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To Sow and To Reap: The *An Ceathramh* Language Learning Unit, Rogart, Sutherland,
Scotland. A Private Community Based Language and Culture Initiative in Scottish
Gaelic.

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The *An Ceathramh* Gaelic Language Learning Unit opened its doors in Sutherland in 1992 with the goal of revitalizing Gaelic locally and elsewhere. Between 1992 and 2001 it offered a series of week-long graded courses in Scottish Gaelic from April to October. Out with these months, afternoon and evening classes were also offered. *An Ceathramh* won a number of international awards¹, and set in motion Gaelic initiatives which are still flourishing today.

As a community-based initiative *An Ceathramh* stands in contrast to the top down language programmes in Scotland today, and its success and achievements reflect what can be achieved at the local level. When *An Ceathramh* opened there were no other similar full time centres, although short courses were available in various places, including universities and colleges. This paper will describe the progress of *An Ceathramh* from its very beginnings and how it developed in a number of directions. Firstly however, a look at its social and cultural context will be helpful.

¹The An Comunn Gaidhealach America Award for excellent in teaching, 1993, 1994

The *An Ceathramh* Centre is in the crofting township of Muie, in the Parish of Rogart, in Sutherland, Scotland. The parish is large with an estimated 400 inhabitants in 1991, of which there were 13 Gaelic speakers over the age of 3 years. (Government, n.d.) Until the mid-twentieth century there was little urbanization, and even today there is only a small village, Pittentrail, in the south-east of the parish. Nearly the entire area is under crofting², which certainly helped the maintenance of historical culture and therefore language. However, like most areas of the Highlands in the twentieth century, Gaelic was lost as a community language, although it still survives to an extent to this day with a few individuals.³ All of this meant that the *An Ceathramh* Centre began to operate in an area where Gaelic was still within living memory, but with few fluent speakers.

Historically, in Gaelic the county of Sutherland consists of three regions, Mackay Country also called Strathnaver in the north and north-west (Duthaich 'ic Aoidh / Srath Nabhair), Assynt on the west coast (Asainnt) and Sutherland in the south-east (Cataibh).⁴ Each region was inhabited by different clans, and there were different dialects of Gaelic. On the south-east coast, the fishing villages developed their own dialects, and it is these dialects that Prof. Nancy Dorian researched.⁵

The author's family, who with his wife undertook the project, is indigenous to the area, with connections to the parish of Rogart but also to the parish of Durness in the north-west and his family

²Crofting is a land holding system which emerged out of land agitation in the 1880s. It is credited with the retention of the indigenous population. cf. <http://www.crofting.org> July 17, 2012

³The last fluent speaker of whom the author is aware was Mrs Dolina Murray, nee Macdonald, who died in 1990s. Mrs Murray was born and raised in Rogart, as were both her parents. Many people of the senior population still use many words and phrases in their everyday English, and a few can understand simple conversation. (Duwe, 2006-2014)

⁴In his paper however, Duwe uses the term Cataibh to refer to the entire county, and then refers to Cataibh an Ear, South East Sutherland. Local speakers in Mackay Country use the historical divisions. (Personal communications)

⁵The author had corresponded with Prof Dorian over the years, and materials have been exchanged. It is also notable that students from the north and west attended secondary school in the east at Golspie. As a result people from Melness in the north have told the author that they had no trouble communicating in Gaelic with Golspie speakers. Also, Melness speakers maintain that Embo Gaelic from the south-east, was the same as Skerray Gaelic, on the north coast. (Personal communications)

kept Gaelic alive to a degree, such that the author was able to acquire some Gaelic as a child and most importantly, allowed an interest to develop which eventually led to fluency.⁶ The author also inherited the family croft in Sutherland, and after Ph.D. studies (Guelph, 1989), he decided to move back to the family home and begin the *An Ceathramh* project. Fortunately, his wife was also supportive because she was intimately involved in all aspects and has since acquired conversational Gaelic. Also, there was a lot of encouragement and support from Mr. Fionnlagh Macleòid, and Mr Keith Sgammal who were both founding members of *Comhairle nan Sgoiltean Araich (CNSA)*, The Scottish Gaelic Pre-School Council, which established, arguably, the most important foundation for modern Gaelic revival by firstly setting up pre-school Gaelic education, and then successfully lobbying for Gaelic Medium education.⁷ From the point of view of *An Ceathramh*, CNSA provided access to a network of interested Gaelic learners.

