

Queen's gazette

Getting back to Gaelic

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By Andrew Stokes, Communications Officer

With St. Patrick's Day around the corner, Danny Doyle (MAC'15) is reminding campus that we're more Irish than we realize.



Danny Doyle stands in front of the official Gaelic translation of "O Canada". (University Communications)

On Thursday, March 12, he'll be delivering a public lecture on the history of the Gaelic language in Canada, from its early spread and use, to the large influx of speakers during the Great Irish Famine and the causes for the language's eventual decline.

"It's accepted in scholarship that people left Ireland speaking Gaelic, but what's never been discussed is what happened to them when they arrived in Canada," says Mr. Doyle. "It's not as though they got off the boat and stopped speaking the language."

On the contrary, Mr. Doyle says that Gaelic, in its various dialects, was once Canada's third-most spoken language. One in 10 Canadians were fluent in Gaelic at the time of confederation and it was the mother tongue of many of the country's political founders — Sir John A Macdonald himself spoke Scottish Gaelic. There was once even a bill in the House of Commons that proposed making Gaelic Canada's third official language.

The beginning of the decline in Gaelic's popularity came with the Great Famine, a period of mass starvation that afflicted Ireland from 1845-52 when a blight ravaged the country's potato crop.

“The famine did horrible things to the language, because it primarily affected rural farmers who were mostly Gaelic speakers. People's opinion of the language was devastated. It was an ancestral indigenous language which people believed had been spoken since the Tower of Babel,” says Mr. Doyle. “Suddenly, after the famine, it became the language of death and poverty. Speaking English symbolized moving on with your life.”

Mr. Doyle is part of a small but dedicated group who are trying to revive Gaelic in Canada. As the group's unofficial heritage officer, he began assembling a record of the language's use, a project that grew and grew until he had enough content for a manuscript, which will be published later this year. Thursday's lecture is culled from the content of his book, which brings to light information about the country as a whole as well as some places close to home.

“In 1847, more than 49,000 Gaelic speakers came through Kingston as they travelled along the Rideau Canal. They stopped here before redistributing to other communities, but Kingston became a big centre for Gaelic speakers,” he says.

Along with having a Gaelic newspaper, Kingston began celebrating traditional Irish holidays, and Mr. Doyle says the first recorded celebration of Halloween (derived from the Irish festival of Samhain) in North America was in Kingston.

By bringing to light Gaelic's history in Canada, Mr. Doyle hopes to reignite people's interest in a language that was fundamental to the country.

“It's said that Gaelic culture is a tapestry that's been ravaged by time, so we have to gather together all those threads lest we lose it,” he says.

Mile Mile I gCein: 500 Years of Irish Gaelic in Canada is Thursday, March 12 at 7 pm in 517 Watson Hall.