



Kidd, S. (2000) Social Control and Social Criticism: the nineteenth-century còmhradh. *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 20:pp. 67-87.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/4585/>

8th September 2008

SOCIAL CONTROL AND SOCIAL CRITICISM: THE NINETEENTH CENTURY *CÒMHRADH*¹

In recent years some scholars of Highland history have been criticised for their failure to take account of Gaelic sources and thus for their provision of an incomplete perspective on Highland history. Of no century is this more true than of the nineteenth century. This imbalance is being gradually redressed thanks primarily to the work of Donald Meek whose publications, *Màiri Mhòr nan Oran* and, perhaps more importantly with its English translations, *Tuath is Tighearna*, have made Gaelic verse of 'social and political protest' accessible to a wider audience. He has demonstrated the value of Gaelic song and poems as a gauge of contemporary opinion and reaction and established the role of verse as part of the process of informing change. Yet this in itself highlights another imbalance - that of verse alone being studied with no attention, as yet, being given to Gaelic prose. This is not entirely surprising, as poetry tends to be seen, by scholars at least, as the more fruitful genre in Gaelic literature through the centuries, and has received a proportionally greater amount of their attention. This paper considers one particular aspect of Gaelic prose which offers scope for both literary and historical research; that is the prose dialogue or *còmhradh* which came to be popular with Gaelic writers in the nineteenth century. The paper will discuss the emergence of the *còmhradh* as the preferred prose genre for the discussion of social issues in the course of the century. It will focus on the way in which the *còmhradh* was used, first by the Rev. Dr Norman MacLeod (Caraid nan Gaidheal) as a form of Establishment propaganda which aimed to diffuse social unrest during the famines of the 1830s and 1840s, and it will then offer a contrast with the use of the *còmhradh* in the 1870s and 1880s when it was adopted as part of the campaigning literature of the crofters' cause.

The *còmhradh* is a written conversation between two or more characters, of varying length, typically between 1000 and 3000 words, although that is not definitive. Characters are stereotypical as defined by their names, e.g. Fionnladh Piobaire, Lachlann nan Ceist, Coinneach Cìobair, am Maighstir-Sgoile and an Gobhainn. There is generally no attempt to develop characters who are used merely as a vehicle for the writer's message. Very often one figure acts as informer or instructor with the other character(s) asking questions in order to elicit further information. Some dialogues contain the briefest of explanations at the beginning to indicate the location or time of the dialogue, although that is often implicit in the title, e.g. *Còmhradh na Ceàrdaich*, *Còmhradh nan*

Cnoc etc. In some dialogues there may be an occasional explanation in the manner of a stage direction to indicate that a character has entered or departed. These dialogues do not, however, seem to have been intended as plays in themselves, although the *còmhradh* has had its part to play in the shaping of Gaelic drama as Antoinette Butler has discussed in her study of the development of Gaelic drama.

Before examining the way in which the *còmhradh* was used by writers in the course of the nineteenth century, consideration must first be given to the environment in which the genre emerged as such a popular form in Gaelic literature. Dialogues have enjoyed popularity in many European societies throughout the centuries from the time of Plato until the nineteenth century. Virginia Cox in her study of Italian Renaissance Literature has suggested that when a genre such as the dialogue, which 'stages' the art of communication, is adopted by writers on a wide scale this may be indicative of 'the breakdown of traditional certainties, a failure of confidence in the concept of certainty itself, a major shift in the medium or audience of literary discourse'. (Cox 1992: 7)

This certainly merits exploration in the context of the nineteenth century Highlands. This was a period of unprecedented social change, with the final disintegration of the clan system by the beginning of the century and the resulting change in social relations as clan chiefs became landlords and their clans became tenants. Migration to the Lowlands and emigration to other countries, whether by choice or by force, further fragmented social networks. Although there were scattered instances of resistance to landlords' evicting tenants, it was not until the 1870s that there was any concerted resistance, such as the Bernera Riot in 1874 and the Battle of the Braes in 1883, which achieved national publicity for the crofters' cause. To this 'breakdown of traditional certainties' one might add a sense of linguistic and cultural uncertainty as a corollary of the expansion of an education system which promoted English language, institutions and cultural values, as had been the case in the Highlands from at least the early eighteenth century, but with more noticeable effect in the nineteenth century.

What Cox terms a 'shift in the medium or audience of literary discourse' is also applicable to the nineteenth century Gaelic context in which oral and printed literature co-existed, with the latter beginning to fulfil aspects of the former's role. As education became more widespread in the Highlands, so the potential audience for printed Gaelic expanded. This required adjustment on the part of an audience which was accustomed to oral rather than printed literature and this may have consciously influenced writers in terms of both subject matter and style.

The *còmhradh* was being written within what was still fundamentally an oral culture, a culture in which information, literature and spiritual guidance were disseminated orally, whether in the *taigh-cèilidh* or from the clergy. Consequently, Gaels were listeners rather than readers. Information and literature were 'produced' and 'consumed' at the level of the community and thus were validated by authority figures known to the community, whether the *seanchaidh*, the *bàrd*, the minister or the schoolmaster. The *còmhradh* with its familiar figures who are seen to be lending authority to the written word presented a means of easing the transition from an oral to a literary culture. Equally, the genre afforded writers the opportunity to use language and idiom closer to that of everyday speech. Writers may in fact have intended that these dialogues be read aloud for the benefit of those who were not literate. Although I have thus far been unable to find any references to this happening, it is interesting to note a published account of the first dinner held by Glasgow University's Ossianic Society in 1833. Norman MacLeod was in the Chair and the report records 'that the recital of a dialogue from the Gaelic Messenger in character, by Mr Maclaren from America and Mr MacDougall from Perthshire occasioned great merriment'. (GH 18/1/1833: 2) The dialogue in question was one penned by MacLeod himself and therefore this recital should perhaps be seen more as a tribute to him than as any sort of conclusive proof that dialogues were commonly read aloud. Nonetheless, this indicates that they lent themselves to this treatment and that it was not an unknown occurrence.

