

PROGRAMMING FOR CULTURAL DEFENCE: THE EXPANSION OF GAELIC TELEVISION

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The impact of television on minority cultures and minority languages has frequently been assumed to be destructive, but television is so central to contemporary societies that it must feature in any attempt to defend these minorities. Just such an attempt is currently taking place in Scotland. With the aid of an annual sum of £9.5 million given by the government, a major increase in Gaelic programming began in January 1993. Although the long-term effects of this will not be apparent for some time, the programmes themselves reveal the strategies by which the programme-makers intend to use television to protect and expand the Gaelic language community. This paper examines these strategies. The intention is to describe and offer some comments on a cultural phenomenon which will undoubtedly be seen as of great significance in the future, although whether it will appear as the point at which the Gaelic revival finally took off, or as being the death throes of the language and its culture, is at present impossible to judge. Columnist John Macleod has talked of the 'dreadful irony' that 'television, that great flattener of communities and cultures, has done much to destroy Gaelic in the last three decades' but is now being cited at its saviour (Macleod 1993, p.12). This seemingly paradoxical situation is echoed in a number of other European regions and makes the Gaelic television experiment of more than just local interest.

THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT: SETTING THE AGENDA

Two contexts need to be understood before the programming strategies can be examined. The first is the historical context which I have examined elsewhere (Cormack 1993). Here it will suffice to summarise the situation by

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noting that there are, according to the 1991 census, only around 65,000 Gaelic speakers in Scotland. Although these are concentrated in the north-western islands, there are significant numbers in many other parts of Scotland, particularly in Glasgow. Until recently Gaelic programming on television was very limited, with an annual total of only 100 hours by the three main Scottish broadcasters combined. This paucity of output has meant that the Gaelic dimension has received very little attention in surveys of the Scottish media, even those in which questions of cultural identity are raised. Thus MacInnes (1993) does not discuss Gaelic broadcasting at all and Meech and Kilborn (1992) make only passing comments. Yet Gaelic has a significance for many Scots and there is a sympathy for the language which goes well beyond the ranks of speakers and learners.

The second context is the institutional context which has been created specifically in order to expand Gaelic television. As a result of a vigorous campaign in 1989 the Thatcher government was persuaded to invest an annual sum of £9.5 million in Gaelic television in order to increase the annual amount of programming from 100 hours to 300. The legal framework for this was set out in the 1990 Broadcasting Act (**Broadcasting Act 1990**, pp.154-6). This established a Gaelic Television Fund, with money coming from the Treasury to the Independent Television Commission (ITC). The amount of money is decided by the Secretary of State for Scotland, and was set at £9.5 million per annum for the first three years of broadcasting (1993-5). The ITC established a management body called the Comataidh Telebhisein Gàidhlig (CTG), consisting of a chairperson and between four and eight members (currently it has the full complement of eight), to administer the fund.

The CTG's role is clearly set out in the Act. It is to make grants for three purposes:

- 1 for 'financing the making of television programmes in Gaelic primarily with a view to the broadcasting of such programmes for reception in Scotland';
- 2 for 'financing the training of persons employed or to be employed in connection with the making of such programmes';
- 3 for 'other purposes connected with or related to the making of such programmes.'

In addition the CTG is to finance 'the undertaking of research into the types of television programmes in Gaelic that members of the Gaelic-speaking community would like to be broadcast.'

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The Act goes on to specify that the programmes must be of high quality (although not specifying what is meant by this) but that the CTG cannot itself act as a commissioning agent, merely as a grant-awarding body. Thus when programmes are proposed, the CTG enters into a tripartite arrangement with the broadcasters (who are the commissioning agents) and the programme producers (who may be the broadcasters but may also be independent production companies). The CTG not only has the power to award or deny funding but it will also agree with the broadcasters as to when the proposed programmes will be scheduled. This is important since the CTG has been concerned to avoid a ghettoisation of Gaelic programmes in unpopular late-night spots.

The significance of this structure is that it allows the CTG complete freedom to enforce its own agenda. It is protected from interference from politicians (and in fact politicians have not so far shown much interest in the particular programmes broadcast) and, because of the funds at its disposal, has met with comparatively little complaint from the broadcasters who are happy enough to get the money in a time of recession. It is this aspect of the commissioning process which allows generalisations to be made about the Gaelic programmes, regardless of who the producers or the broadcasters are. In the first six months of 1993, all the Gaelic programmes broadcast by Scottish and Grampian were CTG-funded, as were some, but not all, of the BBC Scotland programmes.

