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**From:** Martin MacGregor [M.Macgregor@scothist.arts.gla.ac.uk]  
**Sent:** 01 October 2004 16:31  
**To:** info  
**Subject:** Initial submission on behalf of the Gaelic Books Council[Scanned]

Please find attached an initial submission to the Cultural Commission on behalf of the Gaelic Books Council, and apologies that it is slightly past the deadline. While this discussion document has not been prepared specifically with the Commission in mind, hopefully it will serve a purpose in indicating the current thinking of GBC regarding the status of, and way forward for, the Gaelic literary sector in Scotland. It seeks to alert the Commission to the scale of the challenges facing the sector; to the fact that constructive and forward thinking is taking place to seek to meet these challenges; and to initiate dialogue with the Commission as a means of obtaining advice and support in this process. I would suggest further that the vision outlined here is fully consistent with the aim and remit of the Commission. It seeks to be radical and forward thinking, and engages very powerfully with all aspects of the Commission's agenda: education; the institutional infrastructure; the delivery of services and access to them; marketing and promotion; encouraging creativity.

It would be of immense help if it were possible to meet with representatives of the Commission in the near future to discuss this document.

Yours sincerely

Martin MacGregor  
Vice Chair  
The Gaelic Books Council

1 October 2004

**valerie**

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COMHAIRLEPLAN.doc (54 KB)

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# Comhairle nan Leabhraichean (The Gaelic Books Council) and the Gaelic Literary Sector

A consultation paper prepared in advance of the creation of a three-year development plan for Comhairle nan Leabhraichean

## 1 Explanatory

- 1.1 This discussion paper has been prepared as a contribution to the imminent creation, for the first time, of a three-year development plan for Comhairle nan Leabhraichean (CnanL). It seeks to identify a principal aim for this plan, and two objectives required to fulfil this aim.
- 1.2 The paper takes inspiration from, and seeks to be consistent with, recent documents mapping out the immediate future and priorities of CnanL: the summary report of a meeting with the Scottish Arts Council (SAC) on 3 February 2004; 'Basic Recommendations for 2004-5 arising from the Appraisal Process for 2004', written by Prof. Donald Meek, Chair of CnanL, in April 2004; and CnanL's Application for Funding to the SAC for 2005-6, prepared by the Director of CnanL, Ian MacDonald. It also seeks to build upon the broader dialogue referred to under 2.6.
- 1.3 Nevertheless, and particularly since it is intended to use this paper as an aid to dialogue with partner agencies, it is important to emphasise that this paper is a draft document prepared by the acting Chair for discussion purposes, and does not at the time of writing represent official CnanL policy.
- 1.4 The paper is concerned with the relationship between CnanL and the rest of the Gaelic literary sector: publishers, authors, creative workers, and all other relevant parties. Although generated from within CnanL, as a step towards the creation of a three year plan, it attempts to stand outside that body and adopt an 'objective' perspective whose primary concern is not what is best for CnanL, but what is best for the sector. It does so in the belief that if all the agencies and individuals which comprise the sector can collectively take such an approach, then unity of purpose can be achieved and progress made.
- 1.5 This paper sets out one vision for the future of the sector. Realising it would have radical implications for the structure and remit of CnaL, and all others in the sector. Whether this vision is right or wrong or in need of amendment is a matter for discussion. What is arguably more important is that all within the sector agree on the need to unite around a vision and work together to realise it, irrespective of the individual impacts it may have.

## 2 Contexts

*The three-year plan will require to be framed in the following contexts, which collectively provide reasons for optimism, and reasons for urgent action:*

### (i) CnanL

- 2.1 The historic role of CnanL as the agency with prime responsibility for giving encouragement, direction and leadership to the Gaelic literary sector.
- 2.2 The expertise of existing CnanL staff and the imminent expansion in staff numbers from three to four.

