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Recovering and Reshaping a Lost Identity: The Gaels' Linguistic and Literary Struggle

Céline Guignard

Language has long been considered to be at the heart of the concept of national identity and the relationship between language and identity was at the centre of the literary debate that took place at the beginning of the twentieth century in Scotland. In the context of such a debate, three authors in particular - William Sharp, Neil Munro and Fionn MacColla - believed that it was possible to write about Gaelic identity and culture in the English language, despite the fact that English was seen as the very language which threatened to hasten the decline of Scottish Gaelic. This essay examines the literary techniques which they developed in order to make the Gaelic nature of their texts shine through their English prose. Part of the essay will also focus on the way the two languages are represented in the three authors' fiction and on the relationship their Gaelic and English protagonists entertain with the language.

The man who loses his language
loses his world.
The Highlander who loses his language
loses his world.¹

These lines from Iain Crichton Smith's poem "Shall Gaelic Die?" (68-69) refer to the existence of a link between national, or ethnic, identity and language. The belief in the existence of such a link is by no means new. John E. Joseph, in *Language and Identity*, quotes from Ep-

¹ "Am fear a chailleas a chànan, // caillidh e a shaoghal. // An Gàidheal a chailleas a chànan, // caillidh e an saoghal."

icurus of Samos (341-270 BC) and the Book of Genesis to show that the debate over the relationship between identity and language is indeed ancient (Joseph 42-43, 95-96). In the Scottish context, the idea that language is central to the formation of an identity has long been part of nationalists' discourse. Attempts by the British government in the nineteenth century to enforce the use of English to the detriment of the native Gaelic were perceived by Highlanders, rightly or not, as so many attacks against Gaelic identity. Likewise, any nationalist programme tends nowadays to focus on the reintroduction of the ancient language as an essential part of the restoration of a Highland identity.

The purpose of the present essay is neither to confirm, nor to refute, the existence of a link between language and ethnic identity, as this would be the domain of linguists and ethnologists.² It focuses, rather, on the works of three Scottish authors who believed that language was an essential part of Scottish Gaelic identity and analyses the use they made of the Gaelic and English languages in their prose. William Sharp (1855-1905), Neil Munro (1863-1930) and Fionn MacColla (1906-1975) chose to write their fiction in English while retaining the Gaelic language at the centre of their work. They deliberately chose to blend Gaelic prose within an English foundation in an attempt to reassert their own Highland identity.³ The period in which Sharp, Munro and MacColla wrote spans over the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, from what is often referred to as the "Celtic Twilight" to the "Scottish Renaissance" of the 1930s. It was a period of heated debates among the Scottish literati over such issues as the existence and essence of a Scottish national literature. The choice William Sharp, Neil Munro and Fionn MacColla made of selecting for their prose the very language that threatened the Gaelic with annihilation can only be understood within a certain cultural context which I propose to sketch briefly.

² For a discussion on the relationship between ethnic or national identity and language, see Hobsbawm's *Nations and Nationalism* and Silverstein's contribution to Kroskrity's *Regimes of Language*. On the same topic but with a particular focus on the Scottish case, see Joseph's *Language and Identity* and McColl Millar's *Language, Nation and Power. Language in the British Isles*, edited by David Britain, and *Languages in Britain and Ireland*, edited by Glanville Price, both provide a useful insight into the complex linguistic situation in Scotland.

³ William Sharp was born in Paisley and was therefore not a Highlander by birth. Yet, his love for and knowledge of Highland culture, together with his frequent stays in the Highlands make him a Gael by adoption. Fionn MacColla was also born in the Lowlands of Scotland, on the East coast. His father was a Highlander though and MacColla became familiar with the Gaelic language from an early age. MacColla lived for over twenty years in the Western Isles.

