

Laoidh an Tàilleir ‘The Ballad of the Tailor’
Sartorial Satire and Social Change in Eighteenth-Century Scotland

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THE eighteenth century is often heralded as a particularly dynamic period in the history of Gaelic literature in Scotland. The poetry of this period displays both abundant creativity and a significantly greater familiarity with, and interest in, wider British matters than that of previous eras. This is a reflection of the unprecedented level of interaction then taking place between the Highlands and the Lowlands, as a combination of political and economic factors spurred more movement of people to, from, and within the Highlands than ever before. Accompanying this flow of bodies was a stream of ideas, which was resulting in a substantial modification of values in Highland society, particularly among the gentry. In fact, Highland society was becoming increasingly more ‘British,’ and it was becoming so from the top down. The poets of this period, unlike their bardic forbears, were not often among those at the top; they were therefore in a position to observe the social changes occurring around them, and to offer pointed critique when they thought those changes did not necessarily benefit ordinary Highland people. This article examines an early eighteenth-century poem that, I argue, exhibits such critique: Dòmhnall Bàn MacNeacail’s *Laoidh an Tàilleir* ‘The Ballad of the Tailor.’ What is particularly notable about this poem is that it pre-dates the 1745 Rising and thus evidences the changing nature of Highland society even before the momentous social reorganization that followed the Jacobite defeat at Culloden.

MacNeacail’s poem was probably written in 1716. The speaker in this composition is a tailor who depicts himself at the center of a sartorial squabble among a rather famous, if fictional, assembly of the Gaelic elite—Fionn mac Cumhaill and his Fenian band. The renowned nineteenth-century folklore collector and scholar, John Francis Campbell included this poem in his *Leabhar na Féinne*, in which he

describes the poem as a parody of the Fenian tradition (1872, 201).¹ MacNeacail appears to be having a laugh at the Fianna and the gravity with which they are depicted in the heroic ballad tradition by showing them squabbling about something as petty as who the tailor will work for first.² The element of self-promotion on the part of the tailor in the opening couple of stanzas provides added interest and may indicate something more about the poem's purpose. Here, the tailor asserts the quality and value of his labour, declaring, *Cha tug iad an-asgaidh mo shaothair* 'Not for nothing they had my work'; indeed, a cassock made by him is worth at least *gìni* 'a guinea' (2001, 80.3, 7).³ The poem's modern editor, Ronald Black, claims that it employs 'the humorously hyperbolic spirit of advertising at its best' (2001, 398). The author is reputed to have, himself, been a tailor, and the idea that he might be using a poem to drum up business is intriguing (396). While the clever fellow may have had such ulterior motives, however, I think there is more to this poem than advertising or even Fenian parody.

I perceive elements of sharp social critique in the poem—critique that falls squarely on the Highland gentry and their adoption of more typically Lowland values. If we look more closely at the poem, we see that not every character is treated in a parodic way. Certainly, most of the Fianna are. But the very first character described is not Fenian at all; he is Cù Chulainn, the most prominent of the warriors of the Red Branch. Cù Chulainn is treated in an entirely different poetic mode, that of bardic panegyric. Cù Chulainn, I argue, represents the Gaelic chieftains of the past—the heroic progenitors of the eighteenth-century Highland gentry. His lifestyle and achievements are those

¹ See also Watson 1932, 290.

² See also the similarly parodic Fenian poem, *Laoidh an Bhruit* 'the Lay of the Mantle', in which the topics of clothing and honour are also conflated, and which MacNeacail may have had in mind when composing his poem. In *Laoidh an Bhruit*, a visiting woman subjects the Fenian wives to a test of character in which each must try on a magic mantle that will only fully cover a completely faithful wife. The noble ideals of the Fianna are called into question when nearly all are found wanting. The poem is recorded in both the Book of the Dean of Lismore and *Duanaire Finn* (Gillies 1981, 64-65).

³ I retain Ronald Black's translation of the poem in all quotations.

expected of a traditional Gaelic leader. He is a great warrior, capable of swiftly dispatching his enemies.⁴ In this case, the enemy is an otherworldly attacker appropriate to such a legendary hero: a five-headed giant whom Cù Chulainn faces and strikes down as the tailor sews his commissioned legwear (MacNeacail 2001, 80.11–16). After describing this attack for his audience, the speaker begins to address Cù Chulainn directly, as though he were a bardic patron, praising the ‘magnificence of his household’ (MacInnes 1976–1978, 446).

