

REVIEW: POLITICS OF THE GAELIC LANGUAGE

James Kellas

Vincent McKee (1997), **Gaelic Nations. Politics of the Gaelic language in Scotland & Northern Ireland in the 20th Century**, London: The Bluestack Press, ISBN 1 902147 00 6, pb, £10, pp. ix+127.

Travellers in Glasgow Queen Street Station are surprised to see the notice *Fàilte gu Sràid na Banrighinn* - Welcome to Queen Street. Is this a bilingual city, like Brussels? No, it is not, for Gaelic speakers are a tiny minority in all parts of Scotland outside the Western Isles and Skye, and Glasgow is English-speaking and Glasgow-Scots-speaking. Yet someone decided to have bilingual signs in some of Glasgow's railway stations (Partick - *Partaig* - is another example), and this was done only very recently. Who and why?

There is no doubt that the status of Gaelic in Scotland is now higher than it was, and if it is not yet an official language this may come with devolution (see McLeod 1997). Already, Gaelic has advanced in education, broadcasting, and local government, notably in the Western Isles and Highland. This is despite a history of hostility to Gaelic in official circles since at least the 17th century. The reversal in attitudes needs to be explained, but McKee's book goes only part of the way to doing that, and is especially vague in its treatment of the Scottish case. Why did the Establishment in Scotland, and the Conservative Government after 1987 in particular, seek to promote Gaelic, with considerable public expenditure on Gaelic broadcasting and schooling, at a time when public expenditure was being cut back generally. What political advantage was there in that?

Northern Ireland is different. There, language divides the Unionists and Nationalists/Republicans, with English seen as a mark of Britishness and Gaelic an attribute of Irishness. The Gaelic language was associated with Irish nationalism and was more or less proscribed by the Northern Irish Establishment (there is still hostility, as when the Northern Ireland Fair

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Employment Agency in August 1997 branded Irish notices at Queen's University, Belfast, as sectarian (p.107)). But with power-sharing the aim of the London, Dublin and Belfast Establishments, it is a short step to recognising the claims of the two cultures, British and Irish. These cultures include the English and Irish languages, respectively, although Irish Gaelic is spoken by only a tiny minority of those calling themselves Irish in the North. The new Northern Irish Assembly entrenches power-sharing between the political parties representing their 'communities', and it will be interesting to see how the Gaelic language fares as a result. At its first meeting on 14 September 1998, however, some Sinn Féin speakers spoke in Gaelic, but had to translate into English themselves, as no translation facilities were provided. This was the first contentious issue in the Assembly.

McKee is aware that the two cases of Scotland and Northern Ireland are very different politically, and that the position of the Gaelic language in each differs accordingly. In Scotland, Gaelic was not directly associated with nationalism (although more could have been said about the part played by Donald Stewart, the SNP MP for the Western Isles from 1970 to 1987, whose name is typically misspelt as 'Steward' in the Dedication on p.iii. (It is regrettable that the whole book is full of spelling errors and idiosyncratic type-setting and has no index.)

The title **Gaelic Nations** conceals more than it reveals. Neither Scotland nor Northern Ireland are Gaelic nations. In the former, the Gaelic speakers amount to under 1.5% of the total population, although there are strong native-speaking communities in the north-west. In Northern Ireland, there is no native-speaking Gaelic community, and the communal identity is much more based on religion than language. In fact there appears to be hostility between the Roman Catholic Church and the Gaelic lobby on the question of schools. The RC Church wishes to preserve its monopoly of education in its community, while the Gaelic lobby is setting up Gaelic-medium schools outside the Church's control. This conflict could have been explored further, since the relationship between nation, community and language is crucial to explaining the prospects for Gaelic in both countries.

While Northern Ireland is divided by religion and nationalism, with language almost incidental as an issue, Scotland is actually more divided about language as such, although the politicians seek consensus. Gaelic is supported by all the parties, and the SNP has been unable or unwilling to make it a cause to campaign on. This is partly because the number of voters speaking Gaelic is so small, but also because there is a latent hostility to Gaelic among non-Gaelic speakers. This surfaces with Gaelic broadcasting and Gaelic schooling, both of which take resources from the non-Gaelic-speaking

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population. The privileged position of Gaelic is resented by the Scots language lobby, which points to the fact that Scots is spoken by over 1 million people, and is as much a language as Gaelic. But Scots has no 'status' with the Establishment, despite pressure from the Scots Language Resource Centre, Perth, to give Scots and Gaelic equal rights in the Scottish Parliament (see **Scotland Forum** no. 3, March 1998, p.12).

Vincent McKee is from County Down in Northern Ireland but moved to England in 1977, and has remained there ever since. He is a lecturer and Senior Politics Tutor with the National Extension College, Cambridge. The research for his book has included interviews in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and he provides statistical appendices on Gaelic learners worldwide (!), Gaelic medium education units and Gaelic pre-school groups in Scotland, and Irish medium nursery education and primary education in Northern Ireland. In both Scotland and Northern Ireland there is evidence of an increased take-up of Gaelic instruction, the reasons for which are not very clear. Is this a political or a cultural development, or both? What attracts people to a language whose economic position is so tenuous? Are the circumstances in the Gaelic native-speaking parts of Scotland comparable with those of the urban Gaelic-learning areas?

McKee writes as a 'political scientist', but there is very little political science here, apart from basic political contrasts. References to Catalans and other language groups in Europe need to be as firmly placed in their contexts as Gaelic in Northern Ireland and Scotland in theirs. Explanations for political decisions should similarly be based on the politics of the countries concerned. McKee does go some way to explaining the contrasting positions of Irish Gaelic and Scottish Gaelic, and he provides an interesting narrative, backed by interviews and statistics. But there is a lack of rigorous analysis both at the communal level and at the political level. The book reads more as a tract for Gaelic than a work of political science. What are the forces for and against Gaelic today, and how will devolution in both countries alter these? It looks as if Gaelic will survive and perhaps grow, but is there not a limit to such languages, set by economic and wider political forces? The European Union, for example, is an ambiguous source of support. On the one hand, money is given to the European Bureau for Lesser Spoken Languages, but 'significantly...the United Kingdom abstained in the final vote [in 1982], as surprisingly, did the Irish representative' (p.103). These significances and surprises need to be explained by a political scientist.

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REFERENCES

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