

# *Six Poems of Sorley MacLean*

## Teaching Notes for Higher English

*Emma Dymock*

Looking at the poems which have been chosen as the Sorley MacLean key texts for Higher – ‘Hallaig’, ‘Screapadal’, ‘An Autumn Day’, ‘I gave you immortality’, ‘Shores’ and ‘Heroes’ – it is not difficult to detect their passion, their courage at tackling both highly political and highly personal themes and their technical prowess. MacLean is perhaps the perfect poet for pupils studying for Highers to engage with. He was a young man (not long out of his teens) when he composed many of his most famous poems. He was passionate about politics (and had formed many of his most strident and impassioned political ideals while at Portree High School). He fell in love with a woman (unknown to her) but procrastinated over it and the love remained unrequited. He grew up during a time of threat of war and political upheaval. Political passion, feelings of unrequited love, knowledge that the world is changing and is unstable ... these are all experiences and situations that are well understood by young people in the twenty-first century – the passing of the years has not diminished these human concerns and issues.

Sorley MacLean is now synonymous with twentieth century Gaelic poetry, he is viewed as a spokesperson and a tradition-bearer of his Gaelic culture and yet, at the same time, you will often hear people proclaim that MacLean’s poetry is not Gaelic but European poetry, emphasising how MacLean’s work somehow rises beyond and transcends, the tradition from which it originated. So is MacLean a Gaelic or a European poet? The answer may be ‘both/and’ rather than either/or’. But the fact that MacLean has been interpreted in so many ways highlights a tension that arguably stems from his own work. There is a dichotomy in his poetry; an opposition of themes and the reason this comes so naturally to him is that these same factors played out in his own life. As a Gael in the twentieth century, MacLean existed in a ‘between place’.

### A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF SORLEY MACLEAN

MacLean was born in 1911 in Raasay. He was one of a family of seven and it might do no harm in emphasising the social situation of the time to any future pupils who study MacLean’s work – many of his life decisions were made out of economic necessity in order to help his younger siblings through their education. From an early age he was greatly influenced by the Gaelic tradition; his family were steeped in the old Gaelic songs so MacLean was always aware of this aspect of his native culture. It may also be worth noting here that the other great ‘native’ influence on this poet was his landscape. The MacLean family’s embracing of Gaelic song was slightly at odds with the other great tradition of his island – the Free Presbyterian church. While

#### **RANGE:**

- Higher English

#### **KEY TEXTS:**

- Emma Dymock: *Scotnote: The Poetry of Sorley MacLean* (ASLS)
- Peter Mackay: *Sorley MacLean* (AHRC Centre for Irish and Scottish Culture)
- Sorley MacLean: *Ris a’ Bhruthaich: the Criticism and Prose Writings of Sorley MacLean* ed. William Gillies (Acair)
- Sorley MacLean: *Dàin do Eimhir* ed. Christopher Whyte (Birlinn)
- Sorley MacLean: *An Cuilithionn 1939 and Unpublished Poems* ed. Christopher Whyte (ASLS)
- Sorley MacLean: *Caoir Gheal Leumraich / White leaping Flame: Sorley MacLean Collected Poems* eds. Christopher Whyte and Emma Dymock (Birlinn)
- Raymond Ross and Joy Hendry, eds: *Sorley MacLean: Critical Essays* (Scottish Academic Press)

MacLean rejected the Free Church, he embraced 'the gospel of Socialism' as he himself put it. He studied Honours English Language and Literature (gaining a First Class) at the University of Edinburgh. If his early life had been characterised by the Gaelic oral tradition, his university days opened him up to modernist literature and also afforded him the opportunity of meeting Scottish writers and intellectuals in Edinburgh, including C. M. Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid). MacLean went on to Moray House and from there began a career in teaching. Much later, in 1956 he moved to Plockton in Wester Ross and was Headmaster at the high school there until his retirement in 1972. In many ways he was a teacher more than he was a poet – it is no coincidence that his poetic output was not abundant during his teaching years, but the love of his Gaelic language and culture which is so obvious in his poetry, translated into his teaching too. He was a campaigner for the teaching of Gaelic in schools and the Gaelic exam paper, and he was also a supporter and advisor in the early days of the Gaelic college, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, on Skye. MacLean retired in 1972 to the Braes district of Skye, was Writer in Residence at Edinburgh University for two years, took part in poetry tours in Britain and Ireland, and was awarded honorary degrees from seven universities. He died in 1996 but his poetry continues to influence and act as a benchmark for a new generation of Gaelic poets.

