

## THE WAY FORWARD FOR THE SCOTS LANGUAGE

### WHAT SCOTS IS

Unlike Gaelic, Scots is closely related to English and it is now often asked: What is Scots? 'Is it a language or a dialect of English? Is it swearing?' Certainly, in some quarters, Scots has a bad image associated with social deprivation; that of a drunk staggering about the street and asking every passing male: '*Ir ye awricht, Jimmie?*' Despite the close relationship with English, sentences written in Scots sometimes look very different and perhaps incomprehensible to an English person.. For example: *ilkane gangs aye his ain gait* or *Monie a pikkil maks a mukkil*.

It is difficult to answer the question, 'Is Scots a language?' because whether any mode of speech is regarded as a language or as a patois, depends on the status we accord it. If we see it as the speech of a country, then Scots becomes a language, or what is left of a language. If we see Scotland as an aberrant part of England, then Scots becomes a deviant form of English—a patois. It has often been suggested that a language is essentially a particular dialect which has an army and a navy to support it.

What Scots is, is essentially a political question. For example, in the sixteenth century, Portugal and Spain were politically united and if they had stayed united, Portuguese would probably have remained another Iberian dialect, rather than developed as a language in its own right. Similarly, Dutch is now seen as a distinct national language rather than a form of Low German, because of the fact of Dutch independence. On the German side of the Dutch Border, where the language may be linguistically Dutch and practically indistinguishable from that spoken on the Dutch side, then Low German it becomes. The future of the Scots language certainly depends on the political future of Scotland.

The term 'Scots' is at present a generic term which covers every aspect of the language: the language of the medieval makkars and the Scottish Court; the literary Scots which developed after about 1707; and all the surviving dialects, such as the speech of Buchan, the Borders, Caithness and Shetland. Contemporary colloquial Scots, now differentially eroded under the influence of English, is what is left to us of what was the State Language of Scotland before the Union of the Crowns in 1603.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This language, Scots, is descended from the form of Anglo-Saxon spoken in Lothian and Berwickshire, which originally formed part of the ancient kingdom of Northumbria. This area became a permanent part of Scotland after the Battle of Carham in 1018 and its language eventually replaced Gaelic, the ancient language of the Scots Kingdom, as the language of the Scots Court. However, as late as the fourteenth century, this language was still known as *Inglis* and seems to have been very similar on opposite sides of the Border. In the following centuries, it developed along very different lines. On the Scottish side, the language began to evolve into the language of an independent kingdom. On the Northumberland side, it came to be regarded as a northern English dialect, where eventually, words which had been in

common use on either side of the border, such as *bairn*, *doun*, *oot*, *faither*, *gang* and *heid*, came to be seen as Scotticisms.

Scots, as it survives today, has many Norse features, such as *houss* for house, *kirk* for church, *skraich* for screech, *ilk* for each, *streik* for stretch; words borrowed from French such as *ashet*, *aumrie*, *cundie*, *douce*, *dour* and *tassie* and a number of Flemish influences through words such as *loun*, *pinkie* and *scone*; in addition to Gaelic words such as *bourachie*, *brae*, *glen*, *ingil*, *keelie*, *loch*, *thrang* and *winnok*. Many other words borrowed into Scots from various European sources have been quoted by Murison (1977).

### **Scots - The State Language**

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Scots was certainly the State language. It was the principal language used at the Court. State records were kept in Scots and it was spoken by everyone in Scotland who did not speak Gaelic. Scots had a body of literature of European standing, represented by the works of Robert Henryson, William Dunbar and Gavin Douglas. At this time, Scots was generally seen as adequate for every purpose of life. Gaelic the ancient language of the Scots kingdom, was not held in high regard in the lowlands and had become known as 'Erse'.

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, during the reign of James VI, there were a number of Court poets such as Alexander Scott (1525-84), Alexander Montgomerie (1545-1611) and Mark Alexander Boyd (1563-1601), and the following stanzas from a poem by Montgomerie exemplify the Court language they used:

*The Nicht is Neir Gone*

*Hay! now the day dawis;  
The jolly cock crawis;  
Now shroudis the shawis  
    Throw nature anon.  
The thissel-cock cryis  
On lovers wha lyis:  
Now skaillis the skyis;  
    The nicht is neir gone.*

*The fieldis owerflowis  
With gowans that growis,  
Quhair lilies like lowe is,  
    As red as the rone.  
The turtle that true is,  
With notes that renewis  
Her pairtie pursuis:  
    The nicht is neir gone.*

This poem exemplifies the Scots practice of using what appears to be the singular form of verbs with plural nouns, as in: *Auld men dees an bairns suin forgets!* and *The kye cums hame*. This feature is still found in contemporary Scots speech, for example, in such sentences as: *The weeds cums throu the fence aye*, and *The nichts is*

*fairlie drawin in*. This was the subject of a paper presented by Michael Montgomery (1991) at the third International Conference on the Languages of Scotland. It is an interesting feature of Scots grammar and good Scots, but has often been presented in our schools as bad grammar, because it represents a deviation from standard English.

