

A Study of Gaelic Language and Culture in
Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd*

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Education

of

Mount Saint Vincent University

by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Research Master of Arts

September, 2008

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I dedicate this thesis to my children Sarah and Ian MacNeil.

Abstract

The purpose of this study of Gaelic language and culture in Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd* is to discover trends in the loss of the Gaelic language and culture in this community and to identify what will be lost as a result. While estimated numbers of Gaelic speakers indicate that in the 1800s there were approximately one hundred thousand speakers, today there are few living people for whom Gaelic is a first language in Nova Scotia. The type of Gaelic most commonly spoken in Cape Breton is Scottish Gaelic which is currently an endangered language. This study focuses specifically on communities in Cape Breton which were settled by people from Barra, Scotland, but the research has implications for the Gaelic community of Nova Scotia as a whole. For this investigation, five Gaelic speakers from Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd* were interviewed and extensive archival research was conducted at the Beaton Institute in Sydney, Cape Breton. Four trends that contributed to the decline of the Gaelic language include: government policies towards Gaelic language, depopulation of rural areas, the movement of English into Gaelic communities, and the passing of the last Gaelic monolinguals. Much more than a language stands to be lost if the Barra dialect dies out in this community. For example, language loss is connected to the loss of worldview and culture and also to the *blas* (taste) of the language. The impact of the outside English world on Gaelic speakers' confidence in the language is explored, as is the role of the Nova Scotian government, in terms of its support of the language and lack thereof at different historical moments.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Susan Walsh of Mount Saint Vincent University, for her encouragement and guidance throughout this project. Additionally, I wish to thank Dr. Heather Blair of the University of Alberta, who was part of my thesis committee, for her suggestions and guidance.

A special thank you goes to Anne MacNeil and Anne Connell of the Beaton Institute in Sydney, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia for their support during my numerous archival searches.

A special thank you is extended to my wife Suzanne and my children Sarah and Ian MacNeil for their support and understanding during this project. I would like to thank my parents, Eddie and Patsy MacNeil, for their encouragement and financial support.

I wish to express my gratitude to Clyde, Eachann, Hugh, Joseph and Stephen for sharing their stories. Without them, this research would not have been possible.

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Introduction

This purpose of this study of Gaelic language and culture in Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd* (Cape Breton's Barra Gaelic speaking area) is to identify trends in the loss of the Gaelic language and culture in this community and to identify what will be lost as a result. The Gaelic in the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* is a dialect of Scottish Gaelic. Scottish Gaelic is one of the many languages worldwide which are on the verge of extinction. This thesis is significant in that the linguistic group which is the focus of this study is on the verge of extinction, and the area has rarely been the subject of in-depth investigation. As part of this study, I interviewed five people, one of whom is one of the last speakers from the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* with Gaelic as a first language.

I chose to study Gaelic in the Barra communities of Cape Breton because it is in-keeping with my personal interests. This project is personally relevant in that both my parents are MacNeils by birth and both can trace their ancestry to Barra, Scotland¹. Additionally, they both have an ancestral connection to the Barra *Gaidhealtachd*. I am the genealogist for Clan MacNeil in Canada, and I have extensively studied the ancestry of all of the Barra families known to have lived in this area. I am the editor of the Clan MacNeil in Canada Newsletter and the co-administrator of the MacNeil-Barra DNA project hosted at

¹ My paternal *sloinneadh* (pedigree) is Vincent Patrick MacNeil son of (s/o) Michael Edward 'Eddie' s/o Hector Raymond 'Raymond' s/o Hector Raymond s/o Hector J. s/o James s/o Malcolm s/o John s/o Rory 'The Piper' who was the piper to the Chief of Barra. My maternal *sloinneadh* is Vincent Patrick s/o Agnes Patricia 'Patsy' daughter of (d/o) Hector Joseph MacNeil s/o Francis Hector s/o Hector Rory s/o Rory Mor s/o Donald s/o Rory.

Family Tree DNA². Since the majority of community members who live in the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* are MacNeils, this interest is significant to this project. This project is in part one of self exploration in that it has allowed me to learn more about my linguistic and cultural heritage.

I also have a professional interested in this topic as I am an administrator and teacher with the Halifax Regional School Board, and the impact of Nova Scotia's school system on Gaelic language and culture is explored as part of this thesis. I have come to this project in part through a previous Master of Education degree in which I was able to study Gaelic language and culture through some of the literacy courses I completed.

I am not a Gaelic speaker, but I have completed some beginning level course work in the language. I am not a resident of the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* and was not raised within this community. However, my maternal grandfather Hector Joseph MacNeil was born in the community, and I spent some time there in my youth as my grandparents maintained a cottage in the Grass Cove area. My interest in genealogy and the Clan MacNeil have also allowed me to develop some connections within the community. I am biased in this project in that I believe the loss of Barra Gaelic in Cape Breton is a tremendous loss.

I have not interviewed any close relatives or friends as part of this investigation. The name MacNeil is repeated throughout the thesis, but these are not people that I know or with whom I have any personal relationship. I had little or no contact with all five of the informants interviewed for this thesis prior to this investigation, and I am not closely

² <http://www.familytreedna.com/public/MacNeil>

related to any of them. The name MacNeil recurs throughout the thesis simply because it is the most common name of residents of Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd*.

To put the crisis faced by Cape Breton's Barra Gaelic community into a broader perspective, the first chapter, "Disappearing Languages and Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd*" includes a brief discussion of disappearing languages in the global context. The chapter also includes a brief account of classification systems used to identify the viability of languages. An important component of this chapter is that the community of Barra Gaelic speakers which comprises Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd* is introduced and the geographical area which they traditionally inhabit is defined as many readers may be unfamiliar with this relatively small part of the world.

The second chapter, "Research Approach and Methods" outlines the research I conducted, as well as relevant theoretical issues. I interviewed, five men between the ages of 54 and 94 with ties to Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd*. I also conducted extensive archival research at the Beaton Institute in Sydney, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Information from both sources was synthesized in order to identify trends in language decline in Cape Breton's Barra communities.

Chapter three is entitled, "What Do You Lose When You Lose a Language?" This chapter, named for Fishman's 1997 article of the same name, focuses on what will be lost if we lose the Barra dialect of Gaelic in Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd*. This chapter relies heavily on information provided by informants interviewed from the Barra Gaelic community in Cape Breton. I also integrate information from writers such as Neil

Francis MacNeil (1980) who was born in 1891 and Joe Neil MacNeil (1987) who was born in 1908 in order to discuss life in the Barra *Gaidhealtachd*. Accounts of MacNeil and MacNeil's experiences with Gaelic language and culture are combined with those of informants presently living in the community.

In the fourth chapter, "The Decline of Gaelic in Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd*" factors contributing to the decline of Gaelic in Nova Scotia are identified. I will argue that the government of Nova Scotia contributed to the decline of Gaelic in Cape Breton through its policies. This chapter starts with a brief discussion of the decline of Gaelic in Scotland. A key concept in this chapter is that the government of Nova Scotia engaged in what Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) refers to as "linguistic genocide." The policies used by the government of Nova Scotia in its interactions with Cape Breton's Gaelic community will be discussed in terms of Cobarricbias' (1983) taxonomy of state policies towards minority languages. Other causes for the decline of Gaelic in this community such as depopulation of rural areas, and the movement of English into the community are also explored.

Chapter five is entitled, "The Changing Status of Gaelic in Cape Breton and its Barra *Gaidhealtachd*." In this chapter I discuss changes in public perception of Cape Breton's Gaelic community through time. The first section of this chapter, "A Loss of Confidence" covers the period of time from the arrival of Gaelic speakers in Nova Scotia to the end of the 1930s when the catastrophic language shift is thought to have taken place in the Barra *Gaidhealtachd*. The second section of this chapter entitled, "Cultural Packaging – An Outsider's View of Gaelic" begins in the 1930s with the arrival of folklorists in Cape

Breton and the development of the Gaelic College. The final part of chapter five entitled, “Partial Support of Specific Language Functions” concerns the first real attempts on the part of the government of Nova Scotia to do anything about the decline of Gaelic in Nova Scotia. This period began in the late 1980s and continues to present time.

The final chapter is entitled, “Closing Remarks.” In this chapter this thesis is briefly summarized and recommendations for further research are made.

Chapter 1: Disappearing Languages and Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd*

Chapter one begins with a discussion of disappearing languages and language classification systems. Next, linguistic decline is reviewed globally and nationally followed by a discussion of Celtic languages and Scottish Gaelic. The focus of this chapter then narrows to Gaelic in Nova Scotia and as part of this, emigration to the province from Scotland is reviewed. This chapter ends with an introduction to Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd*, which is the focus of this study.

Disappearing Languages

Never in recorded history has linguistic diversity been in such jeopardy. Languages are disappearing globally at an alarming rate. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) states, "languages are today being killed at a much faster pace than ever before in human history, and relatively much faster than biodiversity" (p. 5). At the current rate of linguistic decline, Krauss (1992) approximates that fifty percent of the world's estimated 6000 languages will become extinct during the next century. He further asserts that ninety percent of world's languages will become doomed or extinct during this same period. In the next one hundred years, the majority (over half of today's languages) with less than 10,000 speakers are likely to disappear, as are the majority of those which have between 10,000 and one million speakers (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

Language Classification

Researchers who study linguistic diversity use a variety of terms to classify the viability of languages. Krauss (1992) divides languages into three groups: moribund, endangered and safe. Moribund languages are those which are no longer being learned by children. Although a language may continue to exist, a language is considered moribund as soon as the children stop learning it. Moribund languages may continue to exist in a ceremonial form for some time. Between 20 and 50 percent of the world's languages are considered moribund (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Endangered languages are those which are currently being learned by children, but, if conditions don't change, will not be learned in the next century. Safe languages are defined as languages which do not fall into either of the above categories. A healthy or safe language is one that acquires new speakers. In order for a language to be safe, it must have over one million speakers (Krauss, 1992).

Another example of a language classification system is based on M. Dale Kinkades's 1991 study entitled, "The Decline of Native Languages in Canada." Kinkade divides languages into the following groups: already extinct, near extinction, endangered, viable but with small populations base, and viable with a large population (Norris, 1998). The first group (extinct) includes languages which are considered beyond the chances of revival. The second group (endangered) is comprised of languages still used by enough people to make its continuance a remote possibility. The third group (viable but small) is made up of languages which have at least 1000 speakers in often isolated areas. The last group (viable) is composed of languages which have a strong enough population base so that their survival is relatively likely.

The UNESCO Red Book Report on Endangered Languages divides languages into five categories (Salminen, 1999)³. These include the following: extinct languages other than ancient ones; nearly extinct languages with maximally tens of speakers, all elderly; seriously endangered languages with a more substantial number of speakers but practically without children among them; endangered languages with some children speakers at least in part of their range but decreasingly so; potentially endangered languages with a large number of children speakers but without an official or prestigious status; and not endangered languages with safe transmission of language to new generations. The UNESCO Red Book Report on Endangered Languages (1999) uses this classification system to give the status of languages all over the world.

Global Linguistic Diversity

Language loss is a worldwide phenomenon, and language diversity is greater in some places in the world than in others. Percentages of languages found in different parts of the world according to Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) are: Europe and the Middle East have about 4%, all of the Americas have about 15%, and Africa, Asia and the Pacific have about 81% of the world's languages. Nine countries in the world are estimated to have just over half (3500 of an estimated 6000) of the world's languages (Krauss, 1992). These nine countries include Papua New Guinea (850), Indonesia (670), Nigeria (410), India (380), Cameroon (270), Australia (250), Mexico (240), Zaire (210), and Brazil (210). Of the languages in peril found in North and South America, most are spoken by

³ In this thesis, the UNESCO Red Book on Endangered Languages (1999) classification system is used to classify Scottish Gaelic (which is the form of Gaelic most commonly spoken in Nova Scotia) later in this chapter.

Aboriginal populations. In South America, Spanish represents a significant threat to language diversity. In North America, Aboriginal languages are threatened by English, and to a lesser degree French.

Linguistic Diversity in Canada

Canada's Aboriginal languages are among the most endangered in the world, and many of these tongues are facing extinction. Over 60 Aboriginal languages were once spoken in what is now Canada (Kirkness, 1998). A number of First Nations languages have already become extinct with the passing of the last of their speakers. Over the last century, at least ten once thriving Aboriginal tongues have disappeared (Norris, 2007). According to Cook & Howe (2004), these include: "Laurentian (Iroquoian, Quebec) in the late 1500s; Beothuk (isolate, Newfoundland) in 1829; Nicola (Athabaskan, British Columbia) in the late 1800s; Huron-Wendat (Iroquoian, Quebec) and Tsetsaut/Ts'ets' aut (Athabaskan, British Columbia) in the early 1900s; and Pentlatch (Salish, British Columbia) around 1940" (p. 302).

Currently in Canada, eleven Aboriginal language families are represented and approximately 50 or more individual Aboriginal languages are spoken (Norris, 2007). However, many of these languages face imminent extinction. Cook & Howe (2004) state, "fewer than a dozen (elderly) speakers remain for each of Munsee Delaware (Algonquin), Western Abenaki (Algonquin), Han (Athabaskan), Tagish (Athabaskan), Squamish (Salish), Sechelt (Salish), Tuscarora (Iroquoian), Ditidaht (Wakashan), and Chinook Jargon" (p. 302). Some other Aboriginal languages with a relatively large numbers of speakers in Canada are also quickly becoming obsolete. Only a minority of

Canada's First Nations population is able to speak or understand an Aboriginal language (Norris, 2007).

Celtic Languages

As is the case with many languages globally and nationally, Celtic languages are in jeopardy. Celtic languages evolved from the Proto-Celtic "Common Celtic" language which is a branch of the Indo-European language family. Gaelic languages comprise the Goidelic or Q-Celtic branch of Celtic languages. There are three types of Gaelic: Scottish, Irish, and Manx. Of these, Manx is extinct and Irish and Scottish Gaelic are endangered.

Scottish Gaelic

Scottish Gaelic⁴ is one of world's many endangered languages. The UNESCO Red Book Report on Endangered Languages (1999) notes that while a number of children are learning Scottish Gaelic, they may not become active users. UNESCO estimates the total number of active users to be between 20,000 to 30,000 speakers (Salminen, 1999). They further assert that more than 50,000 others claim knowledge of the language. The majority of these speakers are in Scotland.

⁴ Unless otherwise stated, when the term Gaelic is used in this thesis, Scottish Gaelic is the form of the language being referred to as this thesis concerns the decline of a dialect of Scottish Gaelic language in Cape Breton.

Gaelic in Nova Scotia

In Nova Scotia, the most commonly spoken form of Gaelic has been and continues to be Scottish Gaelic. Nova Scotia (which means New Scotland) was a favourite destination of Gaelic speaking Scots emigrating from the Highlands of Scotland. Tens of thousands of Gaelic speakers are believed to have emigrated to Nova Scotia from Scotland, mainly between 1773 and the mid-1800s (Campey, 2004). In order to establish the degree of prominence Scottish Gaelic once held in the province, I now turn to a discussion of emigration from Scotland, and then to estimates of numbers of Gaelic speakers.

The Emigration of Gaelic Speakers from Scotland to Nova Scotia

The magnitude of emigration from Scotland's *Gaidhealtachd* to Nova Scotia speaks to the importance that this language once held in this province. The exact number of people who came to Nova Scotia from this part of Europe is impossible to determine because of poor record keeping, as passenger manifests were either not kept or have not survived for most ships. It is likely that the number is in the tens of thousands. Campey (2004) states that 40,000 people are known to have emigrated from 1773 to 1852 (p. 181) but the number is likely much higher than that as records do not exist for all arrivals.

Emigration from Scotland was unique in that often whole family groups and communities relocated. Multiple generations of the same family, from the youngest to the most elderly, came together and settled together. MacNeil (2005) refers to this as chain

migration; he defines chain migration as a phenomenon whereby emigrants simply followed the paths of their neighbours who had gone before them.

In Nova Scotia, Gaels settled along familial and religious lines in various pockets of the province (Dunn, 1991). For example, Catholic emigrants to Cape Breton settled in distinct locations: people from Lochaber settled in the Mabou area, individuals from Moidart and South Uist in the Boisdale and East Bay areas, and Gaels from Barra and South Uist in the Iona/Christmas Island, Mabou, Northern Cape Breton and along the shores of the Bras d'Or Lakes from the Red Islands to Big Pond. Protestant emigrants to the island also settled in distinct groups: those from Lewis and Harris settled on the North Shore of Victoria County, and those from Lewis, Harris and North Uist settled in the Loch Lomand / Framboise areas (See map at the end of this chapter). MacKenzie (1929) highlights some reasons for settlement patterns, "The advantages of Christmas Island, Grand Narrows and the Iona peninsula were many. The Barraites were together; they were sharing a common Catholicism and language [Gaelic]" (p. 1). The same reasoning for chain migration can likely be applied to other Gaelic speaking groups of emigrants.

The first large group of Gaelic speakers to come to this province came on the ship Hector in 1773 (Campey, 2004; Edwards, 1991). Bumsted (1982) writes that on board this ship were 189 passengers who sailed from Loch Broom, Scotland to Pictou where the first Gaelic speaking settlement in Nova Scotia developed. Campey (2004) lists eight ships which are known to have arrived in Eastern Nova Scotia from Scotland between 1773 and 1801. "Exceedingly large" numbers of Highlanders came to Nova Scotia and in particular to Cape Breton, from 1801 to 1803 (Campey, 2004, p. 63). Prebble (1969)

writes that approximately 10,000 Highland Scots emigrated to Nova Scotia and Upper Canada between 1800 and 1803.

The first ship from Scotland which transported Gaelic speakers from Scotland to Cape Breton landed in Sydney in 1802 with 299 passengers (Campey, 2004). Between 1815 and 1821, approximately 20,000 Scots joined those who had previously settled in Nova Scotia (Edwards, 1991). These were followed by about 15,000 between the 1830s and 1850s. By the 1830s, large numbers of Highland Scots began relocating from the mainland of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island to Cape Breton. At this point in time, the Scots had become the largest ethnic group in the province. Most of these were Gaelic speaking Highlanders who came to the eastern region of the province.

