

Alexander MacDonald, better known as *Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair*, belonged to the Clanranald heartland of Moidart. A character larger than life, he was a heroic figure, inspirational and visionary, his heartbeat in tune with the events of his time.

Hailed as the most original and innovative poet of the 18th century, Alasdair successfully integrated ancient bardic tradition, classical themes and Scots literature. His verve, acute powers of observation and wealth of vocabulary brought new life and vitality to Gaelic poetry.

Alasdair was born around 1698 in Dalilea on the shore of Loch Shiel.

His parents were from Benbecula and Morvern, and he had ancestral links with the Clanranalds and Islay MacDonalds. Flora MacDonald was his first cousin.



*Sliochd nan eun bho 'n Chaisteal Thioram
'S bho Eilean Fhìonnain nan gallan
Moch is feasgar togar m'ìolach
Seinn gu bileach, milis, mealach*

Offspring of the birds of Castle Tirrim
And from Islandfinnan of the saplings,
Morning and evening my cry is raised
Singing billed, sweet and honeylike.

Smeòrach Clanraghnail, - The Mavis of Clanranald
Tr Ronald Black

Alasdair's father, Maighstir Alasdair, was the Episcopalian minister of Islandfinnan, a huge parish which extended from Kilchoan to Arisaig. University educated, he was famed for his strength of character as well as his physical strength - he would walk the 50 miles round from Dalilea to Kilchoan every Sunday.



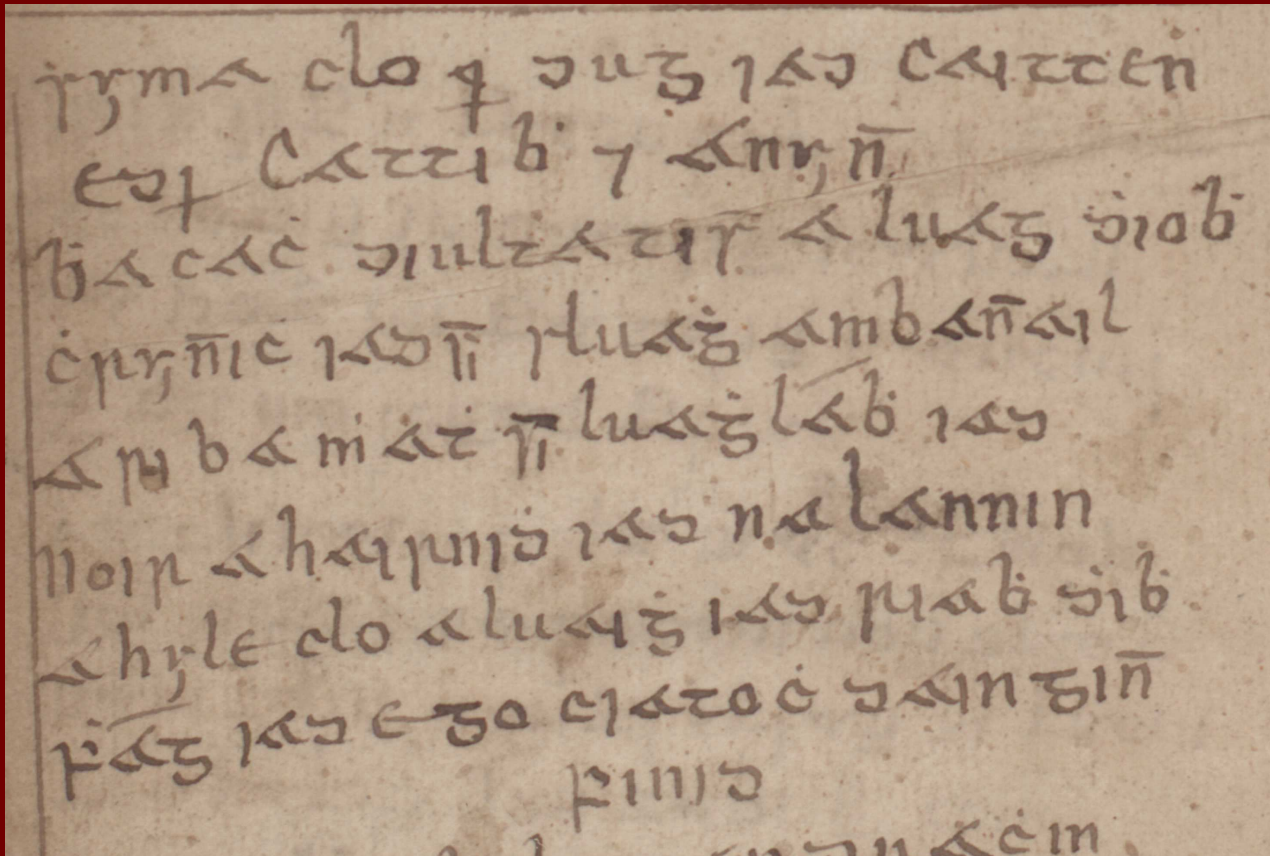
Loch Shiel from Island Finnan

Refusing to convert to Presbyterianism, Maighstir Alasdair lost his stipend, but kept his parishioners who would not entertain the thought of another minister. He is buried on Island Finnan, "*the Green Isle*", on Loch Shiel.



Maighstir Alasdair's tombstone

Alasdair learned the classics as well as the ancient Gaelic script from his father. He was also taught the art of bardic composition by the Mac Mhuirich poets in South Uist.



