

## 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 airneach* 'hawthorn farm') in Midlothian to Baile Màrtainn in South Uist, from Craigentinn ( *creag an t-sionnaich* 'fox Craig') in Edinburgh to Aultivullin (*allt a' mhullinn* 'mill burn') in the far north of Sutherland; from Drummore (*druim 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 Raghnaid 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 12<sup>th</sup> 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—*Goídil*, Gaels. Gaelic had spread to north-western Britain, to Argyll, by the 6<sup>th</sup> 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 Riada, 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 Ardnachan, 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 9<sup>th</sup> century (and beyond) men from eastern Scotland would travel to Ireland for their church education.

In the 9<sup>th</sup> 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 12<sup>th</sup> 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 9<sup>th</sup> 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 12<sup>th</sup> 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 Oláfr, Ljodr, Ívarr, Thorketil were the new Gaels of the central middle ages. Their descendants, as MacAmhlaibh, MacLeòid, MacIomhair, MacCorcadail, and many others, would be the lordly families of the later middle ages and early modern period. During the course of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> 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 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> 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 14<sup>th</sup> 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 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> 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 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century, too, Inglis—Scots—was becoming an increasingly official language, and especially a language of law. By the 16<sup>th</sup> 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 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, but it would not be until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> 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 15<sup>th</sup> 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 16<sup>th</sup> 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 16<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> and through the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> century would have less opportunity to do so in the 20<sup>th</sup>. 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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.

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## 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 fhuair an ainm o thùs bho Ghaidheil: o Bhail' Àirneach an Lodainn (Balerno) gu ruige Baile Mhàrtainn an Uibhist a Deas; o Chreag an t-Sionnaich an Dùn Èideann (Craigentenny) 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 pàirtean 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 tìre.

Ann an dara 's an treas linn deug, agus rèim na Gàidhlig aig a h-àirde, gheibhte luchd-labhairt a' chànain ann an cha mhòr gach oisean de mhòrthìr na h-Alba, air bilean gach cuid uachdarain is ìochdarain: 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 Mhuire à Srath Thuaidh, no Gille Mo-chaoi a bha cuinglichte aig Cathair-eaglais Ghlaschu. Gun luaidh air na Ragnallan is na Somhairlean a bha a' gabhail seilbh le làmhachas làidir air a' chosta an-iar agus ann an Innse Gall – uaislean a bhuineadh do shliochd 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 Bànrinn 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-ainmean àite Gàidhlig as cumanta a chruthachadh, ainmean le *baile* no *achadh*. Ciamar a fhuair a' Ghàidhlig a leithid de phrìomhachas, agus dè bu choireach gun do chaill i a rèim? Cuin a thàinig an cànan dhan dùthaich an-toiseach 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 cùntas seo air freagairtean a thoirt dha na ceistean sin uile.

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'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. Shìolaich na trì teangannan "Goidelic" seo o chànan-tobrach a bhathar a' bruidhinn ann an Èirinn anmoch sa chiad mhìle-bliadhna ro Chrìost agus tràth sa chiad mhìle-bliadhna as dèidh Chrìost. 'S e "Scoti" a bha aig sgrìobhadairean Laideann air luchd-labhairt a' chànain seo, agus "Scotia" a bha aca air Èirinn, ach tràth sna Meadhan Aoisean ghabh iad ainm orra fhèin a thog iad bho na Ceiltich 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 Earra-Ghaidheal. Dh'fhaodadh gun do thachair seo mar thoradh air in-imrich shluaghan Scotach às Èireann, ach tha am beachd seo air a bhith air a chur gu dùbhlán o chionn ghoirid agus cuid a' cumail a-mach gun do sgaoil an t-Seann Ghàidhlig ann an Èirinn agus ann an Earra-Ghaidheal aig a' cheart aon àm. Ach is cinnteach co-dhiù gum b' i an cànan a bha aig luchd riaghlaidh Earra-Ghaidheal anns an t-6mh linn agus aig an rìoghachd aca, Dàl Riata (rìoghachd a bha a' gabhail a-staigh pàirtean de dh'Antrim, an Èirinn a Tuath). 'S i cuideachd a bha aig luchd eaglais Dhàl Riata, aig a robh ceanglaichean poilitigeach is cinneadail dlùth ri Èirinn. Aig an àm sin bha luchd labhairt na Seann Ghàidhlig air an cuairteachadh le sluaghan aig a robh cànanan ceilteach eile (Pioctais agus Breatannais), 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 Bheurla Tuathail (a' chainnt às an tigeadh a' Bheurla Ghallda). Tro na linntean a lean, chaidh àireamhan luchd na Gàidhlig am meud agus dh'at na crìochan 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 làidir aca san Eaglais, ge-tà, agus gu dearbh b' e Gaidheil a thug iompachadh Crìostail air sgaoiltich mhòra den dùthaich.