Another feature which makes for a fairly uniform approach to the language amongst the programme-makers (and allows for an easy acceptance of the CTG's agenda) is the compactness of the Gaelic intellectual community. Many of the Gaels involved in television share the same educational background - school education at the Nicolson Institute in Stornoway, Portree High School or Oban High School, and university education at Glasgow, Edinburgh or Aberdeen Universities. Three of the main figures in the campaign to get funding for Gaelic television, and who later became the director, chairperson and depute chairperson of the CTG (respectively John Angus MacKay, Roy MacIver and Matthew MacIver) were all educated at the Nicolson Institute and at either Aberdeen or Edinburgh Universities. In addition to this, movement from one television company to another is not uncommon. Thus the current head of Gaelic programming at Grampian, Allan MacDonald, was a director in the BBC's Gaelic department and then head of an independent production company, Media nan Eilean, before moving to Grampian. Cathy MacDonald, the presenter of a historical series made by an independent production company for Scottish Television was appearing at the same time on the BBC in repeats of a children's series.

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Simon Mackenzie appeared as both a regular in the cast of the soap opera **Machair** on Scottish Television and as presenter, interviewer and even occasional singer on the BBC's **Aig Baile**, a series looking at traditional life in local communities, with an emphasis on music and song. The closeness of this community has led to accusations that there is a 'Gaelic mafia' operating to the exclusion of outsiders. In fact, what exists is the inevitable result of the networking which takes place within any special-interest group, but which in this case is perceived as being more impenetrable to outsiders because the group is defined by language ability and by attitude to that language.

The CTG has been fairly open about its aims. In a publicity leaflet (Comataidh Telebhisein Gàidhlig 1992) it describes the potential audience for the Gaelic programmes as 'Gaelic speakers in both Gaelic-speaking and non-Gaelic-speaking areas, Gaelic learners, and non-Gaelic speakers in both Gaelic-speaking and non-Gaelic-speaking areas.' Thus the programmes have been aimed not only at the island Gaelic communities but also at the larger community of Gaelic sympathisers, with the intention that the programmes should be 'attractive to the non-Gaelic-speaking majority and serve to promote a wider understanding of the language in the whole of Scotland.' An important aspect of this has been the English subtitling of Gaelic programmes. In the first six months of 1993 almost all the CTG-funded programmes were broadcast with subtitles. The only exceptions were the short daily news programmes and the BBC's series **Eòrpa** which had subtitles available for those who could receive teletext. Some of the BBC's self-financed programmes were also broadcast without subtitles. Another aspect has been the scheduling of programmes at primetime slots - the first series of **Machair**, for example, was broadcast at 6.30 pm on Wednesday evenings. This has kept the Gaelic programmes in the public eye and, as noted earlier, is a quite explicit aim of the CTG.

THE NEW PROGRAMMES: YOUTH, MODERNIZATION AND SCOTTISH IDENTITY

The CTG's strategy can be seen most clearly by looking at the Gaelic programmes broadcast during the first six months of 1993. The most apparent signs of this strategy were an accent on youth, an attempt to present a modernised view of the Gaelic community avoiding traditional stereotypes, an attempt to move Gaelic to the centre of Scottish affairs, and the adoption of an optimistic and rather one-sided view of the language's future.

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The emphasis on youth was perhaps the most obvious. Some programmes were specifically aimed at younger people, notably the world music series **Annas Ciùil** (Novelty of Music) and **Aig Astar** (On the Move), a series which toured various Scottish towns and cities, looking at entertainment facilities. Indeed the very first CTG-funded programme to be broadcast (on 1 January 1993) was **Air an Oir** (On the Edge), a documentary about the Gaelic rock group **Runrig** on tour in Estonia and North America, highlighting the importance to the broadcasters of the youth audience. The on-screen faces also showed an emphasis on youth, ranging from news and current affairs programmes (such as the daily news programmes **Telefios** (Telenews) and the BBC's European current affairs series **Eòrpa** (Europe)) through many of the light entertainment programmes (again **Aig Astar** was the most obvious example with its presenter Patsi Mackenzie looking scarcely out of her teens) to the Gaelic learners' series **Speaking Our Language**. The average age of many of the panellists (especially the non-celebrity panellists) in the quiz show **Dè Tha Seo?** (What Is This?) was also noticeably young. This is all in marked contrast to some of the older style Gaelic programmes, although a move towards youth had been occurring in the later eighties (Cormack 1993, p.109).

