Electioneering in Gaelic in Perthshire

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The Gaelic columns which began to appear in Highland newspapers such as the Highlander, the Scottish Highlander and the Oban Times in the 1870s and 1880s provided, among other things, a platform for political songs and poetry. Coinciding with the emergence of the land reform campaign in the later decades of the nineteenth century, politics and politicians were to become a common feature of the Gaelic poetic repertoire. The growing engagement of Gaelic poets with politics was due in part to the Reform Acts, particularly that of 1884 which saw almost 14% of the Highland male population enfranchised. While politics appears to have received less attention from Gaelic poets earlier in the century, that is not to say that it was ignored. A small corpus of Gaelic political material survives from the fourth decade of the century in the form of three songs and two posters which relate to the 1832 Reform Act and the election which followed it.

Interestingly, this material all relates to one single constituency, Perthshire, where Gaelic was spoken by the majority of the population in the northern and western parts of the county in the nineteenth century. The 1891 Census – the first to provide reliable figures for Gaelic speakers – recorded just over 14,000 Gaelic speakers in Perthshire, a number which would have been significantly higher earlier in the century. Perthshire also boasted the largest county electorate in Scotland at that time, with 3,185 eligible voters in the first post-Reform election in December 1832.

Northern and western Perthshire is an area for which we have evidence of a significant amount of activity among Gaelic speaking poets in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, with collections published by Dughall Bochanan, Kinloch Rannoch (1767), Angus Campbell, Edramuchy (1785), Duncan Lothian, Glenlyon (1790), John MacGregor, Glenlyon (1801, 1818), Robert Stewart, Moulin (1802), and Margaret MacGregor, Glen Errochty (1831). And Perth itself was no stranger to Gaelic publishing with no fewer than thirty-eight books appearing in print in the city during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Its Gaelic-speaking hinterland also saw the sporadic publication of Gaelic books in the nineteenth century with three apiece being published in Aberfeldy and Killin.
The first of the poems on the events of 1832 is by Perthshire-born poet Duncan (Gow) Mackintosh, also known as ‘am Bàrd Mùgach’, (the Sulky Poet). He celebrates the passing of the Reform Act in a song entitled ‘Oran air lath a cho-chruinneach bha’n Dunedan nuair bha builleadh an Reform air a Sheulach leis ’n Righ’ (Song on the day of the meeting in Edinburgh when the Reform Bill was sealed by the King), occasioned by the Edinburgh Reform Jubilee held on 10 August 1832 (MacIntosh: 10–13). The implications of the new Act are not discussed by the poet who delights in the Tories’ defeat: ‘Ged a b’ ardanach na Torries, /
Thainig failig air ‘n onair, / Chaill iad am blar gu boile leo, / Striochd iad dhionnsuidh ‘n lair ga ‘n ain-dheoin’ (Although the Tories were arrogant / Their honour failed / They lost the battle despite them / They bowed to the ground reluctantly). The Scotsman estimated that a crowd of around 80,000 gathered on Bruntsfield Links for the Reform Jubilee with some 15,000 from Edinburgh’s Trades and public bodies taking part in the procession (11 August 1832). The poet seems to have been present, describing how the entire city moved ‘mar thonnaibh na mara ri iomadh ghaoth’ (like the waves of the sea in a whirlwind). As Michel Byrne has pointed out (Byrne: 75–76), the various Edinburgh Trades with their flags and insignia are described in terms of Gaelic military rhetoric:

Nar chaidh iad n dluths ri cheile,
Sa chrhuinnich gach Reismeid fo ‘m brataich,
Sa ‘n Coirneil féin air ceann gach treibh dhiu,
‘S gu ‘m b-aigeantach eutrom na gaisgich.

(When they gathered close together / And each regiment assembled under its banner / And their own colonels at the head of each group / Spirited and light were the heroes.)

