Sabhal Mór Ostaigh
coláiste go hAirdeilig
1974
Sabhal Mór Ostaig
coláisde gàidhlig
The Objectives of the College

1. To promote education and study for Gaelic speaking communities in Scotland in all relevant subjects including the literature, history and culture of the Gaels, the environment, the other arts, and various practical subjects.

2. To provide facilities for people throughout the world who wish to study the culture of Gaelic Scotland and to learn its language in an academic and geographically appropriate setting.

3. To act as a Gaelic social centre for residents and visitors on the Island of Skye.
Urrasairean (Trustees/Governors)

Duncan MacQuarrie
Inverness Royal Academy
Inverness
Chairman

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Lecturer
University of Dundee

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SABHAL MÔR OSTAIG

The Background

It is not generally realized that at the dawn of history Gaelic was already a highly cultivated language, rich in oral tradition, which began to be committed to writing some time in the 6th century. The literary works of that time have a breath-taking simplicity of imagery and a great awareness of human relationships which has lasted to this day. By the 12th century certain families enjoyed hereditary custody of native learning and literature which produced classical Gaelic literature until the 18th century in Scotland. In parallel with these classical composers were poets of the people who came to the fore late in the 17th century and developed their power and influence from then on. By this time Gaelic society was on the retreat but the language retained its power and virility.

Any language is more than a mere instrument of communication; it carries all the nuances of art and civilisation, the moral and religious values of the society it represents and becomes the mortar which binds the community fabric. Social scientists have long recognised the importance of language in fostering self respect and confidence. This is particularly true in a bilingual situation where the dominant language tends to be under-valued by the media as in Gaelic speaking areas. As social and environmental pressure groups arise in modern society it is acknowledged to be of vital importance to Hebridean communities to have something peculiarly their own to contribute to European civilisation. Empirical evidence from Scandinavia and Europe supports the view that children educated in a bilingual situation are at a distinct advantage in later years when they are required to assimilate other languages. This is also true of Gaelic speaking communities, among which is the peninsula of Sleat.

The development of the Gaelic language as a general medium of communication is a prime means of enabling the people of those areas to retain their individuality which rests on a foundation of shared historical and social experience and largely inherited modes of life and feeling, tradition and loyalties. Commentators on sparsely populated areas agree that economic revival is dependent on a strong and cohesive linguistic and cultural framework.

Language learning itself is generally now considered a skill which, all things being equal, with adequate motivation, the majority of students can undertake with some measure of success. The motivation for language acquisition is multifarious and diverse and can vary in degree from a national impetus in countries which are consciously bilingual to the dedication of the solitary student.
It is not often realised that Gaelic is one of Scotland’s native languages and as such its storehouse of literature, art, music, archaeology and folklore is not just the property of Gaelic speakers but of all Scots people.

The problem is one of communication.

Sabhal Mor Ostaig is a step forward in achieving that communication.
The Building

Sabhal Mòr Ostaig is situated in the parish of Sléibhte in the Island of Skye, ten miles from Broadford and fifty-five miles from Uig. The nearest ferry terminal is the Armadale — Mallaig one.

The project involves the gradual conversion of a former semi-derelict farm-steading of substantial proportions to include a theatre/conference hall, a library, reading room, class-rooms, shop, offices, stores, toilets and other necessary facilities. Significant progress in these directions has occurred since the founding of the College in 1973 and developments completed include a lounge/sitting room, kitchen and toilet facilities, restoration of floors, doors and windows and the re-roofing of certain parts where necessity has prevailed. As a result of a magnificent gift from An Comunn Gàidhealach, ornamented wrought iron gates have been erected complementing the surrounding massive stone walling.

Under the aegis of the Manpower Services Commission Job Creation Scheme part of the east wing and tower have been refurbished to provide office accommodation for teaching and administrative staff on the ground floor, while on the first floor a class-room and music room for Còmhlann Phiobairean Shlèibhte (Sleat Pipe Band) is in embryo and should provide a focus for musical activities in the surrounding community.

The Sleat Job Creation Scheme has also been involved in landscaping part of the College grounds and further projected developments include the provision of a stage and dressing-room for the promotion of Gaelic Drama. While much development remains to be initiated, progress to date has been substantial and satisfactory.
Constitution and Organisation

The College has been set up under a Trust, the sponsors (Urrasairean) of which form the governing body of the College. The Trust has been registered as a non-profit making charity. The Urrasairean total twelve; three-quarters of whom must be resident in the Gaelic speaking area. The Urrasairean rule all business of the College and all assets of the College are vested in them.

