

Review: *North American Gaels: Speech, Story, and Song in the Diaspora* (Sumner and Doyle)



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Scandinavian intruders. Reading Asser with an eye on older Welsh texts, especially *HB*, allows Thomas to argue that Asser deliberately repurposed topoi previously used to castigate the English; in effect, the anti-English rhetoric of *HB* was turned against the Vikings. Equally new, and perhaps revolutionary, was Asser's conception of Wales as a country – *Britannia* – next to the English country of *Saxonia*. Asser turned away from distant British origins and embraced the geographical reality of his own present; yet paradoxically, the Britain-centred viewpoint remained, but attached now to Alfred's kingdom of English and Welsh *Christiani*.

In conclusion, it might be felt that the problems of Welshness and Britishness were not solved by any of the authors whom Thomas discusses in this book. Indeed, one could argue that they remain to trouble Welsh commentators down to the present day. *HB* looks backwards towards a British past but does not offer much in the way of a vision of the future. *Armes Prydein* attempts to turn *HB*'s rhetoric into just such a vision, but the clash with the real political geography of the poet's own world is severe – and his vision failed. The same is not true of Asser, for views that are recognizably descendants of his position are still observable and widespread in Wales today. Yet his hope for a multi-national community in which Welsh rulers could find an honourable place under English overlordship was not destined to be realized in the long term either. Rebecca Thomas's book is an excellent discussion of all these ninth-century visions of Wales-in-Britain, and reading it has reminded me that they remain relevant even today.

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North American Gaels: Speech, Story, and Song in the Diaspora. Edited by Natasha Sumner and Aidan Doyle. McGill-Queen's University Press: Montreal & Kingston, London and Chicago, 2020. 511 pp. \$55. ISBN 9780228003793.

About an hour's drive from where I sit is a community first established in North America in the eighteenth century and in which the language of the old country continues to be transmitted from generation to generation. The speech of the Amish, however, is probably the only variety of German likely to persist in the American diaspora. This endogamous religious community deliberately isolates itself from the wider society in order to preserve its cultural identity. All other European languages in the Americas, however, other than those of the original colonial powers, are disappearing through the integration of their speakers into the wider national societies. Scottish Gaelic is a good example. It has had a continuous presence in Nova Scotia for as long as the Amish in the US, but intergenerational transmission has now largely ceased, though its significance to local heritage and identity remains.

North American Gaels is a collection of scholarly papers on the diasporic linguistic communities that spoke Scottish Gaelic and Irish. It is dedicated to

the memory of Kenneth E. Nilsen (1947–2012) whose voluminous research on Celtic languages in North America inspired much subsequent work, including this volume. The editors are to be congratulated for their lucid introduction which does more than just introduce the essays: it also gives an overview of the history of both diaspora groups in North America, establishes the state of research and points to future exploration. The book highlights the differences between the two diasporic groups as well as the similarities. As the editors point out, ‘in terms of national and ethnic identity, Irish and Scottish Gaels diverged considerably after the turn of the seventeenth century and into the present day’ (6). Natasha Sumner’s tribute to Nielsen chronicles his pioneering work on Irish and Scottish Gaelic speakers in North America through extensive interviews, folklore collection and finding manuscripts. He was also a major teacher and promotor of Scottish Gaelic in Nova Scotia from his position as first chair in Gaelic Studies at St Francis Xavier University. The remainder of the book is divided into two sections, devoted to ‘Irish Gaels’, with eight chapters, and ‘Scottish Gaels’, with seven, as well as a concluding list of Nilsen’s publications.

The book’s editors note the neglect by historians of the Gaels in North America. The neglect is all the more surprising considering that Scottish Gaelic was the third most widely spoken language in Canada at Confederation in 1867, while Irish at the same time was among the most important immigrant languages in the US (since the Irish were first in number of the foreign-born population at the time, Irish speakers were possibly second in number only to German speakers among immigrants). While there has been a large increase in publication on the North American Gaels since the 1970s, the subject still receives little interest outside of the specialist fields of Irish, Scottish and Celtic Studies – even within the fields of Irish and Scottish studies few scholars know the Gaelic languages.

