Chapter One

The Scots columns in *The National*

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The National is a daily newspaper, launched in November 2014 and running continuously since then. It was presented from the outset as a journal supportive of Scottish independence, and as such a deliberate counter to the predominantly pro-Union bias of the rest of the Scottish press. 'Predominantly' is in fact an understatement: only one other newspaper, namely the *Sunday Herald*, endorses independence: the two national quality daily papers, the *Scotsman* and the *Herald*, the Scottish editions of serious English papers such as the *Times* and the *Telegraph*, 'rags' with a national distribution such as the *Express, Record* and *Mail*, and the various local papers either avoid the issue entirely or take a Unionist stance, though their attitudes to the devolved powers of the Scottish government and the extent to which these should be increased varies with the individual publications: an astonishing and disgraceful situation in a country where, according to assorted polls, support for independence remained consistently around the 45-50% mark after the narrow defeat of the independence movement in the referendum of 2014 and in recent months has risen significantly above that level (though at least no paper in Scotland argues for a reversion to the incorporative union.)

The National has indubitably been successful in establishing itself as a reputable newspaper, with high-quality reporting, a lively correspondence section with notably well-informed and thoughtful contributions, and excellent columnists whose scholarly and incisive articles provide detailed examination not only of the Scottish socio-political situation but of UK and international political developments and of other contemporary social issues. A recurring theme among the columnists is discussion of the institutions and established social practices which enhance the national life in various small independent countries, but which in Scotland are either woefully underdeveloped or absent altogether. It also includes regular essays on Scottish

McClure, J. Derrick. 2020. 'The Scots columns in *The National*'. In Joanna Kopaczyk & Robert McColl Millar (eds.) 2020. *Language on the move across domains and communities. Selected papers from the 12th triennial Forum for Research on the Languages of Scotland and Ulster, Glasgow 2018*. Aberdeen: FRLSU, pp. 3-12. ISBN: 978-0-9566549-5-3.

history, Scottish literature and arts and the contemporary cultural scene. And notably, it has a weekly full-page article in Gaelic, and another in Scots.[1]

The ideological reason for this practice is clear: since Gaelic and Scots are national languages of Scotland, they should as a matter of course have a regular place in a national newspaper; and particularly one of which the entire *raison d'être* is to raise the general level of awareness of what is distinctive and valuable in the national life. The practice of including columns in the two languages is not unique to *The National*: the Aberdeen *Press and Journal*, for example, has a regular weekly column in the North-East dialect of Scots, locally called the Doric, and a comic-satiric feature by a team called 'The Flying Pigs' which makes some use of the dialect; and several regional papers in currently or recently Gaelic-speaking areas include features in Gaelic. As far as I know, however, *The National* is the only paper to print articles in *both* languages. The topic of any given Scots or Gaelic column is at the discretion of the writer (both columns have several contributors): the languages themselves and the extent (less than satisfactory in the case of Gaelic, very much worse in the case of Scots) to which they are provided for in such fields as education and the media have provided material for some contributions, but more often than not the column in any given week is devoted to discussion of some topical social or political issue: the Scots columns published from May to August of this year [2018], from which the examples used in this paper are taken, have discussed, among other things, audience contributions at public lectures and discussions, the baleful legacy of the mining industry in Fife, President Trump's reaction to the offshore windfarm near Aberdeen, the Catalan inde-pendence movement and the fad for using steroids among young men: and on any showing the discussions are on a sufficiently high intellectual level to meet the standards of a quality newspaper. The Gaelic column is always accompanied by a very brief synopsis in English and a glossary of a few (sometimes only two or three) of the less common words used (in many cases, words recently concocted to extend the traditional Gaelic vocabulary into the contemporary world); no such apparatus is provided for the Scots column. Occasionally a contributor to the paper's letters pages is

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[1] In the period between the original writing of this paper and its publication, the Scots and Gaelic pages have ceased to appear. This is due to various factors, most notably the departure of several of the columnists and financial constraints which have prevented their replacement. The paper's editorial team is still committed to supporting the languages and is exploring other possible means of doing so; though the current pandemic is proving an impediment to this as to many other projects.

prompted by an art-icle to write a commenting letter in Gaelic or Scots; more often the latter.

