

FROM “OBSCURE PREHISTORIC DIALECT” TO “ICON OF NATIONHOOD”

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Wilson McLeod, *Gaelic in Scotland: Policies, Movements, Ideologies*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. 448 pp. ISBN 978 1 4744 6239 6.

Wilson McLeod’s monograph *Gaelic in Scotland: Policies, Movements, Ideologies* is one of the books which, when they finally appear, make one wonder how the field could have managed so long without them. This is not a rare occurrence in Scottish Gaelic studies where a great deal of essential basic work remains to be conducted, but McLeod’s 450-page study of Gaelic in Scotland is truly a milestone which had been missing for far too long and which all subsequent studies of related topics will need to consider. It maps the paradoxical and precarious existence of the language that has been vilified and ridiculed by some as “obscured prehistoric dialect” spoken by “bracken-munchers” (280) and treasured and extolled by others as “icon of nationhood” (330) from its origins up to the present, with special focus on the developments from 1872 up to 2020 and on the Gaelic revitalisation efforts.

The scarcity of publications on various vital topics related to Gaelic in Scotland will likely come as a shock to those who arrive to the field from the outside. As McLeod himself notes, there has been surprisingly little research on the evolution of Gaelic language policy and movements in Scotland, and although some popularising publications, companion volumes, pamphlets, and essays appeared before, up to now there has been no successful attempt to write a focused study of this scope and detail.

The monograph is, in the author’s words, primarily a “a diachronic study of language policy, with its principal focus on the demands of language advocates and the response of public institutions” (3) which “endeavours to explain the trajectory of Gaelic in modern Scotland, considering the policies of government and other powerful institutional actors, the work of the movements, activists and campaigners that sought to maintain and promote the language, and the competing ideologies that have worked to drive the decline, marginalisation and revitalisation of Gaelic” (1).

The study opens with an overview of the historical and sociolinguistic background, reaching back to the Middle Ages, and outlines the emergence of Gaelic in Scotland and its history up to the nineteenth century. The second part of the introductory section covers various topics such as the relation between the Gaelic language, nationalism, and unionism in Scotland; various conceptualisations of the value of the language; its relation to Scots; and it also offers a useful characteristic of the Gaelic language movements.

Together with the summaries at the end of the following chapters, these parts will be of great relevance to all who seek to acquaint themselves with the situation of Gaelic and its historical roots, and with its role in Scottish history and politics. McLeod also brings in a broader framework of reference, connecting research on Gaelic and evidence from period documents with more general works on language philosophy, ideology, and planning, and continuously makes enlightening references to the state of affairs in other minority languages, especially Welsh and Irish, the closest points of comparison for Gaelic, but also to more distant but no less relevant examples including Māori, and evaluates the history of Gaelic with regard to European developments and trends in terms of minority language policies. This corresponds with the proclaimed intention of the monograph to be of relevance and interest to international readership, bringing a welcome and refreshing breadth of thought to the realm of Scottish Gaelic studies at the same time.

The following six chapters trace the policies, movements, and ideologies related to Gaelic through six historical periods, beginning with 1872, a year when the *Education (Scotland) Act* was issued and marked the start of state education in Scotland but has been traditionally seen as detrimental to Gaelic, up to 2020, which saw the language embedded in various official structures to an unprecedented extent and with flourishing published literature but steadily declining number of speakers to whom it serves as a primary means of everyday communication.

In each of the chapters, McLeod presents a thorough account, rich in facts and figures but still remarkably readable, of the most important developments and factors. Governmental policies, the work of various initiatives and activist groups, and the gradual emergence of Gaelic media are covered, with most attention and space being devoted for good reason to developments in Gaelic in education and debates and controversies surrounding it. These individual chapters that cover the periods in depth will become indispensable for further studies dedicated to individuals and initiatives.

McLeod, who spent most of his career at the University of Edinburgh, is one of the most productive researchers working on language policy, legislation, and rights in Scotland. As he acknowledges in the introduction, he also has legal background (3), and it is tempting to see the influence of this training both in the ability to handle the vast amount of data and information and summarize complex developments into a narrative which is easy to follow but not simplifying, and in the cautious balance of the tone which is both incisive and restrained.

This is all the more remarkable with regard to McLeod's own commitment to the language and his involvement in Gaelic revitalisation movement, where he constitutes a robust critical presence. In this study, however, the commitment is

communicated by the rigour and scope of the work, rather than by expressions of preference for certain initiatives and disavowal of other trends. It is exactly this decision not to single out any personalities or strands in the movement and the balance and impartiality that pave the way and create space for future work.

In the conclusion, looking over the findings of the book and the most recent developments, McLeod mentions that the key factor in the efforts of Gaelic revitalisation in Scotland is “the failure to achieve critical mass,” as “not enough people were directly engaged in Gaelic language organisations and movements, and not enough people were quietly supportive of their efforts,” which resulted in insufficient pressures on politicians and policy makers to take decisive steps on behalf of the language (331). The view of the Gaelic revitalisation movement and the future of the language that emerges from McLeod’s monograph is certainly not uplifting, but neither is it excessively dismal. The detailed analysis of the failure of certain initiatives and their possible causes, the resistance to policies on the part of Gaelic speakers and the anti-Gaelic sentiment in Scotland, the frequent manifestations of the “too little too late” trend (334), all this offers precious insights and directions not only for future scholarly work, but also for future action, while the scope of the monograph also provides a lesson in individual commitment.

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