At the time of the Scottish literary Renaissance, many issues that were taken up by Scottish nationalists at the end of the twentieth century were already at the centre of debates. If most protagonists tended to agree on the importance of a distinct national literature for the formation of a national identity, the question whether this literature was to be written in a Scottish national language or whether a distinctively Scottish literature could be written in English became of primary importance. The Irish success in creating a literature that was distinct from the so-called English literature in which, traditionally, Anglo-Irish works had been included, led the Scots to wonder whether a similar feat was feasible in Scotland. Those who, in the 1920s and 1930s, maintained that Scottish authors could both write in English *and* express their Scottish identity were often designated as the successors of the Anglo-Celtic literary movement that was at its height in the 1890s. The writers who belonged to the so-called Anglo-Celtic movement argued that, as descendants of the British Celts, the Scots could bring valuable assets to British literature and culture to complement the Saxon characteristics of English. They argued that as Anglo-Celts they successfully combined the imagination, the creativity, and the sensitivity that were said to characterise the Celtic mind, with the pragmatism, the force and precision of the Saxon character.

In Scotland, the choice of a traditional, ancient tongue that could be considered a national language was between two contenders only: Gaelic, a Q-Celtic language spoken mainly in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, and Scots, a Germanic-based language spoken in Lowland and North-East Scotland. The debate over the choice of a national tongue for Scotland and its literature triggered three types of reactions: Some, like Gordon Leslie Rayne or Edwin Muir, thought that it was too late to save either Gaelic or Scots and turn them into national languages (Rayne 109-110; Muir 823). The two languages, they argued, had got stuck in the past through disuse and neglect and had, as a result, stopped their evolution. They could not, therefore, be used to express the present in all its complexity and diversity, and thus had no future as literary media. Other writers, including Fionn MacColla, thought that it was still possible to save the Gaelic language, but that it was essential to preserve and restore its linguistic purity. A third group, led and sustained mainly by the poet Hugh MacDiarmid and his friends, thought that it was possible to use Scots as a national language to write a distinctive Scottish literature but that such use necessitated an update of the vocabulary, together with a few alterations, so that the language could

be used to express anything a modern man might wish to express.⁴ John E. Joseph argues that the coexistence of two potential national languages in Scotland has impeded the development of linguistic nationalism, as the partisans of Gaelic and Scots have spent much energy combating the claims of the rival group, rather than the hegemony of English. He also mentions that a majority of Scots “consider the strategic economic value of using a world language as greatly outweighing the political, cultural and sentimental value of the ‘heritage’ languages. A case might be made that the eternal struggle between Gaelic and Scots is an intelligent way of keeping the nationalist flame burning while making sure that it does not set fire to the bank” (Joseph 94).

In the context of such a debate, William Sharp, Neil Munro and Fionn MacColla chose to write in English and believed that specifically Gaelic and Scottish features could be expressed despite the use of a non-Scottish medium and that a quality Scottish literature could be created. A closer analysis of these authors’ texts reveals a series of literary techniques which they developed in order to make the Gaelic tongue and culture shine through the English superstrate. Moreover, Gaelic as a language also plays a part in these authors’ fiction that goes beyond the formal level of the text; the issue of the relationship the Gaels entertain with their native and adopted languages is often developed as a theme on its own, as will be shown later.

One of the first writers who succeeded in blending the two languages in his fiction was William Sharp (1855-1905). A poet, biographer, playwright and novelist who met and befriended the greatest literary figures of his day, he is now best remembered for his writings under the pseudonym of Fiona Macleod. He succeeded in leading two separate literary careers without revealing the true identity of the female author who was hailed worldwide as a Celtic visionary. It was William Sharp’s wish to give expression in his “Fiona Macleod” writings to what he felt was the Highland half of his personality. He was not a Highlander himself, but he felt close to Highland culture and spent much of his time in the northern and western parts of Scotland. As a reporter and a writer he had a keen interest in local folk tales and legends, and he tried, in his fiction, to offer an accurate rendering of life in the Highlands as he had experienced it. Whether his writings are close to reality or whether they correspond to a phantasmagoric vision he had of Gaelic society and life is subject to debate. What cannot be questioned, however, are his efforts to confer a Gaelic flavour to his texts.

