

Book Reviews

Òrain Dòmhnall Ailein – The Songs of Donald Allan MacDonald, 1906 – 92, edited by Fr John Angus MacDonald. Benbecula 1999. Xxiii + 317 pp. £12.99

Chì mi – Dòmhnall Iain MacDhòmhnaill. The Gaelic Poetry of Donald John MacDonald, edited by Bill Innes. Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd, 1998. Xxx + 369 pp. £12.99

I have a very clear memory of one of my older brothers standing between me and the fire at home, learning a new song. It was *Gruagach Òg an Fhuilt Bhàin*. At the time, possibly the early fifties, when I was a teenager, the authorship of songs was not important to such as me. Neither, I suspect, was it important to those who immediately took a liking to this song. It is amongst those which, as suggested by my colleague Dr John MacInnes, have ‘qualities of passion, tenderness, vividness of imagery and a personal tone’. I do not know where my brother got the words or the tune of the song, but it had somehow got into the general Gaelic folk repertory. Its author, Donald Allan MacDonald saw what he thought of as a truncated version of it in a shop window in Fort William in 1950, with, written underneath the text, ‘Composed by the deceased Donald MacDonald’. That incident is quoted from a recorded Gaelic conversation between the bard and the late Donald Archie MacDonald in 1963 in Father (now Canon) John Angus MacDonald’s *Òrain Dhòmhnaill Ailein Dhòmhnaill na Bainich*. For me, proper knowledge of authors like Dòmhnall Ailein, like Donald MacDonald of Coruna, North Uist, author of *An Eala Bhàn*; like Donald Macintyre, South Uist and Paisley, author of *Òran na Cloiche*, *Sporan Dhòmhnaill* and *Bùth Dho’ill ‘icLeòid*; and like Donald John MacDonald of Peighinn nan Aoireann, South Uist came much later. The Canon has given a way of adding to that knowledge on pages 42–44, where we are given an account of some poets, junior to Donald Allan, who belonged to South Uist and who also composed songs which are very popular and part of the singing repertory of present-day artists from there and elsewhere.

Canon MacDonald investigated Donald Allan MacDonald and his songs for an M.Litt. Degree in the University of Aberdeen. The resulting book is divided into 5 sections including, for instance, a biographical sketch of the bard, formative influences, the bard and the local tradition and the bard and the composition of his songs. There are 35 poems in all. Some are fragments only, and there are three short satires in Limerick form which, along with a few others, may not have been intended by the bard himself for a general readership.

Both Donald Allan and Donald John – but the former more so – belonged to an era when, as Canon MacDonald puts it, ‘the bulk of Scottish poetry was composed for singing’. The melodies of 25 of Donald Allan’s songs have been transcribed by Ishabel T. MacDonald. Five of them are familiar to me personally: *Oran Uibhist* (no.5), *Ceud fàilt air gach gleann* (no.10), *Gruagach òg an fhuilt bhàin* (no.11), *An Daorach* (no.20), and *Moladh Uibhist* (no.30). It remains to be seen whether more will go into general circulation as a consequence of the Canon’s and Ishabel’s work.

Apart from the texts themselves, the translations and the melodies, there is some very useful information given to us. The sectional format, however, makes for an untidy layout in my opinion, and a certain amount of repetition could have been avoided. Bill Innes’ editorship of the poems of Donald John MacDonald is more concise and the book is easier to consult. Again the dichotomy between song and poem is highlighted, this time in the quotation on the back cover, ‘Once we made songs to be sung – now we write poetry to be read’. One could indeed imagine many of Donald Allan’s songs – or stanzas from them – being sung by any serious singer, especially singers from Uist. *Aiseirigh a’ Bheachain* (no.34), thirteen 8-line stanzas which contributed to his winning the Bardic Crown at the National Mod of *An Comunn Gàidhealach* in 1959, would not go into the singing repertory.

Donald John MacDonald had the advantage of literacy in Gaelic; Donald Allan MacDonald could read it but could not write it with ease (a fact that was aggravated later by the loss of his sight). Bill Innes describes Donald John MacDonald as a ‘harum-scarum, truant-playing teenager impatient to leave school at fourteen having shown little sign of any academic bent’. Donald John in particular had a striking pedigree: son of one of the greatest storytellers and song-transmitters of the last century, and of a sister of Donald Macintyre. Canon MacDonald tells us that Donald Allan MacDonald made much of his own kinship to well-known poets. There has always been a belief among Gaels that the ability to compose poetry was an inherited gift, and it is tempting to surmise that that is the case for these two MacDonalds.