Praise for the household is a common feature of traditional Gaelic praise poetry, and many of the elements described closely align with those discussed by John MacInnes in his seminal article, ‘The Panegyric Code in Gaelic Poetry and its Historical Background.’ For instance, MacInnes notes that concentration is often given to drinking, especially of wine, musical instruments such as harps and bagpipes, the playing of *tàileasg* ‘chess,’ and the dispensing of gold; the description of these activities in a chieftain’s house highlights his generosity and noble way of life (456). We see all of these points here. The speaker tells of *Fìon ga leigeadh* ‘Wine being broached’ and *branndaidh Éireannach is Fhrangach* ‘brandy from Ireland and from France’ (MacNeacail 2001, 82.19, 32). He stresses that *Gheibhte farast’ ad’ theach rìoghail / Pìobaireachd is cruith is clàrsach* ‘Easily found in your royal house / Were piping and stringed instrument and harp,’ as well as *Fir ùra ’g iomairt air thàileasg* ‘Noble men playing [chess]’ (82.17–18, 20). He is also careful to mention *òr ga dhìoladh* ‘gold being paid out’ (82.19). Further on in this passage, the speaker references luxury items indicating the wealth of the chieftain, including *coinnle céir* ‘waxen candles’ and such items of tack for his horses as *Pillean òir is cuirplinn airgid* ‘Golden pillions and silver cruppers’ (82.24, 28). Lastly, we see a good deal of concentration on the implements of hunting and war, indicating both wealth and the warrior chieftain’s ability to protect his people (MacInnes 1976–1978, 454). Cù Chulainn has numerous hounds, quality swords, spears, helmets, shields, and horse-riding implements:

⁴ Cf. John MacInnes’s assertion that ‘The subject of a praise-poem [...] is a warrior, ruthless to his enemies and tenacious in pursuit’ (1976–1978, 452).

B' iomadh seang-chù ann air slabhraidh
 Agus Spàinneach ann air ealchainn,
 [...]
 S iomadh clogaid agus ceannbheart,
 Sgiath amalach dearg is uaine,
 S iomadh dìollaid is srian bhuclach,
 [...]
 S lìonmhor sleagh as rinngeur faobhar
 An taice ri laoch air ealchainn;

Many sleek hounds [were] there on chains
 And Spanish swords on weapon racks,
 [...]
 Many helmets and other headgear,
 Many shields with red and green whorls,
 Many saddles and buckled bridles,
 [...]
 a spear with sharp tapering blade
 For support of warrior on weapon rack;
 (82.21–22, 25–27, 29–30)

MacNeacail would have been well familiar with such panegyric, which was, as MacInnes states, in its ‘high age’ in Scotland at the time, and would not recede until the failure of the 1745 Rising (1976–1978, 459).

That Cù Chulainn is described in the bardic mode indicates that in the fictional world of this poem, he represents a chiefly ideal that the Fianna do not live up to. As we have seen, he is portrayed as a generous supporter and capable protector of his land and people. With regard to the Fianna, on the other hand, the only reference made to their prowess is voiced not by the poetic speaker, and not in a bardic mode, but by Fionn, who brags that he is *'n neach as luaithe [...]* / *An seachd cathaibh na Féinne* ‘the swiftest / In all the Fenians’ seven battalions’ (MacNeacail 2001, 82.37–38). This self-proclaimed prowess is never evidenced, however, because the Fianna are not shown fighting to protect their land and people as Cù Chulainn is, but rather squabbling amongst themselves about petty matters. After Fionn’s claim that his prowess entitles him to priority service from the tailor, Osgar complains about being made to wait to put in his order, eliciting an antagonistic response from Fionn (82–84.39–52). Their family tiff has only just gotten underway when the Clann Morna Fenians get wind that Fionn has got a tailor working for him. The

quarrel then develops into a clash between Fionn's own Clann Baoiscne, and Goll and his relatives' Clann Morna, evoking the traditional strife between the two kin groups seen in the tales and ballads, but here over matters of fashion rather than family honour (84.53–64). I posit that like Cù Chulainn, the Fianna in this poem are intended to be read allegorically. Where Cù Chulainn represents the old chiefly ideal of a Gaelic, warrior society, the petty, bickering Fianna are representative of those among the contemporary eighteenth-century Scottish gentry who, in the opinion of the poet, are no longer living up to the chiefly model found in bardic poetry. Rather than coming together to act in the interest of their people, with the two clans of Baoiscne and Morna acting as the sort of idealized 'network of allies' represented in bardic clan listings (MacInnes 1976–1978, 449), the Fianna are so averse to cooperating with one another that even a tailor's visit threatens to set off *aimhreit san teaghlach* 'a family feud' (MacNeacail 2001, 86.102).

