

13th February 2022

Meaning

“Still with the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings.”

T S Elliot, Four Quartets, 'East Coker'

I'm not a Gaelic speaker. I could still offer a reasonable rendition of the chorus of *Failte Rudha Bhatairnis* ("Welcome to Waterish"), a Gaelic song I learned in Primary School. But apart from the odd word, I have no clue about Gaelic. So, looking for help with the rudiments of the language, I was delighted when I found in a charity shop a battered copy of *Gaelic Self-Taught: An introduction to Gaelic for beginners (with easy imitated phonetic pronunciation)*. This "new revised fourth edition" was published in 1935 by Alexander MacLaren & Sons, Glasgow, for the princely sum of 2/- (10p in today's terms). Just what I need, I thought ...

I got no further than the third paragraph of the introduction.

*The most characteristic device for the nominal and verbal flexion is what goes by the name of aspiration. This is simply a breathing represented by the letter **h**, which modifies the letter into a softer sound and sometimes smooths it away altogether. Thus **b** when aspirated becomes a **v**, the letter **s** when aspirated becomes obliterated altogether, and this obliteration is carried still further in the case of **f**, as in **fios**, where the addition of the **h** produces **fhios**, in which the **fh** is silent, leaving **ios**, pronounced eess. Until the student understands the application of Gaelic aspiration and inflexion, he cannot make use of any Gaelic vocabulary or dictionary.*

So, there you have it! Or, in my case, there you don't! I'm stuck with T S Elliot's "intolerable wrestle with words and meanings" of the English language before I get drawn into the verbal flexions and aspirations of Gaelic. More work to do on my "Gaelic for Beginners", I think ...

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare has Lorenzo say:

I pray thee understand a plain man in his plain meaning.

Language is hard enough to understand without using words that cause more confusion. In the written and spoken word, from politicians to preachers, in relationships and commerce, from instruction manuals to the introduction to *Gaelic for Beginners*, let's speak plainly and clearly. Let the meaning of our message be conveyed in accessible, plain speech. Let's be done with this "intolerable wrestle" – please!

A prayer for today

Within your Word I find words of meaning and purpose. That's just what I need! Amen

An original reflection by © Tom Gordon

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