

SCOTTISH STUDIES

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# Luchd na Gàidhlig and the 'detritus of a nation'

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ABSTRACT

No abstract.



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In his doctoral thesis, with its elegantly straightforward title ‘Gaelic Poetry’, John MacInnes argued as follows:

The Gaels in Scotland for most of our history have been a nation....I know of no more adequate term to express the particular sense of identity possessed by the Gaels through the vicissitudes of Scottish history.... During the last two and a half centuries the processes of decline have produced what can only be regarded now as the detritus of a nation (1975: 1; see also MacInnes 1978: 436–7).

A comprehensive analysis of this provocative claim would require an extensive discussion of the nature of ‘nations’ in the pre-modern era as well as the period since 1789, taking into account the work of scholars such as Anthony Smith and Ernest Gellner (Smith 2004, 2010; Gellner 1983). What constitutes, or constituted, a nation at different stages in history, and to what extent can the Gaels’ collective experience and sense of connectedness, and the social, political and economic structures that underpinned them, be framed in ‘national’ terms? How to interpret MacInnes’ term ‘detritus’, which calls to mind Friedrich Engels’s characterisation of the Scottish Gaels, the Bretons and the Basques as ‘relics of a nation’ and ‘ruined fragments of peoples’ (Engels 1977 [1848])?

It would also be important to assess the extent to which MacInnes’ characterisation of the Gaels as a ‘nation’ has become adopted and accepted by the Gaelic community, either in modern discourse or at different points in the past. There is certainly evidence of the term ‘Gaelic nation’ being used, in different ways, by various Gaelic writers and intellectuals. The term appears sporadically in the nineteenth century (e.g. ‘Abriensis’ 1817) and was used fairly frequently by Ruairaidh Erskine of Marr and other language revivalists of the early and mid-twentieth century (e.g. Erskine 1906: 212; Paterson 1954: 3); in more recent decades there are still occasional sightings (e.g. Buchanan 2002: 271; MacLeod 2006; Watson 2011: 110). Conversely, forms like *an nàisean Gàidhealach/Gàidhlig* seem rarer in Gaelic, although the singer and music scholar Griogair Labhruidh (2012: 100–01) has discussed the cultural decline of ‘an nàisean Gàidhealach’ from the eighteenth century on, and poet Maoilios Caimbeul has referred to ‘nàisean nan Gàidheal’ (Caimbeul 2006). So far as I am aware, however, there has been no detailed explication of the concept of the ‘Gaelic nation’, and in particular how this concept articulates with the more widespread (if controversial) idea that Gaelic is the true language of the Scottish nation, and indeed that Scotland as a whole should be understood as a ‘Gaelic nation’ (e.g. MacNeacail 1920; Mac a’ Ghobhainn [1977] 2000; Paterson 1954: 3).

This article will confine itself to one particular aspect of this problem: the way in which the ethnic identifying label *Gàidheal* has come to be replaced in many contexts by language-centred verbal formulae such as *luchd (na) Gàidhlig* or *muinntir na Gàidhlig*, literally ‘the people of the Gaelic language’.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in modern media usage and in usage arising out of the diverse

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<sup>1</sup> These terms are plural and do not have counterpart singular forms such as *\*neach na Gàidhlig*. Indeed, there are no simple terms that correspond to the English ‘Gaelic speaker’ or to the ‘ethnic’ identifier *Gàidheal*; *neach-labhairt na Gàidhlig* is used in some contexts but is unwieldy and not common in ordinary usage. In Irish, the simple noun *cainteoir* equates to ‘speaker’ (and is well established in the phrase *cainteoir dúchais* ‘native speaker’). In Basque the term *Euskaldun* takes the place of an ‘ethnic’ identifier, although it means simply ‘Basque speaker’; with this terminology, it is impossible to be a Basque without a knowledge of the language (Urla 2012: 127–8).

contemporary initiatives that seek to sustain and revitalise Gaelic in Scotland, the language term *Gàidhlig* (technically a noun, but used adjectivally) is far more widely used than the ethnic adjective *Gàidhealach*. This marks a clear shift from the nineteenth century, when *Gàidheal(ach)* tended to predominate, matched in English by the obsolescent term *Highland(er)*. For example, early collections of Gaelic poetry tended to use the term *Gàidhealach* – most obviously in the repetitive titles of the early anthologies (*Comh-chruinneachaidh Òrannaigh Gàidhealach* and the like), causing them to be known now as the Eigg Collection, Gillies Collection, Turner Collection and so on – but by the early twentieth century *Gàidhlig* seems to have become more common, most famously in the title of W. J. Watson’s important anthology *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig* (1918) and the accompanying volume of prose extracts *Rosg Gàidhlig* (Watson 1915).

