

Scottish Gaelic

HUGH CHEAPE

*A Chlanna Cuinn Cead-chathaich
Anois uair bhar n-aitheanta*

Children of Conn of the Hundred Battles,
Now is the time for you to win recognition!
—Battle Incitement by Lachlan MacMhuirich, 1411

Scottish Gaelic is one of the languages of Scotland, along with Scots and English. It is closely related to Irish Gaelic, and both belong to the Celtic group of the Indo-European language family. Scholars have suggested that Celtic-speaking peoples moved into Ireland and Britain some time before 300 B.C.E. and that the dialects of these British Celts later split into two groups: P-Celtic, including what we know today as Welsh, Breton, and Cornish; and Q-Celtic, including Irish, Scottish Gaelic, and Manx (the Gaelic of the Isle of Man).

*'S ge iomadh cànan
Bho linn Bhàbeil fhuair
A' sliochd sin Adhaimh
'S i Ghàidhlig a thug buaidh*

And though many a language
From the time of Babel
That race of Adam got,
It is Gaelic that won fame.
—Alexander MacDonald, 1698-1770

From Ireland (referred to as Scotia in Latin), the speakers of Gaelic, the Scotti, migrated east across the sea sometime in the 5th century C.E. and gave their name to Scotland. They spread north, east, and south to achieve in about 1100 C.E. what was probably the language's greatest extent as the speech of kings and people. Gaelic place-names reflect settlement patterns, and their presence in the Scottish Border country near England indicates the extent and status of the Gaelic-speaking settlers of this period. Close association with the Celtic church in Scotland and Ireland in these centuries created a rich tradition of literature. A Gaelic kingdom emerged in the 14th and 15th centuries, as a probable reaction to the Viking invaders of the north and west coasts. Called the Lordship of the Isles, its power and success led, in turn, to its destruction by the Kings of Scots. Successive phases of persecution of the language followed, with laws passed to weaken Gaelic culture and enforce education in English, and with policies that identified the Gaelic language as hostile to church and state. The missionary Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, for example, pursued a policy in the 18th century of "extirpating the Irish language" (i.e., Scottish Gaelic) from the Highlands and Islands. In spite of the cultural pressure and political hostility of the Scots and English languages, the areas of Gaelic speech remained stable and coterminous with the Highlands and Islands of Scotland until the 19th century.



A coat of arms welcomes visitors to the Gaelic-speaking community of Stornoway on the island of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. Photo by Paul Tomkins
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Curator of Scottish Culture in the National Museums of Scotland, Hugh Cheape has been involved in the creation of a number of museums including the new Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. Since joining the service in 1974, he has published extensively from his research, exhibition, and collecting work.



The prehistoric Callanish Stones document the ancient history of the Gaelic-speaking Isle of Lewis. Scotland's main concentration of Gaelic speakers now live in the Western Isles (Outer Hebrides), the Western Highlands, and in and around Glasgow. © VisitScotland/ScottishViewpoint

Following the defeat of the Jacobite Rebellion led by “Bonnie Prince Charlie” in 1745, economic collapse in the Scottish Highlands and Islands forced emigration on people who created Gaelic colonies overseas such as in Nova Scotia.

*Chì thu buailtean a' chruidh-laoigh
Air gach taobh anns a' ghleann,
A' toirt taisbean le 'n cuid sgeul
Air na treun-fhìr a bh' ann.*

You'll see the folds of the milk-cows
On each side of the glen,
Giving witness by their stories
To the heroes that were there.

—Donald MacDonald, 1926–2000

The 1991 population census of the British Isles recorded nearly 70,000 people as being able to speak, read, or write Scottish Gaelic, and this represents 1.4 percent of the Scottish population. A hundred years earlier, nearly a quarter of Scots were familiar with the language, but official insistence on literacy in English and statutory prohibition of Gaelic in schools under the Education Act of 1872 seriously eroded the language's base. It survived most strongly as an informal medium of

communication in family and home, and to a lesser extent in the church. The main concentrations of Gaelic speakers are now in the Western Isles (Outer Hebrides), the Western Highlands, and in and around Glasgow. A sharp decline in the number of Gaelic speakers, particularly in the late 20th century, has led the government to take measures to support Gaelic language, culture, and identity. A Minister for Gaelic has been appointed, and Gaelic is used in broadcasting and at all levels of education from pre-school to college.

A Highland Association, An Comunn Gàidhealach, founded in 1891 to encourage the use of Scottish Gaelic, instituted an annual music festival, the Mòd, which is still celebrated. In recent decades the Scottish musical scene as a whole has been enriched by Gaelic rock groups such as Runrig and Capercaillie, who have fearlessly transposed traditional modes into modern idioms. Music and arts are supported in the community by a popular movement—Na Fèisean—ensuring dedication to and a love of Gaelic culture and a supply of young performers to sustain a worldwide

popularity of Scottish Gaelic song and instrumental music. In spite of a sense of declining numbers, Scottish Gaelic still has a very rich published literature, drawing strength and confidence from a “revival” beginning in the 1930s, associated particularly with Sorley MacLean (1911–96). Gaelic writers have followed the example of the literary and political “renaissance” in Scots as well as movements in contemporary English and European poetry in exploring the human condition in a changing and threatening world. In the experience of Gaelic, the sense of place, of ancestry, and of the inner strength of the language continues to sustain it.

*Fuirichidh mi ris a' bhèith
Gus an tig i mach an Càrn,
Gus am bi am bearradh uile
O Bheinn na Lice f'a sgàil.*

I will wait for the birch wood
Until it comes up by the Cairn,
Until the whole ridge from Beinn
na Lice
Will be under its shade.

—Sorley MacLean, “Hallraig,” 1970