

# BACK TO THE FUTURE: GAELIC IN NOVA SCOTIA

*The valiant and progressing effort to preserve an ancient language*

BY MARJORIE SIMMINS

*(Editor's note: Fewer than 60,000 Scottish people, (1.1 per cent of the population) mostly inhabiting the Outer Hebrides islands, claim to be able to speak Gaelic. The numbers have been in steady decline for generations—but revival efforts seem to be paying off. The number of proficient Gaelic speakers younger than 20 years has remained level. Outside Scotland, "Canadian Gaelic" was once spoken all across Canada, and has been spoken in mainly Cape Breton Island since the 18th century. Stalwart efforts to maintain it have resulted in a situation where Scotland is looking to recruit Canadians to help teach the ancient language in the old country.)*

Left: Margaret 'Peggy Bheag' MacDonald, Shay MacMullin's great-great grandmother, was born in Scotland and came to Canada in 1842. She settled in Upper Grand Mira in Southeastern Cape Breton and married John 'Iain Beag' MacMullin. Below: The campus of The Gaelic College of Cape Breton.



SHEGHEAG MULLIN/MACOL FAMILY PHOTOS



Shay MacMullin and her students outside in nature, conversing in Gaelic.

On a cool and cloudy day in Port Hood, Nova Scotia, the atmosphere inside the mobile home on Shore Road is warm, and filled with riotous laughter. Someone stirs a fragrant pot of chili on the stove, intended for the evening meal. Someone else replaces the lid on a roasting pan, filled with fat, looping coils of spicy white Scottish sausage slated for the following day's supper, and returns it to the refrigerator.

Nine adults return to the living room, seat themselves on couches and chairs, and begin folding laundry. They are giving one in their midst, a young man, a hard time. The language in which they are doing this is incomprehensible to many Nova Scotians, but not, apparently, to the fellow taking the ribbing. He's laughing, too.

Shay MacMullin, the instructor for the gathering, tosses a hand towel here, and a dish cloth there, keeping everyone's hands busy, and the energy bright. Fold this, stack that, check this—and all the time Gaelic, the language of the Gauls of France, the Galatians of Asia Minor, the Gaels of Scotland and Ireland, all Celts, pours forth, brook-words tumbling fast over shining stones.

"In my experience, it's really important to laugh and have

fun," says the high-energy MacMullin. "It keeps the brain and heart open to learning, and it also cements memories around certain phrases."

MacMullin, a community educator, is renting the mobile home for the duration of the immersion class, which is three weeks, from 2 to 7:30pm each day. She and the students share tea and meals, visit out in the community, and talk about—well, everything under the sun.

Between 1770 and 1850, tens of thousands of Gaels came from the Highlands and islands of Scotland to Canada. And Gaelic, the third literary language of Europe, after Greek and Latin, came with them. By the time of Confederation, Gaelic was the third most-common Canadian language.

Sadly, by 2011, the Canadian census reported only 7,195 speakers of "Gaelic languages," which includes Gaelic, as well as Irish, Welsh, and Breton. Also in 2011, the UK census reported 57,375 Gaelic speakers.

To Shannon Colleen MacMullin, nicknamed "Shay" since junior high, Gaelic is far more than a statistic; it is a passion, and the vibrant centre of her intellectual life. As a self-employed itinerant educator, and a fluent Gaelic speaker since her 30s, she joyfully fights against the low numbers of Gaelic speakers, one student at a time.

"I can't even describe my feelings of connection to the language," says MacMullin, 42, who was born and raised in Sydney, and now lives in Head of Chezzetcook, on the Eastern Shore. "It always seemed it should have been my first language—and as though my birthright was denied."

Growing up, MacMullin's father understood the Gaelic around him, but didn't speak it. "The children of Gaelic speakers, in their 60s and 70s now, they had bad impressions about Gaelic," says MacMullin. "There was a lot of shame and embarrassment, because Gaelic was somehow considered backwoods, lower-class. My grandfather always said his generation had the language beaten right out of them."

It is easier for the grandchildren, like MacMullin, to return to their language of origin. But she, having begun her Gaelic



Conversations are lively over tea and treats in the kitchen.



Stòras a' Bhaile is a four-day folklife school put on by Highland Village, Iona.

studies relatively late, was not able to teach her three children to speak the language. Of her grandsons, Ciaran, age two and Eòghann, aged seven months, she says proudly, “I speak only Gaelic to them.”

MacMullin does far more than teach grammar and parse sentences. She facilitates the acquisition of Gaelic language and cultural expression through her preferred teaching method of immersion. She leads sessions for children and adults at beginner, intermediate and advanced levels, both in groups and one-on-one.

“We’re reclaiming a piece of who we are,” says Bernadette Campbell, student and co-facilitator, who lives in Little Judique. “And we are creating intentional communities, where age, background, and anything else, doesn’t matter.”

Also in the Shore Road class are students Jeanette MacDonald, Janet MacKenzie, Janet MacIsaac, Dale Gillis, Charlotte Rankin, and Cathy Campbell, David Spencer and his wife, Dana Thomas. Amber Buchanan and Emily MacDonald joined as guest instructors for six afternoons.

This session in Port Hood is one of several community immersion programs put on by the provincial government’s Department of Gaelic Affairs, throughout the year, and at different locations in Nova Scotia. People come from near and far, and are committed to learning.

