

DEIREADH AN FHOGHAIR AND THE ENVIRONMENT¹

Petra Johana Poncarová

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Abstract: This essay seeks to expand critical engagement with the novel *Deireadh an Fhoghair* (1979) by Tormod Caimbeul by focusing on its environmental preoccupations. It discusses the way Caimbeul draws on traditional features of Gaelic literature about places and transforms them and examines the relation between people and places, depictions of the sea and the moor, and the interaction of the characters with non-human life, especially with farm animals. Finally, it turns to the questions of recycling and renewal and to the novel's own viability in terms of readership.

Keywords: Tormod Caimbeul (Norman Campbell), *Deireadh an Fhoghair* (The End of Autumn), Scottish Gaelic fiction, Outer Hebrides, moor, sea, farm animals, place, naming

Deireadh an Fhoghair (The End of Autumn, 1979) by Tormod Caimbeul (Norman Campbell, known as "Tormod a' Bhocsair," 1942-2015) has been recognised as one of the most accomplished novels that have so far emerged in Scottish Gaelic, and possibly as the very best extant one. Yet, although almost fifty years have elapsed since its publication, it has attracted little critical commentary.² This is part of a broader trend of substantial gaps in the study of Scottish Gaelic literature as a field, and a reflection of the scarcity of translations of Gaelic fiction into other languages, which would have made it available to a broader audience, both popular and critical. As it is, the pleasures and complexities of *Deireadh an Fhoghair*

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² I summarize the reception of the novel in "The Best Scottish Gaelic Novel? Reception and Analysis of Tormod Caimbeul's *Deireadh an Fhoghair*," in *Imagining Scottishness: European and Domestic Representations*, ed. Aniela Korzeniowska and Izabela Szymańska (Warsaw: Semper, 2017) 304-14.

are only accessible to readers and scholars with sufficient command of Gaelic, as the novel works with various registers and dense and diverse references. It has been read autobiographically, situated as an example of “village fiction,” and praised for its documentary and almost ethnographic values,³ yet, despite this acknowledged link with its rural island setting, there have been no sustained explorations of its environmental preoccupations in a broader sense.

Set in a fictional township on an island modelled on the author’s native Lewis in the Outer Hebrides, the short novel focuses on three friends: Coinneach, who lives on his own, and the married couple Ailean, nicknamed An Sgudalair [Dogsbody], and Nellie. All are well advanced in years and represent the last living human inhabitants of an area which was once home to a busy community of scattered farms and small settlements. The novel follows them for twenty-four hours, from one early morning to the next, and the third-person narrative, with no overt authorial intrusion, shifts between the three characters and details not only their present actions and thoughts but especially their reminiscences. Through those, the novel provides a fuller view of their lives, and those of their ancestors.

In terms of form, *Deireadh an Fhoghair* fuses experimental elements, inspired by techniques of literary modernism and postmodernism,⁴ with traditional features of Gaelic literature. On the thematic level, Caimbeul manages to mix humour and warmth with close, unflinching, and unostentatious exploration of old age, loneliness, and death. With no sense of being forced or overly manifest, the sympathetic and thorough portrayal of the characters, their lifestyle and surroundings also serves as a commentary on the broader issues of social change

³ For comparisons with autobiographical fiction from Irish-speaking islands, see Máire Ní Annracháin, “*Deireadh an Fhoghair*,” *Litriocht na Gaeltachta: Léachtaí Cholm Cille* 19 (1989): 168-91; for interpretation as, respectively, autobiography and village fiction within Scottish Gaelic context, see Meg Bateman, “The Autobiography in Scottish Gaelic” and Michelle MacLeod and Moray Watson, “In the Shadow of the Bard: The Short Story, Novel and Drama in Gaelic Since the Early Twentieth Century,” both in *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature, Vol. 3: Modern Transformations: New Identities*, ed. Ian Brown (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) 225-30 and 273-82. The documentary value is singled out, for instance, in the review of the novel for the magazine *Gairm* by Derick Thomson (Ruairaidh MacThòmais), “*Deireadh an Fhoghair*,” *Gairm* 114 (Spring 1981): 187.

⁴ In his review, Donald MacAulay (Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh) points out that Caimbeul “has a remarkable awareness of language nuance, and a great skill in handling cliché and blocks of ready-made language to express qualities of life, to reflect evasions and to signal dead ends.” Donald MacAulay, “*Deireadh an Fhoghair*,” *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 14 (1983): 140.

and language loss and captures a disappearing way of life in Gaelic-speaking rural Highlands and Islands between the two world wars.

Gaelic Literature and Place

In the minute attention he pays to environment and in the tight link between characters and the place where they live, Caimbeul draws on extensive Gaelic tradition. As a number of scholars have noted, the spatial preoccupation of Gaelic literature is conspicuous and ancient.⁵ John MacInnes (Iain MacAonghuis) commented on this attunedness to place, observing that it relates to “not so much a landscape, not a sense of geography alone, nor of history alone, but a formal order of experience in which these are all merged.”⁶ As the strongly prevailing genre in Scottish Gaelic literature had, at least until the most recent decades, been poetry, these observations are based on Gaelic poetry of place. In *Deireadh an Fhoghair*, Caimbeul inventively moves some of these preoccupations and strategies to prose, and it is the transposition of this particular sensibility and richness of tradition into the form of the novel which makes *Deireadh an Fhoghair* so remarkable. After centuries of poetry of place in the Gaelic tradition, Caimbeul created what has so far been the most subtle and complex “novel of place.”

The close connection between people and place which has been at the centre of attention in Gaelic literature for centuries has also been explored more recently by representatives of human geography, landscape phenomenology, and other disciplines. In *Topophilia and Space and Place*, Yi-Fu Tuan examines the “the affective bond between people and place or setting”⁷ and observes that places are “created and maintained through the ‘fields of care’ that result from people’s emotional attachment.”⁸ The concept of place as “a central meaningful component in human life” certainly holds true for the people portrayed in *Deireadh an Fhoghair*.⁹ In *Phenomenology of Landscape*, Edward Tilley comments on the bond between personal and cultural identity and “the creation of self-identity through

⁵ See for instance John MacInnes, *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: Collected Essays of John MacInnes*, ed. Michael Newton (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2006); Donald MacAulay, “Introduction,” *Nua-bhàrdachd Ghàidhlig / Modern Scottish Gaelic Poems*, ed. Donald MacAulay (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 1995).

