A’ Moladh na Rèiseamaid: Gaelic poetry and the British Army, 1793–1815.

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Much has been written about the role of the Gaels of Scotland in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. A glut of regimental histories written about the various Highland divisions which served at the time paint the Gaels as fierce and loyal members of George III’s imperial army.[1] Such studies often propose that in the Highland regiments the British army harnessed the innate martial qualities of the clans, channeling their primitive energy for service in modern warfare, and allowing for Gaels to become British in the process. The hypothesis is dubious enough, but made even more so by the fact that these regimental histories largely fail to take into account the testament of the Gaels in their own language. In order to get an insight into the manner in which the activities of the British army impacted on the Gaelic community in Scotland at this time it is essential to take into account the documentary evidence in Gaelic, and as such it is necessary to look at poetry: relatively little Gaelic prose from this time is extant, and there is no other body of evidence that is so plentiful and varied as Gaelic verse.[2]

A brief overview be given here of some of the ways in which Gaelic poets dealt with the increasing influence exerted by the British army in the Highlands at the time of the wars against revolutionary and Napoleonic France. Emphasis will be placed on the manner in which the Gaelic poetic tradition was adapted to fit the context created for it through the raising of the Highland regiments, and more generally on how Gaelic poets responded to the British military at this time.

Independent companies had been raised in the Highlands since the early-seventeenth century, but it was in the years between the Jacobite Rebellions of 1715 and 45 that the Government proceeded to create a strong and sustainable military force in the region. The ’45 actually paved the way for much of the recruitment that would follow: it demonstrated the Highlands’ military potential at a time of crisis and was subsequently used as an example to rationalise recruiting policies.[3] After the Seven Years War (1756–1763) the raising of regiments became more widespread in the Highlands, and the part that the Highland companies played in the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783) cemented the region’s status as a vital recruiting ground for the British Imperial army. Between 1745 and 1793 the Highlands shifted, in the eyes of the Government, from a troublesome quarter whichhad to be suppressed, to a hotbed of military potential which could beutilised. By 1815 the sheer scale of the Napoleonic wars had shown that military expectations placed on the region were unrealistic; but by that time the legendary status of the Highland regiments had been affirmed in the nation’s consciousness. Throughout this period Highland proprietors raised regiments from within their centres of power, thus reaping the benefits of the British fiscal-military state by playing on the supposed clannish, martial qualities of their tenants.[4]

War had, of course, long been a central influence on life in the Highland region, and the

conventions of Gaelic panegyric poetry had developed around the warrior-based society of the clans. John MacInnes has aptly delineated the nature and function of the rhetorical code of Gaelic panegyric, showing it to be 'a system which reflects the entire Gaelic experience in Scotland'.[5] The main function of panegyric is the praise of a chief or clansman through the application of a set of conventional images and forms of address, which are drawn upon to extol the heroic and social virtues of the subject of praise.[6] The subject might be compared, for example, to a tree or a bird of prey, so that he is 'a' chraobh as àirde' (the highest tree) or 'an t-seabhag threun' (the valiant hawk).[7] The poet might also draw attention to the subject's skill as a warrior; his generosity in hospitality; the allies who will fight with him in battle; and his revered ancestral line. These are just some of the stock conventions of panegyric;as a poetic system it is far more wide and varied than a few examples can demonstrate. Although it developed within the clan-system, the adaptability of panegyric allowed for it to survive the decline of the clans; indeed, although political independence was taken from the Gaels after Culloden, their poetic tradition stayed strong, and they remained to a large extent culturally independent from the rest of Britain. It was therefore natural for poets in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to adapt the rhetoric of Gaelic panegyric to fit the changing society around them, and as the regiments of the British army became an increasingly influential and visible feature of life in the Highland region, poets turned to their literary tradition in an attempt to contextualise this new military order.

