

DUNDEE'S GAELIC

GAELIC IN DUNDEE PAST AND PRESENT

BY
NICKY MACCRIMMON AND ALEX MULHOLLAND



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WAS DUNDEE EVER GAELIC?

When talking about Dundee, and other parts of Scotland outwith the Highlands and Islands, you may have heard it said that “Gaelic was never spoken here”. Nothing could be further from the truth. There has been Gaelic in Dundee from the very beginning of Dundee’s story and the language has continued to be used in the city throughout the centuries. Indeed, the people of Dundee still use Gaelic every day in the placenames of our city and the surrounding areas.

You may have heard that Gaelic was “never the national language of Scotland”. It is hard to argue that the language of state, the language of the majority of the people and a language used from Sutherland to the Lothians was not a national language but it is certainly true that it was never the only language of Scotland.

You may have heard that Dundee and other parts of eastern Scotland “were never Gaelic, but Pictish” and it is correct that up until around the 9th century, the language of the area where we now find Dundee was likely Pictish. However, it is around this time that the Gaelic language appears in this part of Scotland.

In 731, in his *Ecclesiastical History of the British People*, Bede identifies the five languages being spoken on the island of Britain as Latin, English, Welsh, Gaelic and Pictish. Pictish is thought to be a Brythonic language, part of the language family which includes Welsh. At this time Dundee was in the Pictish zone.

At the time at which Bede was writing it is possible that all five of those languages were being spoken in Scotland alone. Latin as the official language of the church, with the lands south of the Clyde and Forth being home to the speakers of languages Bede describes as English and Welsh and the lands north of those two rivers home to communities speaking Gaelic and Pictish.

In the following centuries Norse speakers settle in the north and west of Scotland and the resulting Norn language continued to be spoken in the far north and Northern Isles until as late as the 18th century.

As we come into the 10th century, Gaelic is not the only language in Scotland but it is undoubtedly the most widespread and the language of state. At this point Dundee is firmly within the Gaelic zone. This is due to the emergence of the Gaelic Kingdom of Alba. Originally a joint Pictish-Gaelic enterprise, the language and culture of the Kingdom of Alba eventually becomes wholly Gaelic. Smaller than the later Kingdom of Scotland, Alba extends from Forth to Spey and contains the settlement which will eventually become the city of Dundee.

DUNDEE AT THE HEART OF ALBA

A local legend tells of Dundee being at the heart of Alba's origin story, and being the site of the last battle between Picts and Gaels before the two kingdoms came together, the Battle of Liff or the Battle of Pitalpin.

The story goes, that in the early 9th century, the Gaelic leader Alpin also had claims to the Pictish Kingdom. Alpin invades Pictland and the Gaels and Picts contest a huge battle on the western slopes of the Law. The Picts emerge victorious. Alpin was captured and beheaded at Pitalpin – The Place of Alpin. The beheading taking place on the stone where Alpin had planted his standard, the Kings Cross, which Dundonians may have seen in front of Camperdown House.

It would be Alpin's son *Cináed Mac Alpin* or Kenneth MacAlpin who would eventually unite the Picts and Gaels under one kingdom.

The story is likely more legend than history, but in 1842, the Dundee Advertiser did publish a story of a headless skeleton being dug up at King Cross and proclaimed that it must be the grave of Alpin.



PITALPIN

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Looking at the Gaelic name, or names, for Dundee is far from a simple exercise. In modern Gaelic Dundee is variously spelled *Dùn Dè* or *Dùn Dèagh* and both forms would give an approximate pronunciation of *Doon Jay*.

More rarely, you will also see *Dùn Deagh* (*Doon Jow*) without the stràc or accent above the e. However, perhaps this is the form Dundonians should adopt, as it may be closer to the pronunciation of Gaelic speakers from around Dundee in centuries past. We know from recordings and linguistic surveys of the last native Perthshire Gaelic speakers, in the second part of the 20th Century, that *Doon Jow* is how they were pronouncing the name.

But what does it mean? Again, the answer here is not simple. The *Dùn* element is uncontroversial, simply meaning a fort. However, there are several competing theories and folk tales around the second part of the name.

FORT OF FIRE

One theory is that the *Dè* element comes from an old Celtic word for fire, which in modern Gaelic would be *teine*. The fort of fire is thought to relate to the fort on Dundee Law, said to have been a vitrified fort, having been strengthened by lighting a huge fire to fuse stone together. A fantastic interpretation of what that might have looked like can be found at www.dundeelaw.info. However, it does seem unlikely that the city was named after a fort on the Law as, at the beginning of Dundee's story, the Law lay a mile north of the city boundaries.