### THE KEY TEXTS

It is possible to identify several 'Sorley MacLean's' in these poems and is perhaps the reason why these texts work so well as a sample of his work; they show clearly the breadth and depth of MacLean's poetry. So there is Sorley the War Poet in 'An Autumn Day' and 'Heroes', 'the Love Poet' in 'I gave you immortality' and 'Shores', and the Gaelic tradition-bearer and voice of the people in 'Hallai'g' and 'Screapadal'. This is not to suggest that MacLean's poetry can be easily categorised or only performs one function at a time, but it is useful to bear in mind these different poetic roles.

### The War Poems: 'An Autumn Day' and 'Heroes'

While English poetry often seems to lack Second World War poems in comparison to the number of First World War poems composed by a number of writers, Gaelic does not have this same dearth. MacLean composed a number of Second World War poems, and also referred more fleetingly or subtly to the war in a good few other poems too. MacLean's dedication to the socialist cause is evident throughout his poetry; he wished to fight on the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War and was only prevented from doing so because of economic reasons relating to his family. He described himself as a Communist and was a supporter of the Red Army and the Soviet Union (a stance that caused him some difficulty and embarrassment later, when Stalin's atrocities came to public attention). He was fiercely critical of all forms of Capitalism and, in letters to friends in particular, it is clear that he viewed the concept of 'Great Britain' as abhorrent. And yet, he joined the British Army at the outbreak of the Second World War – this very action seems out of character, given that a number of his friends and fellow writers were conscientious political objectors. However, his reasons for joining the army were completely logical in relation to his personal moral and philosophical belief system. Firstly, he viewed himself as 'a man of action'. Secondly, MacLean's main reason for fighting in the British army was that it was the only way that he could see to take a firm stance against Fascism – something which he hated above all else. So, he 'compromised' on certain beliefs and ideals because he was not prepared to watch Fascism poison Europe. This quandary is something which should be emphasised because it is what gives his poetry its tension and richness. But, he does not become mindless in his army service – 'Heroes' and 'An Autumn Day' prove this point. MacLean was trained at Catterick Camp, Yorkshire and then was posted to North Africa as part of the Signal Corp. He was wounded at the Battle of El Alamein in November 1942, recovered in military hospital and was eventually discharged in August 1943. Both the key text war poems deal with his expe-

riences on active service but, as you will notice, they have an underlying message, which hints at his socialist ideals. As he himself noted in one of his war letters he was not a 'pure' recruit.

### *'An Autumn Day'*

In 'An Autumn Day' MacLean recounts his experience of being shelled, and having to stay put for the whole duration of that autumn day in the shell hole, surrounded by six dead comrades. In some ways this is a perfectly formed personal, almost journalistic account of war experience with its sensory experiences (as described in the first and second stanzas):

On that slope  
on an autumn day,  
the shells sougning about my ears (stanza 1)

When the screech came  
Out of the sun  
Out of an invisible throbbing  
... blinding of eyes, splitting of hearing.  
(stanza 2)

The shock of the dead bodies beside him cannot be underestimated – the repetition of 'Six dead men at my shoulder/ on an Autumn day' at the end of the poem is a neat device, showing that the poet seems to have to repeat his memory of this one more time in the poem to come to terms with it, or even believe what he has felt and seen. For a Gaelic poet, who is most at home describing his native landscapes, the beauty and unforgiving nature of the desert is a surprising contrast and this poem proves that MacLean is not just a landscape poet of the familiar but of the unfamiliar also. The relentlessness of the sun, which is described in the fourth stanza as 'indifferent' and 'so white and painful' both slows time and heralds the passing of time from morning, to midday to evening. It is only when the stars come out and darkness falls in the desert that the reader is given the impression that MacLean is able to make his escape. But, having had the whole day with these dead men, he has had the time to think on the greater subjects of destiny and fate. While

