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**“LANGUAGE IS AT THE HEART OF MY WORK”:  
A NOTE ON THE POETRY OF IAIN CRICHTON SMITH  
(IAIN MAC A’GHOBHAINN)**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

One of the more interesting developments in twentieth-century Scottish Gaelic culture was the renaissance of poetry, especially in the second half of the century. Scottish Gaelic is spoken now by less than sixty thousand people, practically all of them English-speaking. However, in spite of this considerable decline in the number of Gaelic speakers, and to some extent also culture, the twentieth century saw a remarkable flowering of Gaelic literature, especially poetry.<sup>1</sup>

Traditional Gaelic poetry had an elaborate system of metres, it made use of end-rhyme, internal rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and introduced variation in line and stanza length. Early bardic verse in Ireland and Scotland observed a number of conventions and normative prescriptions, and bards were required to master specific linguistic knowledge necessary to construct appropriate verse. Modern Gaelic poetry differs from traditional in both form and content. Of the most important 20<sup>th</sup> century Gaelic poets, George Campbell Hay (Deòrsa Mac Iain Deòrsa, 1915–1984) and Sorley MacLean (Somhairle MacGill-Eain, 1911–1996) worked within traditional metrical frameworks: George Campbell Hay revitalized traditional forms and created new elaborate sound-patterns, whereas Sorley MacLean creatively transformed old patterns. Iain Crichton Smith (Iain Mac a’Ghobhainn, 1928–1998) often used regular length and rhyme but with variations of rhythm (a technique similar to the one used in his English poems). Derick

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the comments in the introductions to the collections of Gaelic poetry edited by MacAulay (1976), Davitt and MacDhómhnaill (1993), and Black (1999). For a general background on Scottish Gaelic language and literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Stalmaszczyk (2005). This note develops some of the ideas from Chapter Three, Section 5.5 of that study.

S. Thomson (Ruaraidh MacThómais, b. 1921) and Donald MacAulay (Domhnall MacAmhlaigh, b. 1930) experiment with both traditional and modern forms, using *vers libre* to a considerable degree. The most important difference in content between traditional and modern poetry is the widening of scope of the modern poet's interest. Poets write about politics, Scottish Nationalism, Spanish Civil War, World War II, ecology; they discuss psychological states, philosophical issues and everyday-life problems. Derick Thomson singles out politics, as the area in which "the widening of geographical horizons shows most clearly in recent Gaelic poetry" (Thomson 1995: 165). Also sources of inspiration are wider: Classical Gaelic poetry is accompanied by John Donne and the English Metaphysicals (MacLean), W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot (MacLean, MacAulay), Hugh MacDiarmid's verse in Scots (again MacLean), Symbolism and the American poets William Carlos Williams and Robert Lowell (I. C. Smith), contemporary philosophical controversies (again I. C. Smith).<sup>2</sup>

Crichton Smith observed in 1961 that there were "three writers of importance in this century [...] Sorley MacLean, George Campbell Hay, and Derick Thomson" (I. C. Smith 1961: 173). To this short list one has to add the author of those words, and another poet (and distinguished Celtic linguist), Donald MacAulay. Their poetry, notwithstanding all differences and highly individual traits, shares several important features, such as interest in current developments (including politics, social issues and philosophy), the perception of Gaelic Scotland through an universal perspective, explicit sense of place and tradition, and very strong language awareness. The poets ask questions about the future of Gaelic and they explore the possibilities created by the language and by the fact that they are bilingual (and bicultural). Though they published in the previous century, their voice is constantly present in contemporary Scotland and continues to influence the successive generations of Gaelic poets. This short note looks at the poetry of Iain Crichton Smith, especially his attitude towards Gaelic language and culture.

## 2. THE POETRY OF IAIN CRICHTON SMITH

Iain Crichton Smith (Iain Mac a'Ghobhainn) was born in 1928 in Glasgow, but brought up on the Isle of Lewis from 1929 onwards. He was educated at the Nicolson Institute in Stornoway and at Aberdeen University.

