GAELIC
IN THE
HIGHLAND SCHOOLS

ADDRESS

BY

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Principal MacAlister's Address.

My grateful acknowledgements are due to the Education Committee of *An Comunn* for inviting me to preside at this Conference on Highland Education. As a Highlander and an Argyllshire man, it is pleasant for me to revisit the scenes of my youth, and to see again the kindly faces of my kindred of the North and West. As one who has given the best years of his life to English educational administration, it is doubly pleasant to me that my visit is associated with an effort to arouse deeper interest in popular education among my fellow countrymen. It will be for those experts in the subject who will address you later to point out in detail how Highland education can be made more popular, more efficient, and more elevating than it often is at present. My part will be to learn rather than to teach. I am confident that before we close this Conference, I at least shall have learned much that is valuable.

But without trenching on the province of those who are to read, and those who are to discuss, the papers of to-day, I may venture to offer you some general conclusions at which I have arrived, partly from my own experience elsewhere, and partly from my observation of the conditions that prevail in the Highlands. For many years I have been a spectator only, in regard to many of the questions that concern you "at home." But a spectator, especially if he is a sympathetic spectator, as I claim to be,

often sees things that escape the notice of some of the actors themselves. I shall leave you to judge whether my observation has been just.

It would have been to me a further pleasure, nay, a source of pride as well, if I had been able to address you, here in the Highlands, on Highland questions, in the Highland tongue. Gaelic is entwined with my earliest and most sacred memories. Its tones have ever been dear to me. They awaken a responsive echo in my heart, which is different in kind and degree from anything evoked by other tongues however eloquent. But during my forty years' wandering in the Saxon wilderness, I have lost so much of accent and of idiom that I dare not risk offending your ears by attempting the vernacular now. The Ross-shire men would charge me with speaking Argyllshire Gaelic, and the Argyll men would disown me as a mere Sasunnach. As a written language, particularly in its older forms, I have studied Celtic speech because I loved it. And so I am not without knowledge of its rich expressiveness, its long and eventful history, and its abiding charm. I covet earnestly the gift most of you possess, the gift of both speaking and reading Gaelic as it should be read and spoken. Perhaps I am not too old to re-learn with an effort what was once as easy as second nature. And now that I am nearer to the bens and glens than I have been for many years, I hope that I may ere long recover the power I covet, and speak again in intelligible fashion the language of Paradise. Meanwhile, as it is not chiefly those who speak and read Gaelic that we have to persuade of its educational value, but those who, knowing nothing but English, think there is nothing else worth knowing, it may not be the worse for our

purpose that I am constrained to use the commoner and more commonplace language of the Saxon.

If you are dissatisfied with me for this involuntary defection—well, I must bear your displeasure as best I can. *You* must be more careful in the choice of your President next time, that is all. *Is olc an comunn dheth 'm bi dithis diombach*, and if you displace me I promise that *I* shall not be *diombach*.

Having made this confession and apology with all sincerity, may I use my disability to illustrate one of the questions we are here to discuss. My parents thought, and spoke, and sang in Gaelic. They used it in worship. They read and wrote it. They knew something of its literature, and they felt its power. My father, I may say, accompanied John Campbell of Islay when he began his quest for West Highland Tales. In later life he was an elder in more than one Gaelic Church. One of my earliest schoolmasters was an accomplished Gaelic scholar, who performed the feat of publishing in Gaelic an excellent text-book of astronomy. But like too many Highland parents of forty or fifty years ago, my father never thought of teaching me, or seeing that I was taught, to read my mother-tongue, at a time when the effort would have cost me nothing. English was necessary for my schooling; English was sufficient for school requirements; the schoolmaster, worthy man, though a scholar himself, did not teach us Gaelic; so Gaelic was probably not worth teaching to young boys at all. That, I suppose, was the course of my father's reflexions. By degrees, as I struggled with my English lessons, my hold on the home speech weakened for it was unfixed by any power of reading it; and then long disuse in the Lowlands

reduced it to little more than a vague memory —a potentiality perhaps, but no longer a possession.

