

Article

‘*Bidh mi Cumha mu d’ Dhéibhinn gu Bràth*’ [I Shall Grieve for You Forever]: Early Nova Scotian Gaelic Laments

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Abstract: Gaelic laments played an integral role in the deathways of the Highland Scots of Nova Scotia. These often passionate outpourings of grief served as lasting obituaries for the dead and epitomized the richness and vigour of the Gaelic language. As sincere emotional responses, they gave a poetic and performative dimension to the deaths of clergy and other noted community members, as well as beloved relatives and victims of sudden, unexpected deaths, such as drowning and even murder. A casual scan of Gaelic printed sources from newspapers and anthologies will immediately impress the reader with the prolific number of extant elegies. It is therefore necessary to confine the scope of this article to the earliest examples in Nova Scotia, focusing primarily on the creations of the better known, established poets. Several works by less familiar bards have also been included in this study.

Keywords: Scotland; Nova Scotia; Cape Breton; laments; Gaelic; Highlanders; deathways

1. Introduction

Gaelic laments are still being composed and sung in Nova Scotia, more than two hundred years after the Highland Scots first immigrated to the province. This fact is quite remarkable, considering the gradual decline in the number of speakers of the Gaelic language over the past two centuries. Pipers still play slow, sad airs at funerals, but in Cape Breton in particular, the violin has become a predominant form of expression when remembering many of those who have died. Nevertheless, the voice of the Gael in song and poetry continues to mourn its departed loved ones.

Throughout this article, the terms elegy and lament are used interchangeably. Although elegy is probably the more accurate term for contemplative verses of tribute to the deceased, the lament with its passionate outpouring of grief came to mean basically the same, and as a result, was equally popular. There is a similar amalgam of meaning with the equivalent Gaelic terms *marbhrann* and *cumha*; in earlier times, *marbhrann* essentially denoted the work of an established poet while *cumha* was applied to a less formal work. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, such distinctions had diminished in both Scotland and Nova Scotia, and some immigrant poets tended to use the term *cumha* more often in their poetic titles.

It needs to be stressed that all their laments were set to music and were meant to be sung; they could, of course, be recited on occasion, but it was the magical synthesis of words and melodies which ensured their success, longevity, and enduring popularity. Gaelic Scotland lost so many of its people and its poets to Nova Scotia in the early nineteenth century, and with them went their traditional airs. According to Sister Margaret MacDonell, “[t]he elusive nature of the oral tradition and more especially the decline of the Gaelic singing tradition among third and fourth generation Gaels abroad render the search for such airs almost fruitless” (MacDonell 1982, p. 187). Some song airs may, however, have lasted longer among the Gaels of the New World, perhaps in an older or different

form—as is the case with some violin tunes. Unfortunately, it is now almost impossible to recover the titles of some airs if they were never recorded in print in either country.¹ The popularity of slow, sad laments has decreased in Nova Scotia, particularly with the decline of the Gaelic language and its older singers; with the loss of singers and an appreciative audience goes information which can rarely be recovered.

A wide variety of different types of Gaelic laments exists. This article discusses only a sampling from a large corpus, to give an idea of the calibre of compositions created by these early poets. There are commissioned elegies from well-established poets which can be elegant pieces, graced by elevated language and abounding in poetic kennings and metaphors; there are mandatory works normally dedicated to clergy and other noted community members; there are laments which are simple and sincere emotional responses, usually, but not always, as a result of sudden, unexpected deaths; there are less common laments for murder victims; and, finally, there are several examples of mock elegy, always of a comical and satirical nature.

2. Literature Review

Among the earliest printed sources for Nova Scotian emigrant poetry are collections by the Rev. A. Maclean Sinclair, grandson of the prolific Bard MacLean—in particular, *Clàrsach na Coille* (1881), *Comhchruinneachadh Ghlinn-a-Bhàird: The Glenbard Collection of Gaelic Poetry, Parts I-III* (Sinclair 1890a, 1890b), *Filidh na Coille* (Sinclair 1901) and *The Gaelic Bards from 1825 to 1875* (Sinclair 1904). Vincent MacLellan's *Fàilte Cheap Breatuinn* (1891) contains an invaluable number of works by somewhat lesser known poets whose verses may never have been preserved had it not been for this small yet remarkable book. In his foreword to *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia* (1964), the Gaelic editor, Calum MacLeod (MacLeòid), claims that “the survival of a rich oral tradition may flourish and reach its highest perfection in peripheral areas rather than in the centre of its original diffusion” (Creighton and MacLeod 1964, p. v). Considering the amount and quality of Gaelic literary materials collected in Nova Scotia during the twentieth century, such a statement is not without merit.

