

## The Beginnings of Doric Poetry

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From the later nineteenth century to the present day the dialect of the North-East, locally known by its commandeered label 'the Doric', has been the vehicle of one of the richest and most individual local dialect literatures in Scotland: in *mainland* Scotland, almost certainly the richest of all. Charles Murray's *Hamewith*, first published in 1900, initiated a school of poetry aimed specifically at a local readership, describing scenes and characters from the village and farming communities of the North-East and using a literary dialect in which the characteristics of the local speech were strongly emphasised. In prose, the use of the dialect had been familiar from somewhat earlier: William Alexander's *Johnny Gibb of Gushetneuk* first appeared in instalments in the *Aberdeen Free Press* in 1868-9 prior to its publication in book form in 1871; and in a different genre, George MacDonald included many extensive, expressive and highly realistic passages of Doric dialogue in his novels. Throughout the twentieth century and up to the present day, the dialect has never ceased to be productive as a vehicle for both poetry and prose. Its beginnings as a literary medium, however, came much earlier, though a notable fact in the history of Doric writing is a lack of continuity: Charles Murray's work represents a revival of a practice which had sprung into life in the eighteenth century but unaccountably gone into eclipse. Doric literature arose in the context of the eighteenth-century Vernacular Revival, of which its emergence is an integral part; and a remarkable feature of its development is that it sprang fully-armed, so to speak, into being: there is virtually no evidence of local poets experimenting with the dialect until three highly individual, mutually unlike and quantitatively very substantial poems, deliberately and unmistakably in a dialect which contrasts with that being used contemporaneously by writers from further south, appeared in quick succession: John Skinner's *The Christmass Bawing of Monimus* in 1739, Robert Forbes' *Ajax his Speech to the Grecian Knabbs* in 1742 and Alexander Ross's *Helenore, or The Fortunate Shepherdess* presumably in the 1750s.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It was first published in 1768 but had circulated locally in manuscript from a much earlier date, impossible to ascertain precisely.

McClure, J.Derrick. 2013. 'The Beginnings of Doric poetry'. In Cruickshank, Janet and Robert McColl Millar (eds.) 2013. *After the Storm: Papers from the Forum for Research on the Languages of Scotland and Ulster triennial meeting, Aberdeen 2012*. Aberdeen: Forum for Research on the Languages of Scotland and Ireland, 166-86. ISBN: 978-0-9566549-3-9

Throughout the history of Scots literature, writers from the North-East have, as is to be expected, made their distinctive individual contributions: the fact that John Barbour, author of the *Brus*, was the Archdeacon of Aberdeen is a well-grounded source of local pride (though there is no evidence that he was an Aberdonian by birth, and some reason to assume the contrary).<sup>2</sup> However, literature of the mediaeval and Renaissance periods emanating from the North-East shows virtually no trace of distinctive dialect features, and certainly no evidence that they were emphasised in writing as markers of regional identity — which, considering how late in the day Scots itself came to be recognised as a possible mark of *national* identity, is hardly surprising. Between Barbour and the Vernacular Revival period some notable works of poetry can be certainly attributed to writers of North-Eastern origin, and of the abundant store of ballad texts which collectively form one of the glories of Scottish folk culture, a few at least exist in forms dating back to this period; but neither art poetry nor folk-poetry (simplistically distinguished) from the region, though much of it is certainly in Scots, shows distinctive local dialect features to any degree (see Walker 1887 for a convenient introduction). Philological examination of all available writings, including not only poetry but such non-literary texts as burgh records, shows clearly that the regional dialects had at least begun to diverge before the end of the MSc period: in the North-East, there is definite orthographic evidence of such well-known shibboleths of modern Doric as the replacement of [xw] by [f] (*fit, faar, fa* for Gen.Sc. *whit, whaur, wha*) and raising of [e:] from former [a:] to [i] before [n] (*steen, been, aleen* for Gen.Sc. *stane, bane, alane*); and less certain but still suggestive evidence for the change of [w] to fricative [v] in the initial cluster [wr] (*vrang, vricht* for Gen.Sc. *wrang, wricht*: the [w] has of course been lost entirely in most modern dialects) and following an [a] (*snyaave, byaave* for Gen.Sc. *snaw, blaw*) and the change of the sequence [xt] to [θ] (*mith, dother* for Gen.Sc. *micht, dochter*). (See Aitken 1971, Macafee 1989, LAOS 2008.) Nonetheless, it may be accepted as a generalisation that neither linguistically nor in any other respect was there any significant regional dimension to Scots literature in the Early or Middle Scots periods.