⁶ John MacInnes, “The Panegyric Code in Gaelic Poetry,” *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal*, 279.

⁷ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974) 4.

⁸ “Editors’ Introduction,” *Key Thinkers on Space and Place*, ed. Phil Hubbard, Rob Kitchin and Gill Valentine (London: SAGE Publications, 2004) 5.

⁹ Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) 49.

place,”¹⁰ which applies to all the characters whose self-awareness and self-perception is largely based on an intersection of place and ancestry.

The delight in detailed description, naming and listing,¹¹ and the desire to praise and celebrate, characteristic of traditional poetry of place, work on two levels in *Deireadh an Fhoghair*, as Caimbeul observes them in some of the characters and replicates it in his own text. One of the characters, Ailean, is a poet: “Bha a’ Sgudalair ‘na bhàrd agus bha e air sgrìobhadh còig Òrain Mhòr a’ moladh Nellie, trì dàin dha Gil-a’-Chlamhain agus abhain mu-dheidhinn frasan agus sgòthan ‘s an cuan mòr farsuing” [Dogsbody was a poet and had written five Big Songs praising Nellie, three poems about Buzzard’s Gully, and a song about showers and clouds and the big wide ocean].¹² His poems praise both people and places together, in a manner reminiscent of what MacInnes outlined as the “panegyric code” of Gaelic poetry, where the subject of the praise, often the chieftain, is celebrated through his domains: “muinntir ‘Ic Dhomhnaill a bha ‘san Dùn, muinntir ‘Ic Sheumais ann am Buaile na Crois, Bànaich Lèinebroc [...] mu-dheidhinn nan daoine còir sin, agus mu-dheidhinn nan àiteachan a dh’aithnicheadh iad: a’ Loch Chaol, Bhrèitheascro, an t-Slugaid, Ard-nan-Claisean, ‘s a’ Ghil...” [the MacDonalds, who lived in the Fort, the Jameses in the Cross Pen, the MacBains in Lèineabroc (...) about these kindly people, and about the places they belonged to: the Narrow Loch, Bhrèitheascro, the Slough, the Furrowed Mound, and the Gully...] (24). As Tilley points out, “the place acts dialectically so as to create the people who are of that place. These qualities of locales and landscapes give rise to a feeling of belonging and rootedness and a familiarity, which is not born just out of knowledge, but of concern that provides ontological security.”¹³

¹⁰ Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths and Monuments* (Oxford: Berg, 1994) 15.

¹¹ The relish in cataloguing is not limited to natural phenomena in *Deireadh an Fhoghair* and extends to man-made things (the contents of Coinneach’s barn, the assemblage of articles found in the bed of Ailean’s grandmother, etc.). In this way, the novel is remarkably focused on material objects. As Peter Mackay has pointed out, the novel “functions both as living museum and immanent mausoleum for a culture.” Peter Mackay, “Museums of Gaelic Literature,” conference paper, Third World Congress of Scottish Literatures, 24-28 June 2023, Charles University, Prague, <https://scotlit2020.ff.cuni.cz/peter-mackay/>.

¹² Tormod Caimbeul, *Deireadh an Fhoghair* (Dùn Èideann: Chambers, 1979) 23. All further references to the novel are given in the text in parentheses. All translations from the novel are my own. I am grateful to Michel Byrne and Peter Mackay for their feedback.

¹³ Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape* 26. The closeness of people to the environment is also emphasised in descriptions: for instance, when the impressiveness of a house built

Despite the time setting, most of Ailean's poems in praise of his immediate surroundings present a vision of a yet unproblematised relationship to place, undisturbed by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Clearances or deprivation and the lack of opportunity that often caused the departure of people from their ancestral homelands in the history of Gaelic Scotland. Still, there is also a more sinister take on the traditional intimate link between people and their environment, and Caimbeul presents the notion of the place absorbing its people, making them stay, and ultimately killing them. The vision of the grave which appears in a scene where Ailean and Nellie discuss their approaching deaths and related arrangements is ugly, simple, and unpleasant, and does not hint at any uplifting vision of being united with nature after death and physically merging with the environment: "ann an ùine aithghearr bhiodh esan cuideachd ann an toll anns an talamh – toll beag cumhang grod – gun lèirsinn, gun chlaisneachd" [shortly he too will be in a hole in the ground – in a small, narrow, horrible hole – without sight, without hearing] (95).

In the poem which Ailean premieres at the "big dinner" which the three characters share and which forms the centre of the novel, he addresses the death of their ancestors and neighbours and the loneliness they are facing, also due to being childless: "na fiùrain bha bòidheach / tùrail is dòigheil / chaochail iad uile / 's tha sinne leinn fhìn" [the youths who were handsome / sharp-minded and decent / all of them died / and we are alone] (67). The novel works extensively with the idea of the shrinking human life in the area, as most people are only present in the memories of the three characters and in the material traces in the landscape. Although the only departures from the area mentioned in *Deireadh an Fhoghair* are voluntary and motivated by individual desires and ambitions, some of these descriptions echo the tropes of Gaelic poetry of the Clearances, such as the idea of silence descending on the landscape, the permanence of places and the transient human presence, awareness of how quickly nature reclaims previously cultivated places – "a' faicinn nam ballachan ud a' dol fo thalamh uaine" [seeing those walls going under the green ground] (57, 58) – and the idea of nature thriving in spite of human tragedy and absence, or indeed because of it.¹⁴ These observations

from old slabs from the shore is praised, the stonemason himself merges with the material of his craft, "Coinneach Mòr [...] cho cruaidh ri creag, chanadh tu gur ann às aodann na creige a chaidh a sgealbadh." [Big Coinneach (...) as hard as rock, you'd say he was split off from the face of a rock] (73), and the boundaries between natural and man-made environment blur.

