

Book Reviews

Còmhraidhean nan Cnoc: the Nineteenth-Century Gaelic Prose Dialogue. Ed. Sheila M. Kidd. Glasgow. Scottish Gaelic Texts Society 2016. xiii + 432pp. ISBN: 978-0-903586-08-5. £25.00 (Hardback)

The twenty-fourth volume in the series of publications by the Scottish Gaelic Texts Society is devoted to the important literary prose genre of the *còmhraidhean* ('dialogues, conversations') that first emerged in the Gaelic periodicals of the nineteenth century. In her substantial introduction, Sheila M. Kidd details the literary and social context in which the *còmhraidhean* originated. Then the editor presents a selection of thirty-five prose *còmhraidhean*, chosen from a corpus of more than 300 which appeared at various points during the nineteenth century. Each *còmhradh* is accompanied by detailed explanatory notes and references in English; there are no translations of the texts themselves. The selected *còmhraidhean* are divided into seven thematic sections containing five *còmhraidhean* each that reflect the important concerns that impacted Gaelic-speaking communities in the nineteenth century: Education and Gaelic; Social Control: Famine, Emigration and Migration; Land; Electioneering; Ecclesiastical; News and Information; and Past and Present. In their original form, the *còmhraidhean* conformed to the orthographic standards of their time and the present editor's decision to normalise spelling and punctuation to current standards greatly improves their accessibility for those readers who may be unused to the earlier conventions. In order to demonstrate the differences between modern and nineteenth-century conventions, the first *còmhradh* is presented in an appendix in the form in which it appeared originally. A bibliography, a glossary, and an index conclude the volume.

The Rev. Dr Norman MacLeod (*Caraid nan Gàidheal*) was the first to give a platform to the genre in the various periodicals he published, beginning in 1829 with *An Teachdaire Gae'lach*. But *còmhraidhean* also featured in other publications, for instance the Free Church's *An Fhianuis* or its Church of Scotland equivalents *Teachdaire nan Gaidheal* and *Cuairtear nan Gleann*. Clergymen were dominant among the writers of *còmhraidhean* in the early periodicals, and their influence and attitudes are clearly visible in the themes and their treatment. Many newspapers that circulated in the *Gàidhealtachd* published *còmhraidhean* at times, but during the last quarter of the nineteenth century they were most prominent as a vehicle for political discussion in Gaelic in newspapers as diverse as the conservative *Northern Chronicle* and John Murdoch's radical *Highlander*. The various publications where *còmhraidhean* were printed thus demonstrate that the topics covered addressed ideas and topics across the Presbyterian denominational as well as the political spectrum. As Kidd puts it (p. 64): '[t]he *còmhradh* was the single most conspicuous strategy adopted by Gaelic writers to navigate a way for themselves, and their audience, in a world of changing social and literary relationships'.

And the term 'audience' is entirely appropriate here because in a society where, prior to the introduction of compulsory education in 1872, literacy – especially literacy in Gaelic – was by no means universal, a strong oral element made the literary material that was beginning to be published in Gaelic widely accessible. The *còmhraidhean*, with their cast of easily distinguishable speakers, presented an ideal vehicle for entertainment, for different viewpoints to be discussed, and for information to be disseminated. Kidd points out the models, from within and without the Gaelic tradition, that contributed to the development of the *còmhraidhean*, from dialogue as used in Gaelic verse to contemporary material in

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Blackwood's Magazine, via examples from the Classics that the clergymen who wrote the *còmhradhean* would have encountered in their university studies. As Kidd highlights (p. 26): '[w]hat we have in the *còmhradh* is not so much a new paradigm in Gaelic literature but an amalgamation of existing ones, both oral and literary, religious and secular, reinforced by non-Gaelic models'.

