

DERICK THOMSON AND IRELAND

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14712/2571452X.2023.65.3>

Abstract: This essay examines the diverse manifestations of a lifelong interest in Ireland in the work of the Scottish Gaelic poet, scholar, and activist Ruaraidh MacThòmais (Derick Thomson, 1921-2012). It touches upon Thomson's academic engagement with Irish-related topics and follows his comments on the situation of the Irish language and revitalisation efforts in his "manifesto" essay "The Role of the Writer in a Minority Culture" (1966) and other articles, where it serves as a source of inspiration and a point of contrast. Detailed attention is paid to the generous space which was devoted to Irish affairs and literature in the Gaelic quarterly magazine *Gairm* which Thomson co-founded and steered for fifty years (1952-2002), including his reviews of Irish-related publications. Drawing on references in *Gairm* and in Thomson's poetry collections, the essay also brings together evidence of his personal contacts with Irish writers and intellectuals, including Máirtín Ó Direáin, and of his sustained engagement with W.B. Yeats.

Keywords: Ruaraidh MacThòmais (Derick Thomson), Ireland, revival, *Gairm*, Máirtín Ó Direáin, William Butler Yeats

The link between Ireland and Gaelic-speaking Scotland has been a vital and complex one for centuries, and across the sea, Belfast from Kintyre and Co. Antrim from Islay seem closer and more accessible than Edinburgh. From the thirteenth up to the eighteenth century, the countries shared a high literary bardic culture and a language in which it was produced. There is evidence of "bardic circuits" that brought Irish poets to Scotland and vice versa from the fifteenth century,¹ including Giolla Críost Brúilingeach, and comparable cultural exchanges have continued, both in an informal and official manner, in the twentieth and twenty-first century.

¹ Derick Thomson, *An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989) 21.

The closeness of the languages and cultures coincides with some notable differences in religion and politics. The strong links with Catholic Ireland were to an extent severed by the Scottish Reformation and by the Evangelical movement in the Highlands and Islands in the nineteenth century,² but were retained in prevalently Catholic islands in the Hebrides and also in Glasgow. The Irish struggle for devolution and independence, the establishment of the Republic of Ireland, and the new possibilities for language and cultural revival it brought about have served as a source of inspiration for Scotland, a close model to look up to but also to learn from unsuccessful steps.

Many twentieth-century Scottish Gaelic intellectuals and authors kept an eye on the developments in Ireland. Author and activist Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar (1869-1960) had personal contacts with Irish radicals, most notably Patrick Pearse, and closely followed cultural trends, including the activities around the Abbey Theatre. Poet Somhairle MacGill-Eain (Sorley MacLean, 1911-1996), who had a keen interest in Irish radical politics, manifested in poems such as “Seamus Ó Conghaile” (James Connolly) and “Àrd-mhusaeum na h-Èireann” (The National Museum of Ireland) which celebrate Connolly,³ the Edinburgh-born socialist and one of the leaders of the Easter Rising, and also in the works of W.B. Yeats, whose poetry addressing unfulfilled love and political commitment constitutes one of the most important intertexts to MacLean’s *Dàin do Eimhir* (Poems to Emer, 1943).

However, the connections to Ireland in the diverse work of Ruaraidh MacThòmais (Derick Thomson, 1921-2012), although less generally known, were just as important and took on even more forms. Thomson was one of the personalities who shaped Gaelic Scotland in the second half of the twentieth century as a poet, scholar, editor, and organiser, and he combined commitment to Gaelic revitalisation efforts and Scottish political independence with consistent pro-European orientation and focus on high standards and cosmopolitan impulses. This essay outlines the main areas in which Thomson’s interest in Ireland manifested itself, including his academic work, journalism, translations, and his own poetry.

² Ian Grimble, “Introduction,” *The Future of the Highlands*, ed. Derick Thomson and Ian Grimble (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968) 12.

³ See Niall O’Gallagher, “MacLean in the Museum: James Connolly and ‘Àrd-mhusaeum na h-Èireann,’” in *Scotland and the Easter Rising: Fresh Perspectives on 1916*, ed. Kirsty Lusk and Willy Maley (Edinburgh: Luath, 2016) 149-52.

Essays and Academic Work

In the essay "The Role of the Writer in a Minority Culture" (1966), Thomson consistently refers to examples from other countries and regions.⁴ He devotes most space to Wales, where he lived and taught at the beginning of his academic career, and his engagement with Welsh literature, culture, and revitalisation efforts would be a fitting subject for a detailed separate discussion, but Ireland comes next in frequency. When commenting on the degree to which a minority culture comes to terms with its majority neighbour(s) and with contemporary world, he brings together the Aran Islands and the Hebrides: "If the minority culture is conservative and backward-looking it may conserve its ethos in isolation for a time – as, let us say, in the Aran Isles (off the west coast of Ireland) until the 1930s, or parts of the Scottish Hebrides until the last war."⁵

Thomson is well-aware of the impact of political independence on cultural and linguistic revitalisation efforts, and argues that in the situation when information and instruction is disseminated in a language other than that of the minoritized culture,

part of the bread and butter may be taken out of the writer's mouth in a country which gives no official recognition to its minority language or languages. This situation is not closely linked to the number of speakers of these languages, for we see that Ireland employs many people to translate the proceedings of its legislature, and the edicts of Civil Service, into Irish, and some of these are also creative writers of note [...].⁶

He does not mention any specific examples, but since a number of notable writers pursued a career in the Irish civil service, he could have easily had in mind Brian Ó Nualláin (Flann O'Brien), Séamus Ó Grianna, and Máirtín Ó Cadhain, but most likely the reference is to Máirtín Ó Direáin, whom Thomson knew personally, as discussed later in this essay.

