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*Roderick Macdonald*

## Some Present-day Trends in Gaelic Writing in Scotland

I have been asked to outline some present-day trends in Gaelic writing in Scotland as I see the situation from where I stand; while some of these trends may appear to be contradictory, I believe that these apparent contradictions are part of the authentic pattern. Having mentioned this fact, it might be as well to begin by referring to two trends which fall into the category, even though we might be expected to deal with them nearer the end of this essay.

The first of these (rather a negative one) is a mood of hopelessness which is hard to define or pinpoint, and which paradoxically evidences itself more in what is not written than in what is. By that I mean that some of our very competent Gaelic writers have given up in despair because of the absence of any meaningful response to their work. It is not entirely, or even mainly, a question of money, though that, of course, comes into it. There are good grants available from Scottish Arts Council funds channeled through the Gaelic Books Council for those writers whose work is approved by the Council, and there are very few complaints from unsuccessful applicants. But if books languish unsold for years (in some cases forever), the publisher and/or author will be out of pocket, and, far worse, the aspiring writer suffers a severe psychological blow. I have no knowledge of supporting statistics, but anecdotal evidence suggests that very few Gaelic works of a serious nature make enough money to provide even a modest living for the writers.

One such writer, probably the most richly idiomatic Gaelic author writing in Scotland in our day, has come to the conclusion that the evidence is overwhelming that, whatever efforts may be made to revive the language, it is already under im-

minent sentence of death. Laboring under such a burden of disillusion, he has come to the further conclusion that the efforts of those who still continue to write are in vain so long as the great bulk of native Gaelic speakers show so little interest. An afternoon spent in the company of such people can be both chastening and depressing, all the more so because we all know—though not everyone will admit it—that what they say is undeniable. Too many native speakers are apathetic to any Gaelic offering other than undemanding entertainment—in stark contrast to the evident interest of Gaelic speakers in Eire who will travel many miles to be present for an evening’s program where the recitation of poetry is as prominent as singing, and apparently as highly valued. One of our foremost scholars recently traveled from Glasgow to give a lecture in the heart of Gaeldom to be met by a tiny audience of hard-core enthusiasts. And were it not for the contribution of national and local Mòds (Gaelic festivals) the situation would be even worse.

Secondly, and more positively, the other side of the paradox is that there is evident at the same time a new sense of buoyancy and optimism among many young people who are involved in projects, such as playgroups, drama groups, music groups, and learners’ groups, through which they feel they are doing their bit to keep the language alive. It has to be admitted that Gaelic learners’ classes frequently suffer heavy casualties in the course of their first year as the realization is borne home that Gaelic is a completely separate language, and not another Scots dialect. But for those who survive to the stage of simple conversational competence—and even to writing their first “poem”—there is a sense of elation which is infectious. Herein surely lies a main hope of a revival of our language as a vehicle of communication, both oral and written. And for proof of this second trend, one has only to study the pages of the excellent magazine of *Comunn Luchd-Iomsa-chaidh* (C.L.I.), the Association of (Gaelic) Learners, now sited in Dingwall.

These first two trends are of a very general nature. So also are the next two, which similarly have to be set over against each other.

There is a trend among writers, and not only of the younger generation, to regard their upbringing in the traditions of Gaeldom as a negative, constricting experience, rather than as a good and valid foundation for the rest of life. Perhaps the most frequently quoted illustration of this is D. S. Thomson’s short poem found in *Nua-Bhàrdachd Ghàidhlig*:

‘Water and peats and oats’—  
 a word in a stranger’s mouth,  
 in the throng of the town,  
 in the town of the strangers.  
 Madness! The foolish heart  
 lapping along these ancient rocks  
 as though there were no sea-journey in the world  
 but that one.  
 The heart tied to a tethering-post, round upon round of the rope  
 till it grows short,

and the mind free.  
I bought its freedom dearly.<sup>1</sup>

The last line says it all! In fact, Professor Thomson provides us with a perfect “generational” example of this trend in that his father, James, was also a poet, and a model of all that was best in the traditions of Gaeldom. It is most illuminating to set Professor Thomson’s poetry side by side with his father’s published work in *Fasgnadh (Winnowing, 1953)*. The basic relationship surfaces occasionally, but the trend from veneration to questioning, from freedom enjoyed in a secure tradition-respecting milieu to the freedom which renounces the “tether” of tradition in order to be free is the dominant impression created.

