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Elegies and Laments in the Nova Scotia Gaelic Song Tradition: Conservatism and Innovation

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Abstract: Gaelic-speaking emigrants brought with them a massive body of oral tradition, including a rich and varied corpus of song–poetry, and many of the emigrants were themselves highly skilled song-makers. Elegies were a particularly prominent genre that formed a crucially important aspect of the sizeable amount of panegyric verse for members of the Gaelic aristocracy, which is a tradition dating back to the Middle Ages. This contribution will demonstrate that elegies retained a prominent place in the Gaelic tradition in the new world Gaelic communities established in many parts of Canada and in particular in eastern Nova Scotia. In many respects, the tradition is a conservative one: there are strong elements of continuity. One important difference is the subjects for whom elegies were composed: in the new world context, praise for clan chiefs and other members of the traditional Gaelic aristocracy were no longer of relevance, although a small number were composed primarily out of a sense of personal obligation for patronage shown in the Old Country. Instead—and as was increasingly happening in the nineteenth century in Scotland, as well—the deaths of new community leaders, including clergy, and other prominent Gaels were recorded in verse. The large number of songs composed to mark the deaths of community members is also important—particularly young people lost at sea and in other tragic circumstances, occasionally in military service, and so forth. In these song–poems, we see local poets playing a role assumed by song-makers throughout Gaelic-speaking Scotland and Ireland: that of spokespeople for the community as a whole.

Keywords: Gaelic Nova Scotia; elegies; laments; community-building; death



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The centrality of panegyric in the Gaelic poetic tradition is widely acknowledged, and it has been an important form since at least the Middle Ages. While they composed on a wide range of topics, the principal function of the high-status professional Bardic poets of the so-called ‘classical period’ (c. 1200–c. 1700) was the production of compositions for their aristocratic patrons (McLeod and Bateman 2007, pp. xxix, xxxv; Martin and Mathis 2018; MacPherson et al. 2021, p. 22). This was the period during which Gaelic Scotland and Ireland shared to a considerable degree an elite culture disseminated through the medium of a form of the language, usually referred to as Classical Common Gaelic, which was created for the purposes of transmitting this culture. Elegies composed on the death of a chieftain or prominent member of the chieftain’s retinue were of particular importance in this panegyric tradition.

In the vernacular Gaelic tradition, which came more fully into view in the sixteenth and particularly the seventeenth centuries, the fundamental importance of panegyric, and especially of the elegy, has been expressed in these terms by Dr John MacInnes, who was one of the greatest Gaelic scholars of our age:

The primary function of *bàrdachd* [poetry] is to be found in clan panegyric, where the stress is on the survival of the group of warrior-hunters at the top of society. The diction is codified in sets of conventional images, most densely concentrated in the heroic elegy composed at the point of crisis brought about by the death of a leader—in other words, when it was most necessary to reaffirm the traditional values of the community.

(MacInnes 2006, p. 265)

MacInnes refers to the system of rhetoric which he identifies in this body of poetry as the ‘panegyric code’. One element is the chief’s background: the territory with which he and his clan are associated, his noble ancestry, battles in which his progenitors were involved, and his allies. A second element is the chief’s personal endowments and social roles. For example, the chief may be praised for his intelligence, wisdom, judgment, learning, piety, bravery, and so forth. He is lauded for his kindness to the tenantry, his generosity, particularly to the poor and vulnerable, his hospitality, and his patronage of poets, musicians, and others in his retinue. In this way, the poets enumerate and reinforce the social obligations that a good chief is expected to honour, and in doing so give expression to values that are important in the culture. The chief is also the defender of his people, and the poets express the physical qualities that are expected of the good chief: physical strength as well as skill and ardour in battle. Also, he is expected to demonstrate martial qualities in other ways. For example, he is frequently praised for his skill as a horseman and as a huntsman, particularly in pursuit of the deer. He is also celebrated as the helmsman, which is a motif that is employed both literally and metaphorically, in the sense of the good captain of Plato’s ‘ship of state’. Furthermore, the chief is commended for his physical attractiveness and for his household, with references to feasting, drinking and toasting, and music, and to various pastimes in which he and his retinue are engaged. The poets also employ a variety of kennings: the chief is likened to a variety of ‘noble’ trees, such as the oak or the yew, or ‘noble’ animals such as the eagle, the salmon, or the lion. Finally, images of death are often referred to, such as the death shroud, the coffin, the funeral procession, and the tomb, as is the grief of the clanspeople.¹

By the last third of the eighteenth century, the point at which Gaelic emigration to Nova Scotia was commencing, praise poetry composed for clan chiefs and other members of the Gaelic aristocracy was beginning to wane, although as we shall see, it did not cease altogether. The reasons for this are connected with the massive changes that were taking place in Gaelic society in the eighteenth century. The transformation has been described in broad terms as one in which clan chiefs became mere landlords (Dodgshon 1998). Highland estates under clanship had traditionally been managed to enhance the unity of the clan itself. In the eighteenth century, clan chiefs sought increasingly to manage their estates on a more commercial basis. Even before the final Jacobite rising of 1745–1746, some clans, notably the Campbells of Argyll, were removing the tacksmen, the traditional middle-men on Highland estates; while tacksmen had been important in the military and social organisation of the clans, their maintenance imposed a financial burden on the chiefly class. The defeat of the Jacobites at Culloden in April 1746 ushered in wholesale changes. The estates of leading Jacobites were forfeited and managed, frequently by members of Campbell kindreds, on a much more commercial basis (Macinnes 1996, pp. 210–34). By the 1770s, rent increases had led to a widespread desire to emigrate, which was a trend noted by Boswell and Johnson on their famous tour of 1773 (Black 2007, pp. 110, 143, 169, 230, 235, 289, 301–2), and by the end of the century, the Gaelic-speaking tenantry on many Highland estates were being removed from their traditional lands to make way for large-scale sheep farming, which was an activity that brought in much greater rental income. The clan system was effectively dead; the traditional values that the chiefs were expected to uphold had been largely cast aside by the chiefly class.²

In spite of these changes, the panegyric tradition itself did not come to an end. Instead, the complex rhetorical code developed for the purposes of praising the Gaelic aristocracy was redeployed in favour of new figures who assumed the mantle of leadership in Gaelic society, figures who were perceived as more loyal to the traditional values of that society than the aristocracy had been (Meek 2003, p. 207). Thus, by the late eighteenth, throughout the nineteenth, and into the twentieth century, poetry in praise of clergy, those engaged in the professions, those who had distinguished themselves in military service to the state, political leaders, campaigners on behalf of the language and the community, and ‘culture heroes’—important cultural figures—begins to assume a greater prominence in the Gaelic poetry composed in Scotland (Meek 2003, p. xxvi).

Panegyrics, particularly in the form of elegies, as well as other songs of lamentation, also retained their central importance in the New World. They can be found in virtually every collection of Nova Scotian Gaelic poetry that has been published and are well-represented in important Gaelic periodicals such as *Mac-Talla* (1892–1904). The Nova Scotia Gaelic Folklore Project (1977–1982) at St. Francis Xavier University is the largest and most important collection of New World Gaelic oral tradition. The collection contains a significant number of panegyrics, including at least 29 laments.³ The richness of the tradition in an emigrant context is attested to by the fact that this is the third article in this series to focus on it (Rankin 2020; MacPherson et al. 2021).⁴ Dr John Shaw, the principal fieldworker on the project, has noted the prevalence of laments in the Nova Scotia Gaelic tradition:

Laments were routinely produced for the locality, or sung within a family, as a means of reinforcing its own history. A number of laments, such as 'Òran Bean Dr Noble' ['The Lament for Dr Noble's Wife'] and 'Òran nan Granndach', 'became universal favourites for reasons of their aesthetic appeal, and were widely performed.'

(MacLellan and Shaw 2000, p. 17)

With regard to elegies, as in Scotland, we see a redeployment of the panegyric tradition in Gaelic emigrant communities in Nova Scotia.⁵ If poets who remained in the Highlands no longer had much reason to compose poetry for the aristocracy, New World Gaelic poets had even less reason for doing so. After all, in all the New World Gaelic communities, there were generally no landlords, and men who were tenants holding land at the pleasure of their chieftains became landowners in their own right. John MacLean (1787–1848), arguably the greatest of the poets who had emigrated from Scotland to the New World, composed two elegies (and one other praise poem) after emigrating to Nova Scotia in 1819 for Old Country chieftains. However, these works were exceptional: MacLean, known in Gaelic in Scotland as 'Bàrd Thighearna Cholla' ('The Poet to the Laird of Coll'),⁶ was one of the last poets recognised as poet to a clan chief, and he appears to have considered it his duty to compose an elegy on the death in 1835 of his patron, Alexander MacLean, chief of the MacLeans of Coll.⁷ Clan feelings persisted in the New World, and these were occasionally given expression in verse,⁸ but such song-poems were also somewhat exceptional and in any case were not laments, and therefore, they are of a different nature to the poetry being considered here.