All projects require finance, and in the case of *An Ceathramh* money was needed to convert an out-building on the croft into a studio suitable for teaching. Good advice was obtained from the beginning, and the Centre was described as a studio rather than a school which otherwise may have entailed a number of extra regulations and therefore expense. At the time the author obtained a position in the Celtic Department of St. Michael's College, the University of Toronto which he held for two years to build up finance towards the project. Also, European development money was available within the Scotland for agricultural diversification, and because the *An Ceathramh* project was on a registered croft it was an eligible holding and was awarded a grant. The result was that in June of 1992, *An Ceathramh* held its first class.

⁶Interestingly, the author acquired his Gaelic as a child at home while in Canada, to where the family had emigrated. There he was brought to conversational fluency through the help of Ann Readman, nee Nicolson (Anna Aonghais Alasdair 'icNeacail) a native of North Tolsta, Isle of Lewis.

⁷The pre-eminence of CNSA (later TAIC), is recognised by veterans of Gaelic development. Against the advice of many international scholars the group was shut-down by the Gaelic Language Board in 2011, which then took over its work. c.f. Editorial, *The West Highland Free Press*, 26 August, 2011

Further patterns of verb and noun use

Week 4, Advanced: Based upon consultation with the students
 Frequently involved trips to visit local speakers

For each class written material was prepared which recapitulated the steps taken to teach the particular goal. Although the classes were primarily conversation based, the written material, mostly visual, provided memory aids which proved quite popular with the students.⁸ A few students recorded the classes.

Owing to the location of *An Ceathramh*, food had to be provided. Efforts were always made to ensure that the students were well fed! Tea and coffee were always available and lunch menus were varied with vegetarian options. During the intermediate levels there was often a lesson involving bread making by the students themselves, the result of which was later eaten for lunch!

⁸A study of the methodology used at *An Ceathramh* formed part of a Masters Thesis by an *An Ceathramh* student, Palmer, Jeanine T., *Current Language Planning in Scotland*, MA Thesis, San Diego State University, Summer 1999, pp.62 -64.



(interior of An Ceathramh, author's picture)

In addition to the classroom the students went outside nearly every day. *An Ceathramh* was and is a working croft so the outside environment provided lots of opportunity for conversation on agricultural, historical or contemporary topics. People were not put under any pressure to speak but they had ample opportunity to listen to what others were saying. After a few years a mini-bus was added which increased the range of our outdoor visits.

The immersion classes discussed so far were on offer from April to October and in the main students came from outside the local area, most frequently from Scotland, often from England but also from Canada and the United States. With support from Caithness and Sutherland Enterprise⁹, *An Ceathramh* was able to offer afternoon and evening classes during the winter months, which were aimed at the

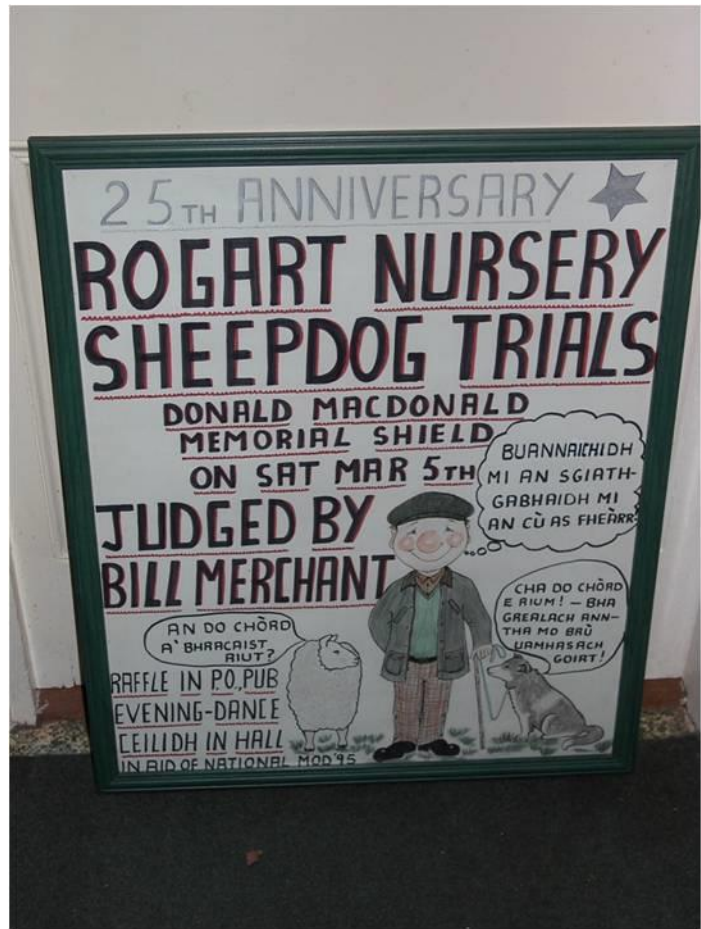
⁹Caithness and Sutherland Enterprise is one of a network of government organisations with a remit for economic and social development. cf. <http://www.hie.co.uk> July 17, 2012

local community. These classes were well attended and did a lot to promote Gaelic locally.