Gaelic immersion is also available at the Gaelic College, a non-profit educational institution located in the community of Saint Ann’s and at the Highland Village in Iona, both in Cape Breton; and also at the Gaelic School, in Halifax. Gaelic instruction is available at three Nova Scotia universities: Cape Breton University (CBU) in Sydney, St. Francis Xavier in Antigonish, and St Mary’s in Halifax.

Visitors to Nova Scotia will also hear Gaelic spoken on the street, in the villages around Cape Breton, and some communities on the Mainland, as well as at innumerable summer festivals and Scottish concerts in Cape Breton.

It’s not just the older generation speaking, either.

“What drew me to learning Gaelic were the old values of community, story, and song,” says David Spencer, 28, of Mabou. “When we have a family, we’d like to raise our children in the Gaelic language and culture.” This includes traditional fiddle music, step dancing, and square dancing. He and his wife Dana, absent on this day, are studying Gaelic together. Both were raised out West, and both have parents raised in Cape Breton.



Kenneth MacKenzie teaching piping to young students.

Amber Buchanan, 33, was actually one of Shay’s first instructors, at a two-week tutor training event held in Baddeck in November 2007. “Building a community with shared values is so important,” says Buchanan. “And it’s not just the language, but the culture.”

Everyone, young, middling and older, loves the stories of the Gaels, too.

The culture of the Gaels is estimated to be 6,000 years old, and like the Greek of Homer, Gaelic is a heroic language. It is also proverbial, bardic, and mystical—and on the flip side, homespun. The Gaelic world is one of crofters and fishers who are also warriors and prophets. Witches and fairies, called *sithichean*, are also part of everyday life. Supernatural beings live in the ancient tales, too.

The abundant literature of the Gaels ranges from short anecdotes, to “wonder tales” about the Fenians, to *sgeulachd*, or “great stories,” which take hours to tell. Some of these can take as much as three evenings. They are also formulaic, and rely on repetition, which makes them easier to memorize.

Kenneth MacKenzie, the director of education at the Gaelic College, is proud the college offers programs for children, youth, and adults, year-round, as well as second- and third-year immersion courses accredited by CBU. He is delighted to be a part of the living culture of the Nova Scotia Gaelic people, which he believes is strengthening. Beyond sharing a deep love for music, story, dance, and song, MacKenzie is seeing youth bringing the language to a new, younger generation.

“We’re approaching a critical mass of young people wanting to teach their children Gaelic,” he says. “Perhaps half of the kids in some Cape Breton communities will be learning Gaelic. To me personally, we’re not just preserving the language, but the cultural values. This includes caring for the land and our surroundings, and intergenerational mixing and caring.”

Not everyone chooses to limit their study of Gaelic to Nova Scotia. Connall McKinnon, 26, of East Bay, graduated from



David Spencer “reading” a wordless book to fellow participants Dana Thomas, his wife, and Janet MacKenzie. He had to make up the story, telling it in his own words—all in Gaelic.

CBU with a bachelor of arts, Celtic concentration. He studied Gaelic language at CBU and then, to gain greater fluency, signed on for a one-year exchange and immersion program at *Sabhal Mòr Ostaig*, on the Isle of Skye, Scotland.

“Growing up, I was exposed to Gaelic by my father,” says MacKinnon. “There’s a deepness and richness to the culture—in the songs, the poetry and literature, and in the time spent with the elders.”

For MacKinnon, as with so many who choose to study Gaelic in Nova Scotia and abroad, the experience has been satisfying, almost mystical.

“It was a process of falling in love,” he says. “First there’s learning, then accessing of the songs, then beginning to understand the art and world views. Without the Gaelic language, the world of our ancestors is inaccessible.”

During the past year, Connall has been working on the Gaelic audio collection, or *Stòras Gàidhlig Cheap Breatuinn* project, at CBU’s Beaton Institute of Cape Breton Studies. He was tasked with digitizing tapes, describing files and identify-



Milling frolics are a time for singing and chatting as well as working the fabric.

ing Gaelic informants and the songs and stories they shared. These are bardic compositions (a phrase one doesn’t get to write every day). And there are many.

“Virtually every Gaelic community in Nova Scotia produced, and may still produce, song composers,” wrote MacKinnon, in a recent article in the *Cape Breton Post*. “Many of these composers undoubtedly earned the title of ‘bard’ in the historic sense.”

MacKinnon and others who study and live in Gaelic, in Canada and elsewhere, are used to hearing criticisms about the “moribund” Gaelic language, around which they are building their lives.

“If anything, we are building a future,” says MacKinnon. “In Cape Breton, young men and women often leave the island. But if you feel connected to your home community, you’d never want to leave.” Scotland, he says, made for a “big step” for his fluency, but it is his connection to Cape Breton Island and learning the Gaelic that is spoken here, that touches his heart most deeply.

MacKinnon refers to a house party in Mabou that he and his girlfriend, a fiddler, will be attending. “Everyone will be speaking Gaelic,” he says, of the young people at the gathering. Of course.

Shay MacMullin has now been teaching for 10 years. Always ready for a good laugh, she describes herself as, “very fluent, able to talk about tying your shoes, or throwing up.” While she applauds all types of Gaelic instruction, she feels immersion is “the most fun, the most effective.” And she’s willing to trust her zanier instincts, for a good lesson.

“I remember a time in the month-long live-in, I threw a lump of leftover spaghetti out the window for the crows,” she says. “They never ate it. It just stayed there and stayed there. So I did an impromptu lesson about the lump of spaghetti. The laughs! Almost three years later, students still remember that lesson and the language around it.”