

Perhaps there is relevance in beginning this short discourse in answering the question as to why I began the reinstatement of this dialect back into common usage in Argyll and beyond. I was brought up in the Kerry peninsula in Cowal and having discovered a strong interest in Gaelic placenames as a teenager and an even stronger interest in learning the spoken tongue as an adult, found myself upon reaching conversational fluency in standard Gaelic dis-satisfied with it and with a powerful desire to find out how the Gaelic of my homeland sounded and also if and when it had died out. While learning the dialect, having availed myself to every resource I could find, I began speaking it to my children, who already had a North-Argyll-tinged standard Gaelic, and before long I was determined that I would do justice to the almost forgotten speech of my home corner of Argyll by making it available to anyone who wished to learn it. This is why and indeed how the revival began.

During this process, I started to feel the necessity to come up with a name for the dialect which described sufficiently well that part of Argyll in which it was once almost universally spoken. This was because there was and is no name –so far as the present writer is aware- that has ever been in use for this particular geographical area which includes the locales known as Craignish, Lochaweside, Kilmartin, Kilmichael, Knappdale, Lochfyneside, Cowal and the island of Bute. The dialect spoken within all of these areas bar Bute has been well-enough documented to illustrate a marked uniformity of speech throughout, evidence for which will be referred to later.

I have been required to assume –due to lack of documentary evidence- that the Gaelic of the island of Bute was similar to that of Cowal due to their extremely close proximity to one another and because of the ferry links which operated between the mainland of Cowal and the island and continue to this day. Even at the north-west end of the island, the service known as Blair’s Ferry operated until 1940¹. It can be assumed that this was effectively the end of the Gaelic-speaking era of the island due to the failure of fieldworkers from the School of Scottish Studies to find anyone able to speak Gaelic in the island during the early 1950s², but throughout the previous 150 years at least, a regular albeit very modest ferry service had connected the Gaelic-speaking neighbourhoods of north-west Bute and the Kerry coast of Cowal³.

Horses and cattle were swum across the narrows⁴ at Colintraive *Caol an t-Snàimh* (Narrows of the Swimming), at the north-east end of the island where the current ferry operates, meaning that contact between the Gaels on both sides of the water there would also have been fairly regular, and have extended well into the past. Given that until very recently, the idea of water connecting rather than dividing was a truism, it can safely be assumed that at the very least the Gaelic of the island of Bute shared more features with that of the Cowal mainland than with the speech of any other area, due to their proximity to one other and the trading routes which were open and well-used right into the period when Gaelic ceased to be spoken in this part of Argyll.

And so Bute was included within the present study area for the simple reason that the evidence for its inclusion was stronger than the evidence for its exclusion, which amounts to nothing I have ever come across. The island therefore joined the rest of an area which still required to be named for ease of expression. The name Cowal and Mid-Argyll Gaelic came to mind at first, but since Mid-Argyll is often thought to include only Lochfyneside, and Cowal does not contain the aforementioned island, this option did not suffice.

The appropriation of the name Mid-Argyll in order for it to stand for the entire dialect area, since it exists in what is geographically the centre of Argyll, was something that was also considered, but given that Bute was formerly regarded as a distinct council area and even now is referred to with the rest of Argyll as *Argyll and Bute*, this did not seem entirely appropriate either.

A friend suggested the name *Gáidhlig Chloinn Dhiarmaid* after the Campbell clan whose holdings almost mirrored –somewhat remarkably but perhaps not coincidentally- the borders of the dialect area. But this held little more appeal despite the relatively neat solution it offered in terms of geography, because to

¹ RCAHMS Canmore ID 78623; site Number NR97SE 27

² Ó Dochartaigh 1997 Vol I, 35

³ McLean 2001, 252

⁴ *ibid*, 253

name a language after one single clan seemed immediately exclusive. The label would therefore carry little significance to anyone other than myself and those who were able to mentally link the clan with the geographical area. There was also no English translation which did not sound clumsy. If the above were not enough, Bute also fell outwith Campbell territory.

I then began to think “outside the box” as an American businessperson might put it. Although there were definitely various issues with the previous ideas, did the name that was eventually settled upon necessarily have to be directly representative of the geographical area? This was a dialect which not one person since the turn of the present century spoke fluently. It was effectively moribund. In that case, we were not talking about a revitalisation, but about a complete revival. Perhaps a name reflecting the revivalist aspect of this venture and not necessarily the exact geographical area would be more appropriate altogether. Add this to the fact that the dialect like the landscape itself had never been referred to by one single name, and moreover had never received anything but the most cursory acknowledgment from the academic world as a distinct dialect⁵, and I had a terrific case for starting from scratch.

