to learn the language of their new masters. In 1755 the population of the seven crofting counties was more than 20% of the population of Scotland. In 1801 it was 18%. In 1851 it was 13%. In 1901 it was 7%. In 1951 it was 5%. Yesterday it was 3%. A whole culture was systematically destroyed by economic power.

The history and situation of the Gaelic language in Scotland is, therefore, fundamental to *The Cheviot* as its fate is tied to the political standpoint of the play. McGrath's text as it appears in the later published play scripts (McGrath, 1981; McGrath, 1996) contains excerpts from nine different Gaelic songs: seven of the nine are to be sung in Gaelic in the play and appear without English translations; the other two appear as English translations of Gaelic songs, to be recited as poetry in English, but the original Gaelic is not given. Until recently scholars interested in *The Cheviot* had paid little attention to the place or meaning of the Gaelic songs in the play. However, two studies by this writer (Sim Innes) and Ian Brown (2012; 2015) have begun to investigate McGrath's dramaturgical use of Gaelic song and the consequences for our understanding of his own intentions and potential audience reception. This short introduction to the Gaelic songs draws from those articles by Brown and Innes. The excerpts from the seven Gaelic songs intentionally appear without translation in the scripts and in performance. McGrath later said that when the play toured the Highlands, audiences knew the songs and joined in singing them with the cast, and we see and hear that in Mackenzie's film. However, in areas where Gaelic is less commonly spoken the untranslated Gaelic songs and occasional short interactions in dialogue were 'meant to be a challenge to the audience' (Winkler, 1990, p.296).

The film of *The Cheviot*, broadcast in 1974, combines footage of a performance of the play staged in Dornie, Wester Ross, with dramatizations and interviews filmed in Uist and in Aberdeen. This broadcast version cut the seven instances of untranslated Gaelic song to four instances. In what follows below, discussion of the remaining four Gaelic songs will detail the origins of the songs. It will also provide English-language translations of the excerpts used in the film; these English-language

translations are largely already available elsewhere in print. Some may wish to be 'challenged' by the Gaelic songs, but what follows here allows non-Gaelic speakers to engage with McGrath's use of those particular songs through English translation.

In each case, only a short excerpt from a Gaelic song is included in the play. The songs sung would be well known to Gaelic speakers. Therefore, Gaelic-speaking audience members/viewers might often have a good sense of the rest of the song. Thus, even one verse might remind one of the other ranges of associations and references in the rest of the song.

The first Gaelic song in the film accompanies the narrator's introductory welcome monologue to the audience in which he refers to '1746, Culloden and all that'. The song, sung by the well-known performer Dolina MacLennan from the Isle of Lewis, is an appropriately traumatic song. Its original context is indeed the aftermath of the 1745-46 Jacobite rebellion. The play script labels it as 'a quiet Jacobite song in Gaelic'. The song is 'Mo Rùn Geal Òg' ('My Fair Young Love'), often referred to as 'Chisholm's Lament'. 'Mo Rùn Geal Òg' is traditionally attributed to Cairistiona NicFhearghais/Christina Ferguson and understood as a lament on the death of her husband Uilleam Siosalach/William Chisholm of Strathglass at the Battle of Culloden. Only a portion of the first verse is used in *The Cheviot*. The translation given here is by Anne Lorne Gillies, where the full text and an English translation of the song can be found (2005, p.185).

Och, a Theàrlaich òig Stiùbhairt,  
'S e do chùis rinn mo làireadh:  
Thug thu bhuam gach nì bh' agam  
Ann an cogadh nad adhbhar;  
Cha chrodh is cha chaoraich...

*O young Charles Stewart,  
It is your cause which has left me wretched:  
You took from me everything I possessed  
In the war on your behalf;  
It is not cattle or sheep...*

Gillies has written of this song that it, 'reflects not only the grief of any woman left to fend for herself and find a new role in society, but also the feelings of the Gaelic-speaking people as a whole, facing massive social changes which were to culminate in hardship, famine, and for thousands, exile' (2005, p. 188).

