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## Louis MacNeice's Irish and Scottish Pasts, 1935–9

Paul Robichaud

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Louis MacNeice is a profoundly retrospective poet, with his best known work, *Autumn Journal* (1939), taking a backward glance at an entire decade. The personal past in MacNeice's writing is always linked with other, more communal histories. Born in Belfast, but educated and domiciled for most of his life in England, it is the Irish past—national and personal—that most persistently haunts MacNeice. As a classicist, he was also professionally immersed in the ancient past common to Europe as a whole.<sup>1</sup> During the 1930s, however, the poet's travels to Iceland and the Hebrides confronted him with other small communities with their own unique histories, experiences reflected in *Letters from Iceland* (1937; written with W.H. Auden) and *I Crossed the Minch* (1938). These travels altered MacNeice's perspective on contemporary Europe and his sense of Irish identity. His encounter with Scotland, particularly with the recent history of the isle of Lewis, suggested the impossibility of finding an authentic Celtic community resistant to the pressures of capitalism and modernity. This sense of futility in turn informs MacNeice's engagement with Ireland in part XVI of *Autumn Journal*, which rejects both unionist and nationalist versions of Irish identity.

MacNeice's first mature collection, *Poems* (1935), shows the poet already rejecting fixed, essentialist versions of personal and cultural identities. The poem 'Valediction', which appears second in the collection, after 'Christmas Eclogue', is meant to be a farewell to Ireland, portrayed as a country paralyzed by its own cultural memories, where 'history never dies.'<sup>2</sup> As MacNeice's speaker recognises, however, Irish history lives on within himself as well, in an intimate, familial way. He tropes his relationship to the North as one of mother and child; Belfast is his 'mother city', its surrounding mountains his 'paps'.<sup>3</sup> MacNeice would come to view the mother-child bond as shaping Irish

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<sup>1</sup> For a suggestive discussion of MacNeice and the classics, see Robert Crawford, 'The Classics in Modern Scottish and Irish Poetry' in Peter MacKay, Edna Longley and Fran Brearton (eds), *Modern Irish and Scottish Poetry* (Cambridge, 2011), 131–46.

<sup>2</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, Peter McDonald (ed.) (London, 2007), 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

national feeling more generally. In his 1941 study of Yeats, he suggests that Cathleen Ni Houlihan – the symbolic female embodiment of Ireland – might be viewed ‘as a mother image, and so refer much of Irish nationalism to a mother fixation, even to an Oedipus complex, England representing the father’.<sup>4</sup> This Freudian model also makes sense of the way MacNeice’s personal history is inescapably entwined with that of Ireland throughout his writing. Despite the scathing critique that ‘Valediction’ offers of Irish society, the speaker acknowledges the feelings of guilt such criticism provokes: ‘Cursèd be he that curses his mother. I cannot be / Anyone else than what this land engendered me’.<sup>5</sup> Self-authenticity requires an acceptance of his own personal Irish past, regardless of how bogus he thinks Ireland’s national self-image may be:

I can say Ireland is hooley, Ireland is  
A gallery of fake tapestries,  
But I cannot deny my past to which my self is wed,  
The woven figure cannot undo its thread.<sup>6</sup>

MacNeice’s use of the verb ‘wed’ is particularly telling in this context, given the implicitly Oedipal relationship between speaker and country presented in the poem, and the later, more explicitly Freudian diagnosis of Irish nationalism in *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*.

The self is married to a past that is intrinsically Irish and maternal, a bond likened to that between a ‘woven figure’ and the very thread of which it is made. This metaphor raises the question as to whether leave-taking of our origins is ever really possible, as it is ostensibly woven into the fabric of who we are. As a result, ‘Valediction’ hovers uneasily between wishful thinking and linguistic performance, with the accomplished separation displaced into the future tense:

I will exorcise my blood  
And not have my baby-clothes my shroud  
I will acquire an attitude not yours  
And become as one of your holiday visitors,  
And however often I may come,  
Farewell, my country, and in perpetuum.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (1941; London, 2008), 124 n2.

<sup>5</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 9.

This final farewell, 'in perpetuum', nonetheless leaves open the option to return on holiday, albeit with a foreign 'attitude.' What this passage makes clear is that the speaker's valediction is not so much about physical separation as self-transformation—or at least the wish to be transformed. It is an unreflective, deadening version of Irishness that blocks change and eradicates personal freedom: 'in the cemetery / Sham Celtic crosses claimed our individuality'.<sup>8</sup> The self is absorbed into a collective identity expressed through derivative forms; it is this earlier, passively formed self the speaker wishes to change through his farewell to Ireland.

*Poems* foregrounds this disparity between fixed, totalising forms of identity and more flexible selves open to otherness and change. One of the volume's most anthologised poems, 'Snow,' acknowledges that 'World is crazier and more of it than we think,' celebrating 'The drunkenness of things being various'.<sup>9</sup> Peter McDonald's edition of the *Collected Poems*—as John Kerrigan has noted—allows us to see 'Snow' in its original placement beside 'Belfast', setting up a contrast that is 'typical of MacNeice'.<sup>10</sup> In the context of *Poems*, MacNeice's placement of 'Belfast' after the secular revelation of 'Snow' has the effect of dramatising the freedom afforded by imaginative vision against the entrapment of the individual in prejudice and unreflective tradition: 'The hard cold fire of the northerner / Frozen into his blood from the fire in his basalt / Glares from behind the mica of his eyes'. Whereas the speaker in 'Snow' apprehends the wonder and multifariousness of the world, the northerner merely 'Glares', a word implying a hard stare, a way of looking at without seeing into things. His hardness is both cause and consequence of northern industrialisation, which has contaminated nature as well as man, tainting the 'lurid sky' and 'stained water' of Belfast Lough. The physicality of labour in the Belfast shipyards shades into sectarian brutality—'hammers clang murderously' and the gantries are compared with 'crucifixes'. The Catholic minority is represented in the poem by the figure of a 'shawled factory woman' lying in a chapel porch 'before a garish Virgin', itself an image of static religious identity.<sup>11</sup>

To his credit, MacNeice acknowledges his own place in the social and sectarian divide, as one of those who simply pass the factory woman by,

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 8–9.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>10</sup> John Kerrigan, 'The Ticking Fear', *London Review of Books*, 30/3 (2008), 15–18, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v30/n03/john-kerrigan/the-ticking-fear>, accessed 5 February 2010.

