

*Warriors of the Word: The World of the
Scottish Highlanders*, Michael Newton

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The world of the Scottish Gaels has been seen in academic literature most often through the lens of English-speakers. Much of this literature has often viewed the Gaels as straws in the wind of a particularly malevolent history: displaced, slaughtered, and misunderstood; hapless victims of events such as the Clearances and the Jacobite rebellions. Michael Newton's recent publication aims to show the world of the Gaels through their own eyes, primarily using the medium of Gaelic song, poetry, story and indeed the language itself. This book does not claim to be an unbiased historical work, but a retelling of Scottish history from a Gaelic viewpoint, as well as a guidebook into the deeply symbolic cultural and mental landscape of the Gaels.

The first of the book's eight chapters is essentially a pocket Scottish History, although it is refreshing and at times startlingly different from normal Scottish historical narratives in that its emphasis is on Gaelic sources and the political geography of the

Gaelic world: the western seaways, the Lordship of the Isles, the early Christian Church, later connections with France, and opposition to the Anglophone world to the south. This first chapter serves as an effective way to introduce this historical period (roughly the early medieval period to the present day), into which the following seven thematic chapters delve. In itself this opening chapter is a must-read for archaeologists and historians of Scotland seeking an alternative viewpoint to the mainstream literature.

The following bulk of the book is set out in chapters organised in a thematic nature about aspects of Gaelic society and culture such as ‘clan society’, ‘family and personal life’, ‘music, song and dance’ and ‘human ecology’. The order of discussion is effective in that it gradually builds up knowledge: allowing the reader to acquire a depth of understanding which allows the author to make clear, complex, symbolic connections between many aspects of life in Gaelic society.

The discussions are not structured in a chronological order. For example, in chapter 4 ‘Clan society’, the nature of highland society is not laid out in a narrative manner, discussing how it changed after important events such as Culloden or the Enlightenment, which is what one might normally expect. The chapter is instead divided into thematic sub-sections such as ‘leaders and leadership’, ‘territory and ownership’, ‘law and morality’ and ‘feasting and fighting’. This structure is extremely effective in putting across one of Newton’s main ideas: that Gaelic society was in a constant dynamic flux between different values, systems, and symbols. This technique also

serves to subvert the kind of historical determinism often seen in other discussions of this topic, where it is imagined that the entirety of Gaelic culture is changed immediately, entirely, and irrecoverably by events imposed by the outside world.

The author, Michael Newton, is a well respected scholar in the field of Celtic studies who has produced several highly regarded pieces of work, and the respect with which he is held is attested to in a foreword by Professor Hugh Cheape: an expert in the fields of Celtic studies, Gaelic, and Scottish history and material culture. The wide-ranging knowledge of the author is demonstrated by his large and varied bibliography which cites sources in Celtic studies, archaeology, history and anthropology as well as many varied historical documents, poems, and stories. The short Gaelic poetry sampler with extensive notes at the end of the book is also an extremely useful companion to the main body of the work. Partly due to his effective use of these varied sources, I believe this book would be of interest to anyone studying in any of these varied disciplines.

The writing itself is accessible which makes the book a relatively easy read considering the large amount of information being delivered. The author's use of Gaelic terms is not excessive and does not cause the non-Gaelic speaker any particular difficulties, as those terms are always adequately explained and established. Newton's use of diagrams to illustrate abstract concepts and historical ideas is effective in aiding understanding. There are also many tables which offer quick referencing of ideas, concepts and terms at a

glance. Despite these effective writing techniques there is a vast amount of information within the book on a large number of topics which can incite a feeling of ‘overload’ when reading!

One slight difficulty that some readers may have when using this book is that its thematic structure does not encourage certain kinds of thinking. For example, a reader particularly interested in the history or place of concepts within Gaelic society and culture through time may not find it easy to trace a chronology. This structure does however *force* the reader to recognise the symbolic and cultural links across different times and places in Gaelic society, and to understand ideas within their rich cultural context, which is one of the unique strengths of the book. The referencing (endnote style) and lack of images may not suit all readers, particularly those from academic disciplines such as archaeology where references and discussion of images in the text is the norm. This is not a criticism of the author however as the work is designed primarily as a publication in Celtic studies and follows the norm of that discipline. Regardless of this, the wide range of knowledge and the interesting connections the author makes between concepts which cross disciplinary lines makes this book worth any extra effort.

I would recommend this book to anyone studying virtually any aspect of Gaelic society and culture from the medieval period to the present day. The scope of knowledge in the book may mean that it does not meet the detailed and specific needs of some readers, but its holistic approach should expand and improve the knowledge of

anyone studying this topic, and emphasise the importance of viewing the Gaelic world through the eyes of the Gaels.

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