

At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae

Helen MacAlister

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An Lanntair

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Roddy Murray

Embedded in Scotland's culture, Gaelic preserves ancient idioms, ideas and traditions as if in some fathomless peat *bank*. Serene and still, yet intensely alive, Helen MacAlister's work has its roots in this rich loam that comprises the priceless bequests of Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir, Burns, MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn, Hamish Henderson, John MacInnes and others.

This exhibition penetrates deep into language. In so doing, it creates a new medium of itself that leaps gaps and generations, fuses ideas and influences and transcends, resolves and reconciles them. There are core elements of concrete poetry and the choice essentials of cryptic clues: creativity, ingenuity, imagination, economy and enigma that lead to re-solution, revelation and reward: the word revealed.

An Lanntair is pleased indeed to present this exhibition when Scottish and Gaelic culture is more examined and threatened yet also more valued and relevant than ever.

Ruairidh Moireach

Air a leabachadh ann an cultar na h-Alba, tha a' Ghàidhlig a' glèidheadh cainnt aosmhoir, dualchais agus tradaiseanan mar gur ann an doimhneachd a' phuill-mhòine. Aig a' cheart àm sàmhach is socair ach fhathast gu tur beòthail na dòigh tha an obair aig Eilidh NicAlasdair air a bogadh anns a' pholl shaoibhir seo is air a cuairteachadh leis an dualchas luachmhor aig Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir, Burns, MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn, Hamish Henderson, Iain MacAonghais is eile.

Tha an taisbeanadh seo a' drùidheadh gu domhainn air cànan. Agus leis a sin tha e a' cruthachadh meadhain ùir dha fhèin a leumas beàrn is ginealaich a leaghas beachdan 's gan treòrachadh is a' toirt bàrr orra, agus gam fuasgladh is gan ath-rèiteachadh. Tha na h-eileamaidean aig cridhe "bardachd choncrete" agus na rudan riatanach airson bhoillsigidhean diomhair ann: tionnsgalachd, seòltachd, mac-meanmna, crìontachd agus dubh-fhacal is iad gar treòrachadh a dh'ionnsaigh ath-fhuasglaidh, taisbeanaidh agus diolaidh: am facal nochdte.

Tha an Lanntair air leth toilichte an obair seo a thaisbeanadh aig àm nuair a tha cultar na h-Alba agus nan Gàidheal fon phrosbaig 's fo bhagairt, ach fhathast cho prìseil is iomchaidh 's a bha iad riamh.

Duncan Macmillan

There are beaches around Scotland where those in the know can pick up rough pebbles, take them home to tumble in carborundum for hours, or even days and finally reveal in them the beautiful layering of agate, the rich red of jasper, or the warm, transparent gold of carnelian. Helen MacAlister's art is like that; precious and highly polished by long tumbling of ideas in her mind and slow and careful execution. The final result is always elegantly simple. They are not easy pictures, however. Indeed, their complexity is in inverse proportion to their apparent simplicity. Each work has a layered richness, which like the agate pebbles, emerges for the spectator too as it is polished by long reflection. She herself remarks in an early draft of her notes to the works, 'with irony', she says, (but I feel aptly nevertheless) that the Gaelic word '*taisbeanadh*' is used for 'exhibition' but also for 'revelation'.

The object of the artist's own reflection is, in the very broadest sense, language. Words in many different ways are her subject. She is not a poet manqué, however. Far from it. She sees words and images as two, closely analogous modes of perception. In this, she follows the Enlightenment philosopher Thomas Reid. She does this intuitively, picking up on themes in art that stretch back to Reid. She is not dependent directly on the philosopher in any way, although she does indeed quote him in a different context in her note on the drawing *Standard Habbie*.

This is what Reid wrote in a key passage on perception in his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*:

When someone speaks to us in a familiar language we hear certain sounds, and that is the only effect that his discourse has on us by nature; but by custom we understand the meaning of these sounds, and so we fix our attention not on the sounds but on the things signified by

them. Similarly, by nature we see only the visible appearance of objects, but we learn by custom to interpret these appearances and to understand their meaning. And when we have learned this visual language and it has become familiar to us, we attend only to the things signified and find it very difficult to attend to the signs by which they are presented. The mind passes from one to the other so rapidly, and so familiarly, that no trace of the sign is left in our memory, and we seem to perceive the signified thing immediately and without the intervention of any sign.¹

Thus, incidentally also coining the phrase, Reid identified what he called 'visual language'. We tend to think of the visual and the linguistic as two very different modes of perception belonging to two quite different faculties of the mind. He however proposes a direct analogy between this language of visual signs and the more familiar language of words, whether spoken or written. With both, he argues, we read intuitively a set of signs which have no coherence in themselves and to whose actual form we pay no attention, but from which we have learnt to select and interpret the information that we need and thus proceed from raw sensation to perception, from confusion to meaning. In her notes to her pictures, the artist also quotes Robert Louis Stevenson expressing a very similar sentiment, if less philosophically: "Man's one method, whether he reasons or creates, is to half-shut his eyes against the dazzle and confusion of reality."

In explaining how he sees this process, Thomas Reid uses the painter as an example. "The painter has a need for an abstraction regarding visible objects somewhat similar to what we need here, and this is indeed the most difficult part of his art. For it is obvious that if

he could fix in his imagination the visible appearance of objects, not confusing it with the things it signifies, it would be as easy for him to paint from the life.. as to paint from a copy."²

The influence Reid's argument had on the future of painting was profound. I cannot discuss it here beyond saying that, because of his influence in France, it stands at the very heart of the project that has become modern art. The fact that Reid was so influential does, however, indirectly also locate Helen MacAlister's own remarkable work, not in some obscure backwater, but in an inquiry that extends back into the Enlightenment and remains central even now. Indeed the relation between the sign and the signified is still a crucial area of discussion. Just think of the writings of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault and the whole argument about the opacity and inescapable tendentiousness of language, of the insidious gap between sign and signified that they explore. In the subtlety of her own inquiry Helen MacAlister may match them, but she never follows them so far as to lose faith in language. For her instead it is a rich landscape of shared experience and, like a landscape, it invites the painter's exploration.

