

THE REVITALIZATION OF THE MANX LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN AN ERA OF GLOBAL CHANGE¹

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Introduction

Language scholars have long decried the loss of minority languages (Crystal, 2000; Nettle and Romaine, 2000; Dalby, 2003). In his work *Language Death*, David Crystal argues that “the rapid endangerment and death of many minority languages across the world is a matter of widespread concern, not only among linguists and anthropologists but among all concerned with issues of cultural identity in an increasingly globalized culture” (Crystal, 2000). Concerns about the impact of globalization and the endangerment of minority languages and cultures are particularly relevant in the case of small island jurisdictions. Over the past century, the indigenous cultures and languages of many small islands have been threatened by the forces of global political, economic and social change. Ironically, for students of small islands, “the juggernaut of globalization” (McCall, 1996, as cited in Hay, 2006: 31) and all of the negative implications that it has for small island cultures “is the factor that has given the greatest fillip to island studies, so, too, has it been the major driving force behind a revived intellectual interest in place” (Hay, 2006: 31).

It appears, however, that not all small islands have suffered at the hands of globalization. Indeed, a more nuanced examination of the relationship between small islands and globalization reveals that some have found particular niches which have allowed them to compete and prosper in the global economy (Baldacchino, 2006: 97). In some cases, the indigenous languages and cultures of small islands have become important tools in the development of economic and political strategies to deal with the changes brought about by globalization. During the last two centuries, the indigenous language and culture of the Isle of Man, a small island located in the Irish Sea, mid way between England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (see map)², have been both victims and beneficiaries of the broader changes connected with successive waves of globalization. After being universally spoken on the island prior to 19th century, Manx Gaelic (Manx) endured a slow decline over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, largely as a result of external factors, such as immigration and mass tourism, which opened up the island and its culture to the outside world. Following the death of its last ‘native speaker’, Ned Maddrell, in 1974, many consigned the Manx language to the dustbin of history—a quaint historical curiosity in a rapidly globalizing (read Anglicizing) world. In recent years, however, renewed interest in Manx and a gradual increase in the number of speakers have started to reverse the fate of the language. Over the past three decades, the number of Manx speakers has increased steadily and the language has a renewed presence on the island, in both official and unofficial capacities. More recently, the language and culture have even begun to play a role in the Isle of Man’s quest to consolidate its position within an increasingly competitive international environment.

This article will examine the internal and external factors that have driven the rebirth of the Manx language since the 1970s. The existing literature on the revival of Manx has emphasized the role played by internal actors and organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, in this revitalization process (Gawne, 2002; Abley, 2004; McArdle, 2005). This

article acknowledges and confirms these findings, but it also offers a different perspective on the current linguistic and cultural revival in the Isle of Man. It argues that the revitalization of the Manx language and culture over the past three decades is also the result of the island's political and economic autonomy, the redevelopment and growth of its economy and, more recently, the government's strategy to consolidate and strengthen the island's position in the broader regional and global economy. Drawing on the literature on value change in post-war democracies, the paper also considers the impact that recent economic stability and growth on the Isle of Man have had on values and attitudes about language and culture among the island's inhabitants.



The Isle of Man—<http://worldatlas.com/aatlas/infopage/irishsea.htm> (Date Accessed: December 18, 2007)

The Decline of the Manx Language and Culture in the 19th and 20th Centuries

Although influenced culturally by the Norse invasions of the early medieval period, as well as connections with neighbouring countries and regions, for many centuries the insularities of island life protected the Isle of Man's unique language and culture. Beginning in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, however, the language and culture of the island entered a period of prolonged decline. The start of this decline can be traced to the 1765 Revestment Act, in which the British Crown assumed control over the island from the Dukes of Atholl and initiated a process of linguistic assimilation (McArdle, 2005). The external assault on the island's language and culture intensified in the 19th and early 20th centuries, with increases in immigration from Northwest England, the redevelopment of the island as a tourist destination for the working classes of

northern England and Scotland, and the mass emigration of islanders to countries such as Canada, Australia and the United States (Abley, 2004; Gawne, 2002). By the end of the 19th century, Manx went from being a language that was almost universally spoken on the island (outside of the upper classes) to one that was spoken by a small minority of the population as a mother tongue. In spite of the efforts of cultural preservationists at the beginning of the 20th century to maintain and revive the language and culture (Maddrell, 2002; Abley, 2004), the language went into further decline during the first half of the 20th century. By 1961, there were only 165 Manx speakers on the island (Mate, 1997).