The sitting Member of Parliament for Perthshire in 1832 was the Tory Sir George Murray (1772–1846), a distinguished soldier who had served as Secretary of State for the Colonies under the Duke of Wellington. He had proved a consistent opponent of Reform in the lead-up to the passing of the Reform Act, a fact which would be used against him by his Whig opponent in 1832 (Dyer: 30). This opponent was John Campbell, Lord Glenorchy, later Earl of Ormelie (1796–1862), son and heir to the First Marquess of Breadalbane, one of the most powerful landowners in Perthshire. As the eldest son of a Scottish peer, Ormelie had not been entitled to cast a vote in, or be elected to, a Scottish constituency, and so he had had to seek a Parliamentary seat south of the Border. This saw him representing the English seat of Okehampton between 1820 and 1826 as a Whig Member of Parliament. This bar was
removed by the Reform Act, leaving Ormelie free to stand for election in his own territory. It was to the lifting of this restriction that he would allude during his election campaign when he told prospective electors, ‘I am now on the eve of being emancipated like yourselves’ (*Perthshire Advertiser and Strathmore Journal*, 14 June 1832).

The two Gaelic poems and poster which relate to the election of late 1832 are all in support of Ormelie in a clear attempt to win round voters in the northern and western parts of the constituency. The first poem, headed ‘Perthshire Election – Gaelic Song’, and with the opening line ‘On thuaradh [sic] dhuinn a mach ’n ‘Reform’’ (Since Reform has been brought about for us), appeared on 9 August 1832 in the *Perthshire Advertiser and Strathmore Journal*. At this point Perthshire was served by three newspapers, the *Perthshire Courier* and the newly-founded *Perth Constitutional*, both Conservative in their stance, and the Liberal *Perthshire Advertiser and Strathmore Journal* which had begun only in 1829. From the outset the *Advertiser* was a strong backer of Reform and thereafter of Ormelie during his election campaign. It regularly published political songs in English in support of Reform and indeed, on 16 August 1832, coinciding with the Reform Jubilee, published four separate songs attacking Sir George Murray and his anti-Reform stance. The Gaelic song, however, seems to have been the only Gaelic text to appear in the newspaper for at least the first five years of its run.

The song, in which the anonymous poet rejoices at the passing of the Reform Act, is a rallying call to the voters of Perthshire. Running to five verses and a chorus, it was to be sung to the tune of ‘Blythe, blythe, and merry was she’. Using the same air as this particular Robert Burns song can have been no coincidence, as this was a song which Burns composed in 1787 while visiting the home of Sir William Murray of Ochtertyre, the father of Sir George Murray; the song is in praise of Euphemia Murray, a cousin of Sir William (Low: 210–11). The air to which the Burns song was to be sung was “Andro an’ his cutty gun”, already in use as the tune of a drinking-song, and this Gaelic song also takes the form of a drinking song with the chorus beginning ‘Nuas an botul mor, ’s an copan / Slaint an Righ theid grad mo ’n cuairt’ (Bring the large bottle and cup / The King’s health shall quickly go round). The Gaelic song was undoubtedly given an added edge by its appropriation of a tune already associated with the family of the opposing candidate.

The election battle for Perthshire is depicted as one between ‘Gàidheal’ (Highlander) and ‘Gall’ (Lowlander). Ormelie is referred to not by his title, but as ‘Gael’ gasda’ (an excellent
Highlander) and as ‘mor-fhear mor Ghlinn Urchaidh’ (the great lord of Glen Orchy), while Murray is merely referred to as ‘Gall’ (a Lowlander):

Chaidh Gael gasda, ‘s Gall mo ’n cuairt,
Tre Shiorrachd Pheart a dian chuir stri
A dh’fheuch co roghnaichadh an sluagh,
A thagradh ’n cuis an Cuirt na rioghachd.

Na ’n faodadh leis a Ghall ’sa chuirt
Cha bhiodh gach cuis an diugh mar tha
Cha bhiodh taghadh aig aon do’n tuagh
Ged phaidhar leo na ceudan mail.

(An excellent Highlander and a Lowlander went about, / Through Perthshire vying keenly / To see which the people would choose / To argue their case in the Court of the kingdom.
If the Lowlander had had his way in the court / Things would not be as they are today / Not one of the tenantry would have a vote / Though they paid hundreds in rent.)

The allusion in the second of these verses is to Murray’s opposition to the extension of the franchise. The poet then draws on the traditional ship of state motif, common in earlier poetry in praise of clan chiefs, when he urges voters to return the pro-reform Ormelie:

Co ris a dh’earbar leinn an long
Ach riusadh dhealbh an long ’s an stiur,
A gheachd ri beuchdaich gharbh nan tonn
’Scairt maraich dhoibh mar lochran iuil.

(To whom would we entrust the ship / But to those who built the ship and helm / Who struggled against the fierce roar of the waves / And a sailor’s map like a guiding light to them.)

