Gaelic Scotland: a brief history

Gaelic is one of Scotland’s national languages. This status is marked on the map as much as on the mind. There are very few regions of Scotland that do not boast at least a smattering of places originally named by Gaelic speakers, from Balerno (baile an airneach ‘hawthorn farm’) in Midlothian to Baile Mhàrtainn in South Uist, from Craigentinny (creag an t-sionnaich ‘fox craig’) in Edinburgh to Aultivullin (alt a’ mhulinn ‘mill burn’) in the far north of Sutherland; from Drummore (drùim mòr ‘big ridge’) on the Mull of Galloway to Cairnbulg (càrn builg ‘gap cairn’) near Fraserburgh. In many places where Gaelic is no longer spoken as a native tongue, such as Galloway, Fife, or Aberdeenshire, the landscape is still predominantly one named by Gaelic speakers. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the high point of the expansion of Gaelic as a language in Scotland, one could traverse the whole mainland of Scotland and find speakers of Gaelic in most corners, whether it be the Gaelic landowners of the Lothians like Colmán and Gille Mhuire who gave their names to Comiston and Gilmerton, or the Clydesdale serf belonging to Glasgow Cathedral, named Gille Mochaoi; or the serfs of the upper Tweed valley called Mac Cormaig and Maol Mhuire; or the men of Norse lineage but Gaelic speech who were becoming the political hard-men of the western coast and the Hebrides, men with names like Raghnall and Somhairle.

In thinking about Gaelic in Scotland, we often think of it as in terminal decline from the time of Queen Maragret and her sons. Yet studies indicate that the 12th century was the time when the most ubiquitous Gaelic place-names, those employing the words baile ‘farm, settlement’, and achadh ‘field’, were coined. How did Gaelic become so dominant, and how did it lose sway; how did it become associated so closely with the highlands, and now with the Western Isles? When did it first reach here, and how did it change once it was here? When did various regions last have native speakers of Gaelic? This introduction tries to answer these questions and more.

Scottish Gaelic is a language of the Celtic family—it is a close relative of Welsh, Cornish and Breton, but shares a more intimate relationship with Irish and Manx Gaelic. These three Gaelic or Goidelic languages descend from a common ancestor, spoken in Ireland in the late first millennium BC and early first millennium AD. Writers in Latin referred to the inhabitants of Ireland, and thus the speakers of this ancestor language, as Scoti, and to Ireland as Scotia, but early in the middle ages, they adopted a name for themselves from their British cousins—Goidil, Gaels. Gaelic had spread to north-western Britain, to Argyll, by the 6th century AD at the very latest. It presumably arrived through the migration of Gaels, of Scoti across the Sea of Moyle, though this has been hotly debated in recent years, and the possibility that Gaelic evolved as a language simultaneously in Argyll and in Ireland has been advanced. Whatever the truth of the matter, by the sixth century it was the language of the rulers of Argyll, to Argyll, by the 6th century AD at the very latest. It presumably arrived through the migration of Gaels, of Scoti across the Sea of Moyle, though this has been hotly debated in recent years, and the possibility that Gaelic evolved as a language simultaneously in Argyll and in Ireland has been advanced. Whatever the truth of the matter, by the sixth century it was the language of the rulers of Argyll, and of their kingdom of Dál Ríada, which still included parts of County Antrim in the north of Ireland. It was the language also of its churchmen, who still had close kinship and political ties to Ireland.

Gaelic settlement was limited at this time. North of Ardnamurchan, east of the mountains, south of the Clyde, lay speakers of other Celtic languages—Pictish and British—and beyond them to the south, speakers of the ancestor of lowland Scots, northern Old English. In the subsequent centuries, although their numbers and territory continued to expand, Gaels were one people among many in northern Britain, and far from the most powerful in political terms. In the church though, they were highly influential—Gaelic churchmen played a large part in converting many parts of Scotland to Christianity, and right through the 9th century (and beyond) men from eastern Scotland would travel to Ireland for their church education.

In the 9th century, during a time of great upheaval caused by Viking invaders all around Britain’s shores, Gaels took power in eastern, as in western Scotland. By 900 the old name of Pictland was no more, and a new Gaelic name for that kingdom—Alba—and with it a new identity as Fir Alban (‘the Men of Alba’) was being promoted. The Scoti thus became the major players in the kingdom which would bear their name in English as Scotland. The kings of Alba boasted Gaelic names like Domhnall, Maolcholaim, Aodh, and Donnchadh, and one dynasty ruled that kingdom right through to the 12th century and beyond. North of the Forth, Gaelic speech supplanted Pictish
entirely. South of it, the kings of Alba made conquest as far as the Tweed by 1018, and in their wake came nobles from the north and their retainers, bringing Gaelic speech into south-east Scotland.

