

The role of culture in the sustainable use of a ‘cultural landscape’: a case study from the Hebridean machair¹

Will you go with me to the Land of the marram grass,
Land of machair and pools
Land which is low-lying and beautiful, where the rushes grow,
Its name is the Land of the Barley.

Sarah MacDonald (1900 – 1962), *Tir a’ Mhurain*/Land of the Marram Grass.²

The distinctive shell-sand machair plains of the north-west coasts of Ireland and Scotland are well known for the spectacular summer displays of wild flowers and for the associated rich insect and bird fauna. Machair plays an important part in Gaelic culture and because of its biodiversity has become increasingly important in narratives of sustainability and nature conservation. However it is a fragile ecosystem that needs careful husbandry if it is to retain its fertility and biodiversity.

This paper takes the example of the machair to explore how the narratives of sustainability and culture work together. It applies the methodology of the new environmental literary criticism, usually known as ‘ecocriticism’ to a close reading of a small selection of poems mostly, but not exclusively, from the Inner Hebridean Isle of Tiree. This island has a long tradition of poetry and song that continues to this day. These poems, written originally in Gaelic, are read in English translation with and against the cultural meanings given to the Hebridean landscape and the rationalist narratives of sustainability and biodiversity.³ While the narratives on the sustainable use of machair seem at first to be relatively straightforward, they have over the centuries been greatly complicated by being overlaid by more dominant narratives of ideology, power and politics.

Lime rich soils can be very fertile when care is taken to protect the thin humic layer. Over-cropping exposes bare soil which in the frequent winter gales can lead to blowouts, exposing the bare rock and covering surrounding soils with near sterile sand. On the other hand neglect or abandonment

¹ A shorter version of this paper was presented at the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment Day Symposium on *Literature and Sustainability* on 15 March 2013 at University of Wales, Trinity Saint David, Lampeter.

² *Fèis Thiriodh, Òrain an Eòrna*/Songs of the Barley: Traditional Gaelic songs from the Island of Tiree, Isle of Tiree: *Fèis Thiriodh* and *An Iodhlann*, 2012, p. 26.

³ The limitations of studying poetry in translation are well-known. For example see Corinna Krause, ‘Self-translation: in dialogue with the outside world’, in Emma Dymock and Wilson McLeod, *Lainnir a’ Bhiùrn/The Gleaming Water: Essays on Modern Gaelic Literature*, Edinburgh: Dunedin, 2011, pp. 115 – 132. The aim here is to open up the study area so that future Gaelic scholars can explore ecological readings of poems in their original language.

will lead to coarse grasses becoming dominant at the expense of the exceptional floristic biodiversity of the machair. Ritchie et al have emphasised that machair is a finite resource which is a legacy of the last ice age. As sea-levels rose at the start of the Holocene, the glacial till left behind by the melting glaciers formed an ideal substrate for the production of marine molluscs. This very productive period is now over. It is this 'glacial legacy' of ground up shell on the shallow off-shore shelf that feeds the beaches, builds dunes and is then carried inland by strong winds, the resulting machair soils contain 50 – 80% of calcium carbonate.⁴ Sustainable use of these lime rich soils would aim to get maximum benefits from them for the longest possible time.

Avoiding the extremes of over or under-use produces the very beautiful display of wild flowers that is both culturally valuable and, at a time when 95% of flower-rich meadows were lost across the UK between 1945 and 1985, is increasingly the focus of national and international efforts to conserve biodiversity.⁵ The biodiversity of Machair is no longer a purely local resource for productive agriculture, it is part of the global heritage of wild nature which, while it attracts funding in the form of agri-environment grants, also exposes crofters to new political pressures.⁶ Conservationists attribute this abundance of biodiversity to 'traditional' management practices associated with low-impact crofting.⁷ How this tradition is transmitted from generation to generation is not explained, but the idea that tradition may be important would seem to invite further investigation from a cultural studies viewpoint. This paper is a response to that invitation.

The Lewis-born poet and Celtic scholar Derick Thomson (1921 – 2012), whose *Introduction to Gaelic Poetry*⁸ is a valuable survey of poetry from the earliest times to the late twentieth century, explores

⁴ William Ritchie, Graeme Whittington and Kevin J. Edwards, 'Holocene changes in the physiography and vegetation of the Atlantic littoral of the Uists, Outer Hebrides, Scotland', *Earth and Environmental Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*, 92:02, June 2007, p. 125.

⁵ Andrew Lack, 'Plants' in Norman Maclean (ed.), *Silent Summer: The State of Wildlife in Britain and Ireland*, Cambridge: CUP, 2010, p. 640.

⁶ *Machair*, which in Scottish Gaelic is reserved for these shell-sand plains, is also a habitat category listed at Annex 1 of the EU Habitats and Species Directive. As the Westminster and EU Governments are currently reminding the Scottish people, negotiation on these matters is not a devolved power and only Westminster is empowered to negotiate on EU matters. Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) plays a part in disbursing EU agri-environment payments that form an important part of farm income.

