

INTRODUCTION: CULTURAL INTERSECTIONS ACROSS THE IRISH SEA

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In the article “Ireland and Scotland” (1904), Scottish author and Gaelic-language activist Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar writes:

A very interesting chapter in the history of international relations would be the narrative of those anciently subsisting between Ireland and Scotland. There exists abundant material for such a compilation; and we are inclined to marvel that no one has yet undertaken it, at least in a formal and connected way. [...] As a nation, we hear little of Ireland; and that which we do hear is obviously “cooked” for our consumption.¹

He also notes that Scottish periodicals, even those focused on Gaelic affairs, pay surprisingly scarce attention to Ireland, and that there seems to be little willingness to cooperate and exchange experience in relation to linguistic and cultural revivalist efforts in both countries, given their evident closeness and shared experience.

Ireland and Gaelic Scotland have been often perceived as closely related, sister nations – and the poem “Dùn nan Gall” (Donegal) by Derick Thomson, discussed in one essay included in this volume, explores this sibling image in a startling manner when the two languages, Irish and Scottish Gaelic, are envisaged as two sisters dying in each other’s arms. The grounds for this vision of close familial link

¹ Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar [signed as REM], “Ireland and Scotland,” *Guth na Bliadhna* 1, no. 2 (1904): 197-99. In academic sources, both “Mar” and “Marr” occur. Throughout this issue, in keeping with Derick Thomson’s entry for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, the former was adopted for consistency.

include the shared Celtic heritage and learned culture which would up to the eighteenth century emerge in the so-called classical Gaelic in both countries, involvement in the Jacobite rebellions, and, with important differences in context and scale kept in mind, also the impact of famine and eviction in the nineteenth century, experience of statelessness and diasporic existence across the globe, and struggle to extricate themselves from the British Empire and its legacies – a project in which the Scots were also deeply and influentially involved.

Not surprisingly, there is also an element of competition between the siblings, from the disputed claims to Ossianic lore sparked by James Macpherson's publications in the 1760s,² to the widespread perception that Gaelic culture and language were imported from Ireland and are thus in some way derivative and subordinate. The perceptions of these early influences continues to develop: as Gilbert Márkus notes, "the picture of a Gaelic migration from Ireland to Scotland dominated the historical imaginations of medieval writers and, until recently, of modern historians too," but recent archaeological evidence challenges this migration narrative and the idea of a one-way export of Gaelic language from Ireland to Scotland and suggests that it is more productive to "imagine Ireland and western Scotland as a single linguistic zone in which Gaelic evolved."³

The close links and similarities are singled out from among just as obvious and far-reaching divergences. In the realm of religion, the Reformation in the sixteenth century and the further changes in the religious landscape of the Highlands and Islands in the nineteenth century, with strong impact of radical evangelical churches, seemed to pull Scotland away from Catholic Ireland. Over the last hundred years, Irish affairs have been unfolding within the context of an independent state, which progressively disentangled itself from ties to the British Commonwealth and has furthered its European integration, whilst Scotland, in spite of the progress of devolution, remains, as Murray Pittock puts it, a country but not a state, "one of the longest-lived of all global nations yet hardly counted by some to be a nation at all,"⁴ and its links to Europe have recently been undermined by Brexit. Ireland thus provides a close example of a country that managed to obtain independence, which then shaped its experience of such milestones as World War II, and, from the point of view of Gaelic, it allows Scottish

² For an overview of the debate, see John Francis Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, vol. IV, facsimile ed. (Hounslow: Wildwood House, 1984).

³ Gilbert Márkus, *Conceiving a Nation: Scotland to AD 900* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017) 78-79.

⁴ Murray Pittock, *Scotland: A Global History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022) 1.

activists to observe how Irish-language revitalisation efforts unfold in the context of a sovereign republic which is professedly supportive of the language and seeks to present it as a vital part of Irish national identity.

For all the shared experience and mutual inspiration through difference, there are also much darker undertones to Irish-Scottish relations. Prior to the twentieth century, Scots were deeply involved in British imperial endeavours. An early instance of this is the Ulster plantation during the reign of James I, when many Scottish Protestants were given the land of dispossessed Catholics in the north of Ireland. This, in turn, led to the notorious massacres during the 1641 Rebellion, and contributed to the violence which has not yet entirely subsided in Northern Ireland until this day. As Michael Brown has noted,

the translation of Scottish experience onto Irish soil – and vice versa – is not without a kind of mental dissonance. Rather, this kind of translation of peoples from one location to another has repeatedly created frontier fights and demarcation disputes. This simple fact confronts us with the ways in which Irish-Scottish relations are rarely without mutual suspicion, antagonism and recrimination. And at the heart of this interpretive line is the Rising of 1641, the nuclear meltdown of Irish-Scottish relations. Ulster here becomes not a utopian melting pot of assimilation but a dystopian charnel house of atrocity: an eerie and uncanny foreshadowing of the traumas of the Troubles.⁵

Brown further observes that Irish-Scottish studies are thus concerned with “an interrogation of mass dislocation, the conundrums of empire and nation, and the transfer of cultures.”⁶ In this volume, the more sinister sides of Irish-Scottish relations are primarily addressed in Christopher Whyte’s essay on Irish immigrant experience in Glasgow.

