

## **External Examiner's Report on the Dissertation of Petra Johana Poncarová**

### **"The Political Poetry of Derick Thomson"**

**Submitted in 2020 at the Department of Philology—English  
and American Literature**

#### **I. Brief summary of the dissertation**

At its core, the dissertation provides a detailed critical assessment of the poetry of Derick Thomson which is political in nature, tracing in particular the two dominant themes in that body of work, namely his concern with the state of the Gaelic language and culture and their maintenance and revitalisation, and his commitment to Scottish nationalism. The dissertation also provides an analysis of how Thomson's concerns with these themes is reflected in other writing, principally in the pages of the Gaelic cultural journal he edited, *Gairm*. The dissertation provides a brief account of theories of nationalism, which are used in the concluding chapter to assess the nature of his twin concerns and commitments. Finally, the dissertation provides a short but very useful biographical account of Thomson.

#### **II. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation**

In spite of Thomson's importance as one of the most significant Gaelic poets of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as perhaps the single most important Gaelic and Celtic scholars of the twentieth century, and as one of the most important figures in Gaelic letters and Gaelic development more generally, there have been no sustained attempts to assess any aspects of this work, or, indeed, to provide a comprehensive account of his life and work. Thus, the dissertation is breaking new ground. The most important original contribution of the dissertation is the close analysis of a body of Thomson's poetry that can be described as broadly political, and in doing so, the dissertation provides a critical assessment of many individual works which have not previously received such a treatment. Without question, the dissertation constitutes an important addition to scholarship on Thomson, and given Thomson's great importance, to modern Gaelic literature and, in particular, modern Gaelic poetry.

#### **III. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects**

##### *1. Structure of the argument*

The objectives of the dissertation are clear, the structure of the dissertation is logical and is generally appropriate in enabling the candidate to reach those objectives, and the overall thrust of the argument is evident. Given Thomson's long and consistent commitment to Scottish nationalism and Gaelic revivalism, the discussion of theories of nationalism and the question of the relationship between nationalism and literature is essential, and it made sense to begin the thesis with this discussion. It was also important to contextualise the later discussion of the poetry with a discussion of Scottish nationalism at an early point in the dissertation.

The biographical account was also useful, particular given that no similarly detailed biographical account of Thomson exists, although more might have been said about particular events or experiences in Thomson's life and career which in the candidate's

estimation played a particularly important role in informing his worldview and political opinions.

Given Thomson's clear concerns about Gaelic itself, so usefully and effectively analysed by the candidate in the context of Thomson's poetry and other literary and journalistic outputs (explored in chapters 3 and 4), more could have been said about the state of the language during Thomson's lifetime: the massive sociolinguistic and demographic changes which took place, the evolving public policy choices in relation to Gaelic, and the changing nature of literary production and, especially, institutional support for writing in Gaelic. All of these are touched on—particularly the last of these—at various points, but they might have been considered in more detail and in a systematic way through a brief account in chapter 2, to contextualise and thereby enrich somewhat those later references.

The discussion in chapter 2 of politics in the poetry of Thomson's contemporaries was also appropriate, although I felt that this could have been developed and, indeed, might have formed a bigger part in the assessment of Thomson's poetry in chapter 3, and in the overall conclusions in chapter 5. I emphasise, however, my choice of the word 'might', rather than 'could' or 'should' in making this point. The dissertation does not set out to be a comparative assessment of Thomson's work or, indeed, an assessment of Gaelic political poetry during the period in which Thomson was composing, and therefore a more sustained account of the political poetry of other contemporary Gaelic poets, although reference to such work is appropriate in attempting to elucidate Thomson's oeuvre, which the candidate has sought to do.

Finally, the conclusions are particularly well formed and convincing, and follow on nicely from the preceding chapters. My only comment is that more cross-referencing would have been helpful and will be helpful should the candidate seek to publish the work. Although the points in chapter 5 are based on the assessments in chapters 3 and 4, it may have been useful to draw those links more expressly, through references to particular poems or articles, or passages, or comments the candidate has herself made. The candidate does do this in places in chapter 5, but this approach could have been followed more comprehensively. The possible areas for future research and consideration at the very end of the dissertation were also very interesting and appropriate ones, and will be of use in guiding the candidate's future scholarship and, indeed, that of others.

