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The luxury debate in Scottish Enlightenment-era Gaelic poetry: 'Air Fàsachadh na Gàidhealtachd Albannaich'

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The extent to which Scotland's eighteenth-century Gaelic poets and intellectuals engaged with Scottish Enlightenment intellectual enquiry is an ongoing debate. It has been claimed, rather curiously, that 'Gaelic speakers played almost no part in the Scottish Enlightenment'.¹ On the other hand, Robert Crawford notes that 'Gaelic culture both fed and was fed by the Scottish Enlightenment'.² Richard Sher points out that 'the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment came from virtually every part of Scotland, including a surprisingly large number from the Highlands'.³ Donald Meek has argued that the Gaelic literary activities of men such as Dugald Buchanan (1716-68) should be considered 'in the context of the Scottish Enlightenment'.⁴ There has also been some mention of the poet Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair (c. 1695-c.1770) as 'bard of the Gaelic Enlightenment'.⁵ The Rev. John Walker (1731-1803) noted that the Highlands were 'best defined by the boundary of the Gaelic language' and at the time, the area was 'presumed to be considerably more than one-third, and to constitute perhaps nearer one-half of the whole kingdom'.⁶ When combined with parish surveys this means that in the middle of the eighteenth century the Gaelic-speaking Highlands contained somewhere between a fifth and a quarter of the Scottish population.⁷ Yet the involvement of the eighteenth-century Gaelic *literati* in a 'Gaelic Enlightenment' and their engagement with the wider Scottish Enlightenment are both under-researched topics.⁸

In this chapter an investigation of one anonymous Gaelic poem from the manuscript collection of the Rev. James McLagan (1728-1805) will allow for further insight into Highland literary engagement with Scottish Enlightenment thinking.⁹ The McLagan collection (Glasgow, University of Glasgow Library Special Collections, MS Gen 1042) is made up of 250 discrete paper manuscripts. McLagan, Gaelic-speaking chaplain to the Black Watch (the 42nd Regiment of Foot) and subsequently minister at Blair

¹ Roger L Emerson, *Essays on David Hume, Medical Men and the Scottish Enlightenment: 'Industry, knowledge and humanity'* (Farnham, 2009), p. 40.

² Robert Crawford, *Scotland's Books: A History of Scottish Literature* (Oxford, 2009), p. 306.

³ Richard B. Sher, *The Enlightenment and the Book: Scottish authors and their publishers in eighteenth-century Britain, Ireland, and America* (Chicago, 2006), pp. 193-94.

⁴ Donald E. Meek, 'Evangelicalism, Ossianism and the Enlightenment: the many masks of Dugald Buchanan', in *Crossing the Highland Line: Cross Currents in Eighteenth-Century Scottish Writing*, ed. by Christopher MacLachlan (Glasgow, 2009), pp. 97-112 (p. 106).

⁵ *Alexander MacDonald: Bard of the Gaelic Enlightenment*, ed. by Camille Dressler and Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart (Kershader, 2012).

⁶ John Walker, *An Economical History of the Hebrides and Highlands of Scotland*, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1804), Vol. I, pp. 19-20.

⁷ Charles Withers, *Gaelic in Scotland 1698-1981: The Geographical History of a Language* (Edinburgh, 1984), p.71.

⁸ For recent comment see the text of Donald Meek's 2018 O' Donnell Lecture at <http://meekwrite.blogspot.com/2018/06/the-gaelic-literary-enlightenment.html>

⁹ For an overview of the collection see Derick S. Thomson, 'The McLagan MSS in Glasgow University Library: A Survey', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 58 (1995), 406-24.

Atholl was educated at the University of St Andrews.¹⁰ A combination of personal fieldwork collection and items received in correspondence from a network of other gentleman scholars has resulted in a collection of around 630 items, mostly Gaelic songs and poetry.¹¹ McLagan claimed to have been collecting since his pre-1750s school days and the manuscripts themselves tell us that this was a life-long endeavour, with some items dated to as late as 1803.¹² McLagan's corpus seems to have been a vital source for the Gillies collection of Gaelic poetry, published in Perth in 1786.¹³

The poem to be discussed in the present chapter is given the title 'Air Fàsachadh na Gàidhealtachd Albannaich' ('On the desolation of the Scottish Highlands') and has 'A Bheinn-neamhais ard nan neul' ('O towering Ben Nevis of the clouds') as its first line.¹⁴ I will refer to it as the 'Ben Nevis poem' henceforth. It is one of only four poems that all together constitute manuscript 210 of the McLagan collection. Each of the four poems provides comment on the impact of social, cultural and economic change on the eighteenth-century Highlands.¹⁵ Our poem takes us on a tour of Highland sites known for martial and poetic history, from a starting point at Ben Nevis. The first point of call is nearby Inverlochry Castle, 'a lùchairt uaigneach Inbhir Lòchaidh, is bristeach sian-bhuailte do bhalla!' ('O solitary courtyard of Inverlochry, your wall is brittle and weather-beaten').¹⁶ The poem is, thus, a lament asking for meditation on the ruins of each site and its associated people. From Inverlochry we stay in Lochaber and take in Keppoch, Glengarry and Loch Arkaig before heading south to Glencoe. From Glencoe we go further south, into Argyll, to visit Dùn Mac Sniachan, Dunstaffnage, Dunollie and

¹⁰ Thomson, 'The McLagan MSS', p. 407.

