Seanchaidh na Coille
The Memory-Keeper of the Forest

Anthology of Scottish-Gaelic Literature of Canada

Michael Newton, Editor

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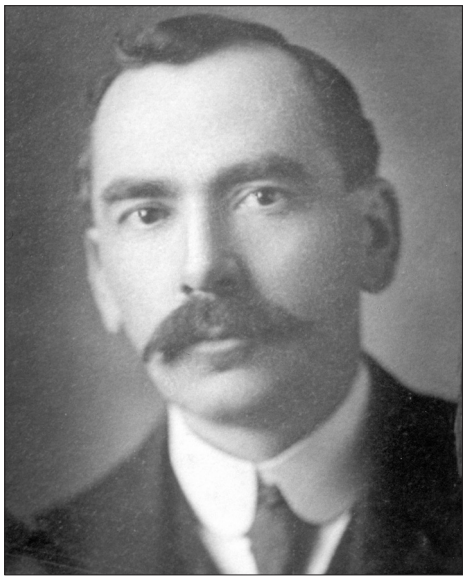

Do dh'Eòin G. MacFhionghain
Caraid nan Gàidheal Canadach

Portrait from the archives of the Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University.
79-1005-3985. ca.1910. Photographer Unknown.

Praise for Seanchaidh na Coille
The Memory-Keeper of The Forest

An t-Ollamh Roibeart Dunbar
Cathair Chànanan, Litreachais, Eachdraidh agus Àrsaidheachdan Ceilteach, Ceannard Roinn na Ceiltis agus Eòlas na h-Alba
Oilthigh Dhùn Èideann

'Se an cruinneachadh saoibhir seo de bhàrdachd agus rosg Gàidhlig à Canada na chruinneachadh as iomlaine dhen litreachas sin a bha againn a-riamh, agus bidh e na ghoireas sònraichte, gun choimeas fad bhliadhnaichean mòra san àm ri teachd. Tha an t-Oll. Newton air obair shuaicheanta a dhèanamh ann a bhith a' lorg agus a' mìneachadh gu gleusta an uiread de stuth taitneach, agus anns an dòigh sin a' sealltainn dhuinn cho iomadh-fhillte is a bha agus a tha beatha nan Gàidheal anns gach àite air feadh Chanada anns am faighear iad. Bidh na h-eadar-theangachaidhean ealanta aige air leth feumail do leughadairean gun Ghàidhlig. Bidh an leabhar barraichte seo cho feumail is a ghabhas do sgoilearan agus oileanaich, do luchd-rannsachaidh, agus do dhuine sam bith aig a bheil ùidh anns a' phàirt chudromaich seo ann an eachdraidh de dh' ioma-chultarachd agus ioma-chànanas Chanada, agus ann an cultar na Gàidhlig san fharsaingeachd.

Dr. Robert Dunbar
Chair of Celtic Languages, Literature, History and Antiquities,
Head of Celtic and Scottish Studies
University of Edinburgh

This extremely rich collection of Gaelic poetry and prose literature from Canada is the single most comprehensive collection of such material we have ever had, and will be an outstanding and unique resource for a long time to come. Dr. Newton has done a remarkable job in retrieving and expertly contextualizing a large amount of fascinating material, showing the rich variety and national extent of the Gaelic experience in Canada. His sensitive and skillful translations open up this material to an English-speaking readership. This outstanding book will be of inestimable value to students, researchers and anyone interested in an important strand in Canada's multicultural and multilingual identity and in Gaelic culture more generally.

Lodaidh MacFhionghain, Tagraiche dha na Gàidheil, Ceannard
Iomairtean na Gàidhlig is Bàrd

Tha an co-chruinneachadh seo a' toirt am follais ann am faclan is an cànan nan Gàidheal fhéin – aig a' robh tùs ann an Gàidhealtachd na h-Albann – an eachdraidh cho-fhillte, mì-bhreithnichte, dhoilleir fad linntean anns a' Cho-chomann Chanéideanach agus an làmh a bh'aca air Uachdaranachd Chanada. Tha e a' sealltainn do mhuinntir Chanada cho fada is farsuing 's a bha tuineachadh nan Gàidheal aig àm a' Cho-chaidreachais: na suidheachaidhean poileataigeach, sòisealta is eaconamach a mhùchaich cha mhór an cànan agus an dearbh-aithne chultarach; agus tha e a' sònrachadh na h-aon mhór-roinneadh 's an dùthaich 's a' là an diugh far a bheil Gàidheil agus a' Ghàidhlig agus a cultar a' leanaid agus a' fantainn mar choimhearsnachd bheò; is mar a 's urrainn dhan roinn seo a bhith 'na goireas do fheadhainn a tha airson ceangal ás ùr a dhèanadh ri'n dualchas Ghàidhealach ann an roinntean eile na dùthcha. 'S ann 's a' leabhar seo goireas eireachdail do dhuine sam bith a tha 'sgrìobhadh neo a' bruidhinn air, no a' cur an gnìomh, iomairtean a bhuineas dha na Gàidheil is an cànan is an cultar anns a' cho-theacsa Chanéideanach.

