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Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

## OPPONENT'S REPORT

**Petra Johana Poncarová, *The Political Poetry of Derick Thomson***

PhD Thesis submitted in 2020 to the Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

This detailed and well researched dissertation makes a significant contribution to Gaelic scholarship, Scottish studies, as well as to the wider discussion of the phenomenon of nationalism. Being the first book-length study of a hugely influential Scottish cultural figure, it focuses on Derick Thomson's politics in the context of his biography, his poetry and his journalism. It portrays Thomson as an inspiring thinker who embraced a distinctly non-chauvinistic, non-violent version of nationalism coupled with a keen interest in the rest of the world. In his thought he combined a regional affiliation to his native Lewis, cultural nationalism in connection to the Gaelic language and culture, and civic nationalism in relation to Scotland as a whole. The dissertation is highly inspirational and relevant at a time when many tensions in contemporary Western societies seem to be based on an unresolved opposition between the local and the global. A further merit of the thesis is linguistic – to my knowledge, it is the first PhD dissertation submitted in this country that makes extensive use of Scottish Gaelic material. It is therefore a welcome addition to the study of Celtic languages in the Czech lands.

The core of the work lies in the minute and nuanced analysis of Thomson's poems in Chapter Three. The candidate captures well the nature of Thomson's political poetry that combines the public and the personal, the history and the present, the natural and the human. It is this ability to make connections, rather than "making things happen" that distinguishes good political poems from short-lived propagandist pieces. The analysis reaches its peak in the extensive discussion of poems like "Cisteachan-laighe" (72-76) or "Feòrag Ghlas, Tuath air Braco" (105-108). Occasional controversial features of Thomson's poetry are not avoided, but given a balanced treatment. The chapter could be improved by expanding the analysis of some poems, such as "Ochan, a Dhòmhnail Chaim" (84) or "Smuaintean ann an Cafe an Glaschu" (97), where the comments are somewhat sketchy. However, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the chapter is of great value even for a reader with no previous knowledge of Thomson's poetic output.

The study suffers from some structural shortcomings, which, however, can be easily remedied should (parts of) the dissertation be converted into a monograph. The enlightening discussion of various kinds of nationalism in Chapter One could be used more productively in the body of the thesis. The various threads are woven together in the conclusion, but the use of Vladimír Macura's study of the Czech national revival in 5.1 merits some introduction. While the connection is interesting and the points made are certainly relevant, the passage, as it stands, might make the reader form misleading parallels between the Gaelic and Czech language revivals.



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Much effort is made to introduce the reader into the Scottish context, but this sometimes results in lengthy digressions only partly relevant to the topic of the thesis. Especially some passages in 2.1 read rather as dictionary entries on various Scottish political and literary figures with little connection to the overall argument. The same is true about the minute account of the history of Gaelic journals at the beginning of Chapter Four. The treatment of the history of the Gàidhealtachd in 5.1 would find its more natural place in 2.1 in a discussion about the relevance of Gaelic within Scottish nationalism.

The standard of language and style is outstanding throughout, with the exception of occasional clumsy sentences (“The absence...” 17; “The conflict...” 18; “In its broad mixture...” 102), and a few typos such as “extend”, *recte* “extent” (3), “treaties”, *recte* “treatises” (10), “principlies”, *recte* “principles” (11), “sign of human unscussess”, *recte* “sing of human unsuccess” (13). A mathematical impossibility appears on page 125: “six of his five short stories were published in the quarterly”.

The formal aspects of the thesis, including the citations and the bibliography, are treated with care and diligence. I have only three minor technical comments: a) the references to footnotes should be consistently put after punctuation marks; b) it would be neater to number the footnotes for every chapter separately, not continuously throughout the study; c) the convention about the asterisk should have been introduced along with its first use, i.e. in footnote 104.

I propose the following points for debate at the defence:

1. The dissertation rightly uses nationalism as an overarching theoretical framework. Does post-colonial theory have any relevance to the topic? This seems to be suggested, e.g., by Silke Stroh’s remark about one of Thomson’s poems quoted on page 64. Post-colonial theory has been used extensively, albeit with various degrees of plausibility, in Irish studies. While Scotland has never been a colony of England in the true sense of the word, some policies that the state applied towards the Gàidhealtachd in history (most notably the post-Culloden repercussions) are reminiscent of a colonial approach. Similarly, the perception of Celts in nineteenth century Britain had distinctly colonial overtones. On the other hand, many Scots were complicit in British colonial endeavour. Could post-colonial theory be applied at all to the work of Derick Thomson?
2. The thesis rightly points out the “progressive” features of Thomson’s nationalism. However, as pointed out several times, he occasionally lapses into controversial, ethnocentric modes of thinking. Such contradictions are common in the thought of Irish-language activists of the past century and can be often explained by the emotional urge to defend the culture under threat, at all costs. How frequent are these “lapses” in Thomson’s work (including his journalism) and how can they be best interpreted?



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3. The question mentioned at the end of 1.4 as one of the main concerns of the thesis, i.e. “whether Thomson’s political poems manage to balance their political agenda and artistic merit, and are of interest as works of art” is not explicitly answered. Rather, a comment on page 147 suggests that this cannot be done in the present: “whether Thomson’s poems transcend their maker and the immediate context of their making, [...], or whether they will come to seem too tied to a particular time and cause, remains to be established.” Could the candidate provide a tentative answer to the question?

In conclusion, let me express my sincere hope that the dissertation (along with some parts of the candidate’s MA thesis) will be soon converted into a full-fledged monograph on Derick Thomson, the first of its kind.

The dissertation fulfils all the necessary standards and requirements and I am pleased to recommend it for defence./S radostí doporučuji práci k obhajobě. Předloženou disertační práci předběžně klasifikuji jako *prospěla*.

Prague, 23 January 2020

Radvan Markus, PhD