Duncan Ban Macintyre (1724–1812) is generally considered to be the foremost of Gaelic poets whose work spans the period between Culloden and the turn of the nineteenth century. His 'Moladh Beinn Dòbhrain' (Praise of Ben Dobhrain) is one of the great works of Gaelic literature – a post-Culloden work which sees the conventions of panegyric being applied to dazzling effect in the praise of nature. It is well known that Macintyre fought on the side of the British against the Jacobite forces at the Battle of Falkirk in 1745, but afterwards distanced himself from this and expressed pro-Jacobite sentiments in his poetry. It is perhaps less well known that, in 1794, Macintyre signed up for the British army again as a recruit of the Breadalbane Fencibles, raised by John Campbell (1762–1834), 4th Earl of Breadalbane.

Macintyre served with the regiment until they were disbanded in 1799, and was based with them in various parts of Scotland during that time. Although his precise role in the regiment is unclear, his age w naturally have limited the activities in which he could be involved. Nevertheless, Macintyre's poems about the regiment are characteristically vigorous works, and in them we see panegyric being applied in something like its proper historical context: to praise fighting men as parts of fighting units. In 'Oran do Iarla Bhràghaid-Albann' (Song to the Earl of Breadalbane) Macintyre addresses his commanding-officer and praises both him and his fellow soldiers:

'S tu ceann an riaghailt
    A tha ciallach carthannach;
Na daoin' a thriall leat
    Gur brèagh am pannal iad;
'S tu thog na ciadan
A shliochd nam Fianntan,
'S an am a ghnìomha
    Bu dian 'sa charraid iad.[8]

Expert in ruling,
    thou art wise and generous;
the men who marched with thee
    are a goodly company;
'tis thou did raise hundreds
of Fiann descendants,
and, in time of action,
    swift in the strife were they.

The Earl is addressed in a manner befitting of a chief: he is a capable, respected leader in full command of his unit of men. We see Macintyre linking the regiment with the warriors of Gaelic legend as he says that they are 'of Fiann descendants' – an affirmation of its belonging to the Highland region and its culture. In'Oran do Rèisimeid Bhràghaid-Albann' (Song to the Breadalbane Regiment) the distinctive, continuous strength of the Gaels is asserted:

'S mairg nàmhaid a thachradh
    Air na lasgairean treun;
Gleidhidh cruadal nan Gàidheal
    Buaidh-làrach dhaibh fèin.[9]

Pity the foe that encountered
    the valiant, gay lads;
the fortitude of the Gaels
    will ensure their victory.

The uniform is described by Macintyre as 'èideadh ceannardach' (a proud accoutrement), and this pride has its roots in the fact that

traditional Highland dress was banned by the British to all except soldiers by the Dress Act of 1746. Although the law was repealed in 1782, plaids and tartans were by that time no longer ordinary Highland wear, and their use in the regiments therefore retained its distinctiveness. By appropriating the once despised tartans and bagpipes for use in a military context, the British army had created a regimental system that had the appearance (and appeal) of a bygone age. In Macintyre's earlier complaint about the Dress Act, 'Oran do 'n Bhriogais' (Song to the Breeches), the poet professed an allegiance to Charles Stuart, and described the British monarch as 'coigreach' (foreigner)

'S e 'n togail inntinn
Cho grinn 's a b' aithne dhomh
Bhith 'n cùirt an rìgh,
Gun bhith strìth ri sgalagachd[10]

'Tis exhilaration
as fine as I know of,
to be in the king's retinue
and not strive with drudgery

It is easy to conclude from a modern perspective that Macintyre's sentiments were misguided: the regiments were part of a military heritage far removed from that of the clans; the military operation in the Highlands was part of the larger process of 'improvement' and therefore hardly intended to preserve anything that was distinctive about Gaelic culture; and figures such as the Earl of Breadalbane did not view their role as patriarchal. But it remains that in an age when Gaels had very little to look towards as a source of pride the regiments offered at least the symbolism of dignity; and, more tangibly, employment.