<sup>11</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 25.

walking 'so buoyantly and glib'. These divisions have made Northern Ireland a 'country of cowed and haunted faces' where even the setting 'sun goes down with the bang of Orange drums'. In the final two lines, MacNeice alludes to the way an ethos of violence has impacted women, as 'the male kind murders each its woman / To whose prayer for oblivion answers no Madonna'.<sup>12</sup> What maintains the fixed brutality of sectarian identities in Northern Ireland is an ideology of violence that is ultimately directed at women, who seek only 'oblivion'. Suppressed by such an ideology, in Chris Wigginton's view, 'neither the Virgin or Madonna of Catholicism, nor the Orange drums of Protestantism is able to escape the silencing'.<sup>13</sup> The powerlessness of the Madonna to answer their prayers suggests that even those nurturing, maternal qualities she embodies have been nullified by male violence.

'Valediction' and 'Belfast' portray Northern Ireland as a society at odds with itself, in which the possibilities for authentic selfhood and community are eclipsed by totalising versions of Irish identity that seek to erase difference through violence. MacNeice's 1937 journeys to Iceland and the Hebrides are ironically inflected searches for a traditional, sustainable community in which the individual can find fulfilment in society. In 'Letter to Graham and Anna Shepherd,' MacNeice sees the virtue of his Iceland trip in the flux of travel itself, characteristically identifying movement with life and stasis with death: 'we must keep moving to keep pace / Or else drop into Limbo, the dead place'.<sup>14</sup> The alternative to movement is the personal and cultural stagnation he wishes to leave behind in Ireland. MacNeice is under no illusions about Iceland itself, but celebrates its smallness as a precondition for communal life. Though it lacks natural, cultural, and economic wealth,

this nation  
Enjoys a scarcity of population  
And cannot rise to many bores or hacks  
Or paupers or poor men paying Super Tax.<sup>15</sup>

Iceland's small size and relative economic equality enables a democratic way of life to flourish. Further, the apparent absence of modernity from the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Chris Wigginton, *Modernism from the Margins: The 1930s Poetry of Louis MacNeice and Dylan Thomas* (Cardiff, 2007), 62.

<sup>14</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 51.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 50.

island allows for a cultural continuity with the Icelandic past. For MacNeice, the Icelandic past is the world of the sagas. That its 'literature is all about revenge' clearly resonates with the poet, who in 'Eclogue from Iceland' dramatises a dialogue between the saga hero Grettir Asmundson, Craven (Auden), and Ryan (MacNeice). The poem is included in *The Earth Compels* (1938), a collection that intersects with *Letters from Iceland* and *I Crossed the Minch* in meaningful ways.

In 'Eclogue from Iceland', Grettir asks Craven and Ryan if there are 'men now whose compass leads / Them always down forbidden roads' and how things are in their own homelands.<sup>16</sup> While Craven emphasises the cramped conditions in England, Ryan stresses the social disparity of a country in which 'nothing stands at all / But some fly high and some lie low', an image that at least partly echoes the indifferent strollers passing the factory woman on the church porch in 'Belfast'. Grettir is taken aback by a modern world in which there are simply 'Too many people' and pegs his hope on the way of life possible on an island. Ryan dispels this illusion forthwith:

I come from an island, Ireland, a nation  
Built upon violence and morose vendettas.  
My diehard countrymen like drayhorses  
Drag their ruin behind them.  
Shooting straight in the cause of crooked thinking  
Their greed is sugared with pretence of public spirit.  
From all of which I am exile.<sup>17</sup>

Peter McDonald notes that MacNeice's account of himself is an 'admission of exile rather than a declaration of escape'.<sup>18</sup> Far from providing the potential hope of a small island nation, a divided Ireland breaks up community by driving its inhabitants abroad. Its endemic violence and 'morose vendettas' suggest a world 'close to that of the sagas'.<sup>19</sup> Exile is the flipside of the kind of travel celebrated in 'Letter to Graham and Anna Shepherd'. As an outlaw, Grettir is himself a kind of exile in his own land, travelling by night. In Robyn Marsack's view, 'MacNeice is not interested in idealising the past, yet through Grettir he conveys the strangeness, superhuman action, and magnitude of

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 72–3.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>18</sup> Peter McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in His Contexts* (Oxford, 1991), 71.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

scale of Icelandic life'.<sup>20</sup> Whereas the self-imposed exile of Ryan and Craven is also a form of self-alienation, Grettir's internal exile still enables him to pursue 'the daily goods / The horse-fight, women's thighs, a joint of meat'.<sup>21</sup> Instead of such 'daily goods', once home the visitors can only expect the same daily routine and attempt to escape from cosmopolitan ennui.

