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A Dying Tongue: Reading Sorley MacLean

I HAVE BEEN READING ON AND OFF IN Irish Gaelic poetry since my early teens when I took private lessons in the language, stuffing my school cap into my raincoat pocket and turning my lapels up to hide the uniform of my secular school as I made my way into a Catholic school, after hours, to get my lessons from a priest. I was learning Donegal Irish whose pronunciation, Father Maguire told me, was similar to that of Scots Gaelic. But I never came across Scots Gaelic until I found the poems of Sorley MacLean, many years later, in Victoria, British Columbia, in the university library. I opened MacLean's 1977 selection, *Reothairt 's Contraigh / Spring Tide and Neap Tide*, in a bilingual edition privileging the English by putting it on the more prominent right page, but my eyes fell first to the left, on 'Reothairt':

Uair is uair agus mi briste
thig mo smuain ort is tu òg,
is lìonaidh an cuan do-thuigsinn
le làn-mara 's mìle seòl.

Again and again when I am broken
my thought comes on you when you were young,
and the incomprehensible ocean fills
with floodtide and a thousand sails.

Falaichear cladach na trioblaid
le bhodhannan is tùrr a' bhròin
is buailidh an tonn gun bhristeadh
mu m'chasan le suathadh sròil.

The shore of trouble is hidden
with its reefs and the wrack of grief,
and the unbreaking wave strikes
about my feet with a silken rubbing.

Ciamar nach do mhair an reothairt
bu bhuidhe dhomh na do na h-eòin,
agus a chaill mi a cobhair
s' i tràgadh boinn' air bhoinne bròin?

How did the springtide not last,
the springtide more golden to me than to the birds,
and how did I lose its succour,
ebbing drop by drop of grief?

Even if you know no Gaelic when you look at the line endings and concentrate on the vowels of the Gaelic poem you may see that these are rhymed quatrains: *a b a b / a c a c / d c d c*. Except that in Gaelic, rhyme is internal—in effect, assonance. Like many of MacLean's poems, this one is influenced by English metre. In others the rhyme pattern is more strictly traditional, with the assonances alternating between the ends and the middles of lines—as occurs only irregularly in this poem. And you can see that something quite intricate is happening in the poem's sound pattern, especially in the last line.

When I first read it I was moved by the first two lines, which I understood; subsequently I had to pick my way through the rest using the translation

on the right. I knew from then on that whatever effort I had to put into reading Sorley MacLean would be worthwhile.

Here is a rough pronunciation of the last stanza, using an amalgam of the systems given from various sources but mainly *MacIannan's Gaelic Dictionary*. (MacLean's own pronunciation, in recordings, is quite idiosyncratic: he chants his poems with strong emphasis on syllables which would not normally receive it). I have CAPITALISED, *italicised* and **bolded** some syllables to show assonance. I have also underlined the stressed syllables.

Kyimer nach do VAR an re-owrsh*htch*
 boo vwee-uh *ghov* nu do **hyoyn**,
 acus a CHA-il mee a co-wer
 shee trahghuh **boyn** er **voynyu** **broyn**?

Even in this crude form the musical complexity of the Gaelic will be apparent. The language contains a larger range of sounds even than English. The lines can be reckoned syllabically (usually alternating 7 or 8) as well as by stresses (usually 3). This is not free verse—which MacLean never wrote although some modern Gaelic poets do—translatable into prose without much loss because it already is, as MacLean himself once put it, “chopped prose.” MacLean's translation is into prose—but chopped into lines corresponding to those of the poem.

In the translation most lines are rhythmic. The only clumsiness is the repetition of “springtide”, presumably to avoid confusion about what the adjective “golden” refers to, but this shows MacLean's priorities. He puts clarity of meaning first; rhythm, second. Yet the many-layered meanings in poetry and their utterance in sound are untranslatable. MacLean's friend John MacInnes, for instance, has pointed out that the word “buidhe” / “yellow”, “golden” also means “grateful” and that both meanings apply here. And take the last line: “s' i tràgadh boinn' air bhoinne bròin?”

This refers to the drop on drop of the ebbing tide, and of tears of grief as well as the ebbing of “succour” and of the poet's spirit. There are three words for “drop” in Gaelic. MacLean often uses “braon”. But here “boinne” assonates with the final word “bròin.” No translation could capture all this.

