

DAILY EXPRESS, Friday August 25, 1911, p. 1, col. 7

MIRACLES OF A WORD HUNTER - STUPENDOUS WORK OF A DICTIONARY MAKER LIFE WORK ROMANCE

A task worthy to be ranked among the great records of industry was described to an 'Express' representative yesterday by Mr Ewen MacDonald, who, practically unaided, has compiled, written out, set up in type, cast in stereotype, printed and published the most complete Gaelic dictionary ever produced.

It seems an inhuman task yet, conversing with an "Express" representative at his Herne Bay residence yesterday, Mr MacDonald showed himself to be a plain human man, gifted, however, with a quenchless enthusiasm, tenacity beyond belief, and a very greed of unremitting toil.

A tour de force which lasts for the best part of a man's lifetime must be followed by some reaction when it is accomplished; the more so since Mr. MacDonald's resources were strained to the very uttermost to get the work finished. "If my wife had not been economical", he said, "I could never have done anything. She kept down expenses, and got people to subscribe, besides translating words for me. "And now that it is over, I feel that I should like to sleep for a year.

For the last three months I have worked from four in the morning till eight at night. In March, it used to worry me that it did not get light soon enough. Throughout the nine years which it has taken to print, I have worked thirteen hours a day, and the only holidays I have taken have amounted to three weeks and three days."

Only by continual questionings were these admissions drawn from Mr MacDonald and though they may appear egotistical in print, when spoken they were infused with modesty.

REAL NAME

"I am not a Scot," he continued, "and my name is not MacDonald. It is Dwelly, and the Dwelly's have been settled in Somerset, in the same spot, between Taunton and Yeovil, certainly since 1150. "My great-grandfather was a quartermaster in the Coldstream Guards, and served forty years with the colours. He fought in all the big battles of the Peninsular War, at Alexandria, in the Copenhagen expedition, and at Quatre-Bras; and he would have fought at Waterloo had he not been guarding the plate-chest. "He went to Glamorgan for his wife, as four generations of our family had done before him - it was a sort of family tradition. My grandfather thought it was a custom to be kept up, and he did the same, so the blood is almost all Welsh.

"I had a fancy for Gaelic, and began to learn it at school. I have been collecting words ever since I can remember. I also had a fancy for the bagpipes, and I thought that the pipes and the Gaelic seem to go together My father got me into Cox's Bank when I was seventeen, and while there I joined the London Scottish, and so got to my piping. "In ten years I had saved what I thought was enough, and gave up the bank, and went to Scotland. They thought I was mad to give up a good income for the pipes and the Gaelic.

"I joined the 5th Argyll Highlanders as piper but I wanted to be a pipe-major, and old Ronald MacKenzie - he is now piper to the Duke of Buccleuch, I think, - undertook to arrange that for me.

"You're a good piper, Dwelly" he said, 'but you'll not get on without a Scotch name. You'll be Ewen MacDonald; that's a good Scots; name for you, and I'll give you a note, Ewen, to the pipe-major of the 1st Ross.

DOMESTIC GAELIC

"They took me, and I went to Ross-shire, and soon spoke Gaelic like a native. My wife is from Argyll, and speaks Gaelic better than she speaks English. We generally speak it at home, and just now I find some difficulty in speaking English to you myself.

"The 'Faclair Gaidhlig', or Gaelic Wordbook, contains about two million words - every Gaelic word I could get, not more than two or three thousand are omitted. "MacLeod and Dewer's dictionary formed the groundwork; then I went through half a dozen other dictionaries word by word. To these were added quite 100,000 words by sixteen gentlemen in various parts of Scotland who were good enough to read the sheets for me. "Thus I probably have 20,000 words which have never been printed at all, and 10,000 which have never been used in literature. "For instance, there are fifteen or sixteen separate words used to denote the various identification marks on sheep's ears; these names are known to very few, and they have never before been printed. The words descriptive of boats and their parts tackle fill seven pages. By the way, in Gaelic the word for boat is masculine or feminine according to whether the boat is on the water or on land, "Numbers of words are of different gender in different parts of the country. Everything in Gaelic is masculine or feminine.

"Fifteen years ago I started to make a fair copy of my manuscript, and it took me six years to get to the letter C. There were 120,000 slips to put in alphabetical order. "I never thought of printing it myself when I began writing the dictionary, but when I took it to the publishers they shook their heads, and asked who would ever buy it. However we had about 600 subscribers. "I bought type and learned to set it up, and I set every letter of the book from beginning to end. The two million words are contained in 1,038 pages, printed in double column, seventy-six lines to a page, and thirty letters in each line.

"I bought a Cropper printing machine, and as soon as ten or twelve pages were set up I printed off copies and posted them to my fifteen correspondents. In about three weeks they would come back, and I collated the additions and corrections, and made the alterations in my type.

"The first 320 pages I sent to Maidstone to be cast in stereo. We lived at Lyminge then, on a hill 620 feet above the sea, and I wheeled the formes in a wheelbarrow down to the station a mile and a half away. When they came back from Maidstone I wheeled formes and plates, weighing about a hundredweight and a half, up the hill again. 'Three times we had to take them to the station in a sledge, when the snow was on the ground.' "Then I bought a stereo plant and taught myself to use it, and the last 700 pages were cast at home.

"At the 900th page I got very sick of it, and felt I could not go on: it affects the nerves to see the sun shining and the birds about, and you shut up indoors. But we got over that.

"The book came out in thirty-three parts of thirty-two pages each, issued to subscribers at 6 1/2d. The first appeared nine years ago, in 1902. The three volumes, now completed, will be sold at two guineas. They represent twenty years hard work. "I feel now that I have had enough of Gaelic for a time, and I am going to work on pedigrees, in which I have always been interested.

"We are moving from Herne Bay to Fleet in Hampshire, and I shall presently start on the monumental inscriptions on the tombstones of Somerset and Devon."

The Inside page of the book:

The Illustrated Gaelic- English Dictionary

Containing every Gaelic word and meaning given in all previously published dictionaries, and great number never seen in print before

To which is prefixed a CONCISE GAELIC GRAMMAR.

675 Illustrations

Compiled by

Edward Dwelly, F.S.A. (Scot), F.S.G.

Hon. Life Member of the Gaelic Society of London.

Hon. Life Member of An Comunn Gaidhhealach.

Edward Dwelly lived at Ardmor (now St Georges) 31, Mill Lane, Herne, Kent