

SEANCHAS SGIBNIS¹

Dualchas nan Gàidheal²

Part 2

By CHARTS' Gaelic Culture Officer Àdhamh Ó Broin

As part of Seachdain na Gàidhlig 2025, CHARTS collaborated with the Kintyre Rainforest Alliance and Skipness Estate to create an opportunity for local people and visitors to Argyll to come together in Skipness Woods and Village Hall and explore Gaelic culture, environment and demographic changes down the decades since 1881 and the first Gaelic language census return. This blog is part two of two exploring these themes.

“There is a reciprocal relationship of spirit between the lands, waters, people, ancestors and Creator. The legends and stories of the land are the law.”

Chief Rueben George³

Tsleil-Waututh Nation

(British Columbia)

In part one of this blog, we explored the demographic changes down the years between the censuses of 1881 and 1921, specifically how Gaelic speakership had waned and what the influence of incomers on the *Sgibnis⁴* area had been. In this second blog we will take a look at the impact of these changes; at how language, lore and landscape

¹ “Skipness Lore”

² “The Inherited Wisdom of the Gael”

³ Chief Rueben George is a Sundance Chief and member of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation. After working as a family counsellor for twenty years, he became manager of the TWN’s Sacred Trust initiative to protect the unceded Tsleil-Waututh lands and waters from the proposed Trans Mountain Pipeline expansion. Over the past decade, he has travelled across the world and built alliances with Indigenous people fighting for water, land, and human rights, and has become an internationally renowned voice.

⁴ “Ship-point” (Skipness)

are interlinked and how both loss and reclamation of ancestral culture can directly affect the world around us.

The people of *Ceann-Tir*⁵ are of mixed heritage and have been since the plantation of Ayrshire folk in the 17th century and further migrations of people into the area during the herring boom. What was once a monolingual Gaelic region found itself infused with Lowland Scots language and over the last 150 years, English. Until that time and the brutal interventions of the British colonial education system in the Highlands which saw young children receive corporal punishment for speaking the only tongue they knew, the Gaelic People of *Ceann-Tir* saw themselves, their land and their language as synonymous. They were grown straight out of the soil like the trees around them⁶ and at one with their environment, not necessarily because of some kind of innate virtue, but because a choice in the matter had never before been offered.

What British colonialism did was to introduce a false dichotomy, a sense that one could either choose to remain a savage⁷ or evolve into Britishness; into politeness, civility, educated out of ones Gaelic ignorance. Among the many obvious problems that this created was the severance of people from land. The Gaelic language interface that had been grown slowly over centuries like Old Man's Beard⁸ over years on moist tree branches and was adroitly adjusted to voicing this landscape, found itself tossed to one side, often in a single generation⁹.

⁵ “Land-head” (Kintyre)

⁶ In fact, Gaels regarded trees as the perfect models of life - strong, upright, deeply-rooted, verdant and long-lasting.

⁷ James VI, himself partly descended from Gaelic People, described those living in the mainland as “barbarous for the most part, although with some show of civility” implying that to be of English manners was to be civil and to be a Gael was to be barbarous.

⁸ The lichen which hangs in pale grey-green clumps, known in Gaelic as *feusag-liath* (grey-beard)

⁹ “There is an ancient conversation going on between mosses and rocks, poetry to be sure. About light and shadow and the drift of continents. This is what has been called the ‘dialect of moss on stone’ - an interface of immensity and minuteness, of past and present, softness and hardness, stillness and vibrancy, yin and yang.”

Robin Wall Kimmerer “Braiding Sweetgrass” (Penguin, 2013)



Chief Rueben and *Àdhamb* deep in conversation last year

Around 2013 I remember pottering about looking for Gaelic Elders as I was often wont to do and had come into *Ceann-Tir*, calling off the road near to a place I thought might still boast the relations of speakers now passed¹⁰. I called at the house of a certain family, finding the son of the last fluent speaker of the area at home. I shan't elaborate on what was said because what was said was incredibly brief and was delivered with a look of the utmost annoyance and inconvenience. No, he didn't speak Gaelic, and neither was he in the slightest bit bothered, because he had gone to France, learned French and spent his working life there. It was as if the loss of this man's ancestral language was part and parcel of "making something of himself," a veritable feat to reckon with.

