Quo Vadis

By COMPTON MACKENZIE, O.B.E., B.A., LL.D.

WHEN we have sat down after a rousing chorus of *Suas Leis a'Ghaidhlig*, when we have finished congratulating ourselves that last year's Mod made more money than that of the year before, when we have brought out Gaelic records to learn the language, when we have presented shields for competitions and attended Summer Schools, and when without having the luck to hear a word of our ancient tongue in youth we have managed in middle age to speak it and even write in it correctly, do not most of us ask ourselves at the end of it all whether our work and our enthusiasm have effected anything more for Gaelic than the substitution of gradual decay for rapid extinction? There are moments when I feel a kind of rage at the expense of so much sentiment in a waste of inconsistency. Such moments occur to me when, after hearing our greatest Gaelic scholars expound the creed of their glorious heritage with fervour and with eloquence, I reflect that in some cases their own children are ignorant of their father's language, for I know then that at the back of all that eloquence is a radical disbelief in any practical future for Gaelic. I know then that the fervour is sustained not by the fire of belief, but by the hot air of sentimentality.

If you want a proof that Gaelic is dying you can see it in the barren philological and grammatical controversies which occupy so much of the energy of its champions. A healthy language does not invite the morbid curiosity of pedants, most of whom are too busy criticizing the rust upon their colleagues' lancets to apply practical remedies to the patient, who indeed must feel more like a corpse at a *post mortem* than a sick, but still living organism. There is one remedy, and one remedy only, which will restore Gaelic to full vitality, and that is the recreation of the surroundings in which it can flourish. No language can continue to live if deprived of the source from which for centuries it has derived its fluency. The real reason why the last four Mods have shown such a remarkable advance in popular support is the simultaneous rise and growth of Nationalism. You have only to compare the attention which the Press accorded to the Mod before Scotland began to be acutely conscious again of her place as a nation with the attention accorded to it now to test the truth of my contention.

The sooner that the members of An Comunn grasp that the future of Gaelic rests entirely on the achievement of national independence the better chance there is of saving the language before it is too late. The lesson of Ireland is one that her sister nations cannot ignore except at the risk of death. We are told by many of our prominent Highlanders and Islanders that the Highlands and Islands could not endure economically without the charity of England. If that be so then let them die, and let their language die with them except as an entertainment at charitable occasions or as a poultry-run for pedants to scratch in.

Scholarship will preserve what has been written, but it will not maintain the spoken word. By preserving and maintaining her language Wales has kept her soul free. By preserving and maintaining her freedom Ireland will now save her language. Will Scotland do neither?

Minutes of a Century

By The Rev. THOMAS M. MURCHISON, M.A.

THE Ossianic Society was founded in December, 1831, by thirty Highland students, under the inspiration of Dr. Norman Macleod ("Caraid nan Gaidheal"), then minister of Campsie, who happened at the time to be assisting at the Communion Season in the Gaelic Church. The ten volumes of Minutes (mostly in Gaelic)—an interesting commentary on student life and thought through a century—have had a romantic history. Some have been in Canada. In 1880, some, missing for 13 years, were recovered from a Mr. Maclachlan, minister of Ardchattan, who, threatened with legal action, alleged that the books were locked up in a

chest and the key mislaid; given a month to find the key or break open the chest, he speedily restored the volume.

At first the Society met in the Old College in High Street; then for 60 years (with an interval in 1843 in "Tigh-osda Mhic Thomais" at 21 Argyle Street, and in 1845 in "Oil-thigh Chinneadach" at 177 Argyle Street) in the Gaelic Church, originally in Ingram Street, but later in Hope Street ("St. Columba's"), until in 1894 they moved to the Union. English was first allowed 40 years ago, but, previously, there was an English-debating adjunct—"The Caledonia Society." In 1895 women were admitted, although two ladies appear much earlier—in 1834 "an Oigh Uasal Sine Robestan de Shiol Rioghail Mhicillein," and in 1845 "Baintighearna Choire-mhonaidh."

Prominent in the long ago were two Alexander Stewarts (one from Glendaruel, the other from Balquidder), Robert Macfarlane (afterwards minister in Greenock), and Robert Blair (later of St. Columba's), and, more recently, Kenneth Macleod of Gigha and other eminent men still living. "Iain Og Ile," "Fionn," and Professor Mackinnon were enthusiastic supporters. Sir Hector Macdonald and Mr. Neil Munro were honorary members, an autograph letter of the latter's being preserved in the Minutes. In 1834-45 a Count Fitzgerald and a John Sobieski Stuart are mentioned.

