

# History of the Celtic Languages and Scottish Gaelic Singing

## *Housekeeping*

- This workshop is divided into two parts. In the first hour, I'll be glossing the history of the Celtic languages and providing some insights into the state of the languages today. In the second hour, I'll give you the opportunity to wrap your mouths around the sounds of one of the languages through the vehicle of song.
- This workshop is a gloss, and a fairly superficial one at that. I'll be providing a bibliography for you so that you can continue learning on your own, but I want to make certain you understand this is not meant to be a comprehensive introduction to Celtic languages.
  - I might add that I don't have access to the kinds of resources necessary to provide a more comprehensive introduction, since Celtic languages are a specialty field. The University of Toronto Kelly Library has excellent Celtic holdings, and I would expect any institution with a Celtic program, especially in Europe, to have excellent holdings as well, for those of you with a greater interest in the topic than I can satisfy here.
- I am not an expert. I have studied Irish and Scottish Gaelic and Medieval Welsh at university, but I am not a linguist, and I am not fluent in any of the languages I've studied. I am happy to try and answer whatever questions you might have, but if I don't have the information you need, perhaps I can point you in the right direction for your independent researches.
- I am not inclined to have this workshop derailed by off-topic discussions or examinations of the minutiae of the languages we're discussing. This workshop is for beginners, and it's their needs I'll be addressing. If you have questions or comments that you believe are intermediate or advanced in nature, I would ask that you hold them until the end. Thanks for understanding.

## *Hour One*

### **I. The Celtic language family is part of the Indo-European language group.**

#### *I. <Celtic Language Family Handout>*

II. In its absolute chronology (the age of the first written sources), Celtic occupies an intermediate position within the Indo-European language family - after Hittite (2000 BC), Greek (1400 BC), Sanskrit (1000 BC), Iranian (700 BC) and Latin (600 BC), but before Germanic (1st century AD), Armenian (5th Century AD), Tocharian (7th Century AD) Slavic (9th Century AD), Baltic (15th Century AD) and Albanian (16th Century AD). - **(Ball, 69)**

III. As to relative chronology, the Proto-Celtic language naturally emerged before its subsequent divisions. However, there are two conflicting theories about the division of Celtic languages after that. One of the reasons for this conflict is that while evidence for the Continental Celtic languages dates to antiquity, evidence for the Insular Celtic languages (with the exception of place-names) only dates to the Middle Ages. So, while some argue on linguistic grounds that there is a unity of Insular Celtic languages and a separate unity of Continental Celtic languages, others argue Gallo-Brythonic as a language unit and Goidelic, Celtiberian and Lepontic as a second, more archaic unit. - **(Ball, 69)**

I. It should also be noted here that because the Continental Celtic languages are all dead, and because the evidence for them is more sparse, they're harder to study, harder to date, and harder

to situate in the wider context of the Celtic language family.

IV. My description of the first part of this workshop as a discussion of 'the six Celtic languages' was something of a misnomer then, since as you can see, there are far more than six languages in the family. However, there are only six living Celtic languages, if you don't count Shelta and Scots, which are dialectical blends of languages with strong English ties. Having said that, I'm going to spend just a moment or two breaking things down for you linguistically before moving on to a discussion of the living languages.

## II. The Continental Celtic Languages, in order of attestation/evidence (Dead): - (Ball, 26-62)

- I. **Gaulish:** Spoken in Gaul, primary inscriptions found on coins and tablets, used Greek and Roman scripts, survived long enough to contribute to various early Breton dialects.
- II. **Celtiberian:** Spoken in Northern and Eastern Spain, primary inscriptions found on mountainsides, bronze tablets and household goods, used the Iberian and Roman scripts.
- III. **Lepontic:** Spoken in north-east Piedmonte, could easily be called a dialect of Gaulish, since there is little to distinguish it from Cisalpine Gaulish (though it is more archaic), most common inscriptions are funereal, was spoken in a remote area.
- IV. **Galatian:** Spoken in the region of Asia Minor around the present-day city of Ankara, very few inscriptions exist.

