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## INTRODUCTION

*James Robertson*

In this book you will find Scots in great variety depicting life; and a great variety of life depicted in Scots. From the outset my intention as editor has been to treat with equal respect, and as equally valid, the literary, colloquial, urban, rural, dense, thin, coarse and fine varieties of the language; but also, to look beyond the language to what it speaks of, to see how it engages with the present. If on turning through these pages some readers are surprised, affronted or confused to find language which, in their view, is not 'true' or 'proper' Scots, or perhaps not even Scots at all, I make no apology for that. There is, I believe, a shared base for all the stories here: they are rooted in a language system which, for all its variations, is common to the Borders, Lowlands, South-west, North-east, east-coast Highlands and northern Islands of Scotland. It is important, in appreciating this language, not to surrender the bulk of the territory to English and classify Scots as a minority in its own country, holed up in a number of small, isolated and ever-shrinking pockets. Narrow definitions based on ideas of 'pure dialect', or where the Doric or Lallans is set up against 'debased', 'gutter' or 'urban patois' Scots, do nothing to strengthen people's confidence in their own way of speaking and thinking.

These stories offer no simple answer to the question,

how does one transcribe the Scottish voice? In my view there is no such thing as *the* Scottish voice. In asking writers to submit stories in Scots, I made it clear that I was using the term as broadly, as loosely, as possible. The aim was to reflect the use of language from Shetland to Selkirk, from Ayrshire to Aberdeen, and also to reflect both real and imagined life in contemporary Scotland. The diversity of what I received surpassed all expectations.

Rather than enter into a lengthy debate on the definition of Scots, I would prefer to quote this admirably clear and largely uncontentious passage by Norman MacCaig, in his Note on the Author introducing Hugh MacDiarmid's *Scottish Eccentrics* (1972 and 1993 editions):

Now Scots, it must be observed, is not English badly spelled; nor is it a dialect of English. To simplify, but not in a direction away from the truth: the Scots language was a development – and by now is a degeneration – of the Anglian branch of what is called Old English, and was originally spoken from the Forth to the Humber – that's to say, on both sides of the Border. The Saxon branch to the South flourished and became what we call English. With the establishment of the Border, the Anglian branch developed as Scots. Scots and English, therefore, are cousin languages with a common ancestor, and it is as absurd to call Scots a dialect of English as it would be to call English a dialect of Scots.

It is sometimes claimed, but is manifestly untrue, that Scots is not really spoken or understood by the majority of people in Scotland. Reports of its death have been many down the years, and always they have been exaggerated. For example, Dean Ramsay, writing in 1857, had this to say:

I can remember a peculiar Scottish phrase very commonly used, which now seems to have passed away. I mean the expression "to let on," indicating the notice or observation of something, or of some person. For example, "I saw Mr. — at the meeting, but I never let on that I knew he was present." A form of expression which has been a great favourite in Scotland in my recollection has much gone out of practice – I mean the frequent use of diminutives, generally adopted either as terms of endearment or of contempt. Thus it was very common to speak of a person whom you meant rather to undervalue, as a *mannie*, a *boddie*, a *bit boddie*, or a *wee bit mannie*.

Both these examples of Scots idiom that apparently died out a hundred and fifty years ago are still flourishing, as most Scots could attest. Anyone who cares to listen for the language will hear it virtually anywhere in Scotland, "in the factories and fields, in the streets o' the toon" in Hugh MacDiarmid's words, even if the voices using it are not, as he had hoped, speaking his poetry. Its increasingly common use in the theatre and on radio and television has also been a feature of the last ten or fifteen years. If we start from the premise that Scots is alive and well and in a majority, then a very different message replaces the mixture of pessimism and nostalgia which is contained in the usual well-worn farewell. And it is that vitality, the need and wish to address real situations imaginatively and with confidence, that I was hoping to attract in setting up this anthology.

Even for Scottish people who, for reasons of class, education, profession or location, speak what appears to be English, there is often the framework of another language below it, influencing it and pulling it in certain directions.