⁷ For example at the major conference on machair conservation organised in 2007 by the Glasgow Natural History Society, one author mentioned 'tradition' five times in her paper. Deborah Long, 'Machair & Coastal pasture: managing priority habitats for native plants and the significance of grazing practices', *The Glasgow Naturalist*, Vol. 25, Supplement - *Proceedings of the 2008 conference on Machair Conservation: Successes & Challenges*, 2009, pp. 17 – 23.

⁸ Derick Thomson, *An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry*, Second Edition, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989.

the cultural significance of machair in his collection *Sùil air Fàire/Surveying the Horizon*.⁹ In Thomson's poem 'Submerging' he writes 'It wasn't an accident: / the sea level rose / little by little, / hiding the Pict's rocks, / rotting the Norse skiffs, / edging through the Gael's machair, / blossom after blossom being submerged'.¹⁰ Here he claims the cultural ownership of the machair for the Gaels and in another poem in this collection, 'Peat-Moss?', he again takes the theme of 'the sea winning the battle / against machair', but here links this forecast of climate change metaphorically to a dying Gaelic language dripping away to join other decaying organic matter to be incorporated into the bog of the peat-moss.¹¹ While the question mark in the title of this poem implies uncertainty, it does raise the question of whether Gaelic would survive the loss of its homeland and whether the machair would survive if it lost the close association between 'traditional' land management and the expression of Gaelic culture.

In the final poem by Thomson considered in this paper, he shows how Gaelic culture can defeat alternative views of how the landscape can be managed. At the same time he shows how 'machair' has taken on a new life as, in semiotic terms, an 'index' for the whole of Gaelic culture. This poem is given below in full.

'Machair'¹²

The Old Soap Man has returned
to give us a little sunlight again
on the machair where our flowers grew
through the generations:
precious flowers between moor and sea,
between ice and hope,
intergenerational floundering;
milfoil and eyebright,
kidney vetch and bluebell,
corn-marigold and yellow iris and yarrow.

He has turned his back on the Stornoway fish-factories
and the bare iron rafters of Leverburgh,
selling Stornoway Castle
and the young trees in the Castle Woods.
"I'm off," he says, "back to soap,

⁹ *Ruaraidh Macthòmais/ Derick Thomson, Sùil air Fàire/Surveying the Horizon: Recent poems by Derick Thomson, Stornoway, Isle of Lewis: Acair, 2007.*

¹⁰ 'Submerging' (lines 1 – 7) in *Sùil air Fàire/Surveying the Horizon*, p. 59.

¹¹ *Sùil air Fàire/Surveying the Horizon*, p. 15.

¹² © Ruaraidh Macthòmais, *Suil air Fair/Surveying the Horizon*, pp. 27-29.

yellow as butter
and much more profitable.
We won't lack sunlight any more,
and it will shine on shallow faces
everywhere."

But the flowers said nothing;
they were used to feet trampling on them,
used to the salt sea,
and to the sound of the waves
that will mock us always.

The poet adds an endnote to the English translation of the poem in which he explains his connotations:

'In Gaelic machair refers to a grassy, flowery seaside plain. More recently it has been used as the title of a Gaelic 'soap', which reminds one of Lord Leverhulme, of Sunlight and Lewis and Harris fame.'

In the early twentieth century Lord Leverhulme, already in his sixties, purchased most of The Isle of Harris and part of Lewis, where he proposed a fundamental change in the economy of the island. This included a fish processing plant to integrate vertically with his Macfisheries business and other enterprises, including whaling to supply his main soap manufacturing operation with oil, hence Thomson's reference to the old soap man. Leverhulme was appalled by the way the islanders lived and that they shared their houses with their animals. He linked squalor with imbecility when he wrote:

'We are so accustomed to our experience of great cities to link respectability with cleanliness, that it has become difficult to explain the islanders' indifference to their surroundings except in terms of mental and moral decay.'¹³

In the end the crofters became disillusioned with his plans and eventually he tried to sell his holdings. In the last three lines of the first stanza of this poem, Thomson celebrates this biodiversity with a litany of wild flower names. He even introduces linguistic diversity by mentioning milfoil as well as yarrow, these are alternative names for the same plant and the translation reflects two Gaelic names for this plant. Too often diversity in culture is made blander by imposing standard names on species. In Thomson's poem we see the machair as a place of resistance to colonial and entrepreneurial enterprise. In the last stanza the phrase, 'the flowers said nothing', seems to be metaphorically linking the machair as a site of resistance to ideologically based assaults to the way it

¹³ Lord Leverhulme, cited in John Philip Bergin, *Nature and the Victorian Entrepreneur: Soap, Sunlight and Subjectivity*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Hull, 1998, p. 132.

recovers from trampling of cattle through the winter and early summer, so that as soon as livestock are removed in May or June, the amazing diverse, colourful and scented display will be restored.