Allan MacDougall (1750?–1829) was a near-contemporary of Macintyre's, and in his poems we also see the conventions of panegyric being applied to fit the military situation in the Highlands. MacDougall was hired as a poet by Alasdair Ranaldson MacDonell of Glengarry (1773–1828) c. 1798, and was therefore employed by Glengarry when he was colonel of the 79th Regiment (the Glengarry Fencibles). The tradition of retaining an official poet had all but died out by this time, but having a bard fitted well with the romantic image that Glengarry liked to project of himself as 'the last of the chiefs'. Glengarry had responded to a call from the king for more troops by raising a regiment from amongst his tenants; they served at Garrisons in Jersey and Guernsey until the regiment was disbanded after the Peace of Amiens in 1802. We see MacDougall composing a panegyric to 'Coirneal Domhnullach' (Colonel MacDonell), in which he closely follows the conventions of panegyric, praising his patron's leadership qualities; his prowess in battle; and his esteemed lineage:

Lean do chruadal, 's do ghaisgeadh,
'S am fasan bu dual
A bhi colgarra, cosanta
'M prossnachadh sluaigh;
Gu h-airmealteach, treubhach,
Gu geur lannach cruaidh;
'S tu shliochd nam fear treuna,
Nach geilleadh 's an ruaig[11]

Your courage and heroism
Followed in the expected manner,
To be fierce and vigorous,
Encouraging soldiers to battle;
Valorous, gallant,
Armed with a sharp sword and formidable
You are the descendent of the brave men,
Who would not yield in the fight.

MacDougall proceeds to name Glengarry's allies, saying that they will come to him with 'dùthchas' (hereditary duty):

Braithearan Dhomhnuill, Cloinn Dhùghaill,
Marcaich shunntach nan stèud:
Cloinn an t-Shaor bho thaobh Chruachainn,
Bha riabh cruadalach trèun[12]

MacDonalds, MacDougalls,
The joyous riders of steeds,
Macintyres from Cruachan,
That were ever courageous and brave

The rehearsal of allies is a key feature of Gaelic panegyric, often used at a time of crisis to highlight the strength of a particular chief by naming all of those who would fight with him. The purpose of rehearsing allies was often less to give an accurate description of those who would fight with the chief and more to envisage an ideal scenario where the strongest possible backing was onside with him. MacDougall's use of the convention may have been an attempt to massage Glengarry's ego, or merely the application of a convention to complete the panegyric structure of the poem. It is also possible that the poet saw in the regiments a genuine opportunity for old unities to be formed again, and other Gaelic poets at this time (without a patron to please) can be seen rehearsing allies in similar contexts. One example would be the Inverness-shire poet, Alasdair Mackay (1775–1880), who listed the various northern allies who would fight together on the side of the Marquis of Huntly:

'S ann leat dh'eireadh na Gaidheal
Th' eadar 'n Aird 's Duthich 'ic Aoidh,
Eadar Cata 's Braidh-bharr, 's bithidh –
Lochaber 's Baideanach cinnt.[13]

It is with you the Gaels would rise
Who are between Aird (?) and MacKay country,
Between Caithness and Braemar,
And Lochaber and Badenoch.[14]

MacDougall's 'Oran do 'n Reisimeid Duibh' (Song to the Black Watch) recounts that regiment's role in the Battle of Alexandria in 1801. His knowledge of the battle appears to derive from a letter sent home about it which is alluded to in the poem's opening couplet: ''S leinn is eibhinn a phachdaid / Thainig dhachaidh bho 'n Eipheid'[15] (Our pleasure is the letter / Which came home from Egypt). Like Macintyre, MacDougall links the regiment with the warriors of tradition, asking: 'C' àit am facas an coltas / Bho linn Oisein 's na Feinne?'[16] (Where has their like been seen / Since the days of Ossian and the Fenians?). The poet notes the Black Watch's fame throughout the kingdom: 'Bha 'n seann-fhreiceadan ainmeil / Ann an Albainn 's an Eirinn'[17] (The old regiment was renowned / in Scotland and Ireland). MacDougall's pride in the regis evident he proceeds to describe their appearance and capabilities as warriors:

Le 'm breachdanaibh ball-bhreachd,
Maiseach, dealbhach, an fhèileadh;
Meanmach, acfuinneach, armach,
Geur-chalgach gu reubadh;
'S an taobh eile do 'n fhairge,
'S tric a dhearbh iad an treundas.[18]

With their checked plaids,
Handsome and elegant the kilt;
Courageous, expert, warlike,
Armed with sharp blades for wounding;
And on the other side of the ocean,
They often demonstrated their bravery.

