

Lewd poem discovered in 16th-century Gaelic manuscript

An erotic poem by a Highland noblewoman boasting about the size of a priest's manhood has been celebrated in a BBC documentary 500 years after it was written.

The poem is thought to have been written by Iseabail Ní Mheic Cailéin, a poet and noblewoman, around the year 1500.

It appears in The Book of the Dean of Lismore, an early 16th century Gaelic manuscript kept in the National Library of Scotland (NLS).

Experts have now compared the little-known work with modern depictions of "hot priest" characters in Phoebe Waller-Bridge's comedy-drama Fleabag and the hit sitcom Derry Girls.

The poem, titled "Éistibh, a Luchd an Tighe-se", resurfaced when a BBC Alba television crew was examining representations of sexuality among the Library's collections for the documentary "Sex in Gaelic", exploring the "hidden sexual history of the Gaels".

Iseabail Ní Mheic Cailéin, the daughter of Colin Campbell, 1st Earl of Argyll and wife of William Drummond, Chief of Clan Drummond, is best known for her erotic poems.

Éistibh, a Luchd an Tighe-se is one of three of her poems preserved in the Book of the Dean of Lismore.

The manuscript was compiled in the first half of the 16th

century by James MacGregor, vicar of Fortingall in Perthshire and Dean of St Moluag's Cathedral on the island of Lismore, off the coast of Oban in Argyll.

The volume contains mostly Gaelic poetry, as well some miscellaneous items in Scots, Latin and English.

Chris Cassells, head of manuscripts at the NLS, said: "In 16th century Scotland, when staying with a friend it was common courtesy to regale your host with your best songs, stories, and poems.

"We estimate that around the year 1500, Iseabail Ní Mheic Cailéin visited James MacGregor in Perthshire.

"When Iseabail recited her poetry to MacGregor, she may or may not have been aware that he was in the habit of copying down his favourites.

"Subsequently, Iseabail Ní Mheic Cailéin has become known in niche circles as a writer of erotic poetry during the Middle Ages – not exactly a time we associate with sexual liberation.

"From Father Peter in Lisa McGee's 'Derry Girls' to 'Fleabag' to the burgeoning sub-genre of priest romance novels, the 'hot priest' archetype continues to resonate 500 years later.

"Iseabail's poem shows this is not a modern invention. It's no surprise this poem has a starring role in the BBC Alba documentary."

The poem's relative obscurity has been attributed to its reception among scholars over the centuries.

In many subsequent publications and translations of the Book of the Dean of Lismore, the poem, or its obscenities, have been omitted.

Cassells added: "One of the joys of our collections is how varied they are. You can return to something you feel like you

know well, like the Book of the Dean of Lismore, and find gems like this one which open a whole new world of enquiry.”

Many of the works included in the Book are in keeping with contemporary perceptions of the time, such as a religious poem on the Virgin Mary and the infancy of Christ.

However, *Éistibh a luchd an tìghe-se* has been described by Thomas Clancy, Professor of Celtic at the University of Glasgow, as a “fairly obscene boast to the court circle on the size and potency of her household priest’s penis”.

The Book of the Dean of Lismore is fully digitised and available to view [on the Library’s website here.](#)

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A collection of poetry, informally brought together with disparate items which give it the character of a common-place book. Assembled by Sir James MacGregor, Vicar of Fortingall and titular Dean of Lismore (d.1551).