Numbers of Gaelic Speakers in Nova Scotia

It is clear that thousands of Gaelic speakers emigrated to Nova Scotia from Scotland (especially to Cape Breton), but it is difficult to say exactly how many speakers were in the province at any given time because of poor record keeping. One of the earliest estimates of the numbers of Gaelic speakers in Cape Breton was given in 1845 by Jacob D. Kuhn, editor of a newspaper published in Sydney called *Spirit of the Times*. Kuhn sought financial assistance in publishing an agricultural manual in Gaelic. In this petition Kuhn (1845) estimates that the Gaelic population in Cape Breton numbered not less than 100,000 people. In responding to Kuhn, the government of the day did not appear to question his estimate, but denied his request. The Agricultural Committee writes, “and however desirable it might be that a large portion of our population might be enabled to

read such Works in their native language, yet the Committee cannot recommend the publishing of such Work should be borne upon the general funds of the Province” (sic) (Agricultural Committee, Appendix, 1845, p.50). In terms of the number of speakers in Cape Breton, is very likely that the majority of the population of the island, especially in rural areas, was Gaelic speaking based on the degree of emigration to this area. Robinson (1988) writes, “One hundred and fifty years ago Gaelic-speakers formed the majority of Cape Breton’s population” (p. 8).

Even though the population of Gaelic speakers had been strengthened by relatively late arrivals of Gaelic speakers in the 1840s and early 1850s, there is evidence that Gaelic was already losing speakers in Nova Scotia by this time. John Boyd began publishing a monthly Gaelic magazine in Antigonish in 1851 entitled *An Cuairtear Og Gaelach - The Gaelic Tourist* (Dunn, 1991). Just one year later, Boyd shifted focus to some degree in order to meet the needs of the changing demographics of the community. In 1852, he began publishing *The Casket*. Half of this newspaper was dedicated to songs, stories, and so on in Gaelic, but the news section was in English. Shortly after the date of its inception, Boyd writes the following in *The Casket*:

We’re sorry that we must admit that Gaelic is drawing back every day and English strengthening her foundations more and more at every turn; so that there is every appearance that she will put the poor Gaelic into a tight corner unless it gets more support than it is getting. (as cited in Dunn, 1991, p. 79)

Early Gaelic community activists relied on information from census returns which gave statistics of ethnicity to support their claims of high numbers of Gaelic speakers. In 1890 Senator Thomas MacInnis attempted to have Gaelic recognized as Canada's third official language. As part of his bill, MacInnis cited statistics from the 1881 census which gave the total Scottish and Irish population of Canada as 1,657,266 compared to 1,289,929 French and 881,301 English (Kennedy, 2002). He argued that the number of people who spoke the ancestral language of the two groups (Scottish and Irish) was large enough to justify giving Gaelic official status. Similarly, in 1920 a Mr. M. R. MacLeod of Sydney submitted a petition to the Nova Scotian government designed to have Gaelic included as a course of study in the province. The petitioners claimed that the federal census of 1911 gave 29.8% of the population as Scottish and of this percentage, "the great majority of Nova Scotians belonging to the Scottish race still preserve the Gaelic language and are deeply attached to the traditions embodied in its literature" (MacLeod, Nova Scotia House of Assembly, Petitions, 1920). While there are believed to have been high numbers of Gaelic speakers in Nova Scotia at the turn of the century there is no way to verify this. Robinson (1988) writes, "At the beginning of the century there may have been 100,000 people who spoke the language, although precision on this point is impossible" (p. 11).

The statistics concerning Gaelic as a mother tongue⁵ were compiled for the first time in 1931, and therefore it is impossible to use this data to determine for certain whether or not the number of persons speaking Gaelic as a mother tongue was increasing or decreasing before this time in Nova Scotia. Census data for the province over subsequent

⁵ Mother tongue, maternal language and Native language are used as synonyms for first language.

decades clearly gives evidence of the decline of the language. However, caution must be exercised when analyzing census data concerning Gaelic (Campbell & MacLean, 1974). Different methods and changes in the coding procedures on these census returns leads to inconsistencies in numbers reported. MacKinnon (as cited in Edwards, 1991) gives the approximate number of Gaelic speakers from census figures for Nova Scotia as follows: 1931 – 25,000, 1941 – 12,000, 1951 – 6,800, 1961 - 3,700, 1971 – 1,420, and 1976 - 540. Based on this data, the general trend over subsequent decades has been approximately a 50% reduction of Gaelic speakers in Nova Scotia for every ten years.

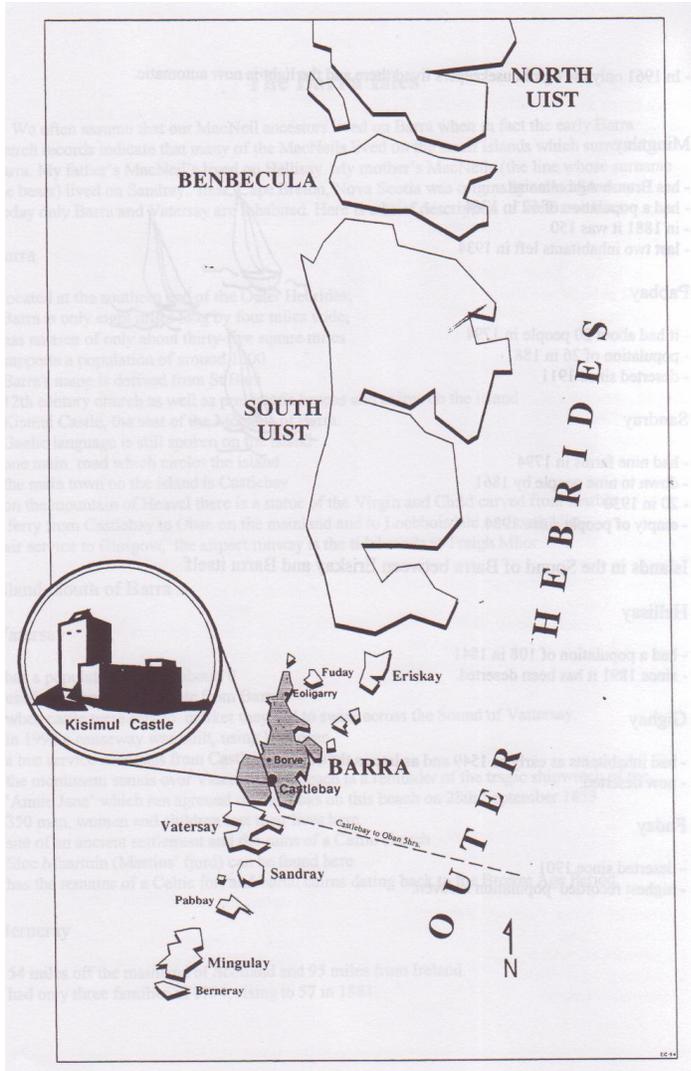
At the time of the 2001 census of Nova Scotia, only 415 people listed Gaelic as their maternal language (MacKinnon, 2005). However, according to a spokesperson at the Office of Gaelic Affairs (2008), there has never been an accurate enumeration of Gaelic speakers conducted in Nova Scotia and the census of 2001 is no exception. Reasons for the inaccuracy of the 2001 census data (which only gives the number of Gaelic speakers who had Gaelic as a maternal language) given by the Office of Gaelic Affairs (2008) include that many people who have Gaelic as a first language may not have recorded this on the census form, there are a large number of learners in the province that the statistic did not take into account, and there are a large number of people who have some familiarity with Gaelic who know and understand a few words or phrases who would not have been included in this number. If the number of native speakers and learners that are involved in Gaelic classes are taken into consideration, there would likely be about 2000 people (Office of Gaelic Affairs, 2008). Similarly, if you include the number of people who spoke the language as children but not as

adults and the number of people who have some understanding of Gaelic, this statistic would be much larger. But there are currently no statistics to verify this number.

Cape Breton's Barra Gaidhealtachd

MacNeil (2005) states that historically in excess of twenty Scottish dialects were spoken on Cape Breton Island. One of these dialect groups speaks a form of Barra Gaelic. This particular dialect of Gaelic in Cape Breton is on the verge of extinction. This dialect is very similar to that spoken in Barra, Scotland today but the version of the dialect used in Cape Breton differs slightly, partly because of the impact of the other Gaelic dialects spoken in the surrounding communities (MacNeil, 2005). Informants from the community interviewed for this thesis indicate that only a handful of Gaelic speakers of the Barra dialect currently remain, and they are generally elderly. This thesis specifically concerns the small group of speakers who comprise this community.

It is important to define what is meant by the Barra *Gaidhealtachd*. The communities that comprise this area include places settled by pioneers from Barra in Scotland who emigrated to the interior of Cape Breton along the Bras d'Or Lakes, especially along the Strait of Barra. This area, historically comprised almost exclusively of Gaelic monolinguals, now only has a handful of Gaelic speakers. The speakers of the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* have a number of things in common. Generally, their ancestors came



from the remote and isolated Barra Isles which can be found off the west coast of Scotland. The Barra Isles are part of a long chain of islands off the west coast of Scotland called the Outer Hebrides (See map).⁶ The Barra Isles consist of about twenty small islands which form the southernmost and westernmost of the chain. Barra, the largest of the Barra Isles, is only about 8 km wide. The island is roughly square with the exception of the Eoligarry peninsula which juts northward for approximately 4 km. Barra covers an area of only about 14, 500 acres. Today it is

connected by a causeway to the island of Watersay which is only 2,400 acres in size.

Only the islands of Barra and Watersay are occupied today, but the people of the Parish of Barra inhabited a number of the Barra Isles at the time of emigration including Barra, Watersay, Sandray, Pabbay, Mingulay, Hellisay. Several of these islands are named on the map of the Outer Hebrides provided.

⁶ This map of the Outer Hebrides was originally published in the March, 2002 edition of Clan MacNeil in Canada's newsletter and it is printed here with permission.

The people of Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd* descend from a small population base and only a limited number of surnames as represented among them. The most common surname on Barra is MacNeil. The MacNeils are said to descend from Niall of the Nine Hostages who was an Irish King in the fourth century⁷. The first MacNeil known to be in Barra is said to be Neil of the Castle who established himself there about 1030 AD. Kisimul Castle, seat of the Chiefs of the Clan MacNeil, stands in Castle Bay, in Barra. In 1427, the MacDonalds (then the Lords of the Isles) gave the charter for Barra to Gilleonan who was the Laird of Clan MacNeil. An examination of the Parish Register of Barra which begins in 1805 reveals that approximately 50% of the inhabitants of the Parish of Barra were MacNeils. Besides MacNeil, almost the entire population of the Parish of Barra had one of the following surnames: Campbell, Currie, Gillis, Johnston, MacDonald, MacInnis, MacIntyre, MacKenzie, MacLean, MacMullin, MacPhee, MacPherson, MacSween, Morrison, Nicholson, O'Handley, and Steele.

Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd* is basically a transplanted Barra community on the opposite side of the Atlantic. Because of the small size of the Barra Isles, the population never exceeded more than a few thousand people. Population figures cited for the Parish of Barra show that it only had 1,150 people in 1755 and 2,303 in 1821 (Branigan, 2005). From 1755 to 1821 there was a slow increase in the numbers of people, but the population was continually culled by emigration to various places around the world, particularly to Cape Breton. Large numbers of Barra people came to Cape Breton in 1801 on the Sarah and the Dove, in 1802 on the Hector, in 1817 on the William Tell and the Hope, and in 1821 on the Harmony. Three of these emigration events roughly

⁷ This assertion is not supported by recent DNA results for MacNeils with roots in Barra.

coincide with census years in Barra. Branigan (2005), estimates that in 1801/1802 24% of the population emigrated, in 1821, it lost 15%, and in 1851, it lost 22%. In addition to this loss of population, 13% of the population left in 1817⁸. The majority of emigrants between 1801 and the 1830s settled in Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd*. The population of Barra today is only 1300 people but it shares close genetic, cultural, and linguistic ties with its Canadian counterparts.

Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd* includes the areas of Cape Breton where the Barra dialect of Gaelic was spoken. People from Barra settled in all four counties of Cape Breton Island: Victoria, Inverness, Cape Breton and Richmond. Branigan (2005) identifies 54 places on the island where people from Barra are known to have settled. However, large concentrations of Barra expatriates settled in certain places within these regions and it was in these places that the Barra dialect survived. The largest concentration of Barra men and women settled along the shores of the Bras d'Or Lakes which form the centre of Cape Breton Island. Many Barra communities are clustered along Barra Strait. Communities on the north side of the Strait include: Barra Glen, Gillis Point, Grass Cove, Highland Hill, Iona, Jamesville, Washabuckt, MacKinnon's Harbour, MacNeil's Vale, Ottawa Brook, Red Point, and St. Columba. Communities on the south side of the Strait include: Beaver Cove, Benacadie, Boisdale, Big Beach, Castle Bay, Christmas Island, Coopers Pond, Grand Narrows, Highlands, Piper's Cove, and Shenacadie. Large numbers of people of Barra descent also settled along the south side of the Bras d'Or Lakes in places such as Hay Cove, Red Islands, Irish Cove, Middle

⁸ 1817 was listed separately as this was not a census year. This statistic is from Branigan (2005).

Cape, Big Pond, and Ben Eoin. These areas comprise what is referred to here as the Barra *Gaidhealtachd*. (See map on next page)

A Map of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia⁹



⁹ A map of Cape Breton Island from Nova Scotia's Official Tourism website: http://novascotia.com/en/home/planatrip/gettingaround/scenic_travelways/brasdorlakes_scenicdrive/map.aspx. Permission provided by Nova Scotia Department of Tourism, Culture & Heritage.

Chapter 2 – Research Approach and Issues

In order to research Gaelic language and culture in the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* of Cape Breton I conducted extensive archival research at the Beaton Institute in Sydney, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia and a series of interviews with informants from Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd*. In this chapter I discuss my approach to the research, including the theoretical issues and some difficulties that arose.

Archival Research and Interviews – Research Process

As part of this investigation, I conducted extensive archival research at the Beaton Institute in Sydney, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. This institute is a public archives which has extensive collections of primary source documents which are pertinent to this study and are specific to the geographical area I am examining. Wiersma and Jurs (2005) write that historical research involves the collection and evaluation of two types of source materials: primary and secondary. Primary sources are original, first-hand accounts. Primary sources are reported by eyewitnesses of events. Secondary sources are at least once removed from the event. With secondary sources, the reporter of the phenomenon may not have actually witnessed the event. The witness may have read about the phenomenon or talked to the person who observed it. Because of the fact that the secondary sources have a greater degree of separation from the original source, they are not considered as reliable as primary sources. They should only be used when primary sources are not available.

Best and Kahn (2006), list three main types of primary source data: documents, remains or relics, and oral testimony. They define documents as, “the records kept and written by actual participants in, or witnesses of, an event” (p. 91). These authors define remains or relics as, “objects associated with a person, group, or period” (p.92). Oral testimony is defined as, “the spoken account of a witness of, or participant in, an event” (p. 92). For a list of primary and secondary sources see Table 1.

Table 1 – Examples of Primary Sources (Based on Best & Kahn, 2006, pp. 91-92)

Documents	Remains or Relics	Oral Testimony
census information, official minutes, genealogies, deeds, wills, diaries, certificates, newspaper accounts, magazine accounts, laws, court decisions, autobiographies, research reports, contracts, transcriptions, letters, pictures, inscriptions, receipts, paintings, charters, recordings, constitutions, catalogs, lists, permits, films, licenses, affidavits, bills, proclamations, declarations, depositions, advertisements, diagrams, handbills, maps, books, pamphlets, films	coins, art objects, pictures, paintings, fossils, skeletons, tools, food, weapons, clothing, buildings, furniture, utensils, weapons	The spoken account of a participant in an event or a witness to the event through personal interview

Through archival research at the Beaton Institute, I accessed a variety of the types of archival documents listed above by Best and Kahn (2006). I viewed documents such as

census information for Nova Scotia which provided me with statistic concerning number of speakers, official minutes of a variety of organizations (including Gaelic societies in Cape Breton and minutes kept by governmental agencies), newspaper accounts in Cape Breton and Scottish newspapers (*Sydney Post Record*, *Cape Breton Post*, *Victoria Inverness Bulletin*, *Casket*, and *Oban Times*), magazine articles in publications such as *Cape Breton's Magazine*, research reports, several Master and Ph D theses (Dembling, 1991, 1997; Metz 1984), conference papers (MacKinnon, 1985), lists, books, pamphlets and two old *Clan MacNeil in Canada Newsletters* from 1928 and 1929. One of the most interesting archival materials that I located at the Beaton Institute were the scrapbooks of Alexander David (A.D.). MacLean. A.D. MacLean, born in Baddeck in 1889, created a series of scrapbooks using wallpaper sample books. These scrapbooks were filled with newspaper articles concerning topics related to Gaelic language and culture in Nova Scotia and Scotland.

Historical research methodology requires the synthesis of information from primary and secondary source materials (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). Because I was researching events which I was unable to witness firsthand, I had to depend on the testimony of others. When faced with this situation, Wiersma & Jurs (2005) suggest that it is important for historical researchers to assess the validity of their sources. According to these researchers, historical evidence must withstand two types of criticism: external and internal. With respect to the former, Wiersma and Jurs (2005) write, "External criticism in historical research evaluates the validity of the document – that is, where, when, and by whom it was produced" (p. 230). According to these authors, to test for external

criticism one asks the question “Is the document genuine, authentic, and what it seems to be?” (p. 230). Concerning the latter, Wiersma and Jurs (2005) write, “Internal criticism in historical research evaluates the meaning, accuracy, and trustworthiness of the content of the document” (p. 231). Internal criticism establishes meaning. To test for internal criticism, Wiersma and Jurs (2005) write that researchers should ask “What does it mean?” in order to determine if a document has internal validity (p. 232). These researchers define data which is considered trustworthy (having withstood tests of external and internal criticism) as historical evidence (p. 231).

