

A. J. Aitken

Address and toast to the Immortal Memory of Robert Burns [1990]

Edited by Caroline Macafee, 2015

In 1786 a young Scotsman – a year older than Robert Burns – named John Pinkerton brought out an important edition of a selection of Older Scots poems from the Maitland Folio MS of 1586, entitled *Ancient Scottish Poems*. In the Preface, Pinkerton expounds his view of the Scots language of his own day:

Perhaps some may say the Scots themselves wish to abolish their dialect totally, and substitute the English; why then attempt to preserve the Scottish language? Let me answer that none can more sincerely wish a total extinction of the Scottish *colloquial* dialect than I do, for there are few *modern* Scotticisms which are not barbarisms. (1786: I, xvii)

Pinkerton goes on to explain that while, as you just heard, he wants spoken Scots totally extinguished, he wants also to preserve Scots as an ancient and poetic language, but only in poetry, and, it seems, ancient poetry at that. Especially he wants Scots kept out of the hands of the vulgar – who need to be discouraged from speaking Scots and encouraged to speak only English – but rather kept as the preserve of the literary élite.

This attitude to Scots, that it is O.K. in poetry and preferably ancient poetry, but not in everyday speech, has been dubbed by Derrick McClure (1985, 1995) ‘the Pinkerton Syndrome’. It is still current today, with paradoxical consequences if the person holding this view happens to be a parent or a teacher: for example, the word *ken* is O.K. in a Scots song, but if a child *says* it, you slap her face. This in fact is what happens. At least, a linguist investigating Scots usage a few years ago was told that one informant lost two front teeth.

Something like the Pinkerton Syndrome seems to have been the majority establishment position in Scotland in the closing years of the 18th century. So around the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries some Scots intellectuals were describing Scots as “the familiar dialects of the meanest vulgar” (Sibbald, 1802: IV, xlv) and “a mass of perfect and absurd corruption” (Dalyell, 1801: x).

The same people were able to console themselves with the belief, which had been current since about the middle of the 18th century, and had been stated by, among others, Dr Samuel Johnson, that, happily, Scots was in fact dying out.

Among those who held both views – that Scots should be extinguished and that, happily, it was dying out, was Burns’ own minister, the Rev. William Auld – Daddie Auld – who wrote in 1791 of the language of the parish of Mauchline, the native tongue of Robert Burns: “The Scots dialect is the language spoken, but it is gradually improving and approaching nearer to the English” (*The Statistical Account of Scotland: Mauchline*, p. 114).

A few years later (1795) another minister wrote similarly of the language of Peterhead:

The language spoken in this parish is the broad Buchan dialect of the English, with many Scotticisms, and stands much in need of reformation, which it is hoped will soon happen, from the frequent resort of polite people to the town in summer. (*The Statistical Account of Scotland: Peterhead*, p. 592)

However, at the same time as Pinkerton was putting forward his programme for doing away with spoken Scots, two of his contemporaries were taking actions which would have the effect at the very least of delaying the accomplishment of his aims. One of these was John Jamieson, born a few weeks and some forty miles apart from Robert Burns in 1759. In October 1787 Jamieson, now a young Seceder minister in Forfar, began his collection of Scots words and quotations, which eventually bore fruit in 1808 in his great two-volume *An*

Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language. Jamieson's aims in compiling his dictionary included the preservation of the Scots vocabulary, which, like most others then, he thought evanescent, and also the vindication of his belief that Scots was entitled to be called a language – not merely as Robert Burns had called it “the Scottish dialect” – co-equal with, and historically distinct from, English. Jamieson's dictionary had huge popular success and helped greatly in the restoration of interest in, and sympathy for, Scots, which came about early in the 19th century.

And of course, the other of Pinkerton's nearly exact contemporaries, who was to play some part in thwarting his aims, was Robert Burns, whose editions came out in 1786 and 1787.

In the event, the ambitions of Pinkerton and other would-be exterminators of Scots were not fulfilled or at least have not yet been fulfilled.