- 2.3 The considerable progress made by the current Chair towards the improvement and formalising of all aspects of the internal working environment within CnanL.
- (ii) *The Gaelic Literary Sector*
- 2.4 Strategic weaknesses in the Gaelic literary sector, most fundamentally the lack of publishing houses, of editorial capacity, and of a centralised and efficient system of distribution. The scale of the problem has compelled CnanL to stretch itself across the sector. To its core function of nurturing Gaelic writing, it has added those of bookseller, and - through the Ùr-Sgeul project, and the agency of Clàr - publisher. It is presently contemplating whether it should become the central distributor for the sector.
- 2.5 Signs of vitality in the sector. The success of the Ùr-Sgeul project to publish new Gaelic writing is demonstrating unequivocally that the sector possesses authors, an audience and a future. The reconstitution of the board of Acair, the most prominent Gaelic publishing house of recent times, with the former editor as part-time manager, is greatly to be welcomed.
- 2.6 Dialogue concerning the future of the sector, involving all the main agencies and individuals, founded upon the EKOS Report of November 2001, and continuing since November 2003 under the aegis of the principal Gaelic development agency, Bòrd na Gàidhlig (BnaG).
- (iii) *The Wider Institutional and Demographic Context*
- 2.7 The constructive relationships existing between CnanL and key advisory and funding agencies: SAC and BnaG.
- 2.8 Recognition of the national cultural importance of a flourishing Gaelic literary sector in the SAC's *Literature Strategy*, and in its *Review of Publishing*: recognition which has been translated into increased funding support for CnanL.
- 2.9 The establishment by the Scottish Executive of a Cultural Commission to map out Scotland's cultural future: the Commission's particular emphasis upon 'cultural rights for the Scottish citizen', and how these might translate into a scheme of entitlements.
- 2.10 The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Bill now published by the Scottish Executive, empowering BnaG to take prime responsibility for language policy, and to draw up a national plan for Gaelic.
- 2.11 The demographics of language loss which make plain the urgency and the scale of the action which must be taken if Gaelic is to survive.

*It is assumed to be self-evident that a vibrant Gaelic literary sector is essential, both to actively ensuring the survival of the language, and as a subsequent marker of cultural health and normality. To perform this role, the sector requires a properly funded and organised infrastructure.*

### **3 A Three Year Plan for CnanL: Principal Aim**

- 3.1 It is suggested that the principal aim informing the plan, and printed at its head, should be:

*That in the lifetime of the plan Comhairle nan Leabhraichean will realise, or bring within reach of realisation, the revolutionising of the Gaelic literary sector, through dynamic leadership*

#### **4 A Three Year Plan for CnanL: Objectives**

*The principal aim can best be realised through fulfillment of the following two objectives:*

*(i) Revolution within: completing Internal Reform*

- 4.1 CnanL cannot effect a 'revolution without' without at the same time completing the 'revolution within', bringing to a successful conclusion the programme of internal reform embarked upon by the current Chair. This entails the following actions.
- 4.2 Most importantly, the use of the updated job descriptions, and of the annual appraisal scheme, as a means of setting annual objectives, and of monitoring progress, for individual employees and for CnanL as a whole. It is absolutely vital that this is done in the constructive and supportive spirit fostered by the current Chair.
- 4.3 Creation of new job descriptions for new employees, and integrating their roles with those of existing staff.
- 4.4 Completion of the upgrading of the physical working environment: office, shop, and store.
- 4.5 Upgrading of the IT infrastructure.
- 4.6 Formulation of a 'succession strategy' in anticipation of the possible departure in the relatively near future of the two senior staff, to ensure that vital core skills are not lost to CnanL.
- 4.7 Implementation of strategies to ensure that the editorial expertise and capacity of CnanL is not only safeguarded, but enhanced.
- 4.8 Scrutiny of the Board of CnanL and its strategic functions, in order to maximise the support available to staff.
- 4.9 Implementation of all other actions already identified in 'Basic Recommendations for 2004-5 arising from the Appraisal Process for 2004'.

*(ii) Revolution without: a vision for the Gaelic Literary Sector*

- 4.10 In fulfillment of its remit to encourage and lead (2.1), and as the best resourced component of the Gaelic literary sector, it is right that CnaL act as the catalyst in uniting the sector behind a common vision.
- 4.11 CnanL has consistently argued for some time that the key to guaranteeing a future for the sector, and unlocking its full potential, is to resolve what can only be described as a publishing crisis. As Ùr-Sgeul and other evidence makes plain, the sector possesses authors and an audience. Barriers between the two are the lack of editorial capacity, and of a centralised distribution system. CnanL is actively addressing both of these (4.6-7; 6.2-3). But the main bottleneck in the system is the fact that existing Gaelic publishing outlets are very few, very small, and chronically underfunded. The problem is historic, but has actually worsened in the recent past. The sector thus currently exists on the most precarious foundations. Gaelic language authors currently do not operate on the same footing as their English language counterparts in Scotland: the fact that their work is of publishable quality gives them no

entitlement to a reasonable prospect of being able to connect with their audience through publication.

