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The Political Poetry of Derick Thomson

Politická poezie Dericka Thomsona

DISERTAČNÍ PRÁCE

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1. Introduction

1.1 Rationale

As Donald E. Meek expressed it in the eulogy he delivered at Derick Thomson's funeral in 2012, "Derick Thomson, scholar, teacher, Professor, language planner, poet, businessman, editor, politician, propagandist, chairman of boards and trusts in abundance" was "uniquely unique."¹ Derick S. Thomson, or Ruaraidh MacThòmais in Gaelic as he preferred to be known in relation to his poetry,² was indeed one of the most universal personalities of the Gaelic world in the twentieth century, outstanding not only in terms of his prolific output but also in the scope of his activities, open critical approach, and inclusive European outlook.

Apart from being an influential university lecturer, scholar and translator, co-founder of the seminal quarterly magazine *Gairm* and "the father of modern Gaelic publishing,"³ Thomson also contributed to modern Gaelic literature a total of seven poetry collections: the first one, *An Dealbh Briste* (The Broken Picture) was published in 1951; the last one, *Sùil air Fàire* (Surveying the Horizon), appeared in 2007. His career thus spans almost sixty years. Most of the numerous activities he undertook during his long and productive life were aimed at the preservation and further development of Gaelic as a viable, versatile language, and the promotion of Scottish independence.

With his usual decisiveness and ready insight into what needs to be done in the Gaelic world, Thomson suggested the following in "Reflections after Writing *An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry*": "What I hope will begin to emerge now is a series of period and genre and author studies. For example, there is a fascinating piece of work to be done on the techniques of political verse before 1750, and I would like to see a full-length literary study of Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair."⁴ Although many of the projects Thomson called for in the article from 1974 have been executed since and several others he would perhaps not have hoped for, there are still some important figures of Gaelic literature who await due critical assessment,

¹ Donald Meek, "Appreciation of Professor Derick S. Thomson: funeral oration, as delivered," *Passages From Tiree* [Donald Meek's personal blog] 5 April 2013, <<http://meekwrite.blogspot.cz/2013/04/appreciation-of-professor-derick-s.html>> 21 June 2019.

² John MacInnes: "About a quarter of a century ago two interesting figures appeared on the Gaelic scene. One was Derick Thomson, a young scholar of Aberdeen and Cambridge; the other Ruaraidh MacThòmais, a new Gaelic poet. I still recall my astonishment on realizing they both inhabited the same body: that of the present Professor of Celtic Languages and Literature in the University of Glasgow." "Review of *An Rathad Cian*," *Scottish International* (January 1972): 36.

³ Ronald Black, "Introduction," *An Tuil* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1999) xl.

⁴ Derick Thomson, "Reflections after Writing *An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry*," *Lines Review* 49 (June, 1974): 17.

including the author of the appeal himself and unfortunately also Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, a poet he felt especially akin to.

In spite of the impressive range of his activities and the seven books of poetry, which is, according to the editors of Thomson's festschrift, "at its best as good as any in the language,"⁵ conspicuously little critical attention has been paid to his multifaceted career. Several illuminating studies have been published, especially by Christopher Whyte, Ronald Black, Michel Byrne, and Ian MacDonald, but even they have not covered all the elements of Thomson's art and activism, and for example his last collection, *Sùil air Fàire*, has not been subject to any substantial critical examination, and no monograph has been devoted solely to Thomson, which comes rather as a surprise, given his being so prolific, the high standard of his literary and academic work, and also his vast influence on Gaelic poetry and on the Gaelic world in general.

This dissertation aims to respond to Thomson's appeal: it focuses on the work of one poet and traces a set of themes and its development in his works. As John MacInnes pointed out, there are of course areas of Thomson's interests "both in scholarship and in public affairs that may not appear to have direct relevance to his poetry [...] but one area where the connection is palpable enough is that of politics. Derick Thomson has consistently supported the idea of cultural and legislative independence for Scotland."⁶ The chosen set of themes can be broadly described as "political issues", although Derick 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, and in the following text the term "political" will be used in this wider sense.

Gary Day, chosen here as a representative of numerous other scholarly voices that give the same warning, stresses that "exclusive concern with politics is threatening to impoverish our understanding of poetry."⁷ The aim of this thesis however is not to constrain the reading of Thomson's poetry to the nationalist paradigm, but to act on the conviction that in order to do justice to Thomson's extensive work, it is necessary to address his politics and properly explore his writing.

⁵ "Dedication," *Fèill-sgrìbhinn do Ruairidh MacThòmais = Festschrift for Professor Derick S. Thomson, Scottish Gaelic Studies XVII* (Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen, 1996): 2.

⁶ John MacInnes, "The Poetry of Derick Thomson: An Introduction by John MacInnes," *The Poetry of Derick Thomson* [CD with recordings of poems in English and Gaelic] (Perth: Scotsoun and Artistes, 2002) 3.

⁷ Gary Day, "Introduction: Poetry, Politics, and Tradition," *British Poetry from the 1950s to the 1990s: Politics and Art*, ed. Gary Day and Brian Docherty (London: Macmillan, 1997) 1.

Politics represent the connection between Thomson's multiple activities, and therefore a suitable framework in which to explore them. In comparison to other writers who may have been violently squeezed into the nationalist box and analysed in terms of the Scottishness and political awareness of their writing with little to justify such a decision, apart from the fact that they lived in Scotland and wrote in one (or more) of its languages, Thomson, with his pronounced lifelong interest in political issues, his active engagement, and also the fact he addressed political issues in his writing, justifies such a design. Quite paradoxically, this framework, so prominent and in some opinions over-exercised in Scottish literary criticism, has not been applied to one of the people for whom it is truly relevant.⁸ So far, the prevailing framework 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 verse and, to a less extent, his writing about Glasgow. In my own research, I have been systematically attempting to bring forward overlooked aspects of Thomson's career – such as his contribution to *Gairm*, his research on the Ossian controversy, or religion as a theme in his poetry – and this thesis constitutes one part of this long-term project.

In relation to Thomson's poetry, one of the first associations with "political issues" would be Scottish nationalist politics. Thomson remained a committed nationalist throughout his life and was an active member of the Scottish National Party (SNP). The frequently applied but not much explored labelling of Thomson as a stalwart nationalist invites examination as to its actual contents. In contrast to the prevailing tendency not to connect Scottish nationalism with a specific language and a cultural agenda, Thomson has always retained a double, intertwined commitment: to an independent Scotland in Europe and to a thriving Gaelic language and culture within such an independent Scotland, that would provide safe space for the development of its many languages and cultures. As Thomson never published any definitive theoretical treatise presenting of opinions on these topics – the closest match would be his essay "The Role of the Writer in a Minority Culture" and the booklet *Why Gaelic Matters*, which are both given due attention later –, his approach needs to be traced in his poems, journalism, and academic writing.

This dissertation would like 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 poetry? Are there poems where a political interpretation might be constructed, but that also allow other ways of reading? What were Thomson's actual political

⁸ For a criticism of the prevailing tendencies in Scottish literary studies, see Whyte, "Introduction," *Modern Scottish Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

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?

Apart from the relevance of this project for the general rehabilitation of Thomson to his place in Gaelic culture and Scottish culture in general, it is also topical as a study of politics in the works of a man who left a significant mark on Gaelic Scotland, at the time when the position of Gaelic in Scotland and the position of Scotland in Europe are both hotly debated issues.

1.2 Thesis Structure

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.

1.3 Methodology

In order to clarify Thomson's position and provide answers to the questions outlined in the thesis rationale, the following section discusses selected approaches to nationalism from the late eighteenth century up to the present. As the topic of nationalism is so overwhelmingly broad and varied, it presents merely a selection of approaches, admittedly limited and simplified, in order to provide a toolbox for the next chapters.

Nation, the unit which lies at the core of the ideology of nationalism, is notoriously elusive, and so is its origin. While state can be quite comfortably defined as a sovereign fiscal-legal-political institution with a territory, what can be said about a nation with certainty is that it is a group of people which is deemed, either by members of the group themselves or by the outside world, as sharing certain characteristics. The array of possible definitions of what a nation is and how it comes into being is dazzling. As Joep Leerssen notes, the important question is whether the nation, as a social and cultural community people identify with and feel loyal to, only emerged in the nineteenth century, alongside the ideology of nationalism, or whether its presence in human history has been longer.⁹ Consequently, one may ask, in the words of Anthony D. Smith, whether nationalism “was [...] always seeking to rediscover the submerged and forgotten nation and, in doing so, was creating the very nations whose hidden existence it assumed.”¹⁰

Plentiful proofs of the word “nation” being used in the Middle Ages and feelings of national loyalty and the necessity to defend it against other nations can of course be found in numerous premodern texts. One of the most obvious examples from a Scottish context is the Declaration of Arbroath. When Scottish barons sent a letter to the Pope in defence of King Robert Bruce in 1320, they did it on behalf of the “freeholders and the whole community of the realm of Scotland”, listing the grievances they have suffered from the English invaders and professing their preference to death over English domination.¹¹

However, it is important to keep in mind that although the words “populus” and “gens” are employed, “nation” was not a distinctly thought-out concept and was not applied systematically: it was sometimes used to express the difference between languages and regions, or to indicate a common descent of a group of people.¹² This impressive medieval document is widely quoted in order to prove the long tradition of a separate national identity in Scotland in the context of the present struggle for independence and is understood as a direct predecessor of today’s nationalism. But does a claim to ancestry, Leerssen asks, really prove direct descent, and is nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalism the direct continuation of a persistently asserted, unchanging Scottish “nationality”? If modern Scottish nationalists see the roots of their own ideals in their medieval predecessors, does that mean that those medieval advocates of Scottish independence would recognise their thought in the

⁹ Joep Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010) 13.

¹⁰ Anthony D. Smith, *The Nation in History: Historiographical Debates about Ethnicity and Nationalism* (UPNE, 2000) 10.

¹¹ Full text in modern translation on the website of the National Archives of Scotland: <<http://www.nas.gov.uk/downloads/declarationarbroath.pdf>>

¹² Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe* 26.

SNP programme? Did notions such as freedom, the English rule, and the Scottish nation mean the same thing in 1320, when the declaration was dispatched, and in 2014, at the time of the independence referendum? Most likely not, and therefore it is important to confront modern nationalism and its rhetoric with the pitfalls of anachronism,¹³ but also to observe how pre-modern phenomena may be interpreted and employed by modern nationalisms, and how they work in the popular and artistic imagination.

In spite of the numerous different theories of nations and nationalism, there seems to be a general consensus that nationalism has been the dominant political force of the last two centuries, and that only in the nineteenth century did it emerge as a specific and recognizable political ideology. The main authorities on the subject also broadly agree on what nationalism is.¹⁴ Ernest Gellner defines nationalism as “primarily a political principle that holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent,”¹⁵ while Smith describes it as “an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential nation.”¹⁶

An important movement in the development of modern nationalism was the transition from Enlightenment patriotism to Romantic nationalism in a process in which the “vertical”, civic vindications of popular sovereignty acquired the horizontal component of inter-national and ethnic rivalry.¹⁷ This early nationalism, or political romanticism, saw nations as natural human categories: each defined in its individual identity by a transcendent essence, each deserving its own self-determination. In the romantic approach, the main focus is on the so-called “organic community”, i.e. on the nation as the creation of nature and the completion of its perfection.¹⁸

At the same time, the idea that each nation has a natural or moral right to be incorporated in its own state, while conversely every state should incorporate its proper constituent nation, emerged. The ideal of the congruence between nation and state and the notion of nation-state is thus a relatively recent one. About one hundred years later, this cultural activism was turned into constitutional reality during the Paris Peace Conference when a number of ethnically defined national states emerged out of the First World War.

¹³ Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe* 25.

¹⁴ Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe* 14.

¹⁵ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2006) 1.

¹⁶ Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism* (London: Routledge, 1998) 187.

¹⁷ Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe* 22.

¹⁸ M.H. Abrams, “The Psychology of Literary Invention: Mechanical and Organic Theories,” *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) 156-183.

Romantic nationalism envisaged nations as sacred communities, with the revivalists styling themselves as priests resurrecting the nation. An important aspect of Romantic nationalism was the question of the national language. In terms of the relationship between the nation and language and culture in the late eighteenth century and in the nineteenth century, the thought of German pre-Romantic and Romantic philosophers, such as Johann Gottlieb Herder and William von Humboldt, was greatly influential, and most of the “national awakenings” that took place in Europe at that time can be more or less directly traced to Herder’s thought.¹⁹

In Herder’s view, individual languages are precious in themselves, as they contain the tradition, history, religion, and customs of the people, and linguistic diversity allows for a diversity of thought and culture. In Herder’s theory, the nation coincides with language and different languages therefore constitute distinct fixed communities whose specific way of thinking was determined by the respective language. Herder stressed the role of culture and language in the formation of nationality and authentic group experience, but also paid close attention to civilisation and will, as people *choose* to speak their own language and discover their own history. Immersing oneself in one’s own history and culture was for Herder the only path to real freedom. Herder was also an advocate of the moral equality of cultures. While the ideas of cultural diversity and uniqueness of each language and, in turn, nationality, are surely appealing from the point of view of activists defending small languages and nations against absorption into bigger units, they also imply language determinism.

This idea of linguistic determination in relation to nationality was further explored by Herder’s younger contemporary, von Humboldt. Approaching language as the basis of “the spirit of the race” and proposing that every language perpetuates a specific view of the world, Humboldt argues that “language is related to everything therein, to the whole as to the individual, and nothing of this ever is, or remains, alien to it.”²⁰ In Humboldt’s argument, a person’s perception of the world is governed by language, which is, in turn, connected to nationality. For Humboldt, language is the very substance of national identity:

Most of the circumstances that accompany the life of a nation (residence, climate, religion, political constitution, manners, and customs) can be, as it were, separated from it, and one can, even in the case of intense exchange, separate out what influence they have exerted and undergone. But one aspect is of a wholly different

¹⁹ Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe* 97.

²⁰ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On language: on the diversity of human language construction and its influence on the mental development of the human species*, ed. Michael Losonsky, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 32, 42.

order, and that is language. It is the breath, the very soul of the nation, appearing everywhere in tandem with it, and (whether it be considered as something that has exerted, or else undergone, historical influences) setting the limits of what can be known about it.²¹

Such ideas of Humboldt and others not surprisingly lead to an inseparable connection between language and race in the works of other authors.

The philosophers of German Romanticism exerted great influence on theories of nationalism which can be grouped under the heading of “primordialism.” As Smith notes, the term “primordialist” is a fairly recent one and generally refers to the idea that “certain cultural attributes and formations possess a prior, overriding, and determining influence on people’s lives” and that people are “compelled by the attachments that spring from these attributes and formations.”²² Among these attachments, kinship, descent, language, religion, and historical territory feature prominently, and they form the basis for the development of nations and nationalism. In this view, nations and nationalism occupy a privileged place in history and can be termed primordial. According to the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, “by a primordial attachment is meant one that stems from the ‘givens’ – or more precisely, as culture is inevitably involved in such matters, the assumed ‘givens’ of social existence... These congruities of blood, speech, custom, and so on, are seen to have an ineffable, and at times, overpowering, coerciveness in and of themselves.”²³

A different approach to nationalism was adopted by Ernest Renan (1823-1892), a prominent French intellectual of Breton origin. Renan was a representative of racially deterministic scientism, which is evident for example in his essay *La poésie des races celtiques* (The Poetry of the Celtic Races, 1854).²⁴ In terms of discussion of nations and nationality, Renan’s thoughts found expression in the lecture *Qu’est-ce qu’une Nation?* (What is a Nation?, 1882), later published as an essay. In this essay, Renan takes stock of common answers to the question, rejecting the ideology of racial purity by pointing out the mixed blood of all European nations, and also dismisses geography, language, and religion as factors determining a nation, by using specific examples. Renan regarded the nation as a spiritual and political principle of collective choice, and nationality as a state of mind. In his view, nations are not eternal: they are a product of historical circumstance and can be traced back into the

²¹ von Humboldt, quoted in Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe* 207.

²² Smith, *The Nation in History* 5.

²³ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1973) 259-60, quoted in Smith, *The Nation in History* 21.

²⁴ The essay was much admired by Matthew Arnold. Arnold pursued a similar line of thought in his *On Celtic Literature* (1867), although he thought Renan’s observations on the Welsh and the Bretons were not applicable on the Irish and Scottish Gaels.

Middle Ages. Thus, they have a beginning, but are not ephemeral or optional. Renan defines the nation politically, but acknowledges that history, mainly the cult of ancestors, is necessary to consolidate the nation which continues to exist through memories of shared suffering and by a desire to achieve common goals. Renan can thus be seen as an advocate of voluntarist, as opposed to determinist, approach to nationality, and favouring identification over identity.

Renan's thoughts proved to be influential in the twentieth century. The two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century, in which national hatred was stirred up as never before, meant that approaches to nationalism in general underwent a great change, and instead of a commendable sentiment, nationalism started to be seen as the primary cause of the rise of Fascism and Nazism and thus the reason for the unprecedented carnage on battlefields around the globe. In its Fascist or Nazi versions, nationalism merged with pseudo-scientific racism and produced an aggressive and destructive, inhuman ideology.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the most striking resurgence of nationalism occurred in Eastern and Central Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain, but the tensions in South Tyrol right after the war, the conflicts in the Balkans, or the activities of the Irish Republican Army, also form a part of the continuous history of nationalism in Europe. It is thanks to these associations that the primary connotations of the term became largely negative.

Scholars returned to nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s, with research of a more political and social orientation, but the huge upsurge in the studies of nationalism occurred in the 1980s, following the work of Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, Terence Ranger, Erick Hobsbawm, and others. Most of these scholars attempted to produce a model of nationalism as an ideology and are representatives of the so-called modernist theories of nationalism. These theories associate the development of nationalism with political and social change brought on by the dissemination of print in the seventeenth century or the discourses of the French revolutionary era a century later.²⁵ In the modernist view, the sense of national identity was fabricated in the nineteenth century by nationalists.

The Paris-born Ernest Gellner (1925-1995), from a Czech Jewish German-speaking background, later a Professor at London School of Economics, is considered one of the most influential theoreticians of nationalism in the second half of the twentieth century with works such as *Nations and Nationalism* (1983). Gellner saw nationalism as a side effect of modernisation, driven largely by intellectuals, and advocated a functionalist approach to

²⁵ Murray Pittock, "What is a National Culture?," *Litteraria Pragensia: Scotland in Europe* 19:38 (December 2009): 36.

nationalism. His main thesis is that nationalism is a product of industrial society and manifests itself in certain social formations which are not universal but related to a specific historical situation.²⁶ Nationalism, in his view, is not the awakening of something old, but the creation of a new principle of social organisation.²⁷ Gellner's theory has been criticised for failing to account for nationalist feelings in pre-modern societies, by tying nationalism to modernity, and also for overlooking the passions generated by nationalism and the individual perspective.

Benedict Anderson (1936-2015) first published his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* in 1983, in the same year as Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism*. It has been a seminal text in the discussion of nationalism for more than three decades and one of the most widely read treatises on the subject. Unlike Gellner, Anderson stressed the developing role of the media and the growth of communication in the development of nationalism, and presents nations as social constructs – as imagined communities evolving at “the convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation.”²⁸ In his view, nationalism emerges from the transformation of late feudal apparatus into a system of bureaucracy, when the unity of a community governed by myths and rituals is supplanted by simultaneity of a distinctly technological form, measured by the calendar and the clock.²⁹ He also connects the formation of modern nations and growth of nationalism with the disintegration of big multinational empires. The strengths of his approach include the notion that the formation of national culture is technological, and the emphasis on literacy as the decisive factor in the creation of historical national awareness. Anderson also developed a new framework focusing not on the use of communication technologies as means of mass communication in the service of existing states but their potential to form human imagination and contribute to “long-distance nationalism.”³⁰

In response to Gellner's and Anderson's sociological approach, anti-modernist voices have been arguing that national identity has been a long-standing ideological presence in Europe way before the nineteenth century. In the modernist treaties, national culture is discussed as an invention, the so-called “invention of tradition” which in Murray Pittock's ironic comment “becomes the means by which the successors of pre-modern elites impose a

²⁶ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* 3.

²⁷ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* 4.

²⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991) 46.

²⁹ Martin Procházka, “Národ a nacionalismus ve věku globalizace,” in: Benedict Anderson, *Představy společnosti*, transl. by Petr Fantys (Prague: Karolinum, 2008) 251.

³⁰ Procházka, “Národ a nacionalismus ve věku globalizace” 248.

fantasy of national solidarity on the wider population.”³¹ As Pittock puts it, these “believers in national invention are prone to assume that poets, novelists, propagandists and self-serving elites can produce some of the deepest passions, for good or ill, in human nature.”³² However ground-breaking modernist theories were, it seems rather clear in hindsight that they failed to account both for the enduring emotional power of nationalism and for its pre-modern roots.

Gellner’s student Anthony D. Smith (1939-2016), with publications such as *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (1986), *Nationalism and Modernism* (1998), and *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach* (2009), strived to adopt a middle course and his “ethnosymbolism” tempers modernist views with different approaches. He opposed Gellner in tracing the pre-nineteenth century ethnic origins of nations, while “arguing that these ethnic identities were largely subjective and underwent an ideological transformation and modern instrumentalization in the nineteenth century.”³³ He maintains that while nationalism is a modern phenomenon approximately two centuries old, nations have premodern origins.

Smith is the author of the productive distinction between “civic” and “ethnic” nationalisms. Ethnic nationalism, operating with the exclusivity of blood and based on shared ethnic origin, often hand in hand with shared language, culture, and creed, is mostly seen as suspect, as a fuel to the Balkan wars or the Rwanda genocide. Civic nationalism on the other hand adheres to liberal values such as equality and individual rights, is based on principles and institutions, and is not defined by one language and culture. Civic nationalism may be inclusive and multicultural, but it may also demand the surrender of ethnic particularity, collective rights and culture. However, even apparently pure civic patriotism presupposes a myth of ancestral origins and shared historical memories of the homeland that defines the ethnic basis of a supposedly entirely civic nation.

Smith also delineates cultural or linguistic nationalism: in such a case full socialisation into the host language and culture can gain people acceptance into the nation, irrespective of their ethnic background, and thus combines inclusiveness without forsaking distinctiveness of some sort. In real-life examples, it may be difficult to find a case of cultural nationalism that would be completely free from ethnic moorings.

The cultural historian Joep Leerssen (*1955), most notably in his influential monograph *National Thought in Europe* (2006), adopts an approach which is positioned between Smith’s ethno-symbolism and the modernism of Gellner and Anderson, and views nationalism as a

³¹ Pittock, “What is a National Culture?” 37.

³² Pittock, “What is a National Culture?” 39.

³³ Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe* 13.

phenomenon that “emanates from the way people view and describe the world”, as a cultural phenomenon which takes shape “between material and political developments on the one hand, and intellectual and poetical reflection and articulation on the other.”³⁴

The concept of national thought which features in the title of the book is deliberately broader than nationalism, and it allows Leerssen to discuss also pre-nineteenth century source traditions of national ideology which, in his opinion, emerged as a fusion of different existing elements during the turbulent decades of Napoleonic rule. This “national thought” is defined as “a way of seeing human society primarily as consisting of discreet, different nations, each with an obvious right to exist and to command loyalty, each characterised and set apart unambiguously by its own separate identity and culture.”³⁵ This way of viewing the world is seen as an active part of historical processes, subject to changing conditions and with a dynamics and development of its own.

While stressing the role of culture in the rise and spread of nationalism, Leerssen views culture as a set of literary myths and stereotypes which under the influence of Romantic historicism started to be taken for long-standing ethnic continuities. Importantly, in Leerssen’s view, national identities are always shaped in opposition of the nation to stereotyped foreigners; he thus defines nationalism as the “political instrumentalization” of these stereotypes of the national self and the other. Leerssen is an advocate of a transnational, comparative approach to nationalism. Given the subject of this thesis, it is interesting to note that Leerssen has been involved in a struggle for greater recognition of Limburgish, an East Low Franconian variety, and that he himself uses Limburgish as the medium of his creative literary work.

For a study of Derick Thomson’s politics, the ideas of cultural nationalism and an ecological approach to languages, going back to Herder, is of utmost importance. However, as will be argued in the following chapters, Thomson’s approach is not determinist and the connection between language and nationality is not an absolute one. In terms of terminology, various concepts, such as the idea of voluntarism, going back to Renan, are useful for describing Thomson’s national thought, as well as the comprehensive typology of nationalisms proposed by Anthony D. Smith. The benefit of Leerssen’s *National Thought in Europe* resides mostly in his approach – close-reading cultural phenomena, in some cases without explicit political content to discover patterns of national thought – rather than in applying his specific observations to Thomson.

³⁴ Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe* 14.

³⁵ Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe* 15.

1.4 Politics and Poetry

In the famous poem written in the memory of W. B. Yeats, W. H. Auden remarked that “poetry makes nothing happen.”³⁶ The phrase, so convenient as a point of departure for a discussion of poetry and politics, has been used again and again, and this thesis could not resist it. The poem was dedicated to Yeats, a poet who did not believe that poetry – and writing in general – was unable to influence the world. Auden, as Jon Stallworthy puts it, might have had lost his belief in poetry as an agent of political change, but would not dare to say that to living Yeats.³⁷ Moreover, even the poem itself does not indicate that the phrase should be read as a comment on the impotence of poetry – after Yeats’s death, his poems remain in the “guts of the living” where they get modified; the poetry survives in its own valley as “a way of happening”. The last verses even summon the poet to “sign of human unscussess / in the rapture of distress” and “teach the free man how to praise.”³⁸ Incidentally, Yeats was one of the few Anglophone poets whose influence on Thomson can be established with certainty.³⁹

Auden himself underwent a radical shift from his politically engaged poems in the 1930s to “poetry makes nothing happen,” to the conviction that poetry should not strive to make anything in particular happen or make someone do something, rather than simply “be”. According to Robert Huddleston, the phrase has two meanings: “In its more pessimistic valence, it suggests that writers and artists are incapable of effecting political change,” but also “poetry should not make things happen; it should not be instrumentalized for a political cause and is harmed by acceding to such uses”, being both a rhetorical act and a statement.⁴⁰

An important topic in the discussion of poetry and politics is responsibility. Does poetry have to reflect social and political issues, or are poets responsible only to their art – or to their conscience? What if someone follows the direction indicated by the writer and meets their death, like the young men lured to war by Cathleen Ni Houlihan (as Yeats wrote in “Man and the Echo”, “Did that play of mine send out / Certain men to the English shot?”), or murders their political opponents on the instigation of Auden’s “Spain”? Related to this is the question

³⁶ W. H. Auden, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” *Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage, 1991) 248.

³⁷ Quoted in: Don Share, “Poetry Makes Nothing Happen... Or Does It?,” *Poetry Foundation*, 4 November 2011, <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2009/11/poetry-makes-nothing-happen-or-does-it>> 19 July 2017.

³⁸ Auden, *Collected Poems* 249.

³⁹ Thomson’s poem “Stri Fhada” (A Long Haul) from *Smeur an Dòchais* begins with a quote ascribed to Yeats and he also translated Yeats’s poetry into Gaelic, including “The Second Coming” and “Easter, 1916”.

⁴⁰ Robert Huddleston, “Poetry Makes Nothing Happen: Auden’s Struggle with Politics,” *Boston Review* 25 February 2015, <<http://bostonreview.net/poetry/robert-huddleston-wh-auden-struggle-politics>> 19 July 2017.

of consistency and authenticity: between the poetry, its political message, and the actions of the poet – George Orwell reproached Auden⁴¹ for writing about necessary murders in Spain while not actually murdering anyone himself, and Yeats never actually picked up arms to personally, physically fight for free Ireland. Does it render their writing on the subject unconvincing? Or is it enough to write and leave the action to others? No matter how careful one may want to be about confusing the persona of the poems and the real-life individual, when the poetry attempts to persuade the reader to political action, the poet's own attitudes and deeds will likely be considered to validate or devalue the message.

Another topic which surfaces frequently is the issue of value. Especially in the twentieth century and in countries which have known undemocratic regimes that sought to police art and employed it for propagandist purposes, believing in the “political efficacy of cultural production,”⁴² serious doubt as to whether any art informed by a specific political aim can be good and lasting has taken root. As Whyte asks, “Can political commitment find adequate expression in poetry? Or must the poetry and the politics necessarily work against one another? Can we achieve an aesthetic evaluation quite detached from any political intention, or are the two inseparable?”⁴³ The impression that political engagement in poetry implies deficiency in literary quality is widespread, as the effort to put forward a message and make it understandable enough may gain the upper hand over literary concerns. It seems that poems written with a distinct political aim in mind lose their interest when taken outside the immediate context, and are of value as historical documents and manifestations of how people approached certain issues at a particular time, not as literature of artistic merit.

But what actually is a political poem? As Oliver Connelly and Bashar Haydar suggest in their article “Literature, Politics, and Character,” “in order for a given phenomenon to be political, it must, at some level, be concerned with power in a social arena, whether that power is underpinned by institutions or attitudes.”⁴⁴ They propose two possible views of the political: the narrow view which is “concerned with the nature and legitimacy of the state, government, legal and other coercive institutions” and the broad view in which “politics is concerned with power relations between social groups that are mediated not through

⁴¹ George Orwell, “Inside the Whale,” Part II, <http://orwell.ru/library/essays/whale/english/e_itw> 23 December 2019.

⁴² Huddleston, “Poetry Makes Nothing Happen: Auden’s Struggle with Politics,” <<http://bostonreview.net/poetry/robert-huddleston-wh-auden-struggle-politics>>.

⁴³ Whyte, *Modern Scottish Poetry* 20.

⁴⁴ Oliver Connelly and Bashar Haydar, “Literature, Politics, and Character,” *Philosophy and Literature* 32/2 (2008): 89.

institutions but through attitudes.”⁴⁵ All literature has arguably the potential to become political under certain circumstances, while explicitly political works seek to make a political standpoint, provoke a debate about a certain topic, or persuade the readers to join a certain cause.

In his essay “The Politics of Poetry”, David Orr asks what a political poem is:

Is a political poem simply a poem with “political” words in it, like “Congress” or ‘Dachau’ or “egalitarianism”? Or is it a poem that discusses the way people relate (or might relate) to one another? If that’s the case, are love poems political? What about poems in dialect? Should we draw a firm line, and say that a political poem has to have some actual political effect? Should it attempt to persuade us in the way most “normal” political speech does?⁴⁶

The field of political poetry is broad and with blurred borders. Perspectives on poetry and politics may include research into textual and sexual politics, ideology, censorship, the sponsorship or suppression of literary work by political bodies, and actual political participation by writers, as politicians or propagandists, and their approaches to political issues. Poetry in turn helps to shape, reinforce, or contest various notions which have political bearing, including nation, race, ethnicity and gender, so literature is both affected by politics and may influence it. As Orr notes, “it’s important to note first that poetry and politics are both matters of verbal persuasion—that is, both have strong connections to the art of rhetoric.”⁴⁷

The connection between poetry and politics is, in Orr’s view, “both enhanced and complicated by the persistence of the lyric as contemporary poetry’s dominant mode”:

The modern lyric may be fractured, tweaked, or warped, but essentially it remains a self-enclosed world created by a singular voice (which isn’t always the same thing as a single subject called “I”). That voice is often speaking to itself in meditative solitude, yet even as the lyric insists on privacy, the act of insisting necessarily implies that there’s someone to be insisted to. This puts the lyric in a potentially awkward position relative to the larger political world.⁴⁸

Sometimes, however, Orr points out, “persuasion is a matter of timing” – apart from asking whether a poem is political, one should also ask when and how poems become political.⁴⁹ Orr

⁴⁵ Connelly and Haydar, “Literature, Politics, and Character” 88.

⁴⁶ David Orr, “The Politics of Poetry,” *Poetry* (July/August 2008): 415.

⁴⁷ Orr, “The Politics of Poetry” 409.

⁴⁸ Orr, “The Politics of Poetry” 413.

⁴⁹ Orr, “The Politics of Poetry” 417.

mentions Auden's "September 1939" which was written as a response to the invasion of Poland, and thus connected to a particular political event. Its momentum faded with the growing time distance from the actual events and the poet grew dissatisfied with it, until, in Orr's view, "the poem emerged again as fully political, fully connected to the spirit of a time and place" after the attacks of 11 September 2001. In the Scottish context, similar examples may be found among the poems written in disappointment over the failed referendum on devolution in 1979 which became political again in the light of the Yes campaign of 2014, the No vote, and the continuing efforts to organise another independence referendum in the near future.

Derick Thomson's poetry is political mostly in the broader sense – he only rarely refers to narrowly political issues, and when he does so, it is never a direct call for specific action, such as "Vote for the SNP" or "Embrace devolution". His political poetry tends to be oblique and complicated, requires a deep knowledge of Gaelic history and culture, and therefore its campaigning potential is very limited. In other cases, it presents a certain situation or a state, often by means of a specific image, and lets the readers draw their own conclusions. One of its aims is to establish whether Thomson's political poems manage to balance their political agenda and artistic merit, and are of interest as works of art, or whether they concur in the argument that artistic merit and political engagement are mutually exclusive.

2. Contexts

This chapter brings in various contexts which should enrich the following analysis of Thomson's poetry, starting with an overview of the various movements and trends in the Scottish national movement. Thomson's biography provides an overview of his life and career, mentioning also the political dimension of Thomson's main research interests. The last subchapter focuses on political issues in the writing of Sorley MacLean and George Campbell Hay, in order to provide parallels and counterpoints from the works of Thomson's contemporaries.

2.1 Scottish Nationalism

According to Neal Ascherson, "the construction of Scottish national identity has been in some ways exceptional. Although sometimes parallel to Czech experience, Scottish national awareness diverges from Central European models in its lack of emphasis on biological-ethnic and language factors."⁵⁰ In its non-linguistic orientation, Scottish nationalism also differs markedly from nineteenth and twentieth century Welsh and Irish nationalism. As James G. Kellas observes, "Welsh language has become closely associated with Welsh national identity, and its promotion has been part of the Welsh national revival. The Scottish nation, on the other hand, does not identify with Gaelic (although it does not deny it either), and Scottish nationalism is based on political and economic demands rather than on cultural or linguistic ones."⁵¹ While in the Welsh and Irish context, there was only one candidate for the position of the national language which could be readily seized upon and employed as one of the cornerstones of the nationalist struggle, the more complex linguistic landscape of Scotland prevented such an easy identification with one language and the associated cultural tradition.

The absence of one uncontested candidate for the position of a national language and the resulting disputes, as in the famous exchange between Hugh MacDiarmid and Edwin Muir, while Erskine of Mar favoured re-Gaelicisation of Scotland, may have been one of the causes of the relative failure of the nationalist efforts in the interwar period. The linguistic diversity in Scotland and the problematic situation of the two most likely candidates for a "national" language has prevented a full-scale adoption of either as a major component of the

⁵⁰ Neal Ascherson, "When Was Britain?," *Litteraria Pragensia: Scotland in Europe* 19:38 (December 2009): 3.

⁵¹ "Politics, Highland (twentieth century)," *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland* 239.

nationalist campaign. To go back to Smith's division, Scottish nationalism has been mostly construed as a civic one, with certain groups favouring a cultural nationalism based either on Gaelic or Scots and the associated culture.

Unlike other national movements which sought to unify various regions into one state, the Scottish national movement is a separatist one, seeking to attain a division from a bigger entity, i.e. the United Kingdom. According to Leerssen, it is one of those separatist national movements that draw their claim from an "ancient and still-remembered feudal independence", such as Hungary, Poland, or Norway, which have achieved their aims, and Catalonia, which still remains part of Spain.⁵² Different strands in Scottish nationalism can be distinguished: while some movements aimed at devolution within the UK and would be willing to keep the Union of Crowns, others required full independence and a Scottish republic. The nationalist cause has often been mixed with other causes in the agenda of movements and political parties, such as communism and socialism, for these types of social organisation, according to their proponents, could be achieved more easily in an independent Scotland. It is also important to trace the tendencies to adopt cultural nationalism versus the so-far prevailing inclinations towards a narrower political nationalism focused on economics and issue politics.

Given the diversity of Scotland in the early medieval period, with Gaels living in the west, Pictish kingdoms controlling in the north and east, the settlement of Angles in south-eastern Scotland, and the Norse influence over the islands in the west and far north, it is not surprising that, as Ascherson puts it, that there was a kingdom of Scotland long before "any chronicler could write about an abstract 'Scottish people' – a process reversing the conventional historical sequence in which a people is supposed to emerge and then to create its own institutions."⁵³ The linguistic and cultural diversity in Scotland has to a large extent shaped the various forms of nationalism in Scotland.

The conflict between England and Scotland, one of the most important ones in the construction of Scottish national identity, can be traced to the time when, after the death of King Alexander in 1286 and the subsequent demise of his granddaughter and heir Margaret, Maid of Norway, four years later, Scottish magnates asked the English king Edward I. to arbitrate in order to prevent civil war over succession. Edward I. asked for recognition that the Scottish realm would be held as a feudal dependency to the English throne before the candidate was chosen. After John Balliol became king in 1292, Edward I. used the

⁵² Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe* 159.

⁵³ Ascherson, "When Was Britain?" 5-6.

concessions to undermine the new king and the independence of Scotland and later invaded Scotland and deposed Balliol. Scottish forces under the leadership of William Wallace and Andrew de Moray rose against the occupation and defeated the English army at the Battle of Stirling Bridge in 1297. Robert the Bruce, another strong claimant for the throne, was crowned in 1306. Although Bruce was defeated by Edward I at Methven and excommunicated by the Pope for murdering his rival for the throne, John Comyn III, at the church of the Greyfriars at Dumfries, he gradually gained more support and control over most of Scotland. In 1314, he defeated the army of Edward II at Bannockburn and de facto secured Scottish independence again. Both Stirling Bridge and Bannockburn are still invoked as glorious examples of how smaller Scotland was able to withstand English attacks and retain its sovereignty.

The Treaty of Edinburgh-Northampton, signed in 1328 by Edward III and acknowledging Scottish independence under the rule of Bruce, did not prevent another English invasion after Bruce's death. The outbreak of the Hundred Years' War however distracted Edward III's attention from the cause and apart from the capture of Berwick-upon-Tweed by the English, the following centuries saw no major conflict between Scotland and England. During that time, Scotland consolidated its internal struggles and territorial issues: it acquired Orkney and Shetland, and after the fall of the powerful MacDonald Lords of the Isles, the Western Isles were for the first time brought under firm royal control. In 1503, the countries were connected by a spectacular royal wedding: James IV married Margaret Tudor, daughter of Henry VII, thus laying the dynastic foundations for the Union of Crowns one hundred years later. When James IV was defeated at Flodden in 1513, it marked the beginning of the disruption of power balance between England and Scotland.

As J. G. A. Pocock notes, from the late sixteenth century at the latest, a discourse of Scotland and England composing an entity called Britain.⁵⁴ In Tudor England, Britishness became a concept which would legitimise the desire to dominate both within the British Isles and beyond.⁵⁵ In 1603, Scottish king James VI of the House of Stuart inherited the English and Irish crown after the death of the childless Elizabeth I., in the so-called Union of Crowns. Moreover, the king keenly proposed a union of parliaments and a scheme of common citizenships, but the plan did not succeed.⁵⁶ Even the Union of Crowns led to paradoxical

⁵⁴ J. G. A. Pocock, "Empire, State and Confederation: The War of American Independence as a Crisis of Multiple Monarchy," *A Union for Empire: Political Thought and the British Union of 1707*, ed. John Robertson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), quoted in Ascherson, "When Was Britain?" 10.

⁵⁵ Ascherson, "When Was Britain?" 11.

⁵⁶ T. M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation: 1700-2000* (London: Penguin, 1999) xxii.

situations – the three Dutch wars were fought against England’s business rival but Scotland’s main commercial partner.⁵⁷ Not surprisingly, the removal of the royal court from Edinburgh to London had a negative effect on Scottish culture, and Scots language was losing its prestige in favour of English.

Throughout the hundred years after James VII attempted to unite England and Scotland under one parliament, there had been many such attempts, all failing because of English unwillingness – one of the main reasons was reluctance to grant the Scots right to trade with American colonies. In 1705, the situation was much different. Many influential politicians and Queen Anne herself were in favour of the union and saw it as essential for preserving the 1688 settlement and the security of both countries.⁵⁸ An important factor which influenced the negotiations was the collapse of the Darien scheme. The expedition attempting to establish a Scottish colony on the Isthmus of Panama in order to facilitate trade with the Pacific and the Atlantic was launched in 1695 in a mood of great optimism, but by March 1700, it was clear that it had ended as a complete fiasco due to incompetent planning and tropical diseases. As the amount invested in the Darien scheme was enormous, the failure hit Scottish noblemen and merchants represented in the Parliament very hard. The operation was supported by the English government and assisted by English agents, including Daniel Defoe, for if Scotland went bankrupt, it would facilitate the negotiations about parliamentary union which was seen as highly desirable.

The Queen and Westminster gradually realised Scotland could no longer be effectively governed in the framework of the old regal union; moreover, Queen Anne was without an heir. Also in response to the support expressed by the French king to the exiled Stuarts, England started to seek to establish a parliamentary union. When the Union was drafted, it met with strong opposition on the Scottish side, especially from the Established Church, and resulted in an increased atmosphere of anti-English feelings. However, the opposition against the Union was broken into a number of fractions, and the Union was indeed passed. Scotland lost its sovereignty and a separate parliament. In spite of that, three distinct Scottish institutions survived the Union: the legal system which is closer to Roman-Dutch law than to English law, the established Church of Scotland, and the characteristic education system.

Since 1707, two approaches to the Union have evolved: in the British or English view, it as an act of Parliament which could only be altered by another act, while in the Scottish view,

⁵⁷ Devine, *The Scottish Nation: 1700-2000* xxii.

⁵⁸ Devine, *The Scottish Nation: 1700-2000* 3.

the union is a treaty and could be annulled if its terms were violated, or if one of the parties involved wishes to withdraw.⁵⁹

During the first half of the eighteenth century, several rebellions attempted to restore the exiled Stuart dynasty to the Scottish throne and re-establish a sovereign Scottish kingdom – and all failed. The most important of them was the uprising in 1715 and the year 1745-6, the so-called “Year of the Prince”. Charles Edward Stuart achieved several significant victories, at Prestonpans and Falkirk Muir, but his army was defeated at Culloden. The following repercussions deepened anti-English hostility and a disaffection to the Hanoverian kings and the Westminster government in Scotland, especially in Gaelic-speaking parts which were heavily involved in the Stuart cause and suffered most in the aftermath. The “Forty-Five” was the last armed attempt to re-establish independent Scottish kingdom under the Stuart kings.

At the same time, by the end of the eighteenth century, the Union was becoming more popular in some parts of Scotland, especially in the Lowland cities, as business and employment opportunities in the British Empire started to generate wealth for the Scots and opened lucrative careers all around the world.⁶⁰ Glasgow was the industrial centre of the British Empire. Scots took an active part in building the Empire, especially in military terms, and the image of the fiercely loyal Scottish soldiers who form the backbone of the British military can be traced back to this time.⁶¹ This change of attitude also explains why there were no attempts to restore independence during the nineteenth century when nationalist movements were sweeping through the Continent. Pittock offers an illuminating insight when he connects the gradual disintegration of the British Empire and the dwindling of advantages and opportunities for the Scots with the progressive rise of nationalist feeling and the desire to end the Union.⁶²

It was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that the “home rule” movement, demanding a devolved assembly, started to gain support in Ireland and Scotland. In 1885, two institutions were established to promote the country’s interests within the United Kingdom: the post of Secretary for Scotland and the Scottish Office. Before the outbreak of the Great War, the concept of universal “home rule” was promoted by the Liberal government, proposing the Scottish home rule would follow the same arrangement in Ireland and that the

⁵⁹ Ascherson, “When Was Britain?” 7.