¹⁴ The tropes of Clearance poetry are discussed extensively by Sorley MacLean in the essay "The Poetry of the Clearances," in *Ris a' Bhruthaich: The Criticism and Prose Writings of Sorley MacLean*, ed. William Gillies (Stornoway: Acair, 1997). I develop some of the ideas

made by the characters themselves are interspersed throughout the novel: “bhiodh a’ loch ud mar a bha i riamh, an gleann seo gun atharrachadh” [that loch would be as it ever was, and this glen without change] (75); and “ginealach a’ tighinn, ginealach a’ falbh, ’s an talamh a’ fantainn” [a generation comes, a generation departs, and the earth remains] (79).

In *Deireadh an Fhoghair*, Caimbeul reconstructs a world in which the characters’ attachment to their environment is close, largely unproblematic, and nourishing, but with the strong sense that that world and type of feeling is disappearing and will no longer be attainable. By presenting the characters as the last representatives of their lifestyle, the novel also acknowledges that their way of relating to the place is an irretrievable one – and still haunts the readers with a fantasy of it by recording it with such detail and conviction.

Naming and Remembering

An important way in which the characters relate to their surroundings and carve places out of space is naming. According to Tilley,

place names are of such vital significance because they act so as to transform the sheerly physical and geographical into something that is historically and socially experienced. The bestowing of names creates shared existential space out of a blank environment. [...] By the process of naming places and things they become captured in social discourses and act as mnemonics for the historical actions of individuals and groups. [...] Human activities become inscribed within a landscape such that every cliff, large tree, stream, swampy area becomes a familiar place. Daily passages through the landscape become biographic encounters for individuals, recalling traces of past activities and previous events and the reading of signs – a split log here, a marker stone there.¹⁵

The following passage is a telling – and humorous – illustration of the general tendencies outlined by Tilley, and Caimbeul shows how names retain the history of places and the human agency involved in their shaping, but also how names speak of claiming a place and investing it with one’s own meanings:

in “Addressing Devastation in the Gaelic Literature of the Clearances,” *The Bottle Imp* 31 (March 2023), <https://www.thebottleimp.org.uk/2023/03/addressing-devastation-in-gaelic-literature-of-the-clearances/>.

¹⁵ Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape* 26.

Chanadh na seann daoine Ard-nan-Claisean ris, ach an deidh saothrachadh agus strì cha robh lorg air na claisean sin an-diugh. Bha 'n talamh còmhnard, torach, agus chunnaic Coinneach Mòr agus Coinneach Meadhonach gu robh e math 's nach robh mòran nithean a's a' chruinne-cè cho feumail ri spaid. Chanadh 'ad Gil-a'-Chlamhain ris a' ghleann 'an robh Nellie agus a' Sgudalair. Bha cearcan-fraoich agus smeòraich agus topagan agus feadagan agus druidean-dubha agus faoileagan a's a' ghleann; bha cuileagan is meanbh-chuileagan, seilcheagan agus damhain-allaidh agus greumairean agus tarbhain'athrach a's a' ghleann; bha tobht àiridh Ailein Ruairidh ann, agus dà thobair, agus boglaichean. Uair is uair chunnaic e 'n iolair a' seòladh seachad, 's bhiodh an corra-ghrithreach glè thrìc a' mèireachadh ann. Ach chan fhac e riamh an clamhan. Thrèig an clamhan 'ad. Thriall e. (4)

The old people called it the Furrowed Mound, but after labour and toil there was no trace of the furrows today. The land was level, fertile, and Big Coinneach and Middle Coinneach saw that it was good, and that not many things in the world were as useful as a spade. The glen where Nellie and Dogsbody lived was called the Buzzard's Gully. There were red grouse and thrushes and skylarks and plovers and starlings and seagulls in the glen; there were flies and midges, snails and spiders and clegs and dragonflies in the glen; there was the ruin of Ailean Ruairidh's shieling, and two wells, and bogs. Time and again he saw the eagle flying by, and the heron was very often pondering there. But he never saw the buzzard. The buzzard deserted them. It departed.

In the original and so far only edition of the novel, a map of the made-up area is included at the beginning, to facilitate the reader's orientation, but also to increase the impression of veracity of the fictional world which is however strongly modelled on places recognisable to those who know the likes of them. A detailed introduction to the place and an overview of paths and directions at the beginning of Chapter 4 serves as a commentary on the map: "Seall, sin an Tom Geur an taobh-sa... seas thusa 'na mhullach latha glan soilleir, agus tha siorruidheachd de mhòinteach mhòr bhriste... lochan agus uillt agus aibhnichean, fèithichean agus raoin... 's chan eil àite gun ainm." [Look, there's the Sharp Mound on this side... stand yourself on its top on a bright clear day, and there's an eternity of big broken moor... lochs and streams and rivers, bog hollows and fields... and there's no place without a name.] (37).

This density of place names influences the experience of reading the novel. In Alan Gillis's view, place names are "portals of contentless, connotational energy

[...] capable of evoking ghosted communal emotions and associations” and can “create an aesthetic texture [...] which enables self-assertion through searching expression and rooted engagement with ourselves and our place, reality and dream, desire and loss, the known and the unknown.”¹⁶ Writing on Scottish and Irish poetry, Gillis also makes a valid point for Caimbeul’s “novel of place” when he notes that in literature, regional places can “create an effect of verisimilitude, rooting a poem in the actual and making it concrete” and become “a means of asserting the cultural and artistic validity of erstwhile marginalised places and traditions.”¹⁷ This double function is made even more complex by Caimbeul’s decision to work with fictional places but based on recognizable existing models.¹⁸

The density of placenames, pointing to the intimate engagement with and detailed knowledge of the area, is emphasised throughout the novel and presented with pride and amazement: “Seas thusa ’na mhullach air latha geal samhraidh, agus chì thu sìorruidheachd de mhòinteach mun cuairt ort – lochan agus cruic agus glinn, uillt agus lòin – ’s chan eil aonan dhiubh gun ainm. Chan eil aonan. ’S nach eil sin-fhèin iongantach.” [Stand upon the summit on a bright summer day, and you will see an eternity of moorland around you – lochs and hills and glens, burns and ponds – and not one of them is without a name. Not one. And isn’t that just wonderful.] (106) The pride is also reflected in the encounter with the “learned man,” a geologist whose visit to the area is fondly remembered and whose return would have been welcome, especially by Coinneach, not only for the possibility of conversation and interaction with an outsider, and for supplementing local knowledge with external expertise, but also to pass on the information, which is otherwise going to die with the three characters (64).