The death of the last native speaker was seen by many as the final stage in the decline of Manx as a living language. Interestingly, it also represented the beginning of the revitalization of the language. To be sure, the deliverance of Manx from near-extinction was aided by the stoic efforts of language enthusiasts, who preserved the voices and conversations of the native speakers on tape in the 1930s and 1940s. But the real saviours of Manx were the men and women who kept the language alive prior to the renewed interest of some government agencies and officials in the Manx language and culture in the 1980s and 1990s (Abley, 2004).

Political Autonomy as a Vehicle for Linguistic and Cultural Revival

The gradual expansion of the Isle of Man's political autonomy during the second half of the 20th century has been a significant factor in the recent revitalization of the Manx language and culture. For much of its history, the Isle of Man has been under the political control of external powers (Wilson, 2005: 136). Since 1765, it has been a Dependency of the British Crown. In this political arrangement, the British sovereign is the island's formal head of state (represented on the island by a Lieutenant Governor), but the Isle of Man is not a part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Like other Crown Dependencies such as Guernsey and Jersey in the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man has its own political institutions and the autonomy to pass its own legislation; although it is important to add that it governs in a manner that is largely consistent with the policies of the United Kingdom Government. These Crown Dependencies also share a common experience with regards to the preservation and revitalization of their indigenous languages and cultures (Johnson, 2005; Jones, 2005; Goodall, 2006; Johnson, 2008).

The revitalization of Manx started to gain momentum in the mid 1980s, when the issue reached the attention of Tynwald, the Manx parliament. In 1984, Charles Cain, the Member of the House of Keys (MHK)³ from Ramsey, put forth a motion before Tynwald supporting the use of Manx in public. The initial outcome of this was the appointment of a Select Committee on the Greater Use of Manx Gaelic whose task was to review the motion and consider reactions from interested parties. Although there was opposition from some government agencies and businesses, the Report of the Select Committee on the Greater Use of Manx Gaelic was approved by Tynwald on July 10th, 1985 (Gawne, 2002). The Report made a number of recommendations regarding the use of Manx in public places and documents. The most relevant, for the purposes of this study, were as follows:

- Tynwald declares its intent that the preservation and promotion of the Manx Gaelic should be an objective of the Isle of Man Government.
- The Board of Education in conjunction with the Manx Heritage Foundation should provide foundation courses in Manx studies for all pupils in both primary and secondary schools with opportunities for further specific courses on a voluntary basis and to that end should also provide courses for teachers. We also recommend that an 'O' level course be created in Manx studies.

- The Manx Heritage Foundation should establish a voluntary Manx Language Advisory Commission⁴ (Gawne, 2002).

Manx was (re)introduced into the school system by the Department of Education in September 1992, as an optional subject for students aged seven and older (Department of Education, 2005). The program of study has since diversified to include pre-school education and immersion programs.⁵ There are four main components of language education, involving programs of study at the pre-school, primary, secondary and adult levels. The Manx language pre-school group (*Mooinjer Veggey*), supports “the development of Manx Gaelic...through structured play, language games, songs, stories and craft activities” (*Mooinjer Veggey*, 2001). The Manx Medium School (*Bunscoill Ghaelgagh*), in the village of St. John’s, offers a Manx immersion program for primary school students. In the regular primary and secondary school systems, Manx is taught on an optional basis by teachers working with the Manx Gaelic Peripatetic Teacher’s Unit (*Yn Unnid Gaelgagh*). There are also various adult education initiatives, although this is probably the least developed aspect of the current language education program.

According to the Isle of Man Department of Education’s (2006a) report *Freedom to Flourish: A Curriculum for Learning and Achievement*, since the launching of the language program in 1992:

... there has been a steady increase in the number of young people studying Manx Gaelic, as well as, since the 2001 Education Act, an enhanced acknowledgement of the importance of the teaching of the culture and history of the Isle of Man in schools.