⁶⁰ Ascherson, “When Was Britain?” 7.

⁶¹ One of the locations of Walter Scott’s second novel *Guy Mannering* is India and the hero, a Scotsman, serves as an officer in the British army.

⁶² Murray Pittock, *The Road to Independence? Scotland since the Sixties* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008) 14-15.

United Kingdom would become a federal system. Negotiations about the Scottish Home Rule bill were however obscured by the immediate concerns of the war.

After the war, the political scene in the UK was undergoing great changes. In 1922, Ireland, with the exception of the six counties, became a free state and a civil war over the Anglo-Irish Treaty followed. As Pittock points out, it is rather surprising how little Scottish nationalists were affected by the developments in Ireland in 1916-1921, apart from artists of nationalist persuasion such as Hugh MacDiarmid and Neill Gunn who wrote about Padraig Pearse for the *Scots Independent*.⁶³ The response among Gaelic nationalists was much more excited, and especially Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar was much involved with representatives of Irish nationalism, and his plans for Gaelic Scotland were influenced by Irish examples.

By the time when the Labour Party in the UK formed its first government, albeit a minority one, in 1924, its commitment to Scottish Home Rule had evaporated. At that point, the nationalist activity was divided into three major groups: the old Home Rulers, the Scots National League, and the 1926 breakaway Scottish Nationalist Movement led by the writer and folklorist Lewis Spence.⁶⁴ The needed catalyst for their unification was provided by the Glasgow University Scottish Nationalist Association headed by the lawyer John MacCormick.

The new National Party of Scotland, a union of the pre-existing movements, was inaugurated on 23 June 1928 – not accidentally, it was the anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn, and the ceremony took place in Stirling. In 1931, the party had about 8,000 members.⁶⁵ Four years later, in 1934, the Scottish National Party (SNP), came into being through a merger of the NPS and the more culturally nationalist Scottish Party.⁶⁶ This joining together was the result of the activities of John MacCormick, co-founder of the NPS and its first secretary who strove to unify the diverse national movements in Scotland.

From the list of the founding members of the NPS, it is evident that the distinct Scottish political culture in the 1920s and 1930s was being shaped by artists of cultural nationalist persuasion, and by some, they were seen as a “somewhat fantastic literary fringe group” with no experience with conducting the daily business of a political party.⁶⁷ Spence described it as a “maelstrom boiling and bubbling with the cross-currents of rival and frequently fantastic theories, schemes and notions, riotous with tumultuous personality and convulsive with

⁶³ Murray Pittock, *The Invention of Scotland: The Stuart Myth and the Scottish Identity* (London: Routledge, 2014) 145.

⁶⁴ F. R. Hart and J. B. Pick, “Politics and Society between the Wars,” *Neil M. Gunn: A Highland Life* (London: John Murray, 1981) 108.

⁶⁵ Pittock, *The Invention of Scotland* 148.

⁶⁶ The Scottish Party was formed in 1932 by a group of members of the Unionist Party who favoured the establishment of a Dominion Scottish Parliament within the British Empire.

⁶⁷ Hart and Pick, “Politics and Society between the Wars” 108.

petulant individual predilection.”⁶⁸ An overview of the most important personalities of the NPS and later SNP provides a telling insight into the colourful strains of the Scottish nationalist scene in the interwar period.

Robert Bontine Cunninghame Grahame (1852-1936), the first president of the SNP, was a politician, writer, socialist, and adventurer. Despite his privileged aristocratic background, Grahame concerned himself with the exploitation of the poor and when he was elected to the Parliament as a Liberal candidate, his major concern were workers’ rights.⁶⁹ After leaving the Liberal Party, he became the member and the first president of the Scottish Labour Party, founded by the left-wing politician Keir Hardie with whom he had been closely associated.⁷⁰ His last party affiliation was to the National Scottish Party, which he co-founded, and, when it merged into the SNP, became its president.

Another aristocrat involved in the nationalist cause and a representative of a distinctly Celtic strain in Scottish nationalism was Stuart Richard Erskine (1869-1960), known as Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar (Ruaraidh Arascain is Mhàirr). Erskine was born into the family of William Macnaghten Erskine, the fifth Baron Erskine, descended from the Erskine Earls of Buchan, grew up in Edinburgh and learnt Gaelic from his nanny who came from Harris.⁷¹ He got first interested in the nationalist activities in Ireland and maintained correspondence with Patrick Pearse whom he probably met at the pan-Celtic Congress in Cardiff in 1899 which they both attended.⁷² Pearse and Erskine shared an interest in Gaelic-medium education and literary revival of their respective Celtic tongues and the radical Irish magazine *An Claidheamh Soluis* (The Sword of Light) that first appeared in 1899 and of which Pearse became editor in 1903, likely served as inspiration for Erskine’s own journalistic ventures.

In 1920, Erskine was involved in the foundation of the Scots National League (SNL), one of the movements which in 1928 merged into the National Party of Scotland, which is a direct predecessor of the current SNP. During the time of Erskine’s involvement, the SNL, as Peter Lynch notes, focused on the status of Gaelic in Scotland, teaching of Scottish history, and proposed the formation of a Celtic, Gaelic-speaking state in Scotland, but Erskine and

⁶⁸ Hart and Pick, “Politics and Society between the Wars” 108.

⁶⁹ Girvan McKay, *The Lion and the Saltire: A Brief History of the Scottish National Party* (Polyglot Publishers, 2016) 36.

⁷⁰ McKay, *The Lion and the Saltire* 36.

⁷¹ Derick Thomson, “Erskine, Stuart Richard [known as Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar] (1869–1960),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004),

<<https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:4563/10.1093/ref:odnb/40311>> 2 July 2019.

⁷² Patrick Witt, “Connections across the North Channel: Ruaraidh Erskine and Irish Influence in Scottish Discontent, 1906-1920,” *The Irish Story*, 17 April 2013, <<http://www.theirishstory.com/2013/04/17/connections-across-the-north-channel-ruaraidh-erskine-and-irish-influence-in-scottish-discontent-1906-1920>>, 2 July 2019.

like-minded members were overpowered by another fraction that was concerned less with cultural nationalism and more with practical political business.⁷³

Erskine maintained correspondence with the Irish nationalist, educator, and man of letters Patrick Pearse whom he probably met at the pan-Celtic Congress in Cardiff in 1899, which they both attended.⁷⁴ Pearse also contributed to one of Erskine's Gaelic journals. As Witt puts it, "Erskine represents a nexus between Irish separatists and Scottish politicians, labour leaders, and intellectuals" and an example of the "underappreciated connection between Irish separatist thinking and Scottish political thought in the early twentieth century."⁷⁵

In contrast to many of his contemporaries, Erskine saw language revival as pivotal to the national cause and criticised his contemporaries for their indolence and unwillingness to learn Gaelic – the argument that the language was dying anyway and too obsolete to sustain a modern culture was in his view a mere cover-up for intellectual laziness.⁷⁶ He sought to provide Scottish nationalism with a language and a distinct cultural agenda, as common with national revivals in other countries.⁷⁷

Despite his aristocratic background, Erskine of Marr sympathised with John MacLean (1879-1923), a representative of the socialist Marxist strain in Scottish nationalism. MacLean, originally a school teacher from Pollokshaws, opposed the Great War on socialist grounds and was imprisoned for his agitation. This gained him an international reputation and in 1918, MacLean was elected to the chair of the Third All-Russian Congress of Soviets and a month later appointed Bolshevik consul in Scotland. He formed the Scottish Workers Republican Party whose communist-nationalist agenda was influenced by the thoughts of the Edinburgh-born Irish socialist and nationalist James Connolly, one of the leaders of the Easter Rising who was executed in 1916. MacLean believed that the break-up of the British Empire would significantly help the socialist cause and supported the idea of Scottish independence on these grounds. The party's activities largely ceased after MacLean's death. After being force-fed during his hunger strike in prison which affected his health, and after premature death from pneumonia, MacLean acquired martyr-like status. He was celebrated in poems by Sydney

⁷³ Peter Lynch, *SNP: The History of the Scottish National Party* (Cardiff: Welsh Academic Press, 2002) 33-34.

⁷⁴ Witt 2013.

⁷⁵ Witt 2013.

⁷⁶ See Erskine of Mar, extract from "The National Tongue and Ascendancy," reprinted in Margery McCulloch (ed.), *Modernism and Nationalism: Literature and Society in Scotland 1918-1939* (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2004) 294-296.

⁷⁷ The magazines and Erskine's own writing are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, in relation to Thomson's *Gairm*.

Goodsir Smith and Sorley MacLean and had a great influence on Christopher Murray Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid) in the initial stage of his career.⁷⁸

A representative of monarchist and Romantic tendencies in the nationalist movement would be Compton Mackenzie (1883-1972), a prolific writer of fiction, biographies, memoirs and historical books, admired by Scott Fitzgerald and Henry James. His most famous publications are the two comic novels, *Whisky Galore* (1947) and *The Monarch of the Glen* (1941). Although born in Durham, Mackenzie considered the Highlands his spiritual home and retained a deep interest in the Gaelic culture and language throughout his life. Mackenzie was also an ardent Jacobite and the third Governor-General of the Royal Stuart Society, a monarchist organisation founded in 1926.⁷⁹

One of the most controversial personalities involved in the NPS was certainly Christopher Murray Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid, 1892-1978), a modernist poet of European stature and the leading spirit of the so-called Scottish Renaissance in the 1920s. As his daughter-in law Deirdre Grieve put it, “I think he entertained almost every ideal it was possible to entertain at one point or another.”⁸⁰ Still as Grieve, he became a member of the Independent Labour Party at the age of sixteen, and started his career as a journalist, reporting on the riots of miners in South Wales for a socialist newspaper run by the already-mentioned Keir Hardie.⁸¹ MacDiarmid was keenly following developments in Ireland and the 1916 Rising, observing another Celtic nation trying to assert its independence from the British Empire, and was also interested in the 1917 Russian revolution.

In the 1920s, MacDiarmid flirted with fascism, and wrote two articles “At the Sign of the Thistle: Plea for Scottish Fascism” and “At the Sign of the Thistle: Programme for a Scottish Fascism”, published in *The Scottish Nation* in summer 1923.⁸² In letters from early 1940s which were discovered in 2010, he expressed his belief that the Nazi invasion of Britain would actually benefit Scotland, for the British and French bourgeoisie were in the

⁷⁸ MacDiarmid wrote a poem “John MacLean (1879-1923) in 1934 but it was only published in *Stony Limits and Other Poems* in 1956 (McKay, *The Lion and the Saltire* 44). Sorley MacLean mentions John MacLean in “Clann Ghill-Eain” (The Clan MacLean), “An Cuilithionn” (The Cuillin), and “Am Botal Briste” (The Broken Bottle), all included in the collected poems *Caoir Gheal Leumraich / The White Leaping Flame* (2011).

⁷⁹ McKay, *The Lion and the Saltire* 32.

⁸⁰ Quoted in: McKay, *The Lion and the Saltire* 28.

⁸¹ “Hugh MacDiarmid, 1892-1978” <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/hugh-macdiarmid>> 19 July 2017.

⁸² C. M. Grieve, “At the Sign of the Thistle: Plea for a Scottish Fascism,” in *The Scottish Nation*, No. 6, 5 June 1923, and “At the Sign of the Thistle: Programme for a Scottish Fascism,” in *The Scottish Nation*, No. 7, 19 June 1923. Scott Lyall, “Hugh MacDiarmid and the British State,” *The Bottle Imp* 18 (June 2015): 1.

long term far more dangerous than the German Nazism, although less violent, and that if the Axis powers were defeated, it would be very difficult to get rid of the victors.⁸³

This definitely is an extreme stance, but for example Sorley MacLean expressed the conviction that WWII was a battle of two different but similarly objectionable evils (although he, a convinced Socialist, actually fought in North Africa against Rommel), and there was a general unwillingness among Scottish Nationalists to fight in the British army, as they considered conscription a violation of freedom of the Scottish people, and, alienated from the Westminster government, approached the war as “someone else’s quarrel.”⁸⁴

Throughout the 1930s, MacDiarmid’s major political concern was communism. But while being a member of Communist Party of Great Britain, he was also one of the founding members of the NPS in 1928. The combination of these loyalties is evident from the fact that in 1931, in the same year which saw the publication of his *First Hymn to Lenin and Other Poems*, he lectured about “a Celtic Union between Scotland, Ireland and Wales, including the Isle of Man” at the NPS branch in London.⁸⁵ During the 1930s, however, he was, as McKay puts it, “expelled from the former for being a communist and from the latter for being a nationalist.”⁸⁶ He re-joined the party when others were leaving it in 1956, and stood as a communist party candidate in 1964.

In the 1920s, MacDiarmid was experimenting with a synthetic form of Scots called Lallans, which he gathered from local dialects and written documents across centuries and encouraged others to follow his example and revive Scots as a literary medium. Although there was also strong artistic motivation involved, it was certainly part of MacDiarmid’s cultural nationalist agenda. MacDiarmid’s cultural nationalism was remarkable in its inclusivity and willingness to incorporate many diverse aspects of Scotland into the national whole without striving to dissolve them. In 1940, he published the ground-breaking anthology *The Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry*, bringing together poetry in Latin, Scots, English, and Gaelic. His readiness to include Gaelic and the choice of Gaelic material, especially of

⁸³ McKay, *The Lion and the Saltire* 27. Letter from Whalsay, April 1941: “On balance I regard the Axis powers, tho’ more violently evil for the time being, less dangerous than our own government in the long run and indistinguishable in purpose.” Letter from June 1940: “Although the Germans are appalling enough, they cannot win, but the British and French bourgeoisie can and they are a far greater enemy. If the Germans win they could not hold their gain for long, but if the French and British win it will be infinitely more difficult to get rid of them.”

⁸⁴ Christopher Whyte, “Interviews with Ruaraidh MacThòmais,” *Glasgow: Baile Mòr nan Gàidheal / City of the Gaels*, ed. Sheila M. Kidd (Glasgow: Department of Celtic, University of Glasgow, 2007) 259-260.

⁸⁵ Lyall, “Hugh MacDiarmid and the British State” 1.

⁸⁶ McKay, *The Lion and the Saltire* 27.

Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, was influenced by his then close association with Sorley MacLean.

The party continued to grow gradually throughout the late 1930s and attract more voters, although it was weakened in 1942 by the departure of John MacCormick and his followers. The peak of this growth was the success of Robert McIntyre who won the Motherwell by-election in 1945 and thus he became the SNP's first MP. At this time, cultural nationalists were still influential in the SNP. RB Cunninghame Graham served as its first president until his death in 1936 and Neill Gunn served as Vice-Chair in 1942⁸⁷. However, their influence was gradually receding, as the party sought to adopt a more narrowly political nationalist agenda. Some of the artists who supported the nationalist cause in the 1920s, such as the novelist Eric Linklater, were disappointed to see the party turn away from their historically oriented views towards a modern political programme.⁸⁸

It is important to note that both NPS and later SNP were left-centre oriented at the time when Nazism was gaining support in Germany and when Oswald Mosley founded the British Union of Fascists in London in October 1932. In the 1920s and 1930s, Scottish Nationalists tended rather to the left, be it socialism in the case of John MacLean or communism in case of MacDiarmid. Right-wing groupings became more prominent only in the second half of the twentieth century, but the SNP was rather careful not to mix with them. The 1320 Club Symposium was expelled from SNP in March 1968 because it was allegedly controlled by right-wing militarists.⁸⁹ Other examples of minority right-wing groups include Scottish Legitimists and Wendy Wood's Patriots.

The new SNP, which after WWII evolved into a centrist, middle-class party, was rather suspicious of the tradition of cultural nationalism it had inherited from its predecessors.⁹⁰ Symbolical acts, such as the stealing of William Wallace's sword from Stirling performed by nationalists on 8 November 1936, were seen as hindrance in the SNP's attempts to make an impression on the electorate and obtain Home Rule. A petition demanding Home Rule for Scotland organised by the Scottish Covenant Association in 1949 attracted over two million signatories, but did not receive much attention from the major political parties.

⁸⁷ Pittock, *The Invention of Scotland* 148.

⁸⁸ Pittock, *The Invention of Scotland* 146.

⁸⁹ A major figure of the Club, Ronald MacDonald Douglas, was, as Pittock notes, "not averse to writing of 'The Idiot Race', Burns's term for the Hanoverians." Pittock, *The Invention of Scotland* 153, 157.

⁹⁰ Pittock, *The Invention of Scotland* 146. Plaid Cymru similarly transformed into a social democratic party after 1945, while its founders included such pronounced cultural nationalists and advocates of Welsh as Saunders Lewis.

After WWII, the British Empire, in whose creation and sustenance Scotland was so much involved, started to decompose, the major step being the independence of India in 1947. During the 1950s, the SNP continued to receive rather small electoral support, but started to grow more rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s. With the Empire no longer unbreakable and the threat of war receding, the idea of Britishness was becoming less convincing when there was no outside threat against which it could be mustered.⁹¹ Election results started to show Scottish people's discontent with their position in the UK. The Westminster government was perceived as failing, and the attempts to stop the growth of nationalism by addressing social and economic issues, by "the old policy of throwing money at Scottish problems" as Finlay has it, no longer worked.⁹² Moreover, the rapid decolonisation process in Africa in the 1960s heralded the end of the British Empire and its position as world superpower, so the claims on devolution nearer home were understandably getting more insistent too.

One of the SNP's first major achievements was the victory of Winnie Ewing in the by-election in Hamilton in 1967. In that year, the party had about 60,000 members.⁹³ While in 1970, the party gained only one seat (the Western Isles), four years later, eleven MPs for the SNP were returned to Westminster, making the general election an unprecedented success.⁹⁴ In 1970s, the independence cause was of course fuelled by the discovery of North Sea oil in 1974. In the General Election in October 1974, the SNP was the second party in Scotland and until 1978, everything seemed to indicate nationalism was getting into full swing.⁹⁵

As Ascherson puts it, the fast rise of the SNP in the 1970s persuaded the Labour British leadership that "constitutional change was necessary, if only to take the wind out of nationalist sails", and a quasi-federal system of devolution was invented which allowed Scotland and Wales elected assemblies and a certain degree of internal autonomy.⁹⁶ In 1978, the Scottish and Welsh law about regional parliaments was passed in the House of Commons on the condition that more than 40% of those registered to vote would support it in a referendum. As Finlay suggests, "without the resources to rectify the social and economic problems which were believed to be the fundamental cause of nationalist discontent, the

⁹¹ Ascherson, "When Was Britain?" 3.

⁹² Richard Finlay, "Changing Cultures: The History of Scotland since 1918," *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature Vol. 3. Modern Transformations: New Identities*, ed. Ian Brown (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) 5.

⁹³ Pittock, *The Invention of Scotland* 157.

⁹⁴ Ian MacDonald, "The Poetry of Derick Thomson," *Alba Litteraria: A History of Scottish Literature*, ed. M. Fazzini (Venice: Amos Edizioni, 2005) 653.

⁹⁵ Pittock, *The Invention of Scotland* 158.

⁹⁶ Ascherson, "When Was Britain?" 7.

creation of an assembly that would give greater power to the Scots, but stopped short of independence, was believed to be the most pragmatic solution available.”⁹⁷

On 26 January 1978, a Yes campaign for possible Scottish devolution commenced, but was hindered by the unwillingness of the SNP and the Labour to cooperate. The supporters of the Yes won tightly, but did not manage to overcome the 40% limit and the referendum failed. In the general election of 1979, a Conservative government was returned under Margaret Thatcher’s leadership and the SNP vote collapsed. As Pittock argues, the reason behind the collapse were the SNP’s inability to capitalise on the support it was able to generate, and on its focus on issue politics, such as oil and civil disobedience, and economics, rather than underlying greater causes, and the neglect of questions of cultural and national identity.⁹⁸

The next breakthrough for the SNP occurred in 1988 when Margo MacDonald won the by-election in Glasgow Govan. The next year, the Scottish Constitutional Convention, an umbrella organization connecting churches, local authorities and the trade unions, started to campaign for the Scottish Parliament, yet it took another nine years until their efforts were rewarded. After the Labour landslide in September 1997, a referendum on a Scottish parliament with tax-raising powers was held and the country voted in its favour.

Following the Scotland Act of 1998, the Scottish parliament was reconvened on 12 May 1999 and it moved into its own building at Holyrood in 2004. As Ascherson notes, Scottish nationalism still tends to be of “non-ethnic identity, based on the memory of political community rather than upon myths of ancient cultural unity or genetic homogeneity.”⁹⁹ However, there are also voices arguing for a more cultural agenda, as few, if any European nationalist parties, have been successful without cultural nationalist priorities.¹⁰⁰

While in 2007, the SNP only formed a minority government, in 2011, the party won a majority in the Scottish Parliament. In consequence of the success, the SNP leader Alex Salmond announced that a referendum on independence would be organised in five years’ time. The referendum, held on 18 September 2014, ended in a close victory of the Better Together campaign. However, the number of SNP members has quadrupled since the referendum, making the party the third biggest in the UK. Under the leadership of Salmond’s successor, Nicola Sturgeon, it enjoyed a landslide victory in May 2015, gaining 56 out of 59 constituencies. The EU referendum revealed a major division between England and Scotland and the Brexit negotiations drove the two countries still further apart. After the victory of

⁹⁷ Finlay, “Changing Cultures: The History of Scotland since 1918” 5.

⁹⁸ Pittock, *The Invention of Scotland* 158.

⁹⁹ Ascherson, “When Was Britain?” 6.

¹⁰⁰ Pittock, *The Invention of Scotland* 159.

Boris Johnson in the general election in December 2019 and the SNP landslide in Scotland, the party started to campaign for a second independence referendum in 2020

2.2 Derick Thomson: A Biography

In a comparative article on MacLean and Thomson, a piece which is both light-hearted and serious, Ronald Black provides a summary of Thomson's life in comparison with the fortunes of the older Raasay-born poet:

Thomson may have served for a time in the RAF, but he was a lifelong academic who lived in a bubble of undisturbed peace and tranquillity, penetrated only by the concerns that affected all of us as a community: the Cold War, the decline of Gaelic in its heartland, the flawed ideology of the Highlands and Islands Development Board, the rise of pop culture, the iron grip of religious extremism on Thomson's native island of Lewis, far-off foreign wars or famines, and the slow, agonising steps towards Scottish home rule and independence, of which he was a passionate, inspiring, and sometimes — dare I say it — courageously silly advocate. To judge by his poetry, other than the tragic death of one of his sons, few great personal challenges ever seem to have faced him.¹⁰¹

Derick Smith Thomson came from a family of Gaelic-speaking intellectuals from the Isle of Lewis, with numerous teachers and ministers in his pedigree.¹⁰² His father, James Thomson (Seumas MacThòmais, 1888-1971), was born and bred in Tonga near Stornoway. He studied at Aberdeen University and after the military service worked as the head of the Gaelic department at Nicolson Institute in Stornoway. In 1922, he became the headmaster of the Bayble primary school. James Thomson was a renowned poet with a deep interest in Gaelic education and an active member of An Comunn Gàidhealach.¹⁰³ He was the first poet ever to receive the Bardic Crown at the National Mòd in 1923 in Inverness. In 1953, a selection of his poetry was published in a volume entitled *Fasgnadh* (Winnowing).¹⁰⁴ He also edited a school anthology of Gaelic poetry, a collection of Lewis songs, collaborated on a play *The Spirit of*

¹⁰¹ Ronald Black, "Sorley MacLean, Derick Thomson, and the Women Most Dangerous to Men," *The Bottle Imp* 21 (July 2017): 1.

¹⁰² For help with gathering genealogical information concerning Derick Thomson's family, I am greatly indebted to Caoimhín Ó Donnaile, An Teanga, Skye.

¹⁰³ MacAulay, "Introduction," *Derick Thomson: The Far Road and Other Poems / Lines Review* 39 (December, 1971): 3.

¹⁰⁴ Derick Thomson and Finlay J. MacDonald also published some verse by James Thomson in *Gairm*, for example in *Gairm* 4 (Summer 1953), p. 17: "Tha 'm Fraoch fo Bhlàth" (*The Heather is Blooming) and "Cuimhne Mo Shamhraidh" (*A Memory of My Summer). The review of *Fasgnadh* by Iain A. MacDhòmhnail appeared in the same issue of *Gairm*, as part of the section "An Sgeilp Leabhraichean" (The Bookshelf), 183-185.

the Tartan with Arthur Geddes, and preached Gaelic sermons in the Church of Scotland where he was an Elder.¹⁰⁵

Christina “Tina” Smith (Tìneag Aonghais Alasdair, 1888–1968), Derick Thomson’s mother, was born in Keos, beside Loch Erisort in the Lochs. She had a great interest in traditional Gaelic poetry, especially William Ross and Duncan Ban Macintyre, and a large repertoire of Gaelic song. For one year, she studied Celtic at Glasgow University together with her sister Malcolmina, very shortly after women were admitted to the university for the first time. She became a schoolteacher and taught in the Leurbost primary school. James and Christina were married on 18 August 1916 at the Imperial Hotel in Aberdeen, when James was already in the army. Their first son, James, was born on 3 June 1917, while James Sr. was still stationed in France. After WWI, the family settled in Lewis. Derick Thomson was born on 5 August 1921 in Stornoway and grew up in the township of Upper Bayble in the Point district, where James worked as headmaster of the primary school.

Technically, Thomson’s first language was English, but Gaelic was often spoken in the house and he soon became fully bilingual:

I had English for my first language and became bilingual from the age of five or so, but there was a curious situation within the family. Father was quite a prominent Gaelic activist, a writer himself, a writer of prose and poetry and editor. My mother, on the other hand, was extremely interested in Gaelic poetry and song. She virtually sang all day about her work. So, as the years went on, I tended to speak Gaelic mainly with my mother and English mainly with my father, but the two of them switched between the two languages continually.¹⁰⁶

He elaborated on the same point in the autobiographical essay “A Man Reared in Lewis”:
“My father and mother habitually spoke in Gaelic to each other, but frequently enough spoke English to each other also, without any sense of strain. They had decided to make English my first language, though Gaelic had been my elder brother’s. I think this was a carefully worked-out policy, for we were in the midst of an almost totally Gaelic environment, and they reckoned Gaelic would come easily.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Derick Thomson, “A Man Reared in Lewis,” *As I Remember: Ten Scottish Authors Recall How Writing Began for Them*, ed. M. Lindsay (London: Robert Hale, 1979) 125.

¹⁰⁶ Derick Thomson, “Poets in Conversation,” *Taking You Home*, ed. Andrew Mitchell (Glendaruel: Argyll Publishing, 2006) 91. The constant switching between the two languages, unmotivated by deficiency in either language, has been a frequent feature of the fluent Gaelic speakers of Lewis.

¹⁰⁷ Thomson, “A Man Reared in Lewis” 124.

Thomson gained his primary education at Bayble Primary School and continued, like most of his compatriots who sought academic advancement, at the Nicolson Institute in Stornoway. His interest in the Scottish nationalism started during the years at the Nicolson, especially at the 1935 General Election when there was a Nationalist candidate, Sir Alexander MacEwen, in the Western Isles.¹⁰⁸ In autumn 1939, Thomson entered Aberdeen University where he enrolled for English Literature and Celtic. At the university, his nationalist stance developed further by reading pamphlets and Scottish literature and meeting prominent SNP activists such as Bruce Watson, David Murison, and Douglas Young, who was teaching at Aberdeen. Thomson's studies were interrupted by the Second World War. He partly shared the opinion, common among Scottish Nationalists at that time, that the war was "someone else's quarrel" and an "intrusion on the Scottish realities," and had no desire to volunteer.¹⁰⁹ He was nonetheless trained at camps in Bradford and Cranwell and served with the Royal Air Force from 1942 to 1945. He spent his off-time reading about Celtic studies, Scottish literature and politics, which "left little time for radar theory."¹¹⁰ He was stationed in Rodel in Harris and in Point in Lewis.¹¹¹

In 1945, Thomson returned to Aberdeen and promptly launched a student nationalist periodical entitled *Alba Mater*.¹¹² He then graduated in 1947 with First Class Honours and went on to study at the University of Cambridge, where he embarked on Section B of the Archaeology and Anthropology tripos: Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic and obtained a First-class degree.¹¹³ His book *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's Ossian*, which appeared in 1952, was substantially the content of the tripos thesis submitted at Cambridge.¹¹⁴ A similar point was made already by the great nineteenth-century folklore collector John Francis Campbell³ in the introduction to the fourth volume of his *Popular Tales of West Highlands*,¹¹⁵ but Thomson was the first scholar who undertook the task of identifying the particular

¹⁰⁸ Thomson, "A Man Reared in Lewis" 134.

¹⁰⁹ Thomson mentioned this in the interviews with Whyte (259-260). He also recalled how he listed English among his foreign languages and England among his foreign travels during an interview for officer training. "Some Recollections," *Spirits of the Age: Scottish Self Portraits*, ed. P. Henderson Scott (Edinburgh: The Saltire Society, 2005) 58.

¹¹⁰ Thomson, "A Man Reared in Lewis" 134.

¹¹¹ Thomson, "Some Recollections" 58.

¹¹² Thomson, "A Man Reared in Lewis" 134.

¹¹³ This study programme was, as Meek points out, established by the pioneering scholars Hector Munro Chadwick and his wife Norah Kershaw Chadwick, who wished to encourage bridge-building and interdisciplinary approaches to the Celtic and Germanic strands in early British cultural history. Meek, "Appreciation of Professor Derick S. Thomson: funeral oration, as delivered,"

<<http://meekwrite.blogspot.cz/2013/04/appreciation-of-professor-derick-s.html>>.

¹¹⁴ Thomson, "Preface," *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's Ossian* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1952; published for the University of Aberdeen) v.

¹¹⁵ John Francis Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, Vol. 4 (Middlesex: Wildwood House Ltd., 1984) 5-23.

passages in specific ballads MacPherson had drawn on and devoted a monograph to the subject.

After graduating, he was appointed Assistant in Celtic at the University of Edinburgh in 1948. He also worked as a collector of Gaelic folklore for what was to become the School of Scottish Studies and he travelled to a number of places to interview tradition bearers.¹¹⁶

His stay there proved rather short, however, as he was offered another job at the University of Glasgow in 1949 – a newly established lectureship in Welsh, which he accepted, and spent the first half of 1950 at the University College of North Wales, Bangor in order to improve his command of the language.¹¹⁷ At Bangor, he would naturally become acquainted with the efforts to promote the Welsh language. As Professor Peredur Lynch of Bangor University said, “Thomson would have been struck by the strength and vibrant nature of the Welsh at a community level in north-west Wales, especially in the large quarrying villages of Caernarvonshire... He would have encountered a strong cohort of native-speaking students in the Welsh Department, whose tuition would have been through the medium of Welsh.”¹¹⁸ The most substantial academic outcome of his interest in Welsh language and literature was a highly acclaimed edition of *Branwen Uerch Lyr* ((Branwen the Daughter of Llyr, 1961), the second of four branches of the Mabinogi, which he edited for the Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies.

In 1951, he approached Finlay MacDonald, then involved in the Gaelic department of the BBC, with the suggestion to establish a Gaelic quarterly. The result was *Gairm*, a seminal Gaelic magazine which lasted for fifty years.¹¹⁹ In 1958, the magazine was complemented by Gairm Publications which went on to produce a wide range of books, including literary works, dictionaries, textbooks and children’s literature, into the 1990s.

In 1952, the same year in which the first issue of *Gairm* appeared, he married Carol Galbraith (Carol Nic a’ Bhreatannaich).¹²⁰ In 1956, he was appointed Reader in Celtic and became the head of the Celtic department at the University of Aberdeen, where he spent seven

¹¹⁶ Thomson, “Some Recollections” 61.

¹¹⁷ Thomson, “Some Recollections” 60.

¹¹⁸ Marcus Williamson, “Derick Thomson: Poet and Champion of the Gaelic Language,” *The Independent*, 9 April 2012, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/derick-thomson-poet-and-champion-of-the-gaelic-language-7627275.html>> 16 September 2016.

¹¹⁹ Chapter 4 discusses *Gairm* in depth.

¹²⁰ Carol Nic a’ Bhreatannaich was born in Campbeltown in Argyllshire. She became involved in Gaelic music and joined a local choir when she was six years’ old. She graduated with an MA degree from the University of Glasgow and then gained a qualification for teaching in primary schools and for teaching maths in secondary schools at Jordanhill College in Glasgow. In 1951, she won a gold medal at the Mòd in Edinburgh. She continued to be active as a musician and dancer and also wrote poetry in Gaelic and mainly in Scots.

“Carol Nic a’ Bhreatannaich,” BBC Alba *Bliadhna nan Òran*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/alba/oran/people/carol_nic_a__bhreatannaich/> 19 November 2014.

years. After the death of Angus Matheson in 1963, he became Chair of Celtic at the University of Glasgow and remained in the position for nearly thirty years, until his retirement in 1991. As Meek points out, “his academic hallmark lay pre-eminently in placing Gaelic literature, rather than the minutiae of the language itself, at the centre of his curriculum. The rebalanced programme for Celtic and Gaelic studies was particularly evident at Glasgow where, as Professor, he built a powerful and vibrant department which was at its peak in the 1960s and 1970s, and contributed immensely to the formation of Gaelic teachers, broadcasters, writers and academics.”¹²¹ However, some aspects of his management of the department may seem rather strange from retrospect and incongruous with Thomson’s belief, such as the fact that classes were taught through the medium of English only.

Thomson was also crucially involved in the foundation of the Gaelic Book Council in 1968, a body inspired by a similar organisation in Wales.¹²² Thomson served as Chairman of the Council until his retirement in 1991, while Ian MacDonald served as its director. In addition to that, Thomson also published a number of books from the Celtic Department of Aberdeen and later of Glasgow, and founded his own imprint entitled Clò Chailleann.

His *Introduction to Gaelic Poetry* (1974) and *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland* (1983, edited) played a crucial part in making Gaelic literature and culture accessible to the English-speaking public and remain the only publications of their kind to this day. From 1961 to 1976, he edited *Scottish Gaelic Studies*. He also served as President of the Scottish Gaelic Text Society (Comunn Litreachas Gàidhlig na h-Alba) and edited some of its volumes, such as *The MacDiarmid MS Anthology* (1992) and selected poems of Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair (1996).¹²³ Nonetheless, even Thomson did not succeed at everything he tried his hand at, and the project of the historical dictionary of Scottish Gaelic founded at the University of Glasgow in 1966 stands out as a rather unique failure in the gallery of his achievements.

As Thomson pointed out in an autobiographical essay, politics began to play a more important role in his life in the 1960s, and he was active especially in the Pollokshields area.¹²⁴ He mentions that the influential SNP politicians Winnie Ewing and Billy Wolfe asked him to stand for the party, but Thomson refused, believing he would make a better

¹²¹ Donald Meek, “Derick Thomson: A Colossus of Twentieth-Century Scotland,” *West Highland Free Press* 2086 (Friday 20 April 2012): 18.

¹²² Thomson, “Some Recollections” 62.

¹²³ The society was founded in April 1934 at the instigation of William Watson (then Professor of Celtic at the University of Edinburgh) and Fred T. Macleod in order to provide proper editions of Gaelic poetry. It published some definitive editions of Gaelic poetry with translations and commentaries, reprinted rare editions, and textbook versions of some of the seminal works. Thomson, “Societies, learned,” *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland* (Glasgow: Gairm, 1994) 270.

¹²⁴ Thomson, “Some Recollections” 62.

contribution to Scotland as an academic.¹²⁵ When the SNP published its Gaelic Policy in 1978, Thomson was one of the main instigators and authors and the topic received substantial coverage in *Gairm*. Thomson's immense commitment to the nationalist cause is evident from the following quote from Meek's funerary speech:

One of the "golden moments" with Derick, which I can remember vividly and with enormous pleasure, was when I went to lunch with him in the Staff Club on the day that Margo MacDonald¹²⁶ won the Govan By-election. He was elated, full of joy, as if the future of Scotland was assured – and for him it was assured. He was an optimist from beginning to end, and, although some of us, like myself, simply could not match his boundless energy and his long-haul capability, he did instil into us a very real commitment to what we regarded as important – and, of course, what he regarded as important. With Scottish Nationalists triumphantly in power in twenty-first century Scotland, I often think of Derick, and the pleasure he must have derived from seeing such a remarkable change. Not that he would have regarded it as "remarkable". He saw it coming, of course. He told me thirty years ago.¹²⁷

Apart from active personal involvement in nationalist politics and addressing political issues in his poetry, Thomson's two most prominent research interests also had a profound political dimension. The first one – James Macpherson, Ossianic poetry, and the related controversies – has already been mentioned in passing. After publishing *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's Ossian*, Thomson continued to publish both academic essays and popularizing articles on the subject throughout his life.¹²⁸ In the academic works, Thomson delves, with great erudition and unsparing judgement, into the details of Macpherson's work and the various aspects of the ensuing controversy, neither extolling the Ruthven native nor blackening him. In works aimed at the general public, such as the pamphlet *Why Gaelic Matters* or the publication for older children *Ainmeil an Eachdraidh* (The Famous People of

¹²⁵ Thomson, "Some Recollections" 62.

¹²⁶ Margo MacDonald (1943-2014) was a Scottish politician, teacher, and broadcaster. She was elected MP for the Scottish National Party for Glasgow Govan in 1973. She served as Deputy Leader of the SNP from 1974 to 1979 and as an Independent Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) for Lothian from 1999 until 2014.

¹²⁷ Meek, "Appreciation of Professor Derick S. Thomson,"

<<http://meekwrite.blogspot.cz/2013/04/appreciation-of-professor-derick-s.html>>.

¹²⁸ Thomson published a number of contributions to the debate about Ossian: the book-length study *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's Ossian*, and the articles "Bogus Gaelic Literature c. 1750 – c. 1820," *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Glasgow* (Vol. 5. 1958); "Ossian, MacPherson, and the Gaelic World of the Eighteenth Century," *Aberdeen University Review* (Vol. XL 1963); "Macpherson's Ossian: Ballads to Epics," *The Heroic Process* (Dun Laoghaire, 1987); "Macpherson's Ossian: Ballad Origins and Epic Ambitions," *Religion, Myth, and Folklore in the World's Epics*, ed. Lauri Honko (1990); "James Macpherson: The Gaelic Dimension," *From Gaelic to Romantic: Ossianic Translations*, ed. F. Stafford and H. Gaskill (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998). He discussed the reception of Ossian in Japan in "Oisean san Iapan," *Gairm* 76 (1971) and contributed the entry "Ossian" to *Cassell's Encyclopaedia of World Literature*, Vol. 1 (1972) and the entry "Macpherson and Ossian" to *A Companion to Scottish Culture*, ed. David Daiches (1981, London).

History, 1997) which he edited and published at Gairm, he stresses the international cultural impact of the Ossian phenomenon, its huge importance for the Romantic movement, and its role in the history of Gaelic Scotland, especially in terms of folklore collecting and appreciation of oral tradition.

The other life-long research interest of Thomson's was the work of Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair (Alexander MacDonald, ca. 1695-1770), one of the most prominent politically committed Gaelic poets of the eighteenth century whose life was intertwined with Jacobitism. Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair was also the author of the first printed book to be published in any Celtic language. A presumed native of the district of Moidart, Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair was an intellectual, studied at some time at Glasgow University, knew Latin, and worked as a schoolmaster of Ardnamurchan. He also produced the effectively first Gaelic-English dictionary while he worked as a teacher for the Society in Scotland for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK). The 200-page volume, aimed at school pupils, appeared in 1741. He joined the Jacobites and served as a military officer and Gaelic tutor to Prince Charles Edward Stuart. In a number of poems, he expressed fierce loyalty to the Young Pretender's cause, complemented by equally passionate hatred of their enemies. In Whyte's words, Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair can be seen a representative of nationalism in earlier Gaelic tradition, in the sense of "lively interest in the military conflicts which condition the exercise of political power within and on the confines of a community defined by its use of the Gaelic vernacular."¹²⁹

Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair is of special importance not only as the author of many a virulent politically charged poem and song, but also as a poet especially close to Thomson's heart and a subject of his research. Thomson published a study entitled *Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair: His Political Poetry* (1989),¹³⁰ edited a volume of selected poems (1996) and also urged there should be a full-length study of his works.¹³¹ As he put it in an interview,

I'm very strongly attracted to his vivid use of language and, I must say, to his unconventional attitudes, his rather fearless expression of his own views, even at times when they can hardly be popular, you know quite well that they were not at all that popular. And I also I think at various times have been attracted to his

¹²⁹ Christopher Whyte, "George Campbell Hay: Nationalism with a Difference" 117.

¹³⁰ The same treatise also appeared in *The Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* LVI (1988-1990): 185-213.

¹³¹ "For example, there is a fascinating piece of work to be done on the techniques of political verse before 1750, and I would like to see a full-length literary study of Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair." Thomson, "Reflections after Writing *An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry*," *Lines Review* 49 (June, 1974): 17.

political standpoint in a very general sense, looking on him as a Gaelic nationalist, as a very strong defender of Gaelic values, of Gaelic independence. He often has a strength of Gaelic, an independent strength that allows him, for example, to use English words freely without being self-conscious. You can go to another extreme with Gaelic purity, which to my mind may exhibit an insecurity rather than a security.¹³²

This is an important indication of Thomson's approach to linguistic purity. In the same interview, he also commented on the eighteenth-century poet's nationalism in relation to his own ideas:

Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's nationalism spilled over a little bit. It may have tended a little towards a wider Scottish nationalism, but it would be much more characteristic at the time to have a Gaelic, you might say a narrow Gaelic stance and, taking the thing to a further logical conclusion, I suppose that would sometimes narrow itself down to a very provincial nationalism, an island nationalism, a clan nationalism and so on. One of the things that perhaps attracted me, has often attracted me, to Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair was that he clearly transcended the narrower aspects of that kind of nationalism.¹³³

It may be argued that Thomson here observes in Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, and perhaps to a certain extent also projects onto him, his own stance: a pronounced loyalty to Gaelic Scotland combined with a broader outlook, and a strong vision:

There are good reasons for regarding Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair as a symbol of resurgence and renaissance in eighteenth-century Gaelic Scotland, in a fashion similar to the regard for Hugh MacDiarmid in our own century. This is not to say that the symbol will be perfect and flawless, but rather that there is some kind of bigness, heroism, inspiration, vision attached to the man, though he is at the same time a vulnerable human being. It is likely that historical circumstances 'create' such figures to an important extent. In any case, they become landmarks in cultural history.¹³⁴

Another shared point between the two poets was their effort to defend and develop the Gaelic language. In 1751, Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair published the volume entitled *Aiseirigh na Seann Chànain Albannach* (Resurrection of the Ancient Scottish Language) which included the poem "Moladh an Ùghdair don t-Seann Chànain Ghàidhlig" (The Author's Praise of the Old Gaelic Language), which defiantly celebrates the language while the Highland culture and way of life were suffering from post-Culloden repercussions. Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair

¹³² Whyte, "Interviews with Ruairidh MacThòmais" 286.

¹³³ Whyte, "Interviews with Ruairidh MacThòmais" 286.