<sup>2</sup> For further analyses see Chapman (1978), Thomson (1995), MacAulay's (1976) introductory essay in his influential anthology of modern Scottish Gaelic poems, and the discussion in Black (1987; 1999).

Until 1977, when he became a full-time writer, he was a teacher in schools in Clydebanks, Dumbarton and Oban. He was a well-known and prolific writer in Gaelic and English. He was made an OBE in 1980. He wrote poetry, short stories, novels, plays, he also translated Gaelic verse into English, including Sorley MacLean's famous Gaelic masterpiece *Dàin do Eimhir* (*Poems to Eimhir*).<sup>3</sup> His first collection of poems and short stories in Gaelic was *Bùrn is Aran* ('Bread and Water', Glasgow 1960), followed by other books, in both English and Gaelic. Carcanet Press published several volumes of his poetry and prose, including *Selected Poems* (1985), *Collected Poems* (1992), *Ends and Beginnings* (1994), and his last volume *The Leaf and the Marble* (1998). Iain Crichton Smith died in Oban in 1998.<sup>4</sup>

In his poetry and prose Iain Crichton Smith is preoccupied with the recession of Gaelic culture and the threat to the language, this feeling is most vividly expressed in a long poem, ominously entitled *Am Faigh a Ghàidhlig Bàs?* ('Shall Gaelic Die?'), with the often quoted words: "Am fear a chailleas a chànanain caillidh e a shaoghal" ('He who loses his language loses his world'). This dim prophecy is a consequence of the author's deep conviction that:<sup>5</sup>

Words rise out of the country. They are around us. In every month in the year we are surrounded by words.  
 Spring has its own dictionary, its leaves are turning in the sharp wind of March, which opens the shops.  
 Autumn has its own dictionary, the brown words lying on the bottom of the loch asleep for a season.  
 Winter has its own dictionary, the words are a blizzard building a tower of Babel. Its grammar is like snow.  
 Between the words the wild-cat looks sharply across to a No-Man's-Land, artillery of the Imagination.

Further on in the same poem, the poet grimly prophesizes:

"Shall Gaelic die?" A hundred years from now who will say these words? [...] Who? The voice of the owl.

Crichton Smith sees the fate of Gaelic not only from the socio-cultural perspective, he also adds a philosophical dimension to his poetry, the line "When Wittgenstein dies, his world dies" is an explicit reference

<sup>3</sup> MacLean's book, *Dàin do Eimhir*, was first published in 1943 (by William MacLellan, Glasgow), Crichton Smith's translation appeared in 1971 (Northern House, Newcastle), a new edition was published in 1999 (Acair, Stornoway).

<sup>4</sup> For further biographical and bibliographical details, see Black, ed. (1999: 793–795) and Morgan (2000–2001).

<sup>5</sup> From *Selected Poems*, I. C. Smith (1985: 65). The Gaelic (original) version of the poem was first published in *Lines Review* 29 (1969).

to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, especially propositions 5.6 ('*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*') and 5.63 ('*I am my world*').<sup>6</sup> In one of his last essays, published posthumously, *On Gaelic and Gender*, the poet wrote:

For many years I was interested in Wittgenstein who examined questions of language. Does language influence us more than we influence it? Are we born into a certain structure? If I hadn't been brought up in Lewis I probably wouldn't have been influenced so much by questions of language and religion. (Smith 2001: 11)

The preoccupation with language is constantly present in his poetry and prose, later in the essay he confesses: "Language is at the heart of my work" (Smith 2001: 12). Crichton Smith shares this preoccupation with other major contemporary Gaelic poets. He was well aware of this common thread of thought (stemming to a large degree from their bilingualism), and writing about MacLean's, Thomson's and his own poetry he observed that "one cannot therefore be a poet such as the three of us are without being concerned with language" (Smith 2001: 11). And in a poem from his last Gaelic collection, *An t-Eilean agus An Cànan* ('The Island and the Language', 1987), Crichton Smith celebrates the reawakening of the Gaelic language:<sup>7</sup>