Donald John experiments with metres that are not common in 20th century popular song. There are one or two examples of Burns’ favourite *Standard Habbie* metre (generally a stanza form aaabab where a has 4 stresses and b has 2. See the Concise Scots Dictionary.). This would seem to conform with the concept of ‘poetry to be read’, as poems in that metre are not sung in Scots. Mr Innes refers several times to examples of the strophic *iorram* which John MacDonald and Mary MacLeod brought to an artistic height in the 17th century. The poems he refers to, important, longer poems, are actually more like *ambrán* where what he calls the triplet would be the complete line if the poem were sung. They are reminiscent of, for example, the Lewis song *An t-Eilean mu Thuath* or *A Chuachag nan Craobh*, but with a longer stanza. Such a song structure has to be sung before one can place its form. That is not by any means to dismiss the poet’s knowledge of the structure or his skill in upholding the same end-rhyme through 68 units. He does, in fact, use the *iorram* metre in his *Duan I* and *Duan*

II (pp.204 and 206), sections of *An Clàrsair* (no. 49), the first stanza of *Duan II* having an echo of John Roy Stewart's *Latha Chuil-Lodair* (see *Highland Songs of the Forty-five*, p.176 or *Sàr Obair nam Bàrd Gaelach*, p.266):

A shliochd nan curaidh a bha
 Bithibh ullamh gun sgàth,
 Seasaibh duineil ri càch-a-chèile.

The editor rightly draws our attention to an example on page 302: *Do Niall Caimbeul* (no. 81), with irregular verse lengths.

Donald John's knowledge is also apparent in his vocabulary, much of which depends less on local dialect than on a kind of literary register. This is true of Donald Allan also, and indeed of most Gaelic poets. It is as much due to a familiarity, in an oral tradition, with the works of earlier poets as to reading. Donald John MacDonald is adept at choosing the proper language to suit his subject, and this is admirably illustrated in *Am Birthday Party*. To quote the editor, 'for a community that was then close to 100 per cent Gaelic-speaking the humour depended largely on the use of alien English words and concepts in the exaggeration of all the imagined sophisticated features of the occasion'. Of course, part of the comic attraction of this device was the attention to the rhyming scheme between the two languages, for example:

Chaidh an seòmar-suidhe rèiteach
 Deiseil glan for the occasion
 Gu robh grunn chongratulations
 Air an leughadh aig a' bhòrd.

There is also a comment on the simplicity of Donald John's language in the religious songs which he composed, of which there are 14 in the book. They are generally short and easy to memorise, which I feel is not surprising as the bard probably intended them for congregational singing.

The humour of songs like *Am Birthday Party* cannot translate into a monolingual situation, and that has implications for the readership of both books – and of this review! Canon MacDonald gives a succinct summary of the recent history of Gaelic in Education on pages 17 to 21 of *Òrain Dhòmhnaill Ailein Dhòmhnaill na Bainich*. Both books are presented in English, with English translations of the Gaelic poem texts, but the Canon's readers who cannot read Gaelic will be frustrated at the Gaelic-only transcriptions of comments recorded on tape, of which there are many in his book. Bill Innes also omits translations of some verses contained in his notes. He declares his wish for *Chì mi* to be useful to students, and we may conclude that both books are intended for a bilingual readership. I confess to not having studied the translations in depth, but have no qualms as to their accuracy.

There are incidental points of interest for the reader: the list of 'local' poets and the piece on Gaelic Education in the book on Donald Allan Macdonald; the note on

Hallowe'n customs in South Uist and several photographs in *Chì mi*. I would recommend both to a bilingual Gaelic/English readership and to any English speaker who wants to know about a lovely aspect of a bygone – and yet fairly recent – age when bards had such prestige in their own territory.

MORAG MACLEOD

The Merry Muses of Caledonia edited by G. Ross Roy. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1999. ISBN 1-57003-324-2. xx, 128 pp., \$90.00.