While the novel focuses in detail on the small area in which the characters choose to live, there is an awareness of the broader context of the island, the country, the world, and even the universe.¹⁹ While the townships and farmsteads

¹⁶ Alan Gillis, “Names for Nameless Things: The Poetics of Place Names,” in *Modern Irish and Scottish Poetry*, ed. Peter Mackay, Edna Longley, and Fran Brearton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 219.

¹⁷ Gillis, “Names for Nameless Things: The Poetics of Place Names” 204.

¹⁸ As most of the Gaelic placenames in the novel are descriptive names, rich in associations, and their meaning would be picked up by fluent users of the language, these have been translated. Those placenames that indicate Norse origin (in this sense, the fictional landscape of *Deireadh an Fhoghair* reflects the complex linguistic layering of Lewis), and thus do not reveal a lexical meaning easily accessible to users of Gaelic, are left untranslated.

¹⁹ The novel includes references to other continents, including Africa and North America, specifically Canada, as places to which some of the characters’ relatives or predecessors

are all named, the main town, into which the characters sometimes venture, is not, and neither is the big city where Nellie and Ailean meet while she works as a maid and he as a gardener.²⁰ The town on the island is mentioned as the location of occasional shopping trips for the few provisions which are not grown or made by the characters. These bring all kinds of excitement, but several incidents from the past connected with the town carry a sense of disorientation and alienation, such as Coinneach's childhood memory of visiting the town for the cattle fair, where he gets lost and frightened, and that is also where he sees off his sister who leaves on a ship, never to return. In the town, even the sea looks wrong and seagulls unhealthy.

The city is also described as a place of constraint and alien lifestyle and values. While there, Nellie is glad to escape to the hills beyond with Ailean, and when she moves to the island to marry him, the change is never regretted: "Ann an ùine glè aithghearr cha robh cuimhne air a' bhaile mhòr. Bha i taingeil cùl a chuir ris." [In a very short time she had no memory of the big city. She was thankful to turn her back on it.] (34) However, there are examples of people, including two of Coinneach's siblings, who decide to leave the area, as they find the life-prospects there unsatisfactory, and do not reconsider. These alternatives, the attitudes to places beyond the small area, and the general sense of self-reliance and satisfaction make the spatially small universe of the characters' lives come across as a choice, not as an inevitability forced on them by material conditions and the lack of other opportunity.

The Moor and the Sea

In *Deireadh an Fhoghair*, Caimbeul engages extensively with two kinds of space that have been formative in Gaelic literature and in the daily lived experience of many Gaelic users for generations: the moor and the sea. The two entities resist precise delineation and human control, inspire both fear and awe, and are at the same time life-threatening and life-supporting, offering sustenance and danger alike. In Gaelic,

in the area emigrated, pointing to the existence of extensive Gaelic diasporas overseas. These real and recent links are contrasted with fantastic notions and tales about faraway places over the ocean shared with the characters in childhood by older relatives (87).

²⁰ If one assumes the island is modelled on Lewis, then it would be Stornoway, and if the broader context follows Scottish realities, the city would most likely be Glasgow or Edinburgh, possibly Inverness, where Gaelic-speaking people from the Islands often worked in domestic service.

both nouns are grammatically feminine,²¹ and their literary depictions sometimes work with this gendered imagery of fertility, attraction, and sense of threat.²²

The three characters are literally and metaphorically the “last of their race” in the area, and in stressing their loneliness upon the moor, Caimbeul is, whether intentionally or subconsciously, dipping into a vision created by James Macpherson’s Ossianic publications in the 1760s and their far-reaching influence across literature and the arts. In these, the heath and the moor are envisaged as haunted, barren spaces, inhabited by solitary characters, and pervaded by a sense of loss and the impossibility to pass on even the memory of bygone people and events. The associations with isolation, exposure, and ultimately death, with hints of supernatural possibilities, characterise the heath and the moor as a literary location in numerous works after Macpherson.

Caimbeul brings out the sense of danger in the moor, which is described as a sentient agent with a will of its own: “Ged a bha a’ mhòinteach aognaidh anns a’ gheamhradh, bha i ’ga tharraing-san gu mòr. Bha i mar gum b’ ann sìnte marbh, ach thuigeadh esan, dh’fhairicheadh agus dh’aithnicheadh e, nach robh i mar sin idir. Bha i ag èisdeachd, a’ feitheamh. Dh’fheumadh duine faiceal ’na còir.” [Although the moor was frightful in winter, it had a strong pull on him. It seemed as if it were lying prostrate and dead, but he understood, he felt and he acknowledged, that it was not the case at all. It was listening, waiting. A man had to be careful around it.] (39)

The very real dangers of the moor are exemplified in the memory of an incident when Coinneach as a young boy went looking for lost sheep:

Fhuair e iad aig ceann-an-Iar loch Bhrèitheabhat ann am fasgadh nam bruthaichean dubha. Dà mhult agus caora, na h-aodainn aca air bòcadh leis

²¹ However, in Caimbeul’s dialect, and in Lewis dialects in general, “muir” (sea) is actually masculine, although the feminine genitive – “na mara” – survives. I am grateful to Michel Byrne for alerting me to this limitation of the argument proposed.

