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# **Elements of Gaelic Grammar**

*Alexander Stewart*

# Imprint

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ELEMENTS

OF  
GAELIC GRAMMAR

IN FOUR PARTS

I. OF PRONUNCIATION AND ORTHOGRAPHY

II. OF THE PARTS OF SPEECH

III. OF SYNTAX

IV. OF DERIVATION AND COMPOSITION

BY

ALEXANDER STEWART

MINISTER OF THE GOSPEL AT DINGWALL  
HONORARY MEMBER OF THE HIGHLAND SOCIETY OF SCOT-  
LAND

Royal Celtic Society Edition.

FOURTH EDITION REVISED.

WITH PREFACE BY THE REV. DR M<sup>c</sup>LAUHLAN

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1892

## PREFACE.

For several years the Grammar of the Gaelic language by the Rev. Dr Stewart of Moulin has been out of print. This has been a source of regret to scholars and students of that tongue. Not but that there are other Grammars of real value, which it would be unjust either to ignore or to depreciate, and which have served, and are serving, an excellent purpose in connection with Celtic Literature. But the Grammar of Dr Stewart has peculiar features of its own which give it a permanent value. It is distinguished by its simplicity, conciseness, and philosophical accuracy. No Grammar of any language bears on its pages the marks of real and profound scholarship, in so far as it goes, more than does the Grammar of Dr Stewart. One cannot read a sentence of it without seeing how carefully he had collected his materials, and with what judgment, caution, and sagacity he has compared them and drawn his conclusions. His discussions upon the Article, the Noun, the Verb, and the Preposition, are ample evidence of this. It is no doubt true that a much fuller discussion is, with the more abundant resources of modern scholarship, {iv}competent and desirable, but, so far as he goes, Dr Stewart's treatment of the subject is of a masterly character.

That there are defects to be found in the work is very true. On the subject of Syntax his disquisitions are deficient in fulness, and there is a want of grammatical exercises throughout. It was at first thought desirable by the publishers and their advisers to remedy these defects by introducing fuller notices on the subject of Syntax, and a considerable number of grammatical exercises from other sources open to them. But it was finally deemed best in every view of it to give Stewart's work just as he had left it, and that is done here with the exception of a list of subscribers' names in the introduction. Messrs Maclachlan and Stewart are doing the literary community a service in republishing this volume, and thanks are specially due to the Royal Celtic Society of Edinburgh, a society which has done much to foster the interests of education in the Highlands, and which has given substantial aid towards the accomplishment of this undertaking.

**Thos. M<sup>c</sup>Lauchlan.**

Edinburgh, *1st August 1876.*

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## INTRODUCTION.

The utility of a Grammar of the Scottish Gaelic will be variously appreciated. Some will be disposed to deride the vain endeavour to restore vigour to a decaying superannuated language. Those who reckon the extirpation of the Gaelic a necessary step toward that general extension of the English which they deem essential to the political interest of the Highlands, will condemn every project which seems likely to retard its extinction. Those who consider that there are many parts of the Highlands, where the inhabitants can, at present, receive no useful knowledge whatever except through the channel of their native tongue, will probably be of opinion that the Gaelic ought at least to be tolerated. Yet these too may condemn as useless, if not ultimately detrimental, any attempt to cultivate its powers, or to prolong its existence. Others will entertain a different opinion. They will judge from experience, as well as from the nature of the case, that no measure merely of a literary kind will prevail to hinder the progress of the English language over the Highlands; while general convenience and emolument, not to mention private emulation and vanity, conspire to facilitate its introduction, and prompt the natives to its acquisition. They {viii} will perceive at the same time, that while the Gaelic continues to be the common speech of multitudes, — while the knowledge of many important facts, of many necessary arts, of morals, of religion, and of the laws of the land, can be conveyed to them only by means of this language, — it must be of material service to preserve it in such a state of cultivation and purity, as that it may be fully adequate to these valuable ends; in a word, that while it is a living language, it may answer the purpose of a living language.

To those who wish for an uniformity of speech over the whole kingdom, it may not be impertinent to suggest one remark. The more that the human mind is enlightened, the more desirous it becomes of farther acquisitions in knowledge. The only channel through which the rudiments of knowledge can be conveyed to the mind of a remote Highlander is the Gaelic language. By learning to read and to understand what he reads, in his native tongue, an appetite is generated for those stores of science which are accessible to him only through the medium of the English language. Hence an

acquaintance with the English is found to be necessary for enabling him to gratify his desire after further attainments. The study of it becomes, of course, an object of importance; it is commenced, and prosecuted with increasing diligence. These premises seem to warrant a conclusion which might at first appear paradoxical, that, by cultivating the Gaelic, you effectually, though indirectly, promote the study and diffuse the knowledge of the English.

