

# History of Scots

**From the Middle Ages to the present day**

## 1. What is the Scots language?

The Scots Language is one of the three indigenous languages of Scotland. Scotland's other languages are English and Gaelic. English is used throughout Scotland, while Gaelic is used mostly in the Highlands and the Western Isles. Scots is spoken throughout the Lowlands, in the Scottish cities, and in the Northern Isles.

Scots has often been misunderstood as slang, or as corrupt or inferior English. It isn't widely known that Scots is a Germanic language in its own right, or that it is a sister language to English, with which it shares a common ancestor in Anglo-Saxon. It isn't always appreciated that Scots has some 60,000 unique words and expressions, that it is the language of a magnificent, centuries-old literature, or that it was once a language of state used by kings, politicians and ordinary people alike.

Scots is spoken on a continuum: this means that some people use more, and some people use less. Some of us use the occasional word or expression, such as wee, scunner, bonny, wean, peedie or peely-wally. Others speak in rich, braid Scots - replete with its own unique pronouns, prepositions, grammar and word-order.

There are many different varieties of Scots. Some of these have names of their own, and they are sometimes known as 'dialects'. It is important not to confuse dialects of Scots with dialects of English, or to imagine that Scots is a dialect of English. The dialects of Caithness, Orkney or Shetland are varieties of Scots. The language used in the North East of Scotland and known as the Doric is a variety of Scots. Scots is also the name that we use for the distinctive language used in the cities of Dundee, Edinburgh or Glasgow. Scots is the name for the language used in parts of Dumfries and Galloway, in Ayrshire, or in the Scottish Borders.

It is a common myth that speakers of one variety of Scots cannot understand those who speak another variety. While there are differences between dialects, and there are words that are unique to particular parts of Scotland, speakers of Scots from one part of Scotland can generally communicate very easily with Scots speakers from other areas. In the 2011 government census, about a million and a half people noted that they use and understand Scots to some degree.

The fact that Scots and English are considered 'sister' languages doesn't mean that Scots isn't a language in its own right. Many other modern European languages are similar to one another, but are still considered to be individual languages. Danish and Norwegian are like this, for example, and so are Dutch and Flemish. French, Italian and Spanish all have their roots in the Latin language, and they share many similarities, including a huge amount of common vocabulary.

As one linguist famously put it, 'A language is a dialect with an army and a navy' (Max Weinreich), meaning that the distinction between a 'language' and a 'dialect' is in many cases largely a political one. Scots has a vast range of vocabulary. Scots has a different history, a wide variety of unique grammatical features, a huge store of idiomatic expressions, and a number of sounds that are never used in English. For these reasons, most linguists and academics today agree that Scots is a language in its own right.

### Audio resources

- Listen to an audio version of this resource here: <http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/curriculumareas/languages/scotslanguage/supportmaterials/historyofscots/what.asp>

## 2. The beginnings of the Scots Language - Scots during the Middle Ages

The Scots Language came into being – and came into its own – during the Middle Ages. It was at this time that what had been a northern variety of the Anglo-Saxon (or Old English) language developed into Scots as we know it, and took over from Gaelic as the main language of the monarchs, nobles and peasants of Lowland Scotland. By about the year 1450, Scots had taken over from Latin as the main language for all official documents and literature in Scotland as well.

Scots was the language of state in Scotland during the Middle Ages. After 1462, the statutes - or laws - of the Scottish Parliament were recorded in Scots. Here is a colourful example from the reign of James IV:

Item, as tuiching the articule of goldsmythtis, quhilkis layis and makkis false mixtouris of ewill metale, coruppand the fyne mettall of gold and silver in dissate of oure soverane lord and his liegis that gerris mak werkkis of golde and silver, for reformacioune and eschewing of the sammyn, it is now avisit and concludit that na goldsmythtis sall mak mixtour nor put false layis in the said mettallis.

[Item, as touching the article of goldsmiths, who debase and make false mixtures of bad metal, corrupting the fine metal of gold and silver, deceiving our sovereign lord and his lieges who have them create pieces in gold and silver, for the remedy and eschewing of the same, it is now advised and concluded that goldsmiths shall not make mixtures or put false alloys in the said metals.]

*From the Statutes of the Scottish Parliament, 18th February 1490.*

As well as being used for official purposes in the Scottish Parliament, Scots was also used by poets and storytellers in the Middle Ages. The medieval Wars of Independence were written about in Scots. A mysterious poet known only as Blind Harry composed the tale of William Wallace in verse – his long poem is called *The Wallace*. Slightly later in the fourteenth century, John Barbour, an archdeacon from Aberdeen, wrote an epic poem called *The Brus*, commemorating the leadership and heroism of Robert the Bruce during the Wars of Independence. *The Brus* is written entirely in Scots. These are some of its best-known lines:

A! fredome is a noble thing!  
Fredome mays man to haiff liking.  
Fredome all solace to man giffis,  
He levys at es that frely levys.

[Ah! Freedom is a noble thing!  
Freedom allows man to have happiness.  
Freedom gives great solace to man;  
He who lives freely lives at ease.]  
*Bk. 1, line 225.*

Much of the great literature of the Middle Ages in Scotland was connected to the royal court. Many of Scotland's monarchs were themselves poets, or 'makars', as they are known in Scotland. James I was Scotland's first poet king. While he was imprisoned in England, he wrote a long Scots poem called *The Kingis Quair* (*The King's Book*).

The Scottish monarchs also promoted poetry and culture by employing court poets, who would write poems on all kinds of topics. These poems would then be performed for the entertainment of the court. The most famous of the medieval makars was William Dunbar, who was the court poet of King James IV. Dunbar was able to produce beautiful devotional poetry on the one hand, and shocking yet hilariously rude 'flytings' on the other. Dunbar was unusual as a medieval poet because he sometimes wrote about quirky or personal topics, as in this verse from a poem about a recurrent migraine:

My heid did yak yester nicht,  
This day to mak that I na mycht,  
So sair the magryme dois me menyie,  
Perseing my brow as ony ganyie,  
That scant I luik may on the licht.

[My head did ache last night,  
So that today I couldn't write,  
So badly does the migraine torment me,  
Piercing my brow like a crossbow bolt,  
That I can hardly look at the light.]