The crofter's resistance to Leverhulme was a rerun of the most celebrated resistance of all, the crofters' unrest of the 1880s that led up to the Napier Commission of Inquiry into the Condition of the Crofters and Cottars of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.¹⁴ Tiree was involved in this unrest in the face of the Eighth Duke of Argyll's enclosures and 'agricultural improvements'. In 1883 the Duke published a detailed rebuttal of the Tiree crofters' evidence to the commission. This document, which ran to 77 pages, is remarkable in many ways. The Duke was well read in science and economics, but seemed completely isolated from any views that did not reflect his own.¹⁵ In effect he seeks to take complete ownership of the narratives of the sustainable use of the natural environment. We have seen how Leverhulme also claimed to know what was best for the island community and A. Fiona D. Mackenzie has discussed how the same tactic of claiming ownership of the sustainability narrative was deployed by the firm seeking to operate a super-quarry on the Isle of Harris.¹⁶ The Duke makes no mention of the rich culture of Tiree despite there being dozens of bards active on the island at that time. He does however lay out in explicit detail the ideological basis of his arguments, which are based on Malthus's theories on population growth, utilitarian economics and an absolute faith in the working of the market to set rents.¹⁷ Here he explains population growth around the start of the nineteenth century, in the context of the temporary abundance of kelp profits and potatoes, together with inoculation against smallpox, as follows:

'It [temporary abundance] did not produce wealth or comfort, but on the contrary, only poverty and indigence. It removed every check upon the law under which population tends to press upon the limits of subsistence. It supplied an insuperable temptation and

¹⁴ *Report of the Royal Commissioners of Inquiry on the Conditions of Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands of Scotland*, 1884.

¹⁵ The Duke's insistence that all improvements in husbandry flow from conditions imposed by the estate on his tenants calls into question the genealogy of 'traditional' land management practices. This issue would merit attention in a future version of this paper particularly as crofting practice has been in more or less constant change over the last two centuries. See in particular Robin J. Pakeman, Sally Huband, Antionette Kriel and Rob Lewis, 'Changes in the management of the Scottish Machair Communities and Associated Habitats from 1970 to the Present' *Scottish Geographical Journal*, 127: 4, 2012, pp. 267 – 287.

¹⁶ A. Fiona D. Mackenzie, 'The Cheviot, The Stag and the White, White Rock? : Community, Identity and Environmental Threat on the Isle of Harris', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 16, 1998, pp. 509 – 532.

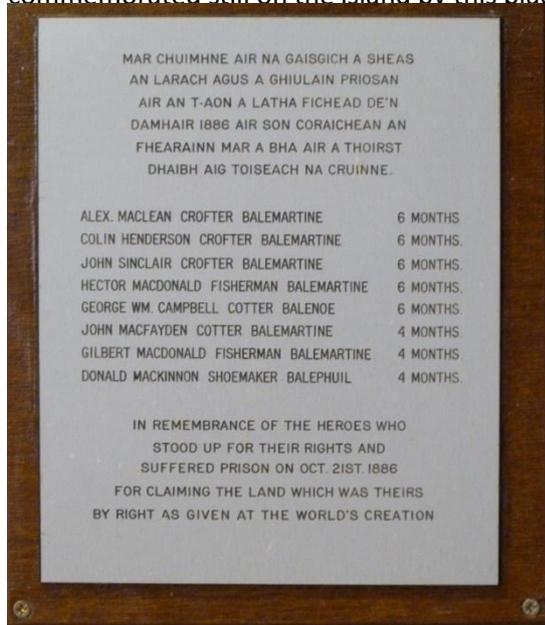
¹⁷ John W. Mason, 'The Duke of Argyll and the Land Question in Late Nineteenth Century Britain', *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Winter 1978, pp. 149 – 170.

encouragement to an improvident multiplication of the people, to wasteful habits, and to a systematic breach of conditions against the reckless subdivisions of farms or crofts.’¹⁸

In arguing in favour of enclosure of the common grazing he advanced very much the same arguments as Garrett Hardin in his paper ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’, published nearly 100 years later which has had such a profound influence of the discourse of environmental justice and ecocriticism at the end of the twentieth century.¹⁹ The Duke’s argument against the communitarianism, which is still a strong factor in Hebridean culture, took the example of common grazing which he felt was far inferior to consolidating such grazing under one farmer:

‘Common grazings are the subject of constant quarrelling, even when tried on the small scale common to old townships in the Highlands; even when peace is kept and quarrelling avoided, it is done only by the sacrifice of that spirit of individuality in enterprise and improvement which is the life and soul of all industrial pursuits. The quality of stock on such joint possessions is generally and notoriously inferior.’²⁰

Three years after the Duke made this submission to Lord Napier, there was serious unrest on Tiree when a group of crofters and cottars moved their stock onto a vacant farm. The Duke arranged for a group of Glasgow policemen to be sent to the island to evict them, but the islanders repelled them. This was followed by the arrival of 50 further policemen supported by two Royal Navy ships and 250 marines. The ringleaders were arrested and given exemplary prison sentences. The event is commemorated still on the island by this plaque which is on display in the community hall where



islanders gather for ceilidhs and other community events.

What is striking about this commemoration is that it is recently erected and also that it shows that islanders regard the land as ‘theirs by right as given at the World’s creation’. This is a vivid expression of the Gaelic concept of *dùthchas* which does not translate directly into English, but literally means an inherited right. A. Fiona D.