FORT OF GOD/GIFT OF GOD

Another story, and one which survives to this day in the coat of arms of Dundee, is the second element meaning God, which in modern Gaelic would be *Dia*. The story goes that David Earl of Huntingdon, a grandson of David I, was returning from crusade when a storm wrecked his boat in the Firth of Tay. He prayed to God for salvation and when he was washed up on the northern shore of the Tay, he built a city dedicated to God in gratitude for sparing his life. The Latin motto on the Dundee coat of arms, *Dei Donum* or Gift of God, may be no more than a play on words backed up by a folk tale but it is a play on words from Gaelic and demonstrates that it was Gaelic that was the language of Dundee at the time at which Dundee's origin story was being established.

FORT OF DAIG

In Watson's *Celtic Place Names of Scotland*, the theory is put forward that the second element is a personal name Daig, which in the modern genitive would be *Deagha*. This name is the origin of the modern Irish surname O' Dea. There is no record of a Daig ever controlling a fort in Dundee and whilst the interpretation works linguistically it is probably not correct.

FORT ON THE TAY

The fourth, and today the most widely accepted, derivation of the Dee element is simply an alternative rendering of Tay. This would make sense when considering the position of the old Dundee Castle at the top of Castle Street, where St Paul's Episcopal Cathedral now sits. At the time the Tay would have come right up to the castle, which sat on the summit of a 40-foot-high basalt rock. Evidence of the rock can still be seen at the side of the church but most of it was blasted away to make way for Commerical Street.

Further evidence for Fort of the Tay can be found in a little-known Gaelic name for the city, which Gaels in some parts of Scotland were still using right up into the 20th Century. In his *Historia Gentis Scotorum (History of the Scottish People)* in 1527, Hector Boece stated that Dundee was once known as *Alectum*. This name seemed to have been lost to history except for the Gaelic speakers in Strathardle and Rannoch who referred to Dundee as *An Athaileag* or in Braemar *Bail' Ailleag*.

Whilst we don't know for certain what this means, one possible explanation is that the Gaelic word being used here is the archaic *ail* meaning a rocky or rugged precipice. *Ail Chluaidh* or Rugged Rock of the Clyde is an old Gaelic name for Dumbarton Rock. If Dundee also had a castle on a prominent rock on the bank of the river at one point it would seem to fit, and *An Athaileag* for the Place of the Rock or *Bail' Ailleag* for Town of the Rock may be a very old Gaelic name for Dundee.



CASTLE ROCK

GAELIC AROUND DUNDEE

Like many other places throughout eastern Scotland, Gaelic begins to lose its pre-eminent status in Dundee the early Middle Ages with the establishment of the burghs. Northumbrian English mixed with the Flemish and French of traders, craftsmen and religious orders, dominated those burghs and created the Scots language which is still a key feature of Dundee life almost a thousand years later.

However, the speed of decline in Gaelic around Dundee and other similar burghs is probably overstated. The evidence for the continued use of Gaelic can be seen in placenames all around the modern city. The emergence of Scots as the language within the burgh is well evidenced by the complete absence of Gaelic names within the old city walls. Those names having been replaced by Scots gaits, wynds and closes. However, outside of the burgh walls it is likely that Gaelic continued to be a community language for much longer.

There is evidence from the late 18th century that, in frontier towns on the border of the Highlands and Lowlands like Callander, Crieff or Dunkeld, people were bilingual, or even trilingual. Gaelic in the home and on the farm, Scots in the burghs for trade and, for those fortunate enough to receive formal education, possibly English in school. We still see this today in Africa and Asia where multi-lingualism is normal. One language in the village, a regional language like Yoruba or Hindi in the city and a formal education in French or English.

The *Old Statistical Account* from the 1790s is full of the accounts of horrified parish ministers from those frontier towns bemoaning the “mutual corruption” of the Scots/Gaelic creole being spoken by the people of the parish. In *Tales from Highland Perthshire* Lady Evelyn Stewart Murray recounts a story from Dunkeld where a visitor mistakes a farmer’s sister for his wife. The sister exclaims “*Tomas and me is no posda ava, nae pairns idir.*”

We can be confident that, even when Scots becomes the language of Dundee within the burgh walls, that Gaelic was present in the surrounding communities for much longer.

There are many examples of placenames in Dundee outwith the old city which evidence the longevity of Gaelic in these communities. Similarly, the resilience of Pictish placename elements around Dundee suggest a long period of continued use and likely bilingualism where people spoke Pictish and Gaelic at one time.