¹³⁴ Thomson, *Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair: His Political Poetry* (Inverness: Bookmag, 1989) 1.

appeals to Enlightenment values and expresses his surprise that in an age which is characterised by freedom of thought and love of knowledge and moderation this nation and its language could be so violently persecuted. He appeals, however, not for another uprising, but for a revival and a deeper study of the threatened Gaelic culture.¹³⁵ In Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's poetry, one may see what Whyte defines as "the potential of the language and the feasibility of its continued use given the political and national circumstances," according to which co-ordinates "much subsequent Gaelic poetry could be plotted."¹³⁶

Thomson's first poetry collection, *An Dealbh Briste* (The Broken Picture), appeared in 1951, published by Serif Books in Edinburgh with a support from the Catherine McCaig Trust. The whole volume was in Gaelic, with an English version of the dedication and English translations of several poems (some of them in prose) at the end of the book. The following three collections – *Eadar Samhradh is Foghar* (Between Summer and Autumn, 1967), *An Rathad Cian* (The Far Road, 1970), and *Saorsa agus an Iolair* (Freedom and the Eagle, 1977) – were all published by Gairm Publications. *Eadar Samhradh is Foghar* kept the same design as *An Dealbh Briste* – translations of several poems following after the complete collection in Gaelic, but the next two did not include any English translations at all.

The subsequent volume, *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* (Plundering the Harp), was published by Macdonald in 1982. It brought together all Thomson's previous four collections of poems (with several omissions)¹³⁷ and some uncollected poems, including such important works as the sequence "Àirc a' Choimhcheangail" (The Ark of the Covenant). According to the publisher's wish, most of the poems have facing English translations, apart from several pieces which Thomson himself deemed unsuitable for translation. Since then, all the collections have been completely bilingual, reflecting Thomson's observation that "public for poetry by Gaelic poets is no longer co-extensive with the Gaelic-speaking population."¹³⁸ *Smeur an Dòchais / Bramble of Hope* was published by Canongate in 1991, *Meall Garbh / The Rugged Mountain* by Gairm in 1995, and the Stornoway-based Gaelic publishing house

¹³⁵ Martin Procházka, "Projekce keltské identity – osvícenství, romantismus, modernismus," *Identity: konstrukce, subverze a absence*, ed. Petr Bílek, Martin Procházka, and Jan Wiendl (Prague: Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 2015) 16.

¹³⁶ Christopher Whyte, "George Campbell Hay: Nationalism with a Difference" 117.

¹³⁷ "This book is much closer to being Collected Poems than it is to Selected Poems. There are various omissions, about twenty in all, from previously published collections. Some of the poems omitted seemed to slight to perpetuate, but I have left out a number of poems from my most recent collection, *Saorsa agus an Iolair* (Freedom and the Eagle), which may not fall into that category, and two translations from Solzhenitsyn." Thomson, "Preface," *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* (Edinburgh: Macdonald, 1982) xiii.

¹³⁸ Thomson, "Preface," *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* xiii.

Acair prepared a richly illustrated, elegant edition of Thomson's last collection entitled *Sùil air Fàire/ Surveying the Horizon* in 2007.

During his lifetime, Thomson received numerous awards: the Ossian Prize¹³⁹ in 1974 and the Oliver Brown Award in 1984. He held honorary degrees from the University of Wales (1987), from Aberdeen University (1994), and from the University of Glasgow (2007). He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in Edinburgh in 1977 and of the British Academy in 1992. He died on 21 March 2012 in Glasgow, at the age of ninety.

2.3 Politics in the Poetry of Thomson's Contemporaries

Five twentieth-century Gaelic poets who played a vital role in creating modern Gaelic verse – Sorley MacLean, George Campbell Hay, Derick Thomson, Iain Crichton Smith, and Donald MacAulay – are known as the Famous Five. While this was no official group or movement, the poets are associated by age (born before WWII) and by inclusion in Donald MacAulay's influential bilingual anthology *Nua-bhàrdachd Ghàidhlig / Modern Gaelic Poetry* from 1976. Three of these writers in particular exhibited a keen interest in politics which found various expressions in their poetry: MacLean, Campbell Hay, and Thomson.

Sorley MacLean (1911-1996), still the most prominent modern literary voice of the Gàidhealtachd in Scotland and beyond, famously mentioned that he gave up Calvinism and became a socialist at the age of twelve.¹⁴⁰ This early kindling of political radicalism may be ascribed to his native environment, for in Raasay, the memory of the clearances was still very much alive and their material traces, including the ruined townships and the distribution of land, were amply visible on the island. MacLean's maternal ancestors lived in Braes and his grandfather's brother took part in the Battle of the Braes,¹⁴¹ which soon assumed legendary status in the Highland radical tradition.

When the Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936, MacLean considered enlisting on the Republican side. Although he in the end did not go to Spain, the event catalysed a number of

¹³⁹ The Ossian Prize was founded in 1974 by F.S.V. Foundation in Hamburg for people who did outstanding work to preserve their own language and culture in the context of minority cultures. Derick Thomson was the first recipient of the award.

¹⁴⁰ MacLean, "My Relationship with the Muse," *Ris a' Bhruthaich* 10; "Poetry, Passion and Political Consciousness" [an interview with Sorley MacLean, also featuring John MacInnes, Hamish Henderson, Donald MacAulay and Iain Crichton Smith] *Scottish International* 10 (May, 1970): 14.

¹⁴¹ The Battle of the Braes (Blàr a' Chumhaing) in 1882 was an upsurge of the crofters' protest against increased rents and loss of grazing rights. The violent conflict, although more of a skirmish than a battle, was one of the first significant acts of resistance on the part of the crofters and it gained a significant symbolical status. The event is commemorated in a song by Mary MacPherson ("Òran Beinn Li" [The Song of Ben Lee]) and referred to in several poems by MacLean.

his meditations on political engagement. According to John MacInnes, MacLean's "concern with the Spanish Civil War as a paradigm of capitalist exploitation vindicated by religious interest, has its earliest roots in the events of the Highlands clearances. [...] He brings the whole of history into a socialist perspective in his political writing, but it is the Scottish, and particularly the Gaelic, historical experience that gives the poetry its poignant intensity."¹⁴² As MacLean explained, the Spanish civil war seemed to him very similar to the evictions in the Highlands: "Franco and his landowners and big capitalists and the Catholic church looked to me awful like the landlords of the Clearances and Church of Scotland at that time."¹⁴³

As Whyte notes, MacLean's "fascination with and passionate sympathies for the international socialist movement made him a communist sympathiser", but he shared his views mostly with a circle of friends.¹⁴⁴ Political issues in his poetry take mainly the shape of addressing the social grievances of Gaelic Scotland, and connecting these with the events in Europe and the world, and frequent references to people, places, and historical events which acquire symbolical meanings and become politically charged. Although MacLean was concerned with the survival of Gaelic and worked to improve its situation especially as far as teaching of the language in schools was concerned, he did not connect the language revival with nationalist aims.

One of MacLean's most overtly political poems and one which offers a good example of his method, is "An Cuilithionn" (The Cuillin), a long modernist poem entitled after the eponymous majestic mountain range on Skye. The poem establishes an opposition between a bog standing for capitalism, greed and oppression, and the heroic mountain symbolising liberation and new hope for humankind. It abounds in images of two contradictory forces engaged in a fateful conflict: the morass versus the mountain; capitalism versus communism; the exploiting bourgeoisie versus the exploited common people; Lenin, Marx and John MacLean versus the perpetrators of the clearances; the oppressing England, France and Germany versus the oppressed Scotland and Poland. It exhibits some of MacLean's typical strategies: the dialectical way of thinking; listing of names, places, and events; broad sweeps connecting the local and the international, the specific and the abstract; and concern with social injustice. More than most of his other poems, "An Cuilithionn" also reflects his interest

¹⁴² John MacInnes, "Verse, political," *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland* 298.

¹⁴³ MacLean, "Poetry, Passion and Political Consciousness" 11.

¹⁴⁴ Whyte, "Cultural Catalysts: Sorley MacLean and George Campbell Hay," *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature, Vol. 3. Modern Transformations: New Identities*, ed. Ian Brown (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) 154.

in Marxism which he abandoned in disgust at the conduct of the Red Army during the Warsaw Uprising.

Two other well-known poems which express MacLean's socialist standpoint are "Ban-Ghàidheal" (Highland Woman), a scathing attack on the Church which threatens poor hard-working people exploited by the landlords with eternal damnation, and the same mixture of social concern and criticism of religion shapes "Calbharraigh" (Calvary) where "life rots as it grows" in poor dwellings in Glasgow and Edinburgh and a diseased infant wastes away and dies in a shocking contrast to the Nativity. Some poems from the later phase of MacLean's career, such as "Palach" and "Sgreapadal", reveal concern with European and global politics, especially with the nuclear threat, interest in heroism, and mix local and global injustices.¹⁴⁵

In Whyte's opinion, "profound indignation at the suffering inflicted on the mass of ordinary men and women by incompetent and corrupt governors"¹⁴⁶ is one powerful element shared by MacLean and George Campbell Hay (1915-1984). Campbell Hay occupies a special position in modern Scottish poetry, for he wrote in all the three languages of Scotland: Scots, English, and Gaelic. Hay was deeply interested in nationalist topics and had regular contacts with nationalist activists,¹⁴⁷ including correspondence with Douglas Young. Similarly to the famous classicist and promoter of Scots, Hay opposed conscription during WWII for nationalist reasons and spent the period between October 1940 and May 1941 hiding in Argyll.

Like Thomson, Hay remained faithful to the idea of Scottish self-determination throughout his life, and also saw his writing as a form of activism in the service of the Gaelic language. In the 1960s he often contributed to the magazine *Catalyst* and during the campaign for the 1979 devolution referendum, he served as unofficial Gaelic bard to the monthly political newspaper *The Scots Independent* where most of his nationalist poems appeared.¹⁴⁸ Hay was deeply interested in old Gaelic poetry and the traditional metres with which he experimented in his own work, and most of his Gaelic political verse, as Byrne points out,

¹⁴⁵ "Palach" also marks MacLean's distancing from his support of the Red Army in the 1930s. It refers to the self-sacrifice of the Czech student who immolated himself in protest against the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, and connects his act and the evil to which it responded with the Nazi crimes of the past, with the history of France and Russia, and the nuclear threat.

¹⁴⁶ Whyte, "Cultural Catalysts" 153.

¹⁴⁷ Whyte, "Cultural Catalysts" 154.

¹⁴⁸ Byrne, "'Out of the Midst of Life': Recurrent Themes in Hay's Poetry," *Collected Poems and Songs of George Campbell Hay / Deòrsa Mac Iain Dheòrsa*, ed. Michel Byrne (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003) 527.

draws on the “tradition of bardic poetry as a social function to the community (whether township, clan or nation, whether actual or notional).”¹⁴⁹

Some of Hay’s poems illustrate the notion of political verse in which the commitment gets the upper hand over artistic concerns: as Byrne observes, they seem to have been “written to arouse feeling and promote action, rather than to stimulate thought or explore the issues of being human.”¹⁵⁰ Hay himself actually commented on this problem in a letter to Young: “I have done the most awful things for my country’s sake, even to turning out a goodly amount of doggerel.”¹⁵¹ In another letter to Young, the poet deliberated on whether part of his writing was or was not poetry, concluding that some of pieces, although correct in terms of feeling and conviction, did not qualify as poetry– the political content stripped them of the rank in the author’s opinion.¹⁵²

For this reason, some poems were left out of his collections, implying that political poetry was meant to be quickly consumed in magazines, to stir up patriotic feelings and comment on contemporary issues and then be forgotten, rather than preserved as “art”. For example, the poem “Duilich an t-Slighe” (Difficult the Way) was originally a cry to fellow anti-conscriptionists. However, when Hay was captured and joined the army, he added some verses to it, providing a personal dimension to the previously propagandist piece, and in the end he actually singled it out as “being poetry.”¹⁵³ Could it be that it is the personal perspective, the acknowledgement of failure and fallibility, which distinguishes propagandist writing from poetry? It seemed to be the decisive difference for Hay.

While during the 1940s, as John MacInnes notes, Hay’s work expressed a buoyant nationalism,¹⁵⁴ during the years it developed from “hurt racial pride” to a more philosophical stance where nationalism becomes “a positive assertion of difference and of communal creation.”¹⁵⁵ In Byrne’s view, Hay’s best political poems are not political in “any didactic sense” and concern themselves with “individual and communal attitudes to life, and with the role of the poet in society.”¹⁵⁶

The well-known poem “Ceithir Gaothan na h-Albann” (Four Winds of Scotland) identifies Scotland first with natural phenomena, such as gentle breeze, ocean storm, and all the seasons of the year, then with abstract qualities, such as angry pride, courage, and mild

¹⁴⁹ Byrne, “‘Out of the Midst of Life’: Recurrent Themes in Hay’s Poetry” 527.

¹⁵⁰ Byrne, “‘Out of the Midst of Life’: Recurrent Themes in Hay’s Poetry” 527.

¹⁵¹ Quoted in: Byrne, “‘Out of the Midst of Life’: Recurrent Themes in Hay’s Poetry” 527.

¹⁵² Quoted in: Byrne, “‘Out of the Midst of Life’: Recurrent Themes in Hay’s Poetry” 528.

¹⁵³ Byrne, “‘Out of the Midst of Life’: Recurrent Themes in Hay’s Poetry” 528.

¹⁵⁴ MacInnes, “Verse, political,” *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland*, 298.

¹⁵⁵ Byrne, “‘Out of the Midst of Life’: Recurrent Themes in Hay’s Poetry” 528.

¹⁵⁶ Byrne, “‘Out of the Midst of Life’: Recurrent Themes in Hay’s Poetry” 528.

pleasantness, and then with the speaker's own person and bodily parts, including his breath, his joints, and his soul. Importantly, this is a vision of Scotland "Highland and Lowland" which means "laughter, warmth, and life" for the speaker. Whyte sums up Hay's later discourse in the following manner: "His plea for autonomous cultural activity in a self-defining nation has deeper, existential roots, and offers extremely fruitful material for observation and meditation by all those whose responsibility it must be to realise such a vision, in Scotland and elsewhere in the world."¹⁵⁷

MacLean, Hay, and Thomson all drew on earlier traditions of Gaelic political poetry in their works. In contrast with MacLean, Thomson's political poetry, as the following chapter will show, is much more focused on Scotland itself and avoids the bold leaps from the local to the global and the sweeping connections between historical personalities, events, and periods. Thomson is more particular and focused on detail – even in political poems, he often starts with a specific image or situation, which is later developed and the political meaning is suggested. Although similarities between Hay's activist verse and Thomson's early political poems will be pointed out, in the later phases, Thomson's writing seems to be more balanced in terms of engagement and literary merit, his poems rarely urge the readers to a particular course of action, and their playfulness and in some cases deliberate obscurity prevent a straightforward propagandist reading.

The following chapter seeks to reveal Thomson as a careful craftsman who prefers a more muted, intimate, informal tone than his two great contemporaries, and as an activist whose engagement with Scottish independence and revival of Gaelic was steadfast and consistent, and inspired poetry worth reading both for its literary merit and for the ways it reflects the author's thought and Scottish history in the second half of the twentieth century.

¹⁵⁷ Whyte, "George Campbell Hay: Nationalism with a Difference" 133-134.

3. Reading for Politics in Thomson's Poetry

When one approaches Derick Thomson's poetry with politics in mind, possibilities of political reading start to surface in a number of poems where one would not necessarily see them. His large oeuvre includes poems which invite both narrowly political interpretations (comments on the legitimacy of the Scottish claim to an independent national state) and broad ones (discussions of the power relations in language and religion); some of them are implicitly political while many explicitly seek to argue a political point. In the light of the present situation in Scotland with the failed independence referendum in 2014, the subsequent landslide of the SNP in the parliamentary election in May 2015, and the likely announcement of a second independence referendum in response to the prolonged agony of Brexit negotiations, some of Thomson's poems become more political or the possibility of a different political reading emerges.

The following chapter discusses Thomson's poems which may be read politically. It is organized according to the eight collections which came out during Thomson's lifetime. The volume of his collected poems, *Creachadh na Clàrsaich*, is treated as a separate collection, for it contains, apart from almost complete reprints of his first four books of verse, also the section "Dàin às ùr" (The Latest Poems), the most recent poetry some of which had been previously published in magazines, but their only appearance in book-form was in the 1982 volume.

The chronological organisation has been chosen for several reasons and with regard to the specific aspects of Thomson's career. With a poet who was mostly productive in one period of their life, such as MacLean, it would be more practical to adopt a thematic organisation. However, since Thomson published quite evenly throughout his life, from his thirties to his late eighties, his books can be read, as Whyte suggests, "as a single creation, almost a novel, with a plot-like excitement at discovering what became of its initial premises," offering us "the privilege of insight into how a single mind responded to half a century of Scottish history."¹⁵⁸ Moreover, since the two major topics, i.e. the situation of Gaelic language and culture and the possibilities of their revival, and the struggle for Scottish independence, are present in all the collections, a thematic organisation would probably result in two great bulk sections.

¹⁵⁸ Whyte, "Review of *Smeur an Dòchais*", *Lines Review* 127 (December, 1993): 49.

Although the chronological arrangement has also certain limitations, it allows us to follow the development of these topics throughout the poet's career and also to trace links between the collections, the events of the time, and Thomson's other activities, such as links between the collections and the preoccupations he voiced in the *Gairm* editorials. A general overview, taking into account findings from the following detailed discussion of individual poems and collections, is attempted in the final chapter. However, it is important to note that without access to Thomson's papers and a minute research of his publications in magazines, it should not be taken for granted that the poems included in a certain collection were all written around the same time – the chronological discussion thus relies on the poet's decision to publish them at a particular point and place them in a particular context.

3.1 *An Dealbh Briste* (1951)¹⁵⁹

An Dealbh Briste (The Broken Picture), Thomson's first published book of verse, witnesses the poet looking for his own distinct voice. Unlike some of the later collections, it is not organized thematically and it includes poems on a great variety of themes which also exhibit a great diversity of register and form: from poems imitating nineteenth-century songs to pieces in carefully wrought free verse which later became one of the hallmarks of Thomson's mature style. The collection reveals a strong influence from Sorley MacLean, especially in the love poems, such as "A' Sniomh Cainnte" (Weaving Words and Weaving Dreams), "Mur B' e 'n Saoghal is M' Eagal" (Were It Not for the World and My Fear), and "'N e So an Dàn Deireannach Dhut-sa?" (Is This the Last Poem for You?), and Thomson acknowledges this influence and his regard for MacLean in the preface to the 1951 edition.¹⁶⁰

In terms of politics, the collection contains several poems where Thomson's approach to political issues is most straightforward and comes closest to canvassing. Both John MacInnes and Michel Byrne have pointed out the similarities with George Campbell Hay in terms of the open expression of nationalist feeling and rather didactic register.¹⁶¹ According to Whyte, it is

¹⁵⁹ In *Creachadh na Clàrsaich*, three poems that were included in the 1951 edition are missing: "Chreid Mi 'n Uiridh" (*Last Year I Believed), "Beinn a' Bhuna" (place name, a hill between Acha Mòr and Stornoway, near Loch a' Bhuna), and "Gealach is Cuan is Gaothan" (*Moon and Ocean and Winds).

¹⁶⁰ "Is bu mhath leam a radh an so gun d'fhuair mi misneachd gu math tràth air an rathad an sgrìobhaidhean a' bhàird as ainmeile a tha againn an diugh anns a' Ghàidhlig – Somhairle Mac Gill-eathain." (I wish to acknowledge the encouragement I received fairly early from the writings of Sorley MacLean, the most notable poet writing in Gaelic to-day.) "Roimh-radh / Preface," *An Dealbh Briste* (Edinburgh: Serif Books, 1951) page not numbered.

¹⁶¹ MacInnes, "Verse, political," *The Companion To Gaelic Scotland* 298. Byrne, "Monsters and Goddesses: Culture Re-energised in the Poetry of Ruairidh MacThòmais and Aonghas MacNeacail," *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, ed. Ian Brown (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) 177.

“the comparative stagnation” of the use of Gaelic since the eighteenth century that has “prompted poets to seek new ways of deploying a basically immobile medium. The fondness for allegorical thinking evident in Campbell Hay’s work and in the younger Thomson is not just a matter of personal predisposition but may be primarily a response to a linguistic predicament.”¹⁶²

One example of this style is the poem “Faoisgneadh” (Unhusking*).¹⁶³ As Thomson noted, he wrote it in spring and summer of 1943 in Cranwell, Lincolnshire, where he was taking part in military training, and the poem was first published in the magazine *An Gaidheal* (1943:12). He described it as a poem with Scottish Nationalist aspirations, which begins and ends with apostrophes to the Killin Hills, and refers to the imprisonment of Douglas Young for his refusal to submit to conscription.¹⁶⁴

The mountains of Killin, an area in Perthshire Thomson often visited in his youth, climbed the local peaks with his friends, are “dorch le dùr-aogas a’ bhròin / a laigh air mo thìr” (dark with the intractable countenance of sorrow / that has covered my land).¹⁶⁵ The poem continues as an entreaty to the heart of Scotland which is to be found not in the people, but in the landscape – it is a natural, age-old phenomenon, and Thomson in this instance comes close to primordial nationalism. Scotland is here, as on numerous other occasions, identified with its landscape, the mountains and the moors. The countenance of the landscape has changed with the passing of time and with “harsh weather”, i.e. historical events which were unfavourable to the nation. This landscape is at the same time personified – it can be addressed and the speaker implores it to wake up and adorn itself, to put on its “breacan na fala” (tartan plaid of blood). The string of adjectives – “dearg-dhathte, glùin-rùisgte, treun-chalpach” (red-coloured, bare-kneed, strong-calfed)¹⁶⁶ – echoes the incitements of old Gaelic poetry. The skirl of the Highland bagpipes is heard over the mountain tops as “mar ghlan ghaoth a’ Mhàirt, / mar ghàirich na tuinne ’s i bualadh / air molan na tràghad” (the clear wind of March, the laughter and beating of the wave / on the shingle of the beach*¹⁶⁷).

Although the mountains are sorrowful and dark, the vision brightens as the speaker inhales “àile na saorsa” (the air of freedom*) and he invokes “teò-chridh na h-Alban” (the warm heart of Scotland*) to break its icy husk so that it could absorb the sun, the political and

¹⁶² Whyte, “Derick Thomson: The Recent Poetry,” *Aiste* 1 (2007) 25.

¹⁶³ Ian MacDonald translates the title as “Unhusking” or “Bursting from the Pod” (646). Other meanings relevant to the poem include: “bursting”, “unpodding”, and “dawning.”

¹⁶⁴ Thomson, “A Man Reared in Lewis” 139.

¹⁶⁵ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 11. The translation is by Ian MacDonald, “The Poetry of Derick Thomson” 647.

¹⁶⁶ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 12.

¹⁶⁷ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 11. The translations marked by an asterisk are my own.

cultural revival of a nation likened to regeneration of nature in spring.¹⁶⁸ As the poem progresses, the mist and clouds seem to be lifting:

A bheanntan Chill-Fhinn, agus faileas na grèin oirbh,
bheil na neultan ri teicheadh
bho shlinnean Mhill Ghairbh,
a bheil anart a' cheò air a thogail
bhàrr uchd Creag na Caillich,
a bheil caithream nan eun ann an Coire Fionn Làirig?¹⁶⁹

*O mountains of Killin, and the reflection of sun on you,
are the clouds retreating
from the shoulders of Meall Garbh,
is the shroud of mist lifted
off the breast of Creag na Caillich,
is there triumphant chorusing of the birds on Coire Fionn Làirig?**

There is a prophetic vision of spiritual renewal, “èirigh do spiorad” (your spirit will rise*), and it envisages the triumphant national revival identified with natural regeneration.

In “Smuaintean an Coire Cheathaich” (Thoughts in Misty Corrie*), the speaker revisits a place which has already been firmly embedded in the Gaelic literary consciousness, the Misty Corrie which inspired one of Duncan Bàn MacIntyre’s most famous creations, “Cumha Coire a’ Cheathaich” (Lament for the Misty Corrie), and it is full of echoes of the older poem. Duncan Bàn’s own poem is by no means a joyful celebration but a comment on a lamentable change in a place the poet used to know in the days of its glory, but now finds mismanaged by a new bailiff.¹⁷⁰ “Smuaintean an Coire Cheathaich” is thus a *caochladh* poem, a poem of adverse change,¹⁷¹ taking another *caochladh* poem as its point of departure. The speaker

¹⁶⁸ The combination of the mountain environment and the political vision is reminiscent of Sorley MacLean’s *An Cuilithionn*, also in such details as the sound of the great bagpipes heard over the mountain tops (in *Dàin do Eimhir* and “*Craobh nan Teud*” where famous pibroch tunes composed by Patrick Mòr MacCrimmon “*Cumha na Cloinne*” and “*Maol Dunn*” are heard on the mountains). Other similarities include the string of adjectives in the eighth stanza (“*tùchanach, tormanach, luaisgeanach, iogalach*” / hoarse, murmuring, restless, light-headed) and the final parade of place names. However, “*Faoisgneadh*” does not exhibit the dreamy, even hallucinatory, quality of “*An Cuilithionn*” and the ever-changing nature of MacLean’s symbols: it seems much more straightforward. Moreover, “*Faoisgneadh*” lacks the international perspective of “*An Cuilithionn*” where both the tragedy and the liberation of the Gàidhealtachd are seen as one with the fortunes of Europe.

¹⁶⁹ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 13.

¹⁷⁰ John MacInnes comments on Duncan Bàn’s poem extensively in a series of short interviews available from BBC Alba: “*Donnchadh Bàn: Dàn 2: Cumha Coire Cheathaich*”, BBC Alba *Làrach nam Bàrd* <http://www.bbc.co.uk/alba/foghlam/larachnambard/poets/donnchadh_ban/bardachd/index2.shtml#analysis_link_s_patch> 18 June 2014.

¹⁷¹ As Donald Meek explains, “*caochladh*” is adverse change in man and nature, a “before and after” scenario. Especially in the nineteenth-century Gaelic poetry, we often find the situation where a location is revisited and its change for the worse is observed. The poet revisits the place he or she once knew and comments on its change, a change which is usually for the worse, as far as both the place and the human observer are concerned –

complains to Duncan Bàn that there are many who would not understand his poems and who pollute and renounce Gaelic:

Nam bu bheò thu an dràsda, 's tu fuireach san àit seo,
cò a dh'èisdeadh ri 'd bhàrdachd, 's cò thuigeadh do cheòl,
cuid a' truailleadh do chainnt 's cuid de d' dhaoine ga h-àicheadh,
is sgread aig a' ghràisg ud nach ceannaich i lòn.¹⁷²

*If you were alive now and staying in this place, who would listen to your poetry, who would understand your music, some pollute your language and other people deny it, and that rabble screeching that she will not buy lunch.*¹⁷³*

In spite of the dismal present state of things, the poem gives voice to remarkable optimism about revitalization of Scotland, and, more specifically, of the Gàidhealtachd and the Gaelic language. In the end, the speaker expresses his hope that a change will come over Scotland and that a new day will break over the rugged corrie.

Such images of national resurrection, employed in both “Smuaintean an Coire Cheathaich” and “Faoisgneadh”, exhibit a link to Romantic nationalism of the nineteenth century, with the spring of independence and self-awareness arriving after the winter of subjection, and the poet assuming a priest-like role, assisting the process.¹⁷⁴ Such great expectations are noteworthy especially in comparison with poems from Thomson’s ensuing collections where his vision of the future, including the future of Gaelic, is more chilling and pessimistic, and expressed with more humour and ambiguity.

“Anail a’ Ghàidheil am Mullach” (“The breath of the Gael on the Summit”*), taking its title from the Gaelic proverb “the rest of the Gael is (when he / she reaches) the summit”, is another patriotic poem located in the mountains.¹⁷⁵ The saying provides a departure point for a meditation on national revival in connection with mountain climbing. The idea of Sisyphus still alive in Scotland (“tha Sisyphus beò ann an Albainn”)¹⁷⁶ and striving with an immense boulder can be read as a reference to the ongoing laborious struggle for independence. The streams running down from the peaks are imagined as flowing through the centuries of Scottish history, but this connection between history and landmarks is left unspecified: the poem refers to general history and general streams rather than to an

an example of this situation is MacIntyre’s “Cead Deireannach nam Beann” (Last Leave-taking of the Bens, 1802), written years after “Moladh Beinn Dòbhrainn”. See Meek, “Introduction,” *Caran an t-Saoghail*, xxviii.

¹⁷² Translation mine with the kind assistance of Caoimhín Ó Donnaíle and Mòrag NicIlleathain.

¹⁷³ I.e. that there is no profit in it. All languages are feminine in Gaelic.

¹⁷⁴ Procházka, “Národ a nacionalismus ve věku globalizace” 252.

¹⁷⁵ Boyd Robertson and Iain MacDonald, *Essential Gaelic Dictionary* (London: Hodder Education, 2010) 7.

¹⁷⁶ *An Dealbh Briste* 14-15.

individual stream and a particular event. Again, the vision of spring, bringing new hope for the country, recurs.

The final stanza advises the readers to remove the blinding bandage from their eyes, so that they will find Everest in Scotland and see Mont Blanc from the Cuillin and “the heights of the world” from Meall nan Tarmachan in Perth. This is a strategy different from the one MacLean employs in “An Cuilithionn” – these are not the self-assured jumps from Blaven to Nanga Parbit and back again, or organizing international revolutionary summits on the crests of the Cuillin; this is a re-appreciation of Scotland which becomes the central point from which links to the broader world can and should be formed.

“Anail a’ Ghàidheil am Mullach” also exhibits features that are unmistakably Thomson’s own and will become more pronounced in the later poems, such as the tongue-in-cheek humour revealed in the upside-down alternatives of the mountaineering proverb: “ghleidheadh na Gàidheil an còmhnard” (the Gaels would keep to the plains) or “seachnadh nan Gàidheil air beanntan” (the Gaels would avoid mountains) that will characterize so much of his poetry dealing with political issues.

Gaelic as a theme is not very prominent in the collection, apart from the already-mentioned argument in “Smuaintean an Coire Cheathaich”, although when *An Dealbh Briste* appeared, the foundation of *Gairm* was less than a year ahead. Rather, the collection itself can be seen as a statement concerning the language. In the preface, Thomson expresses his belief that

[...] if Gaelic is to live, it must be written and read, and the idiom of thought that belongs to our time must find some expression in it. Thus, if both my language and my subject matter resemble none too closely the language and subject matter of the old Gaelic bards, I am not, I think, showing in that any disrespect or lack of humility.¹⁷⁷

By writing in free verse and openly following in MacLean’s footsteps, Thomson strives to move Gaelic literature into the modern times, and thus contribute to the viability of the language.

A poem which can be read as a covert yet powerful comment on the situation of the Gaelic language and culture is “An Tobar” (The Well), one of Thomson’s most successful early creations.¹⁷⁸ The speaker remembers a well about which he heard from an old woman:

¹⁷⁷ “Roimh-radh / Preface,” *An Dealbh Briste*, page not numbered.

¹⁷⁸ Not to be mistaken with the sequence of the same name from the collection *Saorsa agus an Iolaire* (1977).

Tha tobar beag am meadhon a' bhaile
's am feur ga fhalach,
am feur gorm sùghor ga dlùth thughadh,
fhuair mi brath air bho sheann chaillich,
ach thuirt i, "Tha 'm frith-rathad fo raineach
far am minig a choisich mi le'm chogan,
's tha 'n cogan fhèin air dèabhadh."
Nuair sheall mi 'na h-aodann preasach
chunnaic mi 'n raineach a' fàs mu thobar a sùilean
's ga fhalach bho shireadh 's bho rùintean,
's ga dhùnadh 's ga dhùnadh.¹⁷⁹

*Right in the village there's a little well
and the grass hides it,
green grass in sap closely thatching it.
I heard of it from an old woman
but she said: "The path is overgrown with bracken
where I often walked with my cogie,
and the cogie itself is warped."
When I looked in her lined face
I saw the bracken growing round the well of her eyes,
and hiding it from seeking and from desires,
and closing it, closing it.*

The fact that the well is located in the middle of a township, but hidden in lush grass and the way to it is overgrown with bracken, suggests that the township is no longer inhabited. It may imply that it was deserted as the inhabitants emigrated, moved to other areas in search of jobs and better services,¹⁸⁰ or the reference may even be to the Clearances. It is only the older people who know about the well and who remember the old lifestyle symbolised by "an cogan" (the cogie),¹⁸¹ an object of daily use which ceases to be needed in the modernised world with running water in houses. As the old woman remarks, no one goes to the well any more, which may refer to both forced and voluntary abandonment of the old way of life, or a combination of both.

"Cha teid duine an diugh don tobar tha sin,"

¹⁷⁹ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 48-49.

¹⁸⁰ An enlightening first-hand account of how life was made intentionally difficult by the authorities for those who lived and wanted to stay in the remote areas of Western Scotland can be found in *Fàsachadh An-Iochdmhor Ratharsair / The Cruel Clearance of Raasay* (Clò Àrnais, 2007) by Calum MacLeod, who single-handedly built a road in the north of Raasay as a protest against these hostile policies and lack of infrastructure.

¹⁸¹ "Cog, cogie, coag, cogg, coug, etc." is "a wooden vessel, made of staves and girded with metal bands, used in milking cows, carrying water, or in drinking or eating." *Dictionar o the Scots Leid / Dictionary of the Scots Language*, <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/snd/cog_n1> 6 March 2015.

thuir a' chailleach, "mar a chaidh sinne
nuair a bha sinn òg,
ged a tha 'm bùrn ann cho brèagh 's cho geal."
'S nuair sheall mi troimhn raineach 'na sùilean
chunnaic mi lannir a' bhùirn ud
a ni slàn gach ciùrradh
gu ruig ciùrradh cridhe.¹⁸²

*"Nobody goes to that well now,"
said the old woman, "as we once went,
when we were young,
though the water is lovely and white."
And when I looked in her eyes through the bracken
I saw the sparkle of that water
that makes whole every hurt
till the hurt of the heart.*

The old woman's speech reminds one of the wealth of the language which is dying out. She calls the water "geal" (white) and the application of the adjective to water from the well is on the one hand startling, especially to a reader who approaches "An Tobar" in the English translation. In Gaelic, the word is fitting and aptly captures the freshness and purity of the water. "Geal", although it denotes white colour, can also mean "clear, radiant, bright, glistening". The adjective has thoroughly positive connotations in Gaelic, as it is used in phrases such as "latha geal" ("beautiful day") and the traditional term of endearment "gràdh geal mo chridhe", which translates literally as "white love of my heart". The description is original, fitting and implies assured command of the language. The old woman's short phrase stands for all the things the speaker declares as irretrievably lost at the end.

When the speaker is asked to bring a drop of that water to the old woman, he complies with her request, manages to find the well and brings her what she has asked for. However, he suggests that her need was not the greatest. If the water indeed stands for the Gaelic language and culture, the woman has been living outside the natural and cultural environment of her youth. She still remembers what it was like, she recalls "the taste of the water", so her need is not the greatest – people who are most needful of the refreshing sip are probably those who never drank of it and do not even know what they are missing, possibly people who grow up in Scotland without any knowledge of the Gaelic heritage.

Although there is not a single word about language policy and language rights, "An Tobar", as Whyte suggests, discusses "the plight of the Gaelic language," for "a language

¹⁸² *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 48-49.

cannot be conserved, it can only be allowed to live.”¹⁸³ The poem’s political dimension is less pronounced than in the overtly patriotic pieces, but it is precisely this impossibility of abstracting any specific political message from it that make it such an impressive and haunting piece of writing. A convincing political reading can be proposed, but the poem works even when one misses the political dimension, which can easily be the case with readers unacquainted with the context of Gaelic Scotland and Thomson’s work.

The poem which precedes “An Tobar” – and the juxtaposition of individual pieces in Thomson’s collections is often worth noting – is entitled “Làraichean” (Ruins).¹⁸⁴ The translation does not capture the meaning of “làraichean” fully, for “làrach” translates as “site, ruin, (im)print, impression, mark, scar.” Speaking about a township, as the poem does, the word evokes low ruins which allow one to trace the ground-plan of the buildings, while the term “tobhta”, which also translates as ruin, would imply a higher level of completeness, perhaps standing walls.¹⁸⁵ Given the frequent occurrence of “làraichean” in poetry of the Clearances,¹⁸⁶ the very title of the poem can be read as a reference to the traumatic events that contributed to the breakup of the traditional Gaelic society. The reference may also be to emigration, which was still draining people away from the Gaelic areas in 1920s and which could have been the reason of the change of the township into a ghost town: apart from the ruins, the poem mentions rotting boats and sleeping empty fields, i.e. not used for cultivating crops.

Just like “An Tobar”, “Làraichean” present a twilight world. At the beginning of the poem, the sun is warping (“grèidheadh na grèine”) and the first stanza ends with the approach of summer (“’s tha an samhradh gu bhith againn”). In the second stanza, evening is closing in (“am feasgar am fagas”) and the same promise of summer at the end is immediately followed by a shadow of winter (“is an geamhradh gu bhith againn”). The last stanza closes with the prospect of autumn and winter. It is the image of a world that is gone, with only old people being able to bear witness to it and its history.

“Làraichean” mention a number of phenomena connected to the traditional way of life in the Gàidhealtachd: lazybeds (feannagan), curing sheds and boats (taighean-saillidh), threshing and grinding oats. The prominent references to the seasons of the year concern the importance of the cyclical time for the agricultural community, but also, as the poem

¹⁸³ Whyte, “Derick Thomson: Reluctant Symbolist,” *Chapman* 38 (1984): 4.

¹⁸⁴ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 46-47.

¹⁸⁵ The word actually occurs in the poem and is translated as “stolid, grass-covered walls” (“tobhta stòlda, feurach”).

¹⁸⁶ See William Livingston’s “Fios chun a’ Bhàird” (Message to the Poet), Sorley MacLean’s “Hallaig”, or Seumas Dòmhnallach’s “An t-Eilean Àlainn” (The Lovely Island).

replicates the sequence from spring to winter, hint at a more metaphorical winter, one that causes lifestyle, culture and language to wither. Taking into account the semantic range of “làrach”, it is possible to read it literally and metaphorically. Apart from the actual traces of buildings, the township as such and the poem become “làraichean” – ruins, imprints, sites, or scars marking a place where a whole world used to exist.

The examples of “An Tobar” and “Làraichean” vindicate the method of reading Thomson’s poems in the collections and in sequence – reading either of these poems in isolation, the argument of other than a literal reading would prove more challenging, but with two of them in sequence and in immediate proximity, the case for reading them as references to something bigger than old women, lazybeds and cogies becomes stronger.

One of the most oblique pieces in the collection is the poem “A Chionn ’s gu Bheil” (Since the Picture is Broken”), from which the title of the volume was taken. It communicates the feeling of futility in a number of specific images and refuses to be interpreted in relation to any particular disappointment. Formally, it is very regular and organised, which suggests an attempt to detach oneself from the disappointment. Words such as “briste” (broken), “sgàinte” (cracked), “sgoilte” (untied), and “creachte” (raided) which occur at the end of lines, literally breaking them apart while connecting them semantically, communicate the prevalent sense of loss and disruption.¹⁸⁷ Although the reference may well be to a frustrated love affair, for a number of poems in *An Dealbh Briste* deal with disappointment in love, it is also possible to read it as another comment on the disruption of the Gaelic world as Thomson knew it in his youth.

If the broken picture, the cracked wall, the withered branch and the cleft dream indeed refer to Gaelic and the Gàidhealtachd, then resignation is the last thing we would find in the poet’s subsequent seven books of verse, especially when it comes to dealing with political issues. The next collection contains a great deal of political poetry, but in a very different vein from straightforward invocations of Scotland through its mountains. By the 1950s, Thomson had completely abandoned the didactic register of “Faoisgneadh” and followed more in the direction indicated in “An Tobar”.

¹⁸⁷ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 52-53.

3.2 *Eadar Samhradh is Foghar* (1967)

Thomson's second collection *Eadar Samhradh is Foghar* (Between Summer and Autumn) appeared in 1967. Sixteen years had passed since the publication of his first book of verse and he returned as a poet with a voice unmistakably his own, characterized by conversational tone, sense of humour, and attentiveness to sensual detail. The poet himself pointed out that political interests in *Eadar Samhradh is Foghar* acquire a much harder edge in this volume than in *An Dealbh Briste*.¹⁸⁸ As Michel Byrne notes, Thomson develops here a new ironic register which replaces the "slightly hectoring tone of some earlier political writing,"¹⁸⁹ and John MacInnes observes that "pride and anger – pride in people, anger at what history has done to people, and at what people have allowed to happen – as well as celebration of Gaelic ability to withstand the onslaught of hostile forces, all begin to break surface in *Eadar Samhradh is Foghar*."¹⁹⁰

A number of poems deal with the history of the Gàidhealtachd, evaluating various events and personalities, connecting them and tracing their influence on the present. The short poem "Am Prionnsa Teàrlach" (Prince Charlie) goes back to the fundamental event of Highland history – the last big Jacobite uprising of 1745-1746, known in Gaelic as "Bliadhna Theàrlaich" (Charlie's Year) after the Young Pretender Charles Edward Stuart whom it hoped to place on the throne. In the poem, the speaker addresses the Prince, putting forth his own conviction about his approach to the expedition:

Bha a' Bhliann' ud dhut, an dèidh a h-uile dad,
mar thuras a bheireadh fear a cheann-a-tuath Ruisia,
'na òige, is cuimhne an fhuachd air aiteamh,
oir thug e greis air a shlighe dhachaigh
a-measg uaislean St Petersburg,
ri dannsa 's ri brìodal:
ged a dh'fhàg an deigh beàrn air do chridhe
b' e teas na Ròimhe a b' fheàrr leat.¹⁹¹

That Year, when all is said and done, was for you like a trip a man might make in his youth, to the north of Russia: the memory of the cold had thawed, for he spent some time, on the way home, among the nobles of St Petersburg, in dancing and dalliance; though the ice left its mark on your heart, it was the sultry heat of Rome you preferred.

¹⁸⁸ Thomson, "A Man Reared in Lewis" 139.

¹⁸⁹ Byrne, "Monsters and Goddesses" 177.

¹⁹⁰ MacInnes, "The World through Scots-Gaelic Eyes" [a review of *Creachadh na Clàrsaich*], *Lines Review* 85 (1983): 13.

¹⁹¹ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 96-97.

Instead of following the tradition of Gaelic songs which praise the Bonnie Prince and express longing for his return, the nature of Thomson's comment, as Donald MacAulay suggests, "challenges fundamentally the traditional meaning of these events", placing them "in a framework of a different interpretation of Highland history."¹⁹² The poem does not mention any details about the insurrection, well-known as they are to most, and interprets the Prince's feelings about the enterprise: instead of an attempt to restore the sovereignty of Scotland and to improve the position of the Highlands, as the numerous Gaels who rallied to his cause undoubtedly hoped, the Prince takes the journey to Scotland as an exotic trip, as his contemporaries might have gone to the north of Russia as part of their grand tour. Instead of romanticising the Prince as the hero of the great lost cause, the poem implies Scottish Jacobites were unfortunate in the leader granted to them by succession rights, for whom the insurrection was a mere adventure. While his supporters, common and noble, suffered from the post-Culloden repercussions, the Prince lived out his days in sultry Rome, the memory of cold Scotland thawing and leaving a mere mark. The short poem shows Thomson's resolution to take a different approach to Highland history, and his disapproval of those who desert the chosen cause for an easier life.

