

## Irish and Scottish ‘Island Poems’

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Irish and Scottish island poems outnumber Irish and Scottish islands – and there are around 350 sea-islands, not to mention lake and loch-isles. James Knox Whittet’s anthology *100 Island Poems of Great Britain and Ireland* (2005) barely scratches the nesographic, islophiliac or islomaniac surface. Poetry collections have titles like *Sailing to an Island*, *The Permanent Island*, *Station Island*, *The Clare Island Survey*, *Time and the Island*, *Love and Zen in the Outer Hebrides*.<sup>1</sup> This essay will mainly focus on poems written in English since the 1930s, the decade of two influential island poems: Louis MacNeice’s ‘The Hebrides’ and Hugh MacDiarmid’s ‘Island Funeral’. The island-oeuvres of Sorley MacLean and Máirtín Ó Direáin lie outside my linguistic competence.

### 1. Trips and tropes

Given Scotland’s greater number of populated islands (hence of island-bred or island-linked poets) Irish poets are more liable to poach Scottish islands than *vice versa*, but such obvious crossovers belong to a deeper and wider cultural history. One common feature is that most Irish and Scottish island poems consciously establish island co-ordinates. While this does not only apply to poems by ‘outsiders’, native islanders – who also come and go – are more likely to produce works, such as Tomás Ó Criomhthain’s Blasket memoir *An tOileánach (The Islandman)*, in which ‘islandness’ is everywhere and nowhere. John McGahern writes: ‘The island is simply there as a human habitation, a bare foundation of earth on which people live and move’ (McGahern 1989: 55). Conversely, defined by separateness and boundedness, islands seem made for the coordinates of the lyric poem. In *The Islands of Scotland* (1939) MacDiarmid calls an island ‘an almost startlingly entire thing, in these days of the subdivision, of the atomisation of life’. Quoting Yeats on ‘how small a fragment of our own nature can be brought to perfect expression’ under modern conditions, he claims that islands foster ‘expression’ since they correspond to ‘one’s sense of the biological limitations of a human individual’, and asserts their microcosmic

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<sup>1</sup> Collections by: Richard Murphy (1963); Iain Crichton Smith (1975); Seamus Heaney (1984); Seán Lysaght (1991); Seán Dunne (1996); Kevin MacNeil (1998).

potential: 'I am no further from the 'centre of things'/ In the Shetlands here than in London, New York, or Tokio' (MacDiarmid 1939: 26, xv).

The island poem, like all island literature, is massively pre-troped. A recent book on island archaeology is called *Scottish Odysseys*; another, on island natural history, refers to the British Isles' 'extravagant [geological] odyssey over the surface of the globe' (Berry 2009: 328; see also Noble et al. 2008). In *Islands* (2009) Peter Conrad surveys the island's multiple cultural guises. Its mythic force is proved by the way in which it spans genres – tragedy and satire, epic and lyric – also by the fertile antinomies to which it lends itself: beginning/ end; innocence/ fall; escape/ prison; utopia/ dystopia; isolation/ connection; same/ other; self/ community; wildness/ civilisation; discovery/ loss; survival/ extinction; margin/ centre; unity/ diversity; Odysseus/ Penelope; Prospero/ Caliban; Houyhnhnms / Yahoos. Not only are Irish and Scottish island poems pre-troped by the *Odyssey* and its offshoots: Swift, Stevenson and Defoe bring culturally influential islands nearer home, as do western voyage-tales or voyage-allegories like Brendan's *Navigatio* and *Immram Maelduin*. It's hard to say whether the Irish/ Scottish island poem is a subset of the western poem or *vice versa*. Certainly 'the West', as conceived from *Ossian* to 'The Wanderings of Oisín', added Celticism to the inherited mix; and later journeys westward by the Irish Literary and Gaelic Revivals uncovered (or introduced) further cultural elements. Up to a point, the Aran Islands and St Kilda achieved their iconic status by similar means: scientific interest led to literary interest, and cult films (directed by Robert Flaherty and Michael Powell in the 1930s) ratified a romance. Great Blasket is also a contender. Evacuated like St Kilda (Hirta), it too attracts the tropes of doomed civilisation, lost home, paradise lost; while the memoirs of Ó Criomhthain and Peig Sayers supply a dimension that St Kilda lacks. Much-inscribed Aran, however, tops the 'literary island' league. The book that lies behind many Irish and Scottish island poems, and much else besides, is J.M. Synge's *The Aran Islands* (1906).