Lewis MacKinnon, Poet, Gaels' Advocate and Executive Director of Nova Scotia Office of Gaelic Affairs

This anthology brings to light in the words and language of the Gaels themselves – whose origins were the Highlands and Islands of Scotland – their long, complex, misunderstood, obscure history in Canadian Society and their role in the Canadian State. Newton demonstrates to Canadians how far and widespread the settlement of Gaels was at the time of Confederation: the political, social and economic circumstances that almost smothered their language and cultural identity. The only remaining jurisdiction in the country, Nova Scotia, is where Gaels and their language and culture persist in a vestigial and active communal sense, and can be an asset to those who want to reconnect with their Gaelic heritage in other regions of the country. For anyone who is writing on, speaking of or establishing initiatives pertaining to Gaels and their language and culture in the Canadian context, this book is an excellent resource.

Dr. Silke Stroh,
Assistant Professor of English, Postcolonial and Media Studies,
University of Muenster (Germany)

Presenting a wide range of Gaelic poetic and prose texts, along with English translations and information on biographical, historical, socio-cultural and literary contexts, this excellent anthology significantly enhances the accessibility of important primary sources. It also contains analytical commentary which, despite its necessary brevity, includes many thought-provoking observations, making this book an important intervention in contemporary criticism linking Gaelic Studies to wider comparative debates on North American multiculturalism, minority identities, international diaspora studies, colonialism and postcolonialism. While promising to become an important reference for scholars in literary and cultural studies—as well as for historians—this anthology is also of interest to the general reader, being very successful in explaining complex matters in a jargon-free, succinct and compelling manner. It not only contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Canadian colonial and postcolonial identities, but also has implications for contemporary debates about future cultural and educational policies.

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Acknowledgements

The Gaelic title *seanchaidh* has no exact equivalent in English. A seanchaidh is a professional custodian of seanchas: communal memory, history and experience, often in the form of literature, especially song-poetry. The title of this volume alludes to an attempt to restore this largely neglected storehouse of material to its rightful place in the historical annals and literary archives of Canada. The title is also an homage to the work of the Rev. Dr. Alasdair MacGill-Eain Sinclair, an indefatigable Gaelic scholar from Nova Scotia who produced a series of volumes of Gaelic literature around the turn of the 20th century, two of which included the word "coille" (forest). The image of the forest is a dominant one in the Gaelic literature of North America which refers to the continent with such kennings as "Dùthaich nan Craobh" (The Land of Trees) and "A' Choille Ghruamach" (The Gloomy Forest).

I have been aware of and engaging with the heritage of Scottish Gaels in Canada to some degree since the mid-1990s, when I was conducting research in Celtic Studies at the University of Edinburgh. The core of the texts in this collection began in earnest in 1999 when the late Kenneth McKenna of Glengarry, Ontario, bequeathed photocopies of newspaper cuttings from his area to me. I accumulated much more material and a heightened motivation for publishing it while teaching Celtic Studies at St. Francis Xavier University. The absence of any substantial body of primary texts in Gaelic about the immigrant experience, despite the prominence of the iconography of Highlandism in popular Canadian history, became quite apparent to me in the course of research and teaching.

My efforts have been aided by the help and cooperation of many individuals and institutions. I am especially grateful to the staff of the Angus L. Macdonald Library, St. Francis Xavier University, the Archives of Ontario, the National Library of Scotland, the library of the School of Scottish Studies and the Special Collections of the University of Edinburgh for enabling me access to rare and important materials as well as permission to print them. Permission to reprint items that have appeared in previous publications has also been graciously granted by *Comann Eachdraidh Tholastaidh bho Thuath* and

the *Stornoway Gazette*. A digital image of the frontispiece portrait of Gilleasbaig MacFhilip (in his book *Collected Verse: The Blind Bard of Megantic*, 1913) was kindly provided by the Rare Books and Special Collections of McGill University Library. Thanks to the Beaton Institute of Cape Breton University for permission to use the portrait of Eòin G. MacFhionghain, to Jocelyn Gillis of the Antigonish Heritage Museum for the portrait (presumed to be) of Iain Boid (John Boyd) and to Laurinda Matheson at the Angus L. Macdonald Library for scanning the image of Alasdair MacGill-Eain Sinclair.