With respect to the archival documents I located through archival research at the Beaton Institute, I found value in every single reference material I found. Some of the documents, such as papers which were presented at conferences, theses, or rare books, were traditional academic sources and easily stood the tests of internal and external validity as defined by Wiersma and Jurs (2005). These would therefore be considered historical evidence by the definition given by Wiersma and Jurs (2005). However, many other documents failed one or both of these tests, but I did not discount them. According to Wiersma and Jurs (2005), these documents would not be considered historical evidence. Many documents failed the test of external validity because questions of where, when, and by whom it was produced could not be answered. The Beaton Institute is filled with authorless and dateless documents tucked away in file folders and boxes. Other documents failed the test on internal validity, often because they did not pass the test of trustworthiness. These documents contained exaggerations such as claims that Gaelic was the language of the Garden of Eden or unsubstantiated claims that there were

X number of Gaelic speakers in the Nova Scotia at a given time. When I cite these materials in this thesis, I specify if I believed that these claims were unsubstantiated or are questionable.

While not all documents stood the tests of both internal and external validity, these documents, in many cases, are valuable sources. Most were simply created by everyday people who were not academics. They represent the voices of a variety of people with a variety of perspectives, and to me this was their value. My evaluation of these documents as useable in this thesis represents one of the many ways the impact of me as researcher is contained in this thesis in that I made the decision as to whether or not to use them.

The questions suggested by Wiersma and Jurs (2005) regarding internal and external validity of documents reflect positivist assumptions regarding truth. Best and Kahn (2006) (who also write from a positivist perspective) define history and historical method as a process of seeking truth, usually through a prescribed method. Within the positivist paradigm, the researcher is to remain objective. Interpretation increases subjectivity which leads to misrepresentation, and therefore inaccuracy. In this investigation I believe that it is impossible for me to remain objective as I cannot remove myself from the interpretation of the historical documents I viewed and the creation of this text. It is impossible for an author to write text that does not bear traces of its author (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

From a postmodernist's perspective, "truth" is not an attainable goal (Berkhofer, 1995). The postmodernist focuses more on the instability of meaning and questions concerning representation. The influence of postmodernism can be seen in definitions of history given by theorists such as Cohen, who refers to history as "a floating signifier" (as cited in Berkhofer, 1995, p. 13). According to this researcher, words (or signifiers) used to construct historical text are more stable than the concepts they represent. The physical words remain the same through time, but the concepts suggested by them do not. Based on this interpretation, the only fixed reality in the historical documents I viewed (some written over a century ago) is the physical text itself. Postmodern interpretation of language has created a crisis of representation for historical researchers (who regularly rely on text to interpret the past).

Berkhofer (1995) was one of the first historical researchers to examine history from a postmodern perspective. Berkhofer (1995) writes, "Postmodern theory questions what history can be, both as a real past and as a discourse about it" (p. 1). According to Berkhofer (1995), human sciences have taken an interpretive and linguistic turn. He asserts that postmodernism raises questions about the attainment of truth and the basis of knowledge, and the freedom of the individual as subject and agent. The postmodern paradigm challenges the stability of meaning in language, and therefore challenges history as traditionally practiced, conceived and perceived. History is recorded using language. If meaning is unstable, how can history be documented? Historical researchers in the positivist paradigm are seeking the attainment of historical truth; but, how can truth

be known if interpretation is dependent on language and individual and socio-cultural contexts? How then can history be “factual” if language is the main means of recording?

Postmodernists challenge human reality and the representation of it. Berkhofer (1995) asserts that the postmodern challenge to history comes in the form of two main crises of representation. First, he questions how actual historical events can be represented.

Berkhofer (1995) asks: “To what extent can historians combine the two meanings of history as actual past and modern representation when all we know of language seemingly subverts that very goal?” (p. 3). Furthermore, Berkhofer (1995) writes that theorizing by multiculturalists and poststructuralists has helped to create the second crisis of representation. Here he asks: “Who can speak for whom in histories and history?” (p. 3). This question undermines both the objectivity and the authority of history.

Concerning this crisis of representation, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) pose the following questions: “Who is the Other? Can we ever hope to speak authentically of the experience of the Other, or an Other? And if not, how do we create a social science that includes the Other?” (p. 1050).

In my research, the “Other” includes the authors of the numerous archival documents that I located at the Beaton Institute and the five men I interviewed for this thesis. Actually, I feel a tremendous responsibility to do the best that I can to represent those whose words I have interpreted in this thesis, especially the five men I interviewed for this thesis.

Adding interviews as a source of information in this thesis is just as problematic from a

postmodern perspective as the archival research has been. Berkhofer's (1995) crises of representation continues to be an issue with interviews as a means to gather information.

Semi-structured Interviews

Best & Kahn (2006) give oral testimony as another source of primary information. To access the oral testimonies of informants who had firsthand knowledge of the state of Gaelic language and culture in Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd*, I interviewed five Gaelic speaking informants with connections to the community. I solicited interviewees through people I am connected to in the area. My connection to these people comes primarily through genealogical research. I used these contacts to find five willing Gaelic speaking volunteers to participate in this study. I used the snowball approach to find the names of candidates.

The names of the five people interviewed for this thesis are identified by the following pseudonyms: Clyde, Eachann, Hugh, Joseph, and Stephen. Four out of five of these individuals were born in the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* with one born just outside Sydney, Cape Breton. All were men, so this can best be described as a men's perspective on the decline of Gaelic in Nova Scotia. This was not intentional. Most of the speakers identified by my contacts in the community were male. Four of these men have limited education whereas one is university educated. One of these men was in his 90s, one in his 80s, two are in their 70s and one in his 50s. Most lived away from Cape Breton Island for some time, and several married women from outside of the Barra

Gaidhealtachd community. The youngest of these men learned Gaelic through a combination of formal study, family, and the community, whereas the others learned the language mainly from their parents and in the community.

The interviews conducted were semi-structured. In a semi-structured interview, the researcher may have a list of questions or fairly specific topics he or she wishes to explore (Bryman, 2004). This list of questions or topics used during the interview is referred to as an interview guide (See Appendix). This type of interview allows the informant some freedom in how he or she responds, and the interviewer can change the order of the questions. Questions may also be added as the interview progresses. The semi-structured interview has some flexibility built in so that the interviewer can explore issues which arise from the interview; however, the interviewer follows general predetermined guidelines. Bryman (2004) writes that if the interviewer is beginning the study with a fairly clear focus, it is likely that the interviews conducted will be semi-structured. I chose to conduct a semi-structured interview because I had already completed extensive archival research before I began this investigation so I had a sense of what I wanted to ask informants. I wanted to give the informants some room in how they responded, and I also wanted them to have the freedom to take the conversation where they wanted to take it. I wanted the freedom to explore interesting points raised by the informants as I could not predict all that I would learn from the interview interaction. As part of my interview guide I developed a list of eight questions which are included in the appendix.

Interviews are as problematic as other forms of historical research when viewed from a postmodern perspective because the postmodernist focuses on the instability of meaning and questions concerning representation. With respect to conducting the interview, Scheurich (1995) writes that historically (in a positivist framework) the “specific context of the particular researcher interviewing a particular person at a particular time in a particular setting is largely inconsequential” (p. 240). However, according to O’Leary (2004), attributes such as age, class, ethnicity, gender and race of the interviewer and the interviewee alike, can affect the interview interaction. Polkinghorne (2005) writes, “The interviewer’s presence and form of involvement - how he or she listens, attends, and terminates responses – is integral to a respondent’s account” (p. 143).

I agree that the context of the interview interactions impacts on the results attained. I brought to these interactions limited previous interviewing experience. My comfort level increased with subsequent interviews, and I found I was occasionally distracted by the three tape recorders I used as I was fearful that I might get home, and they would be blank. The last interview was conducted on New Years Day and a snowstorm developed. The participant lived in a rural community approximately 45 minutes from where I was staying, and this made me more aware of time.

Before I began the interviews, I attempted to establish a connection with the informants, and I tried to ensure that they were as comfortable as possible. In order to establish a positive relationship with them, I explained my connections to the community. I started the sessions by giving them their family trees, and I discussed them with the informants.

The informants were able to pick the location of the interviews. Four of the participants were interviewed in their homes and one chose an alternate location.

Another difficulty with the interview interaction is that the balance of power is not equal, and this also affects the process. In this study I designed the inquiry and developed the questions for the interview guide based on the purpose of this project which I defined. Fontana and Frey (2005) write “it is the researcher who ultimately cuts and pastes together the narrative, choosing what will become a part of it and what will be cut” (p. 697). Sometimes the informant may resist interviewer domination (Scheurich, 1995). This opposition may show itself in a variety of ways. An interviewee does not always go along with the interview program in that he or she may turn a question into one that he or she wishes to answer. The subject may play out a characterization or perform for the researcher. The interviewee may omit pertinent information, exaggerate an answer, or give what they deem to be a socially acceptable response (Fontana & Frey, 2005). In my investigation of Gaelic language and culture, I saw no evidence of resistance to interviewer dominance or that the informants were assuming an alternate persona; however, I cannot know for sure what the informants were thinking or feeling at the time.

Problems also exist with interviewing as a result of the transcription process. Through this process the interview becomes data, and the nonverbal aspects of communication disappear. The words are decontextualized and the lines of text are numbered, divided according to meaning and categorized. Scheurich (1995) writes “this severe modernist reduction of the exquisiteness of each lived moment borders on a kind of violence” (p.

242). The decontextualized language which results from the coding process becomes the building blocks from which the researcher constructs his or her story. Procedures such as coding designed to remove the influence of the researcher do little to actually attain this goal. This is a problem that I acknowledge which exists in the text that I have created. All five speakers spoke about the topic of Gaelic language and culture with passion. This was clearly demonstrated, not only in their body language but also in the manner of speaking. This problem is compounded here by the fact that three of the informants sang Gaelic songs as part of the interview. I cannot represent this through text.

Another concern raised by researchers is that informants generally want to be perceived positively. They want to be able to maintain a certain level of dignity, and may wish to maintain some degree of privacy, and this impacts on how they respond to questions. Similarly, if they feel that they are being judged, are ashamed, or feel offended, they are going to respond differently as well (O'Leary, 2004). I only sensed that one informant was uncomfortable with part of the conversation that we had during the interview. At one point he asked that I shut the tape recorder off, which I did. He allowed me to continue taking notes. Once he was comfortable with the conversation again, he instructed me to turn the tape recorder back on - which I did.

Scheurich (1995) discusses the problem of representation in interviews. Like Berkhofer (1995) he raises concerns regarding language. Scheurich (1995) states, "The relationship between language and meaning, thus, is contextually grounded, unstable, ambiguous, and subject to endless interpretation" (p. 240). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000),

some researchers address these questions of representation in interviews by engaging in collaborative and participatory research. Researchers, in some cases, encourage participants to be part of the interrogations; together the researchers and participants become “coauthors in narrative adventures” (p. 1050). Others are writing experimental texts in which multiple voices speak. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) write about a rising tide of voices, “These are the voices of the formerly disenfranchised, the voices of subalterns everywhere, the voices of indigenous and postcolonial peoples, who are profoundly politically committed to determining their own destiny” (pp. 1115 - 1116).

Scheurich (1995) lists a number of implications postmodern ideas have for interview research. Scheurich (1995), suggests that first researchers need to critically rethink what occurs during the interview and how it is reported. Secondly, researchers need to highlight the “baggage” that they bring to the research experience. Thirdly, interviewers need to highlight the fact that the interview event is an artificial representation of events. Finally, researchers need to play around and experiment with ways to represent interviews that highlight their indeterminacy and the distribution of power within the interaction.

Denzin and Lincoln (2000), Fontana and Frey (2005), O’Leary (2004), Polkinghorne (2005), Scheurich (1995), all raise concerns about the impact of researchers in the interview interaction. As stated previously, I do not believe it is possible for me to remove my influence from this thesis in terms of synthesizing the archival documents or in the interview interactions. In order to address concerns such as these, I have

highlighted issues in this chapter and that is why I began this thesis by positioning myself as a researcher. I have addressed questions about the artificial nature of the interview interaction by highlighting and reflecting upon these concerns in the interview section of this chapter.

Researchers such as Berkhofer (1995), Denzin and Lincoln (2000), and Scheurich (1995) raise concerns about representation in research. I have included a brief discussion of their concerns about representation in this chapter in order to demonstrate that I am aware of these difficulties. I have chosen to represent my research in a traditional written research format for a number of reasons. First, most of my previous research experiences have involved written representations, and I am comfortable with this medium. Second, the archival documentation which I have conducted consists almost exclusively of a review of written documentation. Third, I may decide to publish this work at some point, and a written format may be easier for me to distribute to the Gaelic community. Finally, the informants interviewed were on average elderly and may not be familiar with non-traditional forms of representation, and I would like this work to be accessible to them.

Chapter 3 - What Do You Lose When You Lose a Language?¹⁰

This chapter focuses on what will be lost if we lose Gaelic in Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd*. This section of the thesis is based on unique cultural traditions identified through interviews with informants from the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* namely: storytelling, singing, holiday traditions, and identity within the Gaelic community. Concepts such as the *blas* (the taste) of the language are also explored. The relationship between language and culture is discussed as is the uniqueness of the Gaelic worldview.

This chapter deals almost exclusively with the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* and not on Gaelic in Cape Breton or in Nova Scotia as a whole. An assumption in this chapter is that what is at risk and what has been lost culturally at the community level in the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* is indicative of trends of loss in other Gaelic communities which speak other dialects of Gaelic. I begin with a brief discussion of the Barra dialect of Gaelic as spoken in Cape Breton.

The Barra Dialect of Gaelic

The dialect spoken in the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* of Cape Breton is unique to all others, including its parent dialect in Barra, Scotland. If we lose Gaelic in Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd*, we will lose words, expressions, and pronunciations which are characteristic of this unique dialect. While there is an amazing similarity in the Gaelic

¹⁰ Title based on Fishman's 1997 article by the same name.

spoken in communities settled by Barra immigrants and that spoken by people in Barra, Scotland today (Hugh; Joseph; Stephen), these dialects likely evolved during almost two centuries of geographical separation. Cape Breton's Barra dialect has been influenced by the Gaelic spoken in other communities on the island which speak dialects based in other parts of Scotland (MacNeil, 2005). This combination of two hundred years of separation and the mixing of words from various other dialects in the area, has resulted in a distinctive form of Gaelic which is spoken no where else in the world.

Language, Culture and Worldview

A major assumption made in this paper is that language and culture are intertwined and are inseparable (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Fishman, 1997; Milloy, 1999; Stiles, 1997). To lose a language is to lose a culture (Fishman, 1997). According to Fishman (1997), "A language long associated with a culture is best able to express most easily, most exactly, most richly, with more appropriate over-tones, the concerns, artifacts, values, and interests of that culture" (p. 81). Eliminate the language from a culture and the culture does not last for long. Milloy (1999) states, "When a language dies, the world dies, the world it was generated from breaks down too" (p. 60). According to Robinson (1988), "When denied the heartbeat of language, culture becomes inert, static – a lifeless assortment of objects amounting to little more than a caricature of itself" (p. 21). The Supreme Court of Canada also recognizes that: "Language is more than a mere means of communication it is part and parcel of the identity and culture of the people speaking it.

It is the means by which individuals understand themselves and the world around them”
(as cited in Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p.79).

Language and worldview are inextricable; languages with diverse structures create radically different worldviews. Ideas are communicated differently through different languages. Battiste & Henderson (2000) write of “the illusion of benign translatability” (p.79). This concept concerns the false assumption that ideas can be translated exactly from one language to another, that ideas are separate from language itself. Belsey (2002), postulates that as we learn languages, we bring into play the social and historical meanings. Therefore, meaning is beyond us as individuals; it is culturally based. Weedon (1997) states, “Different languages and different discourses within the same language divide up the world and give it meaning in ways which cannot be reduced to one another through translation or by an appeal to universally shared concepts reflecting a fixed reality” (p. 22). There is no fixed reality and no fixed meaning in language. Therefore, worldviews cannot be translated from one language to another without distortion and disruption.

In the Gaelic context, the language clearly brings with it a unique worldview. Thinking in this language creates a different relationship to the world than does English (Eachann). Eachann states that this phenomenon can be seen when we look at a concept such as possession. As is the case in English, there are possessive pronouns in Gaelic such as my, your, his, her, and so on. However, unlike in English they are reserved for things that are intimate to you such as your body parts, close relations (my mother, father), opinions, and

thoughts. Eachann reports that, in Gaelic, things external to you such as objects remain so. As a result, instead of saying I have a pen, in Gaelic we say the pen is at me, *Tha peann agam*. *Agam* is a contraction for at me. This example demonstrates that thinking about possession in Gaelic is different than in English.

What will be Lost if the Barra Dialect of Gaelic is Allowed to Disappear in Cape Breton's Barra Gaidhealtachd?

Fishman (1997) asserts that if you take the language away from a culture, then you also take away its greetings, literature, curses, laws, proverbs, prayers, and its songs. These outward signs of culture are integral to a community's unique identity. What will be lost if the Barra dialect of Gaelic is allowed to disappear in Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd*?

In the Barra *Gaidhealtachd*, there were unique storytelling traditions. Around the turn of the 20th century, there is evidence that ancient stories were being told in the Barra Cape Breton *Gaidhealtachd* (Shaw, 1987). Shaw (1987) reports that ancient wonder and hero tales (including Fenian tales¹¹) were told in the Middle Cape and Christmas Island areas of Cape Breton. It appears that the telling of these ancient folk tales was not common in the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* by the 1930s. Only one informant, the oldest of the five, Joseph, reported that he heard these types of long tales being told. He stated that one of these stories could start one evening and last through to the next morning. Joseph states,

¹¹ Fenian tales concern the adventures of the warrior Fiann mac Cumhail and his followers.