Six hundred numbered copies have been made of this limited edition published by the University of South Carolina Press. It comprises a facsimile edition of 'The Merry Muses of Caledonia; A Collection of Favourite Scots Songs, Ancient and Modern; Selected for use of the Crochallan Fencibles,' printed in 1799, plus an introductory booklet, held together in a matching slipcase. Robert Burns was a member of the club, the Crochallan Fencibles, which met in Edinburgh, and he was involved in this publication of bawdy poetry and song. The publication contains no music, but tune titles are given for some of the songs. Bawdy versions of well-known songs are given, such as 'For A' That And A' That' and 'Comin' Thro' The Rye', and lesser-known songs such as 'She's Hoy'd Me Out O' Lauderdale' and 'The Patriarch' are also included. The editor, Professor G. Ross Roy, notes that only two copies of the original *Merry Muses* are known to survive, making this facsimile edition all the more valuable, as it enables scholars to readily access this important historical document. The previously known copy lacked a date as a result of an incomplete title page, but the copy now reproduced dates the publication in 1799.

The introductory booklet includes discussion of Burns's interest in bawdy poetry and of previous editions of *The Merry Muses* (1843 and 1872; the latter is spuriously dated 1827). It also includes a facsimile of the letter Burns sent in 1792 to John M'Murdo at Drumlanrig which accompanied the manuscript of the collection. The letter is important as it makes clear that Burns had a hand in the enterprise; some previous writers on Burns have claimed that he had no relationship to the work. Burns states:

I think I once mentioned something to you of a Collection of Scots Songs I have for some years been making: I send you a perusal of what I have gathered.—I could not conveniently spare them above five or six days, & five or six glances of them will probably more than suffice you.—When you are tired of them, please leave them with M^r Clint of the King's Arms.—There is not another copy of the Collection in the world.

G. Ross Roy notes that Burns's name does not appear anywhere in this facsimile edition of *The Merry Muses*, and that the 1843 edition was the first to mention it. He outlines Burns's involvement in the work and mentions that the compiler of the text of the original edition is not known. Indeed, all we can say for certain is that twelve songs exist in the poet's hand, and that nine of the poems were collected but not written by him (a complete list of these is not given with the work, however). Furthermore, not all of Burns's bawdy work is contained in *The Merry Muses*.

An interesting link to this facsimile edition comes via Sydney Goodsir Smith, who together with James Barke and J. DeLancey Ferguson, produced an edition of *The Merry Muses* in 1959, containing texts from the only other known original copy plus other bawdy works by Burns. G. Ross Roy acquired the copy on which the present facsimile is based in 1965, after Goodsir Smith had become aware of it through a chance meeting in an Edinburgh pub.

Another comparatively recent edition of *The Merry Muses* was by G. Legman, who published the work in type-facsimile with additional sources from the Cunningham Manuscript in 1965. This edition has detailed notes on all the songs, a glossary, a substantial introduction and a bibliography containing details of most of the known editions and reprints of the collection known as *The Merry Muses*. Whilst the introductory booklet to the present edition is not as comprehensive in its coverage as Legman's book, it gives a very clear background to the publication and useful recommendations for further reading. Indeed, although there have been previous editions of *The Merry Muses*, the present edition, because it provides a facsimile of this relatively recently discovered second copy as well as scholarly notes, is an important addition to the Burns corpus and should form a useful reference point for all Burns scholars.

KATHERINE CAMPBELL

Traditional Gaelic Bagpiping, 1745 – 1945 by John G. Gibson. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press; Edinburgh : National Museums of Scotland, 1998. 406p.

When John Gibson's *Traditional Gaelic Bagpiping, 1745 – 1945* first came out in 1998, he anticipated a storm of controversy and debate over its fundamental themes and arguments. This is understandable; in it, he challenged long-entrenched ideas within piping circles and debunked myths that have coloured histories by scholars and learned gentlemen for nigh on two centuries. The controversy may have been contained, however, by the book's cost, to academics and those near enough to a library that lends it. But Gibson's first major work is now available in paperback, and may therefore reach a wider readership wherein a storm or two may again stir.

Gibson's overall theme traces the place and functions of Highland piping from the perspective of old-world Gaelic social culture. He offers this as an attempt to redress a perceived imbalance of scholarly works toward the mainstream aspects of piping – the patronage of an English-speaking aristocracy, the rise of staged competition, quantifiable standards on which to judge and be judged – and perhaps also as a way of promoting general interest in the cultural elements which occasioned piping's roots as an art form. With this in mind, he largely sidesteps the rise of such mainstream institutions as the Highland Society of London and the Piobaireachd Society and addresses instead the cultural upheavals affecting Scottish Gaeldom in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and outlines in turn how this affected the indigenous functions and character

of their music. Not so much a musicological treatise, then, as a chronicling of tradition and change within the emergence of modern Scottish society.