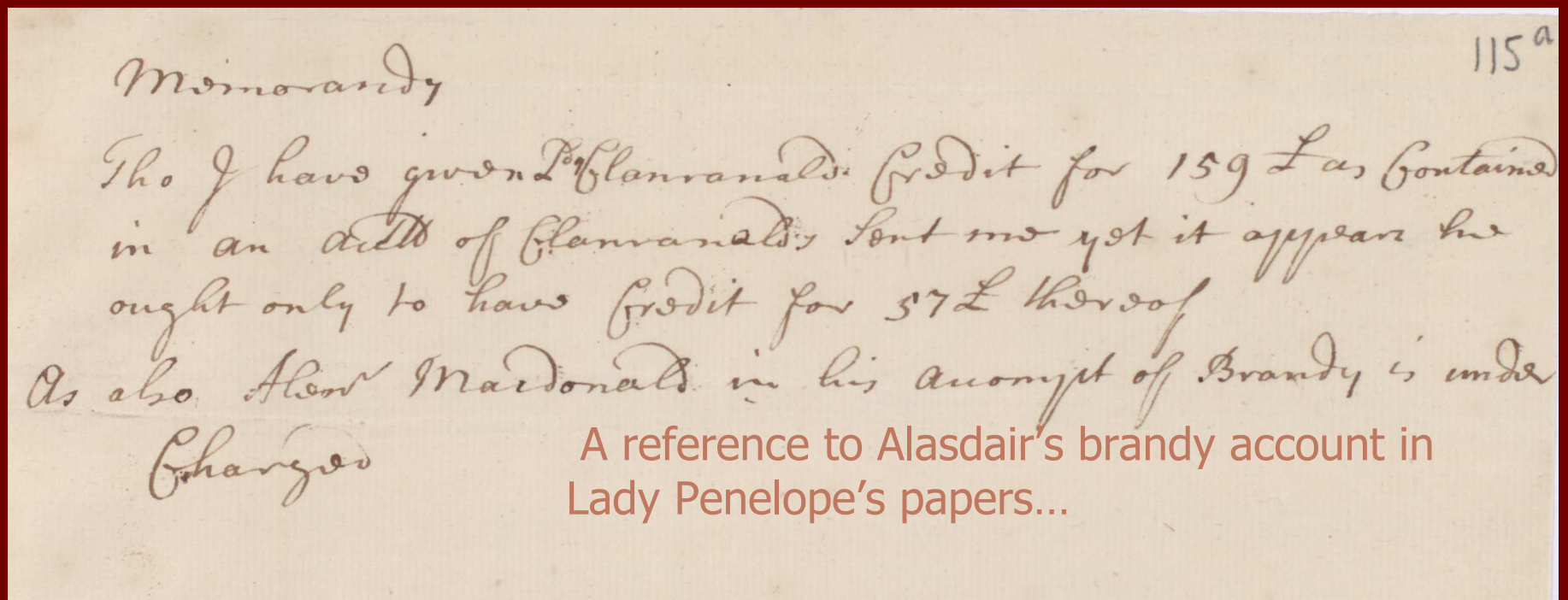
One of Alasdair's poems written in the Hiberno-saxon script

"He is a very smart, acute man, remarkably well-skilled in Erse, for he can both read and write the Irish language in its original character - a piece of knowledge almost quite lost in the Highlands, there being exceedingly few that have any at all that way".

Bishop Robert Forbes, *The Lyon in Mourning*

Alasdair's abilities fitted him for any calling: his father favored the Church whilst his chief wanted him to study Law and become his notary.

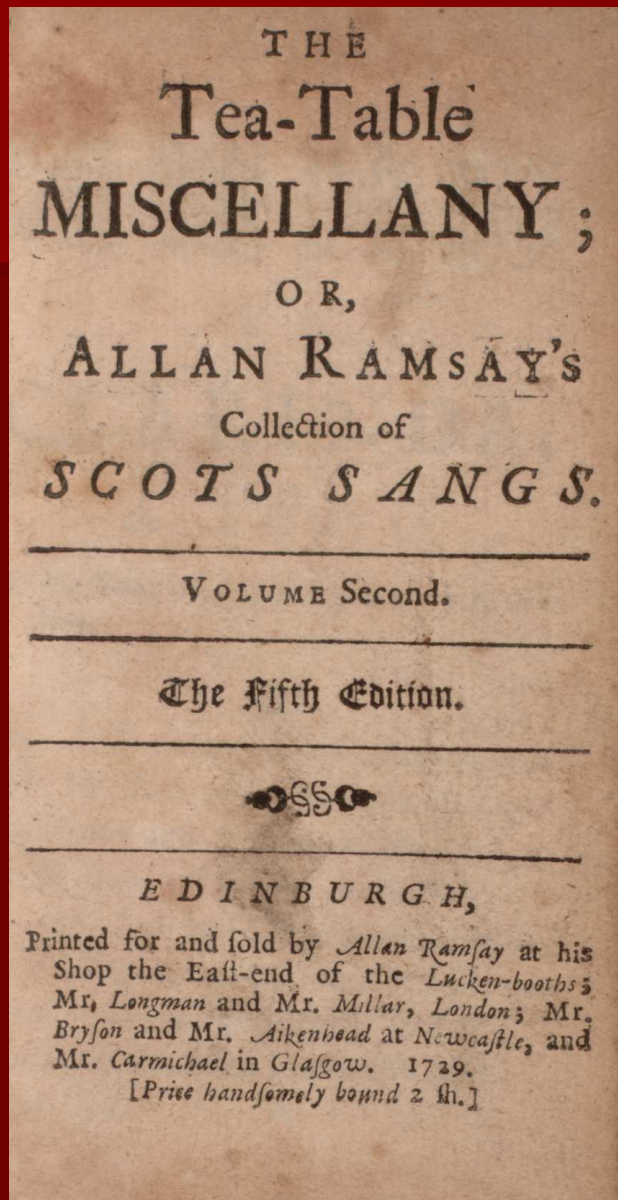
After studying the Classics in Glasgow, Alasdair was then apprenticed to a lawyer's chamber in Edinburgh under the patronage of Lady Clanranald.



In Edinburgh, Alasdair discovered tavern culture,



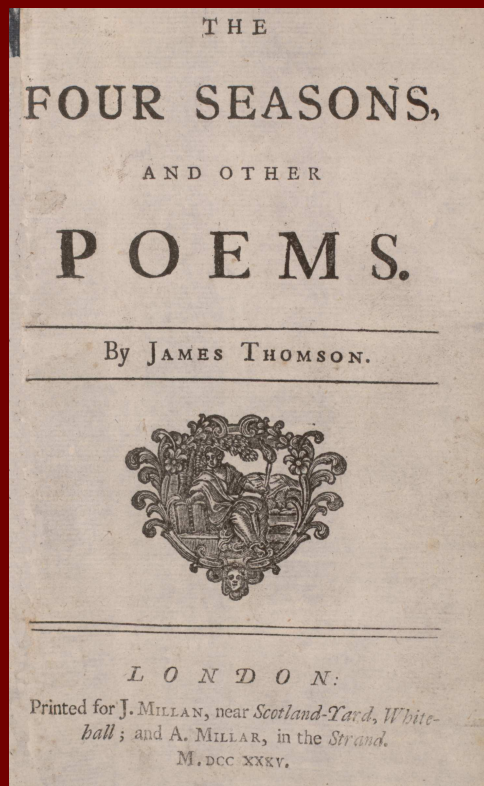
with its emphasis on wit, drinking and music-making.