When I was only a kid this gentleman from Dominion [originally] from Benacadie, he'd be my father's uncle, used to come out here visiting. He'd sit there, six o'clock until one or two in the morning. The same story right through, amazing! I just barely remember them.

In the early part of the 20th century, the storytelling traditions in the community evolved, and stories became localized. They were often about people in the area (Clyde; Eachann; Hugh; Stephen). Much of daily conversation was in the form of story. Eachann states that much of his aunt's everyday conversation consisted of a series of stories. People would exchange news and stories about people through house visits and during informal and formal meetings. MacNeil (1987), reports that news could include information concerning events such as weddings, births, and deaths. The stories could be about daily things that concerned happiness or sorrow. Stories of a humorous nature were also popular in the Barra *Gaidhealthachd*. Sometimes the stories were about something odd that people did because while they were perfectly normal in most ways, they were challenged in some other (Eachann). According to Shaw (1987), locally composed stories often did not travel far outside the community and often did not become permanently established in the repertoire of tales of storytellers. Therefore, like the ancient stories, many of these creations were lost.

Stories concerning the supernatural were also popular in Barra communities. Shaw (1987) reports that local ghost stories were found in every Gaelic speaking community in Cape Breton. Clyde describes a storytelling session at a house in Barra Glen. Because

there was no electricity, people had to depend on the light of kerosene lamps. After they ran out of kerosene, they would stay and have tea by the firelight from the stove. As the night progressed, someone would tell a spooky story. The idea behind this was to scare the listeners so they would be afraid to walk home at night. Even these spooky stories were delivered very sincerely. Often, as far as the storyteller was concerned, these events really happened. Clyde describes these stories as true for the most part, or at least the storytellers often believed that they were true. As was the case in other oral cultures, most were not recorded or passed on. Therefore, many of these stories have been lost forever.

Other common themes for stories that I identified through interviews and archival research include: the history of the people, man against nature, feats of strength, and tales with a religious theme. The most common theme of stories from the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* that I been able to find English translations for (through archival research) are those concerning the hardships of the pioneers. There are several publications of Gaelic stories on a variety of themes which were recorded from informants from Barra communities in Cape (MacNeil, 1987; MacKenzie, 1984; MacLeod, 1974; MacNeil, 1979). These represent only a fraction of the stories told in the community.

If we lose the Barra dialect of Gaelic, we will loss the unique stories and storytelling and traditions associated with the community. Shaw (1987) reports that many of the stories told in Gaelic did not survive because they did not translate well into English.

Concerning this process, MacNeil (1980) writes that even the best of them would not

stand the translation into English. He states, “In Gaelic they were thrilling and picturesque, arousing either stark horror or merriment; but these effects were attained so subtly and depended so much on the nuances of Gaelic expression that they became dull and unconvincing in English” (MacNeil, 1980, p.84).

Another important element of Gaelic culture connected to language identified through interviews was Gaelic singing. The linguistic area where elements of Gaelic culture most successfully transferred over to English was in music. It is evident from the interviews that singing was an important part of daily life. Shaw (1997) reports that Fenian lays were sung in Barra communities of Cape Breton. However, none of the informants reported hearing songs of this nature sung in the area. People in the area sang songs by the noted composers such as Bard MacLean of Barney’s River, Nova Scotia (Joseph).

Locally composed Gaelic songs were also popular. These songs were often about local people and events and were composed by members of the community. Sometimes these songs were not complimentary to other members of the community (Clyde). Some local personalities, were renowned for composing songs in response to a perceived wrong doing (Stephen). Motivation for these compositions could be, for example, not being invited to an event such as a wedding. Because of the personal nature of their content, these songs could not be sung everywhere. They often were not sung when the subjects of the composition or their relatives were present. Stephen states,

There was a lot of local songs composed.... Now there was Big Sandy from down Gillis Point. He was quite a composer of songs. The majority of them you couldn't sing everywhere. They were made for weddings that he didn't get invited to or something else in the community that happened and he didn't get a fair shake. And he was deadly! He wrote scathing numbers!... He could really compose!

These songs were a combination of narrative, satire and humor (MacNeil, 1980).

Examples of songs given by MacNeil (1980) include one about Tight Hugh, the Miser, who accidentally gave the priest fifty cents instead of twenty-five, and one about Fancy Mike, the Carpenter who thought that all of the ladies of Washabuckt were interested in him when they were really having fun at his expense. Stephen gives an example of a humorous song composed by his father.

I have a recording of my father. He made a song for a fox who was stealing his hens.... He was living with his sister Annie down in Gillis Point at this time and they heard the fox. So Annie got dressed and she went out to the barn, and she starts sparring with the fox.

Places in the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* where people would gather regularly were known as ceilidh¹² houses. Each ceilidh house was known for a specific form of entertainment (MacNeil, 2005). The type of entertainments that each house was known for locally was usually determined by the talents of the owner of the house. One such house was

¹² Shaw (1987) uses "house visit" as the definition for the word ceilidh.

MacIntyre's place which was in the Benacadie / Castle Bay area (Eachann). People would gather at the MacIntyres to sing and tell stories.

People would sing to improvise the sounds of musical instruments when a fiddler or a piper could not be found. When they had enough people for a square set, and they didn't have an instrument such as a fiddle or the pipes, someone would 'jig the tunes' (Clyde; Stephen). Jigging a tune involved making sounds like the following, "Dad um da dee...."¹³ These sounds were meant to imitate musical instruments.¹⁴

A unique Gaelic tradition involving Gaelic singing practiced in the Barra communities of Cape Breton was milling frolicking. MacNeil (1980) writes that most homes had a loom, which was usually in the attic. This wool was used to create yards and yards of cloth. According to MacNeil (1980), once enough of this home spun wool was created, the family would organize a milling frolic. Historically, only women participated in milling frolicking. The Gaelic songs sung by the women were called *waulking* songs.¹⁵ The beating of the cloth matched the beat of the songs. In the early 1900s, men were also participating.

In some areas of the Barra *Gaidhealtachd*, informants report that milling frolics were rarely held (Eachann; Hugh). In others parts of this area, they were organized on a regular basis (Clyde; Stephen). In the 1930s and 40s, in the Barra Glen Road area, milling frolics were popular, and competitions were held. At this time, along this road there were up to

¹³ Clyde jiggged a tune during the interview and "Dad um da dee" is a sound based representation of this.

¹⁴ Clyde distinguished jigging a tune from mouth music: the later involves the use of words.

¹⁵ *Waulking* refers to the process of fulling or tightening the wool.

four teams who competed against each other (Clyde). There were six people to a team comprised of both men and women. In addition to the four adult teams, there was a junior team which was composed of youth from the community. Stephen recalls milling frolic practices being held in the kitchen of his family home.

With the loss of dialects such as Barra Gaelic in Cape Breton, unique cultural traditions such as milling frolics will also be gone. Many of the songs composed in the community were not recorded and they were not passed to subsequent generations. Linguistic features of these compositions such as rhythm, rhyming, and syllabication cannot be translated into English. With the passing of the last speakers in the community, who will be left to sing these wonderful locally composed songs?

Informants from the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* identified a unique linguistic tradition around at least one holiday celebration. As part of *Oidhche challainn* (New Year's) celebrations in Cape Breton's Barra communities, people would travel from house to house. Men had to recite a Gaelic rhyme or verse at the door before the owner of the home would allow him in (Eachann). They called this rhyme or verse a *rann*.¹⁶ It consisted of a request to be allowed in the house and it followed a particular form. Eachann gives the following example of a *rann* in English, "The night is cold, and it's warm inside. I'm shivering and...now let me in to your lovely house to enjoy your company." Joseph states, "At that time, like tonight,¹⁷ they'd be going around to houses visiting the neighbours. You'd have to say a rhyme. That was going on then. They wouldn't let you in unless you said

¹⁶ Eachann clarified that a *rann* is more like a verse than a rhyme

¹⁷ Joseph was interviewed on the morning of December 31, 2007.

the rhyme” (Joseph). Joseph reports that the man of the house would answer the man who said it.¹⁸ If the visitor had the right rhyme, the head of house would open the door and let the guests in.

With the decline of the Barra dialect of Gaelic in Cape Breton, unique linguistic traditions associated with the culture such as reciting a *rann* are also being lost. This represents the end of a unique way of interacting with others in the community. This is just one example of how language impacts on celebrations in the Barra *Gaidhealtachd*. While there may be other examples of this phenomenon, this was the only example mentioned by informants from the community.

Interviews with informants from the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* also demonstrate that language was closely tied to the way individuals in the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* were identified. People in the area were known by two names (MacNeil, 1980). One was the anglicized form of their family name such as MacNeil, MacKinnon or MacLean and the English form of their first name (James for Seamus). The other was what MacNeil refers to as a neighbourly or intimate name. This was almost always a Gaelic name but English words were mixed in as time progressed. MacNeil (1980), reports that people in the community were not always addressed by their neighbourly names, but they were known by it. These names could be based on their *sloinneadh* (pedigree) father’s or grandfather’s name, a dominant mother or grandmother, being raised by a widow, physical appearance, occupation, locality, personality peculiarity or nothing at all. This Gaelic tradition carried over into the English community of Gaels in some cases. These neighbourly

¹⁸ Joseph was the only informant who reported experiencing this tradition firsthand.

names often did not translate well into English (MacNeil, 1980). Concerning these informal names, MacNeil writes, “All of these names poured off the tongue with the soft, sweet, gurgling, guttural music of a woodland brook. Translated into English such names lose much of their colour and euphony and all of their alliteration and rhythm” (p. 20).

With the loss of the Barra dialect, comes the loss of a unique way of being known in the community. Descendants of these Gaels may never fully appreciate the intimate names that their ancestors were known by. As the last speakers pass, this unique way of being known in the world will be lost as well.

One of the most interesting trends to come from the interviews were comments by informants concerning the *blas* or taste of Gaelic. The greatest tragedy we face with the passing of the last Barra Gaelic dialect speaker is the loss of the last person on the island with the *Blas* or taste of this particular dialect of the language. With the exception of a few isolated cases, Gaelic is no longer being learned as a living language in the Cape Breton Barra community.¹⁹ Formal study of Gaelic can never replace the experience of growing up with the language in the everyday world (Eachann). Hugh states that in order to be fluent in Gaelic, you should learn it as a preschooler. He reports that it is going to be hard to learn the language, “when you’re not bread and buttered in it.”

Clyde comments that students on Cape Breton Island are learning a homogenized form of the Gaelic. Therefore, the unique words, expressions and pronunciation of various

¹⁹ Eachann raised his children in a multilingual home. He spoke only Gaelic to them for about the first 10 or twelve years of their lives.

dialects (such as the Barra dialect) will not be taught to subsequent generations. Several informants interviewed report that students of Gaelic today do not have the *Blas* of it (Hugh; Joseph). According to Hugh, those who learn Gaelic later in life are forever trying to get the pronunciation of the words correctly. Joseph reports that he is one of the last speakers left to have had access to “old Gaelic.” He states,

It’s not that they’re not learning it. But I don’t think it’s available around.

It’s just like myself, I’m one of the oldest persons left. The younger generation, they’re speaking it now but are not familiar with it like I was....I don’t know what it is to get the dialect, to get the tone to it, get the sound to it. We lived with it all our lives and heard it.

So while students of Gaelic may be learning the language, they are often doing so with an English accent and are learning a standard version of the language. According to elderly speakers, current learners do not have the same feel for the language that they do. As a result, the *Blas* of the Barra dialect will pass when the last speaker who experienced it as a living language passes on.

Very few Gaelic speakers of the Cape Breton Barra dialect of Gaelic are left on the island and these speakers are aging. With only a handful of speakers of this dialect remaining, this form of the language is on the verge of extinction. To lose Cape Breton’s Barra Gaelic is to lose a community and a unique way of thinking and relating to the world. Eachann summarized well the impact of the loss of Gaelic on communities such as Castle Bay which make up the Barra *Gaidhealtachd*. He states,

I think the loss of Gaelic within that community is just a tremendous loss. There's just so much that goes with it. You lose a language and you lose all the stories. You lose the mythology. You lose the legends. You lose a worldview....To lose a language that's so close to you is even worse.... For the world at large it will be a terrible, terrible loss!

Chapter 4: The Decline of Gaelic in Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd*

I blame the government for it [the decline of Gaelic] and their representatives. At that time they should have looked into it and should have protected it. It was our language, our mother tongue. It was under British rule at the time, and we were deprived of it. In other words, when you couldn't speak your own language and you were punished for it, it's a pretty bad situation for a free country and democracy. (Joseph)

The focus of this chapter is on the decline of Gaelic in Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd*. However, much of what is written about the decline of Gaelic in Nova Scotia does not deal with specific dialects such as Barra Gaelic. Therefore, the decline of this dialect is discussed in terms of what happened in Gaelic communities in general across the province and in Cape Breton. One of my assumptions is trends in the decline in Gaelic in Cape Breton and Nova Scotia as a whole are similar to what happened in the island's Barra Gaelic speaking areas.

Through my research, I have identified four main causes for the decline of Gaelic in in Nova Scotia and in Cape Breton's and its Barra *Gaidhealtachd*. These include:

- State policies towards minority languages
- The depopulation of rural areas
- The movement of English into the community

- The passing of the last Gaelic monolinguals

This chapter is organized based on these four causes for the decline of Gaelic in Cape Breton and its Barra *Gaidhealtachd*. Based on my research, trends in the decline of Gaelic in Scotland's *Gaidhealtachd* (Gaelic speaking region) parallel the decline of Gaelic in Nova Scotia. Therefore, I begin this chapter with a brief description of the decline of Gaelic in Scotland. This is followed by a discussion of the decline of Gaelic in the Nova Scotian context, starting with the first cause of the decline identified: state policies towards minority languages.

The Decline of Gaelic in Scotland's Gaidhealtachd

For approximately three hundred years, Gaelic was a thriving language in Scotland. According to Robertson (2001), at the beginning of the second millennium, Gaelic was the language of the crown and government. Matheson and Matheson (2000) assert that Gaelic was the official language of the government and Royal Court from about 800 to 1100. These authors state that this language reached its greatest usage in Scotland between 800 and 1066.

The dominance of Gaelic in Scotland was not to continue. During the reign of Malcolm Canmore, Gaelic was removed as the language of the Royal Court, and James IV was the last of the High Kings to have the language (Matheson & Matheson, 2000). James VI & I created an Act of Privy Council in 1616 designed to eliminate the language. Scots then

became the language of the Royal Court, and as the use of this language grew, Gaelic retreated into the Highlands and Islands.

According to Cox (1994), in the early 1600s educational policies were implemented in the Highlands with the goal of anglicizing the Gaels. Cox (1994) writes,

The Preface to the 1609 Statues of Iona, enacted by the Scottish Parliament under the military pressure from the English, was later legitimized and ratified by the Scottish Privy Council in the Education Act of 1616. It stated that the “*Inglishe toung be universesallie plantit*” and the Gaelic language, which was “one of the chief and principall causis of the continewance of barbaritie and incivilitie amongis the inhabitants of the Iles and Heylands be abolisheit and removit (sic). (pp 3-4)

The decline of the Gaelic was hastened as the Gaels were made scapegoats for the 1745 Rebellion (Matheson & Matheson, 2000). As a result of this conflict, Highlanders were disarmed and forbidden to wear their tartans. The Chiefs, who lost their power, became landlords and their followers became tenants. Although only a small minority of clans participated in the Rebellion of 1745, the events which unfolded afterwards destroyed Scotland’s *Gaidhealtachd*. Every effort was made to remove all distinctions between Highland and Lowland Scots. Concerning this historic event, Matheson & Matheson (2000) write, “The fact that many Gaels fought on the side of the Government was irrelevant and all manifestations of their identity and culture were proscribed, from the wearing of tartan, through the playing of bagpipes, to the speaking of Gaelic” (p. 7).

In the 1800s, the Scottish Society for Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK) first appeared in the Highlands. While the Society encouraged the teaching of Gaelic (as the students had no other language), the effect was quite the opposite. The aim of this group actually was to replace Gaelic with English (Matheson & Matheson, 2000). They simply wished to use Gaelic as a tool to teach English to Gaelic speaking children.

Mandatory education for all Scottish children in 1872 was to further speed the destruction of Gaelic (Robertson, 2001; Sutherland, 2000). According to Robertson (2001), “The Scottish Education Act outlawed the language as a medium of instruction and dismissed it as a subject worthy of study in its own right” (pp 9-10). The 1872 Act marked the beginning of a national system of state schools in Scotland. Unfortunately, it overlooked the needs of Gaelic speakers, many whom could not speak any other language than Gaelic.

Changes in legislation in Scotland in the early 1900s did little to improve the situation. Even though the Education Act of 1918 stated that it was the duty of local authorities to provide for teaching in Gaelic, little action was taken (Sutherland, 2000). Concerning this Act, Robertson (2001) writes, “When a concession to Gaelic education was wrung from the Government in 1918, the Act specified only the teaching of Gaelic, not teaching in Gaelic (p.10). This was the beginning of a system which would see the teaching of Gaelic as an isolated subject and not as the main medium of instruction.”

An article entitled “Teaching of Gaelic in Schools” appeared in the *Oban Times* on October 2, 1937. Mr. J. R. Bannerman, President of *An Comunn*, addressed the crowd at the National Gaelic Mod concerning the state of the Gaelic language in schools and the impact of the earlier Education Act. As part of his speech Bannerman states:

Gaelic tuition, instead of receiving an honourable position in the school curriculum, is the Cinderella of all subjects, sometimes she must get up early in the morning to get in before other subjects have risen or remain cowering in a corner until other subjects have received time honoured deference. (Bannerman as cited in the scrapbooks of A.D. MacLean, n.p.)