At the first annual dinner in 1833, "Caraid nan Gaidheal" presided, supported by Macneill of Barra and Maclaine of Lochbuie. In 1834 Macleod dedicated "Leabhar nan Cnoc" to the Society, who, that same year, memorialised the Government to sanction the post free transmission of the "Teachdaire Gaidhealach" in the Highlands, and enthusiastically resolved to present Macleod with his portrait. "£10 being subscribed in less than as many minutes." In 1834 also a literary competition was initiated, Vergil's Aeneid II. being prescribed for translation into Gaelic; and "An Nuadh Oranaiche Gaidhealach" appeared under the Society's auspices. In 1835, "chaidh bocsa de dh'iarunn geal, bata-dreuchd airgid, bocsa snaoisein de dh'adharc cinn-airgid, aon deug de bhoineidean breaca, agus Foclair Gaidhlig Padruig Mhic Pharlain, a liubhart thairis do'n Chomunn Oiseanach le Donnachadh MacNie, aon de bhuill Comunn nam Fior-Ghaidheal an Glaschu, a chaidh a bith ann an 1823, agus d'am buineadh na nithean ud." In 1847 the great distress in the Highlands brought subscriptions from their pockets. In 1855 Edinburgh University Celtic Society proposed the founding of a Gaelic newspaper, but the Ossianic, moving delay, killed the project. In 1857, to a Mr. Forbes, minister of Sleat, soliciting their aid in publishing his new translation of Ossian, they cautiously replied that, "if it proved worthy," they would advertise it: Gaelic books being scarce, they decided to form a Gaelic library, and invited the Duke of Hamilton to head the subscription list because of his connection with the Society and University: two members won prizes from "Comunn Gaidhealach Ghlaschu" for poems on Highland valour in the Crimea. In 1860 they opposed the removal of the College from High Street, but in 1869, accepting the inevitable, they demanded a gymnasium and a Celtic Chair in the new College. In 1883 they interested themselves in the head-gear of Highland regiments. In 1887 they pleaded for Gaelic teaching in schools, and again demanded a Celtic Chair, often championed later, especially in 1910. In 1889 they persuaded the authorities to purchase Gaelic books for the University library.

The secretaryship dates from the beginning, but the first student President was appointed only in 1881. The office of Bard is very old, that of Piper comparatively recent, while that of Seanachaidh has fallen into desuetude. In 1881 a certain Donald Maclean, on resigning the Bardship, stoutly opposed the appointment of a successor "until Providence should send them a bard"; they then debated and agreed that the Age of the Bards was gone. The "Skye Bard," Neil Macleod, was for many years Honorary Bard. Among the bardic odes in the Minutes are some by Donald MacCallum, later famed as land-agitator and Gaelic litterateur.

Our predecessors' judgments are interesting: they regarded Darwin's theories as philosophically untenable, barred the professions to women, condemned female franchise, Scottish Home Rule, read sermons, organs in church, Sunday cars, and prohibition, and repeatedly blackguarded the Government, Gladstone being Gaelicised as "Clachaoibhneis."

There are also echoes of the ecclesiastical strife culminating in the Disruption of 1843, which indeed caused internal dissension, for in 1864 a seceding party formed the "Glasgow Free Church Students' Celtic Society," which, despite attempts at reunion, remained a friendly rival until it disappeared 25 years ago. In 1911 another domestic rumpus resulted in the formation of the "Glasgow University Celtic Society," which, however, soon returned to the fold. In 1915-19 the Society was suspended during wartime. The post war years have been marked by a rapidly increasing membership, ever-growing enthusiasm, and a considerable widening of activity.

The Centenary was celebrated in December, 1931, on which occasion the Lord Rector, Mr. Compton Mackenzie, a former Honorary President, presented to the Society an antique silver churchwarden pipe, once owned by Dr. Johnson, which is now in the Hunterian Museum, while the Minute-books lie in the University library. All the other Society property mentioned above cannot now be traced.

Exigencies of space have necessiated a mere bald recital of isolated facts, doing less than justice to the subject. A history of the Society, against the background of student life through a century, would be a profitable and interesting undertaking, for which the Minutes provide a wealth of material.