After Culloden, the breakdown of the Gàidhealtachd was furthered by the Clearances. "Srath Nabhair" (Strathnaver)¹⁹³ is Thomson's most open discussion of the topic, and in Ronald Black's opinion, it vies with MacLean's "Hallaig" for the position of the best Clearance poem of the twentieth century. The title announces a distinct location, Strathnaver, and to those acquainted with Highland history the place name immediately evokes the infamous clearances that occurred on the Sutherland estate in the first half of the nineteenth century, and the ongoing series of discussions and accusations they have not ceased to provoke ever since. The historian Eric Richards sums up their progress and significance in the following manner:

Thousands of people were cleared from the inland straths and replaced by great sheep farms occupied by capitalist graziers who revolutionised land use and productivity on the estate. It was all done at a velocity and on a scale which were breath-taking even by the standards of the day. [...] Hence the Sutherland clearances were the most dramatic and sensational of all the removals and they occupy centre stage in all accounts of the Highland Clearances. They were also very well recorded because they were planned by an estate bureaucracy which prized planning and rationality above most other considerations.

¹⁹² MacAulay, "Introduction," *Derick Thomson: The Far Road and Other Poems* 7.

¹⁹³ Black, "Introduction," *An Tuil* xlii.

One of the most tragic consequences of the Clearances is their contribution to the decline of Gaelic language and culture, for the evicted tenants were often Gaelic-speaking, hence the accusations of “ethnic cleansing”. Especially the Sutherland Clearances were an internationally discussed topic, attracting lengthy comment from Karl Marx in *Capital*¹⁹⁴ and provoking a debate between Harriet Beecher Stowe in her *Sunny Memories of Sutherland* and Donald MacLeod’s response *Gloomy Memories of Sutherland*.

The poem begins with the speaker looking back on what was probably the clearing of his family and the burning of their house, as was sometimes the practice during the evictions in order to prevent the displaced people from returning to their former dwellings.¹⁹⁵

Anns an adhar dhubh-ghorm ud,
àirde na siorraidheachd os ar cionn,
bha rionnag a’ priobadh ruinn
's i freagairt mireadh an teine
ann an cabair tigh m’ athar
a’ bhliadhna thugh sinn an taigh le bleideagan sneachda.¹⁹⁶

*In that blue-black sky,
as high above us as eternity,
a star was winking at us,
answering the leaping flames of fire
in the rafters of my father’s house,
that year we thatched the house with snowflakes.*

At the very start, the connection between a burning house in the Highlands and a distant star in the vast night sky gives the scene a universal scope. The idea of thatching the destroyed home with snowflakes is a moving comment on the helplessness and poverty of those affected by the evictions. In the second stanza, the poem proceeds to bring forth the topsy-turvy priorities of the Clearances and the hypocrisy of their executors by means of referring ironically to the Gospel of Matthew (8:20): “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head.”¹⁹⁷

Agus sud a’ bhliadhna cuideachd

¹⁹⁴ I am grateful to Kateřina Halouzková who attended my seminar on the literature of the Scottish islands and shared with me this reference.

¹⁹⁵ Eric Richards, *The Highland Clearances* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2008) 208-209. As wood was scarce in most parts of the Gàidhealtachd, burning the rafters was a sure way to ensure the evicted people would not return later to rebuild the house.

¹⁹⁶ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 94-97.

¹⁹⁷ The version is taken from the Authorized King James Bible.

a shlaod iad a' chailleach don t-sitig,
a shealltainn cho eòlach 's a bha iad air an Fhìrinn,
oir bha nid aig eunlaith an adhair
(agus cròthan aig na caoraich)
ged nach robh àit aice-se anns an cuireadh i a ceann fòidhpe.¹⁹⁸

*And that too was the year
they hauled the old woman out on to the dung-heap,
to demonstrate how knowledgeable they were in Scripture,
for the birds of the air had nests
(and the sheep had folds)
though she had no place in which to lay down her head.*

Thomson's bracketed note on "cròthan aig na caoraich" (the sheep's folds) is a hint, very typical of the poet, at the fact that the main reason for the Clearances was the introduction of sheep farms and that the needs of the animals and their owners were therefore put above the needs of the people.

In the last stanza, the speaker addresses two straths affected by the Clearances, Strathnaver and Strath of Kildonan, and points out that the wild landscape of the Highlands and Islands, void of human presence and so attractive to visitors, is a result of painful, controversial historical events. As Stroh puts it, Thomson corrects the romantic view of the landscape by "putting the human cost back into focus."¹⁹⁹ In this respect, the poem makes a similar point as MacLean's "Sgreapadal" where the lush beauty of the places hides both the memory of evictions and a nuclear threat.

A Shrath Nabhair 's a Shrath Chill Donnain,
is beag an t-iongnadh ged a chinneadh am fraoch àlainn oirbh,
a' falach nan lotan a dh'fhàg Pàdraig Sellar 's a sheòrsa,
mar a chunnaic mi uair is uair boireannach cràbhaidh
a dh'fhiosraich dòrainn an t-saoghail-sa
is sìth Dhè 'na sùilean.²⁰⁰

*O Strathnaver and Strath of Kildonan,
it is little wonder that the heather should bloom on your slopes,
hiding the wounds that Patrick Sellar, and such as he, made,
just as time and time again I have seen a pious woman
who has suffered the sorrow of this world
with the peace of God shining from her eyes.*

¹⁹⁸ Creachadh na Clàrsaich 96-97.

¹⁹⁹ Silke Stroh, *Uneasy Subjects: Postcolonialism and Scottish Gaelic Poetry* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009) 250.

²⁰⁰ Creachadh na Clàrsaich 96-97.

It is thus an absence that commemorates the traumatic events in Thomson's poem: the slopes on which heather covers the "wounds," i.e. places where human dwellings used to stand, function as memorials to the evicted communities. The awareness of these voids, of an emptiness that should not be there, keeps the memory of the Clearances alive. In contrast to MacLean in "Hallaig" and "An Cuilithionn", Thomson presents no grand redemptive vision: only a bitter and resolute statement about an historical act of injustice which should serve as fuel for decisive political action in the present and in the future.

Culloden and the Clearances are brought together in the poem "Cruaidh?" (Steel?). Apart from the disastrous battle which crushed the high Jacobite hopes and the breaking of the tack-farms, it mentions another crucial and in Thomson's view damaging event in Highland history: "Briseadh na h-Eaglaise" (Breaking of the Church), the Disruption of 1843 when 450 ministers left the Church of Scotland and established the Free Church, from which the Free Presbyterian Church seceded in 1893, starting a long history of fragmentation and rivalry in the Highland Evangelical churches.

As Thomson was not himself raised in one of the more extreme evangelical churches, but in the relatively moderate Church of Scotland, and thus did not have to process the effects of such an upbringing and was not a believer in his adult life, he writes about religion from a distance, as an observer, and focuses on it as a social and historical force. In an interview with John Blackburn, he sums up his contradictory feelings towards the evangelical religion in the Gàidhealtachd:

Throughout my life I've been critical of certain aspects of the teaching, and of the character of the churches in the Highlands, and in the Islands especially. But I have been powerfully drawn to some features of the religious culture. There's no doubt at all in my mind that, at its best, that culture helps to mould a strong and thoughtful and caring character among people. I look back with the greatest of affection on some of the church people that I knew. But certainly some of the activity of the churches seemed to me to be totally destructive, and this was particularly true of the "Free" churches – less so of the Church of Scotland. I'm thinking of their condemnation of the local culture, poetry and song and music and dance and all kinds of secular activities, most of which were perfectly harmless. [...] The evangelical religion arrived somewhat late in Lewis, but we have accounts from the third and fourth decades of the nineteenth century of evangelical ministers stamping as hard as they could on the local culture. Ordering people to break their fiddles and break their pipes and stop singing vain songs.²⁰¹

²⁰¹ John Blackburn, "Interview with Derick Thomson," *Hardy to Heaney: Twentieth Century Poets: Introductions and Explanations*, ed. John Blackburn (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1986) 162.

The inclusion of the Great Disruption into the triad of Highland plagues was based on this widespread hostility to the traditional culture and the Gaelic language. The poem follows with a rather oblique reflection:

lamhachas-làidir dà thrìan de ar comas;
'se seòltachd tha dhìth oirnn.
Nuair a theirgeas a' chruaidh air faobhar na speala
caith bhua a' chlach-liomhaidh;
chan eil agad ach iarann bog
mur eil de chruas nad innleachd na ni sgathadh.²⁰²

*two thirds of our power is violence;
it is cunning we need.
When the tempered steel near the edge of the scythe-blade is worn
throw away the whetstone;
you have nothing left but soft iron
unless your intellect has a steel edge that will cut clean.*

This passage, exquisite in terms of sound and vaguely suggestive in meaning, seems to herald the cryptic political poetry from *Saorsa agus an Iolair*.

The second strophe urges the addressee to throw away soft words, otherwise there would soon be no words left, and in the context of the collection, this reference can be read as another appeal on behalf of the Gaelic language. If mere soft words continue to be used in the public debate about the rights of Gaelic Scotland, the language will be become extinct.

Is caith bhua briathran mìne
oir chan fhada bhios briathran agad;
tha Tuatha Dè Danann fon talamh,
tha Tìr nan Og anns an Fhraing,
's nuair a ruigeas tu Tìr a' Gheallaidh,
mura bi thu air t' aire,
coinnichidh Sasannach riut is plion air,
a dh' innse dhut gun tug Dia, bràthair athar, còir dha anns an fhearann.²⁰³

*And throw away soft words,
for soon you will have no words left;
the Tuatha Dè Danann are underground,
the Land of the Ever-young is in France,
and when you reach the Promised Land,
unless you are on your toes,
a bland Englishman will meet you,*

²⁰² *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 98-99.

²⁰³ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 98-99.

and say to you that God, his uncle, has given him a title to the land.

“Tuatha Dè Danann” is a supernatural race from Irish mythology and “Tir nan Og” (The Land of the Young) is the mythological Otherworld and their habitat, visited by Ossian on his famous journey. Both these elemental concepts of shared Celtic mythology of Scotland and Ireland are dismissed as irrelevant to the present critical situation: this might be a covert reproach to those whose interest in Gaelic topics is limited to the misty charms of Celtic past and who do not strive to keep Gaelic alive at present and address the social, cultural, and political problems of the region. The Promised Land is likely a reference to religious escapism, which has, especially in the Evangelical context, often been seen as a major factor contributing to the plight of the Gaels in the nineteenth century, as earthly suffering and injustice were disregarded in favour of divine matters, and seen as justified punishment.

The scathing and amusing image of the Gael who reaches the Promised Land, tiptoeing, only to encounter a smirking Englishman who states that God has entitled him to the land as a favour of kinship, serves as a warning about what will, metaphorically, happen to those whose intellect is not sharp enough and who seek false comfort in religion or in the Celtic past and do not stand up for their rights. The connection between the deprivation of land and rights and an English person who moreover presents the situation as the natural order of things decided by God draws both on the history of dispossession in the Gàidhealtachd in the nineteenth century and on the continuous disregard for Scottish affairs by the Westminster government in the twentieth century.

The interactions between the Gàidhealtachd and the British Empire and its influence on the local lifestyle and economy and exploitation of the region surface in several other poems. The Gàidhealtachd is presented as a region in deep crisis: the poem “A’ Ghàidhealtachd” (The Gàidhealtachd) presents a gloomy image of a deserted house filled with rotting furniture, a synecdoche of the dismal state of the Highlands as a whole. The fact that the speaker calls the house “Ghall-Ghaidhealach” (Highland-Lowland) indicates that he blames the physical decay of the region on the loss of cultural awareness. Other poems included in the section comment from various angles on the current crisis in the region and its historical roots.

The short poem “Asnaichean” (Ribs) brings together the influence of two people on the Western Isles: Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh, the seventeenth-century Gaelic poet famous for her panegyric poetry dedicated to the MacLeod chiefs, who is buried in Rodel in Harris; and William Lever, Lord Leverhulme, the entrepreneur remembered in the Gaelic world for his extensive plans to industrialise Lewis and Harris. The presence of Màiri’s body in the soil

of Harris is seen as natural, native and pleasant: “ann am fearann a sinnsre, / tha corp priseil Màiri / a’ cnàmh gu cùbhraidh” (in her people’s land / Mary’s precious body / decays fragrantly).²⁰⁴ On the other hand, “on Ob, an iar air, / troimh asnaichean Bodach an t-Siabhainn, / chì thu Tìr nan Rocaid, / is fàileadh loit dhiubh (from Leverburgh, west of it, / through the ribs of the Soap Lord, / you can see the Land of the Rockets / with their stench). Lever’s mark on the place is presented as an imposition, the abandoned buildings being compared to huge ribs of a decaying body. In the English translation, the contrast is highlighted by the fact that the English name of An t-Òb was changed from Obbe to Leverburgh when Lever started his project in South Harris, so his impact on the place is sealed by the place name, which is not a native name, but an imperial name, reminding people of “power and property”.²⁰⁵

The Benbecula missile station in North Uist (“Tìr nan Ròcaid”, i.e. the land of rockets) is grouped together with traces of Leverhulme’s projects. As Whyte puts it, “the elements are apparently brought together by a fiery political indignation, yet a subtle metaphoric pattern also connects them. The ribs of the poetess’s skeleton enshrine a fragrant decay, while those of the ruined factory and the grid of the Benbecula missile station silhouetted against the sky enclose a stench that is all the stronger for being metaphorical.”²⁰⁶

The missile station is an example of a specific political topic Thomson addressed both in his poetry and in his journalism. It was discussed in *Gairm* 14 (Winter 1955) and appeared in several editorials in the 1960s. The editors, Thomson and MacDonald, note how the Ministry of Defence continues to move various unpopular military projects to the Highlands and Islands, promising the locals jobs and various improvements, while these schemes in fact do the communities more harm than good, as they attract too many English-speaking newcomers at once without introducing policies to protect Gaelic.

The same intersection occurs in the poem “Rannan air an Sgrìobhadh as dèidh an ath Chogaidh” (Verses Written After the Next War) which appeared for the first time in *Gairm* 30 (Winter 1959). Thomson’s editorial from the same issue refers to the recent General Election to Parliament, which marked a third consecutive victory of the Tories, and moves to education policy. It criticises schools in the Highlands and Islands for not acquainting children with their Gaelic heritage and for their failure to provide sound instruction in practical skills which would allow more people to stay in the Gàidhealtachd and make a living, instead of leaving

²⁰⁴ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 96-97.

²⁰⁵ Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: New Press, 1998) 47.

²⁰⁶ Whyte, “Derick Thomson: Reluctant Symbolist” 4.

the region in search of employment. Reading the poem side by side with the editorial gives the former a contemporary edge and the other a historical dimension.

At the beginning of the poem, the speaker expresses his intention to sing the praise of the Isle of Lewis. He specifies that it is not going to be the usual praise of a Lewissian sunset or of the heather-covered hills – unlike in “Faoisgneadh”, the people, not the landscape, are in the centre of attention:

oir tha fiamh orm roimh dheireadh an là
thighinn air eilean ciar-dhearg mo ghràidh,
's gum bi Mùirneag 'na tom air an uaigh
a chladhaich ar rìoghachd do m' shluagh.²⁰⁷

*for I fear the end of the road
for my dear dark-purple island,
with Mùirneag the mound of the grave
our kingdom has dug for my people.*

Mùirneag is a hillock in the north part of Lewis, visible from Thomson's native Point, which often appears in his Lewis poetry²⁰⁸ and becomes one of the localities that encapsulate Thomson's attachment to the island. The hill, a shortcut for Thomson's love for the place, here becomes a grave mound and the speaker fears that “the end of the day” will come for his beloved island, and that the government has been digging a grave for his people. This connection is also emphasised by rhyming “uaigh” (grave) with “sluagh” (people). The theme of the death of the people is followed in the next stanza:

Chan e cliù do dhaoin tha 'nan laighe
air clachan liomhte an aigeil,
no cliù do laochraidh a mharbhadh
air raointean coimheach nan armailt,
no cliù an fheadhainn a spadadh
gu bàs à soithichean-adhair.
a' gleidheadh onair na rìoghachd
nach tug air am beatha – fioguis.²⁰⁹

*Not praise for your people lying
on the sea-bed's polished boulders,*

²⁰⁷ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 82-83.

²⁰⁸ “Sgòthan” (Clouds) in *Eadar Samhradh is Foghar*, “Nuair a Thig an Dorch” (When the Dark Comes) in *An Rathad Cian*.

²⁰⁹ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 82-83.

*nor praise for your heroes killed
on armies' foreign fields,
nor praise for those who were spatchcocked
to death from fighters and bombers,
keeping the country's honour
that gave not a fig for their lives.*

The reference to those who died in armies' foreign fields is a general one. Military commitment in Gaelic areas had been traditionally deep and many Gaels indeed fell defending the British Empire while the same army participated in the destruction of their families back at home, as was sometimes the case of soldiers who served at the time of the Clearances. As Stroh notes, Thomson in this poem "writes back to certain colonising tendencies of traditional Romantic Celticism. Since the late eighteenth century it had been customary in Anglophone and even Gaelic discourses to praise the Scottish Highlanders for their substantial contribution to Britain's military efforts and the sacrifices this entailed," making the Gaeldom "more celebrated in (and for) its death than its life."²¹⁰

In the context of Lewis, it is impossible not to connect the image of drowned people lying on the seabed with the wreck of *HMY An Iolaire*.²¹¹ The connection is also supported by the fact that the ship was bringing home veterans of the First World War – as the speaker puts it, defending a kingdom that did not show concern for their lives. About 30,000 people were living in Lewis between 1914 and 1918, out of which 6,200 joined up and were in different ways involved in WWI, which means every fifth person, and about 1,000 of them died.²¹²

The mention of "fighters and bombers" moves the poem to WWII. Thomson himself served with the RAF in the Outer Hebrides and references to people who were "spatchcocked" to their death from aircrafts may be a personal remembrance of friends. Still, the speaker proclaims that the focus of his praise lies elsewhere:

'S e cliù do bheatha a sheinninn,
eilein bhig riabhaich, O eilein
a thoinn do fhraoch mu mo theanga,
's a shaill le do shiaban m' anail,
is dh'iarrainn a seinn an Gàidhlig

²¹⁰ Stroh 245.

²¹¹ One of the worst twentieth-century maritime disasters in the UK – on the morning of 1 January 1919, *HMY An Iolaire* was wrecked on the so-called Beasts of Holm, a group of rocks near Stornoway, within the sight of the shore. 201 people drowned: 2 families with 8 children lost their fathers, 4 families lost 2 sons, 58 women lost their husbands and 209 children were left without father. "An Call," *Iolaire*, BBC Alba, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/alba/tbh/iolaire/an_call/> 6 March 2015.

²¹² "An Call," *Iolaire*, BBC Alba, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/alba/tbh/iolaire/an_call/> 6 March 2015.

ach am faic na thig is na thàinig
nach do mharbhadh uile gu lèir sinn
a dh'aindeoin Airm agus Nèibhi.²¹³

*It's your living praise I would sing,
brown little island, O island
that wound your hearth round my tongue
and salted my breath with your brine,
and I want to sing it in Gaelic
so that people now and later
can see we were not killed entirely
in spite of the Army and Navy.*

The poem employs the figure of apophasis – by stating in some detail what he is not going to do, i.e. celebrating the dead, the speaker of course does it at the same time. The life of Lewis is the main focus. The decision to write in Gaelic so that future generations would see the Gaels have not been eradicated entirely falls in with Thomson's own decision to write in Gaelic for cultural and political reasons. The last line echoes the famous opinion "a language is a dialect with an army and a navy,"²¹⁴ suggesting that Gaelic had not been eradicated entirely in spite of lacking the same proofs of independence English boasts. With the previous references to the war, it can also be read as an affirmation that in spite of the British Army and Navy draining the Gaelic communities of young men, the Gaels are still alive. Stroh points out that in Thomson's view, the union with England forced "the entirety of colonised Scotland to fight the wars of its coloniser" and that the poem "expressly refuses to contribute to this fatalistic and fatal discursive tradition and instead asserts the necessity of supporting the present and future survival of the Gaelic world."²¹⁵

The poem is quite typical of much of Thomson's verse where he engages with political issues – there is indignation at the historical iniquities, as these have to be named and remembered, but the backward look tends to be balanced and even outweighed by the look ahead, to what needs to be done in order to save what is not yet past hope and help. For Thomson, the dead are dead, not "seen alive". He strives to remember and to draw strength from the memory in order to work for a future of the Gàidhealtachd.

Another homage to ordinary Gaels, in this case to the girls and women who worked as fish gutters, is entitled "Clann-nighean an Sgadain" (The Herring-girls). In Stornoway, the

²¹³ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 82-83.

²¹⁴ Attributed to various scholars, one of the most likely candidates is the Latvian Yiddish scholar Max Weinreich, the earliest known source being Weinreich's lecture from 5 January 1945.

²¹⁵ Stroh 245-246.

herring industry was crucially important in the latter half of the nineteenth century and by 1870s, the town was recognised as the major herring port of Britain.²¹⁶ The herring girls and women worked in harbours and waited for ships to arrive with the catch, their task being to gut the herring and sort the clean fish into barrels.²¹⁷ The work was physically demanding and financially precarious, as sometimes no catch was brought back and the workers were paid according to the amount of processed fish. Many women from the Gaelic-speaking areas were employed in the herring trade and Thomson's poem pays homage to their strength and dignity. The first stanza connects the workers with their trade through imagery employed to describe them:

An gàire mar chraiteachan salainn
 ga fhroiseadh bho 'm beul,
 an sàl 's am picil air an teanga,
 's na miaran cruinne, goirid a dheanadh giullachd,
 no a thogadh leanabh gu socair, cuimir, [...]
 's na sùilean cho domhainn ri fèath.²¹⁸

*Their laughter like a sprinkling of salt
 showered from their lips,
 brine and pickle on their tongues,
 and the stubby short fingers that could handle fish,
 or lift a child gently, neatly, [...]
 and the eyes that were as deep as a calm.*

From this sprightly depiction, the second stanza moves to political comment:

B' e bun-os-cionn na h-eachdraidh a dh'fhàg iad
 'nan tràilleann aig ciùrairean cutach,
 thall 's a-bhos air Galdachd 's an Sasainn.
 Bu shailte an duais a thàrr iad
 às na mìltean bharraillean ud,
 gaoth na mara geur air craiceann,
 is eallach a' bhoichdainn 'nan ciste,
 is mara b' e an gàire
 shaoileadh tu gu robh an teud briste.²¹⁹

²¹⁶ "The Herring Industry," Stornoway Historical Society,
 <<http://www.stornowayhistoricalsociety.org.uk/herring-industry.html>> 7 March 2015.

²¹⁷ More on the herring girls on the website of the Stornoway Historical Society:
 <<http://www.stornowayhistoricalsociety.org.uk/more-feature-articles/73-herringgirls.html>> 7 March 2015.

²¹⁸ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 88-89.

²¹⁹ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 88-89.

*The topsy-turvy of history had made them
slaves to short-arsed curers,
here and there in the Lowlands, in England.
Salt the reward they won
from those thousands of barrels,
the sea-wind sharp on their skins,
and the burden of poverty in their kists,
and were it not for their laughter
you might think the harp-string was broken.*

As in a number of other poems, Thomson picks up on economic exploitation of the Gàidhealtachd and its people. The bustling herring trade did not change the lives of the ordinary workers involved in it: people from the Lowlands and from England benefited from the slavish labour of the locals, who did not enjoy the profits of the natural riches of their home environment, as they did not possess sufficient initial capital to use it.

The poem “Chaidh an Samhradh Thairis” (Summer Passed) takes one step back and attempts to view the history of the Gaels in the context of the fortunes of other nations, with whom it thus places them on a par. The speaker proposes a cyclical view of history, with the fortunes of nations rising and falling again:

*Tha samhradh mhic-an-duine a’ ruighinn ìre
aig caochladh amannan:
chinn Babalon tràth, ’s a’ Ghrèig cuideachd;
thug an Fhraing na b’ fhaide;
chaidh na Gaidheil a mhùchadh le borbalachd Shasainn
ach chinn blàth iongantach na bàrdachd sa’ Bheurla;
is dòcha nach dainig dubh-shamhradh na Congo fhathast.²²⁰*

*Man’s summer reaches its peak
at different times:
Babylon flourished early, as did Greece;
France took longer;
the Gaels were obliterated by English barbarity
but the marvellous growth came of English poetry;
perhaps the black-summer of the Congo hasn’t come yet.*

The peak of some has not come yet and it may not be through their own fault: the Gaels were deprived of their summer by their southern neighbours. As Stroh puts it, “whereas Anglophone Celticism has often described the Gaels as barbarians, this Gaelic text subverts

²²⁰ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 100-101.

the tradition by applying the same epithets of ‘barbarism’ to the Anglophone world.”²²¹ The reference to the marvels of English poetry serves both as a counterpoint to colonial barbarity and as a reminder that cultural achievements often go hand in hand with unsavoury politics.

Dhaibhsan aig a bheil dòchas ri samhradh,
cha b’ fhuilear dhaibh a bhith ruamhar ’s a’ biathadh
an gàrraidhean. Ach ma tha thu gun dòchas,
caith bhuaht do spaid leanabail ’s do bhucaid,
is iarr tròcair air cuideigin.²²²

*Those who have a hope of summer
had better be digging and feeding
their gardens. But if you have no hope,
throw away your childish spade and pail,
and ask someone for mercy.*

The last stanza is rather oblique, in a manner prefiguring some of Thomson’s later poetry, especially from *Saorsa agus an Iolair*. The speaker identifies “them”, those who still have hope of summer and therefore should take care of their gardens. He then turns to the reader (the pronoun “thú” indicates a single addressee) and says that if s/he has no hope, it is better to throw away the childish gardening tools and ask someone for mercy. The people without hope could be the Gaels, as the speaker implicitly places himself apart from those who retain hope, but whom should they ask for mercy then?

Apart from poems engaging with the state of the Gàidhealtachd, the collection contains several poems which can be read as more or less covert comments on the situation of the Gaelic language. “Uiseag” (Lark) is a typical representative of one strategy in Thomson’s political poetry. The first part describes a seemingly straightforward image or situation, in this case the speaker coming across a wounded bird:

A’ plogartaich air an fheur an sin,
air do chliathaich,
na h-asnaichean beaga ag èirigh ’s a’ tuiteam,
is striochag dhubh-dhearg air an iteig,
’s do shùilean a’ call an sgèanachd,
tha do latha dheth seachad,
is dè math bhith gad iargain?²²³

²²¹ Stroh 247.

²²² *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 100-101.

²²³ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 104-105.

*Throbbing there on the grass,
lying on your side,
the little ribs rising and falling,
and a dark-red streak on the wing,
and with the frightened look leaving your eyes,
it's all over with you,
and what's the good of mourning?*

Instead of continuing the story, the second stanza takes one step back and starts to suggest a symbolical meaning to the previously introduced image:

Ach ged a theireadh mo reusan sin rium,
's ged tha n' fhuil tha mu mo chridhe a' reodhadh
brag air bhrag, is bliann' air bhlianna,
cluinnidh mi i ag èigheachd ris a' chuimhne
"O! na faiceadh tu i air iteig
cha sguireadh tu ga h-ionndrain gu sìorraidh."²²⁴

*But though my reason might say that to me,
and though the blood around my heart is freezing –
year upon year I hear its sharp reports –
yet still it shouts to the memory
"O! could you but have seen her on the wing
you would go on longing for her for ever.*

According to Whyte,

The notion that the speaker is suffering the same fate as the skylark is startling, and the information demands to be integrated as part of our overall understanding of the poem [...] It is the overall context of the other poems in the book, as well as the larger context within which we read the book, that prompts one to attach a meaning such as "Gaelic culture", or "the Gaelic language", to the bird and its imminent demise.²²⁵

Again, the indication of a political meaning is mostly contextual, and the poem could be read merely as a memory of a disturbing encounter with a wounded animal.

A similar strategy is employed in the poem "Anns a' Bhalbh Mhadainn" (lit. "In the dumb morning," translated by the poet as "Sheep"). In this case, the opening image appears to be a memory from the family croft when sheep got lost on the moor in a sudden snowstorm. It

²²⁴ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 104-105.

²²⁵ Whyte, "Derick Thomson: The Recent Poetry" 23.

is revealed however that the storm did not affect only a region but a whole country, with deadly and smothering snow, which is also deceptive. The speaker then states that he would rejoice if he saw a yellow spot on the white plain and knew there the Gaels were still breathing. The snow can, and must therefore be, interpreted in terms of language and culture. Introducing extensive sheep farms in the Highlands and Islands was, of course, the main motive behind the Clearances and thus one of the main impulses which led to the desolation of Gaelic language and culture in the nineteenth century, and so the connection is deeply ironical.

Another example is the poem “Cainnt nan Oghaichean” (Grandchildren’s Talk), one of Thomson’s short masterpieces:

Nuair a thig am feasgar cuiridh sibh làmh anns a’ phutan,
 is their sibh gun d’ fhuair sibh solas,
 buidheachas do Dhia is do Chalum MacMhaoilein.
 Is dòcha gum bi sgeul eile aig na h-oghaichean
 nuair a bhios iad ’nan cailleachan ’s ’nam bodaich:
 iad ag èisdeachd an oghaichean fhèin, na coigrich bheaga,
 a chaill cainnt am màthar, is beus an daoine,
 ’s ag ràdh, gach aon ’na aonar,
 “Chuir sinne an solas às.”²²⁶

*When evening comes you will press the switch,
 and say that the light has come,
 thanks to God and to Malcolm Macmillan.
 Perhaps the grandchildren will think otherwise
 when they are old men and women:
 listening to their own grandchildren, the little strangers,
 who have lost their mother tongue, and their people’s virtues,
 and saying, each one alone,
 “We put out the light.”*

As Whyte puts it, it “links the arrival of electricity and the demise of Gaelic, so that one light goes on while another is extinguished, and the acuteness of the observation [...] satisfies.”²²⁷ It is concise, economical in expression, and shows Thomson’s talent for making original connections (calling children “the little strangers”) and his sense of humour. The last line, chilling and simple, lays the blame for the decline of the language on the Gaels themselves and their inability to pass it on, not on Lowland or English hostility.

²²⁶ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 92-93.

²²⁷ Whyte, “Derick Thomson: Reluctant Symbolist” 4.

Thomson himself pointed out that “the coming of electric light is used as an ironic image of ‘progress’ which has as its accompaniment (factual but not causal) language decline.”²²⁸ The poem is a comment on the paradoxical consequences of technological progress which leads to distinct improvements in the material aspects of life, but the adoption of the modern conveniences leads to the adoption of language and culture from which they enter the community. As Whyte notes, the juxtaposition the poem makes is perilous, in its “implicit association of Gaelic fluency with a world of candles and peats, almost as if the passage to English were an inevitable consequence of electricity’s arrival.”²²⁹ He questioned Thomson about this problem in an interview:

CW: With the electric light switches, where the desire to modernise, to keep pace, involves the destruction of many of the most valuable things.

DT: Yes, yes, yes. If that is the result, if that is the way that modernisation is carried out, if it has that effect of, for example, destroying the indigenous, or the traditional language, it isn’t altogether a matter for congratulation. But it’s not of course as naive as to say one shouldn’t have electric light.²³⁰

Thomson’s answer corresponds with his opinions expressed more openly in *Gairm*, where the technological and economic advancement in the Gàidhealtachd was a frequent topic.²³¹ All his recommendations and his evaluations of bodies such as the Crofters’ Commission, the Highlands and Islands Development Board, and the Western Isles Council, were based on the conviction that such improvements need to be implemented with careful regard to the language: he realised Gaelic communities were not strong and confident enough to be able to partake of the material benefits without giving up their language. The core of the problem thus does not reside in the mutual incongruence of the Gaelic tradition and modern life, but in the weakness of the Gaelic communities, caused both by hostile governmental policies and lack of commitment on part of the people, in withstanding the pressures of English influences. Thomson’s progressive idea of treating Gaelic as an economic asset and cherishing it not only for cultural but also for financial reasons is only gradually being embraced both by language planners and by users of the language.²³²

²²⁸ Thomson, “Tradition and Innovation in Gaelic Verse since 1950,” *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness LIII* (1982-1984): 101.

²²⁹ Whyte, “Derick Thomson: The Recent Poetry” 25.

²³⁰ Whyte, “Interviews with Ruaraidh MacThòmais” 268.

²³¹ See for example *Gairm* 9 (Autumn 1954), *Gairm* 13 (Autumn 1955), *Gairm* 18 (Winter 1956), *Gairm* 27 (Spring 1959), *Gairm* 30 (Winter 1959), *Gairm* 32 (Winter 1960), and others.

²³² “Air an Spiris,” *Gairm* 47 (Summer 1964). Signed by Ruaraidh MacThòmais only.

In contrast to the hidden messages of “Uiseag”, “Anns a’ Bhalbh Mhadainn” and “Cainnt nan Oghaichean”, the discussion of Gaelic and its plight in “Dùn nan Gall” (Donegal) is much more open:

Far a bheil a’ Ghàidhlig sgrìobht air na creagan
an sin dh’fhan i,
is pàisdean luideagach ga caitheamh,
a stiallan sgaoilte air na rubhachan an iar,
os cionn na mara
far a bheil grian na h-Eireann a’ dol sìos,
is grian Ameireagaidh ag èirigh le èigheachd ’s caitheam.

Cha bheathaich feur a’ chànain seo,
chan fhàs i sultmhor an guirt no ’n iodhlainn;
fòghnaidh dhi beagan coirce ’s eòrna,
cuirear grad fhuadachadh oirr’ leis a’ chruithneachd;
chan iarr i ach, cleas nan gobhar, a bhith sporghail
os cionn muir gorm, air na bideanan biorach.²³³

*Where Gaelic is written on the rocks
there it has lived,
and ragged children use it;
its shreds are scattered on the western highlands,
above the sea,
where the sun of Ireland goes down
and the sun of America rises with exultant clamour.*

*Grass does not nourish this language,
it does not grow fat in fields or cornyards;
a little oats and barley suffices it,
wheat quickly frightens it away;
all it asks is to clamber, like the goats,
on sharp rocky pinnacles, above the blue sea.*

Here, as often, one can detect bitter irony on Thomson’s part: what has often been presented as intrinsic, fundamental features of the language – its preference for a “meagre diet” and its strong link with the natural environment – are more likely the preconceptions of the people who deem Gaelic unsuitable for the modern era and who refuse to see it in a different light.

Gus an tog a’ chlann luideagach leoth’ i
air bàta-smùid a Shasainn,
no a Ghlaschu, far a faigh i bàs,
an achlais a peathar –

²³³ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 102-103.

Gàidhlig rìoghail na h-Albann 's na h-Eireann
'na h-ìobairt-rèite air altair beairteis.²³⁴

*Until the ragged children carry it away with them
on the steamer to England,
or to Glasgow, where it dies
in its sister's arms –
the royal language of Scotland and of Ireland
become a sacrifice of atonement on the altar of riches.*

When the rugged children leave for Glasgow or England and take the language with them, it cannot survive and perishes in the arms of its sister, meaning the closely related Irish Gaelic²³⁵ (spoken by the substantial Irish minority in Glasgow), implying that those who immigrated to the Lowlands or to England for economic advancement often dropped the language, so that it would not hinder their advance. As Whyte notes:

All languages survive through a process of constant transformation. For Gaelic, this should have meant the evolution of an accepted standard, phonetic and lexical change, even bastardisation, and the creation of a modern vocabulary through borrowing or coining neologisms. Reading “Dùn nan Gall” hurts so much because we recognize that Gaelic has indeed been this, but that if it continues in the same way, incapable of surviving urbanisation, economic change or the arrival of prosperity, there can truly be no hope.²³⁶

Eadar Samhradh is Foghar closes with one of Thomson's most famous and critically acclaimed poems,²³⁷ “Cisteachan-laighe” (Coffins). According to Byrne, this is both a “superbly constructed meditation on death, childhood solipsism and adult perception, and a chilling indictment of the education system's corrosion of Gaelic identity.”²³⁸ The poem is also remarkable in its successful combination of subtle form, sensual immediacy and vivid imagery with political commentary.

According to the poet himself, it was inspired by his maternal grandfather who lived in Keose and worked as joiner and coffin maker, but, as Thomson recalled, it “was not written

²³⁴ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 102-103.

²³⁵ The connection between the plight of the Gaels in Scotland and Ireland reminds one William Livingstone's “Eirinn a' Gul” (Ireland Weeping). Thomson also called for cooperation with Ireland and inspiration from some of the Irish language initiatives on numerous occasions in *Gairm*.

²³⁶ Whyte, “Derick Thomson: Reluctant Symbolist” 4.

²³⁷ For instances of high praise for “Cisteachan-laighe”, see Iain Crichton Smith, “*Creachadh na Clàrsaich*”, *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 14:1 (1983): 137; Whyte, “Derick Thomson: The Recent Poetry”; and Byrne, “Monsters and Goddesses”.

²³⁸ Byrne, “Monsters and Goddesses” 178.

until about thirty years after my grandfather's death in the mid-thirties (1930s). What sparked off the writing of the poem was the publication in 1963 of the 1961 Census figure for Gaelic speakers, which showed quite a considerable drop from previous census figures in 1951."²³⁹ The contact with English and earlier with Scots has been affecting Gaelic for centuries, and the language started to recede as early as in the twelfth century. Yet, as Thomson points out, behind the border contact with English, "there were the depths of Gaelic country." In the twentieth century, however, he notices

[...] a sense in which we can see these contacts taking place at borders which have retreated perceptibly to the west and the north over the centuries, and in such a series we would place the twentieth-century contacts in the far west of the country, in the Western Isles. This is much the same as saying that English influence has penetrated to all parts of the Gaelic area. There is now no linguistic hinterland to which the Gaelic writer can retire, except for that hinterland of the imagination which can be summoned up at times; though it too needs its defences.²⁴⁰

One of the important factors behind this attrition was the 1872 Education (Scotland) Act which effectively banned Gaelic from schools. As MacKinnon points out, the act was passed "without recognition that the Highlands [and Islands] were an area of particular linguistic significance within a national education system" and no specific references to Gaelic were contained in it.²⁴¹ It is from the end of the nineteenth century, in MacKinnon's opinion, that "the survival of Gaelic faced its most crucial challenge: the use of the schools to rid society of what was termed by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools, 'the Gaelic nuisance'."²⁴²

Such pressure on the part of the authorities was still felt strongly in the first half of the twentieth century and in some opinions continued to be applied, although more subtly and with less open hostility, in the second half.²⁴³ Children were discouraged from using Gaelic in schools, in some cases punished for speaking it, and it was as late as in the 1930s that the use of a punishment device called "maide crochaidh" (hanging stick) which was a humiliating symbol hung around a child's neck for speaking Gaelic, was reported in Lewis.²⁴⁴ It was only after the 1918 Education Act (Scotland) was passed that Gaelic gained recognition in law but,

²³⁹ Thomson, "Poets in Conversation," *Taking You Home* 100.

²⁴⁰ Thomson, *An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry* 250.

²⁴¹ Kenneth MacKinnon, *Gaelic: Past and Future Prospect* (Edinburgh: Saltire Society, 1991) 74.

²⁴² MacKinnon 74.

²⁴³ For a personal account, see the essay "Race against the Dying Of," *Chapman* 35-36 (1990) by the poet Aonghas MacNeacail.

²⁴⁴ MacKinnon 75.

as MacKinnon notes, due to its “vagueness and brevity,” this piece of legislation had very little real impact.²⁴⁵

The poem opens with a very specific, detailed image, a childhood memory brought about by a sensual perception:

Duin' àrd, tana
's fiasag bheag air,
's locair 'na làimh:
gach uair theid mi seachad
air bùth-shaoirsneachd sa' bhaile,
's a thig gu mo chuinnlean fàileadh na min-sàibh,
thig gu mo chuimhne cuimhne an àit ud,
le na cisteachan-laighe,
na h-ùird 's na tairgean,
na saibh 's na sgeilbean,
is mo sheanair crom,
is sliseag bho shliseag ga locradh
bhon bhòrd thana lom.²⁴⁶

*A tall thin man
with a short beard,
and a plane in his hand:
whenever I pass
a joiner's shop in the city,
and the scent of sawdust comes to my nostrils,
memories return of that place,
with the coffins,
the hammers and nails,
saws and chisels,
and my grandfather, bent,
planing shavings
from a thin, bare plank.*

The speaker mentions only one kind of wooden item his grandfather used to make: coffins. This indicates the main preoccupation of the poem, which is death, on many levels – death of the speaker's grandfather, death of his childhood innocence, premonition of his own death, death of language and culture, and death as a general phenomenon determining human existence.

Mus robh fhios agam dè bh' ann bàs;
beachd, bloigh fios, boillsgeadh
den dorchadas, fathann den t-sàmhchair.

²⁴⁵ MacKinnon 72.

²⁴⁶ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 122-123.

'S nuair a sheas mi aig uaigh,
là fuar Earraich, cha dainig smuain
thugam air na cisteachan-laighe
a rinn esan do chàch:
'sann a bha mi 'g iarraidh dhachaigh,
far am biodh còmhradh, is tea, is blàths.²⁴⁷

*Before I knew what death was;
or had any notion, a glimmering
of the darkness, a whisper of the stillness.
And when I stood at his grave,
on a cold Spring day, not a thought
came to me of the coffins
he made for others:
I merely wanted home
where there would be talk, and tea, and warmth.*

As Whyte suggests, “it is so successful because the very process or attribution of meaning has been woven into the poem itself.”²⁴⁸ The notion of baring and shaving, removing layers of course does not apply to the wooden material only in the poem, it also concerns the life of his grandfather, from which year after year is shaved, his own childhood innocence, from which experience removes one shaving after another, his own life, and also the diminishing numbers of Gaelic speakers in the final stanza:

Is anns an sgoil eile cuideachd,
san robh saoir na h-inntinn a' locradh,
cha tug mi 'n aire do na cisteachan-laighe,
ged a bha iad 'nan suidhe mun cuairt orm;
cha do dh'aithnich mi 'm brèid Beurla,
an liomh Gallda bha dol air an fhiodh,
cha do leugh mi na facail air a' phràis,
cha do thuig mi gu robh mo chinneadh a' dol bàs.
Gus an dainig gaoth fhuar an Earraich-sa
a locradh a' chridhe;
gus na dh'fhairich mi na tairgean a' dol tromham,
's cha shlànaich tea no còmhradh an cràdh.²⁴⁹

*And in the other school also,
where the joiners of the mind were planing,
I never noticed the coffins,
though they were sitting all round me;
I did not recognise the English braid,*

²⁴⁷ Creachadh na Clàrsaich 122-123.

²⁴⁸ Whyte, “Derick Thomson: Reluctant Symbolist” 4.

²⁴⁹ Creachadh na Clàrsaich 122-123.

*the Lowland varnish being applied to the wood,
I did not read the words on the brass,
I did not understand that my race was dying.
Until the cold wind of this Spring came
to plane the heart;
until I felt the nails piercing me,
and neither tea nor talk will heal the pain.*

The “joiners of the mind” in the “other school” are the education authorities striving to plane Gaelic off the children’s brains and hearts, and the children sitting in the school desks thus become coffins in which their dying culture and language are going to be buried. The coffins are adorned with English braid, the varnish applied to the wood is “Gallda”, meaning both “Lowland” and “foreign, alien, non-native”. The speaker as a boy did not understand what was happening to his people and only realised the enormity of the loss as an adult.