To public teachers it is of the highest moment that the medium through which their instructions are communicated be properly adapted to that use, and that they be enabled to avail themselves of it in the fittest manner. A language destitute of grammatical regularity can possess neither {ix}perspicuity nor precision, and must therefore be very inadequate to the purpose of conveying one's thoughts. The Gaelic is in manifest danger of falling into this discreditable condition, from the disuse of old idioms and distinctions, and the admission of modern corruptions, unless means be applied to prevent its degenerating. It is obvious that a speaker cannot express himself with precision without a correct knowledge of grammar. When he is conscious of his ignorance in this respect, he must deliver himself sometimes ambiguously or erroneously, always with diffidence and hesitation, whereas one who has an accurate knowledge of the structure and phraseology of the language he speaks, will seldom fail to utter his thoughts with superior confidence, energy, and effect.

A competent degree of this knowledge is requisite to the hearer also, to enable him to apprehend the full import and the precise force of the words of the speaker. Among the readers of Gaelic, who are every day becoming more numerous, those only who have studied it grammatically are qualified to understand accurately what they read, and to explain it distinctly to others. Yet it cannot be denied that comparatively few ever arrive at a correct, or even a tolerable knowledge of grammar, without the help of a treatise composed for the purpose. Whoever, therefore, allows that the Gaelic must be employed in communicating to a large body of people the knowledge of revealed Truth and the way of eternal Life, will readily admit the extensive utility of investigating and unfolding its grammatical principles. Impressed with this conviction, I have been

induced to offer to the public the following attempt to develop the grammar of the Scottish Gaelic.

While I have endeavoured to render this treatise useful to those who wish to improve the knowledge of Gaelic which {x}they already possess, I have also kept in view the gratification of others, who do not understand the Gaelic, but yet may be desirous to examine the structure and properties of this ancient language. To serve both these purposes, I have occasionally introduced such observations on the analogy between the Gaelic idiom and that of some other tongues, particularly the Hebrew, as a moderate knowledge of these enabled me to collect. The Irish dialect of the Gaelic is the nearest cognate of the Scottish Gaelic. An intimate acquaintance with its vocables and structure, both ancient and modern, would have been of considerable use. This I cannot pretend to have acquired. I have not failed, however, to consult, and to derive some advantage from such Irish philologists as were accessible to me, particularly O'Molloy, O'Brien, Vallancey, and Lhuyd. To these very respectable names I have to add that of the Rev. Dr Neilson, author of "An Introduction to the Irish Language," Dublin, 1808, and E. O'C., author of "A Grammar of the Gaelic Language," Dublin, 1808; to the latter of whom I am indebted for some good-humoured strictures, and some flattering compliments, which, however unmerited, it were unhandsome not to acknowledge. I know but one publication professedly on the subject of Gaelic grammar written by a Scotsman <sup>[1]</sup>. I have consulted it also, but in this quarter I have no obligations to acknowledge.

With respect to my literary countrymen who are proficient in the Gaelic, and who may cast an eye on this volume, less with a view to learn than to criticise, while I profess a due deference to their judgment, and declare my anxiety to obtain their favourable suffrage, I must take the liberty to entreat their attention to the following considerations.

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The subject of Universal Grammar has been examined in modern times with a truly philosophical spirit, and has been settled on rational and stable principles; yet, in applying these principles to explain the grammar of a particular language, the divisions, the ar-

rangements, and the rules to be given are, in a good measure, mechanical and arbitrary. One set of rules may be equally just with another. For what is it that grammatical rules do? They bring into view the various parts, inflections, or, as they may be termed, the *phenomena* of a language, and class them together in a certain order. If these *phenomena* be all brought forward, and stated according as they actually appear in the language, the rules may be said to be both just and complete. Different sets of rules may exhibit the same things in a different order, and yet may all be equally just. The superiority seems, on a comparison, to belong to that system which follows most nearly the order of nature, or the process of the mind in forming the several inflections; or rather, perhaps, to that system which, from its simplicity, or clear and comprehensive arrangement, is most fitted to assist the memory in acquiring and retaining the parts of speech with their several inflections.