There, amongst the literati of the budding Scottish Enlightenment, Alasdair met Allan Ramsay, author of a very successful vernacular poetry anthology, *the Tea-table Miscellany*.

Allan Ramsay —*Ailean Bàrd*— was a wigmaker turned playwright, bookseller, editor and founder member of the Jacobite and Nationalist “Easy Club”, “*where men of pairs recited their own verses, sang jovially and drank copiously.*”

Alasdair was also influenced by Ramsay's pastoral play, "*The Gentle Shepherd*", which transposed fashionable Italian pastoral characters from Umbria to the Scottish countryside.



Another major influence was Thomson's "Seasons" poems in the classical style, which were published in London and imported to Edinburgh by Ramsay.

Alasdair decided to follow the muses in his turn and to compose songs in Gaelic that would rival Thomson's and Ramsay's collections.

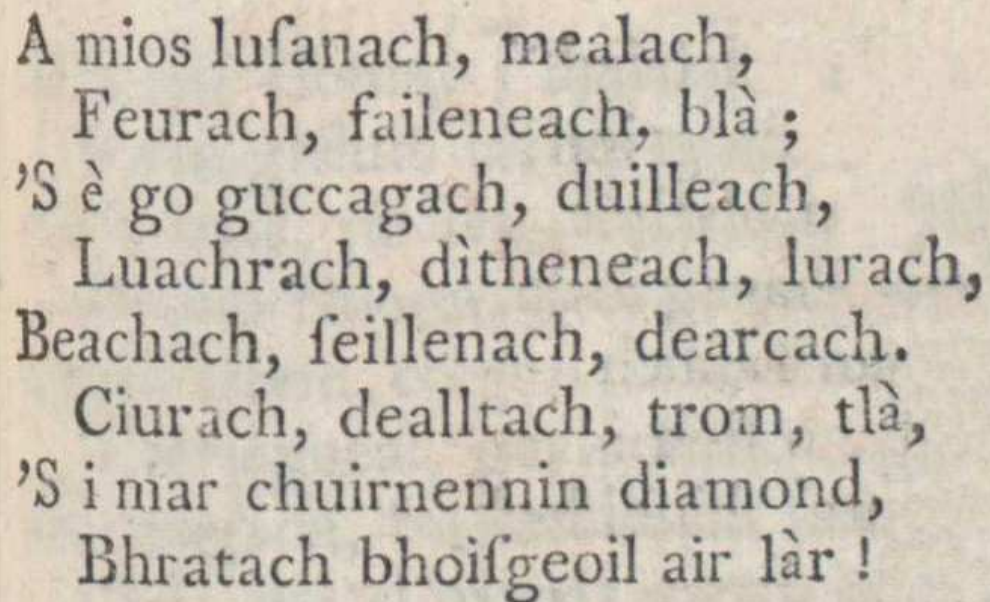
In one of his first poems, Alasdair asks the nine muses to “make his mind pliable like a withy, and spells out his ambition to write poetry that would not be empty of meaning, “*like nuts without kernels*”.

My vigour and range are small enough,
Though ambition's great
to build a wall on so large a base
Lacking chiseled stone
I have no polished words,
Though I tear my will
I am empty of skill
A thing of no substance is art
that's unschooled,
Though the subject were sweet.



Guidhe no Urnaigh an Ughdair don Cheòlraigh,
"Address to the Muses," tr. Derick Thomson

Alasdair soon started to work on his own "*Season*" poems, using bardic alliteration techniques to make words lie neatly like tiles overlapping each other.



A mios lufanach, mealach,
Feurach, faileneach, blà ;
'S è go guccagach, duilleach,
Luachrach, dìtheneach, lurach,
Beachach, feillenach, dearcach.
Ciurach, dealltach, trom, tlà,
'S i mar chuirnennin diamond,
Bhratach bhoifgeoil air làr !

Song of Summer

May, with soft showers and
sunshine,
Meadows, grass-fields I love,
Milky, whey-white and creamy,
Frothing, whisked up in pails
Time for crowdie and milk-curds,
Time for firkins and kits,
Lambs, goatkids and roe-deer.
Bucks — a rich time for flocks.

Oran an -t- Samhraidh,
tr. Derick Thomson

Meanwhile he acted as Clanranald's notary on a number of documents. In 1727, he had a spell as ground officer on the isle of Canna.



Later on that year, he married Jane MacDonald of Dalness in Glencoe, and took her home to Dalilea where their son Ranald was born in 1728.

Teaching now seemed the best way for Alasdair to support his young family, and in 1730, he enrolled as catechist for the Ardnamuchan Parish with the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SPCK).



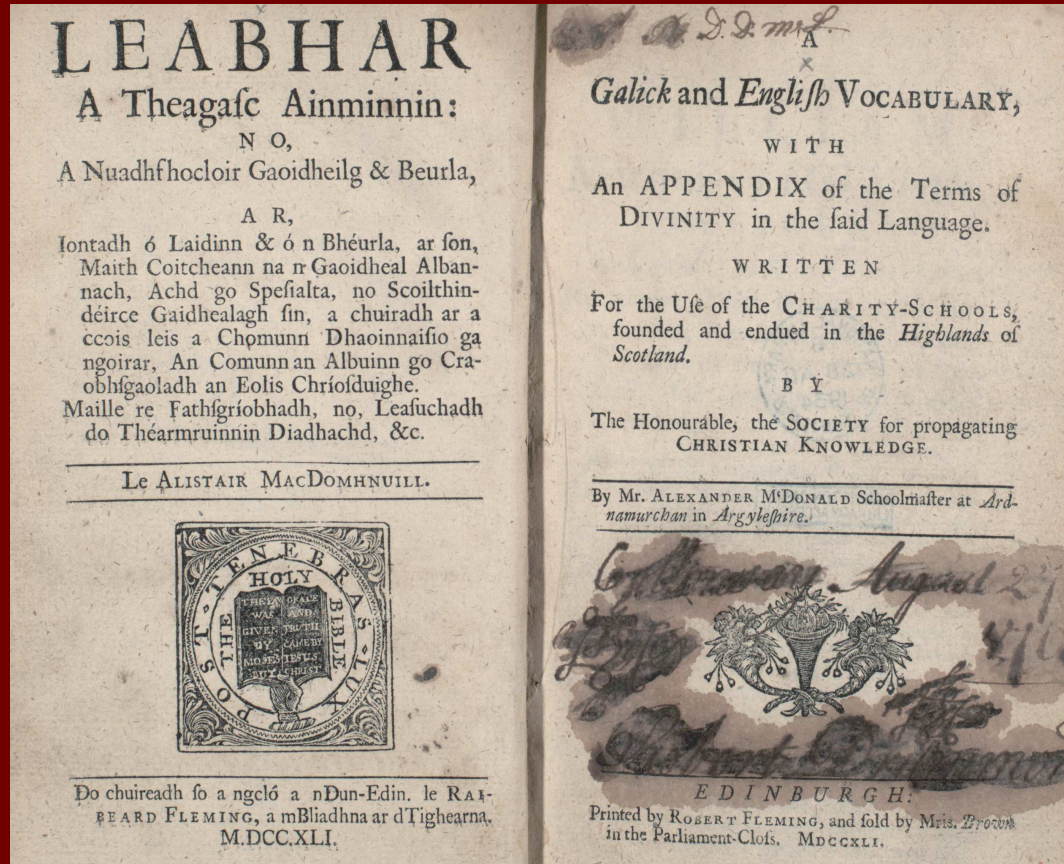
At that time, the huge parish of Ardnamuchan was experiencing an unprecedented population boom with the opening of lead mines at Strontian.



