Cultar Dùthchasach.
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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.


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
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 artefacts.

In antiquity, while these archaeology approaches to material culture in antiquity is implicit in the term ‘Cultur 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. ‘Cultur 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 ‘Cultur 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.

A phrase such as ‘Cultur Dùthchasach’ in Scottish Gaelic requires a semantic twist because it is a ‘modern’ term and cannot be claimed to be gnàthasach or idiomatic. However, it has been accepted by usage - in the same way as flakey terms such as ‘Heritage’ have widespread anglophone use.

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 ‘Cultur 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.

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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 Àrainnachd (Material Culture...
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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 acute 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 Gaels-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 without 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.

Labourous 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 signally 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...
A Gaelic approach to material culture

The time is ripe for expanding our vision and for adding Gaelic to material culture studies and vice versa

Bàn Macintyre’s Moladh Beinn Dòbhrain (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 Righ 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 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 their ‘heritage’ articulated from without. If we adopt a Gaelic approach to material culture studies and vice versa. This is no revolution to material culture studies and vice versa. This is no revolution to material culture studies and vice versa.

The time is ripe for expanding our vision and for adding Gaelic to material culture studies and vice versa. This is no revolution since other developments in a multidisciplinary academic world are already live and active. Most pertinently we have the work of a 20th-century international cohort of university and museum scholars whose field of research was designated ‘European Ethnology’ or ‘Regional Ethnology’, and the more recent innovation of ‘material culture studies’ influenced by cultural anthropology in London and Cambridge.

The descriptor ‘Ethnology’ merits comment in a shifting world of academic domains and disciplines; it describes a mix of social, economic and cultural history, drawing on language (for example, Gaelic and Scots) as well as conventional sources and giving identity to region and locality and drawing on European (and wider) comparanda. It can be said to derive a fresh integrity from material culture studies and sources in museums, making it a ‘methodology’ perhaps, rather than a discipline, while being interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary in its competences.

Ethnology is rooted in the work of European museums in the late 19th century and the Swedish exemplars of Nordiska Museum (1873) and Skansen (1891). The study and interpretation of material remains from whole landscapes to the smallest moveable artefacts was part of the Scandinavian historian’s trade and Chairs for comparative Folk Life research or ‘Ethnology’ were founded at the Universities of Stockholm, Lund and Uppsala. Paradigms of cultural history have been shifting in our more conservative academies in recent decades and we are witnessing a material turn in methodology.

Focus on artefacts predominated in archaeology and in anthropology but now we are getting used to the study of things and their relationship to human history, the study of the made and ‘built’ world of the ‘cultural landscape’, the study of ‘materiality’ as insight to currently the ‘meaning of things’.

With all this debate and intellectual muscle-flexing, there is a tendency to focus on ‘material culture’ theory and to shy away from substance. But if we adopt a Gaelic approach to material culture studies, what can we learn that we cannot learn elsewhere and what difference might this knowledge make? On the simplest level we immediately have another dimension for the big topics of Highland and Hebridean history opened up since Malcolm Gray’s The Highland Economy 1750-1850 (1957), for example, food and diet, cultivation, animal husbandry and fishing, housing and how these responded to changing economic circumstances, and, tapping into the evidence, how people made or obtained supplies and materials such as clothing, tools and the bare necessities of life as the region slipped into crisis. We seem to know very little about self-reliance and survival skills when clearance and emigration became the order of the day, and how people coped with circumstances of relative plenty or famine and how these were experienced outside the literature of economic determinism. We read copiously about the kelp industry with the occasional reference to distinctions between Laminaria and Fucus, but with little awareness, perhaps, of ‘kelp’ as fertiliser and food source, how harvested, how cooked and eaten, how composted, how laid on the land and with what expectations, and the whole picture illuminated by a huge glossary in Scottish Gaelic which far outstrips Linnaean botanical classifications.

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 baisdeach bhaili or so-called ‘township poetry’ in which a wealth of evidence, particularly for material culture, is carried. A song from Arisaig of the...
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

FURTHER READING

- Celtic from the West. Alternative Perspectives from Archaeology, Genetics, Language and Literature, John T. Koch and Barry Cunliffe (Oxbow Books, 2012).
- Celtic from the West 2: Rethinking the Bronze Age and the Arrival of Indo-European in Atlantic Europe, John T. Koch and Barry Cunliffe (Oxbow Books, 2013).
- Glossary: http://scot.sh/hsgaelic
- MSc Material Culture at UHI: http://scot.sh/hsUHI

early-19th century, for example, gives a virtually unique view in his own words of how the Highland drover reared cattle and did business, showing inter alia, how people thought and communicated. The dictionaries tended to be poor recorders of material culture though this is now being rectified by Faclair na Gàidhlig and the Digital Archive of Scottish Gaelic or DàSG, and the Sabhal Mòr’s MSc contributes to these.

A significant amount of ‘material culture’ has survived in the literature of Scottish Gaelic but has hitherto not been singled out. The schools of the SSPCK and Gaelic School Society (1811) produced two or three generations of Gaels literate in their own language. Many of these began to write and publish in the newsprint that proliferated after the abolition of newspaper Stamp Duty in 1855. Clearance and emigration meant that many bright stars of this educated echelon used their skills to record their memories of childhood and growing up, for some of them a way of life lost but committed in detail to paper.

To conclude, by way of example, on using language to expand the material and social record, a topic that can be immensely enriched by drawing on the testimonies of its Gaelic practitioners might be shielings and transhumance. Summer transhumance has been extensively studied on the Continent and we have given less attention to this essential form of land-use and colonisation while studies of clearance and depopulation have predominated.

We can learn about settlement patterns, adaptation to the environment and basic rhythms of a sustainable economy over centuries but, at the same time, we learn about personal circumstances and responses since the shieling or àirigh bulked so large in popular culture. The evidence is abundant, between, perhaps, the lover’s shopping-list and her Renaissance taste in the well-known song Bothan Àirigh am Bràigh Raithneach in which the shieling is characterised as the ’bothy of love-making’, or the restrained sigh of the Glen Lyon woman about the escape to the shielings from sermons and catechising:

\[ \text{"Fionna-ghleann mo chridhe, far nach bitheadh Dìdìmhnach!"}
\]

[Finglen of my heart, where there would be no Sunday!]

With potential to better understand the social and domestic life, the work and physical environments, and indeed the popular mentalities and ‘lifeworlds’ of Scottish Gaels, we can reach out to a more convincing account of ‘landscapes and lifescapes’ of the region and even trade under equivalent headwords in bith-bò ’s arainneachd!

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