
This edited collection of essays written by Gaelic scholar John Macinnes, in both English and Gaelic, seeks to preserve a disappearing culture by recognizing the accomplishments of the several thousand-year-old Gaelic tradition. Macinnes contributes decades of research regarding life, history and literature in the Gàidhealtachd (Gaelic speaking areas); he has also recorded the poetry, song and lore of Gaelic tradition bearers across Scotland and Canada for archival collections at the University of Edinburgh, making him undoubtedly an expert in this field. Throughout these essays the author emphasizes the distinct cultural tradition and national pride associated with the Gàidhealtachd, while continuing to comment on the ever-present awareness that Gaelic has undergone what Macinnes has coined an “ethnocide.” In many instances the 1070 marriage of Malcolm III to Margaret of Wessex, the sister of the claimant to the English throne, marks the first major attack upon Gaelic culture, which was followed by a long, drawn-out decline over the following several hundred years.

The editor, Michael Newton, has divided the selected essays into three sections. First, “Essays on History, and Local and Family Tradition,” act as introductions to more general themes of Gaelic ideology and the history of the Gaelic language. Macinnes challenges the definitions of “Highland” and “Lowland” in the essay, “The Gaelic Perception of the Lowlands,” which questions the concept of a “Highland line.” More specifically this section seeks to explain the importance of
clan sagas and legends within Gaelic tradition. This presents a problem for historicity, but Macinnes’ interest in these “historical stories [is] as narrative fictions rather than reflections of Gaelic history” (p. 50). Local and familial traditions are discussed in essays specific to traditions on both Raasay and the Isle of Skye. It is here that Macinnes’ familiar writing style is best recognized, but remains evident in all of his writing. His first hand accounts of hearing Gaelic folklore and song as a child add a personal touch to his academic narrative.

The second section of essays, “Essays on Literature, Song and Dance,” follow the traditions from their earliest known conception to the twentieth century. Included are three of Macinnes’ essays regarding the work of twentieth century Gaelic poet Sorley Maclean. Together they emphasize that modern Gaelic poetry does exist and brings with it a sense of restoration of Gaelic heritage. This is important for Macinnes, who throughout his essays, stresses that “Gaelic is a major European language, drawing as it does on the oldest literary tradition in Europe outside Latin and Greek” (p. 395). Perhaps the most important essay of this collection, “The Panegyric Code in Gaelic Poetry and its Historical Background” describes the wide cultural reach of vernacular bards throughout the high age of the tradition, c.1600-1745, creating specific categories of analysis within which to interpret poetry.

The third and last section discusses “Essays on Belief Systems and World View.” Here Macinnes investigates how religion and elements of the supernatural affected Gaelic life and culture. The two are often indivisible and are used frequently in association with metaphors of fairies and silgies. Macinnes’ meticulous study of language throughout his work is particularly helpful for the non-Gaelic speakers’ understanding of Gaelic terms and phrases. For example in, “The Seer in Gaelic Tradition,” one of the words for poet, in Gaelic, is *fili*. Macinnes explains that this is connected to the root
of the verb “to see,” defining *fili* originally as a seer (p. 443). This interpretation complements the romanticized view of Gaelic poetry as being linked to prophecy and divination.

Macinnes’ provides an interdisciplinary approach to the study of Gaelic culture. The essays will appeal to a variety of scholars with interests in history, literature and musical studies, who will undoubtedly find his work beneficial, and for those studying Gaelic culture a necessity. For those not proficient in Gaelic some chapters will present more of a challenge as portions of this work are written in Gaelic. No translations are provided for the aforementioned passages, as they are included, as Newton would say, to represent and pay tribute to the full spectrum of Macinnes’ work. The essays can be read either as a collection or individually.

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