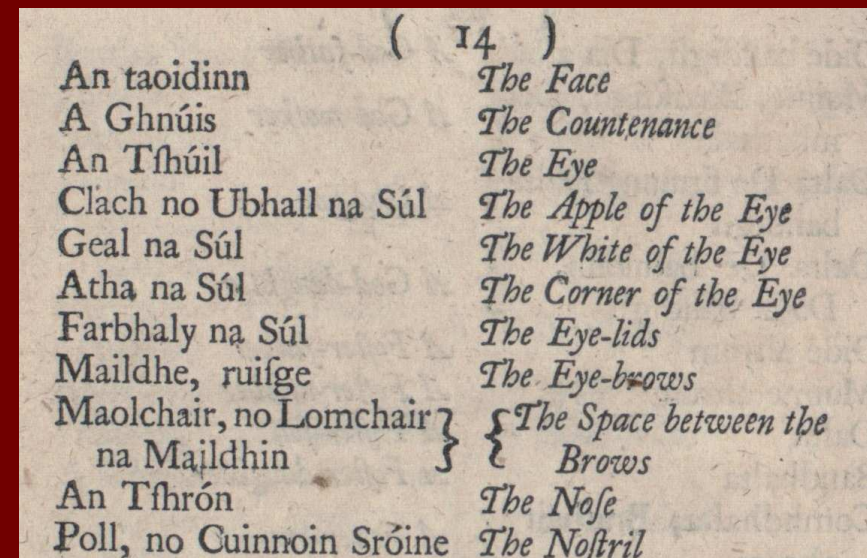
The people there were "*exceeding poor, but very much inclined to have their Children taught English because of the English & low Country Scotch which are daily coming among them,*" reported the SPCK, a Presbyterian organisation which promoted an English medium education as the best way to "root out" Catholicism and Gaelic superstitious beliefs.

Despite his Episcopalian upbringing, Alasdair was seen as a choice recruit because of his education and his Clanranald connections.

Alasdair took his teaching work seriously, successfully establishing a school at Kilmory, where he taught *"Seventeen Boyes & One Girle, One Learning the Bible, Three the New Testament, The rest the Proverbs & Catechism."*



He also compiled a very comprehensive Gaelic/English vocabulary for the SPCK, which was published in 1741.



Teaching allowed Alasdair enough time to write poetry: his famous *Mòlaidh Morag* composed in imitation of a *ceòl-mòr* pipe tune, and his praise of nature in *Allt an Siùcair*, a burn in Corrivulinn, date from that period.

Mòlaidh Morag

We'd strike up our tune
In bright morning,
While Phoebus dyes the waves
to an orange hue
Not confined by prudent sense
In shade of grove and knoll,
Heavily entwined
In our dizziness



Just as though we were
Buck and doe in pair,
Eagerly in chase
Among saplings;
Laughing till we're weak,
Losing all our strength
With youth's joy that's
Urgent and vehement.

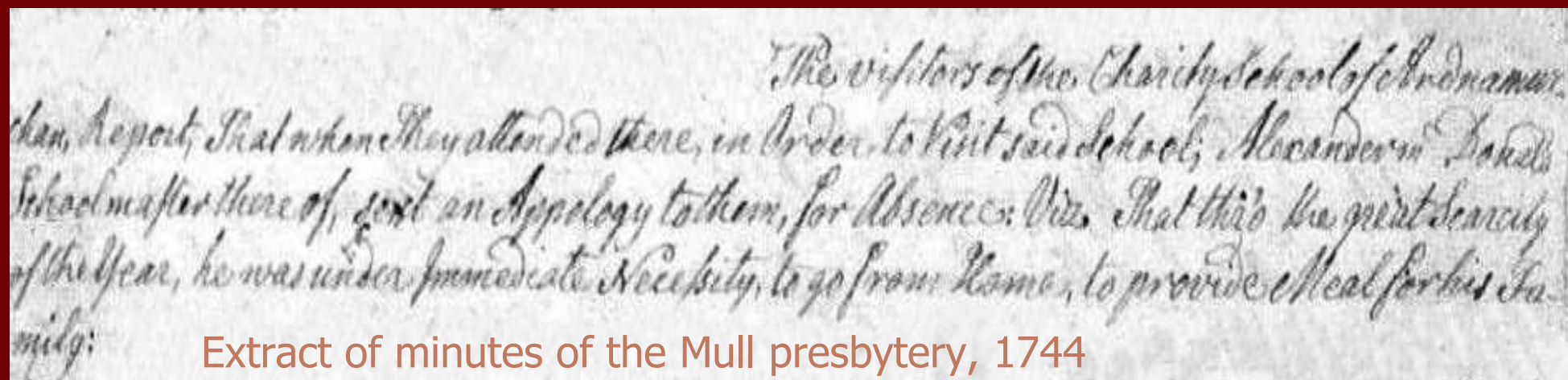
In praise of Morag,
Mòlaidh Morag
tr. Derick Thomson

Nature's work of graving
Is neatly done on your banks
Wild garlic growing freely
Fair nut gall up above,
Shamrock, daisy, red berry
Freckling your meadow's floor
Like stars through frost, the twinkling
Of the fresh and lovely flowers.

Trees with their tops like scarlet
With rowan berries there
And golden nuts in clusters
Bursting over your heads
Blackcurrants and raspberries
bend their branches down:
Smooth, ripe, sweet and fragrant,
Moisture dried off by the sun.