The supporting organisation, Caidreamh an t-Sabhail (Friends of Ostaig) with a worldwide and growing membership, may also appoint two of the twelve governors. Membership of Caidreamh an t-Sabhail conveys several privileges including free access to the College’s consultative machinery, concessionary rates for services provided and a bi-annual newsletter. Còmhlann Leasachaidh Sabhal Mór Ostaig has also been formed to act as a fund raising and supportive organisation in the Island of Skye. It is their intention to finance specific projects as determined by them.
Staff

Dr. Gordon Barr was appointed in July 1973 as the College’s first Fear-Stiùiridh or Director and was responsible for establishing the College as a going concern. Dr. Barr held office until September 1974 during a sabbatical year from Dundee University where he is a lecturer in Bio-chemistry.

In the Spring of 1974 Farquhar MacLennan MA was appointed Fear-Stiùiridh having previously been Headmaster of Balivanich School in Benbecula.

The College also employs a Secretary and specialist teachers for short courses as required.

With the assistance of the Scottish Arts Council the appointment of a Filidh or Poet in Residence has been made possible. The first incumbent was a young poetess, Catriona Montgomery, who held the appointment for an initial period of one year. Thereafter the College was honoured to have the services of Dr. Sorley MacLean for a period of two years. Dr. MacLean is a poet of international renown and is regarded as one of the great European poets of the 20th century.

A change of emphasis for this post was instituted with the appointment of Aonghas MacNeacail as Sgriobhadair or Writer. His poetry, both in English and Gaelic, has received high acclaim in recent years. His remit includes the fostering of close links with the secondary schools throughout Scotland and the initiation of Gaelic educational materials of every kind.

The appointment of other full-time teaching staff will be linked to the development of full-time courses. These full-time courses are under active investigation and appropriate fields of study are being researched in depth.

The Urrasairean recognise the need to be flexible in staff requirements depending upon the financial resources of the College and the teaching requirements of the College’s educational activities.
Educational Activities

It is a central feature of the Ostaig concept, indeed the original inspiration of the project, to create the first comprehensive Gaelic library in the West of Scotland. The only public library with anything approaching a complete collection is the National Library in Edinburgh which is of limited value to the main body of Gaelic speakers and most other good collections are also in urban centres. It is not generally realised that large quantities of Gaelic books have been published in the last three hundred years and that the current output of novels, poetry, essays, biographies and educational texts is greater than ever before. The Gaelic Books Council has greatly stimulated and expanded the field of Gaelic publishing by operating a policy of overall encouragement with planned intervention at specific points. The library, while still in embryo, at present contains several hundred books and is gradually expanding as a result of an annual grant kindly awarded by the Catherine MacCaig Trust.

The library has also mounted exhibitions of artwork and these have stimulated much discussion and interest.

The College has forged close links with the University of Stirling and from 1978 all courses at the College will be in association with Stirling University. Furthermore both institutions will co-operate in the provision of seminars, courses, audio-visual materials and equipment. This association with the Department of Continuing Education at Stirling University offers the College an exciting opportunity to introduce a wide range of academic activities related to the Gaelic and West Highland environment.
Language and other courses

Eventually it is envisaged that full diploma courses will be provided covering subjects connected with the history, culture and environment of the Highlands and specifically concentrating on those educational skills which are necessary for maintaining the social, economic and industrial fabric of the Highlands. These skills may be summarised as being in the fields of industrial and catering management, community, educational and bilingual studies. The possibility also exists for short refresher courses in such diverse subjects as stock management and navigation.

There is an ongoing programme of short Gaelic language courses during the summer months which have proved most successful and which have attracted students from throughout Britain, Scandinavia, Europe, the United States, Canada and further afield. The College has also developed as a centre for school parties which have pursued a number of activities within the College and in the surrounding community. Several literature competitions have been held and they provoked wide interest and stimulated entries of the highest standard.

The College has acted as host for cultural weekends in conjunction with the Scottish Arts Council with the conference on the themes of "Contemporary Trends in the Gaidhealtachd of Scotland and Ireland" being voted a particular success.

Còmhlan Phìobairean Shlèibhte (Sleat Pipe Band) is based at the College and piping, drumming and dancing classes are held on a regular weekly basis. It is hoped to expand the range of musical tuition available at the College to incorporate other traditional instruments.

The Urrasairean would like to work with the education authorities in their aim of promoting Gaelic teaching in schools in as many dimensions as possible, including research into the special problems of Gaelic speaking pre-school children. Through time, as building renovation progresses, it is hoped to have theatre facilities which will fill a great gap in the community facilities available in Sleat. They will add a further aspect to the College’s present involvement in informal education by providing rehearsal, training and performance opportunities.
Research

Through the availability of the library, lectures, modern teaching equipment and academic ambience, as well as easy access to Gaelic speakers in their own native environment, it is hoped that post-graduates and others doing research on any aspects of Gaelic culture will base themselves at Ostaig, rekindling a lamp of learning on a scale which has not existed in the West Highlands for many centuries.