Note the Scots word 'heid', the fricative sounds in 'mycht' and 'nicht', and the verb 'mak', meaning to make, or in this case, specifically, to compose poetry.

Another of the great medieval makars was Robert Henryson, who lived in Dunfermline in Fife. A more sober poet than Dunbar, Henryson wrote a series of beast-fables in Scots. Each fable contains a moralitas – a message of moral instruction for the reader. In this extract from *The Preaching of the Swallow*, Henryson creates a vivid impression of the terrible Scottish winter weather, and how it drives the wild birds indoors:

The winter come, the wickit wind can blaw,  
The woddis grene wer wallowit with the weit,  
Baith firth and fell with froistys wer maid faw,  
Slonkis and slaik maid slidderie with the sleit;  
The foulis fair, for falt they fell off feit –  
On bewis bair it wes na bute to byde,  
Bot hyit vnto housis thame to hyde.

[The winter came, the wicked wind did blow,  
The green woods were wallowed with the wet,  
Both firth and fell were overcome with frosts,  
Wet holes and mud made slippery with the sleet;  
For lack of food the fair birds fell off their feet –  
It was no good to stay on bare boughs,  
So they went into houses to hide.]

This verse uses the Scots word *byde*, meaning to live or stay. It uses the Scots construction *can blaw* for *did blow*, and the '...it' ending for the verb in the past tense – *wallowit*.

Scots language in the medieval period was especially rich and expressive, and became increasingly and markedly different from English as time went on. Yet it wasn't until 1494 that we have the first records of writers referring to their own language as 'Scots'. Up to this point, the language continued to be known as 'Inglis'. In 1513, the makar Gavin Douglas described his own Scots language as 'braid and plane' alongside 'sudron'; this is a strange, almost apologetic comment, which nevertheless seems to identify some of the qualities of the Scots language. The makars were all heavily influenced by the great English poet of the medieval age, Geoffrey Chaucer. So much so that at one time they were known – perhaps somewhat patronisingly – as the 'Scottish Chaucerians'. Nowadays, the makars are revered as the great poets of Scotland's medieval past, and remembered as some of the most skilful and imaginative artists to have used the Scots Language.

## Audio resources

- Listen to examples of Scots from this period here:  
<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/curriculumareas/languages/scotslanguage/supportmaterials/historyofscots/middleages.asp>

### 3. Scots during Renaissance and Reformation times

The sixteenth century in Scotland was a time of great turmoil and upheaval. The murders, intrigues, imprisonments and executions surrounding the reign of Mary, Queen of Scots, are well known. The sixteenth century also saw the tumultuous 'reformation' of the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland, and the establishment of the Protestant Church of Scotland.

As well as being a time of trouble and violence, the sixteenth century was a time of great cultural activity and progress in Scotland: it was the time when the great European movement in knowledge and the arts known as 'the Renaissance' arrived in Scotland.

Many people across Europe had become angry with corruption and extravagance in the medieval Catholic Church. Reformers in Scotland, led by a scholar called John Knox, were in favour of a more austere form of worship, using fewer images, and less decoration. These reformers established what became the Protestant Church of Scotland.

In a roundabout way, this Reformation had an effect on the Scots Language. The sixteenth century had also seen the invention of the printing press, which, alongside the invention of the internet, was one of the two most important developments in the entire history of communications.

The Protestant reformers wanted the ordinary people to be able to read, hear and understand the Bible in a local language – a 'vernacular' Bible – rather than in the traditional Latin, which only the medieval church leaders had been able to read. A printed Bible called the Geneva Bible became available in English, and the reformers opted to use it in Scottish kirks. This meant that the churchgoing population of Scotland – more or less everyone in Scotland during the sixteenth century – heard English read directly from the pulpit in kirk every week.

Although the use of the Geneva Bible may have contributed to people in Scotland using more English, John Knox himself spoke and wrote in Scots. His History of the Reformation is written in Scots Language. Knox's writing is very much of its time, and is notorious for its outrageous prejudice against women and Catholics. In this lively extract, he ridicules two cross bearers who come to blows while leaving Glasgow Cathedral. These events probably took place on June 4th, 1545:

Cuming furth att the qweir doore of Glasgw Kirk, begynnes striving for state betuix the two croce beraris, so that from glowmying thei come to schoudering; frome schoudering, thei go to buffettis, and from dry blowes, by neffis and neffelling; and then for cheriteis saik, thei crye Dispersit, dedit pauperibus, and assayis quhilk of the croces war finest mettall, which staf was strongest, and which berar could best defend his maisteris pre-eminence; and that thare should be no superioritie in that behalf, to the ground gois boyth the croces. And then begane no litill fray, but yitt a meary game; for rockettis war rent, typpetis war torne, crounis war knapped, and syd gounis mycht have bene sein wantonly wag from one wall to the other: Many of thame lacked beardis, and that was the more pitie; and therefore could not bukill other by the byrse, as bold men wold haif doune.

[Coming out of the choir door at Glasgow Church, there began a quarrel for superiority between the two cross bearers, so that from giving dirty looks they went to shouldering, from shouldering then they started buffeting, and then went from dry blows to fists and fist-fighting; and then for charity's sake they cried Dispersit, dedit pauperibus and tried to assay which of the crosses was of the finest metal, which staff was the strongest, and which bearer could best defend his master's pre-eminence; and so neither could get an advantage over the other in this way, they put both the crosses on the ground. And then began no small affray, but a merry game; for robes

were rent, tippets were torn, crowns were knocked, and side gowns could be seen wagging wantonly from one wall to the other. Many of them didn't have beards, and that was a pity; because they couldn't grab each other by the beards, as bold men would have done.]

The Scots language of Knox's text here is particularly colourful and interesting. The ...and present participle endings we saw in the earlier Medieval texts have been replaced by the more familiar ...ing endings of words like glowmying and neffelling. But other older forms remain, such as the quh... spelling in quhilk, and the ...is plural ending on words like buffetis and maisteris. The Scots vocabulary is rich; Kirk (Church), glowmying (glowering, giving dirty looks), neffis (fists) and neffelling (hitting with fists), knapped (knocked), bukkill (join together, literally buckle) and byrse (beard, brush or bristles) all combine to make this a vivid and distinctively Scots description. The Latin phrase is Biblical, and comes from 2 Corinthians 9.9. It means He hath dispersed abroad, he hath given to the poor. In the original Scots, the entire episode is told using the historic present tense, in order to give a lively sense of immediacy. (The English translation above is written in the past tense.)