Mackenzie has noted that for many crofters ‘it is practices of use rights – to individually worked pieces of in-

¹⁸ The Duke of Argyll, *Crofts and Farms in the Hebrides being an Account of the Management of an Island Estate for 130 years*, Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1883, p.13.

¹⁹ Garrett Hardin, ‘The tragedy of the commons’, *Science*, 162, 1968, pp. 1243 – 8.

²⁰ *Crofts and Farms in the Hebrides*, pp. 71 – 72.

bye land – and that constitutes the very fabric out of which a collective claim to the land could be created.’²¹ Joseph Murphy goes over much the same ground in his paper on sustainability in Ireland and the Outer Hebrides. He emphasises the importance of *dùthchas* in discussion of sustainability and looks to poetry as the as the preeminent literary form that holds within the language the meaning of this aspect of Gaelic culture.²²

It is evident that this conception of rights and community responsibilities was completely at odds with the ideology of the Eighth Duke. Mackenzie explores how the principle of *dùthchas* can be used to ‘write against’ the neoliberal concept of enclosure and dispossession and for imagining a more socially just and sustainable future.²³ It is this principle that informs the current wave of community buyouts in the crofting areas of the Highlands and Islands.

During the nineteenth century Tiree became well-known for its bards. The definitive collection of work by the Tiree bards is that published by Cameron in 1932,²⁴ but this is now supplemented by collection of sound recordings which is available as an on-line resource on the *Tobar an Dualchais/* Kist of Riches website.²⁵ Thomson remarks on the unadventurous nature of much of this this verse, in which the new poets forsake their own relatively learned, aristocratic tradition. He attributes this lowering of standards to the spread of English education after 1872 which introduced the ‘simpler ephemera of elementary education [and] semi-literate taste’.²⁶

Emma Dymock has remarked on how Gaelic literature is increasingly exposed to recent developments in literary criticism including ecocriticism, themes of identity in Dymock’s own study

²¹ A. Fiona D. Mackenzie, ‘A Working Land: Crofting Communities, Place and the Politics of the Possible in Post-Land Reform Scotland’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, Vol. 31, No. 3, September 2006, pp. 383 – 398.

²² Joseph Murphy, ‘Place and Exile: Imperialism, development and Environment in Gaelic Ireland and Scotland’, *SRI Papers*, University of Leeds: Sustainability Research Institute, 2009, p. 6. Both Murphy and Mackenzie were writing after the recent community buyouts in the Western Isles. Writing before these buyouts, Iain Robertson urges caution in assuming that there is uniformity in the way individual crofters see the land. Iain Robertson, ‘“Their families had gone back hundreds of years in the same place”: attitudes to land and landscape in the Scottish Highlands after 1914.’, in David C. Harvey, Rhys Jones, Neil McInroy and Christine Milligan, (eds.), *Celtic Geographies: old cultures, new times*, London: Routledge, 2002, pp. 37 – 52. As Tiree has not yet been tested by a community land buyout, the prevalence of sentiments of *dùthchas* requires further investigation.

²³ ‘A Working Land’, p. 384.

²⁴ Reverend Hector Cameron, *Na Baird Thirisdeach* (The Tiree Bards), Stirling: The Tiree Association, 1932.

²⁵ <http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk> accessed 28 February 2013.

²⁶ *An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry*, p. 223.

of Sorley Maclean and post-colonial readings.²⁷ Meg Bateman has identified a division in Gaelic verse ‘between those parts where nature is domesticated and those where wilderness is the dominant force’.²⁸ There is however a risk that the village bards will be passed over by literary critics because their work is perceived to be inferior. But that would be to underestimate the importance of verse and song in reinforcing *dùthchas*. Locally based conservationists, who work closely with the community, have come to understand that Hebridean people have ‘a very high awareness of the machair landscape and wildlife and a high commitment to its conservation’.²⁹ The purpose of this paper is to explore a township culture which flowered in nineteenth century, where the resulting songs are still loved in the twenty-first.

Thomson has noted how the theme of ‘homeland’ recurs in the work these township bards in the nineteenth century. This theme ‘is frequently combined with that of love, particularly lovers’ partings.³⁰ The genealogy of this verse owes its disciplines to the bards who served the clan chiefs but Eric Cregeen and Donald Mackenzie have shown how it continued to flourish around the ceilidh-house culture in the townships (really small hamlets arranged around a common grazing) of Tìree.³¹ In 2011 the organisers of *Fèis Thiriodh* asked islanders and visitors to vote for their favourite songs by Tìree people.³² The twenty top songs with their music were published in order of popularity with modern English translations on the facing page.³³ Intended to bring these songs to a new audience and to new singers, this book is important for many reasons.

Most of the songs were written during the flowering of township *bardachd* in the nineteenth century, but are still cherished today. They include songs of love, most of which are associated with

²⁷ Emma Dymock, ‘Introduction’, *Lainnir a’ Bhiùrn/The Gleaming Water* p. xx. See also Louisa Gairn, *Ecology and Modern Scottish Literature*, Edinburgh: EUP, 2008, pp. 130 – 135.

