

# SAINTS AND SCARECROWS: THE CHURCHES AND GAELIC CULTURE IN THE HIGHLANDS SINCE 1560

DONALD E. MEEK

DEPARTMENT OF CELTIC, UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

This is a very wide topic – potentially the subject of a book, or even several books, rather than an appropriate theme for one paper.<sup>1</sup> Because of restrictions of space, I will need to be very careful that I do not misrepresent the complexity of the topic. Compression can force one to make generalisations, and generalisations may create unfortunate stereotypes which do not always relate to the totality of the field, though they may relate to part of it. In fact, I wish to devote the first half of my paper to the theme of generalisation, before moving to explore briefly, in the second half, the relationship between popular perception and hard fact in what is a highly emotive field. I will begin with modern views on the

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<sup>1</sup> The title of the paper as originally given on 7th May 1994 at the one-day conference of the Aberdeen School of Christian Studies was 'Gaelic and the Gospel: Christianity and Culture in the Scottish Highlands since 1560'. I hope to produce a book on this theme, and I have therefore altered the title of the present article. Remarkably, there are only a few articles (and, so far, no books) specifically devoted to the attitudes of the Protestant Churches to Gaelic culture; see John MacInnes 'Religion in Gaelic Society', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 52 (1980-82), pp. 221-42, for important reminders of the wider dimensions of the subject. In other works by Gaelic scholars, the churches are given, at worst, only a couple of sentences, or, at best, perhaps as much as a couple of paragraphs, in broader conspectuses of the state of the Gaelic language. The churches are more generously treated in recent works by non-Gaelic historians, notably Victor E. Durkacz, *The Decline of the Celtic Languages* (Edinburgh, 1983), and Charles W.J. Withers, *Gaelic in Scotland 1698-1981: The Geographical History of a Language* (Edinburgh, 1984). The problem of non-native involvement lies in the churches' own failure to produce any sustained scholarly engagement with the issues of language and culture; the most significant recent contributions in this area came from the late Revd Dr Thomas M. Murchison, of the Church of Scotland; see his Gaelic article, 'An Eaglais anns a' Ghàidhealtachd anns an Ochdamh Linn Deug' ('The Church in the Highlands in the Eighteenth Century'), in *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Glasgow*, 5 (1958). Murchison contributed articles to D.S. Thomson, *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland* (Oxford, 1983), which gives space to several dimensions of the churches' Gaelic involvement. See also contributions by Kenneth D. MacDonald and Donald E. Meek in Nigel M. de S. Cameron, David F. Wright *et al.* (eds), *The Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh, 1993), henceforward referred to as *DSCHT*.

relationship between Christianity and culture in the Highlands, and then consider some specific themes.

### **Images of Highland Religion**

'Highland religion' (so-called) has generated a number of images, negative and positive. I think it is probably true to say that many people tend to view Highland history in terms of mental images. The very mention of the present theme will have brought images to your mind. Some may see positive images, but most folk, I suspect, will see negative images, especially of very solemn and serious Highland ministers, or Highland elders, pronouncing their anathemas on levity of all kinds, fulminating against the sinful excesses of their wayward people, and standing against secular indulgence in any shape or form.

This is the first, indeed the primary, image which I wish to consider. A version of it forms the core of a modern Gaelic poem, composed by one of our leading Scottish poets, Ruaraidh MacThòmais, otherwise Professor Derick Thomson:<sup>2</sup>

#### **Am Bodach-ròcais**

An oidhch' ud  
thàinig am bodach-ròcais dhan taigh-chèilidh:  
fear caol ard dubh  
is aodach dubh air.  
Shuidh e air an t-sèis  
is thuit na cairtean as ar làmhan.  
Bha fear a siud  
ag innse sgeulachd air Conall Gulban  
is reodh na faclan air a bhilean.  
Bha boireannach 'na suidh' air stòl  
ag òran, 's thug e 'n toradh as a' cheòl.  
Ach cha do dh'fhàg e falamh sinn:  
thug e òran nuadh dhuinn,  
is sgeulachdan na h-àird an Ear,  
is sprùilleach de dh'fheallsanachd Geneva,  
is sguab e 'n teine à meadhon an làir,  
's chuir e 'n tùrlach loisgeach nar broillichean.

#### **The Scarecrow**

That night  
the scarecrow came into the cèilidh-house:  
a tall, thin black-haired man  
wearing black clothes.  
He sat on the bench

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<sup>2</sup> Ruaraidh MacThòmais, *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* (Edinburgh, 1982), pp. 140-1.

and the cards fell from our hands.

One man

was telling a folktale about Conall Gulban

and the words froze on his lips.

A woman was sitting on a stool,

singing songs, and he took the goodness out of the music.

But he did not leave us empty-handed:

he gave us a new song,

and tales from the Middle East,

and fragments of the philosophy of Geneva,

and he swept the fire from the centre of the floor

and set a searing bonfire in our breasts.

This poem, which might well be subtitled 'Calvin comes to the cèilidh-house', is a picture of the evangelical Calvinist minister in Lewis, the island of MacThòmais' boyhood. Although no date is given, it is reasonable to assume that the poet is thinking of the early or middle years of the nineteenth century, when Evangelicalism emerged in power in Lewis. MacThòmais is contemptuous of the scarecrow: the image itself suggests lack of humanity, fear and terror, self-protection and individualism, instead of the collective solidarity of a Gaelic community. The scarecrow displaces that solidarity, symbolised by the fire; he kills off what is good within the culture, and substitutes one set of stories and songs for another ('he gave us a new song' ironically echoes Psalm 40: 'he put a new song in my mouth'). Culture is given a new orientation; in fact, an alien culture is brought in from Geneva and the Middle East. More ominously, the scarecrow destroys the collective conscience of the community, and puts the weight of responsibility on the individual conscience; the fire, once a focal point of warmth, assumes a destructive, rather than a constructive, role.

