

Assessing the Suitability of Scottish Gaelic Dictionaries for the Classroom

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This paper begins by reviewing most of the Gaelic dictionaries which are still available, either to purchase or to borrow from larger libraries. Next, it assesses how these dictionaries (especially Cox's *Brigh nam Facal*) fit into the Gaelic-medium classroom. Finally, it goes on to outline the approach taken by the author in attempting to improve the situation.

INTRODUCTION

The impetus for this review of dictionaries in classrooms comes from work I carried out on behalf of the Primary Review Group for Gaelic Education and, on account of this, the paper is very much biased towards the Primary School situation. Largely due to this, the paper skims over the bulk of the dictionaries and word lists which are available in Scottish Gaelic and concentrates on the more recent dictionaries which have been written specifically with the Primary School in mind: *Brigh nam Facal* (Cox 1991) and *Mo Chiad Fhaclair* (Watson 1996).

The lack of adequate reference material in modern Scottish Gaelic is a problem which affects users of the language at every level, from brand new learners of the language to seasoned veteran first-tongue speakers who remember a more vital and powerful Gaelic that was in existence earlier in the century. Throughout all imaginable domains Gaelic suffers from a dearth of reference materials, from the sciences to art to literature and economics. Most

serious of all is the lack of language reference books, such as basic dictionaries and thesauruses.

There is not a single thesaurus available in the Scottish Gaelic language. Nor is there a modern, accurate or accessible grammar; Roibeart O'Maolalaigh's *Scottish Gaelic in Three Months* (1996) is, in fact, useable as a grammar, although it avoids the modern spelling as set out in Gaelic Orthographic Conventions (Scottish Office Education Department 1981). There is at least one group working on producing grammar reference materials at the time of writing, but nothing has been published as yet. The reference work which this paper will discuss is perhaps the one in which the greatest authority is generally vested, namely the dictionary:

The dictionary is the most successful and significant book about language. In Britain, its success is shown by the fact that over 90% of households possess at least one, making the dictionary far more popular than cookery books (about 70%) and indeed significantly more widespread than the Bible (which was to be found in 80% of households in England in 1983, according to the Bible Society) (Ilson n.d.).

My own interest in this matter is focused on the provision of dictionaries for children, especially those children who are at the age where the use of dictionaries is traditionally introduced. I will give a brief review of the current level of dictionary provision in the language as a whole, concentrating on *Brigh nam Facal*, which claims to be a Primary School dictionary. I will then outline some of the pitfalls I was trying to avoid in writing *Mo Chiad Fhaclair*, and finish the paper by confessing to some of those pitfalls I failed to avoid.

REVIEW OF EXISTING DICTIONARIES

There is no significant general Gaelic dictionary in print which was published later than the 1920s. The main dictionaries which are still in use are: Macleod and Dewar (1901), MacBain (1911), Dwelly (1901-1911), MacEachen (1882), and MacLennan (1925). The newest of these is MacLennan's, published in 1925 and clearly inadequate to the needs of users of the language today. For obvious reasons, the five dictionaries mentioned here are quite out of date. They gloss words which are obsolete or obsolescent nowadays, they define terms with arcane diction, or else they assign meanings to words which do not represent modern usage in any way; or, the most common complaint of all, they simply do not include a large number of words which modern Gaelic speakers consider vital in day-to-day discourse.

The most highly regarded of the five is *The Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary* of Edward Dwelly. Dwelly's, as the book is affectionately known, is undoubtedly an inspiring piece of work, and it is considered an indispensable tool by most users of Gaelic even today, more than a hundred years after its author began gathering words for it.

Nevertheless, Dwelly's title calls attention to the fact that it is a Gaelic-English dictionary: in other words, there is no English-Gaelic section. This causes a number of problems: for one thing, casual users of the language and penurious students have had to suffer the prohibitive cost of purchasing a selection of dictionaries instead of just one; at the same time, it has been difficult to find a 'way in' to a word which Dwelly's almost certainly glosses (but see below regarding MacKay's Key).

