

Learning Manx in North America

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What is Manx?

Manx Gaelic, usually referred to simply as Manx, is the traditional Celtic language of the Isle of Man. Like its sister languages, Irish and Scottish Gaelic, it is a direct descendant of Old Irish. It is also arguably the most ignored and least studied of all the modern Celtic languages, at least outside of its homeland.

Manx is usually classified as a “dead” or “extinct” language which has been “revived”, although in my opinion this position is erroneous. In contrast with the Cornish revival movement, which began at least a century after the death of its last native speakers, the Manx “revival” movement began during the lifetimes of the last native speakers. So while the method of transmission changed—from parent-child to teacher-student—there has never yet been a time since the Gaelic language was brought to the Isle of Man in the fifth century that the language actually ceased to be spoken. So how can a language which has never stopped being used be “dead”?

However, few people in North America seem to share my optimistic and admittedly rather biased viewpoint; indeed there seems to be a general ignorance about the Isle of Man and its language, even among teachers and students of other Celtic languages. Therefore, before discussing opportunities and resources for learning Manx, I would like to offer some background information on the language, its history, and the land where it is spoken.

The Isle of Man

The Isle of Man, called *Mannin* in Manx Gaelic, lies in the Irish Sea, 16 miles from Scotland, 26 miles from Ireland, 30 miles from England, and 45 miles from Wales. The total area of the island is

227 square miles, and there are around 76,000 inhabitants, over 50% of whom are not native-born Manx. Since the end of the 19th century, the capital has been Douglas; before that, the traditional capital was Castletown. It is a British Crown Dependency with a large measure of internal autonomy; it is not part of the United Kingdom, nor a member of the European Union.

Irish settlers brought the Gaelic language and culture to Man in the fourth and fifth centuries AD, around the same time that they were also establishing settlements in what is now Scotland and elsewhere.

Norse settlers began arriving in the ninth century. By the latter half of the tenth century a Norse kingdom consisting of the Isle of Man and the Hebrides, known as the *Suðreyjar* (“Southern Isles”) had come into being, under the rule of Godred I. The Manx parliament, the Tynwald (from the Old Norse *þingvöllr*, “thing [assembly] field”), was established in 979; it is believed to be the oldest continuously operating national parliament in the world. Around 1156, Godred IV lost several of the southern Hebrides, including Islay and Mull, to Somerled of Argyll, whose descendants established the Lordship of the Isles. Competition between the kings of Norway and Scotland over the remaining Hebridean islands led to the Battle of Largs in 1263 and the Treaty of Perth in 1266, in which Norway formally ceded Man and the rest of the Hebrides to Alexander III, King of Scots.

During the Scottish Wars of Independence, control of Man went back and forth between Scotland and England, the island finally coming under permanent English rule in 1333 following the defeat of the Scots at Halidon Hill. After passing through the hands of several English noblemen, the island became the property of the Stanley family, who later became the Earls of Derby. After the death of the 10th Earl of Derby in 1736, ownership of Man passed to the 2nd Duke of Atholl, whose grandfather had married a daughter of the 7th Earl of Derby. His son-in-law, John Murray, the 3rd Duke of Atholl, sold the Isle of Man to the British Crown for £70,000 in 1765. That year, the Isle of Man Purchase Act made the island a Crown Dependency.

The Manx Language

According to the conventional dating, Eastern Gaelic (Scottish and Manx) broke off from Western Gaelic (Irish) around the thirteenth

century—i.e. during the Early Modern Gaelic period—and then Manx and Scottish Gaelic diverged around the fifteenth century.

In the fourteenth century, after falling under English rule, Man became largely isolated from the rest of the Gaelic world, and thus from the Gaelic literary traditions which flourished in Ireland and northwestern Scotland; among other things, knowledge of the traditional Gaelic orthography, still used in Scottish and Irish Gaelic, was lost in Man. Therefore, when Manx was first written down by members of the clergy in the seventeenth century, they wrote the Gaelic words using the spelling system they knew: that of contemporary English.

