

THE GAELIC RENAISSANCE AND SCOTLAND'S IDENTITIES

Sharon Macdonald

As the Scottish parliament is negotiated into existence, one of the issues for debate concerns the languages that will 'officially' be spoken there (McLeod 1998). In particular, as Margaret Ewing (SNP MP for Moray) put it in a debate in early 1998: 'Dé ma tha daoine ag iarraidh bruidhinn ann a'Ghàidhlig?' - 'What if people want to speak in Gaelic?'. Will Gaelic be one of the official languages of the parliament? And will it be given recognition as an official language in Scotland?

As I write, the jury is still out: a consultative steering party is considering the issues involved. However, it looks highly likely that Gaelic will achieve a new official status. Certainly, there has been a remarkable increase in the visibility of Gaelic in public life over the last decade, and the last five years in particular; and 'official status' would seem like a continuation of the general trend.¹ In 1993, for example, the number of hours of Gaelic on television expanded from 100 hours per annum to 300; much of this was broadcast throughout Scotland rather than restricted to the Highlands, and some Gaelic moved from its late night usually documentary slot to a prime-time presence which has included the redoubtable soap opera 'Machair' as well as a number of award-winning dramas, new children's programmes, documentaries and the Gaelic language series with the significant, if

*Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, S10 2TN
s.j.macdonald@sheffield.ac.uk, 0114 222 6444*

¹ *The government's recent (June 1998) signing up to the European Charter on Minority Languages is a sign of willingness to grant some kind of 'official status' to minority languages, including Gaelic, though, as McLeod notes, the Charter is fairly limited in scope and there would be no need for extended provision for Gaelic to satisfy it (McLeod 1998, p.112).*

Scottish Affairs

ambiguous, title: 'Speaking Our Language'.² The number of Gaelic learners throughout Scotland seems to have increased dramatically. In a 1994 report, the Gaelic language organisation Comunn na Gaidhlig reported that 15,000 people in Scotland were 'interested in learning Gaelic' (Comunn na Gaidhlig 1994, p.9) whereas their 1995 survey claimed that one million 'would like to [learn Gaelic]' and, perhaps a little more substantively, that 8,000 adults were 'actively' doing so (Comunn na Gaidhlig 1996, p.9). The opportunities for children to learn Gaelic have also blossomed rather spectacularly. In 1986 there were thirty-two Gaelic playgroups in Scotland operating under the auspices of the Gaelic playgroups association, Comhairle nan Sgoiltean Araich, whereas ten years later there were over 150. Similarly, in 1985 there were only two Gaelic-medium primary school units; but a decade later there were fifty. An important feature of all of these developments is that they are not just in the Highlands but are located as far afield as Edinburgh, where there has recently been controversy over the decision to cap the intake at the primary Gaelic unit at seventy-five. To take another example, the average audience for the Gaelic soap 'Machair' has been 451,000 - a number which, as Cormack notes, is 'massive compared with the 65,000 Gaelic speakers in the country' (Cormack 1994, p.125) (though we should note that 'Machair' is sub-titled in English); and 'Speaking Our Language' had audiences averaging over 300,000 viewers (Rogerson and Gloyer 1995, p.50). There are also plenty of examples of what we might, following Michael Billig in **Banal Nationalism**, call everyday acts of 'flagging' (1995). For example, even as far South as the Border one can now find motorway service stations with menus and welcome signs in Gaelic as well as English; and even McDonalds has, at its Fort William outlet, conceded to bilingual signage and menus (though they refused that their name should also be Gaelicised).³ And at their Scottish conferences, all political parties now have slogans visibly displayed in Gaelic as well as English.

Clearly, something is going on. That something has, since the late 1980s - though borrowing on an earlier usage in relation to Gaelic poetry - been

² See Cormack (1994) for an overview and discussion of the expansion of Gaelic media.

³ See Ross (1998) for a report. Of course, although taken as a sign par excellence of Americanisation and global cultural homogenisation, McDonalds has, at fairly superficial levels, often adapted itself to local markets (Ritzer 1993) and their use of Gaelic might be equally seen as their marketing success (especially in relation to tourists) as a triumph of local councillors who have also pressed for the use of Gaelic in the region.

The Gaelic Renaissance and Scotland's Identities

referred to as 'the Gaelic renaissance'. The name implies a 'rebirth' - the second coming Gaelic, the flourishing of Gaelic arts and cultural life. As the examples I have given indicate, one of the particularly notable features of this renaissance is the fact that it is not confined to the Highlands but that its spread is, if unevenly, throughout Scotland; and, as I shall discuss further, that it is being seen as a *Scottish* matter. In the words of the language learning series, Gaelic is being depicted as 'Our Language' - Scotland's language.

