Scots Language Centre

The Wedding in Scots

By Dr Dauvit Horsbroch

Becoming Engaged

The Scots word *wadding* (also spelled as *waddin* to reflect how it is pronounced) comes from the word *wad*, meaning 'to pledge'. So a *wadding* is a 'pledging'. This is also the reason that the Scots word for a mortgage is a *wadset*, literally 'to set in pledge' (*i.e.* pledging to pay back the money) or that *wad* can also be taken to mean a bet or stake, which is another way of pledging something on an outcome. Forms of the word *wad* can be found in all the Germanic languages with the same basic meaning.

Related to the word *wad* – in general meaning – is the word *tryst*. At the root of the word *tryst* is the meaning 'agree, appoint or pledge' to act a certain way or to do a thing. This is why in Scots couples are *trystit* when they promise to marry one another. In other words, they have agreed or pledged to become joined. It is the equivalent of the French word *engager* meaning to 'secure by a pledge'. Because *tryst* means 'agree or appoint' it is the word often used in Scots for an appointment or meeting, and we can also say a person is *trystit* when they are 'engaged', that is, hired to do a job. Whether we mean in Scots 'engaged to be married' or 'engaged to do a job' is clear from the particular context. Also, it was once a common practice that if a woman was *trystit* to a man, and the man later decided to marry another, then the man was liable to pay a forfeit for breaking off their *tryst*. For example, on 14 February 1583, the kirk session of St Andrews noted that

"The quhilk day, Alexander Caid oblisis him to pay to Jonet Dewar iij Li money, befoir he be mariit with Margret Crawfurd; and for the samyn sche remitis him all promis of mariage maid to hir."

(*The which day Alexander Caid obligated himself to pay £3 to Janet Dewar before he marries Margaret Crawford, in return for which Janet releases him from any promise to marry her*.)

In another example, this time from the Aberdeen kirk session register of 25 March 1621, the promise of marriage could involve a hefty sum if one or more of the parties changed their mind. But on this occasion the session recorded:

"Efter incalling of God, James Nauchtie, comperand personallie befoir the sessioun, declarit he wald not marie Mariorie Hendersone, nochtwithstanding of thair contract and proclamatioun of thair bandis, becaus he hes conducit him selff to gang to Bohemia to play the sogeor. Lykas the said James and Mariorie, with consent of James Hendersone, hir father, discharges ather of them the vther of all promeis of mariage: in respect quhairof the sessioun discharges the saidis pairtes and thair cautioneris of the penaltie of fourtie pundis incurrit be ather of thame for not accomplishing thair mariage.

(*After opening with prayer, James Naughtie, personally appearing before the session, declared he wouldn't marry Marjory Henderson, despite their contract and bands, because he had contracted to serve as a soldier in Bohemia (Czech country). Also, James and Marjory, with consent of Marjory's father James, release each other from their contract and so the session also releases both parties and their guarantors from the penalty of £40 for not completing the marriage*.)

The custom of pledging a *caution* ('cay-shin') or *wadding paund* (related to pawn) was usual for the parties wishing to be married. Each side was required to deposit a sum of money, or *baund* (written promise). If the marriage went ahead then a proportion of the *caution* or *paund* was paid to the poor of the parish and the rest of the sums deposited returned to the parties (generally after a year), and if the wedding did not take place the *paund* might be forfeit entirely. This custom remained in force in Scotland until the 19th century. One other example of this custom from earlier times is illustrated by an act passed by the kirk session of Stirling on 25 December 1622 which sought to regulate the system of *cautions*/*paunds*, penalties and activities of the couples and their friends. It touches on a number of issues related to weddings and is worth quoting in full:

Proclamationis of promesis of mariage. The present assemblie understanding diveris abusis to have bein usit be sindrie that makis promeis of mariage to utheris, and gevis up thair names to be proclamit; for remedy quhairof It is statut and ordeinit, that frathynefurth nane be proclamit quhill ilk partie that is parocchinaris of this kirk consing x lib in money, athir cunyeit or uncunyeit, for the better securitie, that nather of the parties sall fealye in completing of thair mariage within the space of fourtie days nixt, and immediatlie following the first day of ther proclamatione; quhilk if any of thame do, the partie fealyeand sall lois ther x lib consignit, and to be payit *ad pios usus*; and for the better securetie, that thay sall abstein fra all hurdum togithir, that thay and thair cumpanyes sall abstein fra all dansein on any part of the publict streitis of the toun: and that thair salbe na mair tane for ane man or ane womanis lawein on the day of thair mariage nor fyve shillingis, *etc*.