This was not the only way in which Gaelic was expanding in Scotland at this time. The Vikings who had destabilised Britain so greatly in the 9th century settled in great numbers along the northern and western seaboard. In many places they, and their Scandinavian language, were in the minority. Self-consciously hybrid communities sprang up, such as the Gall-Ghàidhil, ‘Scandinavian Gaelic-speakers’, who went on to colonise the south-west of Scotland, giving it its name, Galloway (later confined to one portion of the south-west), and peppering the landscape with Gaelic place-names. By the 12th century, too, Scandinavian noblemen in the west had Gaelic nicknames, and could speak Gaelic, from Dublin to the Outer Hebrides. These men, with their Viking names like Óláfr, Ljodr, Ívarr, Thorketill were the new Gaels of the central middle ages. Their descendants, as MacAmhlaibh, MacLeòid, Maclomhair, MacCorcadail, and many others, would be the lordly families of the later middle ages and early modern period. During the course of the 12th and 13th centuries, the western isles that had been most thoroughly settled by Scandinavians—Skye, Barra, the Uists, Harris and Lewis—began to become Gaelic-speaking communities, both through the increasing use of Gaelic by the ruling elite, and through less perceptible changes further down the social scale as well.

This period—the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries—was one in which the great Gaelic families were founded and began to make their fortunes. Families like Clann Dòmhnaill, descendants of Scandinavian Gaels, who ruled as lords of the Isles for 200 years; but also like the Frasers (na Frisealaich), who drew their descent from Anglo-Norman settlers from south of the Forth; or the earls of the Lennox, whose ancestor bore the Old English name Ælwine. The Campbells saw themselves as descendants of northern Britons (indeed, of Arthur!) and of Normans, as well as of Gaels. To be a Gael, in the middle ages, then, was to be a speaker of Gaelic—it was not a racial or ethnic tag. Gaelic clans looked to multiple lands for their ancestry, not just the Highlands.

For at this time, prior to the 14th century, the Highlands did not exist as a concept. But this very same period saw the circumstances which would bring in the Highland-Lowland divide now so familiar to us, and restrict and then reduce the sway of Gaelic speech. For although the kings of Alba, the kings of the Scots, still boasted of their Gaelic and Irish ancestry, they were progressive Europeans as well, bringing in new religious structures and monastic orders from England and the Continent; opening up the central belt and east coast to trade through the establishment of urban enterprise zones—the burghs—and changing fundamentally the way land and lordship operated. The personnel who effected these changes in many areas—Clydesdale, for instance, or Fife—were largely drawn from furth of Scotland. In burghs and in the church, the majority language came to be, over the course of the 13th and 14th centuries, the language we now know as lowland Scots, but which was then simply Inglis, English. Though burghs like Perth or Elgin must have had many Gaels working and living in them, most burghs did not. So too the great monasteries like Lindores or Arbroath were staffed largely by people who spoke the language which gave rise to Scots.

A map of burghs and new monasteries founded during this period is a telling one: the borders, the central belt, the east coast are dotted with new foundations, the western seaboard and the highlands on the whole are bare. Divergent cultures, as well as divergent speech zones, were emerging. From the 14th and 15th century, too, Inglis—Scots—was becoming an increasingly official language, and especially a language of law. By the 16th century, even those great Gaelic magnates who patronised, and indeed composed, Gaelic poetry used Scots for their correspondence, and for their tombstones. Not only in regional and in economic terms, but now in terms of domain of use, Gaelic was receding. As a token of this, take the printing press—the maker of early modernity. A few religious books were printed in Gaelic in the 16th and 17th centuries, but it would not be until the end of the 18th century before Gaelic culture as a whole embraced the Gaelic printed word.
None the less, the divide between Gael and lowlander was never a chasm. Throughout the early modern period, individuals and families moved between both zones and both cultures. Towns like Perth, Stirling, Aberdeen had long-standing relationships with Gaelic-speaking hinterlands which were close at hand. In the 15th century the lords of the isles were as often in their seats in Inverness and Dingwall as in Islay. The family whose hands scribed the most important manuscript of the Gaelic middle ages, the 16th century Book of the Dean of Lismore, boasted notary publics; in this manuscript, Gaelic poems are rendered in the spelling conventions of lowland Scots. Noble families highland and lowland married within their class as much as their culture. Political alliances such as those which wracked Scotland during the Covenanting Wars and the Jacobite Risings were made across the divisions of speech and community. It is important, too, that for these communities, Gaelic remained a high register language associated with culture and learning. Even in a place like Aberdeen Grammar School in the 16th century, Gaelic (though not Scots) was an accepted medium of conversation, alongside Latin and French.

