Chapter 5. Scotland's unique languages

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A unique voice for Scotland

The Scots and Gaelic languages are unique to Scotland. The Scots tongue has been the vehicle for some of Scotland's outstanding literary works, and its wealth of colourful vocabulary and idiom have conveyed the fiery imagination, intellect, stoicism and affection of the Scottish character to the world. During the Middle Ages, Scots was the official language of the courts, of state, and of kings. Following the Union in 1707, English became the language of government and polite society. This trend continued into the Enlightenment, when the use of English implied elevated class status. However, the continued use of Scots in popular poetry and fiction had a major impact on the Scottish people's sense of identity and kept their culture intact. It is the living language spoken daily by millions of Scots.

Although Gaelic is now spoken by only a small fraction of the Scottish population, it has a cultural profile and influence far greater than such a statistic might suggest. Gaelic has contributed a wealth of cultural assets to the nation in terms of music, songs, dance, poetry and storytelling. Although Scots is a language used nowhere else in the world and recognised by the European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages, Gaelic endures today in Nova Scotia.

Scotland faces similar cultural issues to many countries with endangered languages. Like other cultures seeking to preserve their linguistic heritage in the face of mass communication, Scotland needs to build public awareness and appreciation for its minority languages.

1.

As a World City of Literature, Edinburgh would seek to enhance awareness of Scots and Gaelic languages both at home and abroad and share their distinctive and colourful nature with a global audience.

Not just for flichtmafletheries

The Scots language ('the mither tongue') is descended from Old Northumbrian, the northern form of Old English. It has been influenced by Norse, Gaelic and Dutch. In Scots an agile turn of phrase, the sound of the words and their choice are thought to be almost as important as their meanings.

The Scots language exploits the emotive power of the sounds of words to an extent that has no parallel in Western European languages. Words like flichtmafletheries (useless or excessive ornamentation), heeligoleerie (in a confused state) and cattiewurrie (a noisy dispute) give a real sense of their meaning. Scots is a language of verbal creativity that speaks in vivid tones, particularly suited to the linguistic inventiveness of Scots poetry.

The wider variety of sound patterns allowed by the Scots language meant it was exploited with great skill by the court poets of the Middle Ages, the Makars, such as John Barbour, Robert Henryson and William Dunbar.

1. Gaelic writing taken from *The Great Book of Gaelic*, (An Leabhar Mòr) published by Canongate Books

Opposite:
Celtic border: Poem Anon c.1200 illustrated by Alasdair Gray from *An Leabhar Mòr*

Allan Ramsay and others in the early eighteenth century drew attention to the glories of early poetry in the Scots language. And its stature has been further increased by poets such as Robert Fergusson, Robert Burns and Hugh MacDiarmid (aka Christopher Grieve) and by novelists such as Sir Walter Scott, James Hogg, John Galt, Robert Louis Stevenson and Lewis Grassic Gibbon. The strength of literary Scots has never been greater than it is today, with authors such as William McIlvanney, Liz Lochhead and Irvine Welsh drawing freely on the language in their writing.

Music for the Blind Harper

Gaelic has been spoken in Scotland for over 1,500 years, having been brought over by Celtic migrants. The language spread and developed into a distinct Scottish version. Scottish Gaelic is strongly idiomatic and also possesses a great variety of sounds. Gaelic word order is also slightly different from that of many other European languages, with the verb often appearing at the start of a sentence.

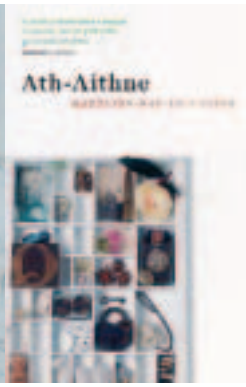
The earliest surviving evidence of a distinct Scottish Gaelic tradition appears in an anthology of heroic sagas, ballads and ecclesiastical texts, *The Book of the Dean of Lismore*, compiled in the early fifteen hundreds by Sir James MacGregor. In the seventeenth century Scottish Gaelic poetry flowered with many poets including An Clarsair Dall (the Blind Harper).