Some hundred and twenty years on from Erskine’s complaint, comparative study of Ireland and Scotland is a vibrant and growing field of research. To list just a few examples, Ray Ryan brought together an unusual selection of writers, William McIlvanney, Iain Crichton Smith, Dermot Bolger, Thomas McCarthy, and Colm Tóibín, in the study *Ireland and Scotland: Literature and Culture, State and Nation 1966-2000* (2002). A dedicated journal, *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies*,

⁵ Michael Brown, “Outwith the Pale: Irish-Scottish Studies as an Act of Translation,” in *Modern Scottish and Irish Poetry*, ed. Peter Mackay, Edna Longley, and Fran Brearton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 316.

⁶ Brown, “Outwith the Pale” 317.

was founded in 2006 at the University of Aberdeen Press with the aim “to promote understanding of the interlocking and comparative experience of the peoples of Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland as well as examining their global reach and influence.”⁷ The collective monograph *Modern Irish and Scottish Poetry* (2011), edited by Peter Mackay, Fran Brearton, and Edna Longley, was envisaged and realised with the expectation that the Irish-Scottish comparisons may, in Longley’s words, “shake up the aesthetic kaleidoscope” and “clarify where nationality has poetic meaning, and where it obscures other kinds of meaning,” apart from the obvious benefits of examining a wide array of authors subjects through diverse critical approaches.⁸

The topic is also not new in the history of *Litteraria Pragensia*. This is the second issue dedicated to the subject, following on *Irish-Language and Scottish Gaelic Literatures: A Global Context* (2018), and also on *Celtic Languages in a Globalised World* (2020) which has a strong Irish-Scottish bent, with some contributions on Welsh and Breton.⁹ The present issue brings together new research in the field presented during the symposium “Cultural Links between Irish and Scottish Gaelic,” held at Charles University in Prague on 11 November 2022. The contributions, and resulting essays collected here, explored various aspects of these links, mostly in the realm of literature and culture but often with important political overlaps, both in the narrow and broad sense. The symposium was complemented by a reading of Irish and Scottish Gaelic poetry translated into Czech; three contributors to this volume – Peter Mackay, Alan Titley, and Christopher Whyte – are also practising authors of poetry and fiction, as well as translators and critics, and to various extent, their essays involve personal reflections and are informed by their participation in the Irish and Scottish literary scene.

Gerard Cairns discusses the Irish inspirations, literary and political, of Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar (1869-1960), paying special attention to his interaction with Patrick Pearse, his responses to the Anglo-Irish school of drama, especially in the context of Erskine’s own vision of Gaelic drama in Scotland and its revivalist potential, and to his belief in the re-introduction of the High King of Ireland. The essay uses the intersections with Ireland to shed a new light on Erskine’s life and career, and,

⁷ “About the Journal,” *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies*, accessed 16 May 2023, <https://jiss.aberdeennunipress.org>.

⁸ Edna Longley, “Introduction,” *Modern Scottish and Irish Poetry*, ed. Peter Mackay, Edna Longley, and Fran Brearton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 16.

⁹ *Irish-Language and Scottish Gaelic Literatures: A Global Context*, *Litteraria Pragensia* 28, no. 55 (July 2018), ed. Radvan Markus and Petra Johana Poncarová; *Celtic Languages in a Globalized World*, *Litteraria Pragensia* 30, no. 59 (July 2020), ed. Radvan Markus and Petra Johana Poncarová.

through him, on the Irish influence on Scottish political and cultural revival in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Two mirror essays focus on major writers and intellectuals who themselves reflected on the links between the two countries – Petra Johana Poncarová explores the long-term interest in Ireland in the works of the Scottish poet, scholar, and Gaelic-language champion Ruaraidh MacThòmais (Derick Thomson, 1921-2012), and Radvan Markus takes up the engagement with Scotland in the writing of Máirtín Ó Cadhain (1906-1970), a foremost representative of modernism in Irish-language fiction. Both Thomson and Ó Cadhain were keen to learn from successful practices in the other country, and their interest was informed and based on broad reading and discerning awareness. Both were intent on promoting engagement with other Celtic languages and with Europe as part of the revivalist efforts, and sought to position themselves as international writers, while remaining committed to the cause of their respective languages.