Whilst the regiment is praised as a group, its leaders are singled out for particular praise. The Marquis of Huntly,, for example, is named as 'An sàr-ghaisgeach 'sa chomh-strì' (great warrior in battle). The convention of describing the warrior as a bird of prey is used to highlight courage as a soldier:

Seobhag uasal, na h-ealtuinn,
Buadhail, reachdmhor, gu 'n còmhnadh:
An t-ian cruadlach, neartmhor,
A fhuair a chleachdadh ri comhrag.[19]

The noble falcon of the flock
Superior, commmanding, in no need of assistance:
The courageous, strong bird,
Who was schooled in warfare.

The nature of the relationship between men such as the Marquis of Huntly and those who fought for them had changed irrevocably from the hereditary duty that existed during the age of the clans, but there remained a tendency for poets to pay the utmost reverence to those figures from the upper echelons of clan society who had emerged from the mid-eighteenth century with money and power.

Whilst MacDougall's 'Oran do 'n Reisemeid Duibh' (shows a tendency towards traditional forms of address, it also demonstrates the manner in which the wider Imperial world was

beginning to register in the perspective of Gaels at this time: the poem was composed in Glengarry country, but it is based on an account sent home from the battlefields of Africa. Military service was one of the ways in which Gaels were becoming acquainted with the various New Worlds of the British Empire, and those who remained at home were gaining a knowledge of these places through the letters, songs and stories either sent or carried home about them. The Morar bard Alexander MacKinnon (1770–1814) saw active service in the British forces, and his work is an example of the manner in which the events of foreign campaigns could be brought to life for a Gaelic audience in poetry. Mackinnon composed a number of poems which detail his experience as a soldier ofthe 92nd regiment (The Gordon Highlanders) and these contain vivid accounts of battles in Europe and Africa. His poem on the battle of Egmont in 1799, 'Blàr na h-Òlaind' (The Battle of Holland), has a spirited description of the British army routing French troops:

Gum b'i sin an tuairmeas smiorail,
Chinnteach, amaiseach, gun dearmad,
Thug na leòghainn bhorba, nimheil,
Bu cholgail sealladh fo'n armaibh
Ri sgiùrsadh nàimhdean mar fhalaisg
'S dreuchdan fallais air gach calg dhiubh.
'S bha na Franagaich brùchdadh fala
'S an cùl ri talamh anns a' ghainmhich.[20]

It was a brave onset,
Certain, well-aimed, not neglectful,
That those wild, deadly lions made,
Looking fierce behind their arms
As they scourged the foe like heather-fire
With drops of sweat on all their bristles.
And the French were belching blood
As they lay on their backs in the sand.

The abundance of adjectives in the first four lines here suggests the influence of the Jacobite poet Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, while the journalistic account of the gory battle echoes the seventeenth century bard John Lom Macdonald. But despite these familiarities, this poetry must have appeared unique to MacKinnon's audience in the Gàidhealtachd: this was a first-hand account of the military conflict between the world's two great superpowers, set in locations that would have been, to say the least, unusual to the vast majority of Gaels.

