An Irish "Selkie": Robin Robertson's "Selkie" Dedicated to Michael Donaghy

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The Scottish poet Robin Robertson wrote a short poem entitled "Selkie" in memory of Michael Donaghy (1954-2004). Donaghy, an American poet of Irish descent, became famous mainly in Britain after moving to London. He edited Faber and Faber's *101 Poems about Childhood*, posthumously published in 2005. Donaghy, however, was not a specialist in children's or childhood poems. His poems treat various subjects such as literature, music, history, religion and even Japanese traditional arts, such as the Tea Ceremony or Incense Ceremony. Some of his poems show deep insight into personal identity or describe serious scenes of partings in a family; on the other hand, other poems reconstruct historical events in lyrical forms.

In "Selkie," the dead poet Donaghy temporarily returns to the world of the living, disguised as a "selkie," and plays a traditional Irish instrument. The selkie, or silkie, is an appellative for a seal or seal person, mainly used in Scotland. The seal people are folkloric supernatural creatures widely found in the stories of the British Isles and Northern European countries, and they have diverse names. Scottish and Irish stories of seal people are similar, but have some conspicuous differences. In this article, the questions how and why the supernatural seal is used in Robertson's poem will be investigated. By examining that, we can see how this lyrical piece succeeds in bringing together the works of the two poets, the dead and the living, and the Scottish and Irish folkloric imagination.

The whole of the poem is as follows:

SELKIE
in memory of Michael Donaghy

‘I’m not stopping,’
he said, shrugging off his skin
like a wet-suit, then stretching it
on the bodhrán’s frame,
‘let’s play.’
And he played till dawn:
all the jigs and reels
he knew, before he stood
and drained the last
from his glass, slipped back in
to the seal-skin,
into a new day, saluting us
with that famous grin:
‘That’s me away.’

This poem is accompanied by two notes. One points out that a “bodhrán” is a traditional Irish drum (81). This instrument powerfully implies Donaghy’s association with Ireland and Irish music. Although Michael Donaghy was an American, he inherited Irish blood. In the introduction to Donaghy’s *Collected Poems*, Sean O’Brien reveals an impressive episode where young Donaghy shocked his parents, who regarded their son as an Irish boy who happened to have been born in America, by saying that he

was an American (xiv). While the episode suggests his complicated attitude to Ireland, Donaghy was well-known as a good flutist of traditional Irish music. This implies that he accepted what he had inherited from his ancestral country to some extent. In "Selkie," the dead Donaghy plays the bodhrán rather than the flute, but it is possible that Donaghy may have played the drum well too, since some musicians of traditional Irish music play several kinds of instrument. If not, the reason why Robertson makes him play the drum is clear; Robertson would have wanted sealskin to be the material of the instrument played by the dead poet. We will later see how closely the sealskin is associated with the dead in the Scottish and Irish folkloric imagination.

As Robertson uses music in his poem, Donaghy also deals with music in some of his poems, alluding to his own Irish-American connections. Take an example. A series of poems entitled "O'Ryan's Belt" in *Errata* (1993) describes people immigrating to the United States. In them, Donaghy poetically and imaginatively reconstructs the lives of his ancestors or their comrades. The "O'Ryan" in the title of the series of poems is "'Patrolman Jack O'Ryan, violin',/ a Sligo fiddler in dry America" ("The Hunter 's Purse" 2-3). A legend of this Irish musician is recounted: "he played Manhattan's ceilidhs,/ fell asleep drunk one snowy Christmas/ on a Central Park bench and froze solid./ They shipped his corpse home, like his records" ("The Hunter's Purse 4-7). "Ceilidh" means an Irish dance session. Drunken Irish musicians once in America are common poetical figures both in "O'Ryan's Belt" and "Selkie," although the musician appearing in the latter had declared himself an American.

Actually, since the poem is dedicated to Donaghy, it is likely that Robertson had some of Donaghy's poems in mind when he wrote "Selkie."