- 4.12 Given the nature and scale of the crisis, and the other reasons for urgency outlined in section 2, CnanL endorses as a solution the formulation of a National Plan for Gaelic Literature (NPGL), which will have as its centrepiece the establishment of a National Publishing House for Gaelic (NPHG).

**5 Realising the Vision: Towards a National Plan for Gaelic Literature**

*NPGL will need to address and resolve two key strategic issues in order to establish NPHG, and secure the future of the Gaelic literary sector. This process will of course be dependent upon detailed negotiation with all relevant parties. What follows is a preliminary exploration, which argues that both strategic issues are closely linked, and which is founded on the conviction that the top priority of NPGL must be the establishment of NPHG.*

- 5.1 The first issue is how to secure the funding to establish NPHG. Logic dictates that NPHG will need to be funded and staffed at a level which guarantees its long-term stability. If an initial staff in upper single figures is assumed, then it is probable that the capital and revenue cost of creating and maintaining it will exceed the sort of grant aid which could realistically be expected solely from the obvious sources of funding, SAC and BnaG. This, coupled with its national status, and the radicalism of the initiative, implies that NPHG, while free-standing, and run on commercial lines, should be a statutory body, legislated into being and core-funded by central government, presumably the Scottish Executive.
- 5.2 The second issue is the relationship envisaged between NPHG and the Gaelic literary sector as it stands at present, specifically the existing publishing outlets. Honesty is crucial here. It must be acknowledged that the existing publishers might naturally perceive NPHG as a threat or rival, with the potential to suck away funding and personnel, and, in the most extreme scenario, to force them to close. To ask them to unite behind a vision which might lead to their obliteration would be to ask for an act of supreme self-sacrifice, and to offer a bitter reward for the commitment and expertise which has helped to keep the sector alive.
- 5.3 The view taken here is that, in a doomsday scenario where the funds available dictate that the price of establishing NPHG is the neglect and hence the potential elimination of the existing publishers, then that is a price which has to be paid. The scale of the publishing crisis facing the Gaelic literary sector demands a proportionate response. As a means of breaking the publishing bottleneck, and ensuring long-term stability for Gaelic publishing, there is no obvious alternative to the establishment of NPHG. Funders might also see a strategic attraction in investing in a single major initiative, rather than the perpetuation of a fragmented scenario in which smaller bodies potentially compete for limited aid that does not address their own long term futures, far less those of the sector. For too long Gaelic publishing in Scotland has been reliant upon sticking-plaster solutions, and the often heroic efforts of individuals. This can no longer be a substitute for more permanent structures, with funding to match.

- 5.4 If the establishment of NPHG did indeed result in the elimination of the existing publishers, it is conceivable that this would be a short-term phenomenon. In the longer term, the stability and expansion engendered by NPHG could create the climate in which smaller publishers reappeared, and diversity was brought to the sector. Nevertheless, the loss of diversity in the short term would be a loss, even if justified by the primary need to establish NPHG. It would also mean that the net gain of personnel active in the Gaelic publishing sector would be negligible. Moreover, although some personnel currently active in Gaelic publishing might be absorbed into NPHG, there would be the risk that others would be lost, and with them qualities which the sector can ill afford to lose. NPGL should therefore seek to explore and argue for more optimistic and ideal scenarios, in which the establishment of NPHG does not entail the elimination of the existing publishers.
- 5.5 One solution might be for NPHG to be organised on federal lines, built upon the existing publishers, and perhaps allowing for the retention of imprints and premises, and even the possibility of moving to independence again once the sector achieved health. However, a federal NPHG would probably hamper its operational cohesion and effectiveness, and the benefit to the sector as a whole in terms of enhanced overall staffing would remain negligible or non-existent.
- 5.6 A better solution may be suggested by revisiting the first strategic issue. If, as suggested in 5.1, the most logical source for funding for NPHG is central government, then this raises the possibility of complementary funding streams. Central government could be approached to establish NPHG: SAC and BnaG could be asked to meet the needs of CnanL, the existing publishers and the rest of the sector. As one means of enhancing the provision for the existing publishers, and giving them a sounder footing akin to that of NPHG, SAC/BnaG could be asked to contribute jointly to a fund dedicated to this end. Agreement on this score might in turn help in making the case for NPHG to central government.