The attempt to present a modernized view of the language could be seen by the programmes' avoidance of traditional images of the Gaelic community. The usual stereotypes of the Gaelic community have emphasised crofting, religion, drink-related problems, an aged population, a strongly parochial outlook, and traditional music and song. These were reflected in the many pre-1990s radio and television programmes which emphasised music and religion. In the new programmes these stereotypes have either been avoided altogether or are apparent only as minority concerns. In the latter category come programmes of traditional music such as the BBC's **Aig Baile** (At Home) (in which different communities in the islands and western highlands were visited and interviews intercut with local musical performances) and Scottish Television's **Laoidhean is Sairm** (Hymns and Psalms) in which the singing of a church congregation was featured. More obvious in the new programmes, however, is the lack of these traditional images. Even crofting, an economically central occupation throughout the Gaelic areas, has only appeared when relevant items have come up on the daily news programme **Telefios**. The traditional parochial outlook has been replaced most conspicuously by the BBC's series **Eòrpa**, a compilation of short documentaries on minority communities throughout Europe, frequently communities with their own language (thus items were included on the Friulian, Sorbian, Faroese and Breton communities, as well as a final programme devoted to a festival of Celtic music in Catalonia). In this context

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the decision to start the CTG programmes with **Runrig** on a world tour becomes doubly significant.

This avoidance of traditional images overlaps with the another part of the strategy - the attempt to place Gaelic in the centre of Scottish affairs. This is perhaps a less expected aim than the previous two, but clearly derives from the belief that Gaelic can only get the popular and institutional support it needs to survive by being seen by the majority of Scots to be central to Scotland's identity, rather than being of only peripheral interest. The most obvious way in which this has appeared in the television programmes is in their settings. Thus **Aig Astar**, the guide to towns mentioned earlier, did not feature Stornoway, Portree, or even Oban, but rather lowland non-Gaelic communities in places such as Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Stirling. Similarly the quiz show **Dè Tha Seo?** featured celebrity guests (usually television celebrities) alongside members of the public who were invariably living in the central belt of Scotland, although being natives of the islands. Most startlingly, the Gaelic learners' programme **Speaking Our Language** (the title itself ambiguously implying that Gaelic is not just the language of the Gaels, but also of the Scots in general) also concentrated on the lowlands, featuring a mini-drama series in each episode which followed the life of a family in Glasgow. Not only did the family speak Gaelic (there are, after all, many Gaelic speakers in Glasgow) but everybody else did as well, so the series showed rather surreal images of Glasgow shop assistants, waiters, estate agents and passers-by all speaking Gaelic as if it was the only language spoken in the city. Another strand to this was the attempt to re-site the history of the Gael as central to Scotland's history in the series **Ainm a'Ghàidheil** (The Name of the Gael). Although factually accurate, the ignorance of many Scots concerning this history made it an ambitious project. In fact the attempt to make Gaelic central to Scottish identity was quite explicit, the Director of the CTG, John Angus Mackay, having admitted as much (in a seminar in the Department of Film and Media Studies at Stirling University).

Finally it is worth noting the rather one-sided view of the language which has appeared throughout these programmes. With the 1991 census figures showing a drop of about 20% in the numbers of Gaelic speakers since the 1981 figures, and this at a time when many had assumed that the numbers had stabilised, the future for the language is still very uncertain. Alongside much pro-Gaelic cultural and educational activity there is the continuing influx of non-Gaelic speakers into the Gaelic areas and the departure of many young people. Also there are the continuing economic uncertainties of this peripheral region - underlined by, on the one hand, the loss of £24 million by the Western Isles Council in the collapse of the Bank of Credit and