The second Gaelic song retained in the film appears after the footage of Highlanders worrying about *saighdearan* ('soldiers'). The film cuts back to the stage performance and we have Dolina singing 'Mo Dhachaigh' ('My Home'), with shots of audience members in Dornie singing along with the chorus of the Gaelic song. We then cut back to footage of Patrick Sellar burning people out of thatched *taighean dubha* ('black houses') in Strathnaver, Sutherland. 'Mo Dhachaigh' was written by Calum

MacPhàrlain/ Malcolm MacFarlane (1853-1931). He was born at Dail Abhaich (Dalavich) on Lochawe-side in Argyll; his family moved to Paisley when he was a child and he was brought up there in the Lowlands as a Gaelic-speaker. MacFarlane, then, is himself part of the late nineteenth-century movement of people out of the Highlands to the Lowlands and elsewhere. He was a prolific Gaelic scholar and songwriter; 'Mo Dhachaigh' is his most well-known song. It won him the £1 1s first prize for best poem in *The Celtic Monthly* (1893, p. 102). It is a highly sentimental romantic song; the kind of nineteenth-century Gaelic song often accused of political myopia, given the lack of reference to the turmoil faced by Highland communities. Derick Thomson referred to this category of Gaelic song as 'pop songs' and called 'Mo Dhachaigh' 'a pretty picture postcard of a song' (1990, p. 232). It is a popular crowd-pleaser. In the film we hear two verses and the chorus. The full Gaelic text of the song can be found in *A' Choisir-Chiùil* (1900-1913, p. 34). A very loose and even more schmaltzy translation-adaptation into Scots by Alexander Stewart (Polmont) appeared in print in Fionn, *The Celtic Lyre* (1898, p.10). The Scots translation below makes the song seem even more couthie than the original. For instance, MacPhàrlain's 'stìùireadh mo chasan' (*lit.* 'directing my feet') becomes 'toddle with glee' in Stewart's translation. However, I have intentionally chosen to give the 1898 Scots translation here rather than a plainer translation into English (for the same approach see Thomson 1990 pp. 226-27), as it helps to underline the use of the song in *The Cheviot*.

The power and shock value in the film comes from the juxtaposition of this romantic song with the scenes of house burning, and later in the film we hear the song again while shown shots of brutalist industrial landscapes. Indeed, the success of the use of this song in *The Cheviot* is also arguably attributable to the performance style of the song by Dolina. Therefore, this Scots translation, accessed in conjunction with the scenes of destruction and desolation, will help to underline the impact of 'Mo Dhachaigh' in the film.

Sèist:

Seinn hìrabh o hiùrabh o hùgaibh o hì  
Seo agaibh an obair, bheir togail dom chridh'.  
Bhith stìùireadh mo chasan do m' dhachaigh bheag fhìn  
Air crìochnachadh saothair an latha dhomh.

Seall thall air an aiseag am fasgadh nan craobh  
Am bothan beag geal ud 's e gealaicht' le aol  
Siud agaibh mo dhachaigh 's e dachaigh mo ghaoil  
Gun chaisteal san t-saoghal as fheàrr leam.

San àit ud tha nàdur a ghnàth cur ri ceòl  
Mur e smèrach san duilleach 's e an uiseag sna neòil  
'S e caochan an fhuarain a' gluasad tron lòn  
No Mòrag ri crònan don phàiste.

*Chorus:*

*Sing cheerilie, couthilie, cantie and free,  
O, this is the hour o' sweet solace to me,  
When wearied wi' toilin' out owre the green lea,  
I toddle wi' glee to my ain house.*

*Ayont by the ferry, whaur woodlands are green,  
My cantie cot housie stan's tidy an' clean;  
I envy nae laird in his castle, I ween,  
I'm happy an' bien in my ain house.*

*Kind nature has scattered her gifts through the glen  
The lark is in tune as he soun's his refrain;  
My wife hears the croon o' the burn in the den,  
As she lilt to the wean in our ain house.*