CONTRA-INDICATIONS

There are, however, some indications to the contrary, the most glaring of which is the fact that, at the last Census, the number of Gaelic speakers - those self-reporting as 'able to speak Gaelic' - had fallen to an all time low of 66,000. This was just 1.37% of Scotland's population, and a continuation of the decline from the 80,000 speakers - 1.7% of the Scottish population - at the 1981 Census, and the much greater decline that has been recorded at each Census since they began just over a century ago (231,694 in the 1881 Census, nearly 7% of the Scottish population).⁴ One might expect nevertheless that the developments would be particularly welcomed in the Gaelic-speaking areas. Paradoxically, however, some of the greatest decline within what is known as the Fìor Ghaidhealtachd - the strongly Gaelic-speaking areas - has occurred alongside the introduction of Gaelic promotion policies such as Gaelic playgroups and primary education; and there are sometimes surprising indications that Gaelic developments are not always welcomed as strongly there as they might be. A small 'write-in' survey about views on Gaelic promotion policies reported in the **Stornoway Gazette** in January 1998, for example, found that all of those from the mainland who chose to write in were in favour of pro-Gaelic developments. Many islanders, however, were not, with nearly half of respondents stating that they were 'strongly against' Gaelic-medium education. Of these, the majority were in the 40-60 year age-group; and, surprisingly, many were themselves Gaelic radio-listeners and viewers of Gaelic television. The following was one, not

⁴ *The results are not strictly comparable as the questions have changed, though it is probably a fairly reasonable approximation and distortion would be more likely to underestimate earlier numbers, leading, therefore, to a greater temporal discrepancy. For further discussion of Census figures see Rogerson and Gloyer (1995) in relation to the alleged 'Gaelic Renaissance' and MacKinnon (1995-6) for a discussion of the 1991 Census.*

Scottish Affairs

untypical, example: 'Stop wasting my money on Gaelic rubbish. I am a Gaelic speaker/reader etc. [Gaelic-medium education] is a piece of utter nonsense. The Gaelic Mafia has had its day'.⁵

Periodically voiced in the media, of course, are also those who argue that too much attention and money are being paid to Gaelic. For example, the proposals that Gaelic may be one of the official languages of the Scottish parliament has occasioned some angry responses about 'imposing Gaelic on non-Gaelic speakers' (**Scotsman** 1998; McLeod 1998). It is also argued that more attention and money should be paid to Scots; and that Scots surely has equal claim to be 'Our Language'. Indeed, in a **Scotsman** article which reported Scottish Office minister Brian Wilson's comments about 'interesting things happening on the issue of status', another commentator (Dr Christopher Whyte from Glasgow University) is also quoted saying that it would be good to see the Scots language also given official status and equally recognised alongside Gaelic; and the debate about the language of the new Scottish parliament also contained mention of recognition for Scots (MacilleDhuibh 1998; McLeod 1998).

Also, at the same time as Gaelic is cast as *Scotland's* language, there are some - perhaps less significant - signs of attempts to redefine Highlanders or crofters as a distinct group, or people, within Scotland. Attempts in 1996 for crofters to be recognised as 'an indigenous people' under international law; and meetings in 1997 between representatives of the Highland Council and Scottish Crofters Union and those of the Assembly of First Nations, are probably the most notable examples of this. Recognition under what is known as Convention 169 - the Convention concerning indigenous and tribal peoples in conventional countries - includes language as a criterion for identifying an 'indigenous people' and includes 'cultural rights', including the right to education in the native language, as one of its numerous provisions. As yet, this development is much less prominent than the definition of Gaelic as *Scottish*, though it indicates nevertheless an interesting alternative identity trajectory along which increased Gaelic activism in Scotland could also develop. It is, moreover, one which draws on another already existing

⁵ *Although this survey was not very large or, by sociological standards, particularly well-designed, it is worthy of note, not least for the strength of views that it produced. For those who know the area, the results were also not entirely surprising, which may be one of the reasons that the editor did not receive letters back condemning the survey as he had expected (pers. comm.). For my own analysis and anthropological commentary on the results see **Stornoway Gazette** 26 February 1998.*

The Gaelic Renaissance and Scotland's Identities

language-identity link: Gaelic as the language of the
Gael/Highlanders/crofters - *not* 'the Scots'.

WHAT IS GOING ON? ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

So what is going on? Why is Gaelic undergoing such a renaissance? What identity or identities is it articulating? Is the increased visibility of Gaelic in public life throughout Scotland mainly about marketing Scotland - 'branding' Scotland (McCrone, Kiely and Morris 1995)? Or does it represent something more? And how do native speakers of Gaelic feel about these developments?

My discussion of these questions is based on research that I have been doing on and off on the subject of the Gaelic Renaissance for more than ten years now - a period in which the Renaissance has really taken off. As a social anthropologist I have carried out ethnographic fieldwork mainly in the Hebrides, particularly in Skye. There my focus has been on local responses to the Renaissance, especially during the mid 1980s when many of the developments were in their early days and when there was a good deal of ambivalence about them. Coupled with historical research and a sense of the relativity of many ways of seeing the world that I draw from my anthropological training, my fieldwork has also led me to think about what it means to 'have an identity' and to 'have a culture', and to where language might fit in (Macdonald 1997). As I argue below, these are not as inevitable and fixed as they are often assumed to be.

The shape of the rest of this article is as follows. First I give a schematic background to notions of identity and language, suggesting that the association between the two - often assumed, especially in nationalist and activist discourse, to be inextricable - has quite a specific history and, more importantly perhaps, is not always widely shared 'on the ground'. I shall illustrate this through Gaelic examples, paying some attention to both Gaelic activist literature, and to certain notable developments in the Gaelic revival. I will then return to the recent pan-Scotland developments to make some suggestions about what is going on before turning more specifically to the Highlands and to what some of my research there might suggest about how recent developments are being received.

