Material Culture found its place in the theme titles of the sessions of the fifteenth International Congress of Celtic Studies in Glasgow, 13-17 July 2015. It was explicit in the titles of six sessions, for example, ‘Material Culture & History I’, and implicit in others such as archaeology and history topics, for example, in Onomastics, Christian Landscapes, Language and the Picts, Celts, Celtic Cultures and the Celtic Revival. Hosted by the University and Department of Celtic, the 2015 congress was a huge and wide-ranging event with six plenary lectures, eleven sessions of lectures with about 340 papers, and six ‘Round Table’ groups with about 40 discussants offering and disputing recent research.

Over 25 countries were represented by almost 500 delegates. It is 56 years since the first International Congress of Celtic Studies was held in Dublin in 1959 and the four-yearly event has grown exponentially since then, meeting in Cardiff (1963), Edinburgh (1967), Rennes (1971), Penzance (1975), Galway (1979), Oxford (1983), Swansea (1987), Paris (1991), Edinburgh (1995), Cork (1999), Aberystwyth (2003), Bonn (2007) and Maynooth (2011).

An observable trend such as the appearance of ‘Material Culture’ in the intellectual arena is symptomatic of the health and vigour of Celtic Studies and of an expanding disciplinary network as represented by the International Congress today. Scanning the Proceedings from the previous thirteen events demonstrates the changing horizons of Celtic Studies. At the beginning, chiming

The interaction of intangible and tangible heritage, pointing to shortcomings in such a distinction: Edinburgh publisher Walter Blaikie’s photograph of 1899 shows a bannal or ‘band’ at the waulking board in Eriskay

The 2015 International Congress of Celtic Studies in Glasgow demonstrated the growing significance of material culture in academic discourses. Hugh Cheape, professor at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, University of the Highlands & Islands, considers the limitations and possibilities of language in adding to the interdisciplinary mix
A Gaelic approach to material culture

with the emergence of Celtic Studies over the preceding century and with roots in German philology, the focus was on linguistics, literature and textual analysis, with archaeology and its material culture as the occasional additive. This light mix reflected a prevailing archaeology paradigm for early linguistics bound up with study of the Hallstatt and La Tène cultures of Iron Age Europe. Scholars then proffered tentative links between language and concepts of origins and diffusion of Continental Celts in tracing historical roots of the Celtic languages. This in turn was shaped by 19th-century ideas about race and the peopling of Britain and Ireland in antiquity. While these archaeology exercises in material culture explored concepts of ‘Celt’ or ‘Celtic’, arguably this had little or no impact on textual analysis, with archaeology and its material culture as the occasional additive. This light mix reflected a prevailing archaeology paradigm for early linguistics bound up with study of the Hallstatt and La Tène cultures of Iron Age Europe. Scholars then proffered tentative links between language and concepts of origins and diffusion of Continental Celts in tracing historical roots of the Celtic languages. This in turn was shaped by 19th-century ideas about race and the peopling of Britain and Ireland in antiquity. While these archaeology exercises in material culture explored concepts of ‘Celt’ or ‘Celtic’, arguably this had little or no impact on textual studies and the two streams remained essentially separate.

With Iron Age ‘Celtic’ material culture, metalwork and so-called ‘celtic art’ served up so sumptuously and beguilingly in the textbooks, this now had to come with the warning that language development could not be measured against it. But modern scholars are exploring a complex of transmission and transformation by different routes and connections, and, more significantly, issues of language development are now having an impact on archaeological thinking.

In short, the proposal is now being scrutinised that the Celtic languages originated in the Atlantic zone during the Bronze Age. ‘Celts: art and identity’, the partnership exhibition between the British Museum and National Museums Scotland, and in Edinburgh since March 2016, plays of course to the gallery in terms of ‘celtic’ expectations but promises a critique of the back-projection of the word ‘celtic’ onto broad swathes of a cultural past extending, it is claimed, over 2,500 years.

The 2015 Celtic Studies Congress programme shows how the horizons have changed and are changing, and how Celtic Studies are engaging with new disciplinary fields and tranches of evidence. My paper in the Congress, on ‘a Gaelic approach to material culture studies’, was designed to demonstrate aspects of this engagement. Equally, it aimed to serve the notion of a material culture approach to Gaelic or Celtic Studies, and to open up ‘material’ references and dimensions in philology and lexicography. A personal interest in the potential of material culture for a multidisciplinary discourse derives from long-term service in the National Museums Scotland and familiarity with museum collections and methodologies. Drawing on this, a ‘Gaelic approach’ to the subject of material culture studies is implicit in the term ‘Cultar Dùthchasach’ that denotes and connotes the current postgraduate MSc programme at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. The course lays claim to innovation on two counts, in the application – as a term to embrace the material or ‘traditional’ culture of the world of the Gàidhealtachd, whether of the Society of the Highlands and Islands, the Gàidhealtachd society of the towns and cities or the Gàidhealtachd society of a diaspora, particularly those overseas communities that evolved as a direct result of the era of clearance and emigration. ‘Cultar Dùthchasach’ has been adopted also to translate ‘material culture’, insofar as the term might now be in common usage in a Gaelic context. The term ‘Cultar Dùthchasach’ might not be an entirely satisfactory equivalent for ‘material culture’, not conveying the same sense of ‘tangible cultural heritage’ (expected of the anglophone world) and even narrowing the inference of Scottish Gaelic in which ‘intangible cultural heritage’ would also certainly be implicit. This sort of linguistic dilemma is all too typical for the minority language and diglossia, with the cultural misfortune of Gaelic in Scotland moving over centuries from being a dominant to a minority language.