THE TRANSLATION SCHOLAR PHILIP VENUTI has defined the options of “foreignisation” and “domesticisation”. MacLean tends to the latter: he provides a straight English version. And his First Class Honours degree in English at Edinburgh can remind us that his knowledge of English was thorough. He might have opted for a more foreign, a more literally Gaelic approach such as:

Again and again and me broken
 comes my thought on you and you young,

and the ungraspable sea fills
with fulltide's thousand sails.

And at the last line:

And she ebbing drop on drop of grief.

This does add something. "Again and again and me broken" conveys the rough pain of the original. "And she ebbing drop on drop of grief" conveys an extra meaning inherent in the original where the "cobhair" ("succour"—or help, relief) is in the feminine gender in contrast to the tide itself which is masculine —i.e. it is the succour given by the woman, the possible healing of his wounds, which is ebbing. ("Cobhair" also evokes a nearly identically sounding word "còbhar" which means "foam".)

But a literal version also takes something away. It is not good English. And literal translation from Gaelic often has something of the stage Irish about it. (I'm thinking of the prostitute in Behan's *The Hostage* who when asked to do a task replies indignantly, "And me on me back all day!")

A verse translation which tried to approximate the form of the original (the assonant rhymes, the line lengths) would also fail at the level of meaning:

Again and again, broken,
my thoughts go to you, young.
Incomprehensible, ocean
thousands of sails in throngs.

Which is, of course, rubbish.

Leaving aside translation, even for a reader who knows Gaelic, some levels of the poem may not be grasped. But it helps to go to a good dictionary. According to Dwelly's *Illustrated Gaelic to English Dictionary* (Gairm, 1988) the phrase "Reothairt an diugh agus còntaigh am màireach" means "up today and down tomorrow"—which gives an extra level to the title of the volume, *Reothairt 's Còntaigh*. There is also a phrase "reothairt nan eun", meaning "springtide of the birds", also called "the springtide of St Patrick's day"—i.e. a real spring tide in spring rather than some other time of year—which MacLean seems to be alluding to in line ten.

This essay is not an addition to the growing critical or academic writing on MacLean (as in *Sorley MacLean: Critical Essays*, edited by Raymond Ross and Joy Hendry, 1986). I want to address the issues which come out of a reading like the one above. How can we best read Sorley MacLean's poetry? In his own translations? In verse translations by others? By learning Gaelic? If so how well do

we have to learn it? How much do we need to know about the Gaelic world to understand MacLean's poems? And isn't Gaelic a doomed enterprise anyway?

MacLean wrote to a friend in 1943:

The whole prospect of Gaelic appals me, the more I think of the difficulties and the likelihood of its extinction in a generation or two. A highly inflected language with a ridiculous (because etymological) spelling, no modern prose of any account, no philosophical or technical vocabulary to speak of ... exact shades of its meanings not to be found in any of its dictionaries and dialectically varying enormously (what chance of the appreciation of the overtones of poetry, except among a handful?). Above all, all economic, social and political factors working against it ...

And he wrote in a poem:

Chan fhaic mi fàth mo shaothrach
bith cur smaointean an chainnt bhàsmhoir ...

I do not see the sense of my toil
putting thoughts in a dying tongue ...

This, incidentally, contains an example of MacLean's bilingual punning: he was, after all a close reader of Donne and Marvell. "Toil" in Gaelic means "inclination, desire ... pleasure". His toil is also a pleasure.

According to the Gaelic Report (Registrar General of Scotland, 2005) in 1981 there were 79,000 Gaelic speakers, in 1991, 66,000, and in 2001, 58,000. In 2001, 92,000 knew some Gaelic. In the Republic of Ireland according to the 2002 Census about 1,500,000 state they speak Irish, with 340,000 claiming to speak it (at least sometimes) every day, but only 33,000 in the "Gaeltacht" areas where speaking it is encouraged to be full time. In Scotland some people now maintain the situation is improving. There is a slight increase in the number of school children who know some Gaelic, and there are at least some programmes on the radio and TV (though nothing like so many as in Ireland where there is a TV channel in Irish), and there is now a Gaelic language college, Sabhal Mor Ostaig, in Sleat, the mildest and apparently most "English-like" landscape in Skye. But I am not convinced. On a visit to Skye in 2006 I heard not a word of Gaelic spoken, though plenty of English, Scots, American-English, German, and Chinese. I mean not in the streets, shops, B & Bs, or even in the harbour pubs in Portree where "ordinary" people go. And I was listening for it, though not addressing people in it for fear of eventually becoming lost for words. I don't want to be what is known in Ireland