In his deliberations about the writer's role, Thomson considers not only those who choose to participate in revitalisation efforts and adopt the minoritized language, but also the situation of authors whose work is influenced by the close coexistence of two cultures, noting examples where this pull has enriched English-

⁴ Derick Thomson, "The Role of the Writer in a Minority Culture," *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* XLIV (1964-1966): 256-71.

⁵ Thomson, "The Role of the Writer" 261.

⁶ Thomson, "The Role of the Writer" 260.

language literature in Ireland and Britain, including W.B. Yeats. He mentions Seán Ó Faoláin (1900-1991), the acclaimed short story writer and co-founder of *The Bell* as one of those who reflect the bilingualism of their lives in using two languages in their work,⁷ and chooses Seán O'Casey, for "venting his spleen on Mother Ireland,"⁸ to illustrate the tendency in which the fiercest attacks on the minoritized culture occur in the border zones. The English-born poet, scholar, and translator from Irish Robin Flower (1881-1946) is singled out by Thomson as an example of a writer "attracted to a culture not their own" who made a productive contribution to it.⁹ Thomson thus showed appreciation of the role of second-language users in the promotion of minoritized languages, which also characterised the outlook of the magazine *Gairm*. In parallel to the term Anglo-Irish, Thomson considers the usefulness of employing the term Anglo-Scottish to differentiate between the Scottish culture produced in English and the traditions of Gaelic and Scots.

Both major research concerns which run through Thomson's academic career have an Irish dimension: one is the work of the eighteenth-century poet Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair (Alexander Macdonald), whose most famous poem "Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill" (The Birlinn of Clanranald) follows a sea journey from South Uist to Carrickfergus. Macdonald was also personally involved in the 1745 Jacobite rising, which received support from Ireland and strongly influenced Irish history and politics. Thomson's other major academic interest are the Ossianic publications by Seumas Mac a' Phearsain (James Macpherson), which draw on the shared lore and ballads of Scotland and Ireland.¹⁰ The awareness of this shared tradition also comes forward in Thomson's poetic tributes to two Irish colleagues, which are discussed below in more detail.

Another topic Thomson followed in his scholarly capacity was Gaelic poetry up to the eighteenth century, the manuscripts in which it survived, such as the Books of Clanranald and the Book of the Dean of Lismore, and the poets represented in these collections, in particular the MacMhuirich bards. He contributed entries on these topics to *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland*, which he edited, and wrote a number of substantial essays on them, including "The MacMhuirich Bardic Family" (*Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* XLIII: 1966), "The Poetry of Niall MacMhuirich" (*TGSI* XLV: 1971), and "Niall Mòr

⁷ The choice of Ó Faoláin is curious, as he is not known for working extensively in both languages, and his main output in fiction is in English only.

⁸ Thomson, "The Role of the Writer" 269.

⁹ Thomson, "The Role of the Writer" 269.

¹⁰ For an overview of Thomson's publications, see the bibliography in James Gleasure and Colm Ó Baoill, ed., *Féill-sgríbhinn do Ruaraidh MacThòmais – Festschrift for Professor Derick S. Thomson*, *Scottish Gaelic Studies* XVII (Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen, 1996).

MacMhuirich" (*TGSI XLIX*: 1977).¹¹ Niall MacMhuirich, who died in 1722, was the last poet to write in Classical Gaelic in Scotland, and his passing epitomizes the end of this particular chapter of cultural links between the two countries.

Irish Influences and Content in *Gairm*

It is likely that Irish initiatives, such as the small independent publishing house *Sáirséal agus Dill* (founded in 1947), which significantly contributed to the development of modern Irish-language literature, and the magazine *Comhar* (established in 1942), which published new writing in Irish alongside cultural and social commentary and also brought out several books each year, could have inspired the all-Gaelic quarterly *Gairm* (1952-2002). Thomson co-founded the magazine with producer and author Fionnlagh I. Mac Dhòmhnaill (Finlay J. MacDonald, 1925-1987) and continued to steer and edit for the fifty years of its existence. *Gairm* played a fundamental role in promoting modern poetry and short story in Gaelic, and it also provided space for literary criticism, discussions of current affairs, both Scottish and international, and translations from other languages into Gaelic, as part of the effort to strengthen the links between Gaelic Scotland and the world. Given this commitment to a broad cosmopolitan perspective and the strong impact of Thomson's own interests on the magazine, it is no surprise that throughout the decades, *Gairm* featured a substantial amount of Irish-related content.