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Commerce International in 1991, and, on the other hand, the European Commission's granting of 'Objective One' status to the Highland and Western Isles regions in 1993 leading to much greater financial assistance. These problems however are not reflected in the programmes. In the daily Gaelic news programme a reverse of the more usual news values appears, with only good news about Gaelic being reported. This is not as one-sided as it may seem, since the bad news about Gaelic emerges only slowly in long-term trends whereas the good news appears in the form of specific events and initiatives. But having said this, a view emerges of a flourishing language under little threat. Similarly in other programmes, the future of the language is usually either not referred to at all, or only obliquely (as in, for example, the sympathetic discussions of other minority languages in **Eòrpa**). Among explicit mentions of the language, a typical one occurred in **Aite Mo Ghaoil** (Place of My Love), a series in which well-known Gaelic singers went back to their place of birth to talk to locals and to sing traditional songs. In several of these programmes the status of the language was mentioned but usually in an upbeat fashion (one old man in South Uist, for example, after noting the overall decline of the language, added that recently more young people were using it in public). To say that there is an unduly optimistic view of the language being promulgated in these programmes is not to imply that a conspiracy is taking place, since it is simply the consequence of the fact that the programmes are planned, commissioned, made and watched for the most part by people who want the language to survive and are optimistic about the chances of this happening. However this does mean that a rather inaccurate view of the current situation is given. And only in the 'opinion' slot of the weekly half-hour news programme **Telefios na Seachdainn** is this view of Gaelic put forward explicitly as a personal view rather than as an accepted fact of life (although even here a negative opinion about the language's future is never heard, or only in the context of something which must be overcome).

SOAP OPERA: MAKING GAELIC VIABLE

The most popular and most highly publicized of the CTG's programmes has been Scottish Television's soap opera **Machair** and as such it deserves special attention, particularly since it shows clearly most of the strategies discussed above. The first series of thirteen weekly half-hour episodes was broadcast in 1993 from 6 January to 31 March, with a second series beginning on 28 September (by which time a third series was already in production). From its earliest planning stage, this was designed as the flagship of the new programming. Although light entertainment programmes in Gaelic had been broadcast by Scottish Television in the two years before

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the 1993 expansion, no drama had been included (Cormack 1993, p.109). In a public lecture given on 26 October 1990, Gus Macdonald, Managing Director of Scottish Television, was explicit about his company's ambitions in this area (having already taken the advice of Welsh producers working on S4C's two serials, **Pobol y Cwm** and **Dinas**):

An artificially created community seems to constitute the compelling appeal of all popular drama serials. It is the communion of a viewer, sometimes lonely, with the engrossing affairs of a community of life-like characters with whom they can identify. According to Welsh producers the creation of such an idealised community on screen is by far the best way to re-engage Gaels, lost to the lowlands, with their Gaelic heartland (Macdonald 1991, p.30).

Notable here is the appeal to nostalgia, alongside a rather stereotypical and dated view of the 'lonely' soap opera consumer. Richard Kilborn has noted how such a view has 'largely given way to a much more differentiated view of the audience, one in which the act of viewing is seen as much a social, as it is an individual, activity' (Kilborn 1992, p.72). The appeal to children was also made explicit in Macdonald's speech:

The best chance of reviving the language is to attract children to it. As the ratings for **Neighbours**, **Home and Away** and British serials show, children are avid viewers of this kind of drama. The activities of adults seem to exert an irresistible pull on them. A specifically Gaelic drama serial would present young Gaels with images, role models and patterns of behaviour from their own society. This would both reinforce their own cultural identity and introduce non-Gaelic viewers to a world that may be as unfamiliar to them as the language (Macdonald 1991, p.32).

At the same time, Alasdair Moffat, Director of Programmes at Scottish Television, wrote in a newspaper that 'all research points to drama-serials - the most difficult and highly crafted form of television - as the best way to hook a spectrum of viewers. Grannies and grandchildren all watch' (Moffat 1991). This view of the importance of Gaelic drama was summed up by Rhoda Macdonald, Head of Gaelic Programmes at Scottish Television, saying quite simply that '**Machair** makes Gaelic viable' (Macdonald 1993, p.16). Scottish were not alone in this view. Well before any programmes were being made, John Angus Mackay was quoted as saying that the CTG would support not only news, current affairs, religion, entertainment and education programmes, but also serial drama and one-off drama (Kavanagh

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1991, p.16). In the CTG's first annual report he wrote that **Machair** 'gave out to people throughout Scotland, and young people in particular, clear signals about Gaelic as a living language and culture' (Comataidh Telebhisein Gàidhlig 1993, p.7).

This emphasis on fiction as important for cultural defence because of its popularity is, of course, a familiar one, as Daniël Biltereyst has noted:

Until now the production of highly expensive drama programmes by these stations [public broadcasters] was justified by a cultural logic, defined as an 'ecological' necessity and seen as an important weapon against the massive influx of foreign imports. In small countries...and also in most nations and language communities, the cry for more home produced drama was inspired by a discourse on the protection of cultural identity (Biltereyst 1992, pp.536-7).

