

THE GAELIC LANGUAGE

Mr. Neil Macdonald contributes an interesting paper to the *Week* on "The Celtic Races and Languages," from which the following extracts are taken:—

With the general admission of its great antiquity, as one of the oldest languages now spoken in the world, the study of the Celtic dialects was pursued with a zest unknown before; until, now, Celtic chairs are established and handsomely endowed in the leading universities of Europe, and Celtic studies are eagerly promoted in the higher schools of Germany, France, Italy, Denmark and Switzerland. In the University of Oxford it is also taught, and Scotland, after ages of neglect, gave a tardy recognition to its ancient language, by establishing a Gaelic chair in Edinburgh University, with Dr. McKinnon as professor. In Ireland, Parliament made provision for the teaching of Irish in the three colleges constituting Queen's University; but although a prize may be gained for proficiency in that language, its study has not been stimulated to the extent it would otherwise be, were it made one of the subjects in a degree examination. It is also taught in many of the National schools, and there are probably at the present time 2,000 of the National school teachers who are competent to give instructions in Irish. It is still spoken by at least a million people in Ireland; and in the Western Counties and in Mayo the ordinary salutation which travellers receive from the peasantry is almost sure to be in the rich, musical language of the Gael. The most eminent divines of the Catholic Church still preach in that language, and in the extensive archdiocese of Tuam, a knowledge of the ancient tongue is made a *conditio sine qua non* to an admission to holy orders.

Sir Walter Scott, to whom the Gael owes an unbounded debt of gratitude, stayed for a time the operation of those ruinous influences, and popularized, by the charm and magic of his genius, the Highlander, his country, his language and his dress. Before long the influence of his writings on public sentiment became perceptible. The Highlander was no longer regarded as a brigand and a cut-throat, but a man who, even when uneducated, had many of the traits of a gentleman. A keen sense of honour, a loyalty even unto death, and a hospitality that would share the shelter of his rude hut and the last morsel of food with the stranger, were soon regarded as more than palliations for vices and defects, less the result of natural prepossessions than the inevitable outcome of his circumstances and surroundings. Those caricatures of the Celtic face, so long regarded as being characteristic of the race, which sketched him with abnormally high cheek bones, retreating forehead, thick lips and an aspiring nose, ceased to be any longer regarded as distinctive features of this people; and it was conceded as altogether possible that the classic beauty and grace, and charm of manner of a Flora and Fergus MacIvor were sketched from the life among the "Highland savages."

The land of the mountain and the flood, with its mysterious lights and shadows, and romances of love and war became a popular pleasure ground for tourists. Gaelic, hitherto regarded as a barbarous jargon, began to be regarded as a language almost as musical as Italian, and for all the purposes of eloquence and poetry, unsurpassed even by the Greek; and the costume of the Scottish Celt, from being looked upon as fit only for a cattle reiver, was henceforth considered the handsomest dress in Europe.

Recently the study of Gaelic has received a new impulse in Scotland, and Prof. Blackie, an enthusiastic Celtic scholar though a Lowlander, has contributed largely to this result. It is now taught in several hundred schools in the Highland districts, and the importance of preserving their ancient language from decay is felt as it never was before by the Highland population of that country.