The poet and novelist Ron Butlin, in an interview in *Cenrastus* No. 24, talked of how he turned to Scots at a crucial phase in his writing:

I was living in a huge emotional turmoil, I always had been. And then suddenly I go right back to the beginning. In this sudden discovery, or re-discovery of the whole sound-world of the Scots language I had known and felt as a child, I was able to draw on an emotional life and point of view that I recognised as mine . . . I think that the Scots language put me in touch with parts of myself that English couldn't reach. And, Scots having opened them out, then English can get to them.

If for many the experience is less dramatic it is no less real. Nor is the tension simply between adulthood and childhood: every day, people switch between registers in their speech, according to different situations. This is, of course, not unique to Scotland, although here the switches may be more frequent. Moreover, the standard register against which other registers were once measured is rapidly losing its authority: English as spoken by the upper classes of England is so far from being 'standard' these days that increasingly it is – and should be – seen as just one of the many forms of world English.

The language question has been bothering Scottish writers for a very long time. It was at the heart of the modern Renaissance spearheaded by the work of MacDiarmid, since that movement attacked the roles that had been handed out to English and Scots (and Gaelic) over the preceding two centuries: English was for seriousness, for moral and intellectual discourse, high culture, narrative in fiction; Scots was for humour, sentimentality, nostalgia,

slavishly Burnsian verse, dialogue in fiction. MacDiarmid's achievement, as Norman MacCaig explains, was to make Scots burst out of the kailyard where it had been banished:

By our time, however, Scots had weathered into dialects of itself, and its vocabulary had become sadly impoverished. Hugh MacDiarmid set himself the enormous task of establishing "a full canon of Scots" by enriching the vocabulary with whatever words suited his purpose, even if they had been obsolete for centuries. A queer marriage this, you might say, of the dying with the dead. The odd thing is, it worked, for him if not for others, which only goes to show that you can strike water from the rock if your name is Moses.

In an interview in *Scottish Marxist* (No. 10, Winter 1975) MacDiarmid said:

I fell in love with the Scots language and I tried to extend it . . . It was like a revelation when I wrote my first poem in Scots . . . I must have tapped some resource deep within myself.

This is the description of a poet searching, not for a language that can do everything, but for "darchie sesames, and names for nameless things." Scots, he believed – and he proved himself correct – can go into places closed to English, just as English can go into places closed to Scots. That this should apply to prose as well as to poetry is a natural development of MacDiarmid's vision of extending all language.

However, the literary rehabilitation of Scots effected in the 1920s and 1930s was most obvious in poetry. With some notable exceptions – Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Scots*

*Quair*, some twenty stories produced by MacDiarmid himself, and, later, the work of Robert McLellan – prose fiction was not an area explored with much confidence by exponents of Scots. It is only in the last two decades that a substantial body of Scots prose and, within that category, fiction, has begun to appear.

The linguistic scope of the stories in this book, and of others by writers not included here (James Kelman and Jessie Kesson come to mind), demonstrates how Scottish accent, syntax and vocabulary – Scottish voices, in fact – may quite readily be transcribed in different forms ranging from dense Scots to (relatively) ‘standard’ English. One writer who, while supportive of the project, did not in the end submit a story for this book, Duncan McLean, told me that he never wrote anything phonetically, “believing that Standard English spelling stands equally for all dialects – I’m not willing to let Standard spelling become any more firmly associated with any single accent/dialect than it is already.” This view begs the question, whether grammar and vocabulary in a piece ostensibly written in English are sufficient indicators of Scots. In many instances, including McLean’s own writing, the answer would probably be yes.

The best example of this is to be found in Lewis Grassie Gibbon’s *Scots Quair* trilogy: on the page it presents no great difficulties to even the most anglophonic of readers, but if read aloud it demands to be heard in “the speak of the Mearns.” In an essay on this work in *Chapman* No. 23/24, John Burns comments: “Language for Gibbon was a living medium capable of being re-shaped by each individual without losing its vital and essential function in a community.” This statement is in a sense a definition of the act of creative writing; and it has a particular relevance in a community where how words are spoken has for so long

been dissociated from how words are written. It might be argued that much of what appears in this book is also a far cry from how words are spoken, but all written language is representation and it seems to me that representation in Scots is as valid and valuable as representation in English. But there is another, crucial factor, that goes beyond phonetics: a writer’s decision to reject English forms in favour of Scots ones is, often consciously, a political decision. The motive may be oppositional or affirmative, or both, in terms of class, culture or nationality, but it is inherently political.

