

THE LANGUAGES OF ULSTER



Exploring the links
between Gaelic and
Scots in Ulster -
the people, places
and languages

Irish, Scottish Gaelic and Ulster Scots have been in a close relationship for centuries and have influenced one another. Here are some words which they have in common.

GAELIC WORDS IN ULSTER SCOTS

IRISH	ULSTER SCOTS	SCOTTISH GAELIC
brochan → porridge	brochan porridge	brochan gruel, porridge
cèill → social visit	kaley, caillich social visit	cèillidh social visit
clàbar → mud	clabber mud	clàbar mud
gob → beak	gub mouth	gob beak
grìosach → hot embers	greeshoch hot embers	grìosach hot embers
pràcas → mess	pracas mess	
scidin → small potato	skeedyin small potato	
sraith → green sward, sod	scraw, scraa sod	sgrath green sward, sod
spàig → broad flat foot	spag, spag big awkward foot	spàig clumsy foot

9TH-13TH
CENTURIES

VIKINGS
SETTLE IN
WESTERN
SCOTLAND

9TH-11TH
CENTURIES

VIKINGS
SETTLE IN
IRELAND



Scottish culture is full of words which have a Gaelic origin. Here are some:

SCOTTISH GAELIC WORDS IN SCOTS

cabar rafter, cable	→	caber trimmed tree trunk thrown in competition at Highland games
claidheamh great sword	→	claymore large two-edged Highland sword
sgian dubh black knife	→	skean-dhu ceremonial knife with a black hilt
sporan purse	→	sporrán leather pouch

Scottish Gaelic has borrowed words from Scots which are not in Irish:

SCOTS WORDS IN SCOTTISH GAELIC

burn stream	→	bòrn water
gurdy arm	→	gàirdèan arm
neep turnip	→	sneap turnip
thrang busy	→	trang busy

FIRST NAMES FROM SCOTTISH GAELIC

- Alistair (from Alasdair, the Gaelic form of Alexander)
- Angus (from aon 'singular' and gun 'bravery')
- Calum (Scottish form of *Còim*, 'dove' – popular because of St Calum Cille/Colmcille, a principal saint revered by the Scots)
- Donald (domhnall 'world-mighty')
- Dougal (dubhghall 'black-haired foreigner')
- Duncan (donnchadh 'brown warrior')
- Finlay (fionnlaoch 'fair-haired warrior')
- Fiona (fionn 'fair')
- Iain (Gaelic form of 'John')
- Kenneth (cinn aed 'offspring of fire' and coinneach 'handsome')
- Kyle (caol 'narrows, channel, strait')

ULSTER SCOTS WORDS IN IRISH

ULSTER SCOTS	NORTH DONEGAL IRISH
bumbee → bumblebee	bumbig bumblebee
glar → mud	glár river mud
gulder → to shout, a roar	goláir loud cry, a roar
gunk → disappointment	gonc disappointment
skink → light porridge, soup	scinc disgusting fluid
scutcher → tool for scutching flax	scultseoir woman who undercuts people
stoor → disturbed or windblown dust	stúir dust
targe, targer → scolding woman	táirdéir scolding woman
thran → obstinate	trán obstinate

500AD

GAELIC HAS SPREAD FROM IRELAND TO ARGYLL

GAELIC-SPEAKING MERCENARIES FIGHT AND
SETTLE IN IRELAND

13TH-16TH
CENTURIES

CLAN DONALD EXTENDS CONTROL INTO
NORTH ANTRIM

15TH-17TH
CENTURIES

LATE
18TH CENTURY
- PRESENT

IRISH MIGRANTS SETTLE PERMANENTLY
IN WESTERN SCOTLAND

MASS MIGRATION OF ENGLISH AND
SCOTTISH SETTLERS TO ULSTER

1606-
1700AD

ROBERT BURNS AND GAELIC



Although Gaelic had died out in Ayrshire by Robert Burns' time, his work contained many words of Gaelic origin: *bardie* (minor poet) < *bàrd*; *caird* (linker) < *caird*; *clachan* (hamlet) < *clachan*; *cranreuch* (hoar frost) < *crann-reathadh*; *galve* (sword) < *claidheamh*; *kane* (payment in kind) < *cáin*; *keber* (rafter) < *cabar*; *messin* (small dog, cur) < *measan*; *phillibeg* (kilt) < *feileadh beag*; *pibroch* (classical pipe music) < *piobaireachd*; *spluchan* (tobacco-pouch) < *spluchan*; *usquebae* (whisky) < *uisge beatha*; and *whist* (silence) < *éisd*.