Biltereyst goes on to note, however, that increasing competition has meant that, while recognising the popularity of home-based fiction, the costs involved have decreased, resulting in cheaper soaps. Even cheap drama is a relatively expensive form of television but the CTG's resolve to provide it was proven when it accepted Scottish Television's proposal and spent one third of its funding for 1993 on the first two series of **Machair**.

The typical British soap opera is based in a community defined largely by place (**Coronation Street**, **Brookside**, **EastEnders**, **Emmerdale** and of course Scottish Television's own **Take the High Road**) and so an obvious way to approach a Gaelic soap would have been to set it in a crofting township on Lewis. Instead **Machair** is set in a fictional Gaelic further education college on the west coast of Lewis called **Bradán Mòr** (loosely based on **Sabhal Mòr**, the Gaelic college on Skye). Unusually for soap operas, the entire series was shot on location, with Ardvourlie Castle on Loch Seaforth on the east coast of Harris standing in for the college. Thus although the sense of place is very important to the series, it does not present the kind of cross-section of a residential community found in soaps set in villages or urban districts. Also, of course, this college setting at once means that the cast will include a high percentage of young people. Not only that, but a modernized image of Gaelic is presented, with students attending classes not in Gaelic language and literature but in business studies and computer science. This was taken to the extent of having a storyline in which a student saved the college's finances by making a killing on the stockmarket after breaking into the college computer. Alongside this is the absence of

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references to crofting or religion. In place of the former, fish-farming (admittedly now a common occupation in the highlands and islands) features as the main occupation of local people outside the college. As far as religion is concerned, only three references appeared in the first thirteen episodes - all of them fairly brief and none of them being particularly complimentary about the typical island religious observances. The unavoidable impression comes over that religion was being intentionally avoided (although such an avoidance of controversy is not, of course, surprising in a soap opera which is trying to appeal to as large an audience as possible).

The series' attitude to Gaelic comes to the fore most obviously in the villain of the piece - Jamie Spencer, an Englishman who inherits the college after his father's death. Although his father had been a Gaelic activist, Jamie is defined in his villainous role by his attitude to the language which he is happy to see die. In the third episode he revealed the extent of his deviousness when he admitted that he only pretended not to know Gaelic - in fact he learnt it at school with the express aim of not speaking it simply to annoy his father. The major non-romantic storyline of this first series was the college's attempt to survive, despite Jamie's machinations. Implicit in this was an analogy with the situation of the language itself. Indeed the name of the series reflects this concern, with the image of the unstable and continually eroding machair coastal lands standing quite consciously as a metaphor for the condition of the language (as advance publicity made clear).

Another aspect of the modernised view of the language is the rather paradoxical one of showing a bilingual community. The nostalgia which is implicit in some soap operas, as well as the understandable desire of many language activists to promote what is seen as a 'pure' version of the language, might have led to a series in which all the dialogue was in Gaelic (all the more so considering the vision of a Gaelic Glasgow in **Speaking Our Language**), despite the fact that contemporary Gaelic communities are all bilingual. Donald Browne has noted how Irish-language radio has adopted an aggressively purist approach to the extent that when, in 1990, Brian Keenan, a former Lebanon hostage, was visiting a friend living near an Irish-language radio station in Donegal, although he was interviewed twice by a member of the radio station staff, the interview was not used because Keenan could not speak Irish (Browne 1992, p.422). Earlier, in 1977, a member of the station staff had actually been dismissed for broadcasting an election address in English (ibid). Most Scottish Gaels have not taken this view, preferring to accept the reality of bilingualism. In the first episode of **Machair** more than one third of the dialogue was in English, although in later episodes the figure was lower, usually around 10%. In fact not only is **Machair** bilingual, but by

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including in the cast such characters as an Englishman who refuses to speak Gaelic, a teenager who, although a native-speaker, also refuses to speak Gaelic and wants to get off the island as soon as she can, and two non-native speakers who sometimes speak in English, the problems of language maintenance have received a better airing in this fictional series than they have had so far in any of the non-fiction programmes. Even the title of the series is, in effect, bilingual since 'machair' is one of the few Gaelic words which have passed into English with meaning, spelling and pronunciation unchanged. All of this helps to give the impression of an up-to-date programme, reflecting the modern Gaelic situation.