²⁸ Meg Bateman, ‘The Landscape of the Gaelic Imagination’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Vol; 15, Issue 2 – 3, 2009, pp. 142 – 152.

²⁹ Stewart Angus, ‘The Conservation of Machair in Scotland: Working with People’, J. A. Houston, S. E. Edmondson and P. J. Rooney, *Coastal Dune Management: Shared experience of European conservation practice*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001, pp. 177 – 191.

³⁰ *An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry*, p. 224.

³¹ Eric Cregeen and Donald W. Mackenzie, *Tìree Bards and Their Bardachd: The Poets in a Hebridean Community*, Isle of Coll: Society of West Highland & Island Historical Research, 1978.

³² *Fèis Thiriodh* is part of the wider *Fèis* movement to involve young people in the traditional music of the islands. Now in its xx year, the Tìree *Fèis* brings tutors to the island for a week-long programme of classes, concerts and ceilidhs. <http://www.feis-thiriodh.com> accessed 1 March 2013.

³³ *Òrain an Eorna/Songs of the Barley*.

homeland, songs of humour and of exile. The most political song is *Oran Mhanitoba*/ The Song of Manitoba, written for a family which had left Tiree for Canada: 'I lament the joyous men who were affable and renowned, / Who left the island of their birthright, turning their back on it for ever'. The Gaelic version of this song gives *dùthchas* which the translator has interpreted as 'birth-right'. Given that *dùthchas* is still a strong sentiment in the islands, is it possible that these songs have a part to play in reinforcing the strong bond between Gaelic peoples and their land? Is the machair at risk if Gaelic dies out and this channel for the transmission of love for the landscape is lost? Or is the culture of *dùthchas* at risk if, as Thomson fears, rising sea-levels obliterate both machair and the Gaelic language? These are important concerns that are easily passed over by the culture of scientific conservation backed by international conventions.

The song considered below was the most popular in this survey. It has been adopted as the 'Tiree National Anthem'. It was written at the time that Tiree was exporting its bards under pressure from the Duke to reduce the population by emigration. The writer Alexander Sinclair was a Tiree man working like so many in Glasgow. The theme of homeland takes on a particular poignancy when this love of land is expressed from afar. Machair is not mentioned, but it would be evident to anyone who knows it that it is the machair landscape that is being praised.

The song is given in full below. When sung, the first verse is repeated as a chorus after each of the next six quatrains. Although the love is for Tiree, it is phrased as a love-song to a 'young maiden' who has not yet seen the island. The invitation to the lover is to see the island that has 'everything that you desire'. This is an interesting take on the love of land that comes from birth and upbringing associated with the day-to-day rhythms of the crofting life, and seems to suggest that an incomer would immediately recognise the scope for this landscape to fulfil their own desires. This song provides a foretaste of how many people, with only a fleeting exposure to the glories of the machair, have come to love it.

'Will you come with me, young maiden?'³⁴

*Will you go with me, young maiden?
Or will you go with me across the sea,
You will see everything that you desire,
On that western island I left.*

Though you will not see forests or deer,
There are geese and white swans;

³⁴ © *Fèis Thiriodh*. English translation of song written by *Alasdair Mac na Ceàrdaich*/Alexander Sinclair, '*Am Falbh Thu Leam, a Ribhinn Òig?*' *Òrain an Eorna*/Songs of the Barley, pp. 6 – 7. Also available as an original recording made in 1963 on the *Tòbar an Dualchais*/Kist of Riches website, <http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk> accessed 21 January 2013.

There is such a view of the Atlantic Ocean
When the tide is out.

You will see Coll, Mull and Iona,
Eigg and Rum of the high hills;
There are lovely expanses of green pastures
Peacefully surrounding Saint Patrick's Chapel.

You will see the lark and the thrush,
Blackbird and ringed plover,
The brown bee with its honey in the garden,
And a bumblebee on each ragwort.

You will see cormorants coming towards you from the sea,
There are mallards swimming there,
Green marram grass growing on the banks,
Every step around the shores.

You will not see a snake on the ground there,
But flowers of the sweetest fragrance
Growing there from century to century,
In the land where I was brought up.

Many a thing I could write,
About the land I once left –
It is the fertile island I love best,
More than any part of Argyll.

In the first line of the first stanza after the chorus, the bard gets out of the way what will not be seen. There are no deer on Tiree and no forests. While there is evidence that the Hebridean machair has at some time been wooded, Tiree is now treeless.³⁵ Despite the determined efforts of many people, trees prove unable to survive the salt drenched gales that sweep across the island in winter. In terms of biodiversity the distinctive Atlantic temperate rainforests that are a special feature of the mainland coast are absent. What biodiversity there is has to flourish in this open country. That Tiree is known for its biodiversity is because the machair is rich in calcium carbonate, because it varies from wet to dry and with the slightly different management technique adopted by individual crofters within the overall concept of 'traditional' practice. Further inland the machair gives way to the acid moorland of the *sliabh*. There are no deer, but their place as nuisance grazers is taken by the huge flocks of migratory geese that settle on the island in winter.

³⁵ 'Holocene changes in the physiography and vegetation of the Atlantic littoral of the Uists, Outer Hebrides, Scotland'.