(*Proclamations of promise of marriage. The present assembly, understanding that various people have abused their promise of marriage to others after having their names proclaimed, therefore to remedy this have enacted and commanded that from this time on none be proclaimed until each party which is a parishioner of this church [Stirling] consigns £10 in money, either in coin or in kind, for better guarantee. That neither of the parties shall fail to complete their marriage within 40 days after, and immediately following the first day of their proclamation, which if any of them do, the party failing shall lose the £10 they consigned which will be used for pious causes. This also for the guarantee they will abstain from pre-marital sex, that they and their companies will abstain from dancing on any part of the public streets of the town, and that no more than five shillings shall be taken from any man or woman as a contribution towards the marriage day.*)

Getting Married

Marriage, or course, is originally a Latin word which came through French and means 'to join together'. In Scots it takes the form *mairrage* ('mair-idge') with the verb being to *mairry*, and the adjective and past tense either *mairried* or *mairrit* depending on dialect.

We make a distinction in Scots when it comes to the place of marriage, and whether it is *releegious* (religious) or *ceevil* (civil) in nature. If the place is a religious site and in communion with the Church of Scotland then we call the place of the wedding a *kirk* (church

in English), but if the wedding place is Roman Catholic or Episcopal we tend to refer to it as a *chaipel* ('chay-pul'). Otherwise the term in Scots for a generic church is simply the word *kirk*. Not so long ago it was common practice for those in the Church of Scotland to marry at home, in a public hall of some kind, or the *manse* of the officiating clergyman, while those of Catholic and Episcopal congregations nearly always married in chapels. In Scots we don't get married *in* a *kirk* or *chaipel* but instead get *mairried oot* them. So, for example, "John an Mary wis mairried oot the kirk o St Andra" (*John and Mary were married in the church of St Andrew*). In Scots it might be remarked (more traditionally for women) that those who give up work on marriage are "mairried oot" a job or trade. For example, "Mary wis mairried oot the factory" ('*Mary worked in a factory until the time she got married*').

In past times many *twasomes* ('couples') got married because the bride was *boukin* or *muckle boukit*, a social stigma being attached to an unmarried mother. In fact, until comparatively recent times in Scotland an unmarried mother was thought a source of great shame by a hypocritical society which often failed to apportion any 'blame' on the father. While it is certainly true that the minutes of the *kirk sessions* (equivalent to English parish councils) are full of citations of unmarried parents, it was usually the woman who bore the brunt of the interrogations, and often the men slipped the net, or left the area. *Boukin* is the word in Scots equivalent to the Latin *pregnant* ('to be born') and literally means 'body or bulk', so, in other words, 'embodied'. For a woman to be *muckle boukit*, meant that she was well into her pregnancy and literally, 'swollen with bulk'.

The person who has legally performed the marriage ceremony has varied somewhat over the years. Until the year 1560 marriages were performed by Catholic priests. However, in 1560, Scotland became a Reformed country when her parliament adopted a Calvinist doctrine and established the Church of Scotland, and so only Protestant ministers were legally allowed to perform marriage ceremonies. There were also periods when the monarchy attempted to re-introduce Episcopacy (meaning a church ruled by bishops) so Episcopal ministers also performed ceremonies, but they did not finally secure the legal freedom until 1712. Roman Catholic priests were unable to legally perform marriages in Scotland until Catholic Emancipation in 1829, though in practice they had been doing so in some areas for many years before. Various other religions have come to Scotland since the 19th century when it was recognised that all religions should be free to practice their beliefs and ceremonies, and in more recent times *ceevil* (civil) ceremonies performed by non-religious registrars have become common.

The person who performs a wedding ceremony in the Church of Scotland is called in Scots a *meenister*, from the Latin word *minister* 'one who serves or supplies', while the person who performs a Catholic ceremony is called a *priest*, a common Germanic word originating from the Latin *presbyter* and Greek *presbúteros* meaning 'elder'. It is for this reason that the brand of Calvinism that the Church of Scotland followed was called *Presbyterian* – 'church governed by elders'. Elders are laymen and women who are elected by the *kirk session* (parish council) to assist the *meenister*, carry out administration, and (traditionally) ensure that the doctrine and laws of the church are adhered to by the congregation.