The name that came to mind after much head-scratching was that of a conglomerate of ancient kingdoms stretching from the other side of the Straits of Moyle and extending perhaps as far north as the Isle of Skye, Dalriada⁶. Hardly a good choice of name for a dialect that existed only in a relatively small patch of this gigantic sea-state, one might think. But also a name that had ceased to be used for anything other than a historical concept and so in a sense, fair game. Not only that, but the most important seat within Dalriada was arguably Dunadd Fort, on the western extremity of the dialect area, but slap-bang in the middle of it if one measures north to south. At the top of Dunadd Fort, one can look out across the dialect area and see a good portion of it spread from where one stands. A seat of ancient power in a place of outstanding natural beauty in the heartland of the dialect area was a very appropriate vantage point from which to name this patois. The only way now was up for Dalriada Gaelic.

And so it was that I came to regard this Scottish dialect which only myself and my children now spoke, as *Gáidhlig Dhàil Riata*. Two old gentlemen who each had one parent from outside of the dialect area were the only carriers of anything remotely resembling the local speech, and I have had to be very careful with the forms they use as they would sometimes display influence from their Luings and Mull parents and naturally also from Western Isles-dominated radio broadcasts.

A curious question oft-raised is that of whether I have any right to simply “invent a dialect”. The truth is of course that there is only one invented Gaelic dialect in Scotland and that is the “Standard Gaelic” or “Mid-Minich” which despite never having been spoken anywhere historically is now seen as the be-all and end-all of the life of the tongue. This has been a somewhat destructive force which has helped strangle most of the remaining life out of the last of the dialects⁷. The frequency with which one hears the statement “but of course my Gaelic’s not right, not correct” from anyone outside of Skye and the Western Isles is down to the influence of standardising a language from whose speakers no permission was ever sought. I therefore feel very little if any responsibility to justify my actions to anyone other than the last of the dialect area’s old people who either spoke the language as youths, or still retain some ability to converse in it. Although I have the feeling that much of what has been said about the project over the years has been the result of amused curiosity rather than animosity, without the advantage of having followed me for the last three and a half of those examining my every endeavour, it would be difficult to know how I have arrived at the point at which I am completely confident that I speak the dialect of this midriff of Argyll.

The answer for those who have not been exposed to Argyll Gaelic before or who suspect that what I do speak is some kind of hash-up need only visit the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh, from where I have with full permission from both fieldworkers and from the nearest living relatives of the contributors, extracted hours upon hours of dialect recordings and painstakingly internalised the features therein. Not only that, but I have repeatedly recorded myself to listen back for the slightest syllable that could be out

⁵ Campbell & Thomson 1963, xviii

⁶ Dál Riata wikipedia

⁷ Lamb 2011, 8

of place. If it weren't enough that the School contained a wealth of lovely material collected by their heroic fieldworkers of the 1950s-1980s, I also acquired unfettered access to the unpublished notebooks of Nils Holmer⁸, produced during his three-month stint in the dialect area. From these, I was able to read directly thousands of responses taken down from the mouths of Argyll folk who would have yet been very fluent in their native tongue, and taken down in scrupulously handwritten IPA. Holmer's venture lay concealed, latterly in his son Arthur's attic in Sweden, for the best part of 70 years, and were it not for Arthur's generosity in allowing myself and one of the School of Scottish Studies' latter-day heroes David Clement scanned copies of the books, would perhaps have lain there still. I read, read and re-read the scans until I had learned the pronunciation of every single word and expression in them by heart. The laborious process of digitalisation is ongoing for the day when Holmer's incredible work may rightfully see the light of an appreciative day.

I have been encouraged by well-meaning friends from time to time to take what I have learned and formalise it in the shape of a PhD. Although I admit this would no doubt make fascinating reading for many academics and non-academics alike, I must confess that I am not capable of producing such an opus; not because of lack of ability to collate the evidence into a coherent structure, but because of a simple lack of patience for that kind of endeavour.