This politicized, allegorical reading is suggested by the end of the poem, in particular. As things heat up among the members of the two clans, Diarmad steps out as the peacemaker, mirroring the Fenian tales, once again, by suggesting that he can solve the problem for them:

Gabhaibh gu suidhe 's gu sìothchaint
'S nì mise innleachd dhuibh an ceartuair
An tàillear a chur às an teaghlach
'S cha mhair a' chaonnag nas fhaide.

Go and sit down and be at peace
And I'll work out for you right away
How to get the tailor out of the family
And the quarrel will last no longer.
(84.69–72)

His solution is not martial and heroic, nor does it address the root problem of an inherent lack of cooperation within the group. Instead, Diarmad simply tells the tailor to go away: *Imich thusa romhad, a thàilleir* 'Be off with you, O tailor' (86.101). Before he does so, however, he asks for news of his people in Scotland, the MacDiarmids of Glen Lochay who claim him as a progenitor. It is here that the socio-political implications of the poem become clear, for the tailor

shares with Diarmad news of clan participation in the recent, unsuccessful 1715 Jacobite Rising. After the defeat, Jacobite commentators blamed many clans' leading men for acting similarly to how the Fianna act—or more accurately, fail to act—in this poem.⁵ The Fianna here are too preoccupied with squabbling amongst themselves over domestic matters to protect the Gaels from any foreign encroachment, be it an otherworldly, five-headed giant or the Hanoverian forces during the 1715 Rising. As the tailor notes, even in the relatively successful Battle of Sheriffmuir, not all of the Jacobite chieftains came out:

Bha mise 'm Monadh an t-Siorraim
 Cuim' nach innsinn duitse, Dhiarmaid,
 Gun d'rinn Clann Dòmhnail an dligheadh
 'S theich Diùc Ghòrdain às na cianaibh?

I was at Sheriffmuir
 Why would I not tell you Diarmad,
 That Clan Donald did their duty
 While the Duke of Gordon fled afar?
 (86.89–92)

This Rising was, in fact, marked by a general lack of commitment and cooperation on the Jacobite side, which is in turn representative of changing attitudes towards clan politics in the eighteenth century. As T. C. Smout (2007, 2) writes:

The seventeenth century had civil wars involving the enthusiastic participation of tens of thousands driven by passion and ideologies. The eighteenth century had risings, mostly minority interests leading small armies: even Mar at the battle of Sheriffmuir led only 4,000 against Argyle's one thousand or so government troops. Many thousands more of Mar's troops had 'melted away', such was their enthusiasm to live rather than to fight.

In the poem, Diarmad scolds his eighteenth-century countrymen for not calling on the Fianna, claiming that they would have succeeded where the contemporary Gaels failed (MacNeacail 86.93–96).

⁵ See *eg.* Sileas na Ceapaich's poems in response to the defeat, in which she decries those leaders who fled or brought too few men: Ó Baoill 1972.

However, the lack of cooperation among those Diarmad represents gives his boasts an empty ring. Perhaps like Clan Donald, Diarmad would have shown up, but it seems questionable whether he could really have gotten these fashion-obsessed Fianna to follow him any more than the Earl of Mar could unite the Jacobites in the 1715 Rising. Diarmad instructs the tailor to boast to his Glen Lochay kin *gun choisg [e] 'chaonnag* ‘that [he] quelled the strife’ that arose from the tailor’s visit (86.104). Ironically, as I read the poem, this is the only sort of ‘strife’ he appears able to ‘quell’ at this point: the kind that requires no *actual* action.

The satire in MacNeacail’s poem digs deeper yet than even this biting indictment of disunified Jacobites. MacNeacail does more than rail; he strikes directly at the heart of the matter, and he uses the tailor and his commissioned wares to do so. William J. Watson, in his edition of the poem in *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig*, was the first to comment on the modes of dress adopted by the pre-Christian heroes in the poem. Watson notes their ‘amusing [anachronism]’ and asserts that the discrepancy is ‘doubtless intentional’ (1932, 290). I agree; in fact, I think MacNeacail invests quite a bit of meaning in his characters’ choice of attire. If we look beyond the comedic element in the poem—that is, the absurdity that the heroic Fianna have become distracted by fashion—we might note that their obsession is fixated on a particular type of fashion that is not in keeping with the heroic, chiefly ideal exemplified by Cù Chulainn, but reflective of a newer, more ‘British’ set of values.