MacThòmais is not alone in presenting a less than sympathetic picture of the impact of Evangelicalism on Gaelic culture. It is fair to say that the picture of the Protestant church in the Highlands, and of the evangelical movement in particular, offered by other twentieth-century modern poets like Sorley MacLean, Donald MacAulay and Iain Crichton Smith, is a fairly negative one; it is seen as being, on the whole, insensitive to the culture, blind to social needs, and restrictive, if not dictatorial, in its demands.<sup>3</sup> Given that the church is not self-critical, the

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<sup>3</sup> Representative poems by these poets can be accessed easily in the bilingual anthology edited by Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh, *Nua-Bhàrdachd Ghàidhlig* (Edinburgh, 1976); see especially MacLean's 'Ban-Ghàidheal' ('Highland Woman'), pp. 104-7, which condemns the Church for its failure to alleviate physical suffering; MacAulay's 'Soisgeul 1955' ('Gospel 1955'), pp. 192-5, which, while sympathetic to the cultural

perspectives offered by such poets are very important, and cannot be lightly dismissed.

Prose writers too can give vent to antagonistic feelings. Thus Alexander Nicolson, in his *History of Skye*, writes:

As a result of the revivals that took place in many parts of Skye in the early years of the nineteenth century, two facts emerge. In the first place, the preachers of the new evangelism waged war persistently against such popular recreations as secular music, the ancient tales and the traditional barderie, with the result that much of the native culture, developed during the course of the ages, has been irretrievably lost.<sup>4</sup>

Nicolson, who goes on to describe the second fact as 'a decided change in the conduct of the people, so far as their attitude to temperance was concerned', illustrates this second point effectively. He does not produce evidence in clear support of his first point, but nevertheless leaves the strong impression that Evangelicalism was the principal cause of the decay of secular culture in Skye.<sup>5</sup>

### **Evangelical Hagiography**

Of course, modern secular Gaelic poets and historians are not the only image-makers. Evangelical composers and writers make images too, and a great deal of modern evangelical writing, in the Highland and Gaelic context, has promoted another potent image, obviously more favourable towards Evangelicals. Much of this image – which has achieved the status of an indelible stereotype – was created in the nineteenth century, chiefly in the second half of that century, and twentieth-century writings have been but a poor shadow of this. You will find the archetype of this kind of image-making in John Kennedy's volume, *The Days of the Fathers in Ross-shire*, which has been an influential work in constructing a picture of 'highland religion'. Kennedy, a Free Church minister who opposed the methods of the American evangelist, D.L. Moody,<sup>6</sup> provides a picture of the 'good old days' in Ross-shire – a region filled with solemn ministers, men and the occasional woman, who are intensely spiritual beings, with their minds firmly set on heavenly things, and spurning the things of earth. The work is rather

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fusion achieved in Gaelic psalm-singing, emphasises the terror created by 'fashionable' hell-fire preaching in a cottage-meeting; and Smith's 'A' Chailleach' ('The Old Woman') pp. 172-5, which portrays the barren and dangerous formality of a world-view shaped strictly by the Bible.

4 Alexander Nicolson, *History of Skye: A Record of the Families, the Social Conditions and the Literature of the Island*, second edn. (Skye, 1994), p. 255.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 272-3.

6 J. Kennedy, *Hyper-Evangelism: 'Another Gospel', though a Mighty Power* (Edinburgh, 1874).

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romantic and uncritical, a point illustrated by the portrayal of Kennedy's own father. This is a prime example of evangelical hagiography; Kennedy is doing for the ministers of Ross-shire what hagiographers did for the saints of the Middle Ages. His character-sketches are like the flip-side of MacThòmais' 'Scarecrow'. Here is his description of the Revd Dr Angus MacIntosh of Tain (1764-1831):

His personal appearance was remarkable. Tall and of a massive figure, a dark complexion, a face full of expression, and a bearing particularly solemn and dignified, he attracted at once the eyes of a stranger, and never failed to command his respect.... There was a gloom of awe on his countenance, as if the very shadow of Sinai were darkening it, when his heart was charged with a message of terror; and the softened cast of his features, and the gleam of light in his eye, at other times, encouraged the broken-hearted to expect a message of encouragement and comfort.<sup>7</sup>

Those who may not know the literary conventions of evangelical hagiography of this kind might think that this was the picture of a fear-inducing ogre. One man's scarecrow is another man's saint. Kennedy's saints, we should note, are drawn in sharp contrast to the 'worldly' ministers who were found in some Highland parishes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – the much maligned Moderates of the Established Church, whose addiction to earthly pursuits became another stereotype which was lampooned in Gaelic – by Evangelicals, of course. It is the Moderates who are generally perceived more sympathetically by academics as the promoters of Gaelic culture.<sup>8</sup> As we will see, this perception can be sustained to some extent, but, on closer investigation, at least one allegedly culture-friendly 'Moderate' turns out to be warmly evangelical in his theology!<sup>9</sup>

Kennedy's book has little interest in Gaelic culture, since this was not his primary concern. However, he does mention Gaelic preaching – and we must recognise that his world did function very much in terms of the Gaelic language. Evangelicals like Kennedy were able to accept the Gaelic language. They had to do so, since it was vital to the communication of the gospel. Gaelic was a means to an end, but this did not apply to most other aspects of Gaelic culture. These could be overlooked or rejected – but some could be absorbed into the evangelical bloodstream without being noticed. This, I think, is a most important

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<sup>7</sup> J. Kennedy, *The Days of the Fathers in Ross-shire* (Inverness, 1979 edn.), p. 69.

<sup>8</sup> A very helpful discussion of the Moderates is provided by Roderick Macleod, 'Ministearan an Arain? A Profile of Nineteenth Century Hebridean Moderates', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 52 (1980-82), pp. 243-69.

<sup>9</sup> See my comments on Ewen MacDiarmid below.

