

“A FITTING OFFERING TO THE GAELIC THALIA OR MELPOMENE”: RUARAI DH ERSKINE OF MAR AND DRAMA IN SCOTTISH GAELIC¹

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This article focuses on Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar (1869-1960), a Scottish Gaelic activist, publisher, critic, and author, and his contributions to Gaelic drama – a genre that has been constantly called for by revivalists, but has so far not gained prominence in Gaelic literature. The chief concern is a series of four articles on the subject that Erskine published in his journal Guth na Bliadhna in the 1910s. These intriguing texts sum up his opinions on future Gaelic drama and present guidelines for playwrights. A mixture of cosmopolitan open-mindedness, elitism, essentialist views of nationality and culture, organizational practicality and economic shrewdness – expressed in a highly polished, witty style – they present a revealing insight into Erskine’s thought and the Gaelic movement in the 1910s, and offer several points of continuing relevance.

Donald John MacLeod, one of the greatest experts on Gaelic fiction and drama, noted that “one of the most unusual features of Gaelic literature has been the apparently complete absence of drama until the 20th century.”² Drama has not

¹ This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund Project “Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World” (No. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000734).

² Donald John MacLeod, “Twentieth Century Gaelic Literature: A Description, Comprising Critical Study and a Comprehensive Bibliography,” doctoral dissertation, University of Glasgow (1969) 124. Available from: <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/5027/> (accessed 25 April 2020). MacLeod notes that there are earlier precedents, such as the “còmhradh” (dialogue), the earliest Gaelic dramatic form. It is also important to note

been mainstream in Gaelic literature at any point, although it has been gaining more prominence since the second half of the twentieth century. The chief genre has always been poetry, in the twentieth century gradually joined by prose, first short stories and later novels.³ On the one hand, various initiatives and individuals have supported Gaelic drama from the turn of the twentieth century, competitions for plays were founded to incite playwrights, and radio plays emerged as soon as the 1930s. On the other hand, activists have been continuously complaining that there should be more Gaelic drama and that it should be employed more efficiently in the services of the revival because of its communal nature and popular appeal. Gaelic drama thus seems to be a genre that has been constantly called for and invoked as a possible game-changer in the Gaelic revival, but has never taken on the pivotal role in the cause.

In the essay “Uisge-beatha agus Uisge-bàs: Reflections on Gaelic Drama” from 1948,⁴ Hector MacIver states that “it is small wonder that the Gaelic Movement in Scotland has made such little progress up to the present, for we have omitted, or possibly refused, to develop the main medium to which practical men in all other countries have turned when they were heading towards a cultural renaissance: that is to say, the Drama.”⁵ MacIver proceeds to criticize the prevailing misuse of the stage by orators and sentimental singers, sketches the benefits of a flourishing drama for the community and for the revivalist cause, and concludes that “it would be good to think that Gaelic drama would at last drive the bogus orators and maudlin songsters from the stage. We would then have, in the Gaelic movement, some of the strong water of life instead of the present tasteless water of death.”⁶

In the editorial to the spring issue of the influential Gaelic quarterly *Gairm* from 1956, less than ten years after MacIver’s scathing article, the author – either Derick Thomson, Finlay J. MacDonald, or both – refer back to MacIver’s tirade,

the innate dramatic quality of Gaelic folk culture of the ceilidh house with its songs and storytelling, but drama *per se* truly begins only in the twentieth century.

³ There has also been relatively little research into Gaelic drama. For an overview of the genre and research into it, see Sìmh Innes and Michelle MacLeod, “On the Study and Promotion of Drama in Scottish Gaelic,” *International Journal of Scottish Theatre and Screen*, 9 (2016): 1-12. Available from: <https://ijosts.ubiquitypress.com/articles/abstract/214/> (accessed 15 April 2020).

⁴ Translation of the title: water of life and water of death.

⁵ Hector MacIver, “Uisge-beatha agus Uisge-bàs: Reflections on Gaelic Drama,” *Alba: A Scottish Miscellany in English and Gaelic*, ed. M. MacLean and T.M. Murchison (Glasgow: An Comunn Gàidhealach, 1948) 40.

⁶ MacIver 43.

state that the situation has hardly changed, with “a gold medal here, silver medal there, a concert, a Gaelic choir, and ceilidh, ceilidh, ceilidh” being the “width and length of Gaelic culture today.”⁷ The author refutes the claims that there is no such thing as Gaelic drama by pointing out that “the drama is as natural to the Gaels as the gugas to the people of Ness,” but that it unfortunately did not evolve from the ceilidh culture, as it could and should have done, due to adverse policies and lack of commitment on part of the people and revivalist groups. The author suggests what should be done to remedy the situation: to form a “Comunn Dràma na h-Alba” [Gaelic Drama Association] and to establish Gaelic drama groups and a special festival.⁸ He stresses that these initiatives should go further than Glasgow, to towns in the Highlands and Islands that should have their own festivals. Either knowingly or unwittingly, both MacIver and the author(s) of the *Gairm* editorial echo some arguments that were already formulated by Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar in the 1910s.