In tune with our wider intellectual aims and ambitions, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig’s interdisciplinary research is rooted in a postgraduate MSc programme which began as MA Cultar Dùthchasach agus an Àrainneachd (Material Culture...
Interdisciplinary study through the medium of Gaelic has drawn on a blend of history, sociology, human geography, cultural anthropology and folk life studies

and the Environment) in academic year 2005-6. It reformed as MSc in 2012 in the normal iterative process of re-validation and in response to the direction taken by the course of studies and the focus of research. Being taught entirely through the medium of Scottish Gaelic, it was evident that the language and focus, and consequently identity of the course demanded a different engagement with the scholarly material.

Here in Scottish Gaelic we have a living language, a rich literature, poetry, song and vivid narration in oral transmission, a vehicle for in-depth learning and powerful piety, a distinctive environment, and deeply embedded traditions of working the land and sea. It must be said that these values are often difficult to discern in the sources that purport to give an account of Scottish history and culture, whether in the past or present.

At the same time there was and is a need for conformity with prevailing models and concepts and for engagement with current debates, not least because the research is aimed at informing, modifying and changing prevailing paradigms. It is not easy to engage in national and international debate solely on grounds of one’s own choosing; your voice is lost in the academic clamour and your thesis ignored. Under the former ‘MA’ entitlement validated in English medium in 2005 by the emerging University of the Highlands and Islands, the expectation of a Gaelic-medium postgraduate programme in the then academic world was that the discourse and domain founded on Scottish Gaelic would conform to anglophone models. This tended to the often ludicrous and sometimes futile intellectual pathway, for example, of leading off necessarily with conventional historical and archaeological premises. In order therefore to fulfil ‘sources and reading list’ quotas as well as a Gaelic-medium criterion, one could foresee the laborious translating of history, archaeology or sociology textbooks into Scottish Gaelic to provide the necessary conceptual models on which to base a taught-research course module. To a limited extent (and with little satisfaction!), such work was done. Thus, conventional and basic concepts, say, of Scottish history would sui generis become conventional and basic concepts of Gaelic history; examples might be treatment of the Statutes of Iona, which in most aspects hold a mirror to Gaelic culture, as a blunt instrument of James VI and I’s domestic policy, or failure of the Gaels to measure up to Enlightenment aspirations and teachings.

Laboured attempts in that era to translate the tenets of ‘agricultural improvement’ into Gaelic sank with little trace. Given the significance of ‘environment’ in the Highland and Island region, sociological models are to hand for the interpretation of landscape in the wake of the Picturesque and Romantic movements but any translation of their concepts or content signal fails to add value to Gaelic and can result in awkward and unidiomatic language.

Interdisciplinary study through the medium of Gaelic has drawn on a blend of history, sociology, human geography, cultural anthropology and folk life studies, as well as taking full cognizance of material culture and its vocabulary, between landscape, the built environment and museum collections. The valorisation of MSc evolved a more confident strain of interdisciplinary research into the material culture of the Scottish Gàidhealtachd and is drawing more fully on the complexities and nuances of the language and on indigenous perspectives. This is ideal material for masters and higher level research since students in the Scottish Studies arena can learn to challenge existing ideological and academic landscapes within the humanities and social sciences.

A simple example could suffice: ‘constructs’ of the world erected and contemplated by social scientists and sociologists have been applied to Scotland and its regions, and employed as working models by scholars and the agents of government. In terms of the Highlands, we usually find Duncan
Bán Macintyre’s Moladh Beinn Dobhrain (In praise of Ben Doran) smugly quoted as sufficient gesture towards the evocation of local values. Deeper engagement with the sources would discover contemporary voices from the very different Gàidhealtachd of the 16th and 17th centuries, in the literature of Seathan Mac Rìgh Èirinn or Òran na Comhachaig with their strong sense of landscape, its qualities and their stewardship, as well as in the deeply-rooted concept of the wellbeing of the landscape and the benign ruler.

The committed student wonders at the absence of such extended voices from the current discourse. One might go further and claim that the Highlands and Islands have been a ‘landscape’ of condescension with ‘heritage’ articulated from without. The time is ripe for expanding our vision and for adding Gaelic to material culture studies and vice versa.

Shieling or both airigh in the Uig district of Lewis drawn by Captain F W L Thomas RN about 1860 and showing construction of turf cladding on corbelled-in stone walls. This detailed sketch evidences the context of a vital dimension of animal husbandry in Upland and Island Scotland.

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To an extent the evidence is transmitted through oral tradition and survives in song and colloquial speech. Until more recently, Celtic Studies rarely engaged with bùrdachd bhaile or so-called ‘township poetry’ in which a wealth of evidence, particularly for material culture, is carried. A song from Arisaig of the

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Celtic material culture in museums

Two Scottish museums stand out for their treatment of Gaelic material culture – the Highland Folk Museum at Newtonmore and the Skye Museum of Island Life. The former covers all the Highlands & Islands, and the latter deals with the town of Kilmuir – as assembled by the knowledgeable Skye historian Jonathan MacDonald.

The Highland Folk Museum is an outdoor attraction which shows visitors what life would have been like in the Highlands & Islands from the 18th century through to the 1960s, from a 1700s township to a 1930s working croft.

Skye Museum of Island Life also uses reconstructed buildings in an outdoor setting to re-create crofting life in the village of Kilmuir through the centuries. Visitors can explore buildings including a croft house, smithy, barn and weaver’s cottage.

Websites: Highland Folk Museum: www.highlifehighland.com/highlandfolkmuseum
Skye Museum of Island Life: www.skyemuseum.co.uk

Notes:

Prof. Hugh Cheape works at the National Centre for Gaelic Language and Culture, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig.

FURTHER READING

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• Msc Material Culture at UHI: http://scot.sh/hsUHI