

[Page 8 - The Future of Gaelic on Cape Breton](#)

ISSUE : [Issue 1](#)

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Irish Gaelic Canadian Gaelic Scottish Gaelic (extinct) Manx Gaelic Welch Gaelic (extinct) Cornish Gaelic Breton Gaelic Goidelic I Brythonic Celtic THE FUTURE OF GAELIC ON CAPE BRETON by Rosemary Hutchinson It is perhaps gratifying to the Gaels of Cape Breton that of all the places to which Scottish Highlanders were dispersed after Culloden and the Clearances • it is on Cape Breton that the Gaelic language has remained longest and strongest. But I do not think we can afford to be smug on that account--because the Gaelic here is dying, and unless all of us work together the struggle to keep it alive will be absolutely hopeless. I think it is worth the fight. I think Gaelic must live, we must not lose its eloquence and beauty as a spoken language. So often I have heard Cape Breton Gaels say that they cannot speak Gaelic to me because I come from Scotland and therefore must have the "proper" Gaelic. Utter nonsense! My Gaelic is no more proper than that of most Gaelic speakers I have met on the island, and I have often wished mine was as good as some I have heard. Changes have occurred in the Gaelic, of course, with transference from place of origin and lack of contact with the Old Country for over 150 years. Some words have changed in meaning or in pronunciation, accents have altered slightly over the years, but that is to be expected. Perhaps if the isolation from Scotland and other parts of Canada had continued • if the jet-age had not caught up with all of us • we would in another few hundred years have had a complete divergence between the languages of Cape Breton and Scotland. Something similar to this occurred between Scottish and Irish Gaelic. When the Irish colonized the west of Scotland some 1,500 years ago, they brought with them their Gaelic language; and while these two regions remained in close contact, little divergence in language occurred. However, as western Scotland and Ireland drew apart, socially and politically, so too the languages drew apart and were subjected to different linguistic influences. For example, Scottish Gaelic absorbed more Old Norse elements than did Irish Gaelic because the Vikings held sway over Gaelic Scotland longer than they did over Ireland. Thus today, in Scotland and Ireland, we have two separate Gaelic languages not mutually comprehensible. In view of that, we can not be surprised to find some Gaelic words on Cape Breton have a different meaning from that in Scotland. We say smeorach when we see a robin; in Scotland it means a thrush. It is not a question of "proper;" rather, it is an example of a living language adjusting to express a people's new experience. Moreover, Cape Breton Gaels have kept alive words that long ago fell out of common usage in Scotland. No Cape Breton Gael whose Gaelic is acceptable on Cape Breton, need ever fear it would be less acceptable in Scotland. Gaelic is a very old language. It's had a long, hard struggle. Some people think we should let it die in peace. But I fervently believe in my heart that it is precisely because of this struggle that it should not die. A person who has struggled usually has an interesting history. It is the same with languages and cultures. The Celtic peoples and cultures have been struggling for power and survival since the 5th century B. C., and that struggle has produced a history and folklore that is not fully



comprehensible to the non-Gaelic mind. Now, that may sound chauvinistic, but it is nonetheless true that Celtic history and folklore cannot be translated into the non-Celtic languages. William Butler Yeats in Ireland and Margorie Kennedy-Fraser in Scotland tried to adapt Gaelic lore for English-speaking audiences. Both had a sincere interest in Gaelic lore; neither had a thorough understanding of the language. Their writings have been much appreciated by English-speaking audiences, but Gaels generally regard these pictures as mere caricatures. Even Gaelic scholars find what Yeats and Kennedy-Fraser tried to do well-nigh impossible. Gaelic is pretty well untranslatable; and so, if we lose the language we risk losing the history and folklore too. CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE Cape Breton's Magazine/8