Classic Poetry Series

Evan MacColl

- 5 poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

Evan MacColl (21 September 1808 - 24 July 1898)

Evan MacColl (1808-1898) was a Scots-Canadian Gaelic poet who also produced poems in English. He was known as the "Clarsair-nam-beann" or the Mountain Minstrel. Later he became known as "the Gaelic Bard of Canada".

Early Life

Evan MacColl was born at Kenmore on the banks of Loch Fyne, Argyll and Bute, Scotland, on the September 21, 1808. His father was Dugald MacColl who was possessed of "the richest store of Celtic song of any man living in his part of the country." His mother, Mary Cameron, "was noted for her storehouse of traditional tales, legendary and fairy tales." She was also said to be something of an 'improvisatrice' or maker-up of tales. Though MacColl was fully employed farming and fishing, and later with road repairs, he nevertheless received a fair education. His father was fond of literature and procured books for his children when he could. Since the local village school offered a very poor education, his father employed a tutor who taught his son English and instilled in him a love of Burns and of English literature in general. He thus began his poetic efforts in boyhood.

Later Life

MacColl's family emigrated to Canada in 1831, but he could not make up his mind to leave his native land. He continued his employment in road repairs while composing many of his best Gaelic lyrics. He published his first book of poems at his own expense in Glasgow in 1836. This was The Mountain Minstrel; or, Clàrsach nam Beann, and it sold enough to give the author a small profit. In 1837 he began contributing to the Gaelic Magazine then published in Glasgow. From October 1838 to January 1839, MacColl made a tour of northeast Scotland which was recorded in a diary published by Alexander Mackenzie in his biography of MacColl. Later in 1839 he became a clerk with the Customs House in Liverpool. He remained in Liverpool until 1850, when, because of declining health, he obtained six months' leave of absence and visited friends and relatives in Canada. While staying on his brother's farm on the Trent River, he was introduced to the Hon. Malcolm Cameron, then a Minister of the Crown and was offered a position in the Canadian Customs at Kingston, Ontario, which he accepted. MacColl remained in this post for thirty years and was superannuated about the year 1880. His first wife was Frances Lewthwaite whom he married in Toxteth, Liverpool on May 6, 1847. He later married Isabella MacArthur in Kingston. He had nine children from one or both marriages. He died on 24 July 1898 in Toronto and was buried in Kingston.

Poetic Achievements

Dr. Norman McLeod, editor of Good Words, wrote as follows:
Evan MacColl's poetry is the product of a mind impressed with the beauty and the grandeur of the lovely scenes in which his infancy has been nursed. We have no hesitation in saying that the work is that of a man possessed of much poetic genius. Wild indeed and sometimes rough are his rhymes and epithets, yet there are thoughts so new and striking—images and comparisons so beautiful and original—feelings so warm and fresh that stamp this Highland peasant as no ordinary man.

MacColl had written numerous poems, mainly of a lyrical character, while in Canada. One of the most noted is his "Robin", written for the occasion of the Burns Centennial celebration in Kingston. The poem's easy and melodious expression is in excellent imitation of Burns' own style. He had been for many years the bard of the St. Andrew's Society of Kingston, and his anniversary poems are greatly appreciated by all Scotsmen. His poetic gifts were inherited by his daughter, Miss Mary J. MacColl, who published a meritorious little volume of poems entitled "Bide a wee," highly commended for their sweetness and delicacy.

Works:

Books

The Mountain Minstrel; or, Clàrsach nam Beann consisting of original poems and songs, in English and Gaelic, etc. Glasgow: Maclachlan & Stewart, 1836.
The English poetical works of Evan MacColl with a biographical sketch of the author by A. MacKenzie. (Contributor: Alexander Mackenzie, 1838-1898) Toronto : Hunter, Rose. Edinburgh : MacLachlan & Stewart, 1883.
(This 'biographical sketch' is a reprint of Mackenzie's biography in The Celtic Magazine of 1880-81.)
Clarsach nam Beann. An ceathramh do-bhualadh, meudaichte agus ath-leasaichte. [With plates, including portraits.] Glasgow: Evan MacColl Memorial Committee, 1937.

Scores

Màiri: for 16-part choir a cappella. James MacMillan; words by Evan MacColl; English translation by James MacMillan. Boosey & Hawkes, c2003. (English words, translated from the original Scottish Gaelic of Evan MacColl; also printed for reference with French and German translations preceding score.)
Welcome, Snow. Text by Evan MacColl. Author: Joseph Roff 1910-. New York: Leeds Music Corporation, [1959].
Suaicheantas na H-Alba, Gaelic text by Evan MacColl, translated by Malcolm MacFarlane as 'The Badge of Scotland' (more popularly known as 'The Thistle o' Scotland'), and accompaniment by Frederick W. Whitehead. Published in Songs of the Highlands, Inverness: Logan and Co., [1902].