The writing and printing of secular prose in Gaelic was still very much at an embryonic stage in the nineteenth century. The first printed book to appear in Gaelic was John Carswell's translation of the *Book of Common Order* in 1567, and this was to set the tone for published prose for the next two and a half centuries, namely that it was generally religious, more often than not texts were translations and they were almost without exception associated with the Reformed Church. At the beginning of the nineteenth century there was no tradition of writing original secular prose. This was only to emerge in the nineteenth century as writers began to experiment with prose style and with different genres, among these the *còmhradh*. The emergence of the *còmhradh* coincided with the rise of the Gaelic periodical press which provided both a stimulus and an outlet for Gaelic writers and it was in the century's succession of periodicals that the majority of the dialogues were to appear. The catalyst for the early periodicals was the expansion of education in the Highlands, and the resulting need to provide reading material for those being educated. The first significant periodicals were *An Teachdaire Gaelach* (1829-1831), *Cuairtear nan Gleann* (1840-43)

and *Fear-Tathaich nam Beann* (1848-1850).² The first two were founded and edited by the Rev. Dr Norman MacLeod, underlining the continuing control exerted by the church over Gaelic prose well into the nineteenth century. It was MacLeod who wrote most of the *còmhradh* which were published in the first half of the century. *Fear-Tathaich nam Beann* was set up at the instigation of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and was edited by the Rev. Dr Archibald Clerk. These Gaelic periodicals presented a means of extending the authority of the clergy far beyond the pulpit. This can be paralleled with the effect of the press in other parts of Britain in the nineteenth century. David Vincent, for instance, has observed of the press in nineteenth century England, that 'the primer and the pamphlet now replaced the shepherd's crook as the most appropriate symbols of the pastor's care of his flock'. (Vincent 1989; 175) Not only were the editors of the Gaelic periodicals ministers, but so too were many of the most prolific contributors, among them the Rev. Alexander MacGregor who will be mentioned in the course of this discussion.

There is no lack of models which may be suggested as having influenced those who chose to adopt the dialogue. These influences include religious and secular, Gaelic and non-Gaelic sources. First and foremost is the literature of the Reformed Church. Butler has highlighted this as a factor underlying the attraction of the dialogue for the groundbreaking prose writers of the nineteenth century who were generally ministers. (Butler 1994: 42-43) Of the two earliest Gaelic publications, the first, Carswell's *Foirm na n-Uirrnuidheadh*, contains 'Modh Ceasnuighe na n-Oganach', based on Calvin's Catechism and the second is the anonymous translation from the 1630s of Calvin's *Catechismus Ecclesiae Genevensis*. The Catechism is of course a dialogue based on question and answer as a means of religious instruction and was fundamental to the post-Reformation Church. In addition to the publication of close to 100 editions of the Shorter Catechism between 1659 and 1951 numerous other catechisms were translated into Gaelic in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. (MacDonald 1993: 143-44) It was a form with which both writers and audience were familiar and thus may have been perceived as facilitating the acceptance of the written word. There is however another crucial text which must not be overlooked. The first Gaelic translation of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Cuairt an Oilthirich; no Turas a' Chrìosduidh*, was published in 1812, with at least a further fourteen editions following. (Ferguson & Matheson 1984: 27-28) Central to the text is a series of dialogues as Christian encounters such characters as Worldly-Wiseman, Piety and Faithful in his quest for the Celestial City.

The Gaelic translation of this text was one of the commonest books to be found in Highland households after the Bible itself.

The dialogue had however existed in Gaelic literature for centuries before the Reformation. One of the earliest examples is that of *Agallamh na Senórach* with its dialogue between St Patrick, Oisín and Caoilte. This early dialogue is particularly interesting in the light of the Rev. Donald MacLeod of Glenelg's comment in 1764 that 'Highlanders at their festivals and other public meetings, acted the poems of Ossian'. (HSS: 29) Douglas Hyde states that he once read a letter in an Irish-American newspaper by a man who claimed to have seen the *Agallamh* acted out. (Hyde 1967: 511 fn 1) In its earliest forms, the dialogue would then seem to have been not only oral but dramatic. Dialogues are not, however, restricted to literature of the *fianna*. There are early law texts which make use of question and answer format. There are dialogue poems such as *Immacallamh in dá Thuarad* and there is the dialogue between Dallán Forgaill, Colam Cille and Baíthín at the Convention of Druim Cett which involves the saint arguing for generosity to poets while Baíthín puts forward the arguments on behalf of the church and for prayer. (Ó Cuiv 1968) Equally, there are many early Irish tales in which dialogue in verse is embedded within the narrative. That is not to say that MacLeod was necessarily familiar with these early dialogues, rather that in its various forms the dialogue has its roots in early Gaelic literature.

As far as poetry is concerned, although the classical poets do not seem to have favoured the dialogue form, the genre emerged among the compositions of Scottish Gaelic vernacular poets who came to prominence in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In fact it is almost as though a dialogue poem became a standard part of any poet's repertoire and this holds true down to the twentieth century for those composing traditional verse. Thus, to name but a few, we have Sileas na Ceapaich's *Còmhradh ris a' Bhàs* (Ó Baoill 1972: 12-14); An Clàrsair Dall's *Oran do Mhac Leòid Dhùn Bheagain*, a dialogue between Echo and the Harper (Matheson 1970: 58-72); Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's *Oran Araid mar gum b'ann eadar am Prionnsa agus na Gaeil* (Campbell 1984: 86-92); John MacCodrum's *Caraid agus Nàmhaid an Uisge-Beatha* (Matheson 1938: 308-310); William Ross's *Oran eadar am Bàrd agus Cailleach-Mhilleadh-nan-Dàn* (Calder 1937: 126-30); Dòmhnall Ruadh Mac an t-Saoir's *Oran nan Con* (MacMillan 1968: 278-81). There are also flytings between poets such as those from the seventeenth century involving Iain Lom. Dialogues, most commonly between a man and a woman, feature among *òrain luaidh*. (Campbell & Collinson 1969: 20-21). Examples from John Lorne Campbell's *Hebridean Folksongs* include '*S muldach mi 's mi air m'aineol* and *Cha*

dirich mi an t-uchd le fonn while Margaret Fay Shaw's *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist* contains *Còmhradh eadar Nighean Og agus Each-uisge* and *A' Bhean Iadach*. While far from exhaustive this list of poems and songs serves to demonstrate that the dialogue in verse form was an accepted part of Gaelic literature and known to nineteenth century Gaelic writers.