I thus grew up maimed of a faculty I might have enjoyed throughout my early school-years, the faculty I mean of moving in two worlds of thought and speech instead of one, and that one the less congenial to my nature and nurture. I now know that my education was impoverished, and my mental development retarded by the loss. From the time when I ceased to "have the Gaelic," till the time in my teens when I began to study a second language other than English, I have good reason to believe that my progress at school was satisfactory neither to my teachers nor to myself. It was only when I took up French and German and Latin that I became fully aware of the gratuitous deprivation that had hitherto kept me back. My English subjects took on a new interest, and became not only easy but delightful, when I had other ways of speech and modes of thought to compare with them. Each shed light on the other and each helped to make the other intelligible. With pains I recovered something of the intellectual heritage which years before I might have entered upon by right of birth, and it was only then that my real education, the spontaneous unfolding of mind and heart under the influence of letters, began for me. Kipling says. "What can they know of England who only England know?" I found that I knew more *of* English as soon as I knew more *than* English. My real education might have begun seven years earlier, to my lasting profit, if I had been allowed to continue bi-lingual while I was struggling with the rudiments of English schooling. To my excellent parents I shall ever be grateful for all they were

and did for me. But I, and they, too, before I lost them, often regretted the mistake made by them and by my first teachers in this point of my early training. It was the mistake of their generation, a mistake not yet wholly excluded in some quarters, namely, that only *that* is educationally profitable which is of immediate marketable utility.

You will pardon me this lapse into autobiography, which I have allowed myself, not from vanity or egotism, but because I would draw a moral from my own experience. It may, moreover, help to explain why one who is no more than an amateur philologer in Gaelic should take so deep an interest in the question before us—namely, the value of Gaelic as a school-subject, as an educational instrument, for Gaelic-speaking children. I was one of these myself; Gaelic was *not* used as it might have been in my schooling: I was the poorer then, I am the poorer still, for the lack of it. And because I am conscious that I needlessly lost my birthright, I am anxious that the like misfortune should not befall my young kinsmen in the Highlands, through any ignorance or prejudice of their proper guardians.

For the question—Should Gaelic be taught in the schools where Gaelic is the speech of the people?—is not a mere question of sentiment. It is not a mere question of parochial patriotism. It is not a mere fad of ultra-nationalists, who are trying to put back the clock in the supposed interest of a separatist faction. It is not a mere cry of obsolescent antiquaries, who are vainly attempting to conserve what is doomed to inevitable decay. Rightly regarded, it is a question of educational psychology, and a question of practical efficiency; for practical efficiency can be

secured only when it is the outcome of sound educational principle.

Why do we send Gaelic-speaking children to school at all? Why does the State erect and maintain costly machinery, and pass stringent laws, whose effect is to secure that every Gaelic-speaking child shall pass a large part of his childhood within school walls? Is it not that we may develop his mind to the extent of his capacity, so that he may become an intelligent and efficient citizen of the Empire? That surely first and chiefly. And to this end, as a necessary means, we want to equip him with such a command of English as will make him free of the Empire, in whatever portion of it his lot may be cast. If these are our objects, it remains to ask how we are to attain them with the least waste of time, and effort, and money, and with the greatest practical effect.

Let us assume that the child's home-language is Gaelic. The assumption is true of over twenty thousand children in the Highlands. He thinks and talks Gaelic. It is the language of his family and of his playmates. It is the medium by which he learns from them, and expresses what is in himself. English is an unknown or an unfamiliar medium, and books are still dumb to him. We have first to teach him to read, to associate the printed symbol with the spoken word and with its meaning. We have to train his eye to help his ear in acquiring knowledge. Will it, think you, be easier to begin the exercise by teaching him to read Gaelic, in which he already knows the spoken word and its meaning, or to read English in which he knows neither? If we had to deal with an English-speaking child, to whom for some reason a knowledge of French was necessary, does anyone doubt that it would

be better to begin by teaching him to read in English, so that he might first be got to understand what reading means? When he had mastered the elements of the art, and could draw instruction from the book as well as from the voice, we could then teach him French through English, and have two gateways of knowledge open instead of one. In this way it seems to me we should fulfil two elementary conditions commended both by psychology and commonsense, which are at the basis of all sound education, namely that in teaching a child we should (1) proceed from the known to the unknown, and (2) take one step at a time. To read at all is one step, to read a foreign language is another step. The home-language is the known, the foreign language is the unknown. What is true and sound when French is the foreign language for the English-speaking child does not become untrue and unsound when it is a case of the Gaelic-speaking child learning English.

The Bi-lingual Faculty.

