

Gaelic Writing
from the Bible to the Stage:
The Role of the *Còmhradh*



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Foreword

The Scottish Gaelic Texts Society / Comann Litreachas Gàidhlig na h-Alba was founded in 1934 and is a charitable organisation with open membership by subscription. Volumes published by the Society can also be purchased by non-members. Professor William J Watson, Professor of Celtic at the University of Edinburgh, defined the purpose of the Scottish Gaelic Texts Society as being, 'to provide the publication of texts in the Scottish Gaelic language, accompanied by such introductions, English translations, glossaries and notes as may be deemed desirable.' This is still the Society's mission today.

The Òraid Chanaidh / Canna Lecture series was established in memory of Margaret Fay Shaw (1903–2004) and her husband John Lorne Campbell (1906–1996), known as 'Fear Chanaidh' ('Laird of Canna'), in recognition of both their outstanding contribution to Scottish Gaelic scholarship and their generous legacy to the Society.

Past Canna Lectures

2016 Donald E. Meek 'Dugald Buchanan (1716-68): The poet, the translator and the manuscript evidence' (published in 2019 and available for purchase from The Gaelic Books Council)

SGTS

Glasgow, March 2020

2017, the year in which this lecture was delivered, was a year of anniversaries for the Gaelic language, marking 450 years since the publication of the first book in Gaelic, John Carswell's 1567 translation of the *Book of Common Order*, *Foirm na nUrrnuidheadh*; and 250 years since the 1767 publication of the New Testament in Gaelic, both significant spiritual and literary landmarks for the language (Thomson 1970). 1767 also saw the publication of the spiritual verse of Dùghall Bochanan, who saw the New Testament through the press, and who was the subject of Professor Donald Meek's 2015 volume for the Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, *Laoidhean Spioradail Dhùghaill Bhochanan*, and of his inaugural Òraid Chanaidh / Canna Lecture in 2016 (Meek 2015; Meek 2019). The appearance in print of the Gaelic New Testament prepared the ground for the translation of the Old Testament, an endeavour which was brought to fruition in 1801. The sense of pride engendered by these publications is reflected in Alasdair Macdonald's 'Oran do'n Chomunn Rìghail Ghaedhlaich' (*Song to the Royal Highland Society*), very much a contemporary reaction as the song was published in 1802, within a year of the appearance of the Gaelic Old Testament (Stiubhard 1802, 2):¹

Tha ghaedhlic nis ga leugha,
'S gach ceum a ni mi 's duthaich
Tha 'm piobal [Bioball] air a thionda dhuin,
'N deigh mhineach' 's eidear-theangacha,
'N tiomna nuadh 's an sean-tiomnadh,
Air tighin gu cainnt, ur dùch';
Leis a' Chuideachd fhuair an turram,
'S dual doibh uile cliu.

¹ Macdonald, whose name appears as 'Alastir Mac Dhonuill', may have been a Perthshire poet since this song is the first one in the collection of songs by Robert Stewart of Moulin (Stiubhard 1802).

*Gaelic is now read
 Everywhere I go in the country
 The Bible has been translated for us
 Having been explained and interpreted
 The new testament and the old testament
 Are now in the language of our country
 Produced by the honoured Society²
 Which is due every praise.*

In addition to being landmarks, these publications are also reflective of an increasingly productive Gaelic publishing scene with secular verse, dictionaries and grammars beginning to appear in print from the middle decades of the eighteenth century. This was alongside the existing flow of spiritual translations, and this publishing activity would continue to gain pace in the course of the following century (Black 2009; Meek 2007).

It was not, however, until the early twentieth century that the first original and fully Gaelic play, and the first Gaelic novel, would be published: Calum MacAonghais's 'Iseabail no ri Linn do Sheanar' (*Isabel or In your Grandfather's Day*) serialised in 1901 in the journal, *Am Bàrd*, and Iain MacCormaic's *Dùn-Àluinn*, in 1912 (MacLeod 1969, 150–51; Kidd 2006).³ The growing body of nineteenth-century Gaelic prose allows us to trace the path which Gaelic literature took towards the emergence of drama and fiction as productive genres. My 2016 Scottish Gaelic Texts Society volume,

² 'Cuideachd' here is to be understood as 'Society' and refers to the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge which sponsored the translation of the Bible into Gaelic.

³ Gaelic had featured in the plays of Archibald Maclaren in the late eighteenth century (MacLeod 2014; Brown 2016). Katherine Whyte Grant's translation, *Uilleam Tell*, of Friedrich Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*, was first serialised in 1890–91 and subsequently published in volume format in 1893 (Innes 2016, 61–69). The definition here of the first novel is that of the first to appear in book format as opposed to serials which never made it to the format of a published novel, or, in the case of Angus Robertson's *An t-Ogha Mór*, was only partially serialised before its appearance as a full-length novel in 1913.

Còmhraidhean nan Cnoc: The Nineteenth-Century Gaelic Prose Dialogue, focuses on a crucial part of this route (Kidd 2016). The thirty-five texts in this volume are all *còmhraidhean*, conversations, or dialogues, selected from a corpus in excess of 300 which appeared in the course of the nineteenth century, for the most part in Scotland, but with a small number published in Canada and Tasmania. As a genre, it is fictional and, generally, topical with characters responding to, and discussing, contemporary events and issues. It was also a genre which was deployed by writers to support a range of agendas over the course of the century; and it is a genre which was ground-breaking in developing a new style and register in Gaelic writing. Importantly, it also had a performative aspect, which will be discussed in more detail later.

Central to the development of secular Gaelic prose literature in general, and to the *còmhradh* in particular, was the periodical press. Gaelic journals began to emerge from the third decade of the nineteenth century and Gaelic columns began to appear in a number of newspapers from the 1870s. I will consider this emerging Gaelic press before turning to the *còmhraidhean*, and to discussing how, in tandem, they heralded an innovative phase in Gaelic literary development.