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point: the churches in the Highlands absorbed unconsciously far more of Gaelic culture than they have ever cared to admit.

The image of renunciation, however, has become increasingly popular among some Evangelicals, as a means of underlining their heavenly-mindedness. It is transmitted quite bluntly and directly in the present century by at least one evangelical body in the Highlands, namely the Free Presbyterian Church. In the recent history of the Free Presbyterians, *One Hundred Years of Witness*, the Revd John MacLeod of the F.P. Church in Stornoway tells the remarkable story of how the Free Presbyterians gained a fortune and lost an opportunity to help the Gaelic language:

In 1979, the Church's determination to keep to the old paths and remain aloof from worldly practices and organisations was, in the Lord's mysterious providence, to bring its own reward. This came in the form of the Forsyth Legacy. Initially Mr Forsyth's legal agent phoned our General Treasurer with the information that his client desired to donate a substantial sum of money to the Church to help in the preservation of the Gaelic language. It was, however, to be used for that purpose in co-operation with An Comunn Gaidhealach – the body responsible for organising mods and other worldly activities in which the Church could not possibly involve itself but rather was duty bound to condemn. The offer was thus courteously declined. But instead of that being the end of the matter, as was thought, it proved to be only the beginning! Mr Forsyth, on being told that the money had been refused on a matter of principle, was so impressed by the fact that he, there and then, decided to leave the entire residue of his estate to the Church. This eventually turned out to be around two and a half million pounds.<sup>10</sup>

Such statements serve only to strengthen the opinions of those who would see Highland Evangelicalism and Protestantism generally as unsupportive of Gaelic culture. Lack of action on behalf of the language offers further ammunition: the Free Presbyterians have not supported Gaelic through the Forsyth legacy; they have not launched a new Gaelic religious periodical, nor have they established a scheme to ensure that Gaelic-speaking ministers are trained for Highland charges – both wholly laudable aims which could surely proceed without An Comunn Gaidhealach. In fact, some within the same denomination have recently claimed that the Lord's favour no longer rests on Gaelic, since the number of Free Presbyterian ministers capable of preaching in the language is in such serious decline.<sup>11</sup> It therefore appears that

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<sup>10</sup> *One Hundred Years of Witness*, with a Preface by Duncan R. MacSween (Glasgow, 1993), p. 135.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth MacKinnon, 'Scottish Gaelic Today: Social History and Contemporary Status', in Martin J. Bail (ed.), *The Celtic Languages*

renunciation of Gaelic culture, among some religious groups in the Highlands, is now in danger of extending to the language itself. However, I must stress that this observation applies only to one denomination, and to the view of a minority within it. I have no evidence that the view is widely shared within that denomination or beyond.

Gathering these points together, I would say that, in a curious way, the image provided by the secular poets, such as Ruaraidh MacThòmais, coincides closely with certain aspects of evangelical self-definition. On the one hand, the perspective is born of antipathy towards the Protestant Church and especially its evangelical wing; on the other, the desire of certain religious bodies to emphasise their great spiritual purity, and their separation from the world, leads to a playing down, or even a renunciation, of involvement with the cultural heritage. Given such an overwhelmingly negative impression, it is perhaps quite futile to attempt an evaluation of the overall position in the hope of redressing the balance. Neither side will want to believe me!

I will need to restrict myself to a few key themes, mainly (1) Secular customs, (2) Language, (3) Literature, and (4) Song and music. These coincide with the broader thematic concerns of Thomson's 'Scarecrow', and we will use the poem as a frame for the discussion. In so doing we must recognise its literary nature as a close-up snapshot, rather than a full picture, and we must also recognise that it applies to nineteenth-century Lewis in the first instance.

### Secular Customs

In MacThòmais' poem, the scarecrow comes into the cèilidh-house, which was the centre of the Gaelic culture of a Highland community. The picture is one of direct intrusion into a traditional culture-centre. My own view is that this is probably overstated in the interests of the form of the poem.<sup>12</sup> For one thing, traditional cèilidhs (and the aspects of cultural activity which underpinned them) remained a feature of most parts of the Highlands and Islands until the late nineteenth century. Their demise was not caused solely by the hostility of the church; they declined and died out, not through the intrusion of the clerical scarecrow, but

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(London, 1993), pp. 518-9. MacKinnon notes that the island congregations of the F.P. Church are 'probably the most strongly and ethnically Gaelic of all the local churches'.

<sup>12</sup> It is, however, known that ministers have entered places of entertainment directly to proclaim their message while events were in progress. This occurred in Lewis during the 1949-53 revival, when a minister went to a dance-hall: the circumstances are described on the cassette, *Lewis: Land of Revival*, Ambassador Productions Ltd. (Belfast, 1983).

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through progressive social change and the influence of the more subtly pervasive world of the mass media and the decay of the corporate life of the Gaelic communities. It is noticeable that those who blame the Protestant church for the loss of Gaelic culture seldom assess simultaneously the impact of social processes such as clearance, famine, emigration, out-migration, immigration and English-language media-intrusion.<sup>13</sup>

If the Protestant church cannot take sole responsibility for the decline of the cèilidh-house, did it nevertheless take an active role in suppressing secular customs more generally? The Protestant church in the Highlands, in its most militant mood, undoubtedly did take a stand against certain customs, which are noted fairly comprehensively by John MacInnes in his important book on *The Evangelical Movement in the Highlands of Scotland*. These often included customs, or in its view, abuses, associated with excessive consumption of alcohol: baptisms, marriages, wakes, and funerals were particularly strictly controlled from the seventeenth century onwards, though with varying degrees of success.<sup>14</sup>

However we must note here that this sort of intervention was not peculiar to the Protestant church in the Highlands, nor was it directed solely at Gaelic-based culture. Protestantism, especially in its evangelical form, aimed at moral improvement, and similar interventions or moral stricture can be found in other non-Gaelic contexts – for example, within the seventeenth-century Puritan disciplines of England or even New England.<sup>15</sup>

It is also evident that the Protestant church was able to find a new purpose for some of the secular customs of the Gaelic communities. Thus, the custom of the wake, in the home of the deceased, was transformed into a small-scale religious service, held on the evening prior to burial. Again, it is possible that the cèilidh-house was one of the pre-existing models for fellowship meetings, of the kind that became common when Evangelicalism took firm root in the Highlands. The 'conversion of the cèilidh-house' may have aided the development of cottage-meetings. I know of at least one cèilidh-house in Tiree which later became a focus for cottage-meetings. Though it might not care to acknowledge the debt, Protestantism in the Highlands may have owed much to the secular institutions of the area.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> A study of this theme remains to be undertaken. In the meantime, we have to rely on general impressions rather than firm facts.