Calum MacLeòid's *Bàrdachd à Albainn Nuaidh* (1970) and Donald A. Fergusson's *Fad air falbh as Innse Gall—Beyond the Hebrides* (1977) have opened further access to early nineteenth-century songs. Fortunately, there has been an increase of helpful materials in the last number of years, beginning with Sister Margaret MacDonell's *The Emigrant Experience* (1982), an indispensable resource for scholars, providing ample contextual historical detail, as well as critical evaluation. However, it is unfortunate that the section devoted to Nova Scotian poets does not deal specifically with laments. John Shaw's *Brìgh an Òrain* (Shaw 2000) includes text and detailed notes on Piper MacGillivray's famous lament, “*Òran nan Granndach*”; Effie Rankin's collected works of Allan the Ridge MacDonald, *As a' Bhràighe* (2005), includes five Ridge laments; and Trueman and Laurinda Matheson's *O Cheapaich nan Craobh* (2008) deals with the poetry of the Keppoch bard, Alexander MacDonald, containing some six laments by him. The Antigonish *Casket* newspaper which began in 1852 and Jonathan G. MacKinnon's *Mac-Talla* (1892–1904) are long-standing and vital newspaper sources for scores of immigrant Gaelic songs. Other magazines, such as *Mosgladh*, *Fear na Ceilidh* and *Teachdaire nan Gàidheal*, which were published intermittently in Sydney, Cape Breton, during the early 20th century, also provide much Nova Scotian poetic material, including elegies. These newspapers and the Gaelic songs contained within are indispensable documentation for historians, especially given the scant availability of printed sources with first-hand evidence describing the thoughts and feelings of Nova Scotia's early Gaels.

One can find occasional songs in other publications, but these main ones were responsible for making sure that people had access to their own Gaelic songs, as well as to vast numbers of Scottish compositions. The laments found in those materials serve as lasting obituaries for a people in their

¹ At the end of this article, I have provided as comprehensive a list as possible of the airs associated with the laments which I discuss.

own language, a rare phenomenon at a time when most death tributes in newspapers were confined to English. Furthermore, these published sources illustrate the richness of Nova Scotia's Gaelic lament tradition, and highlight its fertile terrain for historians seeking to analyze and understand this significant cultural legacy and its integral role in Scottish immigrant deathways.

The very earliest publications mentioned above do not generally provide much by way of critical assessment; instead, they tend to concentrate on giving useful historical details regarding both poet and subject matter. There is undoubtedly a dearth of constructive analysis in this field of poetic criticism, but signs of improvement have fortunately appeared in recent years. John Shaw addresses this deficiency in "Brief Beginnings: Nova Scotian and Old World Bards Compared" (Shaw 1996, pp. 342–55). Likewise, Robert Dunbar provides valuable insights into facets of immigrant poetry in "Poetry of the Emigrant Generation" (Dunbar 2008). According to Dunbar, "[p]oetry of the emigrant generation has been given little sustained attention in Scotland. In the only comprehensive overview of Gaelic poetry, Prof. Derick Thomson (Thomson 1974) devotes less than two pages to the entire body of Gaelic poetry composed outside of Scotland and this is in keeping with his assessment of the subject matter" (Dunbar 2008, pp. 24–25).

3. Discussion of Evidence and Analysis of Findings

The Jacobite Rebellions and the eventual disastrous defeat at Culloden in 1746 ushered in a period of harsh reprisals for many Highlanders. Unfortunately, these were but omens of further hardships, often resulting in displacement, evictions and eventual emigration as the former clan system disintegrated and land, not people, became the ultimate source of power and wealth. Emigration presented a solution to many of these problems for both landlords and tenants. Those Gaels who arrived in Nova Scotia did so for various reasons, some looking forward optimistically to the acquisition of treasured land and new freedoms, while others were fearful of the unknown and all the changes involved. Their poets had always held positions of respect and privilege during the old clan system, serving as custodians of *seanchas* or historical lore, while fulfilling a duty to praise chieftains and leaders in both life and death. Once the Gaels immigrated to Nova Scotia, poetic traditions of praise generally remained the same; in the absence of chieftains and lairds in the New World, however, other subjects were embraced for eulogy and elegy.

Only two immigrant poets were privileged to have enjoyed aristocratic patronage in their homeland; John MacLean had served as bard to MacLean of Coll, while John MacGillivray had been MacDonald of Glenaladale's personal piper. Both men arrived in Nova Scotia in 1819 on board the vessel *Economy*, each bringing his own poetic genius as well as centuries of learning and tradition. John MacLean had the unique distinction of having had a volume of his poems published in Scotland prior to his departure (MacLean 1818).

The first generation of Nova Scotian Gaelic poets came from a long-established bardic tradition in Scotland. It is interesting that several of these pioneers founded their own poetic dynasties in the province, some of which survived well into the twentieth century. The Bard MacLean's grandson, Alexander MacLean Sinclair, composed Gaelic poetry and is remembered especially for his prolific historical writings and editing of Gaelic poetry anthologies. The bard may well have influenced another young poet while crossing the Atlantic. Donald MacLellan was only twelve years old when he found himself on board the *Economy* in 1819, in the august company of both John MacLean and John MacGillivray. The lad must have revealed an aptitude for poetry for he was tutored by John MacLean himself and taught *Ailean Dall* (Blind Allan) MacDougall's *Oran do Mhac 'ic Alasdair*, in praise of MacDonald of Glengarry (MacKenzie 1907, p. 326). Donald later in life became a well respected poet, as did his son, Vincent, the editor of *Fàilte Cheap Breatuinn*. Donald's grandson, Angus, was also celebrated as a fine Gaelic singer and tradition bearer (Creighton and MacLeod 1964, pp. 76–100). Despite the myriad surviving accounts of hardships endured on board most emigrant ships of the nineteenth century, any distress undergone by the *Economy* passengers must have been alleviated at times by the superb entertainment which those fine musicians would surely have provided.