According to Sutherland (2000) in 1947 “The Report of the Advisory Council on Education in Scotland” demonstrated a Lowland Scot’s attitude towards the Gaelic language. The Act stated that Gaelic speaking students should be given the study of this language over any foreign language; every secondary school in Gaelic speaking areas should have on staff a qualified Gaelic teacher, and that at least one school in urban areas possessing a large Gaelic speaking population should provide opportunities for the study of Gaelic. According to Sutherland (2000), the report fell short in that, “the Council could not agree that Gaelic should have complete parity with other European languages in all secondary schools of Scotland” (p. 203). The reasons given for this were that Gaelic is not as easily learned as some of the Romance languages, and its utility value wasn’t very high. Furthermore, the report asserts that while Gaelic literature is rich in appeal to those of Gaelic origin, it lacks the “sustained greatness or the immense range and volume of the European Literatures” (p. 203). The Council also notes the difficulty

in finding the qualified teachers which would be required if the language was given equal status to other languages (Sutherland, 2000).

Depopulation has also been cited as a cause for the demise of Gaelic in Scotland.

Emigration from Scotland was particularly heavy from its *Gaidhealtachd* (Gaelic speaking region). People emigrated by the tens of thousands to destinations around the world, especially Nova Scotia (Stockdale, MacGregor & Munroe, 2003). Some people emigrated by choice whereas others were forced. These forced evictions which were part of the Highland Clearances²⁰ which decimated Gaelic rural communities in Scotland. Gaelic also declined in the county because of voluntary emigration into the predominantly English speaking cities of Scotland (Matheson and Matheson, 2000).

Another major factor responsible for the demise of Gaelic was the increasing prominence of English in daily life (Stockdale, MacGregor & Munroe, 2003). As higher status was placed on English, key institutions became Anglicized, and Scotland experienced growth in English trading relationships. English became the language of prosperity. More recently, the dominance of English language media (television, radio, and the Internet) and popular culture have also done their part to lessen the hold of Gaelic. Emigration of young people to areas outside the *Gaidhealtachd* in Scotland continues to be a problem.

²⁰ Highland Clearances is a term used to refer to the forced displacement of the population of the Scottish Highlands.

The decline of Gaelic in Scotland can also be attributed to centuries of famine, poverty, agricultural reorganization, and political isolation which lead to wide-spread emigration (Stockdale, MacGregor & Munroe, 2003).

Before I begin a discussion of Nova Scotia's policies towards the Gaelic language, it is important to clarify several concepts which will be referred to occasionally in this section. I draw on Cobarrubias' (1983) taxonomy of policies which a state can adopt towards minority languages and also on the United Nations' 1948 definition of linguistic genocide and therefore explain them in the section that follows.

Cobarrubias' Taxonomy of State Policies and Linguistic Genocide

Cobarrubias (1983) created a taxonomy of policies which a state can adopt towards minority languages. These include:

- attempting to kill a language;
- letting a language die;
- unsupported coexistence;
- partial support of specific language functions;
- adoption as an official language (p. 71).

According to Cobarrubias (1983), governments rarely officially adopt the first policy, "attempting to kill a language," as these attempts are usually unsuccessful. People are prohibited from speaking the minority language in public places, but this type of banning

“can hardly reach the privacy of the family and other communal uses” (p. 72). Political bodies more frequently adopt Cobarrubias’ second policy “letting a language die,” where languages can cease to exist through official neglect. Cobarrubias writes that the third policy, “unsupported coexistence,” involves “indifferent tolerance” (p. 72). Here, the government tolerates the use of the minority language in the community but no support (financially or other) is given toward the use and maintenance of this tongue. With this orientation, language maintenance is entirely left up to the community in which it is spoken. With Cobarrubias’ “partial support of specific language functions,” the government supplies official institutional or financial support; specific legislation is often drafted to support this assistance. This support can come in the form of a minority language being used as medium of education in specific grades or taught as a subject, or in the form of teaching the language as a foreign tongue (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). The last of Cobarrubias’ political policies is “adoption as an official language.” In order to have official language status, a language must be actively used by the government for a variety of its functions.

Cobarrubias’ policies can be classified as to whether or not they usually lead to language death or language maintenance. Concerning the first three of these policies, Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) writes, “the first three policies seem to lead, with few exceptions, to languages dying/being killed. Especially under conditions when all children participate in formal education” (p. 297). About the last two of Cobarrubias’ policies Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) states, “only the last two policies seem to make a language potentially

safe, because formal education is one of the main killers of those languages which are not used as main media for that education” (p. 297).

In addition to Cobarrubias’ taxonomy of state policies towards minority languages, linguistic genocide is also a term which will be referred to periodically in this chapter. Linguistic genocide was first named in 1948 by the United Nations. This type of genocide is defined in Article III (1) of the final draft of what became The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide as "prohibiting the use of the language of the group in daily intercourse or in schools, or the printing and circulation of publications in the language of the group" (as cited in Shutnabb-Kangas, 2000, p. 316). The UN General Assembly voted down Article III when the Convention was finally approved, and therefore it is not part of the actual Convention. Even though linguistic genocide did not become part of the Convention, this definition was accepted by the majority of what were then UN states (Shutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

The first part of the prohibition in the UN’s definition “prohibiting the use of the language of the group in daily intercourse or in schools” (as cited in Shutnabb-Kangas, 2000, p. 316) can be achieved through physical or psychological punishment or it can be attained structurally. An example of physical punishment is when children were hit for speaking Gaelic in the classrooms of the Barra *Gaidhealtachd*. An example of structural prohibition is given by Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) whereby children are prohibited from using the minority language as a means of expression when there are no teachers who speak the minority language in the school and when the main language is not the main medium of instruction. Another example of structural prohibition is

educating minority children in a dominant language. For example, educating Gaelic speaking monolinguals in English is an example of structural prohibition in that they are not being given the opportunity to be educated in their mother tongue. An example of psychological prohibition is when Gaelic children were made to feel ashamed of their mother tongue in the Barra *Gaidhealtachd*. Such prohibition may result in the child no longer using the minority language in daily communication.

The second part of the UN's definition of linguistic genocide involves prohibiting "the use and circulation of publications in the language of the group" (as cited in Shutnabb-Kangas, 2000, p. 316). This action can involve discrimination by publishers and libraries against literature in minority or Indigenous languages.

The 1948 United Nations International Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide does have sections which are applicable to the education of minority and Indigenous students. Articles II(b) and II(e) in the current convention about what constitutes genocide state:

Article II(e), "forcibly transferring children of the group to another group"

Article II(b) , "causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group" (as cited in Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, p. 316)

Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) gives the most vital factor in the maintenance of languages as the transmission of the language from the parent's generation to the child's. Once schools are established in an area, much of the language learning that once occurred in the community now takes place in the school, and this can influence the inter-

generational transmission of minority and Indigenous languages. She also states that the forcible transfer of people from one group to another often causes harm to them mentally. These two constructs: "forcibly transferring children of the group to another group" and "mental harm" fit the definition of genocide under current International Law as specified in Articles II(b) and II(e) of the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

The focus of discussion will now return to the four major causes of decline of the Gaelic language identified at the beginning of this chapter. These include: state policies towards minority languages, the depopulation of rural areas, the movement of English into the community, and the passing of the last Gaelic monolinguals.

State Policies Towards Minority Languages – Nova Scotia and its Cape Breton Barra Gaidhealtachd.

Based on information collected from interviews with informants from Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd*, and on a review of the literature concerning the decline of Gaelic in Nova Scotia (Campbell & MacLean, 1974; Cox, 1994; Edwards 1991; Mertz, 1984; Robinson, 1988), I argue that historically the provincial government played a significant role in the demise of Gaelic. The government showed a lack of support for the Gaelic community through its school policies, financially, and in the way it conducted its daily business with Gaelic speakers. Over time, the province of Nova Scotia enacted policies which move it up and down Cobarrubias' (1983) taxonomy. The following discussion of the role of the government in the decline of Gaelic in Nova Scotia is organized based on

this taxonomy. The actions of government are discussed at every level of the taxonomy beginning with “attempting to kill a language and ending with “adoption as an official language.”

“*Attempting to kill a language.*” According to Cobarrubias’ (1983) taxonomy of state policies towards minority languages, “attempting to kill a language” concerns people being officially banned from speaking a minority language in public places. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) refers to this as active linguistic genocide. The main public place where a ban of Gaelic appears to have been enforced was in the school system. This prohibition of Gaelic was mainly achieved through physical punishment, structural prohibition, shame, and stigmatization.

In Cape Breton and its Barra *Gaidhealtachd*, physical punishment was used to force Gaelic speakers to speak English. Cox (1994) writes, “By the turn of the century, teachers scolded and spanked their students, in order to prevent them from speaking Gaelic in schools, or even in the schoolyard” (p. 25). A study of Gaelic speakers in Nova Scotia by Edwards (1991), who studied three groups of Gaelic speakers in Nova Scotia, demonstrated that punishment was used against several informants who spoke Gaelic at school. One of these informants is quoted as saying, “When I attended school in 1915-1920, you got a strapping with a leather strap if caught speaking Gaelic” (p. 288). Dembling (1991) conducted a survey of Gaelic speakers in the Christmas Island and North Shore areas of Cape Breton. He reports that two informants said they were punished for speaking Gaelic.

Several of the informants from the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* also report stories of punishment in the schools. According to Eachann there are stories of Gaelic monolinguals starting school when they were four years old and being spoken to by the teachers in English. When they turned to the student beside them asking for clarification, they were beaten for asking the question in Gaelic. Hugh refers to his mother's teacher as a "fluent Gaelicer" and as a "savage man" with respect to "pressing the English." He reports that his mother experienced the threat of corporal punishment at school. His mother, born about 1895, was allowed to speak only English inside the school. Hugh asserts, "Once you entered the school, you spoke nothing but all English. If you spoke Gaelic, you'd get the stick or strap or something."

Only one informant from the Barra *Gaidhealtachd*, reported experiencing punishment firsthand. This would have occurred sometime in the 1920s. Joseph, born in 1913, states:

It was a sad experience in school. You weren't allowed to speak Gaelic in school. If you did speak Gaelic in school, and you were caught, you were punished, which happened to me a couple of times.

As punishment Joseph reported that he was kept in after school, placed in a corner and was made to face the wall.

Joe Neil MacNeil (1987) also relates an example of prohibition of Gaelic at school through punishment. MacNeil (1987) reports that one day a dog following him into the school and a boy in his class was reprimanded for speaking Gaelic after trying to get the dog out. Joe Neil (1987) asserts,

But the dog entered the schoolhouse after me, and people began to try to put the dog out of the school. And one of the young boys said in Gaelic, “Out you go!” or “Put him out.” And I believe from the few words of English that I was able to understand vaguely, that the lad was spoken to – was censored – for speaking Gaelic. (p. 7)

Prohibition of Gaelic was also achieved through the structural means of educating Gaelic speaking students in English only. Clyde states, “It was frowned upon to use any Gaelic expressions when you went to school. Although very often the teachers were of Gaelic origin, but they didn’t want the Gaelic getting mixed into the English too much.” Joe Neil MacNeil (1987) states, “When I went to school I can say that Gaelic was as good as forbidden there; we were not allowed to use it at all except outside” (pp. 6-7).

Several informants connected with the Cape Breton Barra *Gaidhealtachd* report that some time in the 1920s, Gaelic was forbidden in the local schools (Joseph; Stephen)²¹. Joseph, who was attending school in the Highland’s area at the time, reported that a meeting was called at the local school, and parents were told that there would be no more Gaelic allowed. Concerning this development Joseph states,

back in the 20’s...we were allowed [to speak Gaelic at school]. Then this law came out that you weren’t allowed to speak Gaelic in school. You were deprived of your rights, your culture. Which, whoever put it into

²¹ I could not locate legislation to support this. Was this school policy the result of a misinterpretation of legislation introduced in 1921 which is discussed later in this chapter?

effect, I don't think they were very intelligent in regards to culture or your rights and them.

Stephen also reported hearing stories about this event from at least two older community members. Stephen was told that a decree came down from Halifax stating that Gaelic would no longer be spoken at school. Stephen states,

There was a meeting called, and they went to talk to the teacher. The teacher told them that he got word from Halifax that there was no more Gaelic going to be taught in the school. And I guess she (sic) was definitely...a Gaelic person. But it was her living to teach so I guess she just kept teaching. But, Gaelic wasn't allowed to be used in the class.

While a Gaelic prohibition was in place, not all teachers adhered to this policy. There were some exceptions to the rule, and Michael B. MacDonald (born about 1847) who taught in Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd* was one of them. Clyde states,

My mother learned to read and write Gaelic from her teacher. He was an M.B. MacDonald...He told any of the students who would be interested in learning to read Gaelic, they could stay inside during recess and they would have a 15 minute class of Gaelic.

Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) identifies stigmatizing and shame as a means to prohibit the usage of minority languages, and this was also the case in the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* of Cape Breton. Gaelic speaking children in the area were taught at school that Gaelic was something bad. Joseph states,

When you weren't allowed to speak it in school they [the other students] turned against it. They called it a jib ridge. You're not allowed to speak it. We used to meet them on the road or meet them in houses and start talking Gaelic. What are you saying? You're not allowed to speak that language. They just completely turned against it. And that was really detrimental to it.

"Letting a language die" and "unsupported coexistence." Cobarrubias' taxonomy of state policies towards minority languages gives "letting a language die" and "unsupported coexistence" as other possible orientations assumed by governments. Both usually lead to the death of the minority language (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) refers to "letting a language" die as passive linguistic genocide. These orientations were also assumed by the government of Nova Scotia at times through its school policies and everyday dealings with Gaelic speakers.

The Nova Scotian government demonstrated an orientation of "unsupported coexistence" toward Gaelic in 1864 when state schools were established in the province. At this time, no provision was made for Gaelic as a medium of instruction (Edwards, 1991). This Act eventually brought English schools into Gaelic communities across the province.

"Unsupported coexistence" by the government of Nova Scotia as a political orientation was demonstrated toward the Gaelic language in the way it conducted its business

dealings with Gaelic speakers. Official interactions between government representatives and the Gaelic community were almost exclusively in English. Mertz (1984) reports that there was no official prohibition preventing government officials from conducting business in a minority language, but official documents such as tax and census forms were in English, and government publications were also almost exclusively in English. Because government business was conducted in English, residents of Gaelic speaking communities in the Barra communities of Cape Breton had to be known by two names. People in the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* had a neighbourly Gaelic name and an English legal name (MacNeil, 1980).

“Partial support of specific language functions.” Credit must be given to the government of Nova Scotia in that there have been incidences where it has demonstrated an orientation towards Gaelic which is in keeping with what Cobarricbias’ (1983) refers to as “partial support of specific language functions,” (However, these efforts were weak and inconsistent). The Nova Scotia Education Act of 1841 did allow for the use of Gaelic as a medium of instruction if a school district wished to use it (Dunn, 1991; Edwards, 1991). While the original draft of the Act stated that money should only be allotted to English schools, the bill was later amended to allow for instruction in French, German, and Gaelic (Mertz, 1984). However, Gaelic speakers failed to take advantage of this Act to promote and preserve their language. A possible reason the Gaels failed to take advantage of this opportunity to preserve their language was that most of the Gaelic-speaking areas in Cape Breton were not formally organized into school districts in the

1840s. Therefore, few schools on the island were able to take advantage of this possibility (Cox, 1994).

In 1921, the government of Nova Scotia demonstrated “partial support of specific language functions” in that Gaelic was allowed as an optional subject (but not the main medium of instruction) in schools where students demanded it. However, at the elementary level, there was no suggestion of any language of instruction other than English (and in a few instances French) being taught or used as a medium of instruction. Latin, Greek, German and French competed for attention in the senior grades. According to Robinson (1988), “Gaelic was very much an isolated consideration” (p. 12). While this support was limited, it still demonstrated some official institutional or financial support for Gaelic.

The government of Nova Scotia also showed “partial support of specific language functions” for Gaelic in the 1950s and in the 1970s. In 1950, the Nova Scotia’s Department of Education set up a Gaelic Service Branch within the Adult Education Division (Cox, 1994). Colonel Ian MacLeod was appointed Gaelic Advisor. Teachers were trained, and Gaelic language classes were established in four schools in Inverness County. More than 50 teachers were trained at a Nova Scotia Summer School between 1950 and 1955 (Robinson, 1988). These teachers were to offer one hour of instruction per week in a number of Cape Breton schools. Two publications, “Simplified Gaelic for Beginners” and “*An t-Eiltireach*” (a collection of poems by MacLeod) were created for Gaelic instruction. Unfortunately, when MacLeod left this position in 1958, he was not replaced, and the Gaelic Service Branch appears to have vanished (Cox, 1994).

In 1973, the Provincial Department of Education implemented a Gaelic language program in some Cape Breton schools (Cox, 1994). This also demonstrated “partial support of specific language functions.” However, only three teachers were employed to teach a total of 710 students in seven schools (Robinson, 1988). These schools were located in Mabou, Port Hood, Judique-Creignish, North East Margaree, Whycocomagh, Margaree Forks, and Inverness. The classes were offered primarily at the upper elementary level, but in a few cases primary and junior high classes were conducted. Generally, these classes were taught for brief weekly periods during the school year at the beginners’ level. Some adult education classes were taught at Mabou and Port Hood, and some classes for students at an advanced level were available for students at Mabou. These classes provided students with only limited exposure to Gaelic language and culture, and the teachers involved stated that the classes were ineffectual (Mertz, 1984).

Unfortunately, many of the limited gains made by the Gaelic community previously were lost in the 1980s. In the 1980s, Gaelic classes in all but one of the seven schools were discontinued. A lack of funding and qualified teachers meant that the program had to be scaled back. Dated curriculum guides, a lack of additional support resources, the absence of textbooks, and an already crowded school curriculum also contributed to the failure of the program. The two teachers who had been originally hired to teach Gaelic in Port Hood and Mabou were assigned to Mabou. Only sixty-seven students were studying Gaelic at the high school level at Mabou Consolidated, where it was offered as an optional subject during the 1986-87 school year. Gaelic was maintained as a high school subject in the school curriculum, but its continued presence was honoured in name only (Robinson, 1988). While there were some protests concerning the discontinuation of the

program, no real effort was made to save it (Edwards, 1991). Ironically, there was no money from the province for Gaelic classes, but there was lots of money for provincial tourist campaigns which were designed to promote all things Scottish (Robinson, 1988).