4 For a first-hand account of the debate over the use of Scots and Gaelic in literature, see McCulloch’s *Literature and Society in Scotland*.

The first technique employed by William Sharp in order to add a Gaelic flavour to his English prose consists in inserting Gaelic place-names, terms of endearment (“m’eudail”⁵), curses and exclamations (“mo chreach”, “O Dhia!”, “Ochone!”⁶). These insertions provide authenticity and exoticism without hindering the understanding of the text. Short sentences in Gaelic are also inserted into the English prose; phrases like “Tha e agam”⁷ or “Sin agad!”⁸ add local colour without being essential to the understanding of the text itself. Sharp did not, of course, invent this technique. Walter Scott already inserted words and names in Gaelic into his prose when dealing with Highland scenes. He took care, however, to Anglicise the spelling of Gaelic terms so as to allow non-Gaelic readers to reach a fairly good approximation of the way they were pronounced. Scott replaced, for example, the commonly used consonant combination “mh” with the letter “v,” or used the letter “w” (unknown in the Gaelic alphabet) or accents to render in English the original Gaelic pronunciation. Thus, the name of the Highland clan chief whom Edward Waverley meets in the eponymous novel is transformed from the original “Fearghus Mac Iomhair Mhic Iain Mhóir” to the Anglicised form of “Fergus Mac-Ivor Vich Ian Vohr” (Fergus MacIvor Son of John the Great) (75). Another example of Scott’s alteration of Gaelic spelling in *Waverley* is his mention of a “Saxon Duinhé-wassal” (English gentleman) instead of the original “duine-uasal” (75).⁹

Beside the insertion of Gaelic terms, William Sharp developed another technique consisting in juxtaposing Gaelic and English sentences, with the English sentences featuring as translations of the Gaelic originals. Such juxtaposition allows his prose to flow naturally. The following extract from *Pharais*, Sharp’s first text as Fiona Macleod, illustrates the advantages of such “juxtaposition” technique. In this passage, the heroine Lora is worried about her husband’s late return from the mainland. Her husband had an important appointment with a doctor, and the last ferry he could possibly be on before the night is about to pass their island without stopping. Lora therefore begs her friend Ian to row her to the ferry so that she can inquire about her husband:

⁵ “My love.”

⁶ “My Goodness,” “Oh, God” and “Alas!”

⁷ “I have it” or “I have him.” Literally, “it is him that is on me.”

⁸ Probably short for “Sin agad e,” meaning “There you have it.”

⁹ Neil Munro and Fionn MacColla also frequently inserted into their own prose place-names, expressions and phrases in Gaelic, yet, unlike Scott, they kept the original Gaelic spelling.

A dark figure rose from beside the ferry-shed.

“Is that you, Ian? ’Am bheil am bhata deas? Is the boat ready? Bi ealamh! bi ealamh! Mach am bhata: quick! quick! out with the boat!”

In her eager haste she spoke both in the Gaelic and the English: nor did she notice that the old man did not answer her. . .

“Oh, Ian, bi ealamh! bi ealamh! Faigh am bhata deas! rack a stigh do’n bhata!”

Word for word, as is the wont of the people, he answered her:

“Why is it that I should be quick? Why should I begin getting the boat ready? For what should I be going into the boat?”

“The Clansman! Do you not see her? Bi ealamh; bi ealamh or she will go past us like a dream!”

. . . “There is no good in going out, Lora bhan! The wind is rising: ay, I tell you, the wind goes high: we may soon hear the howling of the sea-dogs.”

But Lora, taking no notice, had sprung into the boat. . . Ian followed, grumblingly repeating, “Tha gaoth ruhbr am! Tha coltas staim’ air!”