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<sup>2</sup> The family name Barbour is much commoner in the South-West of Scotland than in the North-East; and the accounts of the topography of battle sites which abound in the poem are rather more detailed and precise for those located in southern parts than in the Highland and North-East areas. For discussion see for example the Introduction to McDiarmid and Stevenson (eds.) 1980-85.

Quite suddenly, however, in the second quarter of the eighteenth century, John Skinner, Robert Forbes and Alexander Ross — a minister, a hosier and a schoolmaster — launched what is now referred to as the Doric, and what the second-mentioned identified as ‘Broad Buchans’, into burgeoning life as a poetic medium. By 1739, the date of Skinner’s *Christmass Bawing*, the Vernacular Revival was in full swing: what had begun as a quietly-rising tide of interest in Scots poetry of the past, and of efforts at restoring it in the writers’ own times to a life worthy of its former status, had become a boisterous flood in and through the works of Allan Ramsay. The first volume of Ramsay’s poems had appeared in 1721 and the second in 1727, and in between them, in 1724, his anthology *The Ever Green*, consisting mainly of selections from the Bannatyne Manuscript. A definite feature of his technique is a dynamic and deliberately-cultivated interaction between his contemporary language and earlier stages of the Scots tongue: he does not, however, show any sign of wishing to exploit the differences between regional forms of Scots. Fergusson in *Leith Races* was later to make a character called ‘Sawny frae Aberdeen’ speak some lines containing markedly North-Eastern features — Fergusson’s parents, of course, were from Aberdeenshire; but there is nothing of this kind in Ramsay. Nor, in the word-lists by which he illustrates etymological correspondences between English and Scots, does he show any sign of recognising the existence of dialect differences within Scots. There is nothing surprising, much less reprehensible, in this: Ramsay was no scholar and approached his literary projects armed with native wit rather than academic learning; and his poetic language is essentially the mother tongue of a Lanarkshire man living an active social life in Edinburgh, enriched to some extent with words derived from his enthusiastic reading of earlier literature.<sup>3</sup>

Ramsay may well simply have equated what he called Scots with the Lothian dialect: Edinburgh, after all, was the capital, and the centre of the rapidly-flourishing regeneration of Scotland’s cultural and intellectual life. Yet the North-East, though geographically isolated, was fully capable of keeping pace with Edinburgh in this (see for example Carter and Pittock 1987); and the dialect which Skinner, Forbes and Ross heard around them

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<sup>3</sup> His un-scholarly approach was remarked on disapprovingly by later scholars, e.g. Lord Hailes (Dalrymple 1770): ‘The editor of *the Evergreen* was a person of singular native genius. [...] But while I make this just acknowledgement to his merit, I must be allowed to observe, that he was not skilled in the ancient Scottish dialect. His skill indeed scarcely extended beyond the vulgar language spoken in the Lothians at this day.’ For discussion see McClure 2012.

was not only distinctive in itself but the mother-tongue of a region with a flourishing cultural life of its own, and a local capital which had been a university city for longer than Edinburgh and, for much of the Middle Ages and beyond, a more important centre for European trade.

That Skinner, Forbes and Ross should have regarded their native dialect as a fitting medium for their literary works is then, in principle, entirely natural; though it is also predictable that the practice largely established by Ramsay of associating Scots predominantly with humorous poetry would have an effect on their poetic practices. Two of the three poems on which this paper will focus, Skinner's *Christmass Bawing* and Ross's *Helonore*, are specifically modelled on existing works, respectively the mediaeval but uninterruptedly popular and influential *Christis Kirk on the Greene* and Ramsay's *The Gentle Shepherd*; and in both cases the conspicuous use of the local dialect is part of the individual approach to their models which the poets take. Forbes' *Ajax his Speech* is in some respects the most remarkable of the three, since it has no obvious precedents at all. It is a translation — using the word with some degree of freedom — from Book XIII of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; but in complete antithesis to the greatest of Scots translations from classical Latin, Gavin Douglas's *Eneados* (which Forbes probably knew from Ruddiman's landmark edition of 1710), treats its original with a marked lack of reverence, choosing not the dignified pentameter couplets which an eighteenth-century poetic translation from Ovid might be expected to employ but a racy ballad metre, and a vocabulary abounding in homely and even vulgar expressions. What all three writers have in common, however, is a clear determination to bring their native dialect into literary prominence by strongly emphasising its distinctive phonology and vocabulary in their works.