MacLean had rejected his Free Presbyterianism long before this poem was composed, it is interesting that he uses the language of the Free Church to process the deaths of these men:

One Election took them  
and did not take me,  
without asking us  
which was better or worse:  
it seemed as devilishly indifferent  
as the shells. (stanza 5)

The Election – God's choosing of individuals unto salvation – manages to tie the 'foreignness' of the desert back into a more Gaelic sense of the world, but the Election is also undermined in the last two lines of stanza 5 with the mention of 'indifference'; not the way the Election is supposed to work at all, with its emphasis on choosing and on predestination. In the first stanza of the poem the dead men are described as waiting for a message, presumably one that did not come, again, undermining the definition of the Election. So is MacLean destabilising church philosophy or simply showing, in the best way he can, his utter depression and helplessness of the meaninglessness of war? Perhaps he is doing both.

### *'Heroes'*

MacLean continues this destabilising in 'Heroes', but this time it is in relation to Gaelic poetical and cultural ideals and themes rather than religion. In the poem, MacLean describes the death of an English soldier, 'a poor little chap with chubby cheeks', who fought bravely but was killed in a distinctly unheroic and unromantic way. To understand 'Heroes' we need to first understand the context of the tradition from which it arose. The description of heroism in older Gaelic poetry from previous centuries usually referred to the chief or other heroic member of a clan, and followed a strict code of praise which included always describing the hero as superior in appearance and highly accomplished in deeds. His genealogy would be well-known and the act of naming was an important device in this context. In contrast, MacLean's hero is not named – in fact, the title of the poem

is 'Heroes', the plural succeeding in removing the personal emphasis on a 'known' hero. MacLean's hero is an unnamed English private – as far removed from a Highland chief as you can get. The third stanza reiterates this point:

He was not a hit 'in the pub  
in the time of the fists being closed',  
but a lion against the breast of battle,  
in the morose wounding showers.

The reference in the first two lines of this stanza is to an older Gaelic praise poem to Allan MacDonald of Kingsburgh, Skye. So MacLean is injecting his war poetry with a realism more suited to the horror of modern warfare than to his own Gaelic tradition; the subverting of traditional devices of praise thus becomes a way of accentuating the modern condition and is proof that MacLean had not lost his communist/socialist ideals in the army. He would rather praise a nameless English soldier than the higher echelons of his own society and he is under no illusion that these soldiers of the Second World War are expendable – the soldier who died a sad and quite ugly death would gain, in his words, no posthumous medal:

No cross or medal was put to his  
Chest or to his name or to his family;  
There were not many of his troop alive,  
And if there were their word would not be  
strong. (stanza 7)

He was instead one of the 'masses' so close to MacLean's heart. When MacLean writes, in the last stanza, that 'he took a little weeping to my eyes' he is echoing the concluding lines of the elegy for Alasdair of Glengarry, composed by Sileas (Cicely) na Ceapaich around 1720, but is aligning this older Gaelic praise poem to the modern, more collective sense of death he was witnessing in the desert on a daily basis in 1942, while at the same time making a clear point that an Englishman is capable of being a great hero (something the Gaelic poets of previous centuries would have been less likely to acknowledge).