As in Scotland, poets turned their attention to a range of new community leaders, and such song-poems form the first category to be explored in this paper. Of these, elegies for clergymen are perhaps the most prominent. However, we also have a number of elegies composed on the death of important cultural figures. There are also elegies composed on the death of Gaels who had gained prominence through the professions, politics, or other pursuits. Until the outbreak of the First World War, New World Gaels were generally not called upon to serve in the military, at home or abroad, and therefore, we have relatively fewer elegies concerning men lost in battle than exist in Scotland, although there are some. While the impact in this body of poetry of motifs drawn from the 'panegyric code' is unmistakable, we shall see that the poets developed other rhetorical devices appropriate to the subjects of their praise. In doing so, the poets were, similarly to their Scottish predecessors, not simply engaged in the praise of particular individuals but in reaffirming certain important traditional values of the community.

However, it is important to note that elegies were composed for a much broader group of people than widely acknowledged community leaders, and these form the second category of verse explored here. While there is certainly a strong element of praise for the virtues of the subjects of this body of song-poetry,⁹ and some elements of that praise draw on motifs from the 'panegyric code', in general, the second category served primarily as a means of enhancing communal solidarity at times of heightened grief, particularly when occasioned by premature deaths, and therefore should be treated as a somewhat different category from the first.¹⁰ Here, our terminology in both English and Gaelic is somewhat

ambiguous. The song-poems composed for the first category, acknowledged community leaders, might be referred to as ‘true’ panegyric poetry. The second category, for members of the community who did not perform an obvious leadership role, could be described as eulogistic. Of course, there is always an element of lamentation in both categories, and certainly also in the third, discussed below, although arguably the element of lamentation is stronger in the second and in the third category than in the first.

As Rankin has noted (Rankin 2020, p. 1), two terms are widely used in this body of poetry as a whole, *marbhrann*, defined as ‘elegy, epitaph, funeral song’ (Dwelly 1993), and *cumha*, a noun having a more general meaning of ‘mourning, lamentation, sorrow’, but also a more technical, poetic meaning, ‘elegy, poem in praise of the dead, eulogy’ (Dwelly 1993). Indeed, we also see *tuireadh* in the Scottish Gaelic tradition, which has a range of more general meanings, ‘mourning, act of mourning, deploring, bewailing or lamenting’, ‘weeping, act of weeping’, ‘lamentation, wail’, but also a range of more technical meanings, ‘lament for the dead dirge, elegy’, ‘melancholy narrative’, ‘death-song’ (Dwelly 1993).¹¹ There seems to be considerable semantic overlap between these terms, and Rankin suggests that any distinctions that may have existed in relation to this general body of poetry had largely become blurred by the beginning of the nineteenth century, both in Scotland and Nova Scotia, although she detects that subsequently New World poets seem to use *cumha* more frequently (Rankin 2020, p. 1). It may be that *cumha*, given its slightly wider spectrum of meanings, may have been more appropriate to certain poems of the second or third category being discussed here, where the balance between eulogy and more general lamentation tends towards the latter, and that these became better attested in the course of the nineteenth century: on this matter, more analysis may provide further insights.

With regard to the second category, premature death was a cause of particular personal, familial, and community sorrow, and there are, for example, a considerable number of song-poems composed on the death at sea of young men engaged in fishing or in sea transport. The death of a child was always particularly traumatic, and a considerable amount of poetry was composed to lend support and comfort to families and communities on such occasions. Breandán Ó Madagáin’s comments concerning Irish song in the nineteenth century are equally valid in relation to this and the next category of Nova Scotian Gaelic song-poetry:

Fundamental to the tradition of Irish song was its function as an instrument for the direct expression of emotion, using the enhanced powers of both verse and music, on occasions when feelings were such that ordinary speech was inadequate.

(Ó Madagáin 1985, p. 144)

It is also important to remember that poets were moved to compose when they themselves were touched by deeply personal loss, and this represents the third category, which was alluded to above. Even in elegies composed for community leaders, there is often real emotion to accompany elements that are more formulaic, elements meant to reinforce core community values. The poets usually knew personally the deceased and the families most affected by the loss. Unlike much of the older panegyric tradition in Scotland, where a good deal of the poetry was composed by poets such as John MacLean who had a particular formalised or semi-formalised relationship with aristocratic patrons, the New World poets were not in the main composing out of the same sense of obligation or duty. Unsurprisingly, the expression of strong personal emotion is also to be found in poems meant to express communal solidarity, our second category, particularly where the death occurred in tragic circumstances. However, the death of a close relative—a parent, a sibling, and, especially, a spouse—and of friends inspired the composition of many elegies, and in these, the expression of feelings of deep personal loss is particularly prominent. Ó Madagáin has, in an Irish song context, described how ‘[t]he catharsis of the creative endeavour brings a degree of control over the emotions so expressed’ (Ó Madagáin 1985, p. 148, and generally at pp. 148–51), and this observation is also relevant to the body of song-poetry considered here.

1. Elegies for Community Leaders: ‘True’ Panegyrics

In the absence of clan chiefs, and with no landlords to exercise authority over the daily lives of the people in Nova Scotia and most other parts of the New World in which they settled, Gaels turned to other figures for leadership. The most prominent category was clergy, and there are a very large number of laments composed for clergymen, which is something that is also true in Scotland. What is particularly notable about many of these is the extent to which poets redeploy much of the ‘panegyric code’ in this body of poetry, the stock of images and rhetoric used in praising the chiefly class and other members of the clan elites.

John MacLean composed three panegyrics for Father Colin Grant (1784–1839), the Catholic priest of Arisaig, Antigonish County, including a fine elegy on Father Grant’s death. Although they were of different denominations—MacLean was a Presbyterian—they were close friends, and MacLean was clearly deeply devoted to Grant, who had provided the poet with financial assistance in the poet’s early, difficult years at Upper Barney’s River (Sinclair 1881, p. xix), which is a period memorialised in what is perhaps MacLean’s greatest song–poem, ‘Oran do dh’Aimearaga’ (‘A Song for America’), also known as ‘A’ Choille Ghruamach’ (‘The Gloomy Forest’) (Meek 2003, p. 64; Sinclair 1881, p. 98; Dunbar 2006, Poem 28). The elegy for Father Grant is remarkable in its deployment of so many motifs drawn from the ‘panegyric code’. For example, the poet makes extended reference to Father Grant’s ancestry and familial links to a variety of noble kindreds, something very frequently employed in the older Gaelic panegyric tradition; these references included the Chisholms of Strathglass, the MacKenzies of Brahan, The Frasers of Lovat, the Camerons of Lochiel, the MacLeans of Ardgour, and the Campbells of Barcaldine. Apparently, Father Grant had considered a career in the military before turning to the priesthood, which provides MacLean with an opportunity to make reference to, and to celebrate, the martial qualities so frequently associated with the clan chief—qualities that might have distinguished Father Grant in such a career:

Bha thu cruadalach gun ghealltachd,
Nan èireadh tu ‘feachd na strì,
Nan cleachdadh tu làitheabh t’ òige,
‘Dhol gu seirbheis Dheòrsa Rìgh;
B’ airidh thu air àite Còirneil
‘S gun cois’neadh tu ‘n còrr le d’ ghnìomh,
Le lann stàilinn air do chruachan,
‘S cha bu dualchas dhuit ‘bhith clì.

You were courageous, without cowardice
If you had risen in war or strife,
Had you used your days of youth
To go into the service of George, the King;
You were worthy of the rank of Colonel
And you would’ve earned more with your exploits
With a blade of steel on your thigh,
It wasn’t in your inherited nature to be feeble.

(Dunbar 2006, Poem 42)

A very common motif in traditional panegyric is the depiction of the chieftain as a skilled mariner, usually a metaphor for good stewardship of the ‘ship of state’ (see, for example, Bateman 2008, pp. 58–62) of the communal order, and MacLean employs this motif for Father Grant:

Bu tu stiùramaich’ a’ bhàta
Sheòladh àrd i ‘m bàrr gach tuinn;
‘Sealltainn gu cùramach, beachdail
Mun gèilleadh a beirt na cruinn [. . .]

You were the helmsman
 Who'd sail her high on the crest of the waves;
 Watching carefully and judiciously
 Before the riggings in the mast failed [. . .]

(Dunbar 2006, Poem 42)

In traditional panegyric, the noble subject of the poetry is praised for his prowess in the hunt, particularly in pursuit of the deer, and the imagery in this passage could well have been written for a clan chief:

Bu tu giomanach a' ghunna
 'S tric a rinn thu fuil anns a' bheinn;
 Nuair a dhìreadh tu ri mullach
 Gum biodh cunnart air na fèidh;
 Bhiodh do luaidh dlùth na culaidh,
 Bhiodh iad uireasbhach ad dhèidh;
 Bhiodh do mhial-chù seang na muineal,

Ged bu chuireadach a cheum.
 You were masterly with a gun
 Often you let the blood flow in the hills;
 When you ascended to the summit
 There would be danger for the deer;
 Your lead would pierce their coats,
 You would leave them in distress;
 Your lean greyhound would be upon him,
 Though his pace would be frisky.

