

A bheil Gàidhlig agad?

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Do you have the Gaelic? Your Scottish ancestors spoke the Gaelic long before they ever spoke English. In fact, as our forefathers (and foremothers!) traveled west across the continent of Europe, they left traces of the ancient Celtic language in place names (for instance Belgium is named for a Celtic tribe, the Belgae; the Danube River for the Celtic Goddess Danu.)

The Celtic languages are the westernmost part of the Indo-European family of languages, which spread from Central Europe east to India (where they speak Hindi), and west to Ireland (where they speak Gaeilge).

The Celtic languages are divided into two branches, the Gaelic (Goidelic) Branch being Irish, Scots and Manx Gaelic; the British (Brythonic) Branch being Welsh, Cornish and Breton. Although they once spoke a common parent tongue, the Celtic tribes emigrated west and south during the time of the "great migrations" in early European history. Scholars now theorize that the Gaelic branch of the Celts emigrated from Central Europe, across Gaul, to Galatia, in Spain (where there are still remnants of Celtic culture in the music and art), then to Ireland. The British Celts emigrated from Central Europe, across Gaul to Britain. After the split, the two separate branches of the original Celtic language evolved. Up until the 16th Century, Irish and Scots Gaelic were the same language. They began to deviate as English policy began to subdue the Irish and create barriers between Ireland and Scotland.

Gaelic has been spoken in Scotland since the time of the first missionaries from Ireland around 500 AD. Some scholars believe the Picts to be an early wave of Celtic people, who may have spoken a Brythonic Celtic language themselves. Gaelic was the predominant language in all of Scotland from the 9th Century after King Kenneth MacAlpin united the Picts and the Gaelic speaking Scots, until around the 11th Century when the French speaking Normans began to marry into Celtic families. Many of these Celto-Norman families, however, adapted the native language and culture as their own.

Over the centuries as the Sassanach moved north, Flemish and Germanic people immigrated to Scotland, and the political ties between Scotland and England grew closer, a Scots version of English began to predominate (largely in the Lowlands).

By the 18th and 19th centuries, Gaelic speakers in the Highlands and Islands were forcibly removed from their land through the Highland Clearances, and the language seriously declined in favor of English.

Scots Gaelic is presently spoken by about one percent of the population in Scotland, and in a few other parts of the world where large numbers of Scots immigrated, such as North Carolina and Nova Scotia.

Most of the Scottish Gaelic speakers live in the Outer Hebrides, the Highlands, Strathclyde, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Inverness.

Currently, there is a revival of interest in the Gaelic language in Scotland. Gaelic schools and universities have been set up to preserve and promote their indigenous tongue. The movement is concurrent with the move toward independence that Scotland is now experiencing. And nearly half of the current Gaelic learners live outside of Scotland in Canada, America, England, New Zealand, and Australia!

Cùm Gàidhlig Beò! (Keep Gaelic Alive!)

O cuimhnichibh nach trèig sibh i, Gach Gàidheal tha 'n-diugh beò Chan dèan i chaoidh 'ur sàrachadh Ach blàths tha innt' gu leòr, Nuair bhios sibh anns na fàsaichean Fo àmhghar neo fo leòn Bidh rann de dh'òran Gàidhlig dhuibh Nas fheàrr na botal mòr.

Aithne Do 'n Oige, Calum Mairead, Arnol, Lewis

Translation: Please do not forsake your language, I plead with each Gael today, It will never let you down, But will always be your stay, When you tread life's lonely pathway, In distress or troubled mood, A verse of Gaelic song will cheer you As no bottle ever could.

References/Resources

Up with Gaelic

Video tapes:

* Speaking Our Language (Video set), Cànan, Isle of Skye

Movies/shows:

* Whisky Galore (has a little bit of Gaelic here and there)

* Mira Mara (a Gaelic children's Muppet series)

Books:

* Teach Yourself Gaelic, A Complete Course for Beginners, by Boyd Robertson and Iain Taylor, (with audio tapes) NTC Publishing Group, Chicago, 1993

* Dwelly's Illustrated Gaelic to English Dictionary, Gairm Gaelic Publications, Glasgow, 1994 (first published in 1901)

* Gaelic Dictionary (Gaelic-English, English-Gaelic), by Malcolm MacLennan, Acair and Mercat Press, Stornoway, 1993

* Everyday Gaelic by Morag MacNeill, Gairm Publications, Glasgow, 1991

* Teach Yourself Gaelic by Roderick MacKinnon,

CDs:

* Catherine Ann MacPhee sings Mairi Mohr, Greentrax Recordings, Freeway Films, Edinburgh, 1994 (Mairi Mohr was a revolutionary singer in the last century who championed the Scottish crofters)

* Bannal Waulking Songs, Greentree Recordings, Edinburgh, 1996 (traditional waulking songs - our great-great grandmothers sang these songs as they "waulked" the wool.)

Note:

Most of the books, tapes, and videos are available from Gael Force (call for their catalog at (800) 905-4268), or can be found at Tea and Sympathy and other vendors at the Scottish Games.