

THE SPELLING OF SCOTS

In the courtly poems of the Makars of the 15th and 16th centuries, when Scots was seen as adequate for nearly every purpose of life, the rather loose system of spelling used was superior phonetically to the practices of later writers, who had to be content with a state of affairs where Scots had been socially downgraded for political and economic reasons.

The literary Scots of the medieval *Makkars* was in the process of evolving into a language in its own right, in several respects, distinct from southern English, with its own idioms and orthographic and grammatical standards. A distinction was commonly made between present participles ending in *-an*, or *-and*, and verbal nouns ending in *-in*, such as *biggin* and *flittin*. Writing in Scots was characterised by the use of *quh-* for *wh-*, *sch* for *sh-* and *s-*, and a number of spellings of key words, which were later brought into conformity with English spelling practice. For example, the following were in common use: *ar* (are), *byd(e)*, *dyn(e)*, *tym(e)*, *wyf(e)* (bide, dine, time, wife), *cum*, *sum* (come, some), *eftir* (after), *evin* (even), *evir* (ever), *heir*, *neir* (here, near), *hir* (her), *speik* (speak), *thai*, *thay* (they), *thaim* (them), *thair* (their) and *yit* (yet). Several of these features are present in the following passage from John Bellenden's translation of 1536, of Hector Boece's 'The Chronicles of Scotland'.

The samyne tyme happynnit ane wounderfull thing. Quhen Makbeth and Banquho war passand to Fores, quhair King Duncan wes for the tyme, thai mett be the gaitt thre weird sisteris or wiches, quhilk cam to thame with elrege clething. The first o thame sayid to Makbeth; "Hayill, Thayne of Glammys!" The saicund sayid: "Hayill Thayn of Cawdor!" The thrid sayid: "Haill Makbeth, that sallbe sum tyme King of Scotland."

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, in the time of Allan Ramsay, Scots was beginning to be regarded in influential quarters as a rustic dialect of English rather than a national form of speech which had been independently derived from a remote common ancestor, and Ramsay employed a system of spelling which reflected this parochial attitude of mind.

There were no satisfactory models of written Scots, so instead of basing his system on the relevant but out-of-date, practices of the *Makkars*, Ramsay turned to English, and embarked on large-scale anglicisation of Scots spelling (Robinson, 1973). Traditional Scots spellings of many key words were abandoned and Ramsay also introduced apostrophes into Scots words with similar English equivalents, giving the impression that they were really careless versions of their English counterparts.

Successors of Allan Ramsay, such as Fergusson, Burns, Scott and Galt, tended to follow his spelling ideas, and the general trend throughout the 18th and 19th centuries was to adopt further spelling practices from English, since this was the only accessible standard.

By the end of the 19th century, Scots orthography was in a state of confusion as a result of hundreds of years of piecemeal borrowing from English practice, and it had long been impossible for anyone to write in Scots without using a host of spelling

forms adopted from English. The language had come to be regarded as a parochial form of speech, at one and the same time associated with a stultifying social order and the deepest feelings, of those exposed to it in infancy. The spelling of Scots employed by the *Kailyaird* writers in the second half of the nineteenth century reflected these attitudes.

A completely phonetic system of spelling Scots was devised by Sir James Wilson at the beginning of the 20th century (Grant & Dixon, 1921), and the following stanza from *Caller Herrin* gives an impression of the appearance of Scots written on this basis.

*Neebur weifs, noo tent ma tellin.
Hwun dhu boanay fush yee'r sellin,
At ay wurd bee in yur dailin—
Truth ull stawnd hwun awthing'z failin.*

Although this system was valuable for recording details of pronunciation, the outlandish appearance of Scots written on this basis, ruled it out for general purposes. If the familiar appearance of written Scots was to be preserved, a largely phonetic system was required which would continue to employ spelling precedents for most of the vowel sounds.

Following a spate of Lallans poetry in the thirties and forties, a significant step was taken at a meeting chaired by A. D. Mackie of the *Makkars' Club* in Edinburgh in 1947, when the 'Scots Style Sheet' was approved (APPENDIX I). This consisted of a number of recommendations designed to standardise some Scots spellings and many of these ideas were adopted by Lallans poets. J. K. Annand, Douglas Young, Robert Garioch, A.D. Mackie, Alexander Scott, Tom Scott and Sydney Goodsir Smith all followed the recommendations in the Style Sheet to some extent.