In the article "Blàth Ùr air an t-Seann Stoc (A' Ghàidhlig an Èirinn)" [New Blossom on the Old Stump (Gaelic in Ireland)], which appeared in *Gairm* 29 (1959), Thomson discusses language revitalisation efforts in Ireland in some detail. He points out how difficult it is to assess the success of these initiatives: according to some estimates, only 35,000 people in Ireland used Irish naturally in their daily life, and in that case, Irish as the language of family communication would be in grave peril, and in much worse a state than Gaelic in Scotland, with almost 90,000 users. However, Thomson notes that hundreds of thousands of people in Ireland have some command of Irish, be it basic or advanced, which they acquired thanks to the diverse learning opportunities, with many of them equally competent in both languages. He also mentions the importance of the recently published English-Irish dictionary, edited by Tomás de Bhaldraithe and brought out by the Irish Stationery Office, and singles it out as one of the most important books to have appeared for years, in the sense of practical impact on the future of the language.

¹¹ "Bibliography," *Fèill-sgrìbhinn do Ruairidh MacThòmais* 4-23.

Thomson also uses Ireland as a point of contrast in the essay “Tìr na Gàidhlig ann a Linn na h-Ola” [The Land of Gaelic in the Age of Oil] from *Gairm* 87 (1974), which proposes practical steps and policies that would help Gaelic in the transformed conditions after the discovery of North Sea oil in the 1970s:

Tha sinn ann a suidheachadh annasach an dràsta a thaobh staid na Gàidhlig ann an Albainn. Tha a’ Ghàidhlig, mar gum b’ eadh, a’ fàs ‘s a’ crìonadh aig an aon àm, agus a rèir ‘s dè an t-sùil a bheir sinn oirre gheibh sinn dà shealladh dhi a tha glè aocoltach ri chèile. Gheibh duine an dà shealladh sin ann an Èirinn cuideachd, far a bheil Gaeilge a’ crìonadh air taobh an iar na dùthcha agus nas trice air beul an t-sluaigh na shaoileadh tu an iomadh àite, oir thug na h-Èireannaich rud math de dh’urram dhi ‘nan obair riaghlaidh, anns na pàipearan ‘s mar sin. Cha robh iad ga cumail a dh’aon ghnothaich airson Là an Naoimh Pàdraig, ach ga cur ri d’ aghaidh gach uair a thadhhladh tu Oifis Puist no bus-àros.

[We are in a strange situation regarding the state of Gaelic in Scotland at the moment. It is as if Gaelic was growing and withering at the same time, and depending on our perspective, we will get two very dissimilar views. The same two views can be observed in Ireland too, where Irish is withering in the west part of the country, but more than one would expect, it is spoken by people in a number of other places, for the Irish have given the language a good deal of recognition in legislation, in the papers, and in other fields. They were not keeping the language for St Patrick’s Day, but rather put it in people’s face every time they visit the post office or the bus station.]¹²

The editorials to *Gairm*, in most cases either co-authored by Thomson or written by him and from 1977 onwards basically his opinion column, often discussed the situation of Gaelic in Scotland and made frequent references to Irish revitalisation policies and initiatives, such as the emergence of Irish-language films, book clubs that help to increase the number of volumes published every year, and provisions for Irish in the media, especially in relation to broadcasting and television. In the editorials, Ireland is presented as a commendable example and a source of readily adoptable steps and policies.

¹² Ruairidh MacThòmais, “Tìr na Gàidhlig ann a Linn na h-Ola,” *Gairm* 87 (1974): 209. All translations from *Gairm* in this essay are my own.

In the editorial to *Gairm* 76 (1971), Thomson commented on the continuation of bardic circuits in Scotland and Ireland, and notes that three Irish poets, namely Máirtín Ó Direáin, Caitlín Maude, and Seán Ó Tuama, and likely also Eoghan Ó Néill, will be coming to Scotland in October, thanks to the support of the Scottish Arts Council, in order to read alongside Scottish colleagues in several cities, and that this visit follows on a preceding tour of Scottish poets in Ireland. The editorial mentions the warm welcome they received in Ireland, especially the involvement of young people with the Irish language and the surprising but encouraging fact that they were “a’ gabhail ri bàrdachd mar gum b’ e T.V. no pop a bh’ ann” [taking to poetry as if it were TV or pop music].¹³ The visit of the Scottish poets to Ireland was reported on in more detail in the article “Bàird Ghàidhealach ann an Èirinn” [Scottish Gaelic Poets in Ireland] by Eoghan Ó Néill, which appeared in the same issue.

Gairm 171 (1995) was something of a special Irish issue, featuring the article “Na Bàird Normanach-Gaeilge an Èirinn” [The Norman-Irish Bards in Ireland] by Uilleam Néill (William Neill) and translations of thirteen poems by Ó Direáin by Rody Gorman. Both Neill and Gorman were prominent contributors of Irish-related content to *Gairm*, as discussed below in more detail. In the editorial to the issue, Thomson emphasises the longstanding and strong links and equally important distinctions between the two countries – “tha an ceangal eadar Albainn is Èirinn a’ dol air ais co-dhiù còig ceud bliadhna deug, agus a’ Ghàidhlig agus a’ Ghaeilge a’ nochdadh ceanglaichean is sgaraidhean fad na h-ùine sin” [the link between Scotland and Ireland goes back at least fifteen hundred years, and Scottish Gaelic and Irish Gaelic reveal connections and differences all this time],¹⁴ noting in particular that despite the contentious view of some Irish scholars that Scottish Gaelic is a mere dialect of Irish, they are in fact two separate languages both evolved from Old Irish, and while one learned language was used by poets in both countries for centuries, the spoken idiom and folk literature started to diverge long before the sixteenth century. The fact that many Irish users read *Gairm* is noted with satisfaction, and Thomson encourages users of Scottish Gaelic to pay similar attention to Irish periodicals, but finishes with the reminder that cooperation and mutual support should not preclude a strong hold of Scotland and Ireland on their own affairs.