### **The Love Poems: 'Shores' and 'I gave you immortality'**

While MacLean is rightly well-known as a war and political poet, he is perhaps even better known as a love poet, and this reputation stems from his 1943 collection of love poems, *Dàin do Eimhir*. This collection of sixty-odd poems created great excitement in the Gaelic world – it is the book that most would describe as ushering in a clear Modernist sensibility to Gaelic poetry. The poems are addressed to 'Eimhir', the name of the Irish hero Cuchulain's wife, but Eimhir is really a symbol of three or four women who were in MacLean's life during his early adulthood. Two of the MacLean key texts – 'Shores' and 'I gave you immortality' are poems from *Dàin do Eimhir*. But if you are teaching these poems, some context of the greater story arc of these poems will be needed. While they operate as stand-alone poems, their power also comes from the fact that they are part of a greater whole. The two main Eimhirs who have been given the most attention over the years are a red-haired Irishwoman, who MacLean met in Edinburgh and who was researching in the National Library of Scotland, and overlapping in some places, a 'yellow-haired' Scottish woman who is thought to have been a musician. The hair colour is significant because, not only is it an important Gaelic motif, which MacLean re-uses in a modern setting, it is also a very useful way to differentiate which Eimhir figure MacLean is addressing.

#### **'Shores'**

'Shores' comes quite late in the sequence. In this poem the poet and his beloved appear on five different beaches (Talisker in Skye, Calgary in Mull, Homhsta in Uist, Moidart and Mol Stenscholl Staffin). In a way, this roll call of beaches, this naming which has a beauty of its own, is as much a love poem to these places as it is a love poem to a woman. The poet wishes to defend their love against the ravages of time:

I would stand beside the sea  
renewing love in my spirit  
while the ocean was filling  
Talisker bay forever: (stanza 1)



The beaches could be interpreted as being liminal spaces – between land and water, but also between the present and eternity. The final lines are apocalyptic in imagery and, like many of MacLean’s references, relate to oral history/culture, thereby tying his own love poetry into a much greater tradition:

And if we were on Mol Stenscholl Staffin  
when the unhappy surging sea dragged  
the boulders and threw them over us,  
I would build the rampart wall  
against an alien eternity grinding its teeth.  
(stanza 3)

‘Mol’ is a beach of shingle, thus, Mol Stenscholl Staffin is the shingle bay at Staffin in Skye. The Raasay hero, Iain Garbh, was supposedly shipwrecked and drowned off this beach around 1671 and the story goes that the boulders were thrown up on the beach the day he died – in other words, the very landscape was coming out in sympathy due to the death of this man. MacLean takes this story and reinterprets it in light of his love for Eimhir; the boulders that are ‘spat’ onto the beach are imagined in relation to the ocean throwing pebbles or stones at the lovers – it is a hostile force but the poet assures his love that nothing will come between them.

### *‘I gave you immortality’*

The same theme of eternity is explored in ‘I gave you immortality’ but in this poem MacLean’s tone is quite different. This is a poem which, structurally, most resembles a Gaelic song metre and yet it also has hints of the influence of Horace, Shakespeare, Baudelaire and the Meta-physical poets. ‘I gave you immortality’ is about MacLean’s self-consciousness about being a poet (What power lies here? What can he do with this vocation?) and is also a balancing of accounts, in the poet’s own mind, with his beloved:

I gave you immortality  
and what did you give me?  
Only the sharp arrows of your beauty,  
a harsh onset  
and piercing sorrow, (stanza 1)

In stanza 2, MacLean acknowledges that the deal is reciprocal:

If I gave you immortality  
you gave it to me;  
you put an edge on my spirit  
and radiance in my song.

Later still, MacLean appears to imagine himself taking his place within the Gaelic literary canon:

but, if I reach my place,  
the high wood of the men of song,  
you are the fire of my lyric,  
you made a poet of me through sorrow.  
(stanza 4)

In the last stanza the poet is clear that while physical beauty can rot away (as well as the apparently trivial matter of his love marrying another), the poetry that he creates about this beauty will be lasting – ‘your glory is my poetry’. The poet’s relationship to his love transcends time and physicality and this says a great deal about the respect the poet affords his tradition, and also indicates that while *Dàin do Eimhir* appears to be a sequence of poems about a poet caught in turmoil of passion, there is an underlying steeliness, a greater sense of the poetry’s purpose and direction; MacLean is working on many levels here.

### **The Tradition-Bearer and the Socio-Political Poet: ‘Hallaig’ and ‘Screapadal’**

Of all the key texts for Higher, ‘Hallaig’ and ‘Screapadal’ come latest in chronological terms.