The emphasis on Ormelie’s identity as a Highlander is reiterated with the words, ‘Na treigar leibhs’ an trath s’ an Gael, / ‘Sgu brath cha treig an Gael us sibh.’ (Don’t abandon the Highlander at this time / And the Highlander will never abandon you). This fairly literal translation is in marked contrast to the English translation of the song in the newspaper which ‘is provided for the edification of Southron Anti-Reformers’ and in which the translator was presumably trying to avoid alienating Lowland voters with his interpretation of these lines as, ‘Do not forsake the Reformer and he shall never forsake you’ where the ‘Gael’ (‘Highlander’) of the original has silently become ‘reformer’ in the translation.

The Perthshire Advertiser and Strathmore Journal was printed and published by John Taylor, whose premises were in King’s Arms Close in Perth. It is his name which appears as
the printer of both the 1832 and the 1834 Gaelic election posters, with the name “Jain” appended. Running to 189 lines of densely-packed print, the first poster is dated 10 December 1832, less than two weeks before the election took place, and is entitled ‘Do Shliochd nan Gael Gaisgeil’ (To the Descendants of the Heroic Highlanders).

‘Do Shliochd nan Gael Gaisgeil’ (To the Descendants of the Heroic Highlanders)

The orthography suggests that if it was John Taylor himself who saw it through the press he was not a Gaelic speaker. The first two sentences alone present the reader with ‘re anih’ instead of ‘riamh’ (ever), ‘nanihaid’ instead of ‘nàmhaid’ (enemy) and ‘comradh’ instead of ‘iomadh’ (many), pointing to someone unfamiliar with Gaelic working from a manuscript text.

The rhetoric here appeals to voters’ heroic heritage and this is flagged in the title, the subtitle and again in the very first sentence which reads ‘A mhic nan Caledoniach nach de gheill re anih [riamh] do nanihaid [nàmhaid] tha sibhse nis a seasamh anait bhur ‘nathrichean’ (Sons of the Caledonians who never yielded to an enemy, you now stand in the place of your fathers). This text is the earliest extant piece of Gaelic election rhetoric in prose and reflects the contemporary emergence of secular Gaelic prose writing as writers experimented with
style and genre, most notably in this era in the pages of the Rev. Norman MacLeod’s periodical *An Teachdaire Gae’lach*, (1829–31). More generally, these election posters reflect the extension of functional writing in Gaelic beyond the religious domain, with emigration propaganda also beginning to appear in Gaelic around this time.

The language of poetic eulogy and incitement is drawn upon when the voters are repeatedly addressed with such epithets as ‘a mhic “Alla [=Alba] nam buadh”’ (sons of Scotland of the virtues), ‘a mhic nan laoch’ (sons of the heroes) and ‘Sibhse luchd aiteachaidh nam beann’ (You, inhabitants of the mountains). What is striking, however, is that it is only towards the end of the text that the candidate, Ormelie, is mentioned, and his name ‘Morair Ormelie’ only appears once in the entire text, with only eighteen lines devoted to him out of a total of 189.

This particular text has to be read in the context of the movement for the abolition of slavery. One of the most prominent reformers, Henry Cockburn, compared Reform to the freeing of slaves when he wrote, ‘it is like liberty given to slaves: we are to be brought out of the house of bondage, out of the land of Egypt’ (Cockburn: 5). The converse has, however, also been argued in the light of evidence that in the wake of Reform some tenants were obliged to accept co-tenants when their leases came up for renewal, thus expanding a landlord’s voting capacity and making Reform ‘not [...] a charter of enfranchisement but of slavery’ (Ferguson: 112). The keywords in this Gaelic text are ‘saorsa’ (freedom), ‘daorsa’ (bondage), ‘tràill(ean)’ (slaves(s)) and ‘ain-tighearunas’ (oppression). ‘Saorsa’ is used thirteen times in the poster, ‘daorsa’ once, ‘tràill(ean)’ five times and ‘ain-tighearunas’ twice. The argument is not specifically that the voters have been set free, although that is implicit, but that they have gained a freedom that many others do not enjoy and that they should not waste it. Those electors who have promised their vote to Ormelie, but whose courage is failing them, the poster accuses of consigning themselves to slavery:

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bithidh sibh oiridh [airidh] air ar comharachadh, aon bhuid [chuid] le sgian no le iarrunn dearg, mar tha traillean air an comharacdh ann an iomadh earrainn de’n domhain. Ma ni sibh an ni so bheir sibh cothrom do naimhdean an Ath-leasachaidh – do naimhdean a chinndoine mar a thubhairl nu cheand [mar a thubhaitirt mi cheana], air [t]raill a dheanamh dhuibh & feudar a radh o se [seo] amach mu’r liomchionn [timchionn], ‘sin agad traill leithed so dhuine’.
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(You will deserve to be branded either by a knife or by hot iron as slaves are branded in many parts of the world. If you do this thing you will allow the
enemies of Reform – enemies of humanity as I already said, to make slaves of you and it can be said from here of you ‘there you have a slave in such a man’)

When Ormelie campaigned in Doune in July 1832 he expressed his opposition to slavery ‘under whatever form it appears, whether as on the continent of Europe, upheld by the bayonets of despots, or in the West Indies flourishing under the benignant influence of the whip, it has my thorough hatred and detestation’ (Perthshire Advertiser and Strathmore Journal, 19 July 1832). This framing of the rights of the Perthshire voters in terms of slavery versus liberty was not confined to Ormelie’s campaign; Sir George Murray used similar terms of reference, and it was a feature of the wider campaign for Reform itself. Ormelie’s emancipation rhetoric seems to have been little more than that. On inheriting the Breadalbane estates on the death of his father in 1834, he was to undertake large-scale evictions, with suggestions that as many as five hundred families were evicted between 1834 and 1853 (Mackenzie: 47–49).

The outcome of the election in Perthshire mirrored the national result with a resounding victory for Ormelie who polled 1,631 votes, 558 more than his rival. The second song specifically relating to this election, ‘Oran do dh’iarla Ormeli, am Braid-Alban’ (Song to Earl Ormelie in Breadalbane), can be dated to some point shortly after the announcement of Ormelie’s victory, which it celebrates (MacIntoisich 1830s?: 10–13). This too was composed by Duncan (Gow) Mackintosh who had celebrated the Reform Jubilee in verse earlier that year. There are resonances of Gaelic Jacobite poetry in his second song, with Ormelie referred to as ‘mar ’n rionnaig-iuil thain on iar’ (like the guiding star which came from the west), echoing poetic references to the belief that Charles Edward Stuart’s birth coincided with the appearance of a new star; the wheel of fortune which appeared in verse of the Jacobite rebellions appears here too in reference to the Tories: ‘thionnda chuibhle car cearr orr’ (the wheel took a bad turn for them). The poet refers to the election using military rhetoric similar to his celebration of Reform, with the Tories suffering defeat, ‘Ged bu ghleadhrach an cainnt, /Thainig maoim air a ‘n camp; /Thuit an claidh ’a ‘n laimh, /Dh’ fhas an gairdein cho fann’ (Though their talk was loud /Their camp was struck by fear /The swords fell from their hands /Their arms grew so weak). The poet reserves his satirical powers for the Tory, Sir Neil Menzies of the Appin of Dull, one of Sir George Murray’s political allies, whose depiction is far from noble:

Se bu choslaich Shir Niall,
Na suidh an caithair gu riaghal,
Bhi ’n srath na h-Apuinn ag iascach,
’S seann assail air srian aig;
Teannadh dhachidh le ciocras,
Gu bothan tart-mhor an iotaidh.
Am fàithte a ghoinne ga riarach,
Suidh an taic ris a ghriosach,
’S am balg-acinn ri chliathach,
’S adharc fhad an daimh riathich deananmh spain di.

(Sir Niall was more likely / Than seated ruling in a chair / To be fishing in the
strath of Appin / With an old ass on a bridle; / Approaching home hungry, /
To the parched, thirsty hut / Where his hunger would be satisfied, / Sitting
beside the fire / And the bellows by his side / And the long antler of the
brindled stag is his spoon)

This representation of the 1832 election as a battle to be accommodated within the
traditional framework of Gaelic praise poetry, with heroes to be praised and enemies to be
satirised, is a precursor to the verse of the 1880s in which the crofting MPs were to be
eulogised – and on occasions satirised – by Gaelic poets.