CRAIC OR CRACK?

'Crack', the well-known Irish term for 'gossip' and 'entertainment', has its origins in both Scotland and northern England. In *Holy Fair* (1785) Robert Burns wrote, 'They're a' in famous tune. For crack that day.' Quotations from the *Dictionary of the Scots Language* include 'Sit ye down and gie's your crack' (1833). South of the border there are examples of 'crack' as 'gossip' in the *English Dialect Dictionary* from Yorkshire, Cumberland and Cheshire. Crack as 'gossip' and 'entertainment' appears in Ulster Scots poetry published by Samuel Thomson in 1793. The word entered the Irish language as *craic* in the second half of the 20th century.

NORMANS
INVADE
ULSTER



1177AD

THE IRISH AND SCOTS LANGUAGES HAVE BEEN INFLUENCED BY OLD NORSE AND DIALECTS OF FRENCH:

IRISH	OLD NORSE	ENGLISH
beoir	bjórr	beer
fuinneog	vindauga	window
magadh	markaðr	market
stiúir	stýri	rudder

Most Norse words were borrowed by Scots through northern dialects of Middle English:

ULSTER SCOTS	OLD NORSE	ENGLISH
kirk	kirkja	church
kist	kista	chest
muckle	mill	much, large amount
scarf	skarfr	cormorant

These terms were borrowed from the French dialects spoken by the Normans and their followers:

IRISH	ANGLO-FRENCH	ENGLISH
contae	cuntee	county
gasúir, garsún	garsun	boy
páiste	page	child
seomra	chaum(b)re	room, chamber

These terms stem from Norman influence and the Auld Alliance between Scotland and France (1295-1560):

ULSTER SCOTS	ANGLO-FRENCH, FRENCH	ENGLISH
fash	fasher	annoy, bother
gulpin	prob. galopin	raw youth, a fool
scutch	escoucher	to dress flax
stoor	estour	dust

By the 11th century Gaelic was spoken in most of Scotland, and the Gaelic Scots saw Ireland as their ancestral homeland. Some academics believe that they used poetic forms of 'Ireland' in their place-names, such as the names of three sovereignty goddesses - Ériu, Banba and Fódla.

GAELIC PLACE-NAMES - AND IRISH-SCOTTISH LINKS

SCOTTISH PLACE-NAME	MEANING	ENGLISH VERSION
Athfhòdhla	new Ireland	Atholl
Allt Èireann	stream of Ireland	Auldearn
Banbh	(new) Ireland	Banff
Eilginn	(new) Ireland	Elgin
Fionn-Èireann	white Ireland	Findhorn
Srath Èireann	valley of Ireland	Strathearn

Gaelic-speaking Scots came to Ireland as galloglasses (*gallóglach* 'foreign mercenary') and as followers of the Clan Donald which controlled north Antrim. A minority of the settlers who arrived during the 17th century also spoke Gaelic. Scottish Gaelic words in Antrim place-names include *allt* (stream), *monadh* (hill, mountain) and *scarbh* (cormorant). Stormont and Rowallane are named after places in Scotland.

ULSTER PLACE-NAME	MEANING	ENGLISH VERSION
Allt na Críche	stream of the boundary	Altacree Burn
Baile na nGallóglach	town of the galloglasses	Milford
Carn Albanach	cairn of the Scotsmen	Carnalbanagh
Carn Monaidh	cairn of the hill	Carnmoney
Creag na Scarbh	rock of the cormorants	Craignascarf
Rubha Àlainn	beautiful headland	Rowallane
Stairmhonadh	crossing place of the mountain	Stormont

WORDS IN STANDARD ENGLISH FROM THE IRISH LANGUAGE

ENGLISH	IRISH	MEANING OF IRISH WORD
banshee	bean sí	fairy woman
barmbrack	bairín breac	speckled loaf
phoney (prob. fawney = fake gold ring)	fáinne	ring
poteen	poitín	little pot
shamrock	seamróg	shamrock
Tory	tóraí	outlaw

WORDS IN STANDARD ENGLISH FROM IRISH AND/OR SCOTTISH GAELIC

ENGLISH	IRISH	SCOTTISH GAELIC	MEANING OF GAELIC WORD
bog	bog	bog	soft
clan	clann	clann	family
dulse	duileasc	duileasg	dulse
galore	go leor	gu leòr	enough
glen	gleann	gleann	valley
whisky (Sc.) whiskey (Ire.)	uisce beatha	uisge beatha	water of life