

# GAELIC IN NOVA SCOTIA

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GAELIC was the mother tongue of the early settlers who came from the northern shires of Scotland to settle in Pictou and Antigonish Counties, and Cape Breton Island. Gaelic was the language used in the home, the market-place and the pulpit. In it they wrote letters which they sent back to the Old Land, letters descriptive of the primitive conditions in which they lived, their hardships, and their prospects. These letters provided the best medium of getting news to and from Scotland. Family worship was conducted in Gaelic, the Psalms of David and the hymns of Peter Grant and Dugald Buchanan were sung in Gaelic, and in it the clergy preached to their congregations.

In the year 1773 the ship "Hector" sailed from Lochbroom with thirty-three families from Inverness and Sutherland shires and landed in Pictou in September of that year. This marks the beginning of a great emigration into the Lower Provinces. Between the years 1773 and 1775 it is estimated that 30,000 people from various parts of the Highlands crossed the Atlantic. When Dr. Samuel Johnson visited the Hebrides in 1773 he remarked on the "epidemic desire for wandering which spreads its contagion from valley to valley" and advocated that some method to stop it be adopted.

These Gaelic-speaking Highlanders settled in little colonies in this country. Those from the Western Isles and the western coast of Inverness and Ross shires settled chiefly in Cape Breton and Prince Edward Island. Pictou, Antigonish, and Colchester Counties were settled mostly by people from the interior of Ross, Inverness, and Sutherland shires, with a few from Rannoch, Atholl, Kenmore, and Glenlyon in Perthshire. A colony from Arran settled near Bathurst and Charlo, in northern New Brunswick.

It is to be noted that although emigration to the mainland of Nova Scotia began in the last quarter of the 18th century, it was not till well into the beginning of the 19th century that there was any considerable emigration of Gaelic speaking people to the island of Cape Breton. A few had moved from Antigonish on the mainland and from Prince Edward Island

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to Judique and the Margaree Valley in Cape Breton. But it was not till 1817 when the "Hope" and the "William Tell" arrived in Sydney with 382 emigrants from the island of Barra, that emigration direct to Cape Breton from Scotland can be said to have begun on a large scale. This first group settled on the shores of the Bras d'Or Lake, near Little Narrows. From then on till the middle of the century emigration continued, so that by 1861 the population of Cape Breton was ten times what it had been in 1815, and much of the increase was due to emigration from Scotland.

As a consequence of thus living by themselves in colonies, these groups transplanted their own peculiar dialects to their new home in Canada, with the result that Barra Gaelic was spoken in Cape Breton, Skye Gaelic in Prince Edward Island, and Sutherland Gaelic in Pictou County. Thus many Gaelic accents could be heard in different localities in Nova Scotia.

It is in the field of poetry rather than prose that Gaelic literature shows its richest products,—the songs of Alexander MacDonald, Rob Donn, Ian Lom, Duncan Ban MacIntyre, John MacLean, John MacOdrum and many, many others. A list of poets compiled by Dr. Maclean Sinclair gives a total of one hundred and thirty between 1645 and 1830. Of them he says "Most of these were really good poets, while some of them were poets of really great ability." Professor W. J. Watson confirms this opinion, "With this verdict all who know the facts will agree." Of Gaelic prose it may be said that until the middle of the 18th century little if any original Gaelic prose was published. What there was consisted for the most part of translations of religious books such as *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Boston's Fourfold State*, and *Alleine's Alarm*.

Nova Scotia can boast not a few poets who composed ballads, elegies, eulogies, satires, love songs, laments, and hymns. Probably the best known Gaelic poet to live in Nova Scotia was John Maclean, who emigrated from Tiree in 1819 and made his home in Glenbard, Antigonish County. He is best known by his poem "A Choille Ghruamach" (The Gloomy Forest), in which he truthfully describes in most vivid fashion the hardships of pioneer life in Pictou County. This poem has just recently been translated into English verse by Dr. Watson Kirkconnell, President of Acadia University.\* John Maclean was one of the few family bards to compose spiritual songs. It



was not till after he had spent several winters in Nova Scotia that his mind turned to writing hymns. His hard lot in this world no doubt tended to direct his attention to a better world. His poems have gone through three editions.

Of other poets there are many. Dr. P. J. Nicholson, President of St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, has compiled a list that is representative of a great number of men and women who composed Gaelic poetry. His comment is "Cha'n eil clachan's am bheil Gaidhlig air a labhairt nach do thog bard no dha". (There's not a hamlet where Gaelic is spoken that did not produce a poet or two.) In his list Dr. Nicholson refers to the writings of eight poets from Antigonish County, six from Cape Breton County, twelve from Inverness County, three from Pictou County, and two from Victoria.

