

Alan Riach interviewed by Scottish Poetry Library Communications Manager Colin Waters.

1. Opening words

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[Gentle guitar music – Will Campbell]

[Alan Riach reads poem]

2. Introducing Alan Riach and the *Birlinn of Clanranald*

Colin Waters: Hello and welcome to the latest episode of the Scottish Poetry Library's podcast series. My name's Colin Waters and I'll be your host for the next thirty minutes or so. Now, for this edition you're going to need your sea legs, as we're going to tackle the celebrated late-eighteenth century Gaelic poem *The Birlinn of Clanranald*; a long poem that describes a stormy sea journey. The era in which the poem was written, post-Culloden, was stormy enough in itself, with the British government committed to clamping down on Gaelic culture in the wake of the Jacobites' failed rebellion. The poem was written by Alexander MacDonald, a fascinating character who we'll hear more about in the course of this podcast. It won't come as a surprise, given that he died 250 years ago, that our guest isn't actually Alexander MacDonald himself. Instead we'll be joined by Alan Riach, whose translation of *The Birlinn of Clanranald* was published by Kettillonia earlier this year. Alan was born in Lanarkshire, educated at Cambridge and Glasgow, and he now works at the University of Glasgow where he is a professor of Scottish literature. He's also the editor of Hugh MacDiarmid's collections of works from Carcanet Press and has published five collections of poetry, the most recent one of which is *Homecoming: New Poems 2001-2009*. He also wrote two fantastic books with the painter Alexander Moffit, *Arts of Resistance* and *Arts of Independence*. They're like book-long conversations and I can't recommend them highly

enough. Now I began our conversation by asking Alan to describe *The Birlinn of Clanranald*.

Alan Riach: *The Birlinn of Clanranald* is a poem that was written in the 1750s by Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair. It's about a birlinn, a galley, a ship, and the crew men on the ship, each of whom has a particular function that is described, a particular job to do. But they all have to work in coordination and it valorises and makes heroic the kind of work that we do in that coordination.

But the poem takes you through a voyage from South Uist, down to the Sound of Islay, and then across to Carrickfergus in Ireland. [In] the last third of the poem they go through a horrendous storm; a tremendous storm blows up and threatens to engulf the ship and destroy all the crew and they have to work in coordination in order to get the ship through that and safe to harbour.

So it's an exciting poem and it's a major work of re-imagination because the ship itself is described in meticulous detail, but it's also a metaphor for a kind of humanity that travels through a terrible storm and things that are inflicted upon them without any sense of it being inevitable, or any sense that they will get through it, inevitably.

3. Discussion of the Poem's Historical Background

Colin Waters: What's the historical backdrop against which this poem appears? It's quite a tumultuous period in Scotland's history, isn't it?

Alan Riach: Yeah, it was indeed. And Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, or Alexander MacDonald, was at the heart of it. He fought with the Jacobites in the Jacobite rising of 1745. He was, in fact, a Gaelic tutor to Prince Charles Edward Stuart. But he was a soldier also—he led a command of men in the fight at Culloden. He and his family were persecuted by Hanoverians after Culloden and they had to move around the Highlands and the Islands of Scotland. They lived in Canna for a time. So the Jacobite rising—the march to the south, and then the retreat, and then Culloden—that was a massively traumatic episode in the history of Scotland.

The other great Gaelic poet of that period, Duncan Ban MacIntyre, is curious. He fought on the Hanoverian side because his boss was a Campbell. Famously he went to fight but he threw away his sword – he had to take the sword with him from his chief but he threw it away, he wouldn't fight anymore. But Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair was on the Jacobite side. So you get the sense the whole world of Scotland, the whole world of the fairly recently United Kingdom—1707, so this is happening 1745/1746, and then *The Birlinn of Clanranald* is written we think in the 1750s—this whole world is going through a terrible, traumatic upheaval and period of bloodshed and reconfiguration of identity. I think at the heart of the poem there is this sense that there is the human world in which terrible things might happen, [and] there is also the natural world, the physical world out there which will bring terrible things upon us, but we have to find a way to get through, and the poem enacts a kind of getting through - voyaging through terror.

Colin Waters: For people who are maybe not familiar with the period, it's worth mention that *The Birlinn of Clanranald* was originally written in Gaelic. You've translated it now but at the time, post-Culloden, Gaelic was facing quite a dilemma, wasn't it?