Erskine of Mar (born Richard Stuart Erskine, 1869-1960), an aristocrat descended from the Erskine Earls of Buchan, grew up in Edinburgh and learnt Gaelic from his childhood nanny who was a native speaker from the Isle of Harris in the Outer Hebrides.⁹ He first got interested in the national movement in Ireland and maintained contacts with prominent Irish nationalists including Patrick Pearse, whom he probably met at the pan-Celtic Congress in Cardiff in 1899 and who later contributed to his periodicals. In his journalism, Erskine drew both inspiration and warning from Ireland.¹⁰ He published a variety of works in English and in Gaelic and was most active in the Gaelic movement in the first three decades of the twentieth century.

Erskine was an advocate first of Scottish devolution and later of full independence. In 1920, he was involved in the foundation of the Scots National

⁷ “Air an Spiris,” *Gairm*, 15 (Spring 1956): 203. The editorial, as so often in *Gairm*, is not signed. Since both Thomson and MacDonald were involved as editors at this point, they were both at least willing to be implicated as authors.

⁸ “Air an Spiris” 203.

⁹ For more biographical information and an overview of Erskine’s works, see Derick Thomson, “Erskine, Stuart Richard,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 September 2004, <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:4563/10.1093/ref:odnb/40311> (accessed 15 April 2020).

¹⁰ Erskine’s Irish contacts are discussed in 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> (accessed 15 April 2020).

League (SNL), one of the movements which in 1928 merged into the National Party of Scotland, a direct predecessor of the current SNP. He tried to promote the idea of an independent Gaelic state and to spread pan-Celtic ideals, which is also attested by Irish and Breton contributors to his journals. In his view, political independence was closely linked with cultural sovereignty, and therefore he sought to extend and strengthen the use of Gaelic in Scotland. During the time of Erskine's involvement, the SNL focused on the status of Gaelic in Scotland, the teaching of Scottish history, and proposed the formation of a Celtic, Gaelic-speaking state in Scotland, but Erskine and like-minded members were overpowered by another faction that was concerned less with cultural nationalism and more with practical political business.¹¹ This topic – whether to connect the struggle for Scottish independence with a specific linguistic and cultural agenda – is relevant to this day and has been raised in connection with the 2014 independence referendum campaign.

In general, Erskine tends to be seen as a fringe figure, one of the eccentric cultural nationalists of the early decades of the twentieth century. He has received rather cursory mentions in overviews of Scottish nationalism, but until now, little research has been devoted to him specifically. In terms of Gaelic studies, Erskine's importance for the development of Gaelic prose and drama, both as an author in his own right and as an organizer who provided infrastructure and encouragement for others, was recognized by Donald John MacLeod, and, significantly, by Derick Thomson, who admired Erskine and saw a direct link between Erskine's activities and his own efforts.¹² Erskine is remarkable as a representative of several minority strains in Gaelic literature: in social terms as an aristocrat, in religious terms as a Catholic, and linguistically a second-language speaker of Gaelic who decided to use it as his chosen medium of creative expression – a trend that is now quite well-established, but would have been quite a novelty in his own time. He is also one of the main proponents of *fin-de-siècle* trends in Gaelic literature.¹³

¹¹ Peter Lynch, *SNP: The History of the Scottish National Party* (Cardiff: Welsh Academic Press, 2002) 33-34.

¹² "Ruaraidh Arascain agus Mhàirr," *Gairm*, 16 (Summer 1956): 367. This article is not signed, but given Thomson's well-attested interest in Erskine, it was most likely written by him.

¹³ One of his detective short stories from the series "Gnìomharran Iain Mhic Ranouill" (The Adventures of John MacRonald), "An Tè aig an Robh Cridhe Nathrach" (A Woman with a Snake's Heart, 1909), taps into the widespread *fin-de-siècle* image of the bestial criminal woman. I discuss the short story and the *fin-de-siècle* influences in

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In the words of Donald John MacLeod, 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.¹⁴ 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 since), 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).¹⁵ The most viable and influential was *Guth na Bliadhna*, which lasted for more than twenty years and played a vital role in the emergence of modern Gaelic journalism and literary criticism.