III. The primary definition scholars apply to the term 'Celt' where it concerns who the Celts were in antiquity is linguistic, rather than geographical, cultural or artistic. Celts were people who spoke Celtic languages, since they were widely spread across Europe from Asia Minor to the west coast of what is now France, and from there to what is now the United Kingdom and the island of Ireland. Now that we've looked a little at the Continental Celtic languages, we'll turn to the Insular Celtic languages, beginning with dead languages and continuing on with those that are still spoken today.

## IV. The Insular Celtic Languages (Dead):

- I. **The Primary Difference Between P-Celtic and Q-Celtic:** Now that we've come to the Insular Celtic languages, it is more important to know the difference between the terms P-Celtic and Q-Celtic.
  - I. P-Celtic refers to Brythonic languages, of which Welsh is a primary modern example, while Q-Celtic refers to Goidelic languages, of which Irish is a primary modern example. They are divided in this way literally because of the division of 'P' sound and 'Q' sound divisions in the languages.
    - I. Example: Son=Brythonic-'mab' & Goidelic-'mac'
  - II. **Cumbric:** Sparsely attested, spoken in Cumberland and Southern Scotland. Similar to Welsh and survived into the 10th century. - (Ball, 6)
  - III. **Pictish:** Sparsely attested, listed by Bede as one of the five languages of Scotland. Suggestions run from treating it as pre-Indo-European to being a full-fledged P-Celtic language, or a mixture of both. In any case, it died out with the fall of the last Pictish kingdom in the 9th century. - (Ball, 6)
  - IV. **Ivernian:** The only scholar I was able to find who supports the notion of an Ivernian language is T.F. O'Rahilly (1883-1953), who wrote that the Iverni (or Hiberni, from Ptolemy's 'Geographia')

came to southern Ireland in 500 B.C. as one of four successive invaders of Ireland and brought with them a P-Celtic language called Ivernian. However, I didn't find references to his work in 'The Celtic Languages', edited by Martin J. Ball, which is the primary text from which I took information for this part of the workshop. Since my primary sources are much later than O'Rahilly's work, it's likely his theory is not accepted in Celtic linguistic circles.

- I. O'Rahilly was trying to link the mythological Four Invasions of Ireland with Ptolemy's Geographia. I'm of two minds about this. There are suggestions of a P-Celtic language in southern Ireland during the time indicated, but it is equally likely that they're word borrowings from P-Celtic and not a separate language. At the same time, we all know as Pagans that mythology often has its roots in historicity. However, even if there were four successive invasions of people into Ireland, that doesn't necessarily mean any of them spoke an 'Ivernian' language.

**V. The living Celtic languages are six in number, and these are divided into the same two groups mentioned before, P-Celtic and Q-Celtic.**

- I. I'm a little more comfortable in this part of the discussion, because it covers matters I've studied more carefully and at greater length as part of my university education.

II. The living Celtic languages are:

- I. Brythonic: Cymraeg (Wales), Kernewek (Cornwall) and Brezhoneg (Brittany)
- II. Goidelic: Gaeilge (Ireland), Gàidhlig (Scotland and Nova Scotia), Gaelg (Isle of Man)

III. Modern P-Celtic

I. *Welsh (Cymraeg)*

I. Current dispersion and number of native speakers:

- I. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/voices/multilingual/welsh.shtml#A>
- II. [http://www.bbc.co.uk/voices/multilingual/welsh\\_history.shtml#A](http://www.bbc.co.uk/voices/multilingual/welsh_history.shtml#A)
- III. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/cymru>

II. Language initiatives, classes and workshops:

I. Cymdeithas Madog: <http://www.madog.org>

- I. This is a week-long Welsh intensive held once a year in a different location each time. I attended the immersion week in 2000 and found it to be incredibly well-run and informative.

II. I was well-pleased by the number of Welsh language initiatives I found on the Internet with a simple Google search. If you're interested in pursuing this subject further, I invite you to do the same.