To summarise these various elements, **Machair** has presented some rather contradictory elements. The appeal to nostalgia in Gus Macdonald's original view (and reinforced by **Capercaillie's** haunting theme music), the up-to-date non-stereotypical view of the island community, the rather too obvious avoidance of some important features of island life, such as crofting and religion, along with the familiar generic conventions of a soap opera - all these mix together to give a rather unstable compound. This can be seen as the outcome of contradictory forces - the desire to appeal to urban non-Gaelic-speakers alongside the need to give to the Gaelic communities an acceptable image of themselves, the defence of a culture defined, in the eyes of many, largely by traditional practices alongside the insistence on giving a modernised view of that culture, and finally, the attempt to use the practices of popular mass-appeal television to defend a minority culture.

FIRST REACTIONS

Although the success or failure of the Gaelic television experiment will not be known for a number of years, audience reactions can give some first indication of what is happening. General reactions have been difficult to gauge but in the CTG's first annual report, John Angus MacKay has noted that 'access to audience viewing statistics provided by BARB has confirmed that the overall response to funded programming has been positive' (Comataidh Telebhisein Gàidhlig 1993, p.9). Perhaps the most remarkable audience figure has been that for the daily news programme **Telefios** which is broadcast without subtitles. In the first thirteen weeks of 1993 it was regularly getting audiences of between 380,000 and 430,000 (Comataidh Telebhisein Gàidhlig 1993, p.14). Since the vast majority of this audience would not have understood any of the programme, it seems likely that the audience was largely an inherited one (it is a four minute lunchtime programme, with a six minute evening version on Grampian only, both

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broadcasts following English-language news programmes), with the visual inserts inevitably providing some attractive highland and island scenery. However other programmes also did well. The subtitled historical series **Ainm a' Ghàidheil**, for example, going out at a primetime slot more usually reserved for drama and light entertainment, achieved audiences of between 265,000 and 334,000.

Most public comment, however, has been concerned with **Machair**. The average audience size for each episode was 451,000 - small for the 6.30 evening slot which it occupied but massive compared with the 65,000 Gaelic speakers in the country. The smallest audience was 370,000 (for the eighth episode), the largest 516,000 (for the second episode). In terms of percentage of the television audience, the series did better in the north of Scotland area, averaging 28% and reaching 40% for the final episode. In the central Scotland area, its share averaged out at 20%, with 23% as the highest figure achieved. The combination of drama, local Scottish setting (and one not usually seen on television, even in Scotland), subtitles and a certain amount of bilingualism, has clearly been able to establish a regular non-Gaelic audience (although the importance of the very large number of Gaelic learners in Scotland should not be underestimated). The strength of the show's following was demonstrated when, on 10 February, a technical hitch at Grampian meant that the first half of the sixth episode was blacked out throughout the north and north-east of Scotland. The result was described the next day in **The Scotsman**:

Angry viewers jammed the switchboard of Grampian TV in Aberdeen last night after only half of the popular Gaelic soap **Machair** was broadcast...Furious Gaels immediately called the TV station but most found they could not get through. Frustrated viewers even called the BBC in Stornoway to protest (**The Scotsman** 11 February 1993, p.5).

Grampian made amends by broadcasting the whole episode on the following Saturday afternoon, replacing a regular English-language youth programme.

The most public comments on the new programmes have, predictably enough, been in newspapers, principally from television reviewers. Clearly such comment cannot be taken as typical of audience reaction at large, nor can it always be taken at face value as objective criticism since television critics frequently have their own axes to grind. However, in the absence of more detailed audience research, it is worth considering, particularly since press comment has its own role to play in the formation of public opinion. Generally, press reactions were favourable. The **Daily Record** noted after the

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opening episode that 'Telly's first Gaelic soap got the thumbs up from viewers last night' (**Daily Record** 7 January 1993, p.5). The **Press and Journal** similarly commented that '**Machair**, the first Gaelic soap, was greeted with enthusiasm by Scottish viewers last night' (**Press and Journal** 7 January 1993, p.13). Comparisons with the BBC's unsuccessful soap of 1992, **Eldorado** (finally killed off in July 1993), were frequently made (the Gaelic series was being labelled **Gaeldorado** in newspapers well before it actually began) but only to **Machair**'s advantage. In the **Sunday Mail**, Gavin Docherty wrote as follows:

Move over, **Eldorado** - Scotland's new Gaelic soap is a clean winner with TV viewers. For more Scots tuned in to **Machair** last week for its first showing than the BBC's sun-sex-and-sangria flop. Viewing figures to be issued this week will confirm that the £3 million drama set in the Western Isles won the ratings battle (**Sunday Mail** 10 January 1993, p.21).