²² In his review of the novel, Norman M. MacDonald (Tormod Calum Dòmhnallach) singles out these two locations of the novel when introducing the characters, and also picks up on the gendering of the moor: “[...] one of whom stays by the sea and a couple who live out in a glen on the moor; that moorland which used to be the feminine heartland of Gaeldom and is now almost unknown.” Norman M. MacDonald, “Gaelic Fiction,” *Books in Scotland* 5 (1979): 30. In *Deireadh an Fhoghair*, women also have more direct contact with the moor, for instance in gathering peat, and Nellie is described as walking on the moor, whereas the sea emerges as a wholly masculine realm – only men take part in the fishing trip, and women wait for them to process the catch, or compose laments for drowned lovers.

an fhuachd. Thug e dhaibh aran agus sgealban bhuntàta, an dèireach 'na làmhan aig neimh na gaoithe, a shùilean 's a shròin a' sìleadh. Cha robh fada gus an dàinig a' feasgar a-mach: chruinnich na sgòthan 'san àirde Tuath, las an dealanaich, agus rinn i fras chlach-mheallain a chuir dearg uamhas air. Chrùb e ri seann thobhta àiridh, agus chrùb na caoraich còmhla ris. Bha feagal orra. A' loch cho uamhalt; an t-uisge ri frasadh 's a' stealladh mu bruaichean, agus suaichean a' briseadh oirre mar gu'm biodh sluagh dhiabhuill ag iarraidh suas gu h-uachdair. Na h-uillt air èiridh 's a' sgaoilleadh gu brais feadh raoin is ghlinn. A' mhòinteach gu lèir air dùsgadh ann an corruich. Thug e chasan leis cho luath 's a thog i balgat. Ruith e le bheatha, mar gum biodh na deamhnan ud teann air a shàil, 's bha a' mhòinteach a' fanaid air fad na slighe dhachaidh. Chan fhac e na caoraich tuilleadh. (40)

He found them at the west end of loch Brèitheabhat in the shelter of the dark banks. Two wethers and a sheep, their faces swelled with cold. He gave them bread and potato skins, his hands tingled at the bitterness of the wind, his eyes and nose were running. It did not take long for the evening to fall: the clouds gathered high in the north, the lightning flashed, and there was a shower of hailstones which brought true horror upon him. He crouched by the ruin of the old shelling, and the sheep crouched with him. They were afraid. The loch was so sinister, the water spraying and splashing about its banks, and the swell breaking on it as if a host of demons were trying to get to the surface. The streams rising and rapidly flooding over fields and glens. The moor as a whole awoken in ire. He made a run for it as soon as the heavy rain started. He ran for his life, as if those demons were close at his heels, and the moor was mocking him all the way home. He never saw the sheep again.

However, Caimbeul also portrays the joy and beauty of the moor, its richness and diversity, based not on the Macpherson-derived ideas of emptiness and death, but on daily experience and detailed observation: "A' mhòinteach 'na h-uile ghlòir beò le dathan, mìle dath a-meas a-chèile, 's an adhar mòr os an cionn. 'S an dràs 's a rithist bhiodh faoileag a' dèanamh gu cladach, learg gu loch, cearc-fhraoich gu gleann – srann an t-seillein a's a' luachair, srann aig meanbh-chuileag an toll do chluais." [The moor in all its glory alive with colours, a thousand colours next to one another, and above it the vast sky. Every now and then a seagull would be flying to the shore, a diver to the loch, and the moorhen to the glen – the hum of a bee in the rushes, the buzz of a midge in your earhole.] (19) Another passage (64) points out that the moor provides shelter to numerous animal and bird species and zooms in to reveal the exuberance of life and colour in an environment

deemed empty and monotonous by an outsider's eye. The novel also recalls the gathering of peats for fuel, and thus the moor becomes a source of life-sustaining warmth to the characters.

The sea, even vaster and more unknowable, assumes similarly contrasting characteristics. The people of the novel are not primarily fishermen. There is an extended description of a memorable fishing trip undertaken by the men of the community during the characters' childhood,²³ and the sea is the subject of a celebratory poem incorporated in the novel in Chapter 6, but interactions with the sea are not so omnipresent and vital as they would have been for many coastal communities in Gaelic-speaking areas depending primarily on fishing. In *Deireadh an Fhoghair*, fishing, and especially rock fishing, is even described as a pastime undertaken for pleasure.

Still, the sea and the shore play a significant part in the novel. The sea is portrayed as a vital means of connecting the characters and the island to the broader world from the very beginning, as its waves brought the sturdy hoghead, an itinerant, international object of unknown provenance, admired and praised for generations in Coinneach's family. The shore, the liminal zone between water and land, is depicted as a generous place where found treasures can be discovered in the flotsam, including driftwood, a precious resource in the mostly treeless island, and which also offers additional means of sustenance:

Tha 'n cladach fialaidh, ars esan [...] Thigeadh a' saidhean 's a' smalag a-steach chun na creige cuideachd. Dhèanadh 'ad sabhs leotha sin, agus ceann-propaig le na truisg. Ach cha b' e iasg a mhàin a bhiodh iad a' faighinn: bha maorach gu leòir – faochagan is bàirnich – air na cladaichean; crùbagan is portain, agus feamainn. Bha feamainn ann a dh'itheadh iad: mircein, duilisg, agus stamhan; bha feamainn ann a bhruicheadh 'ad dhan a' chrodh, 's bha feamainn ann a sgaoileadh 'ad air a' chlàr bhuntàta. (29)

The shore is generous, said he [...] The podleys would come to the rocks too. They would make a sauce with those, and crappit heid with the cod. But it wouldn't be only fish they were getting: there was plenty of shellfish – periwinkles and barnacles – on the shores; brown crabs and green crabs, and seaweed. There was seaweed that they'd eat: winged kelp, sea lettuce flakes, and oarweed, there was seaweed they'd boil for the cattle, and there was seaweed they'd spread over the potato patch.

²³ With the extended description of a boat journey and the interaction between the characters, it is tempting to theorize whether Caimbeul was providing a much more local and low-key alternative to "Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill" by Alexander MacDonald (Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair).

The shore here is indeed generous and fertile, and associated with joy and excitement which come from discovering valuable items and means of sustenance brought by the sea. However, the sea is also acknowledged in its terrible power. The older characters repeatedly mention that the sea requires to be visited: “dh’iarr a’ mhuir a bhith ‘ga tadhal” [the sea demanded to be resorted to] (28). Just like the moor, it is presented as an entity with its own will, almost a pagan deity which demands attention and obedience in exchange for its favours and gifts. The deadliness of the sea, and the frequency of sea deaths in coastal and island communities, is reflected in the death of MacBride, a character who gets lost at sea, and a lament composed by his lover is featured in the novel.

