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## INDEXES

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## "Inneal-Ciuil an Diabhail/ The Devil's Instrument": Popular Culture and the Gaelic Learner

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The accommodation of the artifacts of mass culture in Niall Górdan's 1996 article "An Giotár Dealain: Inneal-Ciuil an Diabhail" highlights the current state of the dialogue between traditionalism and modernity in contemporary Gaelic journalism. At the same time, Górdan's article exemplifies the pragmatic function of facilitating language acquisition as an established characteristic of Gaelic public discourse.

A language's ability to accommodate the ceaseless deluge of artifacts generated by popular culture is an indicator of that language's viability in the face of an ever-encroaching modernity. In the case of minority languages whose very survival is predicated to some degree upon a thoughtful response, if not outright resistance, to modernity, the acknowledgement of the mass culture in particular poses urgent challenges to the communication of linguistic identity, both within and without a given linguistic community. In this paper I shall deal with ways in which speakers of "heritage languages" adapt their traditional public discourse in an effort to accommodate the needs of learners from within a cultural mainstream in which native speakers participate, but from which they seek to differentiate themselves. In this situation, the traditionalism embodied in the heritage language ceases to be an anachronistic refuge from modernity, becoming instead a

pragmatic guide to a future in which the language will continue to be relevant to experience.

This paper will use the example of certain late twentieth-century developments in the preservation and promotion of Scottish Gaelic to address the problems inherent in promoting a heritage language on the margins of a mainstream culture. My analysis will illustrate the orientation of modern Gaelic literacy towards what I will call a "learners' culture". In this construct, the form and content of the material produced for public consumption often reflects an intention on the part of its producers to accommodate the needs of those who have acquired or are acquiring the language through study. My analysis will take as a focal point a recent article from the Gaelic press which configures the specific problem of accommodating an artifact from the world of popular culture, in this case the electric guitar, in a Gaelic-language context. Niall Gòrdan's article "An Giotàr Dealain: Inneal-Ciuil an Diabhail?" ("The Electric Guitar: The Devil's Instrument"; *Gairm* 175 [An Samhradh, 1996]) demonstrates how non-traditional subject matter is approached in a language that many consider to be synonymous with traditionalism. At the same time, the article exemplifies the extent to which the pragmatic function of facilitating language acquisition is an established characteristic of contemporary Gaelic public discourse.

For much of this century, what Gilbert Foster calls the "vulgarization" of Gaelic in both Scotland and Canada (p. 115) has until fairly recently relied on nostalgia for a romanticized and pastoral vision of Gaelic culture in selling the language to learners. Two learners' guides which were in wide circulation in the 1970s may serve to illustrate this point. The initial vocabulary that one learned in such determinedly popular texts as John Mackechnie's *Gaelic Without Groans* (1934; third edition 1974) and Roderick Mackinnon's text in Hodder and Stoughton's "Teach Yourself" series (1971) evoke pastoral imagery from another time. The characters one meets in the dialogues and exercises are depicted as fishing for salmon on the loch or

herding cattle, sitting by the fireside, or working in the fields; Mackechnie invites his readers to expand their vocabulary by reading the Gospels in Gaelic (p. 124). The anachronistic vision of the culture that one gains by learning the language from one of these texts represents at once part of the appeal and part of the problem of promoting Gaelic as a viable modern language. On one hand, the language was able to maintain a foothold among "Highland enthusiasts" and other romantics; on the other hand, the language seemed to have little to offer anyone seeking to use it to communicate in an irredeemably modern society.