One example of a Gaelic place name close to the old city would be Dallfield at the bottom of the Hilltown. Possibly a tautology with dall coming from the Gaelic word *dail* for a field or water meadow. Indeed there may even be a Pictish origin, with the word *dôl* meaning the same thing in modern Welsh.

However, there are many more Gaelic placenames in and around the modern Dundee boundaries.

LOGIE

There are many Logies throughout Scotland, and they had been thought to derive from *lag* meaning hollow. However, recent research suggests Logie may in fact be connected to religious sites and the Gaelic word is derived from the Latin *loggia* meaning a place, like locus, in this case a religious place. The problem being that many religious places in Scotland are also in hollows e.g Dargie and Benvie near Invergowrie or St Vigean's outside Arbroath. The old Logie parish church, now just a graveyard, also fits this pattern sitting in the hollow of the Logie Burn now running under the Lochee Road down to join the Scouring Burn.



LOGIE

INVERGOWRIE

Although not in Dundee these days, it is worth mentioning as an important border between Dundee and Perthshire, before that between Angus and Perthshire, and along with other important religious sites like Coupar Angus and Meikle, the border between Angus and Gowrie.

Invergowrie or *Inbhir Ghobharaidh* is *Inbhir* – the mouth of a river or confluence between two rivers, and *Ghobharaidh* refers to the Gowrie Burn which marks the eastern extent of the Carse of Gowrie and the eastern extent of the old district of Gowrie. Blairgowrie or *Blàr Ghobharaidh* – The Plain of Gowrie marks the north-western extent of the district.

The word Gowrie is thought to be a personal name from *Gabrán mac Domangairt*, a grandson of *Fearghas Mòr mac Earca*, King of Dalriada. The story is that the descendants of *Gabrán* – the *Cenél nGabráin* settled the lands of Gowrie and the descendants of his brother *Óenghus* or Angus settling in Angus.

KINGOODIE

Kingoodie is also no longer in Dundee but is an instructive Gaelic name. *Cinn Gaoithe* with *Cinn* coming from *ceann* for head and *Gaoithe* from *gaoth* meaning boggy or windy. Anybody who has been to Kingoodie would agree that both Windy Headland and Boggy Headland are feasible.



BALGAY

BALGAY

Bail' Gaoithe. Again, the second element can mean windy or boggy and the first element from *baile* meaning a farm or town. Windy or boggy farm.

BALGARTHNO

The first element is Gaelic *baile* and the second the Pictish personal name *Gartnait*. The Pictish kings list mentions four kings named *Gartnait*.

STRATHMARTINE

Strath Màrtainn. *Strath* from which we get the Scots word *strath* meaning a wide or open valley. *Strathmartine* sits to the south of the *Sidlaws* over the hills from *Strathmore* or *An Strath Mòr* - the Big Open Valley. *Màrtainn* is Saint Martin of Tours. Saint Columba, or in Gaelic *Colum Cille*, and his followers revered the Gaulish saint which is how a saint from modern France ends up near to Dundee. *Strathmartine* is also home to *Baldragon* or *Bail' Dragan* – Farm of the Dragon which is connected to the famous Dundee legend of Martin, the Dragon and the Nine Maidens.

GELLY BURN

Flowing through the modern ward of *Strathmartine* is the *Gelly Burn*. It is likely that this is *Geal* meaning a bright white. Think of the bright white of the moon which is in Gaelic *a' Ghealach*. This can be compared to *Lochgelly* or *Loch Geallaidh* in Fife. However, there is another theory about *Lochgelly*, which was known for its leeches, that the name is derived from *gealain* meaning leeches.

DRUMGEITH

Drum Gaoithe. *Drum* can mean your spine but in landscape features means a ridge. *Gaoithe* is the windy or boggy element we saw in *Kingoodie* and *Balgay*. The ridge is high ground where *Whitfield* sits and the bog is the flood plain of the *Dichty Burn* which sits below the ridge as *Drumgeith Park*.



DRUMGEITH

BALLUMBIE

Bail' Lòm Buidhe. Lòm is a bare or barren piece of land and *buidhe* the colour yellow. Farm of the Bare Yellow Place.

BALDOVIE

Today the burn that runs past Baldovie is known as the Fithie Burn. The Fithie name is not clear but may be from *fiodhaich* – shrubs and probably isn't related to *fithich* – ravens. However, *Bail Dubhaidh* suggest Farm of the Black Burn. Was it Black Burn or *Allt Dubh* an alternate name or an older name for the Fithie Burn?