The Rev. Donald MacLean, in his 1912 *The Literature of the Scottish Gael*, referred to the nineteenth century as witnessing ‘the dawn of the rich periodical literature’, and ‘the dawn of the golden age of Gaelic prose’ and to the periodicals as ‘our great mine of modern prose’, although he did not quarry this mine in any depth, nor indeed have many others since (MacLean 1912, 35, 57, 59). This relative neglect of the periodicals is, perhaps, understandable given the somewhat ephemeral nature of some of these publications, as editors and publishers wrestled with the challenge of making them financially viable. Figure 1, below, lists those nineteenth-century periodicals which were conducted either entirely in Gaelic or carried at least as much Gaelic as English. There are no known extant copies of the first periodical, *An Rosroine (The Rose of the Field)*, although its existence is attested by John Reid in his 1832 *Bibliotheca Scoto-Celtica* (Reid 1832, 146–

47). Nor do there seem to be any surviving copies of the sole Highland-published periodical – *Caraid nan Gael* (*Friend of the Gaels*) published in 1853 – of which only one issue is reported to have appeared (Noble 1902, 191). This list excludes those

Publications	Place of Publication	Run
<i>An Rosroine</i>	Glasgow	1803
<i>An Teachdaire Gae'lach</i>	Glasgow	1829–31
<i>An Teachdaire Ur Gaidhealach</i>	Glasgow	1835–36
<i>Cuairtear nan Gleann</i>	Glasgow	1840–43
<i>Cuairtear nan Coillte</i>	Kingston, Ontario	1840–42
<i>Teachdaire nan Gaidheal</i>	Glasgow	1844–45
<i>Caraid nan Gael</i>	Glasgow	1844
<i>A' Bheithir Bheuma</i>	Glasgow	1845
<i>An Fhianuis</i>	Glasgow	1845–50
<i>Fear-Tathaich nam Beann</i>	Glasgow & Edinburgh	1848–50
<i>An Cuairtear Og Gaidhealach</i>	Antigonish, Nova Scotia	1851
<i>Caraid nan Gael</i>	Inverness	1853
<i>An Teachdaire Gaidhealach</i>	Hobart, Tasmania	1857
<i>An Gaidheal</i>	Toronto, Ontario, initially followed by Glasgow and then Edinburgh	1871–77
<i>Bratach na Fìrinn</i>	Glasgow	1873–74
<i>MacTalla</i>	Sydney, Nova Scotia	1892–1904

Figure 1: Nineteenth-century Gaelic periodicals

publications which amounted to series of religious tracts, and it also does not include publications such as the Inverness-based

Celtic Magazine which, while publishing about Gaelic literature and culture, actually published very little in the language. As far as newspapers are concerned, Gaelic columns started to become a feature of some Highland publications from the 1870s, most notably, the *Oban Times*, the *Ross-shire Journal* and three Inverness papers, the *Highlander*, the *Northern Chronicle* and the *Scottish Highlander* as well as some in Canada, such as the *Toronto Daily Mail* (Kidd 2020, 353–54).

The early journals were established to respond to the lack of suitable reading material for an increasingly literate Gaelic-speaking population, with the longer-term aim of this leading to reading in English (Kidd 2013, 179–80). Literacy in Gaelic had increased as a result of the work of the Edinburgh Society for the Support of Gaelic Schools from 1811 and the General Assembly's schools from 1825, with the emphasis of both being on Bible-based Gaelic literacy, further underlining the importance of the landmark publications of 1767 and 1801. The editor of the first sustained attempt at a Gaelic journal was the Rev. Norman MacLeod, whose sobriquet, 'Caraid nan Gaidheal' (*Friend of the Gaels*), recognises his roles as minister, educator, charitable fundraiser, writer and editor. MacLeod's first editorial in *An Teachdaire Gae'lach* (*The Gaelic Messenger*) draws attention to the translation and circulation of the Gaelic Bible in the Highlands: 'Anns a' bhothan is isle tha 'n leabhar naomh r'a fhaotainn' (*the holy book is to be found in the humblest of huts*) (TG 1, May 1829, 2). These early periodicals were primarily concerned with the educational, moral and spiritual welfare of Gaels and this is reflected in the range of sermons and improving subject-matter which they published, some of it translated from English, but much of it original prose and poetry. Contemporary reports suggest that the print-run of the early issues was in the region of 4,000 copies (IC 23 Dec. 1829).

These early issues of the *Teachdaire* were substantially made up of MacLeod's own writing, as can be seen in the copy of the collected first year of the journal which MacLeod sent to George Husband Baird, Principal of Edinburgh University and a key supporter of the periodical, with MacLeod marking his own, often

anonymous, contributions for Baird.⁴ The number of contributors gradually grew, albeit with pen-names often masking their identity. Members of the clergy featured very prominently initially, and continued to be among the regular contributors to the *Teachdaire* and later journals. These included two members of Norman MacLeod's own family, his brother John, minister of Morvern, and his son-in-law, the Rev. Archibald Clerk, later editor of *Fear-Tathaich nam Beann* (*The Mountain Visitor*). Others included: Lachlan MacLean a Glasgow merchant originally from the Isle of Coll, who would establish his own *Teachdaire Ur Gaidhealach* (*New Gaelic Messenger*) in 1835; Lochaber schoolmaster and poet John Munro; and Argyll poet and later emigrant to Canada, Evan MacColl. The identity of some of the authors emerges in fleeting references in the nineteenth-century press as, for example, when the *Forres, Elgin and Nairn Gazette* recorded the death in 1852 of Donald Gordon, a post-runner between Forres and Grantown, who 'was a regular contributor to the Gaelic Messenger, and the author of a variety of meritorious productions, both in prose and verse' (*FENG*, 25 Feb. 1852). It has not, however, been possible to identify with any certainty which of the texts in the *Teachdaire* may have been contributed by Gordon.⁵

⁴ This copy has been digitised by the National Library of Scotland, <https://digital.nls.uk/early-gaelic-book-collections/archive/82153814> (accessed 18 October 2019).