The articles of clothing commissioned are: *triubhas* ‘trews’ for Cù Chulainn, *casag mhaiseach* ‘a splendid cassock’ for Goll, *briogais den mheilmhinn* ‘a pair of velvet breeches’ for Fionn, and *còtan sìoda* ‘a silken doublet’ for Osgar (MacNeacail 2001, 80.9, 5; 82.34; 84.51). The language used to describe these items reflects their significance within the poem. Turning first to the description of the trews requested by Cù Chulainn, the idealized warrior-chieftain, we can see that to him, these appear to be a purely functional item; no space is allotted in the poem to the fabric or style he would like. Nor are the trews even the primary focus of the passage in which they are mentioned. Rather, the mention of their production sets the scene for a description of a great act of prowess; the tailor was only present to witness and record

the hero's defeat of a five-headed giant because he was making Cù Chulainn's trews:

Chaidh mi dul a dhèanamh triubhais
Do Chù Chulainn an Dùn Dealgan;
Air a bhith dhòmhsa ga chumadh
Thàinig fomhair a-steach d'ar n-ionnsaigh.

I went one time to make some trews
For Cù Chulainn in Dundalk;
When I'd started on the pattern
In came a giant who bore down upon us.
(80.9–12)

The language used to describe the Fianna's articles of clothing, on the other hand, shows that they are far more invested in their appearance. Goll, for instance, does not have a cassock made simply to keep him warm and dry; his cassock needs to look *maiseach* 'splendid.' And Fionn and Osgar do not want clothing made out of just any fabric, but luxury fabrics like *sìoda* 'silk' and *meilmhinn* 'velvet.' The grandeur of their clothing, and the speed with which they are able to get it, is their primary concern.

Moving beyond the poet's use of language, the types of clothing requested are indeed highly significant. Once again, it is possible to view Cù Chulainn's order differently from the others. Cù Chulainn requests appropriate attire for the sort of Highland chieftain praised in bardic verse. Trews appear in descriptions and illustrations of Highland gentlemen dating back at least to the sixteenth century (Kirkwood 1975, 23; Dunbar 1962, 26, 35, 52).⁶ They were tight-fitting and could be worn beneath a belted plaid to keep the legs warm in winter. They would also have been practical for riding, and seem to have been most common amongst those wealthy enough to own and ride horses, i.e. chieftains and other members of the Highland gentry (Burt 1754.2, 184; McClintock 1949, 15; Cheape 2006, 22). At the

⁶ In his seminal study of Highland dress, H. F. McClintock claims a 'great antiquity' for the trews, possibly even 'dating from pre-Christian days' in Ireland (1949, 104); however, the most reliable descriptions and illustrations date from the post-medieval period. See Dunbar 1962, 52 on the ambiguity of the early evidence.

turn of the eighteenth century, Martin Martin describes the trews worn by men in the Western Isles, noting that they could be ‘coloured’ or ‘striped,’ by which he may mean a tartan pattern (1703, 206–207).⁷ Whatever their colour or style, trews were recognized as an integral part of the attire of the Highland gentry. We see this most poignantly in the provision of the 1746 Disarming Act forbidding Highlanders to wear Highland clothing, including trews, thenceforth. The act reads:

And be it further enacted by the Authority aforesaid, That from and after the first Day of August, One thousand seven hundred and forty seven, no Man or Boy, within that Part of Great Britain called Scotland, other than such as shall be employed as Officers and Soldiers in his Majesty’s Forces, Shall, on any Pretence whatsoever, wear or put on the Clothes commonly called Highland Clothes (that is to say) the Plaid, Philibeg, or little Kilt, Trowse, Shoulder Belts, or any Part whatsoever of what peculiarly belongs to the Highland Garb...

(Act 1746, 596)

While the Disarming Act postdates MacNeacail’s poem, when considered alongside earlier source data, it shows Cù Chulainn not only to be acting the part of the ideal Highland chieftain, but dressing the part as well.

The Fianna, on the other hand, commission items not particular to the Highlands, but representative of contemporary British styles. Fionn desires *briogais den mheilmhinn* ‘velvet breeches’ rather than a belted plaid, and Osgar and Goll request *còtan sìoda* ‘a silken doublet’ and *casag mhaiseach* ‘a splendid cassock’ rather than Highland-style short coats.⁸ The Fianna’s clothing choices indicate three things, the

⁷ James Scarlett asserts that early descriptions of tartan patterns often used words such as “‘Striped”, “Marled”, and “Variegated”” because prior to the early nineteenth century, the word ‘tartan’ did not necessarily imply a particular pattern, but could simply distinguish ‘a type of woolen cloth’ (1987, 65). Illustrations depicting tartan trews from this era can be found in Cheape 2006 (22, 29), Dunbar 1962 (Plates 16, 17, 19), and McClintock 1949 (Illustrations 10, 15, 16).