MacDiarmid clearly felt Synge's influence. The island of 'Island Funeral' is probably Catholic Barra: the Hebridean island that gave him the deepest sense of being 'a different world', of having 'a spiritual climate of its own' (MacDiarmid 1939: 134). This, however, is not the first literary outing for 'crimson skirts', curraghs, limestone, islanders' 'springing step' and 'Battle with the waves'. In fact, owing to poor planning and rushed research, the Hebrides get short shrift in *The Islands of Scotland*. But MacDiarmid had lived on Shetland since 1933, and his most freshly

observed chapter advertises their northerly (rather than western) qualities as an untapped literary resource:

... just as the fishermen are engaged in a trade that still demands the qualities of individual judgment, courage, and hardihood that tend to disappear both from literature and life – the Shetlands call alike in the arts and in affairs for the true creative spirit. Anything pettier would be sadly out of place in these little-known and lonely regions, encompassed about with the strange beauty of the North ... the luminous air, the gleam of distant ice, and the awful stillness of Northern fog. (MacDiarmid 1939: 55)

The 'true creative spirit' is evidently MacDiarmid himself. The passage glosses the imagery of his collection *Stony Limits* (1934).

Stones and limits: the north tends to become geological and terminal in poetry: to stretch or end time, not dissolve it into Ossianic mists. Instead, there is icy fog. Some northern island poems represent and possess an extremity that befits Ultima Thule: a polar rather than Atlantic horizon. For MacDiarmid, Shetland sometimes provides 'a foreglimpse of the end of the world' (MacDiarmid 1939: 84). In *The Idea of North*, Peter Davidson writes: 'To say 'we leave for the north tonight' brings immediate thoughts of a harder place, a place of dearth, uplands, adverse weather, remoteness from cities ... the intractable elements of climate, topography and humanity' (Davidson, 2005: 9). Heading for Orkney on the ferry *Hrossa*, Kathleen Jamie describes herself as 'wanting dark. Real, natural, starry dark, solstice dark ... 360 degrees of winter sea, the only lights those carried by the ship itself ... to be out in the night wind in ... unbanished darkness' (MacDiarmid 1939: 84). But with 'topography' so inflected by psychological, cultural and political factors, poetic north and west are wobbly compass-points. If it's grim up north, the west can be grim too. In Powell's film, 'The Edge of the World', St Kilda (actually played by Foula) is as ultimate as Shetland. Lewis landscapes often assume a more northern than western aspect, their extremity coloured partly by geology – the ancient Butt of Lewis – partly by Presbyterian 'intractability'. In 'The Hebrides', MacNeice's itemising of a hard life includes 'scriptural commentaries'. Yet the poem also encompasses softer (western) images: 'the Gulf Stream warms the gnarled/ Rampart of gneiss'. These dialectics bear traces of MacNeice's Northern Irish upbringing and his western Irish mother who died when he was a child. It would be difficult to do a blind tasting of island poems, to place them on an actual rather than subjective map.

Islands and poems are, of course, locally distinctive, as when Edwin Muir turns Orkney light and treelessness into an aesthetic: 'You see men and women and children walking on the bare earth against the sky, and houses rising as if on an ultimate hill with nothing but space and light beyond them. And seen in this way you, you feel that house and man and woman and child have some universal human meaning (Muir 2009: 90).' Yet certain Atlantic conditions, and hence images, are common to all this island poetry: oceanic vistas, wind and rain, cliffs, rocks and hard places, bogs and moors, seabirds and seals. Thus another over-arching tradition is natural-history writing and its ecological apotheosis. As cultural signifiers, however, Irish and Scottish islands, more often symbolise national separatism than archipelagic commonalities. MacDiarmid thought Shetland all the more useful for nationalism because 'at the furthest remove from the general conceptions bound up in the term ... 'Scottish''. Despite his emulations of Ireland, MacDiarmid's Shetland also seems removed from conceptions bound up with the term 'Irish'. His stress on Shetland's Nordic cultural and linguistic elements verges on a latterday Teutonism or Anglo-Saxonism. Meanwhile, he scorns the 'facile appeal' attached to the Hebrides by 'Celtic Twilightism' (MacDiarmid 1939: 6, 8). In fact, the Hebrides – as robust Scottish Gaelicism rather than wan Irish Celticism – would continue to inform MacDiarmid's cultural nationalism, and that of other Scottish Renaissance worthies. Yet in *The Islands of Scotland* the Scottish islands complicate nationalism. If Shetland deconstructs the Hebrides, all the islands taken together deconstruct Scotland: 'Scotland is broken up into islands other than, and to a far greater extent than merely, geographically'. MacDiarmid rules out ideas of Scotland that do not 'make ... due allowance for the number, let alone the individual and group differences, of its islands' or grasp the 'high alternative value of a thorough realisation of all of them' (MacDiarmid 1939: 8).