(Dunbar 2006, Poem 42)

MacLean praised Colin Grant's ability as a horseman: 'Bu tu marcaich' air each srèine/Cò bhuidhneadh ort rèis na geall?' ('You were the rider on the bridled horse/Who could beat you in a race or a bet?') (Dunbar 2006, Poem 42).¹² Although Grant was reputed to be a good horseman, this is also yet another example of the redeployment of a motif that was very common in praise poetry composed for the chiefly class.

It is notable that MacLean has relatively little to say about Father Grant's virtues as a priest, although in one of the two panegyrics for Grant while he was alive, composed after he had been injured falling from his horse, MacLean referred to how his clerical friend would be missed by his congregation and remarked on Grant's ability to elucidate the Christian Scriptures from the pulpit.¹³ In this respect, MacLean's elegy for Father Grant is not so very different from that composed by one of the other outstanding emigrant poets, Allan 'the Ridge' MacDonald (1794–1868), on the death of Bishop William Fraser (1779–1851), which, as Rankin notes, 'clearly follows the traditional bardic elegy of earlier times' (Rankin 2004, p. 169). The poet does refer to Bishop Fraser as 'Ceannard priseal na clèire' ('the cherished church leader'), who would unite his people in loyalty and guide them in wisdom, whose decrees were worthy, and who 'preached truth on the altar' ('Beul na firinn air altair') (Rankin 2004, pp. 110–13). However, much of the poem draws heavily on common motifs of the 'panegyric code'. The virtues of hospitality and benevolence, especially to the poor and needy—qualities expected of the chiefly class in traditional clan society and in the praise poetry that supported it—are foregrounded. However, we also have passages such as these, which are very reminiscent of the older panegyric tradition:

Gnùis mhacanta chaoimhneil
 Aghaidh smachdail an t-saoighdeir
 Dh'an robh an t-aigne gun fhoille
 'S a' chom gun ghaiseadh gun ghaoid ann
 Chum gach fasan is caoimhneas bu chòir.

Modest and kindly in appearance
 Yet martial and commanding;
 Of upright disposition
 Physically healthy and sound
 You preserved each worthy custom and courtesy.

'Chraobh mhullaich nach seargadh
 Sàr churaidh gun chearb thu
 Leòghann curanta calma
 Bhuineadh urram 's gach feara-ghnìomh
 'S tu b' urrainn 's a dhearb e 's gach dòigh.

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

(Rankin 2004, pp. 112–13)

The praise of the subject's appearance and of his martial air in the first verse quoted, and the use in the second of kennings such as the noble tree and the valiant lion (an image also redolent of martial associations) are very common motifs in chiefly panegyrics.

In another fine elegy for Bishop Fraser (Newton 2015, pp. 268–74), the language and many of the motifs are also reminiscent of the older panegyric tradition, but we also see a more extensive development of motifs that are more explicitly related to the Bishop's spiritual virtues and priestly role. The poem was composed by John Boyd (1797–1871), a native of Arisaig, Scotland who emigrated with his family to Antigonish County in 1801 and who later founded the Antigonish weekly newspaper, *The Casket*. The poem begins with an extensive description of the grief experienced by the community, which is commonplace in Gaelic elegies, chiefly or otherwise. As Michael Newton notes, Bishop Fraser is referred to as 'ceannard' ('a leader') of the people, which is a term usually reserved for chieftains (Newton 2015). Bishop Fraser is praised for his strength and physical prowess. The poet also refers to Fraser's wise counsel and good judgment, qualities for which chiefs were praised but ones also valued in a religious leader. The chieftain is expected to be charitable in times of peace and ferocious in war; similarly, Bishop Fraser is praised for being both calm and fierce: 'Bha thu ciùin mar an leanaban/Is bha thu garg nuair a dh'fheumteadh' ('You were calm, like a little child/and you were fierce when necessary') (Newton 2015, p. 273).

However, John Boyd also refers to Bishop Fraser as 'abstoil' ('an apostle') and as 'm buachaille b' àirde' ('the most supreme pastor', or shepherd). The poet states that Bishop Fraser 'purged the place of many odious evils with your governance' ('Chuir thu iomadh olc gràineil/Às an àite le d' riaghladh'), which is likely a reference to Bishop Fraser's role in the establishment of a temperance society in 1841 (see Sinclair 1881, p. 149), among other initiatives. Although, as noted, Boyd draws on panegyric motifs concerning hospitality and charity, he also ties these virtues directly to Biblical teachings: 'Is làmhnan sgaoilte na fialachd/A' co-lionadh nan àithntean' ('with outstretched hands of generosity/you fulfilled the commandments'). Bishop Fraser is praised for his ability to elucidate Biblical teachings—'Nuair a dh'fhosgladh tu am Bioball,/Bheirteadh mìneachadh réidh leat' ('when you would open the Bible/you would offer a clear exposition')—and his prowess in delivering a sermon—'Is tu bu mhath air an t-searmon/Cha bu chearbach o d' bheul e' ('you were good at the sermon,/it did not come out awkwardly from your mouth'). Finally, the references here to the priestly vows of poverty are ones that would not be found in traditional chiefly panegyrics:

Is tu nach togadh an deicheamh
 Ged is ceart do na cléir e;

Is cha chumadh tu tasan
 Gun a sgapadh air feumaich;
 Chuir thu cùil ris a' bheartas
 Bhon a sheachain Mac Dhé e
 Is rinn thu roghainn den bhochdainn
 Mar rinn abstol na ceud linn.

You would not exact the tithing
 Even though it's right for the clergy to do so;
 You would never keep a shilling
 Without distributing it to the needy;
 You turned your back on affluence
 Since the Son of God shunned it
 And you made poverty a conscious choice
 Like the apostles of the first generation did.

([Newton 2015](#), p. 271)

Of course, there were elegies for Presbyterian clergy and other worthies, and we see in them a similar redeployment of the 'panegyric code'. A particularly striking example is the elegy to Thomas Fraser, which was composed in 1813 by the Rev James MacGregor (1759–1830), who was a very important emigrant clergyman active in Pictou County. As Newton notes, this elegy 'illustrates how the rhetoric developed by the Gaelic literati for the praise of chieftains and battle champions was transformed to pay tribute to the spiritual "warriors" of the church and the values and beliefs that they advanced' ([Newton 2015](#), p. 264). However, even in this elegy, we also see some of the same developments in the code of praise that are evident in John Boyd's elegy for Bishop Fraser, in particular specific references to Christian practices that would not feature in traditional praise for the chiefly class. After referring to Fraser's godliness, for example, the poet states:

Is iomadh Sàbaid thug teist ort
 Nach robh leisge no sgìos ort
 Ann an teagasg dhaibh cheistean
 Is an leas às a' Bhìoball.

It was testified on many Sabbaths
 That you bear no sign of laziness or fatigue
 In teaching them the Catechism
 And its rationale from the Bible.

([Newton 2015](#), p. 266)

And Rev MacGregor also refers to Fraser's abilities as a precentor:

Làmh 'thogail nan Salm thu,
 An taigh-searmoin na sgìre,
 Chuireadh mach iad gu dealbhach
 Gun chearbaich, gun dìobradh.

Yours was a hand that held the Psalms
 In the country's house of worship;
 They would be delivered sagaciously
 Without rough edges or fault.

([Newton 2015](#), p. 265)

The melding of the traditional and the less traditional and more specific is most evident in this quatrain:

Ann an cléir is an seisean
 Is tric a sheas thu droch shìde
 Ursainn-chatha na h-eaglais;
 'N aghaidh beag-nàir' luchd-mìoruin.

In the Presbytery and the Kirk Sessions
 You often withstood difficult times;
 You were the battle-pillar of the church
 Who endured the impudence of enemies.

(Newton 2015, p. 265)

References to the Presbytery and Kirk Sessions would not be found in a chiefly panegyric, but 'Ursainn-chatha' ('battle pillar') was a motif that was very commonly redeployed and one that could easily be transposed to the new setting.

Another important category of community leaders for whom elegies were composed was 'culture heroes'—highly regarded exponents of Gaelic culture. John MacLean's death in 1848 inspired at least three laments, one by Alexander MacDonald, 'Bàrd na Ceapaich' ('The Keppoch Bard') (c. 1819–1904),¹⁴ another by John Cameron (1807–1858),¹⁵ and a third by John MacGillivray (n.d.).¹⁶ As is usual in this tradition, the poets make reference to the sense of loss felt by the family and friends and the community at large, and all employ motifs from the 'panegyric code'. However, the poems also contain much that relates to MacLean's cultural significance. Unsurprisingly, these poems celebrate John MacLean's excellence as a poet: the Keppoch Bard refers to him as 'ar ceann ealain' ('our artistic leader') and says of him 'Bu leat toiseach nam briathran' ('You were the chief of words'). In addition to being a poet, MacLean was valued as a tradition-bearer and singer. Thus, John Cameron laments the loss of the poet's eloquence as a Gaelic speaker and his font of historical knowledge, 'Dh'fhalbh a' Ghàidhlig 's an eachdraidh' ('The Gaelic and the history have gone') and adds the following: "S gheibhte eachdraichean ciatach, / 'S tric a dh'èisd mi bhuaighteach do bheòil' ('Excellent stories would be found, / Often did I listen to the words coming from your mouth'). MacGillivray says of MacLean: 'Chaill sinn tuilleadh 's do bhàrdachd, / Ged a tha sinn 'ga h-ionndrainn, / Chaill sinn t' fhiosrachadh sàr ghasd' ('We have lost more than your poetry, / Though we certainly miss that, / We have also lost your most excellent knowledge'). Cameron also makes reference to John MacLean's skills as a singer:

Gheibhte òranan milis
 Gu ro phongail bho d' bhilibh,
 Dh' fhalbh a' cheòlraidh 's a h-uidheam
 Bhon thug an t-eug bhuainn thu.