Many individuals have been generous in sharing their knowledge and materials with me: Sister Dr. Margaret MacDonell volunteered historical references and much encouragement to me; the late Dr. Kenneth Nilsen provided me with his photocopies of *Cuairtear nan Coillte*; Margaret Bennett gave me a photocopy of the booklet of songs by Cailean MacÌomhair; Susan Cameron and Kathleen MacKenzie of Saint Francis Xavier University aided me in finding and accessing many rare sources; Professor Robert Dunbar of the University of Edinburgh shared his research on the Bard MacGill-Eain and Dr. Michael Linkletter his thesis on Alasdair MacGill-Eain Sinclair; David Anderson of Williamstown, Ontario, furnished notes about some Glengarry authors; Alexander MacLennan of Carleton University was able to track down information about several Cape Breton poets on my behalf.

I am grateful for comments, corrections and suggestions on drafts of chapters from James Ambuske, Matthew Dziennik, Steve Johnston, Stephanie Johnston, Sarah McCaslin, Lodaidh MacFhionghain (Lewis MacKinnon of Antigonish/Halifax), Iain MacFhionghain (Iain MacKinnon of Skye), Silke Stroh and Wilson McLeod. I am particularly indebted to Alexander MacLennan for his copious comments and suggestions. Friends who kindly provided help in several points of translation and cultural nuances include Michael Bauer, Robert Dunbar and Donald Meek.

Cape Breton University Press has been very supportive in the development of this volume and I am grateful for bringing it to fruition.

Thanks are due, finally, to my wife Stephanie and my daughter Róisín for their patience as I spent nights, weekends and holidays completing this extensive project.

M.N.

Foreword

Diana Gabaldon

What a privilege to be asked to introduce such a fascinating, elegant and invaluable book!

My own experience with Gàidhlig (Scottish Gaelic, the Irish form is "Gaeilge") began in 1988, when I began to write a novel for practice, and chose (on the basis of seeing a young man in a kilt on a "Dr. Who" re-run) to set it in the Scottish Highlands of the 18th century. A modicum of initial research revealed that the language of the Highlands at that time was almost exclusively Gaelic, and – conscientious writer that I was – I thought I must both make that fact clear in my novel, and somehow contrive to give an actual flavour of the language.

All I can say is that if you think it was easy to find a Scottish Gaelic/English dictionary in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1988 ... think again. The Internet, as we now know its illimitable quantities of information, contacts and sources, didn't exist. The local Caledonian Society, while very friendly, had no Gaelic speakers. I had never met a Gaelic speaker, native or otherwise, and was not infrequently informed that it was a dead or dying language – who cared?

I persevered and was eventually able to acquire a slender Gaelic/English dictionary from Schoenhof's Foreign Books, in Boston. Even they appeared somewhat bemused by my exotic request, but they did manage to find the book and ship it to me at fantastic expense (no Amazon Prime back then, either).

I used this book to cobble together bits of spoken Gaelic for *Outlander*, my first novel. Much to my surprise, this novel was not only published, but resulted in a three-book contract, at which point I said to my husband, "OK. I really must go and see the place." Scotland, that is. And on my list of Things to See and Do was #3: Find a better Gaelic dictionary. (#1 was "Look at Everything" and #2 was "Eat Haggis."[1])

I did find a much bigger and more comprehensive dictionary, and with that, made further forays into quasi-Gaelic while writing *Dragonfly in Amber*. That novel, too, was well received, and I began to get fan-mail (real letters; email didn't exist, either). Among these lovely letters was one from a gentleman named Iain MacKinnon Taylor. Mr. Taylor praised my books, saying how wonderful it was to

see Scottish history handled so well, and how much he enjoyed the story. He then coughed metaphorically and said delicately that he had just one observation: he had, he said, been born on the Isle of Harris, and was a native Gaelic speaker. And, "I think you must be getting your Gaelic from a dictionary."

It wasn't, he said, so much that the words I was using were wrong, as that I had no grammar, voice, or idiom with which to arrange them. Might he, perhaps, offer his assistance?

To which my response was a fervent, "Mr. Taylor, where have you been all my life?"

Iain – with the assistance of his twin brother Hamish and other family members still living on Harris – helped me with the Gaelic for the next three books. Health issues unfortunately stopped him from further involvement, but good fortune (and an internet friend named Cathy MacGregor – by this time, there was an internet, with email, no less) introduced me to the redoubtable Catherine-Ann MacPhee, native Gaelic speaker from Barra, and a well-known radio and TV presenter in the U.K. The two Cathys – and much more recently, the delightful Àdhamh Ó Broin (Gaelic tutor and consultant to the *Outlander* TV show) have made the Gaelic in my novels ever more plentiful and authentic – and given me the barest smattering of familiarity with that amazing language and its history.

