

REVIEW: REVITALISING GAELIC

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Wilson McLeod, ed., **Revitalising Gaelic in Scotland: Policy, Planning and Public Discourse**, Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2006, xiv + 322pp, pb, £19.95, ISBN 1903765595.

Over the past two decades in particular, there have been wide-ranging – if not always well-funded or concerted – attempts to maintain or reinvigorate Gaelic in Scotland. But how well have these worked? What have been the areas of success or difficulty? What are the prospects for the future? And – just as importantly – what evidence and scholarship do we have to address such matters? This book is a welcome attempt to tackle such questions. It does so by bringing together relevant recent research and commentary from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives. This provides an indication not only of the state of contemporary Gaelic but also of current research on it.

Robert Dunbar's opening chapter gives a useful overview of the main legal and institutional developments related to Gaelic over the past twenty years. These include education and broadcasting, as well as the fairly limited legislation surrounding the use of Gaelic in contexts such as courts and public services. Education and public services are discussed further in later chapters by Boyd Robasdan/Robertson and Wilson McLeod respectively. What emerges collectively from these is that there have been significant developments, perhaps most importantly the expansion of Gaelic-medium education, and there are some promising prospects, partly connected with policies at the European level (such as the 1992 European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages which was ratified by the UK in 2001) and partly connected with devolution, most notably the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005. It is still too early to

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judge the full implications of the latter, and while some contributors express caution, partly based on past experiences, several also hold out hope that the Act's claim to 'establish ... Gaelic "as an official language of Scotland commanding equal respect to the English language"' (McLeod p.vii) will help to make the real difference that policies so far have not managed to achieve.

In particular, the hope is that the new developments will not be accompanied by the same decline in the number of Gaelic-speakers as over the past twenty years: from around 80,000 of those reporting to the 1981 Census in Scotland as Gaelic-speaking to under 60,000 in 2001. What this disjuncture between previous policy activity and apparent levels of Gaelic-speaking makes clear is that it is vital that we understand the interrelationship between the implementation of policies to support Gaelic and what happens 'on the ground' – that is, in relation to actual Gaelic language-use. Census figures do not tell us why people act as they do, including why they tick a particular Census box. Moreover, we need to know more about the *life* of Gaelic, rather than focusing so much on decline and death. For, as Emily McEwan-Fujita argues, as have some others previously, the constant emphasis on assumed imminent death – and the scientific ways in which this is assessed (including arbitrary numerical figures for 'survival') – can itself feed into public discourse and policy-making and, in effect, contribute to the process that it allegedly reports.

The Census is not the only source of statistical information about Gaelic-use. Kenneth MacKinnon briefly summarises some of the results from his own considerable body of empirical research over the decades. *Pròiseact Plana Cànan nan Eilean Siar* (the Western Isles Language Plan Project), discussed by Magaidh NicAoidh, is the most recent major survey. Disappointingly, however, this chapter does not address MacKinnon's important observation that what we really need to know is why some particular communities bucked the trend of decline. The results presented conform to the overall picture of demise, one finding being that even children in Gaelic-medium education rarely use Gaelic outside the classroom (as also reported in Marion F.Morrison's account of her research on Gaelic-medium education in the Western Isles). This doesn't really get under the skin, though, of what might be going on here – or of the potential significance of even fairly limited Gaelic-use outside the classroom.

By contrast, Martina Müller's careful and methodologically innovative study of pupils in Portree argues that even a low level of Gaelic-use with relatives is important. The finding is also supported by James Oliver's study of young people – both those in Gaelic-medium and those in English-medium education

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– in Portree and also in Glasgow (where so many Gaelic-speakers reside but, historically, have too often been ignored by research and policy initiatives). Here is a rare investigation to try to find out *why* people might be using language in the way that they are, and what this might mean for informing policy. It raises important questions of identity, as does Konstanze Glaser’s theoretically astute discussion of notions such as hybridity, identities of choice, and communities of communication. As Gillian Rothach/Munro points out in her reflection on research on Gaelic and its implications for future initiatives, it is such research – using theoretically aware and in-depth approaches – that is needed to help us understand the motivations, inhibitions and social relations that influence language-use.

One question that Oliver, Glaser and Rothach/Munro raise is what is meant by a ‘Gael’ – and, as some of Oliver’s young respondents themselves ask, does this necessarily mean to speak Gaelic? It is a difficult question that is raised also in the field of Gaelic arts – where in some cases anybody working on vaguely ‘Gaelic’ themes is eligible for ‘Gaelic’ funding, as Alison Lang discusses – and by Alasdair MacCaluim in relation to adult Gaelic-learners. These chapters also raise the difficult question of where resources should be dedicated. So too does Douglas Chalmers’ and Mike Danson’s interesting analysis of the impact of initiatives in what they call the ‘Gaelic economy’. Based on research with consumers as well as businesses, they show that providing economic support for small and medium sized enterprises in the Highlands and Islands can have positive implications for local communities and, indirectly, for language.

Overall, this collection succeeds in presenting a broad spectrum of research on contemporary Gaelic. However, while there is much charting of policy developments and survey results, there is less theorising in relation to broader questions and less cross-cultural comparison than there might be. Certainly, there are exceptions as I have noted above; and on cross-cultural comparison John Walsh’s discussion of the Irish situation and especially Konstanze Glaser’s contributions deserve mention. But I was struck too that there has not been more ‘on the ground’ qualitative research, using a wider range of methodological approaches. For example, the in-depth audience research that Mike Cormack calls for (and on which I wrote an unsuccessful proposal for Scottish Television over twenty years ago) is surely long overdue. Like the institutional initiatives discussed, the broad field of research on contemporary Gaelic sometimes seems less coordinated and aware of other research and conceptual developments than it might be. But here, of course, is precisely the

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value of this book. By bringing together some of the best of ongoing work, it makes it easier for scholars to know what is going on beyond their own disciplines; though the editor might have made more of this important opportunity to overview and consolidate the state of research by writing a more substantial introduction.

This book's own politics of language deserve note. **Revitalising Gaelic in Scotland** contains sixteen substantive chapters – seven Gaelic, nine English. An English summary is provided for each of the Gaelic chapters, but no Gaelic summary for the English chapters. The title, introduction and notes on contributors are English-only. Thus while on the one hand the book makes the editor's political point about Gaelic as a means of expression for those who wish to use it, it does not grant it equal status. Okay, anybody who can read the English article will not *need* a Gaelic summary but this surely feeds into the utilitarian mindset that Wilson McLeod so denounces. Yet the non-equivalence is also indicative of the different sizes of the worlds that can be reached by the two languages. Fewer than 40,000 people in Scotland reported as able to read Gaelic at the 2001 Census and of these many would surely struggle as much as I did with the Gaelic chapters here – not because they are particularly obtuse but because, as academic articles, they inevitably contain some relatively unfamiliar vocabulary and concepts. In an academic world in which many scholars all around the world seek to write articles in English in order to maximise their potential readership and the impact of their ideas – this volume itself containing excellent examples from German scholars writing in English – it is hard not to see the publication of Gaelic-only articles as paradoxically contributing to the language's, and topic's, marginalisation. Short summaries – while useful as abstracts – do insufficient justice to the richness of the articles themselves.

Like legal and institutional initiatives on Gaelic, then, this book contains paradoxes, lesser-developed areas and much that deserves debate. Wilson McLeod has done a great service by bringing some excellent work to wider attention. Future research must build on the best of what has gone before. And this book must be read – and debated – by all those involved or interested in Gaelic policy, and the future of Gaelic in Scotland.

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