Looking beyond Gaelic literature, there is of course the influence of Classical writers to be borne in mind, models with which MacLeod would undoubtedly have been familiar. John Stuart Blackie, Professor of Greek at Edinburgh University and supporter of the crofters, wrote in 1876 of Norman MacLeod's *còmhradh*, 'the most brilliant papers are written in dialogic form, marked by the dramatic grace of Plato and the shrewd humour of Lucian'. (Blackie 1876: 315) If comparison is to be made with Classical writers, it would be more appropriate to suggest that Gaelic dialogues be compared with the dialogues of Cicero than with the philosophical conversations of Plato and the humorous dialogues of Lucian. Elizabeth Merrill in *The Dialogue in English Literature* observes that in Cicero's work the dialogue exists primarily as an exposition of subject-matter. Expanding on the expository dialogue as opposed to the philosophical dialogue, she writes 'It is that the ultimate aim and object of the expository dialogue is not to elicit truth through argument, but rather to set forth facts or principles or theories already existent in the mind of the writer'. (Merrill 1911: 59) As will emerge when specific examples of *còmhradh* are discussed in this paper, exposition was closer to the heart of the genre in Gaelic than philosophical debate or humour, certainly in the earliest examples of the genre.

Contemporary examples of the dialogue also existed outwith Gaelic literature - models which may have been equally influential upon these Gaelic writers. 1822 witnessed the first in a popular and long-lived series of dialogues to be published in the well known monthly periodical *Blackwood's Magazine*. The dialogues, entitled *Noctes Ambrosianae*, were from c.1825 the work of John Wilson, Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, writing under the pen-name Christopher North. (Swann 1934: 111-112) Wilson and Norman MacLeod, the Gaelic writer most commonly associated with the *còmhradh*, were contemporaries at Glasgow University, where it has been written of MacLeod that 'the glory of his college days was that in physical contests he alone could rival John Wilson'. (Wellwood 1897: 15) Wilson's *Noctes* and MacLeod's *Còmhradh* both appeared in the same decade, Wilson's some four years before those of the Gaelic writer. Of Wilson's conversations it has been said that 'it was the light and rapid survey in racy dialogue of public events, books and people, by an easy

tribunal that delighted most in the ludicrous side of life'. (Swann 1934: 111) *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*, established in 1832, also published prose dialogues, although with less frequency. These were in fact closer in form to the Gaelic dialogues than *Noctes Ambrosianae*, with the emphasis on conveying information and instruction. On occasions these were translations from French as for instance, 'Column for Young People' in which Monsieur de Flanmont talks to his children about virtue and generosity. (*CEJ* 3/1/1846: 14-15)

Clearly, there was a range of dialogic models available to Norman MacLeod and his contemporaries, and while religious literature may have been the most influential influence, other literary forms may have lent weight to, and demonstrated the potential of, the genre.

Social Control

The first *còmhradh* to appear in Gaelic were written, as indicated at the outset, by the Rev. Dr Norman MacLeod and were published in the periodicals which he himself established and edited, *An Teachdaire Gaelach* and *Cuairtear nan Gleann* in addition to the later *Fear-Tathaich nam Beann*. He wrote at least twenty-five dialogues, which in Gaelic were entitled *Còmhradh*, but in English indexes to the journals were listed as 'Familiar Dialogues'. In the only published study of MacLeod's *còmhradh*, based on a paper delivered to the Gaelic Society of Inverness, Edward MacCurdy comments that 'they breathe a gentle sympathy and kindly humour'. (MacCurdy 1950: 231) One or two other writers, following MacLeod's example, contributed dialogues to these early periodicals, their identity concealed to some extent by their use of initials rather than names. It seems likely that J. McL., two of whose dialogues appeared in *Cuairtear nan Gleann*, was in fact MacLeod's brother the Rev. John MacLeod, further emphasising the close association between the *còmhradh* and the Church.

The first of MacLeod's dialogues *Comhradh na'n Cnochd, Lachlann na'n Ceistean agus Eoghann Brocair*, establishes the tone of the genre. (*TG* 1, 1829: 3-7) After pleasantries are exchanged, the Catechist, the voice of the Church, takes the opportunity to tell Eoghann about this new periodical, *An Teachdaire Gaelach* with Eoghann offering the occasional comment or question, and the dialogue concludes with Eoghann following the Catechist's advice by subscribing to *An Teachdaire*. The *còmhradh* is little more than an advertisement, but demonstrates that from the outset MacLeod consciously chose and used characters associated with authority to expound his message while he expected that readers would follow Eoghann's example, listening to and following this advice. Although a number of MacLeod's dialogues are used as a means

of informing readers on a range of topics such as volcanoes, polar expeditions and French history, there are other *còmhradh* which he wrote in the early 1830s which are more concerned with spiritual and moral guidance. In a discussion between Fionnladh Piobaire, Iain Òg and Lachlann na'n Ceistean, the Catechist says to Fionnladh 'bi glic, tha'm bàs a teannadh ort, tha'n t-àm a' tarruing dlù, agus aig Dia tha brath cia dlù 's a tha e, anns am mothaich thu an saoghal so a' sleumhnachadh uait, agus siorruidheachd a' fosgladh fa d' chomhair'. Fionnladh accepts all that he has been told since, 'cha'n 'eil focal a thainig uait leis nach d'aom mo chridhe'. (*TG* 3, 1829: 57) In *Còmhradh na'n Cnochd. Tigh a Mhaoir*, MacLeod's Smith promotes a Temperance message, complaining about excessive alcohol consumption and its effect on families:

Nach 'eil fir na sgìreachd so fein a' cur a mach ann an òl na chuireadh aodach air gach leanabh rùisgt' a th' ann, a bheireadh sgoil do gach dilleachdan, agus a chuireadh am Biobull anns gach laimh anns nach 'eil e. Nach iomad bean bhochd, an déigh a pàistean ocrach rùisgte chur a chodal, a tha suidhe taobh an droch ghealbhainn, a' feitheamh a companaich, a tha mach gu stròghail, gleadhach san tigh òsda, a cosd na chumadh iadsan gu cuanda aig an tigh; agus nuair a thilleas e a stigh, le mionnachadh agus le malluchadh, a mhaoitheas an dorn, ma their i ris gur olc. (*TG* 7, 1829: 154)