John Knox famously harangued and debated with Mary Queen of Scots. Mary spoke both Scots and French, and wrote love poetry in French. Some of Mary's poems referring to her lover, the Earl of Bothwell, were discovered in a casket, and used as evidence against her at her trial; it was claimed that the poems proved she and Bothwell were involved in plotting the murder of her second husband, Darnley. Eventually she was deposed, imprisoned and executed.

Mary's son, James VI, wrote excellent poetry and prose in Scots. James became King of Scots as a child, and was just seventeen when he published his Reulis and Cautelis (Rules and Warnings) for Scottish poets. Like many of the kings of Scotland before him, James was deeply interested in art and culture, and sponsored a group of court poets known as the 'Castalian Band'. The Reulis and Cautelis is written in lively Scots prose. In this extract,

James says that his advice will only be useful to people who have a natural aptitude for poetry:

For gif nature be nocht the chief worker in this airt, reulis will be bot a band to nature and will mak yow within short space weary of the haill airt; quhair as, gif nature be chief and bent to it, reulis will be ane help and staff to nature. I will end heir, lest my preface be langer nor my purpose and haill mater following; wishing yow, docile reidar, als gude success and greit proffeit by reiding this short treatise as I tuke earnest and willing painis to blok it, as ye sie, for your cause. Fare weil.

[Because if nature isn't the main worker in this art, rules will just be a bind to nature and will make you weary of the whole art; whereas if nature is chief and contributes to it, rules will be a help and a staff to nature. I will end here, in case my preface ends up longer than my purpose and everything following; wishing you, docile reader, as good success and great profit by reading this short treatise as I took earnest and willing pains to compose it, as you see, for your cause. Farewell.]

There are some interesting features of Scots in this extract, namely the use of gif for 'if', the use of mak for 'make', and the use of Scots vocabulary such as airt, haill, langer, als and gude (art, whole, longer, as, and good). Note also Fare weil, rather than 'farewell' at the close.

But James VI of Scots was soon to become James I of what he would style Great Britain. With the Union of the Crowns in 1603, he set off from Edinburgh for London - legend has it with his golf clubs swinging from the back of his carriage. From this point on, James began to favour writing in English. Compare the following extract from his Counterblast Against Tobacco, written in 1604, shortly after the Union of the Crowns, to the Scots of Reulis and Cautelis:

Have you not reason then to bee ashamed, and to forbear this filthie noveltie, so basely grounded, so foolishly received and so grossely mistaken in the right use thereof? [...] A custome lothsome to the eye, hatefull to the Nose, harmefull

to the braine, dangerous to the Lungs, and in the blacke stinking fume thereof,  
neerest resembling the horrible Stigian smoke of the pit that is bottomelesse.

While this is certainly lively and forceful - a powerful piece of early anti-smoking propaganda – it is written entirely in English, with none of the Scots vocabulary or the fricative sounds of his earlier language.

The truth is that James has deliberately airbrushed Scots language from his writing. Closer political and social contacts between the Scots and the English had begun after the Reformation, and James now sought to develop English as a unifying language for a new kingdom. During the later sixteenth century the Scottish nobility all spent a part of their time in southern England. The Scots upper classes began to give up their native speech for what was considered the more 'elegant and perfect' English of the south.

Meanwhile, in London, William Shakespeare wrote the play Macbeth for James, appealing to the new king's obsession with witches. The huge prestige of English literature at this time, which revolved around the figure of Shakespeare, was another of the reasons why English began to eclipse Scots in many official, literary, and formal contexts.

Most of the poets of the Castalian Band followed James to England, and were keen to learn to 'refine' their language by removing Scots words, grammar, or expressions. Some historians and linguists view this as a sad period in the history of Scottish language and culture; it has been said that the departure of this brilliant poet-king and his courtier poets to London was a hammer blow both to the Scots Language, and to wider Scottish culture. But in reality, Scots proved to be much more resilient than that.

## Audio resources

- Listen to examples of Scots from this period here:  
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## 4. Scots in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries

On the face of things, it might seem as if Scots went into a decline during the Seventeenth Century. The King and his court had departed to London, and there is very little literary writing from Scotland during this period in history. Two of the poets who were associated with James VI were William Drummond of Hawthornden and Sir Robert Ayton. Drummond remained in Scotland, and wrote excellent poetry in standard English, while Ayton went with James to London, where he continued to write poetry, written also in the English of his time.

This is an extract from a poem by Drummond from this period. The poem is an extended address to a personification of sleep:

Sleepe, Silence Child, sweet Father of soft Rest  
Prince, whose Approach Peace to all Mortalls brings,  
Indifferent Host to Shepheards and to Kings,  
Sole Comforter of Minds with Griefe opprest.

And here are some lines from a love sonnet by Robert Ayton:

To view thy beauty well, if thou be wise,  
Come not to gaze upon this glass of thyne  
But come and look upon these eyes of myne,  
Where thou shalt see thy true resemblance twice.

Both of these poets are highly regarded by academics studying the Renaissance and Elizabethan periods. At one time, many scholars in Scotland neglected them because they wrote in English rather than Scots. There was a feeling that these poets had somehow 'sold out', or abandoned their roots – that they were somehow less Scottish for not writing in Scots. But now, scholars are keen to recognise writers like Drummond and Ayton as important figures in the history of Scottish Literature, even though they were two of the first Scots to write entirely in English.

Despite the departure of the king in 1603, and the eventual dissolution of the Scottish Parliament in 1707, Scotland - and the city of Edinburgh in particular - became the centre of the great flourishing of scientific, philosophical and economic learning in the Eighteenth Century known as 'The Enlightenment'. There were huge advances in areas such as science and medicine, and Adam Smith published his famous *Wealth of Nations*, the work which became the foundation of modern economic thinking.