Despite the potential alienation of exile, the example of Grettir inspires Ryan to idealise those who have followed their own lights rather than be bound to an oppressive and unsympathetic society:

Let us thank God for valour in abstraction  
 For those who go their own way, will not kiss  
 The arse of law and order nor compound  
 For physical comfort at the place of pride:  
 Soldiers of fortune, renegade artists, and sharpers<sup>22</sup>

Freedom is here identified with an individuality that is markedly liminal, in the anthropological sense of being outside society's accepted structures; MacNeice privileges such individuality over the law-abiding comforts of bourgeois life. Community as embodied by Iceland is an ideal in MacNeice's writing, but where community prohibits the individual from flourishing, the exile rather than the citizen becomes a model of individual freedom.

Much of the dramatic interest in 'Eclogue from Iceland' derives from the tension between Grettir's archaic but meaningful way of life and Ryan's and Craven's cosmopolitan but empty experience of modernity. The travellers express a sense of powerlessness and dread in response to the crises of 1930s Europe, but Grettir counsels them:

Minute your gesture, but it must be made—  
 Your hazard, your act of defiance and hymn of hate,  
 Hatred of hatred, assertion of human values,  
 Which is now your only duty.<sup>23</sup>

While this acknowledges the poets' relative lack of power—a 'gesture' is not the same as an action—it also suggests a vital role for them in a society that

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<sup>20</sup> Robyn Marsack, *The Cave of Making: The Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (Oxford, 1982), 30.

<sup>21</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 75.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

cannot offer the individual a sense of meaningful community. The 'assertion of human values' may be an odd phrase in the mouth of a medieval Icelandic, but it positions the poet as an individual custodian of those values from which authentic community derives.

MacNeice's next collection, *The Earth Compels* (1938), opens with the retrospective 'Carrickfergus', a poem that articulates MacNeice's isolation from the larger Irish community, an isolation culminating in his being sent away to school in Dorset. Its opening stanza emphasises his origins as being between country and city: 'I was born in Belfast between the mountain and the gantries / To the hooting of lost sirens and the clang of trams'. The Belfast of his birth hovers midway between the Irish countryside and the shipyards, dominated by the sounds of an urban modernity not rooted in any particular place or culture. Carrick itself is characterised by harsh division between the 'line of residential houses' in the Scotch Quarter and 'a slum for the blind and the halt' that comprises the Irish Quarter. These divisions are reflected in the physical geography of the town, which from the beginning was meant to be a world apart from the countryside. MacNeice's language shows how the founding of Carrickfergus is a point of origin for the cultural and political divide that continues to haunt the Northern Irish present: 'The Norman walled this town against the country / To stop his ears to the yelping of his slave'. Just as Norman construction creates a physical barrier between their settlement and the surrounding Irish culture, so MacNeice, 'born to the anglican order' is 'Banned forever from the candles of the Irish poor'. Their poverty contrasts with the carved marble effigies of the Chichester family in his father's church, 'With ruffs about their neck, their portion sure'.<sup>24</sup> These figures are, in Louis Marsack's analysis, 'secure in their earthly glory founded on their exploitation of precisely the Irish poor'.<sup>25</sup> The poem then shifts to memories of British soldiers training for the Great War. As harbingers of violence, they follow thematically from the earlier Normans, but their real work in the poem is to set the stage for the child's departure for school in England. From a divided country, the young MacNeice grows into an awareness of a divided world. Far from being a time of innocence, at Sherborne school 'the world of parents / Contracted into a puppet world of sons'.<sup>26</sup> What MacNeice concentrates on in this closing stanza is the extent of his displacement and the continuing awareness of his own origins, even in 'exile'.

<sup>24</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 55.

<sup>25</sup> Marsack, *Cave of Making*, 14.

<sup>26</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 56.



MacNeice's search for community had continued in his 1937 tour of the Hebrides, undertaken for a travel book commissioned by Longmans, Green, and Company, published the following year as *I Crossed the Minch*. A hybrid text combining poetry, travel journal, fictional dialogue and camp correspondence, *I Crossed the Minch* nonetheless encompasses much acute social observation within its ironic and engagingly personalised narrative. An undergirding preoccupation is, as John Kerrigan notes, 'the question of how far the Hebrides had, and could, resist anglicisation and commercialisation, the two forces striking him as inextricable. He was fascinated by the insularity which made the islands exemplars (he agreed) of independence.'<sup>27</sup> This fascination is balanced by scepticism. In the introductory chapter, MacNeice recognises the quixotic romanticism of his seeking out an authentic community in the Islands: 'I went to the Hebrides partly hoping to find that blood is thicker than ink—that the Celt in me would be drawn to the surface by the magnetism of his fellows. This was a sentimental and futile hope'.<sup>28</sup> His lack of Gaelic excludes him from the indigenous culture he sought to be drawn into, but that culture in any case no longer offers a viable alternative to cosmopolitan modernity. Instead, MacNeice finds the ancient culture of the Islands being visibly eroded by their ties to international capitalism. Hebrideans have become alienated from their traditional ways of life without yet becoming fully modern:

The Hebrides are now being invaded by commerce, which means that they are falling to the foreigner. This process is inevitable, but I should prefer to watch it somewhere where it is further advanced, where differences of wealth are long standing and where, though the primitive culture has gone, a sophisticated culture has succeeded it. More than one generation is required before a man can be a capitalist with grace.<sup>29</sup>

Drawn to the Hebrides in the hopes of participating in a shared Celtic identity, MacNeice is confirmed in his status as an outsider from a society dominated by the very commerce that has already reached the Islands ahead of him. The more communal culture of the Hebrides is giving way to 'differences of wealth,' while ways of life rooted in crofting and fishing become less and less viable.