Based on information from the research section of the Department of Education, only thirty-nine students studied Gaelic in Cape Breton during the 1990-1991 school year (Cox, 1994). Gaelic language instruction was confined to Mabou Consolidated School in Inverness County.

Current government policies (the late-1980s to present) show improved support, these will be discussed in the final section of chapter 5.

“Adoption as an official language.” The Nova Scotia government has moved among different points on Cobarricbias’ taxonomy over the last two decades with respect to Gaelic. However, it never adopted Gaelic as an official language at any time in its history. Cobarricbias (1983) writes, “In order for a language to be official it has to be used for purposes of government, including use in government documents, publications of laws, government assemblies, record keeping and the like (pp. 72-73). This has never been the case in Nova Scotia. The only attempt at getting official language status for Gaelic in Nova Scotia was Senator Thomas MacInnis’ failed attempt in 1891.

Gaelic in the Media

So far this discussion has centered only on the first part of the definition of linguistic genocide “prohibiting the use of the language of the group in daily intercourse or in schools” and not on the latter part which concerns prohibiting “the printing and circulation of publications in the language of the group” (as cited in Shutnabb-Kangas, 2000, p. 316). In this section, I will address linguistic genocide through the media, especially publishing.

Generally, the government of Nova Scotia did not attempt to censor Gaelic media in the province. My review of the literature revealed that a significant amount of publishing took place in the province in the early years. John Boyd began publishing a monthly Gaelic magazine in Antigonish in 1851 entitled *An Cuairtear Og Gaelach - The Gaelic Tourist* (Dunn, 1951). In 1852, Boyd started printing *The Casket* which was partially in Gaelic. At least twenty-one Gaelic publications were printed in Nova Scotia between 1851 and 1942 (Turner, 1957). In addition to Gaelic newspapers, Gaelic plays, journals, poetry anthologies, and prose were also published. Robinson (1988) writes that Pictou was the location of the first ever book published in Gaelic outside of Scotland.

The only time Gaelic appears to have been publically banned in the media and as a means of communication was in Nova Scotia during World War II. In 1944, the Wartime Board of Censors issued a ban of Gaelic programming by the Canadian Broadcasting Company and it was illegal to send telegraph messages using the language. On Saint Andrew’s Day, the Scottish Catholic Society of Sydney and the Gaelic Foundation of Baddeck tried to exchange greetings in Gaelic, and the

response was that no Gaelic was allowed by the Board of Censors. In article entitled “Challenge to the Gael” which appeared in *The Sydney Post-Record* the following was stated:

Our War-time Board of Censors, greatly daring, has actually ventured to issue a challenge by deed to the whole Highland community of Canada by promulgating an edict that messages in Gaelic can no longer be transmitted over our telegraph systems. Earlier in the year the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, under the same evil spell as the Board, had imposed a similar veto upon the Gaelic tongue in regard to its programs, but when the welkin in Nova Scotia began to ring with violent protests of outraged Gaels it promptly decided that discretion was the better part of valor, and withdrew its ban. (sic) (as cited in the scrapbooks of A.D. MacLean, n.p.)

The Cape Breton Gaelic Foundation organized a protest and sent a letter to the Prime Minister of Canada. Although reaction to the war measure passed by the Government of Canada forbidding the communication of Gaelic over the telegraph lines was one of outrage, privately most Cape Breton Gaels had already stopped teaching their children the Gaelic language (Cox, 1994).

Depopulation of Rural Communities in Nova Scotia and in its Cape Breton Barra Gaidhealtachd

Informants from the Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd* gave depopulation of rural areas as another reason for the decline of Gaelic. Geography has long played an important part in the survival of Gaelic language and culture in both the Highlands and Islands of Scotland as well as in Cape Breton. For centuries, the landscape of Scotland isolated Gaels from the English majority. People in these rural areas were able to resist a school system which discriminated against them and prejudicial laws designed to destroy their culture. Cape Breton Island, because of its geographical isolation and rurality, became a strong centre of Gaelic language and culture in North America, just as the Highlands and Islands of Scotland had been. The vitality of the Gaelic language has historically been tied to the strength of the rural populations who spoke it. Traditionally, it was in the rural areas that Gaelic was retained (Dunn, 1991).

Outmigration to various locations across the globe has been a significant factor in the decline of Gaelic in Cape Breton (Edwards, 1991). Documented genealogies of families from Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd* demonstrate a constant movement of people out of the area over a number of generations (MacKenzie, 1984; MacMillan, 2001; MacNeil, 1979). Early destinations for Gaels from the rural areas of Cape Breton such as the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* included Industrial Cape Breton (Sydney and the surrounding towns) and places across Canada and the United States as far as British Columbia, California, the Yukon and Alaska. Many Highlanders moved to work in the mining towns of Cape Breton and to a lesser extent mainland Nova Scotia in the last few decades

of the 1800s. Near the turn of the 20th century, a common place to find work was the steel plant in Sydney. Throughout this period an even more popular destination was Boston and what came to be known as the ‘The Boston States.’ Emigration has caused the ongoing depopulation of Gaelic speakers on both sides of Barra Strait in Cape Breton over the course of the last two centuries.

A variety of factors led to outmigration of speakers from rural Cape Breton and in particular the Barra *Gaidhealtachd*. Rural depopulation was caused, in part, by economics. In the early 1800s, as the population of the Barra communities increased and because suitable agricultural land in the area was taken, people were forced to settle in increasingly remote areas (MacKenzie, 1984). Eventually, there was not enough farmable land to support a growing population, and people were forced to leave.

Another factor in the emigration from rural areas was that Highland Scots did not come from agrarian societies. The people of the Highlands of Scotland maintained small crofts but had to learn to farm large parcels of land in Cape Breton. As a result, they did not have the same type of attachment to the land that people from traditionally agricultural societies might have. Scottish parents often saw life off of the farm as holding a better chance for prosperity for their offspring, and so they encouraged their children to go.

A major exodus of people from the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* began in the 1880s. About this time there was a downturn in the fishing, agricultural and forest sector, industries associated with rural economies. Improved farming equipment meant that fewer

labourers were needed to work the land, and increases in the manufacturing industry resulted in jobs for the displaced rural people in urban centres. Later, the development of inventions such as the automobile and telephone were attractive incentives to another lifestyle. Such inventions were far slower in coming to rural areas because the required infra-structure was not in place. In some cases, people sought an escape from the isolation of rural Cape Breton (Campbell, 1978).

A characteristic of the Scots which encouraged emigration from rural communities was what Campbell and MacLean (1974) refer to as that “other-directedness.” By 1880 there were already 37, 753 people of Nova Scotian descent in New England; 29, 307 of these people were in Massachusetts (Campbell & MacLean, 1974). A number of these individuals wrote back to relatives in Cape Breton or came home to visit and spoke of the conditions there. Some spent a number of years in New England and returned to the Cape Breton area bringing new skills and money. While some returned, most did not. Generally Gaels had found employment and had prospered in the urban areas of North America. A mythology in Cape Breton rural communities built up about New England, and young Highland Scots were more than willing to go.

While historically there has always been movement from the rural parts of Cape Breton to other destinations, another significant exodus of Gaels occurred after World War I. The outbreak of war and the Depression that followed completely changed the outlook of life in the area (Joseph). The lack of opportunity in the community was significant, and as a result, large numbers of people relocated.

Every house had five or six boys in and no work.... So once war broke out, they got a rifle and a uniform and a few dollars and that was it. Glad to get it and then their experience in the army, being away. Some of them came back and left and went away and just the place was empty. Still empty! (Joseph)

A significant economic downturn in Industrial Cape Breton occurred in the mid- to late 1900s. This caused subsequent generations from the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* to emigration to other parts of North America in increasing numbers. Industrial Cape Breton was no longer an option for most. The failure of major industries on the island such as Sydney Steel sent a number of works in search of new opportunities.

I was away 15 years in Boston and I should have left 15 years before that. I was working at the steel plant. My name was at the steel plant, but I wasn't working you know, no shifts. No work. Well you got to the point where there was nothing going. Sydney was dead. So I was like 45 then and people said you're going to Boston to work, you won't get a job. I went up to Boston. There was all kinds of work there if you wanted to. (Joseph)

The outmigration of speakers to urban centres in North America was so great that large numbers of Gaelic speakers could be found in locations such as Toronto and Boston.

Here, Gaelic speakers from a variety of locations in the Maritimes congregated, and barriers such as religion and geography which had previously encouraged speakers to remain as distinct groups lessened in influence. Gaelic speakers gathered formally and informally. They often formed Gaelic associations in these metropolitan areas. Joseph states the following concerning his experience with other Gaelic speakers in Boston.

We had a good, good session up in Boston, Cape Breton Gaelic Club, terrific. Oh my God, they were from Loch Lomond, Gabarus, and North River and those places. Why, we could put at a time 35 singers on the stage, Gaelic singers.

Gaelic speakers from various parts of the Maritimes would also gather in Toronto in the late 1940s and 1950s. Unfortunately, their beautiful Gaelic singing wasn't always appreciated. Stephen states,

We knew people from Inverness County. You'd know who they were in the bar and everything. They liked Gaelic and they liked to sing. And of course you'd go back to the room up on the second or third floor. You started to sing and well, next day you'd get a notice to get out. We were in lots of places that we got kicked out on account of singing Gaelic songs. Same thing in the bars. In the bars we went to in the afternoon if you started singing, get out! That was it! ... And it wasn't just the singing as

far as the second or third floor. It was the banging of the foot that really put the killer on it. (Stephen)

The extent of the exodus of people of the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* was so significant that eventually the critical mass of Gaelic speakers just wasn't there any longer (Eachann). Speakers had fewer opportunities to gather and to share Gaelic conversation. If these Gaelic speakers hadn't left the Barra *Gaidhealtachd*, even though they'd be elderly now, the impact of their presence would likely have been significant to the community (Eachann).

The Movement of English into the Gaelic Communities of Nova Scotia and its Cape Breton Barra Gaidhealtachd

Another common theme in the interviews with informants from the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* was that Gaelic declined because of movement of English into the community. English moved into Gaelic communities through the use of this language for new technologies, unfamiliar foods, through the influx of English speaking workers and cottagers, through transportation, and through the media. All of these factors weakened the language in rural areas such as Cape Breton's *Gaidhealtachd*.

By the turn of the 20th century, the phenomenon of mixing English words with Gaelic further hastened the decline of Gaelic. Dunn (1991) attributes this to the fact that many English words didn't have a Gaelic equivalent. He gives the example of the prune, banana, and the tomato which rarely, if ever, made their way to the poor Highland communities of Scotland. Since the Gael had never seen these exotic fruits, they had no

words for them in their language. Dunn (1991) also refers to inventions such as trains, automobiles, electrical devices and planes which required new words. The English were quick to coin the terms, and the Gaels were just as quick to incorporate the English terms into their language.

Improvements in transportation also brought English to rural Gaelic communities. Better roads reduced the isolation of rural communities. Though historically, the residents of the Iona/Christmas Island area depended on fishing, farming, and lumbering for their livelihoods, towards the end of the 19th century, a number of local residents were employed by the railway. The first train service began in the area 1891 (MacKenzie, 1984). A number of people were also later employed by the ferry which connected the communities of Iona and Grand Narrows. A hotel was built at Grand Narrows to accommodate these new travelers, and this required workers who could speak English. Some in-migration of English speakers occurred as the result of some of these new industries, and the train and improved roads gave outsiders greater accessibility to the community.

Improvements in roads also resulted in the movement of English speakers into the Barra communities on Barra Strait because of the recreational value of the area. In some cases these part-time residents were the children and or grandchildren of locals who were from other communities. This group of cottagers and people raised outside of the community brought a significant amount of English into the community.

Communities farther away from the centres of commerce in the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* retained their Gaelic longer. The experience in Barra Glen was quite a bit different to

that of nearby Iona (Clyde). Children in and around Iona lost their Gaelic before children in Barra Glen. Because Iona was a shipping centre, and had a railroad station people needed to have English. Thus, less effort was made to retain the Gaelic.

Also contributing to the demise of the Gaelic language in rural communities was that entertainment and information media was predominantly in English. Radio and movies helped bring the English language into the homes of an increasing number of Gaels. What programming there was in Gaelic was often inferior to that offered in English (Eachann). According to Eachann, who attempted to raise his children in Gaelic, “The dynamics, the scenes of flashes and changing colour and setting that keep a child’s attention” were done so much better in English than in Gaelic. His children were therefore more attracted to the English programming.

The Passing of the Last Gaelic Monolinguals

Eventually, English gained such prominence in Cape Breton’s Barra *Gaidhealtachd* that there were no monolinguals left. The passing of the last Gaelic monolinguals in the Gaelic communities of Cape Breton marked a significant turning point in the need for proficiency in the language. The presence of Gaelic monolinguals encouraged at least some knowledge of the language for family members and, to a lesser extent neighbours. With the passing of the Gaelic monolinguals there was no longer a need to have any knowledge of Gaelic.

Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd* was initially comprised almost exclusively of Gaelic monolinguals. On the 29th of June, 1815, Bishop Plessis of Quebec, along with three priests, visited a log church which was erected at Cooper's Pond near Christmas Island. The bishop and priests celebrated Mass with the people. Plessis wanted to give the settlers some words of encouragement, but, as the pioneers could only speak Gaelic, and because there was no one to translate, he had to remain silent (MacNeil, 1994).

The strength of Gaelic in these Barra communities was evident in that some non-speaking Gaelic settlers in the area became speakers and were integrated into the community. One such man was Thomas Bryden. Bryden came out from England and married a woman from Barra named Flora MacNeil (MacKenzie, 1984). Members of the third generation of this family were fluent in their grandmother MacNeil's language (Dunn, 1991). There are also reports of a few older *Mi'kmaw* (who likely lived at the adjacent First Nations community of Eskasoni) and Highland Scots speaking each other's languages (Dembling, 1991).

An account of the extent to which Gaelic was spoken in the Washabuckt area of Cape Breton around the turn of the century given by Neil MacNeil (1980) indicates that there were still a number of elderly monolinguals in the community. MacNeil was born in Boston in 1891 but came to live with his grandparents as a child. MacNeil (1980) writes, "They all spoke Gaelic, both in the home and out of it. Some of the older people, especially the women, spoke nothing else" (p.17). These comments suggest that English was making greater gains among men than among women. This was likely because a greater percentage of men than women worked outside of the home and the community.

About the time of World War I, there is evidence that many rural communities still retained Gaelic as a primary means of communication and that Gaelic monolinguals still existed. Campbell (1978) writes of his teaching experiences in a small rural school at Mount Auburn in the Loch Lomond area of Cape Breton. Campbell (1978) asserts, “Several of the children who attended for the first time had no English – just Gaelic. In fact, when the school wasn’t in session all that could be heard from the children at play was Gaelic” (p. 87).

There were a number of Gaelic monolinguals living in the Barra communities of Cape Breton in the first half of the 20th century (Clyde; Hugh; Joseph; Stephen). Children in the community in the 1930s had to have some basic conversational Gaelic skills in order to converse with neighbours and, in some cases, family members who were Gaelic monolinguals. Bilingual speakers report that when going on errands or to borrow something as children a basic knowledge of Gaelic was required to respond to questions and greetings from monolinguals (Clyde). Some knowledge of Gaelic was also required in the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* when Gaelic speakers would come to the house ‘on *ceilidh*’ (Stephen). Children had to try to understand the visitors or were expected to remain quiet (Hugh). Informants report being able to understand more Gaelic than they could speak (Hugh; Stephen). Parents often taught their children basic greetings and to answer questions regarding topics such as the weather (Stephen).

By 1940s and 1950s the last Gaelic monolinguals were dying off in many rural Cape Breton Gaelic communities. Dunn (1991) writes about the demise of the Gaelic monolingual in Cape Breton.

A hundred years and more have gone by since the Highland settlers came out from Scotland to Cape Breton, and those who could speak only Gaelic and knew no English have now almost all passed away, even in the most remote county settlements. This fact has weakened Gaelic wherever non-Gaelic speaking people have settled among the Gaels. (Dunn, 1991, p. 139)

In Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd* some of the last Gaelic monolinguals included one informant's maternal grandmother (born about 1847), and one family of monolinguals living in the community which consisted of two brothers and a sister who never married (Stephen). These people were born in the late 1870s to late 1880s.

As late as 1976-1977, a few Gaelic monolinguals could still be found in rural Cape Breton. These monolinguals were comprised of a handful of women in their 80s and 90s (MacKinnon, 1985). Edwards (1991) conducted a study of three groups of Gaelic speakers and students of Gaelic from various parts of the province of Nova Scotia. He found that the most capable Gaelic speakers were those who were the oldest, held semi-skilled jobs, and were the least educated. There was a complete absence of Gaelic monolinguals in Edward's (1991) study which suggests that those still alive at the time of MacKinnon's study were by then deceased.

Nova Scotian government's policies towards Gaelic and the lack thereof, the depopulation of rural areas, the movement of English into the community, and the passing of the last Gaelic monolinguals all played roles in the decline of Gaelic in Cape

Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd*. The impact of these factors on the status of Gaelic in Nova Scotia is explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: The Changing Status of Gaelic in
Cape Breton and its Barra *Gaidhealtachd*

After a few years there were a lot of people who couldn't stand it [Gaelic].
If you talked it they couldn't. They turned right against it. Then all of a
sudden it was a terrific thing! (Stephen).

In the preceding chapter, possible reasons for the decline of Gaelic in Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd* were discussed including: state policies towards Gaelic language, the depopulation of rural areas, the movement of English into the community, and the passing of the last Gaelic monolingual. In the first part of this chapter, I argue that these factors all influenced the Gaelic community's own perception of its language resulting in a loss of confidence. In the second part of this chapter, I discuss the ways in which favorable attention from the outside world influenced the Gaelic speaking community's view of their language and culture. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of how changing views toward Gaelic in Nova Scotia in the late 1980s resulted in the first real action on the part of the Nova Scotian government to do something about the decline of Gaelic in the province in terms of study and language development.