This period in Scottish history was also characterised by some remarkably enlightened legislation. For example, the *1574 Act Anent the Puir* (Donaldson, 1974) involved the imposition of a levy to provide for the socially disadvantaged, and an important distinction was drawn between *sturdie beggaris* and *puir dounhauden bodies*:

*An sen cheritie wald that the puir, aigit and impotent personis sould als necessarilie be providit for as the vagabundis and strang beggaris ar repressit, and that the aigit, impotent and puir people sould have ludgein and abydin places throuchout the realm to settil thame selfis intil....the eldaris and deaconis in ilk parochyn to landwart sal.....tax and stent the haill inhabitantis within the parochyn, according to the estimatioun of thair substance.....to sic.... contributioun as salbe thocht sufficient to sustene the saidis puir people.....*

Scots can perhaps be regarded as having reached its zenith as a recognised national language suitable for every purpose of life about the time of the Reformation in 1560. However, the process of evolution into a language distinct from English was arrested in the middle of the century by the introduction of an English translation of the bible by the reformers from Geneva. The Scots language was sufficiently close to Elizabethan English for this version of the bible to be understood in Scotland and it became universally used. A passage from Purvey's version of Wycliffe's New Testament was uplifted by Murdoch Nisbet around 1520 and given Scotticised spellings, but no satisfactory published version of a translation of the bible into Scots was available at this time.

Thus, the Scottish people, while still politically independent from England, quickly acquired the impression that since the word of God was in English, God must evidently be an Englishman: a dangerous misconception. There are certainly very few examples of Scottish writing in which God is represented as a Scot. One is found in the joke where the sufferers in the torment of Hell hold up their hands and plead: 'But Lord oo didnae ken, oo didnae ken!' only to receive the response from God in His infinite mercy: 'Weill, ye ken nou!'

Another example of God having a Scottish identity can be found in Alastair Mackie's poem, *In Absentia*:

*Syne God said: "Nou I'm awa.  
Mak a kirk or a mill o't!"  
And God gaed tae the back o beyond  
i the midst o aathing.*

## The Downgrading of Scots

The period when Scots was internationally seen as the separate language of an independent kingdom came to an abrupt end in 1603, when James VI blithely took his Court with him to London. As a result, the language lost both the prestige of association with the Court and its principal national focus. Thereafter, because of this political development, a tendency developed to regard Scots as an inferior or corrupt form of English. Although the language survived and evolved in its spoken dialect forms, particularly in rural areas such as the Borders and Buchan, its further development as a literary language or as a medium of communication for 'serious' purposes was impaired.

During the seventeenth century, English became the language of kirk and state and became more and more associated with power and politics. Scots became more associated with barn and byre, and flesh and feeling. This distinction was well established by the time of Robert Burns, who demonstrated that he no longer regarded Scots as a language suitable for every purpose, by shifting into an English register in his poems whenever he wanted to express lofty sentiments. This practice is illustrated by the first two stanzas of the poem, 'To a Mouse'. The title is in English, the first stanza is in rather uncompromising Scots and the second reflective stanza in a stilted kind of English.

*Wee, sleekit, cowrin tim'rous beastie,  
O, what a panic's in thy breistie!  
Thou needna start awa sae hasty  
    Wi bickerin brattle!  
I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee,  
    Wi murderin pattle!*

*I'm truly sorry man's dominion,  
Has broken Nature's doctial union,  
An' justifies that ill opinion,  
    Which makes thee startle  
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,  
    An' fellow mortal!*

The processes of confining and downgrading Scots continued in the nineteenth century and towards the end of the century, Scots had become identified by the *Kailyaird* writers as a parochial form of speech, at one and the same time associated with the parish pump and the deepest feelings of those who had been exposed to it in childhood. This connection with profound feelings is revealed in some of the *Kailyaird* novels. In *Beside the Bonnie Briar Bush* (Maclaren, 1895), we have some very poignant scenes. For example, in the scene where the death of Dr MacLure is described, his friend Drumsheugh puts up a prayer at the bedside:

*Almichty God.....dinna be hard on Weelum MacLure, for he's no been hard wi onybody in Drumtochty... Be kind tae him as he's been tae us aw for forty year...Forgie him what he's duin wrang...an dinna cuist it up tae him...Mind the fowk he's helpit...the weemen an bairnies...an gie him a welcome hame, for he's sair needin it, eftir aw his wark...Amen.*

Although this novel might now be seen as Victorian shmaltz, it ran to eight editions the 1890s and about 50,000 copies were sold.

Perhaps the low-water mark in the Kailyaird was reached with Alexander Anderson's *Cuddle Doon*. Here, the final stanza is clearly on the wrong side of that ill-defined boundary between sentiment and sentimentality:

*The bairnies cuddle doon at nicht  
Wi mirth that's dear to me;  
But soon the big warl's cark an' care  
Will quaeten doon their glee.  
Yet, come what will to ilka ane,  
May He wha rules aboon  
Aye whisper, tho their powes be bald,  
"Oh bairnies, cuddle doon."*

### **The Lallans Movement**

Throughout the twentieth century, there was a growing reaction against the parochial image of Scots created by the Kailyaird writers. There had been some signs of this reaction in the Scots written by Robert Louis Stevenson at the end of the nineteenth century and it became more forthright with the Lallans movement started by C. M. Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid) in the 1920s. This movement gathered momentum during the following two decades. MacDiarmid demonstrated in a number of fine lyrics in Scots, such as *The Bonnie Broukit Bairn* and *Empty Vessel*, that the range of Scots in poetry could be extended to cover cosmic themes.

