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Title of extract: **Gaelic Language**

Name of Author: **Keay, J and Keay, J.**

Title/Author of book/edition (if applicable): **Collins Encyclopaedia of Scotland. Keay, J and Keay, J**

Name of Visual Creator or other acknowledgement (if applicable):

Journal details –title/Vol/Year (if applicable):

Publisher: **Harper Collins**

Pages scanned: **403 - 404**

Course of Study (Module name and number): **Study and Research Methodology
CYCS7014**

Name of Designated Person
authorising scanning:

E. L. Harris

Date authorised: 17.10.17.

Moodle/Powerpoint



GAELIC BOOKS COUNCIL

Set up in 1968 with support from the Scottish Education Department, the Council gives financial support and other kinds of impetus to the publication of Gaelic books. Funding was subsequently made the responsibility of the Scottish Arts Council.

The Council is housed in **Glasgow University**, and the Professor of Celtic there is its Chairman. Its remit is to encourage the production of Gaelic books of all kinds, to publicise such books and to help distribute them. This work takes various forms, such as direct grant-aid to publishers for approved titles, encouragement to authors by commissioning, editorial help to authors, commissioning of editorial work, publicity related to new publications, a catalogue of Gaelic books in print, book exhibitions and literary events, and sales trips to all parts of the Gaelic area.

To date well over 400 publication grants have been awarded, and this general encouragement of Gaelic publication has resulted in a marked increase in the number, range and quality of books published. There are two medium-sized publishers involved in this work, Gairm Publications, which spearheaded new developments from the early 1960s onwards, and Acair, a company formed in the mid-1970s. Several other publishers issue occasional Gaelic titles.

GAELIC LANGUAGE

History

Gaelic is the language in longest continuous use in Scotland. Although settlement of Gaelic-speaking people on a significant scale probably first took place in the 5th century AD, there seem to have been sporadic raids and small settlements in the two preceding centuries. The main early settlement, however, was in the west, and the territory was named *Dál Riada* after its Irish original. It is located in **Argyll**. It was to this established 'colony' that **Columba** came in 563, thereafter spreading his missionary activities to other parts of Scotland.

Gaelic spread to these other parts by infiltration of settlers, accompanied in various instances by political domination, military victory or religious conversion. In these ways an ultimate political union was formed between the **Picts** and the Scots, and Scottish (or Scottic) dominance was achieved over the Welsh-speaking kingdoms of central and southern Scotland. This spread of Gaelic settlers is most clearly demonstrated by the coverage of Gaelic place-names, from **Galloway** to **Caithness**, and although their incidence varies widely in intensity (with only slight influence in the south-east and parts of

Caithness) it is only in **Orkney** and **Shetland** that this Gaelic influence is minimal. It is, however, true that Gaelic was not spoken over the whole area of Scotland at any one point in time.

In a political sense, Gaelic seems to have reached its strongest position in the centuries from the 9th to the 12th, having by then won the 'battle' with Pictish and Welsh, and having not yet begun the 'retreat' in the face of the Teutonic 'advance'. We may feel some scepticism over these military terms, as there is not much evidence of linguistic militancy in early times. The main ebb and flow between Gaelic and Norse also falls within the centuries from 800 to 1300 AD.

The influence of the Church in spreading Gaelic is shown in the high incidence of Gaelic place-names with ecclesiastical content: the numerous Kil-names (from *cill* - church, cell), usually combined with saints' names, eg the Kilbrides, Kildonan, etc; names containing elements such as *eaglais* (church) or *annaid* (patron saint's church) etc; or the names of Church officials. Evidence of Gaelic social organisations also shows up in place-names, eg those including the elements *bàrd* (poet), *breitheamh* (judge) or *clarsair* (harpist).

At the time of its maximum usage Gaelic was the language of the royal court and of courts of law, and there existed a fairly wide range of Gaelic 'professionals' such as lawyers, doctors, scribes, historians and poets. Gradually, with the increase of English influence at court, and English and Flemish influence on commerce, Gaelic lost ground in affairs of state, though retaining its dominance in the court and the business of specific chiefs such as those of the **MacDonalds** and **Campbells**. That dominance lasted, almost as an anachronism, in the case of the MacDonalds until the 17th century.

By the Middle Ages we can see evidence of Gaelic 'survival' rather than dominance, in such areas as the eastern seaboard from the Firth of Forth to **Aberdeen**, and in almost all cases any towns of scale are non-Gaelic-speaking. Gaelic lingered in rural areas, surviving for example, in Galloway and parts of **Ayrshire** until the 17th century, in **Angus** rather later, and in a few areas in **Aberdeenshire** (Strathdon and Deeside) into the 20th century. It petered out in parts of west **Perthshire** (eg **Aberfoyle**, Port of **Menteith**) in the early 19th century, but still survives minimally in east Perthshire.

Due to the repulsion of greedy landlords and the attraction of work in the rapidly expanding central (especially **Clyde**) area, there was significant depopulation of Gaelic-speaking areas in the Highlands, and a considerable build-up of Gaelic colonies in the cities and throughout Scotland generally. These city colonies were to become influential in promoting Gaelic in terms of publishing and entertainment, and also in promoting Gaelic educational developments (eg the Gaelic Schools movement of the 19th century). Similar initiatives continue to the present (eg the work of Gairm Publications, STV and the BBC, mainly in **Glasgow**). At the present time, approximately half the number of Gaelic speakers in Scotland live outwith the Gaelic area. The 1991 figure for Gaelic speakers was approximately 65,000.

Forms and Structure

Brought to Scotland by early colonists from Ireland, the language is one and the same, in origin, as Irish Gaelic.