In short, *Nua-Bhàrdachd*, which has parallel English translations offered by the authors for all the poems, and which is an anthology of poems by Sorley Maclean, George Campbell Hay, Iain Crichton Smith, Derick Thomson, and Donald MacAulay is essential reading for any who would understand this third trend. (There is some internal evidence that the Introduction was originally written in English, then translated into Gaelic—sometimes rather painfully—but this is perhaps an advantage for the non-Gaelic reader.)

Conversely to this third trend, we find a trend to regard the loosening of traditional ties as a liberation. In this sense, Gaelic writers are following what is common in the arts in general. By “following” I do not mean any sheep-like conformity to a wider fashion; for to our surprise we find that the hide-bound Highlander of popular myth is in the van of the process—I will not say “progress,” for that would seem to pre-judge the issue of merit. In this matter, as in so many serious ethical, moral, and religious questions, we Highlanders are sharply divided. There are those to whom anything that smacks of modernism is anathema; there are also those who are prepared to jettison anything older than the date of their own enlightenment as being traditional baggage—or worse. As in all questions which seem to resolve themselves into extremes, the middle ground is hardest to hold, is most exposed to the cross-fire of bitter controversy, and, by the same token, is the one most needing to be manned. Regrettably, any trend for the coming to the fore of writers filling this category in our day is not easy to trace.

At the same time, the work of two sisters from Skye, Morag and Catriona Montgomery, may be seen as a bridge between the traditional and the new forms. Their work is notable also in its portrayal of emotional themes from the woman’s perspective—and they are not afraid of explicitness! Their *A’ Choille Chiar (The Bleak Forest)* appeared in 1974. And of course we need go no further than *Nua-Bhàrdachd* to read poems which are not committed to any extremist philosophies or even confrontational categories, such as practically all the poems of George

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<sup>1</sup>*Nua-Bhàrdachd Ghàidlig / Modern Scottish Gaelic Poems*, ed. Donald MacAulay (Edinburgh, 1976), p. 162.

Campbell Hay. These writings are not bland, but I don't think they either create or buck any significant trends in terms of our present remit.

This leads us to the more specific consideration of trends in Gaelic poetry, which shares with poetry in other languages the trend toward free rhyme, or, as in the case uniquely of Sorley Maclean, an alliteration of vowel sounds which, especially when narrated by himself, makes an impact on the hearer comparable to the effect of the "séis" or intonation of some preachers. Maclean and Colin Mackenzie have voices particularly suited to declamation, and it is true of both writers that for best effect their poetry should be heard, not read. This in passing raises a small but interesting point: whether a poet's vocal expression influences the shape of his writing.

Hand in hand with free rhyme, we come to the matter of abstruseness. Free rhyme in most cases involves a loosening of the discipline of traditional forms—no matter how much its practitioners (and I am one) may protest. Is it fanciful to suggest that a loosening of discipline *in the matter of thought* explains at least some of the abstruseness of modern poetry? I refer again to *Nua-Bhàrdachd*, which I take to be pivotal to my present remit. I have again read it through, reading the Introduction in both English and Gaelic. I have again read the poetry, much of which is very impressive, some of which the average reader can understand, and with which he can identify, but much of which I would say is abstruse and far beyond the average reader. Poets of today sometimes need to be reminded of the words of an immortal poet who lived nearly two thousand years ago, who said he preferred to utter five words which his hearers could understand rather than ten thousand which they could not (see 1 Corinthians 14:19).