<sup>14</sup> John MacInnes, *The Evangelical Movement in the Highlands of Scotland 1688 to 1800* (Aberdeen, 1951), pp. 50-60.

<sup>15</sup> For a general account of the Puritan ethos, see Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (London, 1969 edn.).

<sup>16</sup> This theme also remains unexplored. For a study which deals only with Baptist patterns, see Donald E. Meek, 'Baptists and Highland Culture',



**Language**

MacThòmais' scarecrow appears to have spoken Gaelic in his assault on the customs of the cèilidh-house. If language is the most distinctive marker of cultural identity, it can be said that the Protestant churches in the Highlands strongly embraced Gaelic as a medium of spiritual communication and instruction. I say this notwithstanding the fact that the Society in Scotland for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK), established in 1709, pursued a vigorous anti-Gaelic policy until the mid-eighteenth century. The SSPCK was an ancillary agent which worked alongside the Presbyterian church, and operated through the establishment of charity schools. The SSPCK could attempt to erode Gaelic by its educational strategy, but the church had to communicate the gospel from its pulpits to mature audiences beyond the reach of the SSPCK. From the mid-eighteenth century, however, the SSPCK supported the use of Gaelic as a means of religious instruction.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, if we argue that the Protestant church was broadly supportive of the use of Gaelic in worship and spiritual communication, we must note carefully that 'the use of Gaelic' is not the same thing as 'Gaelic culture'. The church could 'use Gaelic' (and indeed continues to do so) without supporting Gaelic culture. In addition, the Protestant church chose to use a particular type of Gaelic for its foundational attempts at a Reformed ministry in the Highlands – and this was not the Gaelic of the ordinary people. It was high-brow, professional Gaelic. The first Gaelic book ever published was John Carswell's translation of John Knox's *Book of Common Order*, published in 1567. John Carswell was a former priest in the Roman Catholic church; he was trained at St Andrews University, and he was also trained in a bardic school, in either the Scottish Highlands or Ireland.<sup>18</sup> In that bardic school he learned to read and write Classical Gaelic – that is, the sort of Gaelic which would have been used by the poets and prose-writers of the Middle Ages in the Gaelic world, embracing Ireland and Scotland. Because Classical Gaelic was the *lingua franca* of the learned class in Ireland and Gaelic Scotland, it is sometimes called 'Classical Common Gaelic' – common to both countries. It was not 'common' in the sense that it was the language of the 'common' people. The Scottish Gaelic vernacular – the language spoken every day by the people themselves – was not the same entity as Classical Common Gaelic.

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*Baptist Quarterly* 33:4 (1989), pp. 155-73.

17 For the SSPCK, see MacInnes, *Evangelical Movement*, pp. 236-52.

18 Donald E. Meek and James Kirk, 'John Carswell, Superintendent of Argyll: a reassessment', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, 19 (1975), pp. 1-22; R.L. Thomson (ed.), *Foirm na n-Urrnuidheadh* (Glasgow, 1970).

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Carswell, then, chose the Gaelic of the so-called learned classes, rather than the Gaelic of the 'ordinary' people, for his translation of the *Book of Common Order*. Why did he do that? Presumably, it would have been, in the first instance, a natural choice, since Classical Gaelic was the standard written form of the language in the Middle Ages; there was no other model. Furthermore, Carswell would have seen his own peers as the readers of his book, and it would have been very important for him to have their support for the Reformed religion. The ministers would have been expected to lead the people. Again, Carswell was well aware of the culture shared, through Classical Gaelic, by the literary class in Ireland and Scotland, and he may have had his sights on Ireland too. A Protestant literary class, potentially embracing the Gaelic-speaking mandarins of both countries, would have been a major triumph for the new faith.<sup>19</sup>

If Carswell did have a vision of pan-Gaelic Protestantism of this nature, the formal structures of Gaelic high culture which encouraged a close relationship between Ireland and Scotland, and which might have led to its fulfilment, had begun to disintegrate by the end of the sixteenth century. In Scotland, the bardic schools did not survive beyond 1700, and the older class of men of letters, who would have upheld Classical Gaelic, gave way progressively to composers, and transmitters, of verse and prose in vernacular Gaelic. Ireland and Scotland went their separate ways.

Nevertheless, the shape of Gaelic religious language had been set by Carswell's book, and the Protestant church in the Highlands became the direct heir of the literary legacy of the Gaelic medieval learned classes. From 1567 onwards, Gaelic religious language was to be different from ordinary, spoken Gaelic. Of course, adjustments were made with time, and the vernacular language influenced the religious language, but Protestantism in the Highlands was married early to a conservative literary dialect which has been its hallmark ever since. The type of Gaelic which emerged for worship and formal devotion had its roots firmly in the old medieval classical tradition, while reflecting Gaelic vernacular speech in important syntactic and morphological areas. At the risk of some telescoping, it can be said that the pre-eminence of this type of Scottish Gaelic was reinforced by the publication of the Metrical Psalters and some catechisms in the seventeenth century, the Scottish Gaelic New

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<sup>19</sup> Carswell addressed the 'men of Scotland and Ireland' in his Epistle to the Reader (Thomson, *Foirm*, p.10); this may be no more than an acknowledgement of the common Gaelic culture of Ireland and Scotland, but it could be of some significance in hinting at the overall aim of his work.