The first Gaelic paper to be printed in Nova Scotia of which I can find any trace was *An Cuairtear Og Gaelach* (The Young Highland Visitor), a monthly magazine begun in 1851 by John Boyd, Antigonish. One year later the *Casket* commenced publication and had a Gaelic column down the years, and for the past twenty-five years has been edited by Dr. P. J. Nicholson, a great Gaelic enthusiast. It is of interest to note in passing that the first Gaelic book both composed and printed in America was entitled *Companach an Oganach* (The Youth's Companion), by Alexander MacGillivray, son of the Piper, and printed in the Bee office, Pictou in 1836.

The most ambitious and successful newspaper attempt in Canada to preserve and foster Gaelic literature and culture was *Mac Talla* (The Echo), edited by Jonathan G. MacKinnon. Of this paper John Lorne Campbell of Canna writes: "Although printed in Canada *Mac Talla* was read by Gaelic speakers all over the world and could be considered the periodical of the whole Gaelic-speaking population throughout Scotland and the Empire." This weekly of four pages, three columns each, was printed in Sydney regularly for twelve years, 1892-1904. The list of subscribers was never over 1400. It was printed wholly in Gaelic, including the advertisements. *MacTalla* did a great deal in preserving poetry that would otherwise have been lost and in giving a place to contemporary original poetry. Most of the prose in *MacTalla*, apart from the news and local items, consisted of translations from the English, such as *The Arabian Nights*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and stories from Greek mythology.

Other short-lived ventures in Gaelic journalism were

*Teachdaire nan Gaidheal* (Gaelic Messenger), edited in Sydney for ten years by James MacNeil, an ardent Gael who took a great interest in securing the inclusion of a Gaelic program in the C. B. C. He conducted a Gaelic page in the *Sydney Post Record* for four years, until his death in 1939. In 1908 Jonathan MacKinnon edited *Fear na Ceilidh* (The Entertainer), a monthly which ran for two years. *Am Mosgladh* (The Awakening), the organ of the Scottish Catholic Society of Canada was first printed as a quarterly in 1923. *Solus Iuil* (The Beacon) was printed for but a short time.

Shortly after coming to Pictou, Dr. James MacGregor translated the Westminster Confession of Faith. Jonathan MacKinnon has made excellent translations of Hardy's "Three Strangers" and *The Other Wise Man* by Van Dyke. He left a partly completed manuscript of *Treasure Island* in Gaelic. A great many well-known hymns have been translated into Gaelic.

Rev. Dr. D. B. Blair, of Barney's River, Pictou County, compiled a most complete dictionary, which is in manuscript form in the library of the late Dr. MacLean Sinclair in Hopewell, N. S. He also wrote a very thorough Gaelic Grammar, with many references to Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. This, too, is in manuscript form. A shorter Gaelic grammar was compiled by George Lawson Gordon in 1876, entitled *The Gaelic Text Book* and dedicated to "The Officers and Members of the Highland Society of Nova Scotia." In 1939 James MacNeil published *Gaelic Lessons for Beginners*. It contains an interesting vocabulary of rare and new words.

Gaelic has occasionally been heard in the Parliament of Nova Scotia in speech and in song. In 1879 John A. Morrison, Member for Victoria County, made a strong plea in Gaelic for the teaching of that language in the schools of the Province. Mention too must be made of the cheerful songs of D. B. MacLeod, Sergeant-at-Arms, in the House.

On several occasions Gaelic has been used in the Law Courts. Judge James MacDonald, who was Chief Justice of the Province from 1881 to 1904, had the unique experience of conducting a trial entirely in Gaelic, in the Court House, in Baddeck, C. B. A case came up between two neighbours, neither of whom understood English. Despite that handicap they managed somehow to quarrel, and landed in Court. Not a word of English was used in the case. The witnesses were examined and cross-examined, the lawyers addressed the jury,



and the Chief Justice gave his charge to the jury, all in Gaelic. The lawyers engaged in the trial were Duncan C. Fraser, later Lieut-Governor of the Province, and Hon. Samuel MacDonnell, Port Hood, N. S. But the place where Gaelic was pre-eminent in the early days in Nova Scotia was not in Parliament or in the Law Court, but in the pulpit. It is true as Jean Paul Richter says that "the way to a mother's heart is through her children; the way to a people's heart is through their language." It was chiefly through Gaelic that James MacGregor and Norman MacLeod won and held the loyalty and affection of their people. Rev. James Robertson, who wrote just seventeen years after Dr. MacGregor's death, says that "when he addressed the Highlanders in their native tongue the effect was most striking. With breathless attention, and tears in their eyes, they would listen for hours to the precious tidings of salvation, falling upon their ears like sweetest music, in a language that awakened the most heart-stirring associations." Dr. Patterson in describing Dr. MacGregor's preaching writes: "As he warmed up to his subject, his eyes kindled with such brilliancy that it seemed to pierce through each beholder, and his whole frame seemed instinct with emotion. And he had all the command over the feelings of his audience which marks the genuine orator. Sometimes he used strong expressions that would not readily be forgotten. Describing the worthlessness and vileness of mankind by nature he concluded that they were fit only to be 'shovelled into hell.'" It can readily be seen that in the Gaelic the preacher had at his command a very impressive and devotional language.