Erskine himself was especially concerned with the lack of serious drama in Gaelic. As was noted at the beginning, poetry has been the prevailing genre in Gaelic literature, and the infrastructure and taste for drama started to truly develop only at the turn of the century. Erskine and his circle of collaborators, including Dòmhnall Mac na Ceàrdaich (Donald Sinclair), as Sìm Innes and Michelle MacLeod have asserted, really stood at the beginnings of modern Gaelic drama.¹⁶ Some of the most important and innovative plays of the period were published in Erskine’s *Guth na Bliadhna*,¹⁷ including two plays by Erskine himself: *Là de na Làithean* (A Day of the Days, 1923), a symbolist play focusing on the matter of time with motifs from Gaelic folklore; and *Ar-a-mach* (Uprising, 1924), an account of a fictional peasant revolt.

Among other activities, Erskine organized a competition for a play on the topic of Macbeth, advising competitors “to make themselves familiar with the actual character and circumstances of that King, as well as with the history and political and social genius of the times in which he lived, before addressing themselves to the task of seeking to eclipse the English playwright’s master-

“Snake Women and Hideous Sensations: The Strange Case of Gaelic Detective Short Stories by Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar,” *Scottish Literary Review*, 12.1 (2020): 81-94.

¹⁴ Donald John MacLeod, “Gaelic Prose,” *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, XLIX (1974-1976): 210.

¹⁵ Dates and translations of titles quoted according to Thomson, “Erskine, Stuart Richard.”

¹⁶ Innes and MacLeod 2.

¹⁷ Especially five plays by Donald Sinclair, including *Fearann a Shinnsir* (1913) and *Crois Tara* (1914). Sinclair’s works have been collected and published by Lisa Storey, *D.M.N.C.* (Inverness: Clàr, 2014) and an essay evaluating his works was published by Aonghas MacLeòid, “Forgetting Donald Sinclair 1885-1932: The Passage between Celtic Revival and Scottish Renaissance,” *Scottish Language*, 37 (2018): 55-72.

piece.”¹⁸ Regrettably, as MacLeod notes, it appears that no entries were submitted to the competition.¹⁹

MacLeod maintains that Erskine “became the first and, to this day, one of the best Gaelic drama critics,” a statement that still seems to hold even fifty years since the completion of MacLeod’s treatise. Erskine formulated his opinions on the subject extensively in four essays for *Guth na Bliadhna*: “Gaelic Drama” (Summer 1913), “Gaelic Drama: Natural Drama” (Autumn 1913), “Gaelic Drama: Symbolic Drama” (Spring 1914), and the concluding part appeared in the summer issue of 1914.

He starts with an observation that in Scotland and in Ireland, the language movement has been somewhat slow in fostering Gaelic drama, and that

the artistic and propagandist value of the Stage has not been realised with that quickness of perception which its signal merits in these respects emphatically invite, and which one would naturally expect to be discovered on the part of those who are more or less prominently identified with the Gaelic cause, and have its conduct largely in their hands.²⁰

In Scotland, he lists the “old Calvinist feeling” and the prejudice it has generated against the arts and the humanities in general among the possible causes, but judging it to be “greatly decayed, and but the shadow of its former self,” he cannot but wonder “how slow the Gael has been to utilize the drama as a means of assisting the language movement, and as an instrument for brightening and enlivening the social life of the people” (294). He goes back to the discussion of the causes in the third article in the series and apart from listing some incidents proving the Presbyterian hostility to the stage, concludes that religious prejudice alone cannot explain the state of affairs, and that the blame rests much with the Gaelic public.²¹ The following argument oscillates between essentialism – that the Gaels as a people are naturally somewhat “soft” and have been too passive,

¹⁸ Quoted in MacLeod 214.

¹⁹ MacLeod 214.

²⁰ Ruairidh Erskine, “Gaelic Drama,” *Guth na Bliadhna*, X.3 (Summer 1913): 294. Subsequent page references will be given in the text in parentheses. It is interesting to note that Hector MacIver, in the essay quoted above, picks up many similar points as Erskine in his series, including the argument about the Reformation, references to the success of drama in Russia, the potential of drama to reflect on Gaelic history, and especially detailed references to the use of the theatre in the Irish movement.