B' ann anns an 9mh linn, rè nan ùpraidhean mòra a dh'adhbharaich teachd gu tìr ainneartach nan Lochlannach air còrsaichean 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 rìoghachd nam Pìoctach, agus ainm ùr Gàidhlig a-nise ga chur air: “Alba”, no “Scotia” san Laideann. B’ iad na “Scotaich”, na Gaidheil, a-nis an sluagh a bu chumhachdaile san rìoghachd, rìoghachd ris an canadh muinntir na Beurla “Scotland”. Bha ainmean Gàidhlig air rìghrean Alba, mar 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 cànan pìoctach a-mach à bith buileach, ’s a’ Ghàidhlig a’ sìor sgaoileadh; deas air an abhainn, cheannsaich rìghrean Alba an dùthaich gu ruige Abhainn Thuaidh ann an 1018, agus nan lorg thàinig uaislean a thug leotha a’ Ghàidhlig gun cheann an earra-dheas.

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 lìonmhor air na costaichean siar agus tuath. Gu math tric cha bhiodh annta ach beag-chuid, agus dh’èirich coimhearsnachdan cothlaimte às a seo, aig a robh dà chultar le chèile: na “Gall-ghaidheil” (“Gaidheil Lochlannach”), mar eisimpleir, a ghluais a-steach gu ceann an iar-dheas 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 Lochlannach san àird an iar, o Bhail’ Ath Cliath gu Innse Gall, agus farainmean Gàidhlig orra, a bharrachd air deagh ainmean Lochlannach mar Oláfr, Ljodr, Ívarr no Thorketill. B’ iad seo Gaidheil Ùra nam Meadhan Aoisean, agus b’ ann bhupasan a thigeadh cuid de shliochdan mòra uasal nam Meadhan Aoisean anmoch: Clann ’Ic Amhlaibh, Clann ’Ic Leòid, 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 Sgitheanach, Uibhist is Barraigh, Leòdhas is Na Hearadh – gu bhith nan coimhearsnachdan Gàidhlig.

B’ ann anns na Meadhan Aoisean anmoch – an dara, an treas is an ceathramh linn deug – a stèidhicheadh is a shoirbhich na teaghlaichean mòra Gàidhlig: fineachan mar Chlann Dòmhnail – sliochd Ghaidheil Lochlannach 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 sinnsreachd Anglo-Normach bho thaobh a deas na Foirthe; no iarlan Leamhnachd, is sinnsear aca air a robh ainm Seann Bheurla, Aelwine. Bha na

Caimbeulaich a’ tagairt dhaibh fhèin freumhaichean Tuath-Bhreatannach (air ais gu Rìgh Artair fhèin, ma b’ fhìor), a thuilleadh air fuil Normach agus Ghàidhlig. Gu follaiseach, cha b’ e suaicheantas cinneadail a bha ann an ‘Gaidheal’ anns na Meadhan Aoisean idir – ’s e bha ann an Gaidheal duine sam bith aig a robh Gàidhlig, agus ’s ann bho iomadach ceàrnaidh a bharrachd air a’ Ghaidhealtachd againne a bha na fineachan Gaidhealach a’ faighinn an cuid dualchais.

