

ALISTAIR LIVINGSTON

Distortion of history- Scottish Gaelic as a mythical rather than historic language of Scotland

The proposal that the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act should cover the whole of Scotland (not just those areas where Scottish Gaelic remains a central part of local heritage and culture) is based on the assumption that Scottish Gaelic was once spoken across the whole of Scotland. So that even in regions where there is no recent Scottish Gaelic language tradition or culture, Scottish Gaelic remains as a forgotten strand of culture and history.

However, by emphasising Scottish Gaelic as the underlying historic language of Scotland, there is a danger that a broader and deeper understanding of Scottish history will be 'officially' lost. This is especially true for southern Scotland.

The earliest recoverable language layer in southern Scotland is not Gaelic but a language related to modern Welsh. And variously described as Brittonic, Cumbric or Old Welsh. This language was spoken from at least 500 BC into the 12th and 13th centuries. It can be traced through place name evidence and gave rise to its own literature in the 6th century - of which the epic poem *y Gododdin* is the earliest example.

From the 7th century onwards, Old English speakers from the Anglian kingdom of Bernicia (later Northumbria) extended their influence north along the east coast to the Firth of Forth and west along the Solway Firth, reaching Whithorn in Wigtownshire by AD 700 and gaining territory in Ayrshire around AD 750 and the lower Firth of Clyde. An Old English poem 'The Dream of the Rood', carved in runes on the Ruthwell cross in Dumfriesshire has been claimed as the earliest example of Scots literature and may be as early as AD 600.

In south-east Scotland, Old English evolved into Old Scots. There is no evidence that this evolution was interrupted by a Scottish Gaelic phase. Although the situation is more complex in south-west Scotland/ Dumfries, Galloway and south Ayrshire, Old English settlements may have persisted, facilitating a similar language evolution.

In Galloway there is place name evidence for Gaelic. However, this was not Scottish Gaelic. It was a form of Gaelic which now survives as Manx Gaelic, which exists only as a revived language. This form of Gaelic was introduced by the Hiberno-Norse Gall-Gaels (foreign Gaels) in the 10th / 11th centuries. It did not reach Galloway from Gaelic speaking Scotland.

Significantly, the Gall-Gael arrived as a ruling elite, replacing the Northumbrians as ruling elite in the lower-lying more fertile areas. The shift from Old Welsh to Galloway Gaelic has not been studied. It is likely that a detailed study of Galloway's Gaelic place names would show a 'Gaelicisation' of Old Welsh originals.

Finally, any suggestion that the existence of Gaelic in Galloway supports the claim that Gaelic was once the national language of Scotland runs counter to the historical fact that up until the death of Alan of Galloway in 1234, it was an independent kingdom. After the death of Alan, the 'Community of Galloway' chose Thomas, the illegitimate son of Alan, as their ruler 'to preserve the kingdom' rather than see it divided between Alan's three legitimate daughters (or rather their husbands). Scots king Alexander II responded by invading Galloway and defeating an alliance of Manx, Irish and Galwegian forces. The fact that there was Manx and Irish support for Thomas of Galloway against a Scottish invasion reinforces the links suggested between the 'Gall-Gael of Galloway and their Manx and Irish Gaelic speaking neighbours. If Alexander II can still be considered a Scottish Gaelic king, then Scottish Gaelic influence in Galloway was external and enforced as late as 1235.

Even 100 years later, Galloway supported the claim of Edward Balliol (son of king John Balliol) to the Scottish throne out of loyalty to the Balliols as inheritors of the kingdom or lordship of Galloway. After Edward Balliol's death in 1365, Archibald 'the Grim' Douglas became lord of Galloway. He built a castle at Threave on the river Dee to practically and symbolically demonstrate that Galloway was now a province of Scotland. Threave is a Brittonic place name, from *y Tref*, meaning 'the settlement' and can be traced back to at least the Roman era. Dee is also a Brittonic word, meaning 'river goddess'.

The Gaelic of Galloway is assumed to have survived along the Galloway/Ayrshire border into the 17th century. If this is so, this survival conflicts with the widely held belief that support for the Jacobite cause was strongest in Gaelic speaking regions. The south-west was the heartland of resistance by the Covenanters to the Stuarts. Support for the Reformation can be traced back as early as the 1530s, when Alexander Gordon of Airds of Parton (an Old English placename) in the north of Galloway had access to an illegal English translation of the New Testament. At secret meetings, there were readings from this text - which would not have been possible if local people were still Gaelic speakers.

Conclusion.

That if, even in Galloway which is considered to have been a Scottish Gaelic speaking area, the historical claim that Scottish Gaelic was once the native tongue is untrue, then the broader claim that Scottish Gaelic was spoken across the whole of Scotland is revealed as a myth. Indeed, this claim requires a deliberate distortion of Scottish history to exclude the prior and continued existence of Old Welsh and Old English in the south of Scotland.

That many people across southern Scotland wish to learn and speak Scottish Gaelic in the belief that it is the 'authentic' language of their ancestors can only be used to justify support for Scottish Gaelic at the expense of historical fact. Should the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Bill become an Act of the Scottish Parliament, myth will be legitimised at the expense of history.