Reviews

Derick Thomson and the Gaelic Revival. **Petra Johana Poncarová. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023. Pp. 208. ISBN (hardback) 9781399501194.**

Derick Thomson and the 'Gaelic Revival' of the second half of the twentieth century are synonymous concepts. That Derick Thomson (1921–2012) existed, I can attest from personal experience, despite his efforts being superhuman; more on that anon. That the 'Gaelic Revival' existed, I am not quite so sure. As Petra Johana Poncarová is careful to point out, while Thomson spent these fifty years almost single-handedly building up national institutions and national esteem for Gaelic, the living language spent these fifty years slowly going down the drain. In 1951 there were 95,447 speakers, and in 2001 there were 58,652 – less than the present capacity of Murrayfield Stadium, though a bit more than Hampden Park. Apparently Derick wrote in 1976, with typical enthusiasm, that 'it is possible now to predict that the revival is only in its early stages, and will continue strongly for the remaining quarter of the century', and that there could be 'little doubt now that the figures of Gaelic speakers will by then have surged well over the 100,000 mark'. Oh dear. Can the sinking of the *Titanic* be called a 'revival' simply because a certain organisational genius got all available ships to steam in the right direction?

So far I have referred familiarly to 'Derick' and formally to 'Thomson'. From now on I will compromise by calling him DST, which was quite usual in his day. It is appropriate for a man whom I knew well, but whom I always addressed as *sibh*. Indeed if I may be personal for a paragraph, I first met him when I was still wearing my school uniform, and he was in his first year as Professor of Celtic in Glasgow University. To say that he was a formative influence is an understatement. At that point I was uncertain whether to pursue a degree in German or in Celtic, as my German and Gaelic teachers at school had been outstanding. I soon made up my mind. The teaching of German at the university proved to be poor. In contrast, the teaching of Celtic, under DST, Kenneth MacDonald, Donald Howells and (later) Donald John MacLeod, was inspiring. DST became a second father in my imagination, although he would have been horrified to know it, as he must have seen too little of his own six children as it was – in fact, one wonders if he ever slept. As with a parent's influence, I have gone through life unsure whether my beliefs and interests are truly my own or really his, and I have felt a sense of daring when deviating from them. If Cotrìona Mhór, the cleaner in his father's school, was the key to his museum (*iuchair mo mhuseum*), as he put it in a poem once, he himself is certainly mine.

DST possessed a curious gift. He had a quiet way of speaking, a whisper almost, but he was a big man, and such was his force of personality that any audience would fall silent to hear him. All eyes would be fixed on his face – he blinked constantly, so even when standing still, his countenance was in constant motion. One could almost hear the buzz of an agile brain behind those blinking eyes.

Derick Thomson and the Gaelic Revival is an excellent piece of work. In six chapters, it introduces us to the Gaelic language, to Scottish Nationalism, to DST's life and work, and to the institutions and events that provided the context for these, or were created by them. Chapter 1 consists mainly of an interesting biography of DST, including (in a footnote) this quote by himself: "My father and mother habitually spoke in Gaelic to each other, but frequently enough spoke English to each other also, without any sense of strain. They had decided to make English my first language, though Gaelic had been my elder brother's. I think this was a carefully worked-out policy, for we were in the midst of an almost totally Gaelic environment, and they reckoned Gaelic would come easily." This calculated linguistic policy of his childhood home and hearth speaks volumes about his later life.

But to continue. Chapter 2 provides background on the history of Gaelic and the Scottish independence movement, and summarises DST's opinions on these. It makes thoughtful comparisons with Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar and Hugh MacDiarmid, and explores DST's engagement with the languages of Ireland and Wales. Chapter 3 is a study of *Gairm*, the periodical which he founded (with

Finlay J. MacDonald) in 1952 and edited until 2002. Chapter 4 considers his scholarly output where it touches on Gaelic revival – meaning especially Ossian, Mac Mhaighstir Alastair, *An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry* and *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland*. Chapter 5 is a fascinating study of how the thread of Gaelic revival can be traced through his seven poetry collections, taking them one at a time; also through his short stories. And Chapter 6 summarises his legacy.

What then is DST's legacy? Poncarová quotes Donald Meek, who said of DST's vision: "It is not too much to say that that vision made Gaelic what it is today, with its numerous means of enlightened support, but it also went some way to making Scotland what it is today." He added that those engaged in Gaelic revitalisation efforts nowadays are 'by and large, doing no more than finessing the templates which Derick Thomson and his team created all those years ago'.

Another way to look at DST's legacy is to ask what the Gaelic world would look like today had there been no *Gairm*, no Gairm Publications, and none of DST's poetry. Also, would some other visionary have founded the Gaelic Books Council and provided the impetus that has led to Bord na Gàidhlig, BBC Alba, Gaelic place-names along our roads, and now-familiar signage like 'POILEAS', 'AMBAILEANS' and 'PÀRLAMAID NA H-ALBA'? I suspect that the answer is no, because Thomson was unique, and had made a series of decisions about his life which he stuck to through thick and thin. Unlike his father or Sorley MacLean, he decided not to live and work in a Gaelic-speaking area. He wanted to be close to the levers of power, and had the kind of ambition that is normal in politics and business. His ambition, however, was devoted not to achieving power or making money, but to reviving the Gaelic language. Poncarová says: 'SNP politicians Winnie Ewing and Billy Wolfe asked him to stand for the party as a candidate, but Thomson refused, believing he would make a more productive contribution to Scotland as an academic.' To put this another way, he believed passionately in making people's lives better, but also, rightly in my view, that the way to do that was to help them maintain or revive their use of the Gaelic language. In any case, SNP victories in those days were rare and ephemeral (despite being leader of the SNP, Billy Wolfe never won a seat, though he stood for one seven times). In negotiating for funds DST was tenacious, and usually successful; indeed, the Principal of Glasgow University described him to me once as 'difficult'. And he was difficult. Twice he had a co-editor on *Gairm*; twice they left.

