THE GAELIC VISION IN SCOTTISH CULTURE

Scottish Gaelic society began to arouse the scholarly interest and curiosity of its more or less hostile neighbours and the outside world of Europe over two hundred years ago. The travels of the Welshman Edward Lhuyd in the Gaidlealtachd between 1697 and 1701 provided us with one of the first major contributions to Gaelic philology and to theories of 'Celtic' unity. In the next hundred years, the Gaelic language was at once a political irritant and the star of European Romanticism in the ascendent, sited in the Ossianic literature of James MacPherson.

Malcolm Chapman, an Oxford social anthropologist, traces the origins of interest and enthusiasm for the Gaelic language in this period and the way in which the study of Gaelic society and language has developed to the present. This, as the author's thesis describes it, has been a complicated and far from positive process. He suggests that the Gaelic vision of English-speaking peoples is a distorted one and that Gaelic culture is misrepresented to its disadvantage by a series of myths and misconceptions whose roots go back to the late eighteenth century. A twist given to the tale in the nineteenth century is the casting of racial stereotypes of Celt and Anglo-Saxon by the dominant society whose metaphorical requirements could be satisfied by myths and putative qualities summed up by the terms 'Celtic' and 'Highland'. The test to the integrity and powers of survival of Gaelic has come in the long term, as the author shows, not only from straightforward political oppression but also from the scrutiny and blandishments of industrial societies, tourists, scholars and dreamers, prompted to examine their own souls and escape from urban blight and mass-media culture. In fact, the paradox of Gaelic culture is that it has been both persecuted and espoused by the outside world. Chapman's investigation goes further than this in that he raises the issue of the experience of minority language groups who can only assert themselves through the medium of the dominant language, in this case English. He describes the intellectual reaction of Gaelic society to this long term conditioning; Gaelic speakers themselves adopt the metaphors of English and explore the expectations which the outside world has of them, appearing to draw strength from its theories of Celtic mysticism or the Gaelic temperament rather than remaining aloof from them. Indeed a whole metaphorical complex has been erected on the basis of a polarity of separate languages and separate societies, but because of bilingualism and the dispersal of Gaelic society, the exclusively Gaelic mind and culture no longer exist and discussion must be in terms of English.

While Chapman explores different facets of the experience of Gaelic culture, his treatment is primarily of the language since, as he himself would admit, it is the only practical avenue of approach to the outsider. The limits imposed by a reliance on the written word of what is in this case possibly an elite have two general consequences. In the first place we cannot assume that the validity of the literary message holds good for the collective consciousness and can be extended to the Gaelic psyche as a whole, and secondly, we may be in danger of arriving at a model of the thought processes of a Gaelic ecotype or even anti-hero fundamentally repugnant to his or her compatriots. Other aspects of his work may also give the reader a sense of unease. The course of early history and literature in terms of the "Gaelic hegemony of Malcolm Canmore" or a pan-Gaelic political stature for the Lordship of the Isles provides dubious premises. The view that the "history of Scotland since the Reformation can be seen as a sustained confrontation of the Highlands and the Lowlands" should not be allowed to seduce the reader. Having made this claim Mr. Chapman then says that in the eighteenth century, Scots looked to the Highlands to provide the location for an autonomy in which they could lodge their political, literary and historical aspirations. But before Ossian and the Romantics, the Scots looked enthusiastically to a Lowland Scots rural past and the courtly culture of the Scottish Renaissance. Neither does the Gaelic view of this
"confrontation" appear so stark; *Gall* or *Galda* as the literary expression of deprecation or contempt is vague, meaning not necessarily 'Lowlander' but everyone else who is not Gaelic—a simple 'them' and 'us' antithesis.

Mr. Chapman's thesis is delivered under six heads which take us from the excitement of the Ossianic era to modern prognostications of Gaelic death or regeneration, decline or revival. His analysis takes us behind what has perhaps been the predominant theme of culture and conflict to reveal the ideas and attitudes which shape the often unhappy co-existence of a majority and minority language. He takes the traditional arguments apart to show that they are expressed in terms of metaphorical dualities which have grown out of antitheses, for example of scientific knowledge and folklore. Nineteenth century models may have worn thin for the academics but they still continue to play havoc with images and self-images of the Gael.