Despite the superficial parallelism of the newspaper's provision for Gaelic and Scots, the implications of the practice are more complex and far-reaching than they appear at first sight. By including a page in Gaelic on Tuesdays and a page in Scots on Thursdays, *The National* is by no doubt deliberate implication placing the two on equal footing; but in reality their positions are not the same and not equal: Gaelic is universally recognised as a language; Scots is not. (I leave this simple statement as it stands: probably all readers are familiar with the situation to which it refers, and I have no thought of even attempting to summarise it in the present context.) The Scots column, therefore, is by its existence a 'promotion' of the language in a sense in which the Gaelic column neither is nor needs to be. Furthermore, written Gaelic has a standardised grammar and orthography and a well-developed range of styles: written Scots certainly has a range of styles, but no standardisation on any linguistic level: on the contrary, every individual writer, at least since the Scots Renaissance, has been at full liberty to concoct his or her own literary idiolect. The Ayrshire-Edinburgh axis of eighteenth-century poetry, the regional dialects of Shetland, Aberdeenshire, Fife or any other locality, the literary pan-Scots abounding in archaisms and other lexical rarities of the post-MacDiarmid school, the sanitised urban register of J.J. Bell, Helen W. Pride and the *Sunday Post* strips until the death of the artist Dudley D. Watkins (always associated with childhood or traditionally idealised family life and presented as intrinsically funny), the phonetically-spelt basilect of modern urban *verismo* writing: the opportunities which Scots affords for a creative writer are unlimited; but the disadvantage of this is that the term 'Scots' has such a wide range of possible references as to be almost hopelessly nebulous. A reader on being told to expect 'a column in Gaelic' will know clearly what he will find; anticipation of 'a column in Scots' will entail no such certainty.

Furthermore, the genre of expository and argumentative prose, though not a developed register in classical and early modern Gaelic literature, is by now well-established in the language: in Scots, the case is much less clear-cut. A landmark event in the study of Scottish cultural history was the discovery by William Donaldson, some thirty years ago, of an enormous quantity of popular journalism in Scots dating from the mid-nineteenth century to the First World War, with articles covering a wide range of topics and utilising Scots in various forms (corresponding to the locality of the individ-

ual newspaper) as their medium: his discovery, in effect, of a major ingredient of the national life in this period, which had in the interim been consigned to almost complete oblivion (see Donaldson 1986 and 1989). To this extent, the Scots columns in *The National* are building on and contributing to an important and fascinating tradition. However, the fact that this treasure-trove of Scots writing and the tradition it embodied *was* consigned to oblivion has the obvious corollary that it does not in practice provide models or even consciously-recognised precedents for the contemporary columnists. Expository and argumentative prose in Scots exists in abundance, but since most of it is virtually unknown, a journalist wishing to write in such a vein is still in effect starting from scratch. Even in the scholarly field, the influence of Donaldson's work on subsequent research has been disappointing in the extreme. Despite his revelation of what would seem an unlimited and fascinating field of linguistic and sociological investigation, no other scholar has embarked on any in-depth study of the material; and the most substantial and important study of Scots in journalism to appear since the date of his work, examining material from our own time, does not even mention Donaldson or the material which he unearthed (Douglas 2009).

In all these respects, the inclusion of something presented as a Scots column is a far bolder and more controversial procedure on the part of a newspaper than that of a Gaelic column.

Of the various columnists whose work is published on the Scots page, the one with the widest reputation based on work other than his writing for *The National* is Rab Wilson: poet, translator (his first published work was a free rendering into colloquial Scots of *The Rubai'iyat of Omar Khayyam*), performer and active campaigner for Scots. He comes from New Cumnock in Ayrshire, one of several small towns in the Ayr and Doon valleys which flourished as coal mining communities until the closure of the pits. Various ingredients in this background contribute to his literary persona. First, Ayrshire is the home ground not only of Burns but of a whole company of poets (male and female) who flourished contemporaneously with him, establishing for the county a lasting reputation for poetic achievement. Next, the local form of Scots is still very much the medium of ordinary social interaction among much of the populace.[2] Thirdly, the mining industry (here as of

[2] One Ayrshire town, Muirkirk, has recently taken a vigorous and strikingly successful initiative in overcoming the depression which the mining communities have suffered since the demise of the industry by promoting its literary heritage as a tourist attraction: one feature is a 'Heritage Trail' along which visitors are guided past buildings and landmarks associated with the eighteenth-century poets and other Muirkirkers of renown; another is the annual

course elsewhere) begat a breed of tough working-class men, and the demise of mining in the area and consequent unemployment and social deprivation encouraged radical thought and expression.