The key issue surrounding any observation of piping in the eighteenth century is its status in the post-Jacobite era, and this serves as the platform to Gibson's wider exposition. Modern lore dictates, for instance, that the Highland bagpipe was considered an instrument of war in the aftermath of 1746 and henceforth banned under the terms of the Disarming Act. This in turn brought about a catastrophic decline in the music – particularly *ceòl mòr*, its classical form – which was stemmed only by the efforts of preservation-minded societies in the 1780s.

Whether classical piping was indeed in a state of alarming decline at the end of the eighteenth century has proved debatable in recent years. It is true that many Scots at the time perceived *ceòl mòr*, among other by-then iconic strains of Highland heritage, to be in mortal danger of oblivion, such as found in John Ramsay's introductory essay to Patrick MacDonald's 1784 *Highland Vocal Airs*. But these frequent reports of imminent demise were surely exaggerated by a predilection toward the romanticism of a doomed Celtic twilight among gentlemen with little direct knowledge of piping or, indeed, of the resiliency of Gaelic grass-roots social cohesion. As William Donaldson has shown in his *The Highland Pipe and Scottish Society, 1750–1950* (Tuckwell, 2000), there is little hard evidence to support the notion of a sharp decline in the performance tradition at that time, but much oral and manuscript evidence through the nineteenth century to suggest quite the opposite.

However, not everybody who feared for the future of classical Highland music in the post-Jacobite era were lay observers. John MacLean, physician and advisor to MacDonald of Sleat in the 1770s, was a man with impeccable Gaelic credentials and an intimate acquaintance with both the MacArthur pipers in Trotternish and the MacKays of Gairloch. In a letter to the chief of the Grants in 1770, MacLean noted of the MacKays that 'the grandfather of the present generation has been a fine player and composer, but there has been a great degeneracy since his time'. It is likely that he was referring to the famous blind piper and bard, *Iain Dall*, who had died some 16 years earlier. Although MacLean did not go into detail about this 'degeneracy', the remark, from one so well-placed, supports the position that courtly Highland pipe music was not circumventing unscathed the upheavals being suffered by its patron class up to that time.

The wider social framework in which *ceòl mòr* had hitherto operated and flourished was crumbling. I, for one, am inclined to believe that its performance and transmission was not in great danger in the post-Jacobite era, owing to the conservatism and inheritance of what Donaldson has termed 'the performer community'. But it is likely that the classical idiom was in the process of becoming rigidified – gradually becoming divorced from the vital song tradition with which it had shared much cultural and musical space as its bearers moved gradually further afield from the monoglot Gaelic context; its repertoire and stylistic interpretations becoming less pluralistic, less spontaneous and more curatorial in the minds of its bearers and patrons.

Gibson's work proves in many respects to complement this position. In Part One of his book, he argues that the pipes were by no means banned under the terms of the Act and that, even had they been, legislative limitations and thoroughfare conditions in the Highlands would have made such an edit unenforceable. He instead reveals the decline in classical piping's vitality at the time as symptomatic of the decline of the Gaelic aristocratic and middle-class social order on a wider scale. The entire eighteenth century, after all, was a period of economic and cultural upheaval in the Highlands as the old aristocracy integrated more and more with British modernisation and agricultural improvement. A clan chief's priorities were gradually changing – and so, in effect, was the very *raison d'être* of classical Highland pipe music.

In Parts Two and Three, Gibson proceeds to observe piping's role in eighteenth-century Highland military regiments as well as amongst the grass-roots community up to c. 1820, when notated collections began to appear. From his analysis in these sections we can conclude that forms of piping in the Highlands which were not as dependent on the aristocracy as *ceòl mòr* managed to thrive during and beyond the post-Jacobite era: piping in the regiments because, amidst the instability which characterised the Gaelic upper class at the time, piping's martial qualities naturally allowed the army to replace them as patrons; and piping within the community because the music was predominantly played for dancing in the *taigh-céilidh*, or ceilidh-house, and needed no laird to patronise it.

The fourth and final part to Gibson's thesis expounds on the character of this indigenous dance-piping idiom, and charts both its decline in Scotland and its survival in the few remaining Gaelic-speaking emigrant communities of Nova Scotia. The legacy of Highland emigration, so far as piping is concerned, has only recently begun to receive proper attention from scholars and performers, and this is due in no small part to Gibson's research there over the past 25 years. He is well aware that a sufficient base of reference for old-world Gaelic piping cannot stand on documentary evidence alone, as the written record since the eighteenth century is mainly from the English-language perspective and, with the exception of travellers' memoirs, not too concerned with rural Gaelic social traditions. This is why Gibson attaches such importance to the conservatism of Nova Scotia's Gaelic-speakers and the anachronistic nature of their piping traditions: they were, until relatively recently, less subject to the influences of British modernity than Scotland's *Gàidhealtachd* and so suggest how pipe music may have been transmitted and performed in the ceilidhs of pre-emigration Highland communities.