The distinction of producing the first poetic work in a conspicuously North-Eastern dialect belongs to the Reverend John Skinner; and though a *juvenilium* written at the age of seventeen, *The Christmass Bawing of Monimusk* is not only a landmark in the history of Doric literature but a comic poem fit to stand among the finest things of its kind in the eighteenth century. The half-century gap between the writing and the publication of *The Christmass Bawing* casts an interesting light on the poetic scene in eighteenth-century Scotland. The poem had become well-known throughout the country by circulating in manuscript and (no doubt) frequently being recited at convivial gatherings, and Skinner had gone on to produce a substantial corpus of verse in Scots, English and Latin; yet, apparently regarding his poetry as a mere hobby incidental to his vocation as a minister

and his scholarly writings on historical and philosophical topics, he made no attempt to publish a collected edition and indeed actively rejected suggestions that he should do so,<sup>4</sup> though the fact that such suggestions were made is evidence that the manuscript circulation of his poems, and publication (with or without his authority) of a few individual ones, had earned him a substantial degree of renown. In poems written as responses to expressions of praise for his work, or invitations to publish it, he argues that his verse is of little worth, though it may provide amusement; and that though he scorns any suggestion that the writing of humorous poetry is a ploy unbecoming a minister, he is nonetheless unwilling to bestow on it the dignity of print. It was an approach by Andrew Shirrefs that proved the catalyst in changing his mind. Shirrefs, bookseller, publisher and a poet with a gift for vituperative satire and an enthusiasm for the Aberdeenshire dialect, had sent Skinner a copy of his pastoral drama *Jamie and Bess* (modelled directly on Ramsay's *The Gentle Shepherd*) with a verse epistle in which the conventional expressions of admiration for Skinner's work and deprecation of his own are presented with an attractive degree of vigour and dexterity, and requests Skinner to read over his drama and give him his thoughts on it:

Sae, gin nae sin tae drap the creed,  
And spare me ae short hour to read,  
For mair I think it winna need

Frae your devotion;  
I sall be blyth, be't ill or guid,  
Tae hear your notion.

*To the Reverend the AUTHOR of TULLOCHGORUM,  
with a Copy of JAMIE and BESS (Shirrefs 1790, pp.338-9)*

On September 15<sup>th</sup> 1788, some weeks after receiving Shirrefs' drama and letter, Skinner responded with an Epistle (surprisingly enough, in English and in octosyllabic couplets, a form which he rarely used), giving qualified praise to *Jamie and Bess* and using the fact that it is an 'imitation' to lead on to a reference to his own poem, which is an imitation (as already noted) of *Christis Kirk on the Green*:

Near fifty years ago I wrote it,  
And to this day have not forgot it.

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<sup>4</sup> See Bertie (ed.) 2005, from which all quotations are taken. This excellent edition, containing many hitherto unpublished poems, fills a major gap in the field of eighteenth century literary history.

So now I send it, and you may  
Dispose of it in any way,  
Either to throw it on the fire,  
If its deservings so require,  
Or, if ye think it worth inspection,  
To place it in your month's Collection.  
*Epistle to Andrew Shirrefs*, ll.83-90.

that is, the *Caledonian Magazine* which Shirrefs edited and published. Shirrefs responded at once with another epistle, characteristically vigorous in tone, in which he expressed enthusiastic appreciation of Skinner's poem:

Your *Christmas Ba'* has fill'd a place  
Whare mony a bonny turn I trace,  
And a' gaes aff wi' sic a grace,  
Throughout the sang,  
I wad be baul' to brak' his face,  
Wha thought it lang.

*Answer to the Former* [i.e. Skinner's Epistle]. (Shirrefs 1790, p 349.)

and proceeded to publish it in the next issue of the *Caledonian Magazine*.

Skinner's model for his poem of course ranks with Robert Sempill's *Epitaph on Habbie Simpson* as one of the seminal forces in the history of Scottish literature. First appearing in the Bannatyne Manuscript of 1568, where it is attributed to James I,<sup>5</sup> it was printed many times in the seventeenth century, and selected by James Watson for the first poem in his *Choice Collection*, a foundation work of the Vernacular Revival. Ramsay printed it in 1718 and 1720 with his own additions ('Cantos II and III', thus making the original poem Canto I: each of Ramsay's new Cantos is a poem of roughly the same size as the original), and in 1721 included it in his first volume of poems: he also printed it, this time using the original Bannatyne Manuscript text as his exemplum instead of any of the later reprints, in *The Ever Green*.<sup>6</sup>

Skinner's poem is a worthy sequel to Ramsay's in its rambunctious physical comedy: a hallmark of the poem is an abundance of words suggesting noise, rapid action and injuries (*bensil* – sudden violent

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<sup>5</sup> Later editors assigned it to James V: there is no independent evidence for either attribution. Ramsay accepted James V's claim, at least for poetic purposes: his lines 'Our Kings were poets too themsel, / Bauld and jocose' (*Answer to William Hamilton of Gilbertfield*) refers to James I (for *The Kingis Quair*) and James V (for *Christis Kirk*).