¹¹ For some comment on his methods see Victoria Henshaw, 'James Macpherson and His Contemporaries: The Methods and Networks of Collectors of Gaelic Poetry in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland' *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 39.2 (2016), 197-209. Henshaw's mention of McLagan's reticence about his own Gaelic, at p. 203, should be treated with caution and not understood to mean that he was not a fluent speaker. On McLagan's collecting in Ireland and the Isle of Man see Sìon Innes, 'Fionn and Ailbhe's Riddles between Ireland and Scotland' in *Ollam: Studies in Gaelic and Related Traditions in Honor of Tomás Ó Cathasaigh*, ed. by Matthieu Boyd (Madison, 2016), pp. 271-85; 'Peadar Ó Muircheartaigh, 'Fin as Ossian revisited: A Manx ballad in Belanagare and its significance', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 63.1 (2016), 95-127.

¹² Thomson, 'The McLagan MSS', p. 407; Derick S. Thomson, 'Indexes of the Ossianic Ballads in the McLagan MSS', *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, 8 (1958), 177-224 (p.204).

¹³ Charles Coventry, 'A Reconsideration of the Gillies Collection of Gaelic Poetry', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 26 (1991), 199-206.

¹⁴ For an edition and translation of the poem see Michael Newton, *We're Indians Sure Enough: The Legacy of the Scottish Highlanders in the United States* (Auburn, NH, 2001), pp. 43-47. This chapter makes use of that edition and translation but notes where I have diverged significantly as a result of preferable alternative readings. For some use of this poem for terminology used to name the Highlands see Wilson McLeod, 'Galldachd, Gàidhealtachd, Garbhchriochan', *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, 19 (1999), 1-20.

¹⁵ The other three poems in MS 210 are: 'Òran an t-Sealgair' ('The Hunter's Song') which has 'Chaidh Ghàidhealtachd na fàsaich' ('The Highlands have become a desert') as a first line; 'A Loch Laomainn nan Lùb le Turasaiche' ('O Loch Lomond of the many bends by [a] Traveler'); 'Òran na Banaraich' ('The Milkmaid's Song') which has 'O mo thìr a dh'àraich mi gu mìn' ('O my land, which reared me so gently') as the first line of the chorus. For editions and translations of all three see *Bho Chluaidh gu Calasraid/ From the Clyde to Callander: Gaelic Songs, Poetry, Tales and Traditions*, ed. by Michael Newton (Glasgow, 2010, first published 1999), pp. 246-59. See also 'A Lennox Song', *The Highland Monthly*, 1 (1890), 342-344 (for the Loch Lomond song). Newton's edition of the final song has 'Oran na Bantraich' ('The Widow's Song') but this should be emended to 'Oran na Banaraich' ('The Dairymaid's song'). All four poems are only known from the McLagan manuscripts.

¹⁶ Newton, *We're Indians*, p. 44.

Finlaggan. In doing so, we will see that the poem arguably extends the purported positive aspects of pre-Commercial society (such as the hunter stage, to be discussed in more detail below) into the eighteenth century. A close reading of the poem evidences an intellectual standpoint ready to embrace the positive aspects of representations of the Highlands as a barbarous society. Yet it also rejects the ubiquitous notion that the Highlands were free from the corrosive impact of luxury. The poem appears at once rooted in the real life experience of improvement and its theoretical underpinning from Scottish Enlightenment writings. Before focusing on the presentation of luxury, an examination of the verse on Dùn Mac Sniachan will allow us to situate the poem within an environment of cutting-edge scholarly endeavour.

The poem's previous editor and translator noted that the verse on Dùn Mac Sniachan had caused some difficulty.¹⁷ It is hoped that the emendations suggested here will bring further clarity. This verse, on Dùn Mac Sniachan, at Benderloch on Ardmucknish Bay, demonstrates the poem's indebtedness to textual sources. By the eighteenth century Dùn Mac Sniachan had come to be identified with the ancient lost Scottish city of Beregonium.¹⁸ Beregonium was described by Hector Boece in his *Scotorum Historiae a Prima Gentis Origine* (Paris, 1527), and in Bellenden's Scots translation of Boece, *Hystory and Croniklis of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1537), as a crucial royal palace in Scotland's history.¹⁹ In these sixteenth-century histories the exact location of Beregonium was not clearly described. Boece/Bellenden note of King Fergus:

Castelum condidit Berogomum, ubi ius dici voluit in Louquhabria ad Albionis plagam occidentalem in Hebridum insularum prospectu, ut illuc et insulani et Albiani Scoti facilius ad iurisdictionem iustitiaeque administrationem coirent.

Efter this, he beildit the castel of Berigone in Lochquhaber. This castell standis in the west part of Scotland, fornent the Ilis; quhare he exercit his lawis to that fine, that his pepil might be drawin their the more esaly, for exercitioun of justice.²⁰

However, in Boece and Bellenden the exact location of Beregonium in relation to Inverlochy and Evonium/Dunstaffnage is somewhat unclear since all three are described as being in close proximity.²¹ By the eighteenth century the location of Beregonium had settled down and various writers comment on its link to Dùn Mac Sniachan. Thomas Pennant's *Tour in Scotland, 1772* (1774, 1776) has, 'A mile from Connel, near the shore, is *Dun-mac-Sniochain*, the ancient Beregonium, or *Berogomum*. The foundation of this city, as it is called, is attributed, by *Apocryphal* history, to Fergus

¹⁷ Newton, *We're Indians*, p. 277 footnote 31.