LANGUAGE AS IDENTITY REPOSITORY

Language is often regarded, especially in nationalist literature, as the key repository of a people's identity. As anthropological and historical research

Scottish Affairs

has shown, however, this view is far from ubiquitous; and indeed even the notion of languages as necessarily discrete with separate underlying grammars and clear-cut speech communities is itself a relatively 'modern' viewpoint (Billig 1995). The latter is particularly associated with the growth of philological linguistics; and the articulation of the view of language as a people's 'collective treasure'(Herder, Barnard 1969) was made particularly influentially by the German Romantics, especially Herder (see Edwards 1985). These views, themselves thoroughly embedded in the social transformations of late eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, became part of the means through which nation-states were imagined into being in this period (Anderson 1983). Out of what were generally rather motley multilingual situations, and often rather untidy and pragmatic decisions, national languages emerged (Anderson 1983); and language itself came to be seen not simply as a matter of communicative pragmatics rooted in everyday practice but instead was reconfigured into conceptions of linguistic specificity and elevated to a symbolic matter of belonging. Languages became proclamations of national identity and repositories of all that was distinctive about a people. Of course, this was the official position; and, of course, it was contradicted by much that went on 'on the ground', not least the fact that there were those within the nation-states who did not speak the 'national language'.

But what of 'identity', especially national - or national-statist - identity? How was this conceptualised in the emergent interlinked romantic nationalist and modernist schemata? One dominant conception which emerged is of nationhood and personhood coming to be thought of as the same kinds of things. We see this, for example, in Herder where he frequently personifies the nation and draws explicit analogies between individuals and nations. But of course ideas of personal identity are far from universal (Carrithers, Collins and Lukes 1985), and the notion which Herder articulates and which was developed in all kinds of other areas, and shaped also through other sources - e.g. Calvinism - was a vision of persons as distinct individuals with their own inner depths and personal histories. This has been superlatively traced and argued by Charles Taylor in **Sources of the Self** (1989). Especially important, Taylor points out, was an idea which he calls 'expressive individuation'. As he emphasises, this was not simply 'individualism' but was like a kind of demand or 'calling' for individuals to express their distinctiveness. It entailed 'that each one of us has an original path which we ought to tread; and [it laid] the obligation on each of us to live up to our originality' (1989, pp.375-6). It became an imperative that individual distinctiveness be made manifest. This was equally applied to nations as to

The Gaelic Renaissance and Scotland's Identities

persons; and in the case of nation-states articulated well with the eighteenth and nineteenth century attempts to 'materialise' identities - to cast them in various literal and literary forms.⁶

Identity, then, was to be expressed and culture was the medium in which this was done. 'Having a culture' - to use Richard Handler's phrase (1988) - became synonymous with 'having an identity'; with language integral to both. These new national-statist identities were, as Benedict Anderson (1983) has pointed out, cultural rather than social; 'communities' were to be imagined beyond those of experienced social relationships. Shared culture, and especially shared language, were particularly important here; language being not only a symbolic marker of 'sharedness' but also a technology through which a shared culture could be effected. Anderson talks about this especially in terms of print capitalism and the new structures of 'simultaneity' in literature.

In the case of Scotland, of course, all of this is deeply problematic; for not only is Scotland a 'stateless nation' (McCrone 1992) within a larger entity making a bid to be not just a state but a nation-state; but it also contains what had by then come to be seen as two culturally and linguistically distinct 'peoples' - or, to use the term as it had been used even back in the fourteenth century when the distinction was first clearly pointed out in writing, between two nations. In other words, a demarcation was made between the Gaelic-speaking Highlanders (who until the sixteenth century were referred to as Scots) and the English-speaking 'Teutons' (who came to be referred to as 'Scots' in the sixteenth century, with Gaels by then generally being referred to as 'Erse' or 'Irish').⁷

What ensued, then, not only in Scotland, but for the whole of the 'United Kingdom' and indeed in varying degrees for other European nation-states, were fairly fragile political-sentimental entities which contained within themselves other groups who could - to borrow from Anderson again -

⁶ *Another domain in which we can see this kind of 'materialisation' of the nation at work is in museums. Many public, and especially national, museums opened in the nineteenth century, providing spaces in which the new nation-statist public culture could be performed, legitimated and inscribed into physical space (Macdonald 1998).*

⁷ *Of course, then, as now, the distinction 'on the ground' between the alleged 'peoples' - or 'nations' as they were often termed - would not have been so clear cut. What we are dealing with here are classificatory attempts which do symbolic violence to the more complex reality. Nevertheless, they can also feed into, and at least partially reshape, that reality.*

Scottish Affairs

'pirate' this new identity-model; i.e. who could, reasoning back from the new status of cultural and linguistic distinctiveness, identify themselves as 'nations' and make claims for the political-cultural status that seemed to flow from this. And this is just what happened - identity piracy galore on the turbulent high seas of European ethnicity, though not with any real momentum until the mid-twentieth century.