In Ireland Aran became a much-contested symbolic site where the linguistic and literary revivals staked rival claims. If Synge potentially bridged the two, the human element in his prose and plays caused a fatal breach. Sinéad Garrigan Mattar argues that language-based nationalism retained a 'romantic primitivism', more noble than savage, whereas Synge and Yeats absorbed the darker findings of modern anthropology (Garrigan Mattar 2004: 20). (Discussing 'Island Stories', Andrew Fleming finds a similar spectrum in images of St Kilda) (Noble et al. 2008: 13-4). It was thus not *The Aran Islands* but the mediated memoirs of Blasket-dwellers that would occupy a totemic place in the school curriculum of independent

Ireland. In 'The Western Islands: Ireland's Atlantic Islands and the Forging of Gaelic Irish National Identities', the archaeologist Aidan O'Sullivan shows that western islands served 'as icons of a true Irishness – the dwelling places of a Gaelic people; pure, clean-living and timeless' (Noble et al. 2008: 175). MacDiarmid echoes this notion: 'there is nothing surprising in the fact that the healthiest parts of Scottish Gaeldom – physically, psychologically, economically and otherwise – are precisely those in which Gaelic is still purest and most generally used' (MacDiarmid 1939: 12). As a boy, O'Sullivan was persuaded 'by the literature, art and music that my society put in front of me – that Irishness was something that most truly resided on the western islands' (Noble et al. 2008: 175). Now, as an archaeologist, he introduces history (including the fact that some islands were not continuously inhabited) into that pure archetype. Deconstructing the western island has accompanied other revisionism. Witness Father Ted's 'Craggy Island' or the plays of Martin MacDonagh. MacDonagh's work can enrage Irish nationalist intellectuals as Synge's once did.

Irish and Scottish island poems are involved in these dialectics. As regards critical paradigms, there may be an analogy with arguments in island archaeology, which pivot on the extent to which an island's life, at different times, was bound up with a distinct land- and sea-scape; regionally interactive with mainland coasts or other islands; or internally differentiated. *Contra* MacDiarmid, an island is not always 'an almost startlingly entire thing' in its human as well as physical aspect. Similarly, no island poem is an island but belongs to an archipelago of poems in time and space. Yet, as with archaeology, there are complex variables. In a more than obvious sense, Scottish and Irish island poems constitute a ground for current debate about 'archipelagic' and 'national' paradigms.

## 2. Island docu-poems

Island poems can be divided into three main groups, not always distinct: the 'docu-poem', the 'holy island' poem, the 'parable island' poem. The docu-poem, the island poem as case study, is spoken in the voice of someone who reports and comments from outside: visitor, returning native, journalist, sociologist, anthropologist, writer, or various blends. Synge lurks in the background. In 'St. Kilda's Parliament' Douglas Dunn speaks as the man who took that haunting photograph: 'This flick of time I shuttered on a face'. 'The Hebrides' and 'Island Funeral' share a generic context in 1930s reportage and travelogue. They were first published in works of documentary prose; or, rather, idiosyncratic books that purported to be such:

MacNeice's *I Crossed the Minch* (1938), MacDiarmid's *The Islands of Scotland*. MacDiarmid mentions MacNeice's book, and 'Island Funeral' seems influenced by 'The Hebrides' as well as by Synge. In 'The Hebrides' MacNeice represents a funeral as the summation of island community:

Whoever dies on the islands and however,  
The whole of the village goes into three-day mourning,  
The afflicted home is honoured and the shops are shut  
For on those islands  
Where a few surnames cover a host of people  
And the art of being a stranger with your neighbour  
Has still to be imported, death is still  
No lottery ticket in a public lottery –  
The result to be read on the front page of a journal –  
But a family matter near to the whole family.

MacDiarmid, who makes a funeral his main focus, writes: 'This burial is ... A reassertion of the islanders' inborn certainty/ That 'in the midst of life we are in death'./ It is unlike the appointed funerals of the mainland/... Everyone is immediately concerned/ In what is taking place/ All through their lives death has been very close to them'.

