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[See table of contents](#)

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## **Book Review**

### ***North American Gaels: Speech, Story, and Song in the Diaspora***

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McGill-Queens University Press, 2020, 511 pp.

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A fascinating, if often overlooked consequence of mass migration from Ireland and the Scottish Highlands to North America from the late-seventeenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, is the enduring legacy of Irish and Scottish Gaelic speakers across the continent. For the first time, this substantial and impressive volume foregrounds the long-lasting impact of Gaels in Canadian and American communities from the earliest days of British imperial expansion to the present. This publication traces the various activities and achievements of Irish and Scottish Gaels in different North American contexts over sixteen chapters. Each chapter is dedicated to the memory of Prof. Kenneth Nilsen, the late Sister Saint Veronica Chair of Gaelic Studies at St Francis Xavier University, and a tireless scholar-advocate for the Gaelic languages in Canada and the US. This engaging and accessible volume is a fitting tribute to Prof. Nilsen, with whom each of the contributors worked or studied in Celtic scholarship and Gaelic language teaching.

Sumner and Doyle's introductory chapter sets out the overarching structure of the book, and discusses the following 16 contributions, situating each in relation to Prof. Nilsen's career. Sumner's chapter contribution provides a detailed biography of the man to whose memory the book is dedicated. Nilsen collected substantial quantities of recorded speech from L1 Irish and Scottish Gaelic speakers in New York, New England and the Canadian Maritimes, and his dedication to preserving the remnants of Gaelic languages in North America was unflinching and energetic. Fruits of these labours are increasingly visible in different respects: in 2006 the Office of Gaelic Affairs was established within the Nova

Scotia government, and in September 2021 North America's first Gaelic immersion school opened its doors to primary school pupils in Mabou, Cape Breton. Parents here, and in various other North American communities, are once again raising families through Gaelic languages, and the greater part of recent successes in Gaelic revitalisation in Canada and the US owe much to Nilsen and colleagues' tireless language preservation work. Sumner fondly recalls Nilsen's career, from his graduation from Brooklyn College, through doctoral study at Harvard, positions teaching Gaelic languages at colleges throughout New England in the 1970s, to his appointment as inaugural Chair of Gaelic Studies at St Francis Xavier in 1984. Nilsen continued in this position until his death in 2012.

The following fifteen chapters address aspects of Irish language, literature and folklore (chapters 2-9) and Scottish Gaelic history, song, and cultural heritage (chapters 10-16) across North America. Whilst perhaps surprising to an unfamiliar audience, Sumner and Doyle (p. 3) point out that the cultural footprint of Gaelic language speakers in such diverse contexts is understandable when one considers that Scottish Gaelic was the third most widely spoken European language in Canada at Confederation (1867), or that several hundred thousand Irish speakers lived in the US and Canada at the same time. Whilst close contact and cultural interconnection has characterised the relationship of Scottish and Irish Gaels throughout the history of those peoples, by the advent of the mass colonial settlement of North America, distinct national identities and religious observances distinguished the majority of Gaelic speakers across *Sruth na Maoile* (the 'North Channel' separating Scotland and Ireland) and in the diaspora. As such, the volume's treatment of Irish and Scottish Gaels' subsequent achievements in North America makes eminent analytic sense. Continuing connections and commonalities linking Gaelic-speaking communities in Scotland, Ireland, Canada and America – as well as the Isle of Man and L2 diasporas elsewhere in Europe and former British Commonwealth – could nevertheless be stressed elsewhere in the revitalisation of closely related forms of Gaelic.

Ó Liatháin's contribution (chapter 2) explores the transatlantic context of Irish language poet Donncha Rua Mac Conmara's compositions in eighteenth-century Newfoundland, whilst Stenson's (chapter 3) examination of non-standard orthographies, used for Irish in two manuscripts compiled in the US, similarly highlights the significance of that diasporic context for linguistic usage and creative expression. In chapter 4, Ó Floinn discusses the impact and influence of the post-emigrant setting of upstate New York on the poet Pádraig Phiarais Cúndún's Irish language compositions, whilst in chapter 8, Ryan examines the poetry of Seán Ó Súilleabháin in the Irish-dominant mining town of Butte, Montana. Ó hÍde (chapter 5) highlights the significance of Irish folklore material published in the Brooklyn-printed periodical *An Gaodhal* ('The Gael') while Knight (chapter 6) explores tensions between political and cultural objectives prioritised by different contributors to the Boston-based *Irish Echo* journal in the late-nineteenth century. In chapter 7, Mahon

explores technological innovations from the same period that allowed for both the recording of remaining L1 Irish speakers in North America, and the growing use of recorded materials in second language instruction in Irish. Ó Siadhail's contribution (chapter 9) discusses Irish language novels composed by Canadian, Irish and US authors in the 1920s and 30s, and how writers' respective experience and positionality informed their framing of the diasporic context of their writing.

Just as in the first half of the book, section 2 of the volume, which focuses on Scottish Gaelic diasporas in North America, similarly demonstrates the wealth of expertise in contemporary scholarship on Gaels in Canada and the US. Dunbar's chapter (10) discusses the text and context of the bard John MacLean's compositions in Nova Scotia following his family's emigration from the Isle of Tìree, and the changing attitude to the poet's adopted homeland that can be traced through his songs. In chapter 12, Falzett examines the experiences of secondary migrants from Gaelic diasporas in Prince Edward Island to New England, and the attitudes and worldviews of such North American Gaels that are reflected in vernacular song traditions from the nineteenth century. The importance of a wealth of Gaelic material published in Nova Scotian newspapers is explored by Linkletter (chapter 12) and Parsons (chapter 16). Linkletter's contribution focuses on public disputes and satirical poems printed in the influential Gaelic weekly *Mac-Talla* ('Echo'), whilst Parsons' chapter examines Kenneth Nilsen's own Gaelic columns in the Casket newspaper of Antigonish from 1987-1996. Nilsen's column frequently gave a platform to exhibit pieces of local folklore and cultural life that he had collected in the area, therefore showcasing the vernacular Gaelic tradition of eastern Nova Scotia that he worked so faithfully to record and preserve.

Reddy and MacKinnon's respective chapters (14 and 15) consider different aspects of Nova Scotia Gaelic folklore. Reddy deftly illustrates accounts from the School of Scottish Studies Archive and Cape Breton Folklore Collection which demonstrate the popularity of vernacular apocryphal tales of encounters between Christ and the animal world, while MacKinnon's chapter focuses on the travels, songs and stories of Barra-born tradition bearer Annie Johnston, in Nova Scotia. Newton's (chapter 13) contribution examines the works of Alexander Fraser, who immigrated to Ontario from Inverness-shire in 1886 through the lens of Anderson's notion of 'imagined community'. Newton convincingly demonstrates that Fraser's literary productions – and especially his magnum opus *Leabhar nan Sonn* ('The Book of Heroes') – sought to portray a sense of transnational Gaelic solidarity and cultural continuity across communities in Scotland, Ireland and Canada.

The theme of cultural connectedness across the former and contemporary Gaelic-speaking world on either side of the Atlantic is conveyed strongly throughout the volume, and the work of the editors and contributors in producing this book is highly commendable. The volume breaks new ground in bringing these varied perspectives together, whilst

also bringing the continuing story of Gaels in New America to fresh audiences. Readerships of graduate students of Celtic, literary and cultural studies, as well as senior scholars and admirers of traditional song, story and folklore will find in this book an engaging and rewarding account of the Irish and Scottish Gaels in Canada and the US from the 1700s to the present day. In short, the work is a fitting and poignant tribute to the career and achievements of the late Prof. Nilsen.

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