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What's Scots?



J Derrick McClure

Tracing the history and contemporary challenges of Scots as a living tongue

For many years, the Lowland Scottish vernacular speech was relegated to the status of a low-prestige dialect: banished from classrooms and polite discourse, associated inseparably with the socially-disadvantaged classes and, even, denied official existence. This last was a subterfuge commonly used to reconcile the despised status of the *spoken* tongue with the insurmountable fact of an admirable *literature* in Scots: the language of Burns, Scott, Stevenson or Lady Nairne was not to be identified with the language Scottish children brought to their schools—*that* being mere ‘slovenly speech’ and not the same (even when it patently *was* the same) as the ‘good old Scots’ of literature, now officially pronounced dead.

It must be acknowledged that, in recent years, considerable progress has been made towards restoring Scots to a place more befitting a speech-form of its demographic, cultural and historical importance—or at any rate, towards ensuring that the questions relating to its nature, origins, actual and desired status in Scottish life are matters for discussion. Conferences and in-service courses have, for many years, been held on the initiative of interested organisations such as the Association for Scottish Literary Studies, the Committee for the Advancement of Scottish Literature in Schools and the Scots Language Society. But now they are being organised by the regional education departments and some of those have also appointed individual office-bearers whose remit is to investigate the position of Scots in primary and/or secondary education and propose ways in which it could be enhanced. From such developments, the scholars and educationalists who have been campaigning for years, even decades, for a due measure of attention to be assigned to the Scots tongue in the educational and social fields, can derive considerable satisfaction.

Nonetheless, unresolved questions have a habit of intruding upon the path of progress. In particular, the chronic dilemma of *what* is, or should be, receiving promotion as ‘Scots’ continues to be troublesome. And, indeed, despite the straightforward historical explanations which can be offered for the present-day Scottish sociolinguistic situation, the problems of definition, on which political decisions have to rest, are very real.

Scots, in origin, is the speech-form descended from the Northumbrian dialect of Old English, as English (ie standard literary English) is from the Mercian. In the same way as the London dialect—a blend principally of east and south-east Midland features—developed into a national standard form of English under the influence of the Chancery scribes, a written form based on the speech of Edinburgh and the Lothians became the official language of the Scottish monarchy. Don Pedro de Ayala, the Spanish ambassador to the court of King James IV, remarked that the King’s

Scots tongue differed from English as much as Aragonese (ie Catalan) from Castilian: a slight exaggeration no doubt, but a recognition that the lines of descent taken from the common ancestor by Scots and English had, even by then, resulted in two quite widely divergent national languages.

Some of the differences which Ayala could have observed can be traced as far back as Old English: the absence of an *-n* ending in verb infinitives; *-s* as the ending for second and third singular indicatives; the prepositions *til* and *fra*—these features of Northumbrian, as

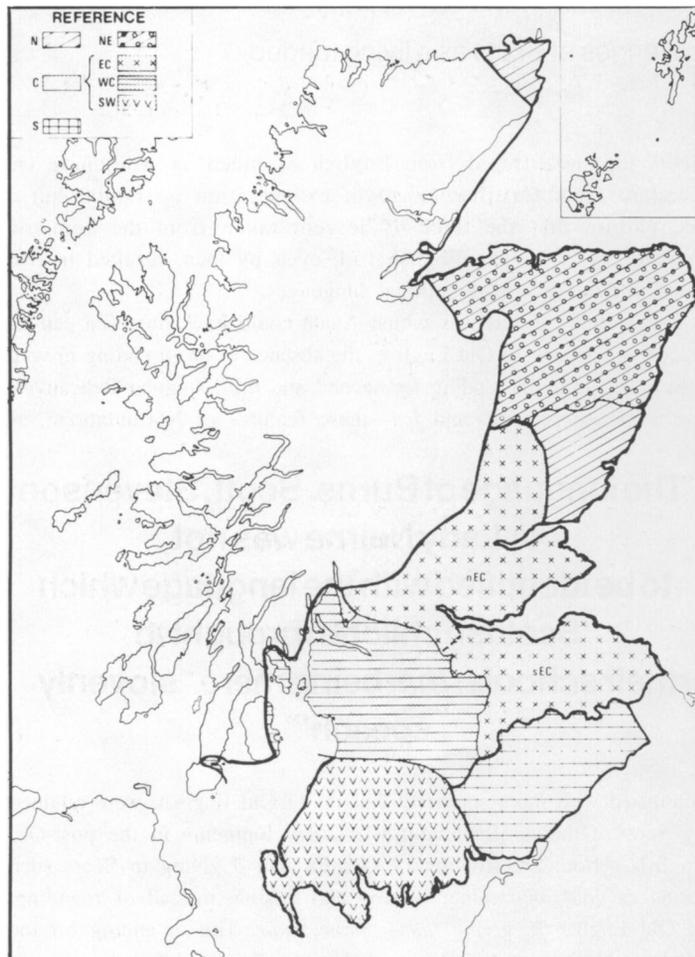
‘The language of Burns, Scott, Stevenson or Lady Nairne was not to be identified with the language which Scottish children brought to their schools, *that* being mere “slovenly speech”’