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<sup>27</sup> John Kerrigan, 'MacNeice among the Islands' in MacKay, Longley and Brearton (eds), *Modern Irish and Scottish Poetry*, 62.

<sup>28</sup> Louis MacNeice, *I Crossed the Minch* (1938; Edinburgh, 2007), 7–8.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

This culture nonetheless possesses considerable residual strength, and a sense of unity that finds political expression in a general commitment to Scottish independence. MacNeice is ambivalent towards Scottish nationalism. On the one hand, he dismisses it as 'a precious affectation of bright young men with a distaste for real politics'.<sup>30</sup> In the case of the Islands, however, Gaelic 'needs no artificial cultivation, their population is small enough to allow of a genuine community feeling, their social life is still homogeneous (though commercialisation may soon drive rifts through it), lastly the sea still separates them from their neighbours'.<sup>31</sup> Those same features that made Iceland such an attractive escape from the crises afflicting the rest of Europe also hold true for the Hebrides. Commenting on the close imaginative connection the Islands had with MacNeice's Irish memories, John Kerrigan writes that the Hebrides 'were tied for him genealogically and experientially, as well as culturally and symbolically, to the islands of the west of Ireland'.<sup>32</sup> Within *I Crossed the Minch*, the question of Scottish nationalism immediately raises that of Ireland. MacNeice initially sees an irreconcilable conflict between local nationalisms and the international socialism espoused by the thirties left: 'With the World Revolution and the Classless Society waiting for a midwife, why take a torch to the stable to assist at the birth of a puppy?' Nonetheless, he recognises that this irreconcilability is reflected in his own changeable attitudes: 'When I am in Ireland I find myself becoming Nationalist. If I lived in the Hebrides, I should certainly plump for the puppy'.<sup>33</sup> Identifying what specific 'puppy' MacNeice has in mind, Kerrigan sees its meaning slipping here from 'the Hebrides to something more like Scotland', suggesting a temporary identification of the Hebrides with the whole Scottish nation.<sup>34</sup> MacNeice himself acknowledges that his shifting political allegiances and grow out of his participation in a particular community; lacking permanent membership in such a community, his allegiances fluctuate.

The word MacNeice uses to describe the value of small communities and cultures like those of the Hebrides is 'differentiation'. This emphasis on difference reflects the coherence in his thought and poetry, recalling as it does 'the drunkenness of things being various' celebrated in 'Snow'.<sup>35</sup> Differentiation has both a political and ethical imperative. MacNeice is

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 13–14.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>32</sup> Kerrigan, 'MacNeice among the Islands', 62–3.

<sup>33</sup> MacNeice, *I Crossed the Minch*, 14.

<sup>34</sup> Kerrigan, 'MacNeice among the Islands', 66.

<sup>35</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 24.

sceptical towards those who would level all differences to bring about ‘the co-operation of one with the other in forwarding the march of history and singing the one creed in unison’, citing instead the example of Lenin, ‘who saw clearly that differentiation was necessary; only it must not be founded on the irrelevant accident of birth or the luck of money’.<sup>36</sup> In an economically just world, local differences would flourish alongside one another. This leads MacNeice to a critique of the kind of cultural uniformity imposed by Fascism:

A world society must be a federation of differentiated communities, not a long line of robots doing the goose-step. In the same way the community itself must be a community of individuals. Only they must not be fake individuals—archaizers and dilettantes—any more than the community must be a fake community, a totalitarian state strutting in the robes of Caesardom.<sup>37</sup>

Authenticity and community are here set against their opposites, fakery and totalitarianism. The ‘community of individuals’ is not a paradox for MacNeice, for it is only through community that individuals achieve authenticity. The ‘archaizers and dilettantes’ (perhaps an allusion to reactionary modernists like Ezra Pound) are fake individuals because their individuality is rooted not in community, but in adherence to nostalgia and whimsy. Similarly, the Fascist donning of ‘the robes of Caesardom’ marks its totalitarian society as ‘a fake community’ created by an imposed uniformity. Valentine Cunningham sees MacNeice here ‘resisting the current masses rhetoric because of the goosestepping Caesar tendencies of “Collective Man”’.<sup>38</sup> Like many on the left during the 1930s, MacNeice tentatively holds up the Soviet Union as an exemplary ‘federation of differentiated communities’, but his wording betrays a certain scepticism: ‘The Soviet Union, I am told, encourages the maintenance of local traditions though in subservience to the new order’.<sup>39</sup> While ‘the maintenance of local traditions’ is clearly an important element in cultural differentiation, the Soviet example is introduced as hearsay, and ‘subservience’ suggests an awareness of Moscow’s own totalitarian tendencies, further re-enforced by the phrase ‘new order,’ in the 1930s more usually applied to Fascism.

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<sup>36</sup> MacNeice, *I Crossed the Minch*, 15.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>38</sup> Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford, 1988), 272.

<sup>39</sup> MacNeice, *I Crossed the Minch*, 16.