<sup>6</sup> See MacLaine (ed.) 1996 for the most recent annotated text of the poem and detailed discussion of it and its influence, including reference to Skinner's poem.

movement; *binner* – a noisy rush or rumble; *blaise* – a bang, thump (seemingly an idiosyncratic usage); *brattle* – clatter, rush noisily; *brein* – roar; *broolzie* – fight, brawl; *clammyhowat* – a heavy blow;<sup>7</sup> *clash* – strike; *dawrd* – violent rush; *ding* – knock; *feugh* – resounding blow; *flirr* – gnash (teeth); *foolzie* – trample underfoot; *fudder* (Doric form of *whidder*) – rush; *gowph*, *youph* and *sowph*, all evidently meaning to bang or thump: the last, though a common word in other senses, has only this unique attestation in the SND with *this* meaning; *heels-o'er-gowdie* – head over heels; *hurry-burry* – tumult, confusion; *lounderin* – thrashing (Skinner's *Leitch lent the ba' a lounrin lick* recalls Ramsay's *To lend his loving wife a lounding lick* from *The Gentle Shepherd*); *pran* – bruise; *rap* ('wi'a rap') – instantly; *skib* – smack (also idiosyncratic); *snib* – swift stroke; *snype* – smart blow; *staffy-nevel* – fight with staves and fists; *stoyt* – stagger; *swinge* – a violent swiping motion; *thud* – bump, rumbling noise (an authentic OSc word, though recently adopted into English); *toolzie* – fight; *yark* – hard knock); and another is an almost equal abundance of derogatory nouns and adjectives applied to human beings (*ablach* – an insignificant or contemptible person; *camshuch* – surly, ill-tempered; *drochlin* – puny, feeble; *fleip* – 'a lazy stupid fellow, an oaf, a lout'; *gilpy* – callow youth; *grunshy* – stout person; *gurk* – stout heavily-built person; *hempy* – rascal (deserving of the *hemp*); *huddrin* – slovenly; *ill-trickit* – mischievous; *mawtent* – lazy, sluggish: this is the first of only two instances attested in the SND of this figurative use of an adjective literally applied to tough, heavy inadequately-baked bread; and *loll* – a pampered lazy person: these two occur together in the lines *There tumbled a mischievous pair O' mawtent lolls aboon him*, and in the only other instance of *loll* recorded in the SND, from Banff, it is qualified by the same adjective; *primpit* – affected; *sauchin* – flabby, lacking in energy; *skate* – 'term of contempt for a stupid or objectionable person'; *skypel* – ragged, tattered; *stiblar* – hobbledehoy, adolescent; *trypal* – long thin person; and *slype*, a predominantly local word for which the SND definition is worth quoting in full: 'a term of great contempt for a lazy, coarse, dissolute, worthless, uncouth kind of person, a lout, a sloven, slut, a dirty, sneaking man, or occas. woman'). Many of these words are unique, or almost so, to the North-east; some are attested for the first time in this poem (*clammyhowat* is one such). The same is true of some

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<sup>7</sup> All later attestations of this word, including one by Forbes, have spellings that suggest [ju] or [u] in the third syllable: Skinner's spelling suggests the North-Eastern [jʌu] for [ju].

other words from different semantic fields: *job* – to pant or gasp;<sup>8</sup> *inset* – acting, temporary (in the phrase *the inset dominie*); *knableich* – a large stone; *mird* – venture, dare; *rammage* – rough, uneven (of ground), in the phrase *a rammage glyde*, apparently meaning a downward sloping path, in which the second word is also rare and local. A trick of style to which the Scots tongue lends itself with exceptional readiness is that of placing semantically forceful and phonologically memorable words in rhyming position; and Skinner often takes advantage of the tricky quadruple rhyme scheme of the stanza to do this with a panache worthy of Ramsay.