Traditional Gaelic Bagpiping does not contain staff-notated examples setting mainstream competitive style against what Gibson perceives to be the older style of the eighteenth century. True, a comparison of cultures naturally leads to a comparison of styles where music is concerned; but Gibson limits himself to a discussion of the cultural contexts which distinguish the aural idiom of the pre-emigrant, monoglot Gael and the literate idiom of today's competitive player. Readers expecting a bombshell of 'this

tune was played in this manner' – a definitive account of style in eighteenth-century Highland Scotland such as that proposed by Allan MacDonald in his 1995 M.Litt thesis – will therefore be disappointed and frustrated. Although such an approach would have been more appealing to pipers hungry for the stuff of repertoires, Gibson is concerned with the broader questions of function, context, and the dynamics of inexorable change. Instead of casting judgement on either style, he merely identifies the points and means by which they diverged, and offers justification for the aural idiom's value to current scholarship. He places piping in the hands of the Gael uninfluenced by Empire, and proceeds to observe its evolution within Empire as the cultural pillars which had previously supported it eroded over decades and centuries. It is an important and timely point to make nowadays, as the *féis* movement gains in popularity and more competitors look to early nineteenth-century manuscripts for 'new' settings of familiar tunes; and therein lies Gibson's opportunity to capture the imagination of the performers as well as the scholars. His work emerges at a time when the piping world is looking more and more at what was, as inspiration for what will be.

JOSHUA DICKSON

Scottish Gaelic Studies volume 17. Edited by Donald MacAulay, James Gleasure and Colm Ó Baoill. University of Aberdeen 1996. 402 pp.

As indicated by its title, *Féill-Sgrìbhinn do Ruairidh MacThòmais/Festschrift for Professor D S Thomson*, this very substantial volume is dedicated to one of the most distinguished and productive Celticists to have worked in Scotland within living memory. Following the opening dedication, the editors provide a useful list of Derick Thomson's publications to date, comprising some 275 items in all (academic books, articles, reviews, translations, original poetry and short stories in Gaelic and English) that have appeared over nearly half a century. The 38 contributions by friends and colleagues, among them leading scholars from Scotland and abroad, are ordered alphabetically by author. A good number of these works are interdisciplinary, capable of being listed under a number of conventional headings, and have the added interest of being consciously associated in some way with Thomson and his work. Their breadth and variety reflect Thomson's wide interests and influence, at the same time providing an impressive indication of the extent of research in Scottish Gaelic (SG) at the close of the twentieth century in the fields of language (linguistic description, dialectology and sociolinguistics), fieldwork-based ethnology, literature, history, medieval manuscripts, and onomastics. Materials studied range from prehistory to the present, and are drawn from as far afield as Nova Scotia.

The studies on language highlight the benefits to be derived from continued applications of modern linguistic theory and descriptive techniques to SG. Richard Cox emphasises the need for reappraisal of our understanding of tense and aspect, pointing to the cursory nature of standard descriptions currently available. The same