In this line, Thomson translates the word “cinneadh” as “race” and it is indeed used in that sense in modern Gaelic (for example, racism is “gràin-cinnidh”, lit. “hatred of race”), but its meaning in Gaelic, according to Dwelly, includes also “clan, tribe, surname, relations, kin, kindred.” The situation in the poem concerns schooling and education, not misalliance of the Gaels with the English in marriage.²⁵⁰ What the speaker mourns here is not the disappearance of racial purity – which would anyway be difficult to imagine in the Gaelic context – but the death of language and culture. These are not a birthright, but can be achieved (as well as lost) and adopted, and Thomson’s vision of Gaelic Scotland was open to these newcomers, to Gaels by choice and decision.

3.3 *An Rathad Cian* (1970)

An Rathad Cian (The Far Road), Thomson’s third collection, which appeared only three years after *Eadar Samhradh is Foghar*, marks a radical departure from the structure of the previous two volumes – it contains only the eponymous numbered sequence of fifty-six poems. It is devoted solely to his native isle of Lewis and it addresses the island in various guises – as a stone, boat, or a loom –, using mostly local imagery. It is a deeply personal and introspective collection, but in its all-pervasive concern with the island it also addresses some political

²⁵⁰ Thomson’s indignation at the school system which seeks to obliterate Gaelic or, at best, ignores it, is also the subject of his later poem published first in *Gairm* 84 (Autumn 1973) as “1872-1972” and subsequently as “Ceud Bliadhna sa Sgoil” (One Hundred Years in School) in *Saorsa agus an Iolaire*.

issues, especially the impact of religion on the local life and the social and economic situation in Lewis.

Ever since the Reformation in 1560, the Protestant, Calvinist forms of Christianity have been affecting life in Scotland and have become, in some attitudes, one of the “marks of Scottishness,” a “means of interpreting cultural and social realities in Scotland.”²⁵¹ However treacherous and limiting such an assertion of Calvinism as an essential trait of Scottish national character may be, the experience with radical Presbyterian Christianity has been one of the important features of life in most of the Gaelic-speaking areas in the Highlands and Islands.²⁵² According to John MacInnes, the Evangelical Movement “swept through the Highlands in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and wrought a fundamental transformation in the life of the tolerant, structurally Calvinist, spiritually lax Established Church of Scotland in the Gàidhealtachd”:

Those were the bitter years of the Clearances when the chaos that the break-up of every traditional society produces was intensified beyond endurance in the bewilderment of a people attacked by its own natural leaders. This broken community eagerly accepted the demands of a passionate and uncompromising faith. Here was a new dialectic, powerful enough to replace the deep loyalties of the traditional order. It was theology that now supplied an identity, and a world view of history, partly in millenarian terms.²⁵³

Since their establishment, the Free Church and its further offshoots have been arousing strong emotions and various myths and negative images became associated with them: they entered the popular consciousness as joy-killing institutions, opposed to the traditional Gaelic culture and art, forcing all life to freeze on the Sabbath, and by its focus on the afterlife undermining resistance to the acts of social injustice committed against the Gaelic communities. In the memories and works of many Gaelic writers, including MacLean, Donald MacAulay, and Iain Crichton Smith, the influence of the Church often emerges as oppressive and disheartening, the reality was more complex.²⁵⁴

²⁵¹ Whyte, *Modern Scottish Poetry* 15. In the introduction, Whyte warns against the dangers of approaching Calvinism as homogeneous, constant and unique to the Scottish experience.

²⁵² For a very thorough and even discussion of the topic, John MacInnes, “Religion in Gaelic Society,” *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness LII* (1980-1982): 222-242.

²⁵³ MacInnes, “A Radically Traditional Voice: Sorley MacLean and the Evangelical Background,” *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2006) 384-385. The role of Gaelic-speaking Catholic islands and enclaves in preserving the language, vital as it has been, continues to be overlooked.

²⁵⁴ It was the Church, as both MacInnes and MacLean stress, that ensured the continuity of Gaelic prose, and for some time, the Church was the only major social institution which treated Gaelic “not as if it were a dialect but as a language, and used as a medium of exposition on a par with any other language in that context.” MacInnes, “Religion in Gaelic Society,” *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal* 426. The Free Church established hundreds of schools in

As has already been mentioned in relation to “Cruaidh?” (Steel?), Thomson himself had an ambiguous relationship to the religious landscape of Lewis. His parents were members of the moderate Church of Scotland, of which his father was an Elder, but the office did not prevent him from attending ceilidhs and campaigning for Gaelic.²⁵⁵ He of course could not help being exposed to the more radical churches in Lewis: “I had already met both the spiritual and the pharisaical kinds of religion, and my views were forming quite definitely about both [in the 1930s]. Both were very strongly represented in Lewis, which is a place of extremes in any case, and my emotions are still apt to swing from admiration to loathing in this context, whatever my mind says.”²⁵⁶

When asked whether he saw the sects as something deriving from the society, or something alien, Thomson confirmed he would regard “particularly the more contentious among religious sects as being very intrusive. [...] It seemed particularly obscene to me, in a small community like Lewis, that you would get several warring sects, you know, when they could be getting on with something more positive.”²⁵⁷ In the same interview, Thomson also mentions his brief childhood desire to become a minister which was however quickly replaced by a calling to become a bus driver.²⁵⁸

One of Thomson’s main objections was that the evangelical churches often strove to suppress the traditional folk culture and in consequence weakened language (see the discussion of “Cruaidh?”). Calvinism also helped to sever the strong cultural links with Catholic Ireland.²⁵⁹ This point of view is expressed most strongly in “Am Bodach Ròcais” (The Scarecrow).

The poem describes a situation when a black-haired man dressed in black, i.e. an evangelical minister or preacher, arrives to a ceilidh house where people are sitting round the fire and engage in traditional community amusements. The image of the minister draws on a

the Highlands and Islands and it also published two Gaelic periodicals: *An Fhianuis* (The Witness / The Testimony) and *Eaglais Shaor na h-Alba* (The Free Church of Scotland). Donald Meek proposes a thesis that the Highland wings of Scottish Presbyterian churches adopted a largely pragmatic approach to Gaelic language and culture, using those aspects of the native culture which they could profit from in their mission, and rejecting others which were seen as contrary to their efforts. Donald Meek, “Saints and Scarecrows: The Churches and Gaelic Culture in the Highlands since 1560,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 14 (1996): 20-22.

²⁵⁵ Thomson, “A Man Reared in Lewis” 125.

²⁵⁶ Thomson, “A Man Reared in Lewis” 131.

²⁵⁷ Whyte, “Interviews with Ruaraidh MacThòmais” 263-264.

²⁵⁸ Whyte, “Interviews with Ruaraidh MacThòmais” 263-264.

²⁵⁹ “Introduction,” *The Future of the Highlands* 12.

tradition of portraying the representatives of evangelical churches in the Highlands as sinister ominous dark figures who kill all joy.²⁶⁰

An oidhch' ud
thàinig am bodach-ròcais dhan taigh-cheilidh:
fear caol àrd dubh
is aodach dubh air.
Shuidh e air an t-sèis
is thuit na cairtean às 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 às a' cheòl.²⁶¹

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

The poem has an almost filmic quality to it or it could very easily serve as a subject for a painting: the moment the black figure enters the cosy house, everything freezes, cards fall down, and the chatter dies out. In spite of the derogatory title of “The Scarecrow”, the man’s presence is powerful and transformative – the music loses its goodness, all the activities cease. The newcomer also gives, not only takes away, yet the gifts prove destructive:

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.²⁶²

²⁶⁰ For a discussion of this image, see Donald Meek, “Saints and Scarecrows: the Churches and Gaelic Culture in the Highlands since 1560”.

²⁶¹ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 140-141.

²⁶² *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 140-141.

*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.*

The strength of the poem lies in the striking visual image it conveys and also in the ironic correlations between the traditional folk culture and the imported culture of evangelical Christianity: the richness of Gaelic songs is replaced by a new song, which is an echo of Psalm 40,²⁶³ the tales of ancient kings and heroes by Biblical stories, and the community and its solidarity by fragments of Calvinist philosophy.²⁶⁴ The word “sprùilleach”, i.e. crumbs, fragments or refuse, indicates that what the scarecrow brings is not even a proper philosophical system which would replace the traditional mind-set but debris which has been twisted and misinterpreted on the way.

The final image of the change from the homely fire in the middle of the ceilidh house which drew the people together and provided light and warmth for the assembled community to the individual searing bonfires of fear of damnation in the breast of each individual, a divisive flame of fanaticism, is an especially powerful one.²⁶⁵ As Meek puts it, “the scarecrow destroys the collective conscience of the community, and puts the weight of responsibility on the individual conscience.”²⁶⁶ The bonfire could also evoke the widespread image of a fire used for burning musical instruments by converts seized by the evangelical zeal.²⁶⁷ The relation of Calvinism to traditional culture also underpins the short poem “Ged a Thàinig Calvin” (Although Calvin Came).

The poem “Is Dubh a Choisich Thu Latha” (Black You Walked through the Day) addresses Lewis in the guise of a pious woman mourning the deaths of local men drowned during the wreck of An Iolaire (see the discussion of “Rannan air an Sgrìobhadh as dèidh an

²⁶³ “Is òran nuadh do chuir am bheul,” *The Gaelic Psalms 1694* (Lochgilthead: James M. S. Annan, 1934) 68. I realised this reference thanks to Meek, “Saints and Scarecrows” 5.

²⁶⁴ However, it is important to note, as Meek notes, that the traditional ceilidhs prevailed in the Highland society at least until the end of the nineteenth century, and they did not die out because of the intrusions of the church but because of social change, such as clearance, famine, and emigration, and spread of mass media. Meek, “Saints and Scarecrows” 9-10.

²⁶⁵ Thomson’s own commentary on the poem explains these substitutions: “[...] warm and homely and natural and traditional things are being destroyed, or there are people who want to destroy them, looking at it from a different and, as I would see it, foreign, outside standpoint, and are quite prepared to sweep away that fire in the centre of the floor, taken as a symbol of that old society, the ceilidh-house society, are willing to sweep that away and to put a fire, but this time a destructive fire, right in people’s breasts, the fire of Hell for example, Hellfire and the fear of it, loisgeach, a burning bonfire.” Whyte, “Interviews with Ruaraidh MacThòmais” 277.

²⁶⁶ Meek, “Saints and Scarecrows” 5.

²⁶⁷ For a discussion of this image, see Meek, “Saints and Scarecrows” 18.

ath Chogaidh”). The title refers to the traditional song “Is Dubh a Choisich Mi ’n Oidhche”, a lament in which a man tells of coming to see his sweetheart, only to find that she is dead, and he pleads with God to prevent him from going mad with grief. Thomson himself recorded the song, so the echo is surely intentional.²⁶⁸

The disaster had a profound effect on the community, as it killed a substantial part of the male population in some areas, and also presented a great challenge to the ideas of Calvinist theology. The woman might interpret the terrible ironical and useless deaths of men who survived the world war as God’s decision, but this could, according to the speaker, actually be devil’s talk.: “Is thubairt thu gur h-e toil Dhè a bh’ ann / gun deach am bàta sin air na Biastan, / a’ diochuimhneachadh na chual’ thu às a’ chùbainn: / gun robh Abharsair nan iomadh riochd a sàs unnad” (And you said it was God’s will / that the ship went on the Beasts, / forgetting what you heard from the pulpit: / that the Adversary of many guises was working on you).²⁶⁹

A more humorous and tongue-in-cheek take on the island’s religion is presented in the poem “A’ Cluich air Football le Fàidh” (Playing Football With a Prophet). The poem begins with the speaker’s statement that if one has ever played football with a prophet, it is an unforgettable experience, and continues:

’Sann air fàidhean an Aonaidh a b’ eòlaich mi,
ach thuig mi, gu math tràth,
gu robh fàidhean anns an Eaglais Shaoir cuideachd,
fàidhean ann am Barraigh
agus eadhon anns an Eilean Sgitheanach,
agus beag air bheag thuig mi
nach robh tròcair an Tighearna air a cuingealachadh
ri creud no ceàrnaidh
no eadhon cànan.
’S e ’m peacadh as motha
a bhith càrnadh a’ ghràis gu lèir ’na do chliabh fhèin.²⁷⁰

*I was better acquainted with Church of Scotland prophets,
but understood, quite young,
that there were prophets in the Free Church too,
prophets in Barra,
and even in Skye,
and bit by bit I came to know
that the Lord’s mercy is not confined*

²⁶⁸ Recording nr. 21229, *Tobar an Dualchais*, <<http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/21229/1>> 20 October 2016.

²⁶⁹ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 136-137.

²⁷⁰ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 134-137.

*by creed or region,
or even language.
The greatest sin
is to pile all of the Grace in your own creel.*

The surprising discovery that prophets can be found in other churches than the established one (even among the Catholic clergy!) and in other places than Lewis is a satirical reference to the sectarian strains in Highland religion and also to the rivalry between individual islands.²⁷¹ The final conviction about the unlimited range and reach of divine grace, expressed through the particular and very day-to-day image of the creel, as if mercy came into the world in the shape of peat turfs, is at the same time amusing and poetically convincing.

The title of the poem “Dùsgadh” (Re-Awakening) refers to the great number of religious awakenings which affected Lewis. The speaker visits a cemetery and takes a stock of people buried there who attempted to “awaken” Lewis: a proponent of Calvinism, a follower of the famous nineteenth-century English preacher Spurgeon, a socialist from “red Clyde”, and a Marxist. The speaker then asks for a preacher who would find a text in the ancient rocks of Lewis, in its peat and the blooming machair, “nar cainnt fhìn” (in our own tongue).²⁷² This is not a plea for a new religious movement but for a new sort of civic spirituality which would nurture the local traditions, history, and language, rather than suppress them.

Apart from religion, the collection addresses other political and historical issues. As Crichton Smith noted in his review of *An Rathad Cian*, “Thomson is generating more sociological comments in this book than in any of his previous ones as he realises more clearly than ever the scale of the attack on island values.”²⁷³ The sequence contains several satirical poems aimed at political and social issues in Lewis, and criticism is directed both to the outside, i.e. to the Scottish Lowlands and England, for their intrusions into the Gàidhealtachd, their exploitation of the area and their lack of concern for its well-being, and also inside, at Gaels themselves, for being unable to resist these pressures and for sinking into passivity.

²⁷¹ “The Lewis people regarded the inhabitants of any other island as strange and different. That’s one of the byproducts of insularity in any case, but Lewis people regarded the Harris folk as strange and backward. In that connection, I remember many years ago, I was teaching in Aberdeen, and we had a Swiss student with us for a session, and I was telling, partly with my tongue in my cheek, but you know he was asking about conditions in the island and was exaggerating this difference between Lewis and Harris, and he asked me quite seriously after a bit of this, I retracted it all of course later you see, and he asked me quite seriously: ‘And when did the wheel come to Harris?’ So that was in the spirit of the kind of banter that used to go on.” Whyte, “Interviews with Ruaraidh MacThòmais” 267.

²⁷² *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 150-151.

²⁷³ Iain Crichton Smith, “Review of *An Rathad Cian*,” *Lines Review* 36 (March 1971): 44.

Several of these poems address the withering of Gaelic. The poem “Fàs is Taise” (“High Summer”, lit. “Growth and Moistness”) starts with the description of a peaceful scene in the countryside. Everything in nature is moist and growing. After the lush opening comes the startling question “Cò chanadh gu bheil am baile seo ri uchd bàis?” (Who could guess this village is at death’s door?). Since it is apparently still inhabited, even by young families, it needs to be the death of something else than the local people:

Tha nighean bheag, le sùilean sgèanach,
 a’ cluiche air tricycle.
 Dh’fhalbh an liùdhag
 is thàinig an dolla à Hong Kong,
 is falbhaidh tusa cuideachd
 air slighe an fhortain ’s an TV
 ’s bidh a’ chreathail a’ breothadh anns an t-sabhal ùr le mullach zinc air.²⁷⁴

*A little girl, with frightened eyes,
 plays on a tricycle.
 No rag-doll now –
 plastic from Hong Kong –
 and you in turn will take
 the road of fortune and TV,
 and the cradle will rot in the new barn with its zinc roof.*

The words such as “tricycle” and “zinc” stand out of the poem, and Thomson pointed out that the old word for a doll, “liùdhag”, is contrasted with the borrowed “doll”, and the contrast is even starker as the doll is manufactured and imported, not home-made. The poem describes “the break-up of Gaelic tradition on the island, not the break-up of Lewis itself or Lewis society, but certainly of a Gaelic one.”²⁷⁵ The place can be lush and green and full of natural life, but the cradle, a symbol of continuing life, is rotting in a barn sealed with a new zinc roof.

Similarly to “Cainnt nan Oghaichean”, the criticism here is not directed at technological advancement such as zinc roofs, but on the suffocating and deadening effect of the rapid changes on the weakened Gaelic world. When commenting on *An Rathad Cian*, Thomson mentioned:

I think often my strong preoccupation was of course with the Gaelic society of Lewis, and from that point of view, the move to a different type of linguistic

²⁷⁴ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 140-141.

²⁷⁵ Whyte, “Interviews with Ruaraidh MacThòmais” 279.

society seemed to me a death. But as you know, looking at it from a different viewpoint, if you like less emotional, a more rational standpoint, I see the place continue with a different kind of society, as it happens in all sorts of places when linguistic change happens.²⁷⁶

This ability and willingness to see that the possible death of Gaelic, tragic as it may be to the poet himself, is not the end of all life, and the awareness of other languages suffering the same fate, complements Thomson's determination to ensure Gaelic survives as a living and competitive language.

Criticism of damaging outside influences is the main subject of the poem "Cuthag is Gocaman" (Cuckoo and the Look-out Man). The first line, "hileabhag, hoileabhag, ho oro ì" (all nonsense words), establishes, as Thomson explains in a footnote, a link to eighteenth-century songs "put in the mouth of mavis, etc., in praise of particular districts in the Highlands."²⁷⁷ One example would be "Smeòrach Chlann Dhòmhnail" (Mavis of Clan Donald) by Iain MacCodrum (ca 1693-1779), a North Uist poet whom Sir James MacDonald appointed his official bard. MacCodrum was an ardent Jacobite and a close friend of Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair. The pattern of questions and answers is also reminiscent of traditional song. The important point is that the blame is put not only on England but also on Lowland Scotland, stressing the fact that the Gaelic areas have for long been under attack not only from the UK but also from the Scottish capital.

Other poems focus on economic issues. "Ochan, a Dhòmhnail Chaim" sees the root of the crisis in the internal mismanagement of the Gàidhealtachd and the laziness of the people. It addresses Dòmhnall Cam (c1560-c1640), the chief of MacAulays in the early modern period and a subject of many folk stories. As Thomson explained in an interview in relation to the poem, "Dòmhnall Cam was regarded as the leader, the symbol of the MacAulays who lived in Uig, their base was in Uig, and there was a saying about him. It was said, somebody said to Dòmhnall Cam 'Ma ghlaidheas tu beanntan Uige, gleidhidh beanntan Uige thu', 'If you stick to the Uig hills, the Uig hills will protect you,' you see, the two senses of gleidheadh there, and here it was a snide comment on the modern system of living on grants and subsidies, where you don't have to make any effort, you can just do what the rest do."²⁷⁸ The speaker assures the chieftain he would have ended with a house from the Highland and Island Development Board and a subsidy from the Crofters' Commission.

²⁷⁶ Whyte, "Interviews with Ruaraidh MacThòmais" 280.

²⁷⁷ Thomson, footnote to "32 Cuckoo and Look-out Man," *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 153.

²⁷⁸ Whyte, "Interviews with Ruaraidh MacThòmais" 275.

Both in “Cuthag is Gocaman” and “Ochan, a Dhòmhnail Chaim”, the references are very specific and a detailed knowledge of the situation is required – they work best when read alongside the 1960s *Gairm* editorials. Here, Thomson comes, in terms of employing specific references that would be clear to those involved in the situation, to traditional Gaelic satire, as practised by Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair and others. The link is strengthened by vocabulary and formal echoes of older poetry.

“Na Tràlairean” (The Trawlers) continues in the satirical vein and brings together economics and education. It starts with a plain statement that trawlers are boats that pull fishing nets behind them along the sea-bed, which they sweep clean. Fishing with trawlers is naturally more effective than individual fishing boats which just cast nets, but can in consequence be damaging both to the sea environment and to the local economy. Again, there is the image of outside intrusions threatening the economy of the Gàidhealtachd and culture, for it is evident from Thomson’s journalism he realised that there would be no cultural and linguistic revival without sound economy in the region. The speaker then ironically lists a number of local subjects which he would like the Secretary of State to consider, such as schools in Uig, a tweed-mill in Shawbost, or a seaweed factory in Keos, but which by implication are unlikely to receive attention. The trawler, as a tool of exploitative, short-sighted economy that drains a place out for a quick profit and leaves it barren, could be interpreted as an emblem of the attitude of the Westminster government to Scotland and of the Lowland bodies to the Gàidhealtachd.

The poem ends on a note of false consolation, imitating the way the government and the various development boards address the locals and try to hoodwink them into thinking they are not actually being robbed of their resources: “Ach, O chlann, na biodh eagal oirbh, / tha na bàtaichean-freiceadain gur dìon, / gheibh sibh adagan gu leòr, / mas e adagan tha dhith oirbh, / O adagan!” (But, O children, have no fear, / the Fishery Cruisers will protect you, / you will get plenty haddock, / if it is haddock you want, / O haddocks!).²⁷⁹ The locals can get food enough from the trawlers, but other sources of sustenance they may require, such as local schools, are disregarded.

There are also several poems focusing on the poor and downtrodden of Lewis, such as “Murdag Mhòr” and “Bha do Shùilean Ciùin” (Your Eyes Were Gentle, that Day). In the latter, the speaker addresses an old “every-woman” whom he imagines walking the roads of

²⁷⁹ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 150-151.

Russia and sitting on the banks of the Ganges.²⁸⁰ By this address, although the literal reference is to China, Tibet, and India, he commemorates some of the historical sins committed against the Gaelic people – the land machinations, contemptuous attitudes to the traditional culture, obliteration of the language, and the abandonment of the poor in their need during the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century evictions. In spite of its international scope, the poem ends with a distinct island image – the sins of the fathers are piled on the woman’s back in a creel, as if they were slices of peat, with crumbs of grace falling through its apertures.

When commenting on the poem, Thomson mentions that he employed the figure of the “archetypal old woman”, seen in Tibet, Russia, India, or Scotland, who is contrasted with representatives of imperialism who would seek to obliterate the language of the neighbouring community.²⁸¹ Camels which receive the Lord’s inheritance while people are dying of consumption are intended as parallel to sheep in the Highlands at the time of the Clearances. The strange aspect of the poem is the inclusion of China and the reference to the obliteration of China’s language (which one?), overlooking the Chinese occupation of Tibet and the brutal attempts to obliterate the Tibetan culture and traditions. Logically, China should have been included in the imperial camp.

These politically charged poems are not usually associated with *An Rathad Cian* – the sequence is famous mostly for poems discussing the different shades of internal and external exile, and those in which the spell of the native place is at the same time reinforced and overcome. However, they form an important layer of Thomson’s portrayal of Lewis, and they naturally continue topics discussed in the previous collection and also herald imagery, subjects, and strategies which will be developed in the following ones.

3.4 *Saorsa agus an Iolaire* (1977)

According to the cover blurb on Thomson’s next collection *Saorsa agus an Iolaire* (Freedom and the Eagle, 1977), “sann anns an àm tha làthair a tha mòran de na dàin seo air an suidheachadh, agus tha iad cuideachd a’ dèanamh togail ris an àm tha teachd” (most of these poems are situated in the present and they also look forward to the future).²⁸² Published seven years after *An Rathad Cian*, it marks Thomson’s move from the past to the present, from the personal to the public, and from the Gàidhealtachd to Scotland as a whole.

²⁸⁰ Thomson mentions he developed a great interest in Tibet and India, and the challenge of the Everest when at Aberdeen. “A Man Reared in Lewis” 137.

²⁸¹ Whyte, “Interviews with Ruaraidh MacThòmais” 265.

²⁸² Cover summary on the first (and only) edition of *Saorsa agus an Iolaire*.

It is arguably the most overtly political collection he ever published, which has also been noted by contemporary reviewers and later critics. Iain Crichton Smith observed that it contains more “sustained overtly political poetry” than Thomson has written in the past,²⁸³ and Whyte points out that in a number of poems in the collection, “the political indignation, and a willingness to fight, to search and to hope are even more explicit” than in the previous collections.²⁸⁴ This is not surprising given the developments in the 1970s: North Sea Oil was discovered, the SNP was on the rise (in 1974, eleven candidates of the Scottish National Party were elected to Westminster, an unprecedented success for the party), and Thomson was involved in the campaign for the General Elections of 1974 as well as for local elections.²⁸⁵

There is also a notable movement away from explaining – while the previous collections usually guided the readers at least by context, in *Saorsa agus an Iolaire*, the tone is much more obscure and less reader-friendly. In these cases, Thomson’s own English translations included in the collected poems become helpful in establishing which meaning the author wanted to put forward, which should nonetheless not limit the possible interpretations. *Saorsa agus an Iolaire* is thus Thomson’s most overtly political collection; however, it uses a variety of formal strategies such as wordplay, allegory, and allusions to historical context to express a covert meaning. It also introduces a new formal preference of Thomson’s: the poem-sequence. *An Rathad Cian* was a book-length sequence, but in this collection, several longer poems appear, such as “An Turas” (The Journey), “An Tobar,”²⁸⁶ “An Iolaire” (The Eagle) and “An Crann” (The Plough), allowing Thomson to pursue one theme at greater length and approach it from different perspectives.

The very first item, a Gaelic poem with an English title, ““Who Are the Scots?””, indicates one of the vital questions of the collection. The title comes in inverted commas, implying that it is a repeated question which may be asked by the Scots themselves, or perhaps by those who are not Scots and wonder about the sudden rise of nationalism in the

²⁸³ Iain Crichton Smith, “Review of *Saorsa agus an Iolaire*,” *Lines Review* 65 (June, 1978): 27.

²⁸⁴ Whyte, “Derick Thomson: Reluctant Symbolist” 6.

²⁸⁵ MacDonald, “The Poetry of Derick Thomson” 653.

²⁸⁶ There are two poems with the title “An Tobar” in Thomson’s published oeuvre. The first one, which has been discussed in 3.2, is clearly a starting point for the sequence of twelve shorter poems in *Saorsa agus an Iolaire*, as the references to “eyes behind the bracken” indicate. The difference between the two well poems is symptomatic of the development of Thomson’s writing. While the first “An Tobar” is a short, carefully-wrought poem in which the symbolical meaning is not obvious but not difficult to fathom either, and works just as well without any added meaning, the second “An Tobar” is much more oblique and elusive. It would be possible to assign the same symbolic meaning to the well as in the first eponymous poem, but there is no clear evidence in the text that would support (or disqualify) such a reading. It seems that “An Tobar” would be closer, with its mysterious hints, dream-like qualities, uneasy and beautiful imagery, first-person narration and addresses of natural phenomena, to MacLean’s “Coilltean Ratharsair” (The Woods of Raasay) rather than to the consummate but clear first “An Tobar”.

1970s. It is also important to note that the title of the Gaelic original is in English, which strengthens the notion that it is a question asked by someone “from the outside”. The speaker of the poem, on the other hand, speaks from the “inside”, on behalf of “we”, presumably the national community.

Thainig fuachd an Earraich
anns na cnàmhan aosda againn,
deàrrsadh anns na cnuibheanan,
beagan de chrith anns na crògan,
's gun fhios carson
thòisich sinn a' bruidhinn air ar n-òige,
air an t-sealg a rinn sinn air an Fhoghar ud,
air a ruidhle dhanns sinn fo ghealach abachaidh an eòrna
air an aodach mheileabhaid
's air a' ghrèim làidir
roimhn a' ghrèim seo thàinig
a bhreith air sgamhan oirnn.

A' tionndadh nan grìogagan
air an t-seann mheileabhaid,
le na làmhan critheanach,
an crù air lapadh,
's ar n-uail anns a' chruan.²⁸⁷

*The Spring cold
penetrated our old bones,
our knuckles reddened
and our hands shook a little,
and not knowing why
we began to talk about our youth,
and the hunting we did that autumn,
the reel we danced beneath the harvest moon,
the velvet cloth
and the hard grip we had
before this pneumonia
gripped our lungs.*

*Turning the beads
on the old velvet
with shaky hands,
the blood thinning,
taking a pride in enamel.*

²⁸⁷ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 186-187.

It is an old community, and probably a pre-modern one, given the references to hunting and the dancing out in the open beneath the harvest moon (“gealach abachaidh an eòrna”). The references to velvet and beads indicate an embroidered relic, perhaps a Jacobite standard, and the overall image presents an old and weakening nation, ill and backward-looking, remembering, quite accidentally, the days of its youth and strength, taking pride in mementoes of the past. It could be an answer to the title question by the outsiders who perceive the Scottish nation as a relic of its heroic but now irrelevant past, or the answer of the Scots themselves who have internalised such a perception.

Other poems in *Saorsa agus an Iolair* abound in puns and wordplay and contain some references which imply a political meaning which nonetheless remains hard to fathom, such as “Alb’-Chalg” (Scots-Stab), where the indication is contained in the last line “Alb’-chalg a bh’ann – / cha dean Galla-phlâsd feum dha” (Scots-stab it was – foreign plaster doesn’t help it).²⁸⁸ The poem “Fuil” (Blood) may not seem political at first glance, but in connection with another item in the collection, “Rabhadh” (Warning), it is possible to argue a convincing political reading, for both poems mention labour and birth which is apparently not human, reminiscent of the apocalyptic vision of Yeats’s “Second Coming”, a poem Thomson knew well and translated into Gaelic. Again, it is the contextual reading which provides a key to interpreting these poems. In “Sgeulachd Albannach” (A Scottish Story), the political meaning must be inferred from a reference to the legend according to which Robert Bruce, while hiding after the defeat at Methven and despondent, observed a spider continually remaking its web in a cave, and, drawing inspiration from the patient spider, Bruce decided to keep up his own tiring struggle and free Scotland from English rule.

Two of the long sequences engage with political topics, one of them with the imperial influence on Scotland, the latter with a vision of the successful national struggle. “An Iolair” (The Eagle) has been described by Whyte as an “overtly nationalistic sequence” drawing directly on medieval satire.²⁸⁹ The eagle stands for oppression and exploitation of the Gàidhealtachd in many guises, and the poem consists of a number of episodes showing its activities. As Stroh notes, the sequence “links its critique of modern intra-British imperialism in Scotland to the ancient precedent of Roman colonial occupation.”²⁹⁰

²⁸⁸ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 190-191. The title combines the Gaelic word for Scotland, Alba, and the word “calg”, which, according to Dwelly, means “awn; prickle, point; any sharp-pointed thing; sting; beard of corn; spear, shaft; arrow; sword”.

²⁸⁹ Whyte, “Derick Thomson: Reluctant Symbolist” 3.

²⁹⁰ Stroh 259.

At one point, the eagle-priest (“an iolar-shagart”) preaches complaisance and meekness, referring to the role of the churches in pacifying the people and turning their minds from their earthly grievances to otherworldly matters. When the eagle ministers talk together, Thomson makes them, in an enjoyably humorous touch, the ministers of the Big Nest and the Little Nest (Nead Mòr agus Nead Beag) – the names sound like actual Highland villages while keeping with the avian imagery. In another part, the chief eagle addresses chickens, representing the Gaels, announcing that he is their new landlord. There are also ducks, old Highland landlords, sitting in the parliament on the basis of their lineage. The final stanza concludes that only when the imperial eagle loses his grip will the prophesied strength return to the eagle of the wild – the golden eagle is one of Scotland’s national beasts, and Thomson uses it as a positive symbol of courage and national awareness, both at the end of this particular sequence and in later collections.²⁹¹

As the note to the English translation of the sequence “An Crann” (The Plough) explains, the word “crann” means “Cross / Mast / Lot / Harp-key / Saltire etc.”,²⁹² and all these meanings are employed in the sequence, it is also a euphemism for the male sexual organ.²⁹³ Thomson’s English translation is helpful in identifying which meaning he decides to put forward in each case, but it of course does not have the connotative richness of the original. First the, the crann is a plough in the country’s soil, in the second, it turns into a harp key, and the speaker remembers that his country’s harp had many tunes and that the tunes were many-layered, before the harp was smashed. Then the country turns into a living female body, the speaker’s lover, swelling, and only a birth can make it well again.

The fourth stanza articulates a challenge to thrust the plough deep to make the tillage efficient. In keeping with the agricultural imagery and the physical perception of the land, the speaker states his country has many wounds which the pine trees can never hide – it is possible the meaning of these pine trees hiding wounds is the same as that of MacLean’s pine trees in “Hallaig”, where they symbolise the new management of Raasay where pine trees supplanted the original wood and people were replaced with deer in a sporting estate. The vegetation hiding historical wounds is also reminiscent of Thomson’s own clearance poem “Srath Nabhair”.

²⁹¹ “Còmhlan nan Eun” (The Bird Company) from *Sùil air Fàire* presents a lighter touch on the allegorical bird poems from *Saorsa agus an Iolair*: the small Scottish birds, the crow, the cuckoo, and the duck are arguing and the speaker waits for the Scottish eagle to descend and chase away the timid birds – here, the image of the eagle assumes a thoroughly positive meaning.

²⁹² *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 208-209.

²⁹³ The poem “Fèill nan Crann” by the seventeenth-century poet Ruairidh MacMhuirich (known as An Clàrsair Dall, i.e. the Blind Harper) plays hilariously on the double meanings of the term. Thomson, an expert on older Gaelic literature, was surely aware of this precedent and likely inspired by it.

At one point, the poem assumes the tone and rhythm of a traditional satirical song, imagining the Saltire (An Crann) replacing the Union Jack, and the flag, on the basis of the nickname, is personified and suffers bumps and blushes. In the final stanza, the meaning of “crann” is cross and the national cause is imagined as a journey with a cross to Golgotha. According to Crichton Smith, it “seems to be saying that the Scots must choose their cross, that is the possibility of their freedom, not leaning on the past, not being mastered by propaganda or false religion.”²⁹⁴ The image of crucifixion and the nationalist cause is again made in the short poem “Creag is Boglach” (Rock and Quagmire).

Several poems in the collection refer to particular historical events. The poem “Ceud bliadhna sa sgoil” (One Hundred Years in School), first published in *Gairm* 84 in autumn 1973 under the title “1872-1972.” The dates suggest very clearly that the poem is a comment on the Education (Scotland) Act 1872 that effectively banished Gaelic from Scottish schools by not mentioning it at all as a language in which education could be carried out (see the discussion of “Cisteachan-laighe”). The poem opens with an ironic expression of wonder – even after a hundred years of schooling which was either openly hostile or not supportive to Gaelic, the Gaels have retained their language and self-awareness. Again, it is an identity based on language and culture, not on ethnicity.

Ceud bliadhna sa sgoil
 is sinn nar Gaidheil fhathast!
 Cò shaoileadh gum biodh an fhreumh cho rìghinn?
 Dhòirt iad eallach leabhraichean oirnn,
 is cànanan, eachdraidh choimheach,
 is saidheans, is chuir iad maidse riutha.
 O abair lasair [...]
 Is minig a chunna sinn craobh a chaidh a losgadh –
 A! ’sann le fun tha mi,
 na biodh eagal oirbh, a luchd-stiùiridh an fhoghlaim,
 a chomhairlichean na siorrachd, is a’ Bheurla cho math agaibh –
 a’ fàs –
 siud sibh, sguabaibh a’ chlann a Steòrnabhadh –
 nas braise.²⁹⁵

*A hundred years in school
 and we're Gaels still!
 Who would have thought the root was so tough?
 they poured a load of books on us,
 languages, foreign history,*

²⁹⁴ Iain Crichton Smith, “Review of *Saorsa agus an Iolaire*” 30.

²⁹⁵ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 198-199.

science, and put a match to them.
O what a blaze [...]
We have often seen a bush that was burnt –
I'm just joking,
have no fear, directors of education,
county councillors, with your fluent English-
growing –
that's right, centralise education in Stornoway –
faster.

The last sentence has a more specific implication in the Gaelic original. In literal translation, “*sguabaibh a' chlann a Steòrnabhagh*” means “sweep children to Stornoway”, referring to frequent closures of small local schools in Lewis and in the remote parts of the Gàidhealtachd in general and centralisation in the main towns, such as Stornoway, which is moreover a community that has for long been mostly English-speaking. Such arrangements provide less opportunities to keep Gaelic alive in the communities and lead to depopulation, for when schools close, families are more likely to move away and less likely to come in. The importance of local schooling for the preservation of Gaelic was also stressed in the *Gairm* editorials, for instance in *Gairm* 30 (Winter 1959) and *Gairm* 117 (Winter 1981).

Very specific references are needed to follow the poem “*Rìomadh*” (Adornment). In *Creachadh na Clàrsaich*, the English translation is accompanied by two footnotes (while in the original edition, there are none) – one explains the wordplay on ivory (“*ibhri*”) as material and Ivory as surname of the Sheriff of Invernessshire who brought the Glasgow police to Skye to suppress the crofters during the Battle of the Braes in 1882 and commanded the force of police and marines at Glendale in 1883,²⁹⁶ the other acquaints the reader with Donald Munro, the oppressive factor on the Lewis estate and one of the people responsible for provoking the Bernera Riots in 1874.

The poem describes a house adorned with foreign novelties and mementoes, Millet’s *Gleaners* on the wall next to a picture of the Callanish stones, and urges the addressees to adorn their mind in a similar manner: not only with a nodding acquaintance with the cornerstones of Western learning, such as Plato, Dante, Shakespeare and Voltaire, but also to know the great Gaelic poets Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, Iain Lom and John Smith of

²⁹⁶ The crofters demanded the return of the common grazing land and began grazing their cattle on this land in spite of court orders for their removal. Police action in January 1883 proved ineffective and eventually a government official was sent to Skye on board the navy gunboat HMS Jackal to conduct negotiations. Five crofters including MacPherson agreed to stand in a token trial. They were sentenced to two months in jail and became known as the “Glendale Martyrs”. They were all found not guilty and it was also agreed that a Royal Commission (later the Napier Commission) would be set up to investigate the crofters’ complaints, which eventually resulted in the ground-breaking Crofters Act of 1886. There is probably a typo in the footnote, as Ivory would have to command the force in 1883, not in 1886.

Iarsiadar.²⁹⁷ The memories of historical events and awareness of the great achievements of Gaelic art should prove an instigator against complaisance.

While “Ceud Bliadhna sa Sgoil” and “Riomadh” turn to the past, some poems are clearly related to particular contemporary events that have a bearing on Scotland’s present and future situation. “Dàn na Roinn-Eòrpa” (Poem of Europe) is set on a grey Glasgow street on 2nd January 1973, one day after the UK entered the European Community (Common Market). It mentions the Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath, who led the negotiations and strongly supported UK’s entry. However, the music has grown bitter, the celebrations are over, and the echo of the Ecclesiastes in “latha gu òl agus latha gu padhadh” (day for drinking and day for thirst) is another example of Biblical references and religious imagery that run through the sequence.²⁹⁸ The speaker is pleased with entering Europe, but not under the leadership of a Conservative politician and as part of the UK. The repeated plea to “think of other things” may be read as an urge to keep thinking of Scotland’s future that should combine independence and belonging in Europe.

The note under the English title of the poem “Earrach ’74” (Spring ’74) says “The year of the General Election... with hindsight, two General Elections”,²⁹⁹ reflecting the fact that the poem was written immediately after the first one, and when the collection was being prepared, Thomson wanted to acknowledge there turned out to be two of them: the first in February and the second in October. The first election ended up in a hung parliament, as it did not produce an overall majority in the House of Commons. In the second election, the Labour Party under the leadership of Harold Wilson won the majority, but only of three seats. The second election proved to be an unprecedented success for the SNP, which won 30% of Scottish popular vote and 11 out of 71 seats. The poem describes a tired land but perceives a life in the soil and quicklime.

“Ola” (Oil) is concerned with a turning event in Scottish history, with far-reaching consequences for the independence struggle. In 1969, oil was discovered in the North Sea. The first major discovery was the Montrose field in 1969, followed by the Forties field in 1970 and the Brent field in 1971. Extraction started six years later, in 1975, when Cruden Bay received the first supply of oil extracted from the North Sea. The SNP promptly launched the

²⁹⁷ All three were special favourites of Thomson, as is evident in his *Introduction to Gaelic Poetry*, both because of the quality and strength of their writing and for their political engagement.

²⁹⁸ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 192-193.

²⁹⁹ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 198-199.

campaign “It’s Scotland’s Oil” in 1973, realising, as Pittock notes, that the economic case for independence would be immensely strengthened.³⁰⁰

Thomson’s poem starts with a childhood memory:

Nuair a bha mi beag
bhiodh bodach a’ tighinn a bhùth mo sheanar
gach là laghail, a dh’iarraidh botal ola:
fear dhe na h-òighean glìce ’s dòcha –
cha deidhinn an urras nach e òigh a bh’ ann co-dhiù –
a bha cumail sùgh ris an t-siobhaig;
bodach ait, a ghàire faisg air,
ach beagan de dh’eagal air roimhn an dorch.³⁰¹

*When I was a boy
an old man used to come to my grandfather’s shop
every lawful day, for a bottle of oil:
one of the wise virgins perhaps –
a virgin in any case I daresay –
who kept the lamp-wick wet;
a jolly old man, ready to laugh,
but a little afraid of the dark.*

In the first part of the poem, Thomson uses his characteristic conversational tone and presents a benevolent, albeit humorous, portrait of the village character. The Biblical reference generates the humour of the poem – comparing the slightly eccentric old bachelor from Lewis who, afraid he might run out of oil, therefore buys it in excessive quantities to the wise virgins who took good care of their lamps is greatly amusing.

In the second part of the poem, the anecdote is related to the title and the political message is introduced:

Tha iad ag ràdh an diugh gu bheil an saoghal bràth de dh’ol’ againn
anns an dùthaich bheag seo –
bhig seo, bhog seo? –
gu bheil sinn air bhog ann a lèig ola.
Tha mi ’n dòchas gu ruig an t-siobhag oirre.³⁰²

*They say now that we have an eternity of oil
in this little land –
this toty, flabby land? –
that we are afloat on a lake of oil.*

³⁰⁰ Pittock, *The Road to Independence?* 58.

³⁰¹ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 186-187.

³⁰² *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 186-187.

I hope the wick can reach it.

The speaker talks on behalf of a national community which suddenly finds itself afloat on “an eternity of oil”. But the attributes of the country – little, flabby, toty – together with the reliance on information “from the outside” imply that the country may not be strong enough to take advantage of these natural riches. The speaker expresses hope that the wick will reach the oil, combining the image of the overly prudent old man, the Biblical parable, and North Sea oil. The wick reaching into the oil reservoirs implies that the oil could be a source of light, providing fuel for the independence movement. In this way, the oil may symbolize the overall potential of Scotland, and the wick the determination, strength, courage, and national self-awareness needed to make full use of it.³⁰³ Together with “Cisteachan-laighe”, “Ola” is arguably one of Thomson’s most successful poems with a political dimension, as it manages to connect commentary on vital contemporary events with a vivid sketch from childhood, humour, puns, and political appeal.