Perhaps the greatest and most prolific dynasties that flourished in Nova Scotia were the Ridge MacDonalds from Lochaber and the Highfield MacGillivrays from Arisaig. Allan MacDonald, the preeminent Ridge poet, arrived in Nova Scotia in 1816 from the Braes of Lochaber—a member of a family which was fiercely proud of its Keppoch ancestry and passionate about its history, genealogy, music and poetry. Tradition claims that Allan's father, *Alasdair Ruadh*, Red Alastair, composed Gaelic poetry, as did some of his other sons. Allan's own son, Alexander, was a noted violinist who continued a vigorous poetic tradition into the second generation. It was he who frequently shared information with A. MacLean Sinclair and with the Scottish collector, Dr. Keith Norman MacDonald, always crediting his father Allan's instruction for his own considerable historical and musical knowledge. Allan's grandson, Angus, was also a poet, singer and piper, but he should be particularly remembered for the wealth of ancient song and lore which he passed on to various twentieth-century collectors, including Helen Creighton and John Lorne Campbell, as late as 1937 (Campbell 1990, pp. 223–60). This most talented musical family became known as the Ridge MacDonalds, having spent their initial years on Alpine Ridge near Mabou in Cape Breton, before leaving for Antigonish County.²

Four of pioneer Allan's elegies have survived, three to members of the MacDonald clan and one to Bishop Fraser who died in 1851. In this last elegy, the poet stays true to tradition, employing symbols of nobility and bravery, thereby according the cleric a tribute normally reserved for a warrior chieftain (Rankin 2004, pp. 110–14):

*Chraobh mhullaich nach seargadh
Sar churaidh gun chearb thu
Leòghann curanta, calma
Bhuineadh urram's gach feara-ghnìomh
'S tu b' urrainn 's a dhearbh e 's gach còir.*

Flourishing and dominant tree
Prime hero without blemish
Brave and fearless lion
Victorious in every exploit
You were consistently able to prove this.

Allan composed a similar lament for *Dòmhnall Bàn mac Sheumais*, Donald MacDonald, who died in 1828 (Rankin 2004, pp. 106–7). It is another fine example of the traditional panegyric, where, in an earlier, more martial age, manly valour and prowess were esteemed. Not only is the deceased remembered for his own excellent qualities, but the great Clan Donald receives praise as well:

*Cha robh bàrr aig mac duin' ort
Ri uchd gàbhaidh air muir no air tìr,
Chum thu 'n onair bu dual dhut
Bhith gu curanta, cruaidh ri àm strìth;
Bha fuil àrd ort ag imeachd
Bho d' dhà shàil gu ruig mullach do chinn
'S tu shliochd nam fear mòra
Dha 'm bu dùthchas bhith còmhnaidh 's na glinn.*

² Joyce Rankin, who is descended from pioneer Allan's sister, Jessie, composes English poetry today.

No man surpassed you
 When facing danger on sea or on land
 You upheld your hereditary name
 In bravery and hardiness in strife;
 Noble blood flowed through you
 From your soles to the crown of your head
 For you were of the family of great men
 Who used to dwell in the glens.

When a young kinsman, *Sandaidh Bàn*, Fair Sandy, drowned off the coast of Nova Scotia around 1833, Allan responded in a similar, traditional manner, (Rankin 2004, pp. 108–10) employing an essential component of early Gaelic panegyric, a flattering description of the subject's appearance:

Fear a' chuirp a bha ro-chuimte
Nuair chunnacas na shlàint' e;
Fear chùil duinn's a' chalpa chruinn
Fo 'n phearsa thruim gu'n fhàilinn
Fear chùil dualaich bu ghlan snuadh
'S an t-sùil gun ghruaim bu bhlàithe . . .

His was the perfectly formed body
 When seen in his prime,
 Brown haired man of muscular calf
 Neath a solid, flawless physique;
 Curly haired man of handsome appearance
 Of genial, warmest eye . . .

Although the poet regards the young man's untimely death as a terrible loss for the entire Clan Donald, the young man was obviously very dear to him when he admits in the final, poignant line:

Ach b'e mo challdachd anns an àm ud
Gun robh Sandaidh Bàn ann.

But it was my undoing on that occasion
 That Fair Sandy was there.

