The Interview – Patrick Benn *(continued)*

My grandfather's parents spoke Gaelic as their first language, but they didn't speak it to any of their children, although the children did pick up quite a bit. Historically, as you recall, Gaelic was the common language of the Scots especially those that lived in the Highlands. It also especially found favor among the Clan chiefs. But over time, and I am talking centuries here, there was a steady shift, especially in the Lowlands, from Scottish Gaelic to what became known as Scots, a variation on the English language. Gaelic was usually associated with the rebellious instability of the Highland clans and also interestingly Catholicism. Knowledge of English became increasingly essential to the laborer who worked outside the Celtic culture of his village, especially during the late 18th and 19th centuries. It thus became less taught in the schools, being replaced by English. So during the 1860's and 70's, when my great grandparents grew up, they were made to feel that the Gaelic language was a hinderance to success and was looked down upon.

Another Scottish linguistic entanglement was on my grandmother's side. She was from the Northeast and thus was exposed to Doric dialect or the Northeast variation Scottish language. Most commonly one finds the Doric dialect in the region of Aberdeen. She never spoke it to us, although when I listen to people speaking Doric, I hear her accent.

Scottish culture and the mythical lore of Celtic history is often passed on, embedded in family stories, songs and poems. Even in today's complexity of social media and ease of communication, the spoken word carries more impact than that written. You have been studying Gaelic along with learning to play the Highland bagpipes. That, no doubt has opened many new perspectives on what it means to be a Scot. I would love to hear some experiences that has left a lasting impression on you!

I think the fact my mom was raised in a Scottish household made an unconscious impression on me, my values, sensibilities, sense of humor, etc.

The first time I went to Scotland in 2011, I felt very much at home. It was easy to talk to people. I was largely familiar with the culture. It's a hard thing to describe, but I was more in synch with people there, especially coming from California, where most people are from somewhere else. Another thing I found interesting was how familiar people looked to me. It must have worked both ways because walking around Inverness I was continually asked for directions!

I think Scotland is, and always has been, a much more diverse country than most Americans realize. Aside from the considerable differences between Gaelic, Scots, and English language and culture, there are regional differences, say, between the Highlands and the Borders, as well as local variations in custom and dialect even within regions.

Author Ian Rankin, speaking through his book *Standing in Another Man's Grave*, described the "many Scotlands" one would encounter just driving up the A9 from Inverness to Wick, in

Caithness. Today, immigrants from all over the Commonwealth, and indeed the world, continue to add richness to the culture of Scotland.

Recently, on a trip to the Highlands, I became aware of and fascinated by that part of the Highlands called the Black Isle. The MacKenzie's played somewhat of a varied and sullied role in the history of that region. Your maternal grandfather was from there. With your interest in genealogy, you must have some interesting stories to tell!

Yes, while my grandfather's father's family (MacIntosh) was from Glen Moriston (at least from about 1800), his mother's family (Finlaysons, Urquharts, and MacKenzies), have been in and around the Black Isle for millennia. Despite its name, the Black Isle is not an island but a peninsula in the northern Highlands in Ross and Cromarty counties. I don't think anyone knows why it is called 'Black'. Some say it is because the snow does not stay in winter and therefore the high point looks black while the surrounding country is white. By the by, the Black Isle had its own dialect of Northern Scots but that is not longer spoken.

Genealogy can be a lot of fun. It's like detective work. It can be a challenge in the Highlands where most people in an area have not only the same surname, but often the same first name! So there's a lot of cross checking (age, proximity to previous finds, etc,) to make sure your search takes you to the right person.

Finding not only who your ancestors were, but where they lived is another challenge, but this discovery can be very telling about the life they lived. We spent several days driving around to find the spots where some of my ancestors lived. One ended up just being a small part of a stone wall that remains in a remote wooded area. That was the site of Aonach, where my great-great-great grandfather was born in 1800. In the same area along the River Moriston, were other locations that my MacIntosh ancestors lived for 3 generations before my great-grandfather move up to the Black Isle.

The National Library of Scotland has an excellent online collection of historic maps (https://maps.nls.uk). Another good source for finding places that may not exist anymore is Streetmap (https://streetmap.co.uk/).

Most of my genealogical research has been done through Scotland's People (https://scotlandspeople.gov.uk), part of the National Records of Scotland, but a couple of visits to the Highland Archive Centre (*Tasglann na Gàidhealtachd*) (https://www.highlifehighland.com/highland-archive-centre) in Inverness was really helpful as well. There's also a lot of good information on Ancestry.com.

I'm glad that you took us on a bit of a jaunt through the multiple languages and dialects that are part of the present and past culture that is Scotland. Come to think of it, it is not dissimilar to the US where English dialects sometimes make communication difficult.
Do you have any last words to guide the Society as it formulates its vision for the future - a future that rests upon the shoulders of today's youth who must move forward, influenced by the burden of today's crises. Considered from the standpoint of history, these challenges are metaphorically not that much different than those of the evolutionary years of Scotland itself!

The current COVID-19 pandemic, while tragic on an epic scale, has forced us to interact with each other in new ways. Because of the need to isolate, we now find it commonplace to

communicate with people regardless of where they live, which has made for the inclusion of a much larger audience.

The challenge of the COVID pandemic has made us reliant on conferencing software, such as Zoom, and even more reliant on social media, which tends to skew to a younger audience. This gives us the opportunity to appeal to a younger, as well as a more geographically dispersed demographic. We have to make sure the Society is relevant to them. This makes perfect sense, as Scotland is a modern, diverse, and progressive nation.

The Society now has a presence on social media - Facebook, Instagram and a Webpage. We also publish our Newsletter, The Thistle, on the Internet. It also has regular Podcasts and occasional video conferencing sessions and Meet-ups. But of course, we have still much to learn with the use of the internet to keep our Society relevant.

Thank you Patrick for the informative and thought provoking interview. And thank you for your commitment and all that you do for SASLA