

## The Scots Language - Origins and Development

Modern Scots is a Germanic language, descended, like modern English, from Old English, the Northern variety of which first appeared in what is now south-east Scotland in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Then, and for 500 years thereafter, Gaelic was the dominant language in Scotland, but from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, as the feudal system established in England by the Normans was adopted by the Scottish kings, immigrants from Northern England brought their Danish-influenced speech into many parts of Lowland Scotland. Although called 'Inglis' at this time, the language north of the Tweed began to diverge from that spoken to the south, a process accelerated during the Wars of Independence in the era of William Wallace and Robert the Bruce. 'Inglis' also flourished in the royal burghs established from the 12<sup>th</sup> century on, giving it an urban as well as rural presence. Over the next four centuries trading and political links with Scandinavia, the Low Countries, France and other parts of Europe helped to shape the language as it borrowed words from, for example, Flemish merchants. Some words also crossed from Gaelic.

Some Scots words derived from Danish: kirk (church), breeks (trousers), flit (move house), nieve (fist), hoast (cough), brae (hill)

Some Scots words derived from Flemish or Dutch: pinkie (little finger), howff (inn or enclosed space), bucht (sheep pen), redd (tidy up), loun (boy)

Some Scots words derived from French: fash (annoy), douce (gentle), vennel (lane), ashet (deep dish)

Some Scots words derived from Latin: sederunt (a sitting, or those present at a meeting), dux (head of school), homologate (ratify), dominie (schoolmaster)

Some Scots words derived from Gaelic: ben, glen, loch, strath, cranreuch (frost), tocher (dowry)

By about 1500, for political and cultural reasons, the language was being called 'Scottis', and this coincided with a great increase in its prestige and influence. It was now the language of the royal court, of Acts of Parliament, and of various poets or Makars, including John Barbour, Robert Henryson, William Dunbar, Gavin Douglas – who made a brilliant translation of Virgil's Aeneid into Scots – and David Lyndsay. Their work was both innovative, unmistakably Scottish, and of the highest literary quality.

## **Scots and English**

With the Union of Crowns with England in 1603, James VI and his court departed for London, and as a result royal patronage of writing in Scots ended, and the notion that Scots was inferior to English began to grow. This view was reinforced by the almost universal use of the (English) Authorised Version of the Bible from the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century onward. By the time of the Union of Parliaments in 1707 the formal and official written use of Scots had all but ceased. Increasingly it was considered an oral language despite great literature being produced in it by the likes of Robert Burns, Walter Scott and Hugh MacDiarmid. Today, it is widely believed, even among many whose first language it is, that Scots is 'bad English' or 'slang', or at best a dialect of English. The closeness of the two languages contributes to this belief, and it is certainly arguable that Scots at its most dense or broad exists at one end of a linguistic continuum with Scottish Standard English at the other end. However some linguists maintain that Scots is at least as different from English as, say, Norwegian is from Swedish, Catalan from Spanish, or Slovak from Czech.

## **Who Speaks Scots?**

Scots is recognised as a 'traditional language' by the Scottish and UK Governments, and as a 'regional or minority language' by the European Union, although, unlike Gaelic, it does not have any legal status. The number of Scots speakers is uncertain. Most inhabitants of Scotland use some Scots words on a daily basis, but some speak it much more broadly or continuously than others. In 1996 a government estimate concluded that there were some 1.6 million speakers of Scots. In 2011, for the first time ever, the Scottish Census asked respondents whether they could read, write, speak or understand Scots, and the resulting figures, due in 2013, will give a clearer idea of how many users of Scots there are.

Like any language, Scots has a number of different dialects. These include Glaswegian, Doric (in the North-East of the country), Dundonian, Edinburgh, Borders, Fife, Shetland, Orcadian and others. Scottish settlement in Ulster from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onward also led to the establishment of a dialect of Scots there. Literary Scots is also sometimes known as Lallans.