⁸ A Highland short coat could be worn over a belted plaid without restricting the use of the upper portion of the plaid, whereas a long coat like Goll’s cassock could not. See Cheape 2006, 41; Dunbar 1962, 26, 35; MacClintock 1949, 30–31; Burt 1754.2, 183.

first being that they are wealthy men of high status. In the early eighteenth century, much of the fabric used for clothing in Highland Scotland was still home-spun (Nenadic 2010, 144). Luxury fabrics like velvet and silk had to be imported into Scotland at the time, and were therefore costly and not available to ordinary people.⁹ Second, the Fianna's clothing choices indicate that they travel to and from the Lowlands, since they are familiar with mainstream British styles of gentlemanly attire. Elite forms of Highland dress, such as fine short coats and plaids coloured with bright, imported red and blue dyes, were available at the time to those who could afford them—but Fionn and his men have an eye to the luxurious dress of another elite (Cheape 2010, 26; Dunbar 1962, 226, 229).¹⁰ And third, the Fianna's chosen attire indicates that they have an interest in displaying their status in a Lowland sphere that Cù Chulainn does not. The Fianna and Cù Chulainn are ideologically different. While Cù Chulainn dresses—and lives—as a warrior chieftain, the Fianna readily clothe themselves in lavish forms of Lowland attire.

MacNeacail's depiction of the Gaelic Fianna adopting Lowland styles is reflective of a historical trend among the Highland gentry, as a range of contemporary commentary on dress in the Highlands confirms. There is some evidence that in the mid-sixteenth century, it

⁹ In Scotland, most foreign-made silk products, including those from England, were banned in the decades immediately prior to the Union (Warner 1921, 350–352, 359). Afterwards, Asian- and French-woven silks were prohibited in Britain until 1713 (although such goods could be obtained from smugglers), from which time significant duties were placed on imported silk products. While this greatly boosted trade in English-woven silk (from imported raw material), French silk was generally seen as the most fashionable in Britain and remained popular despite any duties or prohibition (Herz 1909, 711, 720; Cf. Lee-Whitman 1982, 39). While a small quantity of silk was being woven in Scotland, the primary products appear to have been stockings and gloves (Warner 1921, 353–358). Thus, at the time MacNeacail was composing, silk and velvet (a silk product) for tailored items would most likely have come from England or France.

¹⁰ The authors of the *Vestiarium Scoticum* claim that some of the gentry even possessed plaids of European-woven silk. While this source is known to be unfaithful and I have not been able to verify whether or not men wore silk plaids, there is evidence of silk and silk-lined plaids being worn by elite Highland women in the early eighteenth century (Cheape 2006, 42; Burt 1754.1, 100; McClintock 1949, 5, 60).

would be unlikely for a Highlander to possess foreign accoutrements such as doublets or hose (Dunbar 1962, 27).¹¹ However, by the time MacNeacail was composing, it seems that Lowland dress was becoming all too common for many of the gentry. For instance, Martin Martin asserts that in the Western Isles around the turn of the eighteenth century, ‘Persons of Distinction [...] now generally use Coat, Wastcoat, and Breeches, as elsewhere’ (1703, 206). This change in habit prompted a reaction from other Highlanders. In a recent article, Hugh Cheape explores the cultural response to some Gaelic leaders’ abandonment of Highland dress as early as the mid-seventeenth century. He writes that ‘Highland dress began to be articulated within Gaelic culture as a touchstone of loyalty to traditional values. Anyone seen to be moving away from these, like Highland leaders who were being lured into espousal of Lowland and English politics, would be roundly criticized.’ Cheape evidences the Keppoch Bard, Iain Lom’s criticism of the Glengarry chieftain’s frequent absences and altered dress, in which the poet recommends that his chieftain re-adopt the Highland *còt* ‘short coat,’ *breacan* ‘plaid,’ and *triubhas* ‘trews’—and along with them, Highland ways of life (Cheape 2010, 26; Mac Dhòmhnail 1964, 124.1568, 1571).

