

YER AIN TONGUE

ELPHINSTONE INSTITUTE LANGUAGE DAY 26 APRIL 2017 – OPENING REMARKS

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This day is about exploring ways to promote Doric and North-East Scots. Now that's partly about promoting the use of it in the media, the workplace, and education, but it is as much about increasing the *status* of the language. If we can do that, I think the use of it will take care of itself, to an extent. This is not about *preserving* the language, but it's about valuing it, using it, enriching it by using it in new ways, in new places, giving it its due as a *living* language. If a language does not evolve, it becomes a museum piece, and that's not what we're looking for. It's already used in just about every walk of life here in the NE, but often not in high-status areas of that life: used in the home but not in formal education, in the street but not in the media, on the rigs but not in the office workplace. Thus, many have the impression that those high-status areas of life are not for them. We are committed to overcoming that impression and celebrating the use of Doric/North-East Scots in those worlds. And that begins with *status*.

The Elphinstone Institute is a part of the University of Aberdeen dedicated to the promotion and study of NE and northern Scotland. We study culture in context through Ethnology and Folklore – getting to grips with how people make sense of the world around them through stories, customs, practices. Part of our remit is Public Engagement – getting people involved in culture, in interactions with their communities, and with their traditions old and new. We do this in partnership with numerous local groups, individuals, and institutions. Studies from around the world show the value of participation, of interacting with peers and mentors whether learning a traditional craft skill, a song, or a new activity or art form. This is the *process* of tradition, passing on not just knowledge, but *ways of interacting, ways of being, and ways of working together*. This is what builds confident individuals, strong communities, and, by extension, resilient societies, ready to help each other and reach out to others from a secure base.

For more than twenty years, the Institute has been at this and we're now aiming to expand them ten-fold in a North-East Culture Initiative based around the themes of language; music, song, and story; skills and crafts; tourism; and the research to back it all up. Thus, we begin with today: how do we promote, sustain, support, and raise the status of Doric/North-East Scots?

I'm sure we're all aware that this sort of project comes around every decade or so, lots of positive noises are made, and then things tail off, or nothing really comes of it. At the risk of sounding like those past initiatives, this time it has to be different. And I think, as recent

initiatives like Aberdeenshire Council's Doric Language Policy, Turriff's Doric Neuk, and Banff Academy's Scots Language programme show, there's a groundswell to capitalize on.

The North-East is at a tricky time, with the contraction of the oil industry, and we're determined to help fill that gap. We're not *creating* the solution, of course, ordinary North-Easters themselves are doing that, we're simply helping to draw together the threads of a huge range of grassroots knowledge, experience, and initiatives that will build into an alternative vision of the North-East, one that's been here all the time, but one that I believe is undervalued and undersold both here and abroad.

So, the purpose of all this is two-fold: to help build cultural confidence and self-esteem in this region *and* to show that confidence to the world, standing shoulder to shoulder. Confidence breeds success.

- We have a diverse, and expressive language, enriched by hundreds of years of interaction with other cultures, from Dutch fisherfolk to today's recent arrivals who've made the North-East their home, bringing with them languages, music, foods and customs, and many other traditions.
- We have an exceptional cultural heritage. This is the traditional ballad capital of the world, one of the homelands of Scottish fiddle tradition, and home to one of the richest storytelling traditions. We have ancient calendar customs, iron-age monuments, distinctive food and drink, and new hybrid music and cultural fusions.
- We have diverse and multifaceted skills and crafts, from farming knowledge to boatbuilding, from weaving, pottery and spinning to Banff silversmithing and high-fashion straw work.

We are thus exceptionally well placed to be an outstanding tourist destination. Of course, we already are, but increased cultural confidence and self esteem – and a more connected and joined up approach – can lead to a step-change in that industry, with knock-on effects for the economy, our infrastructure, and more importantly, our well being physical and mental.

Now, perhaps that all seems a mile away from why we're here today. But underlying everything we do as social beings is language. The way we talk to each other, the way we tell our own story is who we are. Language shapes our world view and thus Doric/North-East Scots is a priceless vehicle for regional identity. Every language has unique ways of looking at the world, and though it may seem to be just a matter of different words for things, it is not. A language is the fundamental basis for culture – including customs, folklore, traditions – how we make sense of the world around us.

As far as Doric/North-East Scots goes, most North-Easters, old and new, are bilingual to a greater or lesser extent. It has been said that Scots speakers think in English, but feel in Scots. This is, of course, too simplistic; better to say Scots speakers *think* in different ways in Scots and English *and feel* in different ways in Scots and English.

This bilingualism, essentially a biculturalism, can only be a good thing. Millions of people around the world are bilingual, as are many North-Easters. Many recent arrivals are tri-lingual at least – some of the outstanding Scots Language programme pupils at Banff Academy have been Poles who have embraced Scot and English in addition to their first language and dialects.

You see the world in a different way when meeting it in a different language. There's a lot of research out there to show that the bilingual mind has real advantages, making us more *efficient* at processing information, making better *economic* decisions, expressing emotions differently, and retaining cognitive ability around five years longer in old age. Bilingualism increases attainment, self esteem, and improves mental health, employability, and resilience. What's not to like? Being a Scots speaker in the North-East, then, is a huge advantage there for the taking. The key is acknowledging that the language is a valuable asset.

Our job here today, then, is to seek and suggest ways to raise the status of North-East Scots and Doric in every walk of life, celebrating, building on and learning from the diversity of our people.

Schedule for the Day

- Prof. Robert Maccoll Millar, University of Aberdeen on the origins of Doric and North-East Scots.
- Dr Jamie Fairbairn, Banff Academy, on the school's Scots Language programme.
- Matthew Fitt, prizewinning writer, publisher, and tireless campaigner for the Scots language.
- Dr Fiona-Jane Brown, Hidden Aberdeen Tours, on Doric theatre and contemporary storytelling.
- Frieda Morrison, broadcaster, on the role of minority languages in the globalizing world.
- Four discussion groups/workshops on ways forward.