contrasted with more southerly dialects of Old English, were retained by Scots. Others reflect contrasting developments in the post-Old English period: the fronting of Old English \bar{o} giving to Scots such forms as *guid*, *muin*; the fronting and raising, instead of rounding, of Old English \bar{a} , giving *hame*, *stane*, *mair*. The *-it* ending for the weak past tense and past participle, and the *-and* for the present participle, imparted a distinctive appearance to Scots grammar; and such orthographic features as *sch* and *quh* corresponding to English *sh* and *wh*, and the use of digraph spellings *ei*, *ai*, *oi* and *ui* to represent long vowels whether or not derived from original diphthongs, made a written page of mediaeval Scots look strikingly different from a contemporary text in English—even Northern English.

The vocabulary of Scots was highly individual. Many words from ancestral Old English had been retained which southern English dialects had lost (*bairn*, *byre*, *deave*, *greet*, *gloaming* and place-name elements such as *cleugh*, *hauch*, *law*). Gaelic had given, besides many more place-name elements (*ben*, *cairn*, *drum*, *glen*, *loch*, *strath*, an abundance of common words (*brock*, *clachan*, *ingle*, *kelpie*, *tocher*); Scandinavian had influenced the distinctive form of the consonants in *kirk*, *birk*, *brecks*, *brig*, *rig* and had contributed a far greater number of words than Gaelic to the general vocabulary (*baukie*, *ferlie*, *gowk*, *lowe*, *neive*, *sark*). Scotland’s trading links with the Netherlands had resulted in the adoption of Dutch words such as *cavie*, *howff*, *mutch*, *plack*, *redd*, *wapinschaw*; and the Auld Alliance, by engendering a long and intimate relationship between

the languages and cultures of France and Scotland, led to the adoption of many French words such as *asht*, *bawsint*, *dour*, *houlet*, *tassie*, and, even, *Hogmany*.

The Scots spoken by all citizens of the non-Gaelic parts of the realm, from the King down, had, by the late Stuart period, developed into one of the finest literary languages in Europe. It was also coming to be regarded as a national tongue distinct from English—the poet Gavin Douglas in the prologue to his great translation of the *Aeneid* (arguably the finest single work in Scottish literature) pointedly insisted that his language was *Scottis* as contrasted with *Inglis*; and



Scotland: the main dialectal divisions of Scots

James V is reported to have considered “knappin Suddron” the act of a traitor. However, within a short time of the attainment by Scots of this high level of both political importance and literary development, the language and its status were subjected to a series of body-blows which ultimately reduced it to its present confused and impoverished state.

First, the introduction of printing, and the importation of English-trained printers, gradually did away with the distinctive spelling and morphological system of Scots; the printers (at first unobtrusively, then on a wholesale basis) substituted English spellings and inflections for the Scots ones in the manuscripts. Second, the Reformation, by opening Scotland to the influence of English translations of the Bible and the works of English theologians—as well as replacing catholic France with protestant England as the main influence on the culture—materially diminished the prestige of the language. The loss of a Scots-speaking court with the Union of the Crowns in 1603 led to a major cultural vacuum in Scotland: a loss

all the more noticeable in that James VI had tried, with great enthusiasm and considerable success, to make of his court a centre for poetic activity. The 17th century, with its almost unending religious strife and factionalism in both church and state, was a period of grave artistic and intellectual decline in Scotland and of steadily worsening economic impoverishment. The abolition of the Scottish parliament, in 1707, set the seal on the already growing anglicisation of the Scottish ruling classes, by depriving them of any chance of major political advancement in their own country. And the brilliant regeneration of Scottish intellectual, cultural and commercial life, in the course of the 18th century, engendered an attitude of turning one’s back on the unhappy past: an attitude which entailed a deliberate rejection of the traditional language of Lowland Scotland and an attempt among the educated classes to purge their speech entirely of ‘Scotticisms’.

The great 18th-century revival of Scots as a poetic medium, with Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns as the greatest and most influential of a whole school of poets, was a deliberate attempt to counter the declining status of Scots; and it is noticeable that, since Scots was

‘the introduction of printing, and the importation of English-trained printers, gradually did away with the distinctive spelling of Scots’

conventionally despised as the language of the peasantry, the use of it was strongly associated by Burns not only with *political nationalism*, but with vigorous *social radicalism* and iconoclasm. Burns’s enormous popularity, however, though it helped to ensure the survival of the Scots poetic tradition, was insufficient to ensure that the *quality* of the 18th-century revival would be maintained. A sad decline in the standards of Scots poetry was visible from Burns’s death, and even before it, until nearly a century later when RL Stevenson published his collection, *Underwoods*.