As Scottish intellectuals, scientist and writers continued to publish for a southern audience, they tried very hard to develop what they felt was 'proper' or 'correct' English. The Augustan fashion developed for what was considered 'polite' or 'elegant' English. Anything that could be considered 'provincial' (i.e. related to out-of-the-way places) was frowned upon as unsophisticated, backward and 'vulgar'.

The English spoken by the upper classes in London had great prestige, and people in other parts of Britain were anxious to learn to speak it. Rich Scots sent their sons to be educated in England, where they would learn to speak with the metropolitan accent. People employed elocution lecturers to train them to speak 'properly', trying desperately to eliminate anything in their speech that came from their native place. These lecturers came from England, Ireland and Scotland, and worked hard to eradicate Scottish sounds, grammar, idiom and vocabulary – Scots Language – from the speech of their students. Speakers were encouraged to use southern diphthong sounds in words like house and down, as opposed to the older northern vowel sounds of hoose or doon. They were coached in how to make their voices sound more like the English spoken in London.

Starting in 1752, long lists of Scots words and expressions were drawn up - to enable writers to avoid them. The great Scottish philosopher, David Hume, famously and obsessively checked his manuscripts in order to rid them of 'Scotticisms'. It is curious that Hume, one of the most brilliant thinkers of the age,



should have suffered from this linguistic inferiority complex. By the eighteenth century, just about any trace of Scots in print had been eradicated.

So, southern English was adopted by the Scottish elite, and Scots Language began to be associated with the 'common people'. This eventually led to the situation where modern Scotland has been described as a 'sociolinguist's paradise', meaning that the connections between class, wealth and language in Scotland are especially fascinating. On the whole, it remains true that upper class people in Scotland speak very little Scots, whereas middle class people will tend to use a little more Scots. The broadest and most distinct Scots tends to be spoken in working class and/or rural communities.

Although a distinct prejudice developed towards Scots language throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Scots continued to be spoken by ordinary people across the country. The Scots Language proved to be tenacious and persistent, surviving in the speech of millions of ordinary Scots, as well as in their folk songs, ballads and poems.

Eventually, in the second half of the eighteenth century, there was a remarkable flourishing of poetry in Scots. This 'Vernacular Revival' was begun by the poet and dramatist Allan Ramsay, who continued the old tradition of publishing classic medieval poems and contemporary comic verse in paper booklets known as 'chapbooks'. The revival continued in the accomplished work of the Edinburgh poet Robert Fergusson, and culminated in the great poems of Robert Burns – the poetry which most famously brought the Scots Language to the world. The Vernacular Revival is characterised by lively, fun poetry, by ghost stories and satires, and by poetry which reflects the philosophical developments of the time.

This extract from Robert Fergusson's tribute to Edinburgh, 'Auld Reikie', shows exactly the kind of vibrant Scots that inspired and excited the young Robert Burns:

Auld Reikie! wale o ilka town  
That Scotland kens beneath the moon;  
Whare couthy chiels at e'ening meet  
Their bizzing craigs and mous tae weet:  
And blythly gar auld Care gae bye  
Wi blinkit and wi bleering eye:  
O'er lang frae thee the Muse has been  
Sae frisky on the simmer's green,  
Whan flowers and gowans wont to glent  
In bonny blinks upo' the bent;  
But now the leaves a yellow die,  
Peeled frae the branches, quickly fly;  
And now frae nouter bush nor brier  
The spreckl'd mavis greets your ear;  
Nor bonny blackbird skims and roves  
To seek his love in yonder groves.

The poem is addressed to the city – known affectionately in Scots as Auld Reikie, or 'old smoky' – and uses a number of words which are still common (chiels - men, kens - knows, lang - long) alongside some words which are less frequently used nowadays (ilka – each or every, gar - compel, mavis - songthrush, gowans - daisies). The Scots description of the men in the evening with 'bizzing craigs and mous tae weet' must, it seems, have inspired some of the opening lines of Burns' 'Tam O Shanter'.

And this brings us to Robert Burns himself, the poet most famous for writing in Scots. This extract from 'Address to the Deil' shows how the great writer was able to use his Scots to bring together philosophical and religious thought with elements of the folk tradition - and all in the language of Lowland Scotland:

O Thou, whatever title suit thee!  
Auld Hornie, Satan, Nick, or Clootie!  
Wha in yon cavern grim an sootie,  
Clos'd under hatches,  
Spairges about the brunstane cootie,  
To scaud poor wretches!

Hear me, auld Hangie, for a wee,  
An let poor, damned bodies bee;  
I'm sure sma pleasure it can gie,  
Ev'n tae a deil,  
To skelp an scaud poor dogs like me,  
An hear us squeal!

The Scots names for the devil – Auld Hornie and Cloutie - come from folklore. Burns uses a Scots adverb (aboot) and a common Scots preposition (tae), as well as the common adjective wee and the Scots word for the devil – deil. Harsh, Scandinavian-influenced 'sk' consonant sounds combine in the verbs skelp and scaud to bring force and life to the description. The poem presents the Deil in a sympathetic light, suggesting humorously that he must have at least some human qualities.

It is remarkable to compare the earlier English verses of William Drummond of Hawthornden or Sir Robert Ayton with these extracts from Fergusson and Burns, which were written about a century and a half later. While it is true that there was an upper-class fashion for Anglicisation in language, and a trend away from so-called 'vulgar speech' towards

Augustan English, there can be no doubt that the Scots language persisted and flourished throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

## Audio resources

- Listen to examples of Scots from this period here:  
<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/curriculumareas/languages/scotslanguage/supportmaterials/historyofscots/eighteenthcentury.asp>

## 5. Scots in the Romantic Age and Victorian times

The nineteenth century saw the great European artistic movement known as Romanticism, the urbanisation and industrialisation of Britain during the industrial revolution and the growth of the immensely powerful British Empire under Queen Victoria. Scotland was closely involved in all of these things.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Scottish novelist Sir Walter Scott became the world's most famous and popular writer. It was Scott who invented the 'historical novel', and his romantic tales of Scotland's past popularised Scotland internationally, as well as kicking off the Europe-wide fashion for romantic tales and poems that were rooted in history, folk tradition, and the wild places. The Scott Monument on Princes Street in Edinburgh remains the largest monument to a writer anywhere on Earth.