Scottish Gaels in the Maritimes established cohesive, culturally rich and deeply rooted rural communities, maintained their language over many generations and left a considerable documentary record in Gaelic. There is less evidence of intergenerational transmission of Irish, the persistence of which was mostly due to continued immigration. In the US Irish speakers, like Irish immigrants in general, settled by and large in urban areas. In Canada, though there was significant Irish rural settlement in Newfoundland and New Brunswick and some evidence of intergenerational transmission of Irish, the language left few traces. Literacy in Irish among immigrants was very rare. Scottish Gaels, on the other hand, benefited from the attitude of the Protestant churches to use of the vernacular and, before emigrating, were familiar with a print culture in their own language, a situation almost nonexistent for Irish speakers until the period of the Revival. Probably most Irish speakers who came to North America had already internalized a sense of the Irish language’s superfluosity to an Irish Catholic identity forged in adversity, were aware of and acquiesced in the on-going language shift and had no real sense of difference of identity between themselves and English-speaking Irish Catholics (which is not to say that all Irish-speaking immigrants were

Catholic). Scottish Gaels seem to have maintained their distinctiveness within overarching identities, their Britishness accommodating their Scottishness, which accommodated in turn a Gaelic and Highland (and island) identity distinct from that of the Lowlands.

There are abundant Scottish Gaelic written records in North America. Presbyterian religious works in the language appeared in print in the US in the late eighteenth century and became much commoner in the nineteenth century, especially in the Maritimes, with Catholic works also appearing. Secular literature appeared in print from the 1830s, mostly in bilingual periodicals, and included the Gaelic-language weekly *Mac-Talla*, published in Cape Breton from 1892 to 1904. Nearly 200 Gaelic Nova Scotian poets have been identified, born on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, 'who composed on themes including emigration and longing for home, criticism and praise for the landscape, and aspects of community life' (16).

One such poet was John MacLean (1787–1848), the subject of Robert Dunbar's essay. MacLean was a native of Tiree and emigrated to Nova Scotia in 1819. He collected songs before emigrating, transcribed works of his own composed in Scotland and in Nova Scotia – as well as those of others – in two manuscripts that he brought with him, and he published them in two books. His songs appeared in print in his lifetime and, most influentially, in a later edition by his grandson, and they have been recorded from oral tradition on both sides of the Atlantic.

Michael Linkletter makes another interesting contribution to the study of Gaelic print culture in Canada. Alexander 'The Ridge' MacDonald (1823–1904), a poet knowledgeable about his native Cape Breton Gaelic traditions, in 1898 submitted a song composed by his father to *Mac-Talla*. The editor published it with some changes, at which MacDonald protested, whereby the editor re-published it, but with a sardonic comment added. MacDonald's response was a satire – unpublished – in twelve stanzas, attacking *Mac-Talla*, not least for the editor's constant reminder to its subscribers to pay (since Gaelic publishing was financially precarious). Ironically, a song by MacDonald mildly satirizing *Mac-Talla* for not publishing submitted songs already appeared in its pages in 1893, along with a song in its praise by the same writer once the omission was rectified.

Canadian Gaelic-speaking Presbyterians moved to the Boston area from the first half of the nineteenth century, among them members of a Presbyterian sect from Prince Edward Island known as the 'MacDonaldites', followers of the charismatic Perthshire-born Rev. Donald MacDonald (1783–1867) who established his ministry on the island in 1827. Rev. Murdoch Lamont (1865–1927), an islander, was an important chronicler of the life of MacDonald, a composer of Gaelic hymns and a collector and publisher of Gaelic songs. His collection, printed privately in Massachusetts in 1917, gives 'one of the most complete records afforded of vernacular verse composed in Scottish Gaelic during the nineteenth century in Prince Edward Island' (348) according to Tiber Falzett who tells the story. 'Murchadh Cam' (1822–1902), a cousin and namesake from an earlier generation who emigrated from Skye to Prince Edward

Island in 1840, was a frequent contributor to *Mac-Talla* and probably inspired the Rev. Murdoch to write letters to the journal after the latter's death, which elicited responses from a wider area and 'allowed for the retrieval of local Prince Edward Island poetic output through the collective memory maintained by Scottish Gaels in the North American diaspora' (355).