Allt an Siùcair - The Sugar Brook
tr. Derick Thomson

Alasdair soon found out a catechist's life was not an easy living: his salary was small - £18 a year - paid in two instalments, always late. He lacked paper, ink and books, and was moved to a different location every 2 or 3 years. With only 2 pennyland of ground to graze animals and grow, he was often absent from school, "to look for meal for his weak family", leaving his son Ranald in charge of teaching his pupils.



The visitors of the Charity School of Inverness,
report, That when they attended there, in Order to visit said School; Alexander Donald
Schoolmaster there of, sent an Appology to them, for Absence: Viz. That thro' the great Scarcity
of the Year, he was under immediate Necessity, to go from Home, to provide a Meal for his Fa-
mily:

Extract of minutes of the Mull presbytery, 1744

The fact was that Alasdair was also busy preparing the ground for a Jacobite rising, composing inflammatory propagandist songs which spread throughout Moidart, and even further afield, as Alasdair sent his poems to the Jacobite court of St Germain in France.

*Tha deagh shoisgeul feadh nan Garbh Chrìoch,
Sùrd air armaibh còmhraig,
Ùird ri dairich deanamh thargaid
Nan dual ball-chruinn bòidheach*

There is a good gospel throughout the Highlands
Eager preparation of arms for battle
Hammers rattling making target
With beautiful ball-round whorls.

Oran Nuagh - New Song
tr. Derick Thomson

Complaints from the Mull Presbytery and the SPCK mounted: Alasdair's reputation as a Jacobite made him increasingly suspect, and they wanted him out.

At first, Alasdair tried to fight back with irony: "*my Ignorance possest me of a perswasion, that without a palpable misbehaviour attested to you by the presbitry of my bounds &c, I might allwayes be continued in my former station.*"

Then having converted to Catholicism, he finally left his teaching post, handing it over to his son Ranald, a few weeks before the Prince's landing in July 1745.

Alasdair was among the first to meet the Prince and was made captain in his army. He also became the prince's Gaelic tutor.

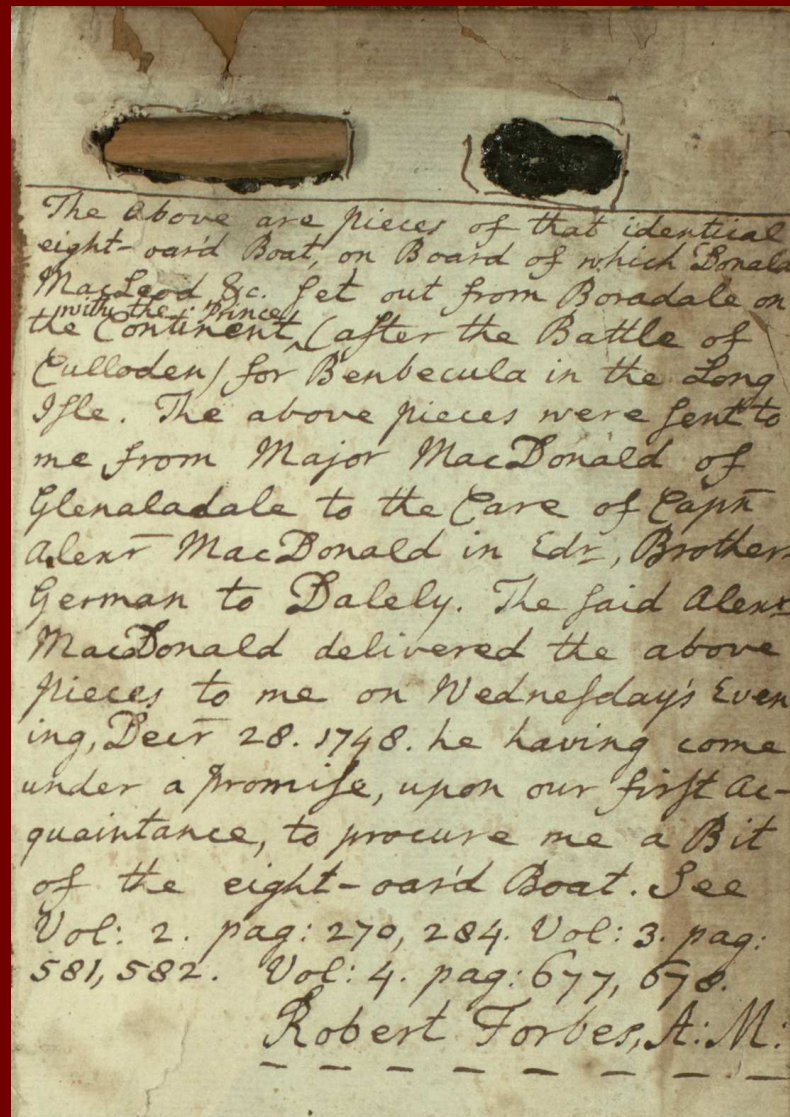
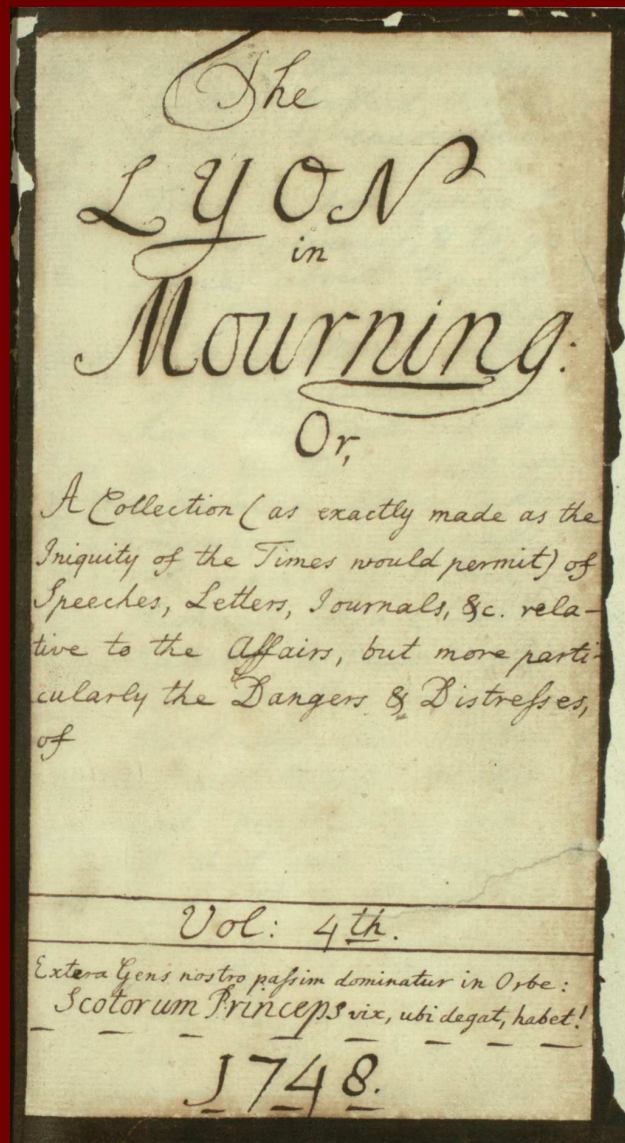