Scholars generally divide the history of the language into three periods: Early Manx (17th century), Classical Manx (18th century), and Late Manx (19th and 20th centuries). Some scholars use the name Neo-Manx to refer to language as used by the enthusiasts and revivalists starting in the 20th century.

The first datable work in Manx is Bishop John Phillips' translation of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer; this was completed around 1610, and is recorded in a manuscript from around 1630, although it was not actually published until 1894. Phillips' spelling system differed in some respects from that of later works, but Phillips is credited with having laid down the general scheme of Manx orthography. The first printed book in Manx was Bishop Thomas Wilson's "Principles and Duties of Christianity", known in Manx as *Coyrle Sodjey*, "Further Advice", which was published in 1707. The Bible was translated into Manx and published in sections between 1748 and 1775; the entire Bible was published in 1819. The very fact that these translations were made can be taken to show that up to the end of the 18th century, the majority of ordinary Manx people were, if no longer monoglots, at least more comfortable in Manx than in English.

The 19th century, however, saw a very rapid decline in the use of Manx. By the end of the century, it had ceased to be used as a community language; the majority of its remaining speakers were elderly and scattered in various locations around the island. The man generally considered to have been the last native speaker of Manx, Ned Maddrell, died in 1974 at the age of 97.

An 1875 survey by Henry Jenner (father of the Cornish revival movement) estimated that outside of Douglas there were 12,350

people on the island who knew Manx. The 20th century census figures are as follows: 1901: 4,419; 1911: 2,382; 1921: 896; 1931: 531; 1951: 355; 1961: 165; 1971: 284; 1991: 741 (there was no census in 1941 due to the war, and there was no language question on the 1981 census).

Yn Cheshaght Ghailckagh, the Manx Language Society, was established in 1899. During the 20th century there were dedicated individuals who learned Manx from the last of the native speakers and in turn taught the language to others. In 1947 Éamon de Valera sent a recording unit from the Irish Folklore Commission to the Isle of Man to record the last native speakers of Manx.

For much of the twentieth century the language was still looked down upon by most islanders, however, and efforts to promote it often met with scorn or ridicule. But by the 1970's, public opinion seemed to begin to change, and there was a notable upswing in interest in the language. There was increased use of Manx in publishing and broadcasting, and enrollment in Manx evening classes grew. In 1992, Manx became available in schools as an optional subject and a Manx playgroup for small children called *Mooijer Veggey* ("Wee Folk") was established in 1996.

The future of Manx looks brighter now, in the first years of the 21st century, than it ever has before. The 2001 census returned 1,689 people who said they could speak, read or write Manx, the highest number of islanders claiming a knowledge of the language since the 1911 census. There are three programs on Manx Radio which feature Manx-language content, and the newspapers carry occasional bilingual columns and items aimed at learners. There is increasing usage of Manx in signage and packaging. Perhaps most significantly, a new Manx-medium primary school unit has been set up and has had two intakes so far.

The Manx Language in North America

Despite the rising fortunes of Manx in its homeland, the language remains largely ignored in North America. This is particularly surprising given the long history of Manx emigration to this continent, and suggests that North Americans of Manx descent do not consider the language to be an important or valued aspect of their heritage. Of course, given the low regard in which the language was held in the Isle of Man during the last few centuries, and the fact that by the nineteenth century most Manx-speakers

were bilingual in English anyway, it is not surprising that even those immigrants with a knowledge of Manx might have rapidly become assimilated to the Anglophone majority and not passed the language on to their children. However, this was not an uncommon scenario, so one is prompted to look at the recent upsurge in interest in other Celtic languages, especially among people who study them as a means of getting in touch with or reclaiming their heritage, and wonder why this has not extended to Manx also.