Some discussions of topics related to the revitalisation of Irish and developments in Irish-language writing were also supplied by Irish contributors,¹⁵

¹³ Ruairidh MacThòmais, “Air an Spiris,” *Gairm* 76 (1971): 297.

¹⁴ Ruairidh MacThòmais, “Air an Spiris,” *Gairm* 171 (1995): 201-202.

¹⁵ Also in this sense, *Gairm* followed on the activities of Erskine of Mar, who managed to involve several Irish contributors in his quarterly *Guth na Bliadhna* (The Year’s Voice), including Patrick Pearse and Pádraig Ua Duinnín.

such as “An Coimisean mu Ath-Bheothachadh na Gàidhlig Èireannaich” [The Commission on the Revitalisation of Irish] by Donncha Ó Laoire, “An tÈireannach in Albain (Ann an Gàidhlig na h-Èireann)” [An Irishman in Scotland (in Irish Gaelic)] by Breandán Ó Doibhlin, and “Sgrìobhadh anns an Nòs Ùr an Gaeilge na h-Èireann” [Modern Writing in Irish] by Pádraig Ó Conchúir.¹⁶ In the 2000s, *Gairm* also ran advertisements for Irish-language courses in Belfast, promoting practical understanding between the users of the two languages and thus broadening the readership for publications in both.

Irish Literature in *Gairm*

Over the years, *Gairm* published a number of translations of Irish literature into Gaelic. The individual texts were not commissioned by the editors but rather reflect the interests and inclinations of the individual authors, who were often second-language users of Gaelic. One of the most active contributors of Irish-related content was poet William Neill (1922-2010) whose translations include some of the most famous works of eighteenth-century Irish poetry, including Brian Merriman’s “Cùirt a’ Mheadhain-Oidhche” (Midnight Court), “Am Bunnan Buidhe” (The Yellow Bittern) by Cathal Bú Mac Giolla Ghunna, the lament of Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, and poems by Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin and Seán Ó Conaill. Irish topics inspired Neill’s own poetry, including “Aisling Shuibhne” (Sweeney’s Dream) which appeared in *Gairm* 73 (1970), and he also wrote an article about “Turas nam Bàrd ann an Èirinn” [The Poets’ Tour of Ireland] for *Gairm* 83 (1973). The Dublin-born poet and translator Rody Gorman (1960), who has been based in Scotland for decades, reported on new Irish-language books and contributed translations, including the already-mentioned selection of Ó Direáin’s poetry and also poems by Michael Davitt, Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh, Colette Ní Ghallchóir, and Alan Tílely. Irish fiction was represented in *Gairm* thanks to Steaphan Camhlaigh, who in the 1990s and early 2000s prepared Gaelic versions of three short stories by Pádraic Ó Conaire and also “A’ Bhuille” (The Blow) by Liam Ó Flaithearta,¹⁷ and Dennis King translated an extract from *An Béal Bocht* by Myles na gCopaleen.¹⁸

¹⁶ The references to the individual articles are available via the project *Gairm Air-Loidhne / Gairm Online*, <https://dasg.ac.uk/gairm>.

¹⁷ The stories by Ó Conaire were: “Nell,” “Mo Bhàrd Caol Dubh” (My Poet Dark and Slender), and “A’ Bhean air an do Leig Dia a Làmh” (The Woman on Whom God Laid His Hand). Another story by Ó Conaire, “Anam an Easbaig” (The Bishop’s Soul), appeared in a translation by Peadar Morgan in *Gairm* 163 (1993).

¹⁸ The complete overview of the contributions by Camhlaigh, Neill, and Gorman, including references, is available via <https://dasg.ac.uk/gairm>.

Some of these translations were later republished as part of the anthology *Bàrdachd na Roinn-Eòrpa an Gàidhlig / European Poetry in Gaelic*, which Thomson instigated and edited.¹⁹ The volume is divided according to languages. The section “Gaeilge” includes “Is Mise Raifteri” (I Am Raftery), attributed to Antaine Raiftearaí, translated by poet and polyglot Deòrsa Mac Iain Dheòrsa (George Campbell Hay), Neill’s Gaelic version of the Old Irish poem “Lon-dubh” (Blackbird) and an extract from Merriman’s *Midnight Court* in his Gaelic rendition. Thomson himself contributed two translations of anonymous Irish poems, “Líadan is Cuirithir” (Líadan and Cuirithir) and “Aoibhinn, a leabhráin, do thriall” (Delightful, Book, Your Trip), and four poems by W.B. Yeats.²⁰

The reviews section in *Gairm* also testifies to the effort to keep up with developments in Ireland, and many contributions that deal with Irish topics were written by Thomson himself. For *Gairm* 13 (1955), he reviewed *Drámaíocht in Éirinn* (Drama in Ireland) by Micheál Mac Liammóir (1899-1978),²¹ and examples of Irish-related publications covered in the review section over the years include a wide selection of material, from dictionaries and educational materials to poetry and fiction.²² Apart from *Gairm* reviews, Thomson also wrote about Irish literature for

¹⁹ Derick Thomson, ed., *Bàrdachd na Roinn-Eòrpa an Gàidhlig / European Poetry in Gaelic* (Glasgow: Gairm Publications, 1990).