For the winter classes, students had the choice of afternoon or evening classes on different days of the week. The afternoon classes fit particularly well into schedules for parents with children in school. Since the students were local people an effort was made to teach a local dialect (Mackay Country, although lots of material from Nancy Dorian's work was also used.) but it was far from easy. In a few cases students had studied Gaelic elsewhere and were uneasy with different forms, and any material such as books, or material from the radio or television were also different. Also, at the time the author doubted his own ability in the dialect and was far from immune from the condescension accorded to local forms. However, the use of local Gaelic often awoke memories held by people of what they heard as children, which was very interesting to both the students and the author. As a result of the classes more and more Gaelic became integrated into local life.

The quieter schedule of the winter months gave the author time to visit and record Gaelic speakers throughout the area, particularly in the Mackay Country. In addition, Prof. Nancy Dorian was very generous with her material which she sent from time to time. A wealth of material has been collected, most of which is natural conversation, now spanning nearly three decades. This material was invaluable especially for creation of material for the local classes.

Popular events in Rogart are the Sheep Dog Trials. These are competitions to measure the skill of sheep dogs and their handlers in a range on traditional skills. For a number of years, the students produced high quality and amusing posters in Gaelic and English to advertise the event. This gave Rogart's Gaelic heritage strong local prominence.



Another very important effect of the classes was to promote pre-school and later Gaelic Medium Education. As a direct result of our

classes parents came together in 1999, and established a *Croileagan*, a pre-school group under the national pre-school education body CNSA. Funding was obtained from the National Lottery, so the group was well equipped. Children from neighbouring communities such as Golspie and Bonar Bridge also attended. The group in Rogart provided the spark which led to the establishment of a Gaelic Medium Unit in the neighbouring area of Bonar Bridge.

As a result of parental interest in Rogart, a meeting was held in Goslpie to determine the level of interest in Gaelic Medium Education. As it turned out very few Rogart parents attended, but a number of very determined parents from Bonar Bridge did come along, and initial steps were taken which later led to the successful establishment of a Gaelic Unit in Bonar Bridge School.

With regard to *An Ceathramh* itself there was little contact with other Gaelic bodies, other than CNSA.

For example, Comunn na Gàidhlig is a Gaelic development agency which has a remit for local projects, and had no input into *An Ceathramh*. Despite this every year someone from Comunn na Gàidhlig in Inverness would phone and after discussing pleasantries would try their best to obtain profit and loss figures for the year. They were never told. They did not support *An Ceathramh* in any way, although they at least were not active against it¹⁰. Interestingly figures from *An Ceathramh* appeared in yearly statements of Gaelic's contribution to the economy prepared by Comunn na Gàidhlig. In other situations, contact with official bodies was rather more difficult.

In 1996, Scotrail began to put up Gaelic signs at all rail stations in the Highlands. They were advised by Comunn na Gàidhlig which, at least with respect to Rogart, did little if any local consultation. The result of course was that a sign was erected at Rogart station which was different from what the students had learned at *An Ceathramh*, which in turn was based upon material gathered from local speakers. The students noticed!

Both Scotrail and Comunn na Gàidhlig were contacted. To their great credit, Scotrail's Highland manager phoned the author to discuss the situation. The controversy reached the press and Gaelic radio visited Rogart and interviewed a few of the local speaker who were sources of the name taught at *An Ceathramh*. Comunn na Gaidhlig insisted on the use of their choice based on literary sources and turned for support to the School of Scottish Studies. Dr. Ian Fraser from the School looked into the matter, and wrote that although he recognised the literary forms, his inclination was for the modern spoken form. For whatever reason, this was denied by Comunn na Gàidhlig, and it took the support and intervention of the local Member of Parliament, Robert Maclellan, to change their mind. Finally,

¹⁰Their lack of support was mentioned in an interview on Gaelic radio, with the result that the author's wife was invited to participate in a trip to the Stone Mountain Highland Gathering in the US in 1995. She was very pleased to participate, and the support was appreciated.

the offending sign was replaced! It is notable that a rare survival of local heritage was nearly lost owing to a programme which was supposed to be supportive!