## Scots in Scottish Culture

Scots is used by hundreds of thousands of people in their daily lives, and it is also present in many aspects of Scotland's culture. The folk tradition includes a wealth of material partially or wholly in Scots, from the ballads of the Borders and North-East (such as 'The Twa Corbies', 'Sir Patrick Spens' and 'The Muckin o Geordie's Byre') to the repertoires of contemporary singers and storytellers. Scotland's national Bard, Robert Burns, wrote his best poems and songs in Scots (including 'Tae a Moose', 'Tam o' Shanter' and the world's hymn of parting and friendship 'Auld Lang Syne'), but many other poets, playwrights and novelists have used different varieties and forms of the language in their work. Among the best-known are, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Sir Walter Scott, James Hogg, John Galt and Robert Louis Stevenson, and from the 20<sup>th</sup> century Hugh MacDiarmid, Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Robert McLellan, Violet Jacob, Marion Angus, Edwin Morgan, Liz Lochhead and Irvine Welsh. In popular culture Scots is the language used by the cartoon characters 'Oor Wullie' and 'The Broons' in the *Sunday Post*, and it is also integral to television programmes like *Chewin' the Fat*, *Still Game* and *Gary: Tank Commander*, and to the hugely successful play *Black Watch* by Gregory Burke.

## Examples of Scots

Item: It is decretyt and ordanyt that wapinschawingis be haldin be the lordis ande baronys spirituale and temperale four tymis in the yere. And that the fut ball ande the golf be utterly cryt doune and not usyt.

*(Extract from the Acts of Parliament, 1457)*

### The Twa Corbies

As I was walking all alane,  
I heard twa corbies making a mane:  
The tane unto the tither did say,  
'Whar sall we gang and dine the day?'

'In ahint yon auld fail dyke  
I wot there lies a new-slain knight;  
And naebody kens that he lies there  
But his hawk, his hound, and his lady fair.

'His hound is to the hunting gane,  
His hawk to fetch the wild-fowl hame,  
His lady's taen anither mate,  
So we may mak oor denner sweet.

'Ye'll sit on his white hause-bane,  
And I'll pike oot his bonny blue een:  
Wi ae lock o his gowden hair  
We'll theek oor nest when it grows bare.

'Mony a ane for him makes mane,  
But nane shall ken whar he is gane:  
O'er his white banes, when they are bare,  
The wind sall blaw for evermair.'

*('The Twa Corbies', 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century ballad)*

### **Gin I Was God**

Gin I was God, sittin' up there abeen,  
Weariet nae doot noo a' my darg was deen,  
Deaved wi' the harps an' hymns oonendin' ringin',  
Tired o' the flockin' angels hairse wi' singin',  
To some clood-edge I'd daunder furth an', feth,  
Look ower an' watch hoo things were gyaun aneth.  
Syne, gin I saw hoo men I'd made mysel  
Had startit into pooshan, sheet an' fell,  
To reive an' rape, an' fairly mak' a hell  
O' my braw birlin' Earth,— a hale week's wark—  
I'd cast my coat again, rowe up my sark,  
An' or they'd time to lench a second ark,  
Tak' back my word an' sen' anither spate,  
Droon oot the hale hypothec, dicht the sklata,  
Own my mistak', an, aince I cleared the brod,  
Start a'thing ower again, gin I was God.

*(Charles Murray, 1864–1941. Murray grew up in Alford: this is an example of writing in Doric)*

## **Mister Mank**

A wee green man wi muckle hauns  
Bides in the bottle bank.  
He's clatty and he's crabbit  
And his name is Mister Mank.

There's spiders in his oxters  
And mushrooms on his taes.  
His skin is like a puddock's  
And he hasna ony claes.

His job is reddin up the bank –  
He disna like a mess:  
He sooks the juice and ginger dregs  
And chaws the broken gless.

Sometimes ye'll hear the bottles clink –  
That's him at work inside.  
I widna want tae dae his job  
Hooever much it peyed!

*Angus Glen (A contemporary bairn rhyme, from the book Blethertoun  
Braes published by (Itchy Coo, 2004)*

Gin I speak wi the tungs o men an angels, but hae nae luve i my hairt, I  
am no nane better nor dunnerin bress or a rínging cymbal.

*(This sentence, from W.L. Lorimer's New Testament in Scots, first  
published in 1983, comes from 1 Corinthians, chapter 13, and is engraved  
on a stone set one of the entrances to the Scottish Parliament)*

## **Examples of Scots phrases:**

Gaun the messages

Ben the hoose

Lang may yer lum reek

Haud yer wheesht

Gie it laldy

Fit like?

High heid yins

Gaun yersel!

Gonnae no dae that?

Awfie no weel

Dinna fash!