

Prophecy and Cultural Conflict in Gaelic Tradition

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The theme of prophecy appears in virtually all genres of Scottish Gaelic literature, written and oral, in every era from which we have surviving evidence. Prophecy has often been used towards social and political ends, especially as propaganda at times of crisis and discord. Despite the pervasiveness of this theme, prophecy has received scant attention in scholarship about Scottish Gaelic literature and tradition.

In this brief survey I will examine the rôle of prophecy as a cultural resource in Scottish Gaelic society, especially in the context of cultural conflict and upheaval. I will for the most part be leaving aside prophecy significant at a merely personal or local level and will be examining the ways that seers, or interpreters of prophecy, discuss the potential future of Gaelic society at large. The dominant voice in Scottish Gaelic tradition for such prophecy is Thomas the Rhymer, and the adoption of this Border poet as a prophetic and messianic figure is counter-intuitive. I will examine the appearance of Thomas in Gaelic literature and suggest some ways in which he may have entered oral tradition and attained such stature in the Scottish Highlands.

Millenarism in Gaeldom

The formation of the kingdom of Scotland was due largely to the success of Gaelic institutions and leaders. Centuries later, the seminal rôle of the Gaels in Scottish history remained in Gaelic consciousness. 'The sense of integrity of the kingdom of Scotland [...] emerges time and time again in Gaelic tradition and the integrating principle is a sense of the Gaelic basis of Scotland.' (MacInnes 1989a: 96).

A stray Gaelic poetic survival from twelfth-century Scotland, lamenting the 'plundering of stable Alba' (Clancy: 89), seems to convey the anxiety of a kingdom in cultural and political flux. John MacInnes was the first to draw attention to the messianic theme in Scottish Gaelic literature and its link to the dispossession of the Gaels from positions of prestige as well as territory. He posited the antiquity of this motif by pointing out verses in the twelfth-century *Prophecy of St Berchan* that celebrate the long-prophesied king of Scotland who will usher in a reign of victory and prosperity, as well as the legend of Thomas the Rhymer, with its probable Brythonic influences (MacInnes 1981: 153).

By the seventeenth century, Scottish Gaeldom had become largely estranged from the central government, which became increasingly disruptive of and intrusive into Gaelic society, attempting to dismantle native formal institutions, stigmatise cultural and linguistic forms, introduce colonial settlements, destabilise social patterns, and even extirpate many of its inhabitants (cf. MacCoinnich 2000). People of all social stations in seventeenth-century Britain as a whole, in fact, looked to prophecy to help explain the social, religious and political upheavals rife during that period (Thomas: 399, 409-413, 429, Ó Buachalla: 509).

Societies, or segments of societies under severe strain, typically respond by creating *millenarian movements*. Such movements promise the imminent coming of a new and better world often, in part, through supernatural intervention, so as to reconstitute society and restore its social order, moral codes, distribution of wealth and so on, to a pre-collapse ideal. The forthcoming Golden Age is often personified in a messiah figure, and the entire set of circumstances, personages, and events are expressed (usually in symbolic and ambiguous terms) in prophetic literature.

Millenarian beliefs have recurred again and again throughout history despite failures, disappointments, and repression, precisely because they make such a strong appeal to the oppressed, the disinherited, and the wretched. They therefore form an integral part of that stream of thought which refused to accept the rule of a superordinate class, or of a foreign power, or some combination of both (Worsley: 225).

Millenarian movements are not limited to ancient times or 'primitive' societies, but are a universal phenomenon for social progress: 'Millenarism has, in fact, played an important role in all national and social liberation movements in pre-modern and modern Europe' (Talmon: 197). The aspirations of millenarian movements are often given expression in prophecies or interpretations of prophecies, responding dynamically to changing conditions. Geertz's study of Hopi Prophecy gives a comprehensive and concise description of prophecy:

Prophecy is not prediction, even though it purports to be so. Prophecy is a thread in the total fabric of meaning, in the total worldview [...] It is tradition that is spoken by someone to someone else for specific purposes, whether for moral, ideological, or political reasons. Prophecy is not static, but is and always has been used in response to internal and external conditions. It is a way of articulating and defining contemporary events within the context and language of "tradition". Prophecy, being understood in this manner as a cultural strategy, gives us a major key to understanding not only our pueblo neighbors but also ourselves (Geertz: 6-7).

The eighteenth-century Irish intelligentsia harnessed this latent millenarian potential primarily in terms of the Jacobite cause (cf. Ó Buachalla). The political *aisling* ('vision'), a poetic narrative in which a distressed female (the personification of Ireland) foretold the future return of her spouse (the true king and saviour of Ireland), became one of the dominant forms of Irish Jacobite prophetic literature (cf. Ó Buachalla [especially Chapter Eleven], Mahon). The Scottish Gaelic intelligentsia shared and expressed many of the same hopes (cf. Gillies 1991). While there are a few isolated echoes of the political *aisling* in Scottish Gaelic literature,¹ the lack of a deeply-rooted identification of Scotland with a tutelary goddess no doubt inhibited the development of such a genre in Scottish Gaeldom.

The archetype of the saviour of Irish Gaeldom was based on the figure of Brian Bórainmhe and nurtured by the Irish literati as early as the twelfth century (Ó Buachalla:

486-492). Irish prophetic literature is almost exclusively in the voice of native saints, such as Patrick and Columba, although poets were expected to provide an exegesis of traditional texts in terms of contemporary personages and events (Ó Buachalla: 484-5). Prophecy in vernacular Scottish Gaelic (at least as evidenced in the post-Reformation era) diverges strikingly from this pattern and seems more akin to prophecies from the rest of Britain. Most Scottish Gaelic prophets were not saints who owed their powers of foresight to their connection with God, but secular figures whose prophecies and ability to see the future were obtained through supernatural means, especially from Otherworld beings and magical books (Henderson and Cowan 2001: 181-9, Newton 2006).

Thomas The Jacobite

Vernacular Scottish Gaelic prophetic literature is primarily in the voice of seers operating outwith the church, sometimes highly localised figures. Since at least the mid-seventeenth century, when documentary sources become reasonably numerous, the foremost of these has been Thomas the Rhymer. Also known in English sources as ‘Thomas of Erceldoune’ on account of lands he held near the modern Earlston in western Berwickshire, Thomas was born c. 1225 and was dead by the end of the thirteenth century (Henderson and Cowan: 146, Black 2005: 398-9).

The Romance and Prophecies of Thomas of Erceldoune is a Northern English narrative, probably composed in the late fourteenth century (Henderson and Cowan: 142-5). It describes Thomas’s encounter with a beautiful woman at the Eildon Tree, their journey to a supernatural realm, and her gift to him of verbal powers (whether in the form of tale or prophecy). She then relates a number of prophecies about the disasters and defeats awaiting Scotland through the Battle of Otterburn (1388).

A number of later Lowland sources make allusion to Thomas, showing the development of his character as prophet. His predictions were compared with those of Merlin by Thomas Gray in 1355; Barbour, writing in the 1370s, claimed that Thomas had foretold the kingship of Robert the Bruce (who himself exploited Arthurian propaganda); Hary’s *Wallace* (written 1476-8) made use of traditional lore attributed to Thomas claiming that William Wallace was not actually dead but was waiting to drive off the ‘Sothrouns’ and bring peace to Scotland (Henderson and Cowan: 147-9).

Thomas the Rhymer first appears in vernacular Scottish Gaelic literature in songs rallying support for the Stewart kings in the mid-seventeenth century. Iain Lom MacDonald (of Keppoch) mentions the prophecy in three of his surviving songs. He implores Graham of Montrose to rejoin the Royalist cause in his song ‘*Soraidh do’n Ghràmach*’ of 1646, imagining him sailing to Ireland, with a reference to the prophecy of Thomas the Rhymer:

*Nan tigeadh Montròs’
Ann ar comhdhail a dh’Éirinn
Le trì fichead long sgòdach
'S buill chòrsaich mar shréin orr',
Le'm brataichibh sròil
Agus òrdugh Rìgh Seurlas:
Thug an fhàistinn ud beò sinn
Mar dh'òrdaich Tom Reumhair.*

(MacKenzie: lines 309-316).