In distributing the various parts of language into their several classes, and imposing names on them, we ought always to be guided by the nature of that language, and to guard against adopting, with inconsiderate servility, the distributions and technical terms of another. This caution is the more necessary because, in our researches into the grammar of any particular tongue, we are apt to follow implicitly the order of the Latin grammar, on which we have been long accustomed to fix our attention, and which we are ever ready to erect into a model for the grammar of all languages. To force the several parts of speech into moulds formed for the {xii}idioms of the Latin tongue, and to frame them so as to suit a nomenclature adapted to the peculiarities of Latin grammar, must have the effect of disguising or concealing the peculiarities, and confounding the true distinctions, which belong to the language under discussion.

Although, in treating of Gaelic grammar, the caution here suggested ought never to be forgotten, yet it is needless to reject indiscriminately all the forms and terms introduced into the grammar of other languages. Where the same classifications which have been employed in the grammar of the Latin, or of any other well-known tongue, will suit the Gaelic also, it is but a convenient kind of courtesy to adopt these, and apply to them the same names which are already familiar to us.

In stating the result of my researches into Gaelic grammar, I have endeavoured to conform to these general views. The field of investigation was wide, and almost wholly untrodden. My task was not to fill up or improve the plan of any former writer, but to form a plan for myself. In the several departments of my subject that distribution was adopted which, after various trials, appeared the most eligible. When there were terms already in use in the grammars of other languages that suited tolerably well the divisions which it was found requisite to make, I chose to adopt these, rather than load the treatise with novel or uncommon terms. If their import was not sufficiently obvious already, it was explained, either by particular description, or by reference to the use of these terms in other grammars. In some instances it was found necessary to employ less common terms, but in the choice of these I endeavoured to avoid the affectation of technical nicety. I am far from being persuaded that I am so fortunate as to have hit on the best possible plan. I am certain that it must {xiii}be far from complete. To such charges a first essay must necessarily be found liable. Still there is room to hope that the work may not prove wholly useless or unacceptable. Imperfect as it is, I may be allowed to think I do a service of its kind to my countrymen by frankly offering the fruits of my labour to such as may choose to make use of them. It has been, if I mistake not, the misfortune of Gaelic grammar that its ablest friends have done nothing directly in its support, because they were apprehensive that they could not do everything.

I confess that my circumscribed knowledge of the varieties of dialect used in different parts of the Highlands, may have left me unacquainted with some genuine Gaelic idioms which ought to be noticed in a work of this kind. The same cause may have led me to assert some things in too general terms, not being sufficiently informed concerning the exceptions which may be found in use in some particular districts. I respectfully invite, and will thankfully receive, the correction of any person whose more accurate and extensive information enables him to supply my omissions, or to rectify my mistakes.

In a few particulars I have differed from some of the highest living authorities,—I mean those gentlemen whose superior abilities are so conspicuous in the masterly translation of the sacred Scrip-

tures with which the Highlands of Scotland are now blessed. [2] Here I have been careful to {xiv}state the grounds on which my judgment was formed. In doing this, I would always be understood to advance my opinion and propose my reasons with the view of suggesting them to the consideration of my countrymen, rather than in the expectation of having my conclusions universally sustained and adopted.

Among my grammatical readers, it is probable that some may have formed to themselves arrangements on the subjects different from mine. Of these I have to request that they do not form a hasty judgment of the work from a partial inspection of it, nor condemn it merely because it may differ from their preconceived schemes. Let them indulge me with a patient perusal of the whole, and a candid comparison of the several parts of the system with each other. To a judicious critic, some faults and many defects may appear, and several improvements will occur. On this supposition, I have one request more to make: that he join his efforts with mine in serving a common cause, interesting to our country, and dear to every patriotic Highlander.

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## ADVERTISEMENT

TO THE

## SECOND EDITION.

In preparing a Second Edition of the following treatise, the author has endeavoured to avail himself of every assistance in his power, from books, observation, and the communications of some literary friends, to whom he is indebted for several judicious remarks. In comparing the opinions of different critics, it was not to be expected that all should be found to agree together. It sometimes happened that one approved what another would have rejected. If the author has not adopted every hint that was offered him, but used the privilege of exercising his own judgment, the responsibility must rest with himself. He hopes those gentlemen who most obligingly favoured him with their remarks will forgive him for mentioning their names, for he is unwilling to withhold from the public the satisfaction of knowing that he has had the best assistance which his country could afford him in compiling and modelling his work. He thankfully acknowledges his obligations to the Rev. Dr Robertson, of Callander; Dr Graham, of Aberfoyle; Dr Stuart, of Luss; Dr Macleod, of Kilmarnock; and Mr Irvine, of Little Dunkeld.