I recall DST making a speech on some public occasion or other. He urged people in the islands who had a choice of garages to bring their car to the one where Gaelic was spoken. It sounded rather odd. Perhaps it was a metaphor.

In fact, Poncarová's 'Legacy' chapter is not so much about legacy as about aftermath. The word 'disappointment' is to the fore. Under the sub-heading 'Gaelic and Scottish nationalism', she fails to say how pleased he must have been about the SNP coming to power in 2007, but records his disappointment that Gaelic development has formed no part of its agenda. The results of the 2014 and 2016 referenda would have come as 'a severe blow' (her words), because he was a convinced European as well as a Nationalist. DST would also have been disappointed, she says, at the Government's failure in 2014 to produce 'a Gaelic version of the ballot paper' for the 2014 referendum. Too true. At the time, I pointed out in *The Scotsman* that all ballot-papers should be bilingual, while recognising the possibility of a backlash that could be detrimental to the independence movement, given the 'No' side's stranglehold on the media. I was particularly taken aback by the stance of the leader of the Liberal Democrats, Tavish Scott, which was that if Gaelic speakers wanted Gaelic on the ballot-paper they should fight for it – despite the fact that Scott himself had voted for the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act of 2005, which gave Gaelic and English 'parity of esteem'.

Another point here needs to be clarified and updated. Poncarová says that 'substantial steps, like establishing a dedicated ministerial position for Scotland's languages,' remain to be taken by government, and Kate Forbes is mentioned in a footnote. What does 'dedicated' mean? There has long been a minister for Gaelic, the most active having been Brian Wilson (Labour) in 1997–99, before responsibility for the language was devolved. But Gaelic ministers are always something else as well, and it has been remarked that the last one, SNP education secretary Jenny Gilruth, 'probably

didn't know she was Gaelic minister'. The latest one is Kate Forbes herself; she certainly knows that she is Gaelic minister, but she also happens to be Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for the Economy. How dedicated is dedicated?

Under 'Gaelic periodicals and media after *Gairm*', Poncarová points out that DST chose to close *Gairm* down rather than passing it on to another editor. She might have added that even when *Gath* was founded as its successor, he failed to pass on his 800-strong list of subscribers. But then, when over 80, difficult people can become even more difficult.

Under 'Scholarship, translations, organisational work' Poncarová remarks that no comparable figure has emerged. She muses that for structural reasons, 'the time of the polymath activists like Thomson seems to have passed'. It is certainly true that organised teamwork has taken the place of individual endeavour, but surely the creation of a set of stable organisations was precisely DST's aim – in a word, his legacy. It would be correct to say that all of the organisable enterprises to which Thomson devoted his life are now flourishing.

DST's legacy can equally be viewed in two other ways. One is this. For all his single-minded devotion to the Gaelic cause, the census figures kept tumbling. Everyone knows that no individual could have tried harder. What then is the point of trying to succeed where even DST had failed? That understanding is part of his legacy. He must have been conscious of it when he pulled down the shutters on *Gairm* so emphatically in 2002.

The other is this. As Poncarová makes clear, DST put great faith in national independence as an essential part of the mechanism for reviving Gaelic. Following independence, the theory goes, the national schools curriculum will be revised to make much more room for the language, every child in Scotland will gain an acquaintance with the basics of it at primary level, so in due course no one will be as ignorant of it as the average Scot is today; money will be found to establish a research institute devoted to the language, and a Gaelic cultural institute like the British Council; all in all, successive governments will see monolingualism as abhorrent, and will make every effort to realise Scotland's potential as a successful trilingual country on the European model (as different from England as possible, cynics would say). This is where the word 'disappointment' may be written in capital letters in DST's biography, because he died – as many of his loyal students will surely die – without seeing Scottish independence.

And this, too, is where Poncarová's book scores a bullseye. She begins with a highly relevant personal statement: "As a person brought up in the Czech Republic speaking Czech, my compulsory education featured a great deal of positive discussion of the Czech national revival, which occurred during the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century and connected efforts to revitalise Czech language and create a Czech culture with the endeavour to obtain political emancipation from the Habsburg Empire." The Czech experience becomes a thread that surfaces here and there in the book, most notably in discussing DST's translation of a biology textbook, which I know to have been one of the achievements of which he was most proud. Poncarová quotes the Czech writer Vladimír Macura on the 'strong journalistic and persuasive aspect' of the use of Czech as a language of science during the Czech national revival: "Elevation of Czech to the language of science was a proof of the ability of the Czech language to assume its place among the educated languages of Europe."

In 1954 the editors of *Gairm* complained that they had more readers in Manchester than in Harris. Poncarová ends, appropriately, by saying that it would have amused and gratified DST that *Derick Thomson and the Gaelic Revival* should have emerged from Central Europe, 'thus confirming the international reach and relevance of his work'. DST might have preferred Harris, but Central Europe is a very good second best. The book is well supported by a good bibliography, is well indexed, and is well worth reading.

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