Historians and Celtists may not take kindly to the book which must be said to be by an anthropologist for anthropologists. Mr. Chapman writes with coherence but often lacks cogency. He appears to take shelter behind jargon which obscures rather than clarifies and lengthy quotations whose conclusions would be better summarised. His own conclusions are important for Scottish studies in the way in which past fallacies are identified, but readers might well gain an overview through this summary before attempting the book itself.

The seal was set on the cultural role of the Highlander, in the author's view by the histrionic Forty Five Rebellion—a sort of Royal command performance ensuring rapid media personality development. Then the publication of James MacPherson's *Ossian* within the next twenty years gave the eighteenth century mind "the epic which they expected" from the Highlands. Controversy has raged since the 1760s on the authenticity of 'Ossian',¹ but Chapman moves beyond this to describe how, bogus as his 'translations' were in detail, they were "the very voice of authenticity for the developing sentiments of Romanticism in Europe." Enthusiasm for the primitive in Scotland, as elsewhere, ensured their success and Chapman describes how the interest in the primitive by the rational, scientific-inquiry, modernist school is not the paradox that it might seem. One only has to remember that the *Report of the Committee appointed to inquire into the Nature and Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian* (1805) as a product of the progressive and utilitarian Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland.

More serious and insidious for Gaelic culture than the reception of Ossian, as the author's thesis proposes, was the misinterpretation of the whole Gaelic tradition beginning with MacPherson's contemporaries, Alexander MacDonald and Duncan Ban MacIntyre. Their published Gaelic verse is considered to be of great artistic merit and has been compared with the work of contemporary English poets; it was dubbed 'native' poetry, assumed into the romantic tradition and thus "appropriated by the English Romantic poets as a source of and allegory for moral and ethical power." Chapman uses MacDonald and MacIntyre to demonstrate that our knowledge and appreciation of Gaelic poetry has been filtered through a literary tradition which has "internalised the language and values of romanticism", and this is where the lie starts. Because of the imperialism of English, modern Gaelic poets look outside the Gaelic world to express the Gael to himself; this is what Chapman characterises as the "symbolic appropriation of the Gael by an English language literary discourse." According to Chapman the world of the Gael was in the eighteenth century "symbolically entirely autonomous," that the poets' voice was an authentic one. But whether they were the first of the moderns or the last of the ancients, are we to believe with Chapman that this symbolic autonomy was located in a closed society with a linguistic impurity? Chapman suggests that we are so far removed from this symbolic autonomy that these poets are still subject to misinterpretation and expurgation. We do know that MacMhaighstir Alasdair was not a romantic peasant poet, and few are now unaware of his political attitudes, his obscurities or his sexual prowess.² Perhaps Duncan Ban, whose work has been more recently edited, should be made to answer for his political equivocation and hypocrisy.³
The subjectivity which we must understand in the nineteenth century's views of patterns of culture under the influence of Romanticism was expressed clearly by two literati Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold. It is one of the main contentions of Chapman's thesis that their view of the 'Celtic' world has been the supreme influence on the 'Celtic' construct. They took the primitive-literature qualities of Ossian and gave them a racial dimension by setting them in opposition to Anglo-Saxon. "The appropriation of the Celtic world to serve the symbolic ends of a dominant intellectual discourse" pointed the literary discourse in the directions of polarisation and characterisation. Renan and Arnold fuelled this discourse.

The metaphors in which it was conducted such as native, idealism, truth, emotion, passion, sensitivity, sentimentality, naivete, proposed a quality which was opposed to the ambitions of science and utilitarian philosophies of rationalism and materialism. In popular as opposed to academic terms, this was understood in the opposites of 'fact' and 'fancy', or Anglo-Saxon and Celt. those who shunned the positivist approach joined the reaction against what was called "the despotism of fact." The imagery created from opposing dualities has been long-lived and finds expression in for example the work of the late Neil Gunn. Chapman also quotes a throw away remark by Professor Derick Thomson which even Thomson would agree has not stood the test of time: "The Gaels are, and were, a profoundly emotional people, and not an intellectual people." The duality in the materialism of the Anglo-Saxon and the spirituality of the Celt matched the nineteenth century stereotype of femininity and attitudes towards the place of women in society. The image of the Celt in opposition to the modern world gave him areas of competence similar to women; the Gael and the women came to fill similar roles in a system of imagery in oppositions which informed the foundations of modern social science. Victorian middle-class women could be said to be excluded from the material world but we should not be tempted to relegate Gaelic women to the dream-world. Women in the Gaidhealtachd in the nineteenth century were thoroughly emancipated and filled an important economic role. They left the community as much as the menfolk; they went to the Lowland harvest, they worked the shielings, they went away to domestic service, they went to the East Coast herring fisheries--Clann Nighean an Sgadain--and they went away to the munitions factories in the First World War.