²¹ Ruairidh Erskine, “Gaelic Drama: Symbolic Drama,” *Guth na Bliadhna*, XI.1 (Spring 1914): 82-83.

like the proverbial members of the Fianna reclining on their elbows – and practical observations that hostile external forces notwithstanding, the revival must be carried by ordinary people, and if they are not interested enough in the promotion of their language and willing to support it, nothing will help it. In Erskine's view, the Gaels have not done their duty to the stage, and cannot blame it on the circumstances: "Neglected, or wasted, opportunities – such is the tale of the Gael" whose "eyes are always fixed on the ends of the earth – anywhere, in fact, but where they should be glued: on the work which lies under their very noses, and clamours, as it were, to be done whilst yet there is time."²²

However, Scotland is not alone in this predicament. Erskine observes that "a similar slowness to grasp the potentialities of drama, considered as an instrument of propaganda and as a branch of Art" can be observed in the language revival in Ireland (294). As has been noted above, Ireland was for Erskine a major source of inspiration throughout his life and he saw the issues of the language revival and political emancipation in Scotland and Ireland as much entwined. Another reason for his long-standing interest in Ireland was likely Erskine's Catholicism. In Ireland, where there is "less Puritanism, and less of the creed of the militant humbug" that in Scotland, Erskine nonetheless observes "just as considerable and wide-spread [an] incapacity to think and to act outside the narrow limits imposed by prejudice and provincialism" (295).

In spite of this, in both countries native drama has at least started to develop, and in Ireland "the movement in this direction has notably increased of late in volume and in popularity" (295). Erskine notes that the Gaelic League in Ireland has improved its attitude to drama and is now devoting considerable attention to it, but the Gaelic Association in Scotland (An Comunn Gàidhealach) is still found much wanting in this respect. While it should be free of prejudices against the stage, "it has done nothing to encourage a native drama, and, judging by appearances, does not contemplate doing anything with a view to that end" (295). Erskine proceeds to offer his view of An Comunn Gàidhealach, which certainly did not win him great favour with it: "to say [the] truth, the Association seems to be a singularly unimaginative and unenterprising body. It may think a bit, while; but, like the parrot of old, it is more remarkable for the attributed measure of its thought, than celebrated for the known volume and value of its communings and cogitations" (295). A similar note of criticism may be observed in the *Gairm* editorials throughout the years – in the view of these activists, the Association was too engrossed in its meetings and speeches and the Mòd

²² Erskine, "Gaelic Drama: Symbolic Drama" 83.

(a festival of Gaelic arts, modelled on the Welsh Eisteddfod), and neglecting more innovative approaches to the revival.

Nonetheless, as “An Comunn Gaidhealach [sic] declines, or delays, or hesitates, to lead where it should long ago have been the first to show the way,” there are fortunately other initiatives and “a native drama is springing up, which bids fair to lay the foundations of a respectable national Stage” (296). Erskine notes that in the last few years, a number of Gaelic plays “of varying merit, and greatly diversified as to theme,” were published and in most cases produced (296). These attempts have in his view revealed three significant considerations: “the extraordinary suitability of the language for drama; the natural genius of the Gael for the Stage; and the appreciative powers of Gaelic audiences” (296).

Erskine then proceeds to sketch a tentative history of Gaelic drama, coming to the conclusion that so far, no examples of older Gaelic drama have been revealed and it is not certain whether any ancient Gaelic drama ever existed. It is a proof of the seriousness of Erskine’s approach that instead of inflating available fragmentary evidence in order to further his cause, he chooses to stick to what has been proven by research, which amounts to nothing: if the Gaels want to have drama, they need to create it from scratch. The example he chooses to illustrate how it can be achieved is Russian drama.²³ He notes that Russian drama also had a relatively late start, which he also ascribes to “to religious, or rather sectarian, influences,” and that “it was not until 1849 that Ostrovski produced the first faithful reflection of contemporary Muscovite life” (297). Characteristically, Erskine assumes a great deal of erudition on the part of his readers – he refers to the great Russian playwright Alexander Nikolayevich Ostrovsky and his ground-breaking realist comedy *The Bankrupt*, which appeared in 1849 and became an instant controversial sensation.²⁴ It seems no accident that Erskine refers to Ostrovsky, as he “almost single-handedly created a Russian national repertoire,”²⁵ which is the very thing Erskine desired for Gaelic Scotland. After this brief excursion into the history of Russian native drama (as opposed to imported models and translations), he digresses again into

²³ Judging from his writing, Erskine had a deep interest in Russia – one of his detective short stories is set in Russia and involves a Russian general, attacks of Russian nihilists, and a murderous Russian aristocrat who is in fact half a snake (see note 13 above); and Russian topics crop up in *Guth na Bliadhna*. There seems to be no obvious personal connection, but research into Erskine’s life and correspondence might yet yield an explanation.

²⁴ “Aleksandr Nikolayevich Ostrovsky,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 8 April 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aleksandr-Nikolayevich-Ostrovsky> (accessed 13 April 2020).