CRAIGIE

Simply the place of cliffs *Creagaidh* comparable to the word crags. Likely referring to the part of the Craigie estate running down to the Tay above Stannergate Road.

BALGILLO

The second element possibly coming from *gille* for a boy or servant to give the Servant's Farm.

BROUGHTY FERRY

On modern railway signage we will see *Port Bhruachaidh* – The Port of Broughty. However, the original Broughty name is itself Gaelic. *Bruach Tatha* – Banks of the Tay which can be compared with *Bruach Chluaidh*, the Gaelic for Clydebank.



BROUGHTY FERRY

THE SIDLAWS

Although situated outside of Dundee, no examination of Gaelic in Dundee would be complete without looking at the Sidlaws. The whole area is a jumble of Gaelic, Pictish, Scots and English and often more than one of those languages appearing in the same word or name.



THE SIDLAWS

The name Sidlaws has a couple of feasible derivations. The second element is likely just the Scots word for a hill - law as in Dundee Law. The first part could come from *suidhe* the Gaelic word for seat. There is Kings Seat nearby and there is certainly a seat like quality between Balkello and Craigowl when viewed from the city.

Although a whole range of hills, the Sidlaws are generally taken to mean the three prominent hills of Auchterhouse, Balkello and Craigowl. In Celtic mythology three is a powerful number. Another set of three hills with magical properties are the Eildons near Melrose where King Arthur, after whom Arthur's Seat is named, was said to have slept the night before battle. Is it possible a similar tale was attributed to the Sidlaws?

Another possibility would be *sìdh* pertaining to fairies, which in modern Gaelic would more usually be written as *sìth*. Hill names with *sìdh/sìth* are very common in Gaelic with most famous example being Schiehallion or *Sìdh Chaillean*- Fairy/Ancessor Hill of the Caledonians.

Fairies are a constant in Gaelic folklore and the fairies of Gaeldom could be malevolent or dangerous if ill-treated. Folk tales from the Angus side of the Sidlaws tell of the parents of Strathmore threatening misbehaving children with being sent to the caves in the Sidlaws to live with the fairies. So, it is possible that the Gaels of Angus and Dundee did see these as the Fairy Hills.

Looking at the main hills themselves, the second element of Auchterhouse is almost certainly just house or hoose. The first is the Gaelic *uachdar* meaning upper. We see it in many other place names e.g. Auchtermuchty – *Uachdar Mucadaidh* – Upper Place of the Pigs.

Balkello is likely *Bail' Gillean* – Farm of the Boy or Servant. This is the same as Balgillo which was a farm north of Broughty Ferry. In name, if in no other way, can Balkello Hill be compared with *Sgùrr nan Gillean* in Skye.

Craigowl is also Gaelic – *Creag Gobhal*. The first part simply meaning crags or cliffs and the second meaning forked or pronged. The refers to the forked or pronged shape given by twin points of Balkello and Craigowl. Balkello is also sometimes known as Balluderon and there is a theory that comes from *ladhran* – a little claw. The Gaelic word *gobhal* may also be the origin of the Scots word for an earwig or forky-tail – a horny gollach.

THE DECLINE OF GAELIC IN LOWLAND ANGUS

Although Gaelic survives for much longer in the communities around Dundee than in the burgh itself, throughout the medieval period Scots does begin to displace Gaelic around the hinterlands too.

It is difficult to determine precisely when Gaelic died out as a community language in the Lowland districts of Angus. Placename evidence, linguistic evidence and scattered records and anecdotes from various sources would suggest that Gaelic survived somewhat longer in Lowland districts above the Tay and also certain parts of Fife than it did in most areas south of the Forth and Clyde, excepting perhaps Galloway and Carrick.

In Angus specifically, it would appear that Gaelic retreated in stages. First withdrawing from the coastal districts, such as the immediate vicinity of Dundee, sometime in the medieval period. It then retreated further into the countryside surrounding the burghs; possibly surviving in rural areas for a time, but we cannot say with certainty when these Lowland areas lost their Gaelic.

It is possible that this was in the late medieval period, likely by the 1500s, as there is some evidence to suggest Gaelic being spoken in the Sidlaws in the 16th century, specifically in the vicinity of Abernyte. According to research carried out on behalf of the Church of Scotland, by the 17th century Gaelic was restricted to the Highland districts in Angus, being spoken as a community language from Edzell to Glen Isla.