‘Were Montrose to come to Ireland to join forces with us, with three score rigged ships and hempen ropes as reins on them, with banners of satin and King Charles’s command, the fulfillment of that prophecy would bring us to life, as Thomas the Rhymer foretold.’

The reference to the prophecy may be a double-entendre, alluding not only to the encouragement offered by the prophecy but also to the ‘sleeping warriors’ or ‘resurrected messiah’ motifs of the legend. In his later song, ‘*Cumha Morair Hunnaidh*’, Iain Lom implores Montrose to return in 1649 after the execution of the Marquis of Huntly in essentially the same words (MacKenzie: lines 627-634). In his ‘*Òran air Rìgh Uilleam agus Banrigh Màiri*’ of c. 1692 denouncing William and Mary, Iain Lom asserts that the rightful King will be avenged, if the prophecy is true, and at the end of the poem he explicitly names Thomas the Rhymer (MacKenzie: lines 2607, 2726). Iain Lom never spells out exactly what the prophecy is, however.

Iain Dubh mac Iain (a MacDonald of uncertain origin) began his rallying song ‘*Òran nam Fineachan*’ to all potential allies of the Jacobites in 1715 by declaring boldly:

*Seo an aimsir 'n do dhearbhadh
An targainteachd dhuinn
Bras meamnach fir Alba
Le an armaibh air thùs*
(Ó Baoill 1994: lines 245-6)

‘This is the moment in which the prophecy was fulfilled for us, with the spirited and fierce men of Scotland, in the vanguard of battle with their weaponry.’

Although it is not stated explicitly, it is likely that he is making reference to the prophecy of Thomas the Rhymer. Although the song pays most of its attention to the Highland clans, Iain Dubh is inclusive of the nobles of the Lowlands, thanking them in advance for their support.

Sileas na Ceapaich, at the end of her song ‘*Do Dh’fheachd Mhorair Màr*’, wishes well to the departing army of the Earl of Mar, assuring them that they will fulfill the prophecy and emerge triumphant (Ó Baoill 1972: lines 303-7). She later laments the failure of the Battle of Sheriffmuir (1715), but takes heart in the prophecy:

*Gu bheil Tòmas ag ràdh ann a fhàistneachd
Gur h-iad na Gàidheil a bhuidhneas buaidh;
Bidh fallus fala air gach mala
A’ cur a’ chatha ud aig uisge Chluaidh;
Nì Sasunn strìochdadh, ge mòr an inntleachd
Ag iarraidh sìth air an rìgh tha uainn.*
(Ó Baoill 1972: lines 520-5).

‘According to Thomas’s prophecy, it is the Gaels who will be victorious; every brow will sweat blood, fighting that battle at the river Clyde; England will submit, despite her cunning, seeking peace from the king who is away from us.’

The poet Iain MacLachlainn of Cille Bhrìde mentions in his ‘*Òran air Bhreith Phrionnsa Teàrlach*’ that a star appearing when Charles Edward Stewart was born in 1720 confirms the prophecy (MacCoinnich: 243), although he assumes that it is so well known that he need not repeat it.

Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair reminds the Gaels during the campaign of 1745:

*’S i seo an aon bhliadhna chorr
Tha Tòmas ag innse gu beachd
Gum faigh sinn coinne gu leòr
Biomaid beò an dòchas rag*
(Mackinnon 1908-9: 301)

‘Thomas tells us very clearly that this is the very year that we will have plenty of encounters²: let us live in that conviction.’

Elsewhere, in a satire of the Campbells, he suggests that the conclusive battle presided over by Thomas the Rhymer will occur in the very heart of their authority, Inverary:

*Adhra mhialach³ nan cat
Air dhealbh nathrach ’s a grunn fuar:
Nuair thig Tòmas le chuid each
Bidh là nan creach mu d’ bhruaich.*
(Mackinnon 1907-8: 297)

‘Louse-ridden Aray (river) of the cats, shaped like a snake with a cold underbelly: when Thomas comes with his horses, the day of pillaging will be on your banks.’

Poems were composed in the aftermath of Culloden whose messianic visions were as grand as they were desperate. After lamenting the plundering and oppression of the Highlands, the tacksman of Inbhir Chadain in Rannoch attempts to convince the Gaels to unite in solidarity for a renewed effort on behalf of the Jacobite cause:

*Mosglaidh uile gach treun-laoch
’S bithibh gleusta mar a b’ àbhaist;
Mar thràillean na dèanaibh gèilleadh
Fhad ’s a bhios fuil ’nur fèithean blàth;
Chuala mi a bhith leughadh
Bharr air Reumar, iomadh fàidh,
Gum bheil curaidhean aig Seumas
Nì treubhantas as dèidh bhith marbh*
(Turner: 281-2; MacilleDhuibh 1998c)

‘Awaken all of you, every warrior! And be adroit, as was your custom; do not submit like slaves as long as blood runs warm in your veins. I have heard that it has been read that many a prophet besides Thomas the Rhymer has said that King James has warriors who can perform great feats after death.’

This verse appears to refer to the return of dead (or ‘sleeping’) warriors under Thomas’s command. The details, then, surrounding the prophecy are late and slow in coming: from Iain Lom we hear that Thomas has prophesied that the true king will return to the throne; it is not until the 1715 Rising that we hear that the Gaels will emerge victorious from battle with the English on the Clyde; from Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair’s verse we learn that Thomas will come with cavalry; some time after Culloden the idea that dead warriors will fight again appears in song.

Prose narratives and Gaelic texts of the prophecy were not recorded until the nineteenth century, well after the Jacobite cause was lost. Although they contain many more details than the verses quoted above, they are consistent with them. The earliest published fragment of prose from the Highlands concerning Thomas and his slumber that I know of comes from Anne Grant of Laggan:

There is current in the Highlands, a prophecy ascribed to the famous Thomas of Ercildown, which was in these terms: “The time is coming, when all the wisdom of the world shall centre in the grey goose’s quill; and the jawbone of the sheep cover the coulter of the plough with rust.” This I have heard from very old people, who had not a word of English.

Yet notwithstanding of these excellent authorities, I do not exactly believe that Thomas said so. Nor do I give implicit credit to his being buried under that romantic and singular eminence, the *tomhan na heurich*, which rises in a fine plain near Inverness, and is pre-eminent among enchanted tomans. Nor do I entirely trust to his promise of throwing off all that incumbant load of earth, to rise and attest the truth of his prophecies (in very good Gaelic,) when they are all fulfilled. Yet, from whatever source the prophecy sprung, the spirit and application of it indicate no common sagacity. (Grant vol. 2: 12-13)

The millenarian aspect of the full text of the legend is clear in the following statement from an elderly Highland woman (unnamed):

Thomas the Rhymer, or some other magician and prophet of the olden time now detained in Fairyland, is destined yet to reappear upon earth with some companions almost as powerful as himself; then shall the water-horses be bridled and saddled by a brave company of Scottishmen from Fairyland, some Highland, some Lowland, bridled and saddled, and fearlessly mounted; a great battle will be fought; all Englishmen and other foreigners will be driven out of the country; the crown will again revert to the rightful heirs, and Scotland once again become a free, independent, and happy kingdom! (Stewart: 45)⁴

According to other material recorded in the mid-nineteenth-century Highlands, Thomas is waiting for the last horse to be found with particular characteristics so that his cavalry will be complete. As John Francis Campbell of Islay relates:

There is a popular saying still current in Islay, which joins true Thomas to a common Celtic British legend. He is supposed to be still living, enchanted in Dumbuck (Dun-a-mhuic, the swine's hill), near Dumbarton (Dunbreaton, Mount Breaton); and he appears occasionally in search of horses of a peculiar kind and colour. He pays for them when they are brought to the hill; and the vendor sees enchanted steeds and armed men within the rock. It is said —
 Nuair a thig Tomas an riom 's a chuid each,
 Bidh latha nan creach an Cluaidh.
 When Thomas of power and his horses shall come,
 The day of plunderings will be in Clyde. (J.F. Campbell: 36-7).

The version of the quatrain about the battle at the Clyde collected by Rev. John G. Campbell gives more detail:

*Nuair thig Tòmas le chuid each
 Bidh latha nan creach air Cluaidh
 Millear naoi mìle fear math
 'S thèid rìgh òg air a' chrùn.*
 (J.G. Campbell 1900: 271)

'When Thomas comes with his horses, there will be a day of pillaging on the Clyde; nine thousand good men will be drowned and a young king will be crowned.'

