

# Teaching Resource

## FIONN MACCOOL AND THE SALMON OF KNOWLEDGE

### Introduction

This is the teaching resource for the book *Fionn MacCool and the Salmon of Knowledge* by Terri M. Roberts (Bradan Press, 2017). This resource document can also be downloaded for free at <https://www.bradanpress.com/fionn>. Click on the blue links throughout this document to visit the recommended websites for further information.

### Fionn Stories in Gaelic Culture

*Fionn MacCumhail* (Finn MacCool) is a mythical Gaelic hero. Stories of Fionn MacCool include Fionn's boyhood deeds, his life as a hero with his warrior band the Fiana, and tales of Fionn's son Oisín (Ossian) and his grandson Oscar.

Tales of Fionn MacCool have a special name in the study of Celtic mythology. They are called the "Fionn Cycle" or "Fenian Cycle" in English, the *fianaigeacht* in Irish, and the *Fiannaigheachd* in Scottish Gaelic. The Fionn Cycle is one of the four Gaelic mythological cycles of medieval Ireland. The other three are the Ulster Cycle (which includes tales of Cuchulainn), the Cycle of Historical Tales, and the Mythological Cycle.

Fionn stories were and still are popular in oral tradition across the Gaelic world: they are found in Ireland, Gaelic Scotland, the Isle of Man, and Nova Scotia. Gaels brought Fionn tales from Scotland to Nova Scotia approximately from the late 18th century through the mid-19th century, and continued to pass them in their families and communities through the oral tradition. Fionn tales were recorded up to 200 years later in the 1970s in Cape Breton by Dr. John Shaw and other folklorists. Although these tales were written down starting in the Middle Ages, they describe a much older, pre-Christian era in Gaelic culture, dating from the 5th century CE or earlier. Therefore, it is safe to say that Fionn tales have been a part of Gaelic culture for over 1600 years.

Several Fionn stories are preserved in Nova Scotia Gaelic oral tradition in the Gaelstream archive at St. Francis Xavier University: <http://gaelstream.stfx.ca/>. The recordings can be found by clicking on the "Cape Breton Gaelic Folklore Collection" square and then typing the word "Fionn" into the search box. Click on the link in each search result to hear the soundfile. For example, the first tale listed is "Fionn agus na Cathagan Coimheach" (Fionn and the Strange Adversaries). This recording is only in Gaelic, but the tale is presented in both Gaelic and English in the book *Tales until Dawn / Sgeul Gu Latha: The World of a Cape Breton Gaelic Story-Teller* by Joe Neil MacNeil, edited and translated by John Shaw (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987). The English-only edition of this book (with a red cover) is in print, but the bilingual edition (lavender cover) is out of print, and available in libraries.

## The Story of Fionn and the Salmon of Knowledge

The earliest known version of the story of Fionn and the Salmon of Knowledge was written in Middle Irish in the 12th century CE as part of "The Boyhood Deeds of Fionn MacCool." In 1453 this version was bound into a medieval manuscript, the MS Laud Misc 610 which is held in the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford. Here is a link to the digital archive version of the manuscript. This link opens at folio 118a2, the page where "The Boyhood Deeds of Fionn MacCool" starts, in the lower right corner with a black and red decorated Celtic-style letter "D." The red text reads "Macgnimartha finn inn so sis" (Here below is the boyhood deeds of Finn): <http://bit.ly/BoyhoodDeedsOfFionn>.

The Middle Irish text of the Macgnímartha Find (Boyhood Deeds of Fionn) has been transcribed and is available here: <https://celt.ucc.ie//published/G303023/index.html>. Click on "The text" at the left side of the screen. The tale of the Salmon of Knowledge is paragraph 18.

This and other manuscript versions were written down especially to be read aloud. This means that Fionn tales have been part of both Gaelic oral tradition and Gaelic literature for centuries. In folklore, different versions of this tale have been recorded in different places throughout Ireland and Scotland.

## Notes on the Book

The book itself contains an introduction, notes about the gestures before each version of the story, and an explanation of how the story relates to the Nova Scotia Gaelic flag.