¹⁰ I shall leave the exact location nameless

Only the intervention of outside agency could cause a person to regard what had been developed over countless generations within his family as useless. Given the atmosphere in which Gaels were forced to live, constantly made aware of their stupidity and ignorance for not being able to behave according to the mores of their colonisers¹¹, it is to be commended that the dialect of the great protruding leg of *Alba*¹² should have survived at all. The commendation goes to those who hung on till the last, refusing to give up what was a perfect tool with which to describe the land most dear to them and the feelings most natural to them.

Thankfully, there were professionals out and about in the landscape long before I first set foot on it in 1992. One of these men was Professor Nils M. Holmer, born in Gothenburg, Sweden, in 1905. Holmer studied Russian at Lund University and became interested in Indo-European linguistics. During a year as a guest student in Prague during the 1920s, he became acquainted with Celtic languages and decided to switch from Slavic to Celtic linguistics. He took part in the Marstrander group working with Gaelic during the 1930s and developed a special fondness for *Arra-Ghàidheal*¹³, which lasted his whole life, collecting in both the islands and mainland, including *Ceann-Tir*.

¹¹ “During the past several centuries of European imperialism, it was claimed that indigenous peoples were less deserving than imperial races because their cultures were primitive, their economics underdeveloped, their lands unimproved, and their very beings inferior. The manifest destiny of empires, it was argued, was to take over the lands of native peoples and rule them according to superior conceptions and methods. If the current state of the planet is a reflection of the stewardship of those superior races, that is condemnation enough.”

Michael Newton “Warriors of the Word” (Birlinn, 2009)

¹² (Scotland)

¹³ “Gaels’ Share” (Argyll)



Nils M. Holmer at work in Éirinn. Credit Arthur Holmer

What Holmer managed to gather was priceless. It illustrated the reciprocal relationship of people to place in stark relief, the effortlessness of what in Gaelic is referred to as *dùthchas*. To command knowledge of place and weather and local story was no great feat, it was simply normal, but the value of Gaelic lore in its latterday absence cannot now be overstated. Let us examine via Holmer's collection work¹⁴ how local Gaels saw the world through use of some examples relating to the current season of the year, which at the time of writing is the start of April:

¹⁴ Nils M. Holmer "The Gaelic of Kintyre" (Dublin Institute, 1962)

About the month of March:

*Nair a thig e 'staigh mar leoghann,
théid e 'mach mar uan*

When it comes in like a lion,
it shall go out like a lamb

About sowing in spring:

*Cuir do shìol sa Mhairt
Biodh an uair fliuch na tiuram*

Sow your seed in March
Whether the weather is wet or dry

Contributor:

Iain Mac Dhùghaill, Dùn Sgitheig
[John MacDougald, Dun Skeig, Clachan]

I wasn't able to find this fellow for sure in the 1921 census, although there is a contender who was 53 at the time it was taken, suggesting that John could have been around 70 when Holmer visited in the late 1930s. A life of ploughing, sowing and reaping under the singing larks and lapwings¹⁵ and after generations of the same before him left this man with an acute awareness of the weather and of propriety when it came to food production. If you don't start as you mean to go on, you can forget about eating well over the winter!

¹⁵ *uiseag & curacag* (Gaelic) *laverock & peewit* (Scots)

Spring saying:

*Chuala mi 'chuthag
Gun mhir nam bhroin
Agus dh'fhaithnich mi gu math
Nach biodh a' bhliana seo leam*

I heard the cuckoo
without a morsel in my belly
And I recognised well
that the year would not be with me

Contributor:

Deasaidh Thodach, Baile na Maoile
[Jessie Todd, Mull of Kintyre]

I found Jessie in the 1921 census for *Ceann a Deas*¹⁶. She was 53 years old at the time and so would have been around 70 when Holmer arrived. Gaelic had just about died a death altogether in the district by that point and so the fact that this lore¹⁷ was extant and current makes it all the more precious. The return of the cuckoo was not only the harbinger of summer but a stark reminder to those who slept in that time and tide waits for no man!