Negative stereotypes against Lowland attire abound in poetry of this period as poets react to the growing trend among the gentry to adopt Lowland political, cultural, and sartorial modes. In the same sort of Gaelic panegyric that MacNeacail emulates in his description of Cù Chulainn, the heroic warrior chieftain is gloriously clad in his tartan plaid, while the breeches, cloaks, cassocks, etc. of his Lowland compatriots are uniformly denigrated as unmanly attire (MacInnes 1989, 94–95). Indeed, the powerful psychological effect of the Disarming Act depended upon the pervasive nature of such perceptions of Highland and Lowland clothing; it is what led later poets like Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir to denounce *teanndachd nam briogaisean* ‘the confinement to the breeches’ (1952, 12.180) and

¹¹ The Earl of Huntly saw fit to levy doublets and hose on Highland regiments in 1552, evidencing that they were not already in possession of such items. Descriptions of Highland attire in the sixteenth century vary with regard to particular details, but they agree in describing Highland dress as distinct from Lowland or English dress. See Dunbar 1962, 25–33.

Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair to decry *An t-aodach bòidheach, bòsdail, dreachmhor / A thoirt bhuainn airson mùtan casaig* ‘That the handsome, lovely clothes we boasted / should be exchanged for a ragged cassock’ (1993, 46.357–358).¹² The Fianna’s adoption of Lowland attire in a poem that references the panegyric mode, in which a strongly negative view of Lowland clothing prevails, is therefore significant. The implied message, I contend, is that the Fianna, like many among the contemporary Gaelic gentry, are consciously ambivalent to such pervasive critique. Their clothing choices suggest that their values align more closely with Lowland values than those of the Highland *populus*. Their satirical, bickering ineptitude indicates the poet’s deep disaffection for this newly imported value system.

The Fianna’s fashion choices are critically reflective of the choices and attitudes of many of the Highland gentry at the time. The value system to which these men adhered was, to a large extent, resultant of social changes that had been steadily occurring since the early seventeenth century as Highlanders began (not entirely of their own impetus) to enter the Lowland market economy. With periodic travel to the Lowlands, people like cattle drovers and the upper class elite were among the first to become familiar with aspects of commercialized society and, particularly with regard to the elite, to develop skills in English (Nenadic 2007, 5, 139).¹³ By the early

¹² The editors’ translations are retained. While Derick Thomson’s translation of Alasdair’s poem is the most modern, he provides only an excerpt of the poem. The full edition can be found in Campbell 1984.

¹³ Initially, Highland elite travel to the Lowlands was dictated by the Crown. Nominally from 1609, and in actual practice from 1616, the Highland gentry were required to appear annually before the Privy Council in Edinburgh. The 1609 Statutes of Iona dictated that landowners possessing at least sixty cattle must send their eldest sons or daughters (if they had no sons) to be educated in the Lowlands, and from 1616 all children of the gentry over nine years of age were required to be educated in the Lowlands in order to learn English; those who were not fluent in English from this point forward were legally barred from inheriting property (Roberts 2000, 142–143; Macinnes 1996, 72, 76; Withers 1988, 113). While there were attempts in the seventeenth century to spread the English language more generally throughout the Highlands through Acts passed in 1616, 1646, and 1696 calling for the establishment of schools, there is little evidence that such efforts were productive prior to the establishment of SSPCK schools in the eighteenth century (Withers 1988, 114, 136).

eighteenth century, the Highland gentry—the majority of whom were readily conversant in English—were not only in the habit of venturing to the Lowlands and further afield, but commercialized society had also begun to come to them: itinerant salesmen and tailors conveyed goods and services even to remote areas, and small towns and market centres had been established both inland and as far afield as the Inner Hebrides (Nenadic 2010, 144; 2005, 216; Withers 1988, 90; Burt 1754.1, 41; Martin 1703, 346). As the gentry's economic involvement increased, the way they perceived customary traditions and their own and others' roles in Highland society began to alter. Such alterations in outlook were encouraged by the State, which was deeply invested in 'civilising' the Highlanders and 'shap[ing] their beliefs and values' to match those of a more manageable, mainstream British population (Nenadic 2007, 8). The new, economically-based value system privileged individualism and discouraged the sort of clan-oriented outlook that had led tens of thousands to rise up in the past.¹⁴ It also led to a preoccupation with personal wealth and display. Like the elite across Britain, the Highland gentry had begun to show an interest in keeping up with the latest fashions. The Fionns and Osgars among them commissioned their velvet breeches and silk doublets and wore them proudly when they journeyed into town.¹⁵ For them, adhering to the dictates of fashion had become necessary in order to uphold their

¹⁴ Withers notes that 'loyalty to clan and chief, a persistent belief in customary traditions and rights of occupation and elements of feudal control of land were [...] all interwoven elements in the fabric of Highland society' (1988, 78). Edmund Burt's Highland commentary (1720s) affirms such a description of the people's loyalty to their chieftains, as well as the reciprocal protection the chieftains were meant to offer their people under the clan system (1754.2, 92–96). Burt adds, however, that while 'the middling and ordinary Highlanders [were] very tenacious of old Customs,' their leaders had become less so and had begun, by that time, to hold a hybrid social position (94).