In Scotland, however, there was constantly a deep ambivalence around its political-sentimental identity - an ambivalence between the enlightenment current of modernity in which 'improvement' or 'making it', as Tom Nairn calls it (1977), seemed always to come in English; and the romantic current of modernity in which what I have called an 'ontology of Being'⁸ - the imperative to 'remain true to oneself' - was often, though not always, articulated in terms of Highland culture. It is partly for this reason that from the second half of the eighteenth century there was a good deal of enlisting of Gaelic/Highland cultural symbols as markers of Scottishness: tartan, kilts, the bag-pipes, whisky, thistles, stags, mountains; with James MacPherson, George IV, Sir Walter Scott and Queen Victoria among others all making their contributions. As Michael Lynch has noted (1992), however, it was only once the Highlands had ceased to be a real threat to the Lowlands that Highland symbols were appropriated as Scottish; and we might suggest that it was only symbols which had little real continuing political or social presence that were so redeployed. The Gaelic language, especially in song and poetry, may have been the fashionable subject at some of the new Highland societies, but in the Highlands themselves the 'improvement' ontology reigned supreme, English language education proceeded apace, and there were virtually no attempts to promote and preserve Gaelic as a living language. Real concerted effort to maintain Gaelic in the Highlands had to wait until the late twentieth century - until the Gaelic renaissance period that is the focus of this article. Extrapolating from the previous historical pattern, an uncomfortable question is raised about the current revival of Gaelic. Is the current appropriation and promotion of Gaelic so much more attractive now because the actual number of Gaelic speakers, and any kind of associated distinctive cultural values, make Gaelic culture of little real continuing social and political consequence in Scotland?

⁸ *I borrow here partly from Kapferer (1988). The phrase also has a Heideggerian flavour, though this also entails various other dimensions which I do not intend to suggest here.*

NATIONALIST HISTORIES/ 1960S->

Having said that late eighteenth and nineteenth century romantic nationalism introduced a model of language as a key marker of 'having an identity', I now want to back-track a little and say that in fact this was probably not a view that was widely held among the majority of the population not only prior to this period but also for long afterwards, and that this is probably the position among many people today. It is this that is misunderstood by many nationalist histories, especially histories of language. These tend anachronistically to project back assumptions of a tight link between language and identity. Equally, many language policies also work from the premise that languages are the central, or even the only, repositories of a people's cultural identity.

In the case of Scottish Gaelic, it is in the second half of the twentieth century that such accounts of the Gaelic language really begin to emerge, one of the most influential of which was Kenneth MacKinnon's **The Lion's Tongue**, published in 1974 (the title being modelled on a similar book about Welsh, **The Dragon's Tongue** - Morgan 1966). In fact, MacKinnon's account is more subtle than some of the other books and pamphlets that have been derived from it or which slightly predate it. However, the general narrative of such texts is one in which Gaelic decline is a matter of English language speakers cruelly suppressing, and 'beating out', the Gaelic language; and 'identity' - already conceptualised as something to be individuated and expressed - also becomes increasingly psychologized and medicalized. Now, there certainly are examples of cruelty to Gaelic-speakers and there certainly were concerted attempts to introduce English to the Highlands. What is often lacking from the policies or from the responses of native Gaelic-speakers, however, is a sense that this was a serious affront to their 'identity' or that it could have 'pathological' consequences. There is an attempt to linguistically recruit them to 'civilisation' and citizenship but this is couched in terms of 'improvement' and 'usefulness'. Often it seems to have been assumed that a bilingual situation would ensue; and in practice this was frequently what happened. As various studies have pointed out, Gaelic-speakers themselves frequently demanded English-language education (e.g. Durkacz 1983). This may, of course, as some have suggested, have been because they were alienated or their real identities were repressed; but equally it may have been because they operated pragmatically and seized the opportunities of English; and because they did not necessarily see English and Gaelic as mutually exclusive. Indeed, it might be suggested that what really needs explaining about the history of Gaelic in Scotland is not so much why Gaelic declined -

Scottish Affairs

the tack taken by pretty much all those writing about it - but why it lived on as long as it has. (Thomas Pennant in the 1770s gave it only another 10 years.)

Another feature of the pro-Gaelic literature that emerges in the second half of the twentieth century is that Gaelic comes much more persistently to be cast as the language of Scotland. This development can be rather neatly, if a little superficially, charted by reference to pamphlets produced by the Gaelic organisation Comunn na Gaidhealach - an organisation which was set up in 1891 to organise a Gaelic festival along the lines of the Welsh Eisteddfod - the National Mòd - but which since 1965 had, with its first state funding, been given a much broader Gaelic promotion remit. The first leaflet produced by the society, in 1966, is called 'Who are the Highlanders?'. While it notes that the name 'Scots' is derived from 'the Gaels who colonised Argyll long ago' and therefore Highlanders 'could well claim to be the most Scottish of the Scots', there is no suggestion that Gaelic should, therefore, be recognised as the language of Scotland. The pamphlet does emphasise that 'language identifies people'; but in the case of Gaelic this means: 'Gaelic identifies the Gael'. (There is some concern expressed in the leaflet about those who would think about themselves as Highlanders but who do not speak Gaelic. Of these, the leaflet observes 'Residents in the Highland Counties whose parents or remoter ancestors were Gaelic speakers are Gaels by residence and by representation'.)

In 1969, however, a new leaflet is published entitled 'Gaelic is....'. Here the case for Gaelic as the distinctive language of Scotland is made unequivocally. It is worth looking at this text directly because it brings together a whole set of issues clearly pressing in towards this recentring of Gaelic as Scottish:

Gaelic is important because it identifies Scotland, just as English identifies England, French France and so on. The value of this is beginning to be realised by Scots people as more and more appreciate the need to retain identity. As it is, all that is colourful and distinctive in Scotland has been derived from the Highlanders, tartans, kilt, bagpipes and much music and a tradition of soldiers unequalled in Europe.

