

REVIEW ESSAY: THE FUTURE OF THE SCOTS LANGUAGE

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We are very fortunate in Scotland to have no fewer than three languages (or four if you include Latin), all with distinguished literatures, which are part of our national identity. The memorial window to George Buchanan in Greyfriars' Kirk in Edinburgh claims, not unjustly, that Scotland was the final barrier against the Roman Empire, but was also the last refuge of Latin eloquence. Both Gaelic and Scots are rich in song. John Galt said that the Scots had great resources of expression because of the 'fortunate circumstance' of 'possessing the whole range of the English language as well as their own' (Galt 1978, p.21). Lord Cockburn was 'really sorry for the poor one-tongued Englishman' (Cockburn 1872, p. 274). That is the right attitude. We should take pleasure and benefit from our linguistic richness and neither apologise for it nor think of it as a problem.

But, particularly with Scots, there are still people who are reduced to embarrassment or inarticulacy because of a complex about language. You can blame the schools, but they have only reflected the attitudes of society. In the past, they have made great efforts to suppress both Gaelic and Scots and implant a uniform English. Their method (apart from, in its time, the tawse) has been to make the bairns ashamed of the language of their parents. The psychological damage which this must have done is horrifying. I say particularly Scots because, unlike Gaelic, it is so close to English, with which it shares a common origin and much common vocabulary, that its opponents believe that they can treat it as simply incorrect English. This is an attitude which betrays an ignorance of linguistic history, but that does not stop them.

Of course, attitudes are changing. Scots has been retreating in daily use under the pressure of radio and television; but it has also been making notable advances both in literature and scholarship. When R.L.Stevenson published

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Underwoods in 1887, he said in the Introduction to his admirable poems in Scots: 'The day draws near when this illustrious and malleable tongue shall be quite forgotten'. It's no deid yet for a that. As George Bruce says in his poem about the attempted burial of Scots (1987, p.77):

She's jinkit again,
the bitch.'
said the man with the spade.

Since Severson, Scots poetry has not only persisted vigorously, but has extended its range and reached new heights in the work of Hugh MacDiarmid, William Soutar, Sydney Goodsir Smith, Violet Jacob, Robert Garioch, Alexander Scott, Tom Scott and scores of others up to the present day. There have also been such notable works in prose as Lorimer's translation of the New Testament and the short stories and plays of Robert McLellan.

Scholarly resources have been given a solid base in the ten volumes of the **Scottish National Dictionary** and in the continuing work on the **Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue**. The data which they have collected has been used in a whole family of dictionaries, of which the latest is the **Electronic Scots School Dictionary**, launched in April. Many books about the language have been published and several of them in the last few months. The most substantial (and most expensive; it costs £150) is **The Edinburgh History of the Scots Language**, edited by Charles Jones and published by Edinburgh University Press. This impressive book shows the width and depth of modern scholarship on the language. There are contributions from academics, not only in Scotland, but in Canada, the United States, Hungary, Finland, Germany and Australia. The Saltire Society has recently published two short books: a revised edition of Derick McClure's **Why Scots Matters** (£6.99) and **A Scots Grammar** by David Purves (£7.99). The first of these is a succinct and classic account of the nature and history of the language which McClure describes as 'a unique national possession, a highly distinctive and expressive tongue which is also the vehicle for a literature of great antiquity, merit and durability'. David Purves's grammar is full of examples of Scots usage which are so well chosen that anyone who lives in Scotland and keeps his or her ears open will recognise with a shock of delight. It is perhaps the first grammar of any language which is a sheer pleasure to read. Purves says that his book is only a modest first step, offered in the spirit that 'bannocks is better nor nae breid'; but it is a good start. He has also written a paper for the Scottish Centre for Economic and Social Research, (17 Maiden Street, Peterhead AB42 6EE), **The Way Forward for the Scots Language** (£4.00),

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which proposes a realistic policy to accord Scots the status which it deserves. This will make an excellent brief for the members of the Scottish Parliament.