Language is the first thing that defines a culture. Nothing else is more important to a people than a shared tongue. Even though language is an ever-living, ever-flexible thing, the fact that it binds human beings in an immortal chain, binding them together. And even though that chain may be stretched and twisted by time and distance, it endures.

One day my husband came back from a short motorcycle trip, and told me that while parked at one rest-stop, he'd been approached by two Spanish tourists, asking directions. He does speak Spanish, but isn't truly fluent, and was pleased when another man, a local monoglot Spanish-speaker,[2] overheard the tourists and asked if he could help. The conversation was going well, my husband said, but ran into a sudden snag. The man giving directions asked the men where they'd turned, off the main road and they replied that it was at a "semafora." A what? My husband and the local man exchanged baffled looks. "A semafora," the tourists repeated, looking anxious. "Describe it," my husband suggested, in Spanish. "What does a semafora look like?"

They did, and my husband and local man laughed in revelation. "Es un alto," the local man informed them. A stop sign.

Divergence in geography or time results in difference – but not in basic identity. Gaeilge and Gàidhlig have very obvious commonalities, though the Irish and Scottish branches of the language diverged long ago.

To track such divergences, to identify the ancient commonalities and to preserve the more recent past for the benefit of present and future, is the blessed job of a scholar and a lover. Someone so in love with a language and a culture that the largest themes are easily apparent and the smallest details treasured. Luckily for us and for the history of the Gaelic tongue and diaspora into the New World, Michael Newton is just such a one.

This book is as elegantly and passionately written as a novel, while providing enough detail to satisfy the most exacting academic sense of curiosity.

It modestly purports to be an anthology of Canadian Gaelic poetry – and certainly it's that. It's much more, though: a stunning description of a culture, both in situ and in transition, and an analysis of the enduring themes in Gàidhlig literature and poetry.

It's also remarkable for its discussion of matters literary, and the durability of the Celtic oral tradition, with its emphasis on the warrior as a common central figure. I found that most interesting myself, as I'd noticed exactly that emphasis in my historical research. The Scottish Highlands were a tribal culture; this is why emigrant Highlanders in America often had no trouble joining or dealing with Native American groups – they identified with both the group dynamics and traditions, the value of a warrior and with the strong oral culture. Stories and songs are paramount in such a culture, because these are the chief means of preserving not only history, but also language.

As I noted above, when I began my research some twenty-five years ago, I was routinely told that Scottish Gaelic was a dying tongue. In fact, Iain Taylor expressed just such a fear to me, saying that he was afraid it wouldn't last past his own generation in the Highlands.

Moved by his letter, I wrote back and said, "I tell you what, Iain; if the Gaelic language dies, it won't be because neither you nor I tried."

Language is the first thing that defines a culture. Sometimes, it's also the last. Many of the smaller Native American tribes have disappeared – because there is no longer anyone who knows their tongue.

A few years ago, I was invited to a book festival in Lithuania; a fascinating experience, the more so as Lithuanian has no perceptible common links to any of the few languages I have a passing familiarity with. I hastily learned "exit," "push," "pull," "toilet," and "ice machine" (the latter by accident), but was for the most part dependent on the kindness of multilingual strangers.

These Lithuanian strangers were very kind indeed. At one point, my hosts took me (with the translator of my books, the only person there who spoke fairly fluent English) to Vilnius University, an ancient and venerable establishment. There isn't much left in Lithuanian that is ancient and venerable any more, save the buildings. Lithuania was occupied for most of the last century, by waves of invaders: the Russians, the Germans, and then the Russians again. Each wave of plunderers receded with the valuables – and much of the tangible history – of the country.

The last wave of Russians tried to take the intangible, too. The invaders forbade Lithuanian to be spoken in public. Only Russian could be used.

But the Russians have been gone for nearly a quarter-century[3] and the Lithuanians have begun stubbornly salvaging their history. One small room at the university contains a small bronze monument, a slab set in the floor, called "The Grave of the Balts," which shows a supine woman in prehistoric costume and lists the contents of a traditional Baltic burial. The walls of the room are painted with figures illustrating one of the classic myths of Baltic history.

Above the monument is a window, made of small diamond-shaped panes. Some are stained glass and some are clear, and the design is intricate. Alone, I would never have seen what my host pointed out: on one of the small, clear panes of glass, someone had painstakingly written with a diamond, "They are trying to kill us. They can't...." In Lithuanian.

We owe a great debt to the stubborn faith of people like the person who wrote that – and people like Michael Newton. People who have kept faith with the past, the singers of songs, the record-keepers, who will not let love or language die. The seanchaidhs.

March 15, 2015
Scottsdale, Arizona
Diana Gabaldon