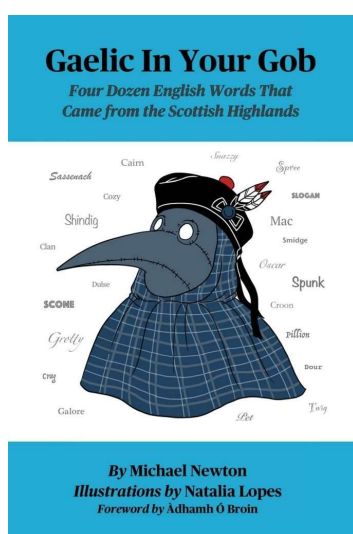


'Gaelic in your Gob: Four Dozen English Words that Came from the Scottish Highlands', by Michael Newton

Review by J. Derrick McClure



Gob - or 'gub' as it was pronounced in my distant Ayrshire boyhood - was a decidedly impolite word, its most common (and it *was* common) use being in the phrase 'Shut your ...'. A book which I read in that period referred to a juvenile detective whose 'mouth was rather too full of a sweetmeat which bore the slangy but expressive name of "gobstopper"'. Yet we learn from Michael Newton's discussion that this disreputable term has an entirely innocuous origin, being simply the Gaelic word for a bird's beak, adopted into Scots in the sixteenth century (its first attested use is in *Christis Kirk on the Grene*), soon phonetically naturalised as *gab* ('wi' his last gasp his gab did gape...'), and finding its way into English as a slang word in the nineteenth century.

We learn too that the word is used in Gaelic not only with its primary meaning but also in the sense which it has as a loanword in English and Scots, and is not necessarily insulting. The book's title, then, simply means 'Gaelic in your mouth'; and one of its successes is as a demonstration of how much Gaelic is used in complete ignorance by Anglophones and Scotophones who would disclaim any

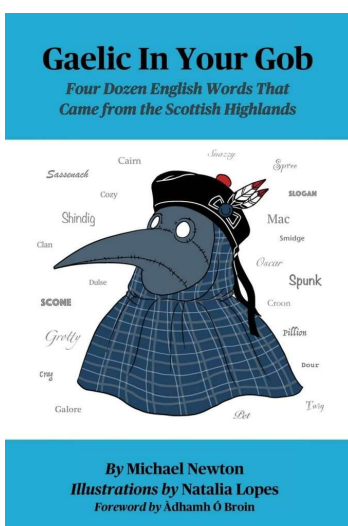
knowledge of the language. Though it will probably not be news to many readers that such words as *Sassenach*, *coronach*, *banshee* and *claymore* are of Gaelic derivation, who would have guessed it of *spree*, *cosy*, *jilt*, *bore* or (for those who remember these long-outmoded expressions) *snazzy* and *dig* (as in 'dig this, man!')? It must be acknowledged that the proposed Gaelic etymologies for those words, and others examined in this section (which is headed 'Slang and idioms'), are intriguing conjectures rather than ascertained facts; but the implication that Gaelic has been alive and well enough to influence the English language in recent times, and in areas far away from Scotland, is far-reaching.

The introductory essay examines the issue of inter-relationships between languages, and with specific reference to the centuries-long contact of Gaelic with English ('English', that is, in the inclusive sense: Anglo-Saxon and all the forms descended from it), a relationship often characterised by mutual suspicion and hostility, demonstrates the intricacies of language change and linguistic interaction. A word in one language may resemble a word in another not only from the simple case of direct adoption (like 'Sassenach', simply *Sasunnach* with a naturalised spelling), but by sheer chance (the Japanese word for 'name' is *namae*, the Navaho name for themselves, *Dine* meaning 'people', is surprisingly like Gaelic *duine*, and reportedly there is an Australian Aboriginal language in which the word for 'dog' is *dog*), or because of common descent from an ancestral form or as independent borrowings from the same source. And in the last two cases the actual degree of resemblance may be so slight as to disguise the common identity: English *mother* and Gaelic *màthair*, the example given, are clearly from the same root, but with, say, *fish* and *iasg* this is by no means obvious; and though Gaelic *clog* shows its descent from Latin *clocca* as clearly as does English *clock*, it is less easy to see that *iormailt* is from the same Latin word as *firmament*. Issues well known in all their complexity to language scholars are presented here for lay readers with lucidity as well as accurate understanding. A key point is that the inherent fascination of linguistic relationships has led ever since classical times to fanciful etymological speculations: Newton could have cited Plato's *Cratylus* and many other authorities between that and his actual example, Robert McDougall's 1841 guide for Gaelic-speaking settlers in Canada with its imaginative but (of course) absurd Gaelic derivations for words in Native American languages;¹ and though some of his own proposed etymologies might seem perilously close to inviting this charge, enough historical evidence is always presented to prove that the suggested borrowing process was in all cases at least

sociolinguistically possible.

The main section of the book is devoted to illustrating, through a notably diverse selection of examples, the faint but pervasive Gaelic presence in English: not only in Scotland (the abundant and well-known array of Gaelic loan-words in Scots is specifically not discussed) but in England, North America and Australia as well. First comes a discussion of the name *Scot*, first attested in Latin but, according to Newton's pleasing suggestion, perhaps ultimately from *scot* 'flower' (and by extension) 'choice, premier'. This chapter emphasises the fact, little known outwith scholarly circles, that the word originally referred to Gaelic-speakers from Ireland (in Old English, *Scotland* means 'Ireland'). Another misconception is corrected in the following discussion of *Sassenach*: the notion, which I have seen used as a debating point by Unionists, that this word refers to Lowlanders as well as English nationals is shown to be false. 'Slang and idioms' is the last of several sections in which familiar words are discussed with reference to their possible Gaelic origins: others are 'Warfare' (*slogan, blackmail, galloglass*), 'Sport and music' (*strathspey, croon, shindig*), 'Food and domestic life' (*whisky, scone, ingle*) and 'Landscape and nature' (*bog, crag, ptarmigan*). For many of the words discussed the Gaelic origin is fully ascertained and familiar; but in other cases we are led to question long-held assumptions (*scone* may not be from Dutch *schoonbrot*, nor *grotty* an abbreviation of 'grotesque').

Michael Newton's previous books have established his reputation as a writer who combines impeccable scholarship with an enticing clarity of style; and this, though perhaps his most outrightly entertaining work to date, fully maintains his standard. Readers are sure to enjoy this fascinating trip through a kaleidoscope of linguistic, literary, social and historical information.



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