The wedding itself, as previously noted, could be performed in a *chaipel, kirk, manse*, public hall or registrar's office, though today many more unusual venues have become possible. On the day the bride, groom and their parties, as well as guests (it is expected) dress in their best or wedding clothes, known in Scots as *wadding braws* while those attending the couple are known as the *wadding fowk* (wedding party). The bride may be said to be *bonnie buskit*, that

is, 'beautifully dressed' (literally 'prepared' or 'made ready') while the groom might be *swank* ('smart'). The groom is accompanied by his *allekay* ('best man') – from the old French *alaquais*, from which lackey also comes, probably meaning 'one who follows or assists'. The best man might also be called the *young-man* in northern Scotland). The bride meanwhile is accompanied by her *best maid* ('bridesmaid'). Until the vows are exchanged and the ceremony completed, the bride and groom are each of them *aesome* ('single') in status but then they become *mairried* or *mairrit*. It was always the custom in Scotland – and still so in legal terms today – that a woman does not lose her family name as in England, but continued to be known after marriage by her own name. So, for example, a Mary Cameron who married a John Stewart was still known in her neighbourhood as Mary Cameron. In legal documents she would be styled Mary Cameron or Stewart, the first name always being her own family name. She could also be referred to as Mary Cameron Mrs Stewart. This custom reflects the strength of kith, kin and family in an older Scotland and the concept that a man often joined his wife's kin group rather than simply the other way around. Kith and kin – and the strong local loyalties which once predominated– are well expressed in the Scots saying:

Better mairry ower the midden nor ower the muir.

(*Better marry among those you know than among strangers*).

On marriage the parents of a person's spouse become his *guid fowk* in Scots, or, in English, in-laws. Until at least the 19th century the term 'in-law' had a different meaning in Scots and was understood to mean step relation. So a *faither-in-law* in Scots actually meant a step-father. To express father-in-law, mother-in-law, brother or sister-in-law, we say in Scots *guid-faither*, *guid-mither*, *guid-brither* and *guid-sister*. Today, because of English influence (largely through the media), adoptive parents and siblings are known in Scots as 'step' rather than 'in-law', while the Scottish custom of women retaining their own name has become much neglected for the same reason.

Until the 19th century it was the custom (as in other lands) for the bride to bring either lands, goods, or commodities to the marriage. In Scots this is called the *tocher* which originally comes from an old Gaelic word *tochar*, meaning 'portion', and is equivalent to English dowry. To say in Scots that someone is *tochert* or *weel-tochert* generally means 'provided for' or 'well provided for' and is a phrase that could be applied to describe a number of situations. In former times when some married for property and money, the old saying advised "Mairry for love an wirk for siller" ('marry for love and work for money') as a warning against profitable, but loveless unions. Since the 19th century the usual custom has been for both the bride and groom's families (and wedding guests) to provide useful gifts as a way of helping the new couple to set up home and this is known by the general Scots term *plenish*, which means to 'furnish' or 'stock' and comes originally from the Latin word *plēnus* ('full'). So the furniture and belongings of the house are called the *plenishings* in Scots.

Of course, not only younger people, but also *weedas* (widows), *weedamen* (widowers) and divorcees get married and they often already have much to bring to the marriage, including baggage from former relationships. This is reflected in the Scots saying "He that mairries a weeda will affen hae a deid man's heid threw in his dish", which is a sharp way of saying a man who marries a widow will soon be told what was good for her former husband if the new one complains.

Customs and Traditions

For a long time the *meenisters* had to contend with competing marriage and wedding traditions practiced by the people of Scotland, which varied from region to region. One of these was the custom of *haunfasting* which was like a *wad* or *tryst* but meant that a couple had joined hands and agreed that they would live together as husband and wife for an agreed period (often a year) before an actual marriage ceremony. It was, in effect, cohabitation. In Scots we refer to cohabitees today as *bidie-ins*. If the couple did not feel the relationship was working, they were free to go their separate ways after the stated period, and if they had a child or children born of the relationship, the community recognised them as legitimate because the relationship had been recognised by the community as a trial marriage. It was precisely this relationship or trial marriage which Robert the Stewart (nephew of King David II) entered into with Elizabeth Muir in the 1330's. The church attempted to regulate the relationship and a papal dispensation was issued in 1347. Robert eventually succeeded as King Robert II in 1371 and because he had several children prior to the dispensation – now heirs to the throne – it is generally believed that this led to the establishment of the law in Scotland that children born outside a church-sanctioned marriage whose parents then later married in the church, became legitimate. However, after the Reformation of 1560, the church increasingly took the view that such relationships should be discouraged and that only pledges made in the face of the church should be recognised. So couples of got married outside their home parish, without banns, were subject to discipline by their own parish minister and their wedding dubbed 'an irregular marriage' which was usually confirmed once the couple had been rebuked.