His column in the issue for 17 May 2018 is headed 'Bourach o the Biased Broadcasting Corporation': a well-aimed and hard-hitting criticism of the BBC's tendency to assign disproportionate time, in its news reporting and discussion programmes, to right-wing and Unionist political parties and their representatives, and its lack of attention to Scotland in general and the independence movement in particular. The keyword *bourach* is a familiar Scots lexeme meaning 'a mass or heap' (of things) or 'a crowd' (of people or animals): in the headline it in fact makes little sense,[3] but correctly used it makes an effective conclusion to the article: '… thoosans o ither Scots wha've finally goat scunnert wi this BBC bourach!' Other familiar Scots lexemes in the article are *lowed* 'flamed', *raxed* 'reached, extended', *kythed* 'revealed', *glaums* 'grabs', *heize* 'raise', *hauntle* 'small number', *airts* 'regions', *scunnert* 'disgusted'. Less traditional usages include *guff* meaning 'nonsense, rubbish' – presumably an extension of its literal sense of 'a smell, often specifically a bad smell', and (idiosyncratically spelt) *chauncer* 'fraud, humbug', appearing in the realistic phrase 'a richt shooer o chauncers'. These are well-established in Scots vernacular usage; but *kahunas* ('…he [the rapper Akala] at least hud the kahunas tae heize up some 'inconvenient truths'…') is not Scottish at all: it has apparently come to be used as a mistake for *cojones*, and has that sense here. In a different category is *nary* (in 'nary a mention'): this is a well-established dialect usage but *not* from any dialect of Scots, and definitely out of place in a Scots article: as much so as *way ayont* (for 'far beyond'), which not only uses the English word *way* instead of its Scots cognate *wey* but uses it in an idiomatic sense which is wholly un-Scottish.

In an article of roughly 800 words, these Scots items constitute only a small proportion of the lexis. Of course, Scots and English have, and have always had, an enormous number of shared words, from the common Anglo-Saxon vocabulary, from the corpus of French borrowings made before the languages became differentiated and from the array of Latin- and Greek-

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Lapraik Festival of Scots poetry and song, called after the recipient of three of Burns' epistles (and a not inconsiderable poet in his own right). Muirkirk also promotes itself as a 'Scots toun', actively encouraging the use of Scots in both speech and writing by school pupils at all stages: this practice is followed sporadically elsewhere, but Muirkirk is still the only town where it is a matter of civic policy.

[3] But the headline is not, or not necessarily, by the writer, as I know from contributing a column on two occasions.

derived lexemes of later coinage; and it is wholly fallacious to imagine that a text is Scots only to the extent that its vocabulary would be incomprehensible to a monolingual Anglophone reader; yet many writers of Scots have deliberately maximised their use of uniquely Scots words to emphasise the distinct status of their language, and it is, though certainly not inherently culpable, at least to be noted that Wilson does not adopt the practice.

On the other hand, his orthography is decidedly not that of Standard English. The differences are of two kinds. For many words he uses a traditional orthography representing a Scots pronunciation established for centuries: *maist, warld, aa, hou, gane, micht, haud, sair, wey, aff.* These are non-controversial; but less so are spellings of relatively recent introduction intended as phonetic representations of urban demotic speech: *masel, yersel, wull, oan, wis* 'was', *wir* 'were', *hud* 'had', *fir* 'for';[4] and still less so are wholly idiosyncratic and patently unnecessary forms like *evri, firgettable, presaintit* 'presented'.

Distinctive vocabulary and pronunciation (the latter as implied by orthography) are easy to recognise in a Scots text, and their literary effectiveness easy to evaluate. A subtler aspect, and one more difficult to assess objectively, of a passage purporting to be Scots is the use of idioms, turns of phrase or distinctive stylistic features which characterise the language. This column opens thus: 'Ah'm shair lik masel maist o the readers oot there wull hae growne up watchin the BBC.' This sounds authentic: it is not obtrusively or assertively Scots, but realistically suggests a familiar colloquial register. This cannot be said of 'Why, thon o coorse wid be the UK's third biggest political pairty, the SNP!' The interjection *Why* is decidedly un-Scots, as are the word order and the use of the subjunctive in *thon o coorse wid be ….* But re-write that passage as English: 'Why, that of course would be the UK's third biggest political party, the SNP!', and it at once becomes a perfectly commonplace phrase from the familiar register of journalistic debate. Here Wilson's practice illustrates a massive and fundamental problem for would-be writers of Scots prose: how to avoid sounding as if they had first composed a passage in English and then simply tweaked the spellings and vocabulary to give it a Scots feel. Almost inevitably, this will be precisely the case for at least some of the work of many contributors: all of them will have learned basic composition through the medium of English, and even for a writer like Rab Wilson, a native speaker of Scots with an abundant knowledge of the rich literary heritage embodied

[4] For discussion of such forms see McClure (1997).

in the language, a conscious effort will necessarily be required to avoid letting the canons of standard literary English prose affect his Scots compositions.