There is an ever-present danger of equating depth and incomprehensibility, with professional bards busy making poetry for each other. The ambitious edifice of uncritical adulation which MacAulay builds in the Introduction to *Nua-Bhàrdachd* is also an impressive piece of work, but it is not always well supported by the infra-structure. It would be more convincing if he were not both judge and jury of his own work, and he were to point to a single flaw in all the 140 pages under review. I have never yet read the complete works of any extensive poet, including our own national Scottish bard, without being acutely aware that some poems are better than others.

I do not believe that it is because of my own interest in theology that I find the theological poems have a cutting edge which makes them immediately comprehensible. Indeed, in some cases, one feels that one can enter upon a meaningful dialogue on the poet's own terms. This is perhaps best explained by quoting part of a poem by Iain Crichton Smith, which I give in English, together with my answer:

The Letter.

Here is my letter to you out of the mirror,  
God who created us.

Why did you put the rabbits in the bellies of the foxes?  
Why did you put man in the middle of the days?  
Why did you raise us with frail bones?  
Why did you give us hearts  
that will feel hubbub and injustice,  
why aren't they like watches  
small, round, and golden?

Why did you not make angels or beasts of us  
with cold wings, with barbarous heads?  
Why did you raise the sea in front of us  
with wide absurd face?

\* \* \*

In the mirror there is your book with a steel fastening,  
with an edge red as a rose.  
In the mirror there is one rose,  
our hope growing  
red, shaking in the winds,  
in a circle of dew.<sup>2</sup>

A Reply to The Letter.

What a pity it was out of the mirror  
your letter came, my son,  
—the constriction is too severe.

The rabbit is inside the fox, no doubt,  
as man is in the midst of the days,  
but, unlike the beasts of the field,  
man's days  
are within the compass of eternity,  
and his frail bones  
due for transformation.

If your heart were like a watch  
—even of the finest gold—  
insensitive to hubbub and injustice,  
then were you no free-willed man,  
but a robot out of control.

I created man with free-will;  
man opted for the image of his choice,

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<sup>2</sup>*Nua-Bhàrdachd*, pp. 186-8.

beast or angel, according to his preference;  
and the sea in front of you  
is the symbol of mercy without limit.

Put away the mirror  
and the steel-bound book,  
inflexible and hard.  
One Word only is supreme,  
with the redness of the blood  
marking his pity.

And that rose of Hope,  
which you saw growing  
a-quiver in the storm  
is your secure anchor.

Having said all that, I discern here again a counter-trend. There is a salutary change in that many new poets, not all young, assert their right to be heard, are turning their backs on abstruse “profundities,” and, without ever saying so in so many words, claming their right to a fair say in the setting of poetic standards. Herein lies a bright hope for the future of Gaelic poetry.

Turning more briefly to prose and drama, of which latter at least there is far too little, we find quite discernible trends, which again run parallel to trends found elsewhere in such writings. There is a departure from conventional, traditional language in favor of local, colloquial, or even vulgar expression. A good example of this may be found in *Tri Dealbhan Cluiche (Three Plays, 1990)* by Alasdair Campbell, a well-known writer from Ness in Lewis. A native of another parish in the same island commented jocularly at the end of a performance of one of these plays that he could have done with an interpreter! The use of English expressions is commonplace, even where there are perfectly good and understandable Gaelic equivalents, on the grounds, presumably, that that is how the Gaelic-speaking community now expresses itself. Without impugning the right of the playwright to reflect actuality, many older people and purists find this trend hard to thole. Implicit in this lies the question and dilemma: if writing for drama is one way of helping to keep the use of Gaelic alive, does it matter whether the Gaelic used—and presumably saved—is relatively pure or utterly corrupt?

Of course, not all drama writing is at this level, nor is humor and entertainment the only ingredient. Mention of humor reminds us of the fact that Gaelic writing is not noted for the presence of this element. But if we may refer to popular Gaelic songs with a parochial appeal, it is probably true to say that the volume and quality of production of this genre is as copious, and perhaps more robust, now than ever in recent times. Humor even finds a place in the solemn corridors of *Nua-Bhàrdachd*. Derick Thomson has a charming, yet pungent, piece called “Clann-Nighean an Sgadain” (“The Herring Girls”) which contains the collection’s

solitary pun. The word “cutach” is given the two meanings, “pertaining to gutting” and “short-arsed.”