In summary, a prophecy attributed to Thomas the Rhymer promising the Gaels ultimate victory in battle on behalf of the true king seems to have had a large audience in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Highlands. The use of this prophecy stressed that Highlanders could regain their prestige in Scotland by fighting for the Stewart kings and ensuring the fulfillment of that prophecy. It is difficult to be sure exactly when the Gaelic legend developed these themes and motifs, given the paucity of evidence, but it would seem to be no later than the early Jacobite period. It also seems likely that legends about Robert the Bruce, well known in Gaelic tradition, also had some influence on the legends of Thomas the Rhymer (MacInnes 1981: 159). According to Barbour's *Bruce*, the bishop of St Andrews had hoped that Bruce was the king foretold by Thomas (Lyle 1968: 114).

There is historical evidence to confirm that Jacobite Highlanders in the 1745 Rising knew of and believed in versions of prophecies attributed to Thomas (Ó Baoill 1972: 53, Ó Buachalla: 508, Thomas: 415, MacilleDhuibh 1998d). Further post-Culloden texts make use of prophecy to lift the spirits of demoralised Highlanders. The vision of a further war appears in the poem '*An Taisbean*' ('The Revelation') by Eachann MacLeòid (Black 2001: 192-201). In style, the poem suggests the influence of the Book of

Revelation and the propaganda which James VI was so keen to promote upon gaining the throne of England (cf. Williamson). When the poet describes the armies preparing for battle, we are given the *brosnachadh* composed to incite them, which no doubt was meant to stir the heart of the hearers of this poem itself. The end of the poem predicts that the victorious Gaels will be able to conduct themselves regally throughout the kingdom, as is their right.

An anecdote recorded in a letter from a gentleman in Aberdeen to a friend in Edinburgh, relates what was described as an eye-witness account of a prophetic vision:

In August 1748, before the Town Council of Aberdeen, eleven men and women swore to the truth of a vision they said they had seen in a valley five miles to the west of the city. On the fifth of that month, at two o'clock in the afternoon, they saw three globes of light in the sky above, which they first took to be weather-galls but which increased in brilliance until twelve tall men in clean and bright attire crossed the valley. There were seen two armies. The first wore clothing of dark blue and displayed Saint Andrew's Cross on its ensigns. The other was uniformed in scarlet and was assembled beneath the Union Flag. Twice the red army attacked the blue, and twice it was beaten back. When it rallied and attacked for a third time it was routed by the Scots army. Those who watched saw the smoke of the cannon, the glitter of steel, and the colours waving, but they heard no sound. When the blue army was triumphant the vision passed. (Forbes vol. 2: 181)

Whatever reality such cultural expressions have, they certainly reflect the aspirations and concerns of the people involved and are likely to occur at times of great duress. Anecdotes such as this also demonstrate that the belief in and exploitation of prophecy was not confined to the literati.

Thomas the Rhymer continued to fascinate people and capture their imagination into the nineteenth century. Sir David Dalrymple, Scottish historian and annalist, lamented in 1773 that the Rhymer's name 'is not forgotten in Scotland nor his authority slighted even at this day'. The prophecies of Thomas had been recently reprinted for the public and 'have been consulted with a weak, if not criminal, curiosity' (Henderson and Cowan: 149). Even Scottish immigrants in the United States showed interest in his prophecies as foreshadowing historical events in the late-nineteenth century (*The Scottish-American Journal* 14 August 1889).

Literary Exploitation of Prophecy

Geertz has shown that prophecy can act as a statement of intention in deliberate acts of cultural change in Hopi culture, as an overture to social engineering (Geertz: 40). This model suggests that poets and other social leaders could exploit prophecy to bolster the persuasiveness of their arguments by recourse to the authorities of the past and the force of tradition.

A particular interpretation of a prophecy may identify the exact people and places that will fulfill long-awaited expectations, but most prophetic texts do not express a clear and definitive vision of what is to come. Instead, prophecy is usually expressed in open-

ended rhetoric employing ambiguous metaphors. This encourages it to be the subject of discussion throughout the community (Geertz: 52-3). The author of the late seventeenth-century *A Collection of Highland Rites and Customes* notes, 'Some pretend to prophetic inspirations and foretel very fortuitous events. Their Responses are deliver'd in very ambiguous Terms, so that they are not known til the event' (J.L. Campbell: 35).

Three times during the course of the Wardlaw History of the Frasers (written between 1666 and 1699), the Reverend James Fraser records historical events which he sees as the unfolding of predictions made by Thomas the Rhymer, but which were unintelligible until interpreted with hindsight (MacKay 1903: 296, 338, 356). He himself witnessed the declaration of a prophecy which was not understood in his time, but he notes that, 'Ridles will unfold themselves. [Thomas] Rymer's prophesies were clear when fullfilled: so may this' (William MacKay: 469).

Prophecy is malleable, and in capable hands it can provide a framework in which to express contemporary events, or to resist or justify the status quo. It was prophecy's potential to support or reject regimes that prompted central authorities to either co-opt it or legislate against it (Ó Buachalla: 513, Thomas: 397, Henderson and Cowan: 182). Jacobite and Hanoverian wrestled to have the last word on the analysis of portents. While the Jacobite poet Iain MacLachlainn, mentioned above, claimed that the star which heralded the birth of Prince Charles was an omen of the deliverance of the Gaels, Dòmhnall MacCoinnich's song '*Óran Gàirdeachais*' upon the repeal of the Act of Proscription and the Act of Forfeited Estates wrested this topos from the Jacobites in favour of King George, claiming the sighting of another star (Newton 2003). While signs themselves continue to appear, there are endless opportunities for recognising and interpreting them. After a Campbell poetess satirised Prince Charles's arrival in Britain as heralded by a comet, Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair responded by warning her not to meddle in the interpretation of prophecies:

*Tighinn chùramach Prionns' Tearlach
Ciallach bairlinn còmaid
Gun robh urra mhòr gun fhàillinn
Teachd gun dàil gu'r còrsa;
'S iomadh facal seadhail tàbhachdach
An cruaidh fhàistinn Thòmais
Bhon fhidrichte nach cuspair àiridh
Do bhan-bhard taigh-òst' e.
(MacilleDhuibh 1998c)*

'True was the comet's sign of the cautious approach of Prince Charles, that there was a flawless nobleman coming imminently to us; there is many a solid and sensible passage in Thomas's complex prophecy, from which it can be seen to be an inappropriate subject for the poetess of a hostelry.'

I have already quoted Geertz's observation that prophecy 'is a way of articulating and defining contemporary events within the context and language of "tradition"' (Geertz: 8, 165). Prophecy was, at least in part, a means of articulating the essence of historical

events. By utilising the style and techniques of Gaelic oral literature, it enabled a native telling of history. Such techniques include metrical structure, rhyme, alliteration, literary allusion, and the exploitation of symbolism developed in the rest of the traditional corpus. John MacInnes similarly declared of the Gaelic seer, ‘the products of his vision are art-forms (whatever else they may or may not be) shaped by the expectations of society and its aesthetic needs’ (MacInnes 1989a: 13).

William Matheson’s study of the prophecies of Coinneach Odhar reveals the historical basis of items pertaining to the political turmoil of *Linn nan Creach*. These were apparently retained in oral tradition for their literary merit after their historical significance was forgotten: ‘Once the prophecy is in circulation it may have a very long life indeed, especially if it is couched in verse or in words that are otherwise memorable; so much so that memory of the prophecy may outlast memory of the event to which it refers’ (Matheson 1968: 78).

Consider one of the many prophecies attributed to Coinneach Odhar, *Thig an là nuair a dh’fhuadaicheas cailleach nam mogan Baintighearna Chloinn Raghnaill a Taigh Bhaile nan Cailleach ann am Beinn a’ Bhaoghla* (‘The day will come when an old woman wearing stockings will evict the Lady of Clan Ranald from the House of Baile nan Cailleach in Benbecula’) (MacIomhair: 38). The prophecy records an event in history using word play and irony that not only describe the end of a dynasty, but suggest a general reversal of things in the world.