While the Rev. Dr Norman MacLeod is the best known, and the most influential, among the authors of *còmhradhean*, there are others who deserve recognition as significant contributors to the genre as well, e.g. the Rev. Alexander MacGregor, whose work appeared both in the *Highlander* and in the *Northern Chronicle*. Many authors remain anonymous, or hidden behind unattributable pen-names, but Kidd makes a clear case for the authorship of John Murdoch of *Còmhradh* 33 which originally appeared in the *Highlander* in 1877 (356). In this, the dialogue partners deplore the growing influence of the Lowlands and the English language on all aspects of life in the Gàidhealtachd (353):

Osgar: 'S iongantach an gnothach sin. Chì mi nach e a-mhàin gu bheil na Gàidheil a thig a-mach don Ghalltachd a' feuchainn ri bhith leantail nan Gall anns na nithean sin, ach gu bheil a h-uile maighstir-sgoile, is ministear, is ceannaiche 's tuathanach as urrainn trì òirlich a chur an earball a chòta a' dol anns an aona cheum air feadh na Gàidhealtachd fhèin.

Fionnlagan: Ciod eile, ciod eile? Chan fhiù 's chan fhiach ach nithean Gallta! Sin mar a tha chànan, sin mar a tha an t-aodach, 's gach nì. Tha an t-uachdaran Gallta, tha 'm bàillidh Gallta agus tha h-uile aon a bhios a' streap a-staigh dan cuideachd, 's a bhios an dùil ri buannachd fhaighinn bhuaitha, a' leigeil air gu bheil esan an dèidh fàs cho Gallta riutha fhèin.

The speakers in the *còmhradhean* are often stock characters, some representing authority (catechist, schoolmaster) who are generally the providers of information and others playing the role of those being instructed (foxhunter, blacksmith, crofter). The latter often serve as identification figures for the audience. Sometimes, famous figures from Gaelic literature are pressed into service, such as Osgar, Fionn mac Cumhaill's grandson, in the above example.

Còmhradh 12, from the pro-crofter *Highlander*, highlights the high-handed treatment by the landlord and his representatives that crofters often received, using the example of having to do work for the landlord without pay or face eviction (167):

Dòmhnallach: Tha mi cuimhneachadh air an rud a thuirt thu rium o chionn fichead latha – 'Cuir cuairt air Tìridhe 's gheibh thu 'n aon sgeul'. Ach, a Ghilleasbaig, innis dhomh an fhirinn: a bheil thu faotainn dad airson na mòrlanachd? Mur eil, an robh e ann an cumhachaibh an fhearainn thu bhith 'g obair don Diùc an-asgaidh?

Gilleasbaig: Chan eil eadhon taing agam airson na mòrlanachd, nas motha bha e sna cumhachaibh. Chan e sin a-mhàin, ach nuair a chuireas am Bàillidh fios thugam dol a mhòrlanachd feumaidh mi falbh neo bidh a' bhàirlinn agam mun tèid a ghrian fodha.

Còmhradh 10, taken from a mid-century Tasmanian periodical, *An Teachdaire Gaidhealach*, discusses the dangers of lawlessness and drinking faced by emigrants. Iain Bàn has been robbed at gunpoint of the proceeds of the sale of his crop of potatoes by men he met at the inn. On hearing Iain Bàn's account, his friend Calum Tàilleir advises him to take his money to the bank in future (p. 153):

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Calum Tàilleir: (...) Bheirinn aon chomhairle ort, agus is e seo i – seachain na taighean-òsta agus an uair a gheibh thu airgead a-rithist, cuir ann an àite sàbhailt' e a bhios tu cinnteach air nach amais aon duine, ged a rannsaicheadh iad an taigh agad thairis 's thairis, gus am faigh thu rogha a chothrom gu chur sa bhanc (...).

Iain Bàn: 'S math a labhair thu, Chaluim. Tha mi faicinn gu soilleir gum feum sinn a bhith 'glic mar an nathair agus neo-lochdach mar an calman'. Ach nuair a reiceas mise dad as fhiach a-rithist cha ghabh mi an t-airgead gus an ruig mi am baile agus an sin cuiridh mu sa bhanc na bhitheas agam ri sheachnadh, no mas aithne dhomh an ceannaiche gu math, gabhaidh mi òrdugh air a' bhanc.

As all books published by the SGTS, the volume is sturdy and attractively produced. *Còmhradh nan Cnoc* will be greatly welcomed by readers interested in the development of literary Gaelic prose as well as those with an interest in the social history of the Gaelic-speaking community. Sheila Kidd, a leading expert on the Gàidhealtachd and its literature in the nineteenth century, deserves our thanks for making this fine and wide-ranging selection of texts available.

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