Without the Gaelic influence we do not have a national culture which can take its place with others in the European community or strong enough to resist the onslaught of English or American institutions.

The Gaelic Renaissance and Scotland's Identities

In Gaelic, Scotland has a real language, its oldest institution and what is perhaps the largest body of folk song in Western Europe, and according to the Declaration of Human Rights and the recommendation of the Conference on the Multi Society held at Ljubiana this ought to be promoted and encouraged

What we see here, then, is an unequivocal statement of language as the key identifier of national identity, and of the importance of its distinctiveness. English is regarded as not capable of doing the necessary identity business because it is the language of England - from which Scotland is being distinguished - and, more broadly, of the homogenising forces of American and English cultural imperialism. Only Gaelic, the pamphlet implies, can do the job of expressively individuating Scotland - it is only in Gaelic that 'Scotland has a *real* language' (my emphasis).

The references to Europe and the European community in the pamphlet are also worth noting. This was, of course, a period in which there was considerable debate about the merits and consequences of joining the European Economic Community (which the UK did in 1973); and just as we hear in current debates about monetary union, fears were often expressed about the possibility that national identities might become diluted. A 'strong' 'national culture' was regarded as important for resisting that 'dilution', and a distinctive language was the ideal cultural bulwark. At the same time, however, there was also a recognition that joining the EEC might allow Scotland a new degree of political autonomy, but that this too would be more effectively pursued with a manifestation of cultural distinctiveness - i.e. state rights would more readily follow national identity. The references in the pamphlet to the Declaration on Human Rights and the Conference on Multi Society are also acknowledgements of the relevance of broader transnational developments; and they are part of a theme that has been continued, for example in the possible definition of crofters as 'an indigenous people' or references to the European charter on minority language, of harnessing specific identity and culture claims to *international* legal and political developments.⁹

⁹ *It is a move that I have elsewhere referred to as 'extending semantic reach' (1997a).*

Gaelic as Scottish

But why, then, did Gaelic come increasingly to be cast as Scottish? In part there seems to have been a pragmatic impetus from those involved directly in Gaelic maintenance and promotion that this would be the only way of ensuring enough Gaelic speakers - MacKinnon (1974), for example, is explicit about this. In part it is because of much broader ethno-nationalist developments which took off especially after the 1950s within the established nation-states of Western Europe. These ethnonationalist movements pirated the core cultural configurations on which nation-states had defined themselves; and claimed that, as they too had distinctive cultures, histories and languages, they too should have, if not full-blown separation, then at least increased political and cultural autonomy. There has been too much debate for me to go into here about quite why this happened when it did in so many countries - and about its variations and exceptions. Suffice it to say that economic, political and social dissatisfaction with the established nation-states, increased tolerance for minorities in reaction against the experience of Nazism in W.W.II, a growing critique of imperialism and modernity, new educational and employment patterns, the psy-complexing of identity, and a kind of cultural plagiarism of what was going on elsewhere were part of the repertoire from which groups variously drew.

In Scotland, the adoption of Gaelic as Scottish has been relatively low-key and quite late in getting going, compared, say, to Welsh, Breton, Basque or Corsican, though the 1960s saw Scottish nationalism becoming considerably stronger - looking for the first time like it might actually cause some political disruption - and the SNP making a few attempts to recognise Gaelic, e.g. passing a conference resolution to form a Gaelic Secretariat in 1968. The relative luke-warmness towards Gaelic no doubt lay at least partly in the fact that many within Scotland felt that Scottishness should not be located in Gaelic, a language spoken by such a small minority of the population; and for some involved in Scottish nationalism and indeed other political parties, there was an association of 'the Gaelic route' with what Nairn has called 'tartan kitsch'. Gaelic was seen as a fairly unimportant symbol, analogous to tartans, kilts and thistles; and perhaps as a rather backward-looking one. Real Scottishness should lie elsewhere. Nevertheless, luke-warm though the appropriation of Gaelic may have been, and though it may have been contested by other definitions of Scottishness, the 1960s clearly mark a new phase which might be regarded as the beginnings of what has become the present Gaelic renaissance: the attempt to define Gaelic as the language of

The Gaelic Renaissance and Scotland's Identities

Scotland and to do something about it, and the interlinking of Gaelic and Scottish nationalism.

At this point, however, there was still rather little Gaelic promotion throughout Scotland and indeed little practical activity in the Highlands themselves. It was not until 1975 that bilingual medium primary education - i.e. teaching using both English and Gaelic - was first officially 'tried out' in the Western Isles. Of course, there were sometimes individual teachers who carried out some teaching in Gaelic; and Gaelic was often taught as a subject; but using Gaelic as a medium to teach other subjects was considered 'new' and 'radical' - even though there was at this point no purely Gaelic-medium and in practice Gaelic was often restricted to quite a small and specific part of the curriculum - perhaps nature studies, going out interviewing 'the old folks' (as children I talked with in the research put it) and sometimes religious education. Gaelic radio began in 1976, and the first Gaelic folk festival in 1981, and the Gaelic playgroups association was established in 1982. Then, in the mid-to-late 1980s, there was a flurry of policies and educational programmes, including the opening of the first Gaelic-medium primary units, new Gaelic arts associations; and then, into the 1990s, there was the expansion of Gaelic broadcasting and the possibility in some schools to have Gaelic-medium education in selected subjects at secondary level.