#### *‘Hallaig’*

‘Hallaig’ is probably one of MacLean’s best-known poems – for those wishing to provide a multi-dimensional approach to ‘Hallaig’ for their students, it might be worth mentioning that the late Martyn Bennett set this poem, with MacLean reading it himself, to music on his seminal album ‘Bothy Culture’. Hallaig is a township on the island of Raasay; in 1846 the island was purchased by George Rainy (a man who appears again in ‘Screapadal’), the

son of a Highland minister and from a notable Highland family. Fourteen townships, including Hallaig, were cleared by Rainy. Thus, on one level 'Hallaig' is a poem about the Highland Clearances from the perspective of a twentieth century Gaelic poet.

'Hallaig' begins with the line 'Time, the deer, is in the wood of Hallaig'. This one line hints at the theme of the whole poem (and also introduces the poems' symbolic style) – time is a living entity (the deer) which exists in Hallaig and in the poet's own consciousness. 'The window is nailed and boarded/ through which I saw the West' – this evocative line sees the poet introduce a window into the soul of the Gaels and their experience of loss and desolation. However, this is at its heart a nature poem and the rest of the poem is set outside of this window.

and my love is at the Burn of Hallaig  
a birch tree, and she has always been  
between Inver and Milk Hollow.  
(stanzas 1–2)

The birch tree is known to be one of the first species of trees to repopulate a destroyed area – it is a symbol of recovery and regeneration in the poem. In the poem, the descendants of those who lived in Hallaig are described as trees:

In Screapadal of my people  
where Norman and Big Hector were  
their daughters and their sons are a wood  
going up beside the stream. (stanza 3)

Thus, Hallaig is not populated by people but by trees. In one sense this is a profoundly depressing picture of nature claiming ground where people once were. However, MacLean's vision is also redemptive – the older panegyric poetry of the medieval Gaelic bardic tradition often used trees and other vegetal imagery to describe the strength and nobility of the chief of a clan, and, in equating the people with trees in 'Hallaig' MacLean is modernising and democratising this image into a collective hope for the future of the regrowth and resurgence of a Gaelic community.

The final stanza is pure symbolism:

a vehement bullet will come from the gun  
of Love;  
and will strike the deer that goes dizzily,  
sniffing at the grass-grown ruined homes;  
his eye will freeze in the wood,  
his blood will not be traced while I live.

When teaching students this poem it may be helpful to encourage them to think in terms of what MacLean has created as a poet here – who is holding the gun of love? Who is in control of the whole poem but the poet himself? If he is the one who brings down the deer (who we have been told at the start of the poem represents time itself) then it can be deduced that the poet is stopping time here. By stopping time and ending the linear movement of history MacLean is in control – he succeeds in preserving his sense of place and what Hallaig means to him and his people. The gun, with all its connotations of violence, is instead an embodiment of love in this poem. For all the hopelessness of the Clearances and the past, MacLean has succeeded in capturing a moment in eternity which will last at least as long as he does. 'Hallaig' carries on the themes of 'I gave you immortality' regarding the role of the poet and his power, but 'Hallaig' is a surrealist community-driven poem compared to the personal immortalisation of one woman in his poems to Eimhir.

### *'Screapadal'*

'Screapadal' could be viewed as a companion to 'Hallaig' although it can still stand very much on its own. While 'Hallaig' attempts to make sense of the Clearances and retain some hope in the face of loss, 'Screapadal' is slightly more pessimistic in its look at the future rather than the eternal present. This poem shows that while still embedded in a Highland landscape (Screapadal is another village in Raasay), MacLean can still engage with global politics, dealing as it does with the risk of nuclear holocaust. In the poem MacLean comes to terms with the fact that the damage done by 'the great pietist/ Rainy' in relation to the Clearances cannot come close to the devastation that could come about by

nuclear submarines passing through the Sound of Raasay in the 1970s:

the death that would bring utter devastation  
even on the beauty  
that grew in Screapadal.  
and is still there  
in spite of Rainey's bad deed,  
his greed and social pride. (stanza 16)

The insinuation here is that while the people of Raasay were 'lost' due to Rainey's Clearances, the landscape remained untouched.