In another *còmhradh*, Fionnladh Piobaire's wife compares herself with other women she knows and feels she needs a new bonnet. Fionnladh criticises her for her extravagance when there is rent to be paid and their family to support. Furthermore, he tells her:

B' urrainn domh an ainmeachadh a tha dol do'n eaghluis fo dheise shìoda, agus gun an léine air an druim; agus is aithne dhomh ni is gràineile na sin uile, feoghainn a tha dol do'n eaghluis le rìomhadh uaisl' umpa, agus an athair agus am màthair, a thog agus a dh'àraich iad, a shaothairich iomadh là air an son, gu tròm, airsneulach le fallus an gruaidh, gun aodach, gu'n chaisbheirt leis an urrainn doibh dol do thigh an Tighearna. (*TG* 4, 1829: 80)

This is very typical of the general Victorian preoccupation with personal morality and self-help and demonstrates just how the Gaelic periodicals extended the voice of the clergy beyond the pulpit. However, just as a message promoting morality is central to some of MacLeod's *còmhradh*, so a message promoting obedience to the laws of the

country is central to others. On occasions, MacLeod uses his characters to discourage questioning of the law and encourages, by the example of his characters, passivity and forbearance in the face of hardship and injustice. Typical of this use of a pro-establishment voice is a *còmhradh* in which Calum Posta complains about how low the price of postage is considering the hardships of weather and travel he experiences in delivering letters. His frustration is directed at the Queen and those who advise her. The schoolmaster, however, takes a different view, 'Ciod so 'n gearan a th'ort? Fhad 's a gheibh thusa 's mis' ar tuarasdal cha bhuin e dhuinn a bhi faotainn coire dhoibhsan tha thairis oirnn.' (*CnG* 2, 1840: 36)

Most interesting, however, are those dialogues which MacLeod wrote in the 1840s and which are a response to the famine and emigration of that decade and indeed to the famine of 1836-37. MacLeod's views on the solution to the problems which afflicted the Highlands at this time were clearly expressed in 1841 when he gave evidence to a Select Committee appointed to enquire into the condition of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. When MacLeod was asked if proprietors should be required to share the expense of helping their tenants to emigrate he responded:

I do not think the evil has been brought on by them, and I believe that they can, by the common law of the land, remove the people in the same way as any proprietor in the kingdom can remove cattle. (*RSC* 1841: 75)

This attitude manifested itself in his Gaelic writing, perhaps the best known example being 'Long Mhór nan Eilthireach' with its depiction of an emigrant ship preparing to leave Mull for North America, with intending emigrants shown as sorrowful yet not questioning the reasons for their emigration. The minister who boards the ship to bid a final farewell to his parishioners encourages them to accept their situation, suggesting that no man has an automatic right to live in any one country:

Am bheil ceangal seasmhach aig mac an duine ri aon dùthaich seach dùthaich eile? Cha-n 'eil dùthaich bhunailteach againn air thalamh; cha-n 'eil sinn air fad ach 'n ar n-eilthirich; agus cha-n ann 's an t-saoghal chaochlaideach so a tha e air a cheadachadh dhuinn le Dia an dachaidh sin iarraidh as nach bi imrich. (MacLeod 1834: 67)

MacLeod's dialogue characters behave in a similar way. In *Comhradh eadar Fionnla Piobaire, Màiri agus Para Mór* which appeared in the

first edition of *Cuairtear nan Gleann* in 1840, Para Mór ponders the circumstances in which he, and so many Gaels, had found themselves in those years of overcrowded land and famine and he accepts that he has little choice but to emigrate:

Nach 'eil an dùthaich air dol 'ionnsuidh na dubh-bhochdainn; na h-uile ni 'dol air ais, nach 'eil an t-sìd féin air atharrachadh? cha chreid mi nach e toil an Fhreasdail sinn g'a fàgail, nach d'thainig plàigh air a' bhuntàta féin, cha chinn lus no bàrr mar a b'abhais da; cha 'n urrainn sinn a' mhòine féin a chaoineachadh; nach d'fhàg an sgadan ar cladaichean? nach 'eil gort' agus ganntar an déigh feòil dhaoine bochda chnàmh? . . . Cha 'n eil mise 'coireachadh neach air bith b'e 'n cuid féin a bh'ann, cha d'rinn iad ach ceartas ach O! tha 'n ceartas air uairibh cruaidh; ach c'arson tha mi 'gearan! cha robh còir agam air iochd. (*CnG* 1, 1840: 11)

MacCurdy's reaction to these words is that 'Para and his like as portrayed in these pages, would seem to be the ideal stuff from which hardy colonists are made'. (MacCurdy 1950: 237). Ironically, MacCurdy has succeeded in demonstrating exactly how MacLeod was using Para to manipulate readers' views since he has accepted, just as nineteenth century readers were meant to, the pro-emigration message. Although arguably MacLeod is sympathetic to the hardship suffered by crofters such as Para Mór, nonetheless the crofter is deliberately portrayed as a very submissive figure, who does not blame his landlord, but attributes his situation to Divine Will. He was undoubtedly meant as an example to readers. In another dialogue, Eachann, a crofter who is considering emigrating is resigned to his eviction, 'cha do chuir Eachann deth a' chroit, ach chuir a' chroit dhith Eachann, agus 's e aon ni is éiginn da falbh taobh-eiginn'. (*CnG* 4, 1840: 82) In similar vein, is *Comhradh Feasgair 'an Tigh a' Mhaoir* from 1848, in which the ground-officer, the voice of authority, promoting law and order, tells Ailean Croitear:

Cha'n 'eil cainnt is amaidiche, agus faodaidh mi 'ràdh is bréugaiche na chluinneas tu nis á béul cuid de dhaoine mu thimchioll nan Tighearnan Gàedhealach, mar gu'm biodh mar fhiachaibh orra-san, cha'n e amhàin tighean agus croitean a thoirt do gach aon gun mhàl, ach biadh 'us lòn³ a thoirt do mhòran diubh. (*FT* 2, 1848: 46)

MacLeod's characters go even further as apologists for Highland landlords. The ground-officer from this 1848 *còmhradh* implies that those crofters who are evicted have only themselves to blame:

Nis Ailein, innis so dhomh: Nach ro ainmic a chuala' thusa riamh, croitear bochd, dìchiollach, onorach, sìobhalta, a bha strì gus a mhàl a dhìol mar b'fhèarr a dh'fhaodadh e, a chuireadh a mach gu àite 'dheanamh air son fir eile? Nach 'eil fios agad gu bheil croitearan 'us tuath air an oighreachd so féin a tha fada air deireadh 'sa mhàl, agus cuid nach 'eil aona chuid, saothreachail no dìchiollach, agus gidheadh, cuin a chuireadh a h-aon aca 'mach? (*FT* 2, 1848: 46)

With the exception of essays describing America, Canada, Australia and other emigrant destinations, the dialogue is the only reaction in Gaelic prose to contemporary social issues in the first half of the nineteenth century. MacLeod employed the genre as a form of social control, using his characters to expound establishment viewpoints. Indeed the Establishment fear of social unrest is explicit as early as 1831 when MacLeod's Schoolmaster voices concern about the example being set in Ireland, referring to 'daoine aingidh midhiadhaidh, Slaightearan gun tìus, gun ghràdh-dùthcha, aig iarraidh cogadh agus aimhreit a dhùsgadh eadar Eirinn agus Sasunn'. (*TG* 22, 1831: 228)

Although the vast majority of *còmhraidhean* in these period were written by Norman MacLeod, there are a handful penned by other writers. One anonymous writer follows MacLeod's example in *Comhradh mu Mhin nam Bochd eadar Alastair Cruinn agus Ailean Mór*. Ailean asks Alastair, as a friend and kinsman, for a barrel or two of potatoes to feed him and his family as he had been hoping for 'min nam bochd', the meal purchased by charitable donations which was then distributed in the Highlands during the famines of 1836-37. By 1840 when this particular *còmhradh* was written this distribution of meal had ceased. Alastair is less than sympathetic. While agreeing that the meal brought relief to many he also feels that it has had the adverse effect of encouraging Gaels to depend on this charity:

Theagaisg i droch chleachdainnean duibh, do nach faigh sibh cuidhte r'a luathas. Tha sibh air fàs leisg, lunnach: tha sibh air fàs dìbli, giùgach, leòcach, liosda. Tha na ficheadan, mar is maith tha fios agad, a tha nis ag iarraidh na déirce gun nàire gun athadh, le 'm b'fhèarr mun d' thàinig a' mhin Ghallda do'n dùthaich, an cruaidh-chàs bu mhò fhulang na gu 'm biodh a leithid do

thilgeachan orra féin no air an sliochd; agus nach 'eil cron mór an sin? (*CnG* 5, 1840: 101)

Còmhraidhean in the first half of the nineteenth century were consistently used as a genre for instructing and controlling readers, attempting to lead by the example of characters during a period of unprecedented social hardship in the Highlands. Indeed the genre encourages Gaels to find fault with themselves rather than with those above them. The vast majority of these were written by Norman MacLeod who, while not explicitly expressing support for Highland landlords, repeatedly promotes acceptance of the status quo or the alternative - emigration. The nineteenth century Highland clergy as a body have faced fierce criticism from some quarters for their failure to make a stand against Highland landlords who cleared their estates. Among the most vocal contemporary critics was Donald MacLeod, an eye-witness to the Sutherland clearances who said of the clergy, 'they are always employed to explain and interpret to the assembled people the orders and designs of the factors'. (MacKenzie 1991: 7) Similar sentiments are to be found later in the century as, for example, from the contributor to the *Highlander* in 1875 who refers to 'the hand of the oppressor strengthened by the hand of the Church'. (*H* 30/10/1875: 7) While this paper is not in itself a study of the role of the Highland clergy in the Clearances, the evidence of the *còmhradh* would suggest that the Gaelic periodicals of the 1830s and 1840s must be studied in order to build a more complete picture.⁴ In the first half of the century, at least, the evidence in Gaelic lends weight to the case against the clergy and particularly against Norman MacLeod who used the *còmhradh* as a means of supporting landlord policy and encouraging readers to do likewise.

Social Criticism

There is a dearth of *còmhraidhean* between 1850 and 1870 for the simple reason that virtually no Gaelic periodicals were published in these decades and the *còmhradh* was dependent on the existence of periodicals. It may be partly this twenty year gap which makes the change in the use of the *còmhradh* between the 1840s and the 1870s so clear-cut, as the possibility of tracing a gradual development is denied to us. Certainly by the early 1870s attitudes and expectations had changed greatly in the Highlands and this is evident in both verse, as has been demonstrated by Donald Meek in *Tuath is Tighearna*, and in prose. In the course of the 1870s and 1880s confidence was rising as the campaign in support of crofters' land rights gained momentum both in the

Highlands and in Lowland cities, and agitation flared in various parts of the Highlands. Pro-crofter candidates were elected to Parliament and in 1886 the Crofters' Holdings (Scotland) Act was passed.

Although there were a number of publications in which *còmhradh* appeared after 1870, including the Gaelic columns of two Inverness papers, the *Northern Chronicle* and the *Scottish Highlander* in the 1880s, this discussion will be concerned principally with those which were published in *An Gaidheal* and the *Highlander* in the 1870s. *An Gaidheal* was a monthly journal, which started life in Toronto in 1871 and shortly after was moved to Glasgow. Under the editorship of Angus Nicholson it was conducted mainly through Gaelic, but with an English section, and was a miscellany of informative essays, traditional tales, translations from English, dialogues, verse and news. With its essentially secular content it represents a clear break from the religious leanings of earlier periodicals. The weekly *Highlander* was a radical newspaper set up in Inverness in 1873 by John Murdoch who used it to campaign on behalf of Highland crofters.⁵ The *Highlander* carried a regular Gaelic column. In this period the *còmhradh* was revived by a number of writers and became even more popular with writers than it had been in the earlier periodicals. In fact, it became the prose genre *par excellence* for expressing social commentary in Gaelic. The perspective of the *còmhradh* is, however, markedly different from those thirty years earlier. Instead of functioning as a means of defusing and discouraging social criticism and unrest, the genre became a means of raising expectations and of fuelling dissatisfaction. In common with poetry and song of the period, dialogues reflect the Gaels' new found confidence in their own rights.