Sometimes the accusation has been made that Lallans is the preserve of middle-class people who are desperate to acquire the cultural badge of Scottishness which they feel their anglicised speech patterns deprive them of, and that its literary achievements are therefore highly artificial and reflect certain individual cultural neuroses more than a genuine voice of Scotland. (It could however be retorted that this is, in a country beset with political and cultural dichotomies, frustrations and stresses, a perfectly legitimate form of artistic expression.) In interviews in *Edinburgh Review* No. 77 Tom Leonard articulates the scepticism against Lallans most forcefully:

I know that over the years I have got very annoyed at what I see as a middle-class appropriation of Scots who then finger-wag working-class Scots, particularly in the West of Scotland, as not being, you know, pure Scots speakers . . . .

I always felt that a lot of these people had been to a fee-paying school and then had to go and learn how to speak ‘Scottish’. I had more Scottish words in my mouth in five minutes than they would have in a year, you know. These would be the same people who would be

wagging their finger at me and telling me how to be Scottish and so on.

There is too much truth in what Leonard says for it to be denied completely. Nonetheless, the influence on Scots writing of a few individuals who are obsessed about standardised spelling systems or determined somehow to keep 'bad' language out of their representation of vernacular speech, should not be overestimated. Perhaps the nature of language itself is the best protection against such meddling – if restricted by artificial means, its growth tends to shoot off in unexpected directions.

There is a wide variety of approaches in these stories to problems of Scots orthography, and I have not sought to eliminate these. One argument against a standardisation of Scots spelling is that one of the language's very strengths lies in its flexibility and its less-than-respectable status: writers turn to it because it offers a refuge for linguistic individualism, anarchism, nomadism and hedonism. What has often been perceived as a fatal weakness may in fact be the secret of its resilience and survival against four hundred years of creeping anglicisation. If there are inconsistencies – to adapt Walt Whitman – very well then, there are inconsistencies: the language contains multitudes.

William McIlvanney has spoken of Scots as being like English in its underwear, stripped of all pretensions, and in some respects this is very apt. Used largely by the working class, both urban and rural (though not exclusively – it is a myth that no middle-class people speak Scots), it consequently carries a very different set of political and cultural values from English, the language in which government and the Establishment make their voices heard. In a letter to *The Glasgow Herald* in 1946, complaining about a flippanant

editorial piece on "Plastic Scots", MacDiarmid made the point that the question of language could not easily be separated from that of class:

It is not the case that modern Scots poets have invented new words to eke out their vocabulary. Nor is it the case that they have had undue recourse to Jamieson's Dictionary. Most of them write on the solid basis of the speech they first spoke as children and were familiar with in their homes – the speech incidentally, of the vast majority of the Scottish working class still, and, judging by the scant headway made against it by English during the past two centuries, likely to remain so!

The real reason for developing, encouraging and using Scots is not that it should articulate *everything*, but that it can articulate things which, for whatever reason, English cannot, or which writers and speakers *feel* are beyond English. As has already been mentioned, opting for different registers is an entirely natural linguistic process in which most people engage on a daily basis. The crux of the matter is the relationship between Scots and English. As close cousins, they already possess many similar or overlapping characteristics. This, in the late 20th century, is highly unlikely to be reversed, even in the event of a new political relationship between Scotland and England. There are, presumably, still a few pipedreamers with visions of an independent Scotland in which the citizens all speak either Gaelic or Lallans, or both. Realistically, it seems to me, the future for Scots lies in exploiting its close relationship with English, in generating positive, progressive energy from that juxtaposition and the tensions it creates. The ability of people to renew their *spoken* language by such means is not in doubt; the knock-on effect on *written* Scots should be

equally dynamic. The stories contained in this book are strong indicators that this process is already in train.

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