It must be said however that there is most decidedly something else at work here. The dialect could follow on from that of Kintyre⁹ or Arran¹⁰ in Holmer's case and be entombed in a linguist's guide to the features peculiar to it; there would be plenty precedent for that. In fact, there would be nothing wrong whatsoever with that in and of itself and I hope that at a point in the not-too-distant future Mr Clement and myself can facilitate this somehow. But this is not for the most part where my personal interest lies. I have read endless texts which include accounts of language decline, from Dorian in East Sutherland¹¹ to Wentworth in Wester Ross¹² to Ó Múrchú in East Perthshire¹³. It has always been nothing short of fascinating and has gifted me tremendous auxiliary knowledge to augment the process of what I am trying to do. But there is also the feeling every time I read the section on how the dialects have declined that there is something in common to their demise and not just that they were all subject to the relentless onslaught of English. No, nothing in fact to do with the turning away of the native people themselves from the use of Scottish Gaelic to Mercian English, but to do with the way in which these dialects were handled by outsiders when on the brink of extinction.

Rather than taking the information I found and writing about it so that the dialect could join all the others on the bookshelves of academic institutions and of Gaelic language enthusiasts, I decided to learn the dialect as fully as humanly possible and use it as if it were my own. Part of this would not only include passing it on as a matter of course to the next generation, but also providing the resources necessary for it to become and remain a part of the lives of the people who learned it and their children after them, as Wentworth had begun to do in Wester Ross with his astoundingly detailed dictionary¹⁴.

Not only would the extant poetry of the area need gathered together and made available for use; not only would the songs need brought back to life by being fitted with suitable Scottish melodies were melodies not already assigned to them by their writers or by subsequent singers who kept them in use; not only would there have to be a practical two-way dictionary for the language so that learners and speakers alike could maintain and grow their vocabulary and idiomatic ability, but there would also need to be literature both written in the dialect and also translated into it using sensible natural orthography representative of how the language was spoken in order for reading pleasure to be obtained through the medium of the Dalriada Gaelic.

⁸ Holmer (unpublished raw data)

⁹ Holmer 1981

¹⁰ Holmer 2002

¹¹ Dorian 1978

¹² Wentworth 2005

¹³ Ó Múrchú 1989

¹⁴ Wentworth 2003

Unfortunately, by the point at which the dialect began to be recorded for posterity, it had ceased to be a commonly heard sound in the district and had thinned a great deal, not only represented by very few native bards who could be counted within its speakership, but also containing a naturally reduced vocabulary and idiomatic scope. Thankfully however this has not been the catastrophe it could have been because bards aplenty there were in days gone by and some have left their mark in published and also in unpublished work. From Fletcher and Currie of Glendaruel¹⁵, to Campbell of Stronchullin¹⁶, MacColl of Minard¹⁷, Duncan MacIntyre of Braelean¹⁸ and Neil MacIntyre of Barrbreck¹⁹, there have been enough contributions to the local literature to augment what the School of Scottish Studies had unknowingly laid as a foundation for a dialect revival²⁰. Much of this material was contained in Holmer's notebooks, some in poetry collections from days gone by, others in manuscript form, as well as the dozens of stories and anecdotes throughout the recorded and written corpus of evidence for the tongue some of which is contained in the incredible work done by John Dewar, which I have yet to have the chance to fully explore. Safe to say, there is enough to be getting on with and a fine corpus of material from which to learn the dialect once I have found the time to prepare it all for use!

Perhaps a good move now would be to set out some of the shibboleths one may encounter in *Gáidhlig Dhàil Riata* and also some of the orthographic improvements which have been made, many peculiar to the dialect area, others which can happily be regarded as suggestions for the improvement of the writing of Scottish Gaelic in general.

Perhaps the most conspicuous feature of the dialect is the universal replacement of the verb and conditional ending *-adb* with *-amb*²¹. Just as with the commonly found instance of this suffix in well-known Hebridean Gaelic words such as *dianamb*, *seasamb* and *feitheamb*, so Dalriada Gaelic contains this form wherever you would expect to find *-adb* in the Gaelic of the north. Everywhere in the dialect area from Lochfyneside west, the ending is often also pronounced strongly /əv/²² while in Cowal and presumably also Bute, it sounded something like /u/²³

We find, to give just a few examples, that the following verbs appear as: *smaoineachamb*, *beachdachamb*, and also *dèanamb*, whilst those so written and pronounced in northern Gaelic are often though not exclusively found in the dialect area to end with the suffix *-achd*, for example, *seasachd*, *feitheachd* and also *gluasachd*.

