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Location and Destination in Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's 'The Birlinn of Clanranald'

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'THE BIRLINN OF CLANRANALD' is a poem which describes a working ship, a birlinn or galley, its component parts, mast, sail, tiller, rudder, oars and the cabs (or oar-clasps, wooden pommels secured to the gunwale) they rest in, the ropes that connect sail to cleats or belaying pins, and so on, and the sixteen crewmen, each with their appointed role and place; and it describes their mutual working together, rowing, and then sailing out to sea, from the Hebrides in the west of Scotland, from South Uist to the Sound of Islay, then over to Carrickfergus in Ireland. The last third of the poem is an astonishing, terrifying, exhilarating description of the men and the ship in a terrible storm that blows up, threatening to destroy them, and which they pass through, only just making it to safe harbour, mooring and shelter. It was written in Gaelic sometime around 1751-1755 and first published posthumously in 1776, in an edition compiled by the poet's son. The most carefully edited modern Gaelic text is in *Selected Poems*, edited by Derick S. Thomson (Edinburgh: The Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 1996).

Its author, Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, also known as Alexander MacDonald (c.1693/98-c.1770) was a teacher and soldier, a Jacobite officer during the rising of 1745 and Gaelic tutor to Prince Charles Edward Stuart. His father was an Episcopalian Church of Scotland minister, who taught the boy and introduced him to classical literature. He knew about sea voyages, literally, but he also had read about them in the poems of Homer and Virgil. In the poem, there is clear evidence that the author knew and had experienced the sea, but there is also a supremely literary sensibility at work, especially when we come to the storm, where a wealth of poetic resources of hyperbole and imagery are drawn upon. The modernity of this passage is startling, and it could almost be described as psychedelic or surrealist.

Alasdair attended the University of Glasgow and grew quickly familiar with the literature and culture of his era. Not only contemporary and recent poetry in Scots and English, but the European context of all cultural production came into his knowledge. He has been called 'The Bard of the Gaelic Enlightenment' but if at times his poetry is indeed 'bardic' in a traditional oral sense, he is more accurately described as a highly literate and knowledgeable literary poet, an Enlightenment figure indeed, and a pre-Romantic Scottish nationalist, whose primary language was Gaelic.

In 1729, he became a schoolteacher, an English teacher, working in various parts of Moidart and the west of Scotland. In 1738 he was teaching at

Kilchoan, Ardnamurchan. One of his most famous songs of this period was the lyrical, ‘Allt an t-Siucar’ / ‘Sugar Burn’. In 1741, Alasdair’s *A Galick and English Vocabulary*, effectively the first Gaelic–English dictionary (of around 200 pages), was published, commissioned by the anti-Catholic, anti-Gaelic, Society in Scotland for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK), to help spread the English language and extirpate Gaelic. Alasdair had worked on it in the belief that it would help take Gaelic forward, but he soon came to oppose everything to which the SSPCK was committed. Making this book, if anything, confirmed his own commitment to his language and culture. His poems took on increasingly sharp edges.

Called to account for satiric and inappropriate writing, it is said that he abandoned his teaching to help in the Jacobite rising, and that he was among the first at Glenfinnan when the flag was raised on 19th August 1745. Many of his poems and songs openly extol the virtues of the Jacobite cause and satirise the Hanoverians and their Scottish supporters, the Campbells. He was a captain in the Clan Ranald regiment, in charge of fifty recruits, and taught Gaelic to the Prince himself. He converted to Catholicism, perhaps at this time, but perhaps much earlier. After Culloden, he and his family were fugitives. His house was ransacked by Hanoverian troops.

He and his family settled on the island of Canna in 1749 and stayed there till 1751, when he travelled to Edinburgh to publish a book of his poems, *Ais-Eiridh na Sean Chánoin Albannaich / The Reawakening of the Old Scottish Language*, replete with satires on the Hanoverian succession. In the poem, ‘An Airce’ / ‘The Ark’, he promises that the Campbells will be plagued and scourged for their treason to Scotland, while he himself will build a ship of refuge for those Campbells true to the Jacobite cause, and all moderates who, after swallowing an effective purgative of salt sea water, would be willing to reject allegiance to the British crown. The authorities were outraged.