Like Rev. Lamont, Alexander Fraser (1860–1936) held a strong loyalty to the British Empire. A Highlander, he worked for many years as a journalist in Toronto, notably for *The Toronto Mail*, and became the first provincial archivist for Ontario in 1903. He edited Scottish Canadian periodicals, collected oral traditions, and taught Gaelic at Knox College (a theological school) and at McMaster University. Michael Newton in his essay finds that Fraser's English-language writings 'often resort to clichés about Scottish traits and virtues, and reinforce contemporary forms of racialism' while his Gaelic texts 'affirm the value of the Gaelic language and tradition and the central role played by both in transmitting and embodying identity' (373). He authored four works in Gaelic in which 'language loyalty is a pervasive theme' (376), in one of which he promoted Canada in preference to the Scottish Lowlands as a destination for Gaelic migrants. Another gave biographical accounts of key Canadian Gaels and richly detailed descriptions of a *céilidh* in Canada and sabbath traditions in the Highlands.

The story of Irish writing in North America is more fragmented. In the mid-eighteenth century Donncha Rua Mac Conmara (1715?–1810) is believed to have lived in Newfoundland, which is referred to in three of his poems. Pádraig Ó Liatháin's essay makes the case convincingly that the Clare-born poet did live there and was well informed on life on the island. Pádraig Phiarais Cúndún (1777–1857), who settled with his family in Utica in upstate New York in 1826, composed poetry and wrote letters in Irish to friends and neighbours at home in his native Ballymacoda, Co. Cork. Tony Ó Floinn's essay on Cúndún is an interesting exploration of his 'publics', with more evidence for those in Ireland and less for those in the US, but brings the evidence together in a convincing way.

Cúndún, of course, is *sui generis* with his extensive American writings from the pre-Famine period, but his uniqueness is probably because evidence for other such individuals did not survive. Irish-language manuscripts are known to have circulated in North America. Two by Connacht immigrants who, unlike Mac Conmara and Cúndún were not familiar with the Gaelic literary tradition, were written in an improvised spelling based on English. The orthography of these two manuscripts, a previously published 'farcical tale of high jinks among migrant laborers in mid-nineteenth-century Connemara' (93) probably written by Patrick Lyden early in the twentieth century and an unpublished diary by the Famine immigrant William Gormley, is the subject of Nancy Stenson's study.

Very little in Irish appeared in print in North America until the late nineteenth century. Matthew Knight gives an account of the promotion of the language in the US by dedicated societies. After 1873, when the Philo-Celtic Society was founded in Boston, a number of societies appeared with the aim

of maintaining and promoting Irish, and several newspapers published Irish-language columns. The *Irish Echo* was established in 1886 as the organ of the Boston society, pledging to ‘assist in the vindication of the character of the Irish race from the foul slanders of centuries by English writers – that their ancestors were barbarians, their language a jargon, and their literature unworthy of notice’ (168). It was slow to publish in Irish, though it eventually acquired a Gaelic font. There was acerbic debate when it printed Irish texts in Roman type. Eventually it was to publish Irish-language poetry, prose, proverbs and Irish lessons. Knight looks at this material and provides an index to the first lines of the some one hundred and twenty Irish-language poems and songs that appeared in its pages between 1887 and 1894.

The most significant periodical was *An Gaodhal*, founded in 1881 as the journal of the Brooklyn Philo-Celtic Society. Prose in the journal included stories from manuscripts brought to America, material copied from other publications, original contributions, and folklore, the subject of Tomás Ó hÍde’s essay. Folklore – ‘Fenian tales, folk stories, local legends, fables, songs, proverbs, toasts, prayers, and riddles’ (139) – was contributed by individuals both in Ireland and America, though provenance was not always indicated. A tale about the eighteenth-century Munster poet Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin, collected from an informant in Portlaw, Co. Waterford, by a pseudonymous contributor who may have been the scholar and language activist Fr Richard Henebry (1863–1916), is included by Ó hÍde in a normalized form (with some grammatical changes) along with a translation.