Sweet songs would be heard
 Mostly accurately from your lips,
 The muse and the instrument have departed
 Since death has taken you away from us.

Similarly, John MacGillivray acknowledges MacLean's singing talents: 'Gum bu tric e 'm measg uaislean / A' seinn dhuanagan Gàidhlig' ('He was often amongst noblemen / Singing Gaelic songs'). All of the poets make reference to MacLean's generous hospitality and his sociability—such passages echo motifs in the 'panegyric code', and no doubt they were meant to reinforce important Gaelic cultural values, but they also appear to have been heartfelt.

John MacGillivray ('Iain MacGilleBhràth') (c. 1784–1862) was a fine poet (See Rankin 2020, pp. 8–10) and also an outstanding piper—he was known as 'Am Piobair Mòr' ('The Great Bagpiper'). In Scotland, he had been piper to MacDonald of Glenaladale in Moidart. On his death in 1860, an unnamed brother composed an elegy. As is the case in elegies composed for 'culture heroes', the poet stresses MacGillivray's mental abilities and his learning. Then, we have an extensive description of his piping:

Bhiodh a màladh is lùb air
 Is na duis 'cur ris a' cheileireadh;
 Ceòl toilichte cliùiteach
 Is meòir dhùbailte ri mion-bhualadh;
 Crun-lùth glan-phronnadh siùbhlach
 An déigh an ùrlair ro eireachdail,
 Agus caithream bhon t-sionnsair
 'Cur séis-chiùil ri puirt ealanta.

The curved airbag and the drones
 Would energise the revelry;
 Merry, renowned music,
 With doubled fingers making delicate blows;
 A cleanly-cut, nimble quick measure
 After an exquisite melody air,
 And a blast from the chanter,
 Adding forceful notes to artful tunes.

Do mheòir ghrinn 'bheireadh caismeachd,
 Ghabhadh tlachd is thugadh moladh dhoibh;
 Le MacFhionghain nam baiteil
 Thug dhuinn eachdraidh nan ealan oirr';

Your elegant fingers that would deliver a march,
 That gave pleasure and gave praise to them;
 By MacKinnon of the battles
 Who related their history to us;¹⁷

(Newton 2015, p. 278)

MacGillivray was a collector of Gaelic poetry as well as a piper, something for which he is also praised:

Is tric a shaoraich thu duanaibh
 Is cha bu shuarach toirt aire dhoibh;
 Is iomadh aon dhiubh tha clò-bhuailte
 Snasail suairc-fhaclach annasach;

Often you set free poems
 And they are worthy of attention;
 Many of them have been published
 And are elegant, kind-worded and interesting.

(Newton 2015, p. 278)

The importance of musical expression is an enduring feature of Nova Scotian Gaelic culture. The Cape Breton fiddle tradition is now one of the most celebrated aspects of that culture, and Dan Rory MacDonald (1911–1976) of Judique, Cape Breton, affectionately known as 'Dan R', was a legendary exponent of it. Reputed to have composed well over 1000 tunes, many dozens of which, such as 'The Red Shoes' and 'The Trip to Windsor', reels, and 'Lime Hill', a strathspey, have become standards in the repertoires of Cape Breton musicians, he was also in great demand as a fiddler (McGann 2003). On his death, Archie Alex MacKenzie of Christmas Island, Cape Breton, composed a short elegy, 'Marbhrann Dan R' ('Elegy for Dan R') (MacKenzie et al. 1992, p. 40).¹⁸ In the first verse, the poet expresses the general sense of loss felt by the community at large, which is commonplace in this type of poetry, but one in this case that makes specific reference to the music:

Gur iomadh sùil a bhios gu deurach
 Nuair chluinnear do cheòl
 A sgrìobh thu-fhèin an dòigh cho grinn
 A bhios sinn 'seinn gu bràth.

There will be many a tearful eye
When your tunes are played,
The tunes that you composed so well
With us their sound remains.

Then, the poet refers to the esteem in which Dan R is held well beyond the community:

Gun d' fhuair thu ònair agus cliù
A measg luchd-ciùil 's gach àit,
Cho fad air falbh ris an Roinn Eòrp';
Gun cualas daoine ag ràdh
Nach robh do leithid anns na linnntean
Cho fad 's bu chuimhneach leò;
Nuair a chual' iad t' fhiodhall theudan bhinn
Agus tu-fhèin ga seinn.

You earned much praise and honour,
Among musicians in every place,
As far away as Europe;
People have been heard saying
That your like has not been seen
For many generations;
When they heard your fiddle of the sweet strings
And you yourself playing them.

The poet concludes by once again expressing a general sentiment on behalf of the community: that they are praying for the repose of Dan R's soul, and the hope that when they reach the Kingdom of God—'far am bheil ceòl gach latha' ('where there is music every day'), that Dan R will be there playing on his sweet-sounding harp.

One final song-poem that will be discussed in this first category is John MacLean's 'Marbhrann do bhean-uasail òig chliùitich a bha pòsta aig Dotair Iain Noble', which is often referred to simply as 'Marbhrann do Mhrs Noble' ('A Lament for Mrs Noble') (Dunbar 2006, Poem 44; Sinclair 1881, p. 183), and it is considered by many to be one of the finest elegies ever composed in the Gaelic language. It is one of the song-poems referred to by Dr John Shaw as being a universal favourite in the Nova Scotia *Gàidhealtachd*. It could be discussed in the next section, since the subject of the poem, Julia MacNiven, died prematurely in childbirth, at only 38 years of age, in 1843. Similar to the poet, Julia was a native of Tiree, the daughter of a local tacksman who had immigrated to Whycomagh in the early 1820s. She was married to John Noble, a doctor from Inverness, Scotland, who was the first doctor to serve the Gaelic population of Inverness County, Cape Breton. Julia herself was a midwife, and both she and her husband were admired and respected in those communities—they were certainly community leaders, community builders, and 'culture heroes' (Dunbar 2006, p. 377), and hence the inclusion of the elegy in this section. Dr Noble had apparently requested that John MacLean compose an elegy as if by himself (Sinclair 1881, p. 183), which was a fairly common occurrence and one that indicated the great esteem in which the poet was held in the greater Nova Scotian *Gàidhealtachd*.

The poet selectively employs elements of the 'panegyric code', such as the imagery associated with death: the coffin—'ciste chaoil, ghlaiste nan clàr' ('a narrow coffin, sealed by the boards'), a formulation made more striking by the alliteration—and the funeral shroud—'lèine don chaol-anart ghrinn' ('a shroud of fine, elegant linen'). Julia's physical beauty is praised. In one passage, the poet employs an extended metaphor of the family being on a storm-tossed ship at sea, skilfully and strikingly conjuring up the 'ship of state' metaphor that so frequently appears in the 'panegyric code'. He uses a variety of kennings—an apple fallen from the tree, an extinguished candle, a broken mirror, and a ring missing its diamond—which, as Rankin notes, are all appropriate for a female subject (Rankin 2020, pp. 10–11). In addition, the poet makes reference to Julia's personal qualities, thereby reminding listeners of the standards that are admirable in a community leader:

Bha thu fiùghantach fialaidh
 'S tu 'bu shìobhalta briathran is cainnt;
 'S i do làmh nach biodh dìomhain
 'S bu ghlan obair bho d' mheuran gun mheang,

You were liberal and generous
 Your words and conversation were most civil;
 Your hand would not be idle
 Purest was the work of your faultless fingers.

It is in this category of Nova Scotian song-poems that we see particularly clearly the elements of conservatism in the tradition, and the pervasiveness of the 'panegyric code' about which MacInnes has written. However, we also see the innovations that have been brought about by the new circumstances in which Nova Scotia Gaels found themselves. In all such song-poetry, though, the central preoccupation is the maintenance of the core values of the community.

2. Elegies and Laments to Address Communal Grief

While elegies were very important mechanisms for reinforcing community values, they also played other important social functions within the tightly knit rural communities in which the Gaelic language and its associated culture were maintained. In particular, elegies provided a means of expressing solidarity and comfort at a time of loss, and this comes even more sharply into focus in the second category of song-poems discussed in this article. This function was especially important when dealing with a premature death or a death under particularly tragic circumstances.