For both poets, island 'closeness' to life and death figures an essential humanity or existential coherence eroded elsewhere: MacNeice's phrase is 'instinctive wisdom'; MacDiarmid's, 'inborn certainty'. Here the island case study becomes microcosmic as the human 'family' (Muir's 'universal human meaning'). In doing so, it skirts primitivism, as Synge does, and implicates an ancient past: some of MacNeice's Hebrideans 'still can live as their fathers lived'; Dunn's St Kilda islanders 'stand there like everybody's ancestors'. There is also greater 'closeness' to the elements, including 'battles' with them, than in depictions of mainland rural life. This mix of boundedness and exposure subsumes island people and aggrandises them into archetypes: The Islandman. Robert Flaherty's film is called 'Man of Aran'. Eavan Boland calls a poem 'The Achill Woman'. Because 1930s Aran was not archetypal enough, Flaherty took his images from the nineteenth century. MacDiarmid, more primitivist than MacNeice, repeats 'grey' and 'stone' in a way that assimilates islanders, field walls and 'memorials' to the landscape until the burial 'is just an act of nature'. MacNeice's larger canvas, a composite of his Hebridean impressions, models a relatively complex sociology, with emigrant extensions beyond the

islands. His perspectives conditioned by the west of Ireland, he stresses the effort to work a difficult environment, the art and civilisation of the ceildh house: 'And while the stories circulate like smoke,/The sense of life spreads out from the one-eyed house/ In wider circles through the lake of night/ In which articulate man has dropped a stone'; 'Gaelic tunes unspoiled by contact/ With the folk-fancier or the friendly tourist'; In 'Island Funeral' traditional music blends metaphorically with island speech: 'this island note,/ This clear old Gaelic sound,/ In the chaos of the modern world'. The ideal at the core of both poems is aesthetic as well as utopian.

Yet for MacDiarmid, as for MacNeice, modernity cannot be dodged (MacDiarmid compares 'this island note' to 'a phrase from Beiderbecke's cornet'). Their prose books worry about the survival of island economies and culture since 'On those islands/ ... many live on the dole or on old age pensions/ And many waste with consumption' ('The Hebrides'). Ultimately, these death-haunted island-poems are elegies for human and cultural qualities that modernity is seen as driving to the wall. In 'Island Funeral' we are told: 'soon the last funeral/ Will take place here'. MacNeice's 'ending' is more provisional in a double sense: 'There is still peace, though not for me and not/ Perhaps for long'. If these poems seem excessively doom-laden ('doom' is a word MacNeice uses), one of their contexts is 1930s 'waiting for the end'.

Two later island-elegies are Norman MacCaig's 'Return to Scalpay' and Iain Crichton Smith's 'Not to Islands'. 'Return to Scalpay' weighs the advance of modernity in an autobiographical scale: 'A car on Scalpay?' But this audit, from the early 1970s, registers constancy as well as change and loss. 'Aunt Julia's house' – a point of childhood stability – has vanished', but in the last two stanzas another island woman's huge presence balances that absence: 'We look back and see/ Her monumental against the flying sky/ And I am filled with love and praise and shame/ Knowing that I have been, and knowing why,/ Diminished and enlarged. Are they the same?' The speaker's opening of himself to the island, his self-definition as *half-Scalpay*, acts out MacNeice's phrase about 'the art of being a stranger with your neighbour' having yet 'to be imported'. MacCaig's guarded city-self yields to a holistic island-self in a way that reanimates words like 'love', 'hospitality', 'innocence'. 'Return to Scalpay' has a touch of sentimental primitivism: 'My city eyeballs prickle', the speaker says. In activating the trope of the childhood island lost and found, MacCaig tends to infantilise or idealise island life in binary opposition to Edinburgh 'dark years away'. He thus represses the split self that the poem exposes, and fails to exploit the

capacities of the island poem as psychological parable (see below). Certainly 'Return to Scalpay' is thrown into question by a poem of the same date that may expressly contradict it:

Not to islands ever returning now  
with much of hope or comfort. Not to you,  
asleep in the blue sky of TV,  
Lewis or Uist, Harris or Tiree.  
Shadows assemble from America  
where once the moors were silent, where once  
the sea's monotony was experience.  
Where once we drowsed on the hot flowers in summer  
staring across the ocean to where lay  
America invisible, unknown,  
in ignorant mirrors hanging upside-down  
invincibly at peace, the bell-like day.

If 'Not to Islands' is elegy, it is protest-elegy. Or it transposes Gaelic lament, as does Crichton Smith's sequence 'Shall Gaelic Die?' Perhaps both are about the same thing. In any case, this poetic encounter between island and modernity takes no prisoners. MacDiarmid thinks the island 'biologically' akin to the 'human individual'; for Crichton Smith, despite his quarrels with a more problematic childhood island than MacCaig's, islands figure our cognitive range as well as essential humanity. To breach this figurative boundary is to dumb down. Globalisation is 'sleep' as opposed to a vitalising 'drowse' on summer 'flowers'. Irony deflects simple nostalgia: 'where once the sea's monotony was experience'.