A prophecy attributed to Baintighearna Labhair (‘the Lady of Lawers’), but which apparently survives only in English translation, makes good use of the well-developed tree symbolism of Gaelic oral narrative. She predicted that the MacNab lands ‘would be added to the Breadalbane estates when a broken branch from a fir-tree would fall on another fir-tree, and then grow as part of the tree on which it fell’ (Gillies 1938: 252). Although trees more typically represent human individuals or dynasties than their possessions in Gaelic symbolism, the biological process of grafting two plants is a neat metaphor for the amalgamation of family legacies.

Given these precedents, it is not surprising that prophecy was used to attempt to control the cultural damage from the tumultuous and humiliating calamities of the Clearances. One such declared, *Cuiridh claigninn nan caorach an crann o fheum* (‘Sheep skulls will make the plough useless’) ⁵ — in other words, the work of men in the fields would be brought to an end because of the introduction of sheep. The prophecy has been variously attributed to Thomas the Rhymer (Campbell 1900: 272), *Baintighearna Labhair* (J.G. Campbell: 275; Gillies 1938: 250), ⁶ *Am Fiosaiche Ìleach* (Matheson 1968: 75), and probably other prophetic figures.

This prophecy appears in at least five different Gaelic songs. The earliest usage recorded may be in a song by Seumas Shaw, *Bard Loch nan Eala*, probably sometime in the late eighteenth century (Henderson: 390, Matheson 1952: 329). It is also mentioned in ‘*Òran air cuairt do dh’America*’ (‘A Song on the voyage to America’) by *An Cùbair Colach* sometime in the late eighteenth century (Sinclair 1900: 10). The third is in ‘*Òran do na Ciobairean Gallda*’ (‘A Song to the Lowland Shepherds’) by Ailean Dall Dubhghallach sometime between 1798 and 1800 (Meek 1995: 47-51). The fourth is ‘*Caoidh air son Cor na Gàidhealtachd agus Fògradh nan Gàidheal*’ (‘Lament for the Highland people and the Eviction of the Gaels’) by Donnchadh Stiubhart, probably in the early nineteenth century.⁷ The fifth is ‘*Och! Och! Mar a tha mi!*’ (‘Alas! Alas! My

condition!') by Dr Iain MacLachlainn of Rath-thuidhe (Rahoy) (Sinclair 1879: 101-2), composed, I assume, in the mid-nineteenth century. The appearance of this prophecy in numerous songs in a demotic register confirms the need to explain the present in terms of traditional forms of knowledge, the promiscuity of the different genres of oral tradition, and the ways in which prophetic formulae may have been transmitted in Gaelic society.

Prophecy was no longer common in Gaelic verse after the eighteenth century for a number of reasons. There are a couple of late literary examples, however, in which prophecies are invoked in order to inspire and unify Gaels in circumstances which are argued to be threatening to their society.

Renewing so many of the traditional motifs in Gaelic poetry, Màiri Mhòr nan Òran composed a song entitled '*Fàistneachd agus Beannachd do na Gàidheil*' ('A Prophecy and a Blessing to the Gaels') which was sung to the air of a popular Jacobite song from the 1745 Rising that relayed the arrival of the prince. Màiri composed this song sometime between 1882 and 1886 about the just cause of the crofters, urging them to remain united so that the wrongs inflicted on them might be righted:

*'S nuair bhios mise 's na bòrdaibh
Bidh mo chòmhradh mar fhàistneachd:
'S pillidh gineal na tuatha
Rinneadh fhuadach thar sàile
(Meek 1998: 221)*

'And when I am in the coffin, my words will be a prophecy: and the progeny of the crofters who were expelled overseas will return.'

By placing the fulfillment of the prophecy in the non-immediate future — sometime after her own death — Màiri Mhòr signals that this will be a long struggle and keeps the window of opportunity open for as long as possible. The return of the Gaelic people from exile overseas echoes that of the return of the king over the water.

South Uist poet Dòmhnall Ruadh Mac an t-Saoir is also an excellent example of a modern poet composing songs on contemporary topics, who was at the same time keen to draw from the well-springs of tradition. He concludes his protest song ('*Na Rocaidean*') against the military rocket range in Uist, warning of the apocalyptic potential of nuclear war, by providing an interpretation of a local prophecy regarding a salient feature of the landscape:

*Carragh Beinn na Corr-airigh
Gur coltach leam gun d' fhalbh i
Bho 'n ionad as na chuireadh i
Aig cruthachadh na talmhainn.
Nuair thuiteadh i bho 'n ionad sin
Bhiodh sgrìos a' tighinn air Albainn;
Thuir fiosaiche bha ainmeil
'S an aimsir a bha.
(Macintyre: lines 8490-7)*

‘It seems to me that (the rock) Carragh Beinn na Corr-airigh has moved from that spot where it was placed at the creation of the Earth. A famous seer foretold in the days of old that destruction would come upon Scotland when it would fall from that location.’

The expression of prophecy in terms of the landscape is another topic for future exploration of prophecy in Gaelic tradition. The unsettling of rocks and the felling of trees are common harbingers of greater disaster. While early Irish literature generally created *dinnshenchus* to account for the origins of place-names in terms of past events, vernacular Scottish Gaelic tradition often informs us of the future events to occur at specific locations.⁸

The most interesting example of the literary exploitation of prophecy I have yet found is a short allegory expressing a strong pan-Gaelic nationalism, which draws strongly upon the idiom and style of traditional folk-tales (Faloisg). The first part of the story depicts a Golden Age, when a queen named *Éire* (Ireland) rules over a kingdom named *Innis nan Naomh* (the Isle of Saints). She is in love with a man named *Alba* (Scotland), who rules over a kingdom named *Tìr nam Beann ’s nan Gleann* (the Land of the Bens and Glens). Trouble comes in the form of *Iain Buidhe* (Yellow John, who is explicitly named as John Bull), who rules over *Sasann* (England) but is covetous of his neighbours. He throws *Éire* into prison and strikes *Alba* with a magic wand which makes him do the bidding of Iain Buidhe even when it is to *Alba*’s own detriment. Having told of the demise of the Golden Age, the story shifts into prophetic mode:

(Sin shuas agaibh sgeul a fhuair mi fèin bho sheann duine liath ris an abrar “Eachdraidh.” Dh’fhag e an sgeul an sin gun chrìoch a chur air. Ach thachair seanachaidh eile orm, “Faisneachd” a ainm, agus dh’innis e dhomh a chuid eile dheth.)

Bha na Fianntan a’ mosgladh as an suain, agus ag éiridh bharr an uileannan; agus, ma bha, bha Tomas Reumair. Tha fhios agaibh

“An uair thig Tomas le ’chuid each

Bidh là nan creach aig Cluaidh,”

Agus chan ann aig Cluaidh a mhàin, ach

“Bho Chluaidh nan long gleusda

Gun leum e Port Phàdruig.”

Seadh, mus tàinig là a’ mhòr-bhlàir, bha éirigh nach facas riamh a leithid air na Gàidheil eadar dhà chloich na dùthcha, bho’n Chìrc Leoghasaich mu thuath gus a’ Choileach Arranach agus an Teach Mhòir Ni Odhrain mu dheas. Muinntir Tìr nam Beann agus sluagh Innis nan Naomh a’ cuideachadh a chèile, mar bu chòir, cogadh fada eadar iad fèin agus Iain Buidhe. Theab ’s nach d’rinn iad an gnothach air fad air Iain, am fear sin a chuir eagal a bhathaidh air iomadh fear eile, agus leis am bu mhiann a h-uile cinneach ach e fèin a chur fo thuinn. Ach mu dheireadh fhuair iad làmh an uachdar air, là bha sin, agus cha bu chobhartach riamh e gus a sin. Bhrist iad an slachdan druidheachd, agus cha robh Alba fo gheasaibh tuilleadh bho’n àm sin a mach. Chuir iad na caoirich agus na fèidh air falbh, agus bha na Gàidheil air a’ Ghàidhealtachd a rithist.

Liubhradh a' bhan-rìghinn Éire, agus, ged is iomadh bliadhna a thug i ann an tigh-fo-thalamh, thàinig a bòidhchead a rithist innte cho ciatach 's a bha riamh. Bha ise agus Alba a' riaghladh na Gàidhealtachd a rithist, agus bhlaiss a' Ghàidhlig air cupan milis a h-àigh.

