ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on the political verse and journalism by the Scottish Gaelic poet, scholar, publisher, and activist Derick Thomson (Ruaraidh MacThòmais, 1921-2012). The chosen set of themes can be broadly described as “political issues”, although Thomson should not be regarded only as a political poet in the narrow sense of a propagandist, nor does his political poetry deal with elections and campaigns. The political aspect of his poetry is much broader, including concerns with language and power. Politics also represent the connection between Thomson’s multiple activities, and therefore a suitable framework in which to explore them. So far, the prevailing paradigm for studying Thomson’s works has been the poetry of place, a concept deeply rooted in the Gaelic tradition, and both popular and critical attention was paid especially to his Lewis poems and, to a less extend, his writing about Glasgow.

This dissertation strives to provide answers to the following questions: Which political issues can be traced in Thomson’s poetry? What were his main concerns? How does he handle politics in his verse? Are there poems where a political interpretation might be constructed, but that also allow other ways of reading? What were Thomson’s actual political convictions, as far as we can reconstruct them from his published works? How does he negotiate his double commitment, to the Gàidhealtachd and to Scotland as a whole? What sort of future does he envisage for the Gàidhealtachd and for Scotland? What sort of nationalism does he promote?

The methodological section offers a broad discussion of various theories of nationalism and of general questions concerning the relationship of politics and poetry, providing frameworks, concepts and vocabulary for the following enquiry. Chapter 2 introduces various contexts: a discussion of the development of Scottish nationalism, with special focus on the twentieth century and figures and movements with direct relevance for Thomson; an overview of political issues in the works of Sorley MacLean and George Campbell Hay, Thomson’s immediate contemporaries and both politically engaged Gaelic poets; and finally Thomson’s biography, as no such comprehensive overview is available online or in print. Chapter 3, the most extensive part of the thesis, presents a chronological discussion of Thomson’s poetry with a focus on political issues. Chapter 4 explores Thomson’s Gaelic journalism, mainly his editorials and other articles for the Gaelic quarterly Gairm, and its relation to his poetry. The concluding Chapter 5 brings together the findings of the thesis concerning Thomson’s politics and his political poems, and casts an eye back over the whole work, its benefits and limitations, and an eye forward to possible areas of future research.