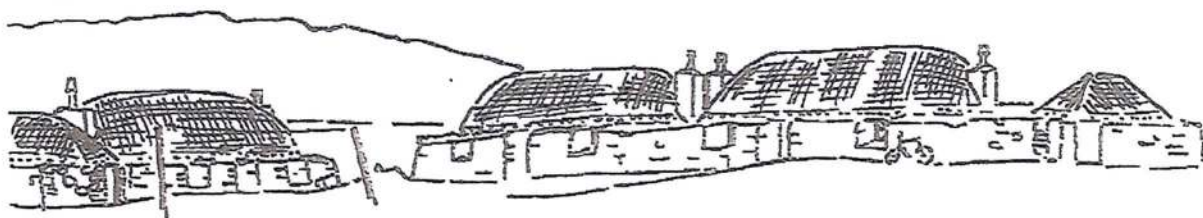


NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS ON THE
GAELIC OF TIREE

A COMPARITIVE STUDY OF HOW THE
GAELIC OF TIREE DIFFERS FROM THE
CURRENT STANDARD GAELIC BASED ON
THE MAINSTREAM DIALECTS OF THE
WESTERN ISLES AND SKYE

BY

ALAN M BOYD



JANUARY 2021

© Alan M Boyd

CONTENTS

CONTENTS	2
INTRODUCTION	3
INFORMANTS & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	5
PARADIGM OF IRREGULAR VERBS	7
ENGLISH-GAELIC GLOSSARY OF TIREE TERMINOLOGIES (INCLUDING MAIN TOWNSHIP NAMES AND FORENAMES & SURNAMES)	25
PERCENTAGE SUMMARY OF GLOSSARY	121
PRINCIPAL PHONOLOGICAL FEATURES WHICH LINK TIREE (ALONG WITH COLL & USUALLY MULL) TO THE CENTRAL GAELIC-SPEAKING AREA OF THE WESTERN ISLES & SKYE	122
PRINCIPAL PHONOLOGICAL FEATURES WHICH LINK TIREE (ALONG WITH COLL & MULL) TO UIST & BARRA	130
PRINCIPAL PHONOLOGICAL FEATURES WHICH CONNECT TIREE WITH ARGYLL AND THE PERIPHERY OF THE GAELIC-SPEAKING AREA	133
ADDITIONAL FEATURES WHICH TEND TO SEPARATE TIREE FROM THE MAIN GAELIC-SPEAKING AREA OF THE WESTERN ISLES AND SKYE	141
CENTRAL/PERIPHERAL PHONOLOGICAL POSITION OF TIREE GAELIC	145
PRINCIPAL PHONOLOGICAL FEATURES WHICH WOULD, IN THE MAIN, APPEAR TO BELONG DISTINCTIVELY TO TIREE ALONE	146
TIREE SHIBBOLETHS (OR NEAR SHIBBOLETHS)	148
VERBAL NOUNS	151
IDIOLECTS & VARIATIONS WITHIN TIREE	152
TIREE & COLL – A COMPARISON	158
GENERAL OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS	161
BIBLIOGRAPHY	167
APPENDIX	170
SEANCHAS EÒGHAINN MHÒIR	171
MAPS & DIAGRAMS	

INTRODUCTION

When I commenced taking an interest in the Gaelic language as a teenager in the late 1960s, I soon realized at that time that there was a considerable variation between the formal register of language, which was what in the main was to be found in grammar books and learner courses, and the colloquial style of language to be heard naturally among Gaelic-speakers themselves. This was no more true than in Tìre where I spent many holidays during my formative years, and where I first learned to converse in the Gaelic language. And the fact that I found myself in Tìre tended to accentuate this as many of the things learned from books had to be relearned or revised to agree with the local vernacular. I soon realized that common linguistic features naturally heard in the central Gaelic-speaking area of the Western Isles and Skye such as “*Ciamar a tha thu?*”, “*Tapadh leat*”, *cairteal*, *a-muigh*, “*Dè mu dheidhinn?*” and “*air adhart*” were foreign to the Gaelic of Tìre, and required to be dispensed with in favour of “*Deamar a tha thu?*”, “*Taing dhuit*”, *ceathramh*, *a-mach*, “*Dè mun cuairt air?*” and “*air aghaidh(ch)*”. And, as the great majority of Gaelic speakers employed in Gaelic broadcasting and education hail from the main central Gaelic-speaking area (or have acquired Gaelic based on dialects pertaining to such), the same may be said of the style of language to be heard in the media, that it in general tends towards a norm based on the central dialects of the Western Isles and Skye. Such can loosely be described as being “BBC Gaelic.” Localisms such as *tathan* for *taighean* or *dithist* for *dhà* which could cause ambiguity or misunderstanding are sometimes shunned and avoided, and can be daubed as being “droch Ghàidhlig” by those belonging to the main Gaelic-speaking area. For example, unless made abundantly clear by the context, the likes of *mòran thathan* (in lieu of *mòran thaighean*) and *cha d’fharraid mi dhith* (in lieu of *cha do dh’fhaighnich mi dhith*) are not likely to be comprehended outside the Tìre environment.