¹⁵ Writing in the late eighteenth century, John Ramsay of Ochtertyre asserts that in the first half of that century, the Highland gentry were known to dress lavishly on visits 'to the low country' (1888, 83). *Cf.* Nenadic's finding that 'some Highland gentlemen, including Colin Campbell of Glenure in the 1740s, wore different clothes in the Highlands to those they wore when visiting the Lowlands (2010, 146).

status in the company of both the Lowland elite and fellow stylishly dressed members of the Highland gentry.

While the outlook and habits of many of the gentry had changed radically, however, those of ordinary Highlanders had not undergone such a major shift. Because they had a lesser stake in economic matters, next to no competence in English, and little reason or opportunity to venture into the Lowlands, ordinary people were significantly less prone to the influence of Lowland ideas. Edmund Burt, an English military engineer who composed a series of letters while working on a roads project in the Highlands in the 1720s, documents the disapproval a group of such individuals held of their lairds' altered behavior. Burt describes witnessing the women of a clan take great offense upon seeing one of their local gentry going about dressed in a Lowland-style outfit, complete with a long coat something like the one Goll requests in MacNeacail's poem. Burt describes his conversation with the Highland gentleman about the incident in this way:

I asked him wherein he had offended them? Upon this Question he laughed, and told me [...] that their Reproach was, that he could not be contented with the Garb of his Ancestors, but was degenerated into a Lowlander, and condescended to follow their unmanly Fashions.

(1754.2, 191–192)

While Burt portrays the women as reacting simply to their laird's fashion choices, the deep and pervasive disapproval that he records suggests that for the women, much like MacNeacail (and Iain Lom before him), the Lowland clothing at issue was symbolic of an accompanying Lowland value system. Even though their outward expression of disapproval centred upon their laird's clothing, it seems likely that the root of their grievance was his noticeable adoption of foreign values that were affecting not only his wardrobe, but other aspects of his life. The women were not simply upset that the laird was dressing in Lowland clothing, but that he had abandoned Highland ways of life to the point that he was, as Burt relates, 'degenerated into a Lowlander.'

What made the gentry's newly adopted value system problematic for people like Burt's group of women and our poet was that it was beginning to impact the lower classes negatively. Like their Lowland and English counterparts, the Highland gentry had begun to expend

vast amounts of money to dress and maintain themselves. One commentator describes the prevailing situation among the British elite in this way:

Expenditure was as vital as income in the world of Britain's landed families. Consumption, the purchase and use of goods and services, was inseparable from elite social activities. [...] Whatever the motivations, and amidst discrepancies in relative wealth and expenditure, members of the eighteenth-century landed class constructed a shared material culture built to a large degree by their money and their passion to consume.

(Henry 2002, 314)

The 'discrepancies in relative wealth and expenditure' could, at times, be significant. According to Richard Steele, writing in the 4 June 1711 edition of the popular, middle-class moral periodical, *The Spectator*, 'Our Gentry are, generally speaking, in debt; and many families have put it into a kind of Method of being so from Generation to Generation.' The cause: '[keeping] up a Farce of Retinue and Grandeur within [their] own House[s]' (1998, 208). Joseph Addison, in the 3 May 1711 edition, expresses a similar complaint when he rails against 'the Pleasures of Luxury,' writing that 'as these Pleasures are very expensive, they put those who are addicted to them upon raising fresh Supplies of Money, by all the Methods of Rapaciousness and Corruption' (1998, 201). It seems that many of the Highland gentry were, to use Addison's phrase, 'addicted' to 'the Pleasures of Luxury,' and their spending was driving them into levels of debt out of which they could only rise by discovering 'fresh Supplies of Money.' John Roberts documents examples of excessive spending as early as the latter half of the seventeenth century by a MacLeod of Dunvegan, a MacDonald of Glengarry, and a MacDonald of Sleat (who very nearly bankrupted his family) (2000, 143–144; cf. Macinnes 1996, 148). The situation became further exacerbated in the eighteenth century as the Highland gentry strove to present themselves in similar styles to Lowland gentlemen on the income of estates that simply could not support that level of display (Devine 1999, 227–228; Macinnes 1996, 171, 224, 232).