Later, successive defeats of movements and individuals who seemed tied to Gaelic culture produced a sense of unease for Gaels, and of disenfranchisement within the Scottish and British nations. The 18th century saw matters change in several dramatic ways at once. The defeat of Charles Edward Stuart at Culloden led to the targeting of images of Gaelic culture—the pipes, the tartan cloth—and thus their closer identification with that culture. The ‘discovery’ of Ossian led to the elevation of Gaelic imagery within Scottish culture, and to the opening up of the highlands to tourism and the infection of the Scottish imagination with the fading relics of the Gaelic past. Gaelic culture became in the late 18th and through the 19th century ever more closely bound in to a wider Scottish identity, but it did so as a culture of the past, and through images more than through words.

At the very same time, modern Gaels were on the move, changing their locations and their horizons, and in the process modernising their culture. Gaels from the Highlands became mainstays of the British Army, helping to forge the British Empire, whilst other Gaels were thrown by economic downturn, famine and rapacious landlordism onto the ebb-tide of emigration. Some of these émigrés made for other lands: North America, Australia, New Zealand. More migrated to Scotland’s emergent industrial cities in search of work. Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, and also London, became hosts to large Gaelic communities. These communities were of the highlands yet modern too. Their songs and Gaelic Societies were often nostalgic for the homeland, but could also be feverishly patriotic or enthusiastic for the new, whether it be steamboats or electoral reform. They were increasingly literate, and fuelled a burgeoning Gaelic publishing industry of books and periodicals. If the twelfth century saw the greatest extent of Gaelic in Scotland, the 19th century saw the greatest numbers of speakers, and many of them, increasingly, lived in the lowlands, in towns and in cities.

But a language needs more than sheer numbers to survive. The final decades of the 19th century saw successful struggles by Gaels for land rights in the wake of savage clearances and brutal landlordism, but it also saw the end of the fragile experiments in Gaelic-medium education, as the Education Act of 1872 brought in English as the sole medium of teaching. Subsequent reforms to allow Gaelic as a subject did not address the fundamental problem. Excluded as a language of law, and now of education, Gaelic was increasingly confined to the family, the croft and the kirk. Gaels who might have become literate in the 19th century would have less opportunity to do so in the 20th. The Gaels who populated the regiments would also take their disproportionate toll on the killing fields of the Great War.

Against a sombre backdrop of decline, the past four decades have seen increasingly significant attempts to change the status of Gaelic and its fate. Migration, exclusion (partial or full) from education and legal usage, the decline in established religion, and the rise of English literacy and the media all continued to take their toll on Gaelic and its communities through the 20th century, to say nothing of the globalisation that affects all local communities in the 21st. Regions which entered the 20th century with solid Gaelic-speaking neighbourhoods, such as the Lennox, Arran, Easter Ross, Perthshire, Southern Argyll, left it with at best a rare, aged speaker still remaining.
More and more, the mainland has ceded Gaelic to English speech, and the Hebrides have become the stronghold of Gaelic. And yet a slow but steady change in fortunes has marked the last half-century. Struggles to secure a modicum of Gaelic presence in the media (especially radio and television), to increase and consolidate Gaelic-medium education, and to secure Gaelic’s status in law, have been partially successful. Gaelic signs now mark the offices of the Scottish parliament, along the High Street to the castle, where once Gaelic-speaking kings reigned, and along the streets the Perthshire poet and Edinburgh resident Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir walked two centuries ago. In Glasgow’s west end, not far from the Broomielaw where countless Gaels once alighted from ships from the west, the first full Gaelic-medium school has been established. There have never been more or better opportunities for those without Gaelic to learn it. Not for many decades have there been so many good and often gainful opportunities for those with Gaelic to use it.

Professor Thomas Owen Clancy
Chair of Celtic
Head of Department of Celtic
Head of the Centre for Scottish and Celtic Studies
University of Glasgow
Alba agus a’ Ghàidhlig: eachdraidh ghoirid

’S e a’ Ghàidhlig aon de chànanan nàiseanta na h-Alba. Tha an inbhe nàiseanta seo ri aithneachadh gu follaiseach air mapa na dùthcha, agus glè bheag de cheàrnaidhean rin lorg ann aig nach eil co-dhiù dòrlach de dh’àiteannan a hfuair an ainm o thús bho Ghaidheil: o Bhail’ Àirneach an Lodainn (Balerno) gu ruige Baile Mhàrtainn an Uibhist a Deas; o Chreag an t-Sionnaich an Dùn Èideann (Craigentinny) gu Allt a’ Mhuilinn fada mu thuath ann an Dùthaich MhicAoidh; no bho Dhruim Mhòr air Maol Ghallghallaibh gu Càrn Builg faisg air Baile nam Frisealach san taobh an-ear. Fiù ’s ann am páirtean den dùthaich anns nach cluinnear Gàidhlig dhùthchasach tuilleadh, mar Ghallghallaibh, Fìofa, no Siorrachd Obar-dheathain, ’s i a’ Ghàidhlig as motha thug buaidh air ainmeachadh cruth na tire.