The analysis of the literary influence of writers such as the French Renan and the English Arnold is important in its presentation of the past as well as for its relevance to the present. The philosophies of youth movement--alternative society, anti-war, anti-state, anti-establishment--have tended to employ the oppositions of idealism and materialism and their respective equations with good and bad. Whether the Gael occupies the same place in the imagery as he did a century ago is open to question. The feminist movement shares with the Gael, as Chapman suggests, the predicament of finding an identity that is independent of the imagery that has brought about their suppression.

The Celtic Twilight movement of the late nineteenth century with its "misty idealism and tender grief" undoubtedly owed much to this self-recognition of the qualities and imagery of the Celt. But we may be in error in locating its inspiration in the English literary discourse. For some, it was the unacceptable face of Irish or Anglo-Irish culture because the cause of Irish literature was the offspring of the political struggle and the Gaelic League with its radical message was identified with the separatist struggles. Hyde, MacNeill, Yeats and others in the Coole Park coterie were arguably very conscious of the Arnoldsque image of the Celt and tried to repudiate it. In Scotland, contemporary Gaelic poetry was bland and mauldin, nostalgic and sentimental. After a hundred years of economic pressure, cultural attenuation and fragmentation, the victims of price movements had no resources left except a little idealism. Few poets tried to foresee an aggressive political solution; many looked to
some sort of arcadian Utopian solution. The unacceptable side of Gaelic poetry found an outlet abroad; the energetic Archibald MacLean Sinclair was uncompromising in the poetry which he printed and Eoin MacKinnon found space in his Gaelic newspaper *MacTalla* for material which seemed to have been erased from the memories of the patriotic publicists of Gaelic at home.4

Chapman's arguments are persuasive if we limit ourselves to the literary discourse and the inheritance of Arnold and Renan. But even the classifications of the rational scientific and the non-rational natural, the fact and the fancy, seem to be as impressionistic now as they were then, and more so. And closer study of earlier periods would reveal that MacPherson and Arnold were building on traits which had already figured in the classical Gaelic tradition. The racial oppositions may well owe more, in Scottish culture at least, to the writings of John Pinkerton (1758-1826) and George Chalmers (1742-1825), protagonists respectively of Goth and Celt in their interpretations of Dark Age civilisation.

The literary and figurative qualities of the Celt in late nineteenth century models located him in the natural as opposed to rational artificial milieu. He therefore fitted easily into the classificatory models of the early social scientists, Ferdinand Tonnies, a founding father of modern sociology, in his influential *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887), inspired an idealisation of the 'community' (Gemeinschaft) against which he set the artificial and spiritually debased form of social life, 'society' (Gesellschaft). His account of the relationship of the sexes of the two types of society which he discussed makes 'woman' a creature of the community. He thus strengthened the imagery of Celt and woman who were located in the natural entity and antithetical to the artificial association, and increased the polarity between the metaphorical dualities which were coming to be applied. Max Weber, whose influence has been considerable in historical studies, defined the Protestant ethic and spirit of capitalism as replacing an old order governed by religion, magic and belief. Both Weber and Tonnies in opposing religious and political conservatism to rationalist materialism gave point to the idea of the community as the repository of 'folklore'.