These proposals closely followed the ideas of Douglas Young and A. D. Mackie, and although they were very limited in their scope, as a result of their influence, modern Scots poetry looks much less like a careless version of English, plagued by a swarm of parochial apostrophes. Nevertheless, much greater consistency in the spelling of Scots was still required, and it was necessary to carry this development a stage further.

Since the proposals in the Style Sheet amounted to little more than a single page of print, and no guidance was given on how to represent the vowel in words such as *ben*, *ken*, *gled*, *sned* and *redd*, they were hardly adequate for spelling a language. Further proposals for the rationalisation of Scots orthography were published by the author in 1979 and in 1985, the Scots Language Society (SLS) published a set of guidelines entitled, 'Recommendations for Writers in Scots' (LALLANS 24, 1985). These Recommendations were republished as a separate document by the SLS in 1994. They represent a consensus view of writers employing Scots at this time (1985), following several years of debate and consultation, involving Alexander Scott, David Murison, Jack Aitken, and Alastair Mackie, among others with a professional interest in the problems of Scots orthography. The published document (APPENDIX II) was essentially a developed version of the 1947 Scots Style Sheet, based on traditional spelling precedents. In this way, the familiar appearance of literary Scots can be

preserved. The publication of the Concise Scots Dictionary (MacLeod and Cairns, 1993) represented a further move towards standardising Scots orthography in some areas.

Although the SLS Recommendations amount to a fairly radical set of proposals for reforming the spelling of Scots, the language still preserved its familiar appearance when written in conformity with these proposals. Hugh MacDiarmid is on record (LALLANS 50, 1997) as being in favor of reform of Scots orthography, and the reproduction of his own writing on the basis of a reformed spelling system. The following version of *Crowdieknowe* provides an impression of what literary Scots looks like when written in this way.

*O ti be at Crowdieknowe
Whan the lest trumpet blaws,
An see the deid cum lowpin ower
The auld gray waws.*

*Mukkil men wi tousilt baerds,
Ah grat at as a bairn
'l skrammil frae the croudit cley
Wi fek o sweirin.*

*An glower at God an aw his gang
O angels i the lift
---thae trashie bleizin French-lyke fowk
Wha gar'd thaim shift!*

*Fain the weimen-fowk'l seek
Ti mak thaim haud thair rowe
---Fegs, God's no blate gin he steirs up
The men o Crowdieknowe!*

Despite the popularity of the fallacy that MacDiarmid wrote in an artificial language described as 'Synthetic Scots', the language here is entirely natural.

The system of spelling Scots used in this book conforms to most of the SLS Recommendations. On the basis of this system, it is possible to deduce the pronunciation of nearly every specifically Scots word from its spelling. With few exceptions, each vowel or digraph represents one sound in Scots. The diphthong in words like *time* and *wife*, which is characteristically different in Scots, is represented by 'y', to give *wyfe* and *tyme*, as in Middle Scots usage. The troublesome 'ea' digraph, which has come to represent three different sounds in English (in *break*, *feather*, and *speak*) is largely replaced by 'ae', 'ai', or 'ei', as appropriate, and the 'ee', and 'oo' digraphs borrowed from English, are largely replaced by traditional 'ei' and 'ou', respectively. However, in this particular text, the 'oo' digraph is sometimes retained in place of 'ou' in a few words, such as *oot*, *aboot*, *oor* and *soond*, to avoid confusion with English pronunciation. This confusion will not longer arise with words like *out* if the Scots language ever assumes its proper place in Scottish education as a linguistic system distinct from English, with its own idioms, grammar, syntax and orthography.

The 'ui' digraph, wherever it occurs, represents the modified 'o' sound, as in *guid, ruif, huik, fuil, luim, muin, stuipit, puir* and *buit*. A list of over 2500 commonly-used Scots words spelt on the basis of the SLS Recommendations is given in Appendix III.

Among the plethora of existing Scots-English dictionaries, more than one option is found for spelling most words, and as many as four or five options can be found for some words. The Concise English-Scots Dictionary, the first dictionary of its kind, was published in 1993 (Macleod and Cairns). This dictionary is unusual in that only one, or, at the most, two spellings are given for each Scots word. Although the publication of this dictionary is unlikely to end controversy over the spellings of particular words, it should have a useful effect in reducing the number of spelling options currently used by writers. This dictionary also includes a number of positive general proposals for the reform of Scots spelling. Some of these, such as the specific proposal to drop unnecessary apostrophes (for example, *awa'* for *awa*) underwrite suggestions already made in the Scots Style Sheet (1947) and in the SLS Recommendations for Writers in Scots (1985).

