REVIEW

Michael Newton, *Warriors of the Word: The World of the Scottish Highlanders*. Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2009. Pp. 464. ISBN 978-1-84158-826-1. CAD\$39.95; £20.00.

Few monographs have been written in the last ten years focusing on the culture of Gaelic Scotland, fewer still have examined it from a literary perspective. Of these, perhaps only a handful accord oral traditions the same weight as written records in their analyses. With *Warriors of the Word*, Michael Newton has helped to fill this lacuna. In this work, Newton has investigated the cultural world of the Gaelic people through the lenses of language and oral traditions, arguing that both were key features in the transmission of Gaelic culture. Although the geographic framework of *Warriors of the Word* is relatively small, specifically discussing the Highlands of Scotland and more generally the *Gàidhealtachd* (the Gaelic speaking areas of Scotland), the chronological scope is vast. Though the primary focus is on the twelfth to eighteenth centuries, Newton delves as far back as the first century CE and extends into the nineteenth in order to contextualize his study. Newton has managed to create an interesting and engaging work, one that not only skillfully describes the mental and social world of the *Gàidhealtachd* but also brings together a wide variety of Gaelic source material.

Newton begins each of his eight chapters with a short story to illustrate the main themes under discussion: a strategy that allows for immediate engagement with primary material. Newton first turns his attention to an overview of Gaelic history. While this helps to provide context for readers unfamiliar with Scottish history, it is little more than an outline and ignores much

of the complexity of the relations in the early Scottish kingdom. In chapter two, Newton addresses the important questions of identity and ethnicity; this chapter also acts as an introduction to the major historiographical themes and to the conflict that existed between Highlanders and Lowlanders, both socially and in the writing of their histories. The following chapter discusses Gaelic orality and introduces the reader to the literature of Gaelic Scotland. Newton assumes little to no familiarity with literary theory or folkloristic categories of analysis and as such provides extensive definition and explanation. Comparative charts and tables further help the reader to understand and classify the literature and information contained within.

Chapters four through eight make up the core of the work and show Newton's methodology in practice. Within these chapters he examines the personal and social aspects of life in the Highlands, including: clan relations, familial structure and interactions, Gaelic belief systems, song and music, and the relations between inhabitants and their environment. Newton's approach to these chapters is informed by a variety of disciplines including anthropology, ethnology, history, sociology and ecology. The bulk of evidence used comes directly from Gaelic songs, stories, and proverbs, demonstrating Newton's assertion that language was a significant conduit for the transmission of culture. He particularly emphasizes the social prestige that the authors and performers of songs and stories received, from *bard baile* (village poet) to *ollamh rìgh* (king's master of poetry). His arguments are based upon the belief that language and oral traditions, their wording and associations, are connected directly to the construction of culture and can be read to uncover the social institutions and practices of that culture. In the case of Scottish Gaelic culture, poems, stories, and songs were not only a way for people to make sense of the world around them, but also to transmit particular cultural expectations and identities.

One frustration with the work is Newton's frequent tendency to "drop" quotations into the text without introduction of the source. Most often these are taken from modern academic works, however, occasionally these come from eighteenth or nineteenth century commentators, a distinction that can only be determined by consulting the endnotes. This not only breaks the flow of the text but also conceals from the reader potential historiographic changes and may give the mistaken impression of a constant and unchanging view of Gaelic culture.

As stated in the introduction, one goal of this work is to "bridge the chasm that yawns between academic discourse and the wider world," and in this sense it is certainly a success (p. 5). Newton contextualizes his work within both the historical timeframe and academic discourse in a way that allows readers with even a passing familiarity with the subject matter to engage with the study. Others may find some aspects too simplistic or the definitions unnecessary. However, it is unlikely that readers would be unable to take something away from the work, as Newton has offered a wide variety of approaches and material rarely found in a single study.

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