It should be stated that although the main aim of this study is to identify those features which differentiate the Gaelic of Tìre from that of the main Gaelic-speaking area of the Western Isles and Skye, necessity dictated that the adjacent islands and districts of Argyll also be brought under the spotlight on many occasions.

Tìre was in a rather unique position, in being somewhat geographically remote from the islands of Skye and the Outer Hebrides, and thus was alone in Argyll in having a sizable native Gaelic-speaking population approaching percentage-wise anything near to the numbers to be found in the Western Isles and much of Skye. Lying on the north-western periphery of the south-western Highlands, and being the most westerly of what are arbitrarily known as the Inner Hebrides, the native crofting community of Tìre could be arguably described for a number of years as having been the last solid bastion of Gaelic speakers with a dialect that was indigenous to Argyll.

The vast majority of information contained in this study pertaining to the dialect of Tìre has been obtained over the past forty or so years from native speakers resident in their own home environment. I have asked many questions, and am deeply indebted to all my

informants, the majority of whom are no longer with us. The majority of information was obtained by careful observation through natural dialogue in the Gaelic medium. It is all too often the case that when an individual is quizzed as to how he or she pronounces or expresses a certain feature or idiom that invariably an unnatural element comes into play. And, sometimes, the longer and more often an interviewee ponders over a question, the more unnatural the desired response is likely to be. Such “question session” situations, although sometimes necessary, have tended to be avoided as often as possible. A certain amount of use was made of the tape recorder, but this was kept to a minimum as, again, the microphone creates a degree of artificiality with many individuals which, in turn, tends to stifle the desired natural spontaneity of language. Recordings were, however, made personally by myself of the following individuals: Hugh Maclean, Alasdair Sinclair, James MacDonald, Hector Kennedy, Alex Maclean, Katina MacDonald, John MacFadyen, Alasdair MacNeill and Hugh Archie Maclean, the latter two having been recorded from broadcasts by courtesy of BBC Rèidio nan Gàidheal. The dialogues were scrupulously researched many years ago after recording took place, and a certain amount of transcription was also undertaken at the time.

Frequent reference and use has been made of the Survey of the Gaelic Dialects of Scotland (SGDS) findings (principally for phonological reasons), together with Seumas Grandd’s fine monograph based on the Gaelic of Islay. The late Hector Cameron’s “Na Bàird Thirisdeach” of 1932 has also proved invaluable as have the Maclean Manuscripts (Iain mac Ailein/Bàrd Thighearna Cholla) in Nova Scotia under the editorship of Colm Ó Baoill, plus many other sources.

One has to be aware that under certain conditions there is a tendency to adhere to a literary standard which is so often regarded as being the “correct” Gaelic. This is no more so than with the dialects of Argyll which now have to be considered as being a minority within a minority. The less literate a person is, the more likely one is able to ascertain the true indigenous form of language. Conversely, it is the person with the greater linguistic knowledge who is able to understand what item of information is being sought after in a question/answer session, and what the interviewer is seeking. All the informants were fluent native Gaelic speakers of the Tìree dialect of Scottish Gaelic; there are also some native-speakers from adjacent areas whom I have questioned on different points of language at various times during my research. To them all I am most grateful for their time and patience, and for the hospitality received from many of them at their own firesides in Tir Ìseal an Eòrna.

Alan M Boyd
Leurbost
Isle of Lewis

January 2021