While Gaelic-language journalism has long recognized that the Gaelic-speaker is in constant dialogue with the modern world, popularizers of Gaelic seemed to come to this recognition more slowly. It is clear from most early textbooks of the Gaelic language that the learner was expected to be acquiring the language in order to have access to traditional materials both religious and secular, especially hymns, folksongs, and the historically significant poetry of the last three centuries (cf Calder passim., Mackechnie loc.cit.) This perspective has been changing, as those seeking to introduce Gaelic to a wider public have recognized that the language must look beyond the past or become an irretrievable part of it. The current version of *Teach Yourself Gaelic* (1993), prepared by Boyd Robertson and Iain Taylor, presents the contemporary Gaelic speaker as a citizen of cosmopolitan, modern society. The textbook's characters watch television, eat in Indian restaurants, attend the theatre, and reflect on events in the Balkans. Another course, Catriona NicIomhair Parsons' three-volume *Gàidhlig Troimh Chòmhradh* (1989-1994), similarly locates the Gaelic speaker in a "typical" late twentieth-century environment; in this case, that environment is Cape Breton Island. These courses do not ignore traditionalism; Robertson and Taylor's inclusion of a "Fiosrachadh" at the end of many of the lessons actually gives the learner a greater insight into Gaelic culture than Mackinnon's work was able to provide. Likewise, through

the inclusion of persistent but unobtrusive references to the Cape Breton Gaidheal teachd's history and traditional culture in the dialogues and reading passages, Parsons' course honours the past without obliging the learner to live in it.

The principal organ for the dissemination of Gaelic language, literature and culture is the Glasgow-based quarterly *Gairm*, which "since 1952 ... has always devoted space to articles on economic, political, social, practical, musical, literary and other topics of current interest" (Thomson 1994, p. 54). Given *Gairm's* preeminence in its field, it is not surprising that the periodical's content should incarnate a bifurcated discourse reflective of the two imperatives active within Gaelic-language culture, namely the maintenance of a viable cultural climate for existing speakers of the language, and the institution of effective means of initiating learners into the culture. The quarterly's founding editor, the poet and scholar Derick S. Thomson, explains *Gairm's* role in both preserving the Gaelic heritage and shaping it for the future, in terms which are worth quoting in full:

[*Gairm's* programme] includes the freeing of prose styles from ecclesiastically dominated syntax and lexis and the partial adaptation of orthographical conventions, aimed at producing a closer fit between the written and the spoken form, while still preserving a standard written language...As to the range of subject matter, *Gairm* ... has regularly featured articles on current affairs, life and travel in foreign countries,crofting topics, industry, politics, leisure pursuits, music, philosophy, cookery, fashion, philology, rheumatism, Japanese painting, etc. Often these articles are the occasion for the coining of new words and the trying out of unfamiliar registers, all this gradually forging a much stronger and more flexible Gaelic canon (p. 224).

Thomson and the other writers associated with *Gairm* have seen Gaelic as a modern language suited to the communication of modern ideas. The promotion of this vision, however, required the cultivation of a modern Gaelic readership, and re-imagining the Gaelic learner as a denizen of modernity was a crucial step in advancing the modernist view of the culture. For this reason, we see in the rise of *Gairm* a new phase in the evolution of Gaelic literature in its educational mode. The recognition of the learner's status as a critical site of interaction between the modern world and Gaelic lexis has promoted a discourse marked by the pragmatic intention to facilitate the acquisition of vocabulary and sentence structure, while still providing significant information and entertainment.<sup>1</sup>

One area in which we see the effort to accommodate modernity within the language working hand in hand with the desire to commodify Gaelic language and literature for the consumption of the learner is in the recognition of popular culture and its technologies. To illustrate the ways in which the presentation of a technological artifact from outside the traditional culture enacts these two agendas, I would like to turn to a recent essay from the Gaelic media. The Summer 1996 issue of *Gairm* featured a short article by Niall Gòrdan, entitled "An Giotàr Dealain: Inneal-Ciuil an Diabhail?" In his text, Gòrdan discusses the history and public profile of the electric guitar in a colloquial and sometimes personal tone, touching on among other things the old, intergenerational debate over whether the instrument is actually a musical instrument (*inneal-ciuil*) at all, or whether it is simply a noise-producing device.

Gòrdan's title anticipates the humour with which he treats the electric guitar's relative novelty within the Gaelic language and culture, and is indicative of the intent to entertain which motivates his essay. Moreover, the allusion to the devil places that humour in a context familiar to the Gaelic traditionalist, through an overt allusion to the devil's first and favourite instrument, the fiddle, and to the dour profile of Scottish Presbyterianism which underlies that

allusion. Gòrdan observes that like the traditional Gaelic instrument, even the relatively inoffensive acoustic guitar, or *giotàr fuaimneach*, has been associated with "*mi-dhiadhaidh*" or "irreligious" music among traditionalists (p. 244). Gòrdan's humorous association of the popular and the diabolical reflects the suspicion of modernity and its works among traditionalists in general, including those whose motivations are not primarily religious.

