

INTRODUCTION

They speak in riddles north beyond the Tweed,
The plain, pure English they can deftly read;
Yet when without the book they come to speak,
Their lingo seems half English and half Greek.

... This room they call the **but** and that the ben,
And what they do not know they **dinna ken**.
On keen cold days they say the wind **blaws snell**,
And they have words that Johnson could not spell,
And when they wipe their nose they **dicht** their **byke**,
As **imph'm** which means – anything you like;
While some, though purely English, and well known,
Have yet a Scottish meaning of their own:

... To **crack** is to converse; the **lift's** the sky;
And **bairns** are said to **greet** when children cry.

Robert Leighton, 'Scotch Words', 1869

The 2011 Scottish Census found that more than 150 languages other than English are used in Scottish homes.

Scotland is a nation of peoples woven together like a **tartan** or **tweed**. The overall effect may be one of **Scottishness** but the individual threads have a uniqueness of their own. Celt and Pict; Gael and Angle; Norse and Norman; Roman and Romany; Italian, English and Irish; African, American, Asian and Australasian and many more have all brought something to the lexicographers' **ceilidh** that is our language – and continue to do so.

At the re-convening of the Scottish parliament in July 2016 the poem 'Threshold' by the Scots **Makar** Jackie Kay was read. In it Kay beseeches

the parliament, the nation, not to ca' **canny** but to be bold and open our hearts and to welcome the future with the voices of all the peoples who call Scotland **hame**. She uses Scots to call out a welcome not only to share our domestic living space but also to repopulate the wide open spaces of Scotland, historically emptied of people, and to create a brilliant **gathering of the clans** of the world.

Poetry is by its very essence a celebration of the diversity and meanings of language used to describe the human condition and the world around us. It has long been a **kist** of riches for the **Scots** tongue. It is from the works of Kay's predecessors as **makars** that many of the words we use today have been preserved – in the poetry of Henryson and Dunbar, Ramsay and Fergusson, Scott and Stevenson, MacDiarmid and Jacob, Lochhead and MacCaig – but most of all in the words of Robert Burns. It is through Burns that many Scots kept Scotland in their hearts as well as on their tongues whether they were in domestic service in London, digging railroads in America, running tea plantations in India, whaling in the Davis Strait, herding sheep in the Australian outback or in the rain-sodden trenches of Flanders.

At the end of his long life my great-great-grandfather published a pamphlet in praise of Robert Burns. In it he wrote:

I have been an enthusiastic admirer of Robert Burns and his works, ever since I was first able to read them. In July 1806 I went from Forfarshire to Dumfries, to see the spot where his remains were interred. I found his grave covered with a plain slab, and literally obeyed the Poet's request – drew near
And o'er this grassy heap sang dool
And dropped a tear.

Two centuries later, Burns' work continues to speak to people. His poems, songs and language contain an immutable Scottishness that touches my soul like no other; my wife and I had his words read at our wedding. He is quoted more than any other writer in this book.

Burns' language grew from the Ayrshire land his family farmed but he was also well read and well travelled; in Edinburgh he moved within

Enlightenment circles, and he corresponded far and wide. From all over the country he harvested words, poems and stories, ploughing them back into his verse. And he was not just a poet but a collector and re-worker of traditional songs, which had been passed down orally through generations; he contributed them to that great compendium of song *The Scots Musical Museum*. He showed an awareness of a unique language that was under threat and needed to be preserved.

Scots is perhaps best described as a *Halbsprache* – a half-language – and has been developing since the start of the second millennium. Its roots are Germanic with many similarities to Middle English but with a history all its own.

Historians and lexicographers call the language of the early period from about 1100 to 1700 ‘Older Scots’ and use ‘Modern Scots’ for the period from 1700 to the present. Sometimes the term ‘Middle Scots’ is used to describe the language from 1450 to 1700. It was during this period that Scots came under pressure as never before from a unique combination of technological advancement, religious dissent and high international politics – French and English influences at court waxed and waned as the two powerful kingdoms sought influence and control over Scotland.

The eventual Union of the Crowns of Scotland with England in 1603 saw the royal court – once the home of poet prince King James I (1394–1437), of Robert Henryson (c. 1460–1505) and William Dunbar (1459–c. 1530) – move to London, and with the Union of the Parliaments in 1707 the legislature joined it. While Scots language remained unique in law, education and religion, it lost the authority of being the language of power and governance.