Douglas Dunn wrote 'St Kilda's Parliament' in the early 1980s. He remixes some elements familiar from the other poems, while also moving away from the docu-poem towards the emblematic and parabolic:

... Traveller, tourist with your mind set on  
Romantic Staffas and materials for  
Winter conversations, if you should go there,  
Landing at sunrise on difficult shores,  
On St Kilda you will surely hear Gaelic  
Spoken softly like a poetry of ghosts  
By those who never were contorted by  
Hierarchies of cuisine and literacy...

Look at their sly, assuring mockery ...

There is, inevitably here, the sense of an ending: 'ghosts'. There is islanders' special wisdom: 'sly, assuring mockery'. But in focusing on the 'parliament', Dunn makes St Kilda exemplify a utopian polity, if partly built on older notions of the islanders' purity and innocence. Fifty years on from 'The Hebrides', this island poem is still leftwing, perhaps anti-Thatcher, perhaps pro-devolution. St Kilda's 'remote democracy' is not 'hierarchical', and prefers 'an eternal/ Casual husbandry' to the market economy. A later poem, 'St Bride's: Sea-Mail' by Don Paterson, reads like a dystopian riposte to Dunn, not only in the context of island *qua* Scotland. The inhabitants of Paterson's fictional island go further than the St Kilda islanders or the Lewis gannet-hunters (see Beatty 1992) in exploiting their natural environment. Their crazily introverted culture, which puts birds to sadistic and ritualistic uses, produces an ecological apocalypse that renders 'parliament' beside the point:

the last morning  
we shuffled out for parliament  
their rock was empty, and the sky clear  
of every wren and fulmar and whitewing.  
The wind has been so weak all year  
I post this more in testament  
than hope or warning.

Yet 'St Bride's: Sea-Mail' continues the tradition of inscribing St Kilda with tragedy and doom. The poem also straddles all three subgenres: it *appears* to be documenting an extinction, and it is both an un-holy island poem ('testament') and a rich parable.

Islands accentuate the anthropological distinction between speaking from 'inside' or 'outside' a given group. With so many island poems written by visitors (a sub-subgenre is the poem of sailing to or from an island), the question of 'who speaks' is often structurally embedded in the docu-poem, although this may not pre-empt all theoretical issues. MacNeice flags his recognition that some insights will ever elude the poet as 'folk-fancier' or 'friendly tourist'. In 'Island Funeral' and *The Islands of Scotland* MacDiarmid less carefully rubbishes all versions of the Scottish island except his own. MacCaig's speaker presents his credentials by observing the protocols of 'return'; that is, by signalling his knowledge of Gaelic, of

places, of how things used to be: 'The ferryman's Gaelic wonders who I am/ (Not knowing I know it), this man back from the dead'. Dunn's politically correct photographer rebukes the Celticist seeking 'Romantic Staffas'. The islanders return his gaze, turn round the lens, and he apologises in advance for future 'texts of specialists' that also will not let them speak for themselves. Yet perhaps there is always textual distance. Máirtín Ó Direáin, a native Aran islander who left, said of himself and Synge when an interviewer charged both with romanticism: 'I wrote of Aran at the time as a young exile. It struck me that way, and I can no more be faulted for this, than Synge can be for neglecting the Catholic ethos' (Ó Direáin 1989: 63). Island life 'strikes' particular poets in particular ways at particular times.

### 3. Holy islands

By definition, one subgenre of the Irish/ Scottish island-poem is almost always spoken by a visitor. This is the 'holy island' poem, where the visitor is a pilgrim or spiritual tourist. Such poems draw on spiritual traditions from Colum Cille (a poem attributed to him says that islands enable us to hear the waves 'sing music to their father', quoted in MacDiarmid 1939: 46) to the Celtic Twilight to the zone covered by *Love and Zen in the Outer Hebrides*. In the 1930s, MacDiarmid was already calling for 'the de-Thibetanisation of the Scottish Highlands and Islands', and had 'no regard of any sort for the mahatmas of this cult' (MacDiarmid, 1939: 18). But he failed to stop Kathleen Jamie from writing a poem called 'A Dream of the Dalai Lama on Skye'. A chapter heading in Conrad's *Islands* is 'God's Outposts'. The chapter includes a potted history of 'Holy Isle', once protected by a Celtic water-sprite; then Christianised by the hermit-healer St Molaise; then occupied by 'unspiritual sheep farmers'; then 'sanctified all over again in the 1990s when it became the home of a Buddhistic community dedicated to global peace and ecological harmony' (Conrad 2009: 63). Yet even hard-headed naturalists admit that islands appeal to the soul. For Frank Fraser Darling, 'the sea subtly detaches one from immediate, practical reality and casts one into a kind of mystic reverie linking one's life and nature, fusing visible stimuli with meditation' (quoted in Berry 2009: 1). Perhaps an island serves as a kind of topographical 'om'.