⁵ It may have been Gordon to whom Norman MacLeod was referring in 1830 in his remarks to contributors which appear at the end of many issues: 'Fhuair sinn an Dàn a chuir D. G. d'ar n-ionnsuidh' (*We got the poem which D. G. sent us*) (*TG* 16, Aug. 1830, 96). It may be that 'A mhaighdinn àillidh 's eòl do'n bhàrd' attributed to D. C., Creaguanach in the following issue should in fact read D. G., although the location would, perhaps, suggest not (*TG* 17, Sept. 1830, 117). A contribution from 'F.' [Fionn?, Henry Whyte] to the *Oban Times* in 1887 mentions Gordon as a contributor to *Cuairtear nan Gleann*, with no mention of the *Teachdaire*, and also notes that 'he had been long occupied with a work of the "Bards of Strathspey" and when finished, the manuscripts were transmitted to Glasgow, but the firm entrusted with the work failed and in the confusion the manuscripts were lost. This was a heavy blow and the author's health failing made it impossible for him to repair the loss' (*OT* 9 July 1887).

From the outset Macleod was very conscious of the audience for *An Teachdaire Gae'lach* being Highland, Lowland, national and international in nature, as a result of migration and emigration which was very far from over when he established the journal:

Dealaidhte mar tha Gaedheil o chéile le monaidhean farsuing, no le caoiltibh leathann, cuid diubh ag àiteachadh tir-mòr na dùthcha, cuid diubh a mach air eileineabh a chuain, mòran's na bailtean margaidh, agus air feadh mhachraichean na'n Gall, [...] fo ghréin loisgich nan Innsean, no fo dhubhar choiltean fásail America, gidheadh thainig (nar barailne) an t-àm, anns am feud iad comhnaltra taitneach a chumail ri chéile ann an cainnt an dùthcha fèin. Thainig, ar leinn, an t-àm, anns am feudar gach gne fhiosracha feumail a bha chuige so glaiste o Ghadheil ann an leabhraichibh beurla, a chraobhsgaoileadh air feadh gach gleann is tioraile, agus gach Eilean is uaigniche' (TG 1, May 1829, 2).

(Separated as the Gaels are from one another by extensive moors or by broad straits, some of them living on the mainland, some out on the islands of the ocean, many in the market towns and throughout the Lowlands [...] under the burning sun of the Indies or under the darkness of the desolate American forests, nevertheless the time has come (in our opinion), in which they can communicate with one another in the language of their own country. We believe the time has come in which all the useful information which was until now locked away from the Gaels in English books can be disseminated through every landlocked glen and each remote island.)

MacLeod's positioning of his new Gaelic periodical as a literary nexus connecting Gaelic communities throughout Scotland and beyond was prescient with the emerging Gaelic periodical press, led by his *Teachdaire Gae'lach*, becoming one of the most salient features of the emigrant literary landscape. Within a little over ten years of *An Teachdaire Gae'lach*'s appearance we see growing

numbers of writers contributing to the Scottish periodicals from abroad, an increasing readership overseas thanks to an emerging international distribution network and, most striking of all, Gaelic periodicals being established in Kingston (Ontario), and later in Tasmania, Toronto and Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. The periodical press was, therefore, very much a product of the Highland diaspora with emigrant Gaelic communities proving to be fertile ground for these efforts. The list in Figure 1 does not include plans for periodicals which, as far as I can establish, never came to fruition: intentions among Glasgow Highlanders in 1839 to establish *An Seanachaidh Gaelach* (*The Highland Storyteller*) along the same lines as *Chambers Edinburgh Journal*; a projected Gaelic newspaper in Sydney, Cape Breton in 1842; and a proposal in 1854 by the Melbourne *Banner* to publish a monthly journal *Am Fìor Ghaidheal* (*The True Gael*) (IC 27 Nov. 1839; *CnanC* 17 Jan. 1842; *Banner* 20 June 1854: 13).

Not only did MacLeod's two periodicals set a pattern for naming journals, with a fondness for *Teachdaire* and *Cuairtear* continuing into the twentieth-century, but they provided a valuable source of material for future editors with texts republished, frequently unacknowledged, throughout the century. The journey of one particular text typifies this new international literary network. 'Am Ministear Làidir', about the Rev. James Robertson of Lochbroom who travelled to London in 1746 to petition on behalf of Jacobite prisoners, first appeared in the Glasgow publication, *Cuairtear nan Gleann*, in 1841, written by 'Eilthreach' (*An Emigrant*), living in Pictou, Nova Scotia. The same, unchanged text next appeared in the Tasmanian *Teachdaire Gaidhealach* in 1857 with no acknowledgement of the original author or source, highlighting the international travels of one Gaelic text from Canada to Glasgow and finally Tasmania (*CnanG* Nov. 1841, 246–49; *TGHob* Sept. 1857, 6–7).

Similarly, we can track the journey of one of the periodical editors, John Cameron, who edited the Tasmanian *Teachdaire*. Cameron's first connection with the Gaelic periodical press seems to date to 1842 where, as postmaster at Bonawe, Argyll, he is listed

as one of the agents for *Cuairtear nan Gleann* and he continued to fulfil this role until the periodical's demise in June 1843. There is no evidence that he contributed to the journal, but given the frequent anonymity of writers, we cannot be certain of this. The next appearance of Cameron is in court in Inverary in 1847, charged with a number of crimes, including fraud and forgery, crimes of which he was found guilty and sentenced to fourteen years transportation. Transportation records show him arriving in Hobart in Tasmania at the end of November 1850, and receiving a conditional pardon three years later. Working in the office of Hobart's *Daily Advertiser* seems to have led to him becoming editor, and most likely founder, of the Tasmanian *Teachdaire Gaidhealach* of which ten issues appeared in 1857 (Kidd 2017, 7).