disparagingly as a “Gaeilgeoir”—originally “speaker of Irish” but now something like “mindless Gaelic enthusiast”. Research has shown that the flood of Gaeilgeoiri to the Irish Gaeltacht areas has caused a deterioration of the language as the locals simplify their discourse in order to be understood. So perhaps in Skye, as happens in the Irish Gaeltacht, people are wisely keeping quiet when language-tourists are around. But there is more Gaelic to be heard on the streets of Dingle, in the Kerry Gaeltacht, than on the streets of Portree. And in the graveyard where MacLean is buried, among several hundred headstones mainly dating from about 1950 on, less than ten are inscribed in Gaelic, including MacLean’s, his mother’s, and I think a brother’s. Furthermore, as MacLean himself gloomily concluded, the self-conscious promotion of Gaelic in festivals and “Mods” leads to mediocrity in standards.

So I take a pessimistic view—as Thomas Hardy said, always the wisest course, as if you are right you can be pleased and if you are wrong you can also be pleased.

And isn’t poetry, too, a dying tongue? I mean real, enduring poetry, not the transitory verse of career poets or of what Eugenio Montale called the “Sunday poets” or “the 30,000”—a number he presumably whisked out of the air. Montale earned his living as a journalist. If you look back on the poetry that endures it is almost always written by people who earn their living by other means than poetry, even if by the writing of prose as with Hardy and Graves. Career poets (I’m thinking of Nahum Tate, Byron, Tennyson—not the university and grant-funded poets of the later 20th century whose enduringness remains to be determined) have to write to order. MacLean did not. He went for years at a time not writing, and at intervals he burned batches of poems he thought no good. He did not have to produce—except as a headmaster, by which he paid his dues to the society that supported him, as almost all of us do. If we are poets or read poetry it is not for society, it is for poetry.

Scots Gaelic is one of the greatest languages in Europe for poetry, as MacLean pointed out in ‘Realism in Gaelic Poetry’, a talk given in 1936 when he was aged 25, worth reading several times over. Its gist is, first, that the “Celtic Twilight” idea of Gaelic poetry taken up by so many 19th century literati, including Yeats, whose verse MacLean at first liked then came to mistrust, is the reverse of the truth about Gaelic poetry; and secondly that

the greater the poem the greater is its realism ... The greater the emotion the more realistic does the poem tend to be ... for the strength of the emotion checks the wandering imagination, and it is from the straying of the imagination that lack of realism comes ... My business tonight is to try to show that Gaelic poetry is not less but more realistic than most European poetry.

But short of moving to Sleat and attending all the events at Sabhal Mor Ostaig and becoming involved in the local politics over Gaelic primary schools, can we steep ourselves in MacLean's world? Actually, not even then. The conflicts which tear MacLean almost apart in some of his poems are universal, but they are also anchored in his own time. He renovated Gaelic by bringing the 20th century into it—Lenin, Ego and Id and the battle of Alamein among other things. But we are now in the 21st century. We cannot relive his or any poet's life except in the poems.

It does help to know something of the Gaelic world. An example is MacLean's famous *Dàin do Eimhir*, in which not only Lenin *et al* appear, but Deirdre and Maeve from Irish myth, William Ross from Gaelic poetry and MacDiarmid from Scots. The whole sequence of 60 poems is best studied in Christopher Whyte's well-annotated edition (Association of Scottish Literary Studies, 2002) in which the Gaelic poems are even on the right; the sequence is knitted together by a triangle from Irish myth. I do not think this has been explored so far in the academic writing about MacLean.

We know from an interview MacLean gave to Joy Hendry and other sources that "Eimhir" is a composite of mainly two women. Whyte suggests actually four are included. (MacLean does state in *Eimhir* XII that there were four to whom he "gave love".) But probably the "red-haired woman" whom he knew in Skye in the early 1930s was the same person as the red-haired woman of the late 30s. She has never been publicly identified. She both preceded and succeeded the "golden-haired woman" who has been identified as an Irishwoman, Nessa O'Shea, who married and went back to Ireland. Furthermore, although MacLean suppressed some of the poems, most of them finally appeared in his *Collected Poems, O Choille gu Bearnadh*, in 1989, a volume which is dedicated to his wife—"Do Rinidh / To Renee"—and includes poems to her. There is evidence that MacLean deliberately muddled some of the language in revising his poems; for example, it is not always clear if the woman is the red-haired one or the golden-haired one—he even seems to have changed references to the colour of her hair. He states frankly in one poem ('A' Mhalairt Bhreugach' / 'The False Exchange') that he has given 12 poems written to one woman to another woman because he felt she needed them. And many poems never included in the *Eimhir* sequence but which appear in the 1939-1941 section of his poems (including 'Reothairt', discussed above) are also about one or other "Eimhir". The original *Eimhir* poems appeared in bursts, quite against MacLean's will: several were written in a single night in a waking between dreams. His feelings about them were ambivalent. He wrote in one poem that he knew his poems were the equal of William Ross's (perhaps the greatest "personal" Gaelic poet) and in *Eimhir* XIX states "I gave you immortality", but he sometimes told friends he was ashamed and disgusted with the poems.