Ó Cadhain makes references to Scotland in his most important literary manifesto, *Páipéir Bhána agus Páipéir Bhreaca* (1969), and Markus's essay traces further evidence of this interest in a series of twenty-four articles, mostly in Irish, which Ó Cadhain published in the *Irish Times* in 1953-1954. In these, he draws on his own visits to Scotland, and discusses the history and prospects of Scottish Gaelic, as well as the Scottish struggle for autonomy within the UK. Poncarová presents a comprehensive overview of Thomson's lifelong interest in Ireland, including essays and academic work, the extensive Irish-related content in the quarterly magazine *Gairm*, which Thomson founded and edited, his translations of Irish literature into Gaelic, and tributes to his fellow poets in Ireland.

Caoimhe Nic Lochlainn examines depictions of Scotland in twentieth-century Irish-language prose across a range of genres, including fiction, autobiography, travel writing, translations, and children's literature, focusing on the works of Séamus Ó Grianna, Íosóld Ní Dheirg, Eibhlín Ní Mhurchú, Cathal Ó Sándair, and others. She reveals that in their works, Scotland assumes a number of roles, becoming a place of toil and an economic imperative on the one hand, but also an area of free time pursuit, adventure, and transgression on the other. The essay further explores how these texts and authors represent Scotland in terms of space, language, culture, and religion. Of special interest is the inclusion of materials from the archive of the state publisher An Gúm, which give us valuable information about the reception of many of these works. Nic Lochlainn argues for the importance of teenage fiction in this context as it offers the greatest variety of approaches to the Scottish theme.

The focus on setting and location is also central to the essay by Alan Titley, who provides an overview of a wide range of fiction written by authors from Irish

and Scottish-Gaelic-speaking islands and set in them, from autobiographies of Peig Sayers, Catriona NicNèill, and Ealasaid Chaimbeul to recent (often genre) fiction, especially the novels of Proinsias Mac a' Bhaird and Iain Finlay MacLeod. By engaging with them, Titley outlines the changing perception and positioning of the Scottish and Irish archipelagos, and their oscillation between centrality and peripherality. He argues that while the first writers aimed to document the 'pristine' life on the islands and salvage the wealth of language preserved there, the more recent generation makes islands a centre of a universe of their own making, exploring larger questions in a limited, manageable setting. Titley's emphasis on genre fiction ties in well with Nic Lochlainn's argument – it is often useful to look beyond the established canon in order to find novel ideas.

Two essays explore the migratory aspect of Scottish-Irish links and diasporic presence of Irish people in Scotland. Peter Mackay focuses on the recent poetic connections between the two countries in a number of Irish poets living in and writing from Scotland, including the polyglot work of the Dublin-born and Skye-based Rody Gorman, who writes in Scottish and Irish Gaelic, the diasporic Gaelic writing of Niall O'Gallagher, the Gaelic and Irish peregrinations of David Wheatley, and the "minoritized diasporic" position of poets in English such as Alan Gillis and Miriam Gamble. The essay examines the work of these writers who, as Mackay argues, "often fit only awkwardly, if at all, within the established Irish communities around the country," and who are not fully claimed by either country.

Christopher Whyte revisits his experiences of growing up in Catholic Glasgow and through a wide range of cultural references, ranging from Richard Strauss's music and Rilke's correspondence to the work of Kenyan author and academic Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, explores disidentification, amnesia, and exclusion from cultural representation. He uses personal experience and references to his own poetry reflecting on these to raise issues relevant for a whole community, outlining the twofold mechanism of exclusion he experienced, as a Scot within the larger unit of the United Kingdom, and as the descendant of immigrants who were perceived as Irish rather than Scottish, foreigners in terms of their religion within the context of the city of Glasgow. While the essay does not in any way shirk from the traumas and controversial issues in Scottish history, it offers a positive and creative vision for the future, based on the potential of internal differences to enrich a common culture.

When read together, the essays yield more connections – and more divergences between the two countries, their cultures, and languages, and the challenges they face. In relation to the two Gaels, these include the close and all-pervading influence of English, the numerical smallness of the communities involved in literature and poetry in terms of authors, readers, and critics, and dilemmas

related to translation. As Gilbert Márkus put it, “the North Channel of the Irish Sea had been for centuries a highway for the movement of people and goods, and so for cultural exchange.”¹⁰ The essays in this issue seek to explore some of the traffic that occurred on this highway in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

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¹⁰ Márkus, *Conceiving a Nation* 79.