Drinking provides a key to link "Selkie" with a poem of Donaghy's in which other supernatural creatures appear. In "Selkie," Selkie-Donaghy plays traditional Irish music with the bodhrán: "he [. . .] shrugging off his skin/ like a wet-suit, then stretching it/ on the bodhrán's frame,/ 'let's play.'/ And he played till dawn:/ all the jigs and reels/ he knew. . ." (2-8). Jigs and reels are traditional Irish music for dancing. Sessions of Irish dancing with traditional music are often performed at a pub, which means with drinks. In fact, the dead Donaghy seems to play jigs and reels at a place where he can drink because, just before he leaves there, "he drained the last/ from his glass. . ." (9-10). In this action, one of the most powerful poetic echoes from Donaghy's poems in Robertson's works can be found. In Donaghy's first collection of poetry, *Shibboleth* (1988), there is a poem entitled "A Miracle," consisting of five four-line stanzas. In the poem, "angels" come to the earth to do some miracle, although they do not seem to be temperate enough to do it:

> The angels have come early for the miracle.
> They've gotten into the bar and drunk it dry.
> Grinning, staggering, shedding feathers,
> They can barely stand up, let alone fly. (9-12)

In "Selkie," Donaghy "drained the last/ from his glass" (9-10) and salutes "with that famous grin" (13). The dead poet/supernatural water creature grins after drinking just like the angels coming to do the miracle, although he does not stagger. It may be true that the "famous grin" in "Selkie" was actually the poet's charming big smile, well-known among his friends when he was alive. Nevertheless, the connection between drinking and grinning

also implies close ties between the poems of the two poets.

* * *

As mentioned above, "Selkie" is accompanied by two notes. The second note says that a "selkie" is a legendary creature who takes the form of a seal in water and can cast off its pelts on land "in Celtic legend" (81). We will here focus on the phrase "Celtic legend," since this phrase suggests a Scottish-Irish legendary connection which must have inspired Robertson to let Donaghy take the form of a seal in "Selkie."

A more pedantic version of the note would state "in one version of Celtic legend," or "in the Celtic legend of a certain district," instead of just "in Celtic legend." Since the late 19th century, the "Celtic" connections between Scotland and Ireland have been spotlighted often as both of them have Gaelic-language native cultures. They have some commonalities, and the seal people in their folk stories are a good example. In both countries, many stories of seal people have been collected. In Scotland, however, the legendary sea creature with sealskin is generally called a "selkie," while it is called a "seal woman" or even "mermaid" in Ireland. The folk stories of seals both in Scotland and Ireland are similar, but they have some differences. Both countries have boasted the cultures called "Celtic," but they are not one "Celtic" culture.

This "Celtic" supernatural creature has fascinated many Scottish writers. For instance in the late 19th century, William Sharp (1855-1905), or Fiona Macleod, wrote fantastic short stories with a strong "Celtic" flavor. Some such stories in *The Sin-Eater and Other Tales* (1895) or in *The Washer of the Fort* (1896) feature seal people. Also, although he was not born in Scotland

(but died in Orkney), Eric Linklater (1899-1974) published a realistic and slightly neurotic short story, "Sealskin Trousers," in 1947, which clearly originated from a seal people folk tale or legend.

More recently, George Mackay Brown (1921-1996) embedded this folk tale in his *Beside the Ocean of Time* (1994). In his dream, the protagonist of the story, Thorfinn Ragnarson, comes across men and women dancing on the seashore.

> The young man was back again, at twilight, among the dunes.
>
> And there, on the sand, glimmering, were men and women—strangers—dancing! And the rocks were strewn with sealskins.
>
> The seal people danced to music unheard. (137)

The story incorporated into Brown's contemporary novel is a standard version of the selkie folk tales. In these, a man, in most cases a fisherman, comes across naked people dancing on the shore at night. He finds sealskins there and steals one of them. The naked people are seal people, and the seal woman whose skin he has taken with him cannot return to the depths of the sea. The seal woman marries the man and bears several children. But she later happens to discover her sealskin hidden in some secret place. She returns to the sea, leaving her human family.[1] In addition to these types of seal tales, Scottish people, especially those living along the coastal areas or the Highlands, enjoyed various kinds of tales or legends featuring this aquatic character, calling her a selkie or silkie.

Robin Robertson can be also nominated as one of the contemporary Scottish writers who appreciate this creature. "Selkie" is included in his third collection of poems, *Swithering* (2006). "Swither" means "hesitate" in

Scottish English. In this collection, "Selkie" is not the only poem in which seals or seal people appear. For example in "Between the Harvest and the Hunter's Moon," watching the waves at night, the narrator of the poem muses: "it's hard to tell if the long black shapes/ are drifting seals, or reefs. . ." (10-11). On the other hand, "On Pharos" starts as follows: "Four hollows and four seal-skins/ on the beach, by a cave, their stink/ undercut by the faint scent of ambrosia. . ." (1-3). The narrator, however, blows away the magical scent and gets back to the everyday life, saying: "Seemed quiet enough now, though,/ so we went and got our towels from the car" (12-13).