Publishing the volume *Dàin do Eimhir* presumably helped him tidy up his turbulent personal situation. The title ties the poems together and merges the women they were written to: they are poems to the Muse. It states in a Gaelic / English pun that these poems are to one eternal woman. “Dàin do Eimhir” is pronounced approximately “Dyin do Ever”—i.e. “Dying Do Ever”, or “Die And Do Ever”. He does not write “Dàin d’Eimhir” which would reflect the common elision of vowels between words in Gaelic—in which case the pronunciation would be “Dyin dever”. No, he spells out the “do”, often pronounced more like “duh” than “do” but in his recorded reading he always pronounces it as “do”, separating it clearly from “Eimhir”. Or if you do not accept the extensive version of this pun, perhaps you will accept a simpler version: “Dàin do Ever”—“Poems for Ever”. Indisputably “Eimhir” (or “Eimhear”, in modern Scots and Irish Gaelic, although it was in “Emer” in Old Irish), meaning probably “swift one”, is pronounced “Ever”.

The story of Eimhir in Irish legends (The Wooing of Emer, the Jealousy of Emer) includes her husband Cuchulain. This hero’s name means “The Hound of Culain”, Culain being the name of his blacksmith foster father. As is well known, Skye is dominated by the Cuillin mountains. MacLean wrote a long poem about them and they haunt his shorter poems. The etymology of the words “Culain” and “Cuillin” is obscure, but they sound the same and may be connected by a common element, the word “cuileann” for “holly”. MacLean’s wonderful poem (Eimhir XXIX) ‘Coin is Madhaidhean Allaidh’ / ‘Dogs and Wolves’, in which the wolves of his poems slaveringly hunt the deer of his love is surely an outright expression of the imagery of the hound Cuchulain pursuing Emer. In the Cuchulain story there is a triangle: Cuchulain, Emer and Fand. Cuchulain has sworn to Emer he would never lie with another woman, but one way or another he does with many. The great love of his life apart from Emer is Fand (probably meaning “tear”, as from an eye) who is divine, being from the Otherworld, and the daughter of the sea god Manannan mac Lir. She is from “across the water”. (She and Manannan have been identified as possible local divinities in the Isle of Man.) Emer and Fand each renounce Cuchulain in the face of the other’s apparently greater love, but Fand’s father Manannan mercifully passes his cloak between Cuchulain and Fand, so that they forget they have known each other. Emer does not forget but she forgives Cuchulain.

Perhaps if this legend were pursued carefully through *Dàin do Eimhir* the poems’ autobiographical content would become more clear. The name Nessa, for example, first appears in the Cuchulain legend as his possible grandmother!—but Irish myth is full of shape-shifting and name-shifting. I prefer to honour MacLean’s privacy and not speculate about the details. Nevertheless it does intensify a reading of the poems if we accept that

1. MacLean is merging several, but mainly two, women into one, and they represent the eternal feminine—the male poet’s Muse or goddess. In the myth, Emer is human, but Fand is a goddess. Cuchulain (the mad and inspired hero who is MacLean’s alter ego) and the actual MacLean (full of sleepless protestant conscience) swing between the human and the divine woman.

2. Emer does not exist, in the legend, without Cuchulain. Although MacLean mentions Cuchulain only once in the poem cycle his presence, as in the wolf hounding his love across the Cuillins, is implied. MacLean is writing about himself—the savage wolf on the one hand, the tame dog on the other—as son of the Cuillins which have meaning in his poems as the summits of poetry and love.

Back to translation. In 2002 Seamus Heaney published a verse translation of ‘Hal-laig’, MacLean’s longish poem about the desertion left by the clearances at Hallaig, a township on his native island, Raasay.