Saorsa agus an Iolaire is a paradoxical collection – while it is the most overtly political of Thomson’s books of poetry, the political message is sometimes rather difficult to abstract, hidden as it is in wordplay, allusions, and allegories. It thus presents a question about the purpose of these political poems, since they were clearly not written with the aim of reaching as many readers as possible and providing them with a clear and accessible model of thought or action. Their purpose seems to be more private, serving the poet actively engaged in practical politics and campaigning as space for reflection and deliberation.

3.5 *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* (1982)

The collected poems of 1982, *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* (Plundering of the Harp), which brought together most of the poems published in the previous four volumes, contain also a section “Dàin às Ùr” (Latest Poems) which has not been republished anywhere else. It contains the major sequence “Àirc a’ Choimhcheangail” (The Ark of the Covenant) where Thomson returns to religion in Lewis, and also several noteworthy political poems which are quite close to material from *Saorsa agus an Iolaire*, as they were written in the following five

³⁰³ Iain Crichton Smith perceives a sexual undertone in the poem, such as references to the “wise virgins” and the “wick”: in his interpretation, the poem could imply “the oil on its own is not enough without energy, associated with sex.” “Review of *Saorsa agus an Iolaire*” 28.

years. All of them can be related to specific political events of the time: the failure of the 1979 referendum on Scottish Assembly and the following General Election.

The poem “Alba vs. Argentina 2/6/79” is subtitled “mìos às dèidh Taghadh na Pàrlamaid, 3/5/79” (a month after the General Election, 3/5/79). The election marked a sweeping victory of the Conservative Party led by Margaret Thatcher while the SNP lost nine seats in the parliament. The poem describes the upsurge of patriotic feeling connected with a football match, the streets of Glasgow choked with tartan, and ironically depicts the drunken fans as clansmen and their shouting “Scotland, Scotland” as a battle cry. The final rhymed couplet makes the derisive point “Alba chadalach, / mìos ro fhadalach” (Sleepy Scotland, / a month late).³⁰⁴ The speaker clearly sees the patriotic feeling as misplaced: the love of the country is clearly limited to football – a sport of which the poet was otherwise a keen follower – and does not extend as far as voting for a step towards independence.

The title of the poem “1707-1979” refers to the year 1707, when the Union of Parliaments was enacted, and to 1979, when the poem was written and when the devolved administration did not receive enough votes. The beginning of the poem describes people walking on the moor one after another, taking an easy way through the rough country, and leading lambs to the old pasture. Then the speaker raises the question whether there is another road leading to fresh pasture with unattested sweet grass, an end to the old pasture/deceit of two hundred and seventy-two years – the noun “cluain” means both a “green field, pasture, meadow” and “intrigue, treachery, deceitfulness”, which Thomson marks in the English translation. The deceitful pasture is thus clearly identified with the Union of Parliaments, and the speaker challenges Scotland to break away from the arrangement.

The short poem “Rabaidean” (Rabbits) is a return to an older style of a specific image into which a symbolic meaning is added with a light touch at the end – the poem depicts a rabbit crossing the road and almost reaching safety, but when a car arrives and the creature sees the headlights, it becomes afraid and turns back. The speaker then addresses the reader and casually remarks that there are “searmoinean” (sermons), i.e. messages to be learnt, in Scottish rabbits this year.³⁰⁵ In the English translation, the date 1979 is added in brackets to make the reference to the referendum on devolution more explicit. Scottish people who did not vote for devolution are compared, unflatteringly, to rabbits, turning back when headlights of Westminster attention dazzle them.

³⁰⁴ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 264-265.

³⁰⁵ *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 260-261.

3.6 *Smeur an Dòchais* (1991)

Thomson's sixth book of poetry, *Smeur an Dòchais / Bramble of Hope*, appeared in 1991, i.e. eleven years after the collected poems and fourteen years after *Saorsa agus an Iolaire*, and it marks a distinct move towards the multicultural world of Glasgow. It is a diverse, contemporary and very European collection – just as it captures Glasgow absorbing people from abroad, it incorporates Romania, Chernobyl, a sultry day in Germany and several poems with references to France –, lighter and more hopeful in tone than *Saorsa agus an Iolaire*. While the previous volume dwelled on the nationalist struggle and specific events from the past and the present, in *Smeur an Dòchais*, Thomson turns his attention to Glasgow and its inhabitants, to religion, immigration, poverty and the expansion of popular culture.

Glasgow, thanks to its industries, has long been a city that absorbed newcomers, willingly and hungrily, but it is also “Baile Mòr na Gàidheal”, the most Gaelic city in the Lowlands and in the twentieth century, the location of various Gaelic bodies, including the BBC Gaelic department and the *Gairm* offices. As Thomson himself noted, as late as before the Second World War, there would be streets in Glasgow where children could play in Gaelic.³⁰⁶

In the sequence “Air Stràidean Ghlaschu” (On Glasgow Streets), one of the highlights of the collection, the speaker identifies himself as a Gael and is therefore also an incomer, but from the same country and a member of a minority which has had its foot in the place for centuries. Still, he feels an outsider, someone whose wishes are not fully recognised and whose situation is in a way similar to the new immigrants from overseas. These contemplations of the city's multicultural nature are among the most arduous ones to assess and unravel.

In “Smuaintean ann an Cafe an Glaschu” (Thoughts in a Glasgow cafe), the speaker observes Burmese girls, admires their exotic beauty – their attractive foreignness is stressed in the description – and confesses he feels a little kindness towards them (“beagan aoibhneis 'na mo chridhe riutha”).³⁰⁷ This encounter, somewhat mysteriously, helps him to understand how difficult it is for the authorities to understand a Gael's wishes. The conclusion of the poem is difficult to pin down. As Whyte asks: “Is the speaker confessing to a limited understanding of the authorities' ethnocentrism or protesting because immigrants are accorded greater cultural

³⁰⁶ Whyte, “Interviews with Ruairidh MacThòmais” 244-245.

³⁰⁷ *Smeur an Dòchais* 14-15.

rights than the Gaels?”³⁰⁸ Does he feel a little kindness towards them because they are in a way outsiders like himself, or would there be more kindness for them were they from Bernera or Barra instead of Burma?

In poem 6 in the sequence, the speaker expresses his dissatisfaction with the fact that the waitresses in a café talk about TV shows and sing a song by John Lennon, while William Wallace and Alasdair MacColla are dead and forgotten. It is difficult to imagine he would want the girls to discuss the merits of Blind Harry and sing “Alasdair Mhic Cholla Ghasta” while serving the customers, although in Thomson’s view it would probably not be such a great thing to ask. The whole situation serves as a model example of the overall situation of the country when its rich history and heritage are being forgotten and replaced by popular culture. In the 1980s and 1990s, criticism of popular culture and tabloid press is one of the evergreens in the *Gairm* editorials. It is “dith tuigse” (lack of understanding) that he perceives as the cause of the present misery of Scotland.

Similar issues are raised in poem 13, “Straid Tradestown” (Tradestown Street). The speaker casts his mind back to the nineteenth-century poet and historian Uilleam MacDhunLèibhe (William Livingstone), famous for his poetry on clearances and social change, interest in antiquities, and resolute nationalist convictions. The Islay-born Livingstone spent most of his life working in Glasgow as a tailor and thus he was also one of the Gaelic newcomers to the city. The speaker recalls Livingstone’s hopes for a new dawn over Scotland and proceeds to comment on the present:

tha an-diugh againn driop là eile,
Innseanaich len taighean-badhair,
turban an àite a’ bhonaid Ghaidhealaich,
eachdraidh air a cur an dimeas
's an là ùr fad air falbh.³⁰⁹

*now we have the bustle of another era,
Indians with their emporia,
the turban instead of the Highland bonnet,
history depreciated,
and the new day far distant.*

As Whyte notes in his 1993 review of the book, there are instances of “lively human compassion” in the sequence which contrast with “the more rigid aspects of his [Thomson’s]

³⁰⁸ Whyte, “Review of *Smeur an Dòchais*,” *Lines Review* 127 (December, 1993): 51.

³⁰⁹ *Smeur an Dòchais* 20-21.

nationalist ethos.”³¹⁰ Are not these Indian shopkeepers, he asks, “the logical successors of Highland immigrants such as William Livingstone?” In an essay on Thomson’s late poetry published in 2007, he proposes a more positive reading of the same poem:

Thomson cannot help but see them [the Indians] as successors to the Gaels. The joking equation of a turban and a Highland bonnet is unequivocal. While this realisation brings him closer to them, closer perhaps, than to any other inhabitant of the city except the exiled Lewismen (and one wonders to what extent Glasgow has to be seen as a city of exile, of displaced immigrants, without any original or indigenous population to speak of), it also introduces a note of competition.³¹¹

These two responses from one critic, who is arguably one of the most perceptive and well-informed readers of Thomson’s poetry, illustrate the interpretative challenges these poems pose, especially in comparison with poems where the poet seems to be acutely aware of the fact that the Gaelic situation is not unique and that Gaels in their time overcame other cultures and languages.

In “Stràidean Ghlaschu,” Thomson acknowledges the presence of dangerous nationalism and religious hatred in the city: poem 5 is entitled “‘Orange Parade’ an Glaschu” (Orange Parade in Glasgow). The Orange lodge in Scotland is one of the biggest ones outside Northern Ireland, so its anti-Catholic and pro-Unionist opinions can be still heard in Glasgow, and anti-Catholic and anti-Irish prejudice has been strong even in the second half of the twentieth century.³¹² Neither of which would be agreeable to the religiously unaffiliated pro-independence Thomson. The speaker compares such initiatives to “a’ cur iuchair / ann an glas air meirgeadh, / spic ann an crann gun mheasan” (turning a key, / in a rusted lock, / a spike in a tree without fruit).³¹³ Criticism of sectarian hatred and violence in Scotland, Northern Ireland and throughout the world is another frequent topic of *Gairm* editorials from the 1990s where Thomson unfailingly promoted civility, tolerance, dialogue, and international cooperation.

As has been noted in the second poem, the sequence is also a search for the meaning of the city’s existence, for the meaning of the speaker’s existence in it, and quite possibly of the existence of the whole of Scotland. This dimension comes forward from poem 14 onwards:

Feasgar Disathairne

³¹⁰ Whyte, “Review of *Smeur an Dòchais*” 50.

³¹¹ Whyte, “Derick Thomson: The Recent Poetry” 29-30.

³¹² See Neal Ascherson, *Stone Voices: The Search for Scotland* (London: Granta Books, 2003) 67-72.

³¹³ *Smeur an Dòchais* 12-13.

air Stràid Earra-Ghàidheal
dh'iarrainn ort do làmh a chur 'na mo làimh-sa
nam biodh fhios agam
càit an robh sinn a' dol.³¹⁴

*Saturday afternoon
on Argyll Street
I would wish you took my hand
if only I knew
where we were going.*

In the two following poems, the speaker's private, unspecified pain, as well as his concern for the city, for the nation it represents and for their future, are expressed against the background of the streets. The last poem is profoundly oblique, addressing probably a ghost who walks the streets of Glasgow in search of something. The recovery is difficult because the sought thing is elusive and because there is mist in the streets: "Chan eil e furasd / a lorg a-rithist / a-measg nan clachan" (It isn't easy / to find it again / among the stones); "Tha e duilich / làmh a chur ann / anns a' cheò seo" (It is difficult / to put your finger on it / in this mist).³¹⁵ Could this something be a distinct Scottish national awareness, which would turn the fortunes of the city and stop the decay portrayed in the collection? However difficult the search is, the discovery is not deemed impossible, and thus the conclusion is not entirely hopeless.

There are also poems focusing on the Gàidhealtachd and Gaelic, such as "A' Ghàidhealtachd" (The Gàidhealtachd) which is just as dismal in its outlook as its namesake from *Eadar Samhradh is Foghar*. The footnote mentions it was inspired by a memory of a wildlife park in Badenoch. It imagines the Highlands as a wild-life park where the indigenous animals, once proud symbols of power and strength in the traditional poetry, degenerate and languish as a spectacle for tourists: the eagle moults and the salmon fattens on foreign food – the animals stand for the Highlands and the Gaels themselves, as the region loses its self-awareness and turns into a tourist attraction. Poems such as "Cuimhne" (Memory)³¹⁶ and "Lasair an Teine" (Flames of Fire) comment on the spread of popular culture and consumerist lifestyle and connect these with the loss of cultural awareness, stressing the point by referring to various events from Scottish history and heroic personalities, such as Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair.

In "Ceòl" (Music), Thomson reflects on the revivalist efforts in which he himself participated, and gives voice to a disappointment with the results of the efforts – the aspiration

³¹⁴ *Smeur an Dòchais* 22-23.

³¹⁵ *Smeur an Dòchais* 24-25.

³¹⁶ A poem that exhibits interesting links to George Campbell Hay's "An Ceangal" (*The Bond).

is no longer the survival of the language and culture, but the prospect that they will survive for another few decades as a “shadow” of their former selves.

Chuala mi ceòl 'na mo latha
nach cluinnear a chaoidh tuilleadh,
cha tog inneal-clàraidh e,
cha lean e ri smùr an dealain-thàirnidh,
thèid e bàs an taigh-tasgaidh,
cha cheannaich am BBC e
's chan fhaigh iad e 'n asgaidh,
chan eil e ann am faclair,
tha gach buaidh
a bh' air a' siothlaidh dhan an uaigh. [...] *[...]*
tha mi 'n dòchas
mus tèid sinn a chadal
gun tilg an ceòl sin faileas fada.³¹⁷

*I have heard music in my time
that will never be heard again,
no recording instrument will pick it up,
it will not adhere to electro-magnetic particles,
it will expire in a museum,
the BBC won't buy it
and will not get it for nothing,
it isn't to be found in a dictionary,
every excellence it had
is sinking into the grave. [...] *[...]*
I hope
that before we go to sleep
that music will throw a long shadow.*

“Ceòl” prefigures a number of following poems that imagine various possible futures of Gaelic and meditate on the impact and possibilities of the revival.

Regarding the forms of Thomson’s political poetry, *Smeur an Dòchais* exhibits some poems oblique in the manner of *Saorsa agus an Iolair*, but also minute and engaging commentary on the multicultural life of Glasgow, and it also contains some examples of the “listing” poems that will become prominent especially in the last collection.

³¹⁷ *Smeur an Dòchais* 96-97.

3.7 *Meall Garbh* (1995)

In its broad mixture of topics, *Meall Garbh / The Rugged Mountain* resembles *Smeur an Dòchais*, and some were actually written before those pieces included in the 1991 volume,³¹⁸ which may explain why in some ways *Meall Garbh* feels as a step back, rather than forward.

While *Smeur an Dòchais* had a distinct Glaswegian focus, the title of the 1995 collection announces a return to Perthshire, a region which Thomson often visited on family holidays and where he lived, in Aberfeldy, in 1977-1984.³¹⁹ A number of poems discuss, in various combinations, the topics of Scottish and Gaelic identity in the contemporary world, the loss of historical and cultural awareness, the corruptive influence of tabloid media and consumerism, and the inscrutable ups and downs of history.

The title of the opening poem “Cridhe na h-Alba” (The Heart of Scotland) comes in inverted commas and it is identified as a quote from an advert, possibly from a poster luring tourists to the “true Scotland”. The topic of commodification of Scotland is also raised in “Uncle Sam”. The quote makes the speaker think whether it can be found, whether the stethoscope is working and whether it is still beating, and then mentions all the possible locations where it might be, and where did he hear its beat. It is more audible in the Highlands, but it is easy to lose the beat on the main road from Killin to Dunkeld, as the ribs of the country are bruised by vehicles, noise, and history – the whole collection might be read as an attempt to find the heartbeat of Scotland in the modern times. Scotland thus becomes, through employment of an age-old image, a body, with individual places as its limbs and parts, and in the end, the body of the country is intertwined with the body of the speaker. In this return to traditional imagery related to the nation, “Cridhe na h-Alba” echoes the early poetry from *An Dealbh Briste*.

A more original point is made in “Tursachan” (Standing Stones) which comments on the transitory nature of phenomena that are often considered as essentially Scottish, and points out that even seemingly timeless places do not stay the same: once in prehistory, Scotland was a sandy desert south of the equator, there was no St Kilda yet, no eagles and no capercaillies; Lewis was not covered in heather and there were no Callanish Stones, not to mention the Edinburgh Castle. In future, many other places that seem important in Scotland today will

³¹⁸ Personal communication between Derick Thomson and Christopher Whyte, related to me by the latter in a letter from 10 December 2019.

³¹⁹ It also featured in *An Dealbh Briste*: “Faoisgneadh”.

disappear, such as the nuclear power stations.³²⁰ The poem closes with an expression of hope that the breath of the Gael will not disappear with the last peat smoke, and that the Gaels (the speaker included) will build standing stones for their own century, i.e. new landmarks, suited to the new era. The poem thus implies that Gaelic identity is clearly not dependent on place or a way of life, it is something far more universal and flexible – burning peats and living in a blackhouse is not essential for being a Gael.

Gaelic identity is also the subject of “Leisgeul” (Sorry), written as an excuse to a naïve Celtic enthusiast who expects the speaker to be a Gael from the Ossianic ballads:

Gabh mo leisgeul:
 chan eil mi de chuideachd Fhinn
 no Osgair,
 ’s cha mhotha tha gath-bolga agam ’na mo bhaga,
 is ged a bha mo chas rudeigin goirt
 cha b’ e sàthadh an tuirc
 a dh’fhàg mar siud i,
 no dearmad dighe Dhiarmaid.³²¹

Sorry:
I am not one of the company of Finn
or Oscar,
and I don't have a belly-shaft in my bag,
and though my foot is a little painful
it wasn't the boar's thrust
that made it so,
nor forgetting to bring Diarmid something to drink.

These “sgeulachdan sgoinneil” (moving stories) lay in the decaying coffin of history and the speaker states his preference for the moor and the hill rather than the graveyard, and finds the primrose sweeter than the White Cockade, one of the symbols of the 1745 Rising and the Prince’s cause and an epitome of the Romanticised Scotland tourists can daydream about. He argues for diversity and moving forward and would like to see both an eagle and a robin in the Scottish skies, and salmon coming from distant seas, and new songs and tales emerging.³²²

“Meall Garbh” (Meall Garbh), a sequence which gave the whole collection its name, makes the best use of mixing these two perspectives: natural versus historical, spatial versus

³²⁰ In 1955, the Dounreay power station was established, in 1959, another in Chapelcross.

³²¹ *Meall Garbh* 86-87.

³²² In the original, the word “ciste” appears both as “coffin” and “chest”, but in the translation Thomson makes a difference between the coffin when the old stories are decaying, and the chest where the new ones should be stored.

chronological. The sequence is framed by the speaker's ascent of the eponymous mountain in Perthshire and it contains passages of skilful description of the mountain the speaker ascends and of the surrounding landscape, with references to historical figures and events. As Whyte notes, Thomson is able to "mobilise the lore of this much loved corner of Scotland" and the climb and the descent are accompanied by references to the seventeenth-century poet Iain Lom, Black Duncan and Saint Adamnan.³²³

This historical dimension of the place is also enhanced by a string of newly coined adjectives applied to the glen: "an gleann Griogaireach, ruadh-shruthach / tartarach an eachdraidh, / cliceach, Caimbeulach, / pàganach, Criosdaidh [...] Deadhanach, Pìolatach" (The Gregory glen, / red-streamed / and resounding in history, / cliquish, Campbely, / pagan, Christian [...] Deanish, Pilatish).³²⁴ These are meant to convey the diverse historical connotations and natural aspects of the place and could be, as Michel Byrne put it, read as "a humorous nod to the tradition of adjectival (-ach) pile-ups in place/nature poetry",³²⁵ and it is likely as echoes of Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's frequent deployment of this stylistic device both in his political and in his nature poetry.³²⁶

In his review of the collection, William Neill finds "a share of Duncan Bàn MacIntyre's bitterness in 'Meall Garbh', where Thomson speaks of more modern usurpations."³²⁷ This passage on "more modern usurpations" is one of the most problematic ones in the whole book and in Thomson's oeuvre, for the speaker envisages a sort of reverse clearance in the vein of Mary MacPherson's "Fàistneachd agus Beannachd do na Gàidheil" (Prophecy and Blessing to the Gaels). The speaker proclaims that had he the divine power to do so, he would banish foreigners to Glasgow, Dundee and Cumbernauld (and to many other dreadful places), thus reversing the Anglophone perspective which often views the Highlands as wilderness,³²⁸ put Gaels in their place and take stock – by using computers – of all the economic and cultural losses the Gaels had suffered at foreign hands.³²⁹ He also blames the introduction of popular culture (and globalized cuisine) on the lack of self-government in Scotland.

Nam bu dia mi,

³²³ Whyte, "Derick Thomson: The Recent Poetry" 35.

³²⁴ *Meall Garbh* 62-63.

³²⁵ Michel Byrne, personal communication, 4 August 2014.

³²⁶ Thomson, *Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair: His Political Poetry* 27.

³²⁷ William Neill, "Review of *Meall Garbh*," *Lines Review* 134 (September, 1995): 62.

³²⁸ Stroh 247.

³²⁹ As Stroh puts it, "rights of property, justice and injustice are reversed, and it is the 'foreign' elites whose hunting and fishing activities are incriminated as theft. The computers imagined to calculate the extent of these thefts thus accomplish not only a mathematical but also a moral reckoning." *Uneasy Subjects* 247.

a' dèanamh nan riaghailtean cloiche
 air an t-sliabh seo,
 chuirinn na coigrich dhan an fhàsach –
 gu Glaschu 's Dun Dèagh is Bradford, [...]
 is chuirinn na Gaidheil 'nan àite,
 is compiutair no dhà ac'
 a dh'innseadh dhaibh às a' mhionaid
 na chaidh a ghoid orra de bhradain,
 de chearcan-fraoich 's de ruadh-bhuic,
 agus àireamh nam pacaidean fuadain –
 Corn Flakes is Pizza is truileis
 de gach seòrs' sa chruinne
 a thàinig tuath air na Crìochan
 bho chaidh a' Phàrlamaid againn a Lunnainn.³³⁰

*Were I a god,
 making laws in stone
 on this upland,
 I would send the strangers to the wilderness –
 to Glasgow and Dundee and Bradford, [...]
 and I would put Gaels in their place,
 with a couple of computers
 that would tell them in a minute
 the number of salmon that had been stolen from them,
 the number of grouse and roe-deer,
 and the number of foreign packets –
 Corn Flakes and Pizzas and rubbish
 of every kind in the world
 that came north of the Border
 since our Parliament went to London.*

As Whyte notes, “these lines are problematic both politically and culturally: in their hankering to restore some kind of racial purity to the Perthshire heartland and in their claim that a Scottish parliament might not only have secured better treatment for the Gaels but have saved the country from the ravages of modern consumerism.”³³¹ The sequence thus reveals a bitterer and more defensive vein of the poet’s thinking, different from the appreciation of the complexities of migration and cultural change as discussed in *Smeur an Dòchais* and in some poems in *Meall Garbh* itself.

In “Feòrag Ghlas, Tuath air Braco” (Grey Squirrel, North of Braco), for example, Thomson handles the theme of the complex cultural history of Scotland with humour and strives to see that as Gaelic culture has been in many places overcome, it had itself replaced

³³⁰ *Meall Garbh* 62-65.

³³¹ Whyte, “Derick Thomson: The Recent Poetry” 36.

others in the past. Braco is a village in Perthshire and the speaker recalls driving through the landscape and seeing a grey squirrel – a species originally from North America which is considered invasive in Europe.

A' siubhal tron an dùthaich bhrèagh sin
chunna mi feòrag a' teicheadh bhon a rathad:
tè ghlas a bh' ann, an treubh ùr tha sgaoileadh
tro dhùthaich nan Cruithneach,
gun eòlas aic' air na lùban diomhair
no air an t-saighead a tha roinn na cloiche,
beò air a crìochan fhèin,
beò air cnothan a' gheamhraidh,
is freumhaichean, corra ugh is iseanan beaga,
is uaireannan a' milleadh chraobhan
leis an dèidh aic' air an rùsg.
'S ann á Ameireagaidh a thàinig a sinnsreachd,
's thuir i rium, tha mi 'n dùil,
ged nach duirt mise guth,
'Carson nach tiginn a seo;
chaidh gu leòr dhe na daoine' agaibhse
a-null thugainne.'³³²

*Travelling through that bonny countryside
I saw a squirrel running away from the road:
a grey one, the new tribe colonising
the land of the Picts,
unaware of the mysterious loops
or the arrow dividing the stone-face,
living in its own territory,
surviving on winter nuts,
and roots, an occasional egg and small chicks,
and sometimes destroying trees
through its fondness of the bark.
Her ancestors came from America,
and I think she said to me –
though I hadn't spoken,
'Why shouldn't I come here;
plenty of your people
went to our country.'*

The image of the impertinent squirrel reminding the speaker of the extensive Scottish emigration to America adds a humorous touch to the poem and also provides a means to further the central argument.

Tha a shearmon fhèin aig gach neach

³³² Meall Garbh 14-15.

's cha duirt mise rithe ach 'Glè cheart',
 ach air a shon sin
 bha mi a' smaoinichadh air na Cruithnich
 a dh'fhàg am breacadh de "pheitean"
 air an dùthaich seo
 ('s ann an trì mionaidean
 chaidh mi seachad air tuathanas
 air a bheil an t-ainm *Pett* fhathast);
 is beag a bha dhùil ac'
 gun teicheadh an fheòrag ruadh
 roimhn a' pheasan ghlas seo,
 no gun cuireadh Gaidheil às dhan
 a' chainnt acasan, 's gu fàsadh na Gaidheil fhèin
 rudeigin Sagsanach.³³³

*Everyone has his own sermon
 and all I said was 'Quite right',
 but for all that
 I kept thinking of the Picts
 who dotted this countryside with 'petts'
 (and in three minutes
 I passed a farm
 which is still called 'The Pett');
 they had no idea
 that the red squirrel would retreat
 at the coming of this grey pest,
 nor that the Gaels would eradicate
 their language,
 and that the Gaels themselves would become
 somewhat like the Saxons.*

The speaker agrees the squirrel's argument is right, but he keeps thinking about the fact that the Gaels overcame the Picts and obliterated their language and their culture, which only remain present in the carved stones and place names. The poem thus shows a full awareness that the Gaelic situation is not unique – the Gaels also emigrated abroad and took other people's land, and therefore should not be, as the squirrel points out, too offended when people from abroad come and settle in their lands.

In the end the speaker points out that the Picts would have been quite surprised to see the Gaels themselves succumbing to another influence – that of the English. It evinces chilling acknowledgement that the Gaels, their culture and language, however dear they are to his own heart, are just one example among many, subject to the same laws of change in cultural dominance. This is one of Thomson's finest poems dealing with topics of cultural dominance,

³³³ *Meall Garbh* 14-15.

both in terms of the level-headedness and humour of its approach, and in terms of form. A similar approach is adopted in “Nuair a Thig a’ Bhalbhachd” (When Stillness Comes) which imagines the world when Gaelic is gone, but the prospect is not entirely hopeless: there will be traces left in nature, “ceòl mìn smeòraich / ann an òrgan na coille” (smooth thrush music / in the organ of the wood), fragments of traditional Gaelic songs,³³⁴ and the Gaelic culture will enter the same eternity as Catullus and Sappho.

Meall Garbh provides interesting and in some cases conflicting insights into Thomson’s political thought, showing some of its most progressive aspects, such as “Tursachan”, and some of the most problematic ones in “Meall Garbh”. The conciliatory poems dealing with the withering of Gaelic prepare the ground for the discussion of the language in the last collection.

3.8 *Sùil air Fàire* (2007)

In the last collection published during Thomson’s lifetime, *Sùil air Fàire / Surveying the Horizon*, all concerns and influences that have been present in the seventy years of the poet’s career are represented. More than any of the preceding collections, it gives the impression of being put together from a large amount of unpublished material accumulated over the years, rather than by being driven by one overall design, such as *An Rathad Cian*. Since it appeared in the year of Thomson’s eighty-fifth birthday, it was very likely produced as a tribute to the poet’s jubilee, and it is also by far the handsomest volume in terms of production.

It is not only an old man’s eye surveying the horizon of future things it will not live to see, but also the eye of the poet looking back over his life’s work. In the last poem of the collection entitled “Pàrlamaid an Dùn Èideann?” (A Parliament in Edinburgh?) Thomson compares the Parliament to the proverbial slow horse that reaches the mill in the end, although there were trickles of water before – Walter Scott, Hugh MacDiarmid, and inspirations from the independent Irish republic –, and the cultural renaissance in the twentieth century. The products of the mill can include oatcakes and loaves in fancy paper, but the speaker urges his compatriots not to forget about the fresh water which refreshes the mind. Although the poem was written much earlier than 2007 Thomson’s choice to place the poem with this title and with a question mark at the end of what was to be his last book of

³³⁴ The poem mentions “Fear Ghlinn Cuaich”, which is a reference to the song “Iain Ghlinn Cuaich” (John of Glen Cuaich), and “Eala nan Cuantan” (swan of the seas), a trope from traditional love songs, and Mòr Ros, William Ross’s love.

verse is surely significant. The exploration is prospective as much as retrospective, and in some aspects, the collection also features new perspectives on old topics and fresh approaches.

One might expect Thomson's final collection to be some sort of testament and a sample book of his verse with little innovation. Some of the poems do indeed follow patterns and themes introduced in *Smeur an Dòchais* and *Meall Garbh* and may seem repetitive. Some of the old themes, however, become more prominent than ever before in *Sùil air Fàire*, such as meditations on the inscrutability of history, the ever-changing nature of the world, the impact of consumer culture and the media on Scotland, and the multicultural realities of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The focus on the changing world, concerned and cautious, but not negative and even slightly curious, is also evident in Thomson's editorials for the last issues of *Gairm*, which were probably written at the same time as some of the poems.

Some poems manage to find an interesting symbol, such as the carrion crow which picks the dead bodies at Culloden and in Rwanda in the poem "Feannag" (Carrion-crow), connecting the violence of Scottish history, represented by the Glencoe massacre and the post-Culloden violence, with the atrocities in Kosovo and Rwanda. The heightened awareness of violence in the world is an important feature of the collection, a concern which is also reflected in a number of *Gairm* editorials from the 1990s and 2000s. The poem "Creachadh" (Storming) is based on a contrast between deeply ingrained ideal notions of Scotland with what the speaker perceives as the dismal present reality. It begins with a famous line from a poem by the WWI poet John Munro (Iain Rothach) – "Tir nam beann, nan gleann 's nan gaisgeach" (Land of mountains, glens and heroes) –, to which the speaker replies that while Scotland still has glens and mountains, not to mention beaches, oysters and unfrequented moors, the heroes are conspicuous by omission.

Many of the poems however may prove repetitive and not truly exciting as poetry, especially when read in one go. They raise important and commendable topics and make interesting claims about them, but sometimes provide little poetic material to carry the political comments, in terms of imagery, argument, and form. "Soraidh Slàn leis an Trosq?" (*Farewell to the Cod?), a satirical piece pointing out the fact that the Highland fishers are suffering because of greedy politicians, draws on the traditional Gaelic satirical songs, but does add anything else to the point. "Luchd-poileataigs" (Politicians) acknowledges how our perception of history and people is shaped by the available media, and that the idealised view one might have about politicians of the past would be far different had there been the same

media to record them as there are nowadays. This would probably make a good topic for an essay or a biting *Gairm* editorial, but the poem does not succeed.

Many of the poems that discuss history, its changes and shifts and inscrutability, employ a “listing”, or rather “piling up” technique. For example the poem “Toinneamh is Siubhail” contests the popular ideas about the ancient past, too much shaped by the current world, tracing Scottish history before the Picts, to the unknown and unknowable people who raised the Callanish stones. It mentions the heart of Robert Bruce which was taking on the Crusades by Black Douglas, John Knox and his conflict with Queen Mary, the Free Church, the Muslims coming to Scotland; and the various languages which have been spoken in the country: Latin, Gaelic, Welsh, English, and Scots. While all the connections and changes are surely interesting to realise, the poem comes across as little more than an enumeration.

Not unexpectedly, Gaelic and its future is one of the most important concerns of the collection, especially in the section “Leòdhas a-rithist” (“Lewis Again”). What may come as a surprise though is that in the last collection, Thomson still manages to find new approaches to the topic which has been his major focus throughout his career. In the poem “Àros nan Sean?” (Old Folks’ Home?), Thomson presents a particularly bitter, dismal image of the gradual withering of the Gaelic language and of the efforts to strengthen it: in a care home built with money from the National Lottery, the old and infirm will be supported by an apparatus so that they can mumble the famous slogan of Gaelic activists “Suas leis a’ Ghàidhlig!” (Up with the Gaelic!) to the accompaniment of harp music, another trope associated with Scotland’s Gaelic heritage. The origin of this dismal vision is outlined in connection with place names, as the speaker is surprised that the gradual decline of Gaelic he had witnessed elsewhere has reached places in Lewis as well:

tachdadh sa bhràighe
is ciorram an ceòs
liota san teanga [...]
is monbar am mùirneig
's na cnàmhan gu bhith ris
a-nis³³⁵

*choking at the Bràighe/throat
and maiming in Keose/the hollow
lispig in Tong/the tongue [...]
and mumbling at Mùirneag/the loved one,
and the bones just about showing
in Ness/now*

³³⁵ *Sùil air Fàire* 18-19.

This elaborate word play where the place names oscillate between their function as place names and their meanings as ordinary nouns, although marked in the English translation, is designed to be appreciated by a fluent/native speaker of the language to whom these words will delineate both the actual localities and the meanings behind the names. A person acquainted with Lewis, moreover, will be able to associate the images of withering and decay of the language with the specific communities. This poem about language thus becomes a test of what it envisages: when the word play cannot be appreciated, the loss has actually come.

In “Dà Chànanas” (Bilingualism), the Thomson points out, by means of place name analysis, how different languages have left their imprint on the Western Isles.³³⁶ By pointing out an amusing instance of place name tautology, a common occurrence in the Western Isles, he points out how the history of the successive waves of people becomes sedimented in places and place names, and also that the situation of Gaelic, as a language in the process of being overcome, incomprehensible to another one, is far from unique, developing the point from “Feòrag Ghlas, Tuath air Braco”.

In “Nuair a Dh’fhalbhas a’ Ghàidhlig” (When Gaelic Goes), the speaker imagines Scotland without Gaelic – the language will become another dinosaur, something to be excavated centuries later and written about frantically in the media, and scientists will research its impact on the country, and with the latest technology they will perhaps hear a couple of songs (competing with prayers), and poetry rising from this old land.

Issues concerning Gaelic feature in many other poems in the section, such as in “Soidhne nan Tim” (The Sign of the Times*), “Cridhe an t-Sluaigh” (The Heart of the People), “Teagamh” (Doubt*) and elsewhere. In these poems, he voices his suspicions of some efforts to promote the language, although he often advocated them in his journalism: putting Gaelic on TV and on road signs, when it is actually dying in the communities and when it loses contact with its natural environment, emerges as hypocritical and specious (“Dh’fhalbh Siud is Thàinig Seo”, That Went and This Came*). For Thomson, this is not a question of being threatened by non-native speakers of Gaelic or of the language being moved to new areas of life – the evidence of his support for these innovations is plentiful in his articles and *Gairm* editorials, but rather, as often, a question of standard and quality.

³³⁶ A place name from Ceòs in Lewis, “Eilean Hàbhaig,” is a blend of Gaelic and Norse elements. The Norse name means “sea island”, to which the Gaels, not realising the meaning of the place name, added “eilean” (meaning “island”), thus producing “Sea Island Island”. Nowadays, with “Beurla cho pailt” (English so abundant), people tend to call the place “Eilean Hàbhaigh Island”, meaning “Sea Island Island Island”. *Sùil air Fàire* 16.

Many of his poems about Gaelic revolve around the question of authenticity – how far can one go with the revivalist efforts until they rob a language of its authenticity? When does a language stop being authentic? Introducing bilingual road signs is a fine idea on the one hand, it reminds people about the existence of Gaelic, and about the origin of many of the Scottish place names. But, Thomson seems to ask, does this policy not become a mere cover-up for reluctance to use the language in everyday life? What difference does it make to have Gaelic on TV, when it is not fluent, correct Gaelic, and when the intended audiences of such programs keep on talking to one another in English.

A more comforting view, similar in tone to that of “Nuair a Thig a’ Bhalbhachd” (When Stillness Comes) and “Ceòl” (Music) emerges from the poem “A’ Siubhal nam Blàth” (Reconnoitering the Blossoms) when he imagines Gaelic only “half-dead” on the pages of books and thinks it possible that it will blossom in people’s hearts as a language of learning and literature, if not of everyday communication. The section “Leòdhas A-rithist” also features reflections on the future of the Western Isles and Gaelic culture (“Riasg?” / Peat-moss?; “Usgairean” / Jewels; “Seann Daoimean” / An Ancient Diamond). The future and the preservation of what is valuable in the past seem to be more important than looking back.

The special role of Glasgow in Thomson’s writing and life, which has been posited earlier, is confirmed in the second section of *Sùil air Fàire*. The poems it contains again comment on the multi-faceted nature of the city, as the very title of the first poem, “Glaschuan” (Glasgows), suggests. It is the city of the rich and the poor, the powerful and the downtrodden, a crossroads of different nationalities and languages. Thomson does not content himself with general observations and sometimes zooms in very close to see the specific features of the city, such as “eaglaisean a’ caochladh gu taighean-seinnse” (churches changing into pubs) and “ball-coise a’ strì ri creideamh” (football at odds with religion).³³⁷

For example, the poem “Glaschu nan Cinneach” (Glasgow of the Foreigners) is another glance at the multicultural vortex of Glasgow: the Italians, the Chinese, Indian dresses, Jewish hats, a Gael from Uist and a nun. The speaker proceeds to ask how long it will take until a Turkish mother in Glasgow calls her daughter by the traditional Lowland name “Senga,” and points out the historical “successes” of an undefined group of the people (the Gaels? the Scots? the people of Glasgow?), including the defeat of the Picts, the Welsh and “corra Shasannach” (occasional English folk), and concludes with a tongue-in-cheek observation – “ged nach d’ fhuair sinn smachd air na h-Èireannaich fhathast” (though we still haven’t

³³⁷ *Sùil air Fàire* 64-69.

controlled the Irish).³³⁸ This is both a comment on the inability of the people to resist invasion and on their succumbing too easily to foreign influences, and a general observation on the speed of assimilation in big cities.

Another remarkable poem from this section is “Uaigneas a’ Bhaile-mhòir” (City Loneliness) which lends an ear to the different voices of the city: the Glasgow vernacular as echoed in James Kelman’s novels and the voice of an old Gael from Harris remembering his home are heard amidst a multitude of others. The closing remark on the “lusan ùra / a’ tighinn beò às an fhàsach” (new plants / appear from the wilderness) and the possibility of change coming every morning suggests the open future of the city.³³⁹

There are many links between the Glasgow poems of *Sùil air Fàire* and *Smeur an Dòchais*. However, contrasting the Gaels and the other incomers to Glasgow is absent here, and it also seems that the poet’s perspective broadens from the Gaels to Scots in general. Although he does not stop being worried about the city and the nation, the poet’s view of the city and its future seems to be slightly more hopeful, as if the mist that complicated the search at the end of “Stràidean Ghlaschu” has lifted.

The section “Laoich” (Champions) celebrates some of Thomson’s heroes. The inclusion of Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair is not surprising, but the usual pantheon is broadened to include some of Thomson’s contemporaries. One of them is Hugh MacDiarmid, whom he addresses especially in relation to his revival of Scots and praises him for “fallaing na meirge / bho ulaidhean àrsaidh” (listing the mantle of rust / from age-old treasures).³⁴⁰ Although MacDiarmid forsook his Scots projects and wrote in English in the later stages of his career, it was thanks to him, as the poem states, that new skin would form under the cracks on the bruised spirit of Scottish heritage, and that his achievement will live on. The poem is thoroughly positive and conciliatory – the controversial aspects of MacDiarmid’s life and career are overlooked in favour of what was good and lasting in them, of what will survive. It also reflects Thomson’s increased interest in Scots in the latest phase of his career and the importance he assigned to its revival and development, alongside Gaelic, for the future of Scotland. In the poem “A’ Chuimhne” (The Memory), he adds Lowland people to the pantheon, the medieval makar William Dunbar side by side with Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, followed by MacDiarmid, David Hume, and the painter Henry Raeburn.

³³⁸ *Sùil air Fàire* 90-91.

³³⁹ *Sùil air Fàire* 80-81.

³⁴⁰ *Sùil air Fàire* 142-143.

Sùil air Fàire reads like a sample book of Thomson's oeuvre: it is diverse, wide-ranging and it attests to the statement made by the speaker in "Sràid Bhuchanain" – "'s iomadh rud a chì am fear a bhios fada beò" (much can be seen by him whose life is long). It is an overview of the past, but it also proves that even here Thomson is developing as a poet: he follows the directions outlined in previous books and goes further, giving prominence to themes that have been present but have never been brought forward to such an extent. As a whole, *Sùil air Fàire* gives the impression of being remarkably relaxed and self-possessed. There is quiet melancholy and genuine fondness in the farewell to beloved places and people, but also humour; not only acknowledgment of past losses and present troubles, but also resilient hope and a keen surveying of future horizons.

4. On the Perch: Thomson's Political Journalism

The magazine has been, due to the relative cheapness of production, regularity, collective nature, and ability to reflect on contemporary issues, an important tool in the revival of minority languages in the nineteenth and especially in the twentieth century. Over the last two hundred years, some of the most significant impulses in the Gaelic movement arose from magazines and the history of Gaelic literature, both creative and factual, is marked by several distinctive personalities who founded and edited Gaelic magazines as a means of spreading their agenda and vision.³⁴¹ Derick Thomson's quarterly *Gairm* is a unique phenomenon in several ways, but it also learnt its lessons from previous Gaelic periodicals and built on the foundations laid by them.

The history of Gaelic periodicals begins in the nineteenth century. The guiding spirit behind the most influential ones was the Reverend Norman MacLeod (1783-1862), a minister of the Church of Scotland nicknamed, for his multiple efforts to help Gaelic-speaking Scots, "Caraid nan Gàidheal" (friend of the Gaels). MacLeod was active in organising material relief in the Highlands in the difficult decades of the 1830s and 1840s, promoted the Church of Scotland's educational scheme in the region, and cooperated on *A Dictionary of the Gaelic Language* (1831). He published *A Gaelic Collection for the Use of Schools* (1828-1834) and two periodicals, *An Teachdaire Gaelach* ("The Highland Messenger") and *Cuairtear nan Gleann* ("The Traveller of the Glens"). *An Teachdaire Gaelach* achieved twenty-one issues published between 1829 and 1831. *Cuairtear nan Gleann*, with the same periodicity, was founded in 1840 and forty numbers appeared until 1843, when it ceased to be published due to lack of support.³⁴² These magazines establish a pattern that is repeated in the history of Gaelic periodicals: the founder also serves as the editor, strives to procure money for the publication, either by means of subscriptions or donations (or from his own pocket), and contributes much of the content.

MacLeod is recognised as one of the major figures in the development of Gaelic prose. *An Teachdaire Gaelach* and *Cuairtear nan Gleann* strove to provide their readers with useful information of all kind that had so far only been available in English and contained articles on

³⁴¹ Similar examples of revivalist media ventures steered by distinct personalities, who were also committed nationalists, can be found in Brittany, where the magazine *Gwalarn* (1925-1944), founded by Roparz Hemon and Olier Mordrel with the aim to prove that high culture could emerge in Breton, represents an interesting parallel to journalistic projects discussed in this chapter. In the Isle of Man, Mona Douglas founded *Manninagh* (1972-1973) and *The Manxman* (1971-1978) with similar aims in mind.