In Chapter VI, 'Potted History,' MacNeice offers a critique of the effects of capitalism on traditional communities through a short account of Hebridean history, culminating in a satire on Lord Leverhulme, the twentieth-century soap manufacturer and landlord who attempted to reform the Isle of Lewis. In documenting the islanders' resistance and survival, MacNeice offers a kind of counter-history in miniature, challenging the easy assimilation of the islanders' story into larger British narratives of social or economic progress. The chapter begins with a hesitant privileging of isolated, marginal societies: 'How lucky, they say, are the people who have always been out of the way.'<sup>40</sup> In this 'potted history', however, the position of Lewis between cultures and centres of political power means that it has always been an object of depredation by outsiders. MacNeice quotes Leverhulme as intending to manage Lewis 'on business lines' before situating him in a long line of raiders seeking to exploit the island. The modern capitalist is successor to such figures as 'Ketil Flatnose from Norway' and, even earlier, 'Finn with the Feine'.<sup>41</sup> Such figures form part of the island's ongoing history, which began with successive rule by Iberians, Celts, Norse, and Scots, creating a hybrid identity. Cultural mixing has thus always been a part of the Hebridean experience, and MacNeice does not idealise the pre-capitalist past. Clan warfare, despotic rule, and bloody revenge characterise centuries of the island's history. What endure are the people and, for a time, their ancient customs: 'Men walked out into the sea invoking the sea-god Shony offering him a cup of beer and asking him to send them seaweed. Old women sold the sea to sailors'.<sup>42</sup> Eighteenth-century Jacobitism temporarily invigorates the culture, finding in the figure of Charles Edward Stuart 'a permanent focus for the nostalgia of Gaeldom', whose defeat would result in government efforts to destroy Gaelic culture altogether.<sup>43</sup> Despite the deaths of many, the people nonetheless survive nineteenth-century Clearances and conscription during the Great War. He concludes his history with an account of a tragic shipwreck in which servicemen from Lewis are drowned returning to the island.

MacNeice follows his potted history with an untitled ballad that appears under 'Uncollected Poems' in Peter McDonald's edition of the *Collected* as 'The Life of Lord Leverhulme'.<sup>44</sup> The figure of Leverhulme is portrayed – accurately enough – as an ambitious capitalist reformer, whose hopes for the Hebrides

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>44</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 754–9.

are undone by the tenacity of the islanders. The ballad thus works as a kind of parable of the confrontation between capitalism and tradition, but unlike in the contemporary Hebrides visited by MacNeice, tradition emerges the temporary victor. His choice of the ballad form is significant here; of all verse forms, the ballad most fully expresses popular and communal tradition. As a counterpoint to the potted history offered in the first part of the chapter, the ballad celebrates popular resistance to the powerful forces shaping modern western history beyond the Hebrides.

Despite his modest origins as 'a grocer's son', Leverhulme achieves business success with his patent on Sunlight Soap, which generates enough capital to enable him to buy up his competitors.<sup>45</sup> From there, his friendship with Gladstone leads to a seat in parliament. After weathering libel in the press, Leverhulme expands his business empire to America and the tropics. In MacNeice's cagey depiction, Leverhulme is driven in his later years by a desire to be remembered by posterity, commissioning portraits 'By Sir William Orpen and Augustus John.' The desire for posthumous remembrance is explicitly linked with Britain's imperial presence in Africa: 'He sailed the Niger black as night / And he left his name on a jungle site'.<sup>46</sup> This capitalist, imperialist context sets the stage for Leverhulme's purchase of Lewis as the object of his reforming zeal:

He bought up Lewis and then he began  
To chart and build and kipper and can;  
Every item was to run to scheme,  
There'd be no hitches in the new régime.

He took the roof off over his bed  
And he founded MacFisheries Limited  
That the British householder might get  
The northern herring fresh from the net.

Leverhulme's 'scheme' to turn a traditional, semi-feudal society into a modern fishery brings in new values emphasising planning and efficiency, ultimately driven by the market demands of 'the British householder'.

What Leverhulme does not count on is the devotion of the island's inhabitants to Lewis and its culture:

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<sup>45</sup> MacNeice, *I Crossed the Minch*, 85.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

But Lever's totalitarian plan  
Was caviare to the Lewisman;  
Our lands, they said, to us belong  
And raided the farms at Gress and Tong.<sup>47</sup>

MacNeice's use of 'totalitarian' is telling here, echoing as it does his dismissal of the totalitarian state's claim to embody an authentic, lived community. It suggests that the kind of paternalistic capitalism imposed by Leverhulme is a forerunner of totalitarian politics. His treatment of the island as private property contrasts dramatically with the sense of communal ownership expressed by the first-person plural of 'Our lands ... to us belong'. Despite Leverhulme's appeals to the Minister of Scottish Affairs, the islanders refuse to back down, and he is forced to admit defeat. He donates the Parish of Stornoway to the people of Lewis, but sells off the rest of the island in parcels of land 'To people who wanted a shooting box'; in a sense, Leverhulme has the last laugh by dividing up the island into blocks of private property for wealthy shooters.<sup>48</sup> After another island failure on Harris, Leverhulme dies and MacNeice imagines him introducing an advertising campaign into heaven, one that is so successful it puts the Devil out of business. In the poem's final stanza, however, 'The moors were quiet on the Hebrides / The crofters gossiped in Gaelic speech / And the waves crept over the lonely beach'.<sup>49</sup> Landscape, culture, and people survive Leverhulme's capitalist scheming. This peaceful image of a rooted people carrying on their way of life is disturbed, however, by its context in *I Crossed the Minch*, which portrays that way of life as it is being eroded by capitalism and modernity several decades later.

