

Scottish Gaelic

The Gaelic language is a powerful symbol of Scotland's unique heritage and nationhood which also provides enduring linguistic and cultural links to other nations in the British Isles and beyond. Its speakers number less than two percent of today's national population but its role in the formation of the kingdom of Alba (still the Gaelic name for Scotland) cannot be gainsayed. It differs from many minority languages in that it was once the majority national tongue, the primary language of power and influence. The historical marginalisation of Gaelic within Scottish society, both politically and geographically, is something that is understood (and lamented) by Gaelic-speakers, but not always by Scots who do not speak the language, many of whom bear the misapprehension that Gaelic was always a marginal element in Scottish life.

Scotland was named for the Gaelic-speaking Scots, and the Gaels have given the country many of its national symbols. The famous 1320 Declaration of Arbroath, which argued passionately for Scotland's independence from an expansive England, drew heavily upon the nation's Gaelic identity.

Gaelic place-names are to be found in every local government division in the country, with the exception of Orkney and Shetland. It was spoken, at some stage in the country's history, virtually everywhere, to a greater or lesser degree. It interacted with other Scottish tongues, and the Scots and English languages carry many Gaelic loanwords (*whisky, sporran, corrie, glen* and *ceilidh* being obvious ones); similarly, Gaelic bears many words borrowed from Scots and English, in addition to Old Norse and Latin.

Scottish Gaelic has two sister tongues – Irish and Manx Gaelic – with whom it shares membership of the Goidelic branch of the Celtic languages. It also has more distant links to the Brythonic Celtic languages – Welsh, Breton and Cornish. This sense of belonging to a wider Celtic 'family' is a powerful internationalizing feature within modern Gaelic culture, as are the elements within the diaspora which have remained loyal to their linguistic roots, most notably in Nova Scotia where the language, while at a low ebb, still boasts native speakers and is now supported by an arm of government.

In time, as Gaelic weakened in the Lowlands, the language became largely restricted to the Highlands and islands off the west coast, a region which is still referred to in Gaelic as *A' Ghàidhealtachd* ('the Gaelic land'). In this mountainous, loch-strewn country of celebrated beauty, Gaelic culture was to reach its zenith. The Gaels named the landscape and developed an intimate vocabulary to do so – there are well over a hundred different Gaelic words for a mountain, hill or slope, and nearly forty for bogland! Many landscape features also link into a powerful stream of oral culture characterized by legendary and historical characters who are celebrated in story and song to this day.

The Gaels had, and have, a keen eye for nature. Their view of the Scottish environment is unique, and some of their most celebrated poets were deeply affected by the beauty surrounding them. There is also a strong spiritual streak running through their heritage, from pre-Christian traditions (some of which are still practised) through the great proselytising saints like Calum Cille (St Columba) to what is still a substantial multidenominational church-going population today.

But much has been lost. Dialects once spoken in localities like Fife and Galloway have long gone. In counties like Aberdeenshire, Perthshire and Stirlingshire, the demise is within living memory. Those Gaelic windows on the world of central, eastern and southern Scotland have faded, and the focus has shifted towards a more maritime Atlantic viewpoint, with the 'heartland' of the language now in the North West, in places like Skye and the Western Isles. But that is changing again, and cities like Glasgow and Edinburgh are starting to play a more significant role in the language's revival as its use expands in education. In BBC Radio nan Gàidheal and BBC ALBA the language enjoys highly respected radio and television services which broadcast nationally.

Until recent times, however, Gaelic suffered damaging discrimination at the hands of the Scottish and British establishments. The Education (Scotland) Act of 1872, for example, left the language on the sidelines – where it has largely remained, notwithstanding the patchy development of Gaelic Medium education since 1985.

But there is hope anew. The Gaelic Language Act (2005) of the Scottish Parliament declared it to be a 'official language of Scotland commanding equal

respect to the English language'. The old anti-Gaelic prejudice is finally breaking down. More and more Scots are coming to realise that the language is a unique and special attribute of their country that deserves, not just to be respected, but to be celebrated.

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