³⁴² Donald John MacLeod, "Gaelic Prose," *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* XLIX (1976) 203-204.

history and current affairs, geography and natural sciences, agriculture, religion (in accordance with MacLeod's ecclesiastical affiliation), poetry, essays, fables, crime stories, informative dialogues, and book reviews. The index to the collected first twelve issues provides a good illustration of this multifarious content: under C, it list "Cottage Gardens, Hints on the management of; China, account of the great Wall of; Culloden, Battle of; Calves, on the feeding of; Cock Fighting condemned; Cultivation of the Sugar Cane; Covenanters; and Christmas day, Meditations on".³⁴³

As John MacInnes observes, MacLeod intended to "develop from the pre-existing traditions, written and oral, a formal standard Gaelic prose which could handle a wide range and subject matter" – as the above-quoted examples amply manifest, and, in spite of the fact that he was breaking new ground almost everywhere, succeeded in creating a "genuinely popular readership" and standards that influenced Gaelic writers for more than a century.³⁴⁴ MacLeod's magazines aimed at a very broad audience which they sought to educate, cultivate, and morally elevate. They provided something for everyone and hoped that while some readers might be enticed to read Gaelic in order to learn about Culloden or Covenanters, others might be more interested in cock fighting or cottage gardens.

Many other nineteenth-century Gaelic periodicals were inspired by MacLeod's efforts, although they exhibited a less pronounced religious leaning, including *An Gàidheal* (The Gael), a bilingual monthly edited by Angus Nicholson, and *Mac-Talla* (Echo), the very first Gaelic newspaper which was published in Nova Scotia by Jonathan G. MacKinnon.³⁴⁵ Both these periodicals published not only new Gaelic literature, but also translations from other languages, especially from English, into Gaelic – for instance Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and James Hogg's short stories.³⁴⁶ An Comunn Gàidhealach (The Gaelic Association), an organisation founded in 1891 in order to promote Gaelic culture, started to issue the magazine *An Deò-Ghrèine* (The Sunbeam) in 1905, which was in 1923 replaced by *An Gàidheal* (The Gael).³⁴⁷

All these publications created important precedents and established the place of the periodical in Gaelic-speaking society. In terms of political and cultural radicalism though, Thomson's most immediate predecessor is Erskine of Mar, already mentioned in the overview

³⁴³ *An Teachdaire Gaelach*, 1829-1830 (W.R. McPhun, Glasgow / W. Blackwood, and Maclachlan & Steward, Edinburgh: 1830) iii-iv.

³⁴⁴ John MacInnes, "Caraid nan Gàidheal," *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland* 35.

³⁴⁵ MacLeod, "Gaelic Prose" 204-205.

³⁴⁶ Donald John MacLeod, *Twentieth-Century Gaelic Literature: a Description, Comprising Critical Study and a Comprehensive Bibliography*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Glasgow: 1969, 38.

³⁴⁷ Donald John MacLeod, *Dualchas an Aghaidh nan Creag: The Gaelic Revival 1890–2020* (Inverness: Clò Bheag, 2011) 11.

of Scottish nationalist politics in Chapter 2. In Erskine’s view, political independence was closely linked with cultural sovereignty and therefore he sought to extend and strengthen the use of Gaelic in Scotland. Erskine’s activities thus represent a combination of Gaelic revival with a distinct political agenda, and the same joint interest can be found in Thomson’s work.

In MacLeod’s words, Erskine “deployed his own capital and his remarkable resources of ideas and of energy to rid Gaelic literature of the influence both of its ‘peasant origins’ and its new ‘enthusiasm for the music hall’” and to raise it to the best European standards of the time.³⁴⁸ To this end, he founded several magazines that he edited, contributed to, and sponsored: the bilingual monthly *Am Bàrd* (“The Poet”, 1901-1902), the quarterly *Guth na Bliadhna* (“The Year’s Voice”, 1904-1925, bilingual until 1919, all-Gaelic after), the weekly *Alba* (“Scotland”, 1908-1909), a magazine devoted to fiction *An Sgeulaiche* (“The Storyteller”, 1909-1910 monthly, 1911 quarterly), and a book-length annual *An Ròsarnach* (“The Rose Garden”, 1917, 1918, 1921, 1930).³⁴⁹

Furthermore, he ran competitions for short stories and plays and was one of the founders of Comunn Litreachais na h-Albann (a society for the promotion of Gaelic letters), encouraging young Gaelic writers to aim for the standards of the most sophisticated European literatures. Although his publishing work was not very successful in a commercial sense, he laid the foundations of modern Gaelic drama, fiction, and literary criticism, and many of Thomson’s activities followed Erskine’s blueprints.

The most influential of Erskine’s publications was *Guth na Bliadhna*, which lasted for the impressive period of twenty-one years. Similarly to Norman MacLeod’s publications, Erskine also sought to make information of all sorts available to Gaelic readers, but his focus was on a much more intellectual and elite readership, and the choice of subjects was governed by his own interests. In response to a complaint that *Guth na Bliadhna* was too high-brow for the majority of Gaelic readers, he pointed out that the aim of the magazine was

[...] deagh litreachas anns a’ chanain Ghàidhlig a chur a mach, agus mar an ceudna spiorad fìor thuigseach léirsinneach a thaobh nithean àrda an t-saoghail so a dhuisgeadh anns na Gaidheil air fad. Ma ghabhas so deanamh ann an dòigh a bheir tlachd agus toileachadh do’n mhor-chuid de na Gaidheil, tha sinn toilichte; ach mur toir, tha sinn coma, is gur iad is motha leinn daonnan prionnsapla seach daoine.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁸ MacLeod, “Gaelic Prose” 210.

³⁴⁹ Derick Thomson, “Erskine, Stuart Richard [known as Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar] (1869–1960),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004).

³⁵⁰ Quoted in: MacLeod, “Gaelic Prose” 211-212. Translation mine.

[...] to publish good literature in the Gaelic language, and also to awake the spirit of true understanding and intelligence towards the elevated things of this world in all the Gaels. If it can be done in a way that brings pleasure and happiness to most of the Gaels, we are glad; if not, we do not care, for principles last longer than people.

Guth na Bliadhna published treatises on a wide range of topics, including history, Scottish and European politics, agriculture, philosophy, aesthetics, folklore, and ethnology; old and new Gaelic literature; book reviews and literary criticism. In tune with Erskine's own creed, it strove to promote Roman Catholicism by publishing prayers, songs, and biographies of saints (the spring issue of 1905 featured a picture of Saint Columba, with the hope the readers will find it "suitable for framing").

Erskine wrote much of the content himself, but he managed to assemble a small team of regular contributors, including the professional journalist Angus Henderson (Aonghas Mac Eanruig), who often discussed topics such as land use and education, while Donald Sinclair (Dòmhnall Mac na Ceàrdaich) contributed poetry and drama. John MacCormick (Iain MacCormaig) and Angus Robertson (Aonghas MacDhonnchaidh), authors of the first two Gaelic novels, *Dùn-àluinn* (Dunalin, 1912) and *An t-Ogha Mòr* (The Great Grandson, 1913) respectively, regularly wrote for *Guth na Bliadhna* and enjoyed Erskine's support and encouragement. In accordance with his pan-Celtic interests, Erskine had a number of Irish contributors, including Pearse and the famous lexicographer and leader of the Gaelic revival Pádraig Ua Duinnín, and in later years he published texts by Breton revivalists Pierre Mocaër and Paul Diverrière.

In terms of literary revival, Erskine was convinced that Gaelic writers should be learning from colleagues from other countries, but without imitating them, combining the best European trends with the Gaelic tradition. Like Thomson, he was the theoretician of his revival and also its practitioner, leading by example and proving that what he called for in his essays on Gaelic literature was actually feasible. One of Erskine's main concerns was the development of Gaelic drama and the argument about the inability of An Comunn Gàidhealach to use it properly in the revival runs from Erskine to Thomson. Erskine discussed the topic extensively in several essays for *Guth na Bliadhna* (1913-1914). The popular music-hall amusements inspired by English examples did not satisfy Erskine who called for elevated, serious, artistic drama that would combine elements from the Gaelic tradition with European trends and wrote two plays himself: *Là de na Làithean* (A Day of the Days, 1923), a

symbolist play on the topic of time, with traditional Gaelic elements, and *Ar-a-mach* (Uprising, 1924), an account of a fictional peasant revolt. Both appeared in *Guth na Bliadhna*.

In 1909-1910, he wrote a series of five detective stories “Gníomharran Iain Mhic Raonuill” (The Adventures of John MacRonald), a Gaelic take on the genre popularised by Sherlock Holmes, and published them in *An Sgeulaiche*. Erskine sought to provide Gaelic readers with the same sort of entertainment they would likely seek in English periodicals, and although the stories arguably do not attain the same quality as Doyle’s creations, they nonetheless managed to expand the boundaries of Gaelic literature. Erskine writes about his own aristocratic world, about environments and characters that had rarely featured in Gaelic fiction before. There is no indication as to why MacRonald’s exploits are related in Gaelic, and by the lack of explanation and excuse, Erskine is making a powerful statement that authors should feel free to write in Gaelic about whatsoever catches their fancy, a case that was still being argued several decades later by Thomson in *Gairm*. Erskine’s own writing may not be always entirely successful when judged by present standards, but its sheer boldness and willingness to experiment still make it a fascinating read.

The revival stimulated by Erskine’s efforts faded out in the mid-1920s and he eventually settled in France and only returned to the United Kingdom shortly before his death. He has fallen into obscurity, his writing remains untranslated and very little research, with the exception of Donald John MacLeod’s publications, has been devoted to his activities, but Thomson knew his work and held him in high regard. He wrote the entry on Erskine for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Bibliography* and co-authored a short piece for *Gairm* 16 (Summer 1956). The anonymous one-page article, accompanied by a photograph of Erskine who was eighty-seven at the time, was likely the work of the two editors, Thomson and MacDonald. It describes Erskine as one of the old heroes who did much for Gaelic, but is unknown to younger generations. It mentions the fact that Erskine considers moving back to Scotland from France and that he remains convinced that there will be no success or improvement in Scotland before it separates itself from England.³⁵¹ Erskine in the end did not manage to return, but he saw the continuation of his earlier revivalist efforts in Thomson’s *Gairm*.

Derick Thomson had a lifelong interest in journalism. His magazine debut was entitled the *Bayble Herald*, which he, “admittedly for very local circulation” (i. e. his parents, brother, and

³⁵¹ “Ruaraidh Arascain agus Mhàirr,” *Gairm* 16 (Summer 1956): 367.

aunt) edited and issued in the Bayble schoolhouse for several years from about the age of ten, and large sketches of a local lady who came to help with the cleaning, filled the space when “copy was short and inspiration failed.”³⁵² His second venture into journalism was the short-lived student nationalist periodical entitled *Alba Mater*, which he co-founded at the University of Aberdeen in 1945 (the first issue sold rather well, as many buyers mistook it for the regular literary magazine *Alma Mater*).³⁵³

It was six years later that he embarked on a journalistic project which proved to be one of the crowning achievements of his career, a venture with a profound influence on the Gaelic world, and also a venue where his political opinions and his vision of the Gaelic revival could be both discussed and carried out in poetry, essays, and other forms – the quarterly *Gairm* (1952-2002). As the poet Donald MacAulay noted, “had Thomson made no other contribution to Gaelic than the work he has put into *Gairm*, in formulating its policy and in putting that policy into effect, his contribution would have been of remarkable importance.”³⁵⁴ Donald John MacLeod considers *Gairm* the basis of the revival which took place in Gaelic literature in the second half of the twentieth century and the first part of the new infrastructure which facilitated especially the development of the short story and modern poetry.³⁵⁵

The project started in 1951³⁵⁶ when Thomson, who was at the time often involved in broadcasting, approached Finlay J. MacDonald (Fionnlagh MacDhòmhnaill)³⁵⁷ of the Gaelic department of the BBC with the idea of establishing a Gaelic quarterly magazine. As Thomson mentioned in an interview, he felt there was a need for such a venture after the war, especially as the bilingual English-Gaelic periodical *Alba*, launched in 1948 and edited by Calum MacLean and Thomas MacCalmain, appeared only once due to lack of funding.³⁵⁸ Thomson contributed the poem “An Loch a Tuath” (The Northern Loch) and the short story “Ri Taobh an Teine” (By the Fireside) to the first issue of the magazine and some of the radical opinions expressed in it, such as the virulent essay “Uisge Beatha agus Uisge Bais:

³⁵² Thomson, “A Man Reared in Lewis” 135; Thomson, “Some Recollections” 57. Thomson talks about his childhood journalistic ventures in the documentary film *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* (BBC Alba 2000, prod. A. Mhoireasdan) that also shows some pages from his hand-written and hand-drawn periodicals.

³⁵³ Thomson, “A Man Reared in Lewis” 134.

³⁵⁴ Donald MacAulay, “Introduction”, *Derick Thomson: The Far Road and Other Poems / Lines Review* 39 (December, 1971) 4.

³⁵⁵ Donald John MacLeod, *Dualchas an Aghaidh nan Creag* 23.

³⁵⁶ In some sources, the date is given as 1952: the confusion springs from the fact that while the magazine was established in 1951, the first issue appeared in 1952. From issue 65 (Winter 1968), the first page of the magazine included “stèidhichte 1951” under the title *Gairm*.

³⁵⁷ Finlay J MacDonald (1926-1987) was a native Gaelic speaker born and raised in Harris. A radio and television producer by profession, he worked on films such as *A Boy in Harris* (1966) and *The Highlander* (1959). He wrote three novels in English dealing with his childhood in Harris between the two world wars: *Crowdie and Cream* (1982), *Crotal and White* (1983), and *The Corncrake and the Lysander* (1985).

³⁵⁸ Thomson, “Some Recollections” 60.

Reflections on Gaelic Drama” by Hector McIver, would have been much in tune with his own convictions. When he saw the quick demise of the promising project, he decided to take matters into his own hands.

Thomson and MacDonald spent the first year gathering funds from various supporters. In the first editorial, they mention that they were certain of the need to gather all the means related to the effort themselves, by asking people and organisations for donations. At the end of the first issue, they published a list of contributors, both individuals and groups, including some usual suspects, such as the folklorist John Lorne Campbell of Canna, the novelist Compton Mackenzie, Sam MacLean (i.e. Sorley, the great poet), the classicist and translator John MacLean, and, not surprisingly, Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar.

They managed to collect £1,000, and since the first issue only cost £300, the magazine had a good start in terms of financial management and could produce two more issues relying only on the initial contributions.³⁵⁹ In terms of funding, as MacAulay points out, *Gairm* was “independent of all the elements of the Gaelic establishment – church, state and Comunn Gàidhealach.”³⁶⁰ This allowed the editors to express radical views on many issues, including possible sponsors such as An Comunn Gàidhealach, the Western Isles Council (Comhairle nan Eilean), and the Highlands and Islands Development Board.

The first issue of *Gairm* appeared in autumn 1952 and the last one in autumn 2002, which means that the quarterly was an important force in the Gaelic world for fifty years. Looking back at the decision to establish *Gairm* in the first issue, the editors said they were certain of two things: “that people will read books when they find something interesting in them, and that unless people read books in their own language, the language will be gone in a short time” (gun leugh daoine leabhraichean ma lorgas iad rud-eigin inntinneach annta, agus cuideachd, mura leugh daoine leabhraichean ’nan cànan fhèin, gun tèid a’ chànan leis an t-sruth ann an ùine nach bi fada).³⁶¹ They state that Gaelic survives on the lips of ordinary people in the Gàidhealtachd – crofters, fishermen, and housewives – and when they stop using the language, scholars will be unable to save it, and therefore they dedicate *Gairm* especially to these readers.³⁶²

This was true especially in the first decades of the magazine and *Gairm* learnt its lessons both from *An Teachdaire Gaelach* and *Guth na Bliadhna* – Thomson and MacDonald were ready to make compromises so that the magazine would attract a substantial readership

³⁵⁹ Thomson, “Some Recollections” 60.

³⁶⁰ Donald MacAulay, “Introduction”, *Derick Thomson: The Far Road* 4.

³⁶¹ “As a’ Chathair,” *Gairm* 1 (Autumn 1952): 13.

³⁶² “As a’ Chathair,” *Gairm* 1 (Autumn 1952): 13.

and diluted the radical new writing and political commentary with more light-hearted and traditional pieces. *Gairm* thus contained travelogues, crosswords, advertisements, and pages dedicated to fashion and cosmetics, and also songs, portrayals of Gaelic “celebrities” with photos, humorous stories, and traditional village poetry. Ronald Black described *Gairm* in the early decades as the Gaelic *Picture Post* and meant it as a compliment.³⁶³ In this respect, some roots of *Gairm* can be traced to the Portree high school magazine *An Cabairneach* (The Tattler), where Gaelic prose, as MacLeod points out, at last broke free of Norman MacLeod’s “sombre formality” and the “earnest idealism” of Erskine and his circle.³⁶⁴ It is no accident that Finlay J. MacDonald, while studying in Portree, was the first editor of *An Cabairneach*.³⁶⁵

The first issue of *Gairm* featured, among other content, a description of St Kilda, a history of fishing in Lewis, poems by Sorley MacLean and Derick Thomson, cartoons, a song (score and lyrics), a women’s page discussing fashion and household management, a section for learners of Gaelic, book reviews, and a crossword puzzle. In the later decades, *Gairm* gradually transmuted into a literary magazine, publishing mostly poetry, short stories, and reviews, but still retaining some of its initial variety. In the first years, it also organised Gaelic classes and encouraged readers to use the magazine as a study material in order to spread the command of the language – *Gairm* was thus not only a magazine, but a whole revivalist project. The accompanying publishing house Gairm Publications was one of the most prolific Gaelic publishers of the era, blazing the trail for initiatives such as *Acair* and later CLÀR.

When recalling the beginnings of the magazine, Thomson mentioned they wanted to

iomadach seòrsa nòs sgrìobhaidh a chleachdadh ann an *Gairm*, rudan meadhanach seann-fhasanta agus rudan cho ùr ’s a ghabhadh agus thog sin rud math de dheasbad anns na bliadhnaichean tràth co-dhiù. Bha daoine a’ sgrìobhadh thugainn agus ag ràdh, chan eil sinn ag iarraidh an còrr dhen rubbish a tha sin fhaicinn, gu h-àraidh ann am bàrdachd. Cha robh e a’ còrdadh riutha idir gu robh dòighean ùra a’ nochdadh ann am bàrdachd agus tha mi a’ creidsinn gu bheil na beachdan sin beò fhathast ann an iomadach àite.³⁶⁶

employ various styles of writing in *Gairm*, fairly old-fashioned things and things that were as modern as possible, and this raised quite some debate, at least in the

³⁶³ Ronald Black, “*Gairm*: An Aois Òir,” *Aiste* 2 (2008): 95.

³⁶⁴ MacLeod, “Gaelic Prose” 213, 215.

³⁶⁵ Anne Loughran, “Bibliography of the Non-Traditional Creative Gaelic Skye Prose: *An Cabairneach*,” *Gaelic Literature of the Isle of Skye: an Annotated Bibliography*, 2018 [website based on the author’s MA dissertation, University of Aberdeen, 1986], <<http://www.skyelit.co.uk/prose/creat2.html>> 2 July 2019.

³⁶⁶ Ruaraidh MacThòmais, “Mar a chaidh an ràitheachan *Gairm* a chur air chois”, BBC Alba *Làrach nam Bàrd*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/alba/foghlam/larachnambard/poets/ruaraidh_macthomas/am_bard> 2 July 2019.

early years. People were writing to us, protesting they did not want to read that sort of rubbish, especially in poetry. They did not like at all that new styles were appearing in poetry, and I believe that these views are still common in a number of places.*

In *The Future of the Highlands*, Thomson asserted that the foundation of *Gairm* was sympathetic to new work, and that it was indeed established chiefly to make the publication of such work possible.³⁶⁷ The encouragement of high-quality new literature, cosmopolitan and comparable to European standards, was clearly Thomson's own preference, and during his career he was, unjustly to a large extent, accused of elitism and insufficient regard for the Gaelic tradition, but he chose a different strategy than Erskine and "wrapped" the radical new writing in more accessible content.

Promoting new literature was part of the magazine's revivalist agenda and some of the principal works of modern Gaelic literature appeared in *Gairm* for the first time, for example Sorley MacLean's poem "Hallaig" and the first Gaelic poems of Iain Crichton Smith (Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn) and Christopher Whyte (Crisdean MacIlleBhàin). Almost all Gaelic writers who worked in the second half of the twentieth century published in the magazine, including the novelist Norman Campbell (Tormod Caimbeul), short story writers John Murray (Iain Moireach) and Paul MacInnes (Pòl MacAonghais), poets Donald MacAulay (Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh), Myles Campbell (Maoilios Caimbeul) and others, and often their first books were produced by Gairm Publications. In its early years, *Gairm* organised a short story competition and it was one of the main platforms thanks to which the short story achieved such high standards and gained such prominence in Gaelic literature in the second half of the twentieth century, building on foundations laid by Erskine and his collaborators.

In previous Gaelic periodicals, the overwhelming majority of the content was supplied by male writers. The *Gairm* editors, reflecting the social changes after second world war, tried to encourage Gaelic women writers and complained about the scarcity of women contributors, using a miscellany of illustrious Gaelic poetesses as an example: "they now deserve the same status as men, and thus a part of their discussion must go into print [...] Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh was not idle in this respect, and neither were Diorbhail Nic a' Bhruthainn, Silis na Ceapaich, Mairead Nighean Lachlainn or Màiri Mhòr nan Òran" (Tha iad a nis a' dleasadh an aon inbhe ris na fir, agus feumaidh mar sin pàirt de'n chòmhradh aca a dhol an clò [...]) Cha robh Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh 'na tàmh anns an t-seagh so, is cha motha

³⁶⁷ Derick Thomson, "Literature and the Arts," *The Future of the Highlands*, ed. Derick Thomson and Ian Grimble (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968) 215.

bha Dìorbhail Nic a' Bhruthainn, is Silis na Ceapaich, is Mairead Nighean Lachlainn, no Màiri Mhòr nan Òran).³⁶⁸ At the same time, the magazine included a women's section focused on fashion and household management, but that should probably be seen as an attempt to cater for as broad a readership as possible, not as a statement on the assumed scope of female interests and capacities. Even the earliest issues had women contributors, especially reviewers such as Murdag Mackenzie and Anna Mackenzie, and *Gairm* regularly published new writing by women, including short stories by Eilidh Watt and Chrissie Dick and poems by Catriona Montgomery, Mary Montgomery, Meg Bateman, Anne Frater, and others.

Gairm also proved to be an important medium for translations from other languages into Gaelic. Thomson welcomed Christopher Whyte's Gaelic renditions of modern European poetry³⁶⁹ and the works of a rather astonishing medley of poets, including Horace, Shakespeare, Merriman, Burns, Brecht, Neruda, Lorca, Claudel, and Hughes, to name just a few, appeared in *Gairm* in Gaelic. Thomson also edited the anthology *Bàrdachd na Roinn-Eòrpa an Gàidhlig* (European Poetry in Gaelic, 1990), largely based on the pieces that appeared in *Gairm* throughout the years. In terms of fiction, the readers of *Gairm* could enjoy Conan Doyle, Tolkien, Maupassant, and Ó Conaire in Gaelic.

Until *Gairm* 47 (Summer 1964), Thomson and MacDonald steered the magazine as co-editors, and up to *Gairm* 56 (Autumn 1966), MacDonald remained involved as a member of the trust. From the next issue (Winter 1966), Donald John MacLeod is listed as Thomson's co-editor.³⁷⁰ He brought with him a radical agenda and contributed articles on subjects such as Christianity and politics, the thought of Mao Tse-tung, and communism, and some of them naturally sparked controversies. He stayed as co-editor until *Gairm* 97 (Winter 1976). Although both MacDonald and MacLeod shaped the magazine by their own viewpoints, talents, and personal styles, Thomson was clearly the major force behind the whole venture, and even more as sole editor since 1977.

By virtue of all the editorial decisions outlined above – to publish new literature that was often breaking away from the Gaelic tradition, to welcome women contributors and non-native speakers who learnt Gaelic and decided to use it as the medium for creative expression, and to encourage translations from European languages – Thomson was moulding Gaelic

³⁶⁸ "As a' Chathair," *Gairm* 14 (Winter 1955): 107.

³⁶⁹ In the 1980s, Whyte translated poems by Anna Akhmatova, Yannis Ritsos, Constantine Cavafy, Tin Ujević, Tadeusz Różewicz, and Eduard Mörike for *Gairm*.

³⁷⁰ Donald John MacLeod (1943), a native Gaelic speaker from Harris, completed a doctorate under Thomson's supervision at the University of Glasgow and wrote an extensive thesis on twentieth-century Gaelic literature, which still remains the most comprehensive source of information on Gaelic writing in 1900-1960. He was a lecturer in Celtic at Glasgow when Thomson served as Head of Department, published a number of articles on Gaelic fiction, and edited the collection of short stories *Dorcha tro Ghlainne* (Through a Glass Darkly, 1970).

literature and spurring it to be more open to fresh impulses and to aspire to more ambitious standards. International champions of Gaelic, such as the Norwegian linguist Magne Oftedal and the Japanese scholar Tokusaburo Nakamura, were also given space in *Gairm* and Thomson reviewed and commended their work.

Contributions to the *Gairm* review section “An Sgeilp Leabhraichean” (The Bookshelf) and essays on literature constitute one of the most substantial volumes of Gaelic literary criticism, as almost all Gaelic publications of note were reviewed on the pages of the magazine, which helped to promote these new works and encourage discussion about them. The *Gairm* reviews and essays read as a fascinating chronicle of Gaelic literature in the second half of the twentieth century and reflect the development of critical approaches. Besides, the section was not limited to Gaelic works only and regularly featured reviews of new works concerning Scottish literature in English and Scots; Scottish history, ethnology, and politics; scholarly works in Celtic studies; and new publications concerning Irish, Manx, Cornish, Welsh, and Breton. Thomson also felt free to review books with no Scottish or Celtic connections, such as poems by Rilke and Solzhenitsyn, signalling unobtrusively that the world did not end at the edge of the Celtic fringe.

Apart from editing the magazine and shaping its editorial policy and inviting contributors, Thomson also wrote for the magazine in a number of genres: his poems often appeared first in *Gairm* and only later in the collections, six of his five short stories were published in the quarterly,³⁷¹ he wrote essays on Gaelic literature, for example on the poetry of “cianalas” (homesickness) (*Gairm* 117) and the image of Glasgow in Gaelic poetry (*Gairm* 94), and took care of most of the reviews. In addition to that, he contributed several witty and engaging articles about his travels abroad, to Sweden (*Gairm* 24), Canada (*Gairm* 108), and Finland (*Gairm* 124), accompanied by his own photos. They illustrate not only Thomson’s sense of humour, open-mindedness, and a keen interest in other countries, their customs and cultures, but they also showcase his skill as a prose writer and the fluent, rich, and clear style that *Gairm* basically forged and which could still be used today as a standard of Gaelic non-literary prose.

Thomson’s politics found expression in the editorials which largely served as a vehicle for his own views. In the first few issues, they were signed both by Thomson and MacDonald. From winter 1954, there was no signature, and it seems, according to the choice of subjects

³⁷¹ “Foghar 1976” (Autumn 1976), *Gairm* 17; “Bean a’ Mhinisteir” (The Minister’s Wife), *Gairm* 22; “Mar Chuimhneachan” (As a Keepsake), *Gairm* 31; “Tea Feasgair” (“Evening Tea”), *Gairm* 35; “An Staran” (The Path), *Gairm* 38. The very first short story, “Ri Taobh an Teine” (By the Fireside), appeared in *Alba* (1948).

and style, that Thomson was the author of most of them, although arguably Donald John MacLeod's style can be discerned in some of the later ones. It seems nonetheless safe to say that either Thomson wrote them himself, subscribed sufficiently to the opinions expressed in them to be comfortable with being cast as their author. From spring 1956, the editorials bore the heading "Air an Spiris" ("on the perch"), in keeping with the galline imagery.

In the essay "The Role of the Writer in a Minority Culture", Thomson pointed out that "a minority culture, with its tendency to ingrowing, and its incipient persecution complex, should be subjected to satire periodically. A society that can learn to laugh at itself becomes more resilient, and the minority cultures need all the resilience they can muster."³⁷² In the *Gairm* editorials, he was certainly doing his best to provide such satirical impulses and boost social resilience. Importantly, the Gaels themselves were very often the main target of *Gairm*'s piercing voice for being lax, resigned, and insufficiently engaged in the fortunes of their own language, culture, and environment. No matter how pleased the editors could be with the growing interest in Gaelic in the Lowlands and all over the world, they maintained that as long as more *Gairm* copies are sold in Manchester than in Harris, there was something wrong, and not with the magazine, but with the Gaels in the Gàidhealtachd.

A telling example, which also illustrates the brisk, vigorous style of the editorials, is the deliberation about the Gaelic ombudsman, which serves as a pretext to pillory the putative capacity of the Gaels to mope and whinge without providing an alternative:

A bheil Ombudsman a dhith oirnn air a' Ghàidhealtachd? Chan eil sinn idir a' ciallachadh an duine sin a tha Pàrlamaid Lunnainn an dùil a chur an sàs, ach Ombudsman dhuinn fhìn, fear a bheireadh am follais gach cànan a th' againn an aghaidh ar luchd-riaghlaidh 's ar luchd-stiùiridh air a' Ghàidhealtachd, agus ann an àite sam bith far a bheil caitheamh agus anacaitheamh gan dèanamh air a' Ghàidhlig. Tha sinn dùil gur h-e duine feumail a bhiodh ann. Nach iomadh gearain a dh'fhaodadh e dhèanamh. [...] Chan eil teagamh cuideachd nach fheumadh e dèiligeadh ris an fheadhainn a bhios a' sgrìobhadh mu ghnòthaichean eaglaise ann an *Gasaid Steòrnabhaigh*. Cha bhiodh leigheas orrasan ach an cur cola-deug do dh' eaglais Easbuigeach a dhustadh 's a ghlanadh nan ìomhaighean. Tha rithist ann na daoine nach cùm camara TV còmhnard air Oidhche Dhihaoine a' Mhòid. Dè ghabhas dèanamh riuthasan? Chan eil a' cheist seo duilich a fuasgladh. An cur fad mhìos do Sheòmar nan Naidheachdan anns a' BhBC, a leughadh nan naidheachdan Gàidhlig, fhad 's a bhios Cailein MacCoinnich agus Coinneach MacDhòmhnaill a' leigeil an anail ann am Majorca. Bu mhath leinn cuideachd gun togadh an duine so gearain an aghaidh nan daoine nach bi a' leughadh *Gairm* – agus gun cuireadh e orrasan mar pheanas *Gairm* a leughadh. Ach cò thaghadh an duine so, agus dé an t-ainm a bhiodh air? Nam b' e an

³⁷² Derick Thomson, "The Role of the Writer in a Minority Culture," *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* XLIV (1964-1966): 270.

Comunn Gaidhealach a thaghadh e có dheanadh casaid an aghaidh a' Chomuinn? A thaobh ainm, cha bhiodh sin duilich a lorg. Gheibheadh e ainmeannan gu leòr aon uair 's gu rachadh e an sàs anns an obair so air Ghàidhealtachd.³⁷³

Are we lacking an ombudsman in the Gàidhealtachd? We do not mean at all the person the parliament in London hopes to put in place, but our own ombudsman, someone who would bring into the open all our complaints about the governance and administration in the Gàidhealtachd and in any place where Gaelic is wasted and misused. We think it would be a useful person. He could raise so many complaints. [...] Undoubtedly, he could deal with those who write about church matters to the *Stornoway Gazette*. There is no remedy but to send them for a fortnight to the Episcopal Church and make them dust and clean the statues. There are also those who cannot keep a TV camera straight on Friday night at the Mod. What should be done with them? It is not a difficult question to resolve. Put them for a month into the BBC newsroom to read the Gaelic news, while Calum Mackenzie and Kenneth MacDonald take some time off in Majorca. We would also like this person to complain about the people who do not read *Gairm* – and to make them read it as a punishment. But who would choose this person and how would he be called? Should he be chosen by An Comunn Gàidhealach, who would then complain about the association itself? As to the name, it should not be difficult to find – he will be called names enough, as soon as he becomes involved in this sort of work in the Gàidhealtachd.*

Naturally, the various aspects of Gaelic revival were among the most frequent topics of the editorials: comparison between the situation of Gaelic and other minority languages (mainly Irish and Welsh), the scarcity of Gaelic books, especially suitable reading for children in Gaelic, and Gaelic-medium education. As Ian Grimble points out, Thomson “used his editorials from the outset to pioneer improvements in the educational system of the Highlands and Islands, and particularly the establishment of proper Gaelic streams in the schools.”³⁷⁴ In summer 1956, he addressed the problem of scarcity of fiction for children and young adults in Gaelic:

Is fhada bho bha aithnichte do dhuine smaoinichail sam bith gum b' ann fìor dheireil a bha teagasg na Gàidhlig anns an sgoil-bhig, an uair nach leughadh ach cora dhuine a' Ghàidhlig le tlachd, aig aois ceithir-bliadhna-deug. Aig an aon àm, feumar aideachadh nach eil ach criomag de leabhar an sud 's an so, ann an Gàidhlig, a tha freagarrach do chloinn na h-aoise so.³⁷⁵

For a long time it has been manifest to every thinking person that teaching of Gaelic in primary schools is truly wretched, when only a few people at the age of

³⁷³ “Air an Spirid,” *Gairm* 53 (Winter 1965): 9.

³⁷⁴ Ian Grimble, “Poet and Scholar as Journalist,” *Scottish Gaelic Studies* XVII (1996): 160.

³⁷⁵ “Air an Spirid,” *Gairm* 16 (Summer 1956): 303.

fourteen read Gaelic with pleasure. At the same time, one has to admit that there is a mere handful of Gaelic books here and there that are suitable for children of this age.*

Only recently, the importance of producing a broad enough corpus of varied books for young readers that would encourage reading Gaelic for pleasure has been addressed by publishing houses and parents' groups, also due to the boom of Gaelic-medium education. As early as in 1956, Thomson realised that reading habits are formed in childhood and that attracting young readers to Gaelic means there would later be a market for Gaelic poetry, novels, and non-fiction. In an editorial from 1963, he attacked both the lukewarm attitudes of the Gaels to Gaelic-medium education and the divided nature of the Gàidhealtachd with many regional rivalries:

A bheil a fìor, mar a chualas, nach eil na Leòdhusaich cho dèidheil 's a tha na h-Uibhistich air Gàidhlig a thoirt do'n chloinn anns an sgoil? Ma tha so fìor, tha dà cheist ann bu chòir a bhith air an cur 's air am freagairt. 'Se a' chiad cheist, Carson nach eil iad cho dèidheil? A bheil eagal orra fhathast gum bi a' Gàidhlig 'na cnap-starra; gun ionnsaich a' chlànn nas fheàrr as a h-aoinais? Tha e coltach nach e so idir a tha iad a' lorg an Siorrachd Inbhir Nis, no anns a' Chuimrigh, no an Switzerland. [...] Tha mòran eòlais agus fiosrachaidh aig muinntir Siorrachd Inbhir Nis mu'n chuspair so. An teid Comhairle an Fhoghlaim an Siorrachd Rois a shealltainn air na sgoiltean Gàidhlig an Uibhist 's anns na Hearadh? An toir iad cuireadh do Shiorrachd Inbhir Nis feadhainn de 'n luchd-teagaisg Ghàidhlig aca a chur greis a Leòdhus, agus feadhainn de na Leòdhusaich a chur greis a dh'Uibhist? Agus an sìn an dà shiorrachd làmh a' chàirdeas gu muinntir Earraghaidheil is Chataibh? Tha a' Ghàidhealtachd air fàs cho beag a nis 's gum bu chòir dhi bhith aonaichte.³⁷⁶

Is it true, as one hears, that the Lewis people are not as keen as the people of Uist for their children to be taught Gaelic at school? And if that is the case, there are two questions that should be answered. The first question is why are they not so keen? Are they still afraid that Gaelic would be a stumbling block for the children, that they would learn better without it? It seems that this is not at all what they find in Inverness-shire, in Wales, or in Switzerland. [...] People from Inverness-shire have a great deal of knowledge and experience with this subject. Will the Education Council of Ross-shire go and look at the Gaelic schools in Uist and in Harris? Will they invite Inverness-shire to send some of their Gaelic teachers to spend a while in Lewis, and some of those in Lewis to spend a while in Uist? And will these two shires stretch out their hand in kindness to the people of Argyll and Sutherland? The Gàidhealtachd has become so small now that it should be united.*

³⁷⁶ "Air an Spirid," *Gairm* 45 (Winter 1963): 9.

The editorials were quite ahead of their time when they proposed, in the 1950s, making short Gaelic films according to Welsh and Irish models, founding a Gaelic book club, so that more new books could be published using private funding, or the establishment of Gaelic drama groups and theatre companies. The magazine kept urging readers to action – to write to authorities and complain, for example about the scarcity of Gaelic broadcasting, and to be generally proactive, and offered very practical and specific suggestions as to what the Gaels could demand of their elected representatives: more Gaelic teachers and examiners, more funding for Gaelic publishing, and more time for Gaelic on TV and radio, two dedicated employees who would work with Gaelic manuscripts at the National Library and two other at the Ordnance Survey. Most of these propositions have been actually realised, some of them in a few years' time, some of them only decades after Thomson called for them, and some still await realisation.

Gairm actively strove to use Gaelic in discussing contemporary and new topics, publishing articles about the Vietnam War, the situation of the Kurds in Iran, essays on Kierkegaard's philosophy and Borges' writing, and UFO. In the editorials, Thomson commented on the developments in Northern Ireland, the fall of the Iron Curtain and the return of democracy to Central Europe, global warming, the Gulf War, and ethnic violence in the Balkans and Rwanda. For these efforts, the magazine was from the outset criticised for not using sufficiently pure Gaelic and for not being mindful enough of Gaelic traditions. Thomson and MacDonald defended themselves by pointing out that the aim of *Gairm* was to use contemporary Gaelic, not the Gaelic of two hundred years ago, and complained that too many people try to make the language "a poor old woman trapped in the corsets which she wore in her youth."³⁷⁷

On many occasions, Thomson used the editorial as a vehicle for criticising various bodies active in the Gaelic world and commenting on their activities, or the lack of thereof. One of the main targets of this criticism was An Comunn Gàidhealach, as the organisation of the Mod became its chief preoccupation and many felt that it was not doing enough to promote the actual use of the language. *Gairm* kept challenging An Comunn to introduce a more modern programme to its competitions, to engage in Gaelic publishing, and to actually start doing something for the language rather than talking about its dire state at endless meetings conducted in English. Another target of the cockerel's piercing call was the Highlands and Islands Development Board and the Crofters' Commission, as Thomson

³⁷⁷ "As a' Chathair," *Gairm* 7 (Spring 1954): 205.

considered them negligent of the Gaelic language and culture. However, it is important to note that no matter how astringent some of the comments were, he was also quick to acknowledge positive developments and changes of policies in anything he had previously criticised.

For all its interest in literature and education, *Gairm* did not forget the economic situation of the Gàidhealtachd and called for new local industries and infrastructure which would prevent people from leaving the region in search of better opportunities, but at the same time stressed the need to introduce them wisely and carefully with regard to the threatened status of the language. In 1974, Thomson published an article entitled “Tìr na Gàidhlig ann a Linn na h-Ola” (The Land of Gaelic in the Century of Oil) where he discusses the situation of Gaelic in the context of the changes the 1970 discovery of oil in the North Sea would undoubtedly bring.

Bu chòir dhuinn tòiseachadh gun dàil a’ dèanamh nam poilisidhean ùra a tha gu bhì freagarrach do shluagh na Gàidhlig. Poilisidh airson luchd-obrach a tha siubhal bho àite gu àite, gus dìon a thoirt do ’n choimhearsnachd, ’s do chànan na coimhearsnachd, anns am bi iad ùine gheàrr; poilisidh son sgoiltean [...]; poilisidh air mar bu chòir Gàidhlig a chleachdadh gu follaiseach, air postairean, air togalaichean, an ainmean shràidean is ròidean, air litrichean ’s mar sin air adhart. Agus an uair a tha gach poilisidh deiseil againn, bu chòir dhuinn a dhol a-mach air an t-sràid leotha, agus a-steach do chomhairlean sgìreachd is fo chomhairlean nam mòr-roinn, bu chòir dhuinn an cur an cèill tre gach meadhon a th’ ann.³⁷⁸

We should start without delay to create new policies that would be suitable for the Gaelic people. A policy for workers who travel from one place to another, to provide protection for the community and for the language of the community where they will be staying short-term; a policy for schools [...]; policy for the ways in which Gaelic should be used in public, on posters, on buildings, in names of streets and roads, in letters and so on and so forth. And when we have all these policies ready, we should take them to the streets, and to district councils, and to province councils, and we should express them through every available medium.*

This appeal ties in with the opinion repeatedly expressed in the editorials: with the damage the hostile policies already inflicted on Gaelic communities, the language and culture will not survive without deliberate protection and the region, weakened by centuries of oppression, was still vulnerable to outward exploitation. In Thomson’s view, the Gaelic revival could not be reduced to singing competitions, but needed to take heed of economic developments in the region. The idea of using Gaelic as an economic asset, based on the conviction that the

³⁷⁸ Ruaraidh MacThòmais, “Tìr na Gàidhlig ann a Linn na h-Ola,” *Gairm* 87 (Summer 1974): 213.

Gàidhealtachd would be more attractive to tourists if it retained its distinctive language and culture, rather than mindlessly adopting English fashions, was not realised until much later.

Thomson was also using *Gairm* for promotion of his political views. The magazine supported Scottish independence or at least devolution from the very beginning, but from the 1970s, it gradually became more pronounced in its support of the SNP, which corresponded with the gradual rise of the party to the position of a respected force in Scottish and British politics. From the late 1960s, reviews of works concerning Scottish politics and national identity also become more frequent.

In 1978, (*Gairm* 104), the magazine published the SNP Gaelic policy and Thomson was one of the five members of the group that prepared the document. He anticipated possible criticism of *Gairm* for giving space to one political party and not others and argued that it was important to make such vital information available to readers in their own language as soon as possible, and pointed out that should any other party come up with such commendable endeavour, *Gairm* would happily give it space too – adding, however, that they did not believe such a hopeful policy would come from any other party, and it was just as well to print it in black and white. The article “Ordugh Puist an Gàidhlig” (Postal Order in Gaelic) from summer 1977 (*Gairm* 99) recounts an experiment conducted by Thomson and his university students when they tried to provide a Gaelic alternative for the official postal order form, proving that it was feasible to translate it and pointing out the lack of use of the language in official, administrative contexts.

The article “Bile na Gàidhlig” (The Gaelic Act) from spring 1981 concerned the Gaelic Acts proposed to the House of Commons by Donald Stewart on 13th February 1981 for the second reading, but it did not receive enough support from members of Parliament. Thomson actually lists MPs who were considered friends of Gaelic or presented themselves in such a manner, but did not turn up for the decisive “battle”. Thomson reminds the readers that all parties in Scotland were promising to help Gaelic before the last General Election and concludes that the SNP is actually the only party living up to its pre-election promises concerning the language and that the Gaels should remember that when casting their votes. With great satisfaction, Thomson saw the fulfilment of his hopes in 1999 when the parliament returned to Scotland, but immediately reminded the readers that the struggle was far from over and that the devolved parliament was merely a means, not the end.