The Ridge MacDonald poets all composed laments for various deceased friends and notables, but Allan, his son and grandson differed from their contemporaries by avoiding elegies to siblings and close family members. They may have considered it inappropriate to over praise their own immediate kin, a task perhaps better served by poets less closely connected. The Ridges, however, regarded themselves as self-appointed poets and historians to their branch of MacDonalds in the New World, and thus, it may not be too far-fetched to suggest that they may well have been following the example of the great, seventeenth-century Lochaber bard, *Iain Lom* MacDonald. When *Iain Lom's* father was killed alongside his chief, Angus of Keppoch, in a clan skirmish at Sròn a' Chlachain in 1640, filial grief is secondary to that for the lost leader:

*Ged a dh' fhàg mi ann m' athair
 Chan ann air tha mi ' labhairt
 Ach mun lot ' rinn an claidheamh mu t- àirnean-s'.*

Though I left my father on the field
 I speak not of him
 But of the sword cut to your kidneys.
 (Sinclair 1895, pp. 2–3)

Whatever their reasoning, this curious custom continued in the family for three generations. When Allan the Ridge's brother, Donald, died, for example, it was left to a cousin to compose the requisite lament. Allan's son, Alexander, did not compose a lament for his father; he chose instead to eulogize Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, when he died in 1891. Although this work is not of the same high standard as that set by the Bard MacLean in his elegy to MacLean of Coll, the late leader and Prime Minister is accorded a traditional elegy with its rhetoric of praise—one which could well have been devoted to a chieftain in earlier times (MacDonald n.d., no pagination):

*'S beag an t-iongnadh ged bha thu luachmhor
 'S tu shliochd nam fiùran bha cliùiteach, uasal
 Se Tigh Bhothfhuinntainn an tùr bho'n ghluais thu
 Nach gabhadh cùram a' chùis a bhuannachd.
 Bu sheobhag firinneach, sìobhalt, suairc thu
 Bu cheannard prìseil air mhiltean sluaigh thu
 A chumadh dìleas iad, gual-ri-gualainn
 'S cha b' fheairrde Gritich bhith srith ri buannachd.*

Small wonder that you were esteemed
 Since you were of the line of renowned and noble men;
 You descended from that fort, the House of Bohuntine,
 Those who were accomplished in victory.
 You were a hawk, truthful, civilized and courtly
 A cherished leader of thousands of people
 You could keep them loyal, shoulder to shoulder
 While Grit attempts to overcome were futile.

Although the Ridges were noted for their retention of ancient MacDonald history and genealogy, Alexander is probably taking liberties with facts when he claims Sir John A.'s descent from his own branch of the MacDonalds of Keppoch; however, a chieftain's lineage would be required in any formal elegy, and thus, the poet could be delving into archaic genealogical material which might be beyond the reach of the ordinary reader or listener.

When Alexander himself passed away in 1904, his son, Angus, did not grant him an elegy—at least none has survived. However, Angus' contemporary, Dr. Lauchie MacPherson, was remembered by him in a sensitive and sincere lament (*The Casket* 1920, p. 11).

*'S tha 'r cumha na d' dheigh
 Mar a bhuin dhut an t-eug cho òg;
 A liuthad deòiridh fo èis
 Ris an d' rinn thu bonn feum gun stòr;
 Bhiomaid earbsach nan èibht' ort
 Gun cuireadh tu'n cèill an tòir,
 Tighinn a sheòmar nan creuchd
 Fhuair thu 'n t-urram gu leir 's bu chòir.*

We mourn your loss
 Since death took you so young;
 How many suffering souls
 Did you assist, without recompense;
 If you were called, we were confident
 You would do your duty,
 Coming to the chamber of sickness
 You received all praise, well merited.

There were several other contemporary poets who were related in various ways to the Ridge family, but one in particular deserves special mention. *Iain Sealgair*, John the Hunter MacDonald, was an excellent poet and first cousin to pioneer Allan. He arrived somewhat later in Mabou in the 1830s, and thus, much of his verse was composed in Scotland where he had served as a deer stalker; this occupation, in the convivial company of wealthy sportsmen, guaranteed the poet a considerably more affluent lifestyle than that of his relatives. As a result, John the Hunter found his new home in Mabou, Cape Breton, to be less than agreeable and this negativity was reflected mournfully in much of his emigrant verse. He composed an exile's lament after arriving in Cape Breton in 1835, a generation later than his Ridge relatives. His "*Òran do dh' America*" is on the one hand a complaint against the misery of severe weather and primitive living conditions, but, on the other hand, it may well be regarded as one of the most beautiful laments—not for kin or humanity in this instance, but for his forsaken homeland (MacDonell 1982, p. 86). His professed love of hunting and of the hunted stag is reminiscent of the work of the great eighteenth-century poet, Duncan Bàn MacIntyre, and like his predecessor, John the Hunter eloquently depicts his former joy and freedom among the mountains of Lochaber:

*An spèis a thug mi dhamh na cròic
 Cha teid ri m' bheò à m' chom;
 Bho'n dh' fhàg mi tìr na seilg's nan sàr
 Tha m' aigne cràiteach trom.*

*Cha chluinn mi dùrdan madainn dhrùchd
 Am barraibh dlùth nan sliabh
 Cha loisg mi fùdar gorm o'n stùc
 'S cha chuir mi cù ri fiadh . . .*

The love I had for the antlered stag
 Will never leave my body,
 Since I forsook the land of the chase and the gallant ones
 My spirits are pained and heavy.

I hear no murmur of a dewy morning
 In the dense mountain thickets;
 I shall not fire blue powder from the heights
 Nor set hound on deer . . .