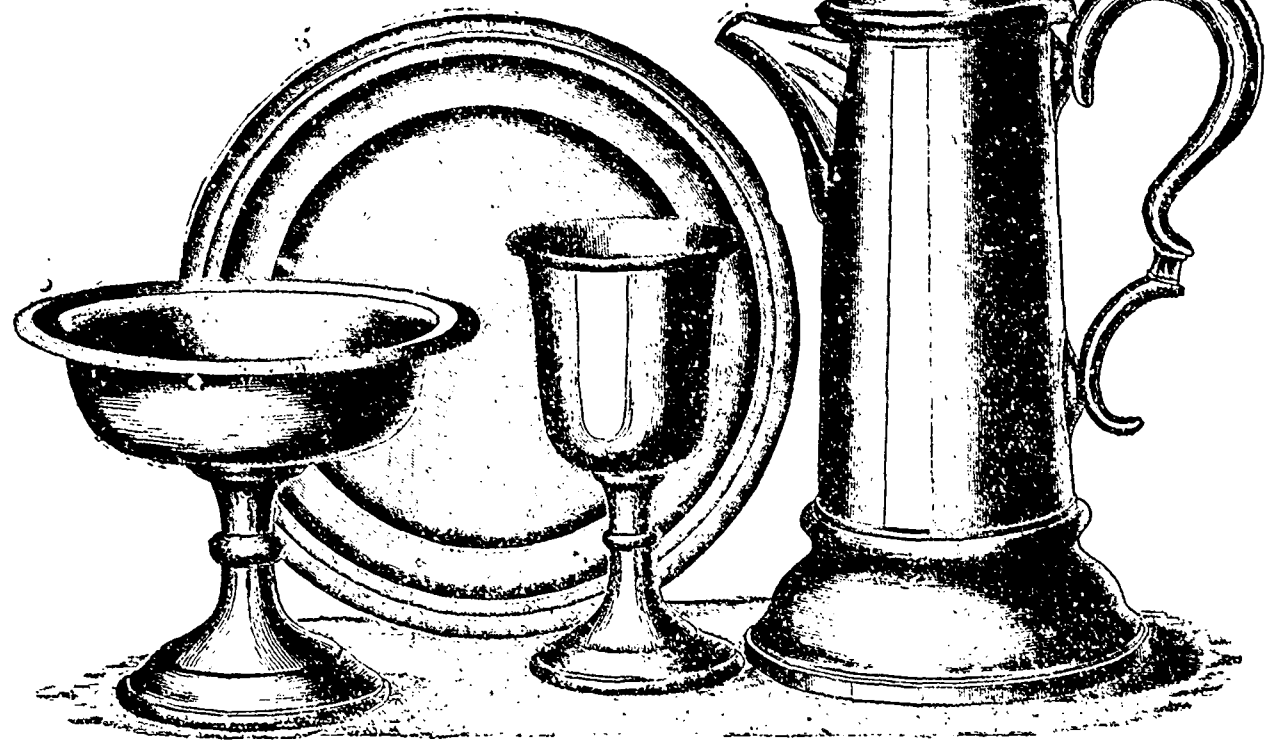
It would extend the limits of this paper too far to specially notice other Celtic races, or institute an inquiry into the causes producing the greater differences existing between the Cymric, Breton, and Cornish dialects of the Celtic language respectively; and those slight variations which leave the Irish and Scottish Gaelic so remarkably homogeneous. It would not be difficult to show that the small amount of change undergone by the languages of the latter, separated as the two races were for over a thousand years, is strong presumption of their greater similarity to the original Celtic than those other dialects mentioned, which almost differ as much from each other as they do from the Irish and Scottish Gaelic. Were important changes produced simultaneously in the language of two kindred peoples, separated for centuries, it is very improbable that the variations from the parent type should be precisely the same; but rather that, as century after century passed by, the varied circumstances under which the two races existed would modify still more and more their speech, until, finally, they would differ as much from their common origin as they did from each other. It is not, then, illogical to suppose, that, such changes not being apparent in the Celtic dialects of Scotland and Ireland, they have changed just as little from the language spoken by both when the races became parted ages ago. Why the other Celtic septs speak dialects differing so much from each other, and probably from the original language of the race, is likely owing to the fact of a greater contact and admixture with other races, and from living under circumstances more productive of change and diversity of speech.

In the United States, though there is a large Celtic population, and many thousands who can speak the Celtic language, it is not the medium of communication between people of this race to any great extent. Emigrants having a knowledge of the language, upon arriving there, are almost invariably isolated from others possessing a similar

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knowledge, the consequence being that it falls into disuse; and with the death of the first generation a knowledge of it ceases altogether. In the city of New York and other large cities of the Union efforts have been made of late to stay for a time the extinction of the ancient tongue. Schools have been established for instruction in it and strenuous efforts made to enlist the sympathies of the Irish in behalf of their noble and venerable language. Patriotism has induced many to engage in its study, but the most sanguine and enthusiastic lovers of Gaelic can scarcely hope to retard for any great length of time, its final relegation in that country exclusively to the province of the philologist.