Archives

Archive material held by the Mitchell Library, Glasgow: 24 items donated by the Evan MacColl Memorial Committee in 1937. Miscellaneous handwritten, typescript and printed material by or relating to Evan MacColl; including letters, cuttings, photographs etc., mainly dating from the period of his life in Canada; also, a synopsis of a proposed biography by Alexander Fraser.

A Lover's Lament

In vain do springtime's many charms essay
To chase the gloom in Aray's glen to-day ;
The strains that there once charmed my listening ear
Can ne'er again avail my heart to cheer.
When that fair star, so late my soul's delight,
Hath vanished, never more to cheer my sight,
—
'When my fond heart, sad-missing joy so brief,
Lies in the dust, enamoured of its grief,
—

When, for the couch she soon might reach, fove-led.
The grave becometh Jessie's bridal bed.
Well may the tears of friendship freely flow,
And life to me be an unending woe.
Insatiate Death ! was it to make us see
How all impartial fly thy arrows, we
Are left to mourn her dead, whose graces might
Make even thee ashamed our prayers to slight ?

Alas for Life ! its frail unequal thread
Is, like the gossamer in sunshine spread,
The ready wreck of the first passing blast,
And yieldeth first where it should longest last.
'Tis thus that all too soon in death's cold sleep
Closed Jessie's eyes, while mine are left to weep ;
Better it were, than thus be left, to have
My own last sleep beside her iu the grave.
Shade of my love ! if it indeed be true
That spirits blest, though hidden from our view,
May still be round us, guardian angels rare,
Oh, be it mine to feel thee often near,—
An inspiration ever leading me
To justify thy loving sympathy
By actions such as may alone secure
The conscious favour of thy spirit pure.
Come then, in all thy wonted, loving grace.
Making the grief, now my sole guest, give place
To the sweet hope that, this vain hfe once o'er,
I'll see thee and be near thee evermore.

Evan MacColl

Loch-Duich

LooH-DuicH, hail ! Scene so all-resplendent!
Were power befitting my wish now mine,
Soon, in a song as my theme transcendent.
Thy charms unmatched would forever shine.
While storms are often o'er ocean sweeping,
Unbroken here is thy slumber, deep
And calm as that of an infant sleeping
Near some sad mother who wakes to weep.
Well may the skiff of the fisher daring.
When tempest-tossed on a sea more wide.
Be often seen towards thee glad-steering,
Assured of safety on thy calm tide.
Ye hills that soar in stern beauty yonder.
Proud watchers over Loch-duich's rest.
Well may ye glory to see your grandeur
Thus mirror'd daily in Duich's breast!

How grand the sight when, with night advancing.
The stars seem touching your summits bold !
Nor less the joy when, your charms enhancing.
The morning crowns you with wreaths of gold.
Hark ! 'tis yon urchins among tLe heather,
—
They see green woods in the lake below,
And fondly question each other whether
Brown nuts and berries may 'mong them grow!

The herd-boy near them, with no less wonder,
Sees kine within the lake's bosom clear,
And thankful seems, as he looketh on there,
The he d he tendeth himself still near !
DunDonnan !* tow'ring there, grim and ^oary
—
Thou ghost of greatness long passed away,
Outliving scenes once thy grace and glory.
Good cause thou hast to look sad and gray.
Thou seem'st like Ossian, alone, lamenting
His vanished prowess—his kindred dead ;
Time, thy stern foeman, knows no relenting ;
Soon, soon shall all but thy fame be fled.
'Tis said,' when moonbeams are round thee gleaming,
Oft by thy sea-circled base is seen
A maiden form of the gentlest seeming.
Sad- singing there 'mong the seaweed green.
The passing fisherman shrewdly guesses
That hapless nymph of the golden hair
Is sad because of the missed caresses
From some false lover once hers to share !

Ye streams, that ever in grateful numbers
Pour to Loch-duich your tribute due,
I marvel not it so often slumbers.

Lulled by the anthems thus sung by you.
More properly, Caisteal Donnain, once the residence of the 'Stem son of
Lord Kenneth, high Chief of Kintail 1'MacColl's Poems. 125
Here—through fair, Jower-mantled meadows pasaiug,
Ye, lingering, waken your softest song ;
There—higher up, bright as sunbeams flashing,
Ye ceaseless roar, rage, and rush along

Scur-Orain, chief of a thousand mountains !
Storm-swept and bare though thy forehead be,
The stag delights to live by thy fountains ;—
Hark ! 'tis the crv of the Chase in thee !
What though, with fleetness the winds excelling,
The quarry far to the desert flies,
Ere ends that yell 'mong the rocks far-pealing
The antler'd Pride of the Forest dies.
Fain would I sing of yon dell roe-haunted,
And thou, Kiutail of the woodlands gay.
Where the cuckoo's first spring notes are chanted,
And wildflowers grace even Winter's sway !
Nor would Glensheil in my lay find wanting
The praises due to its minstrel throng.
But most of all to the charmers haunting
That happy Eden of love and song !
But time forbids. Fare thee well, Loch-duich !
Though thy green banks I no more may see,
While life's warm stream in my bosom floweth
I'll cease not lauding and loving thee.