There were of course always some Scottish intellectuals, especially some of the vernacular poets, who did not share Pinkerton & Co's hostility to vernacular Scots, but on the contrary wished Scots to persist or expand. Thanks largely to the boost given to these ideas by the products of Burns and Jamieson, early in the 19th century the prevailing attitude to Scots changed to one of nostalgic regret at what was still feared to be the incipient demise of a rich and expressive old tongue – an event which, said Lord Cockburn in 1853, would be “a national calamity” (Cockburn, 1874: II, 296), “but it is the natural course” (p. 302).

It is true that this new general approval of Scots and a fair consensus in regarding it as the nation's national language, was conversely some time in the 19th century invariably accompanied by condemnation of what were held to be debased, deviant forms of the old tongue, as spoken by the lower classes of the cities – the impoverished and corrupted Scots of the slums – in other words, the variety of Scots actually spoken by the majority of its speakers. This is a view of Scots which also survives today; indeed I daresay it is still widespread. This view in a sort of half-way approximation to the Pinkerton position. Happily, though, rather recently many Scottish intellectuals, including some educationalists, have abandoned the notion that some varieties of Scots speech are better than others and accept that all varieties are equally valid.

The generally pessimistic and in some cases hostile attitudes to the Scots of the majority of Scots today are at least attitudes to *something*. The *official* attitude to Scots is that it does not exist. You may have noticed that, according to Rifkind two years ago, Britain has three languages (English, Welsh and Gaelic). Scots is not one of them. There is certainly no question of there being anything like a policy for Scots, as there is for Gaelic. This is not too surprising, maybe, from the present Conservative government, ruling in Scotland by virtue of an English, not a Scottish, majority, but it seems that Scots scarcely exists for any of the other political parties either, the SNP among them. Well, not quite entirely. A year ago the Scottish Office announced that it was making a grant of £15,000 to the SNDA. The SNDA is the body which has produced *The Scottish National Dictionary*, *The Concise Scots Dictionary*, *The Pocket Scots Dictionary* and *The Scots Thesaurus*. £15,000 will keep its two part-time staff going for about a year. But at least it is something, and this is the first time ever that there has been direct government subvention to a body working for the Scots language.

So, at last, Scots does officially exist.

Pieces in Scots of any kind are infrequent and certainly irregular in the broadcast media, unless you count *Take the High Road*, *Taggart*, *City Lights*, *The Ship*, etc. And in school education, the totality of *official* recognition of Scottish – not necessarily Scots – literature, let alone Scots language, has so far amounted to a statement at the beginning of the Higher English Literature paper that candidates are reminded that Scottish texts may be used to answer any of the questions except the two specific to Shakespeare.

Is it not extraordinary that such a statement should need to be made in Scotland?

I have been told that the very latest Highers will specify particular contemporary Scottish authors – beginning with George Mackay Brown and Norman McCaig, neither, however,

very strong on vernacular Scots.

You may count it an exception to the official neglect of Scots that since the last war Scots language has been taught in a modest way, originally in one, now in three Scottish universities, to the equivalent of, I should say, three-quarters of the time of one lecturer each – a bit more at Edinburgh, a good deal less in Aberdeen. And I believe there is some teaching of Scots in one Teacher Training College.

There is also indirect government funding, by the Scottish Arts Council, to research on Scots in the shape of occasional grants to DOST and SNDA. And DOST is regularly funded by six of the universities. Otherwise there is nothing. The SNDA will need much more than the £15,000 to accomplish its long-cherished plans to investigate the present state of the vocabulary of Scots.

And yet, despite the Pinkerton Syndrome, despite ancient pessimism about the chances of survival of Scots, and despite official neglect, Scots at least survives, and in one of its manifestations, even flourishes.