Aside from MacLennan's, the other dictionaries are falling out of use, and this is understandable, considering their elderly status. MacLennan's has probably remained in print principally because of its English-Gaelic section, given the absence of an English-Gaelic Dwelly's. MacLennan's,

more so than Dwelly's, gives archaic translations for words, and MacLennan seems to have relied greatly on his knowledge of Old, Middle and Modern Irish during the writing of his book, perhaps to the extent that modern Scottish Gaelic has suffered.

In addition to the major dictionaries, and seven years younger than the newest of them, there is Henry Cyril Dieckhoff's *A Pronouncing Dictionary of Scottish Gaelic*, which was reprinted in 1992 by Gairm. Dieckhoff's dictionary does not really stand comparison to Dwelly's for comprehensiveness or authority. Nevertheless, Dieckhoff's approach to lexicography is more modern than that which can be found in the major Gaelic dictionaries and his book deserved its recent revival.

Douglas Clyne's *An English-Gaelic Dictionary of Expressions, Idioms and Phrases* [Gairm, 1985] is not really a dictionary in the traditional sense, but its emphasis on living language and usage typifies the insight of its well-respected author, who also wrote *Gaelic Verbs with their Prepositions* [University of Glasgow, Department of Celtic Languages, 1984]. Another of Clyne's achievements, and one which he sadly did not live to see completed, was the edition of his *Appendix to Dwelly's Gaelic-English Dictionary*, which was published by Gairm in 1991 and which includes many words collected by Dwelly after the completion of his dictionary in 1911.

A further insightful work, also linked to Dwelly's, is Girvan MacKay's *English-Gaelic Key to Dwelly's Gaelic-English Dictionary* (Gairm, 1974), which gives an index to Dwelly's. The *Key* can be of considerable use when looking for a 'way in' to the wealth of knowledge locked up in Dwelly's.

There is still no real English-Gaelic dictionary on the market, although Sabhal Mòr Ostaig published an English-Gaelic database in 1993: *An Stòr-Dàta Briathrachais Gàidhlig*. *Stòr-Dàta* is a very large list of English words arranged alphabetically with various Gaelic translations of the word-for-word variety, somewhat like Thomson's (see

below), but substantially more comprehensive and up-to-date in certain areas. *Stòr-Dàta* even gives part-of-speech information, although in limited quantities. The greatest weakness of *Stòr-Dàta* when using it in place of a dictionary (which it makes no claim to be) is its failure to distinguish usage, and its insistence upon listing 'Dwellyesque' dead words. As a database, it is a very handy tool for the writer of Gaelic, and as a starting point in the writing of a comprehensive English-Gaelic dictionary, *Stòr-Dàta* could really come into its own.

Other, small works available include Owen's *The Modern Gaelic-English Dictionary*, published by Gairm in 1993 and Thomson's *New English-Gaelic Dictionary* (1981). It is recommended that the Owen dictionary be used in conjunction with Thomson's, but Owen's achievement is considerably superior to that of Thomson. Owen's title page claims that the dictionary is "Specially recommended for learners, containing pronunciation, irregular verb tables, grammatical information, examples of idiomatic usage." It is commendable that someone has at last recognised the lack of provision for learners of the language, and this dictionary is a handy tool for the learner, particularly with its examples of idiomatic usage, something which Thomson's lacks:

gabh v (gav) gabhail, take, receive; gabh a-steach, include, assimilate; gabh ri, accept; gabh os làimh, (laheev) undertake; na gabh ort, do not dare; gabh òran, sing a song; gabh gnothach ri, interfere in; ghabh iad tomhas a chèile, they summed each other up; ghabh sinn orra, we beat them; dèan uiread 'sa ghabhas, do as much as possible; cho luath 'sa ghabhas, as soon as possible.

Glasgow University's Department of Celtic Languages has, since the middle of the nineteen-sixties, been working on a 'historical' dictionary of the Gaelic language. The editor of this immense undertaking is Kenneth MacDonald, who intimated to me in conversation that the project has

been held in stasis for the last few years, largely due to funding problems. It is my belief that progress is now being made once again. It may be hoped that when this eagerly anticipated volume is published it will prove adequate to the present requirements of adult users of Gaelic.