Heaney stated in *The Guardian* of 30 November, 2003, that

I got to know the poetry and the poet in the 1970s. First, through reading Iain Crichton Smith’s translations of Dain do Eimhir ... And then, a year or two later, I met Sorley and read the English translations of poems he delivered in Gaelic at an event in the Abbey Theatre in Dublin.

Heaney describes Crichton Smith’s translations as having “a terrific directness”, and he adds that MacLean’s own translations “which are first and foremost cribs, have a very direct and reliable feel about them”.

Several paragraphs later, however, Heaney turns MacLean’s “cribs” into something else:

My own version does not purport to equal, never mind replace the *almost scriptural English* [my italics] that Sorley set down in place of his Gaelic poem. I simply wanted to catch something of the original trance in a verse translation. I was hoping my English could do what Yeats wanted rhythm to do in poetry: prolong the moment of contemplation.

Irish speakers may find Scots Gaelic hard to understand when spoken, at first, but it is largely comprehensible when written (as, say, written Scots is by an English speaker). It is not clear whether or not Heaney’s translation is of MacLean’s original

Gaelic text or MacLean's English version. But certainly some of his translation fails to do justice to the Gaelic.

Here are the last two stanzas, after lovely lines about ghost girls walking back to the village, in Gaelic, then the translations.

MacLean:

's am bòidhche 'na sgleò air mo chridhe
mun tig an ciaradh air na caoil,
's nuair theàrnas grian air cùl Dhùn Cana
thig peileir dian á gunna Ghaoil;

's a buailear am fiadh a tha 'na thuaineal
a' snòtach nan làraichean feòir;
thig reothadh air a shùil 'sa' choille:
chan fhaighear lorg air fhuil ri m' bheò.

and their beauty a film on my heart
before the dimness comes on the kyles,
and when the sun goes down behind Dun Cana
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.

Heaney:

And their beauty a glaze on my heart.
Then as the kyles go dim
And the sun sets behind Dun Cana
Love's loaded gun will take aim.

It will bring down the lightheaded deer
As he sniffs the grass round the wallsteads
And his eye will freeze: while I live,
His blood won't be traced in the woods.

Which do you prefer? Does Heaney “catch something of the original trance in a verse translation”? I would say definitely not. His version does not come across as more “poetic” or even more verse-like than MacLean’s. Perhaps “his blood won’t be traced in the woods” is more rhythmically emphatic than MacLean’s “his blood will not be traced while I live.” But it misplaces the emphasis. Usually the end of a line of poetry or prose states the most important point, its conclusion. Putting “woods” last implies that the most important thing is that the blood won’t be traced in the woods—i.e. it might otherwise be traced elsewhere. Yet MacLean has made it clear that the blood won’t be traced “while I live”—i.e. that so long as he, or his poem, stays alive the deer too will stay in a sense alive and its blood will not be traced.

Heaney’s “and their beauty a glaze on my heart” is in the same rhythm as MacLean’s “and their beauty a film on my heart”, and different in only one word. That word is a mistranslation. Heaney translates “sgleò” as “glaze”. But there is no single word for “glaze” in Gaelic, there is only “Còmhdach le glaine” which means “cover with glass” (MacLennan). Furthermore in Gaelic the word “sgleò” has several meanings. According to MacLennan: “a shade a film; a vapour or mist ... romancing of one who sees imperfectly”. According to Dwelly: “Vapour, mist”. 2. Shade, darkness. 3. Idle talk, rhodomontade ... 9. dimness of the eyes ... 11. Misapprehension ... 13. Romancing of one who sees imperfectly.”

Clearly MacLean is using the word “sgleò” in its two main meanings—as a film over the eyes, and as a film of illusion. Heaney’s version omits both these meanings. Furthermore, the word “film” hints at the transparent membrane over the heart which it would be nonsense to describe as “glazed”.

A more serious subtraction of meaning is from the word “dian”. MacLean translated this as “vehement”. This does seem a little odd. How can a bullet be vehement if it does not speak? But the point of the poem is that this particular bullet does speak: it is an utterance. Actually it is the poem itself, “killing” the deer (the “dear” in another bilingual pun) of time in order to suspend time—at least in MacLean’s lifetime, i.e. while he envisions this scene and utters this poem. Hallaig is MacLean’s equivalent to Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’.

“Dian” means “hasty, vehement, eager” (MacLennan); and “keen, impetuous, eager, vehement, violent, furious” (Dwelly). The word is usually applied to *people* but MacLean is applying it to a bullet. It is a key word in the poem. Heaney simply eliminates it and substitutes “Love’s loaded gun will take aim”. Well no, it *fires* a vehement bullet.