Testament in 1767, and the entire text of the Bible, made available from 1801.<sup>20</sup>

'Ecclesiastical Gaelic' therefore was, and is, different from 'workaday Gaelic'. The conservative theology and tenor of the Highland churches have tended to check any marked shift towards a more obviously modern vernacular style of worship. Of course, it must be noted that the lines of linguistic demarcation were not entirely rigid. Sermons and prayers, which would have been largely extemporary in the evangelical context, encouraged an extraordinarily rich and powerful blend of Gaelic registers, both vernacular and classical (such as one finds in the fine sermons of the Revd Ewen MacDiarmid, published in 1804),<sup>21</sup> but the existence of written texts maintained the primacy of the classical style, especially within regular worship. It was not until 1980 that the Gospel of Mark was translated afresh into a form of Gaelic significantly closer to modern speech.<sup>22</sup>

In terms of their language of worship, the Protestant bodies in the Highlands have shown very effectively how culture can give a particular shape to religious expression. The medieval Classical inheritance is preserved to this day in the language of the Protestant churches. Historically, this has undoubtedly helped Gaelic by providing a form of the language skilfully honed and developed for use within what sociolinguists call the 'higher domains'. Nevertheless, in recent years such linguistic distinctiveness has become a problem, and the effective maintenance of this argot is one of the challenges currently facing the churches in the Highlands. There are many young people today who, through the decline of regular church-going, simply do not understand the Gaelic of religious discourse, and Gaelic religious vocabulary is being lost.<sup>23</sup> As vernacular Gaelic gains more space in the media, especially on television, a sharp contrast of style and content is emerging between religious activities and their secular counterparts.

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<sup>20</sup> For discussion of the style of the Scottish Gaelic Bible relative to earlier works, see Donald E. Meek, 'Language and Style in the Scottish Gaelic Bible (1767-1807)', *Scottish Language* 9 (Winter, 1990), pp. 1-16.

<sup>21</sup> *Searmona le Mr. Eobhann Mac Diarmaid* (Edinburgh, 1804). I am very grateful to Mr Sandy Munroe, Ballater, for allowing me to use his great-grandfather's copy of this book.

<sup>22</sup> *An Deagh Sgeul aig Marcus* (Edinburgh, 1980).

<sup>23</sup> Students in my 'Ecclesiastical Gaelic' course at the University of Aberdeen (first offered in September 1994) have provided many illuminating perspectives on the difficulties encountered by young people in understanding the Gaelic of the churches. I am particularly grateful to Mr John MacLeod, Northton, Harris, for his account of his own experience.

**Literature and Oral Narrative**

MacThòmais' scarecrow caused a 'folktale about Conall Gulban' (a medieval Gaelic hero) to freeze on the lips of the reciter. What seems to be implied here is that the evangelical movement caused active oral transmission of Gaelic folktales to become passive. I think we have to admit that the pre-eminence of the Gaelic Scriptures as 'The Truth' has indeed militated against the emergence of 'untruthful' fiction and may even have retarded the cultivation of the folktale.

In fact, one finds the earliest example of this view in the work of John Carswell in 1567. In his Epistle to the Reader at the beginning of his translation, he directed some criticism against those members of the learned classes, who, for worldly gain, devoted themselves to the creation of 'lying, hurtful' tales about mythological figures and the secular heroes. The first book produced by Protestantism in the Highlands thus set its face against the cultivation of secular literature rather than the development of sacred literature. This tendency is therefore much earlier than the nineteenth century, and indeed the opposition between sacred truth and secular fiction is earlier than the Reformation. Nor is it peculiarly a Gaelic or Highland phenomenon; it has existed in many guises and in many places across the centuries.<sup>24</sup>

To balance this rather negative picture, moreover, we should be aware that ministers of the churches were among the foremost recorders and editors of Gaelic folklore in the Highlands prior to the establishment of institutions such as the School of Scottish Studies in 1951. The list of such men includes both Moderates and Evangelicals, the former being more active in the collection of the material, especially the tales, and the latter being rather more prominent in their analysis of texts.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, the creation of too firm a distinction between Moderates and Evangelicals in this area can be seriously misleading. This is evident in the work of Ewen MacDiarmid (d. 1801), who was the minister of the Gaelic Chapel in Glasgow (1772-80) and whose splendid Gaelic sermons show him to have been an unashamed Evangelical.<sup>26</sup> He was also the

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<sup>24</sup> Thomson, *Foirm*, p. 11; MacInnes, 'Religion in Highland Society', pp. 234-5.

<sup>25</sup> The reasons for the Evangelicals' rather greater interest in textual analysis are not clear, but may be related to their concern with the exposition of biblical texts and the fact that texts could be analysed without the 'compromise with the world' involved in field-work. However, there was no ardent enthusiasm for this work among Evangelicals; Free Church scholars like the Revd Thomas McLaughlan (before 1900) and the Revd Professor Donald Maclean (after 1900), editor of the hymns of Dugald Buchanan and the writer of major studies of Gaelic literature, were, in many respects, exceptional.