In the southern hemisphere, the Gaelic periodical continued to serve as MacLeod had originally envisaged, and as Cameron put it as a 'slabhraidh leis am faod ar luchd-dùthcha an seo a's ann an Albainn, a bhi an dlu cheangal inntinneil ri cheile ann an caidreamh taitneach agus feumail' (*a chain by which our countrymen here and in Scotland may be intellectually linked in pleasant and useful discourse*). Underpinning this was a sense of an inherited periodical tradition, looking back to the Glasgow publications as models and positioning itself as a successor to these:

Am bheil cuimhne agaibh air an t-sean *Theachdaire* agus air *Cuairtear nan Gleann* nach mairionn? 'S cinnteach leinn gu bheil, b'aineamh fardach anns nach faicte iad. 'S iomadh oidhche fhada Gheamhraidh a chuir sinn tharuinn nar suidhe aig taobh an teine mhoir mhoine, far am biodh an croilein solasach mun cuairt, an t-og 's an liath as fiathghair air gach gnais, ag eisdeachd gu deothasach ri sgeulachdan an *Teachdaire* ann an cainnt bhlasda bhrioghmhor nam beann. 'Nuair a bha a leithid seo de mheas air an *Teachdaire* anns a Ghaeltachd 's an am a dh'fhalbh, shaoileamaid gu'm bu choir am moran tuilleadh a bhi air a nis ann an duthaich chein Astrailia (*TGHob* Feb. 1857, 1).

(Do you remember the old Teachdaire and the late Cuairtear nan Gleann? We are sure you do, there was scarcely a house in which they weren't to be seen. Many was the long winter night we spent sitting by the side of the big peat fire, where the cheerful gathering would be, young and old, a smile on every face, listening eagerly to the Teachdaire's tales in the eloquent, meaningful language of the mountains. When the Teachdaire was held in such esteem in the Highlands in the past, we would expect that it would be even more so now in the distant land of Australia)

This last line speaks to a need to reinforce a sense of identity among the emigrant Antipodean community, or at least an expectation that this need existed, and that the periodical represented a way of doing this. Subsequent publications, such as Angus Nicholson's *An Gaidheal*, which was initially published in Toronto in 1871, before moving to Glasgow when its editor was appointed as an emigration agent for Canada, are similarly characterised by cultural ambitions with the journal seen as providing proof of the language's relevance in the modern world. The acceptance of these periodicals among Gaelic speakers, and the esteem in which they were held, is reflected in the frequency with which they were the subjects of poetic eulogy which praised them as cultural and literary patrons (Dunbar 2019, 126ff; Kidd 2008, 293–96).

Having provided an overview of the publication context in which these *còmhraidhean* appeared, this next section considers the dialogues themselves, all of which is considered in more detail in *Còmhraidhean nan Cnoc* (Kidd 2016). These fictitious dialogues are between stereotypical Highland characters such as Fionnlagh Piobaire (*Finlay the Piper*), Lachlann nan Ceistean (*Lachlan the Catechist*), Eòghann Brocair (*Ewan the Fox-Hunter*) and am Ministear (*the Minister*). These early *còmhraidhean* were experimental and ground-breaking in both subject-matter and style. They engaged with contemporary issues and events in a way that no other Gaelic prose genre did, in a style which broke from a

formal Bible-influenced register, to one which looked to everyday speech for its model, albeit remaining at a remove from this. It may, in fact, have been this departure from existing written norms which irked some early critics of MacLeod's *Teachdaire*. An article which appeared in the *Scotsman*, seven months after the *Teachdaire*'s first issue, noted that:

two clergymen of the highest repute as Gaelic scholars condemn the Messenger *in toto* for the badness of its language, a point on which we cannot ourselves give an opinion. One of these gentlemen writes to us thus:— There is a standard of the Gaelic language, namely, that in which the revised translation of the Scriptures is written, a standard with which the people are made familiar by means of Gaelic Schools, and which in the 'Messenger' is totally neglected or seems to be altogether unknown to its conductors (*IC* 23 Dec. 1829).

Although there is no reference here to any particular texts, rather it seemed to have been the entire journal which offended, it may have been the *còmhradh*, the periodical's most obvious move away from literary, high-register, Bible-influenced norms, which animated these un-named detractors. It certainly hints at some of the underlying tensions caused by the new directions which Gaelic writing and publishing was taking.

The title of the early dialogues, 'Còmhradh nan Cnoc' (*Dialogue of the Hills*) clearly rooted these texts conceptually in a rural Highland setting rather than the industrialised urban one in which many of them were actually physically written and published. As a genre they are much taken up with change and responding to it; in the earlier texts, embracing, and encouraging readers to embrace change of various sorts; and later in the century, often engaging more critically with change or, indeed, advocating for change, particularly in the context of land rights and of education. In the very first *còmhradh* to appear in *An Teachdaire Gae'lach* and penned by Norman MacLeod, the characters Lachlann nan Ceistean and Eòghann Brocair, the

Catechist and the Foxhunter, embody the spiritual and secular, the literary and oral, the old and new, in what is essentially a prospectus for the new periodical; Lachlann enthusing about the periodical with its new content, Eòghann more than a little sceptical of this unknown Glasgow publication, but won round in the end, and thus establishing a model of discussion for many of the *còmhraidhean* which would follow, with a voice of authority conveying the writer's message (*TG* 1, May 1829, 3–7).