Phòs Alba agus Éire. Bha banais mhòr, chridheil aca a mhair là is bliadhna, agus bha an là mu dheireadh dhi a cheart cho math ris a' cheud là.

(That which is given above is a story I received from an old, grey man who is called "History". He left the story there, without giving it a conclusion. But I met another tradition-bearer whose name is "Prophecy" and he told me the other part of it.)

'The Fianna were awakening from their slumber, and rising from resting on their elbows; and so was Thomas the Rhymer. You all know

"When Thomas comes with his horses,
There will be a day of pillaging on the Clyde,"
And not only on the Clyde, but
"From the Clyde of the swift ships
He will hurdle Portpatrick."

'Aye, before the day of the great battle came, an uprising of the Gaels such as never before has been seen occurred between the two landmark-stones of the country, from the Hen of Lewis in the north to the Cock of Arran and Teach Mhór Ni Odhrain in the south (of Ireland). The people of the Land of the Bens and Glens and the host(s) of the Isle of Saints (were) helping one another, as is proper, (in the) long war between themselves and Yellow John. They almost did not completely vanquish John, that man who made many people fear that he would smother them, and who wished to extinguish every other race but himself. But at last they gained the upper hand on him, on that day, and he had never been plundered until then. They broke the magic wand, and Alba was no longer enchanted from that time forward. They sent away the sheep and the deer, and the Gaels inhabited the Highlands once again.

'The queen Éire was rescued, and, although she had spent many years underground, her beauty returned to her again and she was as lovely as ever. She and Alba reigned over the Highlands again, and Gaelic relished the sweet cup of her success.

'Scotland and Ireland were married. They had a great, merry wedding that lasted a year and a day, and the last day of it was just as good as the first day.'

Although polemical and heavy-handed, we could hardly ask for a better illustration of the classic millenarian pattern, outlining the Golden Age of old, the decline, and the anticipated restoration of idealised conditions, all articulated in the language of tradition.

Prophecy as a Tool for Survival

John Carey has argued that an aspect of druidic eschatology survives in some early sources that foretell that Ireland will be submerged by the ocean at the end of the world. Encountering a pre-existing belief that a climactic conflagration would destroy the world, the early Christian missionaries promised the Irish that God would ameliorate this doom by swallowing their island in water beforehand (Carey). A quatrain survives in Scottish Gaelic oral tradition which seems to derive from this same harmonising of native and Christian eschatology:

*Seachd bliadhna roimh' 'n Bhràth
Thig muir thar Èirinn re aon tràth
'S thar Ìle ghuirm ghlais
Ach snàmhaidh Ì Choluim Chlèirich.⁹*

‘Seven years before Judgment Day the sea will suddenly come over Ireland and over green Islay, but Columba’s Iona will float.’

Like early Irish sources treating this prophecy, this quatrain specifies that the flood will happen seven years before the end of the world. This fragment may have been composed when the original druidic belief in the destruction of the world by fire had been forgotten and only the sentence of a future flood was remembered (Carey: 47-8). It may also reflect rivalry between Patrician and Columban cults. Alternatively, it may reflect the need of Iona residents to reassure themselves that they will ultimately survive the perils of the ocean, ever present in their lives.

People look into the future with anxiety. Prophecy frequently concerns natural catastrophes, the fall of dynasties, the casualties of war, and the inevitability of death. Societies coping with destabilisation and dispossession — those most likely to develop millenarian movements — are particularly concerned about their immediate condition and future. Both Hopi and Gaelic cultures have been subject to assimilation from a dominant outside culture. The sense of inferiority and dependency that comes with a position of subservience or marginality can be damaging to the psyche. Geertz (59) suggests that prophecy has played an important part in maintaining Hopi identity in the face of such forces. ‘Hopi prophecy formulates and conceptualizes cultural confrontation in terms of symbols that are highly significant to Hopi identity. Thus, it evaluates confrontation, conceives it, assimilates it, and ultimately defuses it’. By discussing the impact of external forces within the framework of native language and literature, prophecy likewise may have allowed Gaels to maintain belief in the authority of their own tradition and hope that they had control over their own destiny.

Thomas Pennant quotes (in translation) a prophecy about Highland emigration attributed to Coinneach Odhar, gleaned during his 1772 tour: ‘Oppressors would appear in the country, and the people change their own land for a strange one.’ Despite the distress people felt regarding their economic predicament, traditional forms of knowledge themselves remained triumphant: ‘The predictions, say the goods wives, have been fulfilled, and not a single breach in the oracular effusions of Kenneah Oaur [sic]’ (Pennant: 319).

It should be remembered that while prophecies of the downfall of the Gaels may be common, prophecies about the return of the Gaels are also to be found. Màiri Mhòr nan Òran's song above is one such example.¹⁰

The Wheel of Fortune is a common motif in Gaelic poetry, as in many other traditions, and clan fortunes were seen to rise and fall with time. A poem preserved in the Hector MacLean MSS attributed to Domhnall Ó Conchair, apparently a member of the medical family who served MacDougall of Dunolly, is interesting in this regard. It is a prophecy about the downfall of prominent Argyll families: the MacLeans of Duart, the MacDougalls of Dunolly, the Stewarts of Appin, and even the Campbells (Sinclair 1890: 265, 898).

The downfall of the MacLeans was the subject of many songs in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (Ó Baoill 1979: xxxvii-xliii). A poem by Gilleasbuig MacGilleain of Tìree to Domhnall MacGilleain, the Laird of Cornaig, in the late-eighteenth century, however, optimistically anticipates the resurgence of the MacLeans:

*Bha na fàidhean ag innse
Gun dìreadh sibh fathast
A cheart aindeoin luchd mì-rùin
Bha do dh'fhìor Chlann 'illeathain
(Macilleain: 158)*

'The seers foretold that you would rise again despite the ill-wishers of the MacLeans.'

There were similar prophecies concerning the downfall and return of the MacFarlanes of Arrochar in the post-Culloden era. The tacksman of Inbhir Snàthaid, Rob MacPhàdrùig, predicted, on the one hand, that the chieftancy of the MacFarlanes would be defunct when a black goose arrived in the MacFarlane lands (Newton 1999: 252-3). On the other hand, in witnessing the clearance of the clan itself, he predicted that they would eventually return to rout the English-speaking usurpers of their land (Newton 2000).

The prophecy *Nuair a thrèigeas na dùthchasaich Ìle / Beannachd le sìth na h-Alba* ('When the natives abandon Islay / say goodbye to peace in Scotland') has been attributed to MacAoidh na Ranna and has been assumed to be a warning about the consequences of the Clearances (Fionn: 12-13). It possible, however, that it originated at the time that the Campbells ousted Clann Iain Mhòir (Clan Donald South) in the early seventeenth century and the violent conflicts that came shortly thereafter. In that case, the prophecy might have suggested that the expulsion of this branch of Clan Donald foreshadowed the dramatic events that rocked the Highlands in the decades to follow.

Thomas Triumphant

Every community in the Highlands had its recognised figures of prophetic authority: *Baintighearna Labhair* ('the Lady of Lawers') was renowned in Perthshire; in Islay, *MacAoidh nan Ranna*,¹¹ *Am Fiosaiche Ìleach*,¹² or *Guala Chrosta*; in Barra, *Mac a' Chreachadair*; in Ross-shire and Lewis, *Coinneach Odhar*. For the most part, the prophecies of these various figures were fairly local in nature. The figure who emerged as

chief of prophetic authorities in Gaelic literature, at least from the mid-seventeenth century, was Thomas the Rhymer. This is clear from the authority attributed to him in the Gaelic poetry already cited, in the Wardlaw Manuscript, and in traditions recorded about Highland prophecies, such as the following: '[Prophecies about the downfall of clans] originated usually in clannish or personal animosity or revenge, and are usually ascribed to a certain renowned sage, Thomas the Rhymer' (Teignmouth: 140).¹³

An explanation of the ascendancy of Thomas the Rhymer as prophet and messiah in Scottish Gaelic literature poses some interesting challenges. Besides the lack of a common language and literary tradition, there was much mutual antipathy between Highlanders and Lowlanders by the seventeenth century (cf. MacInnes 1989a), so a Lowlander makes an unlikely culture-hero for Highland Jacobites like Iain Lom. English-language prophecies attributed to Thomas make no special mention of the Gael, but Gaelic prophecies attributed to Thomas emphasise the disenfranchisement of the Highlanders from the kingdom that rightfully belongs to them and that Thomas was to lead a crusade on their behalf. In fact, the Gaelic version of the Rhymer legend in general seems to have diverged and developed independently at some point from its ultimate Lowland sources.