Pronunciations characteristic of the dialect are sometimes indicated by the spelling. *Bleed* (blood), *bierly* (for the Gen.Sc. *buidly*, stalwart) and *steir* (Gen.Sc. *sture*, stout, burly) show the raising to [i] of MSc [ø:]. *Senseen* indicates a local pronunciation of *syne* with [i] instead of [Λi]. *Neipor* and *mullart* show lexeme-specific local variants. Often a rhyme-sequence reveals a pronunciation other than that suggested by the spelling. This is a familiar situation in eighteenth-century Scots poetry, but normally an English spelling is used though a Scots pronunciation is required: in Skinner's poem it is sometimes a general Scots spelling that masks a North-East pronunciation. The loss of final [d] in *hand* as shown by the sequence *began – man – hand – ran* is unsurprising; but the vowel must be [a] rather than the [ɔ] of dialects from further south: the same shibboleth is indicated by the last rhyme in the sequence *Mammie – lammie – Tammie – saw me*. In *nane – green – stane – lane*, what appears to be the maverick word is in fact the one which indicates the pronunciation required: the other three have [i] through the raising of former [a:] before [n], which in other dialects has stopped at [e]. In *gi'en him – aboon him – seen him – ondane him* the vowel throughout is [i]; the last-mentioned change and the full raising, with unrounding, of MSc [ø:] collaborating to give a perfectly correct rhyme sequence in Doric which would not work in other Scots dialects. In *feather – gather – bladder – leather* the vowels rhyme in all dialects of Scots, the raising of short [a] to [ɛ] being characteristic; but the replacement of medial [ð] by [d] is another North-East feature. Occasionally Skinner is guilty of using rhymes which are simply incorrect: in *Kate – skate – blate – gyte*, the last is an attested local pronunciation of *gait* (goat), but there is no

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<sup>8</sup> In the line *Gart ane anither job / And gasp that day*: the version printed in 1809 in *A Miscellaneous Collection of Fugitive Pieces of Poetry* has *sob*, but the word in the earlier version fits the context better. The differences between the two versions are generally slight, except for substantial variations in the order of the stanzas, but occasionally intriguing: only the few relevant to this examination of the local dialect will be mentioned in the paper.



possibility of assuming that he intended the same diphthong in the other three words; in *stane* – *grane* – *fain* – *slain* the last two words have [e] and not [i], since the source of the vowel is different. (It is observable that in the later version of the poem, in the line *She* [the ball] *flew fast like a stane* the last word is replaced by *flain* (arrow): since this is a much less common word than *stane*, could the change have been made to save the rhyme by relying on a spelling-based pronunciation?)

Surprisingly enough after such an auspicious opening to his poetic career, it was many years before Skinner wrote anything else in Scots; and he never again wrote a poem in which the North-Eastern dialect is emphasised to anything like the degree it is in *The Christmass Bawing*. His poems written over the next twenty years (according to the chronological ordering in Bertie (ed.) 2005) are in English, often in Augustan heroic couplets, or Latin (his skill in the latter extending to a translation of *Christis Kirk* and an *Ode Horatiana Metro Tullochgormiano*): very occasionally a rhyme like *east* – *breast*, *south* – *truth* or *zeal* – *De'il* calls for a Scots pronunciation, but the vocabulary, grammar and style are the standard literary English of the period. His resumption of the mither tongue was marked by the publication of *Tullochgorum*, enthusiastically praised by Burns, which first appeared in print in 1776 but was probably written around 1760; but though it and *The Ewie wi' the Crooked Horn*, another popular song of the same period, are in fine Scots, their language, on the printed page at least, could have emanated from any part of non-Gaelic Scotland. The poem *The Old Man's Song* has the rhyme *guineas* – *Jeanies* – *steinies* (i.e. diminutive of *stane*: in the context referring to gold coins); *Widow Greylocks* has a few Doric features: *fin*, *fat* (but also *what*), *neen*, *feel* and *gweed*; but scarcely enough to qualify the language as anything more specific than Scots with a slight Doric flavour.

The factor which prompted Skinner's resumption of a more markedly local form of Scots was, apparently, the widespread popular interest which his poetry had attracted. A short poem entitled *To the Revd. the Author of Tullochgorum, &c. &c.*, the author identified only by the initials C. W., was published in the *Aberdeen Journal* of January 11<sup>th</sup> 1779; and drew in response from Skinner a poem beginning:

Fat can ye be that cud employ  
Your pen in sic a tirlly-toy,  
Frae hyne awa' s far's Portsoy  
Aside the sea,

Whare I ken neither Man nor Boy,  
Nor ane kens me.