A couple of pages later the **Sunday Mail** even had a brief review in Gaelic, followed by a translation.

In the quality papers the views were slightly more circumspect but still favourable:

Whatever the shortcomings, **Machair** ought to be more watchable to a Scots soap addict than some of the others, if only because the issues are recognisable. The tension between incomer and native, between tradition and the new woman (Anthony Troon in **The Scotsman** 7 January 1993, p.27).

Like the **Sunday Mail** reviewer, Julie Davidson in **The Herald** began with a comparison with **Eldorado** by which **Machair** 'compared more than favourably.' She then went on to discuss the Gaelic series in more detail:

Filtering through the essentially crude components of the genre was some appreciation of the concerns of the Gaidhealtachd - its beleaguered language, its vanishing youth, its internal tensions between new influences and old social structures. Especially welcome is the absence of special pleading (**The Herald** 9 January 1993, p.17).

But the reviewer who was most impressed was Kenneth Roy in **Scotland on Sunday**. Originally he had been very sceptical about Gaelic broadcasting. In

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1991 he wrote, 'I am much less convinced by the present explosion of Gaelic broadcasting...Its sudden, dramatic development is not organic growth in any sense and may do more harm than good for the cause' (**Scotland on Sunday** 30 June 1991). When **Machair** appeared however he became much more enthusiastic:

Machair, the new Gaelic soap opera, is a credit to the company and a smack in the face for those of us, myself included, who were doubtful whether all that Gaelic broadcasting money would do much for the future of the language. Native speakers are entitled to feel proud of **Machair**, and not a little relieved. It is professionally produced, well-written, serious in purpose, and captures the essential atmosphere of the Hebrides fairly convincingly. In short, **Machair** is better than anyone had any right to hope (**Scotland on Sunday** 10 January 1993, p.42).

In fact, this review indicates not so much the quality of **Machair**, but more how low his expectations had been, since the fact that many of the cast were non-professionals (there being very few professional Gaelic actors when the series was first made) was fairly obvious, particularly in the opening episodes. A few weeks later Roy commented once again on the series:

I wrote warmly of **Machair** when it started. Now I must revise my opinion. It is even better than it looked at first glance, gathering in confidence, quite simply the best thing to have happened to television in Scotland for a long time...It is too early to say whether the version of island life presented by **Machair** will be wholly convincing. We have yet to see Stornoway on a Saturday night after the pubs have closed; we have yet to feel the weight of a Lewis Sabbath. But the signs are promising and I hope there is a long way to go (**Scotland on Sunday** 31 January 1993, p.40).

As will be clear from earlier comments, these less attractive aspects of island life have not only not appeared in **Machair** but have not appeared anywhere else in the Gaelic programmes either. Despite this absence, it is clear from these reviews that the series was perceived by many as being realistic. That this was an important attribute, not just for reviewers making qualitative assessments, but for the audience at large, will be clear by considering Sonia Livingstone's research into British soap opera viewing:

In sum, viewers generally considered soap opera, especially British programmes, to be highly realistic, and it plays an important role in their

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lives: they recognised the situations, felt they learnt from the problem solutions and became involved with the characters (Livingstone 1988, p.78).

Not all reviewers were so happy. Tom Brown and John Millar of the **Daily Record** were dismissive of the series but both had already made clear their opposition to the idea of an expansion of Gaelic broadcasting. Other writers had also taken this attitude to the extent that a complaint was made to the Press Complaints Commission:

A Gael complained about a television programme review in a Scottish evening newspaper in which the columnist voiced his objections to a Gaelic language programme screened during 'prime time' and used derogatory terms to describe the content. The complainant said the piece was racially pejorative and prejudiced in denigrating the Gaelic language and culture (Press Complaints Commission 1993, p.23).

The Commission rejected the complaint. It may be significant that the expression of strong views against the Gaelic programmes have largely come from well-known columnists writing in newspapers aimed mainly at the Scottish urban working class and may reflect these columnists' perception of their readers' interests, rather than any direct view of the programmes themselves. This view is suggested by the fact that all of these writers had expressed their disapproval of the Gaelic television expansion long before the new programmes were broadcast.