One of the dominant themes of nineteenth-century Gaelic song and poetry is that of *caochladh* (*change / decay*) in the face of immense and rapid social change, with much verse infused with a nostalgic view of a pre-clearance idyll (Meek 2003, 33). *Caochladh* and the nostalgic impulse in prose writing remains to be studied and the *còmhraidhean* present a good starting point given their frequent focus on social change, albeit often countered by the voice of acceptance and progress. Where poetry tends to express nostalgia through descriptions of once-inhabited, and now desolate, Highland landscapes, MacLeod's early dialogues cast a nostalgic eye over changing social relationships such as the lack of patronage for poets and musicians; the effect of improved transportation between Highlands and Lowlands; and the change in life-style for many Gaels from a rural way-of-life to an urban one. While these feature in verse too, they enjoy particular prominence in the *còmhraidhean*. The authority figures tend to be forward-looking and, for the most part, welcome change, whereas the less educated characters, in terms of formal education that is, look to the past. In the third *còmhradh* by MacLeod we find Fionnlagh Piobaire – his mere name marking him out as a representative of the traditional rather than the modern – lamenting the way in which books are replacing songs and tales:

Cha chluinnear sgeulachd no duanag. Cha teic na bha dhe seo nar measg roimhe seo, ach chuir an *Teachdaire Gae'lach* cinn daoine gu tur air aimhreidh. Tubaist air fhèin agus air a theachdaireachd, mhill e mo cheàird. Cha chuirear nas fhaide fios air Fionnlagh Piobaire, no air Calum Fìdhlear, no air

Donnchadh nan Aoirean, no Bodach nan Dàn, an duine truagh; chan fhaicear dannsa, 's cha chluinnear òran; air mo shon fhìn, faodaidh mi balg-sèididh a dhèanamh den phìob. (Kidd 2016, 21, 338)

(Stories and wee songs aren't to be heard. We used to have no shortage of them among us before, but the Teachdaire Gae'lach has set folk's heads completely wrong. May an accident befall him and his message, he damaged my craft. Finlay the Piper, Calum the Fiddler, Duncan the Satirist, and the old Songster, the poor man, are no longer in demand; dancing is no longer seen nor a song heard; as for me, I might as well make a bellows out of the pipes.)

And in another *còmhradh* Fionnlagh insists that he will not teach his son to play the bagpipes since 'tha là na pìobaireachd seachad' (*the day of piping has gone*) (TG Sept. 1830, 112).

In their engagement with change some of the *còmhraidhean* can be quite humorous before the dialogue segues into the writer's more serious commentary. A month after the 1840 opening of the Glasgow, Paisley, Kilmarnock & Ayr Railway, Eachann Tirisdeach (*Hector from Tiree*) describes his first experience of travel by steam train, a fearful experience – although amusing for the reader – which leaves him grateful to be alive. The discussion then turns to the changes which improved transport, in the form of the steamship in particular, is having upon the Highlands. The characters discuss 'na cleachdainnean ùra Gallta sin a' tighinn oirnn' (*those new Lowland ways coming upon us*) and how rural areas are deprived of their produce which is sent to fatten Glasgow, further explained in the text with the proverb 'Calum beag a chur a dhìth chum Murchadh mòr a reamhrachadh' (*starving little Calum to fatten Big Murdo*) (Kidd 2016, 348–49).

While some *còmhraidhean* respond to specific contemporary events, others speak to more general trends, such as the first one published in *Cuairtear nan Gleann* in 1840, again written by its editor Norman MacLeod. Para Mòr tells Fionnlagh Pìobaire of his plans to emigrate, in the first *còmhradh* to be published after

the Highland potato famine of the late 1830s, (no Gaelic periodical having been published at the time of the famine itself). Para is intended to serve as an example to readers in his complete acceptance, albeit with heavy heart, of his fate, and specifically avoiding any criticism of landlords or government (Kidd 2016, 133–38). This is very much typical of the *còmhradh* in the first half of the century, encouraging readers to accept their circumstances, and indeed to prepare them for new experiences outwith the Highlands. Those from later in the century, particularly those which appeared in John Murdoch's radical *Highlander* newspaper, often challenged the status quo, as for example an anonymous dialogue published in 1876 between Domhnall Donn (*Brown-haired Donald*) and Eachann Ruadh (*Red-haired Hector*) which specifically criticises estate management on the Skibo estate where the landlord, Evan Sutherland-Walker, had raised rents, evicted tenants and changed leases (Kidd 2016, 175–78). An 1881 dialogue between Cù Chulainn and Calum Croitear (*Crofter Calum*) in the same newspaper resurrects the warrior-hero, Cù Chulainn, to encourage the Highland crofter to look to the example of the Irish in their struggle for improved land rights (Kidd 2016, 179–82).

The contemporary linguistic landscape features regularly in the second half of the century. In an anonymous *còmhradh* from the *Highlander* in 1876, Seumas recounts the pidgin Gaelic he had heard in Glasgow:

Bha dùil agam *calligeadh* oirbh an-dè, ach cha robh cuimhne agam air an *number*, no air ainm na *landlady*. 'S ann a bheir sibh dhomh an *address* fhathast 's *calligidh* mi oirbh feasgar air choreigin, 's thèid sinn a ghabhail *walk* don *West End Park*. *Goodbye* an-dràsta, oir tha agam ri dhol chun a' *railway station* an coinneamh *friend* dhomh a tha tighinn à *Edinburgh* air *quarter to seven o' clock* train. On gheall mi dhol ga h-*attendadh* gu *charge* a ghabhail den *luggage* aice, chan eil math dhomh a *deceivigeadh*! (Kidd 2016, 90)

(I had intended to call on you yesterday, but I couldn't remember the number or the name of the landlady. You can still give me the address and I'll call on you one evening or other and we'll take a walk to the West End Park. Goodbye for now because I've to go to the railway station to meet a friend of mine who is coming from Edinburgh on the quarter to seven train. Since I promised to go and attend to her to take charge of her luggage, I can't deceive her).