The second stanza sets the scene where looking out over this landscape it is possible to see the other islands of the Inner Hebrides with good views of the mountains of Mull, Eigg and Rum to make up for Tiree having only low hills. In the last two lines of this quatrain the bard introduces the machair as 'the lovely expanses of green pastures / peacefully surrounding St Patrick's Chapel'. All islanders can immediately place this scene as in the machair of at the west end of the island. The next three quatrains are a celebration of Tiree through its biodiversity. This deployment of abundant wildlife as an 'index' for Tiree is revealing, it is this diversity that makes such a visual impact in summer on the island that in turn is the object of love. Conservationists, reading these lines in a 'homeland' poem that is also a love song, should not be surprised that Tiree people have a high regard for the natural environment.

In the final stanza, the writer lets it be known that Tiree has much more to offer, here the theme of exile and regret make his love for the island all the more poignant. In summarising all that went before in the phrase 'fertile island' he invokes both sustainable land use and abundant biodiversity.³⁶ That these sentiments from the nineteenth century are embedded in a song popular in the twenty-first supports Murphy's argument that we should look to poetry to understand how *dùthchas* informs the worldview of the Gaelic people.³⁷

The next poem considered here is from a 2012 collection, *Maraiche nan Cuantan* by a contemporary Tiree poet, Flora MacPhail (1944 -). This poet has the heritage of being born and living on the island of the bards, together with an education that exposed her to a more academic literary tradition. At Oban High School she was taught by Iain Crichton Smith and at Glasgow University she attended lectures by Derick Thomson. Both her husband's grandfathers were imprisoned following a 'land raid' in 1918 when they moved onto vacant land in defiance of the tenth Duke. One of her sons is a founder member of the Skipinnish ceilidh band, which is one of many such bands that owe their formation to the music making tradition of Tiree. This collection shows her concern for the traditions of this island, for example, in *Oran an Regatta/Regatta Song* where shares the light-hearted excitement as her father and her brother Iain and his crew as they prepare their Tiree dipping-lug boat 'Daisy' for its annual race against the other traditional boats in the fleet. A sailing

³⁶ The Gaelic people's ownership of machair is in sharp contrast to the discourse of biodiversity in which such a rare habitat, listed in Annex 1 of the EU Habitats Directive (Council Directive 92/43/EEC) is now seen as an international resource. A. Fiona D. Mackenzie explores how the Gaels identification with their natural environment can 'write against' what she sees as the colonializing narratives of scientific conservation. This thread will be followed up in the next draft of this paper.

³⁷ More work is needed to explore to test the assumption that *dùthchas* informs the worldview of the crofting community the specific context of Tiree. This will be addressed in the next version of this paper.

tradition that is kept alive both by the regatta and by the Tiree Maritime Trust formed to hand on the skills needed to repair these wooden boats.

Flora was also involved in the very early days in establishing a *Fèis* on Tiree to hand on the skills of making music and singing the island's Gaelic songs. Her poem *Cèilidh Luchd-Teasag na Fèise 1990/Fèis Tutors' Ceilidh 1990*, written after the first *fèis* on Tiree, mentions each performer in turn at this rumbustious concert that rounds off the week of classes and performances: 'Ò rò, did you hear the clamour / Of the Fèis Tutors yesterday?'³⁸ That poem takes on the form of an informal concert where each line allows each musician in turn to showcase their work. The poem considered here, given in full below, carries some echoes from homeland poetry in celebrating the biodiversity of the island, but it would also be at home in the company of the 'New Nature Writing'.

'The Hare's Nest'³⁹

I placed my hand
In a hare's nest yesterday
He sped off
But in that spot in the marram grass
Where he had crouched,
Ear to shoulder,
He left a warmth.

Sixty years have passed
Since I last did this
As I was taught
By the fine carpenter,
Our good neighbour Johnny, Charles's son,
He in his old age
So pleased to be
Opening the eyes of a little girl
To the beauty of the machair.

He gave me such awareness
Of primroses and daisies,
How to grasp a nettle;
Of the otter's, - black beast's – paws
And how they left tracks
On the white sandy shore;
Of bird's nests;
And hare's nests
Which retain their warmth still.

³⁸ The Song is sung to the rhythm of an old song: *Margadh an t-Salainn*/The Salt Market in Glasgow. Flora MacPhail, personal communication.

³⁹ © Flora MacPhail. Author's English translation of '*Nead a' Mhoighich*', *Flòraidh NicPhail, Maraiche nan Cuartan* (Flora MacPhail, Sailor of the Seas): *Cruinneachden bhàrdachd*, Stonoway: Acair, 2012, pp. 44 – 45.

