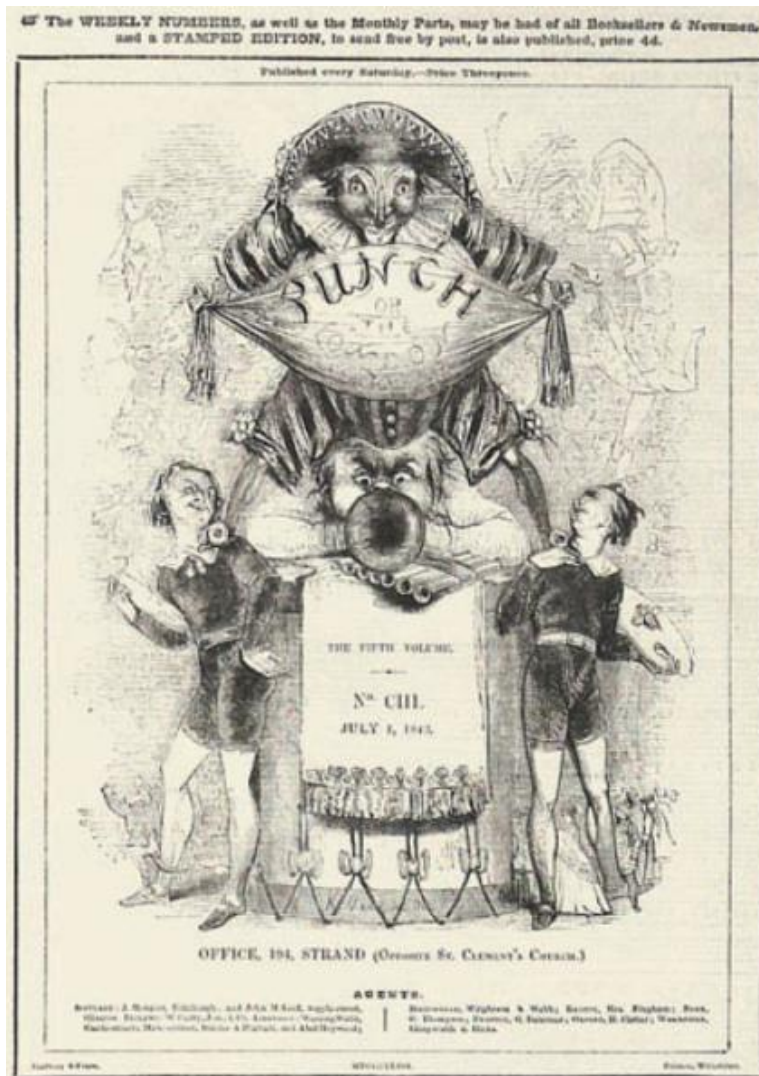




Scots Language Centre

Crack About Politics



Document 8

The Punch Petition 1853

Background

In 1707 England and Scotland were joined by the terms of the Treaty of Union, which created a new state called the United Kingdom of Great Britain. However, by the mid 19th century dissatisfaction among educated, politically-minded, mostly middle class Scots, led to calls for better handling of Scottish affairs by the Westminster Government. There were a number of grievances which included the complaint that business particular to Scotland was not given enough consideration or debate in the House of Commons, that Scottish affairs were sometimes derided or dismissed by English MPs, that Scotland had too few MPs herself, that the terms 'England' and 'English' were often used in place of 'Britain' and 'British' or that the English royal standard was used when the Lion Rampant of Scotland was more appropriate. Some Scots felt that instead of an English Home Secretary, a Scottish Secretary should be appointed to handle Scottish affairs. There were clear signs that Scotland was beginning once again to diverge politically from England and in 1853 the National Association for the Vindication of Scottish Rights was formed to agitate for political reform.

Document

In response to the formation of the National Association for the Vindication of Scottish Rights, the London magazine *Punch* published a clever satire which provides us with a number of fascinating insights into the culture, language, politics and identities of the period. *Punch* was founded in 1841 and was edited by Londoner Mark Lemon from 1842 until 1870. The magazine reflected Conservative (Tory) politics and the preoccupations of upper class English society. The demands presented in the *Punch* petition in no way reflected the reality. Gross satire, suggesting that the Scots intended to subvert the identity of the English, couched in an unfamiliar language (to English readers), made real complaints seem bizarre and entirely unreasonable. Behind the satire is the very real fear of the English upper class that the dominance of their customs, language and identity might be threatened, in the same way that the political rivalry with France fuelled similar fears of non-English cultural domination.

Punch cleverly inverts the prevailing 19th century trend which classified Scots as a provincial dialect by making the Scots in their petition call for the 'Queen's English' to be renamed the 'Queen's Scotch' and for English to be officially designated a dialect of Scots. The name of Lindley Murray (1745-1826), an American of Scots-Irish descent, is mentioned in passing. He published an *English Grammar* (1795) which went through many editions and was extensively used in schools. The petition also calls for the term 'Anglo-Saxon' to be replaced by 'Scoto-Saxon', which is an interesting comment on 19th century notions about ethnic identity. It was in that period that the terms 'Anglo-Saxon' and 'Celtic' – each taken out of their original context – were employed as competing ethnic labels by the English and non-English peoples of the British Isles.

Finally the petition ends with a comment which touches on a debate still relevant in Scotland today – currency. In the event of adopting a decimal coinage, the petitioners call for a coin to be named the *bawbee*, a Scots coin first minted in the 16th century, and a name still used in Scots today as an alternative word for money.