The only Gaelic book (actually a booklet) that I know which devotes its whole effort to the subject of humor is Charles Macleod’s *S fheàirde Duine Gàire* (*One is better of a Laugh*). It has over a dozen stories, some of which are very funny. The eponymous chapter is the last in the book, and, perhaps true to the Gaelic psyche, is given the full title, “Doubtless, one is better of a Laugh, yet, at times one would be none the worse of a Cry.” The theme of this chapter is Lewis and Harris Sabbatarianism! The author says he belongs to the rather strict denomination, the Free Church.

The writing of short stories, novels, and other popular prose forms is enjoying a belated revival, although this is applicable to short stories rather than full-length novels. There is a recently founded Association of Writers, based in Edinburgh, which runs courses of instruction in the writing of novels. *Gairm*, the B.B.C., and *An Comunn Gàidhealach* have done much to encourage short-story writing, and the response has been encouraging, in both quantity and quality. For further information on this topic, reference is made to *Briseadh na Cloiche* (*The Breaking of the Stone*), edited by Kenneth Macdonald (Glasgow, nd, but post-1968).

It is maintained by students of demographic trends that whereas there are now fewer native Gaelic speakers in Scotland than ever before recorded, the number of learners in Scotland and England is at an all-time high. This latter fact, of course, is to be welcomed. Yet it poses problems from the point of view of trends in Gaelic writing. There are several people (some indeed from a Gaelic background) who cannot converse adequately in Gaelic, yet presume to write Gaelic poetry. One of the most difficult things to master in any language is idiom, and Gaelic being a language rich in idiom, no composition, prose or verse, can be truly convincing if this element is missing. Roderick Macleod gave some examples.

On radio and television one often hears “Dé tha air a nochd?” for “What is on tonight?” One well-known writer quaintly translated “at the mercy of the sea” as “aig trocair na mara”; while a visitor to the USA on his return used the phrase, “eader a’ chreag agus àite cruaidh”—which greatly puzzled some of his hearers until they heard a visiting American use the phrase which had been literally translated, “between a rock and a hard place.” (It so happens there is a perfectly good idiomatic Gaelic expression which conveys the same meaning.) Macleod went so far as to suggest there should be classes for Gaelic speakers as well as for learners, especially for those who write or speak in public, before the trend to English-based Gaelic gets out of hand and Gaelic idiom dies.

True to pattern, the final main trend which we note is also fortunately counter-indicative to the previous one—namely a trend, or rather an explosion, in writing for schools and young people which does not patronize but is based on sound educational psychology. Some of this writing is for the media, like Donnie Macleod’s “Dotaman” (“Spinning-top”) which is celebrating its two hundredth emission, and has made Donnie a cult figure among his young audiences—and their mums!



We have only to scan the book-lists of “Acair,” the Stornoway-based publisher, and pick out the titles at random, to find examples. The colorful covers and pictures tell their own story. As we compare the Blackie’s School Readers of yesteryear with their bright present-day successors, we may be convinced that no class of reading material has undergone a greater transformation. Many present-day writers for young people attempt to enter the child’s mind, and see the world through his eyes.

Readers will perhaps excuse a quotation which comes out of the writer’s own experience as a grandfather—although it inevitably suffers in translation:

A very old man is my Granpa;  
Lichen-like fur grows round his ears,  
And when I asked him his age,  
He said “As old as the rocks”.

A kind old man is my Granpa;  
Whatever my mother refuses he will give me -  
Coke and biscuits a-plenty,  
And twenty pence every Friday.

A funny old man is my Granpa;  
He doesn’t care who laughs  
When he pretends to be daft—  
But if he is daft, no one in the village is sane.

