DERICK THOMSON (1921-2012)

DERICK Smith Thomson (Ruaraidh Mac Thòmais), who died earlier this year, was a major force in Scottish Gaelic scholarship for half a century after the publication of his first study, *The Gaelic sources of MacPherson's 'Ossian'* (1952). In 1948, with degrees in Celtic and English Literature from Aberdeen and Cambridge under his belt, he was appointed Assistant in Celtic under Myles Dillon, during the latter’s brief tenure of the Chair of Celtic at Edinburgh University. Here Derick was encouraged to become interested in the Scottish Gaelic dialects, and made some recordings of Kintyre Gaelic speakers for the embryonic School of Scottish Studies. He had also spent some time at UCNW Bangor during his Cambridge days, and Dillon fostered the young scholar’s Welsh interest by getting him to edit *Branwen uerch Lyr* (published in 1961 in the DIAS Medieval and Modern series).

Derick was appointed to a newly created Lectureship in Welsh at Glasgow University in 1949, and spent seven highly formative years there before being appointed Reader in Celtic at Aberdeen University in 1956. By now his research and personal interests had converged and become strongly focused on Scottish Gaelic language and literature – where ‘language’ embraced language revival and ‘literature’ embraced contemporary writing. Both these developments were boldly innovatory in Scottish Gaelic scholarship (and indeed more widely in the Arts) in the 1950s. In 1963 he succeeded Angus Matheson in the Chair of Celtic at Glasgow, a position he held until his retirement in 1991.

The main thrust of Derick’s research was in the field of Scottish Gaelic poetry: the Classical Gaelic compositions of the MacMhuirichs, the eighteenth-century innovators like Alastair Mac Mhaighstir Alastair, and the popular song tradition. These he covered both in text-editions and in literary-critical essays. The outstanding landmark is his *Introduction to Gaelic poetry* (1974), where he carried the narrative on through the nineteenth century and down to the twentieth-century Gaelic literary renaissance in which he himself (as Ruaraidh Mac Thòmais) played a leading role. In fact, there was no aspect of Gaelic literature, from original writing to publishing to criticism and scholarly assessment in which he was not involved. For between the 1960s and 1980s Derick brought into being and then presided over such varied projects and agencies as the Gaelic Books Council, a series of Departmental and personal publishing imprints, and the Historical Dictionary of Scottish Gaelic project. He headed the Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, edited *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, and brought out the still indispensable *Companion to Gaelic Scotland* (1983). Having co-founded the literary quarterly *Gairm* in 1952, he continued to edit it until the 200th issue, published in 2002.

And all the while he was writing poetry of a quality which won major prizes and critical acclaim, both amongst Gaels and, when he brought it out
bilingually, in the anglophone world. His first collection, *An Dealbh Briste*, was published in 1951; and his poetic writing continued to engage him after he had drawn back, in retirement, from the prodigious workload of his earlier years. His last collection, *Sùil ri Fàire*, appeared as recently as 2007.

It is difficult to say which, amongst his many achievements, will stand out the most clearly in years to come; but his pioneering role in championing literature as a subject for scholarly study and his development of the art of Gaelic literary criticism, including criticism of contemporary writing, will surely rank among the highest of his attainments.

*Edinburgh*