I am almost ashamed to insist on principles so rudimentary, and so generally admitted—outside certain School Board districts in the Highlands. Yet I understand that *there* the practical deduction which inevitably follows is neither conceded nor acted upon. It is not realised, even by those who are most anxious to save the rates and to earn grants, that it is quicker and cheaper to teach the Gaelic-speaking child to read Gaelic first, and through Gaelic to read and speak English, than to put into his hand an English book for his first reading lesson, and expect him to master the difficulties both of reading and of English at the same time. Putting aside the question of the loss of time and money involved

in the latter method, it involves a double disadvantage to the child. He learns English painfully and imperfectly at the best, and he never learns Gaelic as a written language at all. The first disadvantage is real and serious, for it means that the object aimed at is more or less missed. Painful and ill-devised school-training means for many the cessation of learning and the desire to learn, when school days are over. The consequent decline of intellectual interest and power during adolescence and manhood is familiar to all. Imperfect and parrot-like acquisition of English means that the future citizen of the Empire is *not* sent out with the equipment he needs for freedom and efficiency. To that extent the trustees of State educational funds have failed to fulfil their trust for him. The second disadvantage to the child, namely, that he never learns to read Gaelic, will appeal less strongly to the School Boards than the first. But I believe, and I do not doubt you believe, that it is a disadvantage as grave as it is unnecessary. I have told you my own experience. It is not a solitary experience. The study of a second language is recognised in every civilised country

AS A POWERFUL MEANS

of cultivating the mind, of conferring breadth of view, power of comparison, flexibility, strength. as a mere intellectual discipline it has approved itself to educators everywhere and always. In the case of the poor, say in England, its advantages may be out of reach, and the educator must make shift without it. The observed results do not justify one in thinking that he achieves more than a makeshift with many of his pupils. But in parts of the country like Wales and the Highlands of Scotland, where the

second language lies to hand, where it is no burden but an actual aid to the culture of the understanding and the acquisition of knowledge, why should the poorest child forego its intellectual privileges? "With a great sum" the English-speaking child obtains the educational advantage of a second language—be it Latin or French or German—the Gaelic-speaking child is "free-born" to this advantage. Why, in the name of sheer economy, should he throw it away? If he can without strain or expense become bi-lingual in the primary school at his own door, why should he be debarred from the benefit to his development, to his outlook, to his human interest, which the bi-lingual faculty affords? At the Feill in Glasgow I spoke at some length of these benefits I do not propose to enlarge upon them now. They might lead me into a region which to-day I have tried to avoid: because in view of our object I want to be as austerely practical as I can. It is to austere and practical administrators that I would appeal, and on grounds only which they will deem worthy of consideration. They are, I know, shy of deductions, however inevitable, from first principles such as I have adduced. They prefer "solid experience." Well, my deductions have been tested by experiment again and again, and always with the result predicted. Dr. Norman Macleod was no mere enthusiast for Gaelic as a language: he gave his life to the uplifting of his countrymen in body, soul and spirit, and to that end he realised that they must be better educated in every sense of the word. Over sixty years ago he bore testimony that, where it was tried, the system of teaching English

THROUGH THE MEDIUM OF GAELIC

had done more "to introduce English in the

course of the last twenty years than the old system—that of reading through an unknown tongue—could do in a century." Over fifty years ago the Committee of the Privy Council on Education were "satisfied that to instruct the children of the Gaelic population by lesson books written in the English language alone, by means of teachers not familiar with the written and colloquial idiom of the Gaelic language as well as the English, must fail to give the scholars . . . any useful acquaintance with the English language." In 1880 Her Majesty's Inspector, not a Highlander, reported that the question of using Gaelic in Highland Schools "is one on which a Saxon is as competent to form an opinion as a Gael; for in so far as it concerns the Education Department it is a purely educational question, to be answered on educational principles . . . Surely, in teaching this foreign language [English] it is only sound sense and good philosophy to employ the native tongue, which first carries the intelligence, to make the teaching of English intelligent . . . It is a mistake to think that the teaching of Gaelic in the higher classes would hinder progress in English. Rightly treated, it would greatly assist progress, for it would afford the important intellectual gymnastic of inter-translation between two languages, and give the pupil

claimed for the study of two tongues." Four years later the Crofters' Commission, whose function and purpose were economic, not primarily educational, certainly not literary or antiquarian, reported thus on Gaelic teaching: "We believe it to be a matter seriously affecting the intelligent education of Gaelic-speaking children, and

thereby affecting the whole condition of the district to which the belong, and the future prospects of its inhabitants." Two years ago, it was given here in Oban as the opinion of H.M. Inspector, "who had examined bi-lingual children for thirty years, that the Gaelic-speaking scholars [in a school where Gaelic was an ordinary class subject] were much more intelligent, brighter, and possessed of a better knowledge of English and English composition than the uni-lingual Lowland pupils." And in the same year my good friend, Dr. Struthers, guide, philosopher, friend—and autocrat—of Scottish education, whom not even the School Boards or the schoolmasters ever accused of being a sentimentalist, wrote thus of the scholars who took Gaelic in the Leaving Certificate Examination, which includes all the subjects of a sound secondary education in English: "The result of the experiment was very gratifying. . . . The explanation of the relative excellence of the Gaelic papers is probably two-fold. The candidates are, as a rule, considerably older . . . again, they are all practically bi-lingual. . . . And the mental discipline thus implied has helped to develop their intelligence." Lastly, Lord Dunmore, speaking of Harris, and of the practical commercial aspect of the question, says his experience "has always been that those children who were taught to read and write Gaelic . . . invariably turned out to be better English scholars than those who for some reason or other had not . . . been similarly instructed in their own language."