Aware of the threat of prosecution, he moved to Glen Uig but then moved again to Knoydart, then to Morar and finally to Sandaig, in Arisaig. He often visited South Uist, where his friend Iain MacFhearchair (John MacCodrum) was bard to Sir James MacDonald of Sleat. The MacDonalds and Clan Ranald were his people, and their family connections extended throughout the west of Scotland and to Ireland, to Carrickfergus.

On his deathbed, his last words were addressed to friends watching over him, who were reciting some poems of their own. Alasdair awoke, corrected their metres and versification, showed them how to do it with some verses of his own, then quietly lay back and drifted away. He is buried in Kilmorie cemetery, Arisaig.

The biography of the poet offers us some secure co-ordinate points and a trajectory through a tumultuous period not only in Scottish but in British history, across the 1707 union of parliaments through the Jacobite risings of the first half of the century, to their aftermath in the second half. Place, in this

sense, is secure, even while the spaces we might identify as Gaelic, Scottish and British, are contested. However, when we come to ‘The Birlinn of Clanranald’ as a poem, the questions become more complex. We might conclude from the biographical and historical context that ‘The Birlinn of Clanranald’ was not widely known in its author’s lifetime, and that its historical moment is of some consequence. There is more to it, of course.

The original Gaelic poem is both traditional and radical. The versification is rhythmic, rhymed, with regular patterns. This would make it as familiar and accessible in its own time and language as free verse is to us. Equally, though, a poem in the forms of its era requires a necessary quickening, whether in address or approach or assumption. Rhyming poems in the twenty-first century are not easily read fresh. Often enough, free-verse or open-form poems can also feel tired. And there is more. The poem is not a fragmented narrative but coherent, and yet its coherence is blasted by opposing forces. The balance in the poem, in its form as well as in its narrative, is delicate but strong, resistant to, but at the mercy of, forces that oppose and cut across it.

Structurally, there are sixteen parts, and there seem to be clearly eight subsections in the last part, the storm. This last part takes up about a third of the whole poem. This is a literary work, carefully put down on paper. It is not a composition made to a musical structure and held in the memory until transcribed, as was the case with the other great Gaelic poem of this era, Duncan Ban MacIntyre’s ‘Praise of Ben Dorain’. Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair intended that ‘The Birlinn of Clanranald’ should be read, as well as heard.

Ambiguities abound. Specific references to the structure and operation of the birlinn, its parts and their purposes, what the crew do, actually, are given in intricate detail. And yet there are contradictions. A birlinn is usually understood as having one sail and one mast. This is what seems to be the case in the poem. Yet in various places, especially at the beginning and end of the Gaelic text, plural terms for these items are used. Today, of course, nobody knows what birlinns were actually like. As far as we know, none survive. In 1493, the Lordship of the Isles was given over to King James IV. It was ordered that every birlinn should be destroyed, as the power of the fleet and the authority of the seafaring clans was a threat. The ships were burned. Reconstructions have been made, and courageously sailed. But questions remain. Perhaps too much importance is given to the word, ‘birlinn’: it seems to have appeared in the title of the poem in the late Victorian era, and is used in the poem sparingly, while ‘long’ (‘luinge’) is used three times, ‘bairc/caol-bhairc’ three times and ‘iubhrach’ once. As Michel Byrne has informed me, ‘In spite of the destruction of his Lordship’s navy, island chiefs obviously continued to sail with their retinue (and to be praised as great sailors in panegyric song), so is there much in the poem to make us think MacDonald had anything other than an eighteenth-century ship in mind?’ This remains one of a number of questions about

authenticity and reference that take the poem beyond the literal world of historical fact and the rigours of material reconstitution. It lives in more than history. It moves through time as well as over seas.

