



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

OPPONENT'S REPORT

Petra Johana Poncarová, *From the Woods of Raasay to Glasgow Streets: Poetry of Place in the Works of Sorley MacLean and Derick Thomson* (M.A. Thesis)

In terms of its chosen theme, the thesis is a truly pioneering work in the Czech context where literature in Scottish Gaelic had not been studied before in any significant way. This fact cannot be overestimated and it may be only hoped that the candidate's research and other activities (such as her website on Gaelic culture) will contribute to further explorations of this promising field, as well as to further contacts between Czech and Scottish Gaelic culture. The study, although clearly a labour of love, is by far not a work by a mere enthusiast – the candidate displays sufficient linguistic ability to read even the most difficult modernist poetry in Gaelic and ample critical acumen to perceive not only the strengths, but also occasional weaknesses of the two researched poets, Sorley MacLean and Derick Thomson. The scope of the research is impressive as it addresses the whole oeuvres of the said authors.

While providing sufficient background information for the uninitiated reader, the study has a clear focus and a sustained argument. It is well grounded in theory, which is at the same time used judiciously, without repetitiveness and at relevant points in the analysis – a good example might be the deployment of Foucault's terms 'heterotopia' and 'heterochrony' in connection with Sorley MacLean's work. Such theoretically informed readings are especially welcome and enriching in the context of minority languages, as they significantly broaden the context in which literary works are usually read.

While one could continue with this eulogy for a long time, mentioning, for example, lucid style, excellent English, and occasional subtle, kind-hearted humour present in the thesis, it seems to me more profitable to give some suggestions of how the research could be possibly broadened in the future. The thesis discusses MacLean's and Thomson's work principally in the context of Scottish Gaelic poetry in the nineteenth and twentieth century. This could be complemented by an outreach into earlier periods. The flourish of place names in the poems, for example, can be easily related to the prominence of this feature in the shared Gaelic tradition since the days of Old Irish. This is not only true about the genre of *dinnseanchas*, mentioned briefly on page 136 in connection to Seamus Heaney (and forgivably misspelled in footnote 26). In fact, place names are virtually omnipresent in most of the medieval epic tales, as well as in later literature. Of definite interest here might be the tale *Tochmarc Emire* (The Wooing of Emer) from the Ulster cycle, and not only so due to its direct connection to MacLean and his *Dàin do Eimhir*. Similarly to the Scottish poets discussed, place names assume multiple functions in *Tochmarc Emire* – along with elements of traditional *dinnseanchas* we can find their use in extensive riddles as well as in equivocal erotic talk.

Fruitful parallels can be also made with twentieth-century authors writing in Irish – the comparison being justified by the relatedness of the two languages, an access to a shared tradition, as well as definite similarities in the situation of the respective language communities in the modern period. A good recent example might be Cathal Ó Searcaigh's poem 'Cor Úr' which, while admittedly less complex than the poems of MacLean or Thomson, nevertheless features ecstatic eroticisation of the land aided by an inventive analytical use of place names. Another point of reference could be certain poems by Nuala Ní



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Dhomhnaill that aim to revert the gender imbalance connected with the use of female tropes for the land – an imbalance that has, again, a very long history. Ní Dhomhnaill, moreover, significantly draws on the *dinnseanchas* tradition. Finally, definite comparisons could be drawn with the work of the great Irish prose writer Máirtín Ó Cadhain as he shared MacLean's radical politics and sometimes deployed similar tropes, such as the view of culture loss in terms of a nuclear explosion (the short story 'An Sean agus an Nua' in *An tSraith ar Lár*) – perhaps a far-fetched simile, but near at hand at the time of the Cold War.

Suggestions for discussion at the defence

As the work of both poets, in different ways and degrees, mediate between the local, the national and the universal, it would be revealing to comment upon the perspectives from which they do it. While the thesis contains scattered references to MacLean's patriotism and socialism, as well as Thomson's nationalist persuasion, these are (understandably in the context where they appear) not elaborated in great detail. The question therefore lies as follows: In what concrete ways do the poets envisage the place of the Gàidhealtachd in Scotland and of both in the world at large? What kind of collective identities do they propose and help to create or develop?

Much attention is devoted in the thesis to the extent of innovation both Sorley MacLean and Derick Thomson brought into Gaelic poetry in terms of content, transforming the traditional topos of *cianalas* into modern forms of thought about place. What were their formal innovations? With Thomson, as a champion of free verse, the answer will be probably relatively simple. The form of MacLean's poetry, however, strikes me as unique in both Scottish Gaelic and its closest relative, Irish. Is it possible to assess the degree in which MacLean adopted traditional Gaelic metres vs. foreign models?

In conclusion, it is my utmost pleasure to **recommend** the thesis to the defence and to suggest that it should be classified as **excellent** (výborně). I moreover hope that there will be opportunities to publish the results of this impressive work.

Mgr. Radvan Markus, Ph.D.
27 August 2014