One aspect of this survival that is often forgotten is the substantial shaping and infusing of a Scots element in the English speech of many Scots, the kind of English that I dare say many of us here speak. This is found:

in the phonetic framework of Scottish English speech;

in the pronunciations of particular words, like *lenth*, *sixt*, *ludge*, *Wednesday*, *tortoise*, *technical*;

in the large numbers of deviations from so-called Standard British English grammar, such as the non-use of the verbs *may* and *shall* by Scots;

and in thousands upon thousands of Scotticisms of vocabulary of one sort and another, like *forenoon*, *pinkie*, *rone*, *split-new*, *to cast out with somebody*, *to miss yourself*; *droukit*, *dwam*, *sweetie-wife*, *wabbit*, *let that flee stick tae the wa*, *keep a calm sough*, *a dreepin roast*; *Beltane*, *first foot*, *dux*, *the fathers and brethren*, *writer to the signet*; and *och*, *ach* and *mphm*.

A lot of these, by the way – and there are indeed thousands – are not in general English dictionaries.

[At this point AJA played a selection of recordings.] Scots also survives more obviously in speech like this. According to David Murison, Scots like this survives only “*diminuendo*, in familiar circles, especially in the outlying areas” (1977: 62). Indeed it seems to be true that tape-recorded passages of richly Scots speech like the first two of these passages, from 25–30 years ago, are becoming more difficult to find and elicit. All the same, a few years ago Billy Kay was able to collect specimens of quite richly Scots speech around the countryside for his programmes.

Doubtless Scots survives most fully, richly and vigorously in literature. [At this point AJA read a selection of passages: the sonnet ‘October Day’ by William Neill (1989); an extract from William Lorimer, *New Testament* (1983); an extract from David Ogston, *White Stone Country* (1986); and Stephen Mulrine’s, ‘Nostalgie’].

If Scots is arguably in decline in speech, there is no question that it is vigorous in literature.

All the same it has to be admitted that literary Scots remains, as it has long been, a marginal and minority activity alongside the great stream of writing and of spoken prose in English. And though local Scots writing like the poetry of Flora Garry, Rhoda Bulter and Sheena Blackhall is genuinely popular locally, and the poetry of Burns is genuinely popular nationally, much of the rest of Scots writing is largely produced and enjoyed by an intellectual élite.

In short, we are heading towards Pinkerton’s promised land, in which Scots is becoming a

museum-piece, for use in literature, but not much for everyday performance. We are heading in that direction, but, as you have heard, we are still a bit away yet. There are still plenty of manifestations of the old tongue in our thinking, speaking and writing.

What should be done about the declining state of the Scots language is a question for some other occasion. The choices include acquiescence, like Pinkerton, study and promulgation, like Jamieson, and use in speech, and/or writing, like Burns. For tonight I see it rather as my duty to celebrate those whose efforts have sustained the Scots tongue so far as a living part of our traditional culture, on which it would still be possible, if we wanted, to rebuild.

Among those who have secured for us the survival of Scots the name of Robert Burns stands high. Some have even claimed that he single-handedly secured the future of the Scots language. This is manifestly an exaggeration and does an injustice to the many others who have made their contribution – ordinary folk who have remained loyal to the speech they grew up with, organisations, including the Burns Clubs and the Federation of Burns Clubs, who have championed the Scots language, scholars like Jamieson, who have championed it in their way, by making its character understood and its content available for use – among these the staff of the SND, who will shortly bring out their *Scots Thesaurus*, which will lay out the riches of the Scots vocabulary in a completely new and much more accessible way. And of course there are, and have been, many other influential writers of Scots before and after Burns. Yet, agreeing all that, there is no doubt that confidence in the Scots tongue was and is still rekindled by what he achieved in it – when we had for the first time a world-class poet writing powerfully and memorably on universal themes for, as it turned out, a world-wide audience, in the familiar dialect of the “meanest vulgar” in Scotland. Virtually every Scot after Burns has been influenced in his loyalty to, and practise of, Scots language by the fact of Burns’ achievement.

As a rule, and quite rightly, Robert Burns is toasted for his superb poetry and song. Tonight, for a change, let us toast him for the part he played, with others, in sustaining and maintaining our historic native language.

Ladies and gentlemen, please be upstanding for the Immortal Memory.

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