Scott wrote his famous Waverley novels in English, yet he had an obsessive fascination with Scottish culture and history, and often wrote the speech of his minor characters in broad Scots. On one hand, this ensured that Scots language and vocabulary was read and enjoyed all over the world, but some have argued that his decision to write the speech of only his minor characters in Scots diminishes the language, suggesting that it is only fit for small or comical parts of his great stories, while all the important people speak English. In this extract from *Old Mortality* (1816), the hero, Morton, talks to an old woman:

As she spoke thus, Morton observed that she was blind.  
'Shall I not be troublesome to you, my good dame?' said he, compassionately;  
'your infirmity seems ill calculated for your profession.'  
'Na, sir,' answered the old woman; 'I can gang about the house readily enough;  
and I hae a bit lassie to help me, and the dragoon lads will look after your horse  
when they come hame frae their patrol, for a sma' matter; they are civiller now  
than lang syne.' Upon these assurances, Morton alighted.  
'Peggy, my bonny bird,' continued the hostess, addressing a little girl of twelve  
years old, who had by this time appeared, 'tak the gentleman's horse to the  
stable, and slack his girths, and tak aff the bridle, and shake down a lock o' hay  
before him, till the dragoons come back. – Come this way, sir,' she continued;  
'ye'll find my house clean, though it's a puir ane.'

Scott was clearly very familiar with spoken Scots language, in order to be able to write it so accurately. Unique Scots words in this extract include lassie (girl), bonny (beautiful) and lang syne (long ago, as in the title of the famous Burns song), the verbs gang (go), hae (have) and tak (take), the preposition aff (off), and the pronoun ye (you). The use of Scots ane for 'one' sounds closer to the German indefinite article ein than the English one. The character Morton, on the other hand, speaks in an almost excessively formal English, and the storytelling voice of the narrative is also entirely in English.

Scott had a contemporary - the earthy, country-born poet and novelist James Hogg (1770 – 1835), also known as the Ettrick Shepherd. Hogg's famous novel *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) is revered as one of the great texts of nineteenth century European literature. Hogg also uses Scots Language for the speech of his minor characters, but with a very positive prejudice towards them; Hogg's ordinary, Scots-speaking peasants are rare, salt-of-the-earth type characters who live good lives in a world of self-important sinners and religious fanatics. In this extract, the farmer William Laidlaw ponders on a mysterious book that has been found preserved among the possessions of a dead man:

'Grave, man!' exclaimed Laidlaw, who speaks excellent strong broad Scots:  
'My truly, but ye grave weel! I wad esteem the contents o that spleuchan as  
the most precious treasure. I'll tell you what it is, sir: I hae often wondered how  
it was that this man's corpse has been miraculously preserved frae decay, a  
hunder times langer than any other body's, or than even a tanner's. But now I  
could wager a guinea, it has been for the preservation o that little book. And

Lord kens what may be in't! It will maybe reveal some mystery that mankind  
disna ken naething about yet.'

Hogg's Scots has the ring of authenticity. The double negatives used by Laidlaw are not wrong (disna ken naething about), but serve to emphasise his point. He makes negative forms of verbs by adding –na at the end of verbs. He uses one outstandingly colourful Scots word – spleuchan – with a prominent, fricative 'ch' sound. The word is almost completely obsolete these days, in our health-conscious, modern Scotland; it means 'tobacco pouch'.

While the prestige attached to the English language in Scotland certainly continued throughout the nineteenth century, the millions of Scots who made their way to the cities to work in factories and mills during the Industrial Revolution were predominantly Scots or Gaelic speakers, and Scots remained very much alive in these communities and their writings. A large body of radical, anti-establishment poetry and song was written and performed by these working people, who strove to make their living in difficult and oppressive conditions, very often struggling against greedy landlords and employers.

Janet Hamilton (1795 – 1873) was one poet who captured the living Scots language used by the workers of Scotland's industrial revolution, as is shown here in her piece Oor Location:

A hunner funnels bleezin, reekin,  
Coal an ironstone charrin, smeekin;  
Navvies, miners, keepers, fillers,  
Puddlers, rollers, iron millers;  
Reestit, reekit, raggit laddies,  
Firemen, enginemen, an paddies;  
Boatmen, banksmen, rough an rattlin,  
Bout the wecht wi colliers battling,  
Sweatin, swearin, fechtin, drinkin;  
Change house bells an gill-stoups clinkin.

Scots prose continued to appear in newspapers in the nineteenth century, as in the following extract from the Scotchman journal, published in Paisley around 1800. The writer here complains about the high price of meal, which meant that poor people found it very difficult to afford bread. Most of the passage, however, criticises sellers of alcohol, who are considered to be evil parasites, costing society dearly:

There's a set o folk amang us, wham it costs sax times mair to maintain  
than a the meal-mongers, an shame haet they're gude for, the maist o  
them: but meal-sellers

we canna want. I mean the idle sloungers wha sell whisky an ither sorts o  
drink. Let ony body think on the swarms o lazy slinks wha leive by this trade  
in every neuk o the kintra, an he'll easily see what an undeemous siller it  
costs to maintain them: for its no a wee thing that ser's them: they maun  
hae the best for baith back an belly. Look juist at hame here, or gang in to  
Glasgo, or ony ither big toun, an at every ither door, ye'll see ane o them  
staunin stechin wi his shouther at the door-cheek, settin out his red snout  
an muckle kyte.

Noteworthy vocabulary here includes sax for six, neuk for corner, siller for silver/money, and kyte for belly. For today's reader, it is interesting and unusual to see such rich, broad Scots being used in formal, political writing like this. Radical, political Scots voices like these, describing the living and working conditions of ordinary people during the Industrial Revolution in Scotland, and protesting against these conditions, are very much in the tradition of the poetry of Robert Burns.

At the same time as Scotland was moving swiftly forward into urban and industrial modernity, writers and scholars were also becoming increasingly interested in the past, and began to write down records of Scotland's history and culture. Romantic poets, composers and novelists were fascinated by history. Some 'antiquarian' writers began to write down the Scots lyrics of the old country ballads, which have been sung for centuries. In 1808, a pioneering linguist called John Jamieson published the first Scots

dictionary - the Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language. This was a very important moment in the history of Scots, and marked the beginning of the next two centuries of lexicography (dictionary writing) focused on the Scots Language.