¹⁸ *Collins Encyclopaedia of Scotland*, ed. by John Keay and Julia Keay (London, 2000), p. 77. For a longer overview see James Hogg: *Queen Hynde*, ed. by Suzanne Gilbert and Douglas S. Mack (Edinburgh, 1998), pp. 238-44; for chronology see Denis Rixson, *The Hebridean Traveller* (Edinburgh, 2004), pp. 262-66.

¹⁹ For Boece I have used the online hypertext critical edition of the 1575 version available here <http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/boece/contents.html> For Bellenden I have used John Bellenden (trans.), *The History and Chronicles of Scotland written in Latin by Hector Boece* (Edinburgh, 1821).

²⁰ Boece, 'Liber I', 36; Bellenden, 'The First Buke', Chap. 12.

²¹ Boece, 'Praeliminaria', 15-16; Bellenden, 'The Cosmographe and Discription of Albion', Chap. 7. See also Boece, 'Liber II', 39; Bellenden, 'The Secund Buke', Chap. 15.

II.’²² In the 1790s the report on the united parishes of Ardchattan and Muckairn by the Rev. Ludovick Grant for Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster’s *Statistical Accounts* stated, ‘in this district stood the famous city of Beregonium, it was situated between two hills, one called Dun MacSnichan, ‘the hill of Snachan’s son’, and the other, much superior in height, is named Dun bhaile an righ, ‘the hill of the king’s town’.²³ The relevant verse of the Ben Nevis poem appears in the McLagan manuscript as follows below. It is accompanied by a new suggested translation. The significance of a number of the new translation choices will be discussed in some detail.

Diplomatic edition	New translation
<i>Dun-mac-sniachain a bha, Cala nan long o shean, Ball-tathaich nan ceannuich an alluid 's an d'fhag foi-theine cús d'fhuil-siachraidh</i>	Dùn Mac Sniachan as was, Harbour of ships of old, Repair of uncouth merchants in which sub-[terrestrial]fire left an overabundance of pumice.

ball-tathaich nan ceannuich an alluid

Intriguingly, Bellenden’s translation of Boece may provide some insight into the problematic ‘ball-tathaich nan ceannuich an alluid’.²⁴ In Bellenden we read of Inverlochy as having been the ‘repair of uncouth marchandis’ and there is a separate discussion of Highlanders and ‘marchandis of uncouth realms’.²⁵ We noted above that Inverlochy, Dunstaffnage and Berigonium are linked in Boece. If we were to emend the line to ‘Ball-tathaich nan ceannaichean allaidh’, it then looks very much like a translation of ‘repair of uncouth marchandis’.²⁶ Bellenden uses ‘uncouth’ in its Scots-language sense of ‘foreign’.²⁷ If the emendation of *alluid* to *allaidh* is accepted then it might suggest a misunderstanding of ‘uncouth’ (meaning ‘foreign’) given that, with *allaidh*, it has been translated as ‘savage/ wild’. An alternative way to understand the phrase is to see it as containing one or two unusual archaisms. ‘An alluid’ might otherwise be understood to represent ‘anall-ód/ a n-allód’ (‘in ancient times’).²⁸ This phrase, known from poetry, is found in Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair’s *Leabhar a theagasc Ainmínnin/ A Galick and*

²² Thomas Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides*, 1772, ed. by Andrew Simmons (Edinburgh, 1998), p. 356.

²³ *The Statistical Account of Scotland Drawn up from the Communications of the Ministers of the Different Parishes, Volume Sixth*, ed. by John Sinclair (Edinburgh, 1793), p. 180.

²⁴ ‘Ball-tathaich nan ceannuich an allaid’ was emended by Newton to ‘Balla-tathaich nan ceannsaich an allaidh’ to give ‘the familiar walls of those who tamed the savages’, *We’re Indians*, p. 44.

²⁵ Bellenden, ‘The Cosmographie and Discription of Albion’, Chap. 7 and Chap. 5.

²⁶ I have been unable to find another example of ‘ball-tathaich’. Robert Armstrong, *Gaelic Dictionary* (London, 1825), p. 902. gives ‘àite tathaich’ (‘place of resort’). *Ball* is usually ‘object of/ instrument of’ and *tathaich* visitation. It is possible that *ball-tathaich* is used here to as a synonym for *àite-tathaich* given the appearance of ‘a place: locus’ as a subsidiary meaning of *ball* in the 1828 Highland Society of Scotland, *Dictionarium Scoto-Celticum: A Dictionary of the Gaelic Language* (Edinburgh, 1828) Vol. I, p.90 (from an Ossianic translation context). The spacing of ‘ceannaich an alluid’ for ‘ceannaichean allaidh’ is somewhat odd and requires us to accept a genitive plural ‘nan ceannaichean’ rather than ‘nan ceannaiche’ which would arguably be more usual in the eighteenth century (for evidence of this see *Corpas na Gàidhlig* at <http://dasg.ac.uk/corpus/>).