In fact, MacDiarmid contradicts himself (no surprise there) since 'Island Funeral' associates the islanders with 'A shadow – or a light – of spiritual vision'. Even at the reportage end of the spectrum, poets nod to some X-factor: MacNeice's 'peace', his mantra-like chorus 'On those islands'. MacCaig invokes 'innocence'; Crichton Smith, 'hope or comfort'.

Four poets who have written poems of island-pilgrimage are Kathleen Jamie, Derick Thomson/ Ruaraidh MacThòmais, Sean Dunne and George Mackay Brown (an intra-Orcadian voyage to Eynhallow). Jamie's Orkney poem 'The Well at the Broch of Gurness', enacts a quest for what the last stanza calls 'replenishing water,/ invisible till reached for,/ when reached for, touched'. Access to this Jungian wellspring, 'below the bright grasses, the beat of surf', is mediated by a ghostly stone-age girl (a Nordic water-sprite?). In Thomson's 'The Second Island', which also enfolds mysteries within mysteries, the island 'dream' elusively recedes since the original island contains another island within a loch. This poem (perhaps also a parable of ageing) ends with sensory 'loss' rather than spiritual gain:

The stepping stones are chancy  
to the second island,  
the stone totters  
that guards the berries,  
the rowan withers,  
we have lost now the scent of the honeysuckle.

*(translated from Gaelic by the author)*

One eastern influence on the 'holy island poem' is the haiku, which seems made for it. With nods to saintly precursors, Sean Dunne and George Mackay Brown organise brief island images into an archipelago of spiritual stations (Catholicism is also a shared influence). In 'The Healing Island' Dunne alludes to 'islands where monks prayed', but the primary healing sources here are natural phenomena given a zen aura: 'Gusts gather the gist of psalms'. A turf fire and shells are endowed with 'cares', 'worries', and the power to alleviate these conditions: 'The sea gives and neighbours give:/ I open and yield to kindness.' Mackay Brown's 'Runes from a Holy Island' might appear more jaundiced:

Among scattered Christ stones  
Devoutly leave  
Torn nets, toothache, winter wombs.

Yet these 'runes', which look North as well as East, rebuke the neglect of religious and other traditions: 'scattered Christ stones' alludes to a ruined ancient church. The sequence opposes a life-affirming miracle by St Cormac ('Stones become haddock and loaf') to the schoolmaster's deadening 'box

of grammars', equated with 'No more ballads in Eynhallow'. A different kind of 'holy island poem', Ian Hamilton Finlay's 'Orkney Interior', can be read as a portrait of a mad hermit. This 'old man' translates island phenomena into his own surreal logic: he does 'what the moon says'; his calendar is 'almost like a zodiac'; and his 'adapted cuckoo-clock ... shows no hours,/ Only tides and moons'. All this, plus a lobster's role, amounts to a Dali-esque version of island timelessness: 'each quarter-tide' the lobster

... must stick its head through the tiny trapdoor  
Meant for the cuckoo. It will be trained to read  
The broken barometer and wave its whiskers  
To Scottish Dance Music, till it grows too old.

Then the old man will have to catch himself another lobster.  
Meanwhile he is happy and takes the clock  
Down to the sea. He stands and oils it  
In a little rock pool that reflects the moon.

Dream, like primitivism, seems ineradicable in island poems. 'Orkney Interior' has dreamlike qualities. This is where the 'holy island' poem, the spiritually interiorised island, becomes the island poem as aesthetic template. 'Orkney Interior' might be an *ars poetica* too. Similarly, Mackay Brown entwines the fate of Eynhallow with that of the island poem and perhaps poetry itself ('ballads' versus 'grammars'). MacNeice ends his poem 'Last before America' by alluding to the tradition of the otherworld conceived as a lost or never-found Atlantic island. He implies that, beyond such figments, the western island survives as muse: 'Both myth and seismic history have been long suppressed/ That made and unmade Hy Brasil – now an image/ For those who despise charts but find their dream's endorsement/ In certain long low islets snouting towards the west/ Like cubs that have lost their mother'. MacNeice represents the islands that endorse the dream as pursuing a quest, rather than as its object: islands as proto-poems. In 'The Wanderings of Oisín' Yeats inaugurated an aesthetic tradition by identifying the western island with the roving poetic imagination at its most intense symbolic pitch. Ian Hamilton Finlay's four-line 'Poet' is on the same wandering track:

At night, when I cannot sleep,  
I count the islands

And I sigh when I come to Rousay,  
– My dear black sheep.