²⁰ I discuss Thomson’s translation-related activities in the forthcoming monograph *Derick Thomson and the Gaelic Revival* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

²¹ *Gairm* 38 (1961) brought out a substantial review of Mac Liammóir’s memoir *Each Actor on His Ass* by Finlay J. MacDonald, which shows detailed awareness of Mac Liammóir’s career, and applauds his voluntary adoption of Irish identity. I discuss the connection to Mac Liammóir in more detail in *Derick Thomson and the Gaelic Revival* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

²² Over the decades, Thomson reviewed: *Studies in Irish Literature and History* by James Carney (*Gairm* 19, 1957), the philosophical dictionary *Foclóir Fealsaimh* by Colmán Ó hUallacháin (*Gairm* 30, 1959), *Dónall Óg, Taighde ar an Amhrán* (Dónall Óg, Research of the Song) by Seosamh Ó Duibhginn (*Gairm* 34, 1960), the school publications *Atlas a hAon do Scoileanna na hÉireann* and *Atlas a Dó do Scoileanna na hÉireann* (*Gairm* 98, 1977), the biology textbook *An Domhan Beo* (The Living World) by C.N. Ó Ceallacháin (*Gairm* 106, 1979), the bilingual publication *Dúlra agus Dúchas / Our Heritage* by Mícheál Mac Ginneá with illustrations by Mairéad Ní Nuadháin, issued to commemorate the centenary of Pdraig Pearse’s birth (*Gairm* 109, 1979), *Blind Raftery: Poems Selected and Translated by Críostóir Ó Floinn* (*Gairm* 184, 1998), a selection of Gaelic short stories translated into Irish by Colm Ó Baoill *Feoil an Gheimhridh agus Scéalta Eile as Albain* (Winter Meat and Other Stories from Scotland) (*Gairm* 117, 1981), the short overview of the development of Irish-language writing *Literature in Irish* by Proinsias MacCana (*Gairm* 117, 1981), Thomas Kinsella’s *The Dual Tradition*, which outlines the development of Irish poetry in

other periodicals, including the article “Recent Irish Anthologies” for *Lines Review* 52/53 (1974). The reviews bear evidence to the breadth of Thomson’s interest and reading in relation to Ireland, and his effort to keep up with the developments especially in the realm of Irish-language publications.

Irish Politics in *Gairm*

Apart from engagement with Irish literature and Irish-language revival, Thomson also followed developments in Irish politics. One of the last issues, *Gairm* 193 (2000), featured a substantial essay on James Connolly by Seonaidh MacÀdhaimh, in line with the above-mentioned sustained interest in the Edinburgh-born Irish revolutionary in Gaelic Scotland. Particular attention was paid to the tensions and violence in Northern Ireland, a part of the island which has strong and troubled links to Scotland due to the Ulster Plantation and its lasting impact on the local linguistic, political, and religious landscape.²³

As early as in *Gairm* 19 (1957), Finlay J. MacDonald published a dedicated essay “Dùthaich Roinnte na h-Aghaidh Fhéin (Suidheachadh Poileataigeach na h-Èireann)” [A Country Divided Against Itself (The Political Situation of Ireland)]. *Gairm* 79 (1972) addressed Irish politics through an innovative format: it published a discussion “Beachdan air Èirinn” [Opinions on Ireland] where Dòmhnall Iain MacLeòid (Dr Donald John MacLeod, Ardhasaig, Harris), a prolific *Gairm* contributor, asks representatives of various religious and political stances about their opinion concerning the situation of Ireland at the time of the Troubles. The respondents include Rev. Aonghas Mac a’ Ghobhainn (Angus Smith, Ness) as “a Protestant minister,” Father Cailean MacAonghais (Colin MacInnes, Oban) as “a Catholic priest,” poet Aonghas Dubh MacNeacail as “a socialist,” Ruairidh M. MacLeòid (Roderick M. MacLeod, Stornoway) as “a Tory,” Gerry Ó Dochartaigh representing Sinn Féin officials, a “Ms. Renahan of Glasgow” speaking for Sinn Féin provisionals, a “Gaelic regiment officer” providing a view of the army, scholar Colm Ó Baoill contributing a view on the army, and folklorist John Lorne Campbell of Canna commenting in the capacity of “a Gaelic scholar.” This printed discussion, apart from fulfilling the quarterly’s commitment to commenting on current topics through the medium of Gaelic,²⁴ also introduces a remarkable

both languages from the beginnings up to the present (*Gairm* 172, 1995), and *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (*Gairm* 175, 1996).

²³ See for instance Neal Ascherson, *Stone Voices: The Search for Scotland* (London: Granta, 2003) 252-56.

²⁴ I discuss the ways in which *Gairm* contributed to the development of political journalism in Gaelic in terms of subject matter, register, and formats in the chapter “Scottish and

breadth of perspective and proves that *Gairm* was indeed ready to give space to various opinions.