## *2. Formal aspects of the dissertation*

Formal aspects of the dissertation are generally excellent, and the presentation is very good. It is extremely clear and well-written—there are a very small number of minor points of English usage and very occasionally grammar which could be corrected, and I have marked these on a hard copy of the dissertation and can provide them to the candidate at the time of the oral examination; however, the quality of English expression is just as good as that of native English speakers in dissertations such as this one. I would also like to commend the candidate on the excellence of her translations of material from *Gairm* into English; again, there are one or two minor points that could be corrected, but it is obvious that the candidate has an impressive fluency in the Gaelic language. In a few places in chapters 1 and 2, I felt that a source or sources might have been added (generally, a reference to a source which is in the bibliography) to support a statement made in the text, and I have also marked these on the hard copy, but I consider these to be relatively minor points as well. In a few places in chapter 3 slightly more detail might have been provided, and in a small

number of cases, information needs to be corrected. For example, on p. 36 the candidate states that Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's 1751 collection was "the first printed book to be published in any Celtic language". This is incorrect: the first book in Welsh, for example, *Yny lhyvy hwnn*, was published in 1546, and mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's was not even the first book published in Gaelic—it was, however, the first printed book of original Gaelic verse. I have marked such items on the hard copy of the dissertation, and will provide these to the candidate at the oral examination. Generally, however—and I want to emphasise this—the presentation of formal aspects of the dissertation was excellent.

### 3. *Use of sources and/or material*

The candidate has done an excellent job of tracking down relevant secondary sources, including sources such as media interviews and websites, and in particular secondary material in relation to Thomson himself. The use of primary sources, particularly poetry, is also excellent. I thought that perhaps slightly more reference could have been made to particular items in *Gairm* to illustrate the points made in chapter 4—both referenced examples of articles of relevance to the point being made and, where appropriate, actual passages (although the candidate has often used such references and quotes to very good effect). There is a massive literature on nationalism, and now a very large literature on Scottish nationalism in general and the SNP in particular, and it would not have been sensible to explore this literature in more depth. In the discussion of nationalism, the candidate does a good job of highlighting the 'big names' and the key points in their work. In the section on Scottish nationalism and the SNP, there is perhaps an over-reliance on particular sources, and this might have been enriched by reference to a few other key secondary sources, and I would be happy to provide references; however, this does not, in my view, constitute a limitation in the dissertation.

### 4. *Personal contribution to the subject*

The dissertation is certainly NOT 'a mere compilation of information' and opinions of others. Rather it is a sustained, original and coherent assessment of a significant body of poetry and prose. Where there has been critical attention paid to this body of material—primarily in the case of particular poems or elements in Thomson's poetry—the dissertation is careful to weave such scholarship into the candidate's own argument, and by doing so the dissertation produces something that is original and important. With respect to Thomson's Gaelic prose, especially that in *Gairm*, much of the work is original, as this body of work has received relatively little scholarly attention. Furthermore, the dissertation demonstrates not only the importance of looking at the sum of Thomson's output in understanding his politics, at how the prose enriches our understanding of the poetry, but also at how Thomson uses poetry and prose in different ways and for different effects. Finally, Thomson's nationalism and his commitment to Gaelic are well known; the dissertation makes an original contribution, however, in assessing in a comprehensive way the *nature* of that nationalism, in reference to theories of nationalism, and similarly the nature of Thomson's commitment to Gaelic in terms of such theories. In sum, the dissertation is an important contribution to scholarship, and will, in my view, be an important point of reference for those working on modern Gaelic literature and will undoubtedly be of considerable interest to those working on Scottish literature of the twentieth century more generally, and on modern European literature and literatures of minoritised languages.

#### **IV. Questions for the author**

The following are a few questions which might be usefully explored at the oral examination or indeed in future work:

1. You discuss the concept of political poetry, but I am not sure that you offer a definition. So, how would you define 'political poetry', and how would you distinguish it (or indeed would you distinguish it) from broader social commentary, historical observation, and so forth.
2. You have demonstrated quite effectively the nature of Thomson's nationalism, but what do we know, from his poetry and prose, about other aspects of his politics. You claim that he was not a Tory, but is he a Socialist or indeed a Marxist (as Sorley Maclean professed to be)? Did liberalism, as a set of political ideas distinct from and in some ways in opposition to Socialism in its various forms, form part of his politics (certainly, some of the material that you discuss hints at this)? From the 1960s, there was in Europe and more generally in the west a period of what could be called ethnic mobilisation—movements quite distinct from nationalist movements, although they could, as in the case of Catalonia or Quebec, overlap with nationalist movements and ideas? Again, you have touched on this in the dissertation, but could you say more about how this fits into his view of Gaelic (this perhaps ties in with question 3, below).
3. Dr John MacInnes has variously referred to Scottish Gaels as a 'nation' and a 'detritus of a nation', thereby raising the question of whether, in discussing Scotland, we are talking of one or two (or more) nations, and what the relationship of Gaelic Scotland is to the broader Scottish nation. Do you feel that Thomson would view the Gaels as comprising a 'nation' in some sense?
4. What do you think Thomson would have made of the 2014 Scottish referendum? What would he have made of the official 'Yes' campaign, particularly given the scant attention given to Gaelic by either side?

#### **V. Conclusion**

I recommend the submitted dissertation with the tentative grade of pass.

5 February 2020

Professor Robert Dunbar