Anns an dara ’s an treas linn deug, agus rèim na Gàidhlig aig a h-àirde, gheibhte luchd-labhairt a’ chànan ann an cha mhòr gach oisean de mhòrthir na h-Alba, air bilean gach cuid uachdarain is iochdarain: uaislean mar Chólman is Gille Mhuire ann an Lodainn (a thug an ainm do Chomiston agus Gilmerton an Dùn Èideann); no tràillean mar MhacCormaig is Maol Mhùire à Srath Thuaidh, no Gille Mo-chaoi a bha cuinglichte aig Cathair-eaglais Ghlaschu. Gun luaidh air na Raghnallan is na Somhairlean a bha a’ gabhail seilbh le làmhach às a chosta an-iar agus ann an Innse Gall – uaislean a bhuineadh do shlochd Lochlannach ach làn an cinn aca de Ghàidhlig.

Is tric a smaoinichear air a’ Ghàidhlig mar chànan air an tàinig sìor chrìonadh o linn na Bànrrinn Mairearad agus Mhaolcholuim Ceann-mòir (c.1050) ’s an cuid mhac. Ach tha rannsachadh ag innse gur ann feadh an dara linn deug a chaidh cuid de na h-aìnmean àite Ghàidhlig as cumant a chruthachadh, ainmean le baile no achadh. Ciamar a fhuair a’ Ghàidhlig a leithd de phriomhachas, agus dè bu choireach gun do chaill i a rèim? Cuin a thàinig an cànan dhan dùthaich an-toisach co-dhiù, agus ciamar a dh’atharraich i as dèidh sin? Ciamar a fhuair i buintealas cho domhain leis na “Highlands” agus mu dheireadh leis na h-Eileanan Siar? Dè cho fada is a mhair a’ Ghàidhlig ann an diofar cheàrnaidhean den dùthaich?

Amaisidh an cùnntas seo air freagairtean a thoirt dha na ceistean sin uile.
’S e a’ Ghàidhlig aon de na cànanan ceilteach. Tha buintealas aice ris a’ Chuimris, a’ Chòrnais agus cànan na Breatainn Bhig anns an Fhraing, ach ’s iad Gàidhlig na h-Èireann (a’ Ghaeilge) agus Gàidhlig Eilean Mhanainn as dlùth-chàirdiche rithe. Shiolaich na tri teangannan “Goidelic” seo o chànan-tobrach a bhathar a’ bruidhinn ann an Èirinn anmocht sa chìd mhile-bliadhna ro Chriost agus tràth sa chìd mhile-bliadhna as dèidh Chriost. ’S e “Scoti” a bha aig sgriobhadairean Laideann air luchd-labhaint a’ chànaidh seo, agus “Scotia” a bha aca air Èirinn, ach tràth sna Meadhain Aoisean ghabh iad ainm orra fhèin a thog iad bho na Ceàltach Bhreatannach (no Sheann-Chuimreach): “Goídil”, ’s e sin, “Gaidheil”.

Anns an t-6mh linn – air a’ char as anmoiche – bha an cànan seo ga bruidhinn ann an Earrag-Ghaidheal. Dh’fhaodadh gun do thachair seo mar thoradh air in-imirch shluaghan Scotach às Èireann, ach tha am beachd seo air a bhith air a chur gu dúbhlan o chionn ghoid agus cuid a’ cumail a-mach gun do sgaol an t-Seann Gàidhlig ann an Èirinn agus ann an Earrag-Ghaidheal aig a’ cheart aon âm. Ach is cinnteach co-dhù gum b’ i an cànan a bha aig luchd riaghadh Earrag-Ghaidheal anns an t-6mh linn agus aig an rioghadh aca, Dàil Riata (rioghadh a bha a’ gabhail a-staigh paarotean de dh’Antrim, an Èirinn a Tuath). ’S i cuideachd a bha aig luchd eaglais Dhàl Riata, aig a robh ceanglaichean poilitigeach air cinneadaid dlùth ri Èirinn. Aig an âm sin bha luchd labhaire na Seann Ghàidhlig anuair a cuairteachadh le sluagh an aig a robh cànanan ceilteach eile (Pioctais agus Breatainnais), tuath air Àird nam Murchan, an ear air beanntannan Bhraid Albann, agus deas air Abhainn Chluaidh. Nas fhaide deas buileach bha muinntir a bha a’ bruidhinn na Seann Bhheurla Tuathail (a’ chainnt às an tigeadh a’ Bheurla Ghallda). Tro na linntean a lean, chaidh àireamhann luchd na Gàidhlig am meud agus dh’at na criochn aca gu sear ’s gu tuath, ach cha b’ iad an sluagh a bu chumhachdaiche ann am Breatann a Tuath fhathast. Bha buaidh air leth làdir aca san Eaglais, ge-tà, agus gu dearbh b’ e Gaidheil a thug iompachadh Criostail air sgoiltnich mhòra den dùthaich.