Bealach nam Ba – The Pass of the Cattle is one of her principal landscape paintings and so perhaps offers a key to her whole project. It is of the mountain pass at the watershed between Kishorn and Applecross, but symbolically it is also the pass between language and painting. For she paints these two things as though indeed they were one, linked in their uplands at the headwaters of the rivers that flow down from them. Her painting *Ben Dorain* is a homage to Donnchadh Bàn MacIntyre's long poem *In Praise of Ben Dorain*. In the poem, drawing on the rich and ancient visual tradition of Gaelic poetry, the poet himself makes the same link. His poem is a landscape.

The languages that concern Helen MacAlister are Gaelic and Scots. Exploring the peculiar complexities of the way they overlay each other, she also demonstrates how that overlay can illuminate what it means to be Scots; how too Gaelic is a great unseen presence in all this. We may not acknowledge it, but it is there nevertheless. In this quest, for her, painting and language elide; words become painting; painting becomes words. There is no difference; her paintings of words are as visual as are her paintings of landscapes. Following Reid's analysis, she paints the signs of our verbal language, the letters and the words that represent them, just as she paints the signs of our visual language. In her drawings, if you look closely, too, words are embedded in the image, hidden in the marks of the pencil. But words are equally her subject when not actually present. They are there in the unravelling of the layers of meaning of her reflections on language, on the exchanges between Gaelic and Scots, on poetry and on the poets and their commentators, to all of which she also adds her own words in the notes she writes as guidance to her work.

Crucially of course, a pass such as *Bealach nam Ba [sic]* sits on a watershed, but if the waters divide, the pass unites. It is a place of joining, even if at the top of an arduous slope and Helen MacAlister certainly does not flinch when faced with a steep climb. Indeed, her chosen title, *At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae*, (also the subject of one of her word pictures) nicely encapsulates this process of mental mountaineering. As she links painting and language in a common pursuit and situates them meeting on a mountain pass, she also mirrors the Scots literary and poetic traditions in which, in the same way, the two languages of Scots and Gaelic coexist, two sides of the same pass as it were. In this she is following Hamish Henderson. *At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae* is the title of an essay on the language of Scots folksong by Henderson in

which he observes that these two languages demonstrate 'a curious bilingualism in one language.'

Several of her works make a play on the linguistic consequences of this peculiar characteristic of the Scots mental landscape, though they do not always reflect deep mutual understanding between the two linguistic communities that have shaped it. *Nonsense Vocables*, for instance, the words almost dissolved in deep blue, is a reflection on the Scots usage for nonsense of the syllables of the *canntaireachd*, the hidorum-hodorum of verbalised pibroch, or Gaelic mouth music. *Don't give a tinker's curse*, the words in black on flat grey, reflects a similar inversion, but in a way that is typical of all her work, one that opens out into a much wider reflection on the nature of tradition. The tinkers and travelling people were a major source of traditional Scots song. Murdo Macdonald commented twenty years ago how it was Hamish Henderson who demonstrated this fact and how it inverts conventional social values:

*Henderson has shown over the years, the finest sources of Scottish tradition are found among the berry pickers and the travelling folk. At a stroke the previously peripheral is recognised as culturally central, and when that happens, what of the so-called centre? What we see here is a complete disjunction between what is culturally central and what is politically central. What Henderson presents us with is a very clear example of this anomaly. When on the basis of this we ask ourselves the simple question 'who is more important to Scotland, the ballad-singer or the Secretary of State' there is really no contest.'*³

The tinkers may curse, but they come out on top. To return to Thomas Reid, however, what he suggests in his analogy between language and painting is that both are ways of setting a grid of signs, a legible, transparent screen of location and meaning over the incoherence of experience, over 'the dazzle and confusion of reality,' to allow us to make sense of it. Helen's own painting suggests exactly that grid, or indeed Stevenson's half-closed eyes. Her pictures of landscapes are monochrome in a range of muted colours. *Bealach nam Ba* is a rich brown, for instance. *The Lido, Campbeltown bay* is yellow, in this case the colour is a compound of translingual and verbal-visual pun playing on 'bay', the Gaelic *buidhe*, yellow, and *buidheachas*, gratitude.

The paintings themselves consist of a layer of binary marks, of signs, light and dark, and in detail chaotic, but which, overlaid on the raw image which sits behind them, reveal its outlines. The drawings, which frequently relate directly to the paintings, work the same way with a mass of pencil marks from whose confusion the image emerges. In both cases, her process is one of formalising and refining and here she refers back to Hamish Henderson again. She quotes from the same essay that has given her her title where he comments on the formality of the language of folksong. 'It is in the great songs, licked into shape like pebbles by the waves of countless tongues, that this sense of formality is most marked.' That, we feel, is exactly how she paints, licking her image into shape with countless marks and infinite care. She herself refers to this obliquely in *Mol, shingle praise* where the image is the sea-smooth, piled up stones of a raised beach on the Isle of Rum. The stones are like her thoughts, polished with reflection, but also massed and, in the mass, potent. In an earlier work she used shingle as an image taken from Hugh MacDiarmid, 'the roar o' human shingle': the power and

coherence of the mass of humanity, of countless individuals moving together as one. Here she extends that idea by another translingual pun, from 'mol' the Gaelic noun for beach, or 'shingle', the stuff of which a beach, or at least this beach, is made, to 'mol', the Gaelic verb to praise, or celebrate. But then the shingle moving with the tide is also like language itself, at once both solid and fluid, moving with the tide of history. It seems the tide of Gaelic is going out, however. The bald figures of the screenprint *Monoglots* are the year, 1971, and 477, the number of monoglot Gaelic speakers who then still lived in Scotland. The artist contemplates these figures with delicate irony in her note where she records that the blue background is also numbered. It is pantone 300, the precise blue of the Saltire as approved by the Scottish Parliament.