The infamous custom of the *blacknin* is to be much feared by prospective bridegrooms (and even brides), whereby his 'friends' may take him out, strip him naked, tar and feather him, chain him to some public place, or have him driven around in an open vehicle for all to see and laugh at. Forms of the *blacknin* were also once practised on apprentices and other young men beginning a trade or new job, the *blacknin* being inflicted by boys and men who had already endured the humiliation. Stripping the victims and smearing them with dirt, grease or oil were common. The *blacknin* is now less practised, and is probably most associated today with the north of Scotland, and the North East in particular. So if you're getting married and your friends tell you "Ye're awa tae get a blacknin" you'll know to make yourself scarce.

Another custom which the church disapproved in former times was the *penny wadding* at which the guests contributed towards the wedding feast either with money or food and drink. If any money or food and drink were left over from the feast it was given to the newly married couple. This is touched on in an act of the kirk session of Stirling in 1622 (already mentioned above) which attempted to control the marriage festivities and the contributions towards the feasting. The kirk session laid down the rules for the marriage party:

...and thair cumpanyes sall abstein fra all dansein on any part of the publict streitis of the toun: and that thair salbe na mair tane for ane man or ane womanis lawein on the day of thair mariage nor fyve shillingis, *etc*.

(*...they and their companies will abstain from dancing on any part of the public streets of the town, and that no more than five shillings shall be taken from any man or woman as a contribution towards the marriage day.*)

The authorities were much concerned by drinking and the excuse for riotous activities at wedding feasts, particularly those at which anyone could attend if he or she contributed food, drink or money. The writer William Watt painted a vivid description of such a gathering in *The Tinkler's Waddin* of which the following is a selection:

Nae priest was there, wi' solemn face,
Nae clerk to claim o'crowns a brace;
The piper and fiddler played the grace,
To set their gabs a-steerin, O.
'Mang beef and mutton, port an' veal,
'Mang paunches, plucks, an' guid cow-heal,
Fat haggises, an' cauler jeel,
Thay claw'd awa careerin', O.

Fresh salmon, newly tae'n in Tweed,
Saut ling an' cod o' Shetland breed,
They worried till kytes were like to screed,
'Mang flaggins an'flasks o' gravy, O.
There was raisin kail, an' sweet-milk saps,
Wi' ewe-milk cheese in whangs an' flaps,
An' they rookit, to gust their gabs an' craps,
Richt mony a cadger's cavie, O.

The drink gaed dune before their drooth,
Which vex'd baith mony a maw an' mouth,
It damped the fire o' age an' youth,
An ilka heart did sadden, O.
Till three stout loons flew ower the fell,
At risk o' life, their drooth to quell,
An' robbed a neeborin' smuggler's stell,
To carry on the waddin, O.

Nowadays the wedding reception, known variously in Scots as the *wadding feast* or *wadding foy*, is a matter for the families alone to decide, and may be celebrated at any place, or in any fashion, though a hotel or family home is usual. Some couples might just opt for the *wadding brekfast* ('wedding breakfast'), intended as a simple, quiet get together of family and friends for a breakfast after a morning ceremony. And children might like to know that it is the custom at the *skailing* (ending of the event) for the wedding party to *poor-oot*, that is, scatter coins for the children immediately before the newly married couple *tak thair wa-gaun* (departure for new home or holiday).

Quick Reference to Wedding & Related Terms in Scots

Scots Word	**English Equivalent**
Aesome	Single
Allekay	Best man
Baund	Bond or written agreement
Best maid	Bridesmaid
Bidie-in	Cohabitee or partner
Blacknin	Pre-marriage ritual of humiliation
Boukin	Pregnant
Caution	Guarantee or monetary pledge
Ceevil	Civil
Chaipel	Chapel
Guid-brither	Brother-in-law
Guid-faither	Father-in-law
Guid-fowk	In-laws
Guid-mither	Mother-in-law
Guid-sister	Sister-in-law
Haunfasting	Trial marriage
In-law	Step relation
Kirk	Church
Mairrage	Marriage
Mairried or Mairrit	Married
Mairry	Marry
Manse	Official home of a church minister
Meenister	Minister/churchman
Muckle boukit	Heavily pregnant
Paund	Pawn or monetary pledge
Penny wadding	Wedding feast paid for by guests
Plenish(ing)	Furnish(ing)
Poor-oot	Scattering coins for children at reception
Releegion	Religion
Tocher	Dowry
Tochert	Provided for
Twasome	Couple
Tryst(it)	Engage(ed)
Wadding / Waddin	Wedding
Wadding braws	Wedding clothes
Wadding fowk	Wedding party
Wadding foy	Wedding celebration or reception
Wadset	Mortgage
Weeda	Widow
Weedaman	Widower
Young-man	Best man