As far as I have been able to ascertain, not one single institution of higher education in North America offers any instruction in Manx, though several offer instruction in other Celtic languages. At most, there are a couple which offer, or have offered in the past, surveys of Celtic literature in English translation which include some content of Manx origin. There is no representation in North America for *Yn Cheshaght Ghailckagh* or any other organization involved with promoting the language. There is a North American Manx Association (NAMA) whose stated aims are the appreciation and preservation of Manx culture, but whose members' interests seem to lie primarily in genealogy and history; the association does not actively promote learning the language nor does it provide any resources or materials for its members to do so. There do not even appear to be any informal study groups, and there is no correspondence course like there is for learning Cornish or Breton. I myself have offered my services as a Manx teacher—very likely the only one in the United States—for over four years, but so far I have had only one student, who is no longer actively studying the language. In the course of my inquiries, I was able to track down fewer than ten individuals in North America who were actively engaged in studying Manx, and only one who has attained a good level of proficiency; moreover, they all live in different states and provinces, as far apart as California, Minnesota, Ohio, Virginia, and Ontario. A few individuals have reportedly attended the summer short courses offered in the Isle of Man in the past, but it has been a few years now since anyone attended from North America.

Independent Study

Given the complete lack of classes and study groups, and the absence of a reliable method of distance learning such as a correspondence course, the only options remaining for North Americans wanting to learn Manx are either travelling to the Isle of Man and taking classes there, or independent study. The latter path is the one taken by all the Manx learners I was able to contact.

Fortunately, a variety of beginner's courses, dictionaries, and such like are available—the amount and quality of learning materials for Manx is perhaps surprising, given its “exoticness” and very small speaking community, and surpass what is available for many Native American or African languages—although none are published in North America. They must be acquired either directly from the Isle of Man or through an importer such as Schoenhof's Foreign Books in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Academic Works and Linguistic Descriptions

The standard academic description of Manx is the exhaustive *Handbook of Late Spoken Manx* in 3 volumes by George Broderick. It is a detailed analysis of the phonology, morphology and lexicon of the language as it was spoken by the last native speakers in the 20th century, and does not deal with the language as used by revivalists or enthusiasts.

A good general description of the language, focusing mostly on Classical Manx (the language of the 18th century, in particular the Manx Bible), is the chapter on Manx in *The Celtic Languages* in the series of language surveys published by Routledge.

Course Books and Audio Material

The standard introductory textbook remains Edmund Goodwin's *First Lessons in Manx*, which was first published in 1901 and has been reprinted many times since. Its aim was to enable students to read the Scriptures in Manx, and most of the examples and texts are Biblical, which may not be to all modern students' taste, but the book remains unsurpassed in its concise yet complete coverage of Manx grammar.

Abbyr Shen! (“Say That!”) is a popular beginner’s course that gives many students their first taste of spoken Manx. It consists of recordings of a 12-lesson course, presented by Douglas Fargher, that was broadcast on Manx Radio in 1986 and an accompanying book. While the grammatical scope is of course not as complete as that in *First Lessons*, it nevertheless covers most of the essentials required for everyday communication.

Bun-Choorse Gaelgagh (“A Manx Basic Course”) is a book and cassette course based around a series of Manx lessons which were published regularly in one of the Manx newspapers. The first few dozen of these lessons were compiled into book format, and recordings featuring several Manx speakers were made to accompany them. Given the format of the lessons, the treatment of grammar is necessarily more superficial and scattered about than in *First Lessons* or *Abbyr Shen!*; instead, this course focuses more on vocabulary and phrases used in everyday conversation.

Y Coorse Mooar (“The Big Course”) is the most recent and comprehensive textbook of the language, used in Manx classes in schools, and designed to bring the student up to the level of the *Teisht Chadjin Ghaelgagh* (“Manx General Certificate”), the GCSE¹-equivalent examination offered by the Isle of Man Department of Education. The course comes with cassettes and a series of exercises and worksheets; there is also a videocassette, however this is only available in PAL (European) format, and is thus unusable to North American students unless they have access to a VCR which is capable of playing videos in that format.