(*Pharais* 26-27)

This passage offers an illustration of different techniques of juxtaposition. In the second paragraph, whatever phrase Lora utters in Gaelic gets directly translated into English in the following sentence. The fourth paragraph shows a slightly different approach: It is entirely in Gaelic, and the reader only gets to know what Lora has said (to Ian) when Ian’s answer is given. In the seventh and eighth paragraphs, the process is inverted; Ian’s words are first given in English in the text and their Gaelic translation is given slightly later in the text. The overall result of such juxtapositions of the two languages is effective. The comprehension of the text is by no means hindered by the insertion of sentences in Gaelic and the prose remains fluid. The interweaving of sentences in both languages adds the required touch of Gaelic atmosphere, while simultaneously reflecting Lora’s own tendency to mix the two languages in her own worried speech.

The technique that consists in telling in a paragraph in English what is about to be said by a character in Gaelic was used relatively often by Sharp at the beginning of *Pharais*, although it is dropped later in the tale as the story focuses on the two main characters – the lovers. The reason for dropping the device as the story unfolds might have been that it proved too heavy to be carried on throughout the whole tale. Moreover, it would probably have hindered both the flow of the prose and the establishment of the poetic and mystic atmosphere for which Fiona Macleod became famous. The following examples show how heavy and ungainly a device this technique proved to be:

Rapidly he gave his directions to Lora to take the helm and to keep the boat to windward:

“Gabh an stiuir, Lora: cum ris a’ ghaoth i!” (*Pharais* 28)

In the middle of the cove she stopped, waved her hand, and, in a dull voice bidding goodnight, wished sound sleep to him:

“Beannachd leibh! Cadal math dhiubh!” (*Pharais* 33)

In later texts written under the Fiona Macleod pen-name, Sharp made more extensive use of footnotes to provide translations. They sometimes included phonetic guides to the pronunciation of the Gaelic expressions. Sharp was not really a native speaker of Gaelic, and this might have rendered him attentive to the difficulty of pronouncing the Gaelic words and names correctly. *The Mountain Lovers*, Fiona Macleod’s second novel, contains several passages in Gaelic in the main body of the text, with translations and linguistic remarks in footnotes. These are indeed informative, especially to non-Gaelic readers, but they prove disruptive in the long run and not so successful a device as the techniques mentioned above. William Sharp was criticised by his friend Grant Allen for inserting too many Gaelic expressions and words into his prose, and he seems to have heeded his friend’s opinion, for he stopped mixing passages in Gaelic with his prose after his second novel as Fiona Macleod (E. A. Sharp 229).

Another author, who was nearly contemporary with Sharp and whose work the latter greatly admired (E. A. Sharp 326), took Sharp’s process of mixing Gaelic and English prose one step further. This author was Neil Munro (1863-1930), a talented writer of Scottish fiction born in Inveraray in Argyllshire and, unlike Sharp, a native speaker of Gaelic. Nowadays he is best remembered for the humorous Para Handy tales, which he wrote under the pen-name of Hugh Foulis.

One of Munro’s innovations concerned the rendering of dialogues. Unlike Walter Scott and James Hogg, who represented spoken words of Gaels and Scots phonetically, thus often creating a comical effect to the detriment of the speakers, Munro chose to have his characters converse in English but often with a Gaelic syntax and with no indication of any particular accent. This technique avoids comic effects and presents the Gael in a new light. Thus in Munro, the Gaels are not rustics who murder English in order to express with difficulty their rather primitive thoughts, but persons with an adequately complex mind who give expression to their thoughts in a language which they master. If the characters happen to be speaking English according to the context, then their Gaelic syntax stresses their Gaelic origins, rather than a particular rusticity or lack of education. If the context indicates, on the other hand,

that they are currently conversing in Gaelic, then the Gaelic turn of phrase reminds the readers of the actual language in which the conversation is taking place. Examples of Munro's adoption of a Gaelic turn of phrase for his English prose can be found in such sentences as "hunger's on us" (*The New Road* 193) and "It is I that am in it" (*Children of Tempest* 156). Indeed, since Gaelic has no equivalent for the English verb "to have," possessions, feelings and bodily manifestations *are* either *at*, *on*, or *in* us. The use of such Gaelic turn of phrase is at once simple and economical.