Both should be referred to as Gaelic, and their various period layers as Old Gaelic, Middle Gaelic, Modern Gaelic; though it is desirable to distinguish the modern languages as Modern Irish Gaelic and Modern Scottish Gaelic. Documentary evidence is much more voluminous for the various stages of the language in Ireland, with early glosses on Latin manuscript texts giving evidence of the language in the 8th and 9th centuries. Many of the manuscripts containing these glosses are in Continental libraries, eg in Würzburg, Milan, Turin and Karlsruhe, for the writers of the glosses were apparently monks and missionaries. There are some still earlier sources, often in later manuscripts which have undergone modernisation, and these probably give evidence of Gaelic language as early as the 6th and 7th centuries AD, while Ogam inscriptions may take us back to the 4th century.

The early documentary sources show a highly inflected, highly complex language, with a plethora of verbal forms, an intricate system of infixed and affixed pronouns, and elaborate patterns of word-composition. The early Gaelic language of Scotland must have shared these features, but both Eastern and Western Gaelic were radically simplified in their transition from the Archaic to the Old and Middle periods, just as Anglo-Saxon sires the much less complicated languages of Middle and Modern English.

There are only modest traces of many of these developments in extant Scottish sources. There are indeed Ogam inscriptions in Scotland, but these are mainly in spheres of Pictish influence, though they include Gaelic names. As to early documents, or documents containing early Gaelic material, these are very scarce, the more important being the *Senchas Fer nAlban* ('History of the Men of Scotland'), perhaps dating from the mid-7th century in its original form (see J W M Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, 1974), and the **Book of Deer**, a Latin manuscript from Aberdeenshire which contains Gaelic notes dating from c1131-50. From the scanty available evidence there is no clear proof of separate Scottish Gaelic developments in language before the 10th century AD, though it is of course inevitable that some five centuries of Scottish existence had left marks. There is in fact some evidence in the *Book of Deer* of, for example, the retention of ancient hiatus where it had been lost in Irish Gaelic, and the growth of a different variety of nasalisation.

The situation is complicated by the existence of a literary Gaelic which was, by and large, common to both Scotland and Ireland, and used by the professional classes. Sometimes traces of vernacular usage show through, as in the cases of the *Book of Deer* and the **Book of the Dean of Lismore**, but there is not a great deal of concentrated evidence of Scottish Gaelic vernacular until we come to relatively modern times, especially the 17th century, though these sources may point us back for generations.

The Gaelic languages of Scotland and Ireland are mutually understandable to some degree, with Donegal Irish Gaelic distinctly closer to Scottish Gaelic. A little study shows the huge overlap clearly. Scottish Gaelic itself has many distinct dialects, the southern ones, eg **Islay** or **Kintyre**, showing stronger affinities with Irish Gaelic, and many differences of accent, intonation and vocabulary between the Gaelic of eg **Perthshire**, **Sutherland**, **Lewis** and **Barra** (although these would seldom seriously hinder communication).

Modern Gaelic is an inflected language, with for example four singular case forms for certain nouns (Nominative, Vocative, Genitive, Dative), separate plural forms (sometimes Nom, Voc, Gen, Dat) and occasionally dual forms. So we use forms such as *balach* (boy), *a bhalach* (O boy), *ceann a' bhalach* (the head of the boy), *nighean* (girl), *leis an nighinn* (belonging to the girl - ie dative), *lámh* (hand), *dà lámh* (two hands), *balaich* (boys), *a bhalachaibh* (O boys), *cinn nam balach* (the heads of the boys), etc. This system of case-inflection has been gradually breaking down (as similar systems did many centuries ago in English and Welsh), and in particular dative and dual forms are in decay, while even the genitive is weakly. The verb has in the main undergone more radical simplification, losing the enormous complexity of its earlier system for the main range of verbs, but retaining some in the case of 11 irregular verbs. In the case of all the verbs, separate forms for the separate persons have largely disappeared, the distinction now depending on the use of the appropriate pronoun: so *chuir mi* (I put), *chuir thu* (you put), *chuir i* (she put), etc. There are still separate active and passive/impersonal forms, distinctions between dependent and independent usage, between indicative and subjunctive, etc.

For many adult learners of Gaelic, one of the most unfamiliar features is initial mutation. The initial consonants or vowels of words can be affected by lenition/aspiration or nasalisation, eg *cù* (dog), *mo chù* (my dog); *taigh* (a house), *do thaigh* (your house); *feadag* (a whistle), *m'fheadag* (my whistle) - in this case the aspiration of *f* - produces a *nil*, and the pronunciation is *m'eadag*; *gàrradh* (a garden), *'nan gàrradh* *hein* (in their own garden) - here the combination of the elements *n* and *g* can produce a composite *ng* sound, strongly nasalised; *aodann* (a face), *nar n-aodann* (in our face), *a h-aodann* (her face). Most of the consonants are affected in this way but, rather awkwardly, the convention is not to show the difference between unlenited and lenited *l*, *n* and *r*.

Gaelic is a strongly idiomatic language, making use, for example, of many combinations of verbs and prepositions to express many nuances.

Gaelic also has a very extensive range of sounds: it is one of the most complex of European languages in this sense, and this has implications for the full mastery of its system in speech, and notable advantages in the range and intricacy of its sound correspondences and contrasts (harmonies and dissonances) in song or poetry.

This necessarily brief summary can be supplemented by reference to D S Thomson, *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland*, 1987; R Thurneysen, *A Grammar of Old Irish*, 1946; George Calder, *A Gaelic Grammar*, 1980; Douglas Clyne, *Gaelic Verbs and their Prepositions*, 1984; Elmar Ternes, *The Phonemic Analysis of Scottish Gaelic*, 1973.