Opposition however was making itself felt in other areas. The BBC's CTG-funded **Eòrpa** (in qualitative terms arguably the most accomplished of all the new Gaelic programmes and certainly the most innovative in its subject matter) received much smaller audiences than **Machair** (understandably since its subtitles were only available on teletext, it was broadcast on BBC 2, and its subject matter was clearly of minority interest, even within the Gaelic community). However it cost more to make than other non-Gaelic current affairs programmes. One BBC 'programme-making executive' was quoted as saying 'I think it's a bloody disgrace. These people are swanning around at the tax-payers' expense making self-indulgent programmes which hardly anyone is watching' (Brown 1993). Even allowing for the jealousy of a hard-pressed programme-maker at a time of recession, clearly such a statement is expressing a point of view which may have repercussions for Gaelic programme-making in the future.

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Apart from **Machair**, few of the Gaelic programmes have received any attention from reviewers. One other sign of reaction, however, can be gauged by the success of the learners' series **Speaking Our Language**. The Scottish supplement of the **Sunday Times** carried leaflets linked to the series (an arrangement proposed by the newspaper, presumably to strengthen its Scottish credentials in its circulation war with **Scotland on Sunday**). Requests for related learning materials were handled by **Cànan**, a company set up by **Sabhal Mòr**, the Gaelic college on Skye. After the first episode the **Sunday Times** gave the following report:

Promotional leaflets carried by the **Sunday Times Scotland** for the last month have provoked several thousand inquiries from across Scotland. At one stage last week Canan's 10-line switchboard was jammed and British Telecom had to instal a special microwave link to enable the company to handle more calls. Canan said that it was receiving about 200 completed forms requesting information each day and was processing more than 50 orders a day for back-up packs (**Sunday Times Scotland** 10 January 1993, p.1).

Having noted this, it is worth remembering that the last Gaelic learners' television series, the BBC's **Can Seo**, first broadcast in 1979, was also very popular but does not seem to have affected the overall numbers of Gaelic speakers in Scotland to any great extent judging by the continuing decline seen in the census figures. Many Scots become enthusiastic about learning Gaelic, but the long-term problems of becoming proficient in a difficult language tend to result in very few of these enthusiasts getting anywhere near to being Gaelic speakers.

CONCLUSION

Several points will have become clear from the foregoing. The new Gaelic television programmes are not simply a cross-section of typical British programming translated into Gaelic, nor are they a showcase for traditional Gaelic culture (as one non-Gaelic-speaking letter-writer complained to **The Scotsman**). They represent the attempt by a relatively small and cohesive group of Gaelic language activists to do two things: to alter the Gaelic community's self-perception, and to alter the broader Scottish public's view of Gaelic. To put it another way, they are attempting to reconstruct the collective identity of the Gaelic community and, at the same time, alter the position of the language within popular definitions of Scottish identity. Indeed the generally negative reactions to the whole enterprise evident in the

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Scottish tabloid press are best read as a refusal to accept this broader redefinition of Scottish identity, rather than any kind of reasoned reaction to the programmes themselves. The activists see these two aims as being central to any future development, or even continuing existence, for the language. As indicated above, initial responses have been mixed and it is notable that so far the public ones have been largely from professional media-watchers outside the Gaelic community. Ultimately, it will be the reactions from the Scottish public at large, both Gaelic-speakers and non-Gaelic-speakers, which will be important, not just the pronouncements of programme-makers and media reviewers.

Of consequence not just to Gaels is the attempt to push Gaelic to the centre of Scottish affairs. In this context it is interesting to note how little Gaelic has been considered in recent debates (as opposed to the collection of pseudo-Gaelic phenomena signified by the notion of 'tartanry' discussed in McArthur (1982) and more recently by Caughie (1990) and McCrone (1992)). And when Gaelic is mentioned, it is frequently by reference to Chapman's 1978 study **The Gaelic Vision in Scottish Culture** which, although a useful account of non-Gaelic discourse about Gaelic, is very inadequate when dealing directly with Gaelic culture itself. It is this situation which the Gaelic broadcasters are trying to change, insisting on the relevance of their language for many more Scots than the few who speak it. Philip Schlesinger has noted the importance of recognising the existence of the plural identities (Gaelic, Scottish, European) which are common throughout contemporary Europe and, indeed, he suggests that these should be seen as resources to be used (Schlesinger 1990, p.232). The expansion of Gaelic television can be seen (in part at least) as the attempt to alter the balance between these differing identities within Scotland and ultimately as a way of developing the cultural resources of the Scots themselves. Whatever the final outcome of this debate, the Gaelic television experiment is offering unusual opportunities to watch the progress of a media-led attempt to save what had seemed to be a dying language, and the progress of a cultural struggle over collective self-definition.

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