

Nancy Currier Dorian, 1936–2024

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Professor Nancy Dorian, who made an immense contribution to Scottish Gaelic linguistics and the study of minority languages around the world, died on 24 April 2024 at the age of 88.

Born in New Jersey in 1936, Professor Dorian earned a bachelor's degree in German from Connecticut College for Women in 1958, followed by an MA in 1961 and PhD in 1965 from the University of Michigan. She served as Professor of German and Linguistics at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania between 1965 and 1989, and also held posts at the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Kiel. Her later years were spent at South Harpswell on the coast of Maine.

As part of her doctoral research, Professor Dorian came to Scotland in 1963 to work on the Gaelic Division of the Linguistic Survey of Scotland. She was assigned to collect data on the then little-known East Sutherland dialect, in the villages of Golspie, Brora and Embo. These villages had been developed in the early nineteenth century when the population of the cleared inland straths were put to work at fishing. Compared to the wider local population, Gaelic was maintained considerably longer among the fishing community, who were socially marginalised and stigmatised. Although language shift was well advanced by the 1960s, Professor Dorian was able to find over two hundred speakers of the local variety of Gaelic. She made the important decision to include in her research not only the most fluent speakers but also those with a lesser range of abilities, including those she called 'semi-speakers', as this allowed her to develop a rich view of the ways the language both changed and did not change through the generations.

Following on the publication of her linguistic description of the dialect in 1978, Professor Dorian's groundbreaking monograph *Language Death: The Life Cycle of a Scottish Gaelic Dialect* appeared in 1981. Her sensitive analysis of the social factors that had brought about the distinct sociolinguistic situation of Gaelic in East Sutherland and the dynamics of language use among different kinds of speakers was highly influential for the developing field of minority language sociolinguistics. She also published an oral history of the East Sutherland fishing community, *The Tyranny of Tide* (1985).

A striking finding in Professor Dorian's research was the extent of grammatical variation among different speakers of the East Sutherland dialect, variation that could not be connected to differences in age, fluency or other social criteria, as conventional sociolinguistic theory would anticipate. She discussed these issues in her important 2010 monograph *Investigating Variation*.

Over the decades she published numerous detailed analyses of a wide range of linguistic issues in East Sutherland Gaelic and other minority languages. Twenty-three of her most important articles and book chapters were collected in the 2014 volume *Small-Language Fates and Prospects*.

Ill-health prevented Professor Dorian from travelling to Scotland after 1978, so her later research on the East Sutherland dialect was mainly conducted using recordings and by means of telephone conversations with her contacts from the area. In 2015, however, she was able to travel to Scotland for the first time in almost forty years. She gave a plenary lecture at the International Congress of Celtic Studies in Glasgow and was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Glasgow.

Professor Dorian was deeply concerned with the maintenance and revitalisation of minority languages around the world. For many years she served as the editor of the 'Small languages and small communities' section of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*. In this capacity she played a crucial role in fostering the development of this emerging research field and encouraged scholars and activists in many different language communities. Her 1990 edited volume *Investigating*

Obsolescence was a particularly important contribution to the field of minority language sociolinguistics.

Professor Dorian recognised that successful language revitalisation might require flexibility, adaptation and change rather than steadfast adherence to tradition. She took up these issues in her final contribution to the field of Scottish Gaelic Studies, “Speaking Gaelic – cò tha dì-beathte?”, a plenary lecture (delivered remotely) to Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 9 at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig in 2016.

I had the great privilege of studying under Professor Dorian in 1983, when her inspiring course on Celtic Civilisation at Bryn Mawr was my first introduction to the field. She encouraged me to go to the University of Aberdeen to learn Gaelic, thus beginning my own study of the language. She remained very supportive and encouraging of my work, and we corresponded regularly for many years. Despite being away from Scotland for so long, she was always keen to stay abreast not only of new academic work in Gaelic sociolinguistics, but also of progress in official support for Gaelic, which encouraged her greatly.

References

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