Dictionaries and Vocabulary Books

The largest and most comprehensive Manx dictionary ever published is Fargher’s *English-Manx Dictionary*. This work is absolutely indispensable for every student of Manx. There is, sadly, no comparable Manx-English dictionary, but a “reversal” of Fargher was compiled by Phil Kelly, which contains as entries all the Manx words that appear in Fargher’s definitions, and gives the English equivalents under which they are given in Fargher. So while this is not a true Manx-English dictionary, it is used as such by most Manx speakers, as the only other available Manx dictionary is Cregeen’s *Fockleyr ny Gaelgey*, which dates from 1835 (but is still reprinted).

A much smaller but still popular dictionary is Kneen’s *English-Manx Pronouncing Dictionary*. This dictionary was originally published in 1938 and continues to be reprinted. It has the advantage of giving the pronunciation of Manx words—notoriously difficult to deduce from the spelling—in a quirky and somewhat complex, but serviceable phonetic notation.

Everyday Words in Manx is a picture/vocabulary book aimed at children, but equally useful for adult learners. Each page is packed with very useful, everyday vocabulary items, many of which are not found in other books. This book has replaced the older *First Thousand Words in Manx*, which was a favorite of Manx learners, but is now out of print.

Software

EuroTalk (www.eurotalk.com) publishes two software packages for learning basic Manx: *TalkNow! Manx* and *Vocabulary Builder Manx*. Both feature lots of colorful graphics and sound clips, and teach basic vocabulary such as colors, parts of the body, and numbers.

Linguashop (www.linguashop.com) is in the process of producing a software package called *TeachMe! Manx*, which is expected to be available later in 2004.

AbsoluteWord (www.absoluteword.com) offers free Manx-English and English-Manx dictionaries for handhelds.

The Internet

Manx does not have much of an internet presence compared to the other Celtic languages, but there are a few sites which every student of Manx should know about and make use of. If nothing else, the internet provides a way—especially important for students in North America—for learners of Manx who live too far away from each other to form a class or study group together, to connect with each other.

Phil Kelly’s website at www.gaelg.iofm.net is far and away the most useful website for students of Manx. It is the single largest repository of Manx information on the internet. It contains a wide variety of resources, from language lessons to a calendar of Manx-language events in Man to archives of Manx-language articles from various journals and publications.

The *GAELG* e-mail list at listserv.heanet.ie/gaelg.html is a forum for Manx speakers and learners to practice their Manx and ask questions, discuss the language, etc. It is frequented by several fluent Manx speakers from the Isle of Man as well as learners of the language worldwide. Messages sent to the list are automatically distributed to all the list members; they are also collected into monthly archives which are viewable on the website.

The Yahoo! Group *Manxlanguage* at groups.yahoo.com/group/manxlanguage is a forum similar to the *GAELG* list in form and function, although its level of traffic is somewhat lower and more sporadic. It is not yet frequented by the Manx authorities who participate on *GAELG*, though hopefully the forum will grow and attract more users from the Isle of Man and more fluent speakers. Messages may be sent and received via e-mail, or read and posted via the website.

Manx Radio provides on-demand "webcasts" of weekly news bulletins in Manx in Windows Media format at www.manxradio.com/gaelic/audio. This service is especially valuable to learners of Manx as it provides the opportunity to hear the language read aloud and follow along with the written text.

Conclusion

Learning Manx in North America is essentially a matter of independent study, thus demanding a certain amount of drive, self-discipline and ingenuity. However, there are quality resources and learning material available, and it is easier than ever before to connect with other learners and speakers of Manx, both within and outside North America, using the facilities available on the internet. There are many people in North America who might study Manx, whether due to an interest in family heritage or though a general interest in Gaelic or Celtic studies, who simply need to be made aware of the available resources and pointed in the right direction. Hopefully in the years to come, more North Americans will start contributing to the small but vibrant Manx language movement and help build a worldwide community devoted to furthering *Chengey ny Mayrey*, the "Mother Tongue".

Notes

1. The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is a public examination offered in a variety of subject areas which is taken at the age of 16 by schoolchildren in England, Wales and Northern Ireland; it replaced the earlier GCE O-Level and CSE examinations. Although not part of the UK, the Isle of Man follows the English educational system.

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