Swithering has two poems including the name of a Grecian-mythical character, Actaeon, in their titles. Actaeon the hunter peeped at the goddess Artemis bathing in a spring. To punish his misdeed, he was turned into a deer and torn asunder by his own dogs. Of the two poems, "Actaeon: The Early Years" directly adapts a legendary episode of seal people.

> You could smell the herring-catch come in each morning,
> taste sea-salt on everything. Some folk swam
> before they walked, they say, like his first girlfriend
> with her lucken toes—said
> to bring good fortune, show
> that seal-blood sang in the veins. (73-78)

The "lucken toes" are toes joined by a web of skin. People having them were believed to be people of seal-blood in some coastal or insular areas of Scotland. They have been generally said to be good swimmers.[2]

One of the unique features of Robertson's selection of poetical topics should be examined here since this investigation will show poetical

connections between Scotland and Ireland, especially Northern Ireland, as well as the shared tradition of seal-people. Now living in London, Robertson is originally from the northeast coast of Scotland. He likes using place names for the titles of his poems, and one poem in his first collection, *A Painted Field*, entitled "Aberdeen," suggests his tight connection with the place. On the other hand, the poems entitled "Advent in Co. Fermanagh" and "Hands of a Farmer in Co. Tyrone" in *A Painted Field* imply that he felt a strong poetic sympathy with Ireland, especially its northern part. In his second collection, *Slow Air*, appears the poem "Dead Sheep in Co. Derry." The counties Fermanagh, Tyrone and Derry (or Londonderry) are all found in Northern Ireland. *Swithering* also has poems with titles including Irish place names such as "Drowning in Co. Down," "Calcutta, Co. Armagh," and "Donegal." Counties Down and Armagh are also in Northern Ireland, although Donegal is in the Republic of Ireland. Nevertheless, Donegal is just beside Northern Ireland; and thus it is in the northern part of the island, too.

The fact that most of the places in Ireland which Robertson used for his poems are concerned with Northern Ireland is suggestive. Just like Scotland, Ireland has many folk legends and tales of seal people, although they are not called "selkies" in Ireland. Among the Irish districts having seal beliefs, it is the coastal areas of Northern Ireland where they are particularly prominent. Especially, the only inhabited island of Northern Ireland, Rathlin Island, formerly called Raghery, is very rich in seal-belief tradition.[3]

Actually, two of the most celebrated Northern-Irish poets wrote poems with motifs of Irish seal-people stories. One of striking characters of Irish folk legends and tales on seals is that seal women are often confused with

mermaids, and that sometimes seals are called "mermaids" as many prominent folklore scholars point out (Note no. 8 in Almqvist 4-5, Lysaght 160 and Ní Fhloinn 234). Consequently, the poems in which both poets describe supernatural sea creatures called mermaids include strong allusions to seal people. Seamus Heaney's "Maighdean Mara," meaning "Sea Maiden," is dedicated to "Seán Oh-Eocha" or Seán Ó hEochaidh, a famous folk-tale collector. Heaney met this collector in his undergraduate days at Queen's University in Belfast (Almqvist 20). The mermaid in the poem, dreaming after having escaped from the land, has "shin and thigh" (5), not a fishtail. The story taken into the poem has the typical story pattern of the seal woman captured on the land because of the theft of her magical garment. On the other hand, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill wrote many poems treating mermaids or mermen. She even published serial poems with mermaid motifs with Paul Muldoon's English translation under the title of *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*. Most of the mermaids depicted in Ní Dhomhnaill's poems clearly have fishtails, but some of the poems address the stories with the basic pattern of seal-woman folk tales mentioned above, and in one such poem, "Filleadh na Murúiche ar an dTír-fó-Thoinn (The Mermaid Returns to Land-Under-Wave)," she directly uses the phrase "seithe róin" (sealskin) (10).[4] A poetical connection between Scotland and Ireland through the folk-belief motif can be here observed.

There is another tendency in Robertson's selection of poetical topics which seems to be tightly associated with the reason why he chose to associate his friend Donaghy with the supernatural aquatic creature. In many of Robertson's poems, even in his first collection, water and death are prominent themes. They have been continuously treated up to his latest collection, published in 2010, as its title, *The Wrecking Light*, suggests.

Swithering also includes many poems with the themes of water and death. For example, the following lines of "Crossing the Archipelago" in the collection represent the beautiful scenery of the Swedish coast and allude to the destiny of every life which inevitably ebbs away and finally dies:

> . . . The sea at Djurgården is a mirror
> of lost light. I watch snowflakes fall on water,
> transparent as tissue, melting back to nothing,
> the black water's endless echo of the night. . . .
> . . . Hopeless to return
> now: my future lit by bridges, and their burning. (6-14)

The two poems treating Actaeon discussed earlier are also good examples. They are as a matter of course accompanied with images of water and death because the Grecian myth itself is a story of water and death: the hunter peeping at the bathing goddess is killed by his own dogs.