Munro's prose skilfully mixes Gaelic turns of phrase with word-for-word translations of Gaelic idioms into English ("the mouth of the night" for the English "twilight" or "dusk"),¹⁰ Gaelic place-names, proverbs, names of tunes and songs, together with a few Gaelic first names. The overall effect is that of creating the illusion that the reader is initiated into the language. Munro also inserts many common words in Gaelic, for the understanding of which he provides a Gaelic glossary of his own making at the end of his volumes of tales. The glossary, however, is not complete, and a thorough reader might have wished for a guide to Gaelic pronunciation. For a reader with no previous knowledge of Gaelic, such a glossary is, however, of great help, for the Gaelic words Munro chose to insert into his prose are less common than, for example, the expressions of endearment or surprise that regularly appear in William Sharp's prose. Here are some examples of sentences in which words in Gaelic are inserted:

"[H]e was *duin'-uasa*¹¹ who carried the sword."

"The *biodag*¹² went flying into the grass at Calum's feet . . . From Kilmune to Uchdanbarracaldine the red fellows were passing, or playing with the *clachneart* or the *cabar*¹³ . . ."

"With luck and a good *sgian-dubb*¹⁴ a quick lad could do some gralloching."

(Munro, "Black Murdo" 36, 42)

Another feature of Munro's style is his inclusion in his prose of a wide range of words in Scots. This technique is both historically accurate, as many such words from the Scots dialect would have infiltrated the

¹⁰ "Beul na h-oidhche" in Gaelic (see Munro, *John Splendid* 197).

¹¹ "A gentleman."

¹² "The food."

¹³ "Clachneart" literally means "stone of strength". The throwing of the "clachneart" and the tossing of the "cabar" are two disciplines of the Highland Games.

¹⁴ Literally "a black knife." A traditional knife used in the Highlands and now part of the Highland dress, its name might come from the fact that it was kept hidden and secret, either under the armpit or in the hose.

Highland speech, and effective, as it reinforces the Scottish nature of the prose. Typographically speaking, the fact that the words in Gaelic are set out in italics facilitates the reader's progression through the text, but it also stresses the foreignness of the terms with regards to the English language. As will be shown below, Fionn MacColla deliberately renounced the use of italics and Gaelic and English words mingle freely in his prose. Munro developed another device to help the narrator introduce his reader into a Gaelic world: he has a Lowland character take part in the conversations. This allows expressions in Gaelic to get translated and explained for the benefit of the character, and of the reader, of course.

A third author well-worth focusing upon in this context is Fionn MacColla (1906-1975). Fionn MacColla, the pen-name of Thomas Douglas MacDonald, was born in Montrose in 1906. A life-long nationalist and a friend of Hugh MacDiarmid, he is the author, amongst other works, of *The Albannach* (1932) and *And the Cock Crew* (1945), a powerful account of the Presbyterian clergymen's role in the social disaster of the Highland Clearances.

MacColla's technique of interaction between Gaelic and English recalls that of Munro, although it is to be noted that the Gaelic words and sentences are not highlighted by any typographic device like italics – they mingle freely with the English prose. This might indicate the author's will to stress that for characters the mixing of Gaelic and English words is just a normal way of speaking, without one language being subordinate to the other. Often, as with Sharp and Munro, one sentence in Gaelic is followed by its translation in the same paragraph. MacColla also uses a specifically Gaelic word order in his English prose.

A notable feature of MacColla's prose is the particular attention he pays to the Gaelic names of people and places and to their correct spelling. He puts greater emphasis than any of his predecessors on the way Gaelic names characterise the person or the place they refer to, and on the fact that Gaelic as a language has no equivalent.¹⁵ This is particularly apparent when MacColla deals with the theme of the Highland Clearances in *And the Cock Crew*, where he stresses the fact that the Gaels were not only robbed of their lands and culture by the English, but also of their names (and, therefore, of their identity), as these were Anglicised by the government for official matters.