This increase is also reflected in recent census data for the island. In the 1991 census, the number of Manx speakers was 653 (out of a population of approximately 70,000) (Mate, 1997). By the 2001 census, the number of residents out of a total population of approximately 76,000 who claimed to speak, read or write in Manx had risen to 1689 (Isle of Man Census, 2001). Granted this is certainly not a scientifically-based means of measuring the development of Manx. It does, however, indicate a significant increase in the number of people on the island who self-identify with the language and are taking steps to learn it.

The programs and activities introduced by the Isle of Man government provide a basis for the future regeneration of Manx as a working, living language on the Isle of Man. Although many of these programs are in their infancy, the ‘green shoots’ of a new generation of Manx speakers are already apparent. And while Manx is by no means safe from extinction, the work of dedicated individuals, both in government and outside government, has started the long process of resurrection. Clearly, much of the credit for the progress made must go to language enthusiasts and cultural preservationists. Without their commitment and drive, especially in the period before the government recognized the value of preserving and promoting the language, none of this would have been possible. But the activities of language enthusiasts and cultural preservationists alone are not enough to fully explain the changing fortunes of the Manx language. It is also important to consider the broader political, social and economic changes occurring in the Isle of Man and further afield in order to account for these developments.

Economic Development and Changing Values

In recent years, the Isle of Man’s unique political status in relation to the United Kingdom and the European Union has allowed it to develop a flourishing off-shore banking and services industry. Not only has this industry been the saviour of the island’s economy, following the decline of traditional industries such as farming, fishing and tourism in the 20th century, but

the economic resurgence generated by it has had a significant impact on the government's ability to engage in the process of cultural revitalization. In addition to supporting educational programs such as the Manx Medium School and the Manx Gaelic Peripatetic Teachers' Unit, the Government has also funded a variety of historical and cultural initiatives including museums, historical sites and Manx National Heritage, a quasi-government agency which seeks "to preserve, protect, promote and communicate the unique qualities of the Manx natural and cultural heritage" (Manx National Heritage website).

A recent re-branding exercise undertaken by the Isle of Man Government recognizes the impact of the transition and, among other things, its contribution to education and culture:

As a nation, we can give ourselves a modest pat on the back. Over the past 25 years, we have achieved a great deal. We no longer struggle with an economic model at the mercy of the seasons, but have built a diverse and successful economic portfolio fit for the twenty-first century. We have developed and improved our standard of living—for example, our island is relatively safe, we have excellent health and education systems, an award winning museum celebrating our heritage and an attractive taxation system (Isle of Man Government, 2006b: 2).

Although the *Freedom to Flourish* brand book is comprised of high-minded and somewhat vague principles and ideas, rather than concrete policy solutions or options, one particularly interesting aspect about the document is that it is bilingual (English and Manx) and contains a smattering of traditional Manx sayings and songs. While some may argue that this pays lip-service to the Manx language, the Isle of Man Government clearly views Manx as one of a number of ways of distinguishing the island from its global competitors, especially in the banking and services industry. It is in this sense that language and culture has made a transition from being simply a victim or a beneficiary of globalization to being a tool in the island's strategy to consolidate and strengthen its position within the global economy.

Of course, the extent to which the island can maintain its favourable economic position will determine whether the government has the resources to support programs in areas such as language and culture. Over the last decade, the Isle of Man has weathered a number of threats to its status as an off-shore banking and services centre (Wilson, 2005: 140). The European Union (EU) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), as well as individual countries, have all promoted tax harmonization and the elimination of tax havens, a move that would harm the Isle of Man economy and, by association, the government's ability to fund language and cultural programs. Indeed, the Treasury Minister recognized the on-going seriousness of these threats in the 2007 budget speech:

. . . the challenges that have faced the Isle of Man over the last five years or so have been unprecedented. I said last year that the challenges would be with us permanently, and the last twelve months has proved this to be the case (*Securing the Future*, 2007).

Despite the evidence linking linguistic and cultural development on the island to economic growth, some feel the island's current economic trajectory and its demographic consequences are not altogether supportive of the development of the Manx language and culture. For example, Manx nationalists argue that the current level of immigration, caused in large part by dynamic economic growth, poses a direct threat to the sustainability of the indigenous Manx population and its culture (Moffatt, 2002: 20). However, while it is true that immigration has made the indigenous Manx a minority in their own island⁶, it is also possible that "among some newcomers there may be an urge to rediscover or even construct a sense of Manx national identity" (Wilson, 2005: 134). For example, informal conversations with Manx-language educators indicate that that some of the students in the Manx immersion and other

language programs are the children of recent immigrants to the island. More research is clearly needed on the personal backgrounds and motivations of those who support the revival of Manx language and culture in order to establish whether this is a sustainable trend among island inhabitants.