The church was still represented among the contributors to these publications, but even here a change of perspective is evident, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the writings of the Rev. Alexander MacGregor, a minister of the Established Church, based in Inverness. MacGregor was the first to revive the *còmhradh*, and went on to write no less than sixty-four *còmhradh* in Gaelic between 1873 and 1881 under the pen-names Alasdair Ruadh and Sgiathanach. This paper will be restricted to considering those dialogues in which the central issue is social criticism. It is interesting to note that MacGregor had been an active writer in the 1840s and a supporter of emigration, as the evidence of his own writing indicates. Yet he does not seem to have written any dialogues in the 1840s, preferring to use essays and letters. His perspective had changed somewhat by the 1870s when he was more willing to criticise landlords and their actions, albeit in the most general terms.

In one of MacGregor's dialogues between his regular characters, Murachadh Bàn and Coinneach we find a contemporary view of the effect that deer forests are having on crofters. Coinneach tells Murachadh that deer, hare, grouse and other game are damaging crofters' crops as are the sportsmen hunting the game on horseback, 'ach an uair a nithear gearan ri Sir Seumas, is ann a thogas e a shròin cho àrd ri crann soithiche, a chionn gum bheil a dhanadas aig an tuathanaich bho chd fiu aon fhocal gearain a dheanamh'. (*G* 1874: 15) In marked contrast to MacLeod's *còmhradh*, the reader is left in no doubt that the crofter's complaints are justified. Another dialogue between the same characters takes a humorous and striking approach to the subject of landlords' exploitation of their land for financial gain. Murachadh encounters Coinneach digging a deep hole and Coinneach explains that this was the idea of his landlord, Sir Seumas:

Bhruadair e air oidhche araidh gun robh am fearann aige lan guail agus nach robh an gual ach beagan shlat sìos o bharr na talmhainn, anns a' cheart aite far am bheil mi a' cladhadh. Uime sin dh'orduich e dhomh-sa cumadh an tuill a ghearradh a-mach, agus a bhith 'criomadh ris mar a dh'fheudas mi, gus an cuir e comunn laidir gu oibreachadh air an ath-sheachdain. (*G* 1874: 208)

To fully appreciate this dialogue it must be read with contemporary events in mind. Earlier in the same year, 1874, the Bernera tenants of Sir James Matheson, owner of the island of Lewis, had forced estate management to back down on its decision to take land away from them and to evict those who refused to comply. Contemporary readers may have felt it to be no coincidence that the landlord was named Sir Seumas. This example serves to demonstrate one of the advantages which the *còmhradh* offered as a means of expressing social criticism. For writers who had no Gaelic models of written social criticism to follow, and who may have been hesitant about openly criticising Highland landlords, the anonymity of the dialogue and the fact that it was fictional, doubtless added to its attraction. For a man of the cloth like MacGregor, he had the double anonymity of the characters and the pen-names which he used.

In *Comhradh eadar am Maighstir-Sgoile agus Callum a' Ghlinne*, MacGregor used the dialogue to encourage readers to voice their dissatisfaction, demonstrating how they could use the press to air their own views on crofters' rights. Callum has come to ask the schoolmaster to read a letter which he has written to the *Highlander* and to see if it requires correction. Callum is a crofter whose crops are being eaten by

deer. He explains to the schoolmaster that he cannot even shoot them, 'B'e la na h-imirich an la air an losgainn aon srad orra, ged a dh'itheadh iad na paisdean co maith ri toradh na talmhainn a tha 'cumail nam paisdean suas'. (*H*, 2/7/1874: 3). The schoolmaster proceeds to read out the letter in which Callum airs his grievances, concluding on his hopes for the *Highlander*,

Tha mi 'cur mo dhochais annad-sa, a Charaid nan Ghaidheal, gu'm faic thu ceartas aig sliochd nam beann, le bhi o h-am gu h-am a' rusgadh suas gach cruaidhchas a ta iad a' fulang, le bhi deanamh am fulangais follaiseach do na h-uile, agus le bhi brosnachadh luchd-riaghlaidh na rioghachd chum reachdan freagarrach a dhealbhadh . . .

The schoolmaster echoes these views:

Is cinnteach aon ni, gidheadh, gu'n feum a nis Ard-Chomhairle na duthcha an gnothuch a ghabhail os laimh, agus na tuathanaich choir a theanachadh o ain-tighearnas nan uachdaran sin d'an robh na Gaidheil riamh dileas, agus ris an robh iad, anns na linntibh a dh'fhalbh, a' sealltuinn suas air son gach sochair agus saorsa.

MacGregor used the *còmhradh* not merely to encourage readers to question the way in which Highland estates were managed, but to show them what channels of complaint were open to them, in this example the press. Once again the contrast with MacLeod's use of the dialogue, thirty years earlier, is stark.

MacGregor did not only use the dialogue to criticise what he saw as abuse of power, but to praise good estate management. By 1877 Sir Seumas, the villain of a number of MacGregor's dialogues in 1874, has seen the error of his ways. He has employed men to clear, drain and plough his land and when the work is finished it is to be given to the tenantry for whom he is building proper houses. Coinneach comments, in marked contrast to the views he expressed three years before:

Uachdaran ni's fearr cha do sheas riamh a 'm broig. Cha 'n 'eil mallachdan nan daoine bochda 'na dheigh mar an deigh nan Uachdaran ain-iochdmhor a tha saruchadh nan creutairean truagh sin a tha fodhpa, 'gan greasadh gu crìochaibh cumhann, agus 'gan claidh le bochduinn, a' cur an fhearainn a dh'araich iomadh cuiridh calma agus treun fo na feidh agus na caoraich bhana.

Murachadh agrees, 'n 'an deanadh gach Uachdaran 'sa Ghaidhealtachd mar a tha Sir Seumas a' deanamh, bhiodh pailteas gach bliadhna 'san tìr

air son gach duine agus ainmhidh'. (*G* 1877: 200) Given that many of those landlords whom MacGregor would wish to follow this example would have been unable to read his Gaelic dialogues, this was presumably intended to raise crofters' expectations, to show them what they should reasonably expect from their landlords and to increase their conviction in their own cause.

