Scots Language Centre

The Mother Tongue

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The old Scots tongue, the language that can still be heard in the mouth of many a lad and lass from the Shetland Isles to the Mull of Galloway, has as wonderful a history as any of the languages of the world.

To understand the life of any language, we must know two things. We must know the structure of the language itself: its sounds and spelling, its grammar, its words. And we must also know what the language means, and has meant, to the people who speak it.

There is no language that has not changed with the passing of the years: the English of Shakespeare is not the English spoken today.

A language can change so much that it becomes an entirely different thing: French, Italian, Spanish and several other European tongues were all one and the same language, Latin, many centuries ago. And a language can simply die, leaving no trace: the Indians of America and Canada have now for the most part forgotten their mother tongues and speak only English, and many people fear that if we are not careful our own Gaelic and Scots will go the same way.

Gaelic is related to Irish; Scots is related to English. What that means is that there was once a single language - Old Irish for one of the pairs, Old English (sometimes called "Anglo-Saxon") for the other - which divided into two, developing and changing in different ways in the kingdoms of Scotland and Ireland, or Scotland and England. The language we call "Old English" was brought to the island of Britain, by the raiding Angles and Saxons, long before there was either a Scotland or an England; and it was not at all like the English of today: in several respects it was more like German. But as it spread over the island it began to break up, developing into dialects that differed slightly from one area to the next; and after many hundred years one dialect from the northern boundary became the Scots tongue we speak today, and one from

the southern boundary, the English. There are many people who ask if Scots is a language in its own right or a dialect of English.
We should already know by now the answer to that. Scots is not a dialect of English if we take "English" to be the language we hear every day from radio and television broadcasters. The English that they speak and the Scots that we speak (or some of us) both came, by different but equally long routes, from Anglo-Saxon. But Scots and English are related: similar to each other, though not identical, because they have a common ancestor. Where the sounds of Scots words differ from their English cognates, it is generally because of changes in pronunciation from long ago in the history of the two languages. The Anglo-Saxon ham, ban, hal, mara, stan have given in English home, bone, whole, more, stone; in Scots hame, bane, haill, mair, stane. From the ancient god (with the sound o "goad", not of "God"), toth, mona, sona, come the English good, tooth, moon, soon; and our own guid, tuith, muin, suin: words that sound very different in different parts o the kingdom, with a Glaswegian saying gid, an Aberdonian gweed, a Fifer gade and a Borderer geud.
If we say toun, doun, hous, cou where the English say town, down, house, cow, we are using a sound more like the ancient tun, dun, hus, cu than is the ow-sound of English; and the well-known ch, which always trips the English up, in our bricht, licht, thocht, wecht, dochter is a sound which we have retained, and the English have lost, since Anglo-Saxon times.
We, on the other hand, have lost a l-sound which they have retained, in aa, faa, caa, gowd, gowf, shouther. And many other sets of cognates show how the Scots and the English languages have come to differ in regular ways: gress, bress, efter, gether to grass, brass, after, gather; drap, pat, lang, sang, wrang to drop, pot, long, song, wrong; jine, ile, bile, spile to join, oil, boil, spoil; want, wash, water retaining the old a-sound which in the English language has changed to an aw.
Most of those words (all except the jine set) were part of the Anglo-Saxon language long before it broke up to give Scots and English. And even up until our own time, the greater part of the Scots vocabulary is from the ancient ancestor. Many words that now belong exclusively to Scots - words that we would all lay claim to as good broad Scots - were formerly part of English as much as Scots.
But an ben is nothing but the Old English be-utan and be-innan: inside and outside. Chaucer, perhaps even Shakespeare, would have understood perfectly well the meaning of thole, or bide, greet, gloamin or deave. But a goodly number of Scots words have come from other languages; and the story of how those languages, and the people who spoke them, helped the Scots tongue to