²⁷ *Dictionary of the Scots Language* <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/uncouth>

²⁸ *The Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language* at <http://www.dil.ie/3340>

English Vocabulary (1741): ‘an allod’ (‘anciently’) and thus our poet would have had access to a Scottish source for this literary archaic phrase.²⁹ It is also feasible, then, that the line, if emended to ‘ball-tathaich nan ceannaich’ an allod’, should be understood as ‘repair of merchants in ancient times’. Eighteenth-century dictionaries also give ‘*ceannaich*’ as a noun meaning ‘strife, contention’.³⁰ Therefore, if emended to ‘ball-tathaich nan ceannaich’ an allod’ the phrase could also be understood to mean ‘hotbed of contentions in ancient times’. The use of archaic vocabulary could be a stylistic choice here, used to match the description of an ancient site. It seems that no matter which of these proposed emendations and translations is preferred, merchants or contentions, they belie the poet’s knowledge of historical writing, in Scots or Latin, on the site of Beregonium.

fuil-siachraidh

The fourth line also appears to give us a glimpse into the poet’s reading material since it includes a Gaelic word for pumice stone, ‘fuil-sìofraith’.³¹ This word for pumice also appears, as *fuilsìofri*, in Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair’s *Leabhar a theagasc Ainminnin/ A Galick and English Vocabulary* (1741).³² *Fuil sìofraí* would appear to literally translate as ‘fairy blood’.³³ Although, used in our poem and by Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair for pumice, it seems that the term is otherwise, as *fuil sìochaire*, known in Scottish Gaelic either for blood stone (heliotrope) or red crota lichen.³⁴ In *A Tour in Scotland, 1772* Pennant noted that at the hill of Dùn Mac Sniachan/Beregonium, ‘are dug up great quantities of different sorts of pumices, or scoria, of different kinds... The hill is doubtless the work of a volcano’.³⁵ Tom Furniss has outlined Pennant’s pioneering contributions, including his writing on Dùn Mac Sniachan, ‘to the gradual realization of the extent to which Scotland’s landscape had been formed by volcanic activity in the distant past’.³⁶ The statistical account report from the 1790s also notes the

²⁹ Alistair MacDomhnuill, *Leabhar a Theagasc Ainminnin* (Edinburgh, 1741), p. 184

³⁰ William Shaw, *A Galic and English Dictionary* (London, 1780), n.p. and it also appears in Shaw’s 1780 dictionary gives ‘ceannaich’ as a word for ‘strife’ and it appears in Armstrong, *Gaelic Dictionary*, p. 106 as ‘strife; contention for supremacy or superiority’.

³¹ Newton, *We’re Indians*, p.44 gave ‘fuil-siachraidh’ (‘pithless blood’), presumably using the Gaelic word *siachaireach* (‘pithless’).

³² MacDomhnuill, *Leabhar a Theagasc Ainminnin*, p. 56.

³³ It seems that by the modern period the distinction between Old Irish *siabair* (‘phantom’) and *sídaige/síthaige* (‘fairy’) had broken down somewhat. Later spellings and variants include: *síofra*, *siafra*, *siabhra*, *siabhrach*, *síochaire sibhreach síthiche* and so on. *Fuil síofraí*, as we see it in Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair’s 1741 vocabulary seems more like Irish than Scottish Gaelic. *Fuilsìofri* for ‘pumice’ does appear in Edward O’ Reilly, *An Irish-English Dictionary* (Dublin, 1817), n.p. and had also appeared in Shaw, *A Gaelic and English Dictionary*, n.p. However, I am unaware of other Irish examples. In the Ben Nevis poem, as it appears in the manuscript, the form used is ‘fuil-siachraidh’ and therefore closer to Scottish Gaelic usage.

³⁴ For ‘fuil sìochaire’ meaning ‘blood stone’ see *The Gaelic Otherworld: John Gregorson Campbell’s Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and Witchcraft and Second Sight in the Highlands and Islands*, ed. by Ronald Black (Edinburgh, 2005), p. 108. For ‘fuil sìochaire’ and ‘fuil nan sluagh’ meaning red crota lichen see Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, Volume II (Edinburgh, 1928), p.357; Angus Matheson (ed.), *Carmina Gadelica by Alexander Carmichael*, Volume VI (Edinburgh, 1971), p. 54 and p. 75.

³⁵ Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland*, p. 358.

³⁶ Tom Furniss, ‘As if created by fusion of matter after some intense heat’: Pioneering Geological Observations in Thomas Pennant’s Tours in Scotland’, in *Enlightenment Travel and British Identities: Thomas Pennant’s Tours in Scotland and Wales*, ed. by Mary-Ann Constantine and Nigel Leask (London, 2017), pp. 163-181 (p. 170).

accumulation of pumice and the 'volcanic appearance' of Dùn Mac Sniachan.³⁷ Therefore, our Gaelic poet is clearly cognisant of this information about the pumice at Dùn Mac Sniachan and we could conjecture that his/her source is Pennant, or indeed that Pennant and the poem share a common source.³⁸

Foi-Theine

The poem's use of 'foi-theine' ('sub-fire') as cause of the pumice at Dùn Mac Sniachan/Beregonium might also signal that the poet was aware of contemporaneous scholarly geological debates in Scotland. James Hutton (1726-97) had lectured at the Royal Society of Edinburgh on his *Theory of the Earth* in 1785; the resulting lectures were published in their *Transactions* in 1788, followed by an extended 2-volume version published in 1795. In the first version, from the *Transactions* in 1788, Hutton put forward that, 'A volcano is not made on purpose to frighten superstitious people into fits of piety and devotion, nor to overwhelm devoted cities with destruction; a volcano should be considered as a spiracle to the subterranean furnace, in order to prevent the unnecessary elevation of land, and fatal effects of earthquakes.'³⁹ Hutton comments on known active volcanoes in high mountain ranges before noting, 'It is not meant to allege that, it is only upon the summit of a continent volcanos should appear. Subterraneous fire has sometimes made its appearance in bursting from the bottom of the sea.'⁴⁰ Thus, with mention of a *foi-theine* at Dùn Mac Sniachan the poet communicates his/her awareness of the burgeoning study of Scotland's geological past and present.

