

Northern Views

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A review of

Michael Newton, *Warriors of the Word: The World of the Scottish Highlanders*

(Birlinn; Edinburgh, 2009), 449pp. ISBN: 1841588261, £20.00

In recent decades there has been a notable growth in the interest surrounding the Scottish Highlands. This book opens up the world of the Scottish Highlander. It explores the latest developments in Celtic studies and is written in an enthusiastic and accessible style. It provides the perfect entry point for those with little knowledge of this culture. The author admits that it is not strictly a history book, but one concerned with the mental and social world of the Gaels from the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries. Throughout, Michael Newton takes the Scottish Highlanders on their own terms, disregarding views of judgemental outsiders or the prejudices of older historiography.

This book is a fully revised and expanded edition of Michael Newton's *A Handbook of the Scottish Gaelic World*, published in 2000. Many of the central themes and features within this new volume have already been discussed in the *Handbook*; Scottish history and the Gaels, the Gaelic oral tradition, the organisation and operation of society and the Gaels' relationship with nature and the landscape around them. This new edition published in 2009 has many new and notable features which are significant improvements on the earlier edition. At the centre of this new volume is the power of words, language and stories in Gaelic culture. Indeed, at the beginning of each chapter there is a Gaelic folk tale which introduces the main themes. This is one of many ways that Newton allows the Gaels to speak for themselves.

The new edition has a sharper focus than its predecessor. There is an expanded history of the Highlands from its 'Celtic' beginnings to its marginalisation in the last three hundred years. There is also expansion on the issue of Gaelic identity inside and outside of the Highlands, Newton develops this into a whole new chapter, putting aside the convoluted theoretical discussions about culture which were a prominent feature of the original volume. In this new edition he clearly highlights what the Scottish Gaels regarded as 'markers' of identity; places of birth and settlement and regional identities within Scotland - 'Gael' (Highlander) and 'Gall' (Lowlander). Newton maintains that language was the strongest element which differentiated the Gaels from outsiders. Ancestry, genealogy and 'origin legends' including the Jews, Greeks and Egyptians also helped create a Gaelic identity.

As was the case in the previous version of this study, Newton acknowledges that the oral tradition has long been at the heart of Gaelic culture. In this revised edition Newton clearly focuses on literature rather than song. The importance of stories and poetry to the Gaels cannot be underestimated for this is how the whole community preserved its memories, traditions and identity. The elite who composed these works influenced social norms and carried traditions from one generation to the next. A very helpful new feature regarding Gaelic oral tradition is the clear and detailed framework Newton provides to help modern readers interpret Gaelic literature in its contemporary context. He is also very keen to emphasise European influences upon Gaelic literature, seeing the Highlands as a full participant in the global exchange of ideas.

In this new version Newton clearly shows the reality of clan society in the medieval and early modern periods, stepping away from modern romanticism. Clan society was not egalitarian, nor democratic. He argues that although clans are seen as extended families, he stresses that clan society, like its European counterparts, was a 'class' based society; it had social structures and order. Although this has been discussed in the *Handbook*, he continues to explore the professional classes such as the lawyers, poets, warriors, historians and the medical profession and the various bonds within clan society such as fosterage, marriage, and *manrent*. In a departure from the previous volume, Newton fully explores the clan's relationship with the state, which, as he highlights, was also determined by social structure and order; king, regional lords, and local chieftains.

Newton explores the personal and family life of the Highlander, attacking the disapproving prejudices of onlookers. As in his previous volume he explains that there were standards of conduct within Gaelic society. He continues to show the importance of hospitality in the Highlands, manners, honour, and general good conduct in life. Children were expected to respect their elders, were taught the skills of their parents and encouraged to get involved in the community. Newton expands his discussion on the Gaelic rites of passage regarding birth, marriage and death. In a departure from the previous volume, he discusses the extent of the pre-Christian influence on these rites of passage. There are also new and very interesting discussions on the Highland diet and clothing, in particular, the international origins of tartan and how it came to be associated with the Highlands.

Newton then attempts to delve into the cosmological world of the Highlanders, critical that until recently Highland beliefs were considered ignorant, naive or backward. He expands greatly on his previous discussions on the 'otherworld' of the Highlander. He explores the 'otherworld' solely from the viewpoint of those who lived with it— the Gaels themselves. As Newton points out the Gaels adapted their legends and traditions to Christianity whilst retaining their own culture. The *Sidh* were blamed for murder, theft, infanticide and illness. The *Cailleach* formed landscapes and represented mother nature.

Song, music and dance are well known features of Gaelic culture. These themes were very briefly discussed in the *Handbook*. However, in this reworking there is a wholly new chapter dedicated to this subject with many valuable insights. Newton argues that Highland music, as we know it, does not date before the eighteenth century. In addition, the complex and 'multicultural' nature of the development of music, song and dance in the Highlands has been obscured. The bagpipes were not in use until the fifteenth century and the fiddle until the seventeenth century. Music was heavily influenced by developments in Europe and from the Lowlands. Instruments now associated with the Highlands have European roots, the bagpipes were common in the rest of Europe and Lowland Scotland before they came to the Highlands. Highland dance also has its roots in Europe, with France having a particularly strong influence.

The Gaels had a strong relationship with their surroundings and environment, this was keenly stressed in the previous volume, much what was discussed can be found in the final chapter of the new volume. Much of the cultural theory has been cut back in favour of allowing the Gaels to speak for themselves. Despite the Gaels' adoption of

agriculture a millennia ago, many facets of a 'hunter gatherer' worldview survived. The Gaels lived as natural resources dictated, rather than by exploitation. Gaels saw themselves as part of the natural world, often relating human attributes to those of various plants and animals. The land was a mother who sought to protect and provide for her people. The Gaels had a very intimate knowledge of their terrain and surroundings believing that people belong to places, rather than places belonging to people.

The author concludes that the tales of the *Fian* show that the Highland people were magnanimous, educated and broadly accomplished people. Indeed, this can be said of Newton's portrayal of the Highlanders, which is far removed from the 'popular' image of the Highlander, replacing it with a reality which is complex, beautiful and diverse. This is an exceptional book which has been significantly revised and expanded from its earlier edition and should be an essential read for all those with an interest in Scottish history or Celtic studies.