As well as dictionaries, there are also Gaelic word-lists: James Adam's *Gaelic Wordbook* (Chambers, 1992); Iseabail Macleod's *Pocket Guide to Scottish Words* (Chambers, 1992), which features a Gaelic-English section; John Paterson's *The Gaels Have a Word for it* (The Gaelic League of Scotland, 1964); and R.W. Renton & J.A. Macdonald's *Abair!* (Gairm, 1990), which has both Gaelic-English and English-Gaelic sections.

DICTIONARIES IN THE CLASSROOM

The first monolingual dictionary to appear in Gaelic in modern times is Richard Cox's *Brigh nam Facal*. This book was written as a teaching aid for use in Primary Schools and carries the subtitle 'Faclair Ur don Bhun-Sgoil.' I would argue that, while it is both a remarkable achievement in the language and an extremely valuable reference for any adult user of the language, *Brigh nam Facal* cannot claim to be suitable for the Primary School.

Brigh nam Facal is quite a sizeable book for such an unprecedented work, including over nine thousand head words: "Gabhaidh am faclair seo a-steach barrachd air 9000 facal, agus dèiligidh e ri barrachd air 10,000 mineachadh." In the foreword, Dr. Cox explains the conventions employed in his dictionary. He indicates, for one thing, that grammatical functions will be given, and he briefly explains his terminology, since much of it will probably be unfamiliar to the non-scholarly user (such as a Primary School pupil?). It was clearly foreseen that *Brigh nam Facal* would be put to use not only by the school pupils for whom it was intended but also by adult learners and native speakers alike.

Head words are written in bold print, followed by grammatical function in (non bold) italics: for nouns, the head word is followed by the letter b or the letter f in italics to indicate whether the noun is feminine or masculine (i.e. boireann, fireann). Beneath this with nouns, genitive or plural forms may be given if they are not obvious. Under all of this, the definition appears, in normal typescript. Separate meanings are kept apart by numbers, but meanings which are considered to be closely related are separated only by a semi-colon or a comma. Thus, the definitions for the adjective and verb *glan* (clean) are as follows:

glan buadhair
coim. *glaine*
1 *gun a bhith salach.*
2 *ùr; gun a bhith air a chleachdadh.*
3 (neo-fhoirmeil) *math dha-riribh.*

glan gnìomhair
dèan glan.
glanadh f.

Here, *coim.* represents 'comparative', and the final word appearing in bold print is evidently the noun 'cleaning', which is less common than the adjective and verb and therefore relegated to a mere mention at the end of the section. The fact that the adjective and verb are two different parts of speech has actuated their separation into two individual definitions, in spite of their obvious relationship.

One criticism that can be levelled (unfairly?) at *Brìgh nam Facal* is that it includes words which simply do not need to be there. Why does a child at Primary School want to know the Gaelic for a trireme? A more serious criticism, and one which must be taken into account, is the fact that Dr. Cox uses abstract, and at times, very difficult, language in the definitions. It can sometimes be difficult to work out what the definition is hinting at, even when the head word is

already known, as in the following example, which is, admittedly, one of the most extreme of its kind:

do roimhear (+ tabh.) (cuideachd *do dh', a dh', a*) (leis an alt *don, dhan*) (leis an riochdar dhàimheach a 2 *do dom don no dha dham dhan*) (le buadhair seilbheach *dham dhad dha/dha dhar dhur dhan/dham, no dom dod da/da dar dur don/dom*) (cumaidhean riochdaireil *dhomh(sa) dhu(i)t(sa) dha/dhi no dhà(san)/dhi(se) dhuinn(e) dhuibh(se) dhaibh(san), no domh(sa), 7c*) 1 *don taobh a-staigh; a-steach ann: chaidh iad dhan bhaile; do na bùithtean.* 2 *a bhith air a ghabhail no air a chleachdadh le: thug mi don duine e.* 3 *mu; mar a bhuneas e ri: dè a thachair dhut?; an aithne dhuibh i?; cha b'urrainn dha tighinn; is pailte brù no biadh dhut.* 4 *air feadh: a dh'oidhche is a là.* 5 *a'buntainn do: 's e càraid dhomh a bha innte; bràthair dhomh.* 6 *air a chleachd- adh ann an clàs aimsireil gus an cùisear a thoirt a-steach: air dhomh falbh; là dhomh a'dol dhachaidh.* 7 *ann an roimhearan fillte: a rèir; a chionn; a thaobh; a dh'ionnsaigh.*