Even in the surviving centres of influence, the creeping Anglicisation over Old Scots came, driven by the printing press rather than by high politics. Although Chepman and Myllar were printing in Edinburgh by 1508, the printing industry in England was more prolific and thus more affordable. Literature, especially ‘high’ literature, was more likely to be printed in English and Latin than in Scots, including bibles and tracts spreading the word of the Reformation. Even the *King James Bible* is in English despite being commissioned by the Scottish monarch.

Both sides of James VI's earthly administration used English and throughout the seventeenth century it became the dominant language of government as well. In the ruling classes of both kingdoms, aristocratic intermarriage cemented English as the language of power and Scots came to be regarded as provincial, outdated and even seditious. Ever since, Scots has been seen as the language of the 'common people', printed in chapbook, pamphlet and ballad; spoken on the farm, the bar or the **scheme**. There are many examples to be found in the book.

Even before Burns, poets had been aware of this decline of the language of their forbearers and had sought to preserve it. Earlier in the eighteenth century, for example, Allan Ramsay wrote his libretto for *The Gentle Shepherd*, Scotland's first opera, set in the pastoral Pentland Hills, while Robert Fergusson's poetry portrayed urban Edinburgh life. They understood Scots held within it not just the voice of Scotland but its very character. Through the use of vernacular Scots, poets and writers captured and nurtured a language in decline, while also popularising it and spreading its readership. The Romantic sentiment of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries adored the Scots of Scott and the **Scottishness** of Byron and while that might have led to the **tartantry** of King George IV and **Balmorality** of Queen Victoria, it certainly boosted the interest in the country's history and the remnants of that past, including its language.

In addition, an increasingly large number of exiled Scots, whether in the ever expanding urbanised centres or in far-off imperial outposts, were nostalgic for their homeland. In its language they found an easily transportable memento of home: the song sung to the rhythm of a pickaxe's swinging; the small **quair** of poems that fitted in an apron pocket; the **cornkister** at a tropical **ceilidh**.

This Scots, though, is the language of poetry chosen for the sound and texture it added to the verse and not necessarily the living language of every day. As the nineteenth century progressed, upper- and middle-class Scotland looked fondly on the traditional and contemporary rural use of Scots but with despair and contempt on the vibrant urban Scots of the poor. In the twentieth century, armed with grammars, national examinations and standardised teaching, they began a sustained assault

on the remaining use of Scots, aided by growing literacy and the greater availability of newspapers, radio, gramophones, cinema and television. Growing up in Glasgow, Mrs Purvis across the road from me had a steady stream of after-school pupils each day attending her elocution lessons – having their glottal stops extracted, **oxters** turned into armpits.

Despite – or perhaps because of – this, there thrived a Scots language culture, vibrant, if **tartanry**, in the Saturday-night music-hall entertainment of ordinary working folk, with performers such as Harry Lauder able to reach out to millions not only at home but in Canada and especially Australia.

A renaissance of Scots in literature, strongly allied to a resurgence of nationalist politics and the very media that had helped standardise the language, also preserved its words, accents, stories and culture, from *Para Handy* to *Still Game*.

A key figure in the history of modern Scots is Billy Connolly. The Big Yin bestrides our recent culture like a colossus. Rooted in urban poverty, he worked in the shipyards of the Clyde, moonlighting as a folk singer and gradually telling stories in between singing traditional songs. This brought him into contact with artists, musicians and poets working within the finest traditions of Scottish culture, including the Shetland fiddler Aly Bain, the traveller singer Belle Stewart, and poet Norman MacCaig. Integrating tradition without losing touch with his roots (whatever the ‘**Ah kent his faither**’ detractors might have said), Connolly moved from a minor club act to a comedian who was selling out theatres, first in Scotland, then in the rest of Britain and eventually across the world; records, cartoon strips, books, plays, TV and Hollywood stardom followed. His use of Scots, if perhaps toned down to be accessible to global audiences, is still at the heart of his humour and is a vital element in how he communicates and why he makes people laugh. That humour contains within itself an intrinsic Scottishness that defines us as a people. That is why, despite all the pressures down the centuries from state, church and establishment, Scots is still used and loved by **a’body**.

But from worldwide to the local, what words can really be classed as Scottish? Is the language of Burns really a universal Scots?