The MacGillivrays of Malignant Cove in Antigonish County were another large and talented musical and scholarly kin group. *Iain am Piobaire*, John the Piper, was undoubtedly their premier bard, having parted from his family to remain in Scotland as a privileged musician to MacDonald of Glenaladale (Cheape 1994, p. 5). A surviving portrait shows him as a youthful piper, dressed in flamboyant Highland livery; once his patron died in 1816, John emigrated shortly thereafter to join his kinfolk in Nova Scotia. In 1836, his son, Alexander, composed a moral treatise for youth, *Companach an Òganaich*, one of the first Gaelic publications in Nova Scotia. Another son, John, followed in the old Piper's footsteps as a teacher and poet. A nephew, Father Ronald MacGillivray, is remembered for some poetry but especially for his historical writings, while one of the Piper's grandsons, A.T. MacDonald, continued the teaching and poetic tradition into the twentieth century.

John "The Piper" MacGillivray had a family of three daughters and six sons, but when he died in 1862, five of his sons had died before him. This enormous burden of grief brought about a remarkable poetic work, "*Cumha nam Mac*" ["The Sons' Lament"] (*The Casket* 1923, p. 5). It is certainly one of the finest laments ever composed in Nova Scotia, reminiscent of the much earlier eighteenth-century lament by Silis MacDonald of Keppoch for Alexander, 11th chief of Glengarry. According to John MacInnes in *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal* (Newton 2006, p. 304), Silis' elegy has the distinction of containing the longest list of kennings and related images of praise in Scottish Gaelic verse. In his lament, MacGillivray's emotion is very real and personal, his similes well chosen from nature, all denoting wounding, anguish and pain. As the poem's intensity builds, so does the poet's sorrow; he never allows his embellishments to overpower his craft, however, and the entire composition remains firmly under his control:

Mi mar chomhachag bhrònach,
'Se bhi' m ònar mo mhian;
Mi mar eal' air a leònadh
'S i gun seòl air a dian;
Mi mar chalman san achadh
'N deidh a ghlacadh san lion,
'S mi guth tùrsach na lacha
'S cach a' creachadh a h-ian.

Mi mar eilid an fhirich
Coin is fir air a tòir
'N deidh a fuadach bho h-innis
'S gun a minneinean beò;
'G iarraidh dh' ionnsaidh na linne
A thoirt fionnfhuachd dha leòin

*Brùchdadh fala bho creuchdan
Is saighdean geura na feòil.*

I am like the plaintive owl
It is my desire to be alone;
I am like the wounded swan
Without means of protection;
I am like a dove in the field
That is caught in the net,
I am the sad cry of the wild duck
When her young are being plundered.

I am like the doe on the mountain
Hunted by men and hounds,
Having been chased from her shelter
And her fawns dead;
Seeking the icy relief
Of the pool for her injuries
Blood pouring from her wounds,
Cruel pangs in her flesh.

John MacLean, better known in Nova Scotia as the Bard MacLean, was undoubtedly considered the preeminent Gaelic poet of the nineteenth century in Nova Scotia—a well-merited distinction. When his former patron, MacLean of Coll, passed away, the Bard MacLean composed the expected, traditional elegy from afar in Nova Scotia; the poet's grandson, Alexander MacLean Sinclair, wrote the introduction for the elegy in *Clàrsach na Coille* as follows: "John MacLean was the last of the family bards. This poem may therefore be looked upon as the last of its kind. There is thus a peculiar feeling of sadness connected with it" (p. 132). One verse, in particular, harks back to a bygone age where the poet imagines the chieftain's galley approaching with the corpse of the dead leader on board—an ancient and especially poignant image which appears in some of the very earliest of Gaelic laments:

*Nuair a chunnacas do bhàta
Tigh'nn gu Rudha na h-Airde fo sheòl,
'S iomadh aon a bha cràiteach
Thu bhi d' shìneadh fo chlàraibh air bord.
Cha bu shunndach an fhàilte
Bh'aig do mhuinntir a' fàsgadh nan dorn;
'S iomadh cuimhneachan càirdeil
Bh' ac an oidhch' ud mu'n armunn nach beò.*

When your galley was seen
Coming to *Rudha na h-Airde* under sail,
Many a one was grief stricken
Since you were in the coffin on board.
Not joyful was the welcome

Of your people, while wringing their hands
 Many a kindly remembrance
 They shared that night about the dead hero.

The Bard MacLean's reputation was such that he was asked on more than one occasion to compose laments for various grieving relatives who wanted their loved ones to be eternally commemorated in fine verses. His ability to empathize with mourners undoubtedly added to his popularity. When the eight-year-old, first-born son of a certain John Chisholm was drowned while returning home from school, the sorrowing father asked for a lament for his child as if he himself were the author. The poet's response is simple and sincere, where he somehow places himself in the mind and the anguished heart of a parent who fears the worst for his lost child (Sinclair 1881, pp. 155–58):

*Le bhi smaointinn mu d' dhèibhinn
 Nuair a bha thu 'n ad èiginn,
 Anns na sruthean leat fhèin's gun mi d' chòir.
 Bha thu 'd shìneadh an oidhch' ud
 Fo na bruachan 's an droighnich,
 Dh' fhaig sin againne cuimhneachan bròin.*

Thinking of you
 In your agony
 Alone in the waters, and I not near you.
 You lay all that night
 Under the river banks in the thorns;
 What a sorrowful memory we were left with.