Several of her prints and glass pieces are as terse as this one, but with them likewise, economy does not limit their meaning. *Newly minted coins*, for instance, is just three words sandblasted onto pale green glass. The words are a quotation from John MacInnes on the poetry of Sorley MacLean. Her point is Gaelic itself might be like the raised beach of Rum left high and dry, not by the tide but by sea level change which is much more permanent, were it not for the poets and especially Sorley MacLean. MacInnes describes how even against the decline of Gaelic, MacLean added to the richness of the language with words that are like 'newly minted coins.'

The transparent simplicity of these glass pieces is wonderfully telling. *Cold air in the nostrils* is an eloquent, poetic metaphor, indivisibly word and image. The wavy surface of ice-blue glass embodies the words. *Sainte Chapelle* is a homage to one of the greatest of all compositions of stained glass, but by reversing it, she suggests it is as though we were seeing it from the outside and how little sense that would make. Perhaps the most

beautiful of them, however, is *Bàn: Dearg*, in English, White: Red. It consists of two equal, contiguous sheets of glass. One, to the left, with *Bàn* engraved in it, is a translucent, slightly wavy white. The other, to the right, engraved with *Dearg*, is a rich, glowing red. In Gaelic, these colour adjectives also name the sides of the plough's furrow. As the ploughshare cuts through the fallow ground, the *dearg*, or red side, which is on the right with a right-handed plough, is the dark, turned earth of the tilled, and potentially productive side. The *bàn*, or white side is the still untilled and thus empty ground. In form, side by side, red and white, light and dark, the glass echoes this. Thus she turns the work into a metaphor for the whole business of making images.

Her approach to landscape is not so very different from such eloquent word pieces. She treats the landscapes she chooses with great formality, but she also finds a formality that is there in them as though in sympathy with the poetry they inspire. Ben Dorain, for instance, represented in the work referred to above, is itself a peculiarly formal mountain. Its profile is remarkably symmetrical and even in plan its ridges resemble a rather neat three pointed star. *Glen Roy* and *Glen Urquhart* are two works which continue this theme. For the artist, the parallel roads of Glen Roy, which is what the Ice Age layers of the glen were once thought to be, and the field bank that became an extended gallery for the Glen Urquhart Free Kirk, both also seem to echo the formal shape that poetry needs. She does not stop there, however, but links these things back to language by different routes. In *Glen Roy*, "The work," she writes, "is metaphorically giving location to 'bilingualism' framing the running of the Gaelic and the Scots line. A parallel implicit in the landscape." The drawing *Standard Habbie* extends this notion of line and form to the poetic tradition itself, its line of descent

and the vivid form handed down, as she records, in the poems 'Christ's Kirk', 'The Cherrie and the Slae' and 'Montmerie's Stanza'. Thus the poetry itself becomes a historical landscape. In this particular symbiosis between poetry and landscape, she comes close to David Herd in his *Scots Songs* of 1769. (Before Burns, Herd was a pioneer collector of Scots ballads.) In the introduction to his first collection, Herd argued that the richness of the tradition of popular song in Scotland was itself symbiotic. As though part of nature, it sprang from 'the romantic face of the country and the pastoral life of the great part of the inhabitants.'

In *Glen Urquhart and Glen Moriston*, the link between language and landscape is different. It was because of the size of the congregation in Glen Urquhart that an outdoor extension to a large kirk already equipped with a gallery was necessary when all the congregation gathered for communion. Those numbers in turn reflected the fact that, uniquely, these two glens were spared the Clearances. Like the last fragment of the old Caledonian forest that survived hidden out of reach in nearby Glen Affric, until the First World War Glen Urquhart and Glen Moriston remained a viable fragment of the old *Gàidhealtachd*. Indeed, the bank behind the kirk was still in use in living memory and the benches until recently still stood stacked in a little stone-built hut nearby. The outdoor gathering of this Gaelic community was therefore a monument to a different, more sombre exchange between language and landscape: the tragic correlation between the Clearances and the geography of the *Gàidhealtachd*, their ethnic and therefore linguistic parameters. Situated in the Great Glen and at the midpoint between Strathnaver and Argyll to north and south and Strathspey and Skye to east and west, Glen Urquhart and Glen Moriston are geographically just about at the centre of the Highlands.

Thus the little bank behind the kirk in Glen Urquhart reaching out to embrace the overflow of its congregation only makes more poignant the emptiness of all the other glens in that wide compass.

Poetry and song are a subtext in all this, but they do also surface directly, in the title of the show itself, for instance, and in the references to Hamish Henderson's collecting and the tinkers who were for him the conduit of so much music. Poetry is there directly in *Standard Habbie* and in *Ben Dorain*, too, but it is at its most immediate in the drawing *And I bleer my een wi' greetin*. Poetry and song have enjoyed the dualism of words and music, their symbiosis indeed, since the time before writing. Reid's analogy of verbal and visual language suggests a similar symbiosis of the aural and the seen. In her work, Helen MacAlister takes the example of that symbiosis and extends it in a new direction. In *And I bleer my een wi' greetin*, she makes this explicit. She refers the line from the song to a remark of John Purser's on the achievement of Burns uniting words and music in his songs, 'for it was a new thing, to enter so deeply into the feeling and inner mood of a tune and realize it in language.'