A complete solution to the genesis of the Gaelic Rhymer legend would have to account for:

- A. Differences in the motifs in Lowland and Highland versions of the legend;
- B. The channel by which the legend was transmitted from Lowland tradition to Gaelic tradition;
- C. The reason for the adoption of Thomas the Rhymer as messiah by the Gaels.

I will attempt to suggest some solutions to these issues in the sections that follow, but given the shortage of documentary evidence, the following hypotheses will have to remain speculative.

Thomas: Motifs

A story added anonymously to the 1665 edition of *The Discovery of Witchcraft, whereunto is added a discourse of Devils and Spirits* by Reginald Scot attests to the development of the Rhymer legend in anglophone literature. This tells of a man going to a fair to sell his horse, and, having failed, was on his way home when he encountered a man (clearly implied to be Thomas the Rhymer) on a milk-white steed. Thomas leads him into an underground chamber where there are 'above six hundred men in armour laid prostrate on the ground as if asleep'. A beautiful woman pays for the horse and he finds himself alone in the field where he first met Thomas.

Sir Walter Scott, in his *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (Letter IV, written in 1830), recounts a story about a man who sells his horse to a wizard (implied to be Thomas), who meets him on the Eildon Hills to close the deal. Thomas takes him inside the hill to a cavern, where he had amassed an army of horses and warriors who 'will awaken at the battle of Sheriffmoor'. The man takes the horn at the end of the room in order to rouse the warriors, but his attempt fails because he has not first drawn the sword next to the horn.

The evidence from Sir Walter Scott and Reginald Scot suggests that narratives about Thomas as a saviour figure had been developing in the Lowlands with many motifs in common with the Gaelic legend. None of the surviving Gaelic sources quite match the

literary *Romance and Prophecies*, or even the Lowland oral ballads about Thomas. Instead of explaining Thomas's abilities as being a gift of the fairy queen, his strange and supernatural birth marks him as an exceptional being in Highland folktales (cf. Newton 2006: 323-4), like other legendary Gaelic figures. This, however, is to be expected when a person becomes the subject of oral tradition: his biography is remodeled according to traditional aesthetic expectations, including those set by archetypal heroic patterns.

In Gaelic literature, Fionn mac Cumhail and his warrior band, the Fianna, defended Scotland and Ireland against invaders and enemies. The messianic motifs in popular Fenian traditions (cf. Bruford 1986-7: 36, Ó Buachalla: 458) likely influenced Thomas's character in Gaelic legend. The proverbial phrase *An Fhèinn air a h-uilinn* ('the Fenians reposing on their elbows') refers to the legend that they are asleep in a secret underground location, waiting for the right conditions before they will return to rescue the Gaels. The legends place their chamber in Tom na h-Iubhraich or Dunbuck (J.G. Campbell: 270, Nicolson: 30, J.F. Campbell: 37), sites where Thomas was also said to be slumbering.¹⁴

Over all, the characteristics of the messianic tale describing Thomas follow the international folk motif Stith Thompson D1960.2, often referred to as the 'Barbarossa legend' or the 'Charlemagne legend' (Thompson: 350).¹⁵ This same mythic narrative attached itself to the Fitzgerald Earls of Desmond: Gearóid Iarla, it was claimed, was not dead but seen by horse-traders at night, trying to persuade them to come to his underwater chambers to make a bargain so that he could make ready for the salvation of his people (Ó hÓgáin: 227-230, Ó Buachalla: 458-9). The legend was fully operational in seventeenth-century Ireland, attached to a hero known as *Ball Dearg*, encouraging popular support for native military action (Ó Buachalla: Ch. 9).

It is not clear how Thomas came to be depicted as riding the *each-uisge* ('water-horse'), as I know of no other Gaelic hero depicted as a rider of that supernatural beast. It may be that it was a means of 'indigenising' Thomas and empowering him over the elements. Perhaps this feature was transferred from lore about a heroic figure such as Manannán mac Lir (cf. kennings for ocean waves referred to Manannán in Gaelic (Ó hÓgáin: 287)). Alternatively, this may simply be a development of the idea that the saviour will come from another country via the ocean, as stated ('A basterd shall come out of the west') in the Lansdowne Manuscript copy of *The Romance and Prophecies* (MacilleDhuibh 1998b) and the Irish *Ball Dearg* prophecy (Ó Buachalla: 449-59). After the Flight of the Earls, the deliverer of Irish Gaels was expected to come from overseas, as was the later exiled Stewart king. Similarly, Iain Lom's poetry depicts Montrose on the Irish sea just before invoking the prophecy of Thomas the Rhymer.

Thomas: Transmission

There are at least four potential channels through which the Rhymer legend may have been transmitted from Lowland tradition to Gaelic tradition, each of which was operative at certain times and under certain conditions. It may be that only a combination of them fully explains the development and adoption of Thomas and his prophecies as found in Gaelic literature and tradition.

1. *Lore introduced by families with southern connections.* The most direct connection between Thomas of Erceldoune and the Scottish Highlands is the Gordon family. Robert the Bruce awarded Sir Adam of Gordon, Warden of the Marches, with the lands of

Strathbogie in Aberdeenshire. The family took their surname ‘Gordon’ from their home parish of Gordon in Berwickshire, which was also the residence of Thomas. If the Gordon family took traditions about Thomas with them from Berwickshire to Aberdeenshire, it would ‘explain the abundant traces of Thomas’s fame and presence in the counties of Aberdeen and Banff’ (Geddie: 30, Black 2005: 398-9).

Nevertheless, it would be difficult to attribute the development of the Gaelic legend to the work of the Gordons alone given that their rôle as a check against the Gaelic kin-groups in the north-east attracted much resentment to them: ‘Indeed, a large part of their history in the north was a continued struggle with the Celtic atmosphere, and continued as such at least to the end of the eighteenth century.’ (Bulloch: 319-20) Alexander Gordon (the third Earl of Huntly) was granted lands in Lochaber at the expense of the MacDonalds after the forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles, and their relations with Clan Chattan were always strained (Cathcart: 168, 170).

On the other hand, the Gordons did form networks with dominant Highland kin-groups and were sometimes recognised for their leadership in the Gaelic world. Jock Gordon, the great-great-grandson of the original settler of Strathbogie, took the daughter of Macleod of Harris in a handfasting marriage (Bulloch: 325). In 1586 George, 6th Earl of Huntly, contracted a bond of manrent with Donald Gorm (chieftain of the MacDonalds of Sleat) and in 1592 he formed alliances with Cameron of Lochiel and MacDonald of Keppoch (Cathcart: 173, 177). Gaelic poetess Sileas MacDonald, of the MacDonalds of Keppoch, married the factor of the Marquis of Huntly’s lands in Lochaber and came to live on his estate in Strathavon (Ó Baoill 1972: xlvi-xlvii). It is her poetry that records the Marquis of Huntly (amongst others) joining the Jacobite Rising of Braemar on 27th August 1715; still, she does not hesitate to deride him for his poor performance in the venture in a following song (Ó Baoill 1972: lines 312-314, 350).

If the Gordons fostered lore about Thomas to legitimise their authority in the Highlands, their efforts left no lasting trace in the surviving Gaelic corpus. Given the ambiguity of the evidence, we should remain open to the possibility that lore about Thomas may have been reintroduced and further developed by other emigrants. Anglo-Norman families who spanned Lowland and Highland zones may have acted as a conduit for the legend. The literary activities of Reverend James Fraser, noted above, demonstrate that this scenario is possible. The Gaelic personal name ‘Tòmas’ was closely associated with the Highland Frasers (cf. MacKenzie: lines 295-7), and one supposed resting place of Thomas the Rhymer, *Tom na h-Iubhraich*, has special associations with the Frasers.