Audio-Visual and Technical Aids for Education

There is a particular need for new methods and initiatives in audio-visual materials for distribution to schools where Gaelic is taught whether in Scotland or in Canada. The College has been actively engaged in this work, much valuable material having been produced as a result of the award of two scholarships. With the skills and resources of Stirling University to hand, it is intended that this work should take on a new dimension. The College has also liaised with the Western Isles Islands Council, the Highland Regional Council, Jordanhill College of Education and other educational bodies and has made contributions to curricular development in Gaelic and related studies.

The central location of the College renders it a natural site for in-service courses for Gaelic teachers in Scotland. Furthermore the College could act as a collection and distribution point for teaching materials in Gaelic. The Summer Schools provide an excellent opportunity in the field of testing of language learning materials for adults and this has been done with commendable results. The College will shortly be able to offer several courses designed for learners of Gaelic in written, visual and aural modes.
Social and Other Activities

In addition to the functions of Ostaig as an educational centre, it has a natural role as a social centre for the South of Skye. The conference hall has been regularly used for ceilidhs and other social functions which take place in Gaelic and the Urrasairean see opportunities further to extend activities such as theatre, music, poetry and prose reading, lectures, discussions, art exhibitions and films. Examples of this have been the literary and cultural weekends organised by the Scottish Arts Council, a pantomime at Christmas and various music recitals. It is hoped that the extension of these activities would provide a forum for artists and writers of every kind, providing them with an inspirational goal as well as opportunities for public performances.

Ostaig is available for any clubs, societies or groups, local or otherwise who wish to carry out their activities in Gaelic.

In the World sense, Caidreamh an t-Sabhail (Friends of Ostaig) provides a focus of interest for peoples of all countries, cultures and creeds who have an interest in minority languages, with a special emphasis on Gaelic in this instance. The membership ranges throughout Europe; as far as San Francisco and beyond to Australia.

The Isle of Skye's identity with the Ostaig project will be cultivated and reinforced by the newly created Còmhlann Leasachaidh Sabhal Mòr Ostaig (Sabhal Mòr Ostaig Development Association) which has representatives from all over the Island.

SMODA is an independent entity and any funds which it raises will be available to the College for specified purposes.
Financial Activities

During the initial period of its existence the College has been most fortunate in securing the help and financial support of many trusts, charities and industrial organisations. The library, scholarships, the fabric and facilities of the College have all benefited from the generosity of contributors. We thank them all most sincerely and refrain from mentioning any in accordance with the wishes of the majority. We look forward gratefully to their continuing support and encouragement.

Although students pay fees for attending the College these do not cover the full cost of operating the courses and this is recognised by the Scottish Education Department which makes a substantial contribution to the College. The Friends of Ostaig numbering about five hundred make a large contribution to the College through membership fees and goods and services. Membership is available on an individual, family and corporate basis. The Development Association should provide considerable annual support when its fund raising activities bear fruit. The College operates a small shop, selling Gaelic books, records, cassettes and various mementoes of the College. The continued use of the premises by outside organisations, translation and information services, volunteer working parties, the College’s own evening functions, the repair and alteration of the building under the aegis of the Sleat Job Creation Scheme all ensure eventual financial viability.

At present statutory charges such as local authority rates, running costs, pensions, National Insurance contributions, salaries and materials for repairs and developments constitute the main financial burdens.
Future requirements

In order that the College may function as a seat of learning, both of Gaelic and other disciplines through Gaelic, much remains to be acquired and put to use.

Audio-visual and reprographic equipment is needed urgently, especially language laboratory facilities. Opportunities for individual study must be available in the library. Residential facilities are an absolute necessity in order to provide cheap self-catering accommodation and allow people of all ages and differing monetary means to attend the College and to provide the ambience of a residential College.

Enormous amounts of materials and labour have yet to be expended on the fabric, for example, the enlargement of windows, replacement of roof trusses, additional teaching areas with heating, lighting and seating, toilet and shower facilities. These will have to be provided either in cash or in kind.

On the administrative side, office equipment and supplies, mobile partitions and office furniture all remain to be provided as circumstances permit.

In the future it is possible to envisage the College with its own teaching staff and full-time students, acting as a focus for Gaelic learning in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland as well as refreshing and reinforcing the social and community ties and developments of Sleat and Skye.
Principal Donors or Subscribers to the College

We most gratefully acknowledge the help and continuing support of the following organisations:

The Scottish Education Department
The Scottish Arts Council
The Gulbenkian Foundation
The Highlands and Islands Development Board
Caidreamh an t-Sabhail (Friends of the College)
Comhlann Leasachaidh Sabhal Mòr Ostaig
(The College Development Association)
Total Oil Marine Ltd
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The Catherine MacCaig Trust
The Gaelic Language Promotion Trust
The Highland Regional Council
An Comunn Gàidhealach
And many other companies and individuals.