As mentioned, the conditional form of the verb also ends with this sound and orthographic convention, so that we find forms such as *bhitheamb*, *dh'fhaodamb* and *reachamb* and even in Cowal the 'v' was sometimes pronounced, although just as often lost in normal speech delivered at pace.

It must be added that other words normally ending in *-adb* would often be found to be pronounced /əv/ /u/ or even /ö/. The likes of *seamb*, *iomamb* and *feamb* being three examples of this.

As can be seen, the shortened form of the conditional 'to be' is not found in Dalriada. While it can occasionally be heard in the Gaelic of one or two contributors as *bhiomb*, this was the exception rather than the rule and extends to all forms of the verb 'to be'.

Here are the basic forms with which it is possible to come into contact when reading or hearing Dalriada Gaelic:

a bhitb, bitb! na bitb!
bitbidb, cha bhitb, am bitb? nach bitb? a bhitheas

¹⁵ Brown, 1908

¹⁶ Campbell, 1798

¹⁷ MacColl, 1937

¹⁸ Brown, 1908

¹⁹ Holmer (unpublished raw data)

²⁰ Ó Dochartaigh, 1997

²¹ Campbell & Thomson 1963, xviii

²² Ó Dochartaigh, 1997 (various examples)

²³ Ó Dochartaigh, 1997 (various examples)

*bhithinn, bhitheamb*²⁴

This provides an entirely unconfusing and instantly recognisable root of *bith* for learners, rather than the needless use of *bi* even in answer forms which are stressed such as *cha bhith*. A further quick note would be that *bhitheamaid*²⁵ was also unknown as part of common usage in the dialect area.

There is also a marked prevalence of the sound /ε/ when normally written as *a* or *ai*²⁶. I had to find a way to get around this and decided that the easiest way was to make use of the now mostly redundant *á*. This was a simple way to denote the sound without having to change the integrity of the Gaelic word, thereby retaining familiarity with other dialects. Examples of this would be *às* written *ás*, *thàinig* being written *thàinig*, *màthair* as *máthair* and indeed *Gàidhlig* being written *Gáidhlig*.

The discovery of this latter pronunciation has caused some consternation. After years of telling non Gaelic speakers that the language was /ga:lik/ and not /ge:lik/ it was now found that despite the fact that most of the study area maintained the pronunciation /gɛ:lik/²⁷ the dreaded ‘Gaylick’ pronunciation of Lowlanders was, about Lochfyneside, not only natural, but historically correct²⁸. The cat went mercilessly among the pigeons, as only the truth has the ability to do so well. It was now not at all wrong to refer to the oldest continuously spoken Scottish language in English as the spelling of the word itself suggests, the Gaelic of the Gaels.

The adoption of *á* is not the only use of the acute accent to be found in this volume. The letters *é* and *ó* have also been re-introduced as a matter of course, given that their removal from Scottish Gaelic orthography²⁹ was one of the strangest decisions yet and often regarded as a notoriously needless one amongst speakers. These accents were and continue to be incredibly useful and have therefore been re-employed. Words like *tóiseachd*, which would be written elsewhere as *toiseach* can now be pronounced and appreciated for their Dalriada sound by readers from any dialect background, once again utilising the fantastically versatile orthography at our disposal to its fullest and avoiding the assumption of placenames and unfamiliar words as containing /ε/ or /ɔ/ sounds, when this was not in truth the case.

Dalriada Gaelic also contains a strong instance of a hard ‘s’, where this –were spelling to dictate sound– should really be soft. Although this is a phonetic point rather than an orthographic one, words such as *sìos*, *seac* and *seasamb* / *seasachd* were often pronounced with a hard ‘s’ sound at the beginning³⁰ rather than a ‘sh’, an occasionally tough pill to swallow for some of those immured in the conventions of Mid-Minich.

Days of the week in Dalriada are pronounced for the most part as they are anywhere bar one, *Di-Daoim*. This is normally found as *Diar-Daoin* in the north and nowadays written as one word, but this lumping together of the two parts of each day of the week has proven notoriously confusing for learners. They will make up entirely the future speakership of this dialect and therefore there should ideally be a minimum of unnecessary teething problems for them given the initial challenge of reading Scottish Gaelic at all when coming from a background of English language literacy. I will therefore be writing the days of the week as two hyphenated parts, as they appeared of old, making emphasis on the second part natural and much more easily understood from the written word.