The line in the drawing is from "Ay Waukin' O," the sad song of a girl who cannot sleep for the absence of her lover,

*Lanely night comes on,
A' the lave are sleepin,
I think on my bonie lad,
And I bleer my een wi' greetin.*

Helen MacAlister renders the sadness with the words set against blank white, in Gaelic against *bàn*, perhaps, the word for fair-haired as in Donnchadh Bàn MacIntyre himself, but, as she remarks, also the word for

blank, empty and pale; pale as an unploughed field, the white in her beautiful glass piece, or here as pale and empty as the girl's sleepless nights. Though he is called *bonie*, there is no hint in the song that the girl's love is fair-haired, but fair is after all frequently a poetic synonym of bonny, so you could well imagine that he might be. If so, that white, empty ground in the picture would be both the dream of his presence and the fact of his absence, all summarised in a few words on a blank field. But that is how her art works. It is, as she admits understated, but it resonates all the more for that.

¹ <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdf/reidinqu.pdf>, p101

² Reid, 51

³ Reflections on Reading Hamish Henderson's *Alias MacAlias*, *Scottish Affairs*, no.6, winter 1994



Mol, shingle praise
oil on canvas, 2008, 148 x 210cm, see pg 48



Glen Roy, parallel roads
oil on linen, 2009, 148 x 210cm, see pg 49

'bastard' affairs

'Bastard' affairs
oil on linen, 2009, A2, see pg 49

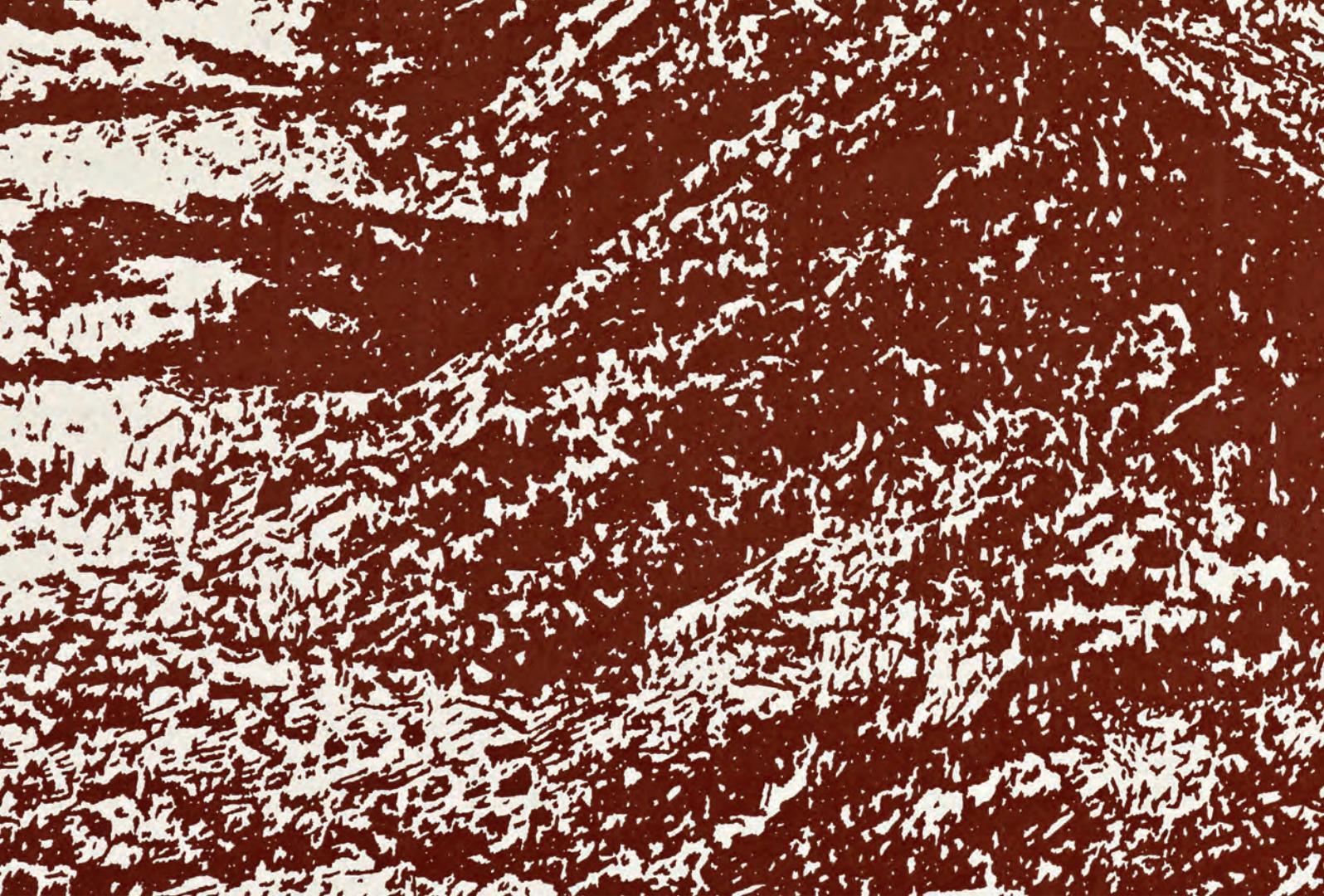


Ben Dorain

oil on linen, 2010, 148 x 210cm, see pg 50

At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae

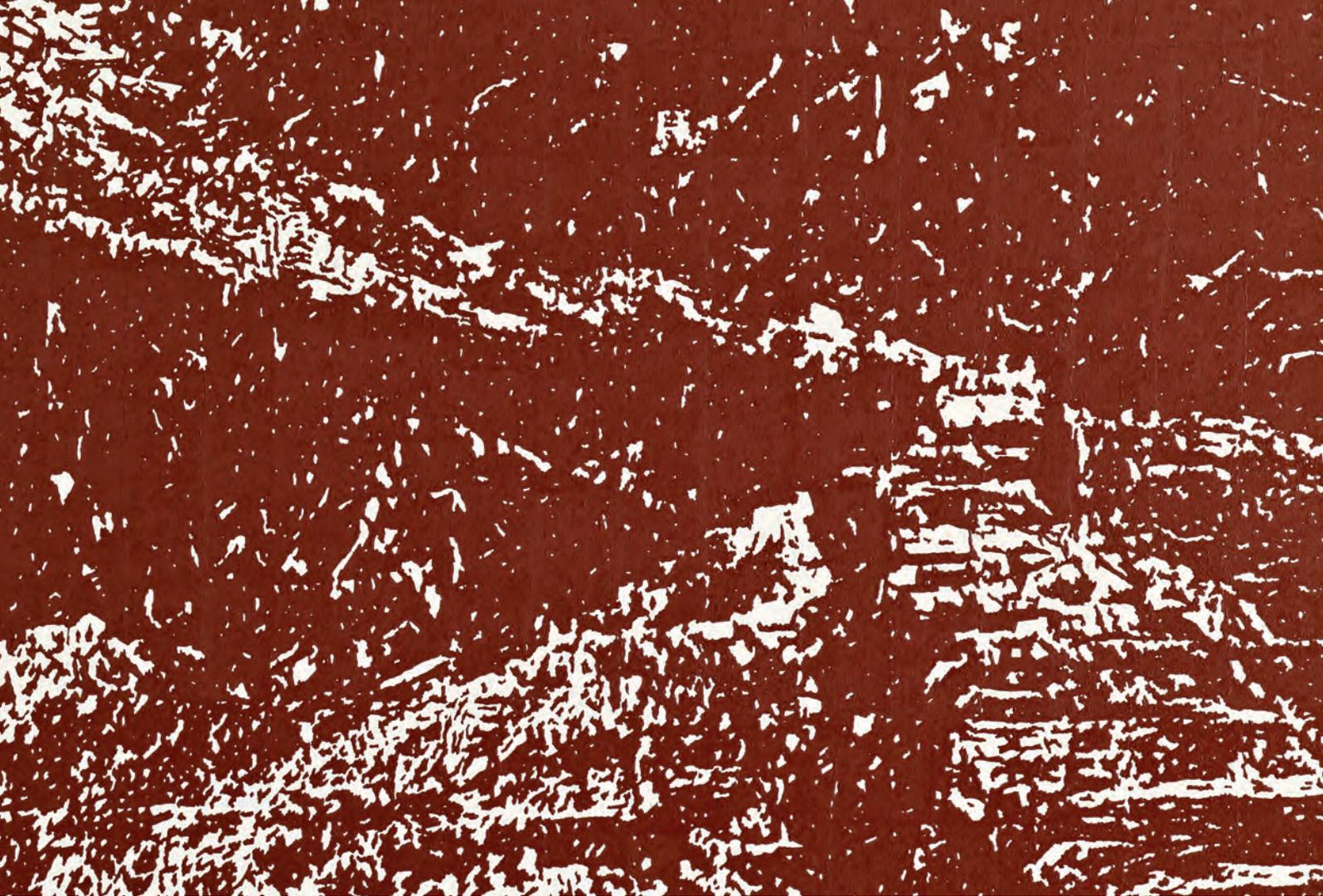
At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae
oil on linen, 2010, A2, see pg 50