Like MacDougall, MacKinnon praises the regiment generally but focuses on its leaders as subjects of particular praise: The Marquis of Huntly is 'An t-òg smìorail fearail naimhdeil'[21] (the young man who was tough, manly and combative); Alan Cameron of Erracht (1753–1828) is 'an leòghann colgarra gun ghealtachd' (the fierce lion without cowardice) who is 'Mar ursainn chatha sna blàraibh.'[22] (Like a doorpost in the battlefields.) MacKinnon saves his highest praise for the commander of the British forces, Sir Ralph Abercromby (1734–1801). A native of Clackmannanshire, Abercromby was one of the most significant military leaders of his day. He served with distinction in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars until he was fatally wounded as commander of the British forces at the Battle of Alexandria in 1801. MacKinnon's poem on Abercromby's earlier success in 1801 at the Battle of Aboukir, 'Oran air don Bhàrd a dhol air Tìr san Èiphit' (A Song by the Poet after Going ashore in Egypt) describes the British commander as: 'An darag dhìleas dharaich ud / Nach d'fhàg san linn seo samhail da'[23] (That faithful tree of oaken wood, / who has left no likeness in this generation). This description of Abercromby as a tree is indicative of the high regard in which MacKinnon held him: the tree is one of the most powerful images in the panegyric code, and its use denotes someone whom the poet considers to be of the very highest standing.[24] Mackinnon asserts Abercromby's authority by describing him as a 'leòghann' (lion) who is 'rioghail' (royal), and the commander's status as a patriarchal, chief-like figure is confirmed as the poet notes the affection which his men have for him: 'Gu bheil do ghaol mar anam dhuinn / air teannachadh na 'r feòil'[25] (love for you is as life's breath to us, / rooted tightly in our flesh). Despite his being a non-Gael, as someone who has fought alongside Mackinnon, Abercromby is addressed in a manner befitting of a fellow warrior. MacKinnon had his precedents here – Iain Lom had similarly used panegyric to lament the death of the Duke of Montrose in 1650. In this way non-Gaelic heroes were drawn into the Gaelic tradition; the language of panegyric made their heroism intelligible t the poet and his audience.[26]

It is rare in Gaelic poetry of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century to see a negative reaction towards the British regiments, although such sentiments can be shown to have existed. John Prebble has demonstrated that the spirit of rebellion could be raised amongst Gaels in the regiments – especially if they became aware that their superiors were being dishonest towards them. A respect for courage and honour could be exploited to the army's favour, but this came with an expectation that

this respect would be reciprocated.[27] Although his work falls outwith the period in consideration here, it is worth looking at a poem by Evan McColl (1808-1898) in order to show that disregard for the British army existed in the early decades of the nineteenth century, which, in this poet's case, may have been a reaction to the events of 1793–1815. 'An Deireasaich' (The Defectors) was published in McColl's collection of 1836, and in it the poet satirises the men in his community for joining the army, questioning whether they deserve to be called Gaels:

A dhaoine gun nàire! Ciod è their mi ribh?
An abair mi Gàeil ribh 's nach Gàeil idir sibh?
B' e samhlachadh an fhleòdair ri stailinn an nì,
'S b' fhèarr h-aon dhiubh 's an àr-fhaich na 'n rèiseamaid dibhs'.[28]

Men without shame! How should I address you?
Should I call you Gaels when you are not Gaels at all?
That would be like comparing pewter to steel,
And better to have one of you in the field of battle than two in the regiment.

For McColl the regiment is clearly a poor replacement for the clan, and in the poem's concluding stanzas he calls for those who are 'dhe 'n fhion-fhuil' (of the true blood) to stay in the Highlands and guard their own people's interests. It is also worth noting the opinion expressed by Alan MacDougall (whom we have already seen praising the regimental unit) in his stinging attack against the introduction of sheep farming to the Highlands, 'Oran do na Cìobairibh Gallda' (Song to the Lowland Shepherds), composed c. 1798. Here MacDougall states 'B' fhèarr leinn gun tigeadh na Frangaich / A thoirt nan ceann de na Gallaibh.'[29] (we would love the French to come / to chop the heads off the lowlanders.) The reference to the French is isolated to this one poem, but it is nonetheless indicative of a poet whose priorities are regional rather than national.