²⁵ “Aleksandr Nikolayevich Ostrovsky,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

essentialist rhetoric, talking about the Irish and Scots as "peoples who are more than commonly impressionable" by social, political, and religious influences, but makes a valid point when he stresses the role of political sovereignty and economic means in the creation of drama (298). He then makes one of his fundamental points:

every created thing must have a beginning, however tardy and humble [...] now that a genuine native drama is rising up in our midst, it behoves us all to do what we can to encourage it, and to improve it, which we can best do by according our warm, but discerning and discriminating support to those of our writers who may elect to enter this particular field of literary endeavour.

(298-99)

The "discerning and discriminating support" is important here: the scarcity of Gaelic literature may lead and has led to the understandable tendency to celebrate every new work just because it is written in Gaelic, and turn a blind eye to its possible shortcomings. From this perspective, any criticism may be seen as an attack on the revivalist cause itself. Erskine's point that beginnings are necessarily humble and his insistence on warm but discerning and discriminating support are still relevant when it comes to evaluating new Gaelic literature, especially when authors strive to establish previously unpractised genres in Gaelic and the first results of these efforts are worthy as pioneering gestures but not entirely successful in literary terms.

There are yet further demands on Gaelic audiences – since there are now "respectable plays in Gaelic," the audiences should prefer them over "foreign productions of equal, or inferior, literary merit" (299). Erskine then proceeds to a scathing denouncement of "Saturday Night's Entertainments" and "Christy Minstrels,"²⁶ stating the Gael who sees "either humour or meaning" in them may be, "in the opinion of even the most robust believer in the efficacy of prayer, past praying for" (299). Music hall entertainments and popular English comedies of the turn of the century were Erskine's pet peeve, and although he states that the nascent Gaelic drama has nothing to fear from such "jejeune, inartistic, and

²⁶ Whether Erskine was so incensed only by the low quality of the amusements, or whether his indignation was also caused by the racist element surviving from the original blackface Christy's Minstrels, could only be established by research into his life and correspondence that would determine which of these amusements Erskine could become acquainted with.

unwholesome performances,” he is still anxious that Gaelic audiences might prefer those to the more deserving plays, and feels the need to exhort them on that point (299-300).

In the following essay, which appeared in the next issue of *Guth na Bliadhna*, Erskine focuses on what he terms “natural drama,” i.e., “drama which aims at reflecting life – whose object is to hold the mirror up to human nature, so that all who have eyes wherewith to see, and minds wherewith to understand, cannot but admit the faithfulness of the representation.”²⁷ After a short account of Aristotelian and Cornelian principles and their abandonment in modern drama, Erskine proceeds to discuss some difficulties that “attend the dramatist’s function” (453). The issue whether drama should be didactic, or not, is quickly resolved: “if art is good, I fail to see how it can be otherwise than ‘didactic’ in the real sense of that word” (453).

The next question concerns the degree of realism in drama. It is admittedly a difficult one and Erskine dwells on it for some time. While agreeing that drama should not be too realistic (in accord with Horace’s maxim that recommends removing actions that can be efficiently narrated from the stage and advises against attempting to showcase cruel deeds),²⁸ Erskine takes issue with an English critic, Mr Courtney. This is undoubtedly William Leonard Courtney (1850-1928), author, scholar, chief critic of *The Daily Telegraph* and editor of *The Fortnightly Review*.²⁹ In Erskine’s reading, Courtney claims that “in his search for dramatic realism, the author must not go beyond the average intelligence of the average audience” (454). His article from *The Fortnightly Review*, where Courtney concludes, though not very happily, that the public prefers to have the argument clear-cut and the heroes and villains recognizably indicated, and where he calls drama the most democratic of the arts, is quoted at great length.

Erskine seems to have great respect for Courtney, but he picks up on “two fallacies that underlie his observations,” namely “that realism in drama should

²⁷ Erskine, “Gaelic Drama: Natural Drama,” *Guth na Bliadhna*, X.4 (Autumn 1913): 452. Subsequent page references will be given in the text in parentheses.

²⁸ “Non tamen intus / Digna geri promes in scenam, multaque tolles / ex oculis, quae mox narret facundia praesens” [You shall not bring on the stage / things that should be accomplished offstage; / you shall remove from my sight / things that resourceful eloquence will effectively narrate]. Quintus Horatius Flaccus, “Epistola ad Pisonem,” *Classic Writings on Poetry*, ed. William Harmon (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) 181.