By MacNeice's own admission, *I Crossed the Minch* is 'the book of a tripper, a person concerned with the surface', rather than a serious attempt at sociological observation and analysis.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, his commitment to cultural differentiation informs the poetry that emerged out of his Hebridean experience in important ways. Reprinted in *The Earth Compels*, 'Bagpipe Music' is a darkly comic masterpiece in its own right, but when read in the context of *I Crossed the Minch*, the satirical bite of the poem is much more apparent. Its satire is directed at the threat posed by capitalist modernity to the principle of

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 18.

differentiation. Unlike a vibrant (or even a stagnant) local tradition, capitalism continuously renders its products and pastimes obsolete, manipulating human desire for novelty and sensation: 'It's no go the merrygoround, it's no go the rickshaw, / All we want is a limousine, and a ticket for the peepshow'. MacNeice explicitly satirises the grotesque effect of capitalism on Hebridean culture in the second stanza:

John MacDonald found a corpse, put it under the sofa,  
 Waited till it came to life, and hit it with a poker,  
 Sold its eyes for souvenirs, sold its blood for whiskey,  
 Kept its bones for dumb-bells to use when he was fifty.<sup>51</sup>

Motivated by profit, John MacDonald comically (or chillingly) refuses to perform the most basic act of human culture, burying the dead. Instead, he murders the resurrected corpse, selling its eyes to tourists and its blood as authentic island whiskey. The keeping of the 'bones for dumb-bells to use when he was fifty' suggests a stereotypical thrift, but also hints at the cult of youth and fitness that accompanies capitalism in its twentieth-century ascent.

The poem makes short work of the kind of spiritualism advocated by W.B. Yeats as an alternative to Victorian materialism: 'It's no go the Yogi-Man, it's no go Blavatsky, / All we want is a bank balance, and a bit of skirt in a taxi'.<sup>52</sup> Money and sex are what motivate modern man; the debased spiritual cravings of the nineteenth century have become a 'no go,' giving way to the more frankly sensual appetites of the twentieth. Woman is commodified in the colloquial synecdoche 'a bit of skirt', a phrase significantly placed between 'bank balance' and 'taxi', the object of male desire poised midway between capital and paid-for service. Another source of readerly unease in the poem is MacNeice's persistent use of the pronoun 'we', which includes both poet and audience within the field of potential speakers, who are never identified. The bardic role assumed by Yeats, in which the poet comments on society from a position of independent and inspired privilege, is itself a 'no go'; poet and reader, as much as the cast of unsavoury characters presented in 'Bagpipe Music', are all implicated in the capitalist modernity satirised by the poem.

In place of the traditional culture and economy of the islands, the inhabitants come to depend upon modern addictions and public charity: 'It's no

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

go the Herring Board, it's no go the Bible / All we want is a packet of fags when our hands are idle'. Their aspiration now is simply to 'Sit on your arse for fifty years and hang your hat on a pension'.<sup>53</sup> Deprived of its social significance within the immediate community, work has become merely time serving. Ironically, in eradicating their traditional ways of life, capitalism has increased the dependence of Hebrideans on government assistance, undermining those very values of self-reliance and thrift promoted by Lord Leverhulme.

The final poem in *The Earth Compels*, following 'Bagpipe Music,' is 'Postscript to Iceland,' dedicated to W.H. Auden. In it, MacNeice rejects the 'Idyll on a mythic shore', admitting his preference for 'a fancy turn, you know, / Sandwiched in a graver show'. His island excursions are haunted by an uneasy awareness of the 'graver show' being played out in mid-thirties Europe, from which there can be no real escape in Iceland or the Hebrides. Events on the continent seem to promise a future 'hell':

Down in Europe Seville fell,  
Nations germinating hell,  
The Olympic games were run—  
Spots upon the Aryan sun.<sup>54</sup>

The Olympics are only 'spots' on the sun of Nazi totalitarianism, no more an actual escape than MacNeice's brief sojourn abroad. Looking back fondly on his holiday from the seclusion of his study, he becomes increasingly aware of his own isolation and uncertainty:

For the litany of doubt  
From these walls comes breathing out  
Till the room becomes a pit  
Humming with the fear of it

With the fear of loneliness  
And uncommunicableness;  
All the wires are cut, my friends  
Live beyond the severed ends.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>54</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 96.



At the end of his search for authentic community in Iceland, MacNeice finds himself, ironically, marooned on the island of his own isolated self, cut off from society just as Iceland is apart from the rest of Europe. The final two stanzas of the poem voice admiration for Auden's prolix vitality, closing with a toast offered 'before / The gun-butt raps upon the door'.<sup>55</sup> Instead of friendship restoring MacNeice to society, the anticipated gun-butt threatens to force violence into the confines of his own private study, a nightmare inversion of the quest for community undertaken in *Letters from Iceland* and *I Crossed the Minch*.

In *Autumn Journal* (1939), MacNeice offers both a poetic record and sustained reflection upon his life during the previous decade. As such, the poem looks back upon his problematic relationship with England and Ireland, picking up and developing themes explored earlier in 'Belfast' and 'Valediction'. There is often a sense of displacement in MacNeice's references to England that is markedly different from its portrayal in Auden's poetry, even in the deliberately estranging perspective of 'On This Island'. In section VIII, for example, MacNeice looks back upon the early, care-free days of his failed marriage, when 'the map of England was a toy bazaar' for the couples' motoring expeditions 'into the green / Fields of English history'.<sup>56</sup> England is the site of rural holiday pursuits, immured in its own past: a tourist's vision of the country, rather than home. In section XVI, MacNeice acknowledges that even though he has been 'educated and domiciled in England', Ireland's 'name keeps ringing like a bell / in an underwater belfry'.<sup>57</sup> This image figures the poet's relationship to Ireland as a submerged awareness evoked by its name, while the 'underwater belfry' suggests the flooded cities of Celtic legend. The Anglo-Saxon surface of MacNeice's English milieu merely conceals Gaelic depths of memory, feeling and imagination.

Section XVI of *Autumn Journal* begins with an admission of jealousy towards those who are decisive enough to take action without being hampered by fear and self-doubt, in contrast with the nightmare-ridden poet. It is as though Yeats's best who 'lack all conviction' in 'The Second Coming' confess to being jealous of the 'passionate intensity' of the worst:<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 117, 118.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>58</sup> W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., New York, 1997), 189.