The poem, as written in translation in free verse, has three stanzas of seven, nine and nine lines. The poem can be read as an example of the 'New Nature Writing', to which in 2008 Granta devoted a special edition in which editor explained that:

'When we began to commission articles for this issue we were interested less in what might be called old nature writing – by which I mean the lyrical pastoral tradition of the romantic wanderer – than in writers who approached their subject in heterodox and experimental ways. We also wanted the contributions to be voice driven, narratives told in the first person, for the writer to be present in the story, if sometimes only bashfully.'⁴⁰

Macphail's poem meets these criteria. It departs from the classical tradition of Gaelic poetry and from the form of the 'Homeland' verse written by the nineteenth-century Tìre bards in favour of free verse. The poet is present in the story and in the first stanza she feels the warmth of the hare where it has left the shallow hollow, not strictly a nest, in which it hides during the day. By connecting with wild nature in such a sensuous way she breaks down the binary human/other divide that keeps *Homo sapiens* apart from the other living creatures that share the same environment. We can visualise the hare 'crouched / Ear to shoulder' and feel the warmth that he left. Such knowledge is possessed by hunters who feel the hollow to see how recently a hare has left its form when his hounds start to feather on a scent, but MacPhail shows how field-craft is both intellectually satisfying and allows for an affective relationship with a wild creature.⁴¹

In the second stanza the poet introduces the way that ecological knowledge is transmitted orally through direct experience in the field sixty years ago, in the company of a neighbour: 'He in his old age / So pleased to be / Opening the eyes of a little girl / To the beauty of the machair'. The poem is important because it shows the mechanism by which the awareness that was transmitted sixty years ago, lives on still as love for the beauty of this landscape. Reading this poem it should come as no surprise that surveys find how much *dùthchas* is bound up with respect for biodiversity.

In the final stanza, the poet runs through her field knowledge of wild flowers, tracks, the shell-sand of the shore, birds' nests and hares' nests 'which retain their warmth still'. When MacPhail had her induction into the beauty of the machair, the UK still had most of its flower-rich meadows. Even

⁴⁰ Jason Cowley, 'Editor's Letter: The New Nature Writing', in Jason Cowley, *Granta 102: The New Nature Writing*, London: Granta, 2008, p. 10.

⁴¹ In this context it will be relevant in a future version of this paper to explore how affective relationships between humans and the species they observe are 'forced out' of scientific discourse. This setting aside of feelings in the interest of scientific accuracy could in part explain how scientific ecology can be seen as hegemonic when faced with islanders who have a more rounded relationship with the wildlife around them. The following paper is significant here: Jamie Lorimer, 'The Affective Science of the UK Corncrake Census', *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2008, pp. 377 – 405.

then the machairs of the Atlantic coast were exceptional, but most British people would have been able to experience similar displays in summer.⁴² Norman Maclean has drawn attention to how people now in their thirties and forties the evidence of biodiversity they saw as a child is taken to be normal, whereas those in their sixties would experience loss. Maclean adapts a term introduced by American marine biologists, 'shifting-baseline syndrome', to explain the lowered expectations of younger people. It is significant that in MacPhail's poem she is able to walk out onto the family croft today and see much the same wildlife as she saw sixty years ago.⁴³

By celebrating the natural environment on Tiree she recovers the feeling for the environment that was expressed in the 'homeland' poetry of the nineteenth-century Tiree bards. She shows how this element of *dùthchas* is transmitted orally in a way that feeling and knowledge combine, thereby breaking down the human/nature dualism which so troubles environmental philosophers such as Val Plumwood.⁴⁴

It is evident that the significance of machair as an 'index' of Gaelic culture is complex. If Thomson is right in seeing the fate of machair as intimately bound to that of the Gaelic language, then both must be protected in any sustainable strategy for the use of the machair. Once the Gaelic people stop loving either, both will be lost. That the Hebrides is holding onto biodiversity that has been lost across much of the rest of Britain means that feeling must not be brushed aside by scientific conservation. A lively island culture will ensure that the machair remains a place of resistance to unsustainable utilitarian or neo-liberal models of resource exploitation.

Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Flora MacPhail for a fruitful discussion of her poetry and for helping to set some of the background in to this paper within the context of island life. The conclusions drawn are my own.

Dr William Welstead

Isle of Tiree - March 2013.

⁴² Norman Maclean, 'What is the likely future for the wildlife in Britain and Ireland?', in Norman Maclean (ed.), *Silent Summer: The State of Wildlife in Britain and Ireland*, Cambridge: CUP, 2010, p. 668.

⁴³ There have been some changes, for example there are now many more resident greylag geese to compete with livestock for the available grazing.

⁴⁴ Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The ecological crisis of reason*, London: Routledge, 2002, pp. 51 -53.