Latha na Cailliche
Lady Day

¹⁶ “South Head” (Southend)

¹⁷ Well-known throughout Gaeldom

“This is one of the days of early spring when the grass is beginning to come up and the winter storms and cold imprisoned by the *Cailleach*¹⁸, who (originally for a fortnight or so) is trying to hinder the grass from growing.”

Nils M. Holmer

“A’ Chailleach - bha i ’comhnuidh anns a’ Mhargadh Mhòineagach agus bha mìle laogh aice agus b’ uamhara an crodh a bhiodh aice nair a bha mìle laogh aice.

Bha slat aice agus bhiodh i ’slabhaicidh leis an t-slat a’ cumail an fheòir air ais.

Nair a bhiodh i beite, thilgeadh i an slat fo’n toman-chuilinn far nach fhàsadh feur na duilleach.

Bha trì mhic aice agus bheireadh ead trì seachduinnean gus am biodh ead beite cuideachd.”

“The Winter Crone - she was living in Barr Mains and she had a thousand calves and it would have been an awful [amount of] cows she had when she had a thousand calves.

She had a rod and she would be slashing with the rod to keep the grass back.

When she would be beaten, she would throw the rod under the holly-bush where neither grass nor foliage would [subsequently] grow.

She had three sons and it would take three weeks until they were beaten too.”

Contributor:

Niall Mac Phàruig, Gleann a’ Bhàir

[Neil Paterson, postman, Glenbarr, Largieside]

¹⁸ “Veiled One” (the spirit of the wild)

Neil is featured at 44 years of age in the 1921 census along with another man of 96 and of the same name whom I presume to be his father or grandfather. This would make Neil the most likely candidate for having contributed the above material to Holmer at around age 60 because his father - if that is who it is - would have to have been 110 years old at the time. This story is known all over Gaeldom and is representative of the spirit of winter, although as can be seen in this example, the protagonist is often given hyper-local provenance. When speaking of something so ethereal, it is common human practice to anthropomorphise the subject of the story in order that it is rendered relatable, especially to the young. The idea of explaining the lack of growth under holly trees in this manner is quite charming.

Sgibnis itself was not devoid of Gaelic lore in Holmer's day, the following story told about a giant by a native of the area being indicative of that:

“S e ‘Bruthach an Fhomhair’ a their ead ris an rathad gus dol gu Crùbasdail agus bha e air inns’ gun do thilg am fomhair sin clach a Dhiùra agus tha ’chuimbne ceart air a’ ghnothain a bha ’m fomhair sin a’ dèanadh. Tha ’chlach mhór na seasamb ann am Muasdail.”

“It’s ‘The Giant’s Brae’ that they call the road to go to Crubasdale and it was told that this giant threw a stone to Jura and the memory is correct about the things this giant was doing. The big stone is standing in Muasdale.”

Contributor:

Iain Mac a’ Ghobhainn, Sgibnis
(John Smith, Skipness)

Found in the 1921 census at age 67, John was living with his brother James (61) and sister Catherine (65). A farmer, he belonged originally to *Cill-Eathain*¹⁹ on the *Taobb na Leargaidh*²⁰ and was a resident of the big house at *Ach' a' Bheithe*²¹ when the census was taken. By the time Holmer arrived in the area in the mid-late 1930s, John would have been around 85 years old. The practice of embodying the spirit of places in the actions of mythical beings is simply sublime, local youngsters no doubt regaled with the like of it by their elders long before cold colonial dismissiveness arrived on the scene and called its importance into question. It conjures the idea of a living landscape, one that has the capacity to reimagine itself through the adventures of its mythical stewards. I find it particularly endearing that John was so keen to insist that the memory of such things was “correct” because you only have to look and see that the stone is standing there!

