

# Cànan nan Gàidheal

## The Language of the Gaels

Le Murchadh MacPharlain

Rann 1

**Cha b'e sneachda 's an reothadh o Thuath,**  
It wasn't the snow and frost of the North,

**Cha b'e 'n crannadh geur fuar bhon Ear.**

It wasn't the shrivelling, sharp, cold from the East

**Cha b'e 'n t-uisge 's an gaillionn bho'n Iar**  
It wasn't the rain and the storms from the West

**ach an galair a bhlian bho'n Deas**

but the disease from the South that withered

**blàth, duilleach, stoc agus freumh,**

blossom, leaf, stock and root,

**Cànan mo threubh 's mo shluaigh.**

of the language of my family and my race.

Sèist

**Thig thugainn, thig còmh' rium gu Siar**

*Come to us, come with me to the West*

**gus an cluinn sinn ann cànan nam Feinn,**

*until we hear there the language of the heroes,*

**Thig thugainn, thig còmh' rium gu Siar**

*Come to us, come with me to the West*

**gus an cluinn sinn ann cànan nan Gàidheal.**

*until we hear there the language of the Gaels.*

Rann 2

**Nuair chitheadh fear fèilidh 'sa ghleann**

When a kilted man would be seen in the glen

**bu chinteach gur Gàidhlig a chainnt.**

it would be certain that Gaelic was his language.

**Nuair spìon iad a threubh as an fhonn**

Then they tore his people from the land

**an àite Gàidhlig tha cànan a Ghoill**

in place of Gaelic is the language of the Lowlanders

**'S a' Ghàidhealtachd creathall nan sonn**

And the Highlands, the cradle of the heroes

**'s tìr 'mhajors' is 'Cholonels' 'n diugh innt.**

is today a land of majors and colonels.

**Cha b'e** - was not; **sneachda**

- snow; **reothadh** - frost;

**Thuath** - North; **crannadh** -

shriveling; withering; **geur** -

sharp; **fuar** - cold; **bhon** -

from; **Ear** - East; **uisge** - rain;

**gaillionn** - storm; **Iar** - West;

**ach** - but; **galair** - disease,

sickness; **bhlian** - withered,

decayed; **blàth** - flower;

blossom; **duillich** - leaf; **stoc**

- stock; **freumh** - root;

**Cànan** - language; **threubh** -

tribe, family; **shluaigh** -

people, folk, race;

**Thig** - come; **thugainn** - to

us; **còmh'** - together; **rium** -

with me; **gus** - until; **cluinn** -

hear; **sinn** - we, us; **ann** -

there; **Feinn** - Fingal's

people, ancient heroes;

**Gàidheal** - Gaels;

**Nuair** - when; **chitheadh** -

would be seen; **fear** - man;

**fèilidh** - of the kilt; **ghleann** -

glen; **chinteach** - certain;

**chainnt** - speech, language;

**Nuair** - when, then; **spìon** -

tore out; **fhonn** - land; **àite** -

place; **Ghoill** - of the

Lowlanders; **Ghàidhealtachd**

- Gaelic speaking area, the

Highlands; **creathall** -

cradle; **sonn** - of heroes; **tìr** -

land; **'n diugh** - today; **innt** -

it is;

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## The Language of the Gaels

Rann 3

**Thoir a nuas dhuinn na coinnlearan òir**  
Bring down the golden candlesticks  
**'s annt' càraibh na coinnlean geal cèir;**  
and in them set up the white wax candles  
**Lasaibh suas iad an seòmar a' bhròin**  
Light them in the room of mourning  
**Taigh-aire seann chànan a' Ghàidheil**  
hold a wake for the Gael's old language  
**'S e' siod bho chionn fhad' thùirt an nàmh**  
That is what the enemy said long ago  
**Ach fhathast tha beò cànan nan Gàidheal!**  
But still the language of the Gael is alive!

Rann 4

**Ged theich i le beath' as na Glinn,**  
Though it fled with its life from the Glens  
**ged nach cluinnear nis muigh as an Dùn**  
though it is not heard now coming out of the castle  
**o dhùthaich Mhic Aoidh fada Tuath**  
from MacKay country far to the North  
**gu ruig thu Druim Uachdar nam bò**  
down to Drumochter of the cattle  
**Gidheadh anns na h-Eileanan Siar**  
Yet in the Western Isles  
**'S i fhathast ann ciad chainnt an t-sluaigh.**  
It is still the first language of the people.

**Thoir** - bring; **a nuas** - down; **dhuinn** to us; **coinnlearan** - candlesticks; **òir** - of gold; **annt'** - in them; **càraibh** - set up; **coinnlean** - candles; **geal** - white; **cèir** - wax; **Lasaibh** - light; **suas** - up; **iad** - them; **seòmar** - room; **a' bhròin** - of mourning; **Taigh-aire** - wake-house; **seann** - old; **siod** - that; **chionn fhad'** - long ago; **thùirt** - said; **nàmh** - enemy; **Ach** - but; **fhathast** - still, yet; **beò** - alive; **Ged** - although; **theich** - fled; **le** - with; **beath'** its life; **as** - out of; **Glinn** - glens; **nach** - no, not; **cluinnear** - can be heard; **nis** - now; **muigh** - outside; **Dùn** - castle; **dhùthaich** - country; **Mhic Aoidh** - MacKay; **fada** - far; **gu ruig** - as far as; **Druim Uachdar** - Drumochter; **bò** - of cattle; **Gidheadh** - yet, never the less; **Eileanan Siar** - Western Isles; **fhathast** - still; **ann** - there; **ciad** - first; **chainnt** - language; **sluaigh** - of people.

Murchadh MacPharlain (1901 - 1982) or Murdo MacFarlane, was known as the Bard of Melbost. He wrote this song in eight verses of which we sing four. He worked closely with the Gaelic folk group Na h-Òganaich who recorded it in the 1970s.

In verse 1 he sees the coming of English to the Highlands as a disease which caused Gaelic to sicken and die in a way that none of the natural hardships of the land could do.

In the chorus we are invited to go to the West where the language of the old Celtic heroes can still be heard. The Feinn were Fionn (or Fingal), Gràinne, Dairmid and others who are part of what is referred to as the Fenian cycle of folk-tales.

Verse 2 refers to the Clearances when Gaels were uprooted from their land to make way for Lowland sheep farmers. It also refers to the later predominance of retired army officers with upper class English attitudes who owned many Highland estates.

Verse 3 is about the concerted effort by the government and educational authorities over the years to suppress Gaelic. Despite them all the language still survives.

In Verse 4 the reference to the castle is a reminder that the old clan chiefs, like the MacKays, held the language and culture in high regard. Now the clan chiefs in these same castles only speak English. But, as the chorus emphasises, in the Western Isles it remains the native tongue for many.