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Zombie-girl: Death and Re-animation in Modern Scottish Gaelic

“But the only purpose of language is to convey information” you often hear as the entrenched assumption of the Western Mindset. As they did in Wales, language campaigners in Scotland went on the offensive and struck back on grounds of cultural inheritance and finding a deeper connection with the land. And yet, when they brought back Scottish (Gaelic) it was like some re-animated corpse in a zombie film, like the dead girlfriend that had been resurrected by a grieving mad-scientist lover, and something was missing....

Imagine a trip back in time to visit *Alasdair, mac Colla chiotaich*, perhaps the greatest Scottish Gaelic warrior of modern times and try to inform him that his mother-speak would be practically wiped from the face of the earth 300 years into the future. He'd have cut out your tongue where you stood just for the very mention of it.

A hundred years later and we have another great *Alasdair*, this time the poet *Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair* and his famous description of the *Seann Chànain Ghàidhlig*:

*Tha 'n Laideann coimhliont',
Torach, teann na's leòir;
Ach 's sgalag thràilleil i
don Ghàidhlig chòir*

Latin is accomplished,
Fruitful, tight and full
But she's a servile slave
To the worthy Gaelic

Despite the tongue-in-cheek nature of the verse, what is exhibited here is a breezy self-confidence that came from absolute belief that *a' Ghàidhlig* was perfect, complete, that neither language nor speaker had need of “improvement”.

Flick back to the early 21st century via Culloden, clearance and general catastrophe and our dear Scottish is the only one of today's six Celtic tongues to be called by an approximation of her own name in English. Far from being a compliment, it serves only to illustrate how much she still suffers from being an ‘other’. In English, rather than being spoken of by Scots as Irish, Manx, Welsh, Cornish and Breton are, she sports the confusingly spelt title *Gaelic*, when of course 99.5% of her dialects in recent times pronounced the name /gahlick/

She finds no true acceptance into Scottish society as the closest we have to an original language or as the progenitor of all that people like to slap on and slap up to proclaim their heritage, from kilts to black pudding. And not only that, but she has come back from the dead in the hyperbolically-proclaimed “revival” lacking her soul. Just like the zombie lover shambling from room to room, her jaw hangs slack and she wouldn't recognise her own grannie if she sat down to supper.

Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair would be horrified to overhear a Western Islander once insist to me that the native Scottish word for a ‘teacher’ was indeed ‘teacher’ although of course rather poorly disguised in ill-fitting Gaelic orthographic overalls as *tidsear*, a term which looks more like the word for a weatherman, were such to exist. Are we really saying that we cannot bring ourselves to use one of the four or five native words for that individual whose duty it can be to impart knowledge of the very language itself? This is in fact nothing short of sheer linguistic permissiveness symptomatic of endemic cap-doffing to foreign authority. The English word now has a meaning amongst speakers which not one of the Scottish ones will ever regain. Not surprising that other terms exemplifying perceived modernity have met similar fates, leaving us *doctair*, *nurs* and the particularly hilarious *ospadal*....

So what about Zombie-girl? How did Zombie-girl come to be if she was resurrected by Gaels who had intimate knowledge of her etched into their very souls? Well the answer is actually very simple; she was not brought back to life by way of years of deep immersion in and reconnection with her soul, but by way of reference to the very civilisation which had forced her speakers to dig her grave and had then nonchalantly elbowed her into it. “Standardisation” found its way into Gaelic parlance by way of the British educational establishment which had done everything in its power to menace, demoralise and quite often simply ignore the language. Its application is a product of those deeply embedded assumptions which have meant that the value of anything really, but including an ancient people and their language, has been judged in terms of cold economic viability.

You can get a job out of it now! But thank heavens we don’t have to speak it when we come off air and at least we can pepper it with English. We wouldn’t want to be mistaken for actual Gaels. There’ll be no boy pointing out that the zombie is wearing no clothes or we’ll be dragged back to the croft in our sleep one of these nights, slack jaws rattling over the lazybeds.

A standard language is fine for getting started on language learning, in fact it’s very useful for mobile phone contracts and microwave manuals. But the sum total of what we have to say to the world? She’s a 2D cardboard cut-out that stands inanely grinning approval of her updated thousand-page care-plan while the last of her ageing children drop off silently one by one in their now tiny and mostly ignored pockets of irreplaceable rural knowledge.

Are we ready to accept that there will never again be another *Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair*? Whenever another finger of idiom drops off the walking Scottish corpse, she grows an English one back. Perhaps its time to raise *Alasdair mac Colla* from the grave to lop off her head with a merciful sweep of his sword before Zombie-girl really starts to stink.

While the farcically premature fanfare blasts in the distance, there are a few who tread the moors in search of truth, who catch a glimpse out the corner of their eye of something else moving in the dusk, the silhouette of an ancient good drifting deftly through the heather in the drizzling autumn haze. There’s a safehouse or two yet with a bowl of *brochan* and a dram out on the table until the standard, with a little less of the *-isation*, is raised once more....

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