Rainey left Screapadal without people,  
with no houses or cattle, only sheep,  
but he left Screapadal beautiful;  
in his time he could do nothing else.  
(stanza 9)

This would not be the case with a nuclear threat and thus, this possibility takes on a meaning beyond MacLean's imagining; while the trees can remain to repopulate Hallaig, there is no such hope offered to the reader of 'Screapadal'.

But the submarines  
and the aeroplanes  
and the atom and neutron!  
The slow sore poverty is not  
their gift but the sudden holocaust  
that will fall from the sky (stanza 17)

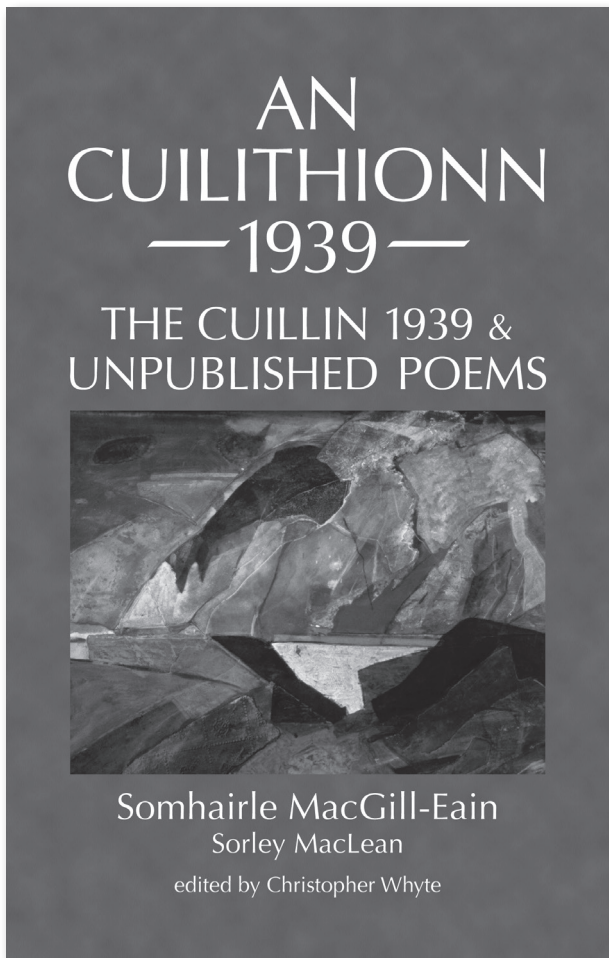
'Screapadal' is a poem of conscience in the same tradition as MacLean's war poems. The poem is rich in placenames and personal names, the heritage that is linked to the land and which Gaelic poets have celebrated over the centuries. However, by the very act of naming things, MacLean is highlighting what will be lost by this threat of 'sudden holocaust'. 'Screapadal' is a nature poem and a poem which charts the social history of the Gael (not hesitating to show the dark times in Highland history). It is a very modern nature poem because it raises very immediate global concerns in a local setting and challenges the reader to face up to what could be lost if this environmental threat is not addressed.

### FURTHER READING

In conclusion, these poems have swept across twentieth century history – from the Second World War right up to the ever-present worry of nuclear power. These key texts are a great chance to show school pupils, not only a window into Gaelic culture, but also a glimpse of how one mind makes sense of political and personal struggle – and this universality, whether the poems are being taught in their original Gaelic or their English translation, is the most important thing that can be taken from them. These teaching notes have been focussed on teaching the six poems of Sorley MacLean as part of a Higher English curriculum. For this reason, the poems have been studied in translation and emphasis on historical, social and political contexts, rather than linguistic points relating to the original Gaelic texts. Many a student has become interested in the Gaelic language through the English translations of poetry by Sorley MacLean and other Gaelic poets. The reading list below is intended to deepen the themes discussed in these teaching notes and may also be of interest to those who want to explore more of the Gaelic aspects of MacLean's work.