theme is taken up at greater length in Donald MacAulay's insightful comments (presumably based on his own Lewis dialect) on time, tense, mode and aspect, where he observes that systems incorporating original distinctions between *tha* and *bidh* in 'traditional SG' have in some instances undergone remodelling along the lines of those characterising contemporary standard English. In her continuing investigation of the terminal stages of East Sutherland Gaelic, Nancy Dorian notes an unusual degree of personal-pattern (i.e. of a kind not conditioned by factors such as age, social class or register and therefore non-evaluative) variation among fluent speakers that does not appear to occur in English. This she tentatively links with isolated communities where there are few speakers literate in the community language, and outside norms are therefore of little consequence. An emic view of linguistic geography in the Western Isles features in the work of Seumas Grannnd, who points out that lexical differences are routinely regarded by Gaelic speakers themselves to function as shibboleths. Taking the north-south distribution of the various words for 'flower' (*sìtbean*, *dìtbean*, *flùr*) Grannnd observes that lexical isoglosses closely follow the lines of old political boundaries between the most powerful clans of the region. In a further study in lexical geography, this time based on data from the linguistic survey of Gaelic dialects, Cathair Ó Dochartaigh studies the distribution of two loanwords into Gaelic (*nàbuidh* 'neighbour' and *cuibheall* 'wheel') in relation to their surviving native counterparts (*coimbhearsnach*, *roth*), and what they can reveal concerning the varying acceptance of loans in their social and technological contexts. Another aspect of lexical geography is addressed by Gearóid Stockman in his examination and listing of lexical correspondences between Scotland and the now extinct dialect of the Glens of Antrim, based on extensive ethnographic material published in the 1920s. As a tip of the hat to Derrick Thomson's co-authorship with John Lorne Campbell of *Edward Lhuyd in the Scottish Highlands 1699–1700* (1963), R. L. Thomson examines in detail some of the lexical evidence contained in a Manx version of the language questionnaire circulated by Lhuyd. SG-Ulster parallels on the level of phonology appear in Seosamh Watson's remarks in the role of hiatus-filling /h/ in dialects of both countries, where he observes that in both the Outer Hebrides and in East Ulster /h/, though a process of hypercorrection, was substituted for hiatus resulting from the loss of intervocalic *-th-* following a stressed vowel. Continuing with phonology, Kenneth Nilsen discusses, *inter alia*, the spread in Nova Scotia Gaelic dialects of what Alexander Carmichael once termed the *glug Eigeach*: the tendency for non-palatal /L/ (lenited and unlenited) to be realised as something close to a /w/ in English. This feature and the others (/N/>/m/ in some environments, [w] in others) examined by Nilsen suggest to the reviewer, at least, that a more comprehensive look at laterals and nasals in dialectology and language history would yield worthwhile results. The ethnological side of lexicography is more to the fore in †Gordon MacLennan's listing and explanation of obscure words and phrases (much along the lines of Fr Allan McDonald of Eriskay's *Gaelic Words & Expressions from South Uist*) from late tradition-bearer Anna Bhán Nic Grianna of

Rannafast, Co. Donegal. MacLennan draws attention to the expression *tog ort!* 'off you go' as a likely borrowing from SG, noting that a long vowel (*tóg*) is characteristic of the Irish form of the verb (p. 262). A similar collection of 'asseverations, exclamations and imprecations', probably the earliest materials of oral tradition in Eigg recalled by Rev. Kenneth MacLeod, is contributed by †John Lorne Campbell who came across them in the Carmichael Papers (Edinburgh University Library). The collection is of considerable interest to lexicographers and folklorists, and Campbell has added his own notes to those by MacLeod. The applications of sociolinguistics to modern Gaelic are demonstrated in Kenneth MacKinnon's use of the of the 1981 census results to reveal relationship between Gaelic language skills and social (occupational) class. The results of his analysis, namely two occupational 'cores' (the crofting community and a professional-managerial sector), while hardly surprising, are the kind that should form the basis for informed language planning.

In one of the two contributions written in Gaelic, Iain MacAonghuis makes us aware of one of the lesser known aspects of Thomson's work: his contributions as an ethnologist and fieldworker. The fruits of Thomson's collecting journeys, undertaken around 1950 in various of the islands in the company of Anthony Dilworth, are now held in the archive of the School of Scottish Studies, and MacAonghuis provides materials (recorded by himself in the 60s and accompanied by his own engaging commentary) from Donald Sinclair of Tiree on the traditions of Cú Chulainn and the Finn cycle. The second of the contributions in Gaelic, from †Donald Archie MacDonald, and based on tape- and video recordings made from 1982–86 of his conversations with Donald John (*Dòmhnall Iain Dhunnchaidh*) MacDonald of South Uist, is noteworthy not only for what it reveals regarding the process of songmaking (e.g. the roles of visualisation, and of writing), but also for the light it throws on language change – specifically the disappearance of language registers – in the community during the bard's lifetime. Continuing his long-standing and productive exploration of Gaelic custom and belief, Ronald Black examines a calendar text found within a 19th century Perthshire manuscript of proverbs. His conclusion that the text contains much that is new and important regarding the Gaelic traditional calendar is supported in his knowledgeable and detailed notes. The role of women in Celtic society, for some time now a growing field of research, is treated from a fresh, ethno-historical perspective by †Alan Bruford in his diachronic examination of the position of women as poets and performers beside the male 'bardic caste', noting in passing that women poets were more prominent in Scotland than elsewhere. He discusses the meanings and functions in Gaelic society of the *bean-chaointe* 'professional keening woman : *ban-chainte* 'female satirist' (both probably descended from the female druid), the work songs recorded down into modern times, and speculates on the cultural politics surrounding the banishment and face-down burial of the Harris poetess Mary MacLeod. Continuing developments in onomastics are ably represented in W. H. F. Nicholaisen's discussion of Scots place-names ending in –o (< SG –ach), located primarily between the Firth of Forth and

the Moray Firth, and the implications they may contain regarding language history in that region. Hermann Pálsson's study on the Old Norse origins of place-names in Lewis and Harris is sensibly organised according to the topographical features they describe.