Another aspect of nineteenth-century language use which found itself represented in *còmhraidhean* by writers was the language barrier which often existed between authority figures and the lower classes. In the bilingual dialogue by the, as yet unidentified, 'Hebridean', 'Comhradh eadar an t-Uachdaran, na Croitearan (Alasdair Donn & Dòmhnall Bàn), agus am Bàillidh' (*A Dialogue between the Landlord, the Crofters and the Factor*), an explanation is added that, because the landlord does not speak Gaelic, he needs a translator (*H* 2 Feb. 1881).

The *còmhraidhean* written in Canada and Australia are very similar in format and subject-matter to the Scottish ones and reflect aspects of the emigrant experience while retaining the moralising side which characterised many of the earlier texts. In the Nova Scotian *Cuairtear*, 'Comhradh na Ceardaich. An Gobhainn, an Tuathanach, agus a' Marsanda' (*Dialogue in the Smithy. The Smith, the Farmer and the Merchant*) involves a discussion of the Farmer's debts to the Smith with the Merchant warning about debtors who end up in prison, before moving to discussion of the jobs which will be created by the building of a new railroad (*COG* April 1851, 66–69). In the Tasmanian *Teachdaire*, the characters in the first *còmhradh*, Iain Bàn (*Fair-haired Iain*) and Calum Tàillear (*Calum the Tailor*), talk enthusiastically about the productivity of the land in Australia, but also warn against the perils of trusting strangers while carrying large sums of money, using Iain's unfortunate experience of being robbed of his earnings as a lesson for others (*TGHob* Feb. 1857, 6–7).

While the *còmhraidhean* are for the most part fictional, there are examples from the 1870s and 1880s which are very much personal and are directed at specific individuals. The conservative Inverness *Northern Chronicle*, in particular, published *còmhraidhean* which attacked individuals such as Irish land-campaigner, Michael Davitt. In one, published in 1882 shortly after he had delivered a lecture in Inverness, a character refers to him as ‘duine calldach, cunnartach’ (*a dangerous, harmful man*) (Kidd 2016, 183–90). Another *còmhradh* resulted in the threat of a law suit against the same newspaper. Published after the announcement of the names of the men who had been selected as commissioners to sit on what has become known as the Napier Commission in 1883, it mocked Inverness businessman and land activist, Alexander Mackenzie who had not been chosen, but whom a character claimed had anticipated being selected as a commissioner. The writer went so far as to suggest, through one character, that Mackenzie’s conduct in helping communities to prepare their evidence in advance of the arrival of the Commission was underhand and harmful. Mackenzie threatened legal action for libel and the *Northern Chronicle* immediately published an apology (NC 30 May 1883; Kidd 2016, 50–51).

As the only form of published Gaelic prose to engage in such a breadth of social commentary over the course of the century, these *còmhraidhean* provide a diverse and fascinating range of perspectives, while also demonstrating the development of style and register, as the later writers moved more towards speech-based prose and further away from the Biblical model which had shaped the earliest stages of the genre. The *còmhradh*’s significance is not, however, limited to its content. As a genre which bridged the literary and the oral, the final section of this lecture considers the uses to which these published texts were put in a public arena.

The connection between the *còmhraidhean* and the stage was discussed briefly in *Còmhraidhean nan Cnoc* with some observations made on the *còmhradh* as a step towards the development of Gaelic drama (Kidd 2016, 26–27, 61–62). Since the volume was published, I have come across accounts in the

contemporary English-language press which provide more definitive evidence for some of these dialogues having not simply been read out, but performed, in the later decades of the nineteenth century. As noted earlier, the first completely Gaelic non-translated play appeared in 1901. The earliest recorded performance of a Gaelic play was in Edinburgh three years later. This was not, in fact, the performance of an original Gaelic play, but of a translation into Scottish Gaelic by Kenneth MacLeod of Douglas Hyde's 1901 'Casadh an tSúgáin' (*The Twisting of the Rope*), which was staged in Edinburgh in 1904 at the Mòd held by the Celtic Union (Scott 2013, 126; *EEN* 13 May 1904).

The earliest evidence for a dialogue featuring in a programme of entertainment dates to 1833 and a dinner held by Glasgow University's Ossianic Society in honour of Norman MacLeod, entertainment which clearly went beyond a simple reading with both costume and prop employed, as the Society's minutes describe:

Chaidh comhradh bho a' Teachdaire Ghae'dhealach (sic) a thabhairt seachad le Mr MacLaurinn o' Chanada agus Fhionnla Piopaire ann an deise Ghaidhealach agus a Phìop fuidh achlais agus le bean Fhionnla Mr MacDhughail. Thog so seachad moran toil-inntinn – cha robh aon nach sruthadh dheur agus ruthadh na aodain g'aireachduin (sic). Cha d'thug Shakespeare e fhein riamh tuille toil-inntinn na thug an comhradh so.

(A còmhradh from *An Teachdaire Gae'lach* was delivered by Mr McLaren from Canada as Fionnlagh Pìobaire in Highland dress and his pipe under his arm and with Mr MacDougall as Fionnlagh's wife. This caused much merriment – there was not one whose eyes were not streaming and whose cheeks were not red with laughter. Shakespeare himself never gave more pleasure than this còmhradh did.) (Kidd 2016, 27).

The humour occasioned by the performance is a common feature of accounts of *còmhraidhean* in entertainment programmes in both Highlands and Lowlands.