As such, it is worth quoting an author whose experience of ships, sailing and seamanship authorises his judgements of the experience of sea travel. Adam Nicolson, in *Seamanship* (London: HarperCollins, 2004), says this of one of the boats on which he voyaged through Atlantic waters, including those around the Hebrides: ‘Of course a boat is not a natural thing. She is the most cultural of things, the way she works dependent on a line of thought that goes back to the Bronze Age: the form of the hull and the weighted keel; the lift and drive given by a sail; [...] the ingenuity of blocks and tackles, strops, sheets, halyards and warps, the sheer cleverness of knots. The knowledge that is gathered in a boat is a great human inheritance, especially valuable because it is not material but intangible, a legacy made only of understanding.’ (p.32)

The elemental realities Nicolson describes here cross time and locations with the most fundamental co-ordinate points that remain essential from the Bronze Age to the twentieth century. They are also human, experienced, remembered and applied in the company of other sailors. They are, on the one hand, indifferent to human feeling and aspiration, and on the other, humanly vulnerable, tough and resilient. This might appear to be an axiomatic dichotomy, yet specific space and place in this light are not irrelevant: currents, climate, seasonal weathers, geographical landfalls, depths and distances are all particular to any voyage, and complex beyond any sense of simplicity. Yet the general truths Nicolson is describing are perennial and in literary or cultural terms evoke most strongly tropes of symbolism with which we have become increasingly familiar in the century or so since mass media encroached western society to the point of visual saturation. Of course, the commercial priority of that saturation is different from that of the sea voyage.

Nicolson continues: ‘You can see the boat, in other words, as our great symbol, the embodiment of what we might be. In her fineness, strength, and robustness, in the many intricate, interlocking details of her overall scheme; even in the bowing to nature of her wing-like sails and the auk- or seal-like curves of her body: in all this, she is a great act of civility. The sea is an “it”, the boat is a “she”, and the courage of that confrontation is why people love the boats they know. Boats are us against it, what we can do despite the world. Each sailing hull is a precious thought, buoyant, purposeful, moving on, afloat in the sea that cares nothing for it. From the deck of a boat, out of sight of land, as Auden wrote in “The Sea and the Mirror”, his great poem on art and consciousness, “All we are not stares back at what we are.” (p.33)

There is a specific geographical location for ‘The Birlinn of Clanranald’ and it is perfectly possible to chart the route the birlinn takes on her voyage. In terms of place and geography, it would seem, we are secure. The poem tells us that the birlinn emerges from the mouth of Loch Eynort in South Uist, voyages

south-south-east to the Sound of Islay then heads south-west, crossing to Carrickfergus in Ireland. But ambiguities remain. No explanation for this voyage is given. Why are these men travelling thus? Why take that route? There are more questions unanswered than resolved by these navigational assurances.

As Murray Pittock says, 'The Birlinn's journey, from South Uist to Carrickfergus in Ireland on St Brigid's Day, the eve of Candlemas, unites the sea-divided Gael of Clan Donald, the last Scottish family to fight in an Irish rebel army, just as it formed such an important part of the last Scottish army of 1746. The invocation of tradition (the bow) and Spanish weapons can be held to represent the ancient unified world of the Gael, and the calls of Irish Gaelic poetry for Spanish military help.' Pittock emphasises this indication of the significance of the date given in the poem for the voyage: 'The date of the voyage is surely important: Brigid, the Mary of the Gael, was also associated with a Gaelic pagan inheritance. Her day – traditionally thought a good day for a sea voyage – was linked to the return of fertility and the coming of spring, a token and hope of the renewing year. In this it was clearly linked to the Christian Candlemas'. Pittock concludes: 'This was a world with which, as a Catholic convert, Alasdair would have been familiar.' So, place and date, the space crossed and the time occupied in the evocation of the voyage at its most literal already has specific reference and meaning that spans particular religious denomination and pagan or non-orthodox belief systems and mythic structures of spiritual reality. At the heart of all these terms are balances between what is certain and what is unknown.

And if we note that balance of certainties and the unknown, at the heart of creating a new version of the poem is the question: How to translate it?