Perhaps the most widely known song of this type is 'Òran nan Granndach' ('Lament for the Grants'), which is the other song-poem referred to by Dr John Shaw as being a universal favourite in the Nova Scotian *Gàidhealtachd*. It is credited to John MacGillivray, the subject of the elegy discussed in the preceding section, who was born in Moidart, Scotland, in about 1792 and who immigrated to Nova Scotia in 1818, settling at Malignant Brook, Antigonish County (MacLellan and Shaw 2000, p. 405). According to Alexander Maclean Sinclair, the song concerned the drowning in 1831 of four men, Donald Grant, Colin Grant, Alexander Ban MacDonald, and Malcolm MacLeod, near Moidart, Antigonish County, when a shallop that was accompanying them struck their boat (MacLellan and Shaw 2000, pp. 404–5). In the version of the elegy that appeared in the Nova Scotian Gaelic newspaper, *Mac-Talla*, MacGillivray begins by reporting the circumstances of the arrival of the news of the accident, which was commonplace in many traditional elegies.

Moch Di-luain an am dhuinn gluasad,
 'S sinn gun smuairan oirnn, gun champar,
 Fhuair sinn naidheachd a bha cruaidh leinn,
 Na fir shuairc' a bhith air chall oirnn, [. . .]

Early Monday as we prepared to depart,
 Without a trace of dejection or sorrow,
 We received distressing tidings,
 That our dear companions had been lost, [. . .]

(MacLellan and Shaw 2000, p. 250)

The poet continues by expressing the sorrow that was felt throughout the district, which was also a commonly used technique in the tradition:

Tha lionn-dubh air feadh an àite
 Mun dà bhràthair bhàthadh còmhla,
 Dòmhnallach bho Allt 'ic Càra,
 'S an deagh nàbaidh bha 'na chòmhdhail;

Drongaireachd no droch nàdar
 Cha do chàraich Dia 'nur feòla;
 'S iomadh cridhe dh'fhàg siud cràiteach
 Barrachd air na dh'àraich òg sibh.

There is sorrow throughout the district
 For the two brothers drowned together,
 A MacDonald from McArras Brook,
 And a good neighbour who was with them;
 Drunkenness or contrariness
 God never fixed within you;
 Many's the heart suffering sorely on your account
 Besides those who raised you when you were young.

(MacLellan and Shaw 2000, p. 250)

In referring to drunkenness, MacGillivray may have been implying that drink was not involved in the accident, thereby providing some comfort to the families and the community as a whole. Then, he follows with expressions of condolences to the families affected by the tragedy and recites the virtues of those lost. For example, the poet addresses the father of the two Grants with these words: 'Liom is duilich thus' Iain Ghranndaich,/Chaill thu a' chlann sin a b'fheàrr beusan' ('Ian Grant, I pity you/You have lost sons possessing the best qualities'). Near the end of the elegy, he addresses their sister.

'S liom 's duilich thus', Anna,
 Bhith trom, galach mar a tha thu;
 'S ann dha'd dhith a tha na fearaibh
 Do dheagh chaidreabh 's do gheala-bhràithrean; [. . .]

My condolences to you, Anna,
 Seeing you so downcast and tearful;
 How you must miss the men,
 Close acquaintances and your own dear brothers; [. . .]

(MacLellan and Shaw 2000, p. 254)

The poet makes several references to the will of God and reminds listeners of their own mortality:

[. . .] 'S cinneach¹⁹ sinn an saoghal uileadh
 Gu 'eil gach duine dol ga fhàgail,
 'S mar gun tilgeadh craobh a duilleach
 Thus' an-diugh 'us mis' am màireach.

[. . .] We of this world are all certain
 That each one of us must leave it:
 Just as a tree casts off its leaves,
 Today it's you, and me tomorrow.

(MacLellan and Shaw 2000, p. 254)

In all of these passages, we see MacGillivray giving expression to the sorrow felt by the family and the community at large, thereby providing comfort and expressing solidarity.

Another well-known elegy is 'Bàthadh nam Fear' ('The Drowning of the Men'), which was apparently composed by Dugald MacEachern ('Dughall Mac Eacharna', 'Dughall Breac') (1789–1880), who was a native of Tiree who immigrated to Antigonish County in 1820 (MacLeòid 1970, p. 19).²⁰ About 1823, a young MacDonald from Arisaig, Antigonish County, had built a boat, and a few days later he and four others set out from Arisaig heading to Pictou. A storm arose and all were lost without a trace, except for the MacDonald, whose body was found on the boat as it drifted ashore on the next day (Creighton and

MacLeod 1979, p. 141). As in ‘Òran nan Granndach’, the poet begins by describing the circumstances of the disaster—in this case, the month and day of the week on which, the poet claims, he saw the vessel passing by on its fateful voyage. This is followed by an expression of condolences to the entire community, which is accompanied by a description of the virtues of the men who died. The references to their courage and appearance are very reminiscent of the sort of rhetoric used in traditional praise poetry for the Gaelic chiefly class:

Seo an tìr tha fo mhulad,
Tha gach duin’ innt’ fo ghruaim,
Mu na dh’fhalbh air an turas
Bhi fo iomain nan stuagh;
Na fir fhoghainnteach, thlachdmhor,
Nach biodh tais ri uchd cruais,
‘S trom bhur càirdean ‘nan aigne,
‘S sibh an caidreabh a’ chuain.

This is the land that is under sadness,
Everybody dwelling here is full of gloom,
Concerning those who departed on the voyage
And who are being driven by the waves;
Brave, handsome men,
Who would not be cowardly in the face of hardship.
Anxious are the thoughts of your friends,
Whilst you are in the company of the ocean.

(Creighton and MacLeod 1979, p. 137)

As in ‘Òran nan Granndach’, in subsequent verses, the poet expresses condolences to the families affected. Again, the poet is at pains to absolve the victims of any blame for the misfortune. Of the MacDonald lad who had built the boat, the poet composes the following lines:

Ach a Dhòmhnallaich ghasda,
Cha robh mearachd nad thùrn
‘S math a shnaidh thu a saighean,
Rinn thu calcadh gu dlùth,
Sìos o gualainn gu sliosaid;
Bu mhath fiaradh a bùird,
Tha do chàirdean gad iargain,
On thug Dia bhuat an stiùir.

But, O, gallant MacDonald,
There was no flaw in your workmanship,
Well did you fashion her stems,
You caulked her tightly,
From her shoulders to her sides;
Her planks were nicely curved,
Your friends are lamenting you,
Since God took the helm from you.

This echoes an earlier passage, in which the poet notes that the disaster was not due to the limitations of the men as sailors but simply to the vagaries of fate:

Cha b’ e laigead am misnich,
No an sgiobadh ‘bhith fann,
Rinn na treun ud a milleadh,
Ach a’ ghloinne ruith gann;

Thàinig snàthlan am beatha,
 Grad gun fhios dhaibh gu cheann,
 Leis an teachdaire dhàna
 Chaoidh 's e 'm bàs am fear meallt'.

It was not the lack of courage,
 Or the weakness of the crew,
 That destroyed these courageous men,
 But that the hour-glass ran out;
 The thread of their lives,
 Came without warning quickly to its end,
 With the bold messenger
 Death is always the deceiver.

(Creighton and MacLeod 1979, p. 137)

Once again, then, we see the poet providing an outlet for the sorrow widely felt in the community and offering comfort to those most affected by the disaster.

'Cumha nam Bràithrean' ('Lament for the Brothers') was composed by Peggy MacIntyre ('Peigi Ailein') of Benacadie Glen, Cape Breton County around the year 1859 on the drowning of two brothers at Big Pond, Cape Breton County as they tried to save their herring nets from the ice. As in other such poetry, we see that the courage of the brothers is praised, and their loss is attributed to forces of nature beyond their command, in this way offering comfort to the families and to the wider community:

'S cha b' e sgioba bha gealtach,
 Dh'fhàs gun neart no gun sgeum sibh,
 Ged a rinn i bhur mealladh,
 Nuair a rac i o chèile.
 Gun do shèid i le frasan,
 'S thill i dlùth le clach-mheallain;
 Gun do rinn i bhur dalladh,
 'S chaill bhur casan an stèidheadh.

You weren't a crew that was cowardly,
 Or who lacked strength or ingenuity,
 Although the weather deceived you,
 When it ripped you from each other.
 It was blowing with showers,
 And closed in with hailstones,
 It completely blinded you,
 And your feet lost their support.

(MacLeod 1970, p. 45)

As was noted earlier, 'Tuireadh' ('Lament for the Dorcas') was composed by Mrs Alexander Ferguson on the loss of the steamship *Dorcas* in a terrible gale in August 1893. The master of the ship, Captain Angus Ferguson, and many of the crew were Gaels from around Catalone, Cape Breton. The song expresses the great sorrow of the community and of the families themselves. The poet provides comfort by making clear that the disaster was due to the elements rather than the skipper:

Chaidh an *Dorcas* don ghrund
 Le gillean mo dhùthch',
 'S tha iomadh neach tùrsach, brònach;
 'S an sgiobair bha treun
 An iomadach feum,
 O laigh e san eug 's cha bheò e.