Thus, MacColla's use of genuine Gaelic names goes beyond a desire to restore the names' correct spelling; it makes the question of names and identity an issue which he develops in his fiction. MacColla pays particular attention to the relationship the Gaels have with their native

¹⁵ A dramatisation of this issue can be found in MacColla's *The Albannach* (70-71).

language. In Munro and Sharp's fictions, Gaelic is recurrently depicted as the language of truth and emotion. It is a particularly poetic language to be used only among friends and decent company.¹⁶ English, on the other hand, is tellingly used by Gaels when plotting and lying, or when they wish to hide their feelings from their interlocutors.¹⁷ The English language is also recurrently referred to in its Gaelic translation, as "the Beurla." As such, it is robbed of its name, swallowed up by the very language whose existence it appears to threaten.

Fionn MacColla goes beyond Munro and Sharp's rather dichotomic representation of the two languages and addresses the issue of the link between language and personal identity. His prose writings feature characters whose relationship with their native Gaelic language is complex and often uneasy. Some are seen making efforts to drop their Gaelic altogether for English in order to sound more genteel and educated. Other characters are so ashamed of their Gaelic origins that they deny having any knowledge of Gaelic at all (*The Albannach* 150). In *The Albannach*, Murdo marries a young woman whom he very soon comes to despise, partly for the airs that she puts on which are inspired by the English tales of romantic love that she reads. Murdo particularly dislikes her imitation of the genteel English discourse that is to be found in her reading and recurrently accuses her of negating her origins. MacColla deliberately stresses the awkward pronunciation of such characters who use English to communicate with other Gaels. However, as he does so, one cannot help feeling that the attack is directed less against English as a language than against the characters themselves, who are guilty of both negating their origins and roots and betraying their community.

With regard to characters who insist on speaking a language that is not theirs and which, it is implied, they do not master, MacColla was especially intent on stressing the appalling irony of the situation in which many Gaels found themselves as they struggled to master a foreign language in order to sound more genteel and learned, with their often poor performances having in fact the opposite effect of what they sought to achieve. In *The Albannach*, the hero is told off by his schoolmaster for using the Gaelic language instead of English. And yet the schoolmaster's own English is shown to be poor and clumsy (102). At a later stage in the novel, the hero's mother tries her best to write to her son in what she thinks is a proper language, i.e. English (104-105). Although she apparently finds it difficult and apologises to her son for the

¹⁶ See, for example, the interview Lora has with her abductors in Munro's *The Children of Tempest* (161).

¹⁷ See, for example, the several instances when Munro's hero Col plots in English with his pirate accomplices in *The Children of Tempest* or in *The New Road* (193-4).

poverty of her prose, she does not seem to have considered the option of writing in her own mother tongue. Thus, MacColla ironically depicts the awkward situation in which a literate Gaelic woman finds herself to be willingly handicapped, for propriety's sake, in her private correspondence with her own son. All such characters are guilty, for MacColla, of betraying their roots and native culture, and several scenes of *The Albannach* are symbolic of a breach in Gaelic identity.

All three writers succeed in providing an air of Gaelic authenticity to their prose by means of Gaelic words, names, idioms and turns of phrase. Munro and MacColla, especially, give their readers the impression of being part of the Gaelic community they describe. They have achieved a balance between the English language that enables the reader to have easy access to both the plot and the themes of their novels, and the Gaelic vocabulary that gives the texts their special flavour. The choice of Sharp, Munro and MacColla to write in English about Gaelic culture enables non-native speakers of Gaelic to have access to a world which might otherwise have remained hermetic and daunting. In doing so, such authors did much to rescue a culture that might otherwise have been in its death-throes. The assertion that "It's a dead language that is in the Gaelic," which recurrently features in MacColla's *The Albannach* is to be belied.

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