MacLeod seems to have anticipated that the journals would be read aloud and in fact that is exactly what we see depicted in the cover image of the *Teachdaire* in Figure 2, below, with both reader and listener represented:



Figure 2. Image from the cover of *An Teachdaire Gae'lach*

Reproduced with the kind permission of Professor Donald E. Meek

The oral dissemination of the content is noted in the contemporary press with a correspondent to the *Scotsman* reporting that the *Teachdaire*:

was found in the houses of the tenants, the shepherds, and the labourers [...] The copies he saw were passed from hand to hand till they would no longer stick together, and their contents were retailed (*sic*) over many a mouldering peat fire, to those who could not read, or had not seen them (*Scotsman* 21 Oct. 1829).

Where the dialogues in nineteenth-century entertainment programmes can be identified, which they cannot always be, these

are consistently *còmhraidhean* penned by Norman MacLeod between 1829 and 1850 and which were published in *An Teachdaire Gae'lach*, *Cuairtear nan Gleann* and *Fear-Tathaich nam Beann*. These texts were given a new lease of life when a selection of MacLeod's writings was edited by his son-in-law and published in 1867, some five years after MacLeod's death, under the eponymous title *Caraid nan Gaidheal*. His *còmhraidhean* were, thus, readily available and featured prominently in formal Gaelic entertainment culture in the later decades of the century, as for instance in 1869:

At Ardrishaig a series of penny readings in Gaelic has commenced – the first in Argyllshire that has provided a programme exclusively in Gaelic [...] The readings were altogether from the pen of the late Dr Macleod, of St Columba Church, Glasgow, and consisted of Mr McIsaac's rendering of 'Paidric More' and Donail Piobaire'; Dugald McCorquodale's 'Friday [*recte* Fionnlagh] the Piper's Letter to his Wife', from 'Teachdaire Gaidhealach' ... (IC 15 April 1869).

Such readings were not restricted to audiences in the Highlands as we see, for instance, when the Greenock Independent Order of Good Templars, *Tir nam Beann*, held a social gathering in 1872 with the entertainment including readings from the *Teachdaire* (OT 11 May 1872). Of all the periodical texts mentioned in these reports of formal gatherings, it is the dialogues which are mentioned with most frequency. At the regular meetings of the Mutual Improvement Society which met in Kingussie 'the proceedings were always opened by a Gaelic reading – generally a dialogue from the "Teachdaire Gaidhealach"' (H 20/12/1873). The dialogues seem to be one of the more light-hearted parts of most of the entertainment programmes. At the annual *soirée* of the Fort William Free Templars in 1874 we read that 'a special feature in the evening's proceedings was a Gaelic dialogue "Am Brocair, Fionnlaidh Piobaire agus Mairi", which was exceedingly well done by Brothers Watson (Am Brocair), Macdougall (Fionnlaidh) and Sister C. Warden (Mairi). The dialogue caused great amusement'

(*IC* 2 April 1874). Similarly, at a penny reading – a cheap form of entertainment normally including readings and song – at Achnacarry, ‘a Gaelic dialogue was read by Messrs Kennedy and Burrell, evoking considerable laughter’ (*IC* 11 March 1882).

The fact that the *còmhradh* were often performed, rather than simply read to an audience, begins to emerge in later nineteenth-century press reports. In 1875, the *Highlander* reported on Comunn Gaidhealach Ghlaschu’s concert, noting that:

a trialogue which featured prominently in the programme was then given by Miss Burrell, and Mr Whyte and Mr Mackay. It was entitled “Eobhan Brocair, Fionnladh Piobaire agus Mairi a’ bheann (sic)”. The manner in which the various parties engaged delivered their respective parts was highly appreciated, particularly the *abandon* [original emphasis] with which Mr Whyte discharged the portion assigned to him (*H* 10 April 1875).

In 1889, entertainment in Manish School, Harris included two Gaelic dialogues: ‘The part of the programme which created most amusement were the dialogues, the different parties being attired in garments etc. appropriate to the characters they represented’ (*SH* 7 March 1889). Evidence such as this lends weight to the argument that the *còmhradh* formed an important part of the development of Gaelic drama, while at the same time not discounting Michelle Macleod’s point that Archibald Maclaren’s late eighteenth-century plays containing Gaelic raise questions about the possible existence of other Gaelic plays which may not have survived (Macleod 2014, 10). The *Ross-shire Journal* provides an even more detailed review of a performance at a soirée organised by Coigach’s Lodge of Good Templars with the words ‘played’ and ‘acted’ underlining that this was a performance rather than a reading:

A feature in the evening’s proceedings was a Gaelic dialogue in which Callum, the old and fast disappearing type of Highland country postman, and the modern schoolmaster

had some humorous and lively passages-at-arms over the changes brought about by the spread of education, which resulted in a rapid development of letter writing, and a consequent increase in the weekly burden of 'Callum Post'. Mr Fraser, merchant, Achiltibuie, pleasingly played the part of schoolmaster, Constable Mackay acted the 'gentleman', who asks the post for a letter from his son in England, and Callum was represented in character by Mr Roderick Macleod (student), Achiltibuie, who made an inimitable postman. The piece was enjoyed immensely by the audience who were kept in roars of laughter by Callum's old world drollery. (*RJ* 23 Sept. 1892)

This particular *còmhradh* had originally appeared in *Cuairtear nan Gleann* in 1840 and was a response to the 1839 Postage Act which led to the introduction of the penny post as well as enabling senders to pay for postage rather than placing the cost burden on recipients (*CnanG* April 1840, 33–39). Calum Post is less than happy about the resulting increase in his load as he is at pains to tell the schoolmaster. Despite this being a response to an event some fifty years earlier, the humour had presumably not aged by 1892, as the postman tries to work out who the letters are intended for from the anglicised forms of personal and place names:

Cò dha tha i siud? A h-uile litir air a cùl cho reamhar gharbh ri m' lùdaig 's cho cam ri iomaire 'n amadain. Stad, fhuair mi e – Donald McLucais Esquire, Shooter of Wild Beats, Big-Craig – Esquire!! Fheara 's a ghaoil! Domhnull Brocair sa Chreig-Mhóir na Esquire! Thug so barr air na chunna' mi riamh; ach cò ì seo? Miss Christiana Mac O'Shenag, Old Wife's Point. (*CnanG* 2, April 1840, 34).