As was the case with the decline of Gaelic in Nova Scotia, much of what is written about the status for the language is about Gaelic in Nova Scotia in general and discussions concerning specific dialects such as that spoken in the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* are rare. As

was the case in the previous chapter, I make the assumption that what was happening in the province with Gaelic in general is applicable to Cape Breton's *Gaidhealtachd*.

A Loss of Confidence

Many Gaelic speakers came to view English as superior and as the language of the educated, refined, and cultured (Dunn, 1991). English became associated with economic opportunity and the higher standard of living found in the cities. Conversely, Gaelic was viewed as inferior and as the language of poverty (Dunn, 1991). Gaelic became associated with rurality and ignorance. Gaelic in Nova Scotia became a stigmatized language by the same forces identified in the previous chapter as contributing to the decline of the language: state policies towards minority languages, depopulation, and the movement of English into the community, and the passing of the last Gaelic monolinguals.

The school system did much to contribute to a loss of confidence in Gaelic. State policies in Nova Scotia exercised through the school system equate to nothing less than linguistic genocide. What Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) refers to as a structural cause of linguistic genocide (exclusive schooling in English), prevented Gaelic speakers from having Gaelic as the medium of instruction. Robinson (1988) asserts, "Exclusive use of English-speaking teachers and English written textbooks, most commonly books imported from England, ensured the supremacy of one common language for all communities – regardless of the heritage and unique cultural characteristics of the

children occupying the desks” (p. 9). Structural prohibition was often achieved through punishment (both physical and psychological). The school system had an extremely detrimental impact on confidence in the language.

Depopulation also contributed to a loss of confidence in Gaelic. Once the Gaels left their rural homes and went to the cities, they discovered that English was the language of the outside world. These newcomers to the cities associated the standard of living there (which was often perceived as superior to what they had left behind) with the English world. Because Gaelic was mainly used in rural parts of Cape Breton, the language became associated with rurality and backwardness resulting in the stigmatization of the language (Edwards, 1991).

The movement of English into Gaelic communities meant that Gaelic monolinguals were disadvantaged both outside and inside their communities as well. In the Barra *Gaidhealtachd*, Gaelic monolinguals could not take advantage of jobs in new industries moving in to the area such as with the railway, in shipping at Iona, and at the Grand Narrows Hotel (Clyde). Clyde states that people felt disadvantaged if they didn't have English. Media such English newspapers, magazines, and radio, also brought English into many homes, reinforcing the idea that English was associated with literacy and new inventions.

Ultimately, this lack of confidence in Gaelic led many parents to stop teaching their children this ancient language. According to a report by the Gaelic Development Steering Group (2004), “By the 1930s, parents throughout the last most important Gaelic

districts in Nova Scotia seemed to lose confidence in the language and its associated culture, and children were actively discouraged from learning the language” (p. 5).

Cultural Packaging – An Outsider’s View of Gaelic

The mid-1900s saw a number of cultural developments which raised the status of Gaelic in communities such as the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* in Nova Scotia. Community outsiders were generally responsible for this phenomenon. A variety of factors contributed to a rise in status of Gaelic including: the creation of the Gaelic College at Saint Ann’s, the arrival of a number of folklorists who came to Cape Breton collecting Gaelic material; Gaelic received positive attention through a variety of media; and the touring of Gaelic musical groups outside of the province.

The formation of the Gaelic College at St. Ann’s in Cape Breton in 1939 changed the way Gaelic language and culture was viewed both on and off of the island. The Gaelic College was founded by Reverend Angus W.R. MacKenzie in 1939. While making a request for the property on which the College would be built, MacKenzie stated that it was “for the purpose of fostering and preserving the Gaelic language, to be the only Gaelic College in the world, and to make this country the world centre of Gaelic literature and knowledge (MacKenzie as cited in Mertz, 1984, p. 188).

MacKenzie was not raised as part of Cape Breton’s Gaelic region and was an outsider in the local Gaelic community. Through the Gaelic College, he imported a new sense of Scottishness to Cape Breton (Mertz, 1984). The program at the College focused more on

the outward signs of culture rather than on the language. Regarding this sense of Scottishness, Mertz (1984) writes,

Gaelic was conceived as part of an “ethnic” package which also included Bagpipes, highland dancing, and kilts. In this “outsider” folk theory of Scottish identity, Gaelic was not simply a language which some Canadians spoke, but a part of a politicized “Scottish” identity. (p.191)

As a result of this Scottish cultural packaging, the Gaelic College functioned as more of a tourist attraction than as an institution to teach students about Gaelic language and culture (Cox, 1994; Mertz, 1984). Cox (1994) argues that the approach taken by the College had little to do with the true way of life of the Gaelic people in Cape Breton and refers to it as “Scotch-on-the-Rocks” (p.33). For the Gaelic communities adjacent to the College, bagpipes, highland dancing and kilts were quite foreign (Mertz, 1984). While the members of the local Gaelic community appreciated the economic spin-off of tourism to the area, they resented the commodification of their culture. Robinson (1988) asserts that, “The College’s priorities in music, dance and other demonstrable aspects of the heritage became a symbol of the Gaelic culture” (p. 13).

By the end of the 1940s, the Gaelic College became an increasingly important tourist attraction. The College increased the attention of outsiders, but it promoted the notion in the local Gaelic community that Gaelic was a frill (Mertz, 1984). Further, the College was not producing fluent speakers. In some instances, it served as a summer camp for outsiders who were given some exposure to Gaelic as part of their program.

During World War II, the College experienced financial difficulties, so Mrs. MacKenzie began weaving tartans. Locals learned this craft, and a new industry was imported into the area. The provincial government afforded the College a grant to open a craft centre, and the government of Nova Scotia came to view the College as a major tourist attraction. In 1963, the government provided funds for a washroom and refreshment building (Mertz, 1984). Money for a craft centre, washrooms, and a refreshment area clearly demonstrate the lack of government interest in the Gaelic College as a vehicle to promote the Gaelic language. To some degree, the administration of the Gaelic College was placed in a difficult position; in order to survive financially, they had to appeal to a marketable, packaged identity, but this was to cost them the respect of the local Gaelic community.

While the Gaelic College may have been removed from local Gaelic reality such as in the Barra *Gaidhealtachd*, it did increase the profile of the Gaelic community on and off the island of Cape Breton, and it elevated the status of the culture. The Gaelic College and its packaged version of Scottishness helped the province of Nova Scotia to view the Gaelic community as an economic asset.

In addition to attention from outsiders created by the Gaelic College, several folklorists visited Cape Breton Island in the late 1930s and 40s. Shaw (1987) and Mertz (1984) give a brief history of visiting folklorists. John Lorne Campbell and his wife Margaret Fay Shaw made the first organized effort to record songs from the descendants of people from Barra and South Uist (such as those in the Barra *Gaidhealtachd*) in 1937. They were followed in 1941 by Charles Dunn (Harvard University) who collected a number of

folktales from across the island, and Rev. Malcolm MacDonell of Inverness County, Cape Breton who transcribed a tale from Hector Campbell. More of Campbell's stories were recorded in 1946 by Kenneth Jackson and in 1952 by MacEdward Leach. The year 1964 saw the publication of a story from Hughie Dan MacDonnell of Deepdale in Inverness County, and in 1969, C.I.N. MacLeod of St. Francis Xavier University published a collection of Cape Breton Gaelic stories. Campbell was again recorded by Sister Margaret MacDonell (St. Francis Xavier) and Dr. Gordon MacLennan of the University of Dublin and Ottawa University in the 1960s. Eventually, the archives at the College of Cape Breton began receiving folktales, and some were printed in *Cape Breton's Magazine*. Several publications such as the *Casket*, *Cape Breton Post*, *Victoria-Inverness Bulletin*, and the *Oran* continued to print the occasional story in Gaelic. In the 1970s and 80s, a Gaelic folklore project was initiated at St. Francis University. Another important publication was *Tales until Dawn: The World of a Cape Breton Story-Teller: Joe Neil MacNeil*, which was transcribed and edited by John Shaw in 1987. Attention from these researchers and collectors helped raise the status of Gaelic in communities such as the Barra *Gaidhealtachd*. This was, once again, attention generated by community outsiders.

Gaelic singing groups began to perform off of the island in the mid-1900s, and this brought the community even greater exposure. As early as the 1940s, a group of folklorists from the US arranged for a Gaelic choir from the North Shore of Cape Breton to visit Harvard University. There the Gaels were observed performing by folklorists from around the world (Mertz, 1984). During the 1950's and 60's this type of activity continued. Mertz (1984) writes that two men, Norman Kennedy and Ralph Rintzler,

came to the North Shore to set a sheep-farming project. In order to fund this project (which never got off the ground), these men arranged for Gaelic singers from the area to perform in order to raise funds. Kennedy arranged for the singers to go to Ontario, and then sent them to a Folk Festival at Newport, Rhode Island. Again, the promotion of Gaelic in these cases was largely from outside interests.

Some of the informants from Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd* also took part in cultural performances. Stephen reported that he and a group of Cape Breton Gaels went to Expo in Vancouver in 1986. According to Stephen, the group was well received. These types of experiences greatly raised the status of Gaelic in the eyes of the performers themselves and in Cape Breton Gaelic community as a whole. Stephen speaks with pride,

We had violin, step-dancers, a milling group, and at least six well known singers. It was a very good experience. An awful lot of people from different islands in Scotland that heard about it came in, especially from Barra. There was a lot from Barra. And they were just thrilled over it.

Celebrations of Gaelic culture were held around Cape Breton Island during this time, and these celebrations attracted international attention, especially from places such as Scotland. Stephen recalls an event that was filmed by a group from Scotland:

In 1980 I promoted a big day over in Baddeck in the arena, where we got 12 communities. Each brought their table and their group and sat around...And it went over great. Wonderful! Everybody had their turn.

They all had their different songs from their community and oh very popular!

The importance of such cultural performances in preserving Gaelic language in communities such as the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* is clear. Some researchers are more favourable towards these “outward signs” of Gaelic culture such as singing, dancing, and music. MacKinnon (1984) suggests that such “outward signs” allow descendants of Highland Scots to maintain a link to their past; he says, “the renaissance of aspects of the local Scottish Gaelic ethnic culture such as Cape Breton style traditional fiddling, Scottish “concerts’ and interest in the Scottish Gaelic tradition may well enable Cape Breton to remember its Gaelic roots” (p.2). Stephen indicates how success with cultural endeavors promoted confidence in the language in elderly speakers who may have lost faith in it. He attributes the resurgence in Gaelic culture in 1975 specifically to the milling frolic²² and, he (who is not an outsider to the community) had a lot to do with this. Concerning the preservation of the language Stephen states,

I’m 100% for this way to keep the Gaelic going; it is with the milling frolic. It’s what did it in ‘75 when we came here. Well we started it. We started going. A lot of these old timers around here, I had to convince them and force them in the car to go over to Johnstown. They thought they weren’t good enough. And then once they started going, once those people heard them, it was just a ball of fire. It just caught on.

²² A description of the milling frolic is given in chapter 4.

This focus on the outward signs of the culture acted as a double edged sword; while this phenomenon did much to encourage interest in Gaelic language and culture in Cape Breton, it gave the impression that all was well with the Gaelic language on the island when this was clearly not the case. Some researchers argue that this focus on cultural activities led to a lack of focus on the perilous state of the language. Robinson (1988) writes,

The “Gathering of the Clans”, the “Mods,”²³ the festivals of music that grace the Cape Breton countryside in the summer, the piper at the border-crossing near Amherst, the provincial greeting “*Ciad Mile Failte*,”²⁴ all suggest that the Scottish heritage is alive and very much a part of Nova Scotian life. (p. 3)

These outward signs of culture may well have directed political attention away from the state of Gaelic language and culture in Nova Scotia. Cox (1994) refers to outward signs of Scottishness as ‘cultural badges,’ and notes that these cultural badges do not reflect Gaelic society as it was truly lived. Cultural badges allow assimilated descendants of Highland families to feel part of an ethnic group which they are, in reality, quite removed from (Cox, 1994).

Robinson (1988) highlights some of the consequences of ignoring language as fundamental to Gaelic culture. He states that Gaelic speakers had not been the subject of any in-depth studies, that there was no reliable data concerning the number of remaining

²³ A mod is an annual Highland Gaelic meeting with musical and literary competitions

²⁴ *Ciad Mile Failte* is Gaelic for “a hundred thousand welcomes.”

speakers, and that there was an absence of planned language development. Robinson (1988), sums up the impact of a focus on the outward signs of the culture as follows:

The “picturesque incidentals,” the external cultural symbols that can be appropriated and promoted to attract visitors to Nova Scotia, became the cornerstone of the Nova Scotia-image merchandizing to the world.

Regrettably, the underpinnings of culture – the linguistic and cultural importance of the Gaelic language languished. (p. 17)

Ironically, Gaelic speakers’ focus on the outside world (as described in chapter 4) caused them to lose confidence in their language. In later years, a focus on the outside world led Gaels to a greater appreciation of their mother tongue. Mertz (1984) writes, “while the English-speaking outside acted as a model for the shift away from Gaelic, the outside also served as a model for renewed interest in Gaelic” (p. 199).

While this focus on the outward signs of the culture may have rendered the true state of the language somewhat invisible for a period of time, it was the money generated by this focus (largely through tourism) which finally garnered positive attention for the Gaelic language from the provincial government.

An Increase in “Partial Support of Specific Language Functions”

In chapter 4, the history of Gaelic in Nova Scotia up until about the mid-1980s was discussed and as part of this review, governmental “partial support of specific language

functions” was explored. Currently, the Gaelic community of Cape Breton and its Barra *Gaidhealtachd* are enjoying a period of time when the government of Nova Scotia is providing much more significant support for Gaelic than it ever has before. This support is mainly directed towards two areas previously identified as areas of neglect by Robinson (1988): in-depth study and language development.

A period of study. The 1980s marked the beginning of a period when the study of Gaelic language and culture become a priority in Nova Scotia. The provincial government began showing “partial support for specific language functions” through support of study of Gaelic language and culture. This support was often backed-up by legislation. In 1985, the “Iona Connection” (which represented museums, heritage groups and historical societies) developed a policy statement concerning the value of Gaelic to the province of Nova Scotia. This policy states that, “The Province of Nova Scotia recognizes the continuing cultural and linguistic importance of Scottish Gaelic as an academic, musical, literary, geographical and historical asset for Nova Scotians” (as cited in Robinson, 1988, p.18).

Later, in September of 1987, an international conference concerning Gaelic language and culture was held at the University College of Cape Breton. The conference (with over one hundred participants from across Canada, the United States, and Europe) was organized to discuss the obstacles confronting the survival of Gaelic culture. Participants suggested that emphasis should be placed on the immersion of language learning for pre-school, elementary, and adult students. Another recommendation was that a Gaelic

nursery school/playgroup program should be developed in Cape Breton for a minimum of three years. This program was to be supported by a full-time executive with secure salaries. Another important development in 1987 was a proposal by the Multicultural Education Council of Nova Scotia concerning multiculturalism for school boards. With respect to languages (with no official status) spoken in Nova Scotia the council states:

The board recognizes language as an essential feature of culture and will:

- a) promote the use of two official languages;
- b) ensure that the needs of the pupils whose first language is neither English or French shall be recognized and met; and
- c) attempt to provide heritage language opportunities where numbers warrant and parents request it. (as cited in Robinson, 1988, p.31)

In keeping with the recommendation that a Gaelic nursery school/playgroup program be developed in Cape Breton, the *Croileagan A'Chaolais* (Iona District Gaelic Playgroup) was established in 1988 at Iona in Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd*. This playgroup was inspired by Scotland's *Comhairle na Sgoiltean Araich* (the Advisory Board for Gaelic Playgroups) (CSNA). According to a report completed by Paul Robinson in October of 1988 entitled, "A Future for the Gaelic Language, A Report for the *Croileagan A'Chaolais* (Iona District Gaelic Playgroup)," the purpose of the group was to create a Gaelic Language Immersion Program for the pre-school children who were from the Iona Peninsula. Conversation, story-telling, singing, drama and play were identified as vehicles to provide language exposure. At the time of the report, 15 to 20 families from this area were being served. The program was operated three times weekly

for a total of ten hours per week. The program was run for 40 plus weeks per year from September to June. The program offered two phases of programming concurrently: Phase I (children from 3 to 5 years) and Phase II (toddlers to age 3 with parental supervision). A qualified Gaelic speaking teacher was employed and limited funding from various levels of government was provided.

Two initiatives in the 1990s also saw increased study of Gaelic in Nova Scotia. A report called, "Gaelic in Nova Scotia: Opportunities" was presented to the Nova Scotia Minister of Education by a Gaelic Steering Committee in 1997. Later in this decade, representatives from the Nova Scotia Department of Tourism and Culture convened at the Nova Scotia Highland Village at Iona in 1999. The purpose of the assembly was to form policy and enhance Gaelic language and culture.