Perhaps notable by its absence in the Dùn Mac Sniachan verse, however, is any mention of Ossianic lore. By at least the early nineteenth century the site of Beregonium/Dùn Mac Sniachan had also come to also be associated with Selma, Fingal's stronghold in MacPherson's Ossianic works.⁴¹ As we shall see below this is not the only instance in the Ben Nevis poem of mention of a geographical location associated with Ossian that avoids any reference to that material. It is clear, however, that the use of Beregonium in the poem, in a way that appears to reflect both older writing on its importance and more recent writings on potential volcanic activity at the site, is evidence of a poem grounded in the contemporary intellectual curiosity of the late eighteenth century.

Barbarous Society and Luxury

In lamenting what has been lost the poem repeatedly returns to the status of Highlanders as hunters, warriors and poets. These traits as objects of praise have a long

³⁷ Sinclair, *The Statistical Account*, p. 180.

³⁸ There is good reason to believe that McLagan himself may be the poet of the Ben Nevis poem and indeed McLagan and Pennant shared a link to the family of the Stewarts/Stuarts of Killin and Luss. I hope to expand on this elsewhere.

³⁹ James Hutton, 'Theory of the Earth', *Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*, 1 (1788), Part II:1 pp. 209-304 (p. 275).

⁴⁰ Hutton, 'Theory of the Earth', p. 275.

⁴¹ John Sinclair et al., *The Poems of Ossian in the Original Gaelic* (London, 1807), Vol. 3 p. 498. For more on this see Nigel Leask, 'Fingalian Topographies: Ossian and the Highland Tour, 1760-1805', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 39.2 (2016), 183-96 (p. 191).

history in Gaelic literature.⁴² However, this representation is also deeply rooted in eighteenth-century writings of the Scottish Enlightenment. Keppoch is described in the poem as ‘Ceapach nam bàrd ’s nam fìor laoch’ (‘Keppoch of the poets and great heroes’). A number of well-known Gaelic poets came from Keppoch, such as Gilleasbuig na Ceapaich (d. 1682), Iain Lom MacDonald (c. 1624-c.1710) and Sìleas na Ceapaich (c.1660-c.1729).⁴³ In the poem Glencoe is referred to as ‘Gleann Comhann nam bàrd ’s nan sealgair’ (‘Glencoe of the poets and hunters’). We can identify a number of Gaelic poets connected to the MacDonalds of Glencoe (*Clann Iain Abraich* or the *MacIains*).⁴⁴ Furthermore, Gaelic poets from the area were still active in the eighteenth century. For instance, the Gaelic poetry of Ailean Dall MacDougall (c.1750-1828), born in Glencoe, was published in 1798.⁴⁵ Anne Grant of Laggan (1755-1838), in a letter dated 1773 notes that the MacDonalds of Glencoe, ‘were all, as the country people say, born poets; and this belief was so well established, that, if a Mac Jan could not rhyme, his legitimacy was called in question: whatever his other merits might be, he was no genuine Mac Jan.’⁴⁶

While the MacDonalds of Glencoe were indeed renowned for poetry the mention of Glencoe in the Ben Nevis poem may also be an oblique reference to Ossian. In the eighteenth century, Glencoe was identified with MacPherson’s ‘streams of Cona’ (‘Glencoe’ is an Anglicisation of *Gleann Comhann* and hence the association *Comhann/Cona*). It thus came to be accepted as the ‘birthplace of Ossian’, an association which gained further traction once it had become a part of the travelogue tour of the likes of Pennant and Thomas Garnett.⁴⁷ It is intriguing, however, that this poem avoids explicit reference to Ossianic lore, given that Donald Meek has shown that for many Highlanders MacPherson’s English-language material became ‘an inspirational body of literature with which they were pleased and proud to interact.’⁴⁸ Our poet seems to have been wary of such direct interaction, perhaps in light of the burgeoning debate over the origins of MacPherson’s publications. Rather the poem, using the vista from Ben Nevis, begins by pointing to areas of Lochaber renowned for poetry as well as warrior and hunter abilities, avoiding talk of Fionn and his warrior band. The renown of

⁴² John MacInnes, ‘The Panegyric Code in Gaelic Poetry and its Historical Background’, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 50 (1978), 435-98.

⁴³ MacDonald, *MacDonald Bards from Mediaeval Times*, pp. 8-13 and pp. 15-19.

⁴⁴ Tradition links the sixteenth-century poet Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn to Glencoe, Robert A. Rankin, ‘Oran na Comhachaig: Text and Tradition’, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Glasgow*, 5 (1958), 122-171 (pp. 127-28) and Pat Menzies (ed.), *Oran na Comhachaig le Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn* (Glasgow: SGTS, 2012). For seventeenth-century Gaelic poets connected to the MacDonalds of Glencoe see Keith Norman MacDonald, *MacDonald Bards from Mediaeval Times* (Edinburgh, 1900), pp. 20-22.

⁴⁵ Ronald Black, ‘The Poetry of Ailean Dall’, in *Gael and Lowlander in Scottish Literature: Cross-Currents in Scottish Writing in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Christopher MacLachlan and Ronald W. Renton (Glasgow, 2015), pp. 22-40.

