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**“WHEN THE BIRDS SPOKE GAELIC”: PERIODIZATION  
AND CHALLENGES OF CLASSIFICATION  
FOR SCOTTISH GAELIC LITERATURE**

*Michael Newton*

There is a substantial body of Scottish Gaelic literature. Selecting the most effective and logical means of classifying, ordering and presenting it to an audience is not a trivial undertaking. Categorizing the corpus of Gaelic texts by chronological divisions is not entirely misguided, given that the composers, audiences and textual topics are situated in specific places and times, at least to some degree. It would be unreasonable, furthermore, to expect Gaeldom to remain entirely unaffected by the trends in subject matter, style and genre prevalent elsewhere in particular periods.<sup>1</sup>

Like the literature of other peoples, Gaelic literature is not a single, monolithic entity. It consists of a variety of genres with particular functions, inflected by the linguistic registers, stylistic conventions and concerns of certain groups. The most influential strands of the tradition have been those cultivated by a professional class of literati who underwent rigorous training to produce texts that spoke directly to the political ambitions and familial concerns of their patrons. These literary expressions, and the high standards to which they were composed, exerted a strong influence even on the lowest classes of Gaelic society, given frequent and intimate contact between all ranks.

From the twelfth century through the early eighteenth century, the Gaelic literati adhered to a set of conventions in linguistic register, metre, rhyme scheme and literary devices (commonly referred to as the “Classical Gaelic” tradition) set by formal institutions of learning (often called “bardic colleges”). The relative stability of the élite literary tradition came

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<sup>1</sup> A strong case for recognizing the eighteenth century as a specific Gaelic literary epoch has been made in William Gillies, “Some Eighteenth-century Developments in Scottish Gaelic Poetry,” in *Language and Power in the Celtic World*, ed. by Anders Ahlqvist and Pamela O’Neill (Sydney: The University of Sydney Press, 2011), 61-95.

crashing down when the political latitude and cultural self-determination of Gaelic aristocrats was undermined by an expanding anglophone imperium.

Thus, Gaelic historical experience and literary production have been closely intertwined, especially at the élite level. This short contribution seeks to explore how the composers, editors and scholars of Gaelic literature have dealt with the issue of periodization. It will also suggest alternative classification schemes for the Gaelic literary tradition.

I begin this exploration with a common idiomatic expression: “Nuair a bha Gàidhlig aig na h-eòin, b’ e sin Linn an Àigh” (“When the birds spoke Gaelic, that was the Golden Age”). The implication is that Gaelic was once part of the natural order of things, before English rudely broke in and turned the world upside down.<sup>2</sup> The vitality of Gaelic literature, written and oral, was one of many casualties.<sup>3</sup>

The Book of the Dean of Lismore (written c.1512 to c.1542<sup>4</sup>) is the earliest surviving effort to assemble an anthology of poetry in Gaelic Scotland. Donald Meek, who has worked assiduously to decrypt this idiosyncratic treasure-house of medieval Gaelic literature, has noted that the subject material of the Book as well as its tone, nostalgically grieving the demise of past glories, departs from Irish peers and precedents.

The Book of the Dean was, in fact, compiled within fifty years of the forfeiture of the Lordship [of the Isles] in 1493. It contains bardic verse which is thoroughly elegiac, lamenting the demise of the last Lords of the Isles.... The decline and eventual loss of the Lordship appear to have generated a mood of retrospection, a kind of cultural depression and sense of hopelessness, particularly among those closest to the Lords and their patronage.<sup>5</sup>

The Book of the Dean contains a great deal of poetry attributed to Oisean (commonly referred to in English as “Ossian”) about the legendary Fian band. “Oisean as déidh na Féinne” is a Gaelic expression which

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<sup>2</sup> The notion that Gaelic is, or should be, an organic element of the Highland landscape is a recurring motif in song-poetry reflecting on the state and historical trajectory of Gaelic itself. See Wilson McLeod, “Language Politics and Ethnolinguistic Consciousness in Scottish Gaelic Poetry,” *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, 21 (2003): 91-146, esp. 112-20.