Northern Ireland was also discussed in *Gairm* editorials, and the editorial to *Gairm* 174 (1996) is the first of several that reveal Thomson's concern with the Troubles, in relation to military projects in different parts of the United Kingdom. Another one appeared in *Gairm* 188 (1999) which mentions the difficulties of achieving peace, and also the adverse influence of the media, especially television, on the conflict, as the coverage of the events stresses the differences between the two communities and thus deepens the mistrust. In *Gairm* 197 (2001), Thomson returned to the topic in response to the laying down of weapons on the part of the IRA and the prospect of an agreement between the Republicans and the Unionists, praising David Trimble for arranging it, and commending the continuing cooperation between parties in the Stormont parliament. He observes that the people of Northern Ireland clearly want an agreement, not a continuation of violence, and that the power balance is influenced by the fact that the IRA has lost some of its support from the USA. He concludes the editorial by praising international cooperation based on equality, in contrast with the tendency of global superpowers to govern other countries. In the editorials from 1980s onwards, Thomson discussed with increasing frequency international politics and problems of violence and human rights abuse around the globe, and the situation in Northern Ireland was addressed in this context, as a particularly close and relevant example for *Gairm* readers of the destructive outcomes of ethnic and religious hatred. The editorials reveal Thomson's detailed acquaintance with events both in the republic and in the North, the fact that his interest was not limited only to cultural and revivalist issues, and also his ability to situate Scotland and Ireland into the broader context of European and global politics.

Ireland in Thomson's Poetry

Connections to Ireland also surface in Thomson's own poetry. One of the most extended discussions of the links between Scotland and Ireland is the poem "Dùn nan Gall" (Donegal), which appeared in his second collection *Eadar Samhradh is Foghar* (Between Summer and Autumn, 1967). The opening refers to the stereotypical connections between the language and the natural environment of

International Politics in *Gairm*" in the forthcoming monograph *Scottish Magazines and Political Culture 1968-99*, ed. Eleanor Bell and Scott Hames (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).

traditionally Irish-speaking regions, in this case Donegal, the low social standing of its users, and its precarious existence:

Far a bheil a' Ghàidhlig sgrìobht air na creagan
an sin dh'fhan i,
is pàisdean luideagach ga caitheamh,
a stiallan sgaoilte air na rubhachan an iar,
os cionn na mara
far a bheil grian na h-Èireann a' dol sìos,
is grian Ameireagaidh ag èirigh le èigheachd 's caithream.

Cha bheathaich feur a' chànain seo,
chan fhàs i sultmhor an guirt no 'n iodhlainn;
fòghnaidh dhi beagan coirce 's eòrna,
cuirear grad fhuadachadh oirr' leis a' chruithneachd;
chan iarr i ach, cleas nan gobhar, a bhith sporghail
os cionn muir gorm, air na bideanan biorach.

*Where Gaelic is written on the rocks
there it has lived,
and ragged children use it;
its shreds are scattered on the western highlands,
above the sea,
where the sun of Ireland goes down
and the sun of America rises with exultant clamour.*

*Grass does not nourish this language,
it does not grow fat in fields or cornyards;
a little oats and barley suffices it,
wheat quickly frightens it away;
all it asks is to clamber, like the goats,
on sharp rocky pinnacles, above the blue sea.²⁵*

These allegedly intrinsic, fundamental features of the language, here presented with bitter irony, are in fact imposed on it by those who deem Irish unsuitable for

²⁵ Derick Thomson, "Dùn nan Gall" (Donegal), *Creachadh na Clàrsaich / Plundering the Harp* (Edinburgh: MacDonald, 1982) 102-103. Thomson's poetry is quoted in his own translations, as they appeared in the collections.

the modern era, who refuse to see it in other contexts, and thus kill it by assuming the “meagre diet” is sufficient – and the reference to starving and hunger, no matter whether intentional or not on the part of the poet, inevitably brings to mind the disturbing associations with the Great Famine.

In the concluding stanza, the language actually moves to the world of modern technology and to Lowland cities and England, referring to the massive emigration of Gaelic speakers, both from Ireland and from Scotland, in the nineteenth century, caused, among other phenomena, by the famine, the Clearances and lack of opportunity in the regions. Irish and Scottish Gaelic meet in these unfavourable environments that prove fatal to them. The personification of the language as an animal in the first two stanzas is replaced by the image of the two languages as women, referring to common revivalist discourse about Irish and Gaelic and the symbolic use of a female figure of different ages, both the fair maiden and the hag, to represent the two countries:²⁶

Gus an tog a' chlann luideagach leoth' i
air bàta-smùid a Shasainn,
no a Ghlaschu, far a faigh i bàs,
an achlais a peathar –
Gàidhlig rìoghail na h-Albann 's na h-Èireann
'na h-ìobairt-rèite air altair beairteis.

