William Livingston/Uilleam Macdhunleibhe (1808-70): a survey of his poetry and prose


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Abstract

This thesis is a survey of the work in poetry and prose of William Livingston or Uilleam Mac Dhunleibhe, the Islay bard (1808-70). The version of his English surname without final "e" has been preferred because it is used in the definitive, 1882 edition of his poems and throughout the text (but not in the title) of the section of his own the Vindication. The first chapter, 'Biography and Background', gathers the available information on the poet's life, and attempts to set him in the context of the cultural, social and economic situation of Islay during the century preceding his birth. The second chapter, 'The Intellectual Background', investigates Livingston's reading and his knowledge and use of historical and antiquarian texts. His familiarity with the traditionary version of the origins of the Scottish monarchy, elaborated by patriotic historians before the Union, is especially interesting. Chapter Three, 'Polemicist and Historian', looks in detail at a work Livingston edited for publication, MacNichol's remarks on Dr Johnson's account of his journey through Gaelic Scotland, before turning to the poet's longest prose work, the Vindication of the Celtic Character. His shorter pamphlets and the incomplete History of Scotland are also examined. The fourth and fifth chapters explore Livingston's attitude to James Macpherson and to the Gaelic version of his Ossian, and attempt to decide to what extent and in what way he was influenced by the earlier poet. Explicit references to Macpherson in the poetry and prose are survey before the triangular relationship between Livingston the poet, Macpherson's work, and ballad material of various degrees of genuineness is discussed. The next two chapters offer close readings of the two major battle poems, 'Na Lochalannaich an Ile' and 'Blar Shunadail', while Chapters Eight and Nine look at the shorter battle poems, ranging from Mons Graupius, in the first century of the Christian era, to the battle at Gruinard Bay on Islay, which took place just before the union of the crow the battles of Alma and Balaklava in the Crimean War. Chapter Ten is devoted to Livingston's poetry of the Clearances. Its two main focuses are 'Cuimhneachan Bhr Alba' and 'Fios thun a' Bh'aird', and the thesis ends with a close reading of this, perhaps his most famous poem.