The *Dorcas* was lost
 With the lads of our land,
 And many were sadly mourning;
 And her skipper so brave
 In many a storm,
 Is lying in death, eternally.

(Fergusson 1977, p. 94)

In a remarkable passage, the sea itself responds to the poet, making clear that ultimately, the elements are simply the agent of God's will:

'Och, och!' ars' an fhairg,
 'Chan fhairich mi balbh,
 Chan fhuiling mi fearg no caineadh;
 Tha mi umhail don Rìgh
 Sin a chruthaich gach nì,
 'S cha tèid mi a chaoidh thar aithne.'

'Och, och!' said the sea
 'I shall not stay still,
 I'll suffer no angry scolding;
 I'll pay heed to the King
 Who's the Maker of all,
 And I shall not lament his order.'

(Fergusson 1977, p. 95)

However, not all premature deaths were at sea. For example, a poet identified as Mrs. Alexander Gillis of Southwest Margaree composed a lament for John Gillis, a 23-year-old man from Northwest Margaree, 'Dh'innseadh beagan mu d' bhuadhan/ Agus uaisle do nàdur' ('To recount a little of your virtues/ And the nobility of your nature'). Gillis had been killed in an accident at the Ironworks in New Glasgow, Pictou County, at the time of the First World War (MacDougall 1939, p. 145).

The period from 1815 until 1914 was a relatively peaceful one for Nova Scotian Gaels, although it appears that at least some Nova Scotia Gaels did see action in the Second Boer War (1899–1902).²¹ The first and second World Wars were a different matter.²² Similar to other Canadians, young men from Nova Scotia paid the ultimate price, and poets commemorated these lost lives in much the same way that they responded to other premature deaths. Kenneth Ferguson, a fine Framboise, Cape Breton, poet, composed song-poems to commemorate the local men lost during the First World War.²³ Neil MacKinnon, 'Niall Mhicheil Nill' ('Neil, son of Micheal, son of Neil'), of Highland Hill, Victoria County, composed 'Cumha do Dhòmhnall MacFhionghain' ('Lament for Donald MacKinnon') on the death of Donald C. MacKinnon ('Dòmhnall Ruairidh Lucy') of MacKinnon Harbour, Victoria County, who was killed on 8 July 1944 in the vicious fighting that accompanied the 3rd Canadian Division's attacks on German positions in the villages of Gruchy and Buron, as part of the Allied assault on Caen.²⁴ After expressing his own sorrow, the poet poignantly reflects on the devastation that must have been felt by the soldier's parents, who lost their only son:

Tha do phàrantan nad dhèidh
 Gun a h-aon aca glè threun,
 Chan eil leigheas air an creuchd,
 'S ann annad fhèin bha 'n dòchas.

Your parents who remain,
 Both of whom have lost their strength,
 There is no balm for their wounds,

In you they reposed their hopes.

(Watson and Robertson 1987, p. 8)

Similar to many other Canadian soldiers, Donald MacKinnon was buried in France: “S iomadh òigear tha ri d’ thaobh/Air raointean na Roinn Eòrpa’ (‘Many a lad is by your side/On the fields of Europe’).²⁵ However, rather than making reference to Donald MacKinnon’s martial qualities, the poet extols his more civic virtues:

Cha chuir mise teud air gleus,
Sheinneas dhomh do chliù ‘s do bheus,
‘S iomadh fear a bha an èis,
A dh’fhairichfeum do throcair.

I cannot put a string in tune,
That can sing your fame and virtue,
Many a man in time of need,
Felt the aid of your compassion.

Cha bhiodh do chridhe dhaibh am foill,
Chleachd thu carrantas le loinn,
Thèid iomadh ùrnaigh gu na nèoil,
Do chaoimhneas thoirt dhut sòlas.

For them there was no deceit in your heart
You practiced charity with grace,
Many a prayer will travel to the skies,
That your kindness will bring you solace.

(Watson and Robertson 1987, p. 8)

The human stories behind many of these compositions are now often obscure and in some cases lost, and song-poems such as this one remind us of this context and transform our appreciation of them. This particular composition was part of the repertoire of the outstanding singer and tradition-bearer, Malcolm Stephen ‘Maxie’ MacNeil (1927–2015), who was also of Highland Hill. The present author will long remember hearing Maxie sing this song at a community gathering at the Iona, Cape Breton, Legion Hall, in the early 1990s, following the funeral of two locals who, as the author recalls, had been veterans; the power and emotion of Maxie’s singing, and the rapt attention of those gathered, illustrated vividly the enduring power of such songs to channel emotion and provide solace to the community even when the immediate context that first occasioned the composition had changed. This is something that was hinted at in the quotation from Dr. John Shaw earlier in this article.

No death is more heart rending than that of a child or children, and there are many songs to mark such an event. A fine example is John MacLean’s ‘Òran do Leanabh-Gille’ (‘A Song for a Young Boy’) (Dunbar 2006, Poem 43; Sinclair 1881, p. 180, where it is titled ‘Tuireadh airson Leinibh-Gille’ (‘Lament for a Young Boy’)). It was composed, as if by the father himself, on the death of the son of a local Antigonish County man, John Chisholm, who was drowned while returning one day from the local school. As with other song-poems of this genre, ‘Òran do Leanabh-Gille’ gives expression to the grief felt by the family and the community, and it offers solidarity and consolation at a time of profound loss. John MacLean’s choice of metre is notable: he employs a three-line ‘iorram’ metre that was strongly associated with chiefly elegies but which was less commonly used by the nineteenth century (Newton 2015, p. 311). The poet voices the strong feelings of sorrow that would have been experienced by the family:

Tha mo chridh’ air a mhùchadh,
‘S trom an t-eallach a dhrùidh air,
‘S tric a shileadh gu siùbhlach mo dheòir.

My heart has been smothered,
Heavy is the load that has born in on it,
Often would my tears flow freely.

Ann am chadal 's am dhùsgadh
Thig thu m' aire, 's mi t' ionndrainn,
Bhon a dhalladh do shùilean fo sgleò.

In my sleep and in my waking
You are on my mind, and I miss you,
Since your eyes were blinded in darkness.

In subsequent verses, the poet gives expression to the profound grief of the mother and also draws on imagery from the 'panegyric code'. For example, the relationship between the chief and his heir is likened to that of parts of the (noble) tree, which is a kenning that the poet references in this passage: 'Thuit 'gheug mu' do chrìon i 'sna meòir' ('The stalk has fallen before its branches decayed'). The poet concludes by referencing the Christian faith that was so important to the Gaelic communities of Nova Scotia and the solace that their faith provided at times of crisis:

Thoir dhuinn neart gu bhith 'g earbsa
Gun tu-fhèin 'thug air falbh e,
'S gum bu leatsa mo leanaban le còir.

Give us the strength to trust
That it was yourself who took him away,
And that my child is rightfully with you.

Thug thu seachad e 'n iasad
'S thug leat mar an ceudna e,
'S dean a mhathadh, 's e m' iarrtas, air bròn.

You gave him to us temporarily
And you have taken him like the rest,
Forgive him, that's my request, in sorrow.

3. The Poet Expressing a Personal Sense of Loss

In the first two categories of song-poems considered here, attention has been focused to a considerable degree on the social roles that elegies and laments have played in Gaelic society. However, it is also important to remember that poets have used such song-poems as a means of expressing their own deeply felt personal grief. Of course, such grief is also present, often with considerable intensity, in laments for public figures in Gaelic society and in those laments that express communal solidarity. Indeed, it is this intensity, and the artistry with which sorrow is conveyed, that make some of the laments we have looked at ones that have been kept alive on the lips of singers and in the hearts of audiences long after the particular events that they mark took place. However, such song-poems are somewhat different from these more personal poems, which are often intended for a smaller circle of people. Although there are sometimes echoes of the 'panegyric code', many of these compositions draw less heavily on such motifs. Many of the individuals for whom such laments were composed are now obscure to us, but as was noted in relation to the earlier discussion of 'Cumha do Dhòmhnall MacFhionghain', we should remember that there is a story behind each such composition, and a spouse, family, or network of friends who were touched and helped by it.

While well-known poets such as John MacLean were sometimes requested by the bereaved to put their sense of loss into words, we have a considerable body of song-poetry composed by the bereaved themselves: a husband for a wife, sometimes a wife for a husband, a parent for a child, a child for a parent, one sibling for another. These were the

sentiments of Murdoch Morrison, ‘Murchadh Choinnich Bhàin’ (‘Murdoch, son of Fair Kenneth’), in his ‘Marbhrann d’a Mhnaoi’ (‘Elegy for his Wife’), which was composed on the death of his wife of fifty years:

O, bidh mi air uairean glé ghruamach ’nam leabaidh;
A h-uile taobh nì mi tionndadh, tha ’n rùm aice falamh.
Gur goirid an ùine bhios agam fhéin air an talamh,
Gus an cuir iad fon ùir mi, cho dlùth dhi ’s bu mhath leam.

Sometimes in bed I’m deeply depressed;
Every which way I turn, her place is empty.
My own time on earth is growing very short,
Until they bury me, as close to her as I yearn to be.