In these two strands – the urban Scots of the Industrial Revolution, and the rural Scots so beloved of the Romantics and antiquarians – began a misguided division in attitudes towards Scots. Basically, many people began to take the view that rural Scots was good, while urban Scots was bad. Rural varieties of Scots began to be thought of as wholesome, traditional and authentic, while urban varieties were frowned upon, and thought of as ‘slovenly perversions of dialect’. To this day, Scots in our cities suffers from this prejudice. An unfortunate, three way linguistic division began during the nineteenth century, into English, and so called ‘Good Scots’ and ‘Bad Scots’.

## Audio resources

- Listen to examples of Scots from this period here:  
<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/curriculumareas/languages/scotslanguage/supportmaterials/historyofscots/romanticage.asp>

## 6. Scots in the twentieth century

The Twentieth Century saw a number of major landmarks in the history of the Scots Language. Possibly the greatest of these progressions came with the movement known as the Scottish Renaissance, a cultural and intellectual ‘rebirth’ that happened in Scotland between the First World War and World War Two.

Some of the beginnings of the Scottish Renaissance began to stir in the north-east of Scotland during the early part of the twentieth century. A north-east poet, Charles Murray, published a book of dark, intellectual, and reflective Scots poems in response to World War One called ‘A Sough O’ War’, in 1917. Murray uses authentic north-east Scots to explore the reactions of rural workers to the advent of war:

I’ve focht wi’ the weather, the wark an’ the weemen,  
Till faith I’m in fettle for facin’ the foe,  
An’ waukin’ or dreamin’ I hear the pipes screamin’  
“Hie, Jock, are ye ready to bundle an’ go?”  
Bundle an’ go.  
Wha bides whan the pipes bid him “Bundle an’ go”?

The speaker is tired of his rural life, and of conflicts with the environment, his work, and women – so much so that he feels ready to go to war. The word bide is still commonly used throughout Scotland, and means to stay, to remain, or to live. Charles Murray’s poetry was so popular that folk would queue to buy an edition of the Press and Journal newspaper when a new poem was published.

But the Scottish Renaissance of the ‘twenties and ‘thirties was led by an eccentric, combative poet known as Hugh MacDiarmid (1892 – 1978). MacDiarmid was a Communist and a Scottish Nationalist, who was thrown out of the Communist party for his nationalism, and thrown out of the National Party of Scotland for his communism. He picked up on the momentum in Scottish culture that had begun before WW1 with writers like Charles Murray and others. But MacDiarmid set out to completely reinvent the Scots language, for literary and political purposes.

MacDiarmid’s masterpiece is a long, symbol-laden poem called ‘A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle’. As well as using the Scots he had heard while growing up in the border town of Langholm in Dumfriesshire, MacDiarmid began to resurrect old Scots words from the work of the Makars, or from the academic Scots dictionaries. He also included scientific language, and passages written in other European languages. The poetry is certainly challenging, but many readers have also found it powerful and stirring. MacDiarmid became a famous writer within the international ‘Modernist’ movement in the arts. In these, the opening lines of A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle, the narrator describes himself as exhausted and worn out, rather than drunk. The whole description is a metaphor for the generally unhappy and depressed state of Scotland during the nineteen twenties:

I amna’ fou’ sae muckle as tired – deid dune.  
It’s gey and hard wark coupin’ gless for gless  
Wi’ Cruivie and Gilsanquhar and the like,  
And I’m no’ juist as bauld as aince I wes.

The elbuck fankles in the coorse o’ time,  
The sheckle’s no sae souple, and the thrapple  
Grows deaf and dour: nae langer up and doun  
Gleg as a squirrel speils the Adam’s apple.

[I’m not drunk so much as tired – dead done.  
It’s very hard work emptying glass for glass  
With Cruivie and Gilsanquhar and people like them,  
And I’m not quite as bold as I once was.

The elbow falters in the course of time,  
The wrist isn't as supple, and the throat  
Becomes insensitive and dull: no longer up and down  
Lively as a squirrel climbs the Adam's apple.]

The language here shows a range of interesting features, from the '...na' negative ending on the verb *amna* to the familiar adverb *gey*, or the common adjective *muckle*. There is also some more unusual vocabulary like *elbuck* and *sheckle* for elbow and wrist. The word *coupin*, meaning 'turning upside down', is still commonly used. Although MacDiarmid is renowned for using obscure older words, words from other languages, and scientific words, the Scots in these lines reads very much like real, rural Scots as it is spoken in many areas today.

MacDiarmid's vigorous, vibrant Scots has inspired a host of other Scottish writers, from the nineteen twenties to the present day. A wave of poets emerged in Scotland during the nineteen fifties and sixties, all of whom had been stimulated by MacDiarmid's Scots. Robert Garioch was an Edinburgh makar who disagreed with MacDiarmid on many issues, yet went on to write hundreds of lyrics and translations in Edinburgh Scots. Garioch's best known poem is a reworking in Scots of the Greek myth of Sisyphus. The New Zealand-born poet Sydney Goodsir Smith was also inspired by MacDiarmid; Sydney Goodsir Smith spoke no Scots, but produced a significant body of poetry in the language. These Edinburgh writers of Scots insisted that their language was the real language of the city, and pointed out that it could be heard on the streets in the Cowgate and surrounding area, being spoken by the working people. Here, Sydney Goodsir Smith addresses a poor alcoholic in his poem 'The Grace of God and the Meth Drinker':

There ye gang, ye daft  
And dootit dotterel, ye saft  
Crazed outland skalrag saul  
In your bits and ends o winnockie duds

[There you go, you daft  
And raving idiot, you soft  
Crazed homeless vagabond soul  
In your scraps and rags of holed clothes]

Meanwhile, in other parts of the Scotland, Scots continued to be spoken, studied, and written. In the Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland, scholars began to explore the linguistic history of the islands, which belonged at one time to Scandinavia. The medieval Scandinavian language of these islands was known as Norn, and the Scots spoken in these island groups has a much greater Scandinavian influence than in other parts of Scotland.