MacGregor was not alone in using the *còmhradh* in this way. In the increasingly confident 1870s the genre was seized on by a number of Gaelic writers as the preferred prose genre for social criticism. The anonymous writer of *Comhradh eadar am bard agus an Domhnullach an Tiridhe*, published in the *Highlander* in 1878 has his characters discuss the problems faced by crofters in Tìree, problems shared by crofters throughout the Highlands, i.e. no security of tenure and the resulting lack of incentive to improve their land. An Domhnullach relates the experience of one man in the island:

D: . . . Thuir e nuair a fhuair e chiad chroit o chionn moran bhliadhnachan gu'n do thog e aitreabh thighean ann air duil gu'n robh am fearann 'dol a sheasamh ris; ach ann an ceann beagan bhliadhnachan gu'n do chuir am baillidh as a' sin e, agus gu'n tug e dha croit eile, air am b'eigin da tighean eile thogail. Ann an ceann bliadhna no dha chuireadh aisde sin e, agus chuireadh air a' bhaca e.

Gilleasbuig: Ach an robh e 'faotainn dad airson nan tighean a bha e togail 'n uair a dh'fhàg e iad?

D: Cha robh sgillinn. Tha'n tigh aig an duine choir so a nis mar dheich slatan do bhile na fairge. (*H* 27/7/1878: 3)

This is a far cry from the passivity of Norman MacLeod's dialogues in which the crofters accept their eviction and their emigration without complaint. Here the complaints take centre stage and there is no apologist for the landlord.

There are many *còmhraidhean* which could be mentioned in this paper, but one which is highly distinctive is *Comhradh eadar an t-Uachdaran, na Croitearan (Alasdair Donn agus Domhnull Ban) agus am Baillidh* by an anonymous contributor to the *Highlander*. (*H* 2/2/1881: 6) Before the conversation itself commences, readers are told that since the landlord does not speak Gaelic, he requires someone to act as translator. The conversation proceeds with the proprietor speaking in English, the crofters in Gaelic - an effective illustration of contemporary social relations on many Highland estates. The proprietor recognises them as

tenants, but does not know their names, further underlining the gulf between them. He listens to their complaint that the factor has not lowered their rents, despite having taken some of the moorland from them:

Bha am baile seo aig na daoine o'n d' thainig sinne; bha am mal air a phaigneadh riamh gu h-onorach agus bha sinne, an sliochd a' deanamh sin cuideachd; ach an uair a thainig am Baillidh seo oirnn, thug e uainn am monadh, gidheadh cha do lughdaich e am mal.

The proprietor's disdain for his tenants is evident when he remarks, 'I am told you are a set of discontented, ill-to-manage people, who are always ready to take advantage of me if allowed to do so . . . the land is mine and I can do with it as I please.' The conversation concludes with the landlord and the factor meeting to discuss - in English - ways of making the estate more profitable and they conclude that they will give land which cannot be put to any other use to the crofters. These characters are just as stereotypical as those of MacLeod in the 1830s and 1840s, but the development of the genre is self-evident. The dialogue has developed from being a tool of social control to being a vehicle for social criticism.

Another interesting development is in writers' choice of characters. In the 1830s and 1840s most *còmhraidhean* - although by no means all - had an authority figure such as the catechist, the schoolmaster or *Cuairtear nan Gleann* himself, as a voice to guide the thoughts of characters and readers alike. In *còmhraidhean* from the second half of the century the voice of the establishment becomes less prominent. In some instances the development goes even further when writers use Gaelic warrior heroes - Cu Chulainn and Fionn - as dialogue characters. It can be no coincidence that the resurrection of these heroes occurs at the same point in time as an increasingly vocal pro-crofting voice, as pro-crofting MPs are elected to Parliament and as Gaels become more confident in asserting their rights, whether cultural rights or land rights. In the anonymous *Comhradh eadar Cuchullin agus Calum Croiteir* (*H* 13/4/1881: 6), Calum complains that the Irish Land Leaguers should be stopped as he believes all that he has read in the *Scotsman* - a paper renowned for its anti-crofter stance in the nineteenth century. Cu Chulainn, an Irish hero defending the Irish, sets Calum straight, telling him:

Nach 'eil fios agad gur e an *Scotsman* namhaid is mo th'aig an Eireannach agus aig a' chroiteir Ghaidhealach? Nach 'eil fios agad gu bheil e 'sparradh anns na h-uachdarain gabhalaichean

mora dheanamh dhe fearann na croitearan agus tha sin air tachairt anns an duthaich so cheana, gu ire beag.

Once again there is a contrast to be drawn with the 1840s and the anti-Irish sentiments expressed by MacLeod's characters. Instead of seeing Irish unrest as something threatening to the Highlands should Gaels choose to follow this example, quite the opposite is the case. Cu Chulainn points out to Calum that the Irish and Scottish Gaels are not only fellow Celts, but that both have been trampled under the feet of the English. Calum is told, 'ma tha thusa airson atharrachadh a dheanamh air do staid fhein, agus air lagh an fhearainn, coimhead air na h-Eireannaich mar na cairdean is mo th' agad anns an rioghachd'. The Irish dimension to the crofters' struggle is a very prominent theme in the *Highlander*, thanks primarily to the writings of its editor, John Murdoch, who had worked in Ireland and become involved in Irish politics, and it is possible that he was the author of this anonymous *còmhradh*. Further instances of Gaelic heroes as dialogue characters are *Comhradh na Feinne* (*H* 3/2/1877: 3) in which Fionn and Oscar lament the decline of the Gaelic language, and *Fionnlagan agus Osgar* in which the characters discuss how 'Gallda' the Highlands is becoming,:

Cha 'n fhiu 's cha 'n fhiach ach nithean Gallda; tha an t-uachdaran Gallda; tha 'm baillidh Gallda; agus tha h-uile aon a bhitheas a streap a staigh d 'an cuideachd, 's a bhitheas an duil ri buannachd fhaighinn bhuatha a leigeil air gu 'm bheil easan an deigh fas cho Gallda riutha fein'. (*H* 6/1/1877: 3)

A parallel example in verse, although some thirty years later, exists in Katherine Whyte Grant's *Céilidh Dhùn-Ì* in which Calum Cille, Oisean and the Druid Coibhi, lament the condition of the Highlands. Coibhi asks:

Ciod tha 'sa Ghaeltachd ach cniota, ball-cluiche fo chasan nan uaibhreach?