<sup>26</sup> See note 21 above.

compiler of a very important collection of secular songs, on the strength of which he has been assigned a place among the Moderates!<sup>27</sup>

Yet we must be aware of claiming too much for the gentlemen of the cloth. In the later nineteenth century, there may have been a growing sense of alienation between Evangelicals and Gaelic secular culture, although the line cannot be drawn entirely exclusively. It would seem that the activities of ministerial scholars who concerned themselves with secular culture tended to be maintained most consistently within the 'broader' denominations. As a rule, it appears that the more evangelically focused a denomination was, the less likely it was to support Gaelic scholarship, particularly of the secular type. It is noticeable that Gaelic scholars within the Free Church before 1900 (a notable example being Thomas McLauchlan, the first editor of material from the sixteenth-century manuscript, the Book of the Dean of Lismore) were inclined to support the case for union with the United Presbyterians.<sup>28</sup> After 1900 such scholarship was maintained (briefly) within the Free and United Free Churches, and (more consistently) the Church of Scotland, although it has declined markedly in the latter in recent years.<sup>29</sup> Baptists, a strongly evangelical denomination that once needed to employ Gaelic-speaking missionaries in the Highlands and had a Gaelic-preaching ministry (in Tiree) until 1965, have contributed little of note to Gaelic scholarship.<sup>30</sup> These observations apply to the contributions of ministers, and not to those of individual scholars who are, or have been, identified with these denominations as lay members.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Derick S. Thomson (ed.), *The MacDiarmid MS Anthology* (Edinburgh, 1992), p. 22.

<sup>28</sup> On Thomas McLauchlan, see Maurice Grant, *Free St Columba's: A History of Congregation and Church* (Edinburgh, 1991), pp. 17-23.

<sup>29</sup> The decay of Gaelic scholarship in the churches is related to a number of factors, including: (1) the decline in numbers of students for the Gaelic ministry, (2) decline in students' understanding of the language, (3) more specialised courses in Divinity (rather than Arts) for ministerial candidates, (4) lack of encouragement to pursue Gaelic scholarship, and (within Evangelicalism generally) a suspicion of scholarly pursuits, both for the potential misuse of time and the danger of being exposed to new ideas or even to some degree of criticism by 'thinkers'. In the Highlands, strict adherence to confessions has probably left little room for any fresh interpretations of theology or history.

<sup>30</sup> The training of Baptist pastors for the Highlands was not normally academic, and this may have had some bearing on their lack of scholarly involvement. They were also evangelical activists, devoted to evangelism rather than study.

<sup>31</sup> It is evident that the major Highland denominations are now increasingly dependent on the laity rather than ordained ministers for the execution of major literary tasks in Gaelic, e.g. the recent (1992)

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The scarecrow, in MacThòmais' poem, 'did not leave us empty-handed'; he gave the community a range of substitutes for the stories which he had suppressed. This seems faint praise, but it may contain more than a grain of truth. The Protestant church, through its ministers and schoolmasters, began the task of providing a printed Gaelic literature, and was the only institution to do so for some three hundred years. Unfortunately, however, what was produced was predominantly a translated literature ('fragments of the philosophy of Geneva?'), using models already in existence, rather than encouraging genuinely creative production. This trend began with Carswell's work, but, in reality, took off in the mid-eighteenth century with the publication of a translation of Richard Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted* (1750). By the nineteenth century, John Bunyan was probably the most popular writer in the Highlands, and Gaelic people would have regarded him as one of themselves. He is one of the few 'early' writers to have been re-translated into Gaelic in the twentieth century.<sup>32</sup>

The points that I wish to make about such activity are, first, that, while it undoubtedly strengthened the role of Gaelic as a religious language, it discouraged the growth of a lively Gaelic style; translations tended, on the whole, to follow their originals, though not always slavishly; second, the tendency to choose models external to the culture was predisposed to retard, if not to prevent, the emergence of a genuinely Gaelic religious prose literature.<sup>33</sup>

Attempts to produce an indigenous Gaelic religious prose literature were nevertheless made, but this did not happen until the first half of the nineteenth century. Pride of place in this must go to the labours of the Revd Dr Norman MacLeod (1783-1862), who produced two periodicals which aimed to counteract the wooden style and narrow subject-matter of the translated works.<sup>34</sup> There were other writers such as the Revd Alexander MacGregor (1808-81), whose prodigious literary labours are only now being appreciated.<sup>35</sup> Both men, who belonged to the

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revision of the Gaelic Bible, which was done by a Baptist layman (the author of this article! *Ed.*).

32 For a general account, see D.E. Meek, 'Gaelic, Protestant prose publications in', in *DSCHT*, pp. 347-9.

33 The Scottish churches were not alone in laying the foundation of Gaelic religious prose by means of translation. A similar approach is found in Wales, but it is evident that there was a stronger and much more creative process of indigenisation in Wales than in Gaelic Scotland. Wales does not appear to have been subjected to the same degree of strict Calvinistic confessionalism as the Scottish Highlands.

34 K.D. MacDonald, 'MacLeod, Norman', in *DSCHT*, p. 532.

35 *Biographies of Highland Clergyman*, reprinted from the 'Inverness Courier' (Inverness, 1889), pp. 71-81. MacGregor's prose writing is being researched by Miss Sheila Kidd, Department of Celtic, University

Established Church, tackled a wide range of topics, sacred and secular, from volcanoes and politics, to second sight and popular superstition. MacGregor's writing on superstitions is, in fact, a good example of the ambivalence which ministers could show in their approach to Gaelic culture. In the twentieth century, these men had few successors, but one was the Revd Donald Lamont (1874-1958), whose delightful sketches and satires in the Gaelic Supplement of *Life and Work* enjoyed great popularity in the first half of this century. Lamont, who set some of his work in the Gaelic equivalent of 'Barchester Towers', was not afraid to deride the top-heavy pomposity of certain aspects of the Church to which he belonged – but he remains unique in this respect.<sup>36</sup>

My main point, however, is that the tendency towards imitation has been one of the factors which has greatly impoverished the potential range of Gaelic religious literature. Such was the significance and status attached to 'imported' works that indigenous writing was apparently restricted. Even the number of printed volumes of original Gaelic sermons is remarkably low. Beyond homiletic material, we have only a couple of rather poor items of church history, we have no commentaries, no theological dictionaries, and little or no original contributions to wider theological debate. Religious writing for children is in short supply, and it is probably significant that the recently published *Bioball na Cloinne* (Children's Bible) is itself a translation.<sup>37</sup> The Highland churches, still embracing upper registers of Gaelic language and indebted to external models of literature, have a long way to go before they will meet the needs of the new era of Gaelic-medium schooling. It is not that the churches oppose the use of Gaelic at this level, but rather that, beyond the publication of foundational works, they have continued to depend rather too much on the retentive memories of predominantly adult hearers. As a consequence, there is an enormous gulf between their way of working and the needs of present-day, literate Gaelic society. It is a supreme irony that a movement which was so singularly committed to the achievement of literacy has produced so little in the way of original Gaelic literature.