²⁹ John Marriott, “W.L. Courtney, Editor, *The Fortnightly Review*, 1894-1928, in Memoriam,” *The Fortnightly Review*, 1 December 1928, <https://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/2017/04/courtney> (accessed 15 April 2020).

be subordinated to the intellectual exigencies and circumscriptions of popular audiences," and that "realism, i.e., faithfulness to truth, should not be represented on the stage, if it be 'unpleasant' or 'painful,' in a major degree" (457). Erskine disagrees and argues that, as far as playwrights observe Horace's guidelines mentioned earlier, they should be free to carry the realism as far as they wish, even if it means causing the audiences pain and displeasure. In his view, no playwrights should shun such topics, and especially Gaelic authors, as there are "many phases in our national life which [...] urgently require 'showing up,'" the obvious example being the Clearances, that perhaps would not have been prevented by means of drama, but at least could have been castigated publicly (458). Pearse made the very same argument for Irish-language literature.³⁰

Erskine opines that in general, "the ventilation of the people's grievances in so direct and appealing a fashion would have done good to contemporary Scotland, even if, exciting the people beyond restraint, it had drowned the guilty parties in a sea of blood" (459). Drama thus becomes a revolutionary agent. Erskine seems in general riveted by the idea of a revolution, as attested by his short stories and plays, and the disquieting image of a sea of blood, spilled in a popular uprising, ties in with his fascination with the Irish movement and his own request to the Irish revolutionary Michael Collins of military support for a Scottish revolution (which Collins declined).³¹

In the following paragraphs, Erskine deconstructs Courtney's argument, comparing the favourites of popular taste in painting and literature with representatives of genuine art, unabashedly proclaiming his own elitist and demanding taste. He expresses the hope that Gaelic natural drama, so far non-existent, shall never "bow the knee to the Baal," concluding that if not pushed too far, "Art of Art's sake is not a bad motto to go by" (460). By following this ideal, Gaelic playwrights should not only create worthy works of literature, but nurture a "sound and correct taste" in the public, so the social and didactic function of drama is still very much present. This combination of "Art for Art's sake" elitism (and the ensuing disdain for popular taste) with a concern for the education and elevation of the public – and as will be seen later, with a shrewd eye for the economic aspects too – is characteristic of both Erskine's theoretical views and practical approach in his ventures. He provides a fitting summary at the close of the article when he claims that "Gaelic Natural Drama must face two ways [...] It must look to art, and it must look to propaganda. It should at the same time serve the cause of art, and educate the people" (462).

³⁰ Patrick Pearse, "About Literature," *An Claidheamh Soluis*, 26 May 1906: 7.

³¹ Witt.

His comments on natural drama end with a fervent apotheosis of truth in art and on the stage: the “instinct of the theatre” should be “an irresistible impulse in the direction of plain dealing and plain speaking, at all costs and at all hazards.” Although “the public may not like to hear the truth, or (what is equally possible) may not recognize it when they see it,” it should nonetheless be proclaimed (462). On that note, Erskine ends his remarks on natural drama, to resume in the next issue of *Guth na Bliadhna* and deal with “symbolic drama,” “a Stage on which Realism has no place.”³²

Such drama can be “conveniently divided” into two parts: “plays wherein the motive is admittedly fanciful, if not mystical,” and the opera (regrettably, no discussion of future Gaelic *opera seria* is offered; 80). Erskine notes that very little drama that would fall into the first category has so far emerged in Gaelic, which is however not due to the unsuitability of the language or the want of material: “probably no literature in the world is richer in the raw material necessary to the creation of a Symbolic stage” (80). This potential is allowed by the alleged tendency of Gaelic literature towards “impressionism,” its avoidance “of the obvious and the commonplace,” and its fondness of the “half-said thing,” as summed up by the German Celtic scholar Kuno Meyer whom Erskine quotes and often refers to.³³

Following this point further, Erskine claims:

No one, I maintain, can take up such a book as Campbell’s *West Highland Tales*³⁴ without being struck by the richness and abundance of the raw material for Symbolic drama therein supplied. What would not the author of *The Blue Bird* – an indifferent example of the Symbolic play – give for such material?

(82)

It is hard to tell whether Maurice Maeterlinck, the Belgian recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature and one of the major representatives of Symbolist drama, would have jumped at the chance to adapt Highland folktales for the stage in a symbolist guise, although if he did care to look, he might have been quite astonished by the disquieting beauty, dream logic, and eeriness of the material.

³² Erskine, “Gaelic Drama: Symbolic Drama” 80. Subsequent page references will be given in the text in parentheses.

³³ Erskine, “Gaelic Drama [conclusion],” *Guth na Bliadhna*, IX.2 (Summer 1914): 207.

³⁴ *West Highland Tales*, correctly *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, is a ground-breaking four-volume collection of Gaelic folklore compiled by John Francis Campbell (1821-1885).