For the most part Gaelic poets did not criticise the regiments. That they did not, and composed poetry that was broadly supportive of a military system designed to manipulate and ultimately mangle their culture clearly points to naivety on their part. But Gaels were hardly in a position where they could properly challenge or grasp the exploitative nature of the regimental system: unlike the Lowlands, where there were at least radical groups to encourage cynicism of the authorities, the tenant-class of Gaels (to which most poets belonged) lived in relative political ignorance. Whatever their inability to grasp the reality of their situation, Gaelic poets were fully aware of their role as spokespeople of their communities and of the poetic tradition to which they belonged. Whilst it palls now to see a poet such as Duncan Ban Macintyre praising a Hanoverian king, it should be borne in mind that in doing so he was attempting to the king his own cultural perspective. The same can be said of MacDougall's praise of the Black Watch in Egypt, or Mackinnon's paean to the commander Ralph Abercromby: poets made the unknown familiar by applying the rhetoric of panegyric to it. Panegyric had long been a mode of both understanding and making understood events which were significant to Gaelic society; during the era of the French revolutionary and Napoleonic wars it continued to serve that purpose.

Notes

1. See for instance, D. Stewart, *Sketches of the Character, Manners, and Present State of the Highlanders of Scotland : with Details of the Military Service of the Highland Regiments*, (London, 1822); T. A. Mackenzie & J. S. Ewart, *Historical Records of the 79th Queens own Cameron Highlanders*, (London, 1877); P. D. Thomson, *The Gordon Highlanders*, (1921).
2. John MacInnes has opened up useful routes of enquiry here in 'Gaelic Poetry in the Nineteenth Century', in C. Craig (ed.), *The History of Scottish Literature* Vol. 3, (Aberdeen, 1987).
3. A. Mackillop, *'More Fruitful than the Soil': Army Empire and the Scottish Highlands, 1715–1815*, (East Lothian, 2000), p. 75
4. *ibid*., p. 166.
5. J. MacInnes, 'The Panegyric Code in Gaelic Poetry and its Historical Background', in J. MacInnes, *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes*, edited by M. Newton, (Edinburgh, 2006), p. 317.
6. *ibid*., p. 273.
7. *ibid*., p. 284.
8. D. Macintyre, *Songs of Duncan Ban Macintyre*, edited by A. MacLeod, (Edinburgh, 1952), p. 366.
9. *ibid*., p. 376.
10. *Ibid*., p. 373.
11. A. Dùghallach, *Orain, Marbhrannan agus Duanagan, Ghaidhealach*, (Inbhir Nis, 1823), p. 10.
12. *ibid*., p. 14.
13. A. MacAoidh, *Orain agus Dain, ann an Gaelic agus am Beurla,* t.d.

[14] A. MacKay, *Òrain agus Dàin, ann an Gaelic agus am Beurla*, (Inbhir Nis, 1821), p. 92.
[15] *ibid*., p. 89.
[16] *ibid*., p. 92.
[17] *ibid*., p. 93.
[18] *ibid*., p. 93.
[19] *ibid*., p. 94.
[20] R. Black (ed.), *An Lasair: Anthology of Eighteenth Century Gaelic Verse*, (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2001), p. 358.
[21] *ibid*., p. 354.
[22] *ibid*., p. 354.
[23] D. E. Meek (ed.), *Caran an t-Saoghail: Anthology of 19th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse*, (Edinburgh, 2003), p. 298.
[24] MacInnes, 'The Panegyric Code in Gaelic Poetry and its Historical Background', p. 284.
[25] Meek, *Caran an t-Saoghail*, p. 298.
[26] *ibid*., p.278.
[27] J. Prebble, *Mutiny: Highland Regiments in Revolt, 1743-1804*, (London, 1975) P. 282.
[28] E. McColl, *The Mountain Minstrel, or, Clarsach nam Beann: Consisting of Original Poems and Songs in English and Gaelic*, (Glasgow, 1836).
[29] D. E. Meek (ed.), *Tuath is Tighearna: Tenants and Landlords,* (Edinburgh, 1995), p. 48.