Efforts to improve the situation for Gaelic in the province improved even further with the new millennium. Another Gaelic Steering Committee was formed in 2002 and in September of that year, a paper was compiled by them entitled, "Developing a Gaelic Policy & Strategy for Nova Scotia." The Steering Committee wrote, "It is widely acknowledged that Nova Scotia's Gaelic heritage is in a perilous state. The clear need for Gaelic development in the province has been identified since at least 1987" (p. 4). In November of 2002, Michael Kennedy completed a report called, "Gaelic Nova Scotia, an Economic Cultural and Social Impact Study." In this report he gives a clear picture of the status of the language in Nova Scotia. Kennedy states,

At the beginning of the 21st century, the state of Gaelic in Nova Scotia is perilous. Not more than 100 years ago, Scottish Gaelic was the fourth

most common language in Canada, and Gaelic speakers in Nova Scotia outnumbered all other language groups combined, with the exception of English speakers. (p. 114)

In 2002, ten community based meetings were held in various parts of the province to gain feedback on work done by the Gaelic Steering Committee. The results of the meetings were tabulated in a document named, “A Report on the Results of Community Meetings Held in November 2002.” It is encouraging that the existing Gaelic community is being given opportunities to provide input into future provincial initiatives designed to promote the language. In April of 2004 the Gaelic Development Steering Group compiled a report entitled, “Developing and Preserving Gaelic in Nova Scotia: Strategy for a Community-Based Initiative.” In this document the loss of the Gaelic language is identified as Gaelic culture’s greatest weakness. The authors of the report state:

Gaelic culture’s greatest weakness is the state of the Gaelic language. It has now reached a critical condition in Nova Scotia. Gaelic has been forced from important social domains that allow languages to develop fully, evolve freely, and move from one generation to the next. It is not simply the language that is being lost, but something much deeper. (p. 4)

Language development. In keeping with the Cobarrubias’ taxonomy designation of “partial support of specific language functions,” the government of Nova Scotia is also now providing further support for language development. Exciting developments have been taking place in Gaelic education in Nova Scotia recently in both the public and

private sectors. New curriculum documents for Gaelic education programs in the school system were developed in 2005 and 2006. *Gaidhlig 10: A Teaching Resource* (Draft, 2005) and *Gaidhlig 11* (Draft, 2006) have been created by the Nova Scotian Department of Education. A program for the grade 12 level is pending.

On February 24th, 2006 the newly sworn in Premier of Nova Scotia, Rodney MacDonald, announced the creation of a new Ministry for Gaelic Initiatives. Angus MacIsaac is the new Minister responsible for this portfolio. The Gaelic Office employs two people: Lewis MacKinnon and Francis MacEachern,²⁵ who have been hired to further Gaelic interests in the province on behalf of the provincial government. An amount of \$100,000 a year has been designated for Gaelic programming. Generally, this money is to be divided among various projects in smaller amounts averaging about \$5000 or less. This program has provided money for much needed funding for new Total Immersion Plus (T.I.P.)²⁶ programs.

Eachann describes T.I.P. as one of the most influential approaches impacting Gaelic education in the Nova Scotia today. T.I.P. is an immersion language methodology which was introduced in the province a few years ago. Groups involved with Gaelic initiatives in Nova Scotia partnered to bring Findlay MacLeod to Nova Scotia to introduce the program. MacLeod was instrumental in starting the Gaelic preschool movement in Scotland, creating Gaelic medium schools in this country, and developing the T.I.P. methodology (Eachann 2007). The entire program involves hands-on learning, with

²⁵ *Oifis Iomairtean na Gaidhlig* (Office of Gaelic Affairs maintains a website at <http://www.gov.ns.ca/oga/default.asp?lang=gd&start=true>)

²⁶ I have taken part in several Total Immersion Plus sessions.

situational based activities using prompts. There is a significant repetition of concepts. Furthermore, there is no written component included with the first 200 hours of T.I.P. instruction, and students are not permitted to take notes in class. Additionally, there are no questions concerning grammar. Eachann reports that T.I.P. has been far more successful than any approach used thus far. He states that people are learning to speaking Gaelic more quickly than ever before with this approach.

One important aspect of T.I.P. methodology is that it encourages local Gaelic speakers, such as those in the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* (four out of five informants interviewed reported participating in T.I.P.s) to come and take an active part in Gaelic class. While inviting speakers such as these to classes is nothing new, the difference with this approach is that it allows these speakers to take a much greater role in instruction because they are not expected to be able to write. Many native Gaelic speakers learned to speak the language but not read or write it. This approach is well suited to people who did not learn Gaelic at school. Eachann asserts, “What they know and the way they deliver it is so much more relevant to the situation than it was in just a standard teacher and blackboard and exercises kind of a teaching setting.” In 2006, the Gaelic College in Cape Breton, offered T.I.P. instruction as part of their six week resident Gaelic immersion summer program. Eachann reports that this was one of the first programs of its nature to be offered in the world thus far. In 2007, the summer session was divided into two three week programs: one at the beginner level and one at the intermediate level. T.I.P. classes at beginner and intermediate levels were also offered at the College in the summer of 2008.

Schools in Nova Scotia are also able to take advantage of provincial funding. Currently in Cape Breton, Gaelic programs are taught at schools such as Rankin School of the Narrows in Iona and a number of programs have been initiated on the mainland of Nova Scotia. While \$100,000 is a small amount, the official support for Gaelic in the schools is a huge boost to the language. Much more remains to be done in order to ensure that Gaelic language and culture continue to survive in Nova Scotia. However, these most recent developments are a critical component in the process. They legitimize the hard work of the Gaelic community over the past number of years and present opportunities to develop a solid foundation on which to build for the future.

So, why after 200 years of Gaelic in Nova Scotia did the provincial government suddenly become interested in the state of Gaelic in Nova Scotia? It is interesting to note that the provincial government has combined the portfolios of Tourism, Culture and Heritage into one. The Gaelic community has become an important part of the economy of Nova Scotia and is a major tourist attraction. Singers such as The Rankin Family, The Barra MacNeils, and fiddle players such as Ashley MacIsaac, Buddy MacMaster and Natalie MacMaster have brought international attention to the island. Celebrations such as The East Coast Music Awards and Celtic Colours are vital to the provinces' economy. The Gaelic College, once forced to offer a packaged version of Scottishness, now attracts students from around the world with high quality Gaelic programming such as T.I.P.

The impact of the international attention now focused on the Gaelic community of Cape Breton is huge. People from all walks of life are now taking Gaelic language classes

across the province. The impact of this cultural resurgence is clear in the interviews conducted with informants from the Barra *Gaidhealtachd*. All five of the participants are active in the Gaelic community. Clyde has written and recorded several Gaelic songs, Stephen, Clyde, Joseph, and Eachann all continue to be active in milling frolic presentations. Stephen and Clyde are active Gaelic singers. Eachann teaches the language and has started participating in Gaelic storytelling. Joseph has assisted with Gaelic instruction. Hugh and Eachann actively participate in T.I.P programs. What is particularly significant about this is that these five men are not outsiders to Cape Breton's Gaelic community. They are very much part of it --- and they are doing what they can to keep Gaelic alive.

Chapter 6 – Closing Remarks

It's too bad it happened [the decline of Gaelic]. I mean when you look at it we're all of the same class of people, Gaelic speakers and people of the Gaelic speakers. It was our right! It's a nice language, a good language and we're entitled to it! (Joseph)

One of the most fascinating elements of this research for me has been the opportunity to speak to possibly the last members from Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd* who have the *blas* or taste of Cape Breton's Barra Gaelic dialect. My hope throughout this research was to give voice to the community of Gaelic speakers from which I descend. Further, my purpose was to discover trends in the loss of the Gaelic language and culture in Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd* and to identify what will be lost as a result.

In this thesis, I have traced the decline of Gaelic, particularly in the Barra *Gaidhealtachd* of Cape Breton. Beginning in 1773 (with the arrival of the ship Hector) and ending in the mid-eighteen hundreds, tens of thousands of Gaelic speakers emigrated to Nova Scotia from Scotland's *Gaidhealtachd*. They settled in communities (such as Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd*) in Nova Scotia (especially in Cape Breton) based on familial, religious, and communal ties. Importantly, they brought with them their distinct dialects and cultures—and these were preserved in the province for generations. Early estimates put the number of speakers as high as 100,000 but only 415 Nova Scotians gave Gaelic as their maternal language at the time of the census of 2001; currently the Office of Gaelic

Affairs puts the number at about 2000.²⁷ Whatever the statistic, Gaelic was once commonly spoken in many rural communities across Cape Breton Island and now it is on the verge of extinction. How did Gaelic decline from a once prominent language in Nova Scotia to its current state?

As I have discussed in this thesis, four important factors that contributed to the decline of Gaelic in Nova Scotia include state policies towards minority languages, the depopulation of rural areas, the movement of English into Gaelic speaking communities, and the death of the last Gaelic monolinguals. Ultimately, these four factors contributed to a loss of confidence in Gaelic by its speakers, and the language fell into disuse. With regard to state policies towards minority languages, I have traced ways that Nova Scotia's government policy has been inconsistent over time. Throughout most of the province's history, Gaelic speaking students were denied the opportunity to have Gaelic as a medium of instruction. This prohibition of Gaelic was often enforced through physical and psychological punishment. The government of Nova Scotia did provide partial support for Gaelic instruction (usually in the form of an optional subject in a limited number of schools at different points in time), but these efforts were sporadic and inconsistent. Currently, attempts are underway to reintroduce Gaelic programming in a limited number of schools and a curriculum is in development for high school. Recent initiatives include the creation of a Ministry for Gaelic Initiatives with Angus MacIsaac as the new Minister responsible for this portfolio, and one hundred thousand dollars per year has been allocated for Gaelic programming. These funds are to be divided among projects across the province in amounts averaging about \$5000 or less.

²⁷ See chapter 1 for concerns regarding the accuracy of numbers of Gaelic speakers in the province.

The impact of the outside English world on Gaelic speakers' confidence in the language is explored, as is the role of the Nova Scotia government, in terms of its support of the language and lack thereof at different historical moments. I have connected an imported sense of Scottishness from the outside English world to the government's current actions. The cultural aspects of Gaelic culture (including singing, dancing, fiddle playing, bag piping, and so forth), have become an important part of Nova Scotia's economy through the tourism that it creates. The Gaelic College also attracts students of Gaelic language with innovative programs such as Total Immersion Plus (T.I.P.).

Language Planning

Comprehensive and systematic language planning is important for endangered languages such as Gaelic. Blair and LaBoucan (2006) outline four areas of language planning: status planning, corpus planning, implementation, and evaluation. Co-ordinated language planning efforts in these four areas would be as useful in developing initiatives to revitalize Gaelic in Nova Scotia and in communities such as Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd*. As part of status planning for obsolescing languages, Blair and Laboucan (2006) write that, "it is essential to consider the current role of the language, its status in the community, and the role that community members would like to see for their language" (p. 208). Corpus planning is about documenting the "body" of the language; Blair and Laboucan (2006), state that "it should include such things as standardizing the

languages, clarifying the existing syntax, or writing a dictionary” as well as recording and encouraging the growth of the language as a living, dynamic entity. Implementation involves creating ways to act on status and corpus findings, and evaluation is the process of assessing the success of implementation (Blair & Laboucan, 2006). MacLeod (2007) writes about language planning in regard to Scottish Gaelic in the Scottish context. More such work needs to be done in the Nova Scotian context.

Based on the research I conducted for this thesis, I suggest the following recommendations:

In the area of status planning:

- Greater attention must be given to Gaelic language through a variety of media in the province such as television and radio to increase its visibility. Gaelic language should receive media attention as part of main stream programming (such as regular newscasts), and through government service advertisements and not just as a segmented, isolated consideration outside of prime time.
- A Gaelic medium school for language and culture should be established in major population centres such as Halifax and Sydney or in areas where significant interest exists. A program focusing on Gaelic language and culture would do much to raise the status of the language.
- Gaelic language learning should be promoted as both a heritage language and as an intellectual pursuit.

- Communities in Cape Breton must be actively involved in language planning activities.

In the area of corpus planning:

- Research with specific dialect groups (such as the focus of this thesis on Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd*) needs to be conducted across the province. It is important to learn what is unique about each Gaelic speaking community—and essential that this research be completed as soon as possible as the majority of maternal language speakers are elderly. It is important that systematic linguistic documentation of dialects and co-ordinated efforts with (and among) linguists be undertaken.
- Coherent efforts at archiving language samples, past and current, should be undertaken in Gaelic communities across the province.

Further, it is essential that research be conducted in order to obtain reliable information concerning the number of Gaelic speakers in Nova Scotia. Data from such a study should be tabulated and presented by the community and should include demographics. Also, information must be collected about the 'level' of Gaelic that the person speaks (i.e. fluent speaker, learned limited amounts from family members, has taken introductory course, etc.). Such research might prove helpful in advocating for revitalization efforts.

As is the case with other endangered languages around the globe and across the country, the loss of Gaelic will mean the loss of much more than just a language. With the loss of Gaelic in Cape Breton's Barra *Gaidhealtachd*, we lose a unique dialect with distinctive words, expressions, and pronunciations—and with it, a unique worldview. In Cape Breton's Barra communities, distinctive storytelling, singing, unique concepts of identity within the community, and holiday traditions (which are inextricably tied to the language) will be gone. But one of the most tragic losses of all which I have been able to identify through this research is the loss of the *blas* (the taste) of the language. Second language speakers can not seem to capture the tone, pronunciation, intonation, and so on, which speakers who learned Gaelic as a living language in their communities acquired. As the last remaining speakers of Gaelic dialects across the province who have Gaelic as a maternal language die, so to goes the *blas* of each dialect.

There is much wisdom in the following Welch proverb:

Cenedl heb iaith, cenedl heb galon

'A nation without a language is a nation without a heart'²⁸

²⁸ (as cited in Crystal, 2000, p. 36)

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Appendices

Appendix A: Semi-structured Interview Guide

Preface: Set the interviewee at rest: explain the purpose of the interviews and issues of confidentiality; discuss consent for tape recordings; rules of confidentiality; sign the informed consent form.

Guiding questions:

- 1) 1. Please tell me what you know about your parents' and/or grandparents' experiences with Gaelic language and culture.

- 2) Please tell me about your early experiences with the Gaelic language and culture:
 - a. in your family.
 - b. at school.
 - c. in your community.

- 3) What Gaelic traditions do you remember being celebrated in your home and community? What Gaelic traditions do you remember hearing about from your parents and/or grandparents?

- 4) Do you currently participate in and/or enjoy any activities/pastimes/hobbies that are associated specifically with Gaelic language and culture?

- 5) Was the Gaelic language passed on to you? In what ways? Have you passed the Gaelic language on to the next generation of your family? Why or why not?

- 6) What are your thoughts and feelings about the loss of the Gaelic language in your community?

- 7) What do you think led to the decline of Gaelic in your community?

- 8) Are you aware of any efforts to revitalize Gaelic in Cape Breton? What are they? Have you, or any members of your family been involved in such efforts? Please explain.

Letter of Informed Consent

November 26, 2007

Dear Participant,

My name is Vincent MacNeil, and I am a graduate student in the Research Master of Arts program at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

I invite you to participate in a research project I am conducting as part of my studies. The purpose of this project is to learn more about the remaining speakers of Gaelic and also about the decline of Gaelic language and culture in Cape Breton. Because I have ancestral ties to these communities, I am particularly interested in finding participants with roots in the communities settled by people of Barra ancestry who settled along the waters of the Bras d'Or Lakes.

I will interview you individually, and I will conduct the interview at a location that is convenient for you. The interview will take approximately one and a half hours. The interview does not have to be completed in one session. If you find the interview too long, I will schedule a second interview or the interview can be completed by phone. During the interview I will take notes. I will request your permission to record the interview using a tape recorder. If at any time, you wish to stop the tape recorder, we can continue the interview without the recorder. I will play this recording back a number of times and transcribe it. Transcriptions will be returned to you for verification.

As a researcher, I will protect the identity and confidentiality of all participants through the use of a pseudonym. . You will remain anonymous in all notes, in the transcriptions of the tapes, in the writing of the thesis and/or any resultant publications and/or associated conference presentations. . Anything that exists in electronic form will be protected by a password. All notes, transcriptions, and audio-recordings will be stored in a locked filing cabinet at my home. The audio tapes will be destroyed after the completion of the thesis. The transcripts will remain in a password protected file until they are no longer needed for the project. They will then be deleted.

If you decide to terminate your participation in the research, you are free to do so at any time without penalty or repercussions. If you have any questions concerning this research project and wish to speak to someone who is not directly involved in this study, you can contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Board (UREB) at the Mount Saint Vincent University Research and International Office at 1-902-457-6350 or via email at research@msvu.ca. You may also contact me at any time with any

concerns/questions. I can be contacted at [REDACTED] or at my email address [REDACTED]. You may also contact my supervisor Dr. Susan Walsh at 902-457-6598 or email her at susan.walsh@msvu.ca.

Participants, by request, will be provided with a copy of a summary of the thesis.

Thank you for taking the time to consider participating in this project.

Sincerely,

Vincent MacNeil
Graduate Student
Mount Saint Vincent University

Informed Consent Form

I have read the information letter regarding Vincent MacNeil's research project dated November 26, 2007. I understand that the research focuses on the history and decline of Gaelic language and culture in Cape Breton.

I understand that I will be interviewed individually. The interview will take place in a location that is convenient for me and will be approximately one and a half hours in length. If I find the interview too long, I can request that a second interview be scheduled or that the interview be completed by telephone. I understand that Vincent MacNeil will be taking notes throughout the interview and that the interview will be tape recorded. I understand that I can request at any time to have the tape recorder turned off. I have been informed that the recording will be transcribed and that a copy of this transcription will be made available to me for verification.

I understand that my identity will be protected through the use of a pseudonym. I have been assured that I will remain anonymous in all notes, in the transcriptions of the tapes, in the writing of the thesis and/or any resultant publications and/or associated conference presentations. I am aware that notes, transcriptions, and audio recordings will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and that electronic text will be kept in password protected files. I understand that the audio tapes will be destroyed after transcription. I understand that transcripts will remain in a password protected file until they are no longer needed for the project. They will then be deleted.

I understand that I can decide not to continue to participate in the research at any time and for any reason without any penalty or repercussions. I am aware that if I have any questions about how this research is being conducted and wish to speak with someone who is not directly involved in this study, I can contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Board (UREB) at the Mount Saint Vincent University Research and International Office by phoning 1-902-457-6350 or via email at research@msvu.ca. Additionally, I can also address concerns or questions to Vincent MacNeil, [REDACTED] or contact him by email at [REDACTED]. Furthermore, I can address concerns or questions to Vincent MacNeil's thesis supervisor Dr. Susan Walsh at 1-902-457-6598 or email her at susan.walsh@msvu.ca.

Finally, I am aware that I can request a summary of Vincent MacNeil's thesis.

Participant Name (Print): _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____
Date: _____