

Michael Newton, editor. *Seanchaidh na Coille Memory-Keeper of the Forest Anthology of Scottish Gaelic Literature in Canada*. (Sydney, NS: 2015, Cape Breton University Press. Pp. 570, ISBN: 978-1-77206-016-4)

Marion MacLeod

Volume 38, numéro 1-2, 2016

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1041598ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1041598ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

MacLeod, M. (2016). Compte rendu de [Michael Newton, editor. *Seanchaidh na Coille Memory-Keeper of the Forest Anthology of Scottish Gaelic Literature in Canada*. (Sydney, NS: 2015, Cape Breton University Press. Pp. 570, ISBN: 978-1-77206-016-4)]. *Ethnologies*, 38(1-2), 293–296.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1041598ar>

are a part of our shared joke history and can be used as a parody reflecting contemporary culture. The following chapter focusses on Princess Tutu, an anime fairytale which reflects western fairytales while maintaining traditional Japanese outcomes. Discussed is how this parody of western fairy tales leaves the westerner uncomfortable with the outcome. The final chapter by Gregory Schrempp focusses on David Toomey's *Weird Life*; it looks at the relationship between popular science writers and monsters as a parody. David Toomey's search for life and creatures that do not fit our mould of life science, but can be compared to the monsters that exist in our folklore, has made a topic that is approachable usually by those with a biology background accessible to everyone who is aware of folkloric monster motifs.

In writing a book review it is difficult to convey the true worth of a publication by simply summarizing aspects, but I believe that anyone interested in popular culture and folklore should read this book. As someone who approaches folklore from a material culture background with a focus on fashion and museum collected artifacts, some of the topics in the book would not seem relevant to my area of study. But by looking at this book as a "reframing" of folklore for popular culture studies, I can apply it to my area easily and the idea of reframing has sparked for me a new way to approach my own work. This book has the potential to start a new discourse within our disciplines and have wide reaching changes in our approaches to popular culture.

Maureen Power
Curator of Special Exhibitions
The Rooms, Newfoundland

Michael Newton, editor. *Seanchaidh na Coille Memory-Keeper of the Forest Anthology of Scottish Gaelic Literature in Canada*. (Sydney, NS: 2015, Cape Breton University Press. Pp. 570, ISBN: 978-1-77206-016-4)

Michael Newton recognizes that scant scholarly attention has been devoted to the Canadian side of the literature of the Gaelic diaspora and, through this editorial achievement, teases out other areas of critical inquiry

under-served in Gaelic scholarship thus far: implications of translation, linguistic hegemony, reflexivity, and reader response. As a result of his healthy contextualization, Newton has succeeded in contributing to the canon of not only Gaelic literature, but of Canadian literature more broadly, and has fleshed out the image of the Gael as it pertains to the earliest sense of Canadian multiculturalism.

Seanchaidh na Coille is organized thematically, first introducing the Gael as among Canada's primary settlers. Newton declares the common "two solitudes" vision of Canada's formative years as insufficient and, identifying Gaelic as the third most spoken European language at the time of confederation, suggests instead a "multitude of solitudes." Throughout, Newton highlights the problematic Canadian conflation of Scottish Gaels with Anglo-British and, to a lesser extent, Lowland Scottish populations. Newton's aversion toward these assimilations is also apparent in *Seanchaidh na Coille's* source material. Rather than focusing on the Scottish "hero" and his works as determined by Anglophone standards of achievement, Newton's selections, ranging from the eighteenth century through to the 1930s, consider "Scottish Gaelic Literature in Canada" to be equally publications, speeches, and letters, and the oral-dominant songs, poems, proverbs, legends, prayers, conversations, and stories. "Verbal forms of cultural expression may be harder to recover and appreciate than material manifestations of culture" he writes, "but the activities, accomplishments and perspectives of Gaelic communities, whether in Scotland or Canada, cannot be properly understood without taking these into account" (p. 9). Newton's translations of this literary material are sensitive to the nuances, literary techniques and stylistic tropes of Gaelic expressive culture, rendering the anthology valuable in both broad and specific terms.