So what is going on in terms of the identities being articulated? As I have suggested, one clear feature is a movement towards defining Gaelic as Scottish and this is reflected in the movement of Gaelic developments outwith the Highlands and Islands. This may be coupled with a greater readiness to conceptualise nations as consisting of more than one singular identity; and even, perhaps, by a weakening sense of identities as being rooted in 'real' social relations and life histories.¹⁰

But why has Gaelic been positioned as Scottish? One reason may have been the increased desire to symbolically mark the distinctiveness between Scotland and England - something for which the Gaelic language was a ready-made potential symbol given that the arguments had already been made that Gaelic was a superlative expression of Scottish distinctiveness and history (as we saw in the Gaelic pamphlet). This desire gathered momentum in the 1980s and into the 1990s with the greater political dissonance between

¹⁰ As argued, particularly, by Anthony Giddens (e.g. 1990). *Identities*, he suggests, are becoming increasingly 'disembedded'. For commentary and critique of this, see, for example, Lash and Urry (1994).

Scottish Affairs

Scotland and England, with it looking like England might continue to foist a Tory government upon Scotland (see Harvie 1994, McCrone 1991).

Another aspect of the appropriation of Gaelic was that, partly through European sources, there was support and some funding for language-linked cultural developments, though much was provided directly by the UK government. More generally, the European emphasis on a 'Europe of the Peoples' or a 'Europe of the Regions' also held promise for the growing demand for greater Scottish autonomy (Harvie 1994a); and although this did not necessarily have to be associated with the Gaelic language movement, Gaelic was again a respectable marker of distinctiveness, and a country which paid proper attention to its own minorities was likely to achieve greater respect in the European arena. The latter may also, of course, have been one of the reasons why - in some ways surprisingly - the Conservative government did as much as it did to support Gaelic developments; or perhaps, as might be suggested, more cynically, supporting Gaelic was seen as fairly politically innocuous but good PR.

CONTESTED IDENTITIES AMONG 'GAELS'

But what of native-Gaelic speakers? What are the consequences of the Gaelic language gaining this increased visibility and being seen as 'the language of Scotland'? What we might expect straightforwardly is that this is quite simply good news for Gaelic-speakers and gives them the recognition and at least some of the cultural provision that they have so long wanted. For some, I think that this is the case. For others, however, the matter is not quite so straightforward. Here, I want to dip briefly into a few cases from my fieldwork (reported more fully in Macdonald 1997). In focusing on those who are not fully wholehearted about Gaelic promotion my aim is not to say that they somehow are more properly representative of real authentic Highlanders than those who are - authenticity claims and dismissals have too long dogged the Highlands and have set up all kinds of unnecessary problematics. What it does, however, is to highlight some of the complexity of identity and language issues in practice, and helps to further relativise the dominant models.

Example One

I call him Seumas. In the mid 1980s he is about forty years old. He is a 'native Gaelic speaker', one of those who went to school 'with nothing but the Gaelic'. Living and crofting in Skye, many of his daily conversations are in Gaelic - with his parents and siblings (he is unmarried), in the post-office,

The Gaelic Renaissance and Scotland's Identities

shop, gathering after church and in the bar; and he regularly listens to the Gaelic radio. Seumas is somebody who has had ample opportunity to 'switch' to English but he has not done so, though he can speak it well enough and does so whenever he needs to and often watches English language television and can read and write more fluently in English than he can in Gaelic. He was brought up at a time when there were no pro-Gaelic policies in the locality, when there was no Gaelic television or radio, when English was the medium of school teaching; when Gaelic was not fashionable 'away' (as he, like many islanders, refers to the mainland); when Gaelic-speakers on the mainland were derogatorily referred to as 'teuchgars'; and when even in Skye's capital, Portree, Gaelic was referred to as 'an canan an sitig' - the language of the midden. Seumas, like virtually all islanders, especially the men, has also spent a good deal of time working 'away', often in exclusively English-language contexts, in his case in the merchant navy and on the oil rigs. But Gaelic is the language he generally speaks.

He is, however, deeply suspicious of many of the pro-Gaelic developments. He tells me:

Now it's becoming the in-thing to have the Gaelic - it's becoming posh. And now, you see, there's people like yourself learning it and coming here. And there's others from the universities and, well, people like Iain Noble in Sleat - they go all in for the Gaelic. But you see, they're extremists don't you think? It's all right for them. But for me, well, Gaelic hasn't held me back but it hasn't helped me any, and I wouldn't have got far with nothing but the Gaelic.

[He goes on to talk negatively about a Gaelic learner couple in Edinburgh who according to the radio had brought their child up with nothing but Gaelic.]

I speak the Gaelic here with my parents and when I go up to the [Hotel bar]. I speak it not because I have to but because it is what we speak. I like the Gaelic. But if it's going to become something artificial, then, well, I won't feel like speaking it at all. I don't want Gaelic to be kept alive by making it artificial. ... For myself, I'd prefer it if it died.