The preservation of Gaelic literature and poetry and its publication in Canada was due to a very large extent to two men, Jonathan MacKinnon, editor of *Mac Talla*; and the Rev. Dr. A. Maclean Sinclair, grandson of the Bard Maclean. In an unpublished manuscript Prof. Charles W. Dunn, Toronto University, writes of them; "It was not until the last quarter of the 19th century that Gaelic publishing really made a mark in the New World. When that time came it found two men, both Canadians by birth but Gaels by inclination, who were filled with a zeal to publish as much as possible of the precious language which they loved so dearly. They both fought against the growing indifference of their fellow Gaels in the New World towards the language and culture of their forefathers. They both struggled against difficult financial odds in order to keep their publication going. They both laboured

tirelessly and ably to recover and put in print the Gaelic songs which were in their time circulating by word of mouth among their friends."

Dr. Sinclair inherited two valuable manuscripts of Gaelic poetry. One of these was a collection made by Dr. Hector Maclean of Tobermory, in Mull, about 1768. Dr. Samuel Johnson had examined the manuscript when he visited the island in 1773. This manuscript came into the possession of John Maclean the Bard, who added on the unused sheets many of his own compositions. The other volume inherited by Dr. Sinclair was a collection of Gaelic songs and classical poems recorded by the Bard while living in Scotland. Much of this material had never been put in print, and it was to the task of presenting this rich body of literature to the public that Dr. Sinclair first turned his attention. At the same time he worked industriously in collecting songs from his Gaelic friends in Canada. He commenced publishing Gaelic poetry in 1880 and continued until 1904. He brought out *Clarsach na Coille* (Harp of the Wood), which contained the bulk of the Bard Maclean's secular pieces, as well as songs by other authors; a collection of hymns by the Bard and others; an anthology entitled *The Glenbard Collection*; four volumes known as *The Gaelic Bards*, containing selections from poets arranged chronologically from 1411 to 1875; two miscellaneous volumes of Gaelic songs; an edition of Iain Lom, John MacDonald's poetry; and one of Alexander Mackinnon's. Of Dr. Sinclair's work Professor Dunn writes further: "Being every inch a Highlander, he was interested in genealogy, especially in the details of the great clan to which he was so closely related, the Clan Maclean. He wrote several small booklets on genealogical matters and one large volume *The Clan Gillean*. His labours were of incalculable value. He brought to light Gaelic songs that were previously available only to those who could inspect rare and early editions or inaccessible manuscript collections. In the New World, where there were few Gaelic scholars competent to record the language in which local bards were daily composing, he gathered a collection of songs that would otherwise have been lost to oblivion. He collected information about the settlers and their families which is by now irrecoverable."

In his *Highland Songs of the Forty-Five*, John Lorne Campbell states that he very often found the best version of a song, bearing in mind that which gives the best meaning, is of greatest historical accuracy and correctest metrical construction,



in poems that had lain in manuscripts for several years after they had been transcribed; and some of the best texts of poems of this kind did not appear in print until they were published in Canada in such works as *Clarsach na Coille*.

For centuries it has been an uphill struggle for Gaelic to maintain a place among the living languages of Britain. Official encouragement is given Gaelic in Eire, but in Scotland it has suffered greatly by severely restrictive laws. In the Highlands, children whose mother tongue it was, were forbidden to speak it in school, and if caught speaking it, were punished. This strange idea came over to Nova Scotia. Dr. Chisholm of Bridgeville, Pictou County, told me that in his early days children who spoke Gaelic were accompanied home from school by others who were to report to the teacher if they heard Gaelic spoken. If caught they were punished, just as in Scotland. Thus in about one generation Gaelic was killed in Pictou County. Many of the older folk reserved it as a sort of secret code to be used when children were about.

The treasures of Gaelic music have been made known to the people through such collections as that made by Mrs. Kennedy Fraser and Dr. Kenneth MacLeod. These songs recall to many, memories of another day when their fathers and mothers spoke Gaelic. But Gaelic is losing out in the home and in the pulpit. The language of the school will displace the language of the home.