Thomas’s name appears in some Gaelic accounts as *Tòmas Reumhair* (‘Thomas the Wanderer’) (J.G. Campbell: 269). While the name ‘*Reumhair*’ may only reflect an attempt to relate a Scots word to a Gaelic homophone, it is suggestive of the importation of his legend with immigrants. The most obvious candidate would be some family associated with the branch of the MacDonalds in Dalness (in Glen Etive), who were known by the name *Clann Reubhair*. John MacCodrum ends his song ‘*Moladh Chloinn Domhnaill*’ (c. 1760) in praise of Clan Donald with a list of allies, concluding with this family, leading him to repeat the prophecy:

*’S thigeadh Clann Reubhair an òrdan —
Nuair a dhùisgeadh fìr na h-Iubhraich
Cò thigeadh air tùs ach Tòmas?*

(Matheson 1938: 130)

‘And the Clan Reumhair would form in ranks —When the men of Tom
na h-Iubhraich would awaken, who would lead them but Thomas?’

This suggests that a Gaelic speaker would recognise an obvious resemblance between Thomas’s Gaelic name and this clan nickname, although it doesn’t prove that there was any actual historical link. It may be significant that all of the Jacobite songs that referred to the Rhymer legend were composed by mainland MacDonald poets: Iain Lom and Sileas na Ceapaich of Lochaber, Iain Dubh of Morar, and Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair of Moidart. Thus, it might be the case that the Gaelic Rhymer legend was advanced by the MacDonalds (perhaps after their contact with the Gordons or others) and given special impetus by the Jacobite cause: ‘Given the strong ideological loyalty to the true dynastic line, this ‘mystical reverence’ of the Gaels for the king, the prophecy could only become prominent if that dynasty were displaced or destroyed’ (MacInnes 1989a: 98).

2. Continuity of tradition. Given that there are Celtic elements in the Scots-language sources for Thomas the Rhymer (cf. Lyle 1967; Lyle 1968; Newton 2006), some form of the legend is likely to have been known at an early stage by speakers of a Celtic language and could have been made its way to a northern Gaelic community that maintained and popularised it during the medieval period.

During Thomas’s life in the thirteenth century, the Scottish Borders were home to speakers of Gaelic, Inglis, French, Flemish, and possibly Cumbric. Thomas himself was certainly multilingual and may have had ancestry from more than one of these ethnic communities (MacilleDhuibh 1998b). Legends about him must have begun flourishing shortly after his death, for the story of his journey to the Otherworld was known as early as the fourteenth century (Lyle 1994: 275). This incident was supposed to have occurred under the Eildon Hills, an ancient holy site (MacilleDhuibh 1997). Prophecies attributed to Thomas appear in learned texts from the fourteenth century to the eighteenth century (Henderson and Cowan: 145-9), demonstrating the strength and longevity of his legend. It may have moved via translinguistic ‘cèilidh crawl’, moving from the Borders, via Gaelic-speaking Ayrshire (where Gaelic died only in the eighteenth century), through to Argyll. This hypothesis might be strengthened by the late nineteenth-century observation that, among Gaelic-speaking areas, Thomas the Rhymer was particularly well known in Argyll and Perthshire (J.G. Campbell: 269).

There are other examples of Brythonic survivals in Gaelic tradition. The Highland narrative repertoire included Arthurian material, although it derives from both Celtic and non-Celtic sources (cf. Gillies 1982). Campbell claims of British origin (and descent from Arthur himself!) were backed up by genealogies that include genuine Welsh names, demonstrating a longevity of interest in Brythonic tradition (cf. Gillies 1999).

A few other Lowland characters appear in surviving Gaelic tradition, most notably Robert Bruce, William Wallace (sometimes taking on the attributes of a ‘Fenian giant’) and Michael Scott (c. 1175-1234, also associated with the Eildon Hills and riding a supernatural horse (Campbell 1889: 46-53)). These are, however, characters on the margins of Gaelic tradition divested of any lasting political import. Nor is there any evidence of the relevance of Thomas’s ethnicity in surviving Gaelic sources. Any

memory of the ‘Celticity’ of the historical Thomas or the Eildon Hills would likely have been long forgotten and of little cultural significance to seventeenth-century Highlanders (cf. MacInnes 1989a).

While this hypothesis would give the legend sufficient time to develop Gaelic characteristics and spread through the Highlands, it would require extraordinary continuities given the chronological and geographical discontinuities in Celtic Scotland. It also does not provide sufficient explanatory power for the relevance of Thomas to Gaelic-speaking communities throughout this time period.

3. Later learned importation. Scottish Gaelic literati were familiar with mainstream texts written by Lowland scholars (cf. Thomson 1963: 296, 299), some of which contained references to Thomas the Rhymer. As was necessary, learned men in the Highlands typically were literate in Gaelic, Latin and Scots. This is reflected in the Scots orthography adopted by many scribes writing Gaelic language texts. Multilingual Reverend James Fraser recorded Gaelic verses in the Wardlaw Manuscript, as well as excerpts of prophetic verse written in Scots attributed to Thomas the Rhymer. He used them to illustrate contemporary historical events in the Highlands, such as the Battle of Auldearn (1645). The Statutes of Iona (1609) required the sons of Highland gentlemen to be sent to the Lowlands to be educated through the medium of English, thus facilitating familiarity with Lowland literature that might have been carried to home communities in the Highlands.

Despite the status of men of learning, it is difficult to imagine why this solitary literary figure from Lowland legend would have made such an impact on popular Gaelic consciousness via such a medium. Given the tenacity of native heroes in Highland oral tradition (Cù Chulainn, Fionn, etc.), very few characters entered the vernacular repertoire as literary imports, although there are some exceptions (Bruford 1969: 11-12). If learned literary import alone was a viable explanation, we might expect other popular Lowland characters to have entered the mainstream of Gaelic tradition with vestiges of their identity intact.

4. Jacobite Propaganda. Thomas may be a character imported at a relatively late stage into Gaelic Jacobite verse. James VI commissioned Robert Waldegrave to print the book *The Whole Prophecie of Scotland, England and Some part of France and Denmark...* in Edinburgh upon his accession to the English throne in 1603. The prophecies therein were attributed to Merlin, Bede, Thomas the Rhymer and others, but there was a ‘substantial bedrock of Rhymer material’ in the book (Henderson and Cowan: 149). The new edition was printed in 1610 and portions from it were recycled in popular chapbooks (MacilleDhuibh 1998b). *The Whole Prophecie...* was meant to bolster James VI’s grand political aspirations, and such prophetic material proved popular later in the propaganda of the Jacobite Risings.

Thomas may have been a convenient symbol of Highland-Lowland symbiosis for the Jacobites. By the time of the eighteenth-century Jacobite Risings, Gaelic poets were eager to incorporate Lowland clans into their roll calls of conceptual unity. Such collaboration may have looked expedient, if not necessary, for the accomplishment of Highland objectives. Hard-core Jacobite Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair (educated at Glasgow University) is willing, in the Preface to his 1751 book of poetry, to extend his invitation for Gaelic cultural renewal ‘even to the inhabitants of the lowlands of Scotland, who have always shared with them [the Highlanders] the honour of every gallant action.’

This scenario may not, however, give sufficient time for the Rhymer legend to develop a specifically Highland form. Given the familiarity with which the traditions were related in poetry to a mid seventeenth-century Highland audience, we would expect that the Gaelic version of the legend had been fully gestated and distributed before the deployment of Royalist propaganda. Furthermore, given that James VI had demonstrated strong anti-Highland policies even before attaining the English crown, it is not altogether likely that Scottish Gaels (especially traditionalists, like the MacDonalds, who later became Jacobites) would create and adopt traditions so closely allied to James's interests. It is possible, however, that the 'Highland Thomas' was the result of Gaelic counter-propaganda, giving an alternative interpretation to James's own royally-subsidised texts.

Thomas: Rationale

It may be significant that the first Gaelic poetry in which Thomas the Rhymer's name and references to his prophecies appear, the songs of Iain Lom, are Jacobite come-all-ye's which highlight the antagonism between Scotland and England but are silent on tensions between Highlands and Lowlands. Lowland allies figure prominently in his first two songs. These features are also pronounced in Iain Dubh's '*Óran nam Fineachan*'.

That James VI had propaganda put in the voice of Thomas the Rhymer demonstrates the popularity of this legendary figure in the Lowlands and re-entrenched his authority as a prophet. Gaels may have appropriated him in order to participate through him in the heroic future of the wider Scottish nation. By taking him within the fold of Gaelic prophecy, his voice could be used to assert the importance of the Gaels in the destiny of the nation. By passing on to him the rôle of messiah, which would have normally been the inheritance of Fionn mac Cumhaill in Gaelic tradition, they have transformed a potentially threatening figure into the leader of their own cause.