(Morrison 1931, p. 63)

However, Morrison finds solace in his personal religious devotion:

Nuair bhios mi ’nam ònrachd, bidh mi brònach ’s chan annas,
Bidh mi ’smaointinn an còmhnuidh air an dòigh a bha againn;
Ach am Fear a thug bhuam i, tha E truasail ri peacaich;
’S tha mis’ ann an dòchas gur ann an Glòir a tha ’dachaigh.

When I’m alone, it’s no wonder that I’m dejected,
I’m constantly thinking about the way that we were;
But the One who took her, He is compassionate to sinners;
And I live in hope that her eternal home is in Heaven.

(Morrison 1931, p. 63)

In an elegy composed on the death of his wife in 1939 (Fergusson 1977, p. 120), John Campbell of Sydney, Cape Breton expresses his deep sadness and sense of loneliness but also speaks of her beauty, her personal virtues of kindness, patience, friendliness, and calmness, the regard in which she was held, and her ability as a singer:

Bha do ghuth gu fuaimneach, binn,
Is b’ e do thlachd bhith ’n comhnuidh seinn,
Na laoidhean spioradail ’s na rainn,
A thugadh dhuinn ’s an t-salmadair.

Your voice was sonorous and sweet,
And your pleasure to be always singing
The spiritual songs and the poems,
That the psalmists have given to us.

(Fergusson 1977, p. 121)

Indeed, much of this song-poem is a reflection on his wife’s piety and the comfort offered by their Christian faith.

In ‘Caoidh’ (‘Lament’), composed by the Port Hood lawyer and Member of Parliament, Donald MacLennan (1877–1953)²⁶, on the death of his wife in 1923, there is also an extensive expression of the poet’s grief and loneliness. However, in this passage, pathetic fallacies very reminiscent of motifs in the ‘panegyric code’—nature itself is affected by the subject’s death—are employed:

Tha mo dhoireachan dol bàs,
Chan eil blàth a’ fàs air craoibh,
Chan eil eun a’ seinn air bàrr,
Dh’fhàilnich iad fo sgàil an aoig.

Here my groves are dying now,
 No blossoms grow on the trees,
 No birds are singing on the boughs,
 They are failing under the shadow of death.

(Fergusson 1977, p. 119)

Again, the poem concludes with the poet taking refuge in the promised rewards of his faith.

A good example of an elegy by a son for a father is that composed by Alexander MacDonald ('Alasdair mac Dhòmhnail ic Alasdair') (1837–1871) of the southwest river of Mabou (McLellan 1891, p. vii). He too likens himself to a ship adrift at sea, which, as noted earlier, draws on the 'ship of state' motif in the 'panegyric code':

Gura mis' a th' air mo chràdh,
 Gun thrèig mo chàil san uair,
 'S mi mar bhàta bhiodh air sàl,
 An dèidh gach ràmh thoirt bhuaip';
 I gun stiùir, gun seòl, gun chapall,
 'S e air bhàrr nan stuadh;
 'S ionnann sin 's mar chaidh mis' fhàgail,
 'S mi nam phàiste truagh.

It is me who is deeply pained,
 My strength has left me now,
 I am like a boat at sea,
 Which has lost all its oars;
 Rudderless, without sails or cables,
 Cast upon the waves;
 That is exactly how I've been left
 A poor, pitiful child.

(McLellan 1891, p. 91)

The poet also describes extensively his father's qualities as a person:

Cridhe diadhaidh, farsuinn, fialaidh,
 Mòran ciall 's tùir,
 Ceann na riaghailt, a's na biatachd,
 Chleachd thu riamh bho thùs;
 Creidimh fìorghlan, 's tu gun fhiaradh
 Ann an gnìomh na 'n gnùis,
 Mo chreach gun thrìall thu, man a liath thu,
 Dh'fhàg thu ceud²⁷ fo thùrs.

A pious, liberal, generous heart,
 Much understanding and good sense,
 A fount of judgment, and of hospitality
 As was always your wont;
 Of pure faith, you never forsook
 Either in appearance or deed;
 Alas, you've departed, before your time
 You've left hundreds dejected.

(McLellan 1891, p. 92)

Finally, there are many elegies composed for friends or for locals who were admired in the community. The fine Margaree poet, Malcolm Gillis (1856–1929), who composed numerous songs that remain popular in Scotland as well as in Nova Scotia, made a number of such song-poems. His 'Cumha' ('Lament') for Angus Gillis, a merchant in Port Hood who died in 1885, is a very good example of this body of work. He begins by recalling

precisely when the news of the subject's death was heard; as noted earlier, this is a very common technique in this genre of Gaelic poetry:

Di-dòmhaich thàinig sgeul chugainn
 Dh' fhàg éisleanach gach cridh',
 Chuir mulad air na dh' éisd ris;
 Tuille éibhneis oirnn cha bhi
 O'n chuala sinn gun d' eug am fear
 Bha sunndach, fearail, treubhach, glan,
 Bha fialaidh ris na feumanaich,
 'S bha beusach anns gach nì.

The news came our way on Sunday
 That left every heart grief-stricken,
 That saddened all who heard it;
 Our joy will never return
 Since we heard of the death of he
 Who was cheerful, manly, heroic, pure,
 Who was generous with the needy,
 And virtuous in every way.

(MacDougall 1939, p. 25)

A particularly notable aspect of this poem is not only the expression of real feeling but the detailed account given of Gillis's personality and of his virtues. Thus, even in these more intimate elegies and laments, the poets are reinforcing qualities that are highly esteemed in their culture:

Gur duilich leamsa 'n dràsta
 Fear mo ghràidh a bhith sa chùil,
 An t-sùil bu choibhneil sealladh leam
 'S a' ghnùis, bu smiorail i;
 An làmh o 'm faighte fàilteachas,
 An cridh' o 'm faighte càirdealachd,
 'S am beul o 'n tigeadh mànràn,
 A bhith 'n diugh fo'n chlàr, gun chli.

What saddens me at this time is
 That my dear friend is in the grave,
 The kindest eye ever cast upon me
 And a countenance that was lively;
 From the hand, a warm reception,
 From the heart, generous kindness,
 And from the mouth, tuneful melodies,
 Who is now lifeless, under a coffin lid.

(MacDougall 1939, p. 25)

Of course, no such poem would be complete without mentioning the general sadness that the death has occasioned:

Gur iomadh gin san dùthaich
 Bhios ag ionndrainn an fhir fhial,
 Gach aon th' ann bha eòlach air
 Ag gal le bròn gu dian;
 Gur tric a thadhail càirdean
 Is fir-shiubhail as gach àite air,
 'S bu dòigh dha bhith 'cur fàilt' orra
 Le mùirn, is gràdh, is ciall.

Many a person in the country
 Will be missing the generous man,
 Every one who knew him
 Shedding torrents of sorrowful tears;
 Often friends would visit him
 As well as travellers from all over,
 His manner was to welcome them
 With cheerfulness, affection, and understanding.

(MacDougall 1939, p. 25)

4. Conclusions

Taken as a whole, the song-poetry of the third and last category of elegies and laments discussed in this article provides a more intimate picture of the how poets responded to the death of their own friends and loved ones. Nonetheless, there are certain commonplaces, some of which still draw on elements of the ‘panegyric code’ developed in Scottish Gaelic poetry for a native aristocracy that had long since disappeared and that had never in any case come to Nova Scotia.

In fact, there is, as has been noted, some overlap among the three categories of elegies and laments discussed here. All provide an outlet for the expression of the strong emotions released by death. All are meant to provide comfort to those left behind and therefore have a strong communal as well as a more personal element. All give expression to those values considered most important in the culture itself. Therefore, to a certain extent, what distinguishes each of the three categories is a matter of the balance among these elements. Furthermore, all draw on elements of the older panegyric tradition, which has its roots in the Gaelic culture of the Middle Ages, but in all cases, we see the poets responding creatively to the changing social circumstances in which they lived. Although the tradition is conservative, it is far from static, and in it, we see a great respect for poetic artistry.

One other theme that emerges from a consideration of this material is the profound importance of song in the life of the Nova Scotian Gaels. John Shaw has noted the pervasiveness of song in the daily lives of the people:

The occasions for singing were so numerous that Gaelic song—and the social and affective content of the verses—has over generations inevitably made up a large part of the inner verbal dialogue among many traditional Gaels.

(MacLellan and Shaw 2000, p. 13)

The sheer number of songs inspired by a death that have survived, particularly in print, give us a picture of the important role that such songs also played in the daily lives of Nova Scotian Gaels. Shaw also notes the links between song and other forms of oral expression:

In a culture where the various genres of oral tradition and music complement and support each other, the links between song and oral narrative are of primary importance. In addition to naming the composer, as was often the practice, a singer would preface the song with the story behind it, providing a context and easier access to the allusions made in the verses.