*The Bonnie Broukit Bairn*

*Mars is braw in crammasy,  
Venus in a green silk gown,  
The auld muin shaks her gowden feathers,  
Their starry talk's a wheen o blethers,  
Nane for thee a thochtie sparín,  
Earth, thou bonnie broukit bairn!  
But greit, an in your tears ye'll droun  
The haill clanjamfrie!*

This was a new non-parochial use of Scots and it led to a significant revival of interest in the language as a medium of poetic expression. William Soutar was writing in excellent Scots at this time and a number of emulators of MacDiarmid appeared on the scene. Archaic words were resuscitated, notably by Louis Spence and Douglas Young, and an attempt was made to restore integrity to what had been a noble language. These activities were described, perhaps over-optimistically, as The

Scottish Renaissance. However, some fine poems were written in Scots in the early period after World War II, by writers like Robert Garioch, Alastair Mackie, Alexander Scott and Sydney Goodsir Smith.

Although this movement had a profound effect on creative artists in Scotland, it hardly reached the general public and there was no detectable political effect. There was, however, a certain amount of uneasy sneering. The following parody of the efforts of the Lallans poets, which was published in a student magazine in the late 1940s, indicates the character of the reaction in some quarters.

*I hear the speugs abune the sheugh,  
the whaups up on the muir,  
but I maun plod ahint the pleugh,  
An' O ma hert is sair!*

Here, Scots is seen as properly belonging to a quaint, parochial past.

In general, the Lallans movement cannot be said to have been a great success in the short term. It had no significant effect on the treatment of Scots in schools and some new poems were evidently written in a bogus kind of Scots---a language which was syntactically English, laced with archaic words dredged from Jamieson's dictionary. This was not so much the fault of the Lallans poets as the consequence of the neglect of Scots in the schools and its representation as corrupt English. It is very difficult to write well in a language short of models and without standards or instruction.

One unfortunate defect of the Lallans movement was that the public was left with the curious impression that MacDiarmid, single-handed, had created a language called *Lallans* or synthetic Scots, which was in some sense artificial. This was a claim that MacDiarmid specifically denied (Purves, 1997) However, This notion was peddled by Robin Bell (1989) in the introduction to an anthology of Scottish verse published in 1989. Bell declared that he was not sorry that there was so little work in Lallans in the anthology and went on to state, 'I regard it as a wasteful distraction for Scottish poetry that such a great poet and persuasive personality as Hugh MacDiarmid should have reached his peak at a time when there was a fashion for synthetic languages. Bernard Shaw was an advocate of Esperanto, but he had more sense than to write his plays in it,' (Bell, 1989).

Perhaps the most charitable thing that can be said of these remarks, is that they do not bear examination. The term *Lallans*, as used by Burns and Robert Louis Stevenson, is simply another word for Scots, and the comparison with Esperanto is absurd. Except for a few experimental pieces, the language used by MacDiarmid in his poems was very natural. In *Crowdieknowe*, for example, apart from two anglicised features (the use of the exclamation, *Oh* in the first line and the rhyming of *bairn* with *swearin* in the second stanza) , the language is entirely natural.

*Oh to be at Crowdieknowe  
When the last trumpet blows,  
An' see the deid come lowpin owre  
The auld grey waws.*

*Muckle men wi tousled beards,  
I grat at as a bairn  
'Il scramble frae the croodit clay,  
Wi feck o swearin.*

MacDiarmid certainly introduced archaic words (such as *howdumbdeid* and *amplefeyst*) into the fabric of several of his poems, but this happens with writing in any language. Perhaps the only sense in which the language of MacDiarmid's poems can be said to be regarded as unnatural or contrived, relates to the extent to which he anglicised his work to suit the notion that modern dialects of Scots (presumably including that of Langholm) were 'debased' or 'degenerate'. It has been pointed out by Milton (1986) that in believing that dialect forms reflect linguistic impoverishment and incompetence, MacDiarmid was about fifty years behind the times. Serious investigators of language had abandoned such views a long time before.

MacDiarmid's negative view of regional dialects as the speech of mere 'hinds' or 'chawbacons' appears to have been derived from what Milton (1986) has called 'the anglicising prescriptivists of Her Majesty's Inspectorate' in the latter half of the nineteenth century, as recorded by Keith Williamson (1982, 1983). At this time, the use of local dialects of Scots was evidently firmly disapproved in the class room. No doubt as a consequence of negative attitudes encountered in his youth to his own natural speech, MacDiarmid appears to have developed a contemptuous attitude to dialect and a view that literary Scots was a 'corrected' version of colloquial Scots, conforming to the grammatical and syntactical standards of literary English.

## **/THE CURRENT STATE OF SCOTS**