

From Glendale to the Arizona desert... through the medium of Gaelic

By Katie Macleod

The historic, adobe-style Arizona Inn in the desert city of Tucson might seem an unexpected place for two island Gaels to meet, but then again 'unexpected' is a word that describes the career of University of Arizona researcher, Muriel Fisher, to a tee.

For eight years Muriel – from Feriniquarrie in Glendale – has been a Senior Research Scientist at the University of Arizona. She is part of the University's Critical Language Programme, aiding the Department of Linguistics in their research of Gaelic. It's one of 14 'less commonly taught' languages in their remit, alongside the likes of Kurdish and Swahili.

Dr Andrew Carmie, Professor of Linguistics and Dean of the Graduate College, says it all began as "a happy accident... We happened to have a number of faculty [members] interested in Celtic languages and Muriel lived in town. Having access to a native speaker consultant is a critical part of doing research on a language."

Interaction with the communities who speak the language is essential for successful linguistic work: this is why the faculty journey to Skye annually to conduct experiments and collect data, with Muriel acting as a liaison. "They have a bunch of experiments that I help them develop, and then I act as a liaison between the locals and the linguists."

"Linguists are like brain surgeons, they want to dissect it [the language],

and they write papers about various aspects of it. It's completely different to what we might think. It's mathematical... I love all the different bits of Gaelic that they teach me, things that I would never ever have known," says Muriel.

Andrew, who invited Muriel to join the department, explains that "Linguists are interested in how humans use, produce and understand language, as well as how we acquire it and how we pass it on to the next generation. Gaelic is a particularly interesting language. While it is genetically related to English and Spanish... it has many properties that make it very different in the spectrum of languages we look at. It has all sorts of rare properties."

Muriel and her colleagues are currently working on a project involving both the University of Arizona and the University of Nevada; they recently received a grant from National Science Foundation, allowing them to undertake necessary linguistic research into Gaelic on the Isle of Skye.

An official partnership is also in the works between the University of Arizona and Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, where Muriel has been teaching summer classes for more than 16 years. If all goes well, a student exchange will take place, with students from Skye studying in Arizona, and vice versa.

As if university classes and linguistic research weren't enough to keep her busy, Muriel wears yet another hat: she offers Gaelic lessons via Skype to students around the world. Her lessons (both on and offline) are not solely about Gaelic grammar, but Gaelic culture too. "We come from

a storytelling culture," she says. "So I also talk about where we grew up and our culture. You can't separate them. Out here in the desert I talk about the sheep and the peats!"

Over the years her Skype students have logged on from as far afield as Colorado, New York, Mexico, England, and France. "They move me to tears," says Muriel. "That's what gets your heart. What makes it possible is the people, because the people themselves, they're so interesting... because they've got this desire for the Gaelic."

Muriel has been recognised at the highest level by the Linguistic Society of America (LSA), receiving the 2015 Excellence in Community Linguistics Award. Muriel is only the second person to receive the award. The LSA honoured Muriel not only for her "outstanding work with the teaching, promotion, and documentation of Scottish Gaelic" which has helped people around the world learn Gaelic, but also for her contribution to linguistic research and documentation efforts.

Muriel first moved to the USA in 1972. Having worked as an artist in Tuscany and at the post office in Glendale, she found herself selling traditional Skye scones in Woodstock and even sheep herding with the Navajo in the Arizona desert.

But it was teaching English in Mexico that opened the door to her current career. "That boots-on-the-ground confidence... I think it helped me a lot," she says of her two years across the border. It was that experience that saw her start private Gaelic lessons in Tucson almost 20 years ago.

Muriel couldn't have done any of it, she says, without her family: her husband, Paul Fisher, and her two children, Alexandra and Jahil, who live in Los Angeles and New York City, respectively. Alexandra's son, Cole, is even taking informal Gaelic lessons from his Nana.

Through it all, Muriel retains her attachment to Skye. "My home is with my husband, because I love him... but also we go 'home' when we go home [to Skye]. You're connected to the land here, and you go back and recalibrate... You feel recharged, you seriously go back and charge your batteries."

Muriel will be returning again this summer to teach her regular Gaelic classes at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, as well as a new addition, one centred on 'The Island.' She says it will be much more hands on, with students going on trips to the likes of Raasay and Cana, engaging in situations where they will use the language they are learning.

"I'm very grateful to them," she says of Sabhal Mòr, and the opportunity the role affords her to return to the island. "I don't know what I would have done without them, because it's Skye, you know? I would still be grateful if it was on Uist or Harris or Lewis, but the fact that it's on Skye is just fabulous."

As we joke and laugh over gin martinis at the Arizona Inn, it's clear to see that Muriel doesn't take herself too seriously. She strives to make her Gaelic classes fun and enjoyable, and has a passion for the language and the people who are trying to keep the language of the island alive – even if it's in a desert on the other side of the world.



| Muriel Fisher with Katie Macleod