Animals

The lives of the characters are shaped not only by the kinds of environment they inhabit but also, and very intimately, by interactions with non-human beings. In the opening of the novel, humans are placed equally among them: “Shaoil leis nach robh beò ach e-fhèin. Bha gach uile chreutair a ghluaiseas a rèir a ghnè, gach steàrnag is leòbag, gach cuileag is crosgag, a rèir an gnè, marbh leis a’ chadal.” [It occurred to him that he was the only one alive. Every creature which moves according to its kind, every tern and flounder, every fly and starfish, were dead asleep.] (2) This closeness of the human and non-human world is also reflected in the characters’ living with farm animals. In Chapter 1, Coinneach’s household is introduced as follows:

‘Na aonar? Cha robh sin buileach ceart. Bha dà mhart aige, cù molach ruadh (Tèrlach), caoraich is cearcan. Agus bhiodh e seanchas riutha a chula latha, ‘s bhiodh iadsan a’ nochdadh urram dha, ag èisdeachd gu furachail ris gach focal. Cha robh sin idir ‘na aobhar iongantais. Bha bothag aig na cearcan cho seasgair ‘s a chunnaic cearc a-riamh; bha pàirc aig na caoraich nach spiulladh ‘ad gu bràth (gun iomradh air mòinteach agus cladach làn feamainn); bha ‘n dà mhart – man dà bhànrig’nn – ann am bàthach ùr, bàthach àrd, bàthach a bha air a bhith ‘na toileachas-inntinn dha Phàro ri linn na gort. Agus bha Teàrlach maille ris a ghnàth – a deagh chompanach air slighean cugallach an t-saoghail, a charaid ‘sa’ chùirt ‘s a chùl-taice. Cha shleamhnaicheadh a cheum, ‘s cha bhiodh feagal no fiamh ris, fhad ‘s a bhiodh Teàrlach le shròin ‘s le spògan còmhlà ris. (2-3)

Alone? That was not quite correct. He had two cows, a hairy ginger dog (Charlie), sheep, and hens. And he would talk to them every day, and they would show him

respect and listen attentively to every word. And that was not at all surprising. The henhouse was so warm and dry that no hen ever saw a snigger one; the sheep had an enclosure they could not eat down till Judgement Day (not to mention the moor and the shore with plenty of seaweed), and the two cows – like two queens – were in a new, high barn, a barn that would have cheered up the Pharaoh in the time of the famine. And Charlie was usually with him – a good companion on the world’s precarious paths, his friend in court of law and pillar of support. His foot would not slide, and he need neither fear nor fret, as long as Charlie was by his side with his muzzle and his paws.

The characters and their animal companions eat and excrete together, which is portrayed by Caimbeul as natural, sympathetic companionship and symbiosis, not as the squalor of “living on the level of animals.” The characters also talk to farm animals. Coinneach holds extended addresses to his dog and cows, and Ailean talks to his sheep who faithfully follow him around: “Cha robh aig a’ Sgudalair ach dà chaora agus aon mult (còig-bhliadhnach), agus bha iad sin daonnan an cois a’ Sgudalair, ag coimhead rise-san airson furtachd agus neart.” [Dogsbody only had two sheep and one wether (a five-year-old one), and they were always at his heels, looking up to him for comfort and strength.] (5) The characters’ daily rhythm is organised around administering to the animals’ needs, from cleaning the barn in the morning and to shutting up the henhouse in the evening. Cows and sheep, not only dogs, are taken for extended visits with neighbours.

Through the characters’ reminiscences, the novel features several formative incidents involving animals, such as when Coinneach’s beloved pet cat dies after getting accidentally impaled on a graip (fork) when children chase each other around: “chunnaic e ’n gràp ann an com a’ Phluicein; chunnaic e ’m Pluicean a’ sineadh a chinn; sròin a’ Phluicean is na bleideagan a’ laighe oirre. Cha robh spàrn no spòrs as dèidh siud. [...] thiodhlaic esan am Pluicean aig bàrr a’ chladaich air oidhche bhrèagha, rionnagach.” [he saw the graip going through Roundcheek’s chest; he saw Roundcheek stretching out his head; the snowflakes lying on Roundcheek’s nose. There was no scuffling and joking after that. (...) He buried Roundcheek himself on the top of the shore on a lovely starry night.] (13) There is also affection lavished on old animals that are no longer attractive or practically useful for the characters, such as Coinneach’s old tomcat, who is afforded a carefree and safe retirement. Even farm animals, not only cats and dogs, are treated with tenderness, given names, and their virtues are remembered and celebrated in a manner similar to those of deceased ancestors, and the characters

hold heated debates about the genealogy of sheep, as well as that of their predecessors (61).²⁴

The novel also features frequent instances of projecting onto animals. The characters imagine how they feel about each other and how they interact, such as in case of enmity between Charlie the dog and the old tomcat (40-41). In a flashback, Coinneach and Ailean, as boys, discuss the life and thoughts of fish in a loch: “Tha mise smaoineachadh gu bheil feadhainn aosd a’s a’ loch – seanairean is seamhairean – ‘s bi ‘ad ag innse dhan fheadhainn eile gu bheil dubhan a’s a’ bhoiteig. Ach cha bhi ‘ad a’ cuimhneachadh.” [I think there are some old ones in the loch – grandfathers and grandmothers – and they tell the others that there’s a hook in the worm. But they don’t remember it.] (20) Similarly, Coinneach imagines the reasons the buzzard might have for abandoning the Gully named after it: “Bha amharus aige ma-tha gun dh’fhàs an clamhan diùmach agus sgìth, ‘s gun duirt e ris fhèin: Tigh na galla, tha mi falbh, tha mi siubhal. Agus gun d’ rinn e dìreach sin, a’ maoidhinn air a chomh-chreutair gun a dhol a ghaoth a’ ghlinn ud far nach robh dad ach doilgheas agus acras agus bròn.” [He therefore suspected that the buzzard grew discontented and tired, and said to itself: To hell with it, I’m leaving, I’m going. And that it did exactly that, and warned its kin not to go near that glen where there was nothing but trouble, hunger, and grief.] (5)

Although farm and domestic animals are at the centre of attention, there is also much interaction with and attention paid to those non-human creatures which cannot be used by the characters in any way, including a memorable extended passage on Coinneach’s fascination with a spider and its web, or the meditation about the alleged immorality of the cabbage butterfly (39). There is no living thing around too small to be uninteresting to the characters, and the discerning and detailed engagement with them is reflected in the detailed terminology available in the language, be it sheep and fish in their different life stages, or insects; and Caimbeul uses every opportunity to display this lexical richness.