In the age of Darwin's theories on the origin of species, the new disciplines of anthropology and sociology developed theories of origins and survivals, and defined physical aspects of race. This racial and cultural historicism marshalled other societies according to their respective stage of evolution towards rationality, and gave birth to the model of a social progression from magic to religion to science. This simplifying and reductive epistemology has tended to belittle Gaelic culture and deride the idea of folklore. Recognising with a measure of complacency that their own society was devoid of symbolic mysteries, scholars and theorists adopted a metaphorical duality by which they opposed their own empiricism to other systems of knowledge, the irrational and the non-utilitarian. Those who found solace in the symbolic and the expressive, or were offended by the squalor and materialism of late nineteenth century Britain, or were uneasy at the loss of old customs and ways of life, or curious about a distant and untroubled past, were the intellectual heirs of Matthew Arnold and like him looked to the 'Celtic' lands. If there was a new valuation of 'folk,' its interpretation and publicisation was another nail in its coffin. Chapman stresses that the accumulation of material on Gaelic with the development of folklore studies was processed blatantly or subtly—and he quotes examples of both—by the ideas of the English language. The imagery employed by folklorists and collectors derives of course from an English language discourse shaped by the rationalist philosophy of the enlightenment and by the succeeding Romantic movement. Such imagery is significantly absent from early 'folklore' collections such as Rev Robert Kirk's in the late seventeenth century.

Dr. John Lorne Campbell of Canna is unfortunately cited as a modern example of the disadvantage of this discourse. He, like all his predecessors, has employed the symbolism of the *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* type, and his "observation of Highland
society is no innocent gaze, but a perception structured by the metaphors available for its expression.” He may throw “a mellow and beautiful light” on his Gaelic subjects but we would hopefully recognise this style, knowing his background and the milieu in which he has conducted his scholarship.

It is difficult to be categorical about the intellectual inheritance of men such as John Francis Campbell of Islay and Alexander Carmichael (not Andrew as on p. 116). Campbell was of course a man of wide cosmopolitan interests who fits into the nineteenth century mould of cultural historicism but we should be cautious about seeing him as a successor to Arnold. The foundation of the Folklore Society in 1878 institutionalised the intellectual climate which could apply the metaphorical duality opposing confident empiricism to other systems of knowledge, but this was twenty years after Campbell had entered the field and only seven years before his death. He himself attributed his interest in prose tales and romances to the Grimm brothers and the Scandinavian scholar G.W. Dasent, the first translator of Njal’s Saga in English, and the reducing imagery with which he introduces his *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (1860) such as “mental debris” is employed to extend his striking metaphor of the ocean flotsam. He appears to have been genuinely shocked that such consummate artistry had been driven to such a depressed state and this his *sgêuilachar* or tradition bearers are the cottars and squatters pushed to the edges of crofting society.

Alexander Carmichael, Campbell’s younger contemporary, from a very different background, displays a slightly different approach in his great collection *Carmina Gadelica*. He was intent on publicising the beauty and intensity of the tradition of Gaelic devotional poetry. Contemporary theorists accepted a basic distinction between the sacred and the secular, and this explains how Carmichael could stress the religiosity of Gaelic life and negate the distinction; thus all activity was in some sense religious, and *Carmina Gadelica* certainly gives this impression, and in this period when religion was cast as the highest development of symbolic activities, Gaelic culture becomes supremely folkloristic. The frequent use of Carmichael’s translations in various forms and contexts is strong evidence in favour of Chapman’s warning that Gaelic is subjected to manipulation within the dominant intellectual dualities of English language discourse.

Apart then from their enthusiasm both men were united in their conviction that ‘folklore’ was on the point of disappearing in the face of modernity, sophistication, newspapers and communications. This crisis had motivated Rev Patrick MacDonald of Kilmore and other eighteenth century song and music collectors. It is an apparent paradox therefore than an institution, the School of Scottish Studies, has only recently been created to collect song and story, and in less than thirty years it has put over 2,400 hours on tape, and when the Irish Folklore Commission began a scheme to collect material through primary school pupils and teachers in 1937 and 1938, it resulted in “thirty tons of folklore”. This *embarras de richesses* can be considered as an end in itself for those who are employed to collect it and collate it. To satisfy the cynic, the School of Scottish Studies has begun to share its wealth in publications, *Scottish Studies* and *Tocher*, and on disc and tape and as its character is revealed, it would be churlish to claim that their recording work is misdirected or even perhaps philosophically unsound.