### Song and Music

MacThòmais' scarecrow 'took the goodness out of the music'. The rejection of particular aspects of Gaelic culture – the cèilidhs, the dances,

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of Edinburgh, in what promises to be a very important contribution to our knowledge of nineteenth-century Gaelic prose.

<sup>36</sup> T.M. Murchison (ed.), *The Prose Writings of Donald Lamont* (Edinburgh, 1960); see D.E. Meek, 'Lamont, Donald', in *DSCHT*, p. 479-80.

<sup>37</sup> Published by Acair, Stornoway, in 1992, this is a translation of Lion Publishing's *Children's Bible*, which has been translated into other Celtic languages, including Irish.

the song and merriment – by converts to the evangelical faith has, in fact, become a leitmotif in the popular view of ‘Highland religion’. The evidence for a new enthusiasm on the part of converts is clear enough, but should we accept that the tradition of secular song and music was, in effect, killed off by Evangelicalism? It is an undeniable fact that certain individuals who have experienced evangelical conversion, and who have adhered to the ‘stricter’ denominations, have sometimes refused to transmit secular songs which they absorbed and enjoyed in their unregenerate days.<sup>38</sup> In this way, cultural transmission has been impoverished. Nevertheless, it is not accurate to envisage a total ban on secular song and music, operating within all denominations and at all times.

This latter perception is nonetheless pervasive. The best known image in this context is fiddle-burning which allegedly happened in Skye and other parts of the Highlands when the evangelical movement took effect. But were the fiddles broken or burnt, or could this be another stereotype, introduced to emphasise the culturally destructive force of Evangelicalism, or (on the other side) the world-rejecting spirituality of new converts? It is worth considering a couple of accounts which describe how fiddles were treated when their former players experienced evangelical conversion.

We begin with Donald Munro, the ‘father’ of evangelical Presbyterianism in Skye. Munro was a blind man who served as a catechist in the north end of Skye prior to his conversion through the preaching of the Congregational itinerant evangelist, John Farquharson, about 1806. Roderick MacCowan tells the story in his book, *The Men of Skye*:

He did not, however, relinquish the violin though called to fill such a holy office in the Church. He pursued the incongruous combination of offices – catechist and fiddler – going from township to township attempting to instruct the people in the Bible and Shorter Catechism, and playing his violin to as many as desired to hear... When Donald was converted, he flung the fiddle aside, and no more is heard of it. His music was now of a higher and more spiritual nature.<sup>39</sup>

It is to be noted that Munro ‘flung the fiddle aside’; according to this version of the story, he did not break it or burn it. If we move southwards to Kintyre, we find a most interesting account from the year 1805, in which the writer, the Congregational itinerant preacher, John Campbell, records in his diary the express denial of one who was popularly believed to have destroyed his fiddle:

We preached near the spot where Mr. Haldane and I landed two years before, when only about three persons came to hear; now we had a

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<sup>38</sup> I have had direct experience of such sensitivities.

<sup>39</sup> Roderick MacCowan, *The Men of Skye* (Glasgow, 1902), p.2.



congregation of upwards of 400 – the effect of Mr. Macallum's labours among them. On leaving them, about a dozen of the people walked on each side of my horse, telling what miserable creatures they were when first I visited their country. One said he then acted as fiddler at all the dancing weddings [*sic*] round about, which he immediately gave up when his eyes were opened. The people said I had broken my fiddle to pieces, *but that was not true*.<sup>40</sup>

This suggests that fiddle-breaking by converts of revival movements was already, by the early years of the nineteenth century, a stereotype well worthy of denial. Despite this, the image has persisted, and appears to have grown to bonfire-status in the course of the century.<sup>41</sup> Broadly the same theme can be found in other contexts. According to this paradigm, following their conversion good pipers laid aside their pipes, the song-makers became silent, the poets burned their manuscripts of secular poetry.

Evidence from the lives of evangelical ministers further supports the view that this was, at times, an exaggeration. One major nineteenth-century evangelical minister, John MacDonald of Ferintosh (1779-1849), who maintained a life-long interest in piping, collected Gaelic heroic ballads in his early days, and allegedly held dances in his manse.<sup>42</sup>

Besides 'taking the goodness out of the music', MacThòmais's scarecrow gave the people a 'new song' – a reference to the Gaelic Metrical Psalter (translated between 1659 and 1694).<sup>43</sup> In due course, these 'new songs' became thoroughly indigenised, and are now the time-honoured 'old songs' associated pre-eminently with the Gaelic worship of the Presbyterian churches. Their tunes – bearing such unGaelic names as 'Martyrdom', 'Torwood', 'Moravia', 'Walsal' *etc.* – have been thoroughly Gaelicised, with appropriate Gaelic musical ornamentation such as grace-notes.

There were, however, other 'new songs', notably Gaelic hymns. Hymnology was perhaps the area of greatest liberty within the Highland religious tradition, and it is certainly the field in which one can observe the most fruitful interaction between sacred and secular dimensions of Gaelic musical culture. Gaelic hymns drew not on the rather restricted repertoire of Lowland Presbyterian worship, but on personal emotions. Tunes were derived from popular songs, an art form which extended

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<sup>40</sup> Alexander Haldane, *The Lives of Robert Haldane and of his Brother, James Alexander Haldane*, fifth edn (Glasgow, 1855), p. 267, italics added.