From these sources of emendation, omissions have been {xvi}supplied, idiomatic phrases have been collected and inserted, some alterations have been made by simplifying or compressing particular parts, and new examples and illustrations have been introduced throughout, according as the advantages which the author enjoyed enabled him to extend his knowledge of the language, and served to correct, or to confirm, his former judgments. He thought it might be acceptable to Gaelic scholars to have a few lessons subjoined as exercises in translating and analysing. For this purpose he has selected some specimens of original prose composition, extracted from unpublished manuscripts, and from the oldest Gaelic books that are known to be extant. These specimens, short as they are, may suffice to exhibit something of the powers and elegances of the language in its native purity, unmixed with foreign words and idioms, as well as to show the manner in which it was written two or three centuries ago.

The present edition owes its existence to the generous patronage of Sir John Macgregor Murray of Lanrick, Bart., to whom the author

is happy in avowing his obligations for the unsolicited and liberal encouragement given him in the execution and publication of his work. To the same gentleman he is indebted for the honour of being permitted here to record the names of those patriotic sons of Caledonia who, in concert with the honourable baronet, and at his suggestion, though residing in the remote provinces of India, yet mindful of their country's fame, contributed a liberal sum of money for promoting Celtic literature, more especially for publishing the poems of Ossian in their original language. It is owing, in a principal degree, to their munificent aid, that the anxious expectation of the public has been at last so richly gratified by Sir John Sinclair's elegant and elaborate edition of the poems of that tender and lofty bard.

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# ELEMENTS OF GAELIC GRAMMAR.

## PART I.

### OF PRONUNCIATION AND ORTHOGRAPHY.

The Gaelic alphabet consists of eighteen letters: a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, l, m, n, o, p, r, s, t, u. Of these, five are vowels, a, e, i, o, u; the rest consonants.

In explaining the powers of the letters, and of their several combinations, such obstacles lie in the way that complete success is not to be expected. In order to explain, in writing, the sounds of a particular language, the only obvious method is to represent them by the letters commonly employed to exhibit similar sounds in some well-known living language. But there are sounds in the Gaelic to which there are none perfectly similar in English, nor perhaps in any modern European tongue. Besides, the same combination of letters does not invariably represent the same sound in one age that it did in a former, or that it may do in the next. And this may be equally true of the letters of the Gaelic alphabet, whose powers are to be taught; and of the letters of any other language, by whose sounds the powers of the former are to be explained. A diversity of pronunciation is very distinguishable also in different districts of the Highlands of Scotland, even in uttering the same words written in the same manner. Though the powers of the letters, then, may be explained to a certain degree of accuracy, yet much will still remain to be learned by the information of the ear alone. {2}

Although the chief use of the vowels be to represent the *vocal sounds* of speech, and that of the consonants to represent its *articulations*, yet, as in many languages, so in Gaelic, the consonants sometimes serve to modify the sound of the vowels with which they are combined; while, on the other hand, the vowels often qualify the sound of the consonants by which they are preceded or followed.

It may not appear obvious at first sight how a vowel should be employed, not to represent a vocal sound, but to modify an articulation. Yet examples are to be found in modern languages. Thus, in the English words, George, sergeant, the *e* has no other effect than to give *g* its soft sound; and in guest, guide, the *u* only serves to give *g*

its hard sound. So in the Italian words *giorno*, *giusto*, and many others, the *i* only qualifies the sound of the preceding consonant. The same use of the vowels will be seen to take place frequently in Gaelic orthography.

Besides the common division of the letters into Vowels and Consonants, it is found convenient to adopt some further subdivisions.

The Vowels are divided into *broad* and *small*: *a*, *o*, *u*, are called *broad* vowels; *e*, *i*, *small* vowels.

The Consonants are divided into *Mutes* and *Liquids*: *Mutes*, *b*, *c*, *d*, *f*, *g*, *m*, *p*, *t*; *Liquids*, *l*, *n*, *r*, *s* <sup>[3]</sup>. They are also divided into *Labials*, *Palatals*, and *Linguals*, so named from the organs employed in pronouncing them: *Labials*, *b*, *f*, *m*, *p*; *Palatals*, *c*, *g*; *Linguals*, *d*, *l*, *n*, *r*, *s*, *t*.

The aspirate *h* is not included in any of these divisions <sup>[4]</sup>.