And I envy the intransigence of my own  
 Countrymen who shoot to kill and never  
 See the victim's face become their own  
 Or find his motive sabotage their motives.<sup>59</sup>

The absence of liberal equivocation among Irish extremists enables action, but violent action that quickly becomes an end in itself. In considering the life of Maud Gonne, for example, MacNeice realises that 'a single purpose can be founded on / A jumble of opposites', a somewhat pained recognition that motive need not make sense to be effective. The attempt to make sense underlies much of MacNeice's poetry of the 1930s, but making sense of a situation may be less likely to inspire action than a partial view strongly insisted upon. Such partiality characterises Belfast as remembered by MacNeice, where the threat of imminent violence colludes with historical memory to create a régime of fear. Within his own family household, he recalls 'the fear / Banded among the servants / That Casement would land at the pier / With a sword and a horde of rebels'; this particular panic is answered by 'the voodoo of the Orange bands / Drawing an iron net through darkest Ulster'. The diction here is striking, and displaces these twentieth-century threats into the domains of the pre-modern past (sword, horde) and the modernist primitive (voodoo, darkest). The adjective 'darkest', conventionally followed by 'Africa', suggests a parallel between the African colonies and the status of Northern Ireland following partition.<sup>60</sup> Violence in MacNeice's vision of Ulster represents the resurgence of the archaic and the repressed, an echo and refutation of Yeats' insistence that 'some revelation is at hand'.<sup>61</sup> A resurgence of archaic feeling here produces no revelation, merely violent motive. The 'jumble of opposites' that characterises sectarian conflict in Ulster results in stalemate, a society in which 'one read black where the other read white, his hope / The other man's damnation'.<sup>62</sup>

As in 'Valediction', MacNeice challenges traditional ways of framing Irish identity, questioning the assumptions, language, and symbolism of both loyalist and nationalist discourses. Terence Brown observes that MacNeice was 'alienated from both versions of Irish identity that had so violently asserted themselves in his lifetime'.<sup>63</sup> His critique of the way Ireland is imagined

<sup>59</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 137.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>61</sup> Yeats, 'The Second Coming' in *The Poems*, 189.

<sup>62</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 138.

<sup>63</sup> Terence Brown. *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision* (Dublin, 1975), 12.

typologically (as 'land of scholars and saints' or through the figure of Kathleen ni Houlihan) contrasts these images with other 'types' drawn from modern Irish society. It might be objected that in doing so MacNeice simply engages in a fresh form of stereotyping that works against the journalistic observation of the poem as a whole. MacNeice's 'grocer drunk with the drum' is as much a figure of ridicule as Yeats' Paudeen, but whereas Yeats conjures Paudeen to mock the Catholic lower-middle class, MacNeice's Orange grocer belongs with 'The landlord shot in his bed' as symptomatic of a society crazed by violence.<sup>64</sup> Such diagnostics are characteristic of *Autumn Journal*, as well as of 1930s poetry in general. 'The shawled woman weeping at the garish altar' immediately evokes the figure of Kathleen ni Houlihan, prompting reflection on the gendered way Ireland has been imagined:

Why

Must a country, like a ship or a car, be always female,  
 Mother or sweetheart? A woman passing by,  
 We did but see her passing.  
 Passing like a patch of sun on the rainy hill  
 And yet we love her for ever and hate our neighbour  
 And each one in his will  
 Binds his heirs to continuance of hatred.<sup>65</sup>

The initial rhetorical question draws attention to the way such naming transforms possessions into objects of (male) libidinal desire. As he notes in *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, MacNeice thought an Oedipus complex lay at the very heart of Irish nationalism. Although he here portrays the figure of Kathleen ni Houlihan as 'A woman passing by', rather than 'Mother or sweetheart', in doing so he remains complicit in the gendered nationalism he attacks. Chris Wigginton suggests that 'it is MacNeice's uncanny (in this sense literally *unheimlich*, or unhomely) hybridised, post-colonial status that allows his disruption of the masculine inscription of the nation as female'.<sup>66</sup> However, MacNeice's attempt to imagine Kathleen as an actual woman, not simply the product of masculine fantasy, continues to inscribe Ireland as female. Glimpsed rather than gazed upon, she still elicits a passionate and dangerous devotion that excludes friendship between neighbours. MacNeice

<sup>64</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 138.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 138–9.

<sup>66</sup> Wigginton, *Modernism from the Margins*, 61.

includes himself in the 'we' who fall in love with her, acknowledging his own complicity in the Irish family romance. His comparison of Kathleen to 'a patch of sun on the rainy hill' suggests she is both fleeting and as natural as the Irish weather. Her beauty, however enchanting, cannot justify the binding of each new generation to 'continuance of hatred'. The paradox of nationalist passion, for MacNeice, is that such fervent love of country can inspire such fervent hatred between its citizens.

Having reflected upon the icon of republican Irish nationalism, MacNeice turns to the symbolic expression of Orange identity in Ulster, the commemoration of the Battle of the Boyne. The insistent Orange drumming virtually brings the dead back to life, as the image of King William marshals his supporters to relive the historic battle:

King William is riding his white horse back  
To the Boyne on a banner.  
Thousands of banners, thousands of white  
Horses, thousands of Williams  
Waving thousands of swords and ready to fight  
Till the blue sea turns to orange.<sup>67</sup>

The reproduction of William's image mirrors the re-enactment of his arrival at the River Boyne, a seemingly endless iteration of a sectarian identity frozen in its mythologised moment of inception. As Robyn Marsack notes of 'Valediction', when MacNeice imagines Ireland, he sees 'the whole nation trapped by its past'.<sup>68</sup> In the context of Section XVI of *Autumn Journal*, the figure of William balances that of Kathleen ni Houlihan. Conquering hero and long-suffering mother, lover and victim both inspire violent passion in their followers, but remain elusive examples of what Peter McDonald calls 'the Irish myth of Irishness, with its menacing, but ultimately empty, phantom of national "identity"'.<sup>69</sup> Both are projections of communal identity and desire that cannot fully be realised in the historical present without the exclusion or submission of the other.