Not an old man in the world is like my Granpa;  
Whatever would we do without him?  
Indeed I very much hope  
God will forget to come for him.  
(From “Traoghadh is Lionadh,” 1991)

This trend (or explosion) applies also to writing for regular weekly newspaper columns, of which there are now half a dozen, compared with only two a few years ago; as well as writing for radio and television. “Can Seo” (“Say This”), the learners’ program shown on television a few years ago, combined education and entertainment so successfully that it became the most popular language-learning program ever screened in Scotland. Eilidh Watt largely pioneered child-oriented stories, and so many others have followed her that this is probably the best catered for class of Gaelic writing today.

Other trends which might profitably be pursued may be summarized. Gaelic writing has benefited from the number of Gaelic writers who are completely bilingual in their output: this is undoubtedly a source of enrichment. In the case of Iain Crichton Smith, who comes into this category, it is notable that one of his well-known efforts is space fiction—for example “Iain am measg nan Reultan”

("Iain among the Planets," 1970). A description of space travel also occurs in the present writer's "Leth-cheud Bliadhna" ("Fifty Years," 1978).

Long gone and seeming far away are the days when Gaelic poets' preoccupations were mainly with stags and bens, or chieftains and heroics, or the elation and heartbreak of love. We find Aonghas MacNeacail in 1992 penning a Gaelic poetic tribute on the death of one of the world's secular goddesses entitled "lily marlene in the western isles" [*sic*]. I quote, "you were always, marlene, a web to the ear. your wistful song luring the memory, and today that dulled eye shed a tear . . . for you."

And we even have extra-terrestrial Gaelic writing in *Cemore*, by M. and D. Halpin (Stornoway, 1991); while in Fergus MacFhionnlaigh's *Iolair, Bru-dhearg, Giuthas (Eagle, Robin, Pine-tree)*, Glasgow, 1991) we have a further sample of very contemporary, even futuristic themes originally expounded by the author in "A' Mheanbh-chuileag" ("The Midge") which appeared in *Gairm* in 1980. Presently topical and futuristic are also some of the poems in D. S. Thomson's latest book *Smeur an Dòchais (Bramble of Hope)*, Edinburgh, 1992), with such topics as Chernobyl and Romania taken by the writer in his stride. It will take longer reflection to decide whether this title itself may prove to be a trend in present-day Gaelic writing—but at this stage I suspect it could.

In conclusion, no claim is made that these trends listed are exhaustive or that they are necessarily the most important. But from whatever angle the subject is approached, I believe they are significant, and have a bearing on the present and future health and survival of the Gaelic language as a vibrant vehicle of communication—in addition, of course, to pointing the personal and national dilemma of a people in a state of transition, if not retreat.

Donald MacAulay succinctly expresses the difficulty of communication in his poem "Prìosan" ("Prison") which concludes *Nua-Bhàrdachd*:

's mi a' stri ri uinneag  
fhosgladh  
a' stri ri ruighinn air mo sheòlaid.

as I strove to get a window  
open  
strove to make contact with my element.

Derick Thomson expresses the same thought in one of his earlier poems, "Marbhrann" ("Elegy," 1951):

A' snìomh seann saoghal ann an saoghal ùr  
Le iomadh bristeachd snatha, mar bu dual,  
'S inar b' éigin do luchd d'èilein 's luchd do dhùthch.

Spinning an old world in a new,  
With many a breaking of the yarn, as was customary  
And necessary for your islesmen and compatriots.<sup>3</sup>

In conclusion, it will be seen that, like all aspects of human endeavor, there are many pluses and minuses in the field of contemporary Gaelic writing. Gaelic writing will continue longer than spoken Gaelic; there is therefore no fear for its demise in the foreseeable future: the fear is that as the spoken language becomes more corrupt and less idiomatic the standard of writing may similarly decline. The best safeguard against such deterioration is the inculcation of a deep and genuine interest in all that is best in our language. "Education" in the widest sense is perhaps the key word here, suggesting a launch-pad for a further development of this important subject.

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<sup>3</sup>*An Dealbh Briste* (Edinburgh, 1951), p. 9.