John MacLean's elegant lament for Julia Noble, a cherished spouse and midwife who died in 1843, is universally admired. Hector Cameron, editor of *Na Bàird Thirisdeach*, declared this lament "perhaps the finest in the Gaelic language" (Dunbar 2008, p. 97). Like the poet, Julia was herself from the isle of Tiree and when she died in Whycocomagh at the age of thirty-eight, her husband, Dr. Noble, beseeched the poet for a lament, as if it were the work of his own hand. Tradition claims that the good doctor was not sufficiently pleased with the bard's first offering and that he demanded a revision. The end result is an elaborate and ornate traditional elegy of twenty-one verses where all the formalities of death are observed, the date of Julia's death is recorded, her beauty and many virtues are commended, the plight of her children is described in detail, and the doctor's unbearable pain is succinctly conveyed in one ironic line: "*Chan eil leigheas aig lèigh dhomh ri tim*"—"No physician can ever heal me" (Sinclair 1881, p. 159).

The entire piece is a cascade of similes and metaphors, couched in an exquisite melody. In traditional Gaelic verse, the apple tree signifies a person of superior rank and its destruction denotes death; the candle, the mirror and the diamond are all feminine representations of warmth, light, purity and love. Here is part of one verse, as if sung by Dr. Noble himself, where the metaphors are all kennings for the woman, the wife and the mother (p. 160):

*... Thuit craobh ubhail mo ghàraidh
 'S gun do fhroiseadh am blàth feadh an fheadh;
 Chaidh mo choinneal a smàladh
 Bu ghlan solus a' dearrsadh mu'n bhòrd;
 Bhris a' ghloine bha' m sgàthan
 Dh' fhalbh an daoimean à m' fhainne glan, òir.*

... The apple tree of my garden fell,
 its blossoms scattered over the ground;
 the candle which once shone so brightly
 at my table has been extinguished,
 the glass in my mirror is broken,
 gone is the diamond from my ring of pure gold.

When the Bard MacLean died suddenly in 1848, several contemporary poets lamented his death; one such was Alexander MacDonald, the Keppoch Bard, who had arrived from Glenuig in Scotland around 1830. His elegy to a brother poet is both dutiful and sincere, as befitting one whom he calls “*ar ceann ealainn*”, our “chief of song” (Matheson and Matheson 2008, pp. 2–4):

*'S bu tu fear furanach càirdeil
 Ris na Gàidheil fhuair sealladh ort;
 Ma'n ghluais thu far sàile
 Fhuair thu'n tàlan' s gun lean i riut
 'S cha b'e fuigheall fo'n d' fhàs thu
 Ach an t-sàr fhuil ghlan Leathanach
 Luchd a sheasadh na làrach
 Mar dhìon ghàradh gun taiseachadh.*

You were courteous and kindly
 To every Gael who set eyes on you;
 Before you crossed the sea
 You received the talent that remained with you;
 You did not rise from meanness
 But from the pure and excellent blood of the MacLeans
 Those who could hold their ground
 Like a protective wall, unflinching.

The above is one of three confirmed laments by the Keppoch Bard, published in the Mathesons' edition, *O Cheapaich nan Craobh* (pp. 90–92). In his exceptionally beautiful tribute to his wife, nature in its annual resurgence contrasts painfully with the bard's bleak state of mind when he says:

*Ged bheireadh drùchd an t-samhraidh chiùin
 Gach maoth phreas ùr fo bhlàth;
 'S ged thilleadh ianlaith bhinn nan speur
 A sheinn 's na geugaibh àrd
 Cha till mo rùn a dhealaich rium
 A thoirt dhomh mùirn is slàint';
 An tè gun ghruaim, cha dùisg a suas
 'S í' n leabaidh fhuair a'bhàis.*

Although the dews of gentle summer
 Will cause each new bush to blossom;
 Although the sweet singing birds will return
 To sing in the high branches;
 My darling who left me will never return
 To restore love and health to me;
 The pleasant one will never waken
 As she is in the cold bed of death.

A further verse reveals Alexander MacDonald's true genius and deeply felt grief:

*O, osaig chaoin thig thar an raoin
 Bho uaigh mo ghaoil, bidh fòil
 'S gun gabhainn 's thu am phòraibh dlùth
 Oir 's cùbhraidh leam thu 'm chòir;
 Gu 'm chuimhn' thoir mùirn na chaidh air chùl
 'S mi 'n drasd an dùsal bròin
 'S gun ann ach roinn diom 's mi gun sgoinn
 Gun dreach, gun loinn, gun dòigh.*

O gentle breeze that comes over the field
 From my beloved's grave—tarry
 So that I might totally absorb you,
 For I love your presence.
 Restore to my memory that love which is gone,
 As I am now in the gloom of sorrow,
 A shadow of my former self,
 Feeble, pallid, ill-favoured, broken.