    The final text, a poster entitled ‘A Thaghdairean Gaedhealach’ (O Highland Electors),
was, like the previous poster, printed by John Taylor of Perth.¹

¹ The author uses the name ‘Tomachluig’, a placename which I have not, this far, been able to identify with
certainty (the place with this name near Lochgoilhead seems unlikely to be associated with this poster,
although the Tom Chluig near Bridge of Gairn in Upper Deeside might merit further exploration and so too the
Bellshill near Auchterarder, drawn to my attention by Dr Sim Innes).
‘A Thaghdairiean Gaedhealach’ (O Highland Electors)


The poster was produced in support of Robert Graham of Redgorton who was to stand against Sir George Murray in the by-election caused by Ormelie’s elevation to the House of Lords on the death of his father in 1834. There is no reason to think that Graham, from Lowland Perthshire, was a Gaelic-speaker, but rather that he wished to follow the success of his predecessor by appealing to the Gaelic-speaking section of the County’s electorate in their own tongue. Significantly shorter than the poster of 1832, it also lacks its rhetorical flourish. Unlike the first poster the focus is very much on the two individuals involved, with Murray described as ‘duine mi dhiaiaidh neo-ghloine’ (an ungodly, impure man) and as ‘namhaid an athleasachadh’ (the enemy of reform) as opposed to Robert Graham, ‘fior charaid an tuathanich, s’ an fhear-chuirde’ (true friend of the farmer and the tradesman).

The use of Gaelic in printed electioneering material raises the question of the extent to which Gaelic was used by candidates and their supporters when campaigning in Highland parishes. It seems unlikely that Ormelie spoke any Gaelic although he did take at least a nominal interest in the language, acting as patron of the Perthshire Gaelic Society and attending some of their events, such as annual dinners. It is, however, highly probable that
Gaelic would have been commonly used in this contest as it would be in later elections. It is interesting to note the report of Lord Ormelie’s visit to Rannoch given in the *Perthshire Advertiser & Strathmore Journal* in August 1832, the same issue in which the first text under discussion was published:

> His Lordship addressed the multitude in an energetic speech [...] Mr [James] Stewart of Crossmount afterwards addressed the meeting in Gaelic; after recapitulating his Lordship’s speech, he animadverted on the conduct of some Rannoch electors [...] Three cheers were then given for Oighre Bhealich, agus tri air-son Tulach Croisg.’ (...for the Heir of Taymouth [the seat of the Earls of Breadalbane at Kenmore, Loch Tay] and three for Crossmount) (9 August 1832)

This indicates that, in at least some Gaelic-speaking parts of the county, Gaelic was used in speeches, albeit in the case of Ormelie, not by the candidate himself.

Perthshire was not the only Gaelic-speaking area where election material in Gaelic was produced in 1832. In September the *Caledonian Mercury* referred to:

> a singular document [which] was lately picked up in the streets of Inverary. The natives of that part of the country, who are of course supposed not to possess the slightest acquaintance with the English language, must feel deeply grateful for so marked a proof of their worthy Member’s continued and flattering attention. (3 September 1832)

The *Mercury*, then, perhaps surprisingly - given its mocking of the translator’s skills in ‘the art of blarney-fication’ - reproduces the Gaelic text of this document which urges electors to vote for Thomas Kennedy, the sitting Whig MP for the Ayr Burghs which included Rothesay, Inverary and Campbeltown.

These Gaelic songs and posters from 1832 are the earliest evidence of Gaelic electioneering propaganda and of Gaelic poets’ engagement with the electoral process, prompted by the extension of the franchise. With two further reform acts in the course of the century, politics came to feature more prominently in the poetic repertoire, and Gaelic poets such as Màiri nighean Iain Bhàin (Màiri Mhòr / Mary MacPherson) would also come to occupy a place on the physical political platform. Similarly, posters and leaflets in Gaelic would become an increasingly common feature of elections in the Highlands. In advance of the 1880 election Sir Kenneth Mackenzie of Gairloch produced an election poster in Gaelic, ‘Da-aobhar-diag air son Sir Coinneach a chur do ’n Pharlamaid’, (Twelve reasons for returning Sir Kenneth to Parliament).
‘Da-aobhar-diag air son Sir Coinneach a chur do ‘n Pharlamaid’, (Twelve reasons for returning Sir Kenneth to Parliament)


The first of the twelve listed reasons was, ‘Tha e na shar Ghaidheal, agus tha Gaidhlig mhath aige’ (He is an excellent Highlander and he has good Gaelic), the language card coming into play again, albeit with slightly less subtlety than in 1832.

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