B’ ann anns an 9mh linn, rè nan ùpraidean mòra a dh’adhbharachd teadh gu tir ainneartach nan Lochlannach air còrsachd Bhreatainn, a fhuair na Gaidheil làmh-an- uachdair taobh an ear na dùthcha a bharrachd air an taoibh siar. As dèidh 900 cha robh
guth air seann rioghachd nam Pictach, agus ainm úr Gàidhlig a-nise ga chur air: “Alba”, no “Scotland” san Laideann. B’ iad na “Scotaich”, na Gaidheil, a-nis an sluagh a bu chumhachdaile san rioghachd, rioghachd ris an canadh muinntir na Beurla “Scotland”. Bhà ainmean Gàidhlig air rìghrean Alba, mar Dhòmhnall, Maochlochaim, Aodh is Donnchadh, agus chùm an aon sliochd greim air riaghladh na dùthcha chun an dara linn deug agus na dhèidh. Tuath air Abhainn Fhoirthe, chaidh an cânan pioctach a-mach à bith buileach, ’s a’ Ghàidhlig a’ sior sgaioileadh; deas air an abhainn, cheannsaich rioghachd rioghachd ris an canadh muinntir na Beurla “Scotland”.

Bha ainmean Gàidhlig air rìghrean Alba, m ar Dhòmhnall, Maolcholaim, Aodh is Donnchadh, agus chùm an aon sliochd greim air riaghladh na dùthcha chun an dara linn deug agus na dhèidh. Tuath air Abhainn Fhoirthe, chaidh an cânan pioctach a-mach à bith buileach, ’s a’ Ghàidhlig a’ sior sgaioileadh; deas air an abhainn, cheannsaich rioghachd rioghachd ris an canadh muinntir na Beurla “Scotland”.

Cha b’ e sin an aon dòigh, ge-tà, a sgaoil a’ Ghàidhlig tron dùthaich aig an àm sin. Bha na Lochlannaich air Breatann gu lèir a chur air udal san 9mh linn, agus thuinich iad gu lionmhior air na Costaichean siar agus tuath. Gu math tric cha bhiodh ann ta a chag-chuid, agus dh’èirich coimhearsnachdan cothlaime às a seo, aig a robh dà chultar le chèile: na “Gall-ghaidheil” (“Gaidheil Lochlannaich”), mar eisimpleir, a ghluais a-steach gu ceann an iar-dhèas na dùthcha air an tug iad an t-ainm “Gallghallaibh”, agus a chuir breacadh de dh’ainmean Gàidhlig eile air a’ cheàrnaidh. Anns an dara linn deug, bha Gàidhlig aig na h-uaislean Lochlannaich san àird an iar, o Bhail’ Ath Cliath gu Innse Gall, agus farainmean Gàidhlig orra, a bharrachd air deagh ainmean Lochlannaich mar Oláfr, Ljodr, Ívar no Thorketill. ’B’ iad seo Gaidheil Úra nam Meadhán Aoisean, agus b’ ann bhuapasan a thigeadh cuid de shlochdand mòra uasal nam Meadhàn Aoisean anmoch: Clann ’Ic Amhlaibh, Clann ’Ic Léòid, Clann ’Ic Ìomhair, Clann ’Ic Corcadail. Tron dara’s an treas linn deug, mar a bu làidire a dh’fhàs an cànan am measg an luchd riaghlaidh, agus tro atharrachaidhean cultarail nas fhalaichte am measg an t-sluaigh fhèin, chaidh na h-eileanan siar sam bu phailte a thuinich na Lochlannaich – an t-Eilean Ghitheanach, Uibhist is Barraigh, Leòdhas is Na Hearadh – gu bhith nan coimhearsnachdan Gàidhlig.

