

**THE EMPIRE WRITES BACK: ENGLISH-GAELIC CODE-SWITCHING IN A LETTER  
FROM NEW YORK 1778**

The summer of 1778 brought with it a number of difficulties for the British Army forces charged with regaining control of the American colonies from rebel forces. During this period of the American War of Independence, one Scottish Highland Regiment, the largely Gaelic-speaking Black Watch, was stationed on Long Island, just outside of New York. Writing to a friend in Glasgow from a tent on Long Island, the Chaplain of the Black Watch reported on the progress of the war, enquired of the political situation in Britain, and engaged in some intensely local discussions relating to contemporary Gaelic scholarship. The letter is remarkable for its use of both Gaelic and English.

The Chaplain in question was Rev. James McLagan (1728–1805), the preeminent eighteenth-century Scottish Gaelic literary collector and scholar (Ó Muircheartaigh 2016; 2020; Innes and Parsons 2021). His correspondent was Rev. Hugh MacDiarmid (†1801), an important collector of Gaelic literature in his own right. This paper will introduce the letter and then focus on its use of Gaelic in terms of both form and function. The purpose of the code-switching will be discussed, and set alongside other examples of English-Gaelic epistolary code-switching from the same period. The form of language used will then be examined to shed light on the linguistic repertoire of the Gaelic-speaking ministers with regards to register and dialect.

**References**

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