A note on the character names: Both characters in the book are named Fionn. The original name of the character "Fionn the Poet" is Finn Éices in Irish. Éices is pronounced "ekis." In previous English versions of the tale, the name Finn Éices was written as "Finegas" which preserves the sound but not the original meaning of the name. We have translated the name into modern Scottish Gaelic as "Fionn am Bàrd," Fionn the Poet. But at the time the Fionn tales were first written down, *éices* meant much more than poet: an *éices* was a scholar, a seer, and a high-class category of poet (there were multiple classes or castes of poets in early Gaelic society). Here is the definition of *éices* (pronounced "ekis") in the Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language: <http://www.dil.ie/19717>

## Pronunciation of Gaelic Words

Bradán Press has created a video pronunciation guide for the Gaelic action words in *Fionn MacCool and the Salmon of Knowledge*: <https://youtu.be/PMDuwKYcbRY>

## Ogham Worksheet Resource

This worksheet introduces the ancient Ogham alphabet invented by the Gaels nearly 1700 years ago in Ireland. On the worksheet the alphabet is given in its original form with 20 letters. Five more letters were added in a manuscript from the middle ages, but these are more difficult to write and they were not used for the stone carvings which were the main function of this writing system. More information about Ogham is found in "Gaelic Nova Scotia: A Resource Guide for Teachers" (Province of Nova Scotia), and in "The Ogham Alphabet," <http://gaelic.co/ogham/>.

Students may notice that the alphabet has "only" 20 letters. This is different from the modern Gaelic alphabet and the modern English alphabet, both of which were adapted from Latin (also note that Gaels adapted the Latin alphabet for their language before English existed). The modern English

alphabet has 26 letters of course, while the modern Gaelic alphabet has 18 letters (it does not use j, k, q, v, w, x, y, z) and also uses 7 accented characters that are not found in English: à, è, é, ì, ò, ó and ù.

Ogham does not contain certain letters because writing systems are developed by speakers of a language to represent the sounds and/or concepts of their particular language. If a language doesn't use a sound, then speakers will not need to develop a way to write that sound. In the earliest form of Gaelic, there was no "p" sound, and a way to write that sound was not needed in Ogham, until several hundred years later when Gaelic borrowed some words with "p" from Latin.

Ogham can be used to write English as well as modern Irish, but there will always be certain letters missing, so in order to write an English word in Ogham, you usually have to compromise and decide which existing Ogham letters to use to represent the English sounds that are not represented in Ogham.

Suggestion: After students finish writing a word in Ogham, have them trade papers with a neighbour and try to read each other's words.

## Scottish Gaelic Words Worksheet Resource

This worksheet uses some of the Gaelic words from *Fionn MacCool and the Salmon of Knowledge* to illustrate 1) how Gaelic has influenced English, especially in Nova Scotia; and 2) the concept of "loanwords" or "borrowed words" in different languages. A discussion of other ways that Gaelic has influenced English is found in "How Gaelic is the English Language?": <http://gaelic.co/celtic-english/>.

In the left column of the worksheet is a list of Gaelic words. The first three are from the book, including Fionn's first and last name (names are a special kind of word, of course, but they are also frequently borrowed from one language into another). Many of the other Gaelic words in the list are fairly common, especially in Nova Scotia, although students may not be familiar with all of them. In the right column are the English words which were borrowed and adapted from the Gaelic originals.

Extra information about each Gaelic word is provided below. Each link opens up a webpage from the Scottish website [www.LearnGaelic.scot](http://www.LearnGaelic.scot) with a Gaelic dictionary definition of the word. Press the little triangle button on the dictionary entry webpage to hear a pronunciation soundfile.

### Fionn – Finn

A name meaning "white" or "bright." The English version sounds almost the same as the original Gaelic name, but the Gaelic meaning is lost when it's borrowed into English. Ask students: Do you know anyone named Finn? It's still a fairly popular boy's name in Canada and the U.S.A. Pronunciation: <http://bit.ly/fionn-pronunciation>

### MacCumhail – MacCool

A name meaning "son of Cumall." To English ears it sounds like "cool" and the original Gaelic meaning is not recognized. Ask students: how many people know someone with a "Mac" name? Can you think of someone famous with a "Mac" name? How many "Mac" names can you think of? Mac means "son of" in Gaelic. For example, MacDonald means Son of Donald (and is written *Mac Dhòmhnail* in Gaelic). MacNeil means Son of Neil (*Mac Nèill*). The name does not usually mean that someone is literally the son of Donald; it means that a person (and a whole family) is descended from an ancestor of that name. In Gaelic, women use a different form of the last name, with "Nic" (daughter of) instead of

“Mac” (son of). So for example, a woman named “MacDonald” in English would have the name “Nic Dhòmhnail” (daughter of Donald) instead of “MacDhòmhnail” in Gaelic. When “Mac” names were adapted into English, the female forms were not maintained, and the original Gaelic meanings of the names were often forgotten. “Ó” surnames in Irish have the same meaning as “Mac” names in Scottish Gaelic (e.g. Ó Briain = Son of Brian, anglicized as O’Brian). The female form of the last name in Irish is “Ní” meaning “daughter of.”