Across Perthshire and Angus as a whole in the 17th century, Gaelic was spoken virtually everywhere to the north of Dunkeld, Crieff, Blairgowrie, Kirriemuir, Forfar and Brechin, and as far south-west as the Trossachs around Callendar and Aberfoyle. It is also important to note that this research carried out by the Kirk tended to measure whether Gaelic was spoken by the majority or significant portion of the population in a parish, to the extent they would require Gaelic speaking ministers and Gaelic translations of the Scriptures. This does not mean that Gaelic was not spoken by minorities south of the Highland Line, and it does not show us when the last native Gaelic speakers in Lowland districts passed away.

CLAVERHOUSE

There are stories that Dundee had a Gaelic speaking village right up until the 18th century at Claverhouse. This is the reason that the streets of Mill o Mains today have names like Lewis, Harris, Uist and Barra Terrace.

However, the Gaels that may have been in Claverhouse were very likely from much closer to home. John Graham Claverhouse, 1st Viscount Dundee or Bonnie Dundee

was much loved by the Highlanders he commanded during the Jacobite rebellion of 1689, in particular the men of Atholl. Indeed, he was buried at Blair Castle by Blair Atholl after his death at the Battle of Killiecrankie. Rather than islanders, it is likely that it was Gaelic speaking men of Highland Perthshire who were working the Claverhouse estate owing to the close connections between the Grahams of Claverhouse and the Duke of Atholl.



MILL O' MAINS

Additionally Silver Button Yard off John Grahame Road references the death of Bonnie Dundee. Having made a deal with the devil it was said that he was impervious to lead. However, a bullet fired in the closing moments of the Battle of Killiecrankie struck a silver button on his coat and it was that button that pierced his heart rather than the bullet.

DECLINE OF GAELIC IN THE BRAES OF ANGUS, GAELS ARRIVE IN DUNDEE

At the turn of the 18th century general economic decline and hardship, as well as famine in the north east of Scotland, led to population movement as people moved around in search of better living conditions. In Glen Prosen as many as fifty Gaelic speaking families were noted as living there at the turn of the 18th century, the majority having moved down from Highland districts in Deeside due to the Seven Ill Years famine of the 1690s. It is during this period of hardship that people with Gaelic names begin to appear on gravestones in the Howff, likely having moved to Dundee from neighbouring Gaelic speaking areas affected by the economic downturn.

At the same time though, Scottish linen begins to develop very rapidly, and linen was produced on a large scale around Perth and Dundee throughout this period. The thread was almost exclusively spun by hand by women at this time, this being one of the only ways in which married women in the Highlands could earn money to support their families.

This became very important as Highland communities across Perthshire and Angus experienced increasing hardship in the middle and latter half of the 18th century following the failed Jacobite Rising of 1745. Angus and Dundee had been something of a stronghold for the Jacobites. There are also some suggestions of severe clearances of tenants in Angus by landlords, somewhat earlier than in other parts of the Highlands.

By the middle of the 18th century Gaelic had retreated from Glen Esk and areas in the foothills to districts such as Glen Prosen and Glen Isla with Glen Clova forming a sort of linguistic border. By the end of the century Gaelic had declined to the point it was only spoken by a minority in Glen Isla itself, once the strongest Gaelic community in the county of Angus, and by the early 19th century it was noted by the parish minister that locals in the upper district of the glen only spoke with a "Highland accent".

Gaelic speakers leaving their homes in these areas seem to have formed the first major wave of Gaelic speaking migrants to Dundee. Highland Perthshire was also affected badly at this time, particularly in the Gaelic speaking northwest of the county.

The large numbers of Gaelic speakers in Dundee from Perthshire and Angus, as well as Aberdeenshire and Inverness-shire, began to form a distinct community within the city, leading to the establishment of the first Gaelic Chapel in Long Wynd by West Marketgait in 1791. The Gaelic Chapel and later Gaelic Church would be the focal point for the Gaelic community in Dundee for the next century. It was four years later that in 1795 the Scottish-Canadian politician and reformer William Lyon Mackenzie, leader of the Upper Canada Rebellion of 1837, was born in Dundee to a Highland family who had moved to the city.

LINEN AND JUTE BRINGS IN GAELS

Gaelic speakers from Perthshire and Angus were drawn to the city due to its proximity, but also because they had experience working with textiles. In this sense the influx of Scottish Gaelic speakers into Dundee mirrors that of the Irish migration to Dundee throughout the 19th century, the Irish largely originating from the Ulster weaving counties.