(MacLellan and Shaw 2000, p. 14)

It is very likely that most, if not all, of the song-poems discussed in this and other articles would have had a range of traditions attached to them for as long as they were sung. Some of the contextual information to which Shaw refers has been recorded in the sources for the songs, but with the decline of the language in Nova Scotia, a considerable amount of this contextual material is now lost. Nonetheless, the songs themselves give us a very good window onto a fundamentally important aspect of the cultural, intellectual, and social life of Nova Scotia’s once-numerous Gaelic communities—communities which are themselves an important part of the province’s, and of Canada’s, heritage.

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Notes

- ¹ (MacInnes 2006, pp. 265–319). For useful discussions, see: (Black 2001, pp. xix–xxvi), and his annotated summary at 525–27; (Newton 2009, pp. 114–19); and (MacPherson et al. 2021, p. 22).
- ² For detailed accounts of these processes, see, for example, (MacInnes 1996, chp. 10), and (Dodgshon 1998). For a useful shorter account, see (Hunter 2000, chp. 1).
- ³ See the Gaelstream/Sruth nan Gàidheal website: <https://stfx.cairnrepo.org/islandora/object/stfx%3Agaelstream>, accessed 17 November 2021.
- ⁴ I have sought to minimise any repetition of material covered in those fine articles and to provide something of a thematic treatment of this body of verse. There will still be room for much more to be said: for example, although the bulk of the sources considered here was composed by men, an analysis of elegies composed in the diaspora by women would be enlightening. In this regard, it is notable that migrants brought with them, and their descendants kept alive, a large body of waulking songs (or ‘milling songs’, as these are now called in Nova Scotia), many of which were composed by unnamed women and in which lamentation of the dead is often a central feature. See, generally, Virginia Blankenhorn, ‘From Ritual to Rhetoric, from Rhetoric to Art: Women’s Poetry of Lamentation in the Gaelic World’, in (Blankenhorn 2019).
- ⁵ The Nova Scotian Gaelic tradition is by far the best attested in both print and sound recordings.
- ⁶ In Nova Scotia, he is known as ‘Bàrd Abhainn Bhàrnaidh’ [‘The Poet of Barney’s River’, the community in Pictou County in which he first settled] or simply as ‘Am Bàrd MacGilleain’ [‘The Bard MacLean’].
- ⁷ ‘Marbhrann do dh’Alastair MacGilleain, Tighearna Chola’ [‘Elegy for Alexander MacLean, Laird of Coll’] (Dunbar 2006, Poem 32; Sinclair 1881, p. 125). See (Rankin 2020, pp. 9–10). In about 1828, he had composed ‘Òran do dh’Alastair MacGilleain, Tighearna Chola’ [‘A Song for Alexander MacLean, The Laird of Coll’], when the chief turned over his estate to his eldest son, Hugh, and it has a very eulogistic feel (Dunbar 2006, Poem 31; Sinclair 1881, p. 119). MacLean also composed a poem in about 1828 on the death of Ranald MacDonell, chief of the MacDonells of Glengarry, who had reputedly shown great respect to MacLean (Dunbar 2006, Poem 30; Sinclair 1881, p. 111).
- ⁸ See, for example, Allan ‘The Ridge’ MacDonald’s ‘Sliochd an Taighe’ [‘The MacDonalds of Bohuntin’] (Rankin 2004, p. 124), or his son Alexander ‘The Ridge’ MacDonald’s ‘Clann Dòmhnuille’ [‘Clan Donald’] (Fergusson 1977, p. 134).
- ⁹ It is important to remember that until the twentieth century, virtually all poetry in the Gaelic vernacular tradition was meant to be sung, something especially true of the emigrant Gaelic tradition, and therefore could be referred to as song-poetry.
- ¹⁰ In this categorisation of this body of material, I am taking a broadly ‘functional’ approach, as defined by Alan Merriam (Merriam 1964, pp. 209–27), as adopted by (Ó Madagáin 1985, p. 137): in essence, an analysis based on what a song does for people, i.e., its social purpose.
- ¹¹ Perhaps the best-known, or at least best-attested, *tuireadh* in the Cape Breton tradition is ‘Tuireadh nan Hiortach’ [‘Lament for the St. Kildans’], which was known on the North Shore and sung by Malcolm Angus MacLeod, one of the greatest traditional singers of his generation. The poet who composed it was identified by Helen Creighton and Calum MacLeod as Dr George Murray (n.d.), a native of Lewis, of the Scots Presbyterian Church, Boston. It is not clear whether Dr Murray had been to St Kilda. It was, however, a song composed well after the period of emigration and commemorated the removal of the last inhabitants of St. Kilda, in 1930—the death of a community, perhaps, but not of a person (Creighton and MacLeod 1979, p. 252). Also notable is ‘Tuireadh’ [‘Lament for the Dorcas’], composed on the loss in 1893 of the steamship *Dorcas* with all hands on board, by Mrs Alexander Fergusson of Broughton, Cape Breton. (See below, and Fergusson 1977, p. 94).
- ¹² The poet made reference to Father Grant’s skill as a horseman in the two panegyrics he composed for Father Grant while the priest was alive, including one composed after he had been injured after a fall from his horse. See (Sinclair 1881, p. 167; Sinclair 1901, p. 64; Dunbar 2006, Poems 41 and 40).
- ¹³ ‘Òran do Mhaighstir Cailean Grannta’ [‘A Song for Father Colin Grant’], (Dunbar 2006, Song 41, lines 33–48).
- ¹⁴ ‘Òran Cumha’ [‘A Song of Lamentation’], which appeared in the Antigonish *Casket*, Vol. 1, No. 28, 3 March 1853; somewhat different versions were published in Sinclair 1881, p. 335, and in Sinclair 1901, p. 142. See also (Matheson and Matheson 2008, p. 2).

- 15 ‘Cumha do dh’Iain MacIlleathain, Bàrd Thighearna Chola’ [‘A Lament for John MacLean, Poet to the Laird of Coll’], which appeared anonymously in the Antigonish *Casket* on 17 March 1853; another version was published in Sinclair 1881, p. 331, and in Sinclair 1901, p. 138.
- 16 ‘Marbhrann do’n Bhàrd Mac-Gilleain’ [‘An Elegy to the Bard MacLean’], which appears in Sinclair 1901, p. 141. Sinclair only identifies him as ‘Iain Ruadh MacGillebhràth a bha a fuireach air a Ghulf’ [‘John Red MacGillivray who was living at the Gulf’].
- 17 The reference here is to Alexander MacKinnon (1770–1814), the fine Morar poet who, in a song-poem in honour of Glenaladale’s boat, ‘An Dubh-ghleannach’, mentions MacGillivray’s piping ability. See, generally, (Black 2001, pp. 521–25).
- 18 Dr John Shaw recorded the poet singing the elegy, which can be heard on the ‘Gaelstream’ website: https://stfx.cairnrepo.org/islandora/object/stfx%3A5442?solr_nav%5Bid%5D=540ea4400a95573c850d&solr_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr_nav%5Boffset%5D=3, accessed 17 November 2021.
- 19 ‘Cinnteach’; in some dialects, such as that of Dr Shaw’s informant, the letter “t” is omitted.
- 20 The song had been incorrectly attributed by Creighton and MacLeod to Alexander MacDonald, ‘The Keppoch Bard’; MacLeod himself corrected the attribution (MacLeod 1970, p. 19).
- 21 The position was somewhat different for Scottish Gaels. They continued to play an important role in the British army during the nineteenth century, and saw action in Crimea in the 1850s and in the Indian sub-continent, most notably, in the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878–1880). This continuing role is reflected in Gaelic verse of the period: see (MacIver 2018, chp. 7).
- 22 A large body of Gaelic verse relating to these conflicts was composed by Scottish Gaels. For a collection of verse relating to the First World War, see (NicDhòmhnaill et al. 2015).
- 23 ‘Mar Chuimheachan’ [‘In Memoriam’], ‘Beannachd leis na Gillean Dileas’ [‘Farewell to the Faithful Laddies’], (Fergusson 1977, pp. 114, 116).
- 24 Lieutenant Donald Columba MacKinnon was born in 1918, the only son of Rory S. and Margaret MacKinnon, and served in the North Nova Scotia Highlanders: <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/second-world-war/second-world-war-dead-1939-1947/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=41354&>, accessed 17 November 2021. A description of the campaign, which was part of the Battle of Normandy, following the D-Day landings, can be found here: <https://www.junobeach.org/canada-in-wwii/articles/the-normandy-campaign/>, accessed 17 November 2021.
- 25 Lieutenant MacKinnon is buried at Bény-sur-Mer Canadian War Cemetery, Reviere, France: <https://www.cwgc.org/find-records/find-war-dead/casualty-details/2059680/DONALD%20COLUMBA%20MacKINNON/>, accessed 17 November 2021.
- 26 Parliament of Canada, Parlinfo, The Hon. Donald MacLennan, M.P., Senator: https://lop.parl.ca/sites/ParlInfo/default/en_CA/People/Profile?personId=12882, accessed 17 November 2021.
- 27 The original text has ‘cìod’, the interrogative ‘what’. While (McLellan 1891) is an important collection, it clearly contains some relatively minor typographical errors which invite emendation.

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