*In sum, the minimum ambition of NPGL should be the creation of NPHG. Its maximum ambition should be creation of NPHG, and the stabilisation of the existing Gaelic publishing sector.*

## **6 Realising the Vision: Generating a National Plan for Gaelic Literature**

*The generation of NPGL along the lines suggested requires the following actions, most of which will be pursued in parallel.*

- 6.1 That this paper be circulated to key selected parties - CnaL, SAC, BnaG, and the Cultural Commission - to initiate discussion, and as a prelude to its dissemination to all relevant parties across the Gaelic literary sector and beyond.
- 6.2 That CnanL generates and commences implementation of a three-year plan, to ensure it completes its internal revolution. In particular, that it take steps to ensure the maintenance and enhancement of the editorial expertise and capacity required to deal with the expansion in Gaelic publications which is the ultimate objective of NPGL, and will be its major outcome.
- 6.3 That as one practical means of bringing unity to the sector, and pointing the way forward, CnanL, with the agreement of the existing publishers, and on

- their behalf, take the steps necessary to establish a central distribution system for Gaelic books.
- 6.4 That CnanL research and bring forward provisional proposals outlining the likely structure and cost of establishing NPHG, drawing upon appropriate parallels, most obviously from Wales and Ireland.
  - 6.5 That CnanL initiate a series of discussions with all other parties in the Gaelic literary sector, culminating in a meeting of the entire sector, to see if unity of vision can be achieved, in the form of the key aims and objectives of NPGL; that CnanL then co-ordinate the process of agreeing upon a finalised NPGL.
  - 6.6 That CnanL initiate preliminary discussions with all relevant funding and support agencies in order to determine the best way of securing funding for NPGL: SAC, BnaG, the Cultural Commission, the Scottish Executive and central government. In particular, that CnanL liaise with BnaG to ensure that NPGL is consistent with the national plan for Gaelic to be formulated by BnaG.
  - 6.7 That CnanL take two further actions in order to maximise support for NPGL, and to raise public awareness. First, that it consult and lobby more widely within and without the Gaelic world: Gaelic-Medium Education from pre-school to the tertiary level; Gaelic learners' organisations; the Gaelic media; the Scottish literary and cultural sector; local government, and the political parties, notably the cross-party Gaelic group. Second, that it investigate the feasibility of organising a series of literary evenings across Scotland to raise the profile of Gaelic literature. The objective would be to give authors a platform, showcase new Gaelic writing, and display and sell Gaelic publications: in essence, to make the case for implementing NPGL.
  - 6.8 That NPGL be submitted to the relevant funding agencies.

Martin MacGregor  
Vice-Chair  
Comhairle nan Leabhraichean/The Gaelic Books Council  
1 October 2004

cc Comhairle nan Leabhraichean/  
The Gaelic Books Council

Scottish Arts Council  
Bòrd na Gàidhlig  
The Cultural Commission

Donald Meek  
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THE GAELIC BOOKS COUNCIL

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Chair: Professor Donald E. Meek Director: Iain MacDonald

4th October 2004

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Mr James Boyle,  
Chair, Cultural Commission,  
Broughton High School,  
Carrington Road,  
Edinburgh  
EH4 1EG

06 OCT 2004

Dear Mr Boyle,

I apologise for the lateness of the enclosed submission, but I hope it will be of interest and use to your committee. We have chosen to highlight one development that we consider very necessary rather than go into great detail about the Gaelic publishing scene, but of course we shall be happy to provide further information if it is required.

We wish you well with the work of the Commission.

Yours sincerely,

Ian MacDonald

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### **Submission to the Cultural Commission by the Gaelic Books Council**

This is intended to provide background to, and support for, the submission already sent to the Commission by Dr. Martin MacGregor. The Books Council would begin by associating itself with the earlier submission put in by the Literature Forum, of which it has been an active member since the outset.

The Council has been a major success story within the Gaelic sector. Beginning in 1968 as, technically, a small committee of the University of Glasgow, with its Chairman being the Professor of Celtic and with its offices being housed in the Department of Celtic, it moved on in 1996 to become a free-standing charitable company renting premises in the Partick district of Glasgow. These include a modern bookshop, an office and (since July 2004) a storeroom. As well as its retail side, it has since it was set up had a significant role in disbursing grants and bursaries to publishers and writers, and it also provides an editorial service and general advice and guidance for its clients.