Robertson's poems with seal motifs may be categorized into his water-and-death poem group because the phrase, "a story of water and death," can be applied to many folk legends and tales of seals. Stories of seal people have been generally told by people living along the seashore. They know seals come from the depth of the sea full of the drowned or wrecked, and in the old days, they often hunted and killed seals on the shore to get oil and pelts.

The association between seals and the image of death in Irish folk belief is pointed out by scholars (Ballard 34; Ní Fhloinn 240). On the other hand, the Scottish storyteller, singer and writer Duncan Williamson (1928-2007) describes a striking episode showing the deep-rooted relationship between

Scottish selkies and death. Williamson collected various stories of "silkies" from Gaelic speaking crofters of the West Coast of Scotland, and retold and rewrote them. In the introduction to his own stories of seals, *Tales of the Seal People: Scottish Folk Tales* (1992), he points out one of the characteristics of the seal people stories as follows: "But the importance of the silkie is its part in the Other World, or after-life" (1). In the introduction, he argues that the stories have a therapeutic effect on the surviving relatives of those lost at sea. Along the Scottish seashores, there are many "beautiful" stories of seal people. Some of them are not simple folk tales, but legends in a folkloric sense; they are believed to be true stories by local people. In such stories of folk belief, the people who died in the sea are told to join the tribe of seal people and return to their families a decade or so later without having aged, since they were dead as humans. He introduces an actual example of the therapeutic power of the seal-people story, even in the present day, as follows:

> . . . I was doing a session in the Hopeman Library up on the Moray Firth and I explained to the children what seal stories were about. This child of twelve . . . came up to me after the session was finished. He said, 'Mr Williamson, you made me very happy. . . . [Y]ou see I lost my daddy in the Hopeman tragedy. . . . [M]aybe my daddy's joined the seal people and I'll see him again.' There was a trawler lost at sea in late 1985. Seven men were lost; five were found, but two were never. [sic] (1-2)

The dead poet, Michael Donaghy, returns from the after-life as a seal man

in Robertson's poem. As shown earlier, in the Scottish and Irish folk imagination a seal person is supposed to be a dead person living in the form of seal in some cases. In the poetic narrative of the Scot, Irish-American Donaghy appears as a selkie, saying "'I'm not stopping,'" and "shrugging off his [seal] skin/ like a wet-suit" (1-3). And the sealskin turns into the skin on the frame of the bodhrán. This bodhrán seems to be the most suitable instrument to be played by a person coming back from the Other World.

In conclusion, in "Selkie" Robertson let Donaghy cross many borders as a selkie. The differences between Scottish and Irish folk stories are overlooked when the poet turned into a seal man is called a "selkie," the appellative for the supernatural creature mainly used in Scotland. The gaps between nationalities are blurred as the American poet, having lived in London for a long time, plays the traditional Irish drum and drinks just as if he were at a pub. The allusions to Donaghy's poetry connect the poems of the two poets. And among other things, as a supernatural creature, the dead poet temporarily and textually crosses the gap between life and death. When humans leave the land of the living, there are no borders among them. All the dead must bid farewell to the living.

Notes

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1 According to Hans-Jörg Uther's categorization, these stories can be placed in a group of folk tales of version three of "The Man on a Quest for His Lost Wife" (ATU

400). Katharine Briggs groups British folk stories with this story pattern into ML 4080 Seal Woman stories in Part B of her British folk-tale dictionary. See Briggs.

2 In Robertson's newest collection of poems, *The Wrecking Light* (2010), there is an eerie poem with strong folk-legend allusions, "At Roane Head." In the poem, a woman, living beside the sea, left by her husband and having four sons, is described. Her sons are said to be "web-footed" (13) and "more fish than human" (21-22). The narrator visits this woman's house, and is given many sinister items. The poem ends with the following line: "Then she gave me the sealskin, and I put it on" (61).

3 For the general view on seals in Irish oral tradition, see Ní Fhloinn. For seal stories and belief on Rathlin Island, see Ballard. The textualized story of a Rathlin seal woman may be found in a popular book on supernatural creatures of Celtic tradition. See Curran 68-72.

4 For the works by W. B. Yeats, Seamus Heaney or Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill with the motif of a seal woman or mermaid and their translations into Japanese, see Shimokusu. The article is accompanied with the story of a Rathlin mermaid collected by the author himself as an appendix.

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