Donald Meek in his contrastive study of the images of nature in the hymns of the 18th and 19th century poets Dugald Buchannan and Peter Grant considers how such imagery was used by the poets in attaining their literary goals, what influences from non-Gaelic/Highland sources were drawn on, how concepts were adapted for specific Highland needs, and what relation they bore to Highland evangelicism. Proinsias Mac Cana's remarks on the much studied Old Irish poem *Caillech Bérrí* 'The Old Woman of Beare' resonate considerably further than the 'literary footnote' in the title of his work would suggest. Mac Cana proposes that past interpretations have been too narrow; the work should be viewed in terms of the larger living mythological and historical traditions, containing multiple allusions that are now only partially recoverable. Also dealing with medieval materials, namely comparisons Welsh, Breton and Irish sources, is J. E. Caerwyn Williams's useful and thought-provoking study, where he examines the usages and semantic range of the root **kan-* 'to sing, etc.' in the Celtic languages, how they are associated with the bard in society and what functions (panegyrist, satirist, magician, prophet) or combinations of these they reveal. In his examination of the Rawlinson B512 MS version of *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó* James Gleasure makes the point that Thurneysen's reproduction of Kuno Meyer's transcription 'is less satisfactory than the latter's transcription of the MS in a number of ways'. Referring to the MS he then lists corrected readings that apply to the work of both scholars. Thomson's longtime friend and fellow poet †Iain Crichton Smith in a critical look at Thomson's verse shows the extent to which its strength is derived from direct access to feeling, uncompromised by academic training.

Contributions on history extend from early medieval times to the present. From the medieval period are detailed studies on *Cath Fedo Euin* by David Dumville; on the landholdings of hereditary families of poets, in particular that of the *ollam rí* (the king's poet) at Balvaird, near Scone, identified on the basis of historical documentation by John Bannerman; William Gillies's review of the linguistic evidence toward a clearer understanding of the history and development of the *Toschderach*, a legal official attested in Scotland and Man from medieval times whose exact functions have been a subject of speculation. In an illuminating example of how traditions from different periods can become attached to a song, T. P. McCaughey makes use of historical and oral sources – among them the Dewar MSS – to explain those associated with a poem by Iain Ciar Dhùn Ollaidh, who was active early in the 18th century. Illicit trade between Ireland and the Scottish Highlands from later in that century have provided the background for numerous sea songs in Gaelic, and is given a comprehensive treatment by Fiona MacDonald. Finally, on a more contemporary note, the historian Ian Grimble takes us beyond the confines of high literary activity or academia to highlight to importance

of Thomson's journalistic activities over four decades: the prescience behind the varied substantive social and political issues raised in editorials appearing in the early issues of *Gairm*, e.g. language rights, education, the participation of women, the media, economic and social development in the Gàidhealtachd, and home rule.

JOHN SHAW

Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland: James VI's Demonology and the North Berwick Witches. Edited by Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000. xiii + 454 p. : ill., maps, ports.

Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland is a combination of a micro-history and a collection of most of the relevant documents from the North Berwick witch hunts of 1590–91 including pre-trial depositions, trial minutes, pamphlet propaganda, and a learned demonological treatise written by King James VI of Scotland. The authors provide an engaging and well-researched micro-history of a most unique event in Scottish history. The North Berwick witch-hunt was a double inversion of social, political and religious hierarchy. Common women accused of witchcraft were thought to have power over the most socially, economically and politically powerful men in Scotland, and the Devil was thought to have had a brief (if failed) opportunity to overthrow God's rule on earth.

The 'North Berwick witch-hunt' got its name from a small grouping of interrelated witchcraft and treason trials of suspects from East Lothian during 1590–91. These suspects were accused of meeting with the Devil in the Kirk of North Berwick to plot and wage magic against the King. While each suspect's case had its own individual (or local) elements – including accusations of malefice (magical harm) against neighbours, love magic, and fortune telling – they were tied together through an alleged conspiracy to kill King James VI. The conspiracy supposedly sought to sink the ship carrying him and his bride, Anne of Denmark, using witchcraft as it sailed the North Sea back from their wedding in Denmark.

