

*Notes for comments by Ian C. MacLeod at Clan MacLeod  
(Greater Vancouver) Society AGM on November 4, 2012*

**Gaelic in Canada**

Given the recent political discussion, following the most recent Census data, over the use of languages other than English and French in Canadian homes, it might be useful to have a look at our history.

At the time of Canadian Confederation (1867), there was no common language – initially there was English, French and Gaelic (in 1850, about 10% of the population spoke Gaelic) and a multitude of aboriginal languages, among at least 629 “First Nations”.

In 1850 Gaelic was the third most commonly spoken European language in British North America (*now Canada*), spoken by as many as 200,000 British North Americans of both Scottish and Irish origin. At that time, Gaelic was probably spoken by one out of every ten inhabitants of British North America.

In 1890 Senator Thomas Innis introduced a bill (never passed) into the Canadian Senate entitled “An Act to provide for the use of Gaelic in official proceedings.” He claimed that there were ten Scots senators and eight Irish ones who spoke Gaelic (***out of the then total of about 85 Senators, or about 21%***), and thirty-two members of the House of Commons (***out of 263, or about 12%***) who spoke either Gaelic or Erse (the Irish variety of Gaelic).

(There is an excellent web site on the Scots, and other immigrant groups, in Canada, at **[www.multiculturalcanada.ca](http://www.multiculturalcanada.ca)**. (click through on: Encyclopedia-Group Entries-Scots-Culture). This site is partnered by Simon Fraser University (lead institution), Sien Lok Society of Calgary, University of Calgary, Multicultural History Society of Ontario, Vancouver Public Library, University of Victoria Library and University of Toronto Library. It provides an excellent thumbnail history of the Scots in both Scotland and Canada.)

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My Great-Grandfather (my Dad’s Mother’s Dad) even delivered an impassioned speech (perhaps a bit thick on the hyperbole) in the Nova Scoti Legislature in 1879. Following is a brief excerpt from my personal family stories:

## **Gaelic Speech in Nova Scotia Legislature (1879), by John A. Morrison**

My Grandmother, Christena Rebecca (“Tena”) (Morrison) MacLeod (known to most as Tena) (November 24, 1874 to April 20, 1949) was also a second generation Canadian of Scottish ancestry, also raised on Cape Breton, at St Ann’s. Tena went to Boston for a few years in her youth, working as a wireless operator.

She had grown up in a politically involved family. Her father, John A. (“Little John”) Morrison, had been elected from Victoria County to the Nova Scotia House of Assembly in 1878, as a Conservative. He served only one term. Late in 1879, during a debate as to whether French should be taught in the Nova Scotia schools, a proposal that he did not oppose, he suggested that it was equally appropriate to teach Gaelic. He was not successful on that suggestion. He made his speech entirely in Gaelic and he must have had to get a ruling from the Speaker to allow him to do so. About a century later I have been told that that speech was used as a precedent by Sinn Fein, the Irish unionist party (they were first elected to the British Parliament in 1918, but due to their refusal to take the oath of allegiance, they did not take their seats until 1922 in the British Parliament) when the Irish Sinn Fein tried to speak Gaelic in either the British or Irish Parliaments. They lost too (I have been unable to locate the actual Hansard record of that speech or ruling).

Here is the English translation of his speech, from the book "The History of the Morrison or Morrison Family" by Leonard A. Morrison, published 1880 (1880 is correct - see: <http://familytreemaker.genealogy.com/users/j/o/h/Russell-W-Johnson/index.html>).

“Mr. Speaker, and honourable gentlemen.

I have been noticing that great initiatives have been set up, and great assent has been given them by some honourable Canadians here, and in other places, to establish the preservation of the French language in this corner of the Dominion, by more pay being given to schoolteachers who teach the French children, the French language.

But I am of the opinion that the venerable Gaelic is as precious and as useful to be taught as any other language; truly, Gaelic is the oldest language, and the best language that is in the world today.

The speakers of English believe that that language is more entitled to respect than Gaelic; but they are foolish, and I am sure that there won't be found today one person who speaks English correctly, except the man who has Gaelic.

Gaelic was the first language on earth, and when that language isn't around, there won't be need of any. Therefore, if provision is made for the French language, certainly provision must be made for the Gaelic.

The great scholars in the old country tell us that Gaelic is the king of all languages, that it is rich, perfected, artistic, melodious, and expressive, and very good for worship, and every other good thing.

Gaelic is the language that Adam spoke, in the garden, it's the language of the bards, and the historians, and it must be kept up.

There's nothing in the French language but poor sputtering; and part of English isn't much better.

Therefore, I say: Up with the Gaelic in School, and out of school; and if a shilling is obtained to keep up the confused awkward language of the French, let there be ten shillings for the great, honourable Gaelic. Do you hear?”

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