In order to continue to support their lifestyles, the Highland gentry desperately needed to increase their revenues. Turning critical eyes to their land and people, they began to perceive 'the products of their

estates as private property' with commodity values that could be augmented and exploited (Nenadic 2007, 4). By our period, ordinary Highlanders were already being affected by shifts away from the customary use of land in order to maximise revenues. Between the mid-seventeenth and the mid-eighteenth centuries, demands for rent in cash rather than kind became predominant (Devine 1999, 228). Rents also began to increase from the mid-seventeenth century as the gentry's needs became more critical, and in the early eighteenth century some consolidation from multiple to single tenancies had begun (Macinnes 1996, 142–148, 222). Consolidations and rent increases occurred with greater regularity in the latter half of the eighteenth century, during which time rents in many regions 'at the very least tripled' (Mackillop 1999, 240). An increasing interest in land improvement projects is evident among the Highland gentry from the early eighteenth century, as well. For instance, as early as 1706, the Campbells of Ardchattan began setting up companies to support ventures such as a tobacco-spinning cottage industry (Macinnes 1996, 226). By 1729, we find an Inverness-shire laird by the name of William Mackintosh publishing a lengthy agricultural tract advocating land enclosure (Smout 2007, 4; Nenadic 2007, 187–188). And from 1735, the gentry who formed the Argyll Company of Farmers actively sought to undertake similarly ambitious projects (Macinnes 1996, 224–225). By the post-Culloden period, the region abounded with improvement schemes which were generally to the detriment of ordinary, landless Highlanders. As communal land was progressively privatised in order to pasture cattle or sheep, tenants struggled to afford increased rents (Mackillop 1999, 244–245). Some not only lost grazing and growing space, but were physically relocated as crofting systems were set up.¹⁶ To generate income, many people soon found it necessary to take up external employment such as fishing, kelping,

¹⁶ Thomas Devine (1999, 231) comments on the speed with which such changes could take effect: 'In the middle decades of the century the joint tenancy was still the dominant social formation in the western Highlands with land cultivated in runrig, pasture held in common and strong communal traditions associated with the tasks of herding, harvesting, peat-cutting and repair. Over less than three generations the joint farms were removed and replaced by a structure of separate smallholdings or crofts'.

distilling, or seasonal labour in the Lowlands (Mackillop 1999, 237; Macinnes 1996, 221, 223). Deploring the now exploitative nature of class relations in Highland society, many began to voluntarily migrate to cities or emigrate (Devine 1999, 234; Mackillop 1999, 248–249).¹⁷ The situation would, of course, come to a critical head with the mass evictions of the nineteenth century.

MacNeacail could not have known when composing his poem the devastating effects on Scottish Gaelic language and culture that would eventually result from the attitudes that he was taking to task, but he saw their danger. Composed before the banning of Highland dress in 1746, which forcibly converted all Highlanders to normative Lowland fashions, MacNeacail's *Laoidh an Tàilleir* highlights the early and ongoing nature of social—and sartorial—change in Scotland. His poem shines a critical light on some of the early eighteenth-century Highland gentry's readiness to leave their traditional way of life behind in pursuit of the comparative wealth of Lowland lords. Over the course of the eighteenth century, the ideological shift to which MacNeacail gestures indeed prompted irrevocable changes in Highland society. What is more, the new ideology was pervasive, coming to affect both highborn and low, regardless of religious bent or political affiliation. While 'tenurial tinkering' was under way in Hanoverian Argyll, the Jacobite, William Mackintosh was writing his agricultural tract from the prison cell he earned for his role in the 1715 Rising (Macinnes 1996, 222; Smout 2007, 4). In the end none were immune to Britain's new ideological thrust and its effects. Comical as this poem is, in highlighting the gentry's altered socio-political focus, MacNeacail's little ditty is more than just an 'amusing parody' (Thomson 1989, 105); indeed, it can—and in my opinion, should—be read as a powerful precursor to later and more well-known poetic reflections on land improvement and clearance policies.

¹⁷ According to Devine (1999, 233), 'around 23–25 000 Highlanders emigrated for North America between 1700 and 1815 with the vast majority leaving after c.1760. [...] Highlanders contributed disproportionately to this outward flow'.

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