I undertook an English-language version of the poem after many years of study. It was a poem which had haunted my imagination since childhood. But without a fluent knowledge of Gaelic, my acquaintance with it was principally through other, older translations. But there were other specific problems. In terms of the imagery, as noted, the birlinn, the parts of the ship, the crew and their expertise, are all given in detail. Yet there are questions. For example, when the crew come to the place where the sailing begins, and Big Malcolm the Stalwart, son of Old Ranald the Ocean, stands up by the leading oar, before the crew, to call for a rowing song, where exactly is he standing? The leading oar is not at the prow of the ship, as you might imagine, but is marking a rhythm for others to follow, and the oarsmen themselves would be facing the other way, with their backs to the prow, facing towards the stern of the ship, so Big Malcolm would be in front of them, at the stern.

There are questions of vocabulary. What do the oars rest in? Some translations have 'oar-ports', which are circular holes with a gash to one side, so the blade of the oar slips through the gash and the shaft rest in the hole; but some have 'thole-pins' which are literally pins, or thick shafts, stuck into holes in the gunwale and chained or tied to the side. But the oars would surely be

knocked out of these in rough seas. The appropriate term, I discovered, is most likely 'cabe', which is like a wooden fist rising out of the gunwale, shaped like the pommel of a saddle, with a strap of leather or rope running from it down to the gunwale, so that each oar has some flexibility as well as security. These matters of details occupied me for a long time while I made my English version.

It is perhaps worth comparing a few examples of different English versions. Here is the opening of the last section, the voyage, first in Hugh MacDiarmid's version from 1935, made with the help of Sorley Maclean:

The sun bursting golden-yellow
 Out of his husk,
The sky grew wild and hot-breathing,
 Unsheathing a fell tusk,
Then turned wave-blue, thick, dun-bellied,
 Fierce and forbidding,
Every hue that would be in a plaid
 In it kneading;
A 'dog's-tooth' in the Western quarter
 Snorters prophesied;
The swift clouds under a shower-breeze
 Multiplied.

Derick Thomson's 1974 version runs like this:

Sun bursting goldenly
from its meshing;
the sky became scorched and gloomy,
awe-inspiring.

The waves grew dark, thick, dun-bellied,
angry and sallow;
the sky had every singly hue
you find in tartan.

A dog's-tooth appeared in the west,
a storm threatened;
swift-moving clouds by wind shredded,
equally showers too.

Iain Crichton Smith, in 1977, has this:

Sun unhusking to gold-yellow
 from its shell,

the sky growing seared and lurid,
amber bell.

Thick and gloomy and dun-bellied,
surly curtain,
vibrating with every colour
in a tartan.

Rainbow in the west appearing
tempest-born,
speeding clouds by growing breezes
chewed and torn.

Ronald Black's 2001 translation of this passage runs thus:

As the sun burst yellow-golden
Out of her husk,
The sky grew overcast and singed,
Truly ugly.

It grew wave-blue, thick, dun-bellied,
Sallow, surly,
With every colour in a tartan plaid
Spread on the sky,

And a bit of rainbow over in the west,
It looked like a storm –
Scudding clouds being torn apart by wind
And showery squalls.

And my own version is this:

Furnace-gold, hot-yellow, yolk-yellow, brass-brazen sun, burning
through fish-nets of clouds, trellises meshed, burning them open,
emerges, and the clouds burn back, close in once again,
cover all things, changing, sky becomes ash, blackening, and a blue

splash there, and then, thickening, bulging, effulging,
turning sick, pale, brown, beige, tawny, impending, bellying
down, and the fretwork rematches itself, closes in, hue
thick as tartan, dark weaves, anger flashes, and there high in the west,
a broken shaft, a dog-tooth of rainbow, colour stripes swelling,
a fang of sharp colour, clouds moving faster to cover it over, and the winds

pick up speed, toss the clouds as if showers of boulders,
grey fragments of stone, chips of earth, avalanching in sky.