expand is part of the story of the Scots nation itself. First, what we call the "Scots" tongue was not always the principal language of the kingdom, and even now is not its only language.
Gaelic could once be heard over half the country and more; an even where no Gaelic has been heard for many centuries, the memory of it is revealed in a number of words. Hundreds o the names on the map of Scotland are Gaelic: all the Auchen-, Auchter-, Bar-, Dal-, Kil- names, for a start. Names of the land and the water: loch (and woe betide any Sasunnach who calls it "lock"!), ben, glen, corrie, strath, craig, cairn; names from Highland history or Highland dress: clan, claymore, clarsach, brogue, sporran, sgian dubh; words we know from Burns and other writers who did not know a word of Gaelic as a living tongue: clavers, crummock, ingle, sonsie and its opposite donsie, clachan.
Two of the most familiar of the birds of the Highlands have Gaelic names: capercaillie and ptarmigan. Many ignorant people think Scots is related to Gaelic or even the same thing: it is not, but there is more than a smattering of Gaelic giving the Scots tongue its flavour. Another language which has given a generous donation to Scots is French.
Everybody who knows anything of the history of Scotland knows about the Auld Alliance, and there is no doubt that the long friendship between the two kingdoms contributed greatly to the Scots language; but many French words came into Scots, and English too, long before the Alliance.
Even the small amount of French that most of us learned at school shows us where words like ashet, aumrie, tassie, dour, douce, disjune or fash came from. Robert Burns's collie Luath had a Gaelic name, but his face was bawsant: a French word. There could be no finer or prouder Scottish city than Aberdeen, but it has a French motto, Bon-Accord. Our best-loved festival of the year, Hogmanay, has a French name, although a present-day Frenchman might be puzzled to recognise the old French word aguillaneuf in its Scots descendant. And we all know what a person might hear in the streets and wynds of Edinburgh not so long ago, warning them to dodge out of the way of something flung out of a window: gardyloo, from garde l'eau! France was not Scotland's only friend among the countries of Europe: the Netherlands was one of our oldest trading partners. And many Scots words come from the Dutch language: our farms had (and perhaps a few still have) buchts, cavies, kesarts and haiks; a game as Scottish as gowf and a food as Scottish as a scone have Dutch names; even our craig, cuit, dowp and pinkie - or crannie if we come from the North-East - give a seasoning of Dutch to the language.
But the most important of all the languages that gave from their own abundance to the vocabulary of Scots was the Scandinavian. (The three Scandinavian languages of our own time, Norwegian, Swedish and Danish, are

even more closely related to each other than Scots and English: in the distant days when Scots, and English too, were adopting hundreds of words from the language of the plundering Vikings, the language which we call "Old Norse" was the tongue of all the Scandinavian kingdoms.) Lass and bairn are Norse words; neive, luif, lug and harns are Norse.

When we flit to a new house, when we take the gait over the brae, when we go to the kirk, when we come to lowsin time, when we call somebody a daft gowk, we use words from the old Scandinavian tongue. The many peoples with whom we Scots have had dealings through the long history o our kingdom have all given of their wealth to develop our mother tongue into the rich, colourful language we know today.

But a grave mistake of which far too many of us are guilty is to think that the Scots tongue is nothing but those fine words belonging uniquely to Scots, from Anglo-Saxon, Gaelic, French, Dutch or Norse, of which no Englishman or untrained Scot knows the meaning. Scots and English, as we have seen, are related; and the greater part of the vocabulary is shared between the two languages. Examine this verse from one of our (and the world's) best-loved songs. We twa hae paidl'd in the burn Frae morning sun till dine; But seas between us braid hae roar'd Sin' auld lang syne. Two words, burn and syne, are not to be found in English at all. A few - twa, hae, paidl'd, braid, auld, lang -are from the same roots as the words they mean in English, but the forms in the two languages show the changes from the ancestor language that we have already considered. And others - morning, sun, seas, roar'd - are identical to their English cognates. But all those words are equally part of the Scots tongue: none of them is either more or less Scots than any others. Scots is a complete language: not merely a catalogue of fine words. And this language is our awn heritage, to make or to mar. By the time John Barbour wrote his splendid epic poem of Robert Bruce in 1375, it was already the language of king an court; it was the language which one of the wisest and strongest of the Stewart kings, James I, used for his laws an Acts of Parliament, as well as his own poetry; it was the language of Henryson, Dunbar, and the poets of their time; and the language the shrewd and eloquent James VI took with him to London to harangue and scold the English parliament. Later in the songs of Ramsay, Fergusson and Robert Burns, and in the novels of Sir Walter Scott, the Borderer James Hogg an the Ayrshire lad John Galt - besides many lesser writers and a few almost as great - it appeared again among the richest tongues for learning and letters in Europe; and in the twentieth century and down to our own days it shines and blazes still, in the scholarly "Lallans" of MacDiarmid and the magnificent group of poets who followed in his footsteps (and if the like of Tom Scott and Alex Scott, Sydney Goodsir Smith, Douglas Young and Robert

Garioch are in a strange eclipse at present, there is no doubt whatever that such shining lights as they will blaze forth again before long), or in the more homely voices of Tom Leonard, Sheena Blackhall, Rhoda Butler and the crowd of poets from all regions. But Scots is not only a language for songs and tales: it is a language that people speak, every day in every part of the kingdom. The Glasgow patter, the Doric of the North-East, the lilt of Fife, the melody of the Borders: wherever you go you hear the tongue that MacDiarmid, Burns or Barbour would have known, even though the world they were part of has gone with last year's snow. And to keep the language alive, we must be proud of it: not reticent. The days when schoolchildren could get the belt for using a Scots word are gone: there is nothing to fear from using it, and if there still any of whit Lang Rob called "split-tongued, nerra-dowped sourocks" to be found who would mock the language, they must be shown that there is no place for them and their notions in the Scotland we live in today. We must speak it, sing it, teach it to our children: yes, and make our Parliamentarians pay heed to it as well. Scots is our mother tongue; and if we do not preserve it, nobody will preserve it for us.

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