Evan MacColl

Mairi Laghach

Chorus.—Hey, my winsome Mary,—
Mary fondly free !
Hey, my winsome Mary,
; Mary, mine to be !

Winsome, handsome Mary,
Who so fair as she ?
My own Highland lassie.
Dear as life to me !w^
130 MacColl's Poems.
Long ere in my bosom
Lodged Love's arrow keen,
Often with young Mary
In Gleiism'^oil I've beeii ;
Happy hours ! succeeded
By affection true,
Till there seem'd 'neath heaven
No such loving two !
Cnoiius.— Hey, my &o.
Often I and Mary
Desert haunts have sought,
Innocent of any
Evil deed or thought,
—
Cupid, sly enchanter.
Tempting us to stray
Where the leafy greenwood
Keeps the sun at bay.
Chorus.— Hey, my &c.

What although all Albin
And its wealth were mine,
How, without thee, da'^^Ung,
Could I fail to pine '/
As my bride to kiss tboo
I would prize far more
Than the all of treasure 4-:->
Europe has in store.
Chorus.—Hey, my &c.
tMacColl's Poems.
Fairer is tlio bosom
Of my loving one
Than the downy phimage
Of the floating swan ;

Hers the sHra waist graceful,
And the nock whose hue
Matches well the sea-gull's
Out on Gairloch blue.
Chorus — Hey, my &c.
What a wealth of tresses
Mary dear can show !

Crown of lustre rarer
Ne'er graced maiden brow.
'Tis but little dressing
Need those tresses rare,
Falhng fondly, proudly
O'er her shoulders fair.
Chorus.—Hey, my &o

Hers are teeth whose whiteness
Snow alone can peer ;
Hers the breath all fragrance,
Voice of loving cheer,
—
Cheeks of cherry ripeness,
Eyelids drooping down
'Neath a forehead never
Shadowed by a frown.
Chorus.—Hey, my &c.132
nMacColl's Poems.
Out on roj'al splendours !
Love best makes bis bed
'Mong the leaver and grasses
Of the sylvan shade,
Where the blissful breezes
Tell of bloom and balm,
And health-giving streamlets
Sing their ceaseless psalm.
Chorus. - Hey, my &c
Chobus.-
No mere music art-born
There our pleasures crowned
Music far more cheering
Nature for us found,
—
Jjarks in air, and thrushes
On each flow'ring thorn,
And the cuckoo hailing
Summer's gay return !
-Hey, my winsome Mary,
—
Mary fondly free !
Hey, my winsome Mary,
Mary, mine to be !
Winsome, handsome Mary,
Who so fair as sha ?
My own Highland lassie.
Dear as life to me !

Evan MacColl

The Child of Promise

She died — as die the roses
On the ruddy clouds of dawn,
When tlie envious sun discloses
His flame and morning's gone. ,
She died—like waves of sun -glow
By fleeting shadows chased;
She died— like heaven's rainbow
By gushing showers effaced.
She died—like snow glad-gracing
Some sea-marge fair, when lo !
Rude waves each other chasing,
Quick hide it 'neath their flow.
She died— as dies the glory
Of music's sweetest swell
:
She died—as dies the story
When the best is still to tell
She died— as dies moon-beaming.
When scowls the rayless main :
She died— like sweetest dreaming
Quick changed to waking pain.
She died— and died she early ;
Heaven wearied for its own.
As the dipping snn, my Mary,
Thy morning ray went down !

Evan MacColl

The Lake of the Thousand Isles

(For Music.)
Though Missouri'stide may majestic glide,
There's a curse on the soil it laves;
The Ohio, too, may be fair, but who
Would sojourn in the land of slaves?
Be my prouder lot a Canadian cot
And the bread of a freeman's toils;
Then hurrah for the land of the forests grand,
And the Lake of the Thousand Isles!
I would seek no wealth, at the cost of health,
'Mid the city's din and strife;
More I love the grace of fair nature's face,
And the calm of a woodland life;
I would shun the road by ambition trod,
And the lore which the heart defiles;--
Then hurrah for the land of the forests grand,
And the Lake of the Thousand Isles!

O away, away! I would gladly stray
Where the freedom I love is found;
Where the pine and oak by the woodman's stroke
Are disturbed in their ancient bound;
Where the gladsome swain reaps the golden grain,
And the trout from the stream beguiles;
Then hurrah for the land of the forests grand,
And the Lake of the Thousand Isles.

Evan MacColl