It is not necessary to attempt justifications here but I would observe a few important differences between my version and all the others: I abandoned any attempt to emulate the rhythmic structure of the original's versification. This seemed crucial, for to follow that would have resulted in a musical mimicry and I could not hope to match that with the close accuracy of meaning provided by the Gaelic-speaking translators above. My hope was to match the meaning of the original with a more exfoliated, elaborated, yet surprising and hopefully still quickening version, almost an interpretation, expanded in what might be called a paraphrasing of the original. Literalism, here, in some crucial way, was not going to work. Yet this is not to abandon the original but to attempt to come at it, or rather bring it towards us, in a different way.

There is what seems an arbitrary space between 'blue' 'splash' in my version of this passage. Why should there be a space here? Let me describe what I was thinking of: there is a moment when, on shipboard, the rise and fall of the water might lift you to a point of seeming equilibrium, then drop you vertiginously, quickly, into a trough. In this passage, the reader and the witness on board are looking up and out at the sky, noting the gathering storm. The sight of something 'blue' might catch the eye with hope, a momentary sense of possibility, escape, before the transient notion of 'splash' brings us back to water and onward flow. It's a moment for holding your breath. The other lines run on, with thickening density and increasing velocity but a break between lines like this gives pause and gathers tension. At least, that's what I was hoping for.

Then there is the question of who is speaking and to whom? Parts of the poem read like commands to the crew, parts as if an omniscient narrator is describing events, but at the same time, all of it gives you the sense that you are on board the ship itself, moving through the waters. The questions here can be answered partially. We are invited to imagine voices and actions in relations of power, commanding and observing. The responses given are a result of agreed loyalty and respect, and the enactment of trusted and proven expertise. But the poem speaks with a voice of its own, not defined entirely by any single character or figure, whether a member of the crew, a captain, a clan chief, or the voice of the ocean itself, though all these have their forms of address, at different moments.

Then there is the voyage and how to convey movement. The whole poem is moving, is in movement, at different speeds, in different places, fluently, easefully, then under pressure and straining, then in terrible action, erratic, yet determined.

Every line of the poem takes place in the evocation of movement upon water. When we think of Wordsworth's poetry, most often we are carried by the

pace of a person walking. The same is true of our progress through Dante's *Inferno*. In Robert Burns's 'Tam o' Shanter' we begin by arriving in a market town towards the end of the day, become quickly settled in a tavern, then proceed on horseback, in an unsteady, rather inebriated ride, and then in the last part of the poem, we move fast, on horseback at full gallop. 'The Birlinn of Clanranald' by contrast to all of these, is moving across water, first by rowing, and with the accompaniment of a rowing song, then under sail, as the seas become bigger and the waves higher, and then through a terrible storm, where the unpredictable weights and vertiginous rising and descending of the ship is represented in the verse itself.

This is inherent in the rhythms of the language used. As Robert Lowell says, in the 'Introduction' to *Imitations* (1971), 'the excellence of a poet depends on the unique opportunities of his native language.' (p.xiii) So how to convey what is Gaelic in English? I have no formula or recipe, only to try as I did, bearing in mind, somehow, both structure and music, the presence of the poem and its history, and the presence and the history of both Gaelic and English.

And there is the matter of the poem's religious context. It was written after Alasdair's conversion to Catholicism and opens with a prayer for a blessing to be given by the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Ghost. I might have let that stand. All other translators have done so. Yet I wanted to say something here that might comprise a blessing even atheists could acknowledge. I started well enough, I thought, with 'the great lord god of movement' – that sets a promise for the whole poem – and 'the great lord god of nature' is surely as present in what we encounter, as movement. But that does not give a trinity. After a while, I hit upon 'the great lord god of permanence' – whatever that might be, something we hope and believe might stay present, giving co-ordinate points to rely on, forever, whatever makes us human in the circumstances, from well before Homer to now. These three gods are, so to speak, co-ordinating points for every part of the poem, and make of it a greater comprehensive human entity, a composition that has coherence, an identity, even in translation, that might be conveyed. The translation, then, has got to be, not only from Gaelic to English, but from the late eighteenth to the early twenty-first century.