Another spin-off from the encouragement of local topics at *An Ceathramh* was the establishment in 1996 of a *Comann Eachdraidh* in Rogart. These are heritage societies, with a view to involvement in both living and historical culture which began in 1977, in Ness, Isle of Lewis.¹¹ Most of the founding members were involved in same way with *An Ceathramh*. The organisation is still active, but owing to changes on the committee, the Gaelic emphasis is weak at present, although the *Comann Eachdraidh* did provide an organisation for support of local musical culture.

Gaelic culture has a rich musical heritage, and Rogart was and is particularly strong in dance and its related music.¹² To promote the parish's music, National Lottery grants were obtained to not only provide tuition, but also to purchase a bank on instruments (accordions, fiddles, chanters and bagpipes) so people could begin learning without incurring cost barriers. The tutors were all local players who were either Gaelic speakers themselves, or whose parents were Gaelic speakers. It was the intention that local styles would be taught as far as possible, and that a positive emphasis would be placed on the connection to language. The classes proved very popular and still continue, although no longer under *An Ceathramh* or the *Comann Eachdraidh*. In fact, at the time of writing in 2019, one of the *An Ceathramh* tutors is still providing private button-key accordion lessons. Her first experience as a teacher was with *An Ceathramh*.

As a result of work in *An Ceathramh*, the author was asked in 1998 to teach an immersion course in the community of Melness on the north coast under the auspices of North Highland College in Thurso.

¹¹cf. <http://www.dtascommunityownership.org.uk/content/case-studies/comunn-eachdraidh-nis> (accessed July 17, 2012)

¹²Melin, Mats, *A Sutherland Dance*. Highland Council, 1995

The project was promoted by the local CNSA field worker, Susanne Macdonald, who did an enormous amount of work in recruiting students and setting up the course. The project was aimed at parents of children in Gaelic Medium Education, and also to teach the local dialect. These immersion courses were organised through a number of colleges in different areas, was well funded and provided monetary allowances for the students and also money for a child's day-care if required. The hours were 10:00 to 3:00, four days a week, for a college year of two terms. For the author the two major attractions were the chance to teach the local dialect and to teach a course long enough for students to become competent speakers. It is notable that the course was aimed at parents and supported by Fionnlagh Macleòid. He has now established the Moray Language Centre and is very much involved internationally in the teaching of language to adults, particularly to parents. He has been a popular speaker and educator with the First Nations in North America. (Institute, n.d.)

There 10 students who came forward to do the course had various backgrounds in Gaelic, and of the 8 who finished the course a few were quite fluent and some went on to further involvement in Gaelic. After this course, the author was then asked to teach two more similar courses in Alness, Ross-Shire and in Dornoch, Sutherland. After the course in Dornoch, funding, for whatever reason, was not forthcoming in any college and so an excellent Gaelic project came to an end. In meantime, the number of classes at *An Ceathramh* had been cut back and, other than the music classes, the number of weekly classes at *An Ceathramh* were less. In addition, the author was offered a position at Scotland's Gaelic College, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig (SMO), in Skye. As with the earlier classes, the opportunity to do longer term courses was attractive, so the author took the position at SMO and the *An Ceathramh* Gaelic classes came to an end.

Looking at the longer term, the *An Ceathramh* project planted a number of seeds, notably the Gaelic Unit in Bonar Bridge, the *Comann Eachdraidh*, local music tuition, local Gaelic signs, and the students

who continued their Gaelic use at home or through becoming involved in Gaelic development. *An Ceathramh* stands out as an example of a project which was not part of a top down strategy from a government funded Gaelic organisation, and is probably still unique in that aspect. It is an excellent example of working with available resources and shows very well what can be achieved.

In closing, there is one more anecdote which can be related which shows clearly the extent of *An Ceathramh's* influence. In 2010, a local paper carried the story, “Councillor Slams Spending on Gaelic Education”.¹³ The councillor filled the pages of the newspaper with the usual complaints against second language funding. However, in the following week the paper printed 16 letters, of which only one supported the councillor. Twelve letters had local addresses, and of these ten were from people who had been involved in *An Ceathramh*. It is hard to think of a better recommendation of the work done at *An Ceathramh*!

¹³*Northern Times*, Golspie, Jan 22, 2010.

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