Gu dearbh aig an àm 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 rìoghachd às an èireadh gun dèante sgaradh eadar “Gaidhealtachd” agus “Galltachd” (no “Hielands” is “Lawlands”). Oir air cho moiteil is a bha rìghrean Alba às an sinnsearachd Gàidhlig is Èireannach, bha iad nan Eòrpaich adhartach cuideachd, ’s iad a’ tàladh òrduighean manachail ùra agus structaran clèireach ùra bho Shasainn is Tìr-Mòr na h-Eòrpa; a’ fosgladh crios meadhanach na dùthcha agus an costa an ear gu malairt le bhith a’ cur air chois ionadan- iomairt ùra: 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 Dhail Chluaidh no Fìofa, ’s ann bho thaobh a-muigh crìochan na rìoghachd 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 chànan ùr: “a’ Bheurla Ghallda”, “Albais” no “Scots” a chanadh sinne rithe, ach cha robh oirre aig an àm sin ach “Inglis” fhèin. Bha Gaidheil rim faighinn ag obair ann am feadhainn de na bailtean malairteach, leithid Pheairt no Eilgin, ach cha robh anns a’ mhòrchuid. Chithear bho mhapa de na bailtean ’s manachainnean ùra mar a bha dà chultar agus dà roinnean cànan a-nise a’ nochdadh anns an dùthaich: tha na h-ionadan ùra rim faicinn anns na Crìochan, anns a’ Chrìos Mheadhanach, agus air an Taobh an Ear, ach tha an Costa an Iar agus “a’ Ghaidhealtachd” buileach bàn.

Tron chòigeamh linn deug bha “Inglis” a’ sìor 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 Ghaidhealach 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’ crìonadh: cha robh an seasamh eaconomach no



poilitigeach aice a b' àbhaist, cha robh i sgaoilte air feadh na dùthcha tuilleadh, agus cha robh a luchd labhairt ga cleachdadh ann an uidhir de shuidheachaidhean na bu mhò. Dh'èirich clò-bhualadh, teicneòlas ùr iongantach an t-saoghail nuadh-aimsirich, ach chaidh an cothrom ùr seo an ìre 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 chlà-bhuailte.

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 teaghlachan a' sìor ghluasad eadar an dà chultar 's an dà cheàrnaidh. Bha ceanglaichean fhathast aig bailtean mar Pheairt, Sruighlea 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 cuid obrach, a chuir ri chèile, tràth san t-siathamh linn deug, an làmh-sgrìobhainn Ghàidhlig as cudromaiche ro Aonadh nan Crùn: Leabhar Deadhan Lios-Mòr; agus 's ann a rèir nòsan litreachaidh cànan na Galldachd a sgrìobh iad sìos a' bhàrdachd Ghàidhlig a tha na dhuilleagan. Bha teaghlachan uasal Gaidhealach is Gallda a' pòsadh taobh a-staigh chrìchean clas sòisealta, 's cha b' ann a rèir chrìchean coimhearsnachd no cànan a-mhàin. Agus thàinig Gaidheil agus Goill le chèile airson sabaid air gach taobh de dh'aimhritean 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, bhathar a' gabhail rithe mar mheadhan deasbaid còmhla ri Laideann is Fraingis, ged nach robh a' Bheurla Ghallda fhèin ceadichte.

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 shluagh gu robh iad air an iomall agus a dh'ith cumhachd taobh a-staigh Alba agus Bhreatainn. Anns an ochdamh linn deug, an cois Chùl Lodair, thug an Riaghaltas ionnsaigh air cuid de shamhlaidhean cultarail nan Gaidheal mar a' phìob 's am breacan. Trithead bliadhna as dèidh sin, fo bhuidhe nan sgrìobhaidhean aig Seumas "Oisean" Mac A' Phearsain, chaidh prìomhachas is cliù ùr a thoirt do dh'ìomhaigheachd

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 fèin-aithne nan Albannach a dhaingneachadh, ach b' ann fo riochd seann chultar romansach le sùil mheallta air na linntean gaisgeil o shean, agus tro ìomhaighean seach tron chànan fhèin a bha a-nise ga chur air dìmeas.

