

Thesis report

Petra Johana Poncarová
THE POLITICAL POETRY OF DERICK THOMSON

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Scottish Gaelic literature and linguistics are, generally speaking, a chronically under-researched and under-resourced field. This applies to the modern period no less than to earlier areas of study. Consequently it is heartening to have a scholar from mainland Europe engage with a crucial, multifaceted but hitherto neglected figure whose importance on the Scottish cultural scene throughout the latter half of the 20th century awaits adequate assessment.

The achievements of Ruaraidh MacThòmais / Derick Thomson (1921-2012) as academic, publisher and campaigner have risked eclipsing the major contribution he made as an original poet. Thomson has also tended to remain somewhat in the shadow of the other "main contender" among his contemporaries, Somhairle MacGill-Eain / Sorley MacLean (1911-1996), whose political affiliations and personal history seemed more dramatic, even sensational in nature.

Suffice it to say that Poncarová's thesis incorporates the first thoroughgoing biographical overview ever attempted in Thomson's case. She demonstrates an extensive command of the published source material in both languages, Gaelic and English. Sad to say, this is not invariably the case with people writing about Gaelic literature and culture within the Scottish context.

The decision to focus on Thomson's political poetry or, it might be more accurate to say, on the political aspects of Thomson's poetry, is an astute and at the same time a delicate one. Throughout most of the poet's lifetime, his dedication to the nationalist cause, the unwavering support he offered for a tiny party pursuing seemingly unrealistic and unachievable goals, was all too often regarded as a pardonable foible which risked turning a respected academic into something of a "crank". The passage of the years has vindicated Thomson's position and his commitment. Poncarová's thesis offers proof of that retrospective vindication in a manner both welcome and profoundly moving.

Poncarová's task is not made any easier by the increasing demonization of the concept "nationalism" in contemporary European discourse. Having reflected in turn on the views of Herder and Renan, and the subsequent analyses of Ernst Gellner, Benedict Anderson and Anthony Smith, she looks closely at the interrelations of politics and poetry and opts for an interpretation of "political" in the broader sense in her close analysis of Thomson's work.

Seeing poetry through the prism of political commitment, or political relevance, is an undertaking fraught with risks. Where Thomson is concerned, it has the advantage of allowing Poncarová to establish an organic connection between his work as editor of the quarterly magazine **Gairm**, in particular his editorials,

and his lyric poetry. The potential for linking these two aspects of Thomson's output had not so far been explored. In this way Poncarová significantly broadens our understanding of Thomson as a writer, while also offering a refreshingly new context in which to read his poetry.

Her generous coverage of the development of political nationalism in Scotland, especially throughout the 20th century, will be of greater interest to readers from outside Scotland, yet constitutes a necessary part of her investigation. She also sets Thomson's contribution in the context of the political and national coordinates in the work of his two most significant contemporaries, MacLean and Deòrsa Caimbeul Hay / George Campbell Hay (1915-1984).

The core of her thesis is a painstaking, poem by poem analysis of the most relevant items in Thomson's poetic output. The approach she adopts is chronological, beginning with the lapidary, emblematic image poems of his early collections. These prompt a range of interpretations, amongst which the political one is often uppermost, not primarily in terms of state organisation but rather of the struggle to assert the rights of a threatened language and the associated culture.

Poncarová supplies detailed background for her readings. Where material hitherto available only in Gaelic is concerned, she includes readable and accurate English versions. She is sensitive to the change of tone and approach in Thomson's later collections. Perhaps more fatalistic and resigned, these are at the same time veined with gentle humour, marked by a sensitivity to ecological issues, and a praiseworthy openness to the contribution of recent immigrants to Scotland, the latter based in part on a vision of historical and cultural cycles. Her closing chapter is a balanced review of Thomson's work as a political journalist across more than half a century which encourages readers to integrate their understanding of poetry and prose in his output.

Taking the wider view, it is likely that the prospects of Scotland's becoming an independent political entity, separate from the remainder of the United Kingdom, may provoke a "sea change" in readings of the country's multifarious cultural heritage, after which the accents and emphases will fall in different places and on different themes. Conscientious and meticulous in its handling of Thomson's texts and of related sources, Poncarová's text is both a harbinger of and a significant contribution to needed ongoing consolidation of our understanding of what Scottish literature means.

It is to be hoped that Ms Poncarová will be given the opportunity to make the fruits of her research widely available in a published book.

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