Still in the north rather than west, Michael Longley represents another Shetland island – MacDiarmid's 'Whalsay' – as itself a poem. There is a parallel with MacDiarmid's own sense of an island's holistic and microcosmic scope:

He fitted all of the island  
Inside a fisherman's float – his  
Cosmology of sea breezes  
Cooling the seabirds' eggs  
Or filling otter prints with sand ...

This poem has a second stanza but, as in Finlay's 'Poet', brevity works reflexively. Tiny Whalsay's boundedness symbolises as well as elicits lyric intensity: 'fitting' it all in. Two brief Aran poems by Derek Mahon (from his first collection *Night-Crossing*, 1967) contain the adjective 'perfect'. 'Recalling Aran' begins: 'A dream of limestone in sea-light/ Where gulls have placed their perfect prints'. In 'Epitaph for Robert Flaherty', Flaherty speaks for himself and for the poet:

The relief to be out of the sun –  
To have travelled north once more  
To my islands of dark ore,  
Where winter is so long  
Only a little light  
Gets through, and that perfect.

This combines death as the terminal island – a northern rather than western Aran-Thule – with the island as ultimate art. The first collections of Heaney and Longley (1966, 1969) also include *ars poetica* Aran poems (Longley's is 'Leaving Inishmore'). In 'Synge on Aran' Heaney turns Synge, as Mahon turns Flaherty, to intense aesthetic purposes. But whereas 'Epitaph' and 'Recalling Aran' ('Reflection in that final sky/ Shames vision into simple sight') represent intensity as perfected 'vision'; Heaney's imagery of blade, salt and wind represents intensity as work in progress, as the shaping force that 'pares down' a writer's material to its essentials. This is elemental

primitivism as style: 'There/ he comes now, a hard pen/ scraping in his head;/ the nib filed on a salt wind/ and dipped in the keening sea.'

#### 4. Parable islands

Heaney's later poem 'Parable Island' names my third sub-genre. Parabolic elements, like 'holy' elements, may contribute to island poems dominated by another subgenre. But some poems, even if they allude to actual Irish or Scottish islands, consciously draw on the literary tradition of the invented island: the island deployed to 'isolate' and highlight aspects of society or of the self as Everyman. Aesthetic reflexivity is also part of the package. All parables move between the poles of self and society, but Don Paterson's 'Luig' might exemplify the psychological island parable. Paterson plays on the term 'inner' Hebrides, as the speaker projects a trip to 'Luig':

When the day comes, as the day surely must,  
when is asked of you, and you refuse  
to take that lover's wound again, that cup  
of emptiness that is our one completion,

I'd say go here, maybe, to our unsung  
innermost isle: Kilda's antithesis,  
yet with its own tiny stubborn anthem,  
its yellow milkwort and its stunted kye ...

'Luig', reflexively the St Kilda poem's 'antithesis', has something in common with the holy or healing island poem, but Paterson makes more complex use of 'isolation' to represent the wounded self in search of therapy. Thus Luig's proximity to 'the motherland' is exploited in Freudian terms. The topographical mix of closeness and separation becomes the ground of a fragile rebirth in which the island models both body and psyche, and potentially reintegrates them: 'Here, beside the fordable Atlantic,/ reborn into a secret candidacy,/ the fontanelles reopen one by one/ in the palms, then the breastbone and the brow ...'

To move from rebirth to death, from psychoanalysis to politics: Iain Crichton Smith prose poem 'The Island' begins: 'There is an island always in the spirit so that we can flee there when the way is hard. But they hit Malta from the sky in the ancient sea in the middle of the day.' Similarly, in 'Rathlin', perhaps an Irish/ Scottish island poem, Derek Mahon represents this island as a site where remembered war 'Shatters the dream-time'. On

Rathlin in 1575, the Earl of Essex massacred the Scottish Gaels who followed Somhairle Bui MacDonnell: 'A long time since the last scream cut short –/ Then an unnatural silence; and then/ A natural silence, slowly broken/ By the shearwater'. The ironic counterpoint between 'natural' and 'unnatural' silences exposes the fallacy of assuming that peaceful island landscapes have always been 'naturally' like that. Mahon also subverts primitivism. The speaker first sees himself as leaving behind 'the infancy of the race', then becomes 'Unsure among the pitching surfaces/ Whether the future lies before us or behind' – again, the island as dystopian future. In 'George Orwell's Death', Leontia Flynn attaches a well-known future-oriented parable to its context in a Scottish island: 'The lamps are lit at half past five on Jura/ as the island sinks into shadowy isolation./ George Orwell here has a vision of the future – a/ place as stark'.