Anns an dà-rìribh, ge-tà, 's ann a bha na Gaidheil a' sìor leantail fhàireannan ùra. Bha pàirt iomraiteach aig cuid anns an Arm Bhreatannach agus sgaoileadh na h-Ìmpireachd, ach gu leòr eile gan sguabadh thall thairis fo bhoichdainn no gort, no fo làmhachas làidir nan uachdaran. 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 cois, a bhiodh gun teagamh air uairean a' toirt sùil làn cianalais air a' Ghaidhealtachd, ach a bha cuideachd beò is tagrach nan aois nuadh-aimsireil 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 sgrìobhaidh 's leughaidh, agus mu dheireadh thall chaidh foillseachadh Gàidhlig na ghnìomhachas fàs-mhor 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 bu phailte luchd labhairt a' chànain, is deagh chuid aca sin a' tàmh air Ghalldachd.

Ach cha leòr àireamhan luchd labhairt a-mhàin airson cànan a chumail fallain beò. Anmoch san naoidheamh linn deug, tro aimhreit agus strì phoilitigeach, thàinig piseach air cor nan croitearan air Ghaidhealtachd agus dh'èirich misneachd ùr am measg nan Gaidheal, as dèidh fhuadachan brùideil agus aintighearnas uachdaran. Ach chuir Achd an Fhoghlaim 1872 stad air fàs tiomach foghlam Ghàidhlig, agus Beurla a-nis ga sparradh mar an aon chànan foghlaim a bha ceadaichte sna sgoiltean ùra. Bho thoiseach an 20mh linn chaidh ceumannan beaga a dhèanamh ann a bhith a' ceadachadh teagasg na Gàidhlig mar chuspair anns an àrdsgoil, ach cha robh annta sin ach suip bheaga. B' e cnag na cùise gum b' fhada o bha a' Ghàidhlig air a diùltadh mar chànan lagha no riaghlaidh, agus gu robh i a-nise air a mùchadh mar chànan foghlaim 's air a cuingleachadh dhan teaghlach, dhan chroit agus dhan eaglais a-mhàin. Sgaoil cothroman foghlam dhan t-sluagh air fad, ach bhiodh e na bu dorra do na Gaidheil a bhith a' fàs

lìtearach nan cànan 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 Gaidhealtachd 's nan eileanan, agus cha tàinig lùghdachadh air eilthireachd nas motha.

Leis a' Ghàidhlig a' sìor chrìonadh san 20mh linn, tha iomairtean air èirigh anns na ceathrad bliadhna a dh'fhalbh airson inbhe na Gàidhlig a neartachadh agus suidheachadh a' chànain a dhaingneachadh sna bliadhnachan ri teachd. Dh'aithnichear gu robh eilthireachd, crìonadh nan Eaglaisean, cion chothroman eaconomaigeach, agus dìth chleachdadh a' chànain ann am foghlam, lagh, riaghaltas agus sna meadhannan, a' sìor lagachadh nan coimhearsnachdan Gàidhlig tron 20mh linn – gun luaidh air an t-saoghalachadh a tha a' bualadh air a h-uile coimhearsnachd ionadail san aona linn fichead. Chaidh an cànan à bith ann an sgìrean 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' chànain 's air a cuid choimhearsnachdan: ann am foghlam, anns na meadhannan (rèidio is telebhisean gu h-àraidh) agus ann am beatha oifigeil 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 sanasan 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' chiad àrdsgoil 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 fheàrr air a bhith ann riamh airson a ionnsachadh.

Gàidhlig le Michel Byrne