Uaislean bhlàr-réis nan steud each, uachd'rain a' bhuideil 's an stòp -

An dùthaich a ghléidh sinn tre chruadal, nach faigheadh aon Choigreach uainn i,-

Nach faigheadh e 'm feasda le 'chladheamh - mhealladh i uainn tre a phòc'. (Grant 1911: 199)⁶

This resurrection of traditional figures, and warrior figures at that, at a time of threat to Gaels and Gaelic identity is indicative of the increasingly confident, and indeed confrontational, attitude of the Gaels. *Còmhradh* are not used to incite the Gaels to violence, rather they are part of the process of raising awareness and instilling confidence.

In conclusion, it is striking that when issues of social and land reform were discussed in the Gaelic columns of journals and newspapers in the 1870s and 1880s, the preferred genre was the *còmhradh*, a genre which, with its personal and oral qualities, seems to have been intended to facilitate the acceptance of both the written word and the views being expressed. There is scope for much further study of the genre, from both literary and historical perspectives. In the 1880s many *còmhradh* were published in the *Northern Chronicle* and the *Scottish Highlander*, dialogues which have been beyond the scope of this paper which is essentially a preliminary overview of the genre. The extent to which the *còmhradh* had become an established prose genre in Gaelic, and the extent to which it had become firmly associated with social criticism, is evident even in the second decade of the twentieth century when the dialogue features regularly in the Mod syllabus among the various literary competitions. In the Mod syllabus for 1912, for instance, one of the designated competitions is 'A Gaelic dialogue between 2 crofters. Subject, "The Present State of the Highlands"'. (DG 18, 1912: 13) What had begun life in 1829 as a strongly conservative, pro-establishment form of propaganda which discouraged social unrest, underwent a complete transformation in the course of the nineteenth century to become a vehicle for social criticism, with the characters adding a dimension of authority and credibility which other prose genres lacked.

NOTES

- ¹ This paper is in part based on a chapter from my PhD thesis, 'The Prose Writings of the Rev. Alexander MacGregor, 1806-1881' (University of Edinburgh, 1999). I am grateful to the British Academy for a travel grant which enabled me to attend the 11th International Congress of Celtic Studies in Cork in July 1999 at which I presented a short version of this paper. I would also like to thank those people in Galway, Glasgow and Edinburgh who have listened to this paper in its various stages and offered suggestions.
- ² The first periodical was *An Rosroine* of which only four numbers were published in Glasgow in 1803.
- ³ A. Clerk in his edition of MacLeod's writing, *Caraid nan Gaidheal* has replaced 'lòn' with 'aodach'.

-
- ⁴ See Mearns 1990 & Smith 1987 for studies of the nineteenth century Highland clergy.
- ⁵ For information on John Murdoch see Hunter 1986.
- ⁶ I am grateful to Mr Ronald Black for drawing my attention to this poem.

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>DG</i>	<i>An Deò-Gréine</i>
<i>G</i>	<i>An Gaidheal</i>
<i>CEJ</i>	<i>Chambers' Edinburgh Journal</i>
<i>CnG</i>	<i>Cuairtear nan Gleann</i>
<i>FT</i>	<i>Fear-Tathaich nam Beann</i>
<i>GH</i>	<i>Glasgow Herald</i>
<i>HSS</i>	<i>Highland Society of Scotland's Report on Ossian, (1805). Edinburgh.</i>
<i>RSC</i>	<i>Report of the Select Committee appointed to inquire into the Condition of the Population of the Islands and Highlands of Scotland, and into the Practicability of affording the People Relief by means of Emigration. (Parliamentary Papers, 1841 VI).</i>
<i>TG</i>	<i>An Teachdaire Gaelach</i>
<i>H</i>	<i>Highlander</i>

REFERENCES

- BLACKIE, J. S. (1876). *The Language and Literature of the Scottish Highlands*. Edinburgh.
- BUTLER, Antoinette (1994). 'An Outline of Scottish Gaelic Drama before 1945' (unpublished MLitt Thesis, University of Edinburgh). Edinburgh.
- CALDER, George (ed.) (1937). *Gaelic Songs by William Ross*. Edinburgh.
- CAMPBELL, J. L. and COLLINSON, Francis (1969). *Hebridean Folksongs*. Oxford.
- CAMPBELL, J. L. (ed.) (repr. 1984). *Highland Songs of the Forty-Five*. Edinburgh.
- CLERK, Archibald (1867). *Caraid nan Gaidheal*. Glasgow.
- COX, Virginia (1992). *The Renaissance dialogue. Literary dialogue in its social and political contexts, Castiglione to Galileo*. Cambridge.
- FERGUSON, Mary and MATHESON, Ann (1984). *Scottish Gaelic Union Catalogue*. Edinburgh.
- GRANT, K. W. (1911). *Aig Tigh na Beinne*. Oban.
- HUNTER, James (1986). *For the People's Cause from the writings of John Murdoch* (Edinburgh).
- HYDE, Douglas (1967). *A Literary History of Ireland*. London.
- MACDONALD, K. D. (1993). 'Catechisms (Gaelic)', in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron. Edinburgh.

- MACCURDY, Edward (1950). "Caraid nan Gaidheal", *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 39/40.
- MACKENZIE, Alexander (repr.1991). *The History of the Highland Clearances*. Edinburgh.
- MACLEOD, Norman (1834). *Leabhar nan Cnoc*. Glasgow.
- MACMILLAN, Somerled (ed.) (1968). *Sporan Dhòmhnaill: Gaelic Poems and Songs*. Edinburgh.
- MATHESON, William (ed.) (1938). *The Songs of John MacCodrum*. Edinburgh.
- (1970). *The Blind Harper: An Clàrsair Dall*. Edinburgh.
- MEEK, Donald E. (1995). *Tuath is Tighearna. Tenants and Landlords*. Edinburgh.
- (1998). *Màiri Mhòr nan Oran*, revision of first ed., 1977: Edinburgh.
- MERRILL, Elizabeth (1911). *The Dialogue in English Literature*. New York.
- Ó BAOILL, Colm (ed.) (1972). *Bàrdachd Shìlis na Ceapaich*. Edinburgh.
- Ó CUIV, Brian (1968). 'A Colam Cille Dialogue', *Eigse* 12.
- SHAW, Margaret Fay (1986). *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist*. Aberdeen.
- SWANN, Elsie (1934). *Christopher North (John Wilson)*. Edinburgh.
- VINCENT, David (1989). *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914*. Cambridge.
- WELLWOOD, J. (1897). *Norman MacLeod*. Edinburgh.

University of Glasgow

SHEILA M. KIDD