Alan Riach: Yes it was, and Alasdair himself was involved in that dilemma. At first almost unwillingly because he worked for the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge and the effect of that was to compile a Gaelic - English dictionary. And he did this in the belief that this would extend the abilities of Gaelic speakers to deal with the contemporary world that they were in. He then found out that of course the whole motivation behind this organisation was the extirpation of Gaelic, and the end of that culture. So he turned against it completely and got more and more committed to the Gaelic cause, as he saw it.

So there was that sense of the language in which it was written itself becoming isolated and obscured, made less relevant to the world that was to come. Because you're talking also about the period of Enlightenment, and very famously in Edinburgh for example, Scottish writers and philosophers are

writing predominantly in English. At the same time, these great Gaelic poems were being composed. So on the one hand, with Duncan Ban MacIntyre, you have someone who is illiterate but fluent in Gaelic, and composes his poetry to be sung, to be performed, as music; with Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair and *The Birlinn of Clanranald* you have an extremely sophisticated poet who reads fluently in a number of languages. So he's familiar with Homer and Virgil and the great epics of classical literature. He's familiar with poetry being written in English at the time. He's familiar with poetry written in Scots. His own writing in Gaelic is part of that continuum, part of that context.

But *The Birlinn of Clanranald* wasn't published until after his death. He wrote a fantastic, scabrous, very funny poem called *The Ark*, almost doggerel, you might say, in which he promises that those Campbells who fought for the Hanoverian side will not be on the ark when it comes through the storm, [Colin laughs quietly] unless they manage to swallow a purgative dose of salt water and vomit up all of their badnesses—then they'll be allowed on. He wrote many other poems. There's a beautiful early song called *The Sugar Brook*, or *Allt an t-Siucar*. So there's a great range of variety in his writing. He really is a major figure of the Gaelic Enlightenment, you might say in that era. *The Birlinn of Clanranald* is one of the great poems of world literature—prove me wrong!

Colin Waters: Would it be possible to hear some of the Gaelic and then hear your translation of it?

Alan Riach: I'm afraid not—I can't give you any Gaelic, my Gaelic is extremely rudimentary and not to be trusted at all. So when I was doing the version that I did of it in English I was working with Gaelic speakers and people who knew the poem very closely and very intimately, and I was working on line-by-line structurally and in terms of vocabulary, how the poem works. But I don't have Gaelic. My name, 'Riach', is a Gaelic word, has meaning in Gaelic. But I did not grow up speaking Gaelic, my father never did, he had no recollection of his father having spoken Gaelic. So you're going back four or five generations in our family before you find people who speak the language of our name. So that's a part of the story as well. So I can give you my version of it but I can't give you the original.

Colin Waters: Let's hear some English translation of the original version, then.

Alan Riach: Well, I should say, it's a translation, in the sense that it is intended to give the meaning of the poem. But it's not a translation in the sense of it being literally line-by-line. Or rhythmically—the Gaelic poem is very closely, tightly structured rhythmically and metrically. My version of the poem uses rhyme and metre and structure but it's not the same; it doesn't mimic the structure of the Gaelic. So this is how it begins...

[Alan Riach reads poem]

4. Discussion Regarding the Form and Narrative Style of the Poem

Colin Waters: Once people read this book, they'll see that the next few questions I'm about to ask have cribbed ruthlessly from the introduction which—very usefully for anyone doing an interview with you, Alan—is presented almost in the form of a Q&A. Why improve on something that's pretty good to begin with? Why don't I steal some of these questions? What form does the poem take? Explain to someone the course of the poem.

Alan Riach: It's structured very tightly, in a very literary way. Again there's a fascinating contrast with Duncan Ban MacIntyre's *Praise of Ben Doran*, which has the structure of a musical pibroch (*piobaireachd*), and that's a very different kind of structure. This one is much more of a narrative, much more of a linear structure, if you like. You can follow it on a map; you can go from Loch Eynort in South Uist down to the Sound of Islay and then across to Carrickfergus. But the structure of the poem is much more rigorous, in a way. It begins with a blessing, that sense of prayer. When I did my English language version of it I wanted to make this a prayer that could be read and understood by atheists.

Now, Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair was a convert to Catholicism, and the blessing that he calls down at the beginning is very conventionally meaningful to the Father, Son and the Holy Ghost, as you would expect. Most translators into English, and I looked at about a dozen of them from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century before working on mine, had simply followed this. But what I wanted to do was to push that meaning out from the orthodoxy of the Christian and the Catholic faith and to think of it in terms of the natural world that the poem and the *birlinn*, the ship itself, seem to inhabit. So nature, creation, the permanent, the idea of movement, are supreme principles in a sense and they're coordinated in the structure of the poem and what the poem is dealing with, what it's about.