Entertainment is not Gòrdan's sole, or even primary motivation, however. Accompanying the article is a simple black and white diagram of a generic electric guitar, with its components numbered and labelled in Gaelic with English translations in a "*Clàr nan Ainm*" or glossary at the bottom of the page (p. 246). This rather prosaic, textbook-style illustration is at odds with the often folksy character of Gòrdan's article. After all, the essay concludes with a reference to the Gaelic version of an exasperated cry familiar to all adolescent rock music fans: "*Nach cuir thu sìos beagan fuaim inneal na mollachd sin?*" ("Won't you turn that damned thing down?" p. 247). One might more readily expect to see in the place of the diagram a cartoon portraying harried parents shaking admonishing fists at shaggy-haired, guitar-strumming teenagers, or some tartan-clad variation on that theme.

This disjunction between the determinedly "factual" diagram and the somewhat more whimsical text is less startling to the reader of the Gaelic-language press in general than to the reader of English-language magazines and journals. To state the matter plainly, the diagram is not tangential to the text in the context of Gaelic-language journalism, where the facilitation of language acquisition is as important as entertainment or information.

Gòrdan's inclusion of the diagram thus alerts the reader to the specific kind of linguistic information from which the learner will most benefit. (The inclusion of English translations of the various terms further suggests a suspicion on the author's part that some of this terminology might even be unfamiliar in English.) As a result, the

learner will be on the lookout for relevant terminology in the text itself to add to his or her active vocabulary. Such general vocabulary permits the reader to distinguish between the electric and acoustic guitars (*an giotàr dealan agus an giotàr fuaimneach*, p. 245) and between bass notes (*fuaim domhainn, beusach*) and treble notes (*fuaim àrd, gliongadach*, p. 247). In the latter examples, Gòrdan makes deliberate use of redundancy to alert the reader to different ways to express the musical terminology, as he does when he alludes to "*am buaileadair, no'n drumair*" (p. 247), offering the reader a choice between a purely Gaelic term for a drummer (literally translated as "a striker", i.e. percussionist) and an anglicization. It is extremely important to note that Gòrdan's text is almost completely free of anglicisms, save for *drumair*. This dearth of English-based vocabulary underscores the author's desire to encourage the reader's linguistic development in the direction of a purely Gaelic modernity wherever possible. In accordance with this principle, he uses the term "*còmhlàn-ciuil 'luasganach*" (p. 247) to describe the rock band in which he played in his youth, coining a term from the Gaelic verb "*luaisg*", meaning rock, shake, or swing. Moreover, he draws attention to his coinage by placing it in quotation marks (p. 247).

The temptation to indulge in anglicisms is ever-present for the Gaelic writer. Edward Dwelly, the editor of what to date remains the standard Gaelic-English dictionary, notes hundreds of such coinages in the lexicon analogous to *drumair*, and refers to them as "Gaelic spellings" rather than as legitimate words (*passim*.) Gòrdan's decision to privilege Gaelic-based coinages may create extra difficulty for the new learner, but assures that his article's linguistic values are in keeping with the goal of promoting a standard language, as outlined in Thomson's description of Gairm's objectives.

One of the specific challenges facing Gòrdan in his article is thus the development of Gaelic equivalents for essential features of the electric guitar. A glance at his

glossary reveals that much of his vocabulary for describing the guitar's construction, words like *drochaid* (bridge) and *colann* (body), could be freely adapted from similar terminology used to describe the fiddle. Other terms, such as *cinn-gleusaidh* (machine heads) could be adapted on the basis of analogy, in this case from the familiar *gleusairean* or tuners. The most specifically modern terminology is more problematic, however. Although a term such as "amplifier" can be coined from a verb meaning to enlarge, giving *meudair*<sup>2</sup>, the term "pick-up" in particular is difficult to describe through appeal to a simple verb or image.