In attempting to answer the question, 'Why do we like being Irish?', MacNeice initially draws attention to the 'hold' the Irish have 'on the sentimental English / As members of a world that never was, / Baptised

<sup>67</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 139.

<sup>68</sup> Marsack, *Cave of Making*, 11.

<sup>69</sup> McDonald, *Louis MacNeice*, 1.

with fairy water'. The English remain spellbound by the otherness of Ireland, even though that otherness as imagined by England is largely 'a world that never was'. Like Iceland or the Hebrides in MacNeice's travel writing, Ireland appears to offer the jaded modern a residually pre-capitalist society and economy. The smallness of Ireland allows it 'To be still thought of with family feeling'. MacNeice initially seems to accept the binary of industrial England and rural Ireland. As an island, it is 'split' by the Irish sea from the 'more commercial culture' of England. Its apparent isolation from the forces of global capitalism allows for unalienated labour, the opportunity to 'Do local work which is not at the world's mercy / And that on this tiny stage with luck a man / Might see the end of one particular action'. Whereas work under modern capitalism alienates workers by separating them from the ultimate ends of production, Ireland seems to hold forth the possibility of work that is both locally meaningful and which the worker will see through to completion. As he saw in the erosion of local crofting and fishing in the Hebrides, however, MacNeice realises that this possibility too is a 'no-go':

It is self-deception of course;  
 There is no immunity in this island either;  
 A cart that is drawn by somebody else's horse  
 And carrying goods to somebody else's market.<sup>70</sup>

Capitalism and the division of labour manifest themselves in even the most rudimentary village economy, binding the worker to 'somebody else'.

Having dispelled the illusions of Ireland's symbolic identities and its apparent isolation from global capitalism, MacNeice launches an all-out assault on what he perceives as the narrowness and squalor of life in both the Republic and Northern Ireland. He begins by condemning the violent republican tradition: 'The bombs in the turnip sack, the sniper from the roof, / Griffith, Connolly, Collins, where have they brought us?'. Ireland's insularity now appears in a different light, with the distinctly Yeatsian symbol of 'the round tower' holding itself 'aloof / In a world of bursting mortar'.<sup>71</sup> There is a fundamental disconnection between the artillery powered violence of modern Ireland and its self-mythologising through artefacts of the ancient Irish past. If there is an implied critique of Yeats' cultural politics here, MacNeice's criticism of life in the republic echo Yeats' own:

<sup>70</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 139.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

Let the school-children fumble their sums  
 In a half-dead language;  
 Let the censor be busy on the books; pull down the Georgian slums;  
 Let the games be played in Gaelic.<sup>72</sup>

The first lines conflate the language of Yeats' 'Among School-Children' and 'September 1913', but in ways that make it difficult to determine if they do so as conscious parody or unconscious echo. There are clear affinities in the two poets' outlook. In Edna Longley's view, 'Despite his different brand of "Anglo-Irish" hybridisation, his half-way house between the conditions of Anglo-Irishman and Ulster Protestant, MacNeice is the major Irish poet after Yeats who follows him in broad cultural orientation'.<sup>73</sup> Yeats' 1926 visit, as 'a smiling public man', to a Wexford school, emphasises its modernity, as the pupils learn 'to be neat in everything / In the best modern way'.<sup>74</sup> In contrast, MacNeice draws attention to the resurrection of 'a half-dead language' as an ineffective medium for modern instruction. MacNeice's choice of 'fumble' to describe the pupils' efforts to perform addition in Gaelic cannot but evoke Yeats's image of the calculating Paudeen who 'fumble[s] in a greasy till / Adding the half-pence to the pence'.<sup>75</sup> Both poets criticise the *petite bourgeois* values dominating modern Ireland, but for MacNeice such values are symptomatic of the global ascendancy of western capitalism, with nationalism and culture pressed into its service. The Catholic state's censoriousness and assault on Georgian architecture manifest a parochial rejection of both ideas and history, those engines of 1930s poetry.

At the end of the decade, MacNeice's retrospective critique of Irish identities seems not so much to have changed or come full circle as to have intensified in anger and frustration. His failed search for community animates the rejections of received versions of Irishness in *Autumn Journal*, and would later find partial resolution among the citizens of fire-bombed London during the war. MacNeice's writing recognises that no European island, however remote, could provide even a temporary escape from the pressures of modernity and history. These are pressures that reach not only traditional island communities, but also act upon and divide the poet's sense of self. These divisions reflect those of Britain and Ireland, and John Kerrigan is

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 139–40.

<sup>73</sup> Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study* (1988; London, 1996), 28.

<sup>74</sup> Yeats, *The Poems*, 219.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 107.

surely right when he writes of MacNeice that ‘so many more of his qualities are visible if he is thought about in the context of what the Good Friday Agreement calls “the totality of relationships among the peoples of these islands”’.<sup>76</sup> While he struggled to come to terms with the divisions in his inner and outer worlds, MacNeice articulated that struggle in poetry and prose that directly engages our own contemporary concerns over cultural survival and the struggle for community in a globalising world.

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<sup>76</sup> Kerrigan, ‘The Ticking Fear’.