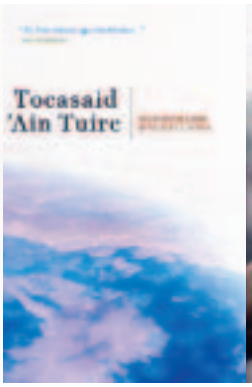
Is scích mo chrob ón scribainn; ní digainn mo gés geroll;
Sceilhid penn – gulban caelda – di ndaelda do dub glégorm.
Bruinnid srúcim n-ecna noledairn as mo láim degduin desmais;
Dolíid a dig for duilinn do dub in chuilinn chriesglais.
Sínim mo phenn mbec mbraonach for aenach le bar ligoll
Cen sóer fri selba ségann, diann scíh mo chrob ón scribann.
Is scích mo chrob ón scribann.
My hand tires of writing, this pen is not steady,
though its narrow beak spouts a dark stream of blue ink.
This brown skilful hand pours out endless wisdom
in holly-tree ink flowing over each page.
Driving wee pen through market of fine books,
not stopping for pay from the rich, my hand tires of writing.

door, and exclude wind, rain, &c—*Sarra.*
clár-malairt,* s.m. Counter of a shop.
clár-ainneabaidh, cláir-, s.m. Glossary.
clár-na-dèarna, s.m. Palm of the hand.

1 2
3 4

153. Clàrsach,
clàrsach,‡ -aich, -aichean, s.m. Harp. Cho
caoin ri c., as soft as a harp.
PARTS OF A HARP :—
1 Amhach, neck,
2 Cnagan, pins,
3 Com, chest,
4 Lámh-chrann, tree,





1. 2. 3. 4. 5.

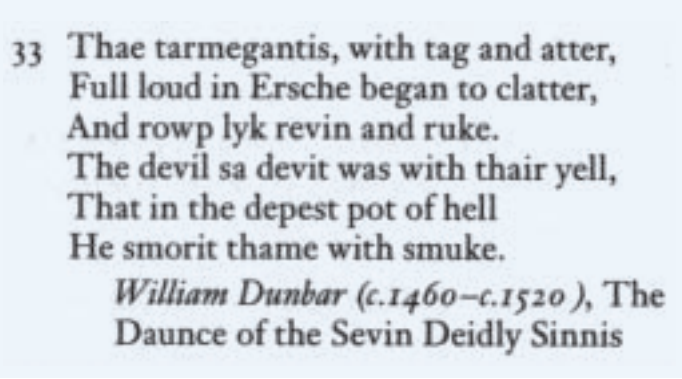
1. An entry from the illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary by Edward Dwelly
2. George Campbell Hay, one of the notable contemporary writers of the twentieth century
3. *Ath-Aithne*, Saltire Award Winner 2003 and part of the New Gaelic Fiction series
4. *Tocasaid 'Ain Tuire*, part of the New Gaelic Fiction series
5. *An Oidhche Mus Do Sheòl Sinn*, part of the New Gaelic Fiction series

Interest in Gaelic culture has never really died, but contact with other literature in the eighteenth century brought new vigour to Scottish Gaelic writing. Probably the most significant Gaelic poet of the century was Alexander Macdonald, whose *Ais-eiridh na Sean Chanoin Albannaich* (The Resurrection of the Ancient Scottish Tongue) was the first book of secular poetry printed in Scotland.

Notable contemporary Gaelic writing began to appear in periodicals in the late nineteenth century, followed in the twentieth century by the publication of writers like Iain Crichton Smith, Sorley MacLean, Angus Nicholson, George Campbell Hay and Derick Thomson. Gaelic writers included Donald MacAulay, Aonghas MacNeacail, Meg Bateman, Rody Gorman and Kevin MacNeil.

Ensuring even small voices are heard

Gaelic is technically an endangered language: there are fewer than 60,000 Gaelic speakers in Scotland and this number is decreasing. However, the Scottish Executive has appointed a Minister with special responsibility for Gaelic and works closely with Gaelic bodies like the Bord Na Gaidhlig (Gaelic Council) to promote the language and assist in its development. Gaelic now features at all levels of education in Scotland and as part of teacher training.



6. 7. 8. 9.

The language itself is no longer confined to small pockets in rural areas but is established in main urban areas. There are around 150 hours of Gaelic language programming a year on Scottish television and public documents and road signs in the north of Scotland are often reproduced in Gaelic.

Gaelic publishing has a long history (the first book was printed in 1567) and more books than ever before are being produced. *Gath* magazine, containing short stories and other material from popular Gaelic writers, is published in Edinburgh and is gaining in popularity.

Scots, however, is a language of everyday life, with 30% of Scottish people believed to use it. Recently this rich and expressive tongue has seen renewed interest from Parliament, education, media and society. Scots-language titles are to be found in around a third of publishers in Scotland. One of the most inventive publishers for children is Itchy Coo Books, an imprint of Black & White Publishing, which publishes 'braw books for bairns o aw ages'.

6. *Gath* Magazine, published in Edinburgh for a growing Gaelic readership
7. *King o' the Midden*, one of the innovative Scots titles from Itchy Coo Books.
8. Title page from *A Scots Dialect Dictionary*
9. Scots, a language of creativity – An extract from the *Pocket Book of Scottish Quotations* by David Ross

Overleaf:
Hugh MacDiarmid sculpture at Langholm in the Scottish Borders