Some parables, both dystopian and utopian, implicate the island as nation in a revisionist sense. By substituting mobility for fixity, 'Outward Bound', one of Edwin Morgan's 'Sonnets for Scotland', counters essentialism. Scotland 'begins to move' and 'becomes an island' until 'There was no ground/ of being, only being'. Reflexively, this models the island-nation on poetic 'movement': 'Amazing grace/ was found in granite, it moved on pure sound'. Heaney's 'Parable Island' and Michael Longley's 'The Island' make the same point negatively: that is, by anatomising islands where nothing moves. These poems are multi-layered critiques that represent islandness – not only Ireland's – as 'insularity'. 'Isolation' often has positive connotations; 'insularity' (coined by some mainlander?) never. The parable poem that most notoriously attacks 'insular' Ireland, and probes insularity as a principle, is Louis MacNeice's wartime 'Neutrality': 'The neutral island facing the Atlantic,/ The neutral island in the heart of man ...'

In Longley's 'The Island' details of island life can be read as simply that. Although its 'we' speaks for natives, not outsiders, the poem has an air of reportage that reflects its factual basis in a mid-1960s visit to the Aran island, Inisheer. But the facts are ironically twisted, as is a sentence from Synge's *Aran Islands*: 'There is only one bit and saddle in the island, which are used by the priest, who rides from the chapel to the pier when he has held the service on Sunday' Synge 1988 [1911]: 59). 'The Island' begins by stretching this into an omen of decline and death:

The one saddle and bit on the island  
We set aside for every second Sunday  
When the priest rides slowly up from the pier.

Afterwards his boat creaks into the mist.  
Or he arrives nine times out of ten  
With the doctor. They will soon be friends ...

Throughout the poem the only productive or creative people are 'visitors' like the 'lapsed Capuchin monk' who 'Was first and last to fish the lake for eels'. Meanwhile, the islanders' parasitic passivity awaits its own dissolution. Their residual role, as 'historians of sorts', is to chronicle non-events and to remember 'our dead submerged beneath the dunes'. The poem ends with another island ending that portends a bleak future: 'We shall reach the horizon and disappear'. This is Celtic Twilight mist and timelessness in a dystopian key. Perhaps it is also pre – or post – Celtic Tiger. Another Longley poem 'Ghost Town' conflates Rackwick (abandoned by crofters) with Lyness (once a Second World War hub), both on the Orkney island of Hoy. The speaker has deliberately sought out a derelict location, where, joining other shadowy 'residents', he seems to become a poet. 'Ghost Town' draws out the aesthetic subtext of 'The Island'. Longley implies that what attracts poets to islands, to 'pentatonic melodies' and 'dialect words', is a recessive gene. Rather than a revivifying journey to the aesthetic core, island-trips may signify poetry's own ghostliness or death-wish.

Seamus Heaney's 'Parable Island', from *The Haw Lantern* (1987) – a collection influenced by Edwin Muir's parable poems – turns on language questions: on the endless ways in which an island can be construed or constructed. This reflexive landscape features, significantly to the North, 'the mountain of the shifting names'. These names nicely include 'Cape Basalt' and 'The Orphan's Tit'. 'Parable Island' represents itself as a failed map of linguistic ground that keeps shifting. The natives are 'fork-tongued'. Archaeologists have to 'gloss the glosses', presumably *ad infinitum*. Amidst all this oral and textual slippage, Heaney blurs the point where 'revisionism' begins, also where 'parable' begins. At one level, 'Parable Island' satirises Irish politics as infinitely contested, as ever-revised readings of history and culture. At other levels, the poem figures the intricate workings of parable itself, of language itself (perhaps of its academic study), and of island poems:

In the beginning there was one bell-tower  
Which struck its single note each day at noon  
In honour of the one-eyed all-creator.

At least, this was the original idea  
Missionary scribes record they found  
In autochthonous tradition. But even there

You can't be sure that parable is not  
At work already retrospectively,  
Since all their early manuscripts are full

Of stylised eye-shapes and recurrent glosses  
in which these old revisionists derive  
The word *island* from roots in eye and land ...

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