
Robert Dunbar (University of Edinburgh)

NOVA SCOTIAN GAELIC VARIETIES: MORE THAN FOSSILS

Gaelic-speaking emigrants began arriving in what is now the Canadian province of Nova Scotia in 1773, and significant Highland migration to the province continued to the middle of the nineteenth century. This resulted in the creation of the largest and most enduring Gaelic-speaking communities in the world outside of Scotland, and in spite of precipitous language shift over the course of the twentieth century, there are still small numbers of native speakers in the province and, over the last fifteen years, more determined government-supported efforts to revitalise the language, resulting in apparent increases in the number of new speakers.

Both group migration and chain migration were significant features of Gaelic migration to and settlement in Nova Scotia, resulting in the retention in Nova Scotia of dialect features originating in the districts of the Scottish Gàidhealtachd from which migrants originated. The presence of certain features associated with areas of the mainland Highlands, in particular, in which Gaelic has all but disappeared has often been commented on, and although there is evidence of considerable conservatism, I will also consider how the language has evolved, and has been impacted by contact with other varieties, especially North American English. I will conclude by considering a number of issues regarding dialect, register, and orthography which have emerged in the context of more recent language acquisition and broader language revitalisation efforts.