Passing by the substitution of “light headed” for “dizzily”, as if the deer had been at a cocktail party, why the unjustified Anglo Saxon “wallsteads”? The Scots Gaelic word “larach” simply means “a building in ruins.” Its equivalent in Irish Gaelic, “lathair” means an empty space, a site. Its root “lar” means simply “floor” in Scots Gaelic (Irish Gaelic “urlar”). It is cognate with the Latin “lar” meaning

“hearth”. It suggests houses ruined down to their floors and their burned out hearths.

Etymology is not everybody’s meat, but a really careful translation like MacLean’s includes a word by word awareness of it. An original poem is likely to resonate on several levels of word meaning and word origins. This resonance on multiple levels is what makes a poem untranslatable except into prose.

I suspect that any one who wants to translate MacLean will be unable to better or equal his translations because he must have thought long and hard about them, word by word. But in order to achieve a new and different translation it is tempting to paraphrase MacLean’s using different, less accurate words, as Heaney seems to have done.

So what about Ian Crichton Smith’s verse translations? If they have brought people to read MacLean in the original, so much the better. But I cannot agree with Heaney that they have “a terrific directness”. On the contrary. Here is the beginning of *Eimhir III*:

Never was I so tormented
or troubled in my clay
by Christ’s wanderings on the earth,
or the millions of the sky.

Robert Garioch, translating the same poem into Scots, is closer to “terrific directness”:

I never kent sic glaumerie
nor stauchert frae sae stark a stound
at thocht of Christ’s dule on the yird
or millions of the mappamound.

Of course both are new products—though not poems, because they cannot be. MacLean himself wrote to Alan Bold “No poetry is translatable, and the more verse approximates to poetry, the more untranslatable it is.” According to Iain Crichton Smith, interviewed in *The Dark Horse* No 6, Spring 1998, “Then again someone like Sorley MacLean will say, ‘Gaelic cannot be translated.’”

I have translated poems by Lehmann, Brecht and Goethe from German, and Pierce Ferriter from Irish Gaelic. To translate a poem one loves into verse is a private homage to the poet. MacLean himself could not resist translating John Cornford’s ‘Heart of the heartless world’ into Gaelic. But translations always subtract from a poem.

How can we best read Sorley MacLean? I shall finish with what I hope are practical recommendations, backed up by the discussion above:

1. Read the poems along with MacLean's own translation and nobody else's. (With the exception of the handful of Eimhir poems published posthumously and translated into prose by Whyte).
2. It is helpful to have Whyte's well annotated edition of *Dàin do Eimhir*.
3. Study at least enough Gaelic to get the pronunciation right and to understand the structures of the language.
4. If a particular poem interests you, look up key words in a dictionary to get a sense of possible double meanings.
5. Listen to MacLean reading his own verse. As of 2006 the Claddagh recording (on tape, not CD) entirely devoted to MacLean reading poems in Gaelic is unavailable, but the CD of Poems in Scots and Gaelic (Scotsoun SSCD072) is invaluable; it includes MacLean reading eight poems in Gaelic then in English translations in which he gives an unusual emphasis to words just as he does in Gaelic. (For example in Gaelic he draws out to an extraordinary extent the usually brief "epithetic" vowel that occurs between certain consonants. The word for Calgary [on Mull, not in Alberta] in Eimhir XLII comes out as "Chal-aaa-garaigh".) This is, in Blake's phrase, "the voice of the bard" and it is clear that this tough-minded headmaster considered poetry as something other than ordinary language. Whether in Gaelic or English he chants. And the bonus on this CD is MacLean's friend Robert Garioch reading in Scots.
6. Spend some time, if you have not already, in a Gaelic or formerly-Gaelic landscape. It does not have to be Skye itself which contains elements (mountains, sea, plants) common to other places in the Highlands and in the North and Southwest of Ireland.
7. Scots Gaelic is in fact not much more like Donegal Irish than other Irishes. If you know some Irish, what are you waiting for?
8. Read a good history of the Highlands or the Clearances.
9. Read as much of the older Gaelic poetry as you can, using MacLean's essays in *Ris a' Bhruthaich* (sometimes translated as "Towards the Summit" but it means "To the Ascent") as a companion.

Yes, Gaelic is a dying tongue. And poetry is a dying tongue. But their blood will not be traced while we live.