

Sowing the seeds

Michael Glen describes an approach to using Gaelic that recognises the importance of the language, and goes beyond the limitations of conventional bi-lingual text.

Gaelic is integral to the Gàidhealtachd and must be integral to the interpretation of its natural and cultural heritage. Thus, paraphrased, was the injunction from Bob Jones, Head of Design and Interpretative Services at the Forestry Commission, when he invited me to write text for panels that would be placed in the heartland of Gaeldom. He ruled out a bi-lingual approach, perhaps bruised by experience in Wales, but wanted visitors to see Gaelic as very much alive.

To achieve this we used an 'integral' method – a nice play on inserting Gaelic words in English text and on sustaining the integrity of the language. We wanted to tease readers into wanting to find out more, to begin to recognise words, to widen their linguistic horizons, and to enjoy Gaelic for its inherent riches.

Our first essay was at Rosal in Strathnaver, Sutherland where we took a double-edged approach. All titles were in Gaelic and English, but the panel text introduced Gaelic words or phrases alongside (where necessary) their English equivalents.

Here are two brief excerpts:

... We can plant buntàta, potatoes, which we rely on so much, sow the eòrna, barley or sow corc, oats for brochan, porridge ...

... They care nothing for the Gàidhealtachd, our ways, our people, our language and ar beathannan, our lives. Mo mallachd aig na caoraich mhòr - my curse on the big sheep.

We did something similar with panel text at Airigh Fhionndail, Ariundle, in Sunart but here the panel titles echoed in English the almost rhythmic structure of Gaelic; this was another form of 'integration'. For example:

Fàilte gu coille nan darach ann an airigh fhionndail os cionn abhainn sròn an t-sithein
Welcome to the wood of oak trees on the shieling of the white meadow above the river of the ridge of the fairy hill

The drafts met with local approval, including that of Michael Foxley, the fierce guardian of Gaelic culture. Perhaps more importantly, the work seems to please visitors – particularly those forming a deep connection to the 'place' – and has set a pattern for later commissions.

Michael Glen
glentigstane@aol.com

Interpretation is an art...

Many projects in Scotland have made pioneering use of sculpture, poetry and other arts as part of interpretation schemes. But there can sometimes be a tension between artists' desire for creative freedom and interpreters' desire to meet interpretive aims. Kev Theaker describes a scheme on Arran that tries to reconcile these two perspectives.

At Brodick Castle on the Isle of Arran the National Trust for Scotland are managing Merkland Wood to remove rhododendron and allow native woodland to re-establish. They have been working with artist Tim Pomeroy to deliver an excellent project which combines sculpture and interpretation.

Instead of interpreting the work in a conventional manner four sculptures were commissioned. These, along with a short written commentary from the artist, are placed in the wood to surprise and delight visitors.

The sculptures are the work of a well-established artist who works within the gallery system as well as producing sculpture in the public sector. The collaborative project succeeds in putting high quality artwork into a semi-natural setting in a way that allows the sculpture and natural space to enhance each other. A key element here is that the Rangers have built on an existing working relationship with the artist, and therefore trusted him to deliver his own work which also meets their interpretive needs. The brief for the work was deliberately kept broad allowing the artist to respond to the site and to avoid curtailing his own artistic expression.

How well does it work as interpretation? Responses from visitors are wholeheartedly positive, suggesting that the work enhances their experience of the place but also encourages them think about the woodland and the work involved. Tim's small text pieces give his interpretation but allow the visitors to develop their own ideas and views. The scale of the artwork is in keeping with the woodland: many of the visitors remarked that they wouldn't like 'artwork that wasn't appropriate – either in materials or design'. A sensitive approach has ensured that high quality artwork is working to create a memorable visitor experience without dictating didactic messages. Surely, that's what we aim for from good interpretation?

Kev Theaker

k.theaker@au.sac.ac.uk