(Who is that one for? Every letter on the back of it as thick and rough as my little finger and as crooked as the fool's field. Stop, I've got it – Donald McLucais Esquire, Shooter of Wild Beasts, Big-Craig – Esquire!! Goodness me! Dòmhnall Brocair at a' Chreag-Mhòir an Esquire! This is beyond anything I've ever

seen; but who is this? Miss Christiana Mac O'Shenag, Old Wife's Point.)

Other formal programmes of entertainment which included this particular *còmhradh* were a meeting of Ballachulish Reading and Debating Society in 1872 and a musical night organised by Perth Gaelic Society in 1898 (*OT* 23 March 1872; *PA* 14 Jan. 1898). Its appeal endured into the twentieth century with Donald John MacLeod citing examples of it being performed in Skye in 1920 and Laggan in 1928 (MacLeod 1969, 135).

Coinciding with *còmhraidhean* becoming a regular feature of formal entertainment for Gaelic-speaking audiences are instances of drama featuring in a political context in the Highlands. In 1888, the *Scottish Highlander* reported on the annual gathering at Helmsdale of local branches of the Sutherlandshire Association:

the chief feature of the evening's entertainment was the performance by a number of the members of the Kildonan branch of a burlesque entitled 'The Deer Raid'. Much laughter was occasioned by the performance, the recent doings of the Duke of Sutherland in Assynt and the military expeditions being very cleverly hit off. The officer of marines was specially noticeable, being adorned with an immense gold medal, which bore to have been presented to him by the Duke of Norseland for his distinguished services at the battle of Clashless. The Sheriff was also very well portrayed, appearing in a full-bottomed wig and cloak covered all over with 'God save the Queen' (*SH* 12 Jan. 1888).⁶

⁶ For details of events at Clashmore in Assynt, see I. M. M. MacPhail, *The Crofters' War* (1989), pp. 144–45. In the context of drama relating to the Highland land struggle, Robert Buchanan's play, *The Blue Bells of Scotland* should also be noted. Staged initially at London's Novelty Theatre in September 1887, it is set against the backdrop of the conflict between Highland crofters and their landlord. According to press reports, a syndicate of Highland MPs and other leading Highlanders purchased the play in order to show it on a large stage 'in order that the eviction scenes may be realised on a more elaborate scale' and with a view to taking the play to the United States and the Colonies. It moved to Islington's Grand Theatre in late October but there is no evidence that the

There is nothing to suggest that this drama, inspired by the Clashmore crofters' stance against the authorities in 1887, was delivered in Gaelic, as it seems likely that this would have been noted in the account if this had been the case. Nonetheless, this speaks to the emergence of political drama in the Highlands during the land agitation years, at the same time as *còmhraidhean* were being deployed for political commentary. The growing political dimension to fledgling Gaelic drama is further underlined by Katherine Whyte Grant who was working on her Gaelic translation of *Uilleam Tell* (William Tell) during the 1880s, a translation which, as Sim Innes has demonstrated, conveyed 'a coded message on injustice carried out by Highland landowners' (Innes 2016, 61–69).

By the final decade of the century, *còmhraidhean* were appearing in print with less frequency than they had been, in part due to a lack of periodicals and Gaelic columns, but perhaps also in part because the genre had run its natural course for both writers and readers. Literary attention turned towards new forms for Gaelic literature such as plays and short stories, the ground having been broken by the work of the *còmhradh* writers who had paved the way for new forms of writing in Gaelic.

The *còmhraidhean*, and the periodicals in which they appeared, are key to understanding the way in which Gaelic literature, and in particular prose, developed in the course of the nineteenth century in the wake of the publication of New and Old Testaments through to the emergence of drama and fiction in the first decade of the twentieth century. From the beginning of the nineteenth century the somewhat faltering advent of a Gaelic periodical press connected Gaelic speakers at home and abroad. This international network of writers began to experiment with new forms and registers. Among the most popular of these was the *còmhradh*, the prose genre which show most engagement with the experience of

planned tour came to fruition (*Bristol Mercury* 11 Oct. 1887). See also <http://www.robertbuchanan.co.uk/html/bluebells.html> (accessed 24 October 2019).

Gaelic-speakers in the nineteenth century, underpinned, as we have seen by a range of agendas, moral, educational, spiritual and cultural. What I hope *Còmhraidhean nan Cnoc* (Kidd 2016) will do is augment and enrich our understanding of the Gaelic literary canon, and encourage greater engagement with the nineteenth-century Gaelic press, and with the *còmhraidhean*.

ABBREVIATIONS AND REFERENCES

CnanC:	<i>Cuairtear nan Coillte</i>
CnanG:	<i>Cuairtear nan Gleann</i>
COG:	<i>An Cuairtear Og Gaidhealach</i>
EEN:	<i>Edinburgh Evening News</i>
FENG:	<i>Forres, Elgin and Nairn Gazette</i>
H:	<i>Highlander</i>
IC:	<i>Inverness Courier</i>
NC:	<i>Northern Chronicle</i>
OT:	<i>Oban Times</i>
PA:	<i>Perthshire Advertiser</i>
RJ:	<i>Ross-shire Journal</i>
SH:	<i>Scottish Highlander</i>
TG:	<i>An Teachdaire Gae'lach</i> (1829–31), Glasgow.
TGHob:	<i>An Teachdaire Gaidhealach</i> (1857), Hobart.

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