²⁴ References to sheep in Gaelic writing from the eighteenth-century onwards carry difficult associations of the Clearances motivated by obtaining more land for sheep grazing. Sheep, despite being generally perceived as harmless and meek, thus assume more sinister connotations, and have been portrayed as stand-in enemies of Gaelic users, such as in the song “Dùthaich MhicAoidh” (“Mo Mhallachd aig na Caoraich Mhòr,” My Curse at the Big Sheep). In the poem “Anns a’ Bhalbh Mhadainn” (Sheep), Derick Thomson connects a childhood incident of looking for lost sheep in a snowstorm and questions of the survival of Gaelic language and culture. *Creachadh na Clàrsaich / Plundering the Harp* (Edinburgh: MacDonald, 1983).

Sustenance and Fertility

Despite the affection and intimate engagement, animals are also an important means of sustenance and are used as such by the characters. This is true for fish but especially for farm animals, and issues of violence and power to decide about the life and death of non-human creatures appear frequently throughout *Deireadh an Fhoghair*. Coinneach and Ailean repeatedly discuss their plans for killing of some of their sheep and try to keep these intentions secret from Nellie, who is too emotionally attached to them: “Dè ‘n fheadhainn a tha thu-fhèin a’ marbhadh?” “Tha mi toirt bliadhna eile dha Caora Bheag na tràghad...” [“Which of them are you going to kill?” “I am giving another year to the Little Sheep of the Shore...”] (63).²⁵ However, nothing ever comes of killing the sheep, chiefly due to Ailean’s own scruples, and all tasks that involve killing or mutilating animals are left to Coinneach: “Cha robh e comasach dhan a’ Sgudalair cron a dhèanamh air creutair cruthaichte. Dh’fhàg sin Coinneach ‘na mhàl a’ bàthadh phiseagan, a’ tachdadh chearcan, agus a’ spoth nan uan ‘s gan comharrachadh.” [Dogsbody was incapable of harming a living creature. So that left Coinneach busy drowning kittens, strangling chickens, and gelding and marking lambs.] (63)

In relation to animals, the novel thus involves both intimate closeness and readiness to use and kill, and these are not mutually exclusive. Compassion towards non-human creatures and doubts about human entitlement to dispose of their lives also come across in a childhood conversation between Ailean and Coinneach. Explaining his distaste for putting worms on hooks, he points out to Coinneach: “An còrdadh e riut, nan tigeadh biasd mhòr de bheathach le biasd mhòr de dhubhan... ‘s gun cuireadh e steach troimh mhullach do chinn e, sìos troimh do mhionach ‘s a-mach air do thòin?” [Would you like it if a big beastly creature came with a big beastly hook... and if it put the hook through the top of your head down through your body and out of your bum?] (63) Coinneach represents a more pragmatic approach: “cha do dh’fhairich esan mòr-thruas ri boiteag ‘na bheatha, agus a thaobh nan cearcan ‘s nan caorach – woill, b’ e gnè an

²⁵ A more chilling incident involving sheep is recalled in the novel. As part of the annual gathering and sheep shearing, ram fights would be organised at the fang for amusement: “Ach chaidh casg a chuir air a’ ghnòthuich seo a riamh bho chaidh caora le Coinneach Mòr a pronnadh gu bàs. Choisich i, brònag, air a deagh shocair eatorra, ‘s mas d’fhuair duine bh’ ann air caruchadh, bha an fhuil dhearg ri coinnlean ‘s a mionach slaodadh rithe. Cha do rinn i a’ fuaime bu lugha.” [But they stopped this business forever from the day when one of Big Coinneach’s sheep got mauled to death. She stepped between them, the poor thing, very calmly, and before anybody had time to move, she had red blood around her nostrils, and she was trailing her guts. And she never made the slightest sound.] (78)

duine a bhi muirt 's a marbhadh 's a' lìonadh a bhroinn gu ìre stracadh. Na boiteagan a b' fheàrr dheth aig a' cheann mu dheireadh co-dhiùbh." [He never felt much pity towards worms in his life, and when it came to chicken and sheep – well, it was in human nature to murder and kill and to fill the stomach to the brim. Ultimately it was the worms who benefitted anyway.] (63) The characters also realise that some of their needs – or pleasures – require them to kill animals they have raised and formed attachments to. The big dinner which allows them to reconnect, celebrate life, and indulge in sensory pleasures despite approaching winter and death, is based around the decision to kill two chickens, so that these can be roasted and savoured. Most of the animal-based food and products indeed come from creatures the characters have raised and formed an attachment to, so there is no way of avoiding knowledge of their provenance, but it is accepted laconically and interspersed with humour and genuine compassion.

In contrast with the frequent depiction of the Outer Hebrides as barren places that only provide meagre livelihood, *Deireadh an Fhoghair* repeatedly accentuates what the characters perceive as abundance, especially when it comes to food:

Cha robh 'n t-acras air duin aca. Chaidh dùsgadh roinn de'n talamh airson buntàt agus snèapan, càl is curranan; bha baraillean a' brùchdadh le feòil shailt bliadhna 'n deidh bliadhna; agus bha 'n fhairge loma-làn de gach seòrsa iasg – rionnaich, saidheanan, cudaigean... gu h-àraid cudaigean... sabhs agus cudaigean agus buntàta... am buntàta co-dhiùbh, feòil shailt agus brochan corc... (5)

Nobody was hungry. Part of the land was tilled for potatoes and turnips, kail and carrots; year after year barrels were bursting with salted meat; and the ocean was full to the brim with fish of every kind – mackerel, saithe, cuddy... especially cuddy... sauce, cuddy, and potatoes... potatoes anyway, salted meat and oat porridge...