<sup>3</sup> William Gillies warns against applying this paradigm of decline too broadly to literature, in his “On the Study of Gaelic Literature,” in *Litreachas & Eachdraidh: Ramnadh na Gàidhlig 2 / Literature & History: Papers from the Second Conference of Scottish Gaelic Studies*, ed. by Michel Byrne, Thomas Owen Clancy & Sheila Kidd (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 2006), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Martin MacGregor, “The View from Fortingall,” *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, 22 (2006): 43.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Meek, “The Scottish Tradition of Fian Ballads in the Middle Ages,” in *Unity in Diversity*, ed. by Cathal Ó Háinle and Donald Meek (Dublin: Trinity College Press, 2004), 18-19.

certainly dates back to the medieval period. Although this phrase can be literally translated as “Ossian in the wake of the Fian band,” it is used colloquially to refer to someone who has outlived his peers. In the Gaelic literary tradition shared equally by Scotland, Ireland and the Isle of Man, the character Ossian is the last of the heroes of yore who is left to chronicle and commemorate their former greatness in his poetry.

By the tenth century the early medieval Gaelic literati synchronized native historical and literary figures with the chronologies adopted from Christian and Classical sources; the end of Ossian’s life was made to overlap—just barely—with St. Patrick, so as to account for the transmission of this corpus of literary texts.<sup>6</sup> The exact time period of the Fian, who were believed to be real historical figures, was much more vague and malleable in vernacular tradition, however.<sup>7</sup>

The Ossianic (or Fenian) cycle enjoyed greater prominence than any other literary repertoire in Scottish Gaelic vernacular tradition in the last several centuries, with good reason: the themes of invasion, opposition and decline are familiar ones in Gaelic historical experience. It is no surprise that these are dominant motifs in James Macpherson’s loose adaptations of the Ossianic materials.

In the mid-eighteenth century the editors of Gaelic poetry collections comment more explicitly on Gaelic perceptions of historical experience and literary expression. Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair (c. 1698–1770, the chief-bard of the 1745 Jacobite Rising) was the first Gaelic poet to publish a collection of secular verse, most of it by himself, and he did so with the explicit aim of elevating the prestige of the language as one belonging to all of Scotland. The title of his 1751 volume is *Ais-eiridh na Sean-chànoin Albannaich* (“The Resurrection of the Ancient Scottish Tongue”). His preface contrasts the downward trajectory of Gaelic with the presumptions of improvement dominant in contemporary narratives of progress:

We cannot however but testify our surprise, that in an age in which the study of antiquity is so much in fashion, and so successfully applied to so many valuable purposes, whether religious or civil, this language alone, which is the depository of the manners, customs, and notions of the earliest inhabitants of this island, and consequently seems to promise, as an accurate review of it, the most authentic accounts of many things useful for us to know,

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<sup>6</sup> Ann Dooley and Harry Roe, eds., *Tales of the Elders of Ireland (Acallam na Senórach)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), ix-x, xx-xxi.

<sup>7</sup> Donald Meek, “The Sublime Gael: The Impact of Macpherson’s Ossian on Literary Creativity and Cultural Perception in Gaelic Scotland,” in *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, ed. by Howard Gaskill (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), 59.

should remain in a state, not only of total abandon, but, which is more astonishing, in an age so happily distinguished from all others, for freedom of thought, love of knowledge, and moderation, this people and language should be alone be persecuted and intolerated.<sup>8</sup>

His son, Ragnall Dubh (c.1728-c.1808), published an anthology of Gaelic verse in 1776. His preface echoes his father's complaint about Gaelic's disenfranchisement. He states that he spent two years collecting the material in the volume, mainly panegyric to Highland aristocrats composed during the previous two centuries.<sup>9</sup> Although his introductory notes do not imply that the poems are presented in any particular order, the initial items seem to be those he believes to have the greatest antiquity. Ragnall promises to release a second volume that "will consist of poems of a much older date than those of the first, some being as far back as the third and fourth centuries."<sup>10</sup> He alludes, of course, to the Gaelic song-poetry attributed to Ossian, a project which he never completed.

By the end of the eighteenth century, Scottish Gaels shared a common paradigm that divided the history of their society and literary production into three or four epochs: the distant pagan past represented by the poetry of Ossian; an era of literary virtuosity upheld by professional poets employed by Gaelic patrons, such as the Lords of the Isle (roughly corresponding to the medieval period); the era referred to in Gaelic as *Linn nan Creach* ("the Age of Plundering") between the downfall of the MacDonald lordship and *Bliadhna Thearlaich* (the Jacobite Rising of 1745) dominated by "clan poets"; and the period of marginalization that followed Culloden.