⁴⁶ [Anne MacVicar Grant], *Letters from the Mountains: being the real correspondence of a lady between the years 1773 and 1807* (London, 1809), pp.79-80.

⁴⁷ Leask, ‘Fingalian Topographies’, p. 187.

⁴⁸ Donald Meek, ‘The Sublime Gael: The Impact of MacPherson’s Ossian on Literary Creativity and Cultural Perception in Gaelic Scotland’, in *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, ed. by Howard Gaskill (London, 2004), pp. 40-66 (p. 65).

Highland localities for fighting, hunting and producing poetry fixes the poem within a different, although related, debate.

For many savants of the Scottish Enlightenment, the Gaelic-speaking Highland part of the Scottish population was at once 'object of interest and subject of improvement'.⁴⁹ The Highlands were considered to be only at the early barbarous stages of societal progress in popular stadial views of history. Adam Smith described barbarous societies as consisting 'of hunters, of shepherds, and even of husbandmen in that rude state of husbandry which precedes the improvement of manufactures, and the extension of foreign commerce'.⁵⁰ Of course, as has been noted by Thomas Devine, in reality Highlanders undertook all sorts of commercial activity and enterprise in the eighteenth-century and 'the familiar image of an archaic pre-Culloden Highlands lacking the capacity to adjust to a changing world requires substantial modification if not complete rejection'.⁵¹ Yet, when the reality of Highland commercial activity was ignored or suppressed then the Highlands, or the 'Arcadia of Scotland', could provide a window onto the past, allowing a Lowland Scot to observe a 'contemporary ancestor'.⁵² In Smith's formulation, the stages of progress were: the Age of Hunters, the Age of Shepherds, the Age of Agriculture and, finally, the Age of Commerce.⁵³ As noted by Penny Fielding, 'Because these stages were not globally uniform, they could all coexist within the same present, available to the gaze of the enlightened observer, though not necessarily to the pre-commercial societies themselves.'⁵⁴

The inherent dichotomy in this understanding of the Highlands necessitated that both the best and the worst qualities of the past could be seen in the eighteenth-century *Gàidhealtachd*. The best qualities of barbarous societies, in contemporaneous Scottish writing on societal progression, included martial ability and creativity, due to the absence of increased and repetitive labour. The natural creative talents of the savage included epic poetry⁵⁵ since his environment, free from the stability and corrosive luxury of the 'Age of Commerce', nurtured the 'elemental creativity and instinctive spontaneity of his uncorrupted mind'.⁵⁶ We see a number of these themes in David

⁴⁹ Charles Withers, 'The Historical Creation of the Scottish Highlands', in *The Manufacture of Scottish History*, ed. by Ian Donnachie and Christopher Whatley (Edinburgh, 1992), pp. 143-156 (p. 148).

⁵⁰ *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, Vol. 2: An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, Vol. 2*, ed. by William B. Todd (Oxford, 1976), pp. 782-783.

⁵¹ Thomas M. Devine, 'A Conservative People? Scottish Gaeldom in the Age of Improvement', in *Eighteenth Century Scotland: New Perspectives*, ed. by T.M. Devine and J.R. Young (East Linton, 1999), pp. 225-236 (p. 229).

⁵² 'Scotch Arcadia' dates to 1771 from Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, ed. by Evan Gottlieb (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), p. 263; 'contemporary ancestor' is from Withers, 'The Historical Creation of the Scottish Highlands', p.147.

⁵³ *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, Vol. 5: Lectures on Jurisprudence*, ed. by R. L. Meek, D. D. Raphael and Peter Stein (Oxford, 1978), p.14. This dates to 1762.

⁵⁴ Penny Fielding, *Scotland and the Fictions of Geography: North Britain 1760-1830* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 72.

⁵⁵ On epic and the Scottish Enlightenment see Colin Kidd, 'The Scottish Enlightenment and the Matter of Troy', *Journal of the British Academy*, 6 (2018), 97-130 (p. 109).

⁵⁶ David Allan, "'Winged Horses, Fiery Dragons, and Monstrous Giants": Historiography and Imaginative Literature in the Scottish Enlightenment', in *The Scottish Enlightenment and Literary Culture*, ed. by Ralph McLean, Ronnie Young and Kenneth Simpson (Lewisburg, 2016), pp. 19-36 (p. 31).

Hume (1711-76)'s (anonymously-published) *A True Account of the Behaviour and Conduct of Archibald Stewart Esq.* (1748) where he contends that

When men have fallen into a more civilized Life, and have been allowed to addict themselves entirely to the Cultivation of Arts and Manufactures, the Habit of their Mind, still more than that of their Body, soon renders them entirely unfit for the Use of Arms, and gives a different Direction to their Ambition. Every Man is then desirous to excel his Neighbour in Riches or Address, and laugh at the Imputation of Cowardice or Effeminacy. But the barbarous Highlander, living chiefly by Pasturage, has Leisure to cultivate the Ideas of military Honour; and hearing of nought else but the noble Exploits of his Tribe or Clan, and the renowned Heroes of his Lineage, he soon fancies that he himself is born a Hero as well as a Gentleman.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, despite the positives, the Highlands were simultaneously, as a barbarous society, 'an embarrassing anachronism, and as a retarded primitive society should be regarded by the literati of Scotland's improving Lowlands with as much attention as they would give to the tribal societies of North American Indians'.⁵⁸