Bibliography

- Angus, Stewart, 'The Conservation of Machair in Scotland: Working with People', in Houston, J. A., Edmondson, S. E. and Rooney, P. J., *Coastal Dune Management: Shared experience of European conservation practice*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001, pp. 177 – 191.
- Argyll, The Duke of, *Crofts and Farms in the Hebrides being an Account of the Management of an Island Estate for 130 years*, Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1883.
- Bateman, Meg, 'The Landscape of the Gaelic Imagination', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Vol; 15, Issue 2 – 3, 2009, pp. 142 – 152.
- Bergin, John Philip, *Nature and the Victorian Entrepreneur: Soap, Sunlight and Subjectivity*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Hull, 1998.
- Cowley, Jason, 'Editor's Letter: The New Nature Writing', in Cowley, Jason, *Granta 102: The New Nature Writing*, London: Granta, 2008.
- Cowley, Jason, *Granta 102: The New Nature Writing*, London: Granta, 2008.
- Cregeen, Eric and Mackenzie, Donald W., *Tiree Bards and Their Bardachd: The Poets in a Hebridean Community*, Isle of Coll: Society of West Highland & Island Historical Research, 1978.
- Dymock, Emma and McLeod, Wilson, *Lainnir a' Bhiùrn/The Gleaming Water: Essays on Modern Gaelic Literature*, Edinburgh: Dunedin, 2011.
- Dymock, Emma, 'Introduction', Dymock, Emma and McLeod, Wilson, *Lainnir a' Bhiùrn/The Gleaming Water: Essays on Modern Gaelic Literature*, Edinburgh: Dunedin, 2011, p. xx.
- EU Habitats Directive (Council Directive 92/43/EEC).
- Fèis Thiriodh, Òrain an Eòrna/Songs of the Barley: Traditional Gaelic songs from the Island of Tiree, Isle of Tiree: Fèis Thiriodh and An Iodhlann*, 2012.
- Fèis Thiriodh*, <http://www.feis-thiriodh.com> accessed 1 March 2013.
- Gairn, Louisa, *Ecology and Modern Scottish Literature*, Edinburgh: EUP, 2008.
- Hardin, Garrett, 'The tragedy of the commons', *Science*, 162, 1968, pp. 1243 – 8.
- Harvey, David C., Jones, Rhys, McInroy, Neil and Milligan, Christine, (eds.), *Celtic Geographies: old cultures, new times*, London: Routledge, 2002, pp. 37 – 52.
- Houston, J. A., Edmondson, S. E. and Rooney, P. J., *Coastal Dune Management: Shared experience of European conservation practice*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001.
- Krause, Corinna, 'Self-translation: in dialogue with the outside world', in Dymock, Emma and McLeod, Wilson, *Lainnir a' Bhiùrn/The Gleaming Water: Essays on Modern Gaelic Literature*, Edinburgh: Dunedin, 2011.
- Lack, Andrew, 'Plants' in Maclean, Norman (ed.), *Silent Summer: The State of Wildlife in Britain and Ireland*, Cambridge: CUP, 2010.

- Long, Deborah, 'Machair & Coastal pasture: managing priority habitats for native plants and the significance of grazing practices', *The Glasgow Naturalist*, Vol. 25, Supplement - *Proceedings of the 2008 conference on Machair Conservation: Successes & Challenges*, 2009, pp. 17 – 23.
- Lorimer, Jamie, 'The Affective Science of the UK Corncrake Census', *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2008, pp. 377 – 405.
- Mackenzie, A. Fiona D., 'The Cheviot, The Stag and the White, White Rock? : Community, Identity and Environmental Threat on the Isle of Harris', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 16, 1998, pp. 509 – 532.
- Mackenzie, A. Fiona D., 'A Working Land: Crofting Communities, Place and the Politics of the Possible in Post-Land Reform Scotland', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, Vol. 31, No. 3, September 2006, pp. 383 – 398.
- Maclean, Norman (ed.), *Silent Summer: The State of Wildlife in Britain and Ireland*, Cambridge: CUP, 2010.
- Maclean, Norman, 'What is the likely future for the wildlife in Britain and Ireland?', in Maclean, Norman (ed.), *Silent Summer: The State of Wildlife in Britain and Ireland*, Cambridge: CUP, 2010.
- Macthòmais, Ruaraidh / Thomson, Derick, Sùil air Fàire/Surveying the Horizon: Recent poems by Derick Thomson*, Stornoway, Isle of Lewis: Acair, 2007.
- Mason, John W., 'The Duke of Argyll and the Land Question in Late Nineteenth Century Britain', *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Winter 1978, pp. 149 – 170.
- Murphy, Joseph, 'Place and Exile: Imperialism, development and Environment in Gaelic Ireland and Scotland', *SRI Papers*, University of Leeds: Sustainability Research Institute, 2009.
- Flòraidh NicPhail, Maraiche nan Cuartan (Flora MacPhail, Sailor of the Seas): Cruinneachden bhàrdachd*, Stonoway: Acair, 2012.
- Report of the Royal Commissioners of Inquiry on the Conditions of Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands of Scotland*, 1884.
- Pakeman, Robin J., Huband, Sally, Kriel, Antionette and Lewis, Rob, 'Changes in the management of the Scottish Machair Communities and Associated Habitats from 1970 to the Present' *Scottish Geographical Journal*, 127: 4, 2012, pp. 267 – 287.
- Plumwood, Val, *Environmental Culture: The ecological crisis of reason*, London: Routledge, 2002.
- Ritchie, William, Whittington, Graeme and Edwards, Kevin J., 'Holocene changes in the physiography and vegetation of the Atlantic littoral of the Uists, Outer Hebrides, Scotland', *Earth and Environmental Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*, 92:02, June 2007.
- Thomson, Derick, *An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry*, Second Edition, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989.
- Tòbar an Dualchais*/Kist of Riches website, <http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk> accessed 21 January 2013.