Ciara Ryan’s chapter is devoted to Seán ‘Irish’ Ó Súilleabháin (1882–1957), a Corkman from Beara who immigrated to Butte, Montana and militated for his native language, for Irish independence and for the cause of labour, a burning question in that mining town. Ó Súilleabháin was active in the local branch of the Gaelic League. He left a large and important collection of books and manuscripts, the latter including his transcriptions of traditional Irish songs from memory and from printed sources, Irish-language poetry by American-based poets and his own compositions, political and personal. The collection is now housed in the Butte-Silver Bow Archives. Ryan argues for ‘the importance of further investigation of Gaelic manuscript repositories in North America’ (243).

Irish-language novels from the 1920s and 1930s set in Canada are the subject of Pádraig Ó Siadhail’s essay. They include works by well-known figures such as the teacher and lexicographer Seán Óg Ó Caomhánaigh (‘Seán an Chóta’, 1885–1947) and the historian and genealogist Éamonn Mac Giolla Iasachta (Edward MacLysaght, 1887–1986). Ó Siadhail also considers Irish translations of works set in Canada, from Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild* (1903, translated by Niall Ó Domhnaill as *Scairt an Dúthchais*, 1932) to Louis Hémon’s *Maria Chapdelaine* (1914, Risteárd Ó Foghludha’s translation from the French with the same title, 1933). In the Irish novels he finds racist references to characters of indigenous and other non-European heritage, noting that ‘[t]his negative portrayal of the Métis conforms to the portrayal of characters of mixed European and Native descent as *homo criminalis* in American popular literature of the time – and, indeed, in Irish-language

texts from the early twentieth century' (260). Contrasting the Irish-language novels with Irish Canadian novels in English, he finds that in them the main characters return to Ireland, which he explains by the influence of the negative attitude to emigration in contemporary nationalist ideology.

Little folklore was recorded in Irish in North America compared to Scottish Gaelic. Three of the Scottish contributions are devoted to the topic. Kathleen Reddy's essay, on Gaelic animal apocryphal tales, focuses more on Scottish than on Canadian examples. She gives an interesting discussion on Catholic versus Presbyterian attitudes to such traditions showing that the assumed hostility of Presbyterians to folklore is not necessarily true, and she also comments on the mostly Catholic Gaelic community of Cape Breton. Lorrie MacKinnon's essay is about the relationship between the Barra teacher, storyteller and singer Annie Johnston (c. 1889–1963), whose love for and knowledge of her native Gaelic tradition was great, and Nova Scotia. She met Gaelic visitors from Nova Scotia in Scotland, maintained a correspondence in Gaelic with several of them and contributed to *Mosgladh*, the Scottish Catholic Society's journal published (mostly in English) in Cape Breton. Her visit to Nova Scotia and Boston was facilitated by relatives in the US and brought her into contact with scholars, singers and storytellers from whom she recorded traditional material with a borrowed tape recorder. Catrìona NicIomhair Parsons' contribution is a selection of folklore items Nielsen collected from Danny Cameron of Antigonish, Nova Scotia, and published in the *Casket* between 1987 and 1996. From this period, the *Casket* Gaelic columns have provided, in Nielsen's words, 'the most extensive collection of mainland Nova Scotia Gaelic in print' (459). The items are translated by the author with folklore notes added by Gregory Darwin. The pieces included family history, a fairy narrative, tall tales, an account of a meeting with a mermaid and a children's rhyme.

William Mahon's piece is a fascinating essay on the use of phonographic recordings on wax cylinders for instruction in Irish. Edison's first phonograph, from 1877, was gradually perfected and found new applications, one of which was, from 1899, language learning, and there were three such phonograph correspondence courses for Irish offered to the public in 1909 and 1910 at a period when wax cylinders were being superseded by recordings on disk. The essay identifies the courses and those who developed them and discusses the materials and recordings used in them.

A fitting tribute to Ken Nielsen, this book is a landmark that will encourage further research on a long-neglected subject. *North American Gaels* is an outstanding collection of essays that provides a superb introduction to the story of Gaelic culture in North America and is highly recommended.

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