For most of the 19th century, the largest proportion of Gaelic speakers in Dundee came from Perthshire along with significant proportions from eastern Inverness-shire and the Black Isle in Easter Ross, again areas that had formerly been major centres for hand spun and hand-woven linen. Even when a large number of Gaels came to Dundee from Kilmuir in the north of Skye, it was because there had formerly been a scheme to encourage textile work in that part of Skye as part of famine relief during the Highland potato famine in the 1840s and 1850s.



BLEACHWORKS

The majority of mill workers in Dundee in the early 19th century were under the age of 20. One Perth mill owner openly referred to the mill workers in his area being "children who come from the Highlands". The young workers in the Dundee linen mills faced terrible working conditions that were extremely hazardous to their health over time.

It is for this reason that one of the primary sources we have for studying the Gaelic community in Dundee is through poor relief or workhouse records; although relatively healthy upon their arrival in the city from the Highlands they would eventually suffer from serious respiratory illnesses, not only greatly shortening their lifespans but also leaving them in poverty and unable to work.

The 1850s brought a number of changes to the Gaelic community in Dundee, not the least being the shift away from linen to jute. Jute saw the numbers of Gaels moving to the city increase rapidly through the ensuing decades and the Gaelic community mirrored that of Dundee as a whole with Highland women (who made up the majority of the Gaelic-speaking population of the city) predominating over the men in terms of various stages of jute manufacture, though they were paid less than Highland men in the same positions and all the overseers would also be men.

PARA TOISEACH STORY – WHAT IT MIGHT TEACH US ABOUT DUNDEE’S GAELS

As such a large proportion of the Gaelic speaking community in Dundee in the 19th century worked in the textile industry, they tended to live close to their places of work in areas such as the Scouringburn and Hawkhill. A Gaelic story from oral tradition that may refer to this time was recorded in *Tales from Highland Perthshire*.



SCOURINGBURN

In the story titled “*Para Toiseach ann an Dùndeagh*” (Patrick Macintosh in Dundee), Para Toiseach was a man from Invervack by Blair Atholl who was unemployed and, facing poverty and hardship at home, decided to seek work in Dundee.

Para went to stay with a friend from Invervack who was already living in the city and together Para Toiseach and his friend came up with a plan to make money in which Para would take an old newspaper and cut it into strips, then drape the strips over his arm. He would then go to the street in Dundee where he would find the most Gaels, and he would stand then in the road and sing a Gaelic song. He would thus pretend to be a song-seller; people who would sell songs with lyrics on strips of paper.

This story was originally told as a humorous tale, but from a modern perspective the fact that Para Toiseach made two and sixpence by doing this suggests some things about the Gaelic community in Dundee; firstly, that a number were illiterate in either English or Gaelic, as they would have otherwise been able to recognise Para was selling strips of newspaper. Secondly that a number of Dundee Gaels felt a degree of homesickness or *cianalas* and would be moved at just hearing their own language sung in the street, to the extent they would buy Gaelic song sheets that they couldn't read.

GAELIC CIVIC SOCIETY

The majority of Gaels in Dundee were working class and faced increasingly difficult working conditions and poverty. However, a powerful minority of Gaels in the city were from the middle classes or even gentry, well-educated and well-to-do. It is from this smaller, more privileged sub-community that a kind of Dundonian Gaelic "civic life" begins to develop, based around certain key institutions.

The most important of all these Gaelic or "Highland" institutions in Dundee was the Gaelic Church, originally opened as the Gaelic Chapel on Long Wynd in 1791, later moving to Tay Street and eventually Albert Square in 1869. The longest serving minister at the Gaelic church was Rev. Charles MacAllister from Argyll, who led the church from 1821 to 1854 and became a very influential figure among Dundee's Gaelic population. He was popular and well respected by his peers and congregation and noted for his "zeal" and "very great devotedness" to his congregation. It is a sign of his influence that he was able to lead the Gaelic Church in Dundee to join the Free Church during the Disruption of 1843.

The church minute books show anxiety about the numbers of Scottish Gaels in Dundee who either did not attend the church, or only infrequently at best, which according to their internal research amounted to as many as forty or more Gaelic speaking families they encountered throughout the city.



CHAPEL

There were probably many reasons for this: from the seat-rents being too expensive, the distance to the chapel being too long, or even religious disagreements. However, the church did play a very important role in using money raised through collection to provide support for poor Gaels in the city for example during the typhus epidemic of 1842.

Rev. MacAllister was also an active member of the Dundee Highland Society, founded in the city in 1814. Although it had a stated aim of "raising a fund for relieving distressed Highlanders at a distance from their native homes and such other benevolent purposes the society may deem proper", as well as an interest in Highland dress and the Gaelic language, it is important to note the Dundee Highland Society's membership at this time was drawn from the elite among Dundee's Highland community.