"Facts are chiels that winna ding." If our friends the sceptics will not accept deductions from first principles, and scoff at the idea of psychology having anything to do with such a

simple everyday matter as the education of the young, perhaps they will condescend to listen to positive facts and

Unquestioned Testimony.

I say "perhaps"—for they proudly call themselves "practical men," and they are apt to pour scorn on "theorists," however eminent. Now, in my experience, the "practical man" is usually the most bigoted of theorists, the only difference between him and the others being that *his* theories are wrong. If we could only succeed in insinuating into his mind a doubt as to whether his method may not be more costly than ours, and less productive of commercially appraisable results, we might get him to try, even half-heartedly, an experiment. If he once did so, I for one would feel that our victory was won, so far as he was concerned. Let him take two parallel classes, or two similar schools, and have one taught by a Gaelic teacher on the method of Gaelic first and English through Gaelic, the other by an English teacher with English first and all the time, and no Gaelic. At the end say of three years, let the pupils be tested in the purely English subjects as to their standard of speaking, reading and general intelligence, and we will abide by the result without a shadow of misgiving. Is that too much to ask, even of our friends, say, in Stornoway? If they, or any others, are so sure that their way of imparting English to the Highland child is the best, they will not hesitate to put it to the test and confute mere "theorists"—like you and me.

I do not propose to weary you by drawing out at length the other practical consequences from the principles I have set forth. They will readily occur to you, and they will doubtless be

emphasised by other speakers. If the Highland child is best taught English through his mother-tongue, his teacher must himself understand and speak Gaelic. The teacher is to be the mediator, the interpreter, of new learning to the child. He is to lead him by natural steps from the known to the unknown, from the familiar to the unfamiliar. How shall he perform his all-important office if the "known" of the child is the "unknown" of the teacher? *Ergo*, the first teacher of the Gaelic speaking child

Must Himself Speak Gaelic.

If he is to teach the child to read and write Gaelic, he must be able to do so himself. And as the first steps in education are not the easiest, the teacher who undertakes to guide them must be trained for his task. When the pupil has got over the first steps, and can use English intelligently and easily, a trained English teacher may carry him on to the higher standards without much difficulty, though even he will be helped if the pupil is simultaneously perfecting his Gaelic. But we must have a supply of trained Gaelic-speaking teachers sufficient to provide one at least for every Highland school. If the School Boards make an efficient demand, I for one believe that the supply will be forthcoming. Gaelic may even now be offered instead of French or German for the Leaving Certificate, and for the Preliminary Examination which admits to the Training College and the University. Both of these are now ready to teach students in training how to teach Gaelic. Bursaries are provided, though there might well be more of them, to help Gaelic-speaking students to a College or University education. Grants by the Education Department and by our Association are to be

earned by trained Gaelic-speaking teachers who return to take up duty in the Highlands, over and above what they receive in common with English speaking teachers who have no Gaelic. The Department is sympathetic and willing to encourage Highland School Boards which adopt sound and enlightened methods of education, though it (perhaps wisely) declines to countenance the coercion of—the others. Conferences such as this, and the discussions *pro* and *con* which they educe, are serving to clear the field from prejudiced and obsolete notions. The baffling obstacle of

Sheer Indifference is Dwindling Away

The example of Wales is beginning to be understood and appreciated, though I hesitate to dwell on it here. I was taken to task by a distinguished Highland lady for having made reference to it at the Feill. "I cannot abide this continual praise of Wales, Wales," she said, "as if Donald wasn't as good as Taffy any day." I am the last man to admit—in public—the inferiority of Donald; but I fear there was a note of envy in her reference to Taffy. He has at least realised that education, to be thorough, to be comprehensive, to be efficient from an Imperial point of view, must become an object of intense national interest—and that in a Celtic country these ends are best attained when popular education is bi-lingual from start to finish. We need not imitate gallant little Wales; let us at least emulate, and if possible excel her in her zeal for her language and literature, not as a means to English only, but as a means to true and self-respecting manhood. *A réir do mheas ort fhéin, measaidh càch thu.*