Alasdair wrote his description of the campaign from the raising of the standard at Glenfinnan to the final defeat at Culloden in his "Journall and Memoirs of P...C... Expedition into Scotland, 1745-6, by a Highland Officer in his Army", a work that showed how confident a prose writer he also was.

On his return home from Culloden, his home burnt down to the ground, he was at first forced to hide in the hills around Arisaig with his brother Donald, then in Glencoe with his starving family until the Act of Indemnity was passed in 1747.

Captain MacDonald had all his Effects plundered & pillaged. After every Thing was destroyed or carried off, the Party, happening to spy a living Cat, immediately killed poor harmless Puss, and threw it out of the Way, lest the poor Mother & her Children should have eaten the dead Cat in y^e Necessity; for Cumberland & his Army were exceedingly desirous, that the Young & Old (Women & Infants not excepted) they did not murder might be starved to Death, which was the Fate of too many; & their Endeavours were fully equal to their Desires. Capⁿ MacDonald, his Wife & children wandered through Hills & Mountains, till the Act of Indemnity appeared, and in the Time of their skulking from place to place his poor Wife fell with Child, which proved to be a Daughter, & is still alive.

The following year, Alasdair wrote his own vivid accounts of the post-Culloden repression on Eigg and Canna and of the Prince's escape for Robert Forbes' "*Lyon in Mourning*", drawing on eye-witnesses such as Flora MacDonald and his brother and nephews in Uist.



The manuscript included pieces of the boat that took the Prince from Skye to Benbecula .

In 1749, Alaisdair was appointed Baillie of Canna by Clanranald, a belated reward for his services to the Prince. At first the poetry he composed whilst living on the island still expressed the bitterness felt after Culloden against the Hanoverians and their land-grabbing Campbell helpers.



When you get your charters
To your beds that are narrow,
Your wills in order,
And your carcasses to beetles,
You will see sums of silver are exceedingly vain.
The world altogether and the wealth that is in it
You must leave behind you
Save for three planks around you.

Aoir do na Caimbeulaich - Satire of the
Campbells, tr. Derick Thomson

But it is also on Canna that Alasdair started composing his great epic, “the birlinn of Clanranald,” perhaps inspired by a trip from South Uist to Ireland with his brother Lachlan.

Sun bursting goldenly
from its meshing;
the sky became scorched and gloomy,
awe-inspiring.

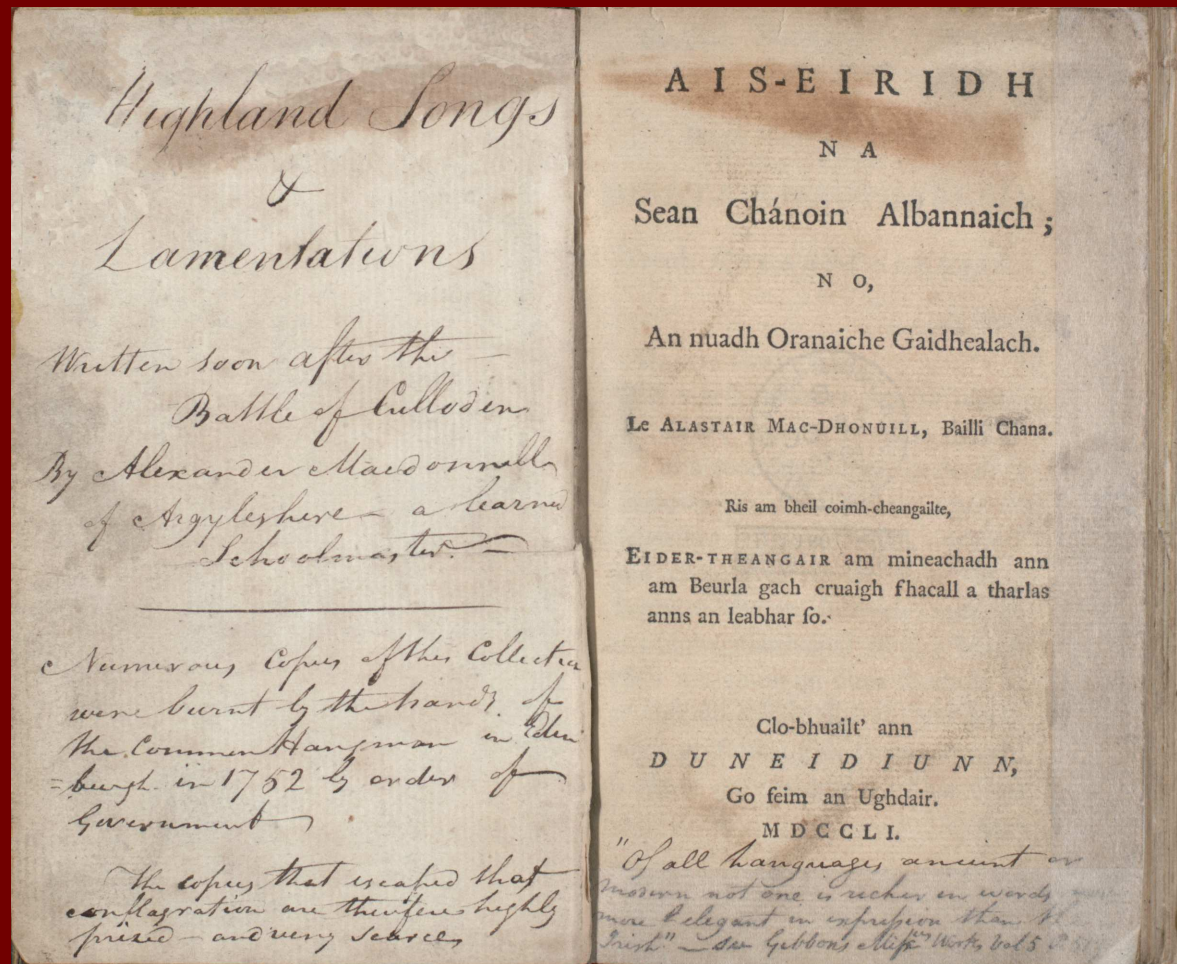


The waves grew dark, thick, dun-bellied,
angry and sallow
the sky had every single hue
you find in tartan....