This is a very disconcerting statement; but Seumas was certainly not alone in articulating such sentiments. Indeed, very few local Gaelic speakers in the mid-1980s in Skye were in favour of things like the use of Gaelic in courts of law or even of Gaelic-medium (as opposed to bilingual medium) education. I found that even some of those who were locally active in Gaelic

Scottish Affairs

developments seemed to hold surprisingly unpoliticised views. So why did such people speak Gaelic and even in some cases do things like trying to get Gaelic playgroups going? An important dimension of any full answer to this question is the fact that for such Gaelic speakers Gaelic was located in everyday social relationships and spaces. It was a matter of everyday communicative practice and of local codes of conduct, among which was the importance of, as it was locally expressed, 'not being pushy' or 'posh' - qualities which were widely associated with 'away'. What Seumas feared was happening, then, was that Gaelic was being relocated within social relations of pushiness: it was becoming - as he put it - 'middle class'. His statement that if this was the way that things were going then he would not speak it any more was not, then, a denial of his own identity - as it would be seen within the romantic language-identity model - but on the contrary was an affirmation of his identity as a local person; as somebody from 'here' rather than 'away'. His conception of identity - of who he was - was a social one, situated in everyday social relations; and language was part of this, not something in itself.

Example Two

Maggie in the mid 1980s was in her mid twenties. Maggie had one Gaelic-speaking and one English-speaking parent; she could passively understand the language and claimed that she spoke it 'well enough' though many others, especially older people, said that she couldn't speak it; and in practice she rarely did so; her generation - especially the women - mostly used English in their daily interactions. Maggie, however, says that she is 'all in favour of the Gaelic'. She also sees herself, as at that time seemed a majority of her peers, as something of a Scottish nationalist; and she is much more in favour of pro-Gaelic developments than are many of those in older generations who use the language more than she does; and generally she seems to have a more politicised view of the language, talking, for example, about the 'right' to speak Gaelic in Scotland. She does not, however, feel that this means that she has to speak the language on a day-to-day basis. As she tells me:

Gaelic's our language right enough and we ought to be trying to keep it up. But I don't think that there's many today would be calling you an outsider just because you didn't have the Gaelic. A while back, yes, you'd be lost here without it. But now, well, it's just to know that it's there. You don't have to be speaking it every minute of the day.

For Maggie, I suggest, Gaelic has ceased to be primarily embedded in local social relations and has become more of an 'in itself' matter. It has become

The Gaelic Renaissance and Scotland's Identities

objectified as part of a conspicuous model of 'culture' and 'identity' which can be drawn on - or donned like a folk costume perhaps - in those circumstances in which one is called upon to express identity. Culture and identity have become 'objects' in their own right which can be disembedded from immediate social relations.

CONCLUSIONS

The objectification of culture and identity and their separation from everyday social relations could be argued to be at odds with the romantic nationalist conception of identity set out by Herder and others, as well as by those trying to bring about a Gaelic renaissance. Both have supposed the integration of community, identity and language; with, for example, bilingual education policies sometimes seeking to promote an association between Gaelic and the local environment. However, at the same time the romantic-nationalist conception and its more recent politicisation, especially in ethnonationalist movements, has also demarcated 'culture' and 'identity' as specific phenomena in themselves; and this has made possible their separation from the social and everyday as Maggie expresses.

More broadly, we could see this as another example of the alleged disembedding and reflexive construction of identity that is said to be rife in late modernity (Giddens 1990). Maggie can select a Gaelic identity when she feels like - and so too can anybody with a will to learn a little Gaelic. However, as the example of Seumas illustrates, this can have repercussions for those who construct their identities in other ways. For them, it can feel like a kind of dispossession.

There are age differences here. I am not surprised that **The Stornoway Gazette** finds the over-forties most against the pro-Gaelic developments. Nor is the fact that it is this group which is most strongly Gaelic-speaking (and Gaelic-radio listening) quite as paradoxical as it first appears. These are the ones who, like Seumas, experience Gaelic as part of everyday social relations, who think that it should emanate from and be located within families, communities and local cultural codes, that it should be 'natural' and not a matter of what they regard as 'gimmicks'. This is the group that is most likely to feel that Gaelic is being transformed into something which is foreign to them. And we might also note in this regard, that for this generation - many of whom have lived experience of being teased as 'teuchtars' while away - the Gaelic term *Goill*, which is the alter of *Gaidheal*

Scottish Affairs

(Gael), means foreigners from wherever - but especially from the Scottish Lowlands (see MacInnes 1989).

This is not so much the case for Maggie's generation, for whom self-definitions as Scottish are more comfortable, and Gaelic can nestle with ease inside an identity as 'Scottish'. 'English-folk' - even if they are in fact Scottish Lowlanders - are more likely to be the moral opposite she invokes. But Maggie's way of relating to Gaelic - which for her can quite reasonably be 'Scottish' - is not one that necessitates linguistic fluency. So, the appropriation of Gaelic as Scottish works well for Maggie. But that doesn't necessarily mean that she feels that she needs to use it. What are the consequences of this? Will Gaelic become just another marker of fictive distinctiveness, floating alongside all those other unanchored signifiers? These are questions that go to the heart of the current renaissance of Gaelic and debates over such matters as the use of Gaelic in the Scottish Parliament. Is Gaelic simply being used rather like a company logo - as a marker of product differentiation and a sign of being a 'national' player in global politics?