“A fitting offering to the Gaelic Thalia or Melpomene”

This off-hand remark is quite illustrative – the essays from *Guth na Bliadhna* show that Erskine was extremely well-informed about recent European trends and had the means and opportunity to read extensively, travel, and keep in touch with what was in the vogue.³⁵

Alas, no Gaelic playwright has seized these bountiful opportunities in Erskine’s view (“o ye of little faith – and less industry”), although there is “many a lovely flower of legend” or a “priceless bloom of old-world incident, which, pulled and placed within some vase of choicest shape and rarest workmanship, would form a fitting offering to the Gaelic Thalia or Melpomene” (83). Erskine suggests that inspiration from Gaelic symbolic drama should be taken from old nature poetry, folk heroic tales, and from stories about the animal world. He is certain that they would succeed admirably, also because of the “simplicity and unsophisticatedness” of the Gaelic audiences – meaning that these intended spectators were not yet as spoiled as French theatre-goers (90).

However, Gaelic playwrights “either eschew the theatre altogether, or employ their pens in reproducing the soul-less, hackneyed, artless, and utterly un-Celtic conventions of the English stage” (85). Erskine realizes that since Gaelic drama has no tradition, there is great temptation to rely too much on foreign models, and stresses that this should be resisted: Gaelic drama needs to be original and based on existing Gaelic literature in other genres. At the same time, he allows that Gaelic writers should be learning from colleagues from other countries, lest they stultify, but without imitating them: Athens and Rome, France, Spain, Germany, England, and Russia all have valuable lessons for future Gaelic playwrights, as “form and technique are universal possessions.”³⁶ He is firmly set against modelling Gaelic drama on English examples, though. Echoing Herder’s theories, he mentions the different “geniuses” of the two languages and the different mentality of the English and the Gaels as a reason, and is convinced that there has already been far too much mindless imitation of English models. He also adds that contemporary English drama does not seem to be particularly healthy, quoting a letter addressed to *The Morning Post* wherein the sorry state of English drama is discussed by the playwright Henry Arthur Jones.³⁷

³⁵ Later, he mentions that when Edmond Rostand’s verse play *Chanticleere* [sic] was produced, he went to Paris to see it (87).

³⁶ Erskine, “Gaelic Drama [conclusion]” 212. Subsequent page references will be given in the text in parentheses.

³⁷ Henry Arthur Jones (1851-1929) was an English realist playwright. In the essay which is quoted at great length by Erskine, Jones criticizes the standard of Shakespeare revivals on English stages, the unsuccessful attempt to establish a national theatre, the

Interestingly, only one Gaelic playwright is mentioned by name in the whole series of the four essays: Donald Sinclair. Sinclair was a frequent contributor to Erskine's journals and his plays with their serious arguments and material from Gaelic history (such as the Clearances and the events of 1745), fitted Erskine's ideals rather perfectly. It is therefore remarkable that Erskine's assessment is quite restrained, rather than overly enthusiastic, describing Sinclair as a dramatist "of whom any country which is going through an artistic crisis as we are passing through might be reasonably proud" (211). Apparently, the standard Erskine had in mind was even higher.

In the concluding article of the series, Erskine, apart from recapitulating some of the points, focuses on the practicalities. After many a lofty comment on what Gaelic drama should and should not be like, he points out that "the test of the pudding consists in the eating," and accordingly, the artistic value of a play cannot be fully ascertained before it is acted. In consequence, one cannot expect playwrights to produce new drama unless they can see their works staged (212). Erskine notes that the situation in this respect is quite dire, and the sooner "a united and determined effort is made to place Gaelic Drama on something like a business footing, the better it will be" (212). He does not expect such a perfect fully equipped Gaelic stage to suddenly descend from the skies, and again stresses the necessity to grow elevated things from humble beginnings. He maintains that it is a general obligation to support Gaelic drama, and that especially those involved in the language movement should do their duty by it.

Despite the disparaging psittacine comparison from the first essay of the series, Erskine praises An Comunn Gàidhealach at this point for its intention to stage a Gaelic play at the annual Mòd, and suggests that various clan and Celtic societies should follow suit: it would provide them with fresh and better entertainment for their annual gatherings, they would be able to make money and at the same time contribute to the revivalist cause (214-15). As these societies are mostly wealthy, Erskine suggests they could well afford to rent a hall, borrow the props, and train the actors. The results would benefit the societies, encourage the use of Gaelic, and incite more playwrights to write new drama if they see there is a market for it. The endeavour should also be commercially profitable.