The term *luchd na Gàidhlig* is attested in a number of Gaelic sources from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but it tends to appear alongside the term *Gàidheal*, and to be used interchangeably (e.g. ‘Seanachaidh’ 1901: 38; MacGilleMhoire 1911: [i]). For example, in her 1876 poem to Charles Fraser Mackintosh, MP, ‘Soraidh slàn, a Theàrlaich, leat’, Màiri Mhòr nan Òran uses the phrase ‘dùrachd luchd na Gàidhlig duit’, but in an earlier stanza expresses this wish as ‘durachd math [sic] nan Gàidheal duit’ (Nic a’ Phearsain 1891: 143–4). Màiri Mhòr is better known for her use of the term ‘luchd na Beurla’ in her famous song ‘Tha Mi Sgìth de Luchd na Beurla’ (Nic a’ Phearsain 1891: 225–31); this term of hostility to Lowlanders, from which *luchd na Gàidhlig* would appear to represent an extension, is much older, and comes into regular use from the seventeenth century onwards (McLeod 2003; Coira 2012). In the constitution of the Gaelic Society of Inverness, adopted in 1871, the English term used to correspond to ‘na Gàidheil’ is ‘the Gaelic people’ (Gaelic Society of Inverness 1872: iv–v), and Màiri Mhòr and other writers of this period may have had this same understanding in mind. In contrast, W. J. Watson used a more language-based formula when he asserted in his inaugural lecture as Professor of Celtic in the University of Edinburgh in 1914 that John Stuart Blackie, the leading campaigner for the establishment of the Chair, ‘deserves the lasting gratitude of the Gaelic-speaking people’ (Watson 1914: 69).

In contemporary usage a clear semantic divergence has developed between *luchd na Gàidhlig* and *na Gàidheil*, reflecting the important social and sociolinguistic changes of recent decades by which the relationship between the Gaelic language and the geographical communities in the Highlands and Islands where it has traditionally been spoken has become much less straightforward. These processes are multifaceted but have two main aspects. First, traditional Gaelic communities are now less Gaelic in linguistic terms than they were, in that the proportion of the local population who can speak Gaelic has declined, through both the failure of language transmission and the influx of non-Gaelic speakers (e.g. Mac an Tàilleir, Rothach and Armstrong 2010). At the same time, the cultural distinctiveness of Gaelic communities has also diminished, as the lifestyles, social norms and cultural practices of Gaelic speakers in such localities are increasingly aligned with those of English monoglots in Scotland and Britain as a whole (Glaser 2007: 184; MacDonald 1997). Second, and more important, the social demography of Gaelic speaking has changed considerably, with the speech community becoming both more geographically dispersed and socially diverse. The 2011 census showed that almost half (48 percent) of those claiming to be able to speak Gaelic live in Lowland Scotland rather than the Highlands and Islands. The growth of Gaelic education (in schools, colleges and universities and other settings) has generated steadily increasing numbers of people who can and do speak Gaelic, but whose family or ‘ethnic’ links to Gaelic may be weak or even non-existent. These ‘new speakers’<sup>2</sup> of Gaelic – more typically and problematically known as ‘learners’ (MacCaluim 2007) – often feel reluctant to identify themselves as ‘Gaels’ (or, in Gaelic, as *Gàidheil*) (MacAulay 1994: 42; McLeod, O’Rourke and Dunmore forthcoming), and many people with stronger family and ‘ethnic’ links to the language appear unwilling to accept ‘new

<sup>2</sup> See O’Rourke & Ramallo (2013) for an explication of the term ‘new speaker’.

speakers' as 'Gael' (Oliver 2004; McEwan-Fujita 2010). Conversely, some individuals with appropriate family or community connections might consider themselves – and be accepted – as 'Gael' even if they have no meaningful communicative competence in the Gaelic language (Dorian 1981).

Although its definition has never been a matter of focused debate, the term *luchd na Gàidhlig*, in contrast to *Gàidheal*, can be and is used to refer without distinction to everyone with an ability in the Gaelic language, although perhaps it might also be extended to those whose relationship is rather more aspirational, more in the nature of an affinity. Critically, the boundaries of a group defined exclusively by language ability are a great deal more porous and permeable than one defined by ancestry, ethnicity or nationality, so that the term *luchd na Gàidhlig* is perceived by some 'new speakers' as being more 'inclusive' than *Gàidheal* (McLeod, O'Rourke and Dunmore forthcoming). A number of scholars writing on the contemporary sociology of Gaelic in Scotland have pointed to the increasing 'linguicism' of Gaelic revitalisation efforts (e.g. Glaser 2007), with Gaelic promotion initiatives becoming increasingly focused on the actual use of the Gaelic language itself, rather than manifestations of 'Gaelic culture' that do not demand Gaelic language ability. The growing use of a group term that defines membership simply in terms of language ability should be understood within this context.

Interestingly, the related terms *coimhearsnachd na Gàidhlig* and *coimhearsnachd Ghàidhlig* have come to develop somewhat divergent semantic significance. The term *coimhearsnachd na Gàidhlig*, now widely used in the context of Gaelic development initiatives, effectively equates to *luchd na Gàidhlig*, i.e. the broad group of Gaelic speakers and users, of whatever origin and wherever they may be found. With a definite article, *a' choimhearsnachd Ghàidhlig*, the meaning is effectively the same. But the indefinite *coimhearsnachd Ghàidhlig* and *coimhearsnachdan Gàidhlig* are, like the English 'a Gaelic community' or 'Gaelic communities', much more likely to refer to 'traditional' Gaelic communities, i.e. geographical areas in which the language has been used for centuries but which now contain large proportions of English monoglots. An interesting illustration of the semantic subtleties is the title of the recent volume *Coimhearsnachd na Gàidhlig An-Diugh/Gaelic Communities Today* (Munro & Mac an Tàilleir 2010) – i.e. 'community' singular in Gaelic, 'communities' plural in English.

To return to MacInnes' classification, then, *luchd na Gàidhlig* can be understood as a term that represents a post-national situation, as the last vestiges of MacInnes' 'detritus' have slowly disappeared. As the only real and relevant marker of distinctiveness becomes the language itself, then an identifier that names the language becomes a necessity.

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