Ben Dorain

detail

28



At the

At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae

detail

Footed



Bealach nam Ba

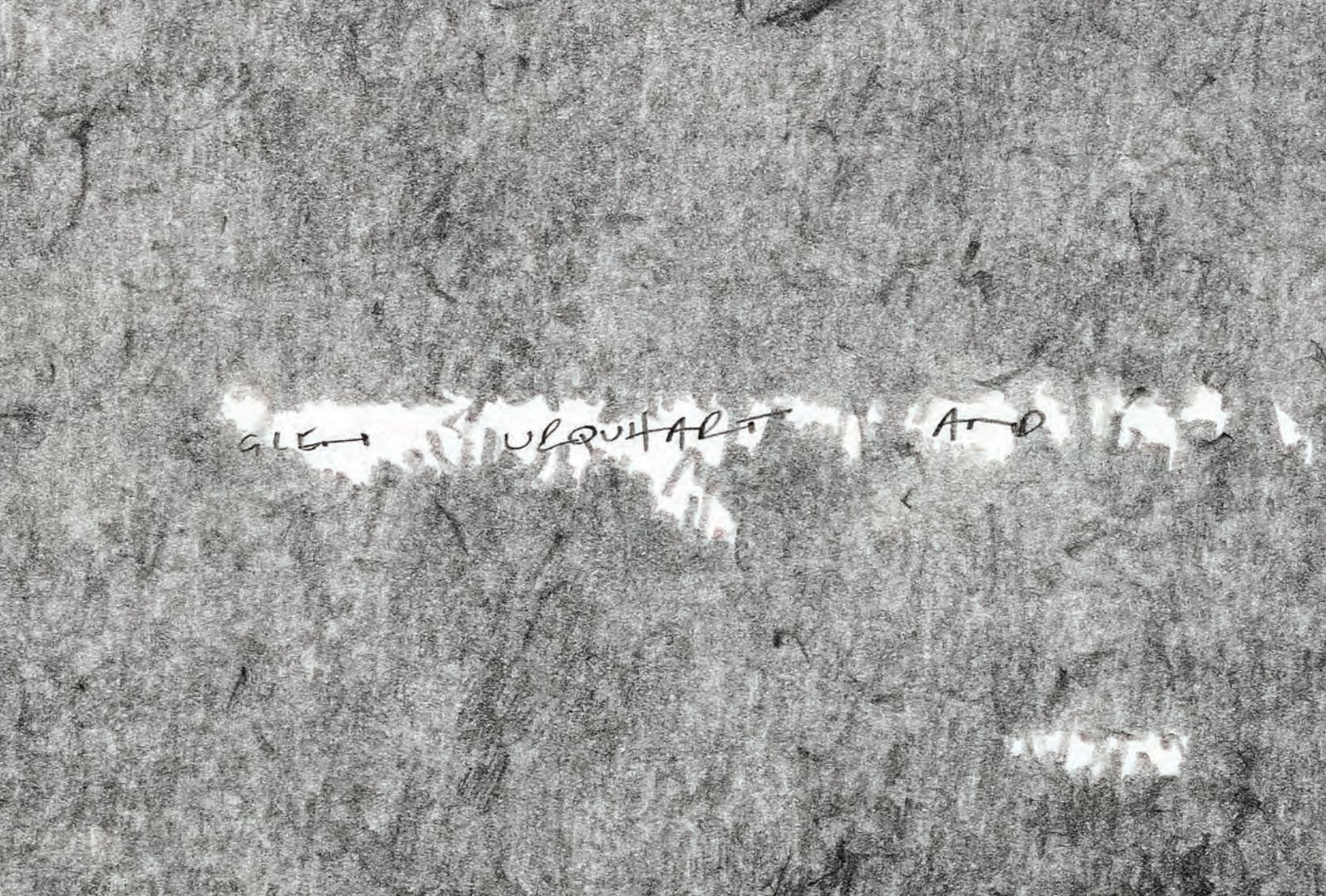
pencil on paper, 2008, A2, see pg 51



Bealach nam Ba
detail



Glen Urquhart + Glen Moriston
pencil on paper, 2008, A2, see pg 52



Glen Urquhart + Glen Moriston

detail

GUEN MORISTON

AND I BLEER MY EEN WI' GREETIN.

And I bleer my een wi' greetin.
pencil on paper, 2008, A2, see pg 53

AND I BLEER MY EEN WI' GREETIN.

And I bleer my een wi' greetin.

detail

epic detachment

Epic detachment : neo-dhàimh bharr-sgeulach
diptych, digital print, 2007, A6, edition of 10, see pg 54

- neo-dhàimh bharr-sgeulach

1971 = 477

Monoglots

screenprint, 2010, 57 x 76cm, edition of 15, see pg 55

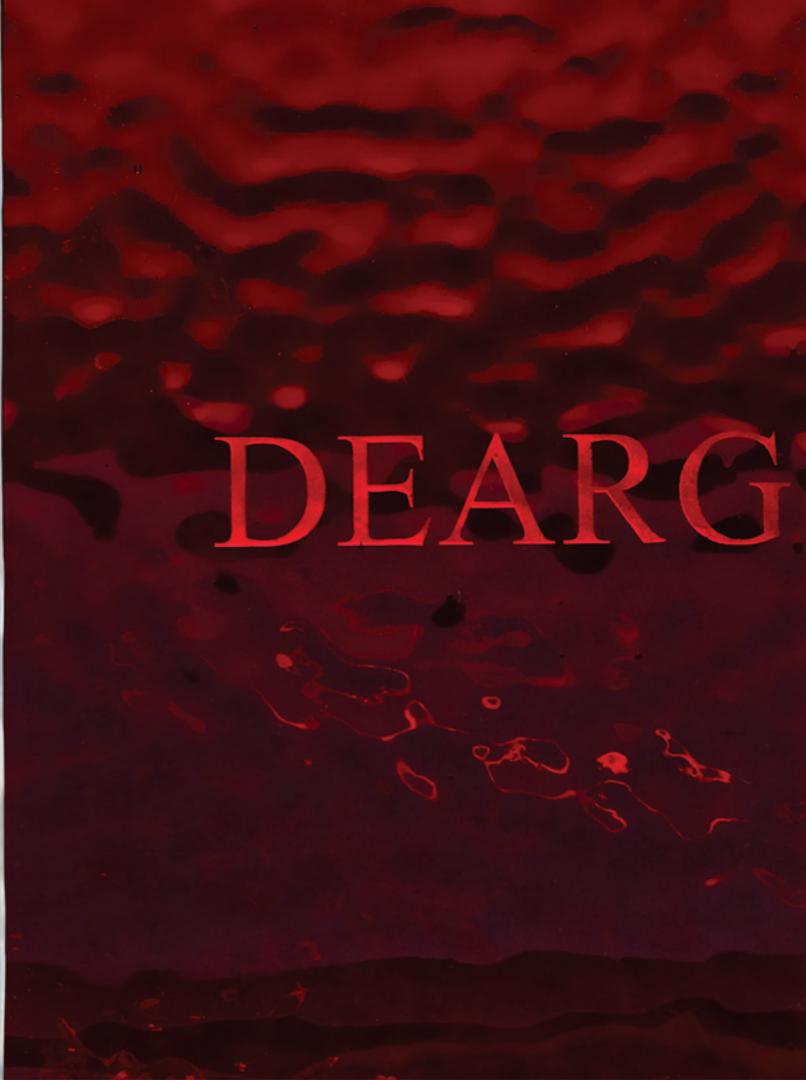
1971 = 477



Sainte-Chapelle

Sainte-Chapelle

sand-blasted glass, 2008, A6, edition of 3, see pg 56



BÀN : DEARG

sand-blasted glass, 2009, A6 (halves = 105 x 74cm), edition of 2, see pg 57



Cold air in the nostrils

Cold air in the nostrils

sand-blasted glass, 2011, A6, edition of 4, see pg 58



Newly minted coins

Newly minted coins
sand-blasted glass, 2011, A6, edition of 2, see pg 59

Mol, shingle praise

oil on canvas, 2008, 148 x 210cm

Mol, shingle praise. A raised beach, a place beyond the high tide mark, a place that endures. Shingle as cultural deposit (this example being Rum). Shingle as speech. 'Speech has its being in the mass of individuals who use it, with the run and stress, the direction, depth, and force of feeling at work. Speech can never be a fixed standard, like the standard foot; it is a force of life in action, alternately affecting and itself being played upon'.¹

Mol is a *beach* or *shingle* as a noun in Gaelic but to *celebrate*, to *commend* or to *praise* as a verb. This painting is a note taken, an account of a malleable vocabulary. Its visual minimalism is determined by the need to articulate a simple 'celebration'.