In the realm of Gaelic verse, there were relatively few women poets in Scotland and Nova Scotia. Even so, there remain exceptional elegies by women who lost loved ones in sudden and violent ways. Scottish and Nova Scotian Gaels still sing the lament for Gregor MacGregor, composed by his widow after his cruel execution circa 1570. William Chisholm lost his life at Culloden Moor in 1746 to be forever remembered in his wife's incomparable cry of grief, "*Mo Rùn Geal Òg*" ["My Fair Young Love"]. Sarah MacDonald's lament for her brothers, "*Gillean Alasdair Mhòir*" ["The Sons of Big Alexander"], continues to haunt both reader and listener with its stark and stoic realism, its understated grief, and its beautiful and ancient melody (Fergusson 1977, p. 92). Donald and Alasdair MacDonald were drowned off the coast of Cape Mabou in 1848; as far as we know, this was the one poetic offering from their sister, Sarah, but it is an unforgettable one. The contrast of beauty and calm foreshadows the fatal, turbulent outcome:

*Rìgh, bu bhòidheach bhur sgrìob
 An àm togail bho thìr
 Air an turas nach d' thill na seòid.*

*Fras mheallain mhòr chruaidh
Tighinn ro bhras bho 'n ear-thuath
Sgar sid bhuamsa mo chàirdean òg.*

Lord, how lovely your sailing
As you left the shore,
On that voyage of no return.

Great, relentless showers of hail
Coming fiercely from the north-east
That was what took my young siblings from me.

Yet another remarkable elegy for a drowning victim is that by Peggy MacIntyre—“*Cumha do Iain*” [“A Lament for John”] (MacLeòid 1970, p. 47). Her extremely graphic portrayal of overwhelming physical shock and visceral grief harkens back to earlier compositions by women who were witnesses to the violent deaths of loved ones:

*'S goirt mo chreach's gura truagh mi
Chaidh mo losgadh air uachdar nan cnàmh;
Bhi 'ad choimhead 's a' chruadal
'S tu gun chothrom tighinn bhuaith air an t-snàmh.
Dh' fhalbh mo radharc san uair sin
'S mo chlaistneachd fo' m chluasan ach gair;
Chaidh mo chridhe mar chruaidh-shnaoim
'S e mar lic, no mar luaidhe na thàmh.*

My distress is sore and I am wretched,
My flesh has been seared on my bones;
Watching you in your ordeal
Unable to survive the swimming.
I lost my eye-sight then
And my hearing, except for the moaning;
My heart went into a vice grip
Rigid, like stone or lead.

Murders were relatively rare in pioneer and later times in the Nova Scotian *Gàidhealtachd* and it is interesting to consider how different poets dealt with such tragedies. Piper MacGillivray's son, James, was murdered in London, England, while serving as a guardsman for Queen Victoria. His only surviving brother, John, composed a restrained yet heartfelt lament for the young soldier who lost his life so far away from friends and family (MacLeòid 1970, pp. 42–43):

*'S Diciadain a feasgar
A fhuair mi sgeul a thog m' euslaint
Gaul nam bràithrean bhith leagta fo bhòrda.*

*An aona bhràthair a bh' agam,
Bha mo dhùil ris tighinn dachaigh.
E na shineadh an Sasainn gun chòmhnadh.*

'Twas on Wednesday evening
That I got the grievous news
That my dearest brother was laid low in the coffin.

My one remaining brother
Whom I expected to come home,
Now lying in England, all alone.

There is a totally different spirit in a bitter keen by Peter MacLellan for his brother, John, who was murdered in the Whycocomagh area in 1886 (MacLellan 1891, pp. 121–22). It seems a drunken brawl broke out at a home in the neighbourhood and MacLellan was stabbed by one, Alexander MacDonald:

*Aig aois na fichead bliadhn' sa dhà
Chaidh d' chur gu bàs gu h-ainneartach
Le d' fhuil a dhòrtadh sìos gu làr
Le nàmh bha 'n gnìomh ro-laimh na bheachd.*

*An àit thoirt fios mu 'n mhort gun dàil
'S ann rinn gu là iad oirnn a chleith
'S an fhuil bha staigh air feadh a' bhlàir
'S ann chuir gun sgàth iad folach air.*

At the age of twenty-two,
You were brutally murdered;
Your blood was spilled on the ground
By an enemy who premeditated the crime.

Instead of informing us immediately of the murder,
They hid it from us until daybreak;
And the blood which covered the floor inside
Was brazenly concealed by them.

Peter dwells on the murder scene and continues his bitter invective for forty-three verses in all, determined to avenge his brother's murder and keep his memory alive. This is not the work of an accomplished poet, but it is a cry of anguish, of pure unrestrained anger against the murderer and those who attempted to cover up the evidence. This tragedy took many strange twists. MacDonald was convicted of murder and sentenced to hang, but the sentence was commuted to a prison term. He was released before his time was served and was apparently employed at a lobster factory in Little Bras d'Or. Later, he disappeared, and some of his clothes were found on the shore of the Lake; did he accidentally drown while swimming, did he fake his own demise, or did MacLellan's friends and relatives exact vengeance?