The most recent of such books is **The Scots Language: its Place in Education**, edited by Liz Niven and Robin Jackson and published by Northern College (Dundee Campus), Gardyne Road, Dundee, DD5 1NY (£11.95). This brings together 16 papers which look at the language from a variety of points of view. Two of its most eloquent advocates state the reasons for its value and importance, Derick McClure and Billy Kay (whose book, **Scots: The Mither Tongue**, published by Mainstream in 1986, is also indispensable). There are papers by people responsible for relevant institutions: the Scots Language Resource Centre, the Scots Dictionary Association, the Consultative Council on the Curriculum, the Examination Board and the Education Department of the Scottish Office. A number of teachers with experience of teaching Scots give their views. There is a great deal of interest in all of this, but perhaps the most significant sentence in the whole book is in the Foreword by Sam Galbraith M.P., Minister for the Arts in the Scottish Office. He says of Scots: 'It is part of our cultural heritage and, if we value that heritage, we need to cherish the language and aim to see it used with respect and sensitivity'. This is the most forthcoming statement on the matter which I have seen from a Government minister. Others, such as Donald Dewar and Calum MacDonald, have brushed it aside as no language at all and as a matter of no importance.

An important advance for Scots in the schools, and the point of departure of this book, was the publication by the Scottish Education Department in 1991 of the **Guidelines on English Language** for the ages 5-14. This emphasised the value of 'the language that children bring to school'. The papers in the book by teachers suggest that a literal interpretation of this well-intentioned phrase may defeat the object. In the first place, the language which children bring to school may not be Scots at all, but a mixture of scraps of Australian, Brooklyn and Cockney, acquired from television. It is one thing to avoid deriding the mother tongue of the children and so destroying their self-esteem; it is another to go to the opposite extreme and accept that anything goes. Some of our novelists already seem to act on this principle. The end result is likely to do more to destroy Scots than to preserve it.

In his paper, John Hodgart argues that teachers should 'jist accept that the "best" Scots is whit the local weans bring to their ain schuil'. Otherwise, 'they will come tae feel that "Scots" is as alien tae them as posh English'. Matthew Fitt is against the idea that 'the obvious way into Scots is through a few Scots poems and stories. ... Nobody would dream of starting a class off learning German with an anthology of Rilke's poems'.

These papers make it very obvious that there are two distinct approaches to Scots in the school. Is the avoidance of damage to self-esteem and self-expression the only objective? Or, in the words of Sam Galbraith, do we want 'to cherish the language and see it used with respect and sensitivity'? Part of the difficulty lies in the belief that Scots has so far degenerated into a number of dialects that teaching must be based on one of them. In fact, this is not the case. Scots is no more divided into dialects than most other languages. The language as it is used in most literature and in poetry and song, in particular, has been essentially consistent for centuries. Of course, some words become obsolete and others are created, as in any other living language.

Scots is worth studying because it expresses certain aspects of the Scottish situation and the Scottish character better than any other and because it gives access to a literature of particular value to us for the same reason. It is a precious asset for its own sake because of its qualities. Few other languages, if any, are so rich in words where the very sound conveys the meaning, which is why it is so powerful a medium for poetry and drama. I mean such words as *snell*, *dreich*, *slaister*, *splairge*, *forfochen*, *sonsy*, *braw*, *fushionless*. As in learning any language, including English of course, the study requires effort and the conscious expansion of vocabulary. This need not be inconsistent with a sympathetic response to the 'language which children bring to school' and to dialectical variations; but the aim should be the expansion, not the restriction, of linguistic resources. We should also cultivate the sheer pleasure of the expressive sound and infinite associations of the language. I think that the aim should be ability to handle at least two of our languages along with some acquaintance, if no more, with the third. Bi- or tri-lingualism is a positive asset in widening the mind and improving the ability to communicate. It is easily acquired by children from the languages spoken around them and it makes it easier to acquire other languages later on. Scots is a useful bridge to several other European languages.

I speak of bilingualism because our schools will, of course, continue to teach English. In consequence of the extent of the British Empire in the past and (as David Hume forecast) of American power in the present, English has become an almost universal means of international communication. The very success of English in this respect also has disadvantages. Since it is the language of mass commercialism, tourism and entertainment, it tends to be reduced to the basic level of the lowest common denominator. The vitality and richness of the vocabulary of Scots can restore some character and colour, some *birr* and *smeddum*. Here the affinity of Scots and English is an advantage because they can readily intermingle in varying degrees.