Scholars like Jakob Jakobsen and Hugh Marwick recorded the Norn words of Shetland and Orkney in important dictionaries. To this day, the Northern Isles are strongholds for Scots language, and many loan words from Norn are used in the Scots spoken in the isles. Later scholars in Orkney and Shetland made dictionaries of the Scots spoken in these areas, such as Gregor Lamb's Orkney Wordbook or John J. Graham's Shetland Dictionary.

For much of the twentieth century, the Scottish educational establishment was downright hostile towards Scots. The Education Act of 1872 had promoted the teaching of English, but made no provision for Scots or Gaelic. There was a feeling that if young people used Scots, they would find it difficult to communicate, and they wouldn't get on well in the world. We now know that learning Scots can be part and parcel of the way young people develop literacy skills. But during the nineteen fifties, the Orkney County Director of Education, John Shearer, was to say of Scots Language, 'We should discard our inborn prejudice in favour of our own dialect ... and make a serious effort in school to raise the level of spoken English'.

Shearer was a well-meaning and kindly director, but most people would now agree that his comments were misguided. He went on to say, in an echo of familiar eighteenth-century prejudice against Scots, that 'The dialects are not pretty, and their literature is small'. The Orkney poet Christina M. Costie wrote a furious poem in response to his comments. In it, a teacher roars at her class 'Don't say nu say now,

and don't say 'ku say cow!' Older people in Orkney and in many other parts of Scotland today still remember being belted for using Scots language in school.

From the nineteen fifties and sixties onwards, interest and enthusiasm for Scottish folk music and song began to grow. Much of this interest revolved around the School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh, and in particular the figure of the soldier, folklorist and poet Hamish Henderson (1919-2002), who travelled the land recording people singing and telling stories. These songs and stories were all either in Scots or Gaelic. As a result, young musicians and singers today study Scots at institutions such as the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, learning classic Scots and Gaelic songs, and keeping alive these ancient traditions. Henderson's own international Scots song *The Freedom Come All Ye* refers to the achievements of Nelson Mandela in advancing freedom and equality in South Africa, and was sung at the opening of the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow. This is the first verse:

Roch the wind in the clear day's dawin,  
Blaws the clouds heelster-gowdie ow'r the bay,  
But there's mair nor a roch wind blawin  
Through the great glen o the warld the day.  
It's a thocht that will gar oor rottans,  
Aa thae rogues that gang gallus fresh and gay,  
Tak the road an seek ither loanins  
All their ill ploys tae sport an play.

Heelster-gowdie is a colourful Scots expression meaning 'head over heels'. The song imagines a roch (rough) wind of change blowing through a seemingly Scottish landscape, which we then discover actually symbolizes the whole world (the great glen o the warld). The verb *gar* means to make or compel, so the rottans (the rats, or evil-doers) are made to look for somewhere else to live (seek ither loanins). The song also includes the well-known Glasgow Scots word *gallus*, meaning 'bold' or 'overly confident'.

In 1983, the most ambitious translation project ever undertaken into Scots came to fruition. The publication of the New Testament in Scots, translated by William Laughton Lorimer (1885 – 1967), marked a truly remarkable point in the history of the Scots language. Lorimer was a leading scholar of ancient Greek, and translated the gospels from their original Greek directly into Scots. Many readers have commented on the vigor and force of his Scots translation, claiming that the text has a genuine energy, and that Christ's words in particular come across with a force, and sometimes an anger, that is hard to find in other versions.

Lorimer used different varieties of Scots to represent the different voices of the authors of the Gospels, and his Scots has a rich range of vocabulary which lends itself very well to the rural scenes and the ordinary working characters who feature in the Gospels.

Here is a famous passage from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians:

Gin I speak wi the tungs of men an angels, but hae nae luvie i my hairt, I am no nane better nor dunnerin bress or a ringin cymbal. Gin I hae the gift o prophecie, an am acquent wi the saicret mind o God, an ken aathing ither at man may ken, an gin I hae siccan faith as can flit the hills frae their larachs – gin I hae aa that, but hae nae luvie i my hairt, I am nocht. Gin I skail aa my guid an graith an awmous, an gin I gie up my bodie tae be brunt in aiss – gin I een dae that, but hae nae luvie i my hairt, I am nane the better o it.

[If I speak with the tongues of men and angels, but have no love in my heart, I am no better than sounding brass or a ringing cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and am acquainted with the secret mind of God, and know everything else that man may know, and if I have such a faith as can move the hills from their foundations – if I have all of that, but have no love in my heart, I am nothing. If I cast all my goods, equipment and alms, and if I give up my body to be burnt in ash – even if I do that, but have no love in my heart, I am none the better of it.]



So, although John Knox had opted for the Geneva Bible in the sixteenth century, this full Scots version eventually appeared in the twentieth century.

Eleven years after the publication of Lorimer's *The New Testament in Scots*, a very different Scots book was to win the UK's largest literary prize, the Booker Prize for fiction. Glasgow author James Kelman's novel *How Late it was How Late* is the story of an alcoholic, Sammy, who is beaten up and loses his eyesight. *How Late it was How Late* was a controversial winner of the 1994 Booker Prize. The book is a first person narrative in a Glaswegian Scots voice, and is full of profanity. The judging panel were nevertheless moved by the courageous descriptions of the hardships endured by the main character, and awarded the prize in the face of criticism from parts of the literary establishment. In his speech at the award ceremony, James Kelman stated simply 'My culture and my language have the right to exist, and no one has the authority to dismiss that'. Other writers wrote similar books in urban Scots during the 1990's, the most famous of which was Irvine Welsh's controversial *Trainspotting*, a shocking and immensely popular story of Edinburgh heroin addicts.

Scots also featured prominently in Scottish drama of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Gregory Burke's hard-edged play about the Iraq War, *Black Watch*, Liz Lochhead's *Mary Queen of Scots Got her Head Chopped Off*, and the acclaimed plays of Rona Munro all made use of Scots language, in order to give their characters realistic, lively Scottish voices.