Probably more than 50 per cent of the lexis of Scots consists of words used in common with English. Unfortunately, the spelling of such words reflects the chaotic state of English orthography, and often conflicts with the principles on which the spelling of specifically Scots words is based. Some evidently English words commonly appearing in the context of written Scots (such as *ability, idiot, blind, find, mind, time, wife, double, finger, hunger, younger, pear, tear, single* and *stir*), have a different pronunciation from English, and in any reformed system of spelling Scots, it is important that the spellings of such words should reflect the difference. On the basis of a satisfactory reformed system, these words could be spelt: *Abeilitie, eidiot, blinnd, finnd, mynd, tyme, wyfe, doubil, fingir, hungir, yungir, peir, teir, singil* and *steir*. It is no accident that some of these spellings occur in Middle Scots, when Scots was seen as a language in its own right rather than as a corrupt kind of English.

As a result of the vagaries of English spelling, *clerk, derby, cloud, loud, our, flour, pour, about, out, stout, ration, fruit, suit* and *vase*, already indicate the pronunciation in Scots of these words on the basis of the Scots spelling system. Readers unfamiliar with spoken Scots are therefore liable to be misled about their pronunciation and assume that these words are pronounced as in English, when they appear in the context of a Scots text.

Where there are no traditional precedents, there seems no good reason for altering the spellings of words used in common with English, if the English spelling leaves no doubt about pronunciation, even if another spelling would conform better to the Scots system. For example, words such as, *crew, deep* and *sleep, see* and *wee, field, here, scene, direct, boat, lout* and *croon*, (meaning 'sing') are probably best left alone.

It is sometimes asserted that Scots includes English, and on this basis, it might be argued that any rational reform of Scots orthography would necessarily involve altering the spellings of any English words shared in the context of written Scots. This does not appear to be a practicable proposition, and even if it were, it would certainly produce a written kind of Scots which would have an odd appearance and be out of kilter with the substantial body of literature which already exists in Scots. At

present, most writers employing Scots are largely concerned with rationalising and systematising the spellings of the specifically Scots words which qualify to be listed in Scots dictionaries.

In spoken Scots, or in Scots-English where the vowel system has been directly derived from Scots, the pronunciation of the letter 'i' is generally different from in English, for example in sentences like, *Wul Ah pit oot the licht, Miss?* However, since this feature extends into the large proportion of English words employed in common with English, no attempt has been made by writers to represent this difference in spelling in writing Scots.

There seems no prospect of early publication of a Scots dictionary which will include all the words used in common with English in literary Scots. The word, *for*, is in this category, and at present, it properly belongs in English dictionaries. The vowel here is unstressed and vitually undifferentiated, and there is, therefore, no justification for representing it as *fer*, *fir* or *fur*, words in which a different vowel is specifically represented. The same applies to representing *the* as *thi*.

If the spelling of a word cognate with English, is irregular and there is a traditional precedent for a better Scots spelling, there is a case for using this. For example, *hir* for *her*, *thai* (or *thay*) for *they*, *thair* for *their*, *thare* for *there*, *thaim* for *them*, *ir* for *are*, *im* for *am*, *wes* for *was*, *wad* for *would*, *war* for *were*, *sal* for *shall*, *wul* for *will*, *littil* for *little*, *cum* and *sum*, for *come* and *some*, are rational spellings used by the Medieval *Makkars*, which might now be usefully reintroduced to the Scots lexis.

In practice, some writers, in accordance with the traditional Scottish tendency for *ilkane ti gang aye his ain gait*, appear to invent their own a spelling systems off the cuff and introduce additional options with bizarre consequences. For instance, it is not uncommon for writers to use the spelling, *oan*, to indicate a difference in pronunciation from English, *on*. On this basis, *or* might be spelt *oar*, and *clock* as *cloak*. The word, *land*, is sometimes spelt *laund* for similar reasons, and on analogy with such spellings, we might feel obliged to use *Scoatlaund* (or even *Skoatlaund*) for Scotland. It seems generally unwise to try to alter the traditional orthography of Scots to such an extent that unfamiliar forms like this are the logical result.

Since any written language is a communal system of communication, rather than a collection of different systems based on the personal whims of writers, the present chaotic state of affairs undermines the status of Scots as a language. The reform and standardisation of Scots orthography is therefore now an urgent necessity. The Scots language cannot be effectively taught, either at school or university level, until this has been accomplished. However, this is a process which is well under way.

