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Alan Macquarrie & Roger P.H. Green, eds., *The poems of Roderick MacLean (Ruairidh MacEachainn Mhicllleathain) (d. 1553)*. The Boydell Press, Scottish History Society, 6th series, volume 17, 2021. ISBN 978-0-906245-47-7.

This is an edition of the *Ionis* or *Iondis Liber* published at Rome in May 1549 by Roderick MacLean *alias* Ruairidh mac Eachainn Mhicllleathain, Wittenburg-educated Bishop of the Isles. *Ionidis Liber* (*Book of Song of Iona*), was a paraphrase by MacLean, in neo-classical Latin, of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae* (c.700). There are only three extant copies of MacLean's work. One of these surviving originals has additional material bound into it which are reproduced here. These include a flattering address to Sir David Lindsay of the Mount, 1548, which runs to 201 lines, and a shorter poem addressed to Governor Arran, dated 1 January 1549. All of this, following on from the Iona material was, according to the editors, part of a long campaign aimed at securing Ruairidh the Diocese of the Isles, a campaign he had won by January 1551.

MacLean's first charge was as a priest at Barabhas, Lewis, simultaneously holding the parishes of Kilmaluag in Skye and Kilchoman in Islay, 1536. By 1542 he had become Archdeacon of the Isles while hoping to succeed his brother, Fearchar, as Bishop of the Isles. The editors provide us with details of Bishop MacLean's background and the way he fitted into the matrix of Clan MacLean genealogy. His family connections – he belonged to the MacLeans of Kingairloch in Morven – were as much a hindrance as a help, however, and much of his career seems to have consisted of a struggle for ecclesiastical advancement. Significant new light is shed here in an appendix on the ecclesiastical figures 'relevant to the career of Roderick MacLean' from the Vatican archives, 1529-55, adding much welcome new detail to our knowledge of the clergy in the Isles between Lewis and Arran.

The immediate focus of MacLean's long and acrimonious tussle, 1545-1551, for the Diocese of the Isles was a rival candidate, Pàdraig (Patrick) MacLean, a natural son of MacLean of Duart. The polished nature of Ruairidh's Latin verse does not hide the bitter nature of the dispute: in his letter to Lindsay of the Mount Ruairidh dismissed Pàdraig as being born of a whore. This came against the background of a great deal of unrest in Scotland, with its focus in the west on the person of Dòmhnall Dubh, long-time pretender to the forfeited MacDonald Lordship of the Isles and lightning rod for a major rising in 1544-45. (Dòmhnall Dubh and his Council of the Isles had supported the candidacy of Pàdraig MacLean, Ruairidh's rival.) Unfortunately for him Bishop Ruairidh only held his diocese uncontested for two years before his untimely death in late 1553.

The comprehensive introduction (67pp) shows us the breadth of MacLean's scholarship, his approach to poetry, and discusses MacLean's approach to his textual sources. The paraphrase of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae* is a startling departure for those more familiar with the sixteenth century. The saint (died 597) does his thing with a bewildering and kaleidoscopic array of miracle, curse, and prophecy. Woe to those who caught the saint's disapproving gaze be it a demon lurking in a milk pail (p.171), a pagan Pictish rival (p.144), a hapless cattle thief (p.171), or an errant priest whose punishment was to see his hand putrefy and be buried while he still lived (p.137). There is a monster in Loch Ness and a poisonous boar in Skye, both of them vanquished, naturally, by Colmcille (pp 188-9). Meanwhile a woman in distant Munster is assisted in a difficult childbirth and a missionary delivered from sea-monsters through the power of prayer (pp 227-8). A clue to the continuing relevance of the saint's life in the mid-sixteenth century is given to us by MacLean who

tells us (here in translation): 'Thus God made him (Colmcille) glorious by miracles and also grant to him this renown, so that we should all celebrate Christ by so great a prophet...' (p.179).

MacLean's approach to language is noteworthy. He announced on his title page that he was *Roderici MacLeanii Hectorogenis Scoti Gathaelici Ionitae* (Ruairidh mac Eachainn MacGhilleathain, a Scottish Gael of Iona). In this, MacLean took a positive approach to his native language and culture which might make an interesting contrast with some Gaelic-speaking peers, such as George Buchanan (p.47) or John Eldar.¹ Those of us who approach MacLean's work, with the aid of the facing translation, are told that MacLean delighted in metrical complexity and displayed his skill in Latin by paraphrasing Colmcille's deeds in sapphic Latin verse. Indeed, the editors tell us MacLean's abilities in composing Latin poetry was 'fresh and astonishing' (pp 27-9) while he is praised for his expert handling of Gaelic forms in Latin (pp 36, 47). This raises intriguing questions about the nature of Latin (and Gaelic) culture in the Isles and at Iona itself, where MacLean received his early instruction. It is observed (p.47) that MacLean was a 'man of wide Renaissance learning and deep scholarship'. The editors of this volume do their subject justice with their surefooted handling of language (Latin, Greek, Gaelic) and scholarly apparatus, providing a full and helpful biblical, classical, linguistic, and historical contextualisation of MacLean's work. This should be useful to a wide range of people with an interest in early to mid-sixteenth century Scotland.

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¹ D. Gregory & W.F. Skene eds., *Collectanea de Rebus Albanicis* (Iona Club, Edinburgh, 1849), 23-32; A. Williamson, 'Scots, Indians and Empire: The Scottish politics of civilisation, 1519-1609', *Past & Present*, 150 (1996), 46-83, at 70-2, 74-5.