The move in 1996 has been associated with greater interaction with other organisations, within the Gaelic world and without, as well as a very great expansion of retail sales, which have quadrupled since the shop was opened. Until now, this great increase in activity had been achieved without any increase in staffing, which did not rise above three between 1976 and September 2004. Happily, a new member of staff has been recruited who begins work on 4th October, with the assistance of increased funding from the Scottish Arts Council (our main funder) and of a special grant of £12,500 from Bòrd na Gàidhlig. While she will help to some degree with the existing workload, her main remit is outreach work.

This concentrates our attention on the 'client base'. In the matter of potential writers, while the number of these within a small linguistic community must itself be small, we are confident that there is a good deal of untapped potential for good Gaelic publishing, ranging from literary work, the very best of which can compare favourably with any other, to useful documentary writing to light and entertaining reading. Much of this will, we plan, come from new writers; a good deal should come from established writers; and there is also a residue of publishable work (especially poetry) held by families and other informal executors. There is also material for many more anthologies (of various kinds) than have been produced to date.

Unfortunately, we have a major problem with outlets for writing at present. Throughout the lifetime of the Books Council, there have, until recent years, been two fairly strong Gaelic publishing outlets, as well as a handful of smaller cottage-industry ones. But the oldest-established of these, Gairm Publications, ceased publishing some time ago and will shortly be wound up. The other main publisher, Acair, has experienced a good deal of difficulty but looks now, with a new board, to be moving forward again. However, funds are in short supply, and in the near future Acair will find difficulty in widening its scope again from the educational books with which it is most concerned at the moment. The other main publisher is Clàr, publisher of the very successful Ùr-Sgeul series, but Clàr has

no paid employees and finds marketing difficult. Publishing by other one-person outlets continues, but is sporadic.

The Books Council has brought the problem of the lack of publishing outlets to the attention of the SAC and of Bòrd na Gàidhlig, and both organisations have recognised the problem. There is agreement that a more formalised, institutional publisher is required, and that the system of ad hoc publishing by dedicated individuals – which has achieved a great deal – is no longer adequate. We therefore ask the Cultural Commission's support in our efforts towards the creation of such a body. It could be an arm of the Books Council (which does not itself publish at present), and such a link has potential benefits, or it could be free-standing.

We are reasonably confident of accessing funds from Bòrd na Gàidhlig, and perhaps from the SAC (although not as part of our normal yearly funding).

A greater flow of Gaelic publications would be very much in line with the Commission's remit as far as 'cultural rights for the Scottish citizen' is concerned. In recent decades the Gaelic reader has come to expect more than the very occasional title in the language, whether he/she is a native speaker or one of the now very significant number of people who have learned the language or are engaged in learning it. It should be said in passing that the interest in Gaelic is by no means confined to Scotland or the UK, as our customer files show. Equally, we would be helping to boost the cultural rights of the creative community in serving authors, many of whom have to wait for a long time for publication of what is often fine work, while others again do not achieve publication at all.

A substantial new publisher is essential if we are to serve the interests both of writers (who are not confined to Scotland or the UK either) and readers.

Much is happening in the Gaelic-medium education sector, and good material is being created, but a thriving publishing industry will always produce work that is valuable for all levels of education, creative work being an obvious example. The education sector will always wish to access books of all kinds to supplement its own products.

With an increased volume of publishing would come economies of scale which would enable distribution of Gaelic books – and, if necessary, other materials – to be carried out more effectively. We ourselves hope that we can help with this through the use of our recently acquired book store.

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Our main concern is with Gaelic books: we are a small organisation, and are very much engaged with the daily nuts and bolts of our operation. But we play an important role in the work of preserving and developing the Gaelic language, and the awareness of the language and its associated culture as an enormously significant strand in the life of the country is surely greater than it has ever been. The new Bill is part of the evidence for that. We would also underline the point already made by the Literature Forum in the first paragraph of its submission about the uniqueness of literature as an art form and how it 'gives coherence to the art and languages of Scotland'. As with literature in the other languages of Scotland, Gaelic literature influences those it reaches in many ways, having, as the Forum says, 'the widest reach of any artform'.

Ian MacDonald  
September 2004