B’ ann anns na Meadhán Aoisean anmoch – an dara, an treas is an ceathrumb linn deug – a stèidhicheadh is a shoirbhich na teaghlaichean mòra Gàidhlig: fineachan mar Chlann Dòmhnaill – sliochd Ghaidheil Lochlannaich a chum smachd air na h-Eileanan Siar fad dà cheud bliadhna mar Thighearnan nan Eilean. Ach cuideachd cinnidhean mar na Frisealaich, aig a robh sinsearachd Anglo-Normach bho thaobh a deas na Forth; no iarlan Leamhnachd, is sinsear aca air a robh ainm Seann Bheurla, Aelwine. Bha na
Caimbeulaich a’ tagaírt dhaibh fhèin freumhaichean Tuath-Bhreatannach (air ais gu Rìgh Artair fhèin, ma b’ fhior), a thuilleadh air fuil Norman agus Ghàidhlig. Gu follaiseach, cha b’ e suaicheantas cinneadail a bha ann an ‘Gaidheal’ anns na Meadhain Aoisean idir – ’s e bha ann an Gaidheal duine sam bith aig a robh Gàidhlig, agus ’s ann bho ionadach ceàraindh a bharrachd air a’ Ghaidhealtachd againne a bha na fineachan Gaidhealach a’ faighinn an cuid dualchais.

Gu dearbh aig an às seo, sìos chun a’ cheithreamh linn deug, cha robh a leithid a rud ann ris “a’ Ghaidhealtachd” ann an inntinn dhaoine idir, ach bha atharrachaidhean gan cur an sàs san rioghachd às an eòradeachd gun deànte sgaradh eadar “Gaidhealtachd” agus “Galtachd” (no “Hielands” is “Lawlands”). Oir air cho moiteil is a bha righreamh Alba às an sinnsearachd Ghàidhlig is Èireannach, bha iad nan Eòrpaich adhartach cuideachd, ’s iad a’ taldadh òrduighean manachail ùr agus structaran clèireach ùr bho Shasainn is Tir-Mòr na h-Eòrsa; a’ fosgladh crios meadhanach na dùthch a gus an costa an ear gu malairst le bhith a’ cur air chois ionadan- ionairt ùr: na bailtean mòra (no “burghs”); agus ag atharrachadh gu tur mar a bha am fearann ga àiteach is ga riaghladh. Agus ann an tòrr àiteannan, mar Dhall Chluaidh no Fìofa, ’s ann bho thaobh a-muigh criochan na rioghachd a thàinig cuid mhòr dhe na daoine a chuir an sàs na h-atharrachaidhean seo. Tron treas linn deug ’s an ceathramh, anns na burghan agus san Eaglais, dh’èirich prìomh chànain ùr: “a’ Bheurla Ghallda”, “Albais” no “Scots” a chanadh sinne rithe, ach cha robh oirre aig an às sin ach “Inglis” fhèin. Bha Gaidheil rim faighinn ag obair ann am feadhainn de na bailtean malairtach, leithid Pheairt no Eilgin, ach cha robh anns a’ mhòrchuid. Chithear bho mhapà de na bailtean ’s manachainnean ùr mar a bha dà chultan agus dà roinnean cânain a-nise a’ nochdadh anns an dùthaich: tha na h-ionadan ùr rim faicinn anns na Criochan, anns a’ Chrìos Mheadhanach, agus air an Taobh an Ear, ach tha an Costa an Lar agus “a’ Ghaidhealtachd” buileach bán.

Tron chòigeamh linn deug bha “Inglis” a’ sior fhàs gu bhith na chànan oifigeil, ’s i gu h-àraidh na chànan lagha. Nuair a ruigeas sinn an siathamh linn deug is ise an cànan a chleachdas na h-uachdarain mhòra Gaidhealach nan cuid litrichean agus air leacan uaghach, fiù ’s an fheadhainn sin a bha moiteil às an dualchas litreachais aca ’s a’ cumail bhàrd Gàidhlig. Bha a’ chànan a’ crionadh: cha robh an seasamh eacomach no
poilitigeach aice a b’ àbhaist, cha robh i sgaolte air feadh na dùthcha tuilleadh, agus cha robh a luchd labhairt ga cleachdadh ann an uiddhir de shuidheachaidhean na bu mhò. Dh’èirich clò-bhualadh, teicneòlas ùr iomgantach an t-saoghal nuadh-aimsirich, ach chaidh an cothrom ùr seo an ire mhath seachad air a’ Ghàidhlig – nochd leabhar spioradail no dhà anns an t-siathamh linn deug gun teagamh, ach cha b’ ann gu deireadh an ochdamh linn deug a ghabh saoghal na Gàidhlig air fad ris an fhacal clò-bhualaithe.