To describe the device which converts sound impulses into electric current, Gòrdan applies the term *clachan-iuil*, which translates literally as "guiding stones", and idiomatically as "magnets". Having come up with an adequate term to describe the electronic properties of the pick-up, he can modify the term to express the notion of a single or dual-coil pickup, although the translation of the latter, *clach-iuil dhùbhailte*, is rather pale beside the English "Humbucker".

The literal translation of pick-up may strike the English-speaker as quaint, as indeed might the fact that the Gaelic term for "electric", *dealain*, has been coined from the term for lightning. The English-speaker should bear in mind, however, that the word electricity comes from the Greek word for amber, "which, under friction, has the property of attracting" (cf *Gage's Canadian Dictionary*, 1983, p. 374), and this same need to communicate the fundamental principle of attraction underlies Gòrdan's choice of term in this example. Thus, if Gòrdan is modernizing the vocabulary of contemporary Gaelic by accommodating an unfamiliar technology, he is carrying out his task in a very traditional manner.

The impulse towards primary language education in a text like Gòrdan's, and indeed in *Gairm's* editorial policy (the journal features, among other things, a column for new learners in every issue) responds to one further obstacle that learners of Gaelic have had to face in the last thirty

years especially. Gaelic currently lacks a standard dictionary which foregrounds the language's applicability in the modern world. Dwelly's *Illustrated Gaelic to English Dictionary* (first edition 1901; 10th ed. 1988) is an excellent reference work, but it was compiled in the Victorian era. As the twentieth century draws to a close, the text's merit lies increasingly in its achievement as an encyclopaedic record of a vanishing society. Nowhere is this problem more evident than in Dwelly's treatment of technology; his book is full of fascinating schematic drawings of handlooms, traditional architecture, schooners, and under the entry for *closach*, or carcass, he offers comparative diagrams of how to divide carcasses of beef and mutton in Scotland and in England (p. 213).

We cannot of course blame Dwelly for not having prophesied the technological advance that characterizes our age. We must however be aware that when the learner's lexical resources are oriented towards an irrecoverable past, then his or her sense of the language's relevance to the present will necessarily suffer. Even Derick Thomson's *New English-Gaelic Dictionary* (1986) fails to offer an established term for "computer", although Thomson does give us the wherewithal to say "cannabis" (*cainb-lus*, p. 6). It is to be hoped that the *Historical Dictionary of Scottish Gaelic* project begun at the University of Glasgow in 1966 will provide a resource which will allow learners in particular to bridge the gap between the Gaelic-speaking past and the Gaelic-speaking present, and thereby to ensure a Gaelic-speaking future.

The accommodation of modernity in its technological and broader social aspects in Gaelic literacy evinces a devil's alternative, particularly for traditionalists. The language must be transmitted to a new generation of speakers if the traditions and values of the past are to be more than exhibits to be visited on brief excursions outside of the mainstream culture. However, the necessary process of transmitting the language to speakers who, like Niall Gòrdan, have strong connections to that mainstream

culture, inevitably effects changes in the overall relationship between the language and the world view that it has preserved over the last few centuries. The promoters of the new Gaelic literacy have increasingly appealed to potential learners on the basis of Gaelic's present relevance, and not on its merits as a vehicle for nostalgia; as a result, Gaelic traditionalism will likely become more and more marginalized even within the promotion of the language itself. For the traditionalists then, the new Gaelic literacy is itself a kind of devil's instrument, which will carry the culture forward rather like the electric guitar might carry the fiddle's music, as a melody which is recognizable, but can never be the same.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This process is taken even further in the bilingual quarterly *Am Bràighe* (Mabou NS: 1993 - ), which, in addition to its learners' column and the Chatroom for learners on its Website, offers a forum for critical discussion of language programmes in Canada, Scotland, and elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup>Gòrdan has since published "Meudairean - meadhon pian nàbaidhean?", in which he anatomizes the amplifier itself. See *Gairm* 178 (An t-Earrach, 1997) pp. 161-163.

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