Language and Style

It was evidently not the intent of the editor to present a fluent text in Scots – which would have been lost on his readership - but rather an approximation of the language. A Scotticised text was written because it represented to readers the national tongue of Scotland. In couching the text in Scots the editor emphasised the foreignness and unintelligibility (to the English) of the Scottish people and by implication their inability or unwillingness to conform to the majority culture and language of the UK. Indeed, when Scotland celebrated the 100th anniversary of the birth of Robert Burns, in 1859, there was some comment from England that Scotland was ‘sliding backwards’. In an age still dominated by the idea of ‘improvement’, it was taken for granted in some circles that speaking English and following customs from England was to improve one’s self. The *Punch* spoof petition links speaking in Scots with awkwardness, in turn making Scots grievances appear all the more unreasonable.

There are a number of words which the editor (and presumably his intended readership) considered as key indicators of Scots. These included a whole series in the first couple of lines, such as *muckle*, *fasht*, *unco* and *whilk*, equivalent to English much/great, annoyed/bothered, extraordinary/strange/unusual and which. These are later followed by items such as *bawbee*, *douce* (dignified, earnest, respectable), *forbye* (in addition), *gang* (go, walk), *gowk* (fool), *scaith*, and *when* (a few, a number). A word such as *scaith* was also present in English, as in ‘unscathed’, but the Scots used it in a much more general range of circumstances and in the text it is standard for ‘harm/injury’.

Cognate forms (words which are clearly related) are also present of course, such as *alane* (alone), *ane* (one), *hae* (have), *hail* (whole), *ither* (other), *lang* (long), *mair* (more), *maist* (most), *noo* (now), *sair* (sore), and *wrang* (wrong).

There are also spellings intended to show the accent (vowel lengths and unstressed forms) of Scots, such as *misca’* (miscall), *an’* (and), *o’* (of), and *wi’* (with).

Lastly, there are also the Greek and Latin words shared by English and Scots, the pronunciations of which in Scots are indicated by a couple of the spellings; for example, *dialeck* (dialect) and *correckly* (correctly). By this period the idea had become prevalent that Greek and Latin words once borrowed into English thereafter became solely ‘English’, so if a Scots speaker used the same words it was imagined he or she was borrowing from ‘English’. This notion remains common today.



THE CLAIMS OF SCOTLAND

TO HER MAIST GRACIOUS MAJESTY VICTORIA, by descent frae the STUARTS o' North Britain, England, and Ireland, QUEEN, Defender of the Presbyterian Faith, *etc.*

The Humble Petition o' the Undersigned, Inhabitants o' the Principal Part o' HER MAJESTY'S Dominions ca'd Scotland,

HUMBLY SHEWETH,

That your Petitioners, leal subjects o' Your Majesty, are muckle and sairly fasht and vexed wi' unco grievances, o' whilk the maist considerable an' intolerable is the degradation an' dislocation, an' deposition o' the Scottish Lion.

That forbye the wrang, an' scaith, an' indignity, done to the Scottish Lion, an' the ither indignities, an' scaiths, an' wrangs, whilk Your Majesty's Petitioners hae set forth, an' enumerated, an' recited to Your Majesty's Ministers, there are a when mair whilk thay wad, wi' a' humility, skirl intill your Majesty's lug.

That *imprimis*, an' in the first place, the mither tongue o' Great Britain, Your Majesty's mither tongue, is erroneously, an' mistakenly, an' vernacularly, an' vulgarly misca'd the Queen's English; whereas the English tongue is just a brogue, an' a corruption, an' a *patois*, an' a dialeck o' the Scotch. And, as your Majesty kens, the hail biggin o' Your Majesty's language was the wark o' Lindley Murray, o' wham the verra name, ilka gowk can tell, belongs to Scotland.

Your Petitioners, therefore, beseech Your Majesty that the language o' Scotland, an' the provinces thereuntil united under the sceptre o' Your Majesty, whilk has heretofore been, as aforesaid misca'd your Majesty's English, may henceforth be rightly, an' truly, an' correckly denominate the Queen's Scotch. An' further mair, that Your Majesty will be graciously pleased to direct, that the orthography an' etymology o' a' Britain be just adapted, an' accommodated, an' reconciled to Scottish institutions an' laws o' grammar; whilk dunna convene wi' thae o' England, let alane just Suntux an' Prosody.

Your Majesty's Petitioners do also pray that Your Maist Gracious Majesty will be graciously pleased to command, an' decree, an' ordain that the term Anglo-Saxon race shall nae langer be applied to the population o' these Islands, mair especially not to emigrants from Great Britain to ither kintras, the maist o' wham are Scotch, that gang awa, and dinna come back again. And that your Majesty will, by virtue o' your Royal prerogative, settle and determine that the tribe an' race, until the noo entitled Anglo-Saxon, shall from this time forth be specified an' distinguished by the title o' Scoto-Saxon instead.

Likewise your Petitioners do entreat your Majesty that the communications o' Your Majesty's douce and honest liege subjecks shall nae mair be denoted by the appellation o' Plain English, but shall, wi' fit an' due regard to justice an' propriety o' diction, be designated as Braid Scotch.

Your Petitioners lastly humbly request Your Majesty that, gin Your Majesty shall be mindit to hae a decimal coinage, ye wad be sae gude an' to order an' provide that there shall be ane braw bright glitterin' bit chinkie amang the coppers to be ca'd a bawbee.

And your Petitioners as in duty bound will ever bray, *etc.*

Source: Reprinted from *Punch* in *The Stirling Observer*, Thursday 17 November 1853.