This dichotomy was temporally further complicated by the appearance of James MacPherson's Ossianic poems, from 1760 onwards. If accepted as authentic, they could highlight the native genius of Gaelic barbarous society. However, since the epic was framed as belonging to 'ancient' Highland society it could imply that contemporaneous Highland society had suffered decline or decay. Indeed, Hume reflects the idea of decay in a letter to John Wilkes in 1754, admonishing him for not having visited the Highlands since

You woud there have seen human Nature in the golden Age, or rather, indeed, in the Silver: For the Highlanders have degenerated somewhat from the primitive Simplicity of Mankind. But perhaps you have so corrupted a Taste as to prefer your Iron Age, to be met with in London & the south of England; where Luxury & Vice of every kind so much abound.⁵⁹

Thus, the Highlands, perceived as a pre-commercial society, could provide a window onto both the positive and negative aspects of the past. Yet, Ossian provided another window onto the past of that past within the present, and the comparison was unfavourable. According to Henry Home, Lord Kames (1696-1782), 'Compared with their forefathers, the present highlanders make a very inconsiderable figure.'⁶⁰

Therefore, the focus on martial, hunting and poetic ability in the Ben Nevis Gaelic poem chimes with the best aspects of barbarous societies. Through nomination of areas

⁵⁷ [David Hume], *A True Account of the Behaviour and Conduct of Archibald Stewart* (London, 1748), pp. 6-7.

⁵⁸ Colin Kidd, 'Gaelic Antiquity and National Identity in Enlightenment Ireland and Scotland', *English Historical Review*, 109: 434 (Nov. 1994), 1197-1214 (p. 1206).

⁵⁹ *The Letters of David Hume*, Vol. I 1727-65, ed. by J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford, 1932), p. 195.

⁶⁰ [Henry Home, Lord Kames], *Sketches of the History of Man in Two Volumes* (Edinburgh, 1774), Vol. I p.308. This is discussed by Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, *Enlightenment's Frontier: The Scottish Highlands and the Origins of Environmentalism* (New Haven, 2013), p. 30.

of the Highlands known for Gaelic poets into the eighteenth century, such as Keppoch and Glencoe, the poet extends those positive aspects into the present. The poem also echoes the notion of decay since it situates the beginning of ‘seargadh Garbh-chrìoch’ (‘withering of the Highlands’) during the reign of King Cinaed mac Alpín in the ninth century. In this reckoning, the normal advance of societal progress has been allowed to decline, or been inhibited, through the movement of the Gaelic royal court to the Lowlands.

The tour of formerly important Highland sites in the poem culminates with the speaker describing the view from Ben Nevis of a solitary Highland hunter. The poem then moves to discuss the reasons for depopulation, ‘Dhithich beusa Shagson sinn: Lean gach triath a struidheas mòr’ (‘Saxon customs have destroyed us: every chieftain has pursued his own great opulence’). The poem notes the result of this as: ‘Theich an sluagh do Mhòr-Thìr Choluim’ (‘The population fled to Columbia’).⁶¹ Thus, the poem ends by returning us to the recent history of negative luxury adopted by the Highland nobility. The description of luxury as ‘beusa Shagson’ (‘Saxon customs’) is likely not post-Union anti-Englishness. Rather it may reflect anxiety over the impact and cost of an education in England pursued by many sons of Highland nobles. For instance, Stana Nenadic has highlighted the struggle concerning the English education, at Eton and Oxford, of the young Sir James MacDonald of Sleat, 8th Baronet (d.1766). In 1759 those against an English education for the baronet wrote that:

an education pursued solely in England might give him ideas of expense, which are very improper for his fortune which is but moderate and considerably loaded with debt... by such a plan of education he becomes an entire stranger in his younger days to his own country and countrymen.⁶²

The pursuit of luxury by the Highland nobility is a unifying theme of the individual manuscript of the McLagan collection in which we find the Ben Nevis poem. Each of the the four poems that make up this manuscript deal with the theme. ‘Òran an t-Sealgair’ opines that after the ’45 the *triath* became overly fond of *sàimh* (‘luxury’) and *faoineas* (‘foolishness/ vanity’). The song on Loch Lomond notes, ‘Is leasach’ neònach air tìr bhith ga fàsach de dhaoìn’’ (‘It’s a strange improvement for the land to be cleared of its people’) before taking aim at a triath’s love for: *cluiche* (sport), *earradh* (clothing), *biadh* (food), *sult* (excess), *sògh* (affluence) and *caitheamh* (spending). The final poem, ‘Òran na Banaraich’ is the only song of the four not to mention the *triath* but nonetheless laments the appearance of ‘cearrachd agus sàimh’ (‘gaming and luxury’). The thematic nature of this collection of four poems might suggest a literary coterie composing on particular topics.

The arrival of luxury was seen to be a key marker of the advanced commercial stages of society and the nature and impact of luxury was a crucial Scottish Enlightenment

⁶¹ Newton, *We’re Indians*, p. 46 emended this to give ‘Theich an sluagh de Mhòr-Thìr Choluim’ (‘The population has fled from King Malcom’s mainland’). However, this should be understood as a Gaelic rendering of Columbia, commonly used as a name for North America in the eighteenth century.