Although numerous collections of Gaelic verse appeared in the nineteenth century, they did not evince any organizing principle until John MacKenzie's monumental *Sar-Obair nam Bard Gaelach* (1841). The volume covers over thirty named poets who are listed in chronological order with biographical sketches and a selection of their poetry which MacKenzie deemed most worthy. The antiquarian James Logan wrote a lengthy introduction to the collection, attempting to summarize the literary tradition's historical trajectory in relationship to its Irish and Welsh cousins. He concludes:

After the period when Ossian, Orain, Ullin, Fergus, Fonar, Douthal, and other unknown bards flourished, which reaches to the union of the Pictish and Scottish kingdoms, there seems to have been for a

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<sup>8</sup> Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, *Ais-eiridh na Sean-chànoin Albannaich* (n. p., 1751), vii-viii.

<sup>9</sup> Raonuill MacDomhnuill, *Comh-Chruinneachidh Orannaigh Gaidhealach*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Walter Ruddiman, 1776), viii.

<sup>10</sup> MacDomhnuill, *ibid.*, xi.

long time few poets of any note. About the end of the 13th century, a revival took place; and, since then, numerous bards of acknowledged excellence have from time to time appeared.... If the age of bardism, in its primary sense, is gone, it is satisfactory to preserve a memorial of what it was, and evidence of its present state. In the following pages are the flowers and blossoms of Gaëlic poetry, culled with careful discrimination, and without the encumbrance of redundant stems and foliage.<sup>11</sup>

Literary criticism in Gaelic itself begins in earnest with Rev. Donald MacKinnon, who became the first holder of the Chair of Celtic at the University of Edinburgh. In a series of articles for the periodical *An Gàidheal* in the 1870s, he suggests a tripartite chronological division for Gaelic literary production: the Ossianic age; the epoch between Ossianic material and the end of the sixteenth century; and from the seventeenth century onwards. It is implied, though not well explicated, that these divisions reflect changes in society as well as in the form and structure of literature. In particular, MacKinnon was attempting to acknowledge the preeminence of the Classical Gaelic tradition in the middle period and the rise of the clan poets using high-register vernacular language and verse forms.<sup>12</sup>

The study of Scottish Gaelic literature benefited greatly from the advances made in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on native Irish literature. A substantial corpus of medieval manuscripts was edited, the linguistic evolution of branches of Goidelic was traced in detail, and the history of literary activity was more accurately described and analyzed.<sup>13</sup>

The work of William J. Watson, holder of the Chair of Celtic at the University of Edinburgh from 1914 to 1938, marks the foundations of a modern scholarly approach to Scottish Gaelic literature. He edited two volumes of literature (under the aegis of *An Comunn Gàidhealach*) that made centuries of vernacular Gaelic literature—one of prose and another of poetry—accessible to a wide reading public. In both of these, texts are arranged chronologically from most recent to oldest. In the introduction to the poetry anthology, *Bardachd Ghàidhlig*, he divides texts into two classes which overlap in time: “Classic” poetry (c.800-c.1730) and modern (from c.1600 onward); “the most fruitful period is from 1640 to

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<sup>11</sup> John MacKenzie, ed., *Sar-Obair nam Bard Gaelach* (Glasgow: MacGregor, Polson, 1841), lx-lxi.

<sup>12</sup> Lachlan Mackinnon, ed., *Prose Writings of Donald MacKinnon, 1839-1914* (Edinburgh: Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 1956), 180-81.

<sup>13</sup> There is a brief but useful summary in the introduction to Kim McCone and Katherine Simms, eds., *Progress in Medieval Irish Studies* (Maynooth: St. Patrick's College, 1996).

about 1830, a period truly remarkable for the number of composers and the quantity and excellence of their output.”<sup>14</sup> An historical overview and discussion of metres is given for each.