Following the introduction, Newton presents the theme, "The Subjugation of Gaeldom," which frames the immigrant experience in terms of the social and physical conditions in Scotland and in Canada. Included is an anonymous text related to the Glencalvie Clearances of 1845 and an extensive variation of the North Uist song, "Oran Fir Ghriminis" (A Song of the Tacksman of Griminis). This song, generally considered to have ten verses in Uist, is collected in a fifteen-verse version in Nova Scotia, inviting comparative analysis of the omissions and elaborations that are part of oral literature. In this section and throughout, readers are encouraged to refer to Newton's valuable section of author and collector biographies as well as maps outlining the sites of significant family names, orators and events.

A contextualizing focus continues in the “Militarism and Tartanism” section, throughout which Newton emphasizes the ironies of the Highland soldier as emblematic of British imperial supremacy. Many of the selections highlight social betrayal and clan militarism and revolve around the wild Highland warrior stereotype. The subordinate status of the Gael and the accompanying sense of inferiority and backwardness is made evident in the literary materials but also in the exoticized, tartan-clad masculinity of the Highland Games and the growing gap of perceptions and habits between Gaels born in Scotland and their descendants born in North America. The selected texts range from romantic celebrations of loyalty and military might to comical criticisms of tokenism and covert ethnic rivalries.

“Migration” and “Settlement” are linked sections. The literature describes the challenges of settlement (plant, animal, and interpersonal), guidelines for migration (directions, materials, conditions, support networks, chain migration), reflections on the promise and hardship inherent in the migration experience, and meditations on the continuity of culture. Many are inflected with a culturally specific use of descriptive language and humor. Newton highlights a common strategy for “turning the shame of dispossession into a narrative of self-determination and triumph” (p. 145), which is extended into discussions of nostalgia and retrospect, as well as literary lineage. Allan “The Ridge” MacDonald’s songs, for example, create a relationship between his voyage by sea and his predecessors’ land-based achievements that is both literary and genealogical. Of supreme significance is the Gaelic newspaper, *Mac-Talla*, which chronicled the memories of the first generations of immigrant Gaels as well as their subsequent concerns in Canada. An excellent essay by its editor, Eòin MacFhiongain, is included, here, with an account of immigrant communities from the Highlands and Islands to Cape Breton in 1903. His global awareness and critique of the challenges of assimilation is among the most valuable inclusions in this anthology.

“Love and Death” also emphasizes continuity but introduces a specifically Gaelic spirituality and affection that is informed by imperialism, diaspora, and a close relationship with nature and mythic symbolism. This is also apparent in works grouped under “Religion.” Newton includes elegies, laments, and clerical praise songs that speak of politics and pedigree, as well as community cohesion. It is within these sections, too, that Newton demonstrates the significance and stylistic evolution of meter, metaphor, and other compositional choices in Gaelic songs of praise. He also calls attention to English “loanwords” as a means of poetically signifying “foreign

and unassimilated concepts and practices” best kept at a distance (p. 341).

“Language and Literature” deals primarily with preservation efforts and oral traditions indicative of a healthy linguistic tradition (Gaelic spoken in the home, in schools, in publications, and in public office). The role of language in nurturing strong community and familial bonds is central and invoked in response to Anglophone takeover. Among the literary motifs that emerge in response to linguistic assimilation is the insistence that Gaelic was the language spoken by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and passionate letters appear in publications such as *Mosgladh*, the Gaelic periodical of the Scottish Catholic Society of Canada.

“Identity and Associations” both celebrates the proliferation of Gaelic societies throughout the country and criticizes them. A letter in *Mac-Talla* complains that “Gaelic organizations cater to the interests of the aristocracy and military to the detriment of the language and culture they are meant to serve” (p. 429). The “Politics” section includes a speech given at the Nova Scotia Assembly in 1879 which speaks to the place of Gaelic in provincial education. Political figures are also memorialized in song, often with qualities identical to those needed by a true highland leader (lineage, reliability, bravery, commitment to community)

Newton’s anthology is engaging and accessible. He defines literature in a broad and culturally appropriate way and encourages dialogue across time, medium, geography, station, and scholarly discipline. His observations are supplemented by thorough footnotes and a considered bibliography, as well as appropriate acknowledgment of Gaelic institutions throughout the country. The anthology has both academic and common appeal and invites inquiry through its generous presentation of previously inaccessible material. Its contents promise to contribute to future scholarship in a way that both complicates and enriches the image of “the Gael” in Canada and is, therefore, a welcome addition to any interdisciplinary library.

Marion MacLeod
University of Chicago