⁶² Stana Nenadic, *Lairds and Luxury: The Highland Gentry in Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2007), p. 53.

debate.⁶³ Writings on luxury pivoted on the potential for increased luxury to improve arts, culture and inquiry but also to lead to inequality and depopulation in the countryside.⁶⁴ Improvement might lead to luxury for the rich but repetitive increased labour for the poor, resulting in the poor losing both their creativity and their ability to fight. The Highlands, as a barbarous society, were largely presented as lacking luxury. For instance, Henry Home, Lord Kames, notes in *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774):

Where luxury is unknown, and where people have no wants but what are suggested by uncorrupted nature; men and women live together with great freedom, and with great innocence...Men and women among the Spartans bathed promiscuously, and wrestled together stark naked. Tacitus reports, that the Germans had not even separate beds, but lay promiscuously upon reeds or heath along the walls of the house. The same custom prevails even at present among the temperate Highlanders of Scotland; and is not quite worn out in New England.⁶⁵

Thus, the Ben Nevis poem, and indeed the other poems in this particular manuscript, shows us that some eighteenth-century Gaelic-poets were keenly aware of the debates on luxury and societal progress and co-opted or rejected parts of the rhetoric as it suited their own purposes. This should be unsurprising, given that Adam Ferguson, a key thinker on the impact of improvement was a Gaelic speaker. Indeed, it has been argued that Ferguson's own status as a Gaelic-speaking Highlander and his awareness of the economic situation of the Highlands had a major impact on his thinking in *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767) which contains a section on luxury and 'Corruption incident to Polished Nations'.⁶⁶ Ferguson writes that '*barbarian*, in use with one arrogant people, and that of *gentil*, with another, only serve to distinguish the stranger, whose language and pedigree differed from theirs.'⁶⁷ Thus, David L. Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah note that Ferguson does not 'fully polarize the savage and civilized'.⁶⁸

Of course, Gaelic poets did not need to wait for writing such as Ferguson's or Smith's to warn of the impact of luxury on Highland communities. Roderick Morison, known as An Clàrsair Dall ('The Blind Harper') mocked the new young chief of the MacLeods for his extravagant spending at the end of the end of the seventeenth century in 'Òran do MhacLeòid Dhùn Bheagain' ('Song to MacLeod of Dunvegan').⁶⁹ Traditionally in Gaelic

⁶³ Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge, 1994); Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Commercial Society in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 2013).

⁶⁴ Berry, *The Idea of Commercial Society*, p. 160.

⁶⁵ [Kames], *Sketches*, Vol. I p. 207.

⁶⁶ Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. by Fania Oz-Salzberger (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 231-47. For the debate on the impact of his own Highland identity on his thinking see Duncan Forbes, 'Adam Ferguson and the Idea of Community', in *Edinburgh in the Age of Reason*, ed. by Douglas Young et al. (Edinburgh, 1967), pp. 40-47; Jack A. Hill, *Adam Ferguson and Ethical Integrity: The Man and his Prescriptions for the Moral Life* (Lanham, Maryland, 2017), p. 9.

⁶⁷ Ferguson, *An Essay*, p.195.

⁶⁸ David L. Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah, *Savage Economics: Wealth, Poverty, and the Temporal Walls of Capitalism* (Abingdon, 2010), pp. 91-92.

⁶⁹ For an edition and translation see *The Blind Harper (An Clàrsair Dall): The Songs of Roderick Morison and his Music*, ed. by William Matheson (Edinburgh, 1970), pp. 58-73. We might note that the 'Augustan elements' of

poetry the liberality and generosity of the chieftain's household was praised, including celebration of the consumption of wine.⁷⁰ A wider study of how this trope evolved in Gaelic poetry, in light of the emergence of the notion of corrosive luxury, is needed.

Despite the oft-repeated notion that luxury had not reached the Highlands we do also see some acknowledgement in contemporary English-language sources of the very real 'evolving relationships through five generations with luxury consumption' in Highland families from c. 1680-1830.⁷¹ Nenadic points out, for instance, that Johnson and Boswell were, 'disappointed to find that southern 'politeness' and the metropolitan 'world of goods' had greatly eroded what they had come to observe'.⁷² The Ben Nevis Gaelic poem, 'Air Fàsachadh na Gàidhealtachd Albannaich', and indeed the other poems that accompany it in the manuscript, also all deal with the impact of luxury, cultivated by the Highland nobility in the eighteenth century. It has been shown here that the poem is rooted in writing about the history, geology, culture and economy of the Highlands. It shows tacit acceptance of the Enlightenment idea that Highland society was only at the initial barbarous stages of societal progress but explains that this is due to a particular set of historical circumstances. It co-opts the positive aspects of the representation of a part of Scotland, to some, stuck in the past; in order to highlight what has been lost due luxury. It was noted above that Hume was of the opinion that the eighteenth-century Scottish Gael heard of, 'nought else but the noble Exploits of his Tribe or Clan'.⁷³ This close reading and editorial work on one anonymous Gaelic poem from the eighteenth-century McLagan collection shows this to be erroneous. It evidences a Gaelic poet, and presumably audience, deeply engaged with key contemporary Scottish Enlightenment texts and debates.

this song are pointed out by Ronald Black and Gerald Carruthers, 'The Eighteenth Century', in *The International Companion to Scottish Poetry*, ed. by Carla Sassi (Glasgow, 2015), pp. 54-63 (p. 55).

⁷⁰ MacInnes, 'The Panegyric Code', p. 456.

⁷¹ Nenadic, *Lairds and Luxury*, p.1

⁷² Nenadic, *Lairds and Luxury*, p. 2.

⁷³ [Hume], *A True Account*, pp. 6-7.