Ge-tà cha b’ e clais mhòr gun drochaid idir a dh’èirich eadar a’ Ghaidhealtachd ’s a’ Ghalltachd. Rè nan Aoisean Nuadh-aimsireach tràth, bha gach cuid daoine fa leth agus teaghlaithean a’ sior ghluasad eadar an dà chultar ’s an dà cheàrnaidh. Bha ceanglaichean fhathast aig bailtean mar Pheairt, Srughlea agus Obar-dheathain ris na coimhearsnachdan dùthchail Gàidhlig a bha faisg orra. ’S e teaghlach de luchd lagha a bha a’ dol eadar Laideann, Gàidhlig agus a’ Bheurla Ghallda nan cùd obrach, a chuir ri chorle, tràth san t-siathamh linn deug, an làmh-sgriobhainn Ghàidhlig as cudromaiche ro Aonadh nan Crùn: Leabhar Deadhan Lios-Mòr; agus ’s ann a rèir nòsan litreachaidh cànan na Galldachd a sgriobh iad sios a’ bhàrdachd Ghàidhlig a tha na dhuilleagan. Bha teaghlaithean uasal Gaidhealach is Gallda a’ pòsadh taobh a-staigh chricean clas sòisealta, ’s cha b’ ann a rèir chricean coimhearsnachd no cànan a-mhàn. Agus thàinig Gaidheil agus Goill le chèile airson sàbaid air gach taobh de dh’aimhreitean poilitigeach mòra an t-seachdamh is an ochdamh linn deug: cogaidhean nan Cobhanantach agus aran-a-mach nan Seumasach. Rè na h-ùine sin bha a’ Ghàidhlig air a faicinn fhathast mar chànan a bha ceangailte le àrd-chultar is foghlam. Ann an Sgoil Ghràmair Obar-Dheathain anns an t-16mh linn, mar eisimpleir, bha thorar a’ gabhail rithe mar mheadhan deasbaid cómhla ri Laideann is Fraingis, ged nach robh a’ Bheurla Ghallda fhèin ceadaichd.

Ach tro na linntean sin, cha do shoirbhich le iomairtean poileatagach is creidimh aig an robh buintealas follaiseach ris a’ Ghaidhealtachd, agus dh’fhàgar na Gaidheil a’ faireachdainn mar shluag gu robh iad air an iomall agus a dhith cumhachd taobh a-staigh Alba agus Bhreatainn. Anns an ochdamh linn deug, an cos Chùl Lodair, thug an Riaghaltas ionnsaigh air cuid de shamhluaidhean cultarail nan Gaidheal mar a’ phion ’s am breacan. Trithead bliadhna as dèidh sin, fo bhuaidh nan sgriobhaidhean aig Seumas “Oisean” Mac A’ Phearsain, chaidh priomhchasas is cliù úr a thoirt do dh’iomhaigheachd
Ghaidhealach ann an cultar na h-Alba, 's a' Ghaidhealtachd aig an aon àm ga fosgladh gu turasachd. Tron naoidheamh linn deug chaidh an dàimh eadar cultar nan Gaidheal agus suaicheantas fein-aithne nan Albannach a dhaingneachadh, ach b’ ann fo riodh seann chultar romansach le sùil mheallta air na linnntean gaisgeil o shean, agus tro iomhaighean seach tron àòn-fhèin a bha a-nise ga chur air dimeas.

Anns an dà-rìribh, ge-tà, 's ann a bha na Gaidheil a’ sìor leantail fhàireann ùra. Bha pàirt iomraiteach aig cùid anns an Arm Bhreatannach agus sgaoileadh na h-Ìmpireachd, ach gu leòr eile gan sguabadh thall that ris fo bhochdann no gort, no fo làmhachas làdir nan uachdar an. Rinneadh imrich gu costaichean ùra – Aimerigea a Tuath, Astràlia, Sealainn Nuadh – agus cuideachd gu na bailtean mòra mu dheas: Dùn Deagh, Dùn Èideann, Glaschu, Lunnainn. Dh’fhàs coimhearsnachdan mòra anns na bailtean sin, agus Comannan Gaidhealach nan cos, a bhiodh gun teagamh air uairean a’ toirt sùil lèan cianalais air a’ Ghaidhealtachd, ach a bha cuideachd beò is tagrach nan aois nuadh-airimireil fhèin: bragail moiteil às an Ìmpireachd, ’s a’ faighinn tlachd is togail à rudan ’s beachdan ùra: am bàta smùid, còirichean bhòtaidh is eile. Sgaoil comas sgriobhaidh ’s leughaidh, agus mu dheireadh thall chaidh foillseachadh Gàidhlig na ghniomhachas fàsmhor soirbheachail. Ma bha sgapadh na Gàidhlig air a bhith aig a h-àirde san dara linn deug, ’s ann anns an naoidheamh linn deug a bha phailte luchd labhairt a’ chàin, is deagh chuid aca sin a’ tàmh air Ghalldachd.