Clearly, prepositions are not easy to define, and this is the first dictionary which has ever attempted to deal with Gaelic's unusual prepositional pronouns using Gaelic itself. However, it should be evident that this definition is not an easy one for Primary pupils to handle. In particular, it would be difficult for children who are just starting to acquire competence in the language. If a child is asked to look up *do* and he or she encounters the first ten lines of this definition (the rest of the definition is over the page in the dictionary), it seems patent that the child will be confused. If the user is familiar with the terms definite article, relative pronoun, possessive adjective and pronominal form, then he or she will have only a reasonable amount of difficulty in tackling this definition; however, any child who is comfortable with terms like these is unlikely to be having

difficulty with *do*. If the pupil thinks to look over the page, the explanation of the meaning of the word itself is not much more helpful.

Children will probably already have a working comprehension of *do*, although this definition would undoubtedly confuse that: how much more difficult is it for the child who does not know what the head word means? This should not be regarded as a criticism of *Brìgh nam Facal*, but as a necessary evil in all traditional dictionaries, because of the way they are written and because of people's conceptions and expectations of them. *Brìgh nam Facal* is really an excellent dictionary for older children at Secondary School. It is not a book that dictionary beginners could use satisfactorily, however. From an educator's point of view, it is important to assess the contribution that the dictionaries mentioned above make in the classroom. *Brìgh nam Facal* is used at the top end of Primary School, but not as the general-purpose classroom dictionary that it can serve as in the higher echelons of school life. Instead, it is used in performing set tasks. When pupils want to know what a certain word is in Gaelic, they still tend to look up its English equivalent in Thomson's, a practice which should not be encouraged. For the language to remain as healthy as possible, young children should be acquiring the habit of translating from Gaelic to Gaelic instead of relying on English. Dwelly's is also in evidence in the classroom, and it is appreciated by many pupils as a comprehensive dictionary which can be relied upon. The attractive pictures are another feature which children like about Dwelly's. Most of them, however, do find it quite difficult when they come across one of the longer entries. Some children have indicated that they particularly like MacLennan's, because it offers the benefits of both an English-Gaelic and a Gaelic-English dictionary in one. This suggests that it may be wise for a future project to consider producing a bilingual dictionary with English-Gaelic and Gaelic-English sections. At the time of writing, Owen's does not seem to have been

adopted by schools, but it has been justifiably recommended by the Scottish Office Education Department.

I visited a number of classrooms when I was preparing *Mo Chiad Fhaclair*, which is aimed at a beginner level for children and which attempts to use Gaelic to define Gaelic in an accessible style for children. During these visits to the various Gaelic Medium Units across the country, Thomson's, Dwelly's, MacLennan's and *Brìgh nam Facal* were being used by pupils. It is unfortunate that eight year old pupils are in a position where they need to use advanced or archaic dictionaries in everyday classroom work. Three of these volumes are of the translating type, only one being a monolingual, definitional dictionary. Thomson's is, in fact, no more than a word book, with apparently direct equivalents given for each headword.

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

I initially undertook the task of writing a new Gaelic dictionary for Primary Schools with a view to producing a somewhat smaller and more accessible version of *Brìgh nam Facal*. After no more than a few weeks of research, both in the classrooms and in the bookshops (and libraries, catalogues, etc.), it became increasingly clear to me that this was not what was required at all. There is no doubt that the choice of a style of definitions for children's dictionaries is one of the most important factors in the success of these works. To recall the definition of *do* from *Brìgh nam Facal*, we must realise that this is simply not an acceptable style for definitions in a dictionary for six- to nine-year-olds.

