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Gaelic, Scots and Gullane (1972)¹

Edited by Caroline Macafee, 2015

Editor's note: a lingering unacceptability of the term 'Scots' may explain an unexpected result from the question on Scots in the 2011 Census (the first Census in which such a question was included): the numbers claiming some skills in Scots are unexpectedly lower amongst the very eldest speakers (80 and over) than amongst those somewhat younger (Macafee, in progress).

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[45] At the recent conference on Scottish Language² a questioner addressed to me a question on the pronunciation of the word 'Gaelic'. Since I failed to answer this question as well as I ought to have done at the time, may I set the matter (as far as I can) to rights, by offering this short note, derived largely (as all such notes are bound to be) from the *Scottish National Dictionary*.

The native Gaelic-speaker's pronunciation has always been [ˈga:lɪk] with a long vowel, represented in spelling for example as *gaalic* (as by Neil Munro in the Para Handy stories). A fully naturalised Lowland version of this would be [ˈgalɪk], with a short vowel, represented in spelling, already in the eighteenth century, as *gal(l)ic(k)*. However, since the second half of the eighteenth century, the commonest Lowland pronunciation has been [ˈgelɪk], represented by the spelling *Gaelic* which is used by both Burns and Boswell. It seems most likely that this originated as a 'spelling-pronunciation' of *Gaelic* itself (compare also *Gael* for a member of the race in question); these having originated as genuine (but, as it turned out, ambiguous) attempts to reproduce the older native pronunciation. However this be, it seems certain that this pronunciation has remained predominant in the Lowlands till near the present time. Recently, however, perhaps under the influence of an increase in interest in the Celtic languages and their culture and the spread of this through such media as broadcasting, fashion seems to be swinging back to the older (and more genuinely native) forms, either as *gaalic* or as *gallick*,³ the former and (in the English of the Lowlands) less fully naturalised form being preferred by the Gaels themselves as well as by others so interested in their language as to be highly aware of the exact native pronunciation, the more fully naturalised English form *gallick* being used by others. Still others again continue to use the form *Gaelic*. Since the recent *gaalic/gallick* fashion is inspired by this fairly specialised cultural interest, it seems probable that it has originated in, and may still be mainly current among, the educated classes, perhaps those specially concerned with the humanities. On the other hand it does seem to be gaining ground among middle-class Scottish speakers generally and it may be that

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² The conference referred to was held in Edinburgh on 20 November 1971 by the Association for Scottish Literary Studies, on the subject of Scottish Language. It was, as AJA comments in the Preface to *Lowland Scots*, "remarkably enough, ... perhaps the first on its theme ever held" (1973: 2).

³ I.e. as pronunciations, not as spellings.

eventually the long fashionable *Gaelic* will become a stigma of uneducated and working-class speech, and *gaalic/gallick* the ‘educated’ or ‘well-informed’ pronunciation.

There is a partial parallel in the history of *Scots* and *Scotch*. *Scots* is the old native form (both as noun and adjective and both as designating the language as well as in the more general application). In the eighteenth century the fashion for speaking English ‘with propriety’, i.e. in as anglicised a fashion as possible, led the Scottish *literati* to prefer the English form *Scotch*. This remained the normal polite form well through the nineteenth century, and is still used freely by no less a person than Sir James Murray himself, in his classic *Dialect of the Southern Counties of Scotland* (1873). However, since the later nineteenth century, educated Scots have reacted strongly against this form, whether for reasons of patriotism or, just conceivably, social snobbery (see below) is not clear. In 1918, accordingly, as the *Scottish* ^[46] *National Dictionary* reminds us, the ‘Scotch Education Department’ had its name changed by Act of Parliament to ‘Scottish’! I myself was carefully trained at school in the thirties of this century to say *Scots* or *Scottish* (but never it was said, except for whisky, tweed or sweets, *Scotch*). Meantime, however, the once fashionable and pretentious *Scotch*, thus recently dethroned, had already passed into vernacular and working-class Scots (Scottish, or Scotch!) usage, and there largely ousted the native *Scots*. By our own time and that of George Douglas Brown and James Leslie Mitchell,⁴ the working-class Scotsman’s word had become and still remains *Scotch*, *Scots* being a badge of narrow doped split-tongued sourocks (according to Long Rob of the Mill in the Chris Guthrie wedding episode in *Sunset Song*).⁵ Perhaps ere long the forthright, honest, down-to-earth Scot will insist similarly that the good old unpretentious everyday name is *Gaelic*, none of your highfalutin, ‘tatty-peelin’ or ‘Portibelly English’ *gaalic* or *gallick*. Just so, too, [ˈgɪlɪn] ‘gillin’, the traditional local dialect pronunciation of *Gullane*, has become ‘polite’ usage whereas what was originally an ignorant outsider’s spelling-pronunciation, [ˈgʌlɪn] ‘gullin’, is now the unpretentious local form.

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⁴ Better known as Lewis Grassie Gibbon.

⁵ For the quotation, see ‘The good old Scots tongue: does Scots have an identity?’ (1981, 2015: n. 18) in the present edition.