In Canada, Scottish Gaelic is still spoken by a considerable number of the people, and there are many localities where a knowledge of it is almost indispensable. The cause of this prevalence of the language in Canada in contradistinction to its disusage and gradual disappearance in the United States is obvious. In Canada the Highland Scotch emigrants settled together in the same localities, and it was but rarely that a Scotch Celt was so isolated from his people as to be unable to continue the use of the mother tongue. Hence it is that in a thousand districts scattered throughout the Province of Ontario, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and the North-West, Gaelic is spoken as freely as in the Highlands; and Glengarry can boast of a much larger Gaelic-speaking population to-day than the old Glengarry which the Macdonald regiment left almost a century ago.

In hundreds of churches scattered over the country, from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, religious services are still conducted in the old language. Those services are, however, more sparsely attended year after year, as the young Canadian, though he may thoroughly understand the Gaelic and feel attached to it as the language of his forefathers, generally feels disinclined to sit out two long services; and that in English being followed immediately by Gaelic, he gives the former the preference, partly because it comes first, and partly because it is the language used generally by the young outside of the immediate family circle. It does not require a great provision of events to predict the ultimate result of all this. The dialect is nowhere in Canada taught in schools, and unless some extraordinary effort is made to retard those destructive influences Gaelic within a few centuries shall have become completely extinct as a spoken language on this continent.

It is almost superfluous to enter into particulars of the part played by the Celt on this continent. He has stamped his glyph deep upon its history, and it needs not a journalist to become the spologist of a race which is able to meet adverse criticism upon its intellectual equality by pointing to its long list of illustrious names.

In almost every department of human activity the Gaelic people in this country have displayed a capacity and talent which has not been surpassed, and this, notwithstanding the fact, that circumstances with which other nationalities had not to contend, were arrayed against them. They have given to Canada many of its leading statesmen,

jurists, clergymen, merchants, and teachers; and surely in view of what they have achieved the most prejudiced in this country can scarcely accuse them of vanity if they adopt as theirs the proud motto of the Forty-second Regiment, "Second to none."

While keenly alive to the importance of the people of Canada becoming homogeneous in sentiment the writer deprecates the notion that in order to be true to the country of his adoption the Englishman, Irishman, Scotchman, or Frenchman should permit his race sympathies to fall into abeyance, and discard as speedily as possible the language and peculiarities of his race. Loyalty demands and requires no such sacrifice. The various cantons of Switzerland, differing as they do in language and religion, are at one in love for their common country, and the Highlander, different as he is from the Lowlander in race and language, does not require to prove at least his equal devotion to the land of his birth.

If loyalty to race does not prove a sufficient motive with many of Celtic descent to prevent the language of their fathers from falling into desuetude, perhaps a more selfish consideration may induce them to regard it with greater favour. It is not a fact that a person becomes less thorough in one language because he knows another, but quite the reverse, and few are so ignorant as not to be aware that to know English well a knowledge of Latin is almost indispensable. The bi-lingual peoples of Europe are undoubtedly superior in range of idea and acuteness to those possessing only one language. If the dull, phlegmatic Dutchman, speaking one language, is compared with his congener the native of Belgium, speaking French and Flemish, or French and Walloon, the intellectual superiority of the latter is apparent. The same holds good of several of the Swiss cantons. Everything else being equal, persons possessing a knowledge of two languages have an expansiveness of intellect which they could not possess were they limited to one form of speech. This argument applies equally to a knowledge of Gaelic, which, added to its utility as a language still extensively spoken, enriches its possessor with a wealth of imagery and poetical figures of speech which cannot fail to be conducive to success in any vocation requiring mental effort.

The Greek of the Academy and the Latin of the Forum are not now spoken by any nation upon the face of the earth, but a language, probably older than either, is still spoken by three or four millions of people and forms now the one living link of speech binding a prehistoric past with the world of to-day. It would be a subject for sincere regret were this noble form of speech to become extinct—a language which probably more than any other is an exponent of the characteristics of the race by which it is spoken; a language so capable of expressing the lights and shadows of the Celtic temperament, with its emotional transports which sweep the entire diapason of feeling, its melancholy and gaiety, its idealisms and devotional raptures; a language which probably more than any other breathes of mystery and the past as the monovalve shell does of the tides and the sea!