Perhaps we are all guilty, Mr. Chapman included, of leaning rather heavily on old cliches. Our images and definitions of folklore employ terms such as rural, remote, primitive, pre-literate, and apparently locate it in the Gaelic-speaking fringes of society. Literacy has been with us for a long time and yet ‘folklore’ has been seen to survive its adoption and spread with few ill-effects from manipulation or literary cross fertilisation. Folklore cannot be the preserve of the depressed, poverty-stricken, cleared or deserted area; as our experience in Scotland has shown, it survives not necessarily in the relict areas but where there is a measure of prosperity. Many of the harvest traditions which are still known such as the clyack sheaf, *maighdean bhuana* and the *gobhar bacach* or
calileach have survived while arable crops are still grown. Chapman's location of 'folklore' in the shrinking Gaidhealtachd would be denied strenuously by most scholars in Scotland and even its monopolisation by rural communities. Can we therefore build a model of 'symbolic appropriation' when Scottish folklore is not, at least from the Scottish angle located par excellence within the Gaelic language? The division of society into traditional and modern is an inevitable classification from the point of view of the School of Scottish Studies. Chapman maintains that this produces an intellectual belittlement because Gaelic culture continues to be 'folklorised' and folklore means quaint, out-moded and non-rational. It is arguable that fashions have changed to the extent that attitudes are not as manipulative as formerly, and if we can believe Norman MacLean (Tormod air Telly) and others, the folklore collector and academic can be suitably neutralised and even manipulated by the Gael.

A clever selection of modern Gaelic poetry is used to demonstrate that the metaphorical and symbolic structures of the English language discourse have been absorbed into the Gaelic intellectual framework. Poets such as George Campbell Hay, Iain Crichton Smith and Derick Thomson frequently return to the discussion of identity, both individual and corporate, with the acerbic ingredient of a plight of a language under threat of extinction.

The Gaelic poets discussed including also Sorley MacLean and Donald MacAulay belong to a generation which appears to have turned its back forcefully on nineteenth century Gaelic poetry, which with few exceptions such as Mary MacPherson of Skye and others of whom careful study is overdue, had pandered to Romanticism. But in trying to discover 'self', Chapman shows how they adopt the imagery of the English language discourse, "an alien discourse." They evoke their rural background and the imagery of childhood and home such that, with Freudian inevitability, Gaelic culture is located in the distant mother figure, reminiscent of Renan's Celt and remote from their own transplanted urban situations.

Chapman does not discuss metric developments and structures although we should note that Gaelic poetry of the last fifty years has used free verse as well as traditional metrics. Gaelic poets have not denied the influence of new verse in English since the 1920's, they have expressed a socialist and a nationalist commitment, as found especially in the works of MacLean and Thomson respectively, and they have adopted the vein of reaction against a cloying sentimentality. Although Chapman's sample of poets is limited to the five mentioned—the leading modern Gaelic poets but in some ways atypical—he concludes that in spite of their commitments their self-consciousness is self-destructive.

The other vital strand in modern Gaelic verse which Chapman discusses is its attitude to the Church,—this ambiguous symbol, allied to the impulses of modern economic life and apparently inimical to the sensitive and sensuous qualities of Gaelic life but at the same time one of its central institutions. The Church may indeed be casually classed as "another imperialist imposition" and Derick Thomson's Am Bocach-Rocais, The Scarecrow, is a superbly vivid and depressing elucidation of Calvinism in the Gaidhealtachd but we need more discussion about the role of the Church both in Highlands and Lowlands before such a potentially complicated appraisal can be pushed through. What about Calvinist religion in the Lowlands since the Church was run from that angle, the persistent enthusiasm for the Secession churches and Evangelicalism in the Highlands and Lowlands, the politico-religious dilemma of the Free and Established Churches after the Disruption, the moral rule of the Men, and the easy interpretation of Sabbatarianism as moral censure? Obviously this is not a book about the Church in the Highlands but the reader may feel that Mr. Chapman is not aware of these factors in his account.

As a sort of valediction or perhaps as the raison d'être or inspiration of the whole book, Chapman concludes by surveying some of the features of anthropology in
the last hundred years, and especially the institutional and intellectual separation of folklore and social anthropology since the 1880s. The influence of Evans Pritchard's move towards the humanities and away from the natural sciences, and the decline in fashion of the positivism of functionalist anthropology seem to Chapman to indicate the future achievement of unity of function which the study of oral and written literature is a healthy symptom. Anthropological studies to date still rely on characterising Gaelic society in terms of the opposition of traditional and modern on the Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft model.