The 1985 SLS Recommendations dealt with most of the orthographic problems for writers in Scots, but one problem which was not addressed, was how to represent the Scots soft 'g' in a number of words. On the face of it, we might think the spelling of a word like *young* should be left alone in a Scots context. The pronunciation is very nearly the same in Scots and English, but in the comparative, *younger*, the 'g' is different in English. A convenient way of representing the Scots pronunciation would be to use the spelling, *youngir*, so we might as well eliminate the irregularity in the representation of the vowels and use *yung*, *yungir*, and be done with it. This would fit

in with spellings like *hungir*, and *fingir*, and *tung* then becomes justified by analogy. The spelling, *langir*, then becomes necessary to indicate the Scots ‘g’, and ‘*strangir*’ to avoid confusion with the English word for an *outlin*. There is no phonetic problem with *singer*, but *singil*, in accord with *ingil*, *pingil*, etc., is needed for *single*, with its hard ‘g’ in English

Another problem which requires attention concerns the spelling of words cognate with English words ending with –serve, for example, conserve, deserve, reserve, preserve, etc. Where the final syllable is stressed, it is convenient, on analogy with *ferr* (far), to spell such words as, *serr*, *conserr*, *deserr*, *reserr*, etc. For example, *It serrs hir richt! Bessie deserrs aw she gits!*

In general, the publication of the 1947 Scots Style Sheet, and Recommendations for Writers in Scots in 1985, have had a useful effect in eliminating some variations and irregularities in the spelling of Scots. However, the proposals in the Style Sheet to use spellings like *aa*, *baa*, *caa*, *faa*, etc. for words sometimes represented with apostrophes, as, *a’*, *ba’*, *ca’*, *fa’*, etc, was due to an error of judgment. In such spellings, the second ‘-a’ is essentially a disguised parochial apostrophe. The spellings, *aw*, *baw*, *caw*, *faw*, etc, were already recorded in 1947 in Scot dictionaries, and it was pointed out by A J Aitken during discussions prior to the publication of the SLS Recommendations, that there was no logical reason for making the spellings of these words inconsistent with words like *blaw*, *braw*, *craw*, *raw* and *snaw*. This practice could lead to the use of absurd spellings like *snawbaa*. It simply had the effect of introducing an unnecessary digraph into Scots spelling practice, and it was therefore abandoned. However, the ‘aa’ digraph could serve a useful function by employing it to represent the more open vowel in north-east Scots, where *snawbaw* could be represented as *snaabaa*, and *whaur* as *faar*.

In 1947, at the time The Scots Style Sheet (APPENDIX I) was written, there were as many as five popular options for representing the vowel sound in *heid* (e, ee, ei, ie, i). These have now been effectively reduced to three (ee, ei, ie) and other unnecessary spelling practices, such as the representation of the modified ‘o’ sound in *muin* and *shuin* by ‘u(consonant)e’, have practically disappeared. The use of ‘u(consonant)e’ is now largely restricted to represent the different vowel sound (‘ou’) in a few words like, *dule*, *smule*, *bure*, *hure*, *smure*, *ture*, *wure*, *snuve*, etc. This is consistent with English practice, for words such as, *rule*, *rude*, *crude*, *brute*, *lute*, etc.

In *Mak it New* (MacCallum and Purves, 1995), an anthology of twenty-one years of writing in the LALLANS magazine, which includes contributions by sixty-two authors, apostrophes are no longer used to represent ‘missing’ letters which would have been present if a related English word had been used. There is also significant replacement of the parochial ‘ee’ and ‘oo’ digraphs borrowed from English, by the native ‘ei’ and ‘ou’ combinations respectively.

It will probably never be practicable to achieve a recognised Scots orthography where every vowel sound in Scots words will be represented by a single letter or digraph. The 'ui' digraph occurs in many Scots words and this presents a difficulty, since it now represents a phoneme, a group of related vowel sounds which vary with the consonant which follows. For example, the sound in *fuir* is not quite the same as in *buir* and the sound in *puir* and *shuir* is different from that in *abuin*, *muin* and *spuin*.

It is, nevertheless, convenient to employ 'ui' to represent this group of etymologically related vowel sounds. In north-east Scots, where earlier modification of the original 'o' vowel led to a significantly different result, it is necessary to use a different digraph (ee) to represent the sound, as in, *skweel* (*skuil*), *teem* (*tuim*), *abeen* (*abuin*), *peer* (*puir*), *beets* (*buits*).

However, with this exception, we now seem to be moving towards a sensible position where, for serious writers in Scots, each vowel or digraph will represent only one sound, and only one spelling will be commonly used for each specifically Scots word. Ideally, this spelling will give a useful indication of the pronunciation for every specifically Scots word in the context of written Scots.