One turns to John MacInnes for background on the 'extending' of words. "A number of words exist in Gaelic which certain writers, have lengthened unhistorically. When an author succeeds in transmitting his individual perception of a word – its sound, its appearance on a page, or a latent meaning – to the public context of his work, a hitherto unrealized potential is made available. In that creative process a writer puts his own impress on a word: it can never be quite the 'same' word again. Its position in the language has shifted; its status has been enhanced and its meaning extended. A major writer alters the language itself."²

Therefore - to plumb and prolong. Coincidentally, the active 'doing' aspect correlates with the heavy use of the verbal noun in Gaelic – it's in the *offing* and can be revised.

¹ Scottish Literature and the Scottish People - David Craig, p240

² Dùthchas Nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes, p406

© 'Original image courtesy of British Geological Survey'

Glen Roy, parallel roads

oil on linen, 2009, 148 x 210cm

'Bastard' affairs

oil on linen, 2009, A2

Loch Lomond Readvance

pencil on paper, 2008, A2

Parallel roads, shorelines of an ice-dammed lake (in this case Glen Roy). The result of a period of glacier readvance also known as Loch Lomond Stadial. The work is metaphorically giving location to 'bilingualism' – framing the running of the Gaelic and the Scots line. A parallel implicit in the landscape.

Alec Finlay on Hamish Henderson: "He took delight in demonstrating that all languages are, as Gavin Douglas has it, 'bastard' affairs."¹

¹ Alias MacAlias - Hamish Henderson; edited by Alec Finlay, xxv1

Drawing = © 'Original image courtesy of British Geological Survey'

Painting = © 'Original image courtesy of British Geological Survey'

Ben Dorain

oil on linen, 2010, 148 x 210cm

At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae

oil on linen, 2010, A2

Panegyric

pencil on paper, 2008, A2

'Ben Dorain' ascribes to given analysis¹ of Donnchadh Bàn MacIntyre's poem, *Praise to Ben Dorain* as being a panegyric to a mountain, a visual documentary.

However, the pieces are also conceived of looser conceits: the *bàn* is Gaelic for fair-haired, (off)white but can also signify blank, empty and pale ie, *talamh bàn* = fallow ground (an uncultivated field is pale in contrast to the dark ground of ploughed) and of course fallow as in fallow deer. By extension there is the pertinent *dèan bàn* = depopulate.

Thomas Clark in *A Book of Deer* is apposite:

*'In a glade of smoky light, that which is
lost, or is constantly displaced, steps
beyond its image.'*

The title of the show is Hamish Henderson's. *At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae*², a text in which he says 'the purpose of this present essay is to demonstrate that a curious "bilingualism in one language" has always been a characteristic of Scots folksong at least since the beginning of the seventeenth century.'³ He further points out that the language is never purely colloquial but is formal and even stylized. 'It is in the great songs, licked into shape like pebbles by the waves of countless tongues, that this sense of formality is most marked.'

'At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae', as declarative, 'steps beyond its image'.

¹ Dùthchas Nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes, p266

² A line from Courtin' Amang the Kye, sung by Willie Mathieson

³ Alias MacAlias - Hamish Henderson; edited by Alec Finlay, p52 & p54

Drawing = © St Andrews University Library, Photographic Collection

Painting = © St Andrews University Library, Photographic Collection

Bealach nam Ba – The Pass of the Cattle

oil on linen, 2009, 148 x 210cm

Countra Wit

oil on linen, 2009, A2

Bealach nam Ba

pencil on paper, 2008, A2

Bealach nam Ba [*sic*] makes its own link to topics of population and politics through it being a parliamentary road. [This engineering of Telford, links also to MacDiarmid's upbringing beneath Langholm Library (to which Telford left a bequest) – the ground of his self-education and latter politics.] The language interest, with an eye on Scots and Gaelic, find its visual outing in such selection – kicking a stone along the road between them. *Bealach nam Ba – The Pass of the Cattle*, land-link between two points, in this case Kishorn and Applecross in Wester Ross.

For *countra wit* I quote David Craig, "The style used for this plainly draws directly on spoken, unliterary Scots. That kind of sceptical, ironic downrightness is in fact what came to be the standard idiom of Scottish poetry. It is always present, suggesting a kind of norm of common-sense (what Burns called 'countra wit'), even in the most abandoned comic flights. My point here is that it is through such processes in the sensibility, rather than in any outward censorship, that 'Calvinism' mainly affected the deeper life of the country."¹

The physicality of the pass connotes duality or countering. The normality of 'reposing' at a summit is incidentally satisfying – no slippage: a space for the reflex action of seeing our own seeing. A 'Rest and Be Thankful' – another parliamentary road.

¹ Scottish Literature and the Scottish People – David Craig, p76

Drawing = © 'Original image courtesy of British Geological Survey'

Painting = © St Andrews University, Valentine Collection

Glen Urquhart

oil on linen, 2012, 123 x 175cm

Glen Urquhart + Glen Moriston

pencil on paper, 2008, A2

Glen Urquhart. The glen's kirk, or its surroundings, lent itself to being a natural amphitheatre – there is opinion that the English speakers were inside and the Gaelic out. Most crucially, Sorley MacLean made comment on Glen Urquhart & Glen Moriston being alone in their innocence of the Clearances – evident in their very appearance. The glen names are therefore used within the drawing itself to reference an original landscape: a landscape as retainer and something to picture.