When *Gairm* ceased publication in 2002, it was mostly focused on literature, but Thomson’s editorials still commented on current issues in Scotland and beyond, be it immoderate salaries in professional football, war crimes motivated by religious hate, or global

warming. The obvious motive for discontinuing the magazine was Thomson's advanced age – he was eighty-one – and the fiftieth anniversary probably seemed like a suitable occasion to end the venture, while it was still going strong and retaining its high standard. In the last editorial, Thomson expressed the belief that *Gairm* will live on in the Gaelic world and serve as a rich source of material for scholars and researchers.

The decision to discontinue *Gairm* and not to look for another editor, apart from the unenviable prospect of stepping into Thomson's shoes after fifty years and having to live up to the expectations, also reflected the changed landscape of Gaelic Scotland and its media: the TV channel BBC Alba and Radio nan Gàidheal provide both news coverage and various sorts of entertainment and give the Gaels space to voice their opinions, numerous websites and blogs cater for different users of Gaelic, and the Gaelic version of the Wikipedia, founded in 2003, offers information on a growing number of subjects. The publishing house Stòrlann issues and distributes educational materials, textbooks, simplified versions of literary classics, and other amenities for Gaelic learners of all ages. The niche for the Gaelic literary magazine has recently been filled by *Steall* (2016), a quarterly publishing new Gaelic writing, reviews, translations, and interviews. Thomson in *Gairm*, and Erskine and other founders of Gaelic magazines before him, managed to prepare the ground for these various, more diversified initiatives.

It is quite certain that Thomson was editing *Gairm* not only for the existing readers but also for the future generations of Gaels whose outlook he hoped to shape by the magazine. *Gairm* started with the premise that certain things, at that point not yet in existence, can be achieved, and Thomson wrote and campaigned them into being.

5. Conclusion

This final part of the dissertation sums up the findings of the previous chapters in two major areas: what sort of political poet Derick Thomson was, and what exactly did his political opinions and his vision of Scotland entail, based on evidence from his poetry and journalism. It also comments on the benefits and limitations of the chosen topic and approach, and suggest areas for further work.

5.1 Derick Thomson's Politics

As Meek notes, Thomson was “totally committed to the cause of Scotland, even when it was unfashionable to be committed to Scotland.”³⁷⁹ He was, to use MacAulay’s observation, one of the poets for whom Scotland was a “meaningful political entity”³⁸⁰ and who perceived the United Kingdom as a forcefully established arrangement which was disadvantageous and harmful to the Scottish people, and therefore sought to re-establish an independent Scottish state. He adhered to this persuasion throughout his life and saw the gradual transformation of Scottish nationalism from a rather obscure political movement to a major and respectable force in Scottish and UK politics. Before his death in March 2012, Thomson saw the return of the parliament to Edinburgh and the promise of an independence referendum in the near future.

For like-minded writers and intellectuals, Thomson’s nationalist commitment was a positive phenomenon. However, the general response to a nationalist writer in the second half of the twentieth century in Europe may not be altogether in the affirmative. As Whyte has pointed out in relation to Campbell Hay, nationalism has acquired predominantly negative connotations in Europe, and is seldom perceived positively by those who witness its rise, as it “almost always takes place in open disagreement with prevailing distributions of cultural and political power”:

We reserve the word [nationalism] for groups which we perceive to be, temporarily or irredeemably, unsuccessful in creating some kind of correlation between linguistic, cultural and political boundaries. Seen in this perspective, nationalism is intrinsically a rear-guard action, the protest of a community whose

³⁷⁹ Meek, “Appreciation of Professor Derick S. Thomson: funeral oration, as delivered,” <<http://meekwrite.blogspot.cz/2013/04/appreciation-of-professor-derick-s.html>>.

³⁸⁰ MacAulay, “Introduction,” *Nua-bhàrdachd Ghàidhlig / Modern Scottish Gaelic Poems*, ed. D. MacAulay (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 1995) 50.

identity is in some way threatened or placed in doubt. One consequence of this colouring of the term is that we may find ourselves requiring from actual or potential losers a self-justification which is almost never required of those we perceive as historically victorious. A Gaelic or a Scottish writer must demonstrate his or her right to the definition in a way rarely required of English or French writers.³⁸¹

For a long time, the Highlands and Islands have been seen as a separate entity in Scotland and marginalised on these grounds. They belonged to the Dal Riata kingdom which encompassed parts of today's west Scotland and northeast Ireland, and naturally, there have been strong ties and cultural exchange with Ireland, which was then replaced by Viking rule. Up to the 1266, the Hebrides belonged to the Kingdom of Norway. When the Norwegian kings passed the archipelago over to the Scottish crown, "a mixed Celto-Norse stock reverted wholly to the Gaelic culture."³⁸² It was probably during the period of the Lordship of the Isles when the Gaelic culture flourished most. The Lords of the Isles strove to assert their independence on the Scottish crown and as soon as in the thirteenth century, there is written evidence about Gaelic resistance to the royal government of Scotland.³⁸³ The sixteenth century saw the disintegration of Gaelic society in Scotland based on the clan system and on the authority and patronage of the vanished lords of the Isles.³⁸⁴ After the Union of Crowns in 1603, anti-Celtic policy grew in intensity, taking a distinct shape in the Statutes of Iona (1609), a set of laws aimed at obliterating Gaelic language and culture and the overall distinctiveness of the Highlands and Islands and the related political threats.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the exiled Stuarts sought and received support from the Gaels in Scotland and Ireland after they had lost the throne to William of Orange, and although many Gaels actually fought for the Hanoverians, not for the Stuart kings, and some of the Highland and Island regions were not Catholic, the Gàidhealtachd became firmly linked with the Roman faith and the military threat of the Jacobite risings, and its population was styled as barbarous and alien. When the 1745 rising led by Charles Edward Stuart was defeated at Culloden in 1746, the proscription laws enhanced the Highland antipathy towards the Westminster government.

During the nineteenth century, the environment and culture of Gaelic Scotland were influenced by a number of socio-political phenomena whose result was depopulation of the area, a substantial weakening of the position of the Gaelic language and a society which was

³⁸¹ Whyte, "George Campbell Hay: Nationalism with a Difference" 119.

³⁸² Grimble, "Introduction," *The Future of the Highlands* 10.

³⁸³ Grimble, "Introduction," *The Future of the Highlands* 9.

³⁸⁴ Grimble, "Introduction," *The Future of the Highlands* 11.

largely impoverished and hindered by internal conflicts, external pressures and imposed policies. These developments resulted in what Stroh describes as “the double marginality of the Gàidhealtachd, both within Scotland and within Britain.”³⁸⁵

Thomson’s writing may thus be seen as a protest on behalf of the threatened Scottish Gaelic community in Scotland, and the Scottish community in Britain. In Thomson’s case, one may thus observe two principal interrelated loyalties: to the Gàidhealtachd and to Scotland as a whole. It has been pointed out in the festschrift in the poet’s honour that the “width of the background awareness [...] makes his political nationalism Scottish rather than Gaelic.”³⁸⁶ In terms of political affiliation, Thomson remained faithful to the Scottish National Party throughout his life, supported the efforts to separate Scotland from the United Kingdom, and did not experiment with founding any new political parties which would focus on Gaelic Scotland only. For Thomson, a sovereign Scottish national state was a framework in which the different Scottish languages and cultures could flourish. It can therefore be argued that there are two sorts of nationalism in Thomson’s writing: Scottish nationalism, focused on politics, and Gaelic nationalism, focused on cultural and linguistic revival.

In this respect, Herder’s view that individual languages are precious in themselves, as they contain the tradition, history, religion, and customs of the people, is of great relevance to Thomson’s thought, and Herder’s famous conviction that linguistic diversity allows for a diversity of thought and culture could be one of Thomson’s mottoes. Two centuries before Thomson, Herder stressed the role of culture and language in the formation of nationality and authentic group experience, but also paid close attention to civilisation and will, as people choose to speak their own language and discover their own history.

An important point in Herder’s theory is the idea of the moral equality of cultures and from the perspective of an activist who dedicated most of his energies towards protecting a minority language and a stateless nation against absorption into bigger units, surely a vital one. However, the application of the theory that the nation coincides with language and different languages therefore constitute distinct fixed communities whose specific way of thinking is determined by the respective language, would be more complicated, as Thomson sees the Scottish nation as comprising of various communities characterised by different languages. What one does not find in Thomson’s thought is von Humboldt’s concept of linguistic determinism, as the Gaels are not shaped by Gaelic, but rather by the fact that it is a minority language, and by their historical experience. According to Thomson’s urging, the

³⁸⁵ Stroh 12.

³⁸⁶ “Dedication,” *Feill-Sgrìbhinn do Ruairidh MacThòmais / Scottish Gaelic Studies XVII* (1996): 3.

Gaels should shape their language and their culture and push them into new directions, rather than be shaped by them.

The following quote reveals the profound connection between language and national identity in Thomson's thought:

A majority of Gaelic speakers cannot read or write Gaelic with any ease, whereas they can read and write English with ease, and they are therefore attracted to English publications, and have no real need for Gaelic to be used in public notices or administration, and indeed tend to regard the use of Gaelic for any purposes other than everyday conversation or religious service as affected, or eccentric, or pertaining to a new and odd class, that of the language revivers. It is clear that a process of denationalisation has been carried out with considerable success, and that the natural relationship between the spoken language and the written language, in a specific area, has been upset.³⁸⁷

His own choice to write in the language was a political act, not a decision of artistic necessity:

In my case I had decided by that time fairly firmly to make Gaelic studies my main career. That reinforced tendencies that had been showing up throughout my secondary school, nationalistic tendencies if you like, which I think began to link by my early teens with the language question. That probably had a strong effect in the long run on my choice of Gaelic as a creative writing language. [...] I don't think I've ever written an original English poem since 1948. I've often written translations of my Gaelic poems. Again, there was a strongish political motivation behind that, but it wasn't the only one. I think there was a strong cultural motivation too. I think I felt at that time that whatever I had to say was likely to have stronger relevance if it was against a Gaelic background.³⁸⁸

This quote reveals Thomson's typical mixture of political and cultural engagement. For Thomson, the effort to preserve the language is an essential component of the attempted revival, although he from time to time admitted his own doubts about its viability. This pessimism however did not quench his determination. In his view, a successful campaign for an independent Scotland must focus not only on economics and social issues, but also on linguistic and cultural matters – which has often not been the case with the SNP in the second half of the twentieth century:

[...] it is vital that this reappraisal should be concerned with cultural as well as with economic and social and political questions. The activists of reappraisal in Scotland can often be accused of working in insulated conditions: the economists

³⁸⁷ Thomson, "The Role of the Writer in a Minority Culture" 264.

³⁸⁸ Thomson, "Poets in Conversation," *Taking You Home* 95.

of showing little interest in other than economic questions, the planners of being blind to cultural matters, and the professional politicians likewise, even the historians of paying too little attention to language and literature.³⁸⁹

As the Czech literary scholar Vladimír Macura points out in relation to the revival of the Czech language in the nineteenth century, “the mere use of Czech as a literary artistic language, as a language of ‘high’ literature was a direct polemic with the opponents of literary Czech, it should win and persuade readers, and also refute and discredit the arguments of the opponents.”³⁹⁰ He adds that the “strong journalistic and persuasive aspect” which was “present in the act of using Czech as a language of artistic literature, was working also in the cases when Czech was used as a language of science. Elevation of Czech to the language of science was a proof of the ability of the Czech language to assume its place among the educated languages of Europe.”³⁹¹ The same cultural-political aim is evident from Thomson’s introduction to a biology textbook he translated into Gaelic:

Nuair a chuir Ragnall MacLeòid na ciad chabaideilean thugam de na sgrìobh e air a’ chuspair Bith-eòlas, gu an eadar-theangachadh gu Gàidhlig, is gann gu robh sgrìobhadh sam bith againn nar cànan fhèin air a’ chuspair. Ach bha mi riamh gu làidir de ’n bheachd gu bheil a’ Ghàidhlig glè chomasach air rudan ùra a thoirt a-steach thuice fhèin, agus gur h-e eachdraidh through nan trì ceud bliadhna chaidh seachad a bha gar bacadh anns an dòigh seo, ’s gar stiùireadh cho tric gu beachdan is modhan seann-fhasanta. Mar sin cha bu ruith ach leum gu dhol an sàs anns an obair seo. [...] tha mi ’n dòchas gu bheil toiseach fais againn an seo, agus gum faic sinn iomadh cuspair eile ris nach robh dùil, air a làimhseachadh tre Ghàidhlig. Oir tha làn chòir aig luchd na Gàidhlig air seilbh a bhi aca anns a’ bheatha ’s anns an eòlas ris a bheil an leabhar seo a’ dèiligheadh.³⁹²

When Ragnall MacLeod gave to me the first chapters of what he wrote on the subject of biology for translation into Gaelic, there was hardly anything written on the subject in our own language. But I have always been strongly of the opinion that Gaelic is very able to absorb new things into itself, and that it is the miserable history of the last three hundred years that was hindering us in this way, and so often leading us to old-fashioned opinions and approaches. Thus, I jumped at the opportunity to get involved in this work. [...] I hope that this is a beginning of growth for us, and that we will see many other unexpected topics discussed through the medium of Gaelic. For the Gaelic people have ample right to take possession of the life and of the knowledge this book deals with.*

³⁸⁹ Thomson, “The Role of the Writer in a Minority Culture” 15.

³⁹⁰ Vladimír Macura, *Znamení zrodu* (Prague: H+H, 1995) 15. All quotes from Macura’s study used in this dissertation have been translated into English by myself, as there is no authoritative English version of the text.

³⁹¹ Macura 15.

³⁹² “Roimh-radh,” in: Ragnall MacLeod, *Bith-eòlas: A’ Chealla, Gintinneachd is Mean-fhàs* [Biology: The Cell, Genetics, and Evolution], transl. Derick Thomson (Glasgow: Gairm, 1976) 10.

Czech revivalists, according to Macura, saw language as the basis for the notion of nation and homeland, and in their activities, language was not used as a vehicle for already existing culture, it was a means of creating culture: “The world of the Czech is not, in the revivalist understanding, signified by the language means – it is produced by them, for the reality of Czech culture is at the beginning stored mainly in the language, and the use of the language itself creates the culture. The basic concepts of the revivalist ideology, especially the notion of the nation and the homeland, are derived from language. Jungmann defined the concept of the nation in relation to the language, and he decidedly identified the notion of the homeland with the notion of the nation: ‘without love for the patriotic language, it is impossible to think about love for the homeland, i.e. for the nation’.”³⁹³ It would be far-fetched to apply these notions literally to Thomson’s Gaelic revival, for there was far more to rely on in terms of previous cultural production, but the idea of language use as creating new culture, is something very close to Thomson’s activities, as well as the primacy of the language.

Macura notes that the Czech revivalist culture exhibited a number of syncretic features: it was “marked by little inner differentiation, and therefore by blending of whole great areas of culture”, and lacked clearly delineated borders between science, literature, journalism, etc.³⁹⁴ The polymath Thomson was himself a living example of such syncretism, and his multi-faceted extensive oeuvre, including poetry, short stories, journalism, and academic studies, is all shaped by one overall design – the effort to save and promote the Gaelic language. He also expressed a similar idea in his article on “The Role of Writer in a Minority Culture”: “In a situation such as the Scottish Gaelic one, it would be most useful to have a reasonably close liaison between the scholar and the writer, if the work of rehabilitation [of the language] is to go ahead smoothly and quickly.”³⁹⁵

According to Macura, the revivalist culture exhibited distinct attributes of play, for “cultural creations were actually thrown into an empty space” and did not enter culture but “created it around themselves as fiction.”³⁹⁶ The revivalists themselves were keenly aware of this situation, as a distich by the poet Jan Kollár entitled “The Poet and the Nation” reveals: “our poems are the voice of the prophet calling in the desert, / we play a piano which is still lacking strings.” There were of course living Gaelic communities in Thomson’s time where the language was still used on a daily basis to a certain extent, and an extensive corpus of literature, especially poetry, going back to the Middle Ages, but the type of modern, open,

³⁹³ Macura 53.

³⁹⁴ Macura 14.

³⁹⁵ Thomson, “The Role of the Writer in a Minority Culture” 265.

³⁹⁶ Macura 14.

progressive Gaelic culture Thomson was trying to create was not unlike Kollár's playing on the yet unstrung instrument. His texts were aimed at creating and shaping a future Gàidhealtachd according to the author's vision.

What Thomson emphasises as the most important components of "being a Gael" was either a command of or a willingness to learn Gaelic, and also historical and cultural awareness. It was this cultural basis of his conception of what it means to be a Gael that allowed him to welcome to the Gaelic world people who learnt the language as adults and came to the culture from the outside, to whom it was not their lot by birth but a choice of free will, such as the historian Ian Grimble who is one of the august company of heroes in *Sùil air Fàire*, together with Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair (and coming from Thomson, that is some praise indeed). Belonging to this Gàidhealtachd / Scotland, the two communities Thomson pledged his loyalty to, was in his view not governed by blood right or any other inherent quality, but by commitment to the cause. In this way, Thomson's thought exhibits features of voluntarism.

In relation to Scotland, Thomson's nationalism is a civic one, inclusive and multicultural, imagining the independent state that would nurture its various cultures and languages. However, even seemingly pure cultural patriotism presupposes a myth of ancestral origins and shared historical memories of the homeland that defines the ethnic basis of a supposedly entirely civic nation. Regarding the Gàidhealtachd, Thomson comes closest to what Anthony D. Smith delineates as cultural or linguistic nationalism, as he promoted the idea that full socialisation in the host language and culture can gain people not born or brought up with them full acceptance into the community. When Thomson seems to lapse into ethnocentric positions, such as in the problematic sections of "Meall Garbh" and in some *Gairm* editorials which include harsh critique of the English and their cultural and economic crimes against Scotland, it is arguably not criticism of the English as a unified ethnic group that would be inherently vile but rather of the United Kingdom and the Tory policies.

MacAulay remarked that Thomson's Gaelic activism, such as the foundation and maintenance of *Gairm* and Comhairle nan Leabhraichean (Gaelic Books Council), spring from the same motivation that pushed him into active participation in nationalist politics, for he saw those activities as "offering at least a marginal possibility of the survival of Gaelic culture."³⁹⁷ In the words of Crichton Smith, Thomson saw "the salvation of his own culture as

³⁹⁷ MacAulay, "Introduction," *The Far Road* 4.

dependent on an independent Scotland”,³⁹⁸ and believed that “for the Highlander to survive as a real human being” there must be a way of making Scotland into an independent state.³⁹⁹ In the article “Gaelic in Scotland”, Thomson wrote that only a Scottish Nationalist government could be expected to adopt efficient Gaelic policies, since “no other political party has committed itself significantly in this area,” and the full realisation of Gaelic potential is unlikely to be achieved without a political revolution of a particular kind.⁴⁰⁰ An independent Scotland, in charge of its own natural resources and economic policies, would in Thomson’s view provide a safer environment for the further development of the individual languages and cultural traditions.

In his view, an independent Scotland was important for Gaelic, but Gaelic was also important to Scotland. In the pamphlet *Why Gaelic Matters*, he describes Gaelic as “one of the touchstones of Scottish cultural and political pride,” points out that “the resurgence of interest in Gaelic has close links with various political aspirations for Scotland”⁴⁰¹ and that “a gradual withering away of a vital part of Scottish history and culture, is not to be regarded with equanimity by anyone who has the full interests of Scotland at heart.”⁴⁰²

His vision of the Gaelic identity is well expressed in his essay “Gaelic in Scotland: Assessment and Prognosis”:

The Gaelic identity is less than secure. Besides the historical reasons for this, and the social or quasi-social reasons, alongside the wholesale intrusion of non-Gaelic influences on the whole of the Gaelic community, it seems to me that there are other, internal, factors that fragment the Gaelic identity. It tends to become parochialised, so that Skye or Lewis or Uist becomes the unit or the touchstone and some very wasteful rivalry develops. Sometimes it shows evidence of class distortion: Gaelic must be equated with folk culture, and so by a rough approximation with a so-call working class. It seems to me more healthy to look on Gaelic as a feature of our national life, and one potentially to be shared by all manner of men and occupations.⁴⁰³

In spite of the general prominence of traditional culture and literature in the Gaelic world, including academia, Thomson’s revival did not use folklore as the wellspring of nationhood. As an academic, he engaged with traditional culture and even contributed to what was to

³⁹⁸ Crichton Smith, “The Poetry of Derick Thomson,” *Towards the Human* (Edinburgh: Macdonald Publishers, 1986) 141.

³⁹⁹ Crichton Smith, “The Poetry of Derick Thomson” 142-143.

⁴⁰⁰ Thomson, “Gaelic in Scotland: Assessment and Prognosis,” *Minority Languages Today*, ed. Einar Haugen, Derrick J. McClure, and Derick Thomson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981) 20.

⁴⁰¹ Thomson, *Why Gaelic Matters* (Edinburgh: The Saltire Society, 1983) 23.

⁴⁰² Thomson, *Why Gaelic Matters* 33.

⁴⁰³ Thomson, “Gaelic in Scotland: Assessment and Prognosis” 18.

become the School of Scottish Studies by a number of Gaelic folk songs in his own renditions,⁴⁰⁴ but did not rely on folk culture as the basis of his revival. His revival was remarkable for its focus on the issues of the present and the future, such as finding vocabulary for modern subjects and situations and publishing new books appealing to children and young people, rather than going back to old songs and etymology.⁴⁰⁵ There are traces of looking for a golden age in some of Thomson's poems with references to the times when Gaelic was the official language of the royal court, but his priority was keeping the language alive in the twentieth century, and he welcomed the culture which emerges from using the language in the new situations and contexts. The aim of Thomson's pragmatic approach was not resurrecting "a golden age" but producing new culture.

Another idea which seemed to be rather controversial from the point of view of the more traditional revivalist was Thomson's refusal to believe that the best way to support Gaelic was to move to one of the remaining communities where the language is still used to some extent on a daily basis: "[...] that only by living in a strong Gaelic community can a poet be a spokesman of the Gaelic community. This is palpable nonsense, but it exists."⁴⁰⁶ Thomson spent most of his life in Glasgow and never went back to live in his native Lewis. This pronounced intellectualism of his revival (which he tried to, with more or less success, temper in *Gairm*), his exacting standards and preference for high culture could result in conflicts with those who failed to meet his standards and worked for the Gaelic revival in a more local context and with a less cosmopolitan agenda. This refusal to become "a voice of the region", to come and live in a Gaelic-speaking area and engage in local issues on a daily basis may be one of the reasons why Sorley MacLean overshadows Thomson's reputation.

Thomson placed great emphasis on the necessity to communicate with the European tradition and to fight provincialism and narrow-mindedness, to which Gaelic Scotland in his view understandably tended as a result of social and economic development. Thomson opined that firm nationalist persuasion not only did not conflict with pronounced internationalism, but even required it:

It is coming to be clearly understood also that it is on the basis of defining rather than submerging national identities that international understanding is built. The spurious opposition of national and international is therefore being undermined, though there are old-fashioned politicians among us who still cling to the

⁴⁰⁴ These recordings of Thomson's singing are freely available through the open-access online archive *Tobar an Dualchais / Kist o Riches* (Thomson's ID as a contributor is 1092).

⁴⁰⁵ Thomson, "Tìr na Gàidhlig ann a Linn na h-Ola" 210.

⁴⁰⁶ Thomson, "Poetry in Scottish Gaelic 1945-1992" 159.

shibboleths of their youth and their early reading, even if that youth is only five years distant.⁴⁰⁷

In analogy, it may be said that in his view, a confident national state is built on supporting rather than submerging regional identities and indigenous languages. Thomson's revivalist efforts are based on a conviction that development of Scotland's languages and cultures should contribute to the self-confidence of the national state. In Thomson's view, such a double commitment to regional cultural nationalism on the level of the Gàidhealtachd and civic nationalism on the state level does not exclude openness towards Europe and the world – such confident and diverse national states that support their various cultures and traditions should inspire and enrich one another, especially in terms of cultural exchanges.

Although the concern with the Gaelic language is omnipresent, Thomson was not essentialist: he considered Gaelic a unique part of Scottish identity which should be embraced and promoted, but he also made it clear Scotland could exist without Gaelic, although the loss of the language would reduce its diversity and also impoverish it economically. Some traces of Romantic nationalism may be observed in Thomson's early poems and articles, but his oeuvre in general can be interpreted as a turning point: as an attempt to overcome Romantic nationalism and its idealistic nature and substitute it with a more pragmatic notion of the Gaelic revival, very flexible, future-oriented, and open to impulses from abroad, turning cultural revival into a political problem. For Thomson, the only framework in which Gaelic can survive is a politically independent Scotland firmly linked with Europe.

5.2 Derick Thomson as a Political Poet

When one attempts to evaluate Derick Thomson as a political poet, there are two essential virtues: that of consistency and authenticity. According to MacInnes, "Thomson's political commitment to Nationalism has remained essentially constant for forty years although the tone of his political poetry has become progressively bleaker, more sceptical, more sophisticated."⁴⁰⁸ There are no sudden shifts, changes of allegiances, or abrupt leavetaking of previously held ideals. Thomson is a political poet who consistently supported two main causes throughout his life – the national independence of Scotland and the revival of Gaelic language and culture, which in his view were intertwined. There are also clear links between the convictions and concerns expressed in the poems and Thomson's activities – when he

⁴⁰⁷ Thomson, "Reflections after Writing *An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry*" 15.

⁴⁰⁸ MacInnes, "The World through Scots-Gaelic Eyes" 18.

writes about the threatened position of Gaelic, it resonates with the fact he was the moving spirit behind numerous initiatives to support the language, and when the prospect of Scottish independence is discussed, the reader likely know he supported the cause unfailingly throughout his life, as a cultural activist, SNP voter, and also by direct involvement in SNP campaigns.

Arguably, the biggest political gesture in literature Thomson ever made is to write in Gaelic and to write about everything in Gaelic. It was not a decision of artistic necessity, but a political choice. Thomson himself commented on the topic in the article “The Role of the Writer in a Minority Culture”: “One often senses, among writers in such a situation, a feeling of communal responsibility and pride in the work they are doing. The role of the writer acquires some extra-literary characteristics.”⁴⁰⁹

So what sort of political poet was Derick Thomson? His poetry does not strive to persuade the reader to a particular cause of action – there are no eulogies of SNP politicians, no paeans to Winnie Ewing or Margo MacDonald, no exhortations to vote for the party or denigrations of its opponents. To be a propagandist poet, Thomson is too playful, ironic, and sometimes deliberately obscure. As Huddleston wrote in relation to Auden,

He insisted on a meaningful distinction between poetic language and political discourse: “To be useful to an artist a general idea must be capable of including the most contradictory experiences, and of the most subtle variation and ironic interpretations.” By contrast, political concepts are intended to “secure unanimity in action.” Consequently “subtlety and irony are drawbacks” in political expression. The importance of irony in Auden’s poetic repertoire grew because double (or multiple) meanings are less useful as rhetorical incitement than simple and immediately intelligible language.⁴¹⁰

As the discussion of the collection *Saorsa agus an Iolaire* demonstrated, in many of the poems which are suggested as political, Thomson delights in puns, obscurity and ambiguities. Whyte remarked in relation to Thomson’s poetry in general that he “set vehicle and tenor oscillating, shimmering in a tension which, as his poetry matures, refuses to let either side preponderate, creating in the process a richness and uncertainty of meaning which are profoundly modern in tone.”⁴¹¹ One is led to believe there is a political meaning, but the references are so particular or the wordplay so intricate that the poems would hardly work as a

⁴⁰⁹ Thomson, “The Role of the Writer in a Minority Culture” 267-269.

⁴¹⁰ Huddleston, “Auden’s Struggle with Politics” <<http://bostonreview.net/poetry/robert-huddleston-wh-auden-struggle-politics>>.

⁴¹¹ Whyte, “The Gaelic Renaissance: Sorley MacLean and Derick Thomson,” *British Poetry from the 1950s to the 1990s*, ed. Gary Day and Brian Docherty (London: Macmillan, 1997) 158.

call to action for a great number of readers, because they would simply fail to understand it. Some poems are also only political “by proxy”, by being placed in a certain collection or a section – inclusion among more openly political poems inspires the reader to read political meanings into them too.

Thomson wrote poetry in Gaelic and the Gaelic world in the second half of the twentieth century was, in terms of the number of speakers, a shrinking one. The target group of Thomson’s political deliberations would thus be a rather small group of fluent Gaelic-speaking intellectuals with literary leanings. It thus seems Thomson’s political poetry was not a means of persuading other people to follow a course of political action, but a rather private way to meditate about politics, using a different form than an essay, newspaper article, or a public speech. It is safe to say that the political appeal of the *Gairm* editorials, which were often openly persuasive and tried to move the readers to a certain course of action, was much bigger. The very fact that the magazine was able to exist for so long without being affiliated to the Church or to any big players on the Gaelic scene suggests it actually reached a number of people who, by buying the magazine, already showed some interest in the cause.

In his discussion of Auden’s poetry, Huddleston distinguishes the proleptic and the commemorative function of poetry, the latter denoting the poet’s capacity to reflect on historical events from multiple perspective.⁴¹² Thomson’s reflective poems which touch on political topics, but address them, in the space of a collection, from different points of view – the Gaels are victims of injustice and oppression, and at the same time are held responsible for being complicit in their own miseries. The decay of Gaelic is mourned and criticised, but in combination with a broader perspective of incessant linguistic and cultural change in human history. The prevailing mode of Thomson’s political poetry seems to be observation, reflection, and criticism of the current situation, rather than suggesting specific solutions. Thomson may be described as one of the poets who, in Stroh’s words, “employ historical perspectives as a means to encourage present and future resistance and revival.”⁴¹³ The political poems are characterised by mediated persuasion – the reader of the poems is alerted to certain topics and connections and can therefore start to think about them in a political manner.

Although one should exercise caution and not equal too readily the poetic persona with the author, in the case of this analysis, where the objective is to provide an overview of

⁴¹² Huddleston, “Auden’s Struggle with Politics” <<http://bostonreview.net/poetry/robert-huddleston-wh-auden-struggle-politics>>.

⁴¹³ Stroh 251.

Thomson's political opinions, it seems fruitful to combine findings from his journalism and scholarly activities with a close reading of his poetry, bearing in mind the historical context and the time of the publication. Such an approach also offers a possibility to explore how Thomson treated identical topics in different media. It has been pointed out that due to the obscurity and playfulness of the poems, their campaigning potential is very limited, but for the audience which they reached, their persuasiveness would likely have been increased by the awareness of the author, his stature and credibility as a person. Thomson's authority in the Gaelic world and the example of his personal activism increase the authority of his politically and socially engaged comments.

When one compares his poetry about Gaelic and his articles and *Gairm* editorials, it seems Thomson moves between the positions of the committed activist and the cautious, often pessimistic poet. Thomson's opinions of course developed throughout his life, and so did the situation of Gaelic, yet there seems to be a more general pattern in Thomson's work and thought. It is as if Thomson the poet had the luxury, or the painful duty, of ruminating over dilemmas and questions Thomson the activist and journalist did not ponder on so much, as his aim was to encourage his fellow Gaels to action. It seems that in his poetry he afforded himself the space to view these matters from different angles, to treat his doubts and fears, and to point out the weaknesses and shortcomings of the strategies and ideas he is trying to promote. Many of the poems concerned with Gaelic either see it dying, imagine the future without Gaelic and its survival as a mere relic or a dead language such as Latin, or express concern about the directions into which the Gaelic revival is moving and the results it produces.

Some critics of nationalism would agree that "the positing of a national identity involves drawing and invoking particular kinds of distinction, contrasts between a putative 'us' and 'them'" and that such distinctions can easily be "hardened, fixed into value laden absolutes of various kinds, and lead to or require the construction of boundaries and barriers, both material and symbolic, whose intent or effect is to exclude a negatively defined 'other'."⁴¹⁴ In the view of the literary and cultural theoretician Tzvetan Todorov, patriotism has an inherent flaw: "...by preferring one segment of humanity over the rest, the citizen transgresses the

⁴¹⁴ Philip Spencer and Howard Wollman, *Nationalism: A Critical Introduction* (London: SAGE, 2002) 57.

fundamental principle of morality, that of universality; without saying so openly, he acknowledges that men are not equal.”⁴¹⁵

Apart from occasional slips into the “we and them” mentality, such as in “Meall Garbh” and some of the angrier *Gairm* editorials, Thomson resolutely disapproves of nationalism of that sort, as his comments on an Orange Parade in *Smeur an Dòchais* show. He was also greatly concerned with ethnic violence in former Yugoslavia, in Africa, and elsewhere. In contrast to ethnic nationalists, who always end up with mixing nationalist ideology and violence, Thomson was resolutely against violence of any sort.

Neither does he follow the tradition of pronounced anti-English or anti-Lowland sentiment, as expressed for example in some works of Mary MacPherson and William Livingstone, who sought to strengthen Gaelic identity at the time of its acute crisis by defining themselves negatively against Lowlanders and against the English. He is also far from victimising the Gaels and the Scots, and he is always quick to point out their failures and shortcomings, their own complicity, by lack of commitment and awareness, in the decay of their own nation. They are the target of most of his criticism, not the English.

The profound commitment to Gaelic did not prevent Thomson from appreciation of other traditions in Scotland and he never claims that Gaelic is in any way superior to them. In the poem “Dà Chànan” (Two Languages), Gaelic and English are compared to two encroaching but separate trees in one garden that live in harmony, in spite of their vast differences. Thomson values different languages and cultures, but he does not want them to erase their distinguishing features – he would prefer them to remain distinct and to coexist peacefully. When he writes about the multicultural vortex of Glasgow from 1990s onwards, he is not appalled by the presence of people of different ethnic origin and by the multitude of languages that may be heard on Glasgow streets, but rather attracted to them. Sometimes he is curious as to what will become of the world he will not see, sometimes he is wary of the cultural melange, especially as he thinks his own nation is losing its self-awareness: through its own lack of confidence and effort, not under the pressure of the immigrants.

In many of his political poems, Thomson seems to be driving at a similar point to the one Gwyn Williams makes in his book *When Was Wales?:* “Wales is an artefact the Welsh produce. If they want to.”⁴¹⁶ Neal Ascherson, who quotes Williams in his *Stone Voices*, develops this thought further: “Perhaps they no longer want to. [...] if they continued to lose

⁴¹⁵ Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) quoted in: Spencer and Wollman as a motto (page not numbered).

⁴¹⁶ Gwyn Williams, *When Was Wales?: A History of the Welsh* (London: Penguin Books, 1985).

their sense of history, then no more artefacts would be produced.”⁴¹⁷ Thomson’s worries are the same: he is aware of the fact that Scotland is continually performed and created, that its history is a narrative whose plot differs according to the storyteller. If people forget about the history and culture, Scotland will cease to be produced, or such a form of Scotland will emerge as Thomson would be no longer able to subscribe to it.

According to Meek, Thomson took his opportunity “to stamp his own vision on Gaelic and on Scotland. It is not too much to say that that vision made Gaelic what it is today, with its numerous means of enlightened support, but it also went some way to making Scotland what it is today,” and adds that those who are trying to support Gaelic are, “by and large, doing no more than finessing the templates which Derick Thomson and his team created all those years ago.”⁴¹⁸ Thomson himself made a list of the most important tasks of the writer in a minority culture: “to increase the range of writing in that language, to provide a minimum bulk of such writing, to express the ethos of his society but also to interpret the outside world to it, and to satirise it periodically.”⁴¹⁹ In all these, he succeeded admirably.

As Whyte noted when the volume *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* emerged, “the publication of Derick Thomson’s collected poems makes it clear yet again that that the material for the creation of Scottish consciousness there is in great richness and abundance.”⁴²⁰ Thomson’s poetry and his overall career certainly provide ample material for developing an open, outward and forward-looking vision of the Gàidhealtachd and of Scotland where minority cultures are supported and where both tradition and cultural exchange are encouraged. Whether Thomson’s poems transcend their maker and the immediate context of their making, as suggested in Auden’s elegy for Yeats, or whether they will come to seem too tied to a particular time and cause, remains to be established.

This thesis made a decision to read Thomson’s poetry with a focus on political issues. The reasons are apparent: Thomson had a lifelong interest in politics, political issues surface in different manners in all his collections, and there has been no longer, not to mention detailed, discussion of the topic. Since my MA thesis discussed Thomson’s poetry of place in all the published collections, following the other thematic trajectory which leads through his whole oeuvre and all parts of his career seemed a reasonable and exciting choice, also with regard to

⁴¹⁷ Ascherson, *Stone Voices* 37.

⁴¹⁸ “Appreciation of Professor Derick S. Thomson: funeral oration, as delivered,” <<http://meekwrite.blogspot.cz/2013/04/appreciation-of-professor-derick-s.html>>.

⁴¹⁹ Thomson, “The Role of the Writer in a Minority Culture” 271.

⁴²⁰ Whyte, “Derick Thomson: Reluctant Symbolist” 6.

the future possibility of connecting both of these (and much else) in a comprehensive book about Thomson.

The most obvious problem of this inquiry is that it attempts to provide too much at the same time – an overview of Thomson’s life and career, a commentary on many of the poems which have not been critically assessed until now, and a discussion of the chosen topic. Writing a dissertation on George Mackay Brown or Edwin Morgan (both born around the same time as Thomson), where the scholar can rely on a substantial amount of existing research and also define his or her work against it, would undoubtedly be much easier. In the Gaelic world, only a dissertation on Sorley MacLean could provide one with similar, though limited, luxuries – critical editions of his works, a great amount of biographical material including published correspondence, and even several academic works which approach MacLean’s writing from more theoretical standpoints. A scholar working on Thomson has no such amenities at hand, and although there are a number of enlightening articles and reviews (especially by Whyte, Black, Meek, MacInnes, and Ian MacDonald, and the debt this dissertation owes to their work is great), the want of critical engagement with such a major figure as Thomson is still striking.

In terms of further work, numerous possibilities present themselves: a comparative study of Thomson’s engagement with Scottish nationalism and his vision of the Gàidhealtachd in it with George Campbell Hay’s contributions to the same cause; a survey of political writing in Scotland in the second half of the twentieth century across its languages. In his decision to write in a language which has been for centuries deprived of opportunities to modernise and keep pace with the developments in culture and science, and in many contexts beaten by English, Thomson’s life and works invites comparison with figures such as the Breton linguist and activist Per Denez, the Welsh poet Gerallt Lloyd Owen, or with Catalan writers and activists such as Agustí Bartra. In fighting for recognition of a then non-official language in the UK and combining the “role of the traditional academic scholar and the more engaged stance of a public intellectual determined to achieve cultural change,” Thomson was not dissimilar to Douglas Hyde (1860–1949), although unlike the first president of Ireland he never carried out a political function.⁴²¹

The brainstorming could go on for a long time and it would be both impossible and inadvisable to try to touch upon all these in the dissertation, on top of its already broad

⁴²¹ Paul O’ Leary, “Public Intellectuals, Language Revival and Cultural Nationalism in Ireland and Wales: a Comparison of Douglas Hyde and Saunders Lewis,” *Irish Studies Review* 17:1 (2009), 12 February 2009, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09670880802658109>>, 16 March 2017.

agenda. What the thesis hopefully succeeds at is reading Thomson's works with a focus on political issues in the context of Gaelic literature and Scottish politics, and providing an overview of his standpoints based on evidence from all parts of his oeuvre. It offers a detailed discussion of Thomson's politics and political verse, a close reading of a number of poems which have not been studied before, with notes and elucidations, and also the most comprehensive biographical accounts so far. Together with Ronald Black's article "*Gairm: An Aois Òir*", it constitutes one of the very few extended accounts of *Gairm*. Since almost no material from the magazine has been translated into English, this thesis is also one of the first works which uses articles from *Gairm* to illuminate Thomson's poetry and activism. If it manages to serve as the basis for more engagement with Derick Thomson's extensive and varied legacy, then its aims have been fulfilled.

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ABSTRAKT

Práce se zabývá politickou poezií a novinářskou tvorbou skotského gaelského básníka, akademika, vydavatele a aktivisty Dericka Thomsona (Ruaraidh MacThòmais, 1921-2012). Thomsona ovšem nelze vnímat jako politického básníka v úzkém významu propagandisty a jeho politická poezie se zpravidla netýká specifických stránek praktické politiky, jakými jsou volby či kampaně. Politický aspekt Thomsonovy poezie je zde chápán v širším slova smyslu a zahrnuje témata, jako jsou například jazyk a moc. Takto pojatá politika rovněž spojuje Thomsonovy rozmanité literární aktivity a představuje tak vhodný, inovativní rámec pro studium jeho tvorby. Dosud totiž ve výzkumu Thomsonova díla převažovalo zaměření na poezii místa, která je v gaelské literatuře obecně hluboce zakořeněná, a pozornost čtenářů i kritiků se obracela zejména k Thomsonovým básním o jeho rodném ostrově Lewis a do menší míry také k jeho glasgowské poezii.

Práce se snaží zodpovědět následující otázky: Jaká politická témata lze v Thomsonově poezii vysledovat? Kterými z těchto témat se nejvíce zabíral? Jak k politickým tématům ve svých básních přistupuje? Existují v jeho díle básně, které lze číst politicky a zároveň je vykládat i jinými způsoby? Lze na základě Thomsnových vydaných děl rekonstruovat jeho politické postoje? Jakým způsobem se Thomson vypořádává se svou dvojí loajalitou (ke gaelsky mluvícím oblastem a ke Skotsku jako takovému)? Jak vidí budoucnost Skotska a gaelsky mluvících oblastí? Jaký druh nacionalismu prosazuje?

Metodologická sekce předkládá široce pojatý přehled teorií nacionalismu a základních otázek týkajících se vztahu politiky a poezie, čímž poskytuje rámce, koncepty a terminologii pro následující rozbor. Druhá kapitola předestírá několik kontextů: přehled vývoje skotského nacionalismu se zvláštním zřetelem ke dvacátému století a k osobnostem a hnutím, které Thomsona ovlivnily; nástin politických témat v díle Sorleyho MacLeana a George Campbella Haye, Thomsonových současníků a rovněž politicky angažovaných gaelských básníků; a konečně Thomsonův životopis, jehož kompletní podoba není v současné době k dispozici ani v tisku, ani na internetu. Třetí a nejrozsáhlejší kapitolu tvoří chronologický rozbor Thomsonova básnického díla se zaměřením na politické otázky. Čtvrtá kapitola zkoumá Thomsonovu novinářskou tvorbu, zejména jeho úvodníky a další články z gaelského čtvrtletníku *Gairm* ve vztahu k jeho básním. Závěrečná pátá kapitola pak shrnuje zjištění týkající se Thomsonových politických postojů a politické poezie, jichž bylo v práci dosaženo, zamýšlí se nad celkovou koncepcí práce, jejími přednostmi a nedostatky, a navrhuje možnosti dalšího výzkumu.

Klíčová slova: Derick Thomson; Ruaraidh MacThòmais; moderní skotská gaelská poezie; politická poezie; skotský nacionalismus; skotská gaelština; *Gairm*

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 represents 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 extent, 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.

Key words: Derick Thomson; Ruaraidh MacThòmais; modern Scottish Gaelic poetry; political poetry; Scottish nationalism; Scottish Gaelic; *Gairm*