Another possible theory as to why the Manx language has undergone a revival in recent years has to do with the broader social and cultural transformations that have occurred in western liberal democracies in the post-war period. According to Ronald Inglehart, a variety of factors, including economic development and stability and the emergence of the Welfare State, have not only affected the values and attitudes of individual citizens, but also the governments they elect, the organizations they join and the businesses they own and in which they work (Inglehart, 1990: 4). In short, “the values of western publics have been shifting from an overwhelming emphasis on material well-being and physical security toward greater emphasis on quality of life” (Inglehart, 1977: 3). The result of this change is societies that have a greater tendency to value self-fulfillment and self-expression, in a variety of areas, including linguistic and cultural expression.⁷

Thinking about these changes in the context of the Isle of Man, one could argue that the economic stability and growth that has occurred as a result of the success of the off-shore banking and services industry has in turn provided the basis for the types of value changes identified by Inglehart. Whereas it is probably too early to see the true impact of the recent economic boom on the values and attitudes of the residents of the Isle of Man, increasing interest in language and cultural issues, especially on the part of the adult generation who grew up in the 1970s and 1980s and whose children are now attending primary and secondary school, is an indication that a value shift has started to occur. Should these trends persist and should the island economy continue to grow, the prospects for the further growth and development of Manx look favourable.⁸

Conclusion

The process of linguistic and cultural revitalization in the Isle of Man has been driven by a variety of actors and forces. Clearly, the initial impetus for saving and reestablishing Manx as a living, working language came from grassroots activists. These individuals worked intensely and under very difficult circumstances when it seemed that the language was destined to become extinct in the 1970s. They were responsible for keeping the language issue on the political agenda and, initially at least, setting up an institutional framework for language education on the island. By the 1990s, the Isle of Man Government had become actively involved in language training, largely through the Department of Education. The current set of programs in place is the result of a very productive partnership between the private and public sectors.

In addition to the activities of domestic actors, however, this paper has argued that a broader set of forces and processes have been responsible for structuring the context in which language revitalization has taken place. The gradual expansion of the Isle of Man’s political and economic autonomy during the 20th century and its particular status as a Crown Dependency have provided the government with the policy tools and jurisdiction to pursue a program of cultural and linguistic revitalization. The government’s ability to maneuver on this issue has been supported by the revenues it has derived from a thriving off-shore banking and services sector. Despite the concerns that the new economy has threatened the indigenous culture and language by initiating an influx of immigrants who have little or no connection to Manx language and culture, the future of the linguistic and cultural revival is largely dependent on the continued growth and development of the island economy. Like other western societies, the Isle of Man is subject to the changing values and attitudes

brought about by a prolonged period of economic stability and growth. Preliminary research indicates that greater public support for Manx language programs and other cultural activities may be a result of generational changes in values and attitudes. Furthermore, as the Isle of Man Government looks to the future, it realizes that one of the keys to remaining competitive in an increasingly aggressive global economy is to promote the unique attributes of one's jurisdiction or territory. Promoting the Manx language and culture may provide one of the means of achieving this goal.

Endnotes

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² The total land area of the island is 588 square kilometers.

³ The Lower House of the Manx Parliament.

⁴ In Manx, this Commission is known as the *Coonceil ny Gaelgey*.

⁵ It is important to note that while the Department of Education and the Isle of Man Government have been very supportive of this program of study, Manx language education has also benefited immensely from the efforts of grassroots volunteers and members of the language community.

⁶ According to the Isle of Man Census (2006), 47.6% of the current population was born on the island. One source estimates that, out of a total population of approximately 75,000, fewer than 10,000 residents have Manx-born parents and grandparents (Moffatt, 2002).

⁷ Inglehart's theory of post-materialism is based on the assumption that an individual's value priorities reflect the particular socio-economic environment that prevails during that individual's formative (pre-adult) years. Those values and attitudes stay with the individual throughout his or her life.

⁸ In a 1990 Gallup Poll conducted on the island, 36% of respondents indicated that they were in favour of Manx being taught in the schools (Gawne 2000).

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