II. *Cornish (Kernewek)*

I. Current dispersion and number of native speakers:

- I. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/cornish-language-declared-extinct-by-un-1628244.html>
- II. <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/leading-articles/leading-article-tongue-in-cheek-1628189.html>

III. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1997718/Cornish-language-makes-a-comeback.html>

IV. <http://radyo.kernewegva.com>

II. Language initiatives, classes and workshops:

I. <http://www.cornish-language.org>

II. <http://www.magakernow.org.uk>

III. Breton (Brezhoneg)

I. Current dispersion and number of native speakers:

I. <http://www.breizh.net/icdbl/saozg/Endangered.pdf>

II. [http://www.eurolang.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=3191&Itemid=1&lang=en](http://www.eurolang.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3191&Itemid=1&lang=en)

II. Language initiatives, classes and workshops:

I. <http://www.ofis-bzh.org/index.php>

II. <http://www.breizh.net>

III. <http://www.kervarker.org/index.php?newlang=english>

IV. Modern Q-Celtic

I. Irish (Gaeilge)

I. Three major dialects: Munster, Connacht and Ulster

I. <http://www.smo.uhi.ac.uk/gaeilge/gramadach/canuinti.html>

II. However, when I studied Gaeilge in Donegal, the dialect I studied was called 'Donegal', and my classes were situated in a Gaeltacht.

I. A gaeltacht is a Gaelic-speaking region.

III. Current dispersion and number of native speakers:

I. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2007/jan/05/ireland.features>

I. This is clearly a situation where a great deal of government effort is being put into preserving and propagating the language, with mixed results.

II. [http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/02/0225\\_030225\\_irishlanguage.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/02/0225_030225_irishlanguage.html)

I. At the same time, there's a great love for the language among speakers in the various gaeltachts and a desire to keep it alive.

IV. Language initiatives, classes and workshops:

I. Foras na Gaeilge: <http://irish.ie>

I. The official organization for the preservation and propagation of Irish in Ireland.

II. Oideas Gael: <http://www.oideas-gael.com>

I. Offers classes in Donegal. Well-run, stable and incredibly informative, or at least it was in 2000!

### III. Daltaí na Gaeilge: <http://www.daltai.com>

- I. A tax exempt, not for profit corporation dedicated to promoting and teaching the Irish language.

### II. Scottish Gaelic (Gàidhlig)

- I. Current dispersion and number of native speakers:

- I. [http://www.bord-na-gaidhlig.org.uk/about\\_gaelic/gaelic\\_today.html](http://www.bord-na-gaidhlig.org.uk/about_gaelic/gaelic_today.html)

- II. Language initiatives, classes and workshops:

- I. Bòrd na Gàidhlig: <http://www.bord-na-gaidhlig.org.uk>

- II. Sabhal Mòr Ostaig: <http://www.smo.uhi.ac.uk>

- III. Chonaisde Ghàidhlig (Cape Breton): <http://www.gaeliccollege.edu>

- IV. An Chomuinn Ghàidhealaich Ameireaganaich: <http://www.acgamerica.org>

### III. Manx (Gaelg)

- I. Current dispersion and number of native speakers:

- I. It's my understanding that the last native speaker of the language passed away in the 1970s.

- I. <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/manx.htm>

- II. However, the language is undergoing a revival, in large part due to the efforts of a Manx-language primary school on the Isle of Man.

- I. <http://www.bunscoill.iofm.net>

- III. This in spite of UNESCO's statement that Manx, like Cornish, was a dead language:

- I. <http://www.iomtoday.co.im/manx-language/Manx-language-extinct-says-UNESCO.5001465.jp>

- II. <http://www.iomtoday.co.im/manx-language/UNESCO-in-firing-line-from.5044417.jp>

- III. <http://www.iomtoday.co.im/manx-language/39Manx-language-is-very-much.5005402.jp>

- IV. <http://www.iomtoday.co.im/manx-language/The-revival-of-Manx-Gaelic.4311475.jp>

- II. Language initiatives, classes and workshops:

- I. Gaelg: <http://www.gaelg.iofm.net>

- II. Learn Manx: <http://www.learnmanx.com>

### V. A Note About Dialects

- I. I know very little about these, except that they're language blends comprised of Goidelic tongues, English, Norse and French. In addition, Scots is a geographically-centered language/dialect, while Shelta is the language of the Irish Travellers, a distinct cultural (and they would hasten to add racial) group.

- I. Scots: A language/dialect spoken in lowland Scotland, made famous in the work of Robert Burns.

