

Brìgh na Bàrdachd

The Power of our Songs

Gaelic song in Nova Scotia is descended from the medieval Bardic (poetic) tradition of Ireland and Scotland. Bards were well-educated and had high status in Gaelic society. When bardic schools were forced to close, it led to the decline of Scotland's literate Gaelic aristocracy in the 17th and 18th centuries.



This was devastating for the future of a Gaelic-centric education. However, the trained and learned elite became absorbed into the ranks of the *tuath*, or common people. Gaels put this knowledge to use during the 18th century, with song poets capturing in verse the beauty of the Highlands and the upheaval, loss and injustice experienced during this period in Gaelic history.

Gaelic poetry, which was intended to be sung, became one of the most important ways for the increasingly subjugated Gaels to record their experience, values and history. At the time of emigration, Gaels possessed one of the richest oral traditions in Western Europe.



Càit' an robh thu, neòinean-chùbhraidh,
Nuair bu ghruamaich gruaim a'
gheamhraidh,
Gus na dhùisg thu suas mu Bhealltuinn;
Dh' àraicheadh gun fhios dhut fhéin thu,
Rinn thu éiridh an déidh na gaillinn;
Tha thu nis fo d' thrusgan bòidheach
Thugadh dhuit le còir gun cheannach.

Bàrd na Ceapaich, Alasdair MacDonald,
the Keppoch Bard, who settled in
Antigonish County, composed this
nature poem, *Òran do Neòinean-
chùbhraidh*, to the first mayflower
he had ever seen. c. 1830

Och! Och! Mo sgeul cruaidh
'S ann a tha sibh 's a chuan
A Rìgh, nan tonn uaine is gorm
Gu'm bu bòidheach ur sgriob,
Nuair a dh' fhalbh i bho thìr,
Air an turas nach d' thill na seòid.

In *Òran Gillean Alasdair Mhoir*,
Sarah (MacDonald) MacArthur
grieves and remembers her two
brothers and their friend, who
were drowned off Cape Mabou,
Inverness County. c. 1848

Mìkma'ki (Nova Scotia) received tens of thousands of immigrants. Almost every Gaelic community in Nova Scotia had at least one bard. Gaels continued to express the life of their community through song – elegies to praise and remember, songs to celebrate the beauty and kinship of home, to express humor, satire, religious devotion, love and to chronicle events.



In addition to new compositions, Gaels in Nova Scotia continued to sing a vast *stòras* (corpus) of song-poems carried with them from Gaelic Scotland. These included historical, love and work songs, lullabies, psalm precenting, lays (hymns about warriors and heroes), sailing songs, puirt-a-beul (instrumental songs) and many others.



Gaels singing together during the annual Féis an Eilein concert series in Christmas Island, Cape Breton.

The songs would not have survived if it was not for the singers and appreciative listeners. Remarkable tradition bearers knew hundreds of songs. Through personal contact, publications and on-line collections, the songs they sang were handed down to Gaelic singers today.

Many people are attracted to learn Gaelic after being drawn to the beautiful and lively airs and the camaraderie shared during communal singing, which is how songs are often shared in Nova Scotia. Milling Frolics still take place in communities in Nova Scotia. Gaelic songs have been a staple among well-known recording artists. Community events and educational institutions offer opportunities to learn and experience Nova Scotia's Gaelic song tradition.



Nuair thigeadh an samhradh bu
bhòidheach 's an àm sin,
An duilleach air chrann cur nam
beanntan nan glòir,
Air raontan nan gleannan, gach
lusan 's neòinean,
Gu gucagach, crom-cheannach,
fanna-bhuidh 's gorm.

Bard Hugh F. MacKenzie says he
would dearly love to return to his
home of Christmas Island in *Bu
Deònach Leam Tilleadh*, composed
on Christmas Eve in 1927, when he
was working in Northern Ontario.