The issues raised by our examination of this particular columnist's practice are manifold. To what extent does a columnist use distinctively Scots vocabulary, and why precisely to *this* extent: if he/she uses particularly recondite words does it add to the force of the argument or obscure it; if a common English word appears when a distinctively Scots one readily suggests itself, does this lessen the value of the passage as a Scots text? Is it necessary or desirable to use nonce phonetic spellings to suggest a particular regionally or socially marked pronunciation: given that the text is a newspaper column presenting an argument on an issue with which readers are presumed to be actively concerned, could this be seen as an unnecessary distraction? How much effort should be made to avoid constructions suggestive of standard English journalese? How *little* Scots can there be in a passage before it ceases to have any credentials as Scots writing at all: does 'borders are tidy, roses are budding, strawberries are ripenin an promisin a bumper crop' (Rab Wilson, 21 June 2018) or 'appyntit tae government as a minister unner Salmond in 2007, he wis elevatit tae Cabinet Secretary by Sturgeon in 2016' (Ashley Douglas, 19 July 2018) qualify as Scots except by the merest token-ism? If a columnist writes 'Ah get a warm, fuzzy feelin inside jist thinkin aboot it' (Antonia Uri, 31 May 2018), does the fact (as I presume it is) that she, a Scot, has adopted this recently-introduced expression into her idiolect automatically counter the fact that it has nothing remotely Scottish about it? Almost any one of *The National*'s weekly Scots columns could be examined for the writer's approach to these and other issues of principle: issues with which the writer may not even have consciously grappled. Since a full dissertation could be written on even the three months' worth of articles which I have examined for this short paper, in what remains I will simply discuss the contrasting techniques used in some individual articles.

A conspicuous feature of the Scots columns is that the regional origin of the writer is often revealed in the medium; or to be strictly conscientious in stating only observable facts, that the literary registers are often based on different dialects. Wilson's Scots prose suggests a planned effort to construct a written medium based on contemporary Ayrshire vernacular speech. The columnist Antonia Uri, in an article headed 'Gien Donald [Trump] a big twa fingers up wi wind fairm' (31 May 2018), uses a number of markedly North-Eastern features; appropriately for an article on a windfarm off the

Aberdeenshire coast: *fa* ‘who’, *foo* ‘how’, *fit* ‘what’ or ‘which’, *fan* ‘when’, *aire* ‘there’ (the spelling is idiosyncratic but the loss of the initial [ð] is characteristic), *’at* ‘that’, *onywye* ‘anyplace’, *kwintra* ‘country’, *nae* as the verbal negator, *ma* as the object pronoun ‘me’, *meen* and *seen* ‘moon’ and ‘soon’, *affa* ‘awful’, as an intensifier. Other features of Scots grammar and phonology, not as those are specifically North-Eastern, also appear; and in a few cases an unmarked Scots form is used when a North-East one was available: *ane* instead of *een*, *auld* instead of *aal*, *uised* instead of *ees’t*, *guid* instead of *gweed*. Though the phonology is thoroughly Scots, however, she makes scarcely any use of distinctively Scots vocabulary, North-Eastern or otherwise: *ken*, *neuk* and *siller* are virtually the only examples; and often the opportunity of using a Scots word, without venturing at all into the realms of the obscure or recondite, is lost: *massive* has a fine North-Eastern equivalent *ondeemous*, *destroy* could have been *connach*, *prood* could have been *vogie* or *vauntie*; *crazy* could have been *gyte, gowkit, glaikit*; *extremely* could have been *richt*, *fell*, *unco*; *shock* could have been *fleg*, *gliff*, *stammagaster*; *twa hoots* (as in *not to give…*) could have been *a doit, a docken, a meck*; and so on. This is a sin of omission only, if it is a sin at all; but the fundamental *raison d’être* of an article in Scots is not only to present an argument but to demonstrate that Scots has the resources to present it as well as (or better than) English could do; and it is therefore legitimate to ask why the writer has passed over the opportunity to use the lexical resources of Scots.