So it begins with a blessing, then talks about the weapons that the crew have on board, then it has very specific descriptions of what each member of the crew does. So you have a man who's there to bail out the ship if the water comes splashing on board; you have a man who sits at the rudder with his arm wrapped around the tiller to direct the ship; you have the lookout who will look out for navigation points, currents he sees, weather coming in from the horizon, what can be seen all around the ship as it progresses. You have all these very meticulously detailed descriptions of the crew and very meticulously detailed descriptions of what the ship itself is made of: the oars, the mast, the sails, and all these things.

And then, they row out and there's a rowing song, which gives you the rhythm of the movement of the oars rowing in synchronicity, and the natural world of the water flowing under the ship, in darkness with phosphorescence to catch the tide. And then when they get to the particular place where they're ready, they bring the oars in and they put the sail up and they get going. And a little later, in the last third of the poem, is the storm as it arrives and starts to bear down upon them and open up great gulfs and monstrosities and it becomes completely surreal, or what you would say in twentieth century terms is surrealism. The imagery is wild and unpredicted. What comes upon these poor guys in the boat is pretty ferocious. But nature prevails in the end, the storm dies down and they sail through and they get to the island. And there's this wonderful sense at the end of the poem of relief, of finding a safe harbour at last, of coming through the storm. So the structure is fairly straightforward or

schematised in that sense: a blessing, a setting out, the crew and what they do and how they work in coordination, the storm they pass through, and then finally coming into safe harbour.

Colin Waters: There's an interesting point [of contention] over who is speaking to whom in this poem, isn't there? Because at points it seems quite bardic and in the sort of declamatory style, but at other times it seems the bard is talking to other sailors, or giving instructions?

Alan Riach: Aye, that's right. There's more than one voice in the poem, I think. But all the voices are in movement; you get the sense continually that you are at sea with them, on the ship. But there is a sense of address, there's an address to individual sailors to do certain things, to make sure they're in the right places and they're able to do things as they arise. There's also a sense of the community of them working together. There's a hierarchy of power—Clanranald commands these sailors, but the sailors themselves are each of them in command of their own expertise. So it's not a hierarchy of class in that sense; it's a hierarchy of expertise that works in coordination for a common purpose. And the common purpose has to do with the survival of all of them—it's not exclusive in that sense. The voice of the poem, the way in which the poem addresses the reader is to bring the reader on board, so you have the feeling of being with them and also to keep you on your toes, to keep you on edge, to make sure that you don't quite know what your role is with here. You're not looking down on these guys, you're actually with them. It's not the sense that the reader is exempt; it's the sense that what you're experiencing in this poem is something, which has, if you like, that vitality of metaphoric reality; you know that storms will come. You know that things will happen in your life. So while on the one hand the details of the poem are incredibly meticulous, on the other hand the whole poem gives you a metaphoric power, a sense of coming through the storm.

Colin Waters: It's interesting, too, the language you use as well—there's nothing that would make your eyes pop out too much, but occasionally you do throw in a modern word that makes you go—aha! [Riach laughs] There's a bit where you say, 'fanning about', or 'data' as well.

Alan Riach: I permitted myself a few words that seemed to have that piquant power. There was one word which was used for the things that the oars rest in. And in various translations these things are referred to as 'oar ports'. There's a circular hole with a slit at the side of it, so you put the blade of the oar through [the slit] and you put the pole of the oar in the circular hole...but that's not what it was, there's something wrong with that translation. Another translation gives it as 'full pins'. Full pins are literally pins that you put in the gunwale and they're chained to the side of the boat. But that isn't right either. I finally tracked it down. I talked to people who are involved in the reconstruction of birlinns now. Because the historical background to the poem is also to do with the fact that birlinns (this form of northern galley), they were all destroyed. So when Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair was writing this poem, the lordship of the isles had been ceded centuries before that. So he's constructing in his imagination what a birlinn is. And today, in the twenty-first century, there are people who are working on reconstructing birlinns, boats of this kind. So I finally got through to somebody who had the expertise and he said "no, what you're talking about are 'cabe,' c-a-b-e." A cabe is like a pommel of a saddle, and it rises out of the gunwale and rope or a strap of leather comes down from it and the oar goes into this between the strap and the pommel of the cabe itself. So it's flexible, but it's also secure, and this is exactly what you would have if you were travelling through the water at that time. The detail of that was very precise. And various seaman's terms, if you like; the wind is "fannyng about" —I've sailed on boats, I have some experience, I've been on sailing ships occasionally. My father was a sailor, a master mariner, a ship's captain, worked as a pilot on the Thames. So there's a vocabulary of seafaring that's not entirely unfamiliar to me. When you're on a sailing ship and you have to make sure that the mainsail is taut, or something to that effect, when the wind is "fannyng about" it's messing around with you, the sail can flap and, if worse comes to worst and the wind comes suddenly from the wrong direction it could split the sail. So you're in dangerous territory with all of that. Using vernacular terms to describe some of this seemed to me entirely appropriate.