Ach cha leòr àireamhan luchd labhairt a-mhàin airson cânan a chumail fallain beò. Anmoch san naoidheamh linn deug, tro aimhreit agus stri poilteigeach, thàinig piseach air cor nan croitearan air Ghaidhealtachd agus dh’èirich misneachd ùr am measg nan Gaidheal, as dèidh fhuaadhach brùideil agus aintighearnas uachdar an. Ach chuir Achd an Fhoghlaim 1872 stad air fàs tiomach foghlam Gàidhlig, agus Beurla a-nis ga sparradh mar an aon chàin anns na sgoiltean ùrda. Bho thoiseach an 20mh linn chaidh ceumannan beaga a dhèanamh ann a bhith a’ ceadachadh teagasg na Gàidhlig mar chuspair anns an àrdsoil, ach cha robh anna sin ach suip bheaga. B’ e cnag na cuise gum b’ fhada o bha a’ Ghàidhlig air a diùltadh mar chàin lughba no riaghlaidh, agus gu robh i a-nise air a mùchadh mar chàin foighlaim ’s air a cuingleachadh dhan teaghlach, dhan chrois agus dhan eaglaigh a-mhàin. Sgaoil cothroman foighlam dhan t-sluagh air fad, ach bhiodh e na bu dorra do na Gaidheil a bhith a’ fàs
litearach nan cànán fhèin anns an 20mh na bha riamh anns an naoidheamh linn deug. Tràth san linn rinn an Cogadh Mòr buain throm mhairbhteach air fireannaich na Gàidhealtachd ’s nan eileanan, agus cha tàinig lùghdachadh air eiltheachd nas motha.

Leis a’ Ghàidhlig a’ sior chrionadh san 20mh linn, tha iomairtean air èirigh anns na ceathradh bliadhna a dh’fhalbh airson inbhe na Gàidhlig a neartachadh agus suidheachadh a’ chànan a dhaingneachadh sna bliadhnanachan ri teadh. Dh’aithnichear gu robh eilthireachd, crionadh nan Eaglaisean, cion chothroman eaconomaigeach, agus dith chleachdadh a’ chànan ann am foghlaim, lagh, riaghaltas agus sna meadhannan, a’ sior lagachadh nan coimhearsnachd-Gàidhlig tron 20mh linn – gun luaidh air an t-saoghalachada a tha a’ bualadh air a h-uile coimhearsnachd ionadail san aona linn ficheadh. Chaidh an cànán à bith ann an sgirean far a robh i fhathast ga bruidhinn aig toiseach an linn – Leamhnachd, taobh a deas Earra-ghaidheal, Aran is Eilean Bhòid, Siorrachd Pheairt, taobh an ear Siorrachd Rois – gus mu dheireadh b’ e cridhe na “Gaidhealtachd Gàidhlig” na h-Eileanan Siar.

Ge-tà, rè nan leth-cheud bliadhna a dh’fhalbh, tro strì is fàs misneachd, tha piseach beag cunbhalach air tighinn air a’ chànan ’s air a cuid coimhearsnachd-Gàidhlig: ann am foghlaim, anns na meadhannan (rèidio is telebhisean gu h-àraidh) agus ann am beatha ofigeil na dùthcha. Ann an Dùn Èideann, far a robh rìghrean Gaidhealach o shean, is far an do choisich Donnchadh Bàn, Mac Mhaighstir Alastair agus Dùghall Bochanan beagan is dà cheud bliadhna air ais, chaidh Achd na Gàidhlig aontachadh ann an 2005, agus tha sanasain Gàidhlig rim faicinn aig a’ Phàrlamaid. Ann an taobh an iar Ghlaschu, goirid dhan a’ Bhrumalàth far an tàinig iomadach Gaidheal gu port on ochdamh linn deug, tha a’ chriad árdsoil Ghàidhlig gu bhith a’ fosgladh. ’S fhada on a bha an uidhir de chothroman aig luchd na Gàidhlig an cànan aca a chleachdadh, agus cothroman cosnaidh ann dhaibh na lùib. Dha na daoine sin aig nach eil an cànan, chan eil àm as fhèàrr air a bhith ann riamh airson a ionnsachadh.

Gàidhlig le Michel Byrne