The third Gaelic song appears during the listing of different instances of clearances across the Western Highlands and before the trial of Patrick Sellar. The tune of the song is first hummed, before we see Dolina sing a verse. The song is 'Soraidh le Eilean a' Cheò' ('Farewell to the Island of the Mist'). It is by Màiri Nic a' Phearsain/Mary MacPherson (1821-98), known as *Màiri Mhòr nan Òran* ('Big Mary of the Songs'). She was a renowned Skye song maker and political activist. It combines praise of the beauty of Skye with mention of sadness over having to leave it for Glasgow. The full Gaelic text can be found in Dòmhnall Eachann Meek's *Màiri Mhòr nan Òran* (1998, pp. 113-18). To my knowledge, a full English translation of the whole song isn't available in print, although a part translation can be found in the liner notes of Catherine-Ann MacPhee's recordings of the songs of *Màiri Mhòr* (1994). *The Cheviot* contains the first four lines, and the translation here is my own:

Soraidh leis an àit'  
An d'fhuair mi m' àrach òg,  
Eilean nam beann àrda  
Far an tàmh an ceò.

*Farewell to the place  
where I was raised,  
The island of the high mountains  
where the mist resides.*

The fourth Gaelic song sung in the film follows descriptions of Highland emigration and the impact of colonialism in Australia, America and elsewhere. It appears in a slightly different context in the film than it does in the published play scripts. In the film the narrator refers to Mary MacPherson and we hear, 'It is said that when the women bards died they were buried face downwards so that their songs would not come up to disturb us, but they do still.' The song we hear, as he speaks, is indeed by MacPherson. It is *Eilean a' Cheò* ('The Island of the Mist'). The full Gaelic text of the

song with an English translation appears in Donald E. Meek's *Caran an t-Saoghail* (2003, pp. 366-75) and I give Meek's translation below of the verse we hear in the film:

Ach cò aig a bheil cluasan  
No cridh' tha gluasad beò  
Nach seinneadh leam an duan seo  
Mun truaigh' a thàinig oirnn?  
Na mìltean air am fuadach  
Thar chuan gun chuid, gun chòir  
Tha miann an cridh' 's an smuaintean  
An Eilean uain' a' Cheò

*But who has ears to listen  
or a heart that throbs with life  
who would not sing this song with me  
about our most piteous plight?  
The thousands who have been banished,  
having lost their lot and right,  
whose thoughts now cross the oceans  
to the green Island of the Mist.*

Towards the end of the Oil Industry section where we hear that the 'West is next'. The film returns to the stage and the second song discussed above, 'Mo Dhachaigh'. We hear it again, as noted previously, here to footage of oil refineries. Therefore, the filmmakers seemingly juxtapose bleak industrial shots against the singing of a song praising a Highland idyll in order to reinforce the potential danger to Highland Scotland.

The play finishes with a return to the fourth Gaelic song above, 'Eilean a' Cheò'. We hear, 'In the 1890s Mary MacPherson from Skye wrote this song.' In the scripts the play finishes with two verses of the song in Gaelic, along with a loose English translation of both, to be delivered to audiences. However, in the film we hear Dolina sing only one of the Gaelic verses. It is given here below, with Meek's translation (2003, p.373):

Cuimhnichibh gur sluagh sibh  
Is cumaibh suas ur còir  
Tha beairteas fo na cruachan  
far an d'fhuair sibh àrach òg  
Tha iarann agus gual ann  
tha luaidhe ghlas is òr  
tha mèinnean gu ur buannachd  
An Eilean Uain' a' Cheò

*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.*

The 1974 film contains four Gaelic songs, all still well-known and popular in Gaelic communities. We have a song thought to be contemporary to the Battle of Culloden, in which the widowed Cairstiona NicFhearghais mourns her husband. It is also seen as emblematic of the state of Gaelic Scotland immediately following 1746. There is Calum MacPhàrlain's Gaelic music-hall anthem 'Mo Dhachaigh' which is sentimental but powerfully poignant if we consider the social upheaval context of its composition and its use in *The Cheviot*. Màiri Mhòr's Gaelic songs are still cherished for their passionate descriptions of the Isle of Skye which combine forthright calls for action and activism against injustice. Her songs are a good fit for *The Cheviot* as they both emphasise an idea of the interconnectedness of *an tìr, an cànan 's na daoine* for the Highlands of Scotland.

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### **Sources**

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