While the choice is limited and the food simple, the characters take great pleasure in eating and sharing food, as exemplified during the big dinner or in the character of Donald of the Shore and his characteristic delight in seafood: "bha mo sheanair-sa dèidheil air maorach: faochagan, feusgain, bàirnich... agus dèidheil air crùbagan... agus sìolagan. Cha robh e togail a chinn às a' chladach." [my grandfather was keen on shellfish: periwinkles, mussels, limpets... and keen on crabs... and sand lance. He never raised his head from the shore.] (8)²⁶

²⁶ The delight in shellfish is notable also in relation to the traditional association of eating shellfish with poverty and desperation: "a bhith beò air maorach a' chladaich" [to survive on shellfish from the shore].

This natural plenty is curiously mirrored in human infertility. The more extensive families and communities of the previous generations are conspicuously present in memories, but when the novel takes place, the human community has shrunk to three people of advanced age, all of whom are without children. Coinneach is unmarried, and the marriage between Ailean and Nellie, though apparently affectionate, is childless. Nonetheless, the novel is full of boyhood memories of the two men, so it actually features a number of childhood impressions and experiences, and there are numerous references to desire and sexual activity, such as the premarital intercourse in a haystack that led to Ailean's conception, or to the excitement a brief encounter with a young shop assistant inspired in the two old friends on one of their rare visits to the nearest town. The characters are clearly fond of life and its pleasures, and loving towards each other, and yet it is evident that the life of the place is ending with them, and they realise there will be nobody left to bury the one who dies last.

Cycles and Renewals

Deireadh an Fhoghair follows the course of one day and night in the lives of the characters, starting with Coinneach on the shore in the morning and ending with him coming back from the big dinner at dawn and closing the door. The novel comes full circle and closes the cycle of the day and of the seasons, which leads to questions about what is going to follow. MacAulay points out that Caimbeul "is well aware of the constant recycling of the same ready-made thoughts, of the same illustrative anecdotes, of the same obsessions that afflict those trapped in a world which for them is incapable of renewal."²⁷ MacDonald, on the other hand, notices the air of celebration in the novel, "of joy in nature, in familiar places and things and animals and in bodily pleasures, mainly to do with eating; in the steady trickle of time from the past into the present and on into eternity."²⁸ On many levels, *Deireadh an Fhoghair* is a novel of death and dead ends. Many of the characters' recollections concern the passing of their ancestors, they discuss their own approaching demise and funeral arrangements, and cultural and linguistic death is strongly implied, as they are childless and without relatives. As Ailean puts it in one of his poems: "chaochail iad uile, tha sinne leinn-fhìn" [they all passed away, and we are alone] (23). At the same time, this novel about death teems with life – the old protagonists show great vitality and delight in the abundance of natural life and the ability to observe it, and the novel shows sweeping linguistic

²⁷ MacAulay, "*Deireadh an Fhoghair*" 140.

²⁸ MacDonald, "Gaelic Fiction" 30.

energy and verve. A convincing argument can be made for *Deireadh an Fhoghair* as both life-affirming and thoroughly bleak in its implications.

In relation to the environmental focus of this essay, it is interesting to dwell on the possibilities of renewal and recycling, mentioned by MacAulay, albeit as impossibilities, which are also implied in the linguistic and cultural practices. Ideas and resources are indeed recycled extensively, and the characters try to make the most of what life brings their way, be it incidents or ideas (or driftwood). Does repetition gradually drain them of value, as recycled materials over time decrease in quality, or is there always variation and difference present? To what extent can the world captured by the novel be renewed and transformed, as when an old story is invigorated with a digression or an added plot twist?

This brings to mind questions about the continuing life of the novel itself and its readership. MacAulay asks, “how would someone who does not know the cultural background intimately respond to the novel,” and notes its challenging aspects, including the experimental narrative features and immersive approach and also the density of language and local references. Is *Deireadh an Fhoghair* a chronicle of a vanishing way of life for those who themselves experienced it and can relate to it, or a museum tour for outsiders offering voyeuristic pleasure?²⁹ At this point, as the novel only exists in Gaelic and in translation into Czech,³⁰ the question is theoretical, but could become pressing should a translation into English or another global language emerge. But even if it remains so, it can just as well serve as a museum for Gaelic users living in the Highlands and Islands, providing a tantalisingly detailed and evocative vista into a vanished lifestyle which can be held onto and looked up to, with uncertain implications for the present and future of the region.

Cresswell writes about the “general condition of creeping placelessness marked by an inability to have authentic relationships to place” and about the widespread inability to become “existential insiders.”³¹ In the multicentred world, pressures that in the past led to inevitable spatial attachments have, for some, decreased, and given way to easy voluntary nomadism, “the lure of the local,” as Lucy Lippard has it, seems to increase.³² A novel which examines and accentuates (but also parodies) strong attachments to places and largely self-reliant rural

²⁹ The notion of the “museum” was suggested in Peter Mackay’s presentation, and he also mentions the voyeuristic dimension of the novel.

³⁰ The complete Czech edition, made directly from Gaelic, was published as *Konec podzimu* (Prague: Argo, 2018).

³¹ Cresswell 42.

³² Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Sense of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997).

existence may exert a strong pull on readers who never experienced similar lifestyles and attachments.

At the same time, *Deireadh an Fhoghair* can be read as a defiant statement on behalf of Highland and Island communities. Hugh MacDiarmid's "Scotland Small?"³³ challenges stereotypical images of smallness and sameness by zooming in on details and uncovering richness and diversity, and Caimbeul makes a similar move in the space of the whole novel, disrupting the idea about life in remote rural areas as uneventful and lacking in stimuli by showing resourcefulness in obtaining sustenance and entertainment, plenty made of seeming scarcity, and a vision of convincingly content characters. Through their eyes, the novel provides a very different view of their natural surroundings – the moors and rocky coasts of the Outer Hebrides, often portrayed as barren and sparse, are presented as an ecosystem teeming with life and diversity. This manner of relating to the environment may provide a productive entry point for readers who will perhaps not appreciate all the references but will find the ways in which the novel celebrates the blurred boundaries between the human and non-human world, relatable, or revealing, and they may also give a new sense of place to those who have ties to the region *Deireadh an Fhoghair* draws on, be they based on ancestry or choice. In this sense, Caimbeul's novel certainly remains generative.

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³³ Hugh MacDiarmid, "Scotland Small?" in Hugh MacDiarmid, *Selected Poetry*, ed. Alan Riach and Michael Grieve (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992) 198.

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