Tim Robinson comments on a specific Irish situation: "That it had ever been found and remarked upon was evidence of how intensively this shore, and indeed the intertidal zone all around Connemara's labyrinthine inlets and archipelagos, was explored by human hands...This repeated laying-on of hands, to me, is the human touch that has made such places holy."¹ In crude comparison, it has been the *non*-laying on of hands in this instance that singles out Glen Urquhart and Glen Moriston.

¹ Connemara - Tim Robinson, p246

Drawing = © St Andrews University Library, Photographic Collection

Painting = © St Andrews University Library, Photographic Collection

And I bleer my een wi' greetin.

pencil on paper, 2008, A2

John Purser on Burns's *Ay Waukin O*: 'for it was a new thing, to enter so deeply into the feeling and inner mood of a tune and realize it in language.'¹

Douglas Young talks of 'the typical Scot as a schizophrenic creature at once realistic and recklessly sentimental.'²

¹ Scotland's Music – John Purser, p231

² A Clear Voice – Douglas Young, p146

Epic detachment

neo-dhàimh bharr-sgeulach

Passionate objectivity

méidh-chothromachd lasganta

diptychs, digital print, 2007, A6, edition of 10
Printed by The Summerhall Press, Edinburgh

Kind thanks to:

Paul Harrison, Visual Research Centre

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The diptychs are extracts from Roderick Watson on Hugh MacDiarmid: "In fact, what MacDiarmid has taken from his interest in Gaelic art is a sense of epic detachment. This is conveyed through a special kind of passionate objectivity, as if poetic description were an intense and relatively selfless act which does not seek to invest the landscape with Romantic shades of the writer's own psyche."¹

The quotation notes MacDiarmid's attention to Gaelic – the 2 diptychs are simply translating that thought, one move.² The cool passion of distance – or space or place – has bearing when one considers Gaelic, like Scots, having 3 distances – seo, sin & siud: here, there & yon.

¹ MacDiarmid (Open Guides to Literature) – Roderick Watson, p72

² Translation by Aonghas MacNeacail

Monoglots

screenprint, 2010, 57 x 76cm, edition of 15

1971 = 477

The question of Gaelic-only speakers was last asked in the 1971 census. The total figure recorded was 477.

477 monoglots.

The blue used is matched to Pantone 300 (international colour code). In 2003, the Scottish Parliament recommended that Pantone 300 should be recognised as the correct colour for the saltire. It's an advisory decision and does not have statutory force.

'Currently, English is rising up like a terrifying behemoth that devours other languages by sucking them dry and tanning their skins..'¹

¹ In Praise of the Garrulous – Allan Cameron, p98

Sainte-Chapelle

sand-blasted glass, 2008, A6, edition of 3

'Hugh MacDiarmid's rhymed version in English'¹ has been widely admired, and thought to convey the impression of a tremendous and unique work; but even this excellent attempt bears hardly more relation to the original Gaelic than the view of the stained glass from outside bears to the sensation of gazing up from inside the Sainte Chapelle.²

The work is therefore the aspiration of seeing from within. (The glass itself is *Scottish Heather* by colour-name and *English Muffle* by type).

¹ Of Alasdair MacMhaighistir Alasdair's *Birlinn Chlann Ràghnail*

² A Clear Voice – Douglas Young, p92

BÀN : DEARG

sand-blasted glass, 2009, A6 (halves = 105 x 74cm),
edition of 2

Position: white on left + red on right

Bàn means white and dearg is red.

'Bàn is the left-handed of the furrow in ploughing, distinguished from dearg, the red or right-handed side. Bàn is empty or waste, as an unplowed field,¹ leaving dearg describing tilled + turned – things seen and thought of in direct visual terms.

R.B.Cunninghame Graham told of a character in a short story, that by, 'Not having Gaelic, he had lost the gift of picturesque expression.'²

¹ Gaelic Words & Expressions from South Uist & Eriskay – Fr. Allan McDonald, p256

² Scottish Stories - R.B.Cunninghame Graham; (A Retainer) p59

Cold air in the nostrils¹

sand-blasted glass², 2011, A6, edition of 4

¹ Tormentil and Bleached Bones - Thomas A Clark; (Beinn Fuar) p55

² The glass itself is *English Muffle* by type

Newly minted coins

sand-blasted glass¹, 2011, A6, edition of 2

In discussing Sorley MacLean, John MacInnes writes²

'MacGill-Eain uses the Gaelic lexicon in such a way that literary Gaelic will never be the same again. The context of his poetry gives the common currency of Gaelic, as well as the antique and unusual words, the quality of newly-minted coins'.

¹ The glass itself is *English Muffle* by type

² Dùthchas Nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes, p406

Helen MacAlister

'Man's one method, whether he reasons or creates, is to half-shut his eyes against the dazzle and confusion of reality.'²

In trying to *reason* these works, you find language. Language as process, register and reference. It identifies. To that extent the works are documents.

But 'kinship or authenticity does not come from knowing the facts. Facts can be acquired easily enough. It comes rather from the attitude of the author to the facts.'³ : and so to how a thing is read. By metaphor, the works can figure with things political and the distinction of traits & temper.

'Some time ago a distinguished Scottish writer, broadcasting on the efforts of his brethren, suggested that our Scottish countryside had nothing more to give the indigenous novelist. As if it were a place that had been skinned, leaving the void beneath. How effectively Mitchell proceeded to show that so far hardly even the skin had been affected!⁴ : and back thereby to how a thing is read.

¹ Alias MacAlias – Hamish Henderson; edited by Alec Finlay, p52 & p54

² Robert Louis Stevenson – Ian Bell, p283

³ Belief in Ourselves - Neil Gunn; (The Novel at Home) p116

⁴ Belief in Ourselves -Neil Gunn; (Nationalism in Writing [on Lewis Grassie Gibbon]) p88

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Aig Bonn a' Bhraghad Bharraicht' ud

Eilidh NicAlasdair