Other orthographic improvements with a more general slant include the use of *ia/eu* interchangeably to allow phonetic spelling. There are many retained “long Es” in the study area, but few of those which are broken elsewhere in the Highlands are likewise written accordingly using *ia*. I believe that they should be and there is no reason whatsoever why this system cannot be applied right across the board. Dalriada Gaelic, you will find the word for ‘one hundred’ for example, written *ciad*, as well as the words *a’ chiad* and also *ciadna*. This means that there need be no confusion as to how a word is pronounced not having heard

²⁴ to be, be! don’t be! shall be, shall not be, shall be? shall not be? that will be, I would be, would be

²⁵ we would be

²⁶ Ó Dochartaigh, 1997 (various examples)

²⁷ GLS_347a Harriet Crawford, Stuckreoch 1954 (with Fred MacAuley)

²⁸ SA1971_286 Archie MacVicar, Loch Gair 1971 (with Eric Cregeen)

²⁹ Gaelic Orthographic Conventions 2009, 12

³⁰ GLS_947 John MacVicar, Loch Gair 1973 (with David Clement)

it, as these vowel combinations are written exactly as they are spoken. *Briagh* for *brèagha* would be another good example of a broken E, as well as the use of *os ceann* and *bho cheann*, reflecting also the unbroken broad vowel sound therein. I have tentatively called this a “variable vowel cluster” for now.

Another example of an orthographic improvement would be the introduction of the letter ‘e’ in the word for ‘did’ or ‘made’, *reinn*. I have never heard this word spoken /rin’/ or /ri:n/ and therefore the spelling *rinn* is an erroneous one for which there is no reason whatsoever not to suggest an alternative. The spelling *reinn* has never been used for any other word and does not exist in Dwelly’s dictionary³¹ and can therefore be appropriated without issue, rhyming naturally with *seinn*. It is especially relevant for the dialect area in that the pronunciation here is /rö:in’/ with a very noticeable long vowel sound³², although perhaps not quite a diphthong as such. In parts of Kintyre, the word is pronounced /röin’/³³ and so the spelling would be most appropriate for there also.

A further improvement would be the use of the words *tu* and *u* for the third person informal. The demise of *thu* as pronounced /hu/ and the pronunciation of the initial sound of every single other word beginning with *thu* as /hu/ (*thubhairt*, *thug*, *thuiò*) means that there is no sensible reason whatsoever for its retention. The oft-heard /dʒe məɾ ə ha hu/ from beginners in Scottish Gaelic could be eradicated for good and their lives made that much easier when picking up what is one of the first pieces of Gaelic with which they will come into contact. The dropping of the *th* has no conceivable negative consequence. I will therefore use this spelling throughout the corpus of the gradually collecting Dalriada material, apart from when the full form *tu* is required in its normally occurring instances.

In this volume I will also be applying the use of *a* for the unstressed vowel sound. Although words such as *àluinn* and *maduinn* were reformed and spelt *alainn* and *madainn*³⁴, just as the likes of *agum* also had an *a* applied, the word *agas* was left as *agus*³⁵, a strange and seemingly sentimentally-driven decision which makes no sense when all other Scottish Gaelic words with the exception of nomenclature (which is more a matter of personal stylistic choice) were reformed. Therefore, in Dalriada Gaelic you shall find only *agas*, in keeping with the decision to represent the unstressed vowel with *a* and the abbreviated form ‘*as*’.

As can be seen this is not an academic paper and my citation has been somewhat loose. It is up to those who wish to investigate my sources further to do so. I am more than willing to accept errors where there are such and amend them accordingly. In fact, I welcome any assistance with anything to do with the project as it cannot exist in a vacuum. The opportunity for the Scottish language of my homeland to receive proper attention for the first time in its history is a marvellous one indeed and I only hope that I can do her the justice she deserves.

However, I certainly won’t manage that without new speakers. I therefore bring this short essay to a close with an appeal to anyone who would like to indulge in a new challenge, as part of a culturally valuable project, to get involved. I can be contacted at the email address below.

Slàn leibh air an àm!

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³¹ Dwelly 1994

³² GLS_0992 John MacVicar, Loch Gair 1974 (with David Clement)

³³ Holmer 1981, 103

³⁴ Gaelic Orthographic Conventions 2009, 11

³⁵ *ibid*

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