The other example would be in the storm, where the imagery is so violent and surreal. But I permitted myself two terms which are historically and literally entirely inappropriate [Riach chuckles]. I talked about the storm opening its

mouth with teeth that are ‘crocodile sharp’, or with ‘hippopotamus tusks’ closing down on you. And of course I don’t think hippopotamuses or alligators or crocodiles were particularly familiar to Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair in the 1750s when he was writing the poem, but it seemed to me entirely right to bring that in in that way because the storm is boiling up and you’re not sure where the language is coming from in this point in time. The threat of it has to surprise you, it’s not predicted.

Colin Waters: The storm is the sort of set piece in the poem, the moment when the special effects kick in and the linguistic CGI takes place. Quite often in seafaring epics or even films nowadays the big moment is the storm, but as you were saying yourself there, this isn’t a storm as you may expect from even Homer or someone like that. I was reading it and thinking it was like gothic horror, or even, with all the stuff about creatures and sea it was like Lovecraft, that sort of tentacular horror coming up from beneath them. It was quite extraordinary to read that, and after quite practical passages about what each crewman does on the ship.

Alan Riach: That’s right. While writing and while reading this we’re in a post-Romantic and post-Gothic world where such images and ideas would come to mind quite readily. That’s not the world that Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair is coming out of. So, in a sense, exploiting that, but on the other hand, everything that goes on in that section of the poem is entirely realistic. Realistic in a sense that—well, when I was out on a yacht sailing around the Hebrides about six or seven years ago, being caught in a force nine gale, where the yacht was going over almost, where the mast was almost parallel with the surface of the sea, and then pushing back up again. It wasn’t that bad but I’ve never experienced anything like it before so when you’re working with some sense of experience to recreate something in a poem which draws on actuality to that degree you’re not actually being literal with what you’re describing; you’re using literal experience to make the metaphoric reality more vivid. I think that’s what’s going on in that section and I think that is there in the original - when he talks about the lightning flickering and flaring up the rigging, that’s literally the case, he would have seen that! But the storm itself is much more explosive in its imagery and you can feel the danger pressing in on you.

Colin Waters: There's a line about the sea looking like boiling porridge in the original. That's a great Scottish line! [Riach laughs] Don't know if any other cultures would bother describing the sea like that.

Alan Riach: It is like that sometimes. There's a great passage in one of the Patrick O'Brian books about Captain Aubrey where a storm comes up and the entire ocean in front of you is grey, grey-white. It's not like a Romantic image of an ocean at all and the storm itself has that 'boiling porridge' look. I think it's accurate. The people I know who have been to sea and who have experienced such things thankfully have approved! [They've] said, "yes, that's alright."

Colin Waters: Great. Shall we read a passage from the storm section? That would be great.

Alan Riach: This is how it begins...

[Alan Riach reads poem.]

Colin Waters: See, that's straight out of H. P. Lovecraft! Lovecraft did write poetry as well but it isn't quite as accomplished as his short stories, let's put it that way.

And that brings to a close another edition of the SPL podcast series. As usual, thanks are in order; thanks to yourself for listening and thanks to Alan Riach who came into the library to discuss his translation of *The Birlinn of Clanrannald*, copies of which are available from his publisher, Kettillonia. If you'd like to order a copy, try their website, or you could of course come into the poetry library and borrow one. Thanks also to Will Campbell, whose music opens and closes the show. Vital information now: another SPL podcast interview will take place sometime in the next fortnight; if you'd like to know what the library is up to between podcasts, why not visit our website? It's at www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk. We have a Twitter account, would you believe, our handle is @byleaveswelve. We do Facebook, just type in Scottish Poetry Library, you'll find us. We do Instagram now as well, our handle on Instagram is splscotland. We have a newsletter, too. It's very easy to subscribe to our e-newsletter which comes out every fortnight on a Friday. Just visit our homepage at www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk. If you go to our homepage you'll find a big button that says "subscribe" and a space next to it where you

type your email then hit subscribe and voila, you are subscribed to SPL e-newsletter.

That's it now for this podcast, barring one last piece of poetry read by our guest Alan Riach. So shiver your timbers and splice the main brace as we return to *The Birlinn of Clanrannald*.

[Alan Riach reads poem.]