The Dundee Highland Society was also very male-dominated; as with a very similar organisation called the Dundee Ancient Caledonian Society founded in 1822, it more or less functioned as a gentlemen's social club that would help better-off Gaels find their way into Dundee's middle class social circles and eventually integrate into the city's wider establishment.

Given that the vast majority of the Gaels living in Dundee at this time could not afford the Highland Society's membership fees, and that the majority of Dundee's Gaels were women (many of whom were unmarried), it does not seem that the Dundee Highland Society was representative of the wider Gaelic community in the city at this time.

Elders at the church and members of the Highland Society would also often be members of the board of management for the Dundee Auxiliary Gaelic School Society established in 1817. This was the local branch of the Society for the Support of Gaelic Schools, a national organisation, with the aim of teaching children to a level of basic literacy in Gaelic to read the Bible, however, the society became defunct by the mid-19th century.

HIGHLAND GAMES AND CELTIC TWILIGHT

The Dundee Highland Society repeatedly wound up and then re-formed in different guises throughout the decades; variously appearing as the Dundee Gaelic Club, the Dundee Highland Association, the Dundee Celtic Club and so on.

One key change however was a shift away from being more of a gentlemen's social club towards actively providing Gaelic or Highland cultural activities for members and the public. This may be due to the Celtic Revival or Celtic Twilight cultural and artistic movements emerging in the late 19th century.

The Highland Society (in its many incarnations) became involved in Highland Games, hosting annual Dundee Highland Gatherings from the 1850s onwards. These were very popular with the public and Highland Games at West Craigie Park in 1891 attracted between 6000 and 7000 spectators with the games at Carolina Port in 1896 drawing 4000 to 5000.

In one incarnation of the Highland Society, specifically the Dundee Highland Association in 1856, the chief of the society was George Murray, 6th Duke of Atholl, a sign of the continuing close links between the Dundee Gaelic community and Highland Perthshire. As part of the Highland Games that year he led his followers in procession through the city "all being attired in full Highland costume".

The chaplain of the Highland Association was none other than Rev. George Gilfillan from Comrie in Highland Perthshire, known for many things including being a mentor to the notorious Dundee poet William McGonagall, and for inviting Frederick Douglass to speak against slavery at his church in School Wynd in 1846.

In addition to the Highland Games, there was variously a Highland Ball in 1871, a Grand Highland Festival in 1873, and a “series of purely Gaelic soirees” at a hall in the Wellgate in 1878.

The Celtic Twilight movement saw the foundation of An Comunn Gàidhealach in Oban in 1891, with the intention of helping to preserve the Gaelic language and also to establish the Royal National Mòd. The first Royal National Mòd would be held in Oban the following year. Five years later the Dundee Gaelic Musical Association (Ceòlraidh Ghàidhlig Dhùn Dè), otherwise known as the Dundee Gaelic Choir, was established and Dundee itself hosted the Mòd for the first time in 1902, and then again in 1913. The Dundee Gaelic Choir would become the first winners of the Lovat & Tullibardine Trophy at the Mòd in Inverness in 1903.

The Dundee Highland Society became an affiliate branch of An Comunn Gàidhealach at this time, and thereafter became primarily focussed on supporting the Mòd and related activities. With the assistance and editorialship of one of their members, Gaelic publisher Calum MacLeòid (Malcolm C. MacLeod) of Blackness Road, they were able to turn their yearbook into a magazine called the Celtic Annual that covered a wide range of topics both related to the Gaelic community in Dundee and further afield, often with impressive examples of Celtic Twilight period art. MacLeòid would go on to publish a number of Gaelic books in Dundee across different genres.

THE DECLINE OF GAELIC IN DUNDEE

Despite the strength of these cultural organisations there was increasingly a greater focus on the trappings of Gaelic culture – songs, music, games, clothing, but less upon the language itself, which was falling into decline among Dundee’s Gaels.

Intergenerational transmission became an issue a very significant number of Dundee’s Gaelic speaking population were women, usually unmarried when they arrived, and many of them would go on to marry non-Gaelic speaking men from Dundee.

As Gaelic declined rapidly in Highland Perthshire, fewer Gaelic speakers were entering the city from these areas. Fewer migrants in general were drawn to Dundee from Highland areas as Dundee’s jute industry also went into decline in the 1920s.