*An Answer in Kind to a Letter from Portsoy, ll.1-6.*

This has not only a few Doric shibboleths of phonology (*fat*, the rhyme sequence *well – Chiel – Skuil – Tweel*, in which the third word requires the pronunciation [skwil]) but, more interestingly, some markedly North-Eastern lexical usages: *frush* in the unusual sense of ‘bold, forward’ — ... *ye’re unco frush / In praising what’s nae worth a rush; bin* ‘mood, humour’ — *When fowks are in a laughin bin / For sang or fable; smeerless* ‘vapid, insipid’ — *It’s bat about sic smeerless Things / That my auld doytied maiden sings*; and the expression *I’ll never steer my Sturdy for him* ‘bother my head’: the last may be an idiosyncrasy of Skinner’s own, as may the expression *tirly-toy* in the first verse, apparently meaning something graceful but trivial like C.W.’s poem.

This was the first of a number of verse epistles which Skinner wrote to various recipients, one being Burns: a common and highly productive practice in eighteenth-century Scotland. And notably, the language he used for these is a Scots with a markedly local ring. *To a Young Bookseller*, declining his suggestion that he should publish his poems, demonstrates local pronunciations on the rhyme sequences *fiel* (=fool) – *skuil – reel – chiel* and *friens – lanes – Jeans – stanes*, though he also uses an English form in *that winna do* for the rhyme *Whan I was young and daft like you*; and the local words *saughin* (spiritless) and *chang* (reiteration — though this may simply be an invention for the rhyme and alliteration of the phrase *the chirmin chang*). Other epistles in the group show such rhymes as *wi’ you – see you – do you – gie you; Skene – tune – clean – ane; well – cheil – ragmariel – fool* (the third word being apparently a nonce invention); *tauld – auld – saul – fauld*, illustrating the characteristic loss of the [d] in the final cluster –*ld*, and in the epistle to Burns *exqueez’d – refer’d – reez’d – pleas’d*; one poem also has the spellings *wardl* and *dother*, suggesting the local dialect pronunciations.

The biographical fact appears to be that Skinner, in his sixties and after a long and prolific career as a scholar and occasional poet, was drawn in to the lively world of poetic exchanges and correspondence, with Scots as the medium and the Habbie stanza the favoured form; and as by now (that is, by the *floruit* of Burns) Scots poetry was an integral part of the national cultural scene, his native skill and fondness for his own dialect led him to indulge in an active participation in the social side of poetry — to the

enrichment of Scots poetry in general and Doric in particular; though it is tempting to wish that he had given as free reign to the resources of the local dialect as he did in his first poetic venture.

Biographical information is almost wholly lacking in the case of Robert Forbes, making it impossible to guess whether his Doric translation from Ovid was prompted by Skinner's poem or any other specific influence. According to the preface to the second edition (Forbes 1742: copy in the Special Collections of Aberdeen University Library), he composed it as one of several poems written 'purely for his own amusement' while 'confined with the jaundice', which he was persuaded to offer for publication by 'a gentleman of this place, who naturally loves the BROAD BUCHANS'. This section of the Preface is in English; but he then refers to a letter which he (allegedly) wrote to this gentleman, in a passage which deserves to be quoted in full:

*Honest HARRY:*

Confeiring to my word, I hae sent you a Translation of *Ajax's* Speech to the *Grecian Knabbs* in our nain Quintry Leid. It's nae literal, as we ca't, or *de verbo in verbum*: Fow an a' be, I hae ettled at the Author's Meaning as near as my sma' Rumgumption cou'd guess. But lat nae body see it, for it's unco' ill harrow'd yet; for I hae na had sae muckle time sin ye left our town as outrade it rightly. Nae doubt bat your gleg-sighted biuk-lear's fouk will be spying fauts in't, bat guid fegs they manna be our ill-natur'd to me, because fan I did the maist o't, I was dwinin awa' i' the Gulsach; and to be sier I was unco' douf at sic an uncanny time: and mairattoiur, being sae lang out o' the quintry, it's nae great fairlie alpuist I hae forgotten some canty wordies o't, But to proceed;

The translation begins on the verso of the same page. His dialect is marked literally from the first word, *Confeiring to...* (in accordance with...), an expression with a strongly local ring; and even in this short paragraph several other Doric shibboleths appear: the negative *it's nae*, the initial [f] in *fow* and *fan*, the vowel in *sier* [si:r], the initial cluster in *quintry* and the word *rumgumption*, for which all the earliest attestations are North-Eastern; besides the somewhat archaic *gulsach* and the idiosyncratic *alpuist*.

