
The Reverend Duncan Blair (1815-1893) was born in a Gaelic-speaking community in Cowall, Argyllshire, and immigrated to Nova Scotia in 1851. When he died in 1893, the editor of the Gaelic newspaper Mac-Talla expressed the hope that his texts would be collected together and published. It is a sad reflection of the underdevelopment of Scottish Gaelic Studies that a partial compilation of them – those published in Mac-Talla – took 120 years to come to fruition. The results provide a vital window into nineteenth-century Gaeldom and a reminder of the Gaelic immigrant communities that existed in Canada.

This volume consists of two introductory essays (one by MacPherson and the other by Linkletter), part of Blair’s essays, and nine of Blair’s poems. It is a testimony to the editors’ dedication to Gaelic that all materials, including their own introductory essays, are presented bilingually. The book concludes with a list of Blair’s published works and photographs of Blair and the church in Pictou County at which he served.

The introduction summarizes how Blair’s essays about the Clearances, the history of Christianity, the origins of the Gaels, and the Ossianic controversy showcase his education in both English and Gaelic traditions. It also suggests how his interest in nature is reflected in memoirs of his first trip to Canada in 1846 and in several of his poems, and how both his prose and poetry draw on older Gaelic literature. Blair was a “culture broker” who negotiated with competing impulses of change, innovation and conservation in his local community as well as in the “imagined communities” of trans-national Gaeldom.

This book contributes to making the sources for Canadian Gaelic literature and history available to a wider public, but more should have been done to ensure that it meets the needs of its likely audiences by providing further commentary about the texts. Gaelic
learners, part of the book’s core audience, may find it less useful as a learning tool due to the editors’ decision to reproduce texts verbatim from Mac-Talla. Numerous inconsistencies and errors are duplicated that would have been straightforward, if tedious, to normalize and correct. Surely Blair would have wanted his texts to be as useful as possible in the development of the language in the present day.

The sources used in Blair’s historical essays could have been identified, especially those about the Clearances, given the controversy which surrounds the interpretation of these events. Blair integrated oral history with printed sources; knowing when he draws from previously published texts would highlight the unique contribution of his fieldwork. His essays about ancient history (“The Old Gaels,” “The Coming of Christianity,” and “The Poems of Ossian”) are important not only for how men of his station conceived of the past but also for how that imagined past provided precedent and justification for the contemporary “civilizing mission” of church and empire.

Blair’s texts are embedded within a long literary tradition and his work cannot be fully appreciated without background knowledge of conventional literary devices, oral formulae, song choruses, and airs. “Aiseirigh na Gàidhealtachd,” for example, begins with a quote from a long and influential poem by the Reverend James MacGregor (1759-1830), the first Gaelic-speaking minister to serve in Nova Scotia. Most of Blair’s song-poems are based on older models, such as “Gabhaidh sinn an rathad mór” associated with the 1715 Jacobite Rising, and his choices of models and the ways in which he repurposed them deserve discussion.

Fògradh, Fàisneachd, Filidheachd is a fine collection indicative of the extensive corpus of Gaelic sources composed in North America that await examination for a greater understanding of the Highland immigrant experience. While these have much to offer in linguistic, historical and literary terms, without the guidance that a scholar can provide, the inter-textual allusions, literary conventions, cultural signifiers and unstated implications in the texts are likely to be lost on a general Anglophone audience who might otherwise find them puzzling or merely quaint. It has been too easy for non-specialists to underestimate and even trivialize the significance of
Gaelic sources and it would be unfortunate for materials such as these not to be given the consideration they deserve.

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