The 1941 Census gave Gaelic as the mother tongue of 32,078, or about .25% of the total population of Canada. There are approximately 30,000 persons in Cape Breton Island who speak Gaelic. Nor are they all of Scottish descent. In *Captains Courageous*, Kipling refers to Gaelic-speaking negroes in Cape Breton, "coal black Celts," he called them. Living in Whycomagh, a Gaelic settlement, these negroes acquired the language from their neighbours. Some Miemac Indians and Syrian peddlars can also speak it.

About fifteen years ago a questionnaire was distributed in Cape Breton and Prince Edward Island, in Pictou and Antigonish counties, relative to the state of Gaelic. The questions asked were "Do the children speak English or Gaelic, or both? Is Gaelic used in the schools? Do you ever preach in Gaelic? Is Gaelic declining in your parish?" Practically all reported that Gaelic was being spoken less and less by children, and that it was declining among the older folk. Yet the author concludes: "On the whole it cannot be denied that Gaelic in the

Maritimes is a dying language, but there is life in it yet, enough to suggest that enthusiasm and interest could still be easily aroused for it in those parts whose speech and tradition are still, after three and more generations, predominantly Highland; while a fertile field exists for the student of Celtic who desires to investigate what changes the Gaelic dialects have undergone under the influence of Canadian expressions, both French and English."

The subject of dialects is an interesting and difficult one. If you want to start an argument that will last till the crack of doom, all you have to do is to get a Skye man and a native of Sutherland or Lewis for instance, discussing the various merits and demerits of different dialects. It is most discouraging to anyone wishing to learn the language to be told that his accent, pronunciation, intonation, inflection and his use of idioms are not just what they should be. As McKechnie says in his *Introduction to Gaelic Scotland*, "One thing is certain, anyone attempting to learn to speak Gaelic will receive as many cold douches on his enthusiasm from Highlanders as he can just about put up with. He will at once be accused of an English accent and ungrammatical construction." The beauty, strength, and the very life of any living language lies in its dialects, and it is to be hoped that no subversive influence will ever reduce Gaelic to the dead level of monotony that is sometimes termed "standardization." On the other hand, if those who are so keen on keeping Gaelic alive were more tolerant, more encouraging, more helpful, and more sensible in their attitude towards others who are equally enthusiastic, but who may have a different accent or speak a different dialect, the future of Gaelic would be brighter and more assured than it is at present.

During the years from 1908 or thereabouts to 1914 Gaelic was taught at Dalhousie University, Halifax, and in St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish. A six-week course was given in it at the Provincial Summer School for Teachers, at Dalhousie, in 1939.\* Good work is being done by the Keltic Society of Acadia University, under the guidance of Dr. MacGregor Fraser, to preserve the language and traditions of the Highlands.

The Gaelic College at St. Ann's, Cape Breton, was officially opened July 26th, 1939, by the Hon. Angus L. Macdonald,

\*Similarly a course was given in 1950.



Premier of Nova Scotia, who delivered the inaugural address in Gaelic. The first building was a log structure built entirely by members of the Gaelic Foundation. The Mod, which is held annually in July, has a comprehensive program of competition in pipe playing, Gaelic singing and story telling, Highland dances and games. The site chosen at the head of St. Ann's Bay is associated with the Rev. Norman MacLeod, who landed there by ship from Pietou in 1820. Here he built the first Presbyterian Church in Cape Breton. He preached to large congregations, taught school, and acted as magistrate. In 1851, when 71 years of age, he with a large part of his congregation sailed for Australia, and eventually settled in Waipu, New Zealand. In the eight years, 1851-1859, the district of St. Ann's lost more than half of its population, most of them going to New Zealand. Repeated crop failures in the 1840's made it difficult to live in St. Ann's, so that New Zealand appealed to them.

Not far from the location of Norman MacLeod's church are the grounds and buildings of the Gaelic College. A new building has recently been erected with the assistance of a grant from the Provincial Government. The Handcrafts department, organized in 1944, has trained over a hundred women and girls in hand-weaving of clan tartans. Sales to summer tourists amounted to \$20,000 in 1949. Plans are being made to launch a new drive for funds to erect a \$100,000 college building and establish and endow a Gaelic language Chair. In 1949 Major Calum Iain N. MacLeod from Ross-shire was appointed Gaelic lecturer.

There are very good reasons for perpetuating Gaelic.

First, for its cultural value. It is a priceless heritage, embodying the true spirit of the Gael. For as McKechnie says, "language is the only true badge of nationality." Gaelic possesses a rich and varied literature of poetry and prose.

Secondly, Gaelic is of especial interest to the philologist, the specialist in the structure and development of language.

Thirdly, a knowledge of Gaelic is indispensable in the study of Highland history. Much of the story of the past is hidden away in old manuscripts and other literature. For those who undertake research work in the early history of Scotland, Gaelic is indispensable.