### **bàrd – bard**

Students can be asked for their own definition. High school students can be reminded that Shakespeare is sometimes called “The Bard” in English. In Gaelic, several hundred years ago *bàrd* meant a lesser grade of poet (there were many grades or classes of poets in ancient Gaelic society). In modern Gaelic it simply means “poet.” Pronunciation: <http://bit.ly/bard-pronunciation>

### **brèagha – Breagha, Bhreagh, Bria**

In Gaelic *brèagha* means good-looking, lovely, nice, or pretty. In English it has been borrowed as a female name. Some Nova Scotian students will know the original Gaelic meaning, especially girls who have the name, but many people do not know it. Pronunciation: <http://bit.ly/breagha-pronunciation>

### **càrn – cairn**

A cairn is a pile of stones built as a memorial or landmark, usually on a hilltop or skyline. It is a culturally Gaelic monument that is similar in some ways to an inukshuk (a Canadian English word borrowed from the Inuktitut language). Pronunciation: <http://bit.ly/carn-pronunciation>

### **céilidh – ceilidh, Kayleigh, Kaylee**

If your students have the cultural knowledge, then ask them: what does this word mean? Many Nova Scotian students can probably offer a definition. A ceilidh is a social event where there is Scottish or Irish folk music, singing, traditional dancing, and storytelling. In Gaelic, it can also just mean a visit to someone’s home. The word is also used by English speakers nowadays as a girls’ name with alternative English spellings. Pronunciation: <http://bit.ly/ceilidh-pronunciation>

### **gu leòr – galore**

In Gaelic this means enough, sufficient, or in abundance. In English, it was borrowed to mean “in abundance.” Pronunciation: <http://bit.ly/guleor-pronunciation>

### **loch – loch**

Loch is the Gaelic word for lake. Pronunciation: <http://bit.ly/loch-pronunciation>

### **Srath Spè – strathspey**

*Srath* means “valley.” *Srath Spè* is the valley of the river Spey in Scotland, an area called Speyside in English and famous for its whiskey distilleries. This region also gave its name to the traditional Gaelic tune type and dance, the strathspey, which is found in Highland dancing, Cape Breton square dancing, and stepdancing. The strathspey rhythm has a characteristic “snap.” Pronunciation: <http://bit.ly/srathspe-pronunciation>

**uisge beatha – whiskey:** *Uisge beatha* literally means “water of life.” Pronunciation: <http://bit.ly/uisgebeatha-pronunciation>

# The Ogham Alphabet

┆	B	┆	H	┆	M	┆	A
┆┆	L	┆┆	D	┆┆	G	┆┆	O
┆┆┆	F	┆┆┆	T	┆┆┆	NG	┆┆┆	U
┆┆┆┆	S	┆┆┆┆	C	┆┆┆┆	Z	┆┆┆┆	E
┆┆┆┆┆	N	┆┆┆┆┆	Q	┆┆┆┆┆	R	┆┆┆┆┆	I

Ogham is a writing system invented by the Gaels in the 4th century CE. It was used to write the oldest form of the Gaelic language.

Ogham was not used for everyday writing. It was used in special carvings on standing stones, probably for boundary markers or memorials.

Pick a Gaelic word from *Fionn MacCool and the Salmon of Knowledge* to write in the Ogham alphabet.

Gaelic words in *Fionn MacCool*:

**ABHAINN** (river)

**BRADAN** (salmon)

**GLIC** (wise)

**NAOI** (nine)

**NORRAG** (nap)

**TEINE** (fire)

Example: **FIONN**

┆┆┆ F  
 ┆┆┆┆ I  
 ┆┆ O  
 ┆┆┆┆ N  
 ┆┆┆┆ N

Write your word in Ogham here:

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# SCOTTISH GAELIC WORDS

English has “borrowed” some of its words from Gaelic.  
How many do you recognize?

Scottish Gaelic word (original)	English word (borrowed)
Fionn	Finn
MacCumhail	MacCool
bàrd	bard
brèagha	Breagha, Bhreagh, Bria
càrn	cairn
céilidh	ceilidh, Kayleigh, Kaylee
gu leòr	galore
loch	loch
Srath Spè	strathspey
uisge beatha	whiskey

# the GAELIC FLAG OF NOVA SCOTIA