So then, keeping in mind when it was written, we might ask, when is it set?

In terms of its political context, the poem was written post-Apocalypse, post-Armageddon, in more than one sense, after Culloden. Shelter is required. A journey must be made. What tone could be voiced to convey that?

Readers of poems know how this works. Reality and metaphor are never opposed. Literalism is often the enemy. Meticulous detail of fact can be good, verisimilitude has a real purpose. But the poem does not and could not convey literally what was contemporary with its author. It refers to a world long, long pre-Culloden, not the eighteenth but the fifteenth century, and earlier. Not pre-Union of Parliaments, but even pre-Union of Crowns. Remember: all the

original birlinns were destroyed. The poem has immediacy, certainly, but it is an act of reclamation, and an assertion of faith. It is, in its way, a resurrection.

That might prompt reflection on the possible meaning of the poem. What answer could we give if we were to ask, simply: What does it mean?

The poem is so visceral and grainy in its depiction of realities, it almost seems hostile to metaphoric interpretation, but there is an interpretation of the poem that the historical context in which it was written suggests, without straining the purpose of metaphoric implication too far.

As noted, it was composed in the aftermath of the Jacobite rising of 1745 and the massacre at Culloden in 1746, and its author was an officer in the Jacobite army. The poem, perhaps, reflects upon this social and human disaster in ways that go further than its literal meaning. It presents a clan and a crew of men working in extreme co-ordination, disciplined and intuitive, in conditions of knowledge drawn from experience, but they and their vessel are subjected to a storm of unprecedented violence, a natural imposition that calls up inimical forces from well beyond anything that might have been predicted. The courage and skills of the crew and the strength of the ship carry them through, but at a cost, and without any sense of inevitability. The safe harbour they come to is in Ireland, and the connection between the Celtic west of Scotland and the Irish coast their voyage makes, is, also, a signal of an ancient kinship, across differences, of the Celtic peoples and the human needs of all people, as opposed to inimical forces in nature and anti-human forces in the political world that intervene to wreak havoc and destruction on us all.

As Silke Strohe writes in *Uneasy Subjects: Postcolonialism and Scottish Gaelic Poetry*, 'retrospection is often a necessary stage in the development of a culture confronted with marginalisation. It may help the marginalised to gain or maintain a belief in the validity and potential of their own communities and cultures, thus laying foundations for later and more direct forms of cultural resistance with a more contemporary focus.' (p.77) By placing the voyage in an unspecified past, by evoking the birlinn, a ship from a previous dispensation, long before the Hanoverian succession, Alasdair gives us a sense of historical depth reaching into mythic reality, whose strengths can be conveyed through the verisimilitude of the details, and thus whose meaning can be brought back not only to his own contemporary but quite deliberately a future reality.

The struggle in his own life may have been specific to the Jacobite and Hanoverian conflict but the forces aligned against human potential are perennial. These inimical forces are always there, ready to break into the worlds we might make for ourselves, family, friends, companions. Human greed and vanity deregulate or restructure the world and our best responses to it. This is as true today as ever. But in poems and music, paintings and sculptures, the structures of ships and the design of our dwelling-places, art of all kinds, there are ways to oppose and resist those natural and unnatural impositions. The

appetite for self-extension is humanly healthy, so long as it does not reach to the point of bloated self-regard.

The poem is based upon the premise of the accepted limits of necessity, and the noble work of pushing against them all. Through the living creatures it depicts and the motion it enacts on its voyage, the poem moves not *towards* but *within* a poetics of the environment.

It is an enactment of virtues: different skills, co-ordination, weathering, strength, suppleness and subtlety, loyalty, determination, hope. It is a play, a drama, a weathering of storm.

It occupies space through time. Its place may be geographically charted yet its moment comes again in every articulation, every reading, silent or voiced, alone or in company. Its historical context, place and space, may be described in such detail as I have given but like any work of great literature its intimation is of human potential. The significance of that does not end. It comes to rest, though, in the prospect of the future.

Further Reading

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