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#### OF THE SOUNDS OF THE VOWELS <sup>[5]</sup>.

All the vowels are sometimes long, sometimes short. A long vowel is often marked with an accent, especially when the *quantity* of the vowel determines the meaning of the word; as, *bàs death*, *sàil the heel*, *càraid a pair*, *rìs again*, *mò more*, *lòn a marsh*; which are distinguished by the accent alone from *bas the palm* of the hand, *sail a beam*, *caraid a friend*, *ris to*, *lon the elk*.

All the vowels, but especially the broad ones, have somewhat of a nasal sound when preceded or followed by *m*, *mh*, *n*, *nn*. No vowels are doubled in the same syllable like *ee*, *oo*, in English.

In almost all polysyllables, excepting some words compounded with a preposition, the accent falls on the first syllable <sup>[6]</sup>. The other syllables are short and unaccented, and the vowels in that situation have in general the same short obscure sound. Hence it happens that the broad vowels in these syllables are often used indiscriminately.

There are no quiescent final vowels.

## A.

A has three sounds.

1. The first is both long and short; long, like *a* in the English words *far*, *star*; as, àr *slaughter*, àth *a ford*, gràdh, {4} *love*, sàruich *oppress*; short, like *a* in *that*; as, cath *a battle*, alt *a joint*; abuich *ripe*.

2. Both long and short, before *dh* and *gh*. This sound has none like it in English. Long, as, adhbhar *a cause*, adhradh *worship*; short, as, lagh *a law*, magh *a field*, adharc *a horn*.

3. Short and obscure, like *e* in *mother*; as, an, a *the*, ar *our*, ma *if*, and in the plural termination *a* or *an*.

## E.

E has three sounds.

1. Both long and short: long, like *e* in *where*, *there*; as, è, sè *he*, rè *during*. This *e* is generally marked with a grave accent. Short, like *e* in *met*; as, le *with*, leth *half*.

2. Long, as, ré *the moon*, cé *the earth*, and dé *yesterday*. This *e* is commonly marked with an acute accent.

3. Short, like *e* in *mother*; as, duine *a man*, ceannuichte *bought*.

## I.

I has two sounds.

1. Both long and short, like *ee* in *seem*: long, as, mìn *smooth*, rìgh *a king*; short, as, min *meal*, crìth *trembling*.

2. Short and obscure, like *i* in *this*; as, is *am*, *art*, &c.

## O.

O has three sounds.

1. Both long and short: long, somewhat like *o* in *more*; as, mòr *great*, òr *gold*, dòchas *expectation*; short, like *o* in *hot*; as, mo *my*, do *thy*, dochann *harm*.

2. Both long and short: long, nearly like *o* in *old*; as, lom *bare*, toll *a hole*; short, as, lomadh *making bare*, tolladh *boring*.

3. Both long and short, like (2) *a* <sup>[7]</sup> : long, as, foghlum *to learn*; short, as, roghuinn *choice*, logh *to forgive*.

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## U.

*U* has one sound, both long and short, like *oo* in *fool*: long, as, ùr *fresh*, ùraich *to renew*; short, as, ubh *an egg*, urras *a surety*.

## OF THE DIPHTHONGS.

There are thirteen Diphthongs reckoned in Gaelic; *ae*, *ai*, *ao*, *ea*, *ei*, *eo*, *eu*; *ia*, *io*, *iu*; *oi*; *ua*, *ui*. Of these, *ao*, *eu*, *ia*, *ua*, are always long; the others are sometimes long, sometimes short.

### Ae.

The sound of *ae* is made up of (1) *a* long, and (1) *e* short. This diphthong hardly occurs, except in Gael *a Gaul* or *Highlander*, and Gaelic the *Gaelic language* <sup>[8]</sup>.

### Ai.

The sound of *ai* is either made up of the sounds of both the vowels, or like that of the former.

1. Made up of (1) *a* and (1) *i*: the *a* long, the *i* short; as, fàidh *a prophet*; the *a* short, the *i* short; as, claidheamh *a sword*.

2. Made up of (2) *a* and (1) *i*: the *a* long, the *i* short; as, saighde *arrows*.

Before a Lingual or a Palatal, not quiescent, the *i* often loses its sound, and only serves to qualify the sound of the following consonant <sup>[9]</sup>; hence,

3. Like (1) *a* alone: long, as, fàisg *squeeze*, fàilte *salutation*; short, as, glaic *a hollow*, tais *soft*.

4. Like (2) *a* alone: short, as, airm *arms*, gairm *a call*.