During our event for World Gaelic Week, I told the story in local dialect about *Ailean Camshron*²² who was lost in the snow in the winter of 1911-12, ably translated into English by local Irish Gael *Dónal Mac Giolla Chomhghaill*²³.

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1912. DEATHS in the Parish of <i>Shipness</i> in the County of <i>Argyll</i>								
No.	Name and Surname. Rank or Profession, and whether Single, Married, or Widowed.	When and Where Died.	Sex.	Age.	Name, Surname, & Rank or Profession of Father. Name, and Maiden Surname of Mother.	Cause of Death, Duration of Disease, and Medical Attendant by whom certified.	Signature & Qualification of Informant, and Residence, if out of the House in which the Death occurred.	When and where Registered, and Signature of Registrar.
1	<i>Allan Cameron</i> Single	1912. January Ninth Between 1h. and 2h. A.M.	M	11 years	<i>Neil Cameron</i> Shepherd <i>Catherine</i> Cameron <i>M. B. MacLean</i>	Exposure to cold Acute by Robert McNaughton Wilson M. B. McLean	<i>Neil Cameron</i> His X Mark Father Present Donald McArthur Registrar Kilmacolm	1912. January 15. At <i>Shipness</i> Donald McArthur Registrar Kilmacolm

*See Page of Cor. Entry
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¹⁹ “John’s Cell” (Killean)

²⁰ “Hill-slope Side” (The Largieside)

²¹ “Birch-Field”

²² “Crooked-nose” (Cameron)

²³ “Daniel, son of Comgal’s Servant” (Dan Coyle)

“Bha 'n t-athair agus a mhac [ann]. Bha 'd shuas ann an taigh-ciobair rathad an Tairbeirt. Bha coslas oidhche stoirm-eil [ann]. Thuirt ead riùcha gun fhàgail an taigh. 'S dh'fholbh ead sa mhonadh. Tháinigh sneachd trom ora agus chaill ead an cursa. Bha an t-athair... lean e air aghaidh agus dh'fhàg e am balach cùl cnoc ann am fasgadh. Agus lean e fhé an reus. Tháinig e gus an taigh-comhnuidh far an robh e na chiobair. Thill e a dh'arac air son a' bhalaich a-rithist agus fhuair e e. Bha e marbh.”

“[There] was a father and son. They were up in a shepherd's house on the Tarbert road. The night looked stormy. They said [to them] not to leave the house. And they departed on the moor. Heavy snow came upon them and they lost their course. The father was... he carried on and he left the lad behind a hill in shelter. And he followed the race [i.e. hurried on]. He came to the dwelling-house where he was a shepherd. He returned to look for the boy and he found him. He was dead.”

Contributor:

Ailean Mac a' Mhaolain, Sgibinis

(Allan MacMillan, Skipness)

The contributor can be found in the census return for *Sgibnis* itself and would have been aged around 65-70 when Holmer visited in the mid-late 1930s. He was a garden labourer for Mrs Graham, the landed proprietress and lived with his brother Donald (59) and sister Mary (69) when the census was taken. The day after the *Seanchas Sgibnis* event, I visited local Gael Duncan Shaw and his wife Jean and they very kindly gave me a copy of the below photograph in which Duncan's father is standing with Allan MacMillan, at work in the very profession listed on the census. This story shows the vulnerability of humankind, even for those who know how to read the weather and understand the dangers. As the father of a son myself, this must have been

devastating for the shepherd who would never have doubted his ability to get himself and his young charge home to safety.