This is all the introduction we have to a most remarkable poem; and it is indeed to be regretted that so little is known of the author: for not even the birth or death of Robert Forbes can be determined with certainty, and all that can be ascertained of his life is that he worked as a hosier in London.

Even this is known only from the survival of his ‘Shop-bill’, a poem in Habbie stanzas advertising his wares, which ends:

*Sed denique* it is uncommon,  
To send a bill that mentions no man,  
*Ut finem huicce* story ponam,  
*Sit notum vobis*,  
Simmer an’ winter, *hoc est nomen*,  
I mean *ROB FORBES*. (Forbes 1765, p.19)

He is also the author of a linguistically exuberant *Journal from London to Portsmouth*, in which the lexical richness of the Buchan dialect is even more brilliantly paraded than in his poems;<sup>9</sup> and probably of a translation of the next section of the Ovid passage which furnished the source material for *Ajax his speech: Ulysses’ Answer to Ajax’ Speech* was included in a 1784 printing; and though it is not overtly attributed to Forbes, its tone, style and language are so much of a piece with those of *Ajax* as to suggest very strongly a common authorship.

Poetic translation is, of course, an integral part of Scottish literary history. Gavin Douglas’s *Eneados* is a landmark in the entire genre, the reign of James VI saw full and sometimes brilliant participation by Scottish poets in the *Übersetzungskultur* of the age, nearly every poet in the great company of the Scottish Renaissance has a substantial number of translations to his credit, and contemporary poets are ably maintaining the tradition. The eighteenth century, however, is not a period in which the practice of translation is notably important. Allan Ramsay’s translations and imitations of Horace form only a small part of his oeuvre, and are indicative of the general popularity of that classical poet in the Augustan age rather than any particular interest in or aptitude for translation as such on Ramsay’s part; and none of the other poets of the Vernacular Revival engaged in translation to any important extent: Burns made no translations at all. (For discussion see Corbett 1999: 100-112.) This being so, the individuality of Forbes’ achievement stands out all the more clearly. Ovid was much less favoured by literary fashion in the early eighteenth century

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<sup>9</sup> Since the present paper is concerned only with *poetry* this document will not be discussed: the detailed examination which it deserves, and the issue of its possible influence on later writers (including Burns, whose only letter in Scots shows what appear to be reminiscences of Forbes’ *Journal*), must be left for another day.

than Horace was (or than he himself had been in earlier periods<sup>10</sup>), the art of poetic translation had been in eclipse in Scotland for the best part of a century, and the dialect which he chose to use had as yet no established tradition of literary development. Despite all this, Forbes produced a translation which shows a sound literal understanding of the original, even though the tone suggested is in pointed contrast to Ovid's, and in which both the North-Eastern dialect and the fast-moving verse form are maintained with unfailing fluency.

The tone and manner of *Ajax his Speech* is clear from the outset: *Consedere duces et vulgi stante corona* becomes:

The wight an' doughty Captains a'  
Upo' their doups sat down;  
A rangel o' the common fowk  
In bourachs a' steed roun.<sup>11</sup>

The augmentations to his original by which Forbes has expanded two words to two lines set the mood for the entire translation with what looks suspiciously like cheerful effrontery. *Wight* and *doughty* are, of course, entirely conventional epithets for fighting men: *upo' their doups*, by contrast, in its blatantly reductive tone instantly replaces the dignity of the Latin line by a colloquial and even jocular familiarity. *Rangel* and *bourach*, even if the former lacks the overtly pejorative overtone which it had in OSc, certainly serve further to emphasise the almost parodic vein in which the mighty figures of the timeless Trojan epic are presented here. *Surgit ... Aias* becomes *Ajax bangs* up, a word suggesting vigour but scarcely dignity; *torvo ... vultu* becomes *wi atry face*, certainly a term with a much more derogatory ring than the Latin word; *fessusque senilibus annis*, of Nestor, becomes the homely and expressive *wi' years sair dwang'd*. The epithet *sleeth*, a local word meaning a lazy or slovenly person, is applied several times by Ajax to Ulysses, usually corresponding to nothing in the original; and Forbes' Ajax gaily informs us, as Ovid's does not, that Ulysses' retreat from Hector's attempt to fire the Greek ships was because 'he cou'd na'

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<sup>10</sup> But not, apparently, in Scotland: Forbes' *Ajax* is the only Ovidian translation from any period at all mentioned by Corbett (ibid.). For an intriguing explanation of Gavin Douglas's mysterious *Lundeyis lufe the remeid* and a more convincing one than the fall-back position of many scholars that *Lundeyis* is an error for *Ouideyis* and the reference is to the *Remedia Amoris*, see Breeze 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Text as in Forbes 1765 (this passage p.3), a somewhat neater version and more free of misprints than earlier editions. The few and minor textual variants between the various editions will not be discussed.