Finally, on a lighter note, there exist several examples of the mock elegy—a genre which was generally popular among bards of a satirical nature. More than one Inverness County poet chose a certain Alasdair Morrison as the inspiration for their mocking verses. Alasdair was a pioneer from the

island of Eigg, and for whatever reason, he became a laughingstock, initially at the skilful and sardonic hand of *Alasdair mac Eoghainn Bhàin*, Alexander son of Fair Hugh MacLean, whose own people had emigrated from the same island (Beaton n.d., p. 73). In his lampoon, MacLean claims that Morrison is so esteemed by his neighbours in the Judique area that they will rise up and fight the *Abraich*—the Lochaber settlers of Mabou—for the honour of claiming the “corpse” and burying the dead “hero”:

*Nuair a ruigeas Sìol Leòid
Theid a thogail air chomhlan àrd;
Ma bhios Abraich le bòsd
Gad chumail bho'n t-seòirs as fhearr,
Le pitcheadh nan dorn
Agus bristeadh an sròin gu làr,
Gheibh iad Alasdair còir
Agus ruma ni tòrradh dha.*

When the MacLeods arrive,
You will be raised high on the bier;
And if the boastful Lochaber men
Try to keep you from their betters
We will punch them with fists
And smash their noses to the ground
They will claim the noble Alexander
And provide rum for his funeral.

For those familiar with MacLean and his poetry, this taunt was doubly ironic in that he had been effusive in his praise of Mabou and its people in the past. This song was instead an example of flyting, a challenge to fellow poets in Mabou to answer his mockery in verses of their own. He received the expected answer when *Aonghas mac Alasdair*, Angus son of Alexander MacDonald, took up the challenge (Beaton n.d., p. 76):

*Ach nam bitheadh e bhuaibh
Dh' èireadh Abraich a suas gun sgàth;
Rachadh an corp a thoirt bhuaibh
'S e bhith againn air guallaibh àrd;
'S iad nach tilleadh san t-srìth
Ged bu chunnart an nì no bàs
Bhiodh na h-Eigich fo chis
'S iad gun druma, gun phiob, gun bhàrd!*

But, if we so desired,
We Lochaber men would rise up fearlessly;
The corpse would be taken from you
And it is we who would carry him shoulder high;
We would never retreat from a fight,
Though danger or death be involved,
And the men of Eigg would be conquered
And left without drum or pipes or poet!

4. Conclusions

This is but a brief glimpse into what is actually an immense corpus of Gaelic elegies and laments, composed by the earliest immigrant poets of Nova Scotia. Some of their works were commissioned, some were personal and spontaneous; some record with journalistic precision important details of the deaths involved; some possess a satirical bite; and most describe for us the heartbreaking circumstances of loss and bereavement. In the entire pageantry of death, the songs of poets must have soothed and comforted both mourner and listener, providing a form of catharsis and solace for pain. The relatives of those fortunate enough to be remembered by a poet would be sustained by the knowledge that their deceased loved ones would somehow live forever on the lips and in the minds of Gaels, wherever their literary traditions endured, even in the face of language loss. The nobility of sentiment and music of such early laments cannot fail but to impress.

5. List of Laments with Airs

1. *Cumha do'n Easbuig Friseal*
Lament for Bishop Fraser
A' Bhliadhna-Leum dar milleadh
2. *Cumha do Dhòmhnall Bàn Mac Sheumais*
Lament for Fair Donald, Son of James
Cumha Alasdair Dhuinn
3. *Cumha do Shandaidh Bàn*
Lament for Fair Sandy
Unidentified air
4. *Cumha Aonghais Mhic Raghnaill Òig*
Lament for Angus, Son of Young Ronald
Charles Stewart
5. *Cumha do Shir Iain MacDhòmhnaill*
Lament for Sir John A. Macdonald
Unidentified air
6. *Cumha do'n Dotair Lachuinn Mac a Phearsain*
Lament for Dr. Lauchie MacPherson
Unidentified air
7. *Òran do dh' America*
Song to America
As mo chadal, cha bheag m' airtneul
8. *Marbhrann do Alasdair MacGhilleathain, Tighearna Cholla*
Elegy for Alexander MacLean, Laird of Coll
Unidentified air
9. *Tuireadh airson Leinibh-Gille*
Lament for a Boy Child
'S trom 's gur h-eisleineach m' aigne
10. *Marbhrann do mhnaoi-uasail òig*

- Elegy for a Young Lady
Gur h-e mise th' air mo leònadh,
's mi ri amharc nan seòl air Chuan Sgìth
11. *Òran Cumha do'n Bhàrd Mac Gill' Eathain*
 Song of Mourning for the Bard MacLean
Gura mise tha fo mhì-ghean,
Dh' fhalbh gach tì bheireadh aire dho'
12. *Cumha d' a Mhnaoi*
 Lament for his Wife
Of All the Airts the Wind Can Blaw
13. *Gillean Alasdair Mhòir*
 The Sons of Big Alexander
Caol Muile
14. *Cumha do Iain*
 Lament for John
 Unidentified air
15. *Cumha Bràthar*
 A Brother's Lament
 Unidentified air
16. *Marbhrann do Iain Mac-an-Leaghlain*
 Elegy for John MacLellan
 Unidentified air
17. *Marbhrann do Alasdair Moirison*
 Elegy for Alexander Morrison
 Unidentified air

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