Erskine goes even further and calls for the establishment of a small regular company of Gaelic actors, a Gaelic national theatre, which would be based in Glasgow and tour the capitals of the United Kingdom as well as the provinces. He maintains that such a company should perform in Gaelic, although audiences

pitiful standard of new plays that are being produced, and the commercial failure of those that show some artistic merit.

may not understand the language, allowing for the acting and the daring innovation to carry the day (215-16). In his view, Gaelic drama could even work as a "mere money-getter." The argument for Gaelic as an economic asset was also made in the *Gairm* editorials and continues to be relevant in contemporary discussions about Gaelic policies and planning.³⁸

He follows these practical suggestions by turning to the example of the Irish Abbey Theatre, also founded on small initial capital. Erskine mentions that at the beginning, the repertoire was extremely limited, but that the efforts soon led to the emergence of a truly notable playwright – J.M. Synge – and remarkable actors (216). Still, the success of the venture notwithstanding, Erskine maintains that Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats were not as wise as they could have been in their decision to work in English, rather than in (Irish) Gaelic. Erskine acknowledges that Lady Gregory acquired some command of the language, whereas "Mr Yeats knows no Gaelic, and apparently has never felt himself sufficiently inspired by its claims to try to remedy that defect in his education" (217). Erskine was known for acerbic criticism of those involved in the national cause who failed to learn Gaelic, as he himself was the living proof that it could be done, and considered all arguments a mere cover-up for intellectual laziness.³⁹ He claims that Gregory and Yeats should have "risen superior to their own linguistic circumstances and insisted on the production of native drama in the Gaelic language," suggesting that the success, both popular and artistic, would have been far greater (217).⁴⁰ However, this was wishful thinking on Erskine's part, as the subsequent fate of Irish-language drama did not prove his point: in the cities where the theatres were based, there was simply not enough of an audience with sufficient comprehension skills.⁴¹

In this respect, he makes an important claim that sums up his attitude to the language revival and political independence: without a national language, a nation cannot be expected to materialize (218). The first duty should therefore be to the language, and the supposedly "national" art in English, be it in Scotland or in Ireland, does not need support, since it already is in an "overweening vogue"

³⁸ "Air an Spiris" 201.

³⁹ See Erskine of Mar, "The National Tongue and Ascendancy," reprinted in *Modernism and Nationalism: Literature and Society in Scotland 1918-1939*, ed. Margery McCulloch (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2004) 294-96.

⁴⁰ Erskine argues that the founders and collaborators of the Abbey, Synge included, were too oriented on success and not loyal enough to the cause to work in Gaelic, and calls them "situation-hunting eavesdroppers" (219).

⁴¹ For more information, see Philip O'Leary, *An Underground Theatre: Major Playwrights in the Irish Language 1930-80* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2017).

(218). Erskine suggests concentrating all energies on the language revival and on creating literature in Gaelic, and “no excuses or diversions should be tolerated” (218-19). In Scotland, unlike Ireland, he appreciates, there are no red herrings such as an “Anglo-Scottish” school, so the path for a drama as thoroughly Gaelic “as the peats” is clear. In conclusion Erskine calls upon An Comunn Gàidhealach to do its duty and support Gaelic drama on its first uncertain steps to a “brilliant and prosperous career” (219), implicitly along the lines he has just sketched with such biting eloquence and vigour.

Erskine’s essays are, apart from their fascinating idiosyncratic style, remarkable for their mixture of cosmopolitan open-mindedness, essentialist rhetoric, financial shrewdness, and sound practical ideas. Several points, such as Erskine’s insistence on high quality and on the need to stay updated on the European and global developments without imitating foreign models mindlessly, remain generally relevant. The four essays present a revealing insight into Erskine’s thought and into the belated birth of Gaelic drama.

It is curious – and perhaps not accidental – that several of Erskine’s preoccupations, namely his interest in Ireland, in material from Gaelic folklore, and in elevated, highly stylized means of dramatic expression, were picked up by the man who was probably the best Gaelic playwright so far – Tormod Calum Dòmhnallach (Norman Malcolm MacDonald, 1927-2000), who used stories suggested in traditional Gaelic songs as plots for his plays, was inspired by the Japanese Noh and by W.B. Yeats, and was both keen to experiment formally and to engage with topics from outside the Gaelic environment.⁴² As this article has hopefully demonstrated, Erskine’s influence on Gaelic drama, both direct and indirect, deserves much further enquiry, and the application of his ideas, such as the foundation of a commercially viable touring Gaelic national theatre that travels across Scotland and beyond, regular commissions of new plays by associations and cultural institutions, rigorous and informed but at the same time supportive criticism of emerging Gaelic plays and productions, engagement with various topics from Gaelic history and literature so far unexplored on the stage, aspirations to the best European and global standards, and openness to new forms and techniques, would still benefit the realm of Gaelic drama, no matter how much progress it has made since Erskine’s times.

⁴² See Michelle MacLeod (ed.), *An Fhìrinn agus a’ Bhreug: Deich Dealbhan-cluiche le Tormod Calum Dòmhnallach* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 2016).