The authors cover the likes of Francis Stewart, Earl of Bothwell, cousin to the King, admiral of the fleet and suspected head of the treasonable North Berwick conspiracy. Then, with equal attention, they present the lives of people like Agnes Sampson, a healer, from East Lothian accused of participating in the conspiracy, divining private conversations between James and his wife in bed, and enacting malefice against her neighbours. High political melodrama was fused with witchcraft accusations by and against peasants (mostly women) that formed the mainstay of witchcraft trials right through the seventeenth century. Normand and Roberts skillfully work their narrative through the many different registers of witchcraft belief, class and culture that intermingled in the North Berwick witch-hunts.

The main strength of *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland* is in the details. Normand and Roberts provide a very satisfying and gripping account of the political, social and cultural factors at play in the North Berwick witchcraft trials. This broad sweep is

complimented and enriched by reconstruction of the lives of the individuals charged with witchcraft and those investigating the alleged crimes. Their narrative brings both ideologies of witchcraft and the inner workings of the late 16th Century court politics and political power into sharp focus – highlighting how the discursive formations drew upon and helped to shape one another. As Normand and Roberts observe, ‘witchcraft is politicised, and politics is demonised’ (p. 44) through the North Berwick witchcraft trials.

Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland is more than a reconstruction of a unique and difficult historical event. Normand and Roberts also provide a coherent theoretical approach to witchcraft. While taking on board recent cultural and literary theory,¹ they do not advance the main pitfalls of such approaches – the tendency to view action and people as static ‘text’ to be ‘read’ or a reification of ‘culture’. Rather they explore the problematic of language, text and society head on. ‘This relation is one of congruence between the ideological forms in the language recorded in the texts and produced through the processes of investigation, trial, propaganda and theorisation (represented in this witch hunt respectively by depositions, dittays, *Newes From Scotland*,² and *Demonology*,³ and those forms as they appear in social, political and religious life’ (p. 55). They interweave personal narrative, ideology, textual analysis, and cultural and social history.

The North Berwick witch-hunt was the first of five major witch-hunts in early modern Scotland. The others were in 1597, 1628–30, 1650 and 1661–62. All of the witch-hunts were animated by specific beliefs about demonic pacts, witches’ meetings, and malefice. A panic more similar to later witch-hunts and much wider than the North Berwick witch-hunt was simultaneously sweeping across the Lothians, Fife, and Aberdeenshire in 1590–91. Those trials referred to as the ‘North Berwick witch-hunt’ were different from the rest because they revolved around the added element of treason. Despite the broad title, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland* is primarily concerned with the North Berwick witch-hunt and as such is not a general explanation of witchcraft in early modern Scotland. The North Berwick trials were substantively and procedurally distinct from later Scottish witch hunts: torture was more liberally applied, procedures were loosened and the government was more directly and personally involved than in concurrent and later witchcraft trials. New, forthcoming work challenges some long held assumptions about the role of Privy Council commissions for witchcraft trials and the legal procedures of witchcraft prosecutions in the 1590s.⁴ Unfortunately, Normand and Roberts could not have had access to this new scholarship before the publication of *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*.

On the whole, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland* is a clear account of a very difficult tangle of historical documents. Normand and Roberts have assembled the clues and evidence to present a compelling and convincing description of the North Berwick witch-hunt. Their combination of excellent micro-history and accessible transcriptions of early modern witchcraft documents in one volume is a unique and much welcomed

addition to the literature on Scottish history and witchcraft. It is a must read and should be added to the corpus of teaching texts.

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NOTES

- 1 For a general discussion of these themes, See S. Clark (ed.), *Languages of Witchcraft: Narrative, Ideology and Meaning in Early Modern Culture*, (Macmillan Press Ltd 2001); and J. Barry, M. Hester and G. Roberts (eds.) *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief* (Cambridge University Press 1996).
- 2 A pamphlet about the North Berwick witch-hunt that Normand and Roberts argue was written by a Scottish minister who participated in the trials themselves and was soon after adapted for circulation in England.
- 3 This is James VI's treatise on witchcraft and demonology.
- 4 See J. Goodare, 'The Framework for Scottish Witch-Hunting in the 1590s', forthcoming.