From the 1930s to the 1990s, the Scottish Gaelic Texts Society was responsible for most of the progress in preparing and presenting editions of Scottish Gaelic prose and poetry. With few exceptions, the volumes have been devoted to the literary output of single authors. In the last two decades Birlinn Limited of Edinburgh has published a series of periodized anthologies of Gaelic poetry, divided by century: *Duanaire na Sracaire* (ed. Wilson McLeod and Meg Bateman, 2007) covers up to the end of the sixteenth century; *Gàir nan Clàrsach* (ed. Colm Ó Baoill and Meg Bateman, 1994) covers the seventeenth century; *An Lasair* (ed. Ronald Black, 2001) covers the eighteenth century; *Caran an t-Saoghail* (ed. Donald Meek, 2003) covers the nineteenth century; and *An Tuil* (ed. Ronald Black, 1999) covers the twentieth.

Periodization has thus figured prominently in the arrangement, presentation and interpretation of Scottish Gaelic literature since the late eighteenth century, but the periods are by no means the same as those in conventional surveys of other Scottish literatures, and periodization has not been the exclusive approach. John MacInnes’s exposition of the “panegyric code” in the 1970s revealed another significant organizing principle of Gaelic literature, tracing long-term continuities in rhetoric and literary conventions linked to social structure and historical experience, albeit inflected through particular metrical structures and genres.<sup>15</sup>

Gaelic literature can also be organized by genre and this, I think, may provide the most meaningful strategy.<sup>16</sup> As has been pointed out by numerous editors, division by period unnecessarily alienates related texts in metres and genres that enjoyed a very long currency for both composers and audiences. A poem about Niagara Falls written c.1848 by Rev. Donnchadh Blàrach in a metre known as *snèadhbhairdne* can be read productively alongside much older texts employing similar techniques.<sup>17</sup> Domhnall Ruadh Phàislig (“Donald Macintyre,” 1889-1964) was born in South Uist but spent most of his productive years in Paisley composing

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<sup>14</sup> William J. Watson, ed., *Bardachd Ghàidhlig: Specimens of Gaelic Poetry, 1550-1900* (Inverness: An Comunn Gaidhealach, 1918), xvii.

<sup>15</sup> John MacInnes, “The Panegyric Code in Gaelic Poetry and its Historical Background,” in *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes*, ed. by Michael Newton (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2006), 265-319.

<sup>16</sup> Genre schemes themselves, of course, are culturally-specific and even within Scottish Gaelic literature there is some ambiguity as to the appropriate categories and boundaries between them.

<sup>17</sup> Donald Meek, ed., *Caran an t-Saoghail / The Wiles of the World: Anthology of 19th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2003), 88-99, 410.

poetry about contemporary events in traditional metres and genres. As Ronald Black has observed, “Macintyre’s instincts are rooted in the seventeenth century.”<sup>18</sup> Periodization occludes such affinities.

One of the most sustained efforts to present Scottish Gaelic literature by genre is the three volume series *Hebridean Folksongs* (published from 1969 to 1981) consisting of *òrain-luaidh*, vernacular work songs belonging to the lowest classes of Gaelic society composed in a variety of stressed metres. These genres were poorly represented in the early transcriptions of Gaelic oral tradition but by conducting fieldwork in both Scotland and Nova Scotia, Campbell and Collinson were able to compile scores of texts dating from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth that show a great deal of thematic and stylistic coherence.

It is finally *de rigueur* for scholars to acknowledge the legitimacy of Scottish Gaelic literature as a distinctive strand of Scottish literature, one that needs to be accommodated on its own terms. As the editors of the three-volume *Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature* noted,

The present editors have recognised that the issue of periodisation is even more complicated in a multicultural society of the kind that Scotland has always been, but that, especially since Scottish literature in Gaelic has often been separately treated, has until recently not received due attention in literary history. One must always ask, “Whose history?” In addition, structural divisions that make sense in a historical narrative may not make equal sense in geographical or linguistic terms.... The editors recognise, then, that any system of literary periodisation in a complex, multicultural society like Scotland through the ages will inevitably have an element of arbitrariness.<sup>19</sup>

It is to be hoped that these recent reassessments of Scottish literature offer a precedent for future scholars to be inclusive and unbounded by previous convention that obscures, rather than illuminates, the literary production of the past, including the practice of periodization.

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<sup>18</sup> Ronald Black, ed., *An Tuil: Anthology of 20th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1999), lii.

<sup>19</sup> Ian Brown, Thomas Owen Clancy, Susan Manning and Murray Pittock, “Scottish Literature: Criticism and the Canon,” in *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, vol. 1, ed. by Ian Brown (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 8, 9.