So, by the end of the twentieth century, the Scots language had once again been revived and put to use in a diverse range of settings, including traditional song, epic poetry, and Bible translation. But the increasing prominence of Scots in Scottish drama at this point is perhaps the greatest testament to the endurance of the spoken language. Scots reached the millennium in an excellent state of health.

## Audio resources

- Listen to examples of Scots from this period here:  
<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/curriculumareas/languages/scotslanguage/supportmaterials/historyofscots/twentiethcentury.asp>

## 7. The Scots language today

Scots has finally achieved official recognition as one of Scotland's three indigenous languages. The European Commission for Regional and Minority Languages now recognises Scots as a minority language and, as such, it is afforded some special protection by the UK and Scottish Governments. A question on Scots was included for the first time in the 2011 census, and responses to the census showed that 1.5 million people identified themselves as speaking or understanding Scots. Nearly 40% of the population said they had some skill in Scots, and there were Scots speakers in every local authority area of the country. The 2011 census showed that areas such as the North East of Scotland, Orkney and Shetland are strongholds for the language, with between 40% and 50% of people speaking or understanding Scots in these places. Sizeable percentages of people in all of the lowland and city areas also reported being able to use Scots. The language, it seems, is alive and well in the twenty-first century.

At the same time as these sizeable figures are emerging, it is becoming ever easier to access books in Scots. Children's literature in Scots is more widely available now than ever before, with writers having translated a range of classic and contemporary English texts into Scots - including *Alice in Wonderland*, a range of Roald Dahl stories, *Asterix*, *Tintin*, parts of *Harry Potter*, and Julia Donaldson's *The Gruffalo*. Original graphic novels have begun to appear in Scots, as well as Scots versions of the stories of Alexander McCall Smith.

In the contemporary print media, *The Herald* newspaper features a 'Scots Word of the Week' and Aberdeen broadcaster Robbie Shepherd writes a weekly Scots column in *The Press and Journal*, covering a range of thoughtful topics. Of course, *Oor Wullie* and *The Broons* have been delighting readers of *The Sunday Post* with their cartoon strip Scots for generations, while *The Orcadian* newspaper features a contemporary Scots-speaking family in its weekly strip feature, *The Giddy Limit*. Extended Scots prose is still difficult to find in the print media, though, but this situation may start to change as the result of a number of recent policy announcements.

In other media, Scots is used throughout daily news and current affairs broadcasts from BBC Radio Orkney and BBC Radio Shetland. In terms of nationwide broadcasting, Scots was the vibrant language of the hit comedy show *Still Game*. BBC Radio Scotland's football magazine programmes *On the Ball* and *Off the Ball* are also conducted in lively, humorous Scots. But the monthly internet podcast from the Scots Language Centre, *Scots Language Radio*, is as yet the only dedicated radio broadcast in 'Scots medium' to cover the entire range of topics that we might expect in a radio magazine – from archaeology to music, politics, wildlife, current affairs, gardening and literature – and goes well beyond the confines of sport and humour.

The tradition of dictionary writing begun in Scotland by John Jamieson in the nineteenth century continues today. Scots has a vast vocabulary, and this can be explored in several excellent modern dictionaries. The agency Scottish Language Dictionaries is responsible for compiling and maintaining a range of titles: *A Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* and the *Scottish National Dictionary*, the single volume *Concise Scots Dictionary* and the schools' version, the *Essential Scots Dictionary*. The first two of these comprise the website *the Dictionary of the Scots Language*. The site is up to date, and free to use. The free *Scots Dictionary for Schools* app was also launched in 2014, and can be used on tablets or androids to access the words from the *Essential Scots Dictionary*. Finding definitions for Scots has never been easier.

In the twenty-first century, the Scottish educational establishment has reversed its former policy of ignoring or actively discouraging Scots. Now, *Curriculum for Excellence* highlights Scots as a key component of bairns' education. Teachers and young people are discovering that learning in Scots can offer fun and constructive pathways into language and literacy. One of the central documents of *Curriculum for Excellence*, Education Scotland's Literacy and English 'Principles and Practice' paper, shows how Scots is part and parcel of the Scottish curriculum:

‘The languages, dialects and literature of Scotland provide a rich resource for children and young people to learn about Scotland’s culture, identity and language. Through engaging with a wide range of texts they will develop an appreciation of Scotland’s vibrant literary and linguistic heritage and its indigenous languages and dialects’.

Scotland’s main awards body, the Scottish Qualifications Authority, has also moved to raise the status of Scots, introducing the Scots Language Award from 2014. It is now possible for learners to be certificated for their learning in Scots, and schools from the Northern Isles all the way to the Scottish Borders are engaged in delivering this Award.

Outside of education, folk continue to speak Scots as they have done for centuries. But these days the language is also increasingly being used in advertising, shop names, official signs, menus and, of course, for texts and e-mails. Professional creative writers also continue to use Scots widely. Anne Donovan’s *Gone are the Leaves*, published in 2014, contains several narrative voices, most of which are in Scots, while James Andrew Begg’s *The Man’s The Gowd for a* that is written entirely in broad Ayrshire Scots.

A range of policy announcements from various public bodies and agencies in Scotland means that the future looks bright for Scots. Creative Scotland, the public body which funds arts projects in Scotland, launched its Scots Language Policy in Spring 2015. Through this policy, Creative Scotland pledges to respect Scots and to promote it, welcoming funding applications for arts projects that incorporate Scots language, and welcoming applications for funding written in Scots. The Scottish Government launched its first ever Scots Language policy in September 2015. These policies will help to ensure that Scots is valued more highly in the future, and that it is treated with equal respect to English and Gaelic.

Contemporary developments in Scottish public life illustrate the good health of the language. For instance, the current honorary Edinburgh Makar, Christine De Luca, comes from a Scots-speaking community in the West of Shetland, speaks Scots, and writes poetry in English and the Shetland variety of Scots. Meanwhile, Creative Scotland and the National Library of Scotland have jointly announced the establishment of an official honorary residence for a writer of Scots, who will be known as the Scots Scribever, or Scots ‘writer’. Finally, Philippa Whitford, the consultant surgeon and Member of Parliament for Central Ayrshire, chose, in May 2015, to take her vow on entering the House of Commons in Scots.

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