Other characteristics attributed to Thomas in Gaelic tradition demonstrate his ability to span worlds. Being in close association with the Dead and the *Sithe* ('fairies') provided his Otherworldly powers of prescience.¹⁶ Furthermore, some traditions assign him a liminal geographical position between Highland and Lowland regions. One of his alleged sleeping chambers is Dunbuck (J.G. Campbell: 270; Lyle 1968: 117) in the Lennox, an area where Gael and Lowlander interacted throughout the Middle Ages. That the climactic battle in which he will participate is located on the Clyde, a symbolic boundary between Highlands and Lowlands (cf. Newton 1999: 246-7), also reinforces his rôle as a figure of cultural mediation.

The poem entitled 'A phrofesie made before the situas'ne of Inverness', uniquely preserved in the Fernaig Manuscript (c. 1688-1693), depicts MacBeth as the messiah figure to triumph in combat (MacPhàrlain 1923: 170-1). The prophecy is localised at Tom na h-lubhraich, a graveyard whose many sacred associations suggest that it is an ancient holy site and possibly the sacred centre of the kingdom of Moray. It appears that Moray long held out from being completely under the authority of the Scottish kings based at Scone, as conflicts between King Duncan and MacBeth, and the agitation of the MacWilliam claimants, illustrate. The last stanza of the prophecy has been deciphered as:

*Ionbhar Nis an Dail Chlasg
An toirear cath an tùir-ghlais
A'n tig MacBeathaig a-mach*

*Le 'lainn agus le 'lùireach
Tuitidh na Gàidheil mu seach
Mu bhòrlum Tom na h-Iùbhraich.*

‘Inverness in Dail Chlasg, in which the battle of the grey tower will be fought, from which MacBeth will emerge with his blades and his armour; the Gaels will fall one by one about Borland of Tom na h-Iùbhraich.’

Could this stanza be a reworking of much earlier local tradition, a distant echo of despair resounding from the pacification of Moray and Ross? An interesting question, and one which I have not yet solved to satisfaction, revolves around the word *Gàidheil* in this text. In light of the later Thomas the Rhymer tradition, we might expect this word to be *Goill*. Although this would be a plausible reading of the manuscript ‘Ghayle’,¹⁷ it leaves the line a syllable short. So if it is indeed meant as *Gàidheil*, did this originally refer to MacBeth liberating Moray from the domination of the southern branch of the kingdom of Scotland? It is an intriguing possibility, though it is highly unlikely that the Moray people would not have thought of themselves as *Gàidheil*, and that more specific ethnonyms would not have been used.

In any case, this verse is contained in a manuscript that demonstrates further points of contact between Lowland scholarship and Highland Jacobitism. The scribe not only employed an orthography based on Scots (rather than standard Gaelic orthography) but also translated two English broadsheet ballads into Gaelic. Jacobite songs are also represented in the collection (Thomson 1994: 72).

This particular prophecy seems to originate in an earlier era, and the association of MacBeth with Tom na h-Iùbhraich suggests that Thomas the Rhymer is supplanting earlier archetypes. While the late seventeenth-century compilers of the Fernaig Manuscript themselves are rather late to be the authors of the Rhymer’s lore in Gaelic tradition, they exemplify the kind of men who may have fostered the growth of the legend.

Conclusions

I have argued that prophecy is an important cultural resource in the wider body of Gaelic tradition. It can be used to mobilise people to act in unison for a common purpose, to discuss possible outcomes of current social and political processes, to integrate history into the larger body of native oral narrative, to maintain dignity and authority in the face of cultural invasion, and to assimilate potentially threatening forces.

I have also attempted to find possible explanations for the adoption and growth of tradition about Scottish Gaeldom’s most prominent prophetic figure, Thomas the Rhymer. Although Thomas’s character and legend first evolved in Lowland literature, it became grafted onto Highland messianic archetypes through contact with Lowland tradition. The Highland version of the prophecy gave voice to Gaelic hopes that, by backing the true king and conquering English enemies, they would be restored to a place of honour within Scotland and that the kingdom would be reintegrated.

Prophecy can be seen as an attempt to de-emphasise the discontinuities of history: cultural icons of the past sanction what might otherwise be disruptive to the social order

and explain contemporary events in the context of tradition. Belief in prophecy is built on the assumption that figures of the past, or people with supernatural associations, would have an interest in communicating with people in the present and that this method of acquiring knowledge was sufficiently reliable to take seriously. Although the learned classes had always shown some degree of skepticism about prophecy, the development of formal history and science made it increasingly difficult to maintain faith in prophecy and other traditional forms of knowledge (Thomas: 428-32, Henderson and Cowan: 24-30).

Nevertheless, prophecy is also an art form that exercises the imagination of society in envisioning and proactively making decisions about its own future, analogous to modern science fiction. The waning of prophecy in Gaelic oral tradition seems to have added significance in the perceptions of Highland communities about their subaltern status and lack of self-determination:

In the past, so far as I am aware, a seer's vision or precognition did not imply that the event was predestined and absolutely bound to happen. In fact it was a seer's duty to warn of the approaching danger. The individuals concerned had some freedom to take evasive action. But it is not so now, in the minds of those who believe in such matters and are prepared to discuss them. Fate is now fixed. Is this a reflection of Gaelic historical experience, which is so much an experience of ethnocide? (MacInnes 1992: 17)

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NOTES

¹ Such as '*An Taisbean*' (Black 2001: poem 37), '*Chunnacas Bean 's an Tùr 'na Suidhe*' (MacPhàrlain 1908: 76-7), Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's '*Moladh Mòraig*'. Regarding the sovereignty myth in Gaelic tradition, it may be significant that many Scottish Gaelic Jacobite songs present a female cypher for Prince Charles (Mòrag, etc).

² I am not certain whether *coinne* should be interpreted as *coinneamh* ('meeting, encounter') or *coinmh(eadh)* ('provisions'), or a pun on both terms.

³ It is possible that *miamhalach*, meaning 'meowing', is meant for '*mialach*'.

⁴ According to J.G. Mackay (93), the legend reprinted in Stewart was originally printed in an 1874 issue of *The Inverness Courier*.

⁵ There are, of course, several versions of this prophecy. This particular version is notable for its alliteration.

⁶ This prophecy also appears in a MS. in private hands I have consulted that was written by Seumas MacDiarmaid for a talk he gave in 1902. This actually appears to have been Gillies's source.

⁷ This poem was first printed in *The Highlander* 31 August 1878. Donnchadh Stiubhart was the son of Rob 'Raithneach' who published a book of Gaelic poetry in 1802.

⁸ This aspect of prophecy is mentioned in John MacInnes 1989b: 10-11.

⁹ This first appeared in print in Pennant 1774 (page 239 in the 1998 edition). However, it appears in exactly the same form in the MacDiarmid MS (held by the Department of Celtic, University of Glasgow) as proverb 736. This collection of proverbs appears to have been made in 1769 (Thomson 1992: 1).

¹⁰ Others can be found in MacÌomhair (Prophecy 20) and (by implication) Thornber: 43.

¹¹ See Fionn: 11-14.

¹² There is some information about the magical book from which MacAoidh read his prophecies in NLS Adv.50.2.2 fo. 130-1. Thanks to Dòmhnall Uilleam Stiubhart for this reference.

¹³ Coinneach Odhar appears to have been developing into a figure of larger stature as prophecies of national significance were being attributed to him from at least the eighteenth century. According to J.G. Campbell, 'In Argyllshire and Perthshire, the celebrated Thomas the Rhymer is as well known as in the Lowlands of Scotland' (269), whereas in the North Highlands, significant prophecies were attributed to Coinneach Odhar 'whose name is hardly known in Argyllshire' (272).

¹⁴ The tale in MacDougall: 73-5 placing the Fianna in the Smith's Cave in Skye does not seem to correspond to any surviving tradition about Thomas in the same cave.

¹⁵ See also Thomas: 415-22.

¹⁶ See Newton 2006: 323-4 for more on this connection.

¹⁷ See, for example, 'ghail' for *Ghall* on page 162.

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