Athair Dhonnchaidh agus Ailean Mac a' Mhaolain. Credit Dunacn Shaw²⁴

The Gaelic lore from the area continues with this strange omen:

*“Bha daoine 'ràdh gum fac ead solus mór
a-mach air an loch eadar seo agus an Coileach”*

²⁴ Duncan Shaw's father and Allan MacMillan

“People were saying that they saw a big light
Out on the loch between here and the Cock [of Arran]”

Contributors:

Iain & Gill-Easpuigh Mac Caluim, Sgibinis
[John & Archie MacCallum, Skipness]

John (62) and Archie (56) were living in Skipness Village at the time of the 1921 census and were, respectively, a forester for Mrs Graham and a gardener of private means at the time, no doubt very well acquainted with Allan MacMillan, above. John died in 1939 aged 80 and Archie passed away 8 years later aged 82. They would have been in their 70s when Holmer visited and through this piece of lore, we can glimpse the presence of the Otherworld in the lives of the Gaelic People, at a time when that realm was seen not as something separate but as an extension of this world, a parallel to our everyday lives.

“*Theireadh ead nach b' e peacadh do dbuine sam bith:*

*bradan a thoirt ás an abhainn
na fiadh ás a' bheinn
na craobh ás a' choille”*

“They would say that it was no sin for anybody:

to take a salmon from the river
or a deer from the mountain
or a tree from the forest”

Contributor:

Iain Caimbeal, Torasdail

[John Campbell, Seaside Cottage, Torrisdale]

Our final segment comes from a fellow who could be any number of the John Campbells in the Saddel district at the time of the 1921 census. In a way, his anonymity is quite fitting due to the ubiquitous nature of this piece of lore. Above all, it explains the nature of Gaels' relationship with their environment which was not there to be parcelled up and sold off to incoming millionaires but to be enjoyed freely - if mindfully - by those indigenous to it. The significance of the three items mentioned should not be lost on the reader; the salmon associated with arcane knowledge, the deer with the *Cailleach* herself and the forest full of the aforementioned trees, so significant in Gaelic cosmology.

“When a language dies, so much more than words are lost.

Language is the dwelling place of ideas that do not exist anywhere else.

It is a prism through which to see the world.”

Robin Wall Kimmerer

Potawatomi People

(Great Lakes)

Taking from the rich world around us is not a crime. Taking too much without the balance of reciprocal relationship however, is. We can see the direct effects of the loss of Gaelic language on the manner in which people behave towards their environment and the plenty it offers. When Gaelic was spoken, in place and in harmony with the land out of which it - and its speakers - were grown, that land was protected. As my friend Vanessa Chakour²⁵ once put it during one of our many long conversations on such

²⁵ Vanessa Chakour is an author, herbalist, holistic arts educator and environmental activist from Massachusetts in the United States whose people hail mostly from Scotland, including having strong roots in Kintyre on her maternal grandmother's side.

topics: “the land is protected by the stories themselves because they voice the land, giving her a sense of living agency.”

If stories are held, carried and shared by communities, people can access a rich point of communal reference for environmental conscience which is based on more than scientific rationalism and ever-more frightening statistics. To me, that seems like real hope and a potential crucible for real action. In valuing these stories, speaking them out loud and passing them on, we revitalise the law that Chief Rueben spoke of and partake in it personally, revoicing the land and returning agency to it. Even if we can’t do so in Gaelic, we are still halfway not only to returning to the practice of respect for our environment by the recitation of the law but to a sense of ourselves as constituents of the natural world rather than its exploiters. As my friend and soul-sister Narubia Werreria²⁶ of the Karajá People put it:

“Nature has the importance of the infinite. It is intangible, unreachable, as is our Universe. There is no meaning without her. There is no life that can exist without Nature. We are all Nature... It is the pulse that is inside of me, that makes me someone contemplative, someone who gives life, someone who brings hope, someone who brings warmth, who loves and who brings the ancestral wisdom of the Universe. It’s what makes me feel alive today.”²⁷

²⁶ Narubia Werreria is an indigenous member of the Karajá Nation from Tocantins, Brazil and is also a musician, community leader, rainforest defender and environmental activist who has recently entered politics to fight for indigenous rights in the Amazon. She travels to COP events worldwide to advocate on these issues.

²⁷ “The Ghost Rainforest” (Earthrise Originals, 2022)



Narubia Werreria at the *Fartairchill*²⁸ Yew Tree in 2021

²⁸ “Fortress-church” (Fortingall)