As Antonia Uri’s Scots has a Doric ring, that of Thomas Clark definitely suggests the demotic of the Clyde conurbation; and he is notably successful in transferring the cadences and constructions of this register to literary form. His article on Catalonia (7 June 2018) begins thus: ‘Haudin ma hauns up here, fowks. Aw this business aboot the Growth Commission? Wey abuin ma pey grade. Ah’m leukin at it an ah’m feelin like a dug that’s jist woke up at the controls o the Millennium Falcon.’ Throughout the article, idioms like *tak a reidie* or *shoot the craw* occur, and realistic turns of phrase suggest the vigorous tones of a Glasgow pub conversation: ‘like a stooshie on the ither side o the train’; ‘It’s no that I need awthin spelt oot for me, like’; ‘a hurl in yer caur tae the saunds an back’; ‘let’s get the honeymuin period oot the wey straicht aff, there’ll be nae room unner this flag for winnae-wirks an charity cases, wance it’s spent we’ll no can get it back’; and so on. Since the theme of this article is the deplorably low level of active support given to Scots (as contrasted with Catalan) at any official level – ‘Ither kintraes dinnae jist spend mair siller on their ain leids than we dae – they spend mair siller on

OOR leids than we dae' – the abrasive tone associated with this register is entirely fitting.

A real readiness to avail herself of the lexical resources of Scots is shown by Ashley Douglas: her column of 10 May 2018 begins 'Ye're at a gey interestin an upsteerin panel discussion. The speakers are crackin, the audience engaged, an yer thochts are birlin excitedly roon yer heid.' In the rest of the paper, we find *shooglin*, *waffin*, *souchin* (the abundance of Scots *verbs* is noticeable), *claucht, cheil, threap*, *glisk*, *ettle*, *stramash*, *douce*, *haiverins* and *hantle*, besides an attractive concoction *unjoukable* for 'unavoidable'. Also notable for enterprising use of Scots lexis is Alastair Heather, who as public engagement officer of the Elphinstone Institute, a department of Aberdeen University devoted to research into the distinctive culture of the North-East including its dialects, has recently initiated a Scots language workshop and a teaching course to be launched in the forthcoming session [i.e. 2018-19; it has since been launched as planned]. His column of 24 May 2018 opens with the observation that Fife has been 'torn tae targets' by the energy industry; and he later remarks that the industrial era 'coupit the region heelster-gowdie'. In another column (29 June 2018) he recalls 'Bairns pleutered through the dubs, birds chuntered fae tree tae tree, an in the gym me an a bourach o ither young lads heched an peched, gettin fit.' Alliterative phrases like 'dulesomeness an drudgery', 'a wee crew o cludgie-cleaners', 'the muckle mowser owre his mou', 'it wis a broon an drouth-scarred daud o dust atween a diddy wee toun an a cauld grey sea', '… tae grab as mony gowden gowpins as possible afore the cash-carnival flittit awa' enliven his writing. Such creative touches undoubtedly demonstrate (if any demonstration were needed) the expressive power of Scots, and is usefulness as a rhetorical tool in an essay designed for forceful presentation of a case.

Overall, the impression gathered from reading the Scots columns over several weeks is of a wide individual range of approaches, resulting in an exuberant variety of styles. What is entirely lacking, however, is any kind of consistency. Even within a given essay, variant spellings of the same word, inconsistencies of dialect (unimportant if the article is in a 'general' Scots; but several, as we have noted, purport to be in specific regional dialects), use of English vocabulary items where Scots ones are readily available and use of obtrusive Anglicisms of phrasing or idiom are frequently found: the last in particular inviting, at least from sceptics, the question whether Scots is really as different from standard literary English as its proponents maintain.

Does this matter? I would argue that it does. The fact that *The National* recognises its responsibility, as a Scottish independence supporting paper, to contribute to the promotion and development of the Scots language is unequivocally praiseworthy, and the creative vitality of many of the columns is, on one level, abundant justification of the practice. But the question now is whether the development of Scots can halt at the stage represented collectively by *The National* columns: the stage of each individual writer employing a personally-devised literary idiolect. I have maintained for some time that a *canonical* Scots, with established rules and conventions of orthography and grammar such as Gaelic has, is necessary for it to claim the status of a fully-developed written language (it goes without saying that the establishment of this would not in the slightest degree impede the licence of creative writers to exploit the language in any way they see fit); and though the achievements of *The National* columnists are impressive (and long may they continue to flourish), they do not contribute to this. That it is not within their remit is an entirely valid answer. For the moment, then, we may simply congratulate the editor and columnists on a major contribution to the ongoing development of prose-writing in Scots; but the issue of devising a standardised register of the language still remains to be addressed.

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