- I. This is not Scottish Gaelic. When referring to the two languages/dialects, it's appropriate to call Scottish Gaelic 'Scottish Gaelic' or ' Gàidhlig' and to call Lowland Scots 'Scots'.
  - II. Shelta: A language/dialect spoken by the Irish Traveller people, which has closer ties to English now than it does to Irish.
- VI. All of the living languages are minority languages under threat of extinction.
- I. The economics of language acquisition and propagation, in that the acquisition and propagation of language is almost entirely pragmatic.
    - I. People learn and teach languages that help them communicate with the greatest numbers of people and find the best jobs. Since none of the Celtic languages fall into this category right now, they are in decline. At present, they are spoken by so few people that they're in imminent threat of extinction.
  - II. Language initiatives in Wales, Ireland, Isle of Man, Scotland & Cape Breton
    - I. The UK, Ireland and Canada have all contributed, at various levels, to the preservation and revival of Celtic languages.
      - I. Some governments have made the learning of native Celtic languages part of the required elementary school curriculum, such as the government of Ireland.
        - I. However, this can backfire, creating a situation where those people who were forced to learn the language as children don't care to continue speaking it as adults.
          - I. I have the same relationship with Lima beans.
      - II. Other language initiatives include public and private sector television and radio programming and money for language study and preservation through university and other venues.
        - I. I don't know how much these initiatives expect to succeed. Interest and belief in their viability seems to vary widely, with more conservative and disinterested people believing the languages should be allowed to die, while more liberal and enthusiastic people fight to preserve the languages.
  - III. Language enthusiasts of all stripes, both in the motherlands and in the diaspora are studying the modern Celtic languages enthusiastically. Private workshops are available in many places for people interested in learning the languages.
    - I. However, it has been my experience that it's very difficult to get past the beginners' stage of language acquisition using books, workshops and classes. You need to be in the company of other speakers to learn and keep a language.
    - II. In addition, since the languages are marginalized, it's much harder to find people who are fluent enough to teach intermediate students. I'm certainly not fluent enough to do so.

## **VI. For the Love**

- I. So, Welsh is strong, and its speakers are proud of the language. Breton is recovering from recent abuses by French-speaking agencies who wanted very much to wipe it out. Cornish and Manx live on, defiant, and the reports of their demise are premature, it seems. Irish and Scottish fight on, perhaps not with as much vigor as does Welsh, but there are plenty of people who love the languages and are willing to work to make them interesting and economically viable means of communication.
- II. But none of this language revival is happening for economic reasons, despite my previous statement.

It's happening because people love the languages and want to preserve them. Personally, I think each of them will have to find a way to address economics in order to thrive. But for now, love appears to be enough. It has certainly caused the language revival movement to thrive in the nine years since I studied them at university.

## VII. Resources for Further Study

- I. <http://www.csmaccath.com/icgc2009transcripts>

### ***Hour Two***

My professor of Scottish Gaelic told his students that while spoken Gaelic might fade from memory after a time, sung or recited Gaelic often does not, so half of our exams were oral. With this in mind, I have decided to teach you one of my examinations by oral recitation, the first verse of Soraidh Le Eilean a'Cheò. It is my first hope that singing will engage another part of your learning mechanisms than the last hour of lecture has engaged, thereby letting one part of your brain rest while another works awhile. Secondly, by teaching you orally, I hope to bypass the internal censor that tells you this language is hard to learn, since you'll simply be repeating after me.

1. Sing the piece
2. Teach the piece line by line
3. Offer a copy of the words and translation
4. Polish pronunciations
5. Teach the tune

<b>Lyrics:</b>	<b>English Translation:</b>
Soraidh leis an àit'	Farewell to the place
An d' fhuair mi m' àrach òg	Where I was reared when young
Eilean nam beann àrda	Island of the high bens
Far an tàmh an ceò	Capped where the mist rests
Air a moch a dh' èireas	On which rises early
Grian nan speur fo ròs	The rose-tinted sun in the sky
A' fuadach neul na h-oidhche	Dispelling the nightly bank
Soillseachadh an Stòrr	And lighting the Old Man of Storr