Tha a' Ghàidhlig a' fosgladh  
mar ròs  
[ Gaelic is opening like a rose ]

At the same time, however, the poet is well aware that this awakening is fragile:

Ach, a rùin,  
tha thu mar bhogha-frois  
air chrith anns an adhar.  
[ But, o love, / you are like a rainbow / shaking in the sky ]

In an earlier essay the poet observed that "Language is a trap: the unimportant writer doesn't realise this, the great writer bleeds within it" (Smith 1961: 175). Bilingual Gaelic poets, to use Crichton Smith's metaphor, bleed within two languages, and the problem of linguistic and cultural identity is for them a matter of everyday choice. Whereas Sorley MacLean, definitely

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London 1922), translated by C. K. Ogden. In *The Notebooks of Robinson Crusoe*, Smith wrote "I have read them all, Sartre, Wittgenstein, Ryle" and added "Language is other people" (1985: 98).

<sup>7</sup> This and the next fragment are from MacLeod (2001: 107), both in the author's translation.

the greatest twentieth century Gaelic poet, decided to write solely in Gaelic,<sup>8</sup> for Crichton Smith the decision was not that obvious and he continued to write in both languages throughout his career. This bifurcation and convergence of languages is clearly seen in his poem *An Litir Àraid* ('The Strange Letter'):<sup>9</sup>

Chuir mi litir gu mo ghaol,  
Pàirt dhith am Beurla 's pàirt an Ghàidhlig:  
"I love you" air an dara taobh,  
'S air an taobh eile: "Tha mo ghràdh ort."

Ach fhreagair i anns na facail sa:  
"Se a dh'iarrainn na laigheas fon dà chànan [...]."

[ I sent a letter to my love,  
Part of it in English and part in Gaelic:  
"I love you" on the one side,  
And on the other: "Tha mo ghràdh ort."

But she answered in these words:  
"What I would want is what lies under the two languages [...]. ]

As observed by MacLeod (2001: 105) "language choice and the inability to distinguish between languages is a symptom of a deeper problem", and bilingualism, somewhat paradoxically, may hamper communication and mutual understanding.

Donald Meek, a Gaelic scholar and professor of Celtic at the University of Aberdeen, stressed that Smith "is pre-eminently the seeker after the 'true' nature of personal identity, in terms of religion, culture and philosophy, in local and global contexts" (Meek 1999: 9). The poet also explored a sense of anger, anguish and despair brought about by cultural decay and death and religious intolerance. His native place, as for all other major contemporary Gaelic poets, is crucial to him as a writer, as attested by a fragment from *Dà Oran airson Céilidh Uir* ('Two Songs for a New Céilidh'):<sup>10</sup>

Ach 'se lomnochd ghrinn Leòdhais  
a rinn obair mo chinn  
mar bheart làn de cheòlraidh  
mhiorbhail 's mhòrachd ar linn.

[ But it was the fine bareness of Lewis  
that made the work of my head  
like a loom full of the music  
of the miracles and nobility of our time. ]

<sup>8</sup> He justified this move on aesthetic and patriotic grounds, see MacLean (1991: xiv).

<sup>9</sup> From Black, ed. (1999: 516–517), translated by the editor.

<sup>10</sup> From the anthology edited by MacAulay (1976: 180–181).

Lewis is the place where the poet returns trying to find the lost world of the past and tranquillity, in this attitude he contrasts sharply with Derick S. Thomson, another poet from Lewis. Thomson's attitude is best expressed in the poem *Sgothan* ('Clouds'), where the island returns as the place which the poet loves, yet is estranged from:<sup>11</sup>

Beinn Phabail an so ri m' thaobh,  
is Hòl 'na chrùban go tuath  
ach chaidh mise bhuap air taod  
cho fada 's a théid gaol bho fhuath.