### KEY THEMES IN SIX POEMS OF SORLEY MACLEAN

- The place of tradition and the role of the poet in Gaelic tradition;
- Love as a way of accessing the eternal and as a method of transcending time;
- Socialism versus the 'established order';
- The regenerative power of nature and poetry;
- The connection between land and people;
- The importance of placenames and personal names in Gaelic tradition;
- The effects of war and nuclear threat on the individual and on the land.



**AN CUILITHIONN 1939  
THE CUILLIN 1939  
& UNPUBLISHED POEMS**  
**Somhairle MacGill-Eain  
Sorley MacLean**

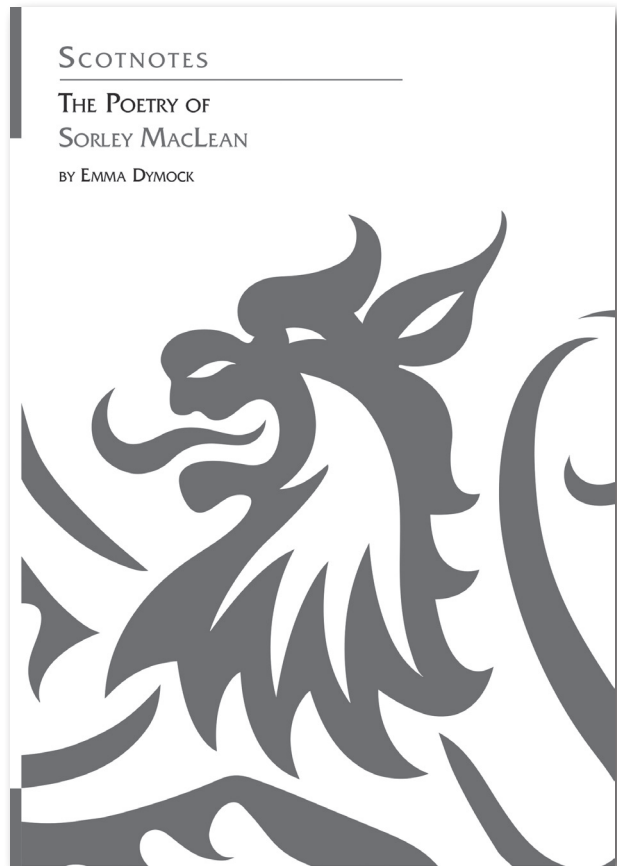
*Edited by Christopher Whyte*  
2011 Paperback 336 pages £12.50  
ISBN 9781906841034

**“A triumph.”—*The Scotsman***

Sorley MacLean’s extended political poem ‘An Cuilithionn’ (‘The Cuillin’) has hitherto been known only in an abridgement, made fifty years after its initial conception in 1939 on the eve of World War II.

Christopher Whyte’s edition of the original manuscript includes 400 lines never before published, along with MacLean’s own English translation from the time of writing, and an extended commentary.

Forty-five other previously unpublished poems by Sorley MacLean also appear here for the first time, with facing English translations.



**THE POETRY OF  
SORLEY MACLEAN**  
**Emma Dymock**

2011 Paperback 92 pages £5.50  
ISBN 9781906841058

Along with his contemporaries Edwin Morgan and Hugh MacDiarmid, Sorley MacLean is recognised as one of the most important Scottish poets of the twentieth century. MacLean was greatly influenced by Gaelic tradition and by contemporary cultural and political ideas from around the world. In many ways he brought Scottish Gaelic poetry into the modern era, and he is a key figure in modern Scottish literature.

MacLean’s poetry ranges beyond Scotland to confront European and world events and politics. This book offers a detailed study of MacLean’s poems, providing insight into the context of his work. It also includes close readings of selected poems that best represent his key themes and ideas. This Scotnote is ideal for senior school pupils and students of all ages as a general introduction or as a starting point for more in-depth study.