*Until the ragged children carry it away with them
on the steamer to England,
or to Glasgow, where it dies
in its sister's arms –
the royal language of Scotland and of Ireland
become a sacrifice of atonement on the altar of riches.*²⁷

Two later poems reflect Thomson's personal contacts with Irish scholars and authors. The relatively little known and seriously understudied section “Dàin às Ùr” (Latest Poems) in the collected volume *Creachadh na Clàrsaich / Plundering the Harp* (1982) includes the poem “Do Mháirtín Ó Direáin” (To Máirtín Ó Direáin). As the reflections of exchanges between Irish and Scottish poets in *Gairm* indicate,

²⁶ The same collection includes the poem “An Tobar” (The Well) which features the figure of an old woman who remembers the lost richness of Gaelic and an old way of life, and may be seen as a personification of the region and its language and culture.

²⁷ Thomson, *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 102-103.

Thomson would have known Ó Direáin personally, and the poem, which was, according to a footnote, written on 4 October 1977 in a café on Grafton Street in Dublin, on the day when Ó Direáin received the Ossian Prize for the promotion of minority languages, shows he held him in high regard:

Chuir thu Árann an sàs
ann an glanadh fuil na h-Èireann,
chuir thu casg air a' bhàs.

Chuir thu an deò
anns an fhilidheachd Ghaeilge fadó,
tha do chainnt beò.

Fear mòr
dhen Fhèinn a dh'èirich air uilinn
's a rinn glòr.

*You involved Aran
in the cleansing of Ireland's blood,
you put a stop on death.*

*You put breath
in the Irish poetry of long ago,
your language is alive.*

*Big man
of the Fianna who rose from the elbow
and made glory.²⁸*

Born and raised in an Irish-speaking family in the Aran Islands, about ten years older than Thomson himself, Ó Direáin also had an interest in European literatures. Together with Seán Ó Ríordáin and Máire Mhac an tSaoi, he is recognised as one of the poets who revitalised Irish-language poetry in the middle of the twentieth century, which is also highlighted in Thomson's appreciation. The short occasional poem works with references to the shared Ossianic lore and the images of life, death, breath, and blood, stress Ó Direáin's role in making Irish viable for the present and the future.

²⁸ Derick Thomson, "Do Mháirtín Ó Direáin" (To Máirtín Ó Direáin), *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 262.

In the 1991 collection *Smeur an Dòchais / Bramble of Hope*, Thomson included the poem “An Cuimhne Dháithí Ó hUaithne” (In Memory of David Greene). A footnote explains a dedication to David Greene (1915-1981), “Irish scholar, patriot, and unforgettable character” who “died shortly after touching down at Dublin Airport, on returning from a visit to the Faeroes.”²⁹ Greene’s career mirrors Thomson’s own in many ways, so it is not surprising he would befriend him and see him as a kindred spirit. Greene was a Celtic scholar with a long-standing interest in Wales and also in Scandinavia, especially Norway. His first appointment was as lecturer in Celtic studies at Glasgow University, so it is possible Thomson would have met him in Scotland, and later he was professor of Irish at Trinity College Dublin and at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies. He contributed regularly to the aforementioned magazine *Comhar* and was liberal in his opinions and politically active.³⁰ Like Ó Direáin and Thomson himself, he was also a recipient of the Ossian Prize, which is another reason for the prominence of Ossianic references in both poems.

Cha robh mi am Bail’ Atha Cliath
bho thàine tu nuas gu talamh
’s bho dh’fhàg thu do dheise uaine
às do dhèidh, a’ dol don dubhar
nach bu dùthchas dhut,
agus feumaidh sinn, O ’s èiginn duinn
do dhealbh a chrochadh air a’ bhalla
bho nach fhaicear d’ ìomhaigh
an taigh-seinnse, air stràid
no ann an leabharlann fionnar,
’s nach mair do càirdeas
ach ann an cridheachan diombuain.

An dèidh na Fèinne
’s beag iongnadh sinn a bhith dubhach:
Tha ’n dubhfhacal dorch dhuinn,
tha a’ chainnt gun eadar-sgaradh;
do lachan a’ dèanamh mac-talla

²⁹ Derick Thomson, “An Cuimhne Dháithí Ó hUaithne” (In Memory of David Greene), *Smeur an Dòchais / Bramble of Hope* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1991) 76-77.

³⁰ Diarmaid Ferriter, “Greene, David William,” *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, last modified October 2009, <https://doi.org/10.3318/dib.003606.v1>.

ann an uamh gun fhosgladh,
do dhòrd fo ghlais,
gun cheannsachadh do Gholiath.

*I haven't been in Dublin
since you came down to earth
leaving your green suit
behind you, going into the shade
that was not your element,
and we must hang – we have no choice –
your picture on the wall
since your features are not to be seen
in pub, or street,
or cool library,
and since your friendship lives
only in short-lived hearts.*

*Survivors of the Fian,
it is little wonder we are sad:
the conundrum remains obscure to us,
the language lacks explication;
your hearty laugh raises an echo
in an unopened cave,
your trumpet-roar is locked up under the green,
your Goliath is still untamed.³¹*

Although it is mostly a personal farewell and a tribute to the man relatable to those who knew him, it transcends its occasional nature by playing with the Ossianic references and with the given name and surname of the deceased, and by employing the powerful image of laughter echoing in a sealed cave.³² In the original, the appearance of “An Fhéinne” [Fian] and “dòrd” [call, roar] brings to mind “An Dord Féinne,” the fighting song of the Fianna from the Fenian cycle.

