

The books that inspired Will Lamb: “Nancy Dorian’s *Language Death* prompted me to pursue linguistics”

by Blog Admin

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Will Lamb is lecturer in Celtic and Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Will talks about the books on languages, particularly Gaelic and Celtic, that tempted him away from a degree in psychology and about the folklore that has carried these languages through the centuries.



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My schooling experience is ultimately responsible for my becoming an academic: between the ages of six and seventeen I used my abilities to the fullest extent possible, and succeeded in doing ‘well enough’ with the least amount of effort. As a result, I left secondary education labelled as a ‘consistent underachiever’ and with a palpable degree of parental disappointment upon my shoulders. However, when I entered university, I found that I was enjoying formal education for the first time and set about redressing my previous, unremarkable academic record. Fortunately for me, I had read widely and avidly during my childhood, and it set the stage for the time to come.

The first book to pique my interest in linguistics and Celtic languages was *The Story of English* (MacCrum, Cran and MacNeil). There was a small section on Scotland, and I was fascinated that Scottish Gaelic culture, with its rich oral tradition, could still be found in Nova Scotia, which was not too far away from my home in Baltimore. Although my first degree was in Psychology, I filed that information away for the time to come. Also influential at the time were Campbell’s *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Jung’s *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* and various books of folklore, such as Williamson’s *Tales of the Seal People*. Duncan Williamson was a fantastic Scottish storyteller, a traveller who learnt many of his tales from Gaelic speakers on the west coast. Predictably, perhaps, I also enjoyed J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* and even went so far as to begin learning Elvish. The resident Elvish speaking population in Baltimore was pretty thin at the time, however, so my enthusiasm quickly waned. Learning languages – even fictional ones – is hard work.

At the end of my degree, I visited Nova Scotia on holiday and came across Nancy Dorian’s *Language Death*, which is an examination of the East Sutherland dialect of Gaelic, and how its language community fell apart over a few generations. Although the linguistic descriptions were beyond me at the time, it was the book that prompted me to pursue linguistics. After spending a nine months digesting various editions of *Teach Yourself Gaelic*, I returned to Nova Scotia to study Gaelic and associated subjects at St Francis Xavier University, for a kind of pre-postgrad year out. This is when I became acquainted with several excellent books to which I still refer on a regular basis: John Francis Campbell’s *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*; Margaret Faye Shaw’s *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist*; John Shaw’s *Tales Until Dawn*; Catford’s *A Practical Introduction to Phonetics*; Bruford’s *Gaelic Folk-tales and Medieval Romances* and Thompson’s *The Folktale*. Between them all, I left Nova Scotia with a good basis in Gaelic linguistics and ethnology.

My years at the University of Edinburgh were spent studying sociolinguistics and grammar. I set out to explore the extent of linguistic variation still present in modern Scottish Gaelic, and write a detailed account of its spoken grammar. I felt that theoretical accounts of language were generally out of step with linguistic reality and wanted to orient my work to be as empirically sound as possible. Four books were very helpful: Payne’s *Describing Morphosyntax*; Miller and Weinert’s *Spontaneous Spoken Language*; Biber’s *Variation Across Speech and Writing* and Van Valin and LaPolla’s *Syntax*. The latter, while being a theoretical account of syntax, is firmly situated on a wide range of typological evidence from the world’s languages and is ‘useful’ in a way that other theoretical systems are not, in my experience.

In my current role, I work more frequently on ethnological than linguistic aspects of Gaelic culture. The most

exciting book that I have seen in the last few years is Rubin's [Memory in Oral Traditions](#). By integrating scholarship in cognitive psychology, ethnology, musicology and linguistics, it distils a compelling theoretical perspective on the human mnemonic capacity. Also fascinating, is Newton's (ed.) [Dùthchas nan Gàidheal](#), which is a collection of essays written (in English and Gaelic) by John MacInnes, formerly of the School of Scottish Studies. MacInnes is the foremost Gaelic-speaking ethnologist and his thoughts on Scottish culture, language and history are always thought provoking. That book, and the European Ethnological Research Centre's *Oral Literature and Performance Culture* would offer an excellent overview to any student interested in these areas. Finally, a brand new book that I look forward to reading is Callan's *Air Bilean an t-Sluaigh* – translating as 'On the Lips of the Folk' – which is an account of oral tradition in North Uist by a Gaelic-speaking ethnologist and singer from the area. I am not aware of plans to translate it into English, but I expect that it will happen in the next few years to increase its readership.

I rarely read outside of work; plane journeys, and the very occasional holiday, are about the only opportunities that I get. I am working my way slowly through a few books on chess, but that is about all I have on the go at the moment. In my student years, I enjoyed Iain Banks' books very much, such as [Consider Phlebus](#) and [The Crow Road](#). My favourite book of all time is Steinbeck's [East of Eden](#), which is a splendid observation of human relationships. For my next trip away – whenever it comes – I plan to read Kem Nunn's [The Dogs of Winter](#), which a colleague lent to me an embarrassingly long time ago. It is classified as surf-noir: Point Break meets Chinatown? I'm hoping that it will encourage me to finally get my surfboard out again.

Will Lamb is a lecturer in Celtic and Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Focussing on Scottish Gaelic ethnology, he works on a range of linguistic, musical and folkloristic topics. His most recent publication is *Keith Norman MacDonald's Puirt-à-Beul*, an expanded, edited version of a 1901 book on Gaelic vocal dance music. He has also written monographs and articles on Gaelic grammar, register variation and oral narrative. In his spare time, he enjoys playing Scottish and Irish traditional music on the bouzouki, beating his brother (occasionally) at chess and mucking about Edinburgh with his family.

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