Consider the amazingly popular children's picture book by Julia Donaldson that has been translated by James Robertson into *The Gruffalo in Scots*. The mouse (or moose) responds to the creatures it meets with the line, 'A gruffalo! Whit dae ye no ken?' The story has also been translated into various Scots dialects and the differences show that there is no standard way of speaking or writing Scots and using Scots words:

North-East Doric: 'A gruffalo! **Foo**, dae ye nae **ken**?'

Dundonian: 'A gruffalo? Yi mean yi **dinnae ken**?'

Orcadian: 'A gruffalo! Beuy, dae ye no **ken**?'

Shetlandic: 'A gruffalo! Oh, does du no keen?'

Glaswegian: 'A gruffalo! How, dae ye no know?'

And while Scots is a national and local language it is also clannish. Each family has its Scots word or phrases, helping to maintain or establish bonds of kinship. These can be words that are passed down – my grandmother referring to a psuedo-tartan cloth as bumbee tartan; my grandfather's braces were **galluses**; my father-in-law always wears **breeks**. Shared experiences also give rise to Scots usage: **bubblyjock** entered our family vocabulary holidaying on an Arran farm; feeling listless and under the weather we are a bit **wersh**; more **carnaptious** than **crabbit**. Any language flexes and adapts, but with all this variation is Scots a language or a series of dialects?

Then there is the issue – shared in Scotland with Gaelic and around the world in all non-English languages – of whether to integrate new words and terms in their English form or to adapt them. In the internet age do you call it a 'website' or, as some in the Scots language community do, transcribe it as 'wabsite' or 'wabsteid'?

As old ways of life **dwyne** and the people who spoke their unique languages die, it is natural to suppose that standard English replaces them. Not the case according to Robert McColl Millar who has made a study of the dialects spoken in the north of Scotland and the Northern Isles. He found that Scots rather than English is replacing Gaelic and that in the growing metropolis of Inverness there is an increase in the use of Aberdeenshire Doric among the younger generations.

At the 2019 Edinburgh Festival an exhibition was held of artworks inspired by Scottish Twitter messages. They reveal a use of language that is distinctively Scottish in its construction and usage even if the individual words are not in themselves always Scottish. They form part of that subversive, streetwise tradition of Scots, a modern urban freshness and vibrancy, that ties in with a love of expressive language, which is confidently, provocatively, joyously rude:

This is **honkin** btw
Specky hotdog
Colossal **roaster**
Massive weapon
Zip it, ya muppet
Hurricane **Bawbag**

So, wanting to pay tribute to the persistence and strength of the Scots language, I decided to put together a collection celebrating its uniqueness. In making my selection I have tried to cover the wide range of Scots discussed above. Around the poetry of the last millennium I have woven quotes from literature and drama to give the range of Scots language and experience. I have included some **weel-kent** faces – historical figures such as Mary, Queen of Scots, but also some surprises from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* and *Dracula*. In addition to quotes I have also given some example phrases to illustrate and illuminate word meanings.

When choosing the 1,000 words it became both pleasingly apparent how many Scots words we use and how many I would have to omit. I have attempted to give a flavour of the diversity of words from all areas of the country, and ones I could hear being said; apologies if some of your personal or family favourites are not included.

Today the Scots language is recognised as a vital element of Scotland's culture and is fostered through numerous government-funded schemes. In schools the former obligatory learning of a Burns poem for 25 January has grown into a winter term dedicated to the celebration of a wider use of Scots and is supported by a small but vital publishing industry. Last Christmas two of the top three bestselling books in Scotland were *The*

Broons and Billy Connolly – a sign that Scots is very much surviving in the twenty-first century. This modest **quair**, I hope, will help to keep a vital part of Scotland's identity alive and flourishing.

Notes on the text

I have tried not to give too many variations of spellings of the same word, especially when the pronunciation is the same, e.g. **pawky** rather than pawkie; **dinnae** not dinny, etc. Instead sometimes the quote will have a different spelling to give a hint as to variations, e.g. **bonnie-penny**, high priced, expensive: 'A **bonny penny** she'll be for books.' Nan Shepherd, *Quarry Wood*.

In a few cases I have added a guide to pronunciation, e.g. **a'body** [*aw-buddy*], **abune** [*a-bin*].

Sometimes I have left the word within a longer sentence or verse that includes other Scots words not given an individual definition in the book. I trust that when I have done so the reader will be discerning enough to understand the meaning.

If you do find yourself struggling with a word, **dinny caw canny**, speak it out loud – you might be surprised by how naturally you say it.