Margaret McKeown (1993) argues that recent research has shown that traditional style dictionary definitions are of little use in conveying word meaning to younger users. She contends that dictionary definitions have a propensity for formality and conservatism which hinders the reader in the quest for understanding. There seems to be a commonality among dictionary writers in that they appear to find it easier to say what a word is not rather than

what it is. McKeown advocates the use of text which "is appropriate for its intended audience."

My approach was to canvass the teachers and pupils themselves to find out what style of dictionary they would favour in their classrooms. The responses were varied, but unanimous with respect to the inclusion of pictures. In a very useful article, Hilary Nesi (1989) mentions the commonly held modern belief that 'direct' means of communicating language are the most economical and effective, but points out that recent research has indicated that it will be virtually impossible to prove or disprove this notion.

Pictures are not there only to stand in for definitions, however. They perform the essential function of making the book more attractive for pupils to use. With this in mind, it was necessary to select an illustrator who would be capable of addressing the appropriate age level. It is my belief that this was not only achieved but was actually one of the most successful features of the finished *Mo Chiad Fhaclair*.

There were numerous other considerations which were brought to light by the teachers and pupils in the Gaelic Medium Units I approached. I have discussed some of these in an earlier article (1997) and will discuss others (such as polysemy and homonymy, synonymy and antonymy) in a subsequent paper.

My conclusions, based on research in schools, were that *Mo Chiad Fhaclair* should mimic the usual dictionary mode, in order to allow pupils to practise the use of dictionaries; that sentences should be complete and should address the reader, in the style of an adult explaining something to a young person; that there should be no pronunciation guides (Watson 1997, p. 52) or grammatical terms; that pictures should be colourful and entertaining; that definitions, instructions and all introductory remarks should be entirely in Gaelic; that spelling should be according to the Scottish Office's Gaelic Orthographic Conventions; and that a spelling section for abstract everyday words should be included.

Among the weaknesses which *Mo Chiad Fhaclair* now suffers from is its isolation. As part of a graded series of dictionaries, leading eventually into *Brigh nam Facal* and the others discussed in this paper, *Mo Chiad Fhaclair* would make sense. Standing alone at the Primary level, as it presently does, *Mo Chiad Fhaclair* falls far short of what is really required.

The definitions are not definitive, nor were they ever intended to be. Looking at the book objectively, it is easy now to pick out definitions which would be unlikely to help the child who was completely ignorant of the head word's meaning, such as the following:

dath (an dath, na dathan)

'S iad buidhe, gorm, dearg, uaine, purpaidh, pinc, orains, dubh, donn, geal agus glas feadhainn de na dathan.

This is not a definition at all, but rather a list of colours, which follows the principle that children might know the names of some of the colours and be able to guess the meaning of dath from that. It is essentially a hopeful approach rather than a scientific one.

The other main problem with *Mo Chiad Fhaclair* is its size. Although this was deliberately limited to make the book appear less intimidating for children, and to make it easier for them to find their way about in it quickly, it is nevertheless something on the small side. Many of the words which do appear are undoubtedly in everyday use and unlikely to cause many children any real difficulty, except perhaps in spelling. On the other hand, another thousand or more everyday words are 'missing.'

Like *Brigh nam Facal* and most other dictionaries I have seen, *Mo Chiad Fhaclair* has entries which vary considerably in size. The entry for *bana-bhuidseach* (witch) is eleven lines long, whereas there are countless entries which are three or four words in length. At the same time, some entries employ Gaelic which is at best questionable, in

the spirit of brevity and of only using words in definitions which are themselves glossed in the dictionary.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although this paper may seem to focus on the negative side of Gaelic dictionary provision, it is fair to say that some important progress has been made in recent years. *Brigh nam Facal* is a ground-breaking work which will blaze a trail for others for years to come. Owen's, too, is a sign of vitality in the language, as is *Stòr-Dàta*, and it is to be hoped that these books are the forerunners of a trend in modernising Gaelic lexicography. At the Primary level, despite its weaknesses, *Mo Chiad Fhaclair* is a first step. What is required now is a *Dara Fhaclair*, a thesaurus and a grammar which children can use.

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