³¹ Thomson, *Smeur an Dòchais* 76-77.

³² Thomson also uses the imagery of confinement in a green cave in “Ged a Thillinn A-Nis” (Though I Were to Go Back Now) from *An Rathad Cian* (The Far Road, 1970): “A’ chuimhne ga mo bheathachadh, / a’ toirt orm fàs / anns an uaimh dhorch seo, / a’ feitheamh tilleadh mara, / ’s a’ crùbadh fo m’ eallach / anns an uaimh uaine seo gun ghealach.” [Fed by memory / which makes me grow / in this dark cave, / awaiting the turn of the tide, / and crouching under my load / in this green cave without moon.] *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 172-73.

Thomson and Yeats

In a review of the festschrift *Memoirs of a Modern Scotland*, a tribute to the author and poet Eachann MacIomhair (Hector MacIver, 1910-1966), which Thomson wrote for *Gairm* 71 (1970) and which is more of a personal essay about the deceased friend than an evaluation of the volume, he gives MacIver credit for introducing him to a lasting poetic influence: “Tha mi an dùil gur h-e a las ùidh dhomh ann am bàrdachd Yeats nach deach às an t-sealladh fhathast” [I think he kindled in me an interest in the poetry of Yeats which has not disappeared to this day].³³ There are indeed a number of manifestations of this preoccupation.

In the foreword to his first collection, *An Dealbh Briste* (The Broken Picture, 1951), Thomson acknowledges inspiration by Sorley MacLean, and thus, indirectly, also by Yeats, in poems dealing with unfulfilled love and the way it fuels poetry, in some cases in a perceived conflict with political commitment, such as “Seann Òran” (Old Song), “‘N e Seo an Dàn Deireannach Dhutsa?” (Is This the Final Poem for You?), “Mur B’ E ’n Saoghal Is M’ Eagal” (But for the World and My Fear), echoing both Yeats’s works that concern his unrequited love for Maude Gonne, and MacLean’s *Dàin do Eimhir*, which address a similar predicament.³⁴ “Ghluais an Raoir an Trom-laighe Mo Chuimhne” (Last Night Nightmare Moved My Memory), included in the same volume, actually mentions Yeats’s name:

Chan abair mi nochd – bu bheag a b’ fhiach leam –
athchuinge Yeats air madainn an iargain,
e smaointinn oirre-se agus ag iarraidh
freasdal do-gheibhte air cuan nam blianntan [...]

*I shall not say tonight – I little care to –
Yeats’s prayer on the morning of longing,
as he thought of her and wished for
a providence unobtainable on the sea of the years [...]*³⁵

The dark and oblique poetry from Thomson’s fourth collection *Saorsa agus an Iolair* (Freedom and the Eagle, 1977), which fuses religious and political imagery in discussions of Scottish politics and prospects of independence, comes especially

³³ Ruairaidh MacThòmais, “An Sgeilp Leabhraichean,” *Gairm* 71 (1970): 281-83.

³⁴ For a discussion of Yeats and MacLean, see Peter Mackay, *Sorley MacLean* (Aberdeen: AHRC Centre for Irish and Scottish Studies, 2010) 44-45, 47-49.

³⁵ Derick Thomson, “Ghluais an Raoir an Trom-laighe Mo Chuimhne” (Last Night Nightmare Moved My Memory), *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 56-57.

close to Yeats. The poem in “Strì Fhada” (A Long Haul) from Thomson’s *Smeur an Dòchais* features an epigraph from Yeats’s “Parnell” from *New Poems*, and his following volume *Meall Garbh / Rugged Mountain* (1995) includes the poem “Do Yeats” (Remembering Yeats), which makes references to his most famous poems, including “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” “Sailing to Byzantium,” and “The Second Coming,” surveying both Yeats’s works and Thomson’s relationship to him. The last mentioned is one of four poems by Yeats, together with “The Scholars,” “A Prayer for Old Age,” and “Easter 1916,” which Thomson translated into English and published as part of the aforementioned anthology *Bàrdachd na Roinn-Eòrpa an Gàidhlig*. These show Thomson’s skill as a translator of poetry, which comes forward in the accuracy of metre, closeness of meaning, and the exquisite sound qualities, and also his intimate knowledge of the texts and regard for them.

Conclusion

Thomson’s involvement with Ireland constitutes another part in the centuries-long close cultural exchange between Gaelic Scotland and its south-western neighbour. The different strands of Thomson’s engagement with Ireland, be it translations from Irish literature or academic engagement with Irish writing, find continuation in the work of contemporary Scottish Gaelic poets and scholars, including Niall O’Gallagher, who has translated the works of Biddy Jenkinson and other Irish-language poets into Gaelic for the magazine *STEALL*, or in the creative work of Rody Gorman, one of the prolific *Gairm* contributors. Thomson’s engagement with Ireland is inspiring in its commitment to follow developments in Irish culture and politics and to learn from successes and productive policies, in balancing close cooperation between the countries with regard for their distinctiveness, and in refusing to idealise Ireland which however does not preclude warmth and regard. More detailed biographical research into Thomson’s life is bound to shed more light on his personal contacts with Irish authors and intellectuals mentioned in this essay, and likely reveal many others. This essay sought to provide a preliminary map of the subject.

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