The ocean then donned completely
its black grey cloak ,
its rough, shaggy sable mantle
of horrid surging.

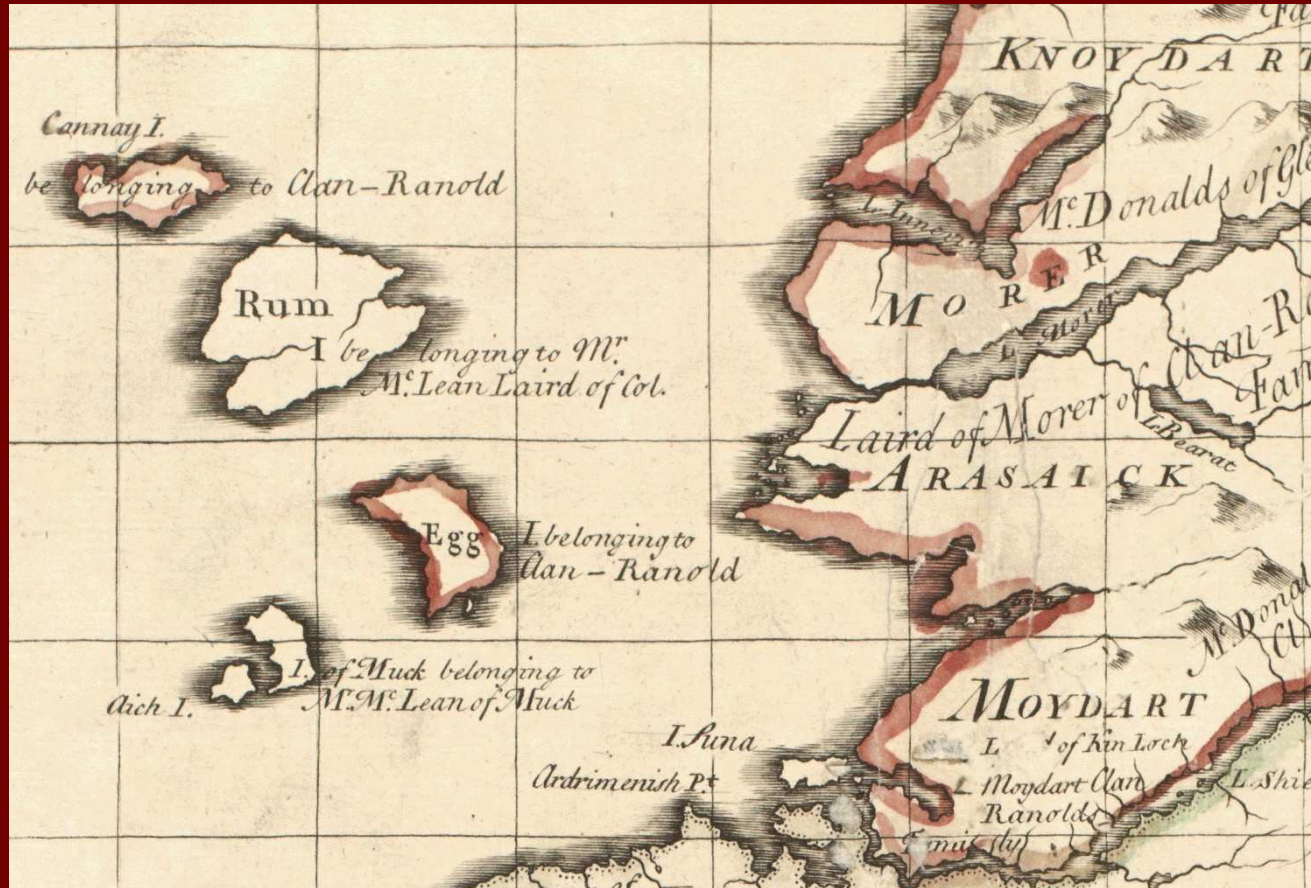
Birlinn Chlanraghnail, the Birlinn of Clanranald
tr. Derick Thomson

Alasdair now put his efforts in publishing his poetry: his collection of "New Gaelic songs" printed in 1751 in Edinburgh was the first book of Gaelic verses ever published.



In the preface of "*Ais-eiridh na Sean Chánoin Albannaich*," Alasdair states his intentions to rehabilitate the language and culture of the Gaels who had been "*persecuted and intolated*" in "*an age so happily distinguished from all the others for freedom of thought, love of knowledge and moderation.*"

On the strength of his publication, Alasdair had dreamt of a return to the Edinburgh literary scene. He had been invited as tutor for a prominent Jacobite family in Edinburgh, but the repressive anti-jacobite laws made this impossible: when his poetry book, deemed to contain seditious material, was confiscated and publicly burnt, it became a criminal offence to knowingly employ him.