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Discrimination against 'unofficial' languages to the point where their survival is threatened is very widespread. Scotland is by no means unique in this regard. With some honourable exceptions such as Switzerland, governments tend to be monolingual and opposed to linguistic diversity because that makes life easier for them. All over the world languages are dying. It is now widely recognised that the loss of a language, as with the loss of an animal or plant species, is an impoverishment of all of us. Every language embodies a particular response to human experience which has its own interest and value.

In recent years there has been a strong international response to this problem. The most ambitious is the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights which was approved in Barcelona on 6 June 1996 at a meeting of 220 representatives from 90 countries and all five continents. This was the culmination of nine years of preparation in which the Scottish Centre of International PEN was closely involved. It began at a PEN Congress in Lugano in 1987. On behalf of Scottish PEN, I tabled a resolution which proposed that International PEN (which is a world-wide organisation of writers) should extend its activities beyond the defence of the right of free speech to the rights of languages. Although we had not been in consultation in advance, the Catalans had a similar resolution. We combined them and the joint resolution was adopted without opposition and only one or two abstentions which included English PEN.

The Catalans, with the enthusiastic support of their Government, led subsequent developments. They organised a series of international meetings in which not only PEN centres, but organisations and university departments in many countries, were involved and which drafted the Universal Declaration. One of the organisations was UNESCO (the United Nations organisation concerned with education, science and culture), and their representatives at the signature in Barcelona undertook to work for an intergovernmental agreement on similar lines for presentation to the General Assembly of the UN. Since the Declaration calls for a full panoply of rights in administration, justice, education and the media for 'language communities and lesser but substantial rights for 'language groups', this is likely to be a slow process. Many governments will certainly resist and argue for a text, if there has to be a text at all, which is less precise and demanding.

There is, however, already another intergovernmental Treaty on the subject which applies in Europe and which is much more flexible. This is the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages approved by the Council of Europe in November 1992. It is a flexible agreement in two senses. First of all, it allows governments on ratification to declare to which languages it applies in their territory. Secondly, they are also free to choose

under each heading (administration, justice, education, media and so on) the degree of support along a wide sliding scale. To the shame both of the previous Conservative, and the present Labour, Government, Britain has not yet ratified. According to press reports, this is now contemplated, but only for Scottish and Irish Gaelic (in Northern Ireland) and Welsh. Even this is said to have been delayed in case the Unionists are upset by a reference to Irish Gaelic in Northern Ireland. If Ulster Scots were also included, as it should be, the Government could appear more even handed.

Why has there been no mention of Scots or of its offspring in Ulster? It was the same in 1995 when the Conservative government replied to a request from the Council of Europe for a report about the situation of 'regional or minority languages' in each country. Again no mention of Scots. No doubt, British Governments have been relying on a clause in the Charter which says that it does not apply to 'dialects of the official language(s)'. Scots shares a common origin with English; but it cannot be dismissed as a dialect because of its centuries of separate development, its use for most of that period as the official language of Scotland, its extensive literature and the fact that it is understood or used by a large part of the Scottish people.

This is where Sam Galbraith has an opportunity to prove that he means what he says in the Foreword which I quoted above. The ratification of the Charter and the specification of both Gaelic and Scots need not commit the Government doing much more for each language than it already does (although I hope that might follow); but mere specification would give both languages the encouragement of the international recognition which they deserve.

Incidentally, many Gaels, as can be seen from quite frequent letters to the press, object to the term, Scots, because they think that it implies that this is the only language of Scotland. I think that we should call it Lallans. That was good enough for Burns and Stevenson and it should be good enough for the rest of us.

The Scottish Parliament will have to evolve a language policy and do far more for Gaelic and Lallans than British Governments have ever done in the past. It would be a helpful, a gracious and a long overdue gesture, if the British Government would now prepare the way by the ratification of the European Charter in respect of both languages.

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POSTSCRIPT

On 4 June, in a written parliamentary answer, the Government announced that they proposed to sign the European Charter and to specify Gaelic under Part III. Scots, they said, would be 'covered by Part II'. The significance of this is that Part III deals with measures which it is proposed to adopt. Part II is a statement of objectives and principles. There is nothing in the Charter which suggests that it is possible to specify a language under Part II only.

This is certainly progress, especially as far as Gaelic is concerned. For Scots, the Government seems to be trying to avoid commitment, but they are apparently reluctant to say so clearly. How can they justify such radically different treatment of the two languages? Scots, after all, has an even more substantial literature than Gaelic and is understood and spoken by more people.

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