The Gaelic Church increasingly only held Gaelic services on a fortnightly basis through the latter half of the 19th century, and various Gaelic organisations in the city seem to have stopped attempting to use Gaelic as their primary means of communication. Dundee’s Gaelic Church that had existed for 132 years held its last Gaelic service in 1923.

REVIVAL - 1959 TO THE PRESENT

Interest in Gaelic in the city has ebbed and flowed since then, however, the Mòd returning to Dundee in 1959 and 1974 bookended the reconstitution of the Gaelic Choir in 1966 with Isobel Darroch as conductor.

One of the most celebrated Gaels to make their home in Dundee in recent times was the esteemed Gaelic poet Catriona NicGuramaid/ Catriona Montgomery. Originally from Skye, Montgomery was one of the most famous Gaelic poets of the 20th century and whilst her poetry was deeply rooted in Gaelic history and folklore, she was able to set that tradition in modern styles or to address modern issues. Some of her most famous poems are set in Dundee including *Howff*. An evocative work in which any Dundonian can immediately place themselves.

Howff

Nan cròileagan aig ceann a' bhàr,
làmh thar làimh a' togail phinnt,
an godail air tighinn gu drabasdachd.
'O dùin do bheul, Iain Mhòir -
cuimhnich, tha boireannach sa chuideachd sa.'
Balgam cabhagach de lionn
's thionndaidh an còmhradh
gu iasgach chudaigean.

Nan cròileagan ann an Dùn Dèagh,
tom taobh tuim sa chladh cruinn
tha na mairbh fo iubhair ribeagach,
ach fad' air falbh air an taobh a-muigh
tha saighdear bochd air adhlacadh
far nach dèan e air a' chuideachd cron,
oir bhàsaich e le Cholera!

Catriona NicGuramaid, 1947-2024

Howff

Huddling at the bar,
a fankle of hands raising pints,
the chatter having become bawdy.
'Oh shut your mouth, Big Jock -
remember there's a woman in the company!'
A quick slug of beer
and the topic returns to cuddy fishing.

Huddling in Dundee
mound beside mound in the graveyard,
the dead sleep beneath ragged yew-trees,
but on the outside, far apart from the others
a poor soldier is buried
where he will not harm the company
because he died of Cholera!

Catriona Montgomery, 1947-2024

Much as the latter part of the 19th century saw the Celtic Twilight, the 1950s and 1970s were very important times for discussions about Scottish identity, language and culture, which encouraged greater interest among the public in the Gaelic language.

It may well be the case that this was replicated in the 2010s in the context of the referendum on Scottish independence, as according to basic analysis of the 2021 census the numbers of people claiming to "speak Gaelic" in general increased from 470 in 2011 to 990 in 2021, an increase of 520 people or 110.6%.

If all the people claiming at least some skill in the language, such as being able to read but not speak, as well as the others mentioned, then the numbers increased from 1,073 in 2011 to 2,511 in 2021, an increase of 1,438 people or 134%.

Although this represents a small number of the city's population it is potentially the largest number of people with Gaelic in the city since the mass migration of the mid 19th century. Further, this represents a higher total number of Gaelic speakers than in many islands and parishes in the 21st century Gaelic heartlands of north west Scotland.



CHOLERA

It may be that the rapid increase through the 2010s reflects a popular groundswell among people in Dundee where people have chosen to learn Gaelic themselves, taking advantage of high-quality Gaelic learning resources becoming available for free online for the first time such as LearnGaelic.scot, Gaelic being added to Duolingo in 2019 and the SpeakGaelic course released in 2022.

It may be close to 1000 years since Gaelic was spoken in Dundee as the dominant community language, but the language and the culture has never ceased to be relevant and important within the city and will continue to be so for generations to come. Tens of thousands of us will be the descendants of those Gaels who came to Dundee seeking a better life and others may just be interested in the language and the culture. Whatever your connection to Gaelic it belongs to all of us and will always be a part of our shared Dundee story.



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Nicky MacCrimmon and Alex Mulholland share a passion for all of Scotland's native languages and cultures. Scotland has always been, and continues to be, a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic nation.

Nicky's Gaelic journey began in the Gaelic pre-school Meadowside St Pauls Church in Dundee before going on to study at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig – Scotland's Gaelic College. Alex was first introduced to Gaelic whilst a pupil at Breadalbane Academy in Aberfeldy before also going on to study at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig.

Nicky and Alex's particular interest is the Gaelic stories and placenames of their native Perthshire and Angus – including Dundee

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Learn Gaelic: www.learnghaelic.scot

SpeakGaelic: www.speakghaelic.scot