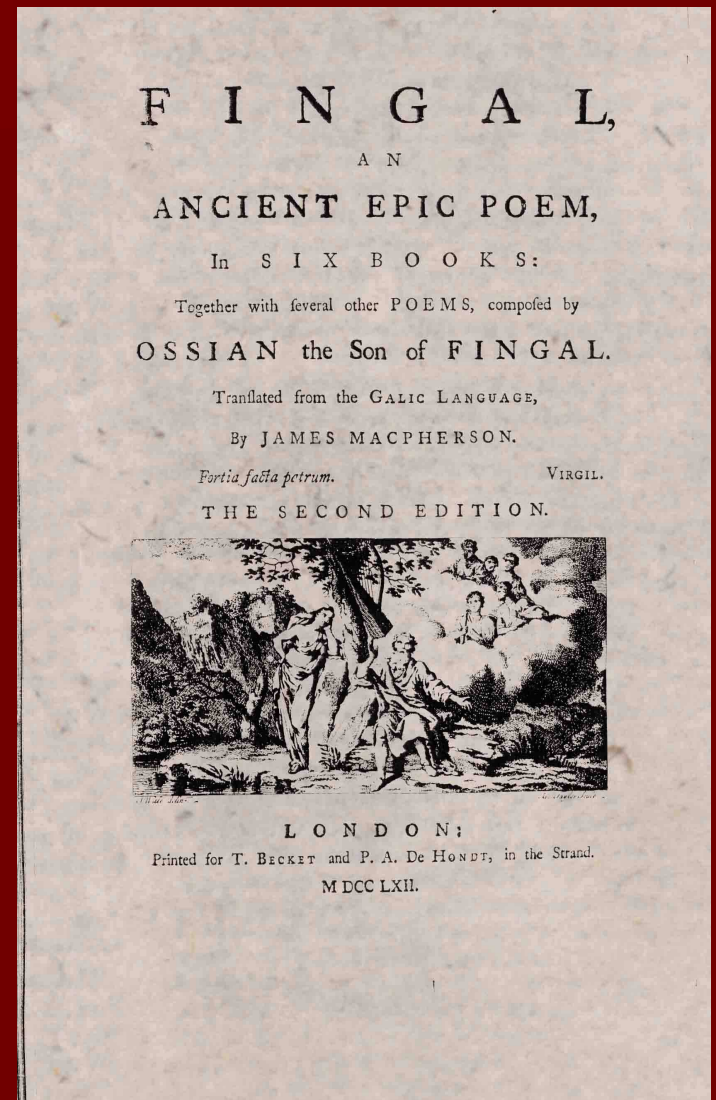


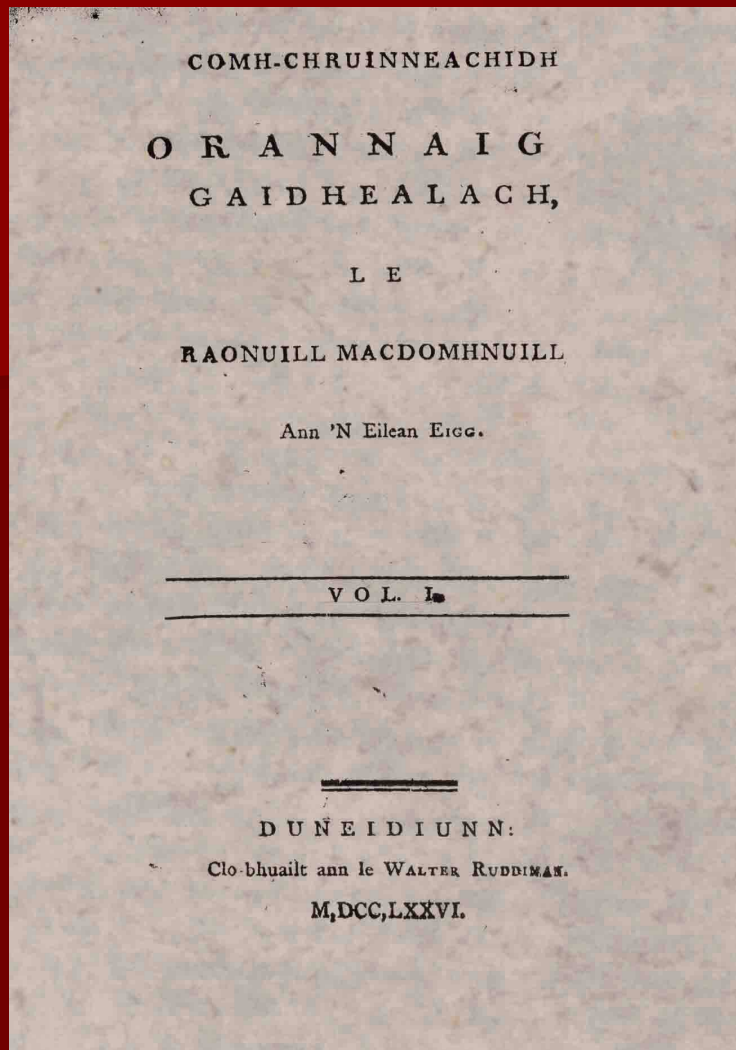
Alasdair thus came back to Moidart, first in Eigneig where his efforts to rekindle the Jacobite flame gained him the enmity of the local priest and forced him out to Inverie in Knoydart, before finally settling peacefully in Arisaig, where his son Ranald was innkeeper.

Alasdair always intended to publish a second volume of Gaelic poetry, an anthology of older poets.

This task was entrusted to his son Ranald, now one of Clanranald's tenant farmers on Eigg.

Ranald was spurred in his task by the huge popularity of James MacPherson's Fingalian tales, which sent the Scottish Enlightenment figures looking for a "Gaelic Homer" in their search for a truly Scottish literary identity.





In his publication, Ranald also takes up the cause of the Gaelic Language "*once the mother tongue of the principal states of Europe ... now struggling for existence in a narrow corner*".

In his defence of Gaelic, he brings up the King of Prussia, a known collector of Highland music and Jacobite supporter, Mac Pherson's Fingalian tales and Lord Kaimes, a prominent Enlightenment figure.

Ranald sold a few copies of his anthology in Edinburgh, including one to James Boswell who showed great interest in Ranald's original Gaelic manuscripts. But his relative lack of success discouraged him, so that the second volume he had planned was abandoned and his priceless manuscripts left to be dispersed and destroyed.

Alasdair did not see his son's work as he died in Arisaig in 1770, six years before its publication. The story is that he died composing verses, an end befitting the great poet he had been.

He may have lived his last years in obscurity, but shortly before his death, John MacDonald of Ardnabie, his foster son, wrote him a moving eulogy that placed him firmly at the top of the Gaelic poets' pantheon.

If my thoughts could satisfy me
And the nine muses equally agreed,
I would gladly consent to be listening to you for ever;
Since you set the standard for all authors
And the base-note for musician's strings,
You have surpassed even Homer
Though he was in Greek a great musician.

Òran do dh'Alastair mac Mhaighstir Alastair,
A Song to Alastair mac Mhaighstir Alastair
tr. Ronald Black

We have no lowly bard, no official poet,
No vicar, no storyteller
Who'd not want to be in your company
In order to listen to your weighty talk;
In learning and in information,
In high intellect you are effective —
You are the king of ballads and of songs,
I can boast that it is I who have proclaimed it.

No one really knows where Alasdair is buried...



According to some, the parish priest had Alasdair buried across the threshold of the church as a punishment for the scurrilous nature of some of his verse. Others say that on the contrary, this place was chosen to honour him.



Kilmory Church, Arisaig



But at Dalilea on loch Shiel, the great oaks planted by Alasdair are still there...