[ Bayble Hill here beside me,  
and Hòl crouching to the north  
but I have strayed from them on my rope  
as far as love can go from hate. ]

Also the poem *Bùrn is Mòine 's Coirc* ('Water and Peat and Oats') summarizes Thomson's ambivalent attitude towards native Lewis:

An cridhe ri bacan, car ma char aig an fheist  
's i fàs goirid,  
's an inntinn saor.  
Is daor a cheannaich mi a saorsa.

[ The heart tied to a tethering-post, round upon round of the rope,  
till it grows short,  
and the mind free,  
I bought its freedom dearly. ]

Two other themes strongly connected with the poet's perception of the Gaeldom, both rooted in traditional Gaelic literature, are exile and homecoming. The isolation and pain of exile runs through Crichton Smith's poetry, novels and stories. His novel *An t-Aonaran* (*The Hermit*, 1976) deals with the misfit in society, poems like *Na h-Eilthrich* ('The Exiles') concentrate on the distressing fate of Gaelic emigrants:

A liuthad soitheach a dh'fhàg ar dùthaich  
le sgiathan geala a' toirt Chanada orra.  
Tha iad mar neapaigearan 'nar cuimhne  
's an sàl mar dheòirean,  
's anns na croinn aca seòladairean a' seinm  
mar eòin air gheagan.

[ The many ships that left our country  
with white wings for Canada.  
They are like handkerchiefs in our memories

<sup>11</sup> Fragments of these two poems come from MacAulay, ed. (1976: 156–157; 162–163).

and the brine like tears  
and in their masts sailors singing  
like birds on branches. ]

Crichton Smith tackled the problem of emigration in several other poems, reflecting on youth, memory and the memory of time. In the *Returning Exile* he writes about the difficulty of the return from the emigration:<sup>12</sup>

Home he came from Canada  
where for many years he drank  
his failure into the ground.

Further poems, such as *Next Time* and *No Return*, reveal the impossibility of such returns (the first fragment comes from the former poem, the second from the latter):

Simply enter the boat  
and leave the island  
for there is no return,  
boy, forerunner of kings.

...

No, really you can't go back to  
that island any more. The people  
are growing more and more unlike you  
and the fairy stories  
have gone down to the grave in peace.

Though difficult, homecoming is nonetheless possible, it is also deeply rooted in Irish and Scottish Gaelic poetry, and Crichton Smith skillfully revitalizes the traditional act. *A' Dol Dhachaidh* ('Going Home') is one of the variations upon this theme:<sup>13</sup>

Am maireach théid mi dhachaidh do m'eilean  
a' fiachainn ri saoghal a chur an diochuimhn'.  
Togaidh mi dòrn de fhearann 'nam lámhan  
no suidhidh mi air tulach inntinn  
a' coimhead "a' bhuachail aig an spréidh".

[ Tomorrow I shall go home to my island  
trying to put a world into forgetfulness.  
I will lift a fistful of its earth in my hands  
or I will sit on a hillock of the mind  
watching "the shepherd at his sheep". ]

<sup>12</sup> The following fragments are quoted from Smith (1985).

<sup>13</sup> These two poems are from MacAulay (1976: 172-175).

*Aig a' Chladh* ('At the Cemetery') adds an ultimate dimension (with a touch of gentle irony) to the act of homecoming:

'S tha esan a-nise far a bheil e,  
Mo nàbaidh 'na laighe fon t-scillean  
A' crònan am measg dhithean milis.  
B'e 'm bàs a thug bàs dha 's cha b'e 'm peileir.

[ But he is now where he is.  
My neighbour lying under the bee  
That is humming among sweet flowers.  
It was death that killed him and not the bullet. ]

### 3. CONCLUSION

Writing about the contribution of Crichton Smith, Edwin Morgan, Glasgow's first Poet Laureate, observed that:

The range and variety of his work, and the naturalness of his best pieces, will always attract and please. If he has anger, he also has compassion, and he opens our ears to "the unpredicted voices of our kind". (Morgan 2000–2001: 6)

Very significantly, it was Iain Crichton Smith's poem (*The Beginning of a New Song*) which was read during the opening ceremony of the Scottish Parliament on 1 July 1999.

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