<sup>41</sup> I have been unable to trace a written source for the Skye bonfire story.

<sup>42</sup> G. Hamilton (ed.), *Memoirs of a Highland Gentleman... Reminiscences of Evander MacIver* (Edinburgh, 1905), p. 211. For MacDonald, see R. Macleod, 'MacDonald, John', in *DSCHT*, pp. 510-1.

<sup>43</sup> See D.E. Meek, 'Psalms, Psalter (Gaelic)', in *DSCHT*, pp. 683-4.

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throughout the Gaelic community as the principal means of emotional expression. The Gaelic hymn became a major outlet for spontaneous religious feeling, though it found no place in the formal worship of the Presbyterian churches.<sup>44</sup>

A conspicuous harmony was thus achieved between Gaelic hymnology and secular song, especially at times of religious revival when hymns came into their own as vehicles of personal testimony, long before the days of Moody and Sankey. It may be that converts occasionally burnt their fiddles, but they could not destroy the tunes which they had learned and which remained in their heads.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, I will set out my own thesis, at the risk of major generalisation! My view is that since 1560 the Highland churches – or more strictly the Highland wings of the Scottish Presbyterian churches – have adopted a broadly pragmatic approach to Gaelic language and culture. They have chosen to use those aspects of the culture which have been to their advantage in the furtherance of the gospel, and they have rejected those other aspects which have been perceived as disadvantageous or inimical to spiritual development. They have also imported styles and fashions from English, as the need has arisen, and they have given these a distinctive Gaelic dress. In making choices, individual ministers and members have been, to some extent, able to define their own limits within the churches, and there is therefore an individualistic dimension which must be borne in mind.

An inherent ambivalence thus exists in the overall approach of the Highland churches to Gaelic culture, and the stresses and strains are apparent at many points. That is why it is possible to compose a poem such as 'The Scarecrow', and why it contains, to some extent, a valid perspective. On the other hand, 'The Scarecrow' does not tell the whole story, which was considerably more complex than the portrait which the poem presents.

While we can provide a more positive view of the churches' attitude to Gaelic culture, we need to temper our counter argument with reality, however unpalatable it may be. We have to accept that the main task of the churches was not, and is not, the promotion of Gaelic or Gaelic culture. The churches' major concern is the promotion of the Christian gospel, but, in order to achieve their aim, they have had to communicate with people within the Gaelic cultural area; the gospel in the Highlands, as in many other parts of the world, has had to be presented in a package which was recognisable to the potential audience. It could, in fact, be argued that, far from rejecting Gaelic culture in its totality, the Presbyterian churches (in particular) have so strongly embraced certain

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<sup>44</sup> See K.D. MacDonald, 'Hymnology, Gaelic', in *DSCHT*, pp. 423-5.

parts of it, notably the Gaelic language itself, that they have produced a distinctive brand of culturally conditioned Highland Evangelicalism. Some have gone so far as to call this 'Gaelic Calvinism', at least in its pre-1690 phase.<sup>45</sup> Whatever we may say for or against such a label, it is undeniable that, in fulfilling their aims, no other public bodies in Scotland have used Gaelic so consistently in the higher domains as the Presbyterian churches. A major by-product of this has been the strengthening of the language and of some (though by no means all) dimensions of the culture.

As a consequence of such inculturation, the churches have not found it easy to make headway in the changing world of the modern, twentieth-century Highlands. If they are now tending to lean away from Gaelic, it is not necessarily because they are inherently hostile to it; it may be because they are encountering language-shift and even culture-shift within their own communities, and this may be leading to problems in the maintenance of their older, Gaelic identity. Evangelicalism is concerned with peoples' souls, and if these souls can be reached more effectively, and in greater numbers, in English than in Gaelic, why should Gaelic preaching be maintained? The question is made all the more urgent by the decreasing number of Gaelic-speaking candidates for the ministry of the various churches. The smaller denominations have already faced this issue, and some, notably the Baptists, have responded by quietly allowing Gaelic preaching to become a thing of the past, 'inevitably' superseded by English.<sup>46</sup> It may be that the larger churches will have to face this question soon. If they do, it will be interesting to see how they will tackle it, and how they will move: so far, no church has developed a 'theology of language', and no church has an official policy for Gaelic.

As we approach the twenty-first century, the Highland churches are confronting major challenges. They need to look seriously at their commitment to Gaelic culture, but more particularly at the immense debt that they owe to the language as a major vehicle for the Christian gospel. I believe that, in acknowledgement of that debt, they should hammer out a policy for the support of Gaelic, and take a more positive role in its promotion, not least in the recruitment and training of Gaelic ministers who are well tuned to the needs of contemporary society. They cannot opt out on the pretext of their evangelical goals, nor can they with impunity invoke the Almighty's approval of their own failures. Rather, they need to acknowledge that the Gaelic-based ecclesiastical culture which has been created during the last four centuries, and which

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<sup>45</sup> Jane Dawson, 'Calvinism and the Gaidhealtachd in Scotland', in Andrew Pettegree, Alastair Duke and Gillian Lewis (eds), *Calvinism in Europe 1540-1620* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 231-53.

<sup>46</sup> Meek, 'Baptists and Highland Culture', pp. 168-9.

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now underpins the language, is largely of their own making. It will then follow logically that they must assume some degree of responsibility for the future development of Gaelic culture, in a manner consistent with the needs of modern Gaelic society. To act otherwise will tarnish and debase the message of the gospel by demonstrating that the churches have embraced the Gaelic language – and the ‘usable’ parts of its culture – on a purely utilitarian basis, as no more than a means to an end.

If I may take up the final image of MacThòmais’s ‘Scarecrow’, the bonfire that the churches lit in the breasts of many Highlanders has not yet been extinguished, and, having used Gaelic in the process of ignition, the churches needs to show the world that the language is, for them, something more than a fire-lighter.