We are being asked in this book to place 'Scottish Culture' under the microscope but the reader may feel that this cautionary tale is not truly germane to Scottish Culture or a Gaelic vision. Is Mr. Chapman presenting us with a tourist brochure view of the Gaidhealtachd and tilting at it? Or do we not see ourselves as others see us? While contextualising attitudes to the Highlands in the British or European mind, the author falls short of providing a satisfactory analysis of Scotland's historical self-image. We cannot deny however that he highlights these complicated attitudes and gives them a pedigree which should be recognised.

It is arguable that Scottish studies can absorb the contentious and committed because they are used to them; the objective analysis of minority cultures may be a luxury that only the social sciences can afford. Most writers on Gaelic or in Gaelic are forced into taking a standpoint, either emotionally sympathetic and sentimental or expressing overt or covert antipathy, rarely radical, generally reactionary. Most of the literature fits comfortably into the intellectual structure which he proposes and aligns itself with the polarities or rationalist utility and alternative society. Indeed, Mr. Chapman's conclusions seems to suggest that we are doomed never to throw off "the dominant and manipulative discourse". Having defined the alien discourse at great length, he has ruled out his own thesis as being unacceptable because it is bound by the discourse! And if the reader feels that Mr. Chapman is championing the virtues of an idealised Gaelic society, then he, the reader, is aligning himself by definition with the aliens.

His thesis avoids unfurling a political banner perhaps because of absurd examples of Gaelic political posturing in the past such as Hon Ruairidh Erskine of Marr. He does however, reveal where his own sympathies lie and even admits cryptically that "Gaelic has a potential political importance of great strategic value." He cannot of course develop this because of the strictures of his thesis. As thorough as his critique is, it will not have any great impact in Scotland. The real Gaelic vision in Scottish culture, in so far as it exists, is not a retrospective or an introspective one. The Gael is not Scotland's noble savage, nor does Scottish Nationalism look to a Gaelic past in spite of Hugh MacDiarmid's vision. If the Scot has to answer the accusation of being obsessed with his own past, he may recall for his accusers the iniquities of the Clearances or the defeat of Culloden as a national affront, but he does not relate to a Celtic heroic age where everything was beer and skittles. If there is a popular idealised view of the past, it is based on social systems rather than on ethnic divide, a society which was kin-based or feudal rather than Gaelic or non-Gaelic. And the image of Gaeldom for many middle class Scots--since Chapman's book is about middle class attitudes--was given its artistic dimension by Marjory Kennedy Fraser whose interpretations of Gaelic traditional song we now regard as unfortunate. Her influence is still with us considering the popularity of the 'high art' renderings of Kenneth MacKellar and the 'folk' renderings of the Corries. Kennedy Fraser does not merit a mention in the book.

Welsh is a political as well as a cultural cause and the Welsh lobby can even afford to be complacent with 500,000 speakers of the language and a constitutional position. A nascent but hesitant Scottish Gaelic lobby represents only about 80,000 Gaelic speakers and the country needs the political commitment of Plaid Cymru or Meic Stephens. Enormous interest was shown last year in the Gaelic broadcasts on television,
Gaelic and the BBC cautiously printed 4,000 copies of the accompanying booklet. These were sold out in two weeks and two re-prints sold between 11,000 and 12,000 copies. The BBC has recognised that there is a demand for Gaelic which has made itself felt in spite of the series being broadcast late at night; with inscrutable wisdom they decided to repeat the series at 11.25 ethnic time on Sunday morning.

A recent Parliamentary Bill proposed that Gaelic should be given a more secure status in the United Kingdom on the analogy of Welsh. The Bill foundered on the barren rocks of economies and political gerrymandering; the taxpayer would refuse to take on the expenses of bilingualism and politicians can still see Gaelic as a political threat. The Gaelic vision in English culture must be more potent than in Scottish culture.

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NOTES

3 Angus MacLeod (Ed), *The Songs of Duncan Ban MacIntyre* (Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, Edinburgh, 1952).
4 But see also Archibald Sinclair, *An t-Oranaiche* (Glasgow 1879).