Perhaps. But we should remember that not all signs and symbols are equally mobile or equally consequential. Language, it seems to me, is not necessarily like all the other signs and symbols in which we are said to traffic in our globalised late-capitalist world. It is, as we have already noted, also an encoding technology, encrypting distinctive cultural repertoires, shaping our way of seeing the world and being a crucial agent of social relations and future possibilities. Language is not quite so easy to put on as a costume - particularly if it is put on well enough for its wearer to go to the party that is interaction with others similarly garbed. And nor is language quite so easy to take off, in that once it has been lived in, its wearer's vision of the world is likely to be, if only subtly, reshaped.

Clearly, the future of Gaelic is uncertain: on the one hand, the current number of speakers is at an all-time low; on the other, it has a visibility (and audibility) in Scottish cultural life that is in many respects new. This is, undoubtedly, rather an important - and fragile - juncture. Of course, the Maggies are only one group within the overall picture; and the Seumas do not account for all of the rest. There are others, not least the Gaelic activists and the learners and 'Machair' viewers throughout Scotland. They are undoubtedly using the language in new ways and within identity projects that may be rather different from those of either Maggie or Seumas. That these ways are new does not mean that they are, therefore, inauthentic or illegitimate. Rather than try to adjudicate between identity claims we should

The Gaelic Renaissance and Scotland's Identities

instead, I think, be seeking to highlight the viability of alternatives and to find ways in which some people's identity options do not end up silencing, or dispossessing, those of others. In part, this entails a recognition that there are different ways of identifying - that 'identity' itself can be variously conceived.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank an audience at the Sociology Department, Edinburgh University; and two anonymous referees for helpful comments on this paper.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, B. 1983 **Imagined Communities**, London: Verso
- Barnard, F.M. 1969 **Herder on Social and Political Culture**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Billig, M. 1995 **Banal Nationalism**, London: Sage
- Comunn na Gàidhlig 1994 **Gàidhlig 2000**, Inverness: Comunn na Gàidhlig
- Comunn na Gàidhlig 1996 **Fàilte**, Inverness: Comunn na Gàidhlig
- Cormack, M. 1994 'Programming for Cultural Defence: the expansion of Gaelic television', **Scottish Affairs**, no.6
- Durkacz, V. 1983 **The Decline of the Celtic Languages**, Edinburgh: John Donald
- Edwards, J. 1985 **Language, Society and Identity**, Oxford: Blackwell
- Giddens, A. 1990 **The Consequences of Modernity**, Oxford: Polity
- Handler, R. 1988 **Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec**, Madison: Wisconsin University Press
- Harvie, C. 1994 **Scotland and Nationalism** (2nd. ed.), London: Routledge
- Harvie, C. 1994a **The Rise of Regional Europe**, London: Routledge
- Kapferer, B. 1988 **Legends of People, Myths of State**, Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution
- Lash, S. and J.Urry 1994 **Economies of Signs and Space**, London: Sage
- Lynch, M. 1992 **Scotland**, London: Pimlico
- McCrone, D. 1991 'Politics and society in modern Scotland', in G.Day and G.Rees (eds) **Regions, Nations and European Integration**, Cardiff: University of Wales Press
- McCrone, D. 1992 **Understanding Scotland**, London: Routledge

Scottish Affairs

- McCrone, D. R. Kiely and A. Morris 1995 **Scotland - the Brand**, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press
- Macdonald, S. 1997 **Reimagining Culture: Histories, Identities and the Gaelic Renaissance**, Oxford: Berg
- Macdonald, S. 1997a 'A people's story? Heritage, identity and authenticity', in C. Rojek and J. Urry (eds) **Touring Cultures**, London: Routledge
- Macdonald, S. 1998 'Exhibitions of power, powers of exhibition', in S. Macdonald (ed.) **The Politics of Display**, London: Routledge
- MacilleDhuibh, R. 1998 'Gàidhlig an Taigh an Ròid', **The Scotsman** 4.2.1998
- MacInnes, J. 1989 'The Gaelic perception of the Lowlands', in W. Gillies (ed.) **Gaelic and Scotland**, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press
- MacKinnon, K. 1974 **The Lion's Tongue**, Inverness: Club Leabhar
- MacKinnon, K. 1995-6 'Gaelic and 'the other languages of Scotland' in the 1991 population census', **Scottish Language**, no. 14-15, pp. 14-15, 104-17
- McLeod, W. 1997 'Official status for Gaelic: prospects and problems', **Scottish Affairs**, no. 21, pp. 95-118
- McLeod, W. 1998 'Scotland's languages in Scotland's Parliament', **Scottish Affairs**, no. 24, pp.
- Morgan, G. 1966 **The Dragon's Tongue**, Narbeth: H.G. Hunter
- Nairn, T. 1977 **The Break-Up of Britain**, London: Verso
- Ritzer, G. 1993 **The McDonaldization of Society**, Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge
- Rogerson, R. and A. Gloyer 1995 'Gaelic cultural revival or language decline?', **Scottish Geographical Magazine**, vol. 111, no. 1, pp. 46-53
- Ross, J. 1998 'New row over bilingual burgers', **The Scotsman** 4.2.1998
- Taylor, C. 1989 **Sources of the Self**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

July 1998