Stevenson’s fear that the demise of Scots as a written and spoken language was imminent—memorably embodied in the first poem in this collection—was shared by most of his educated contemporaries; though attitudes differed as to whether this demise should be seen as a matter for satisfaction or regret. The primary and secondary schools had, for years, been exercising a policy of encouraging children to speak English, by the tawse if necessary, and this virtually became official practice (though never acknowledged as such) with the Education Act of 1872. Another sociological development adversely affecting the language was Scotland’s rapid industrialisation. Glasgow in particular, and the other cities to a lesser extent, suffered enormous population growth and deplorable living conditions, and encouraged the development of a new sociolect despised from the first as the speech of the slums. The belief that English was the language of social advancement, already entrenched among all classes in Scotland, acquired a new urgency with the emergence of a speech-form lacking even the romantic and antiquarian appeal of traditional Scots dialects, and tainted in bourgeois thought by its association with the urban poor.

The deeply-rooted social stigma attaching to the urban vernaculars is possibly the most baleful factor hindering the progress of a new attitude of enlightened interest in the Scots language. In many respects, the way is clear for Scots to assume the place to which it is, on any objective showing, entitled in Scottish society, culture and

education. The modern literary revival inseparably associated with Hugh MacDiarmid continues, years after his death, with exuberance; works of poetry and other literature eminently suitable for school classes at all stages, exist in abundance; scholarly research has produced teaching aids which combine accessibility with conformity to the highest academic standards, such as the **Concise Scots Dictionary**, the **Pocket Scots Dictionary** and the **Scots Thesaurus**; efforts being made by speakers of other European languages of comparable status—such as Frisian, Neapolitan and Catalan—to conserve and develop their native tongues are being noted in Scotland and the possibility of learning from the experience of those peoples is occupying the attention of educational and cultural activists. Incontrovertibly, the circumambient attitude in the educational field is more sympathetic to Scots than ever before.

Yet the fundamental confusion on *what* deserves to be called 'Scots' remains and threatens to stunt many promising developments. In particular, the common conviction that urban demotic speech is not 'really' Scots but simply 'bad grammar' is still firmly held by many teachers. The fallacy, of course, is that the standards of 'good grammar', which educationalists are prone to apply, are those defined by 18th-century prescriptive grammarians for standard literary English. Urban demotic Scots, like any other self-contained speech system, has its own internal grammatical rules, of which some (-s ending in plural verbs, use of three-term deictic system *this, that yon* and *thon*) are shared with traditional Scots dialects and can be traced back to mediaeval Scots; others (emergence of a second-person plural pronoun *yous*, combinations of modal auxiliaries *I'll no can see him, ye uised tae cud dae it*) are of more recent origin; and several (double negatives, loss of distinction between past tense and past participle forms) are, in fact, shared with many non-standard dialects throughout the English-speaking world.

There is no standard written form for Scots. Still less is there a standard *spoken* form: besides the cleavage (perhaps exaggerated, but certainly present) between rural and urban dialects, each region of traditional Scots speech has its own dialect, and the best-preserved (those of the Northern Isles, the north-east and, perhaps the Borders and Galloway) are also the most highly differentiated. For at least the last century, literature in Scots has reflected this fact: Stevenson stated overtly that he was not concerned to write in an accurate representation of any regional dialect; MacDiarmid made the creation of a national, as opposed to any regional, form of Scots part of his poetic purpose; and many of his immediate successors followed him in minimising their use of strongly local features. On the other hand, each region of Scotland continues to produce writers whose preference is emphatically for the local dialect. Encouraging 'Scots' in education must mean encouraging *all* forms, starting (as a logical strategy) with the form spoken where any individual teacher is operating: if this should be the heart of Glasgow, literary texts and language studies exist for that form of Scots as well as others.

After doggedly surviving the status of a socially—and educationally—stigmatised speech-form for almost three centuries, Scots has now the opportunity to recover something of the respect it deserves. It would be sad indeed if the endemic national confusion of attitudes to the language prevented this opportunity from being exploited to the full. ◆

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The Innumerable Christ

Other stars may have their Bethlehem, and their Calvary too.
Professor J Y Simpson

Wha kens on whatna Bethlehems
Earth twinkles like a star the nicht,
An' whatna shepherds lift their heids
In its unearthly licht?

'Yont a' the stars oor een can see
An' farther than their lichts can fly,
I' mony an unco warl' the nicht
The fatefu' bairnies cry.

I' mony an unco warl' the nicht
The lift gaes black as pitch at noon,
An' sideways on their chests the heids
O' endless Christs roll doon.

An' when the earth's as cauld's the mune
An' a' its folk are lang syne deid,
On coontless stars the Babe maun cry
An' the Crucified maun bleed.

from *Sangshaw* (1925)

Hugh MacDiarmid