bide the ewder' (the smell of burning). Ajax is a *birky*, Ulysses a *menseless thief*, the Trojans *limmers*, Nestor's horse a *glyde*; Ajax excels in *banes-brakin* and Ulysses in *chaft-taak*; Hector falls *arselins*; Philoctetes must *get meat for his gabb*: in all those cases, the Latin text has either nothing at all or a neutral instead of a loaded term. Even the word *knabbs* in the title has a somewhat ironic ring: this is its first recorded use, and throughout its history it appears to have carried overtones, more or less strongly emphasised, of pretentiousness and unwarranted conceit. *Cum victus erit* becomes *een fan he gets the glaiks*; *commenta retexit* becomes *his joukry-paukry finding out* (the first attestation of what has become a widely-used expression: another such, *de'il be-licket*, also makes its first recorded appearance in this poem) *detractavitque furore militiam ficto* becomes

An' frae the weir he did back haap,  
An' turn'd to us his fud,  
An' gar'd the hale-ware o us trow  
That he was gane clean wud ... (pp.5-6)

and *Laertiadaeque precaris, quae meruit, quae, si di sunt, non vana precaris* becomes

An' on that sleeth Ulysses' head  
Sad curses down does bicker;  
If there be Gods aboon, I'm seer  
He'll get them leel an' sicker. (p.6)

Proverbial expressions further emphasise the homely and familiar nature of the language: *Just like the man that aucht the cow / Gaed deepest i' the mire*; *Lat him be paid / back just in his ain cuinzie*; *Gin wi' Batie ye will bourd...* . Ajax, in Forbes' recreation, holds forth in the language of an ale-house flyting; and if his language scarcely suggests the hero of antiquity, it certainly makes for a lively and entertaining poem.

Shibboleths of the North-Eastern dialect abound in the translation: the initial [f] corresponding to [m] (*fat, fan, fase, fare, fun-stane, futtle-haft*), the [i] from MSc [ø(:)] (*seer, bleed, steed*: an idiosyncratic spelling *ise* is used once for *eese* (i.e. 'use')), medial [d] for [ð] (*tedder't, nidder* (oppress), *swidders*: the latter rhymes with *brither's*, showing that despite the spelling the dialect pronunciation is intended). *Haave* (*haw* in other dialects), meaning pale and wan (used insultingly of Ulysses) shows the development of [w] in an original [awə] sequence to [v], a shibboleth now virtually obsolete except in the word *tyaave*. Other rhymes likewise reveal dialect

pronunciations: in *wame – time* the first word must be pronounced [wΛim], in *fraud – lad* the first must have an [a] instead of the [ɔ] of dialects from further south (though the rhyme is still not perfect as a duration difference would probably still have been operative), in *scowder – ewder* the *ew-* is an interesting inverse spelling showing that the change from [ju] to [jΛu] in this dialect, giving pronunciations like *byowty* for ‘beauty’, had become established. Of Forbes’ rich store of Scots vocabulary items, many have a North-East ring, several of those having their first recorded attestation in his work: *bowden’d* (swollen, literally or (as here, referring of course to Ulysses) with pride), *brins* (rays), *cappit* (peevish), *dacker* (grapple), *etion* (stock, kindred), *ewder* (smell of burning), *farrach* (strength, energy), *fittinment* (a footing), *flaught-bred* (in a bustle), *furhow* (abandon), *gardy* (arm), *gnib* (smart, eager), *gnidge* (squeeze, press), *hudge-mudge* (secrecy), *hurly* (the last), *kneef* (alert, lively), *neef* (difficulty), *prottick* (escapade), *smeerless* (sluggish, lacking in spirit), *thirle* (pierce), *voust* (boast), *yerd-fast* (of a stone, firmly embedded in the earth).

Forbes’ *Shop Bill* is likewise in confident Doric: since his business was in London, it is hard to put aside some doubt as to its likely success in attracting customers. Opening boldly:

To ilka a body be it kend',  
Frae John a-Groats to the Land’s end,  
That, frae this day, I do intend,  
    some shanks to sell,  
This is my bill, to you I send  
    that it may tell [...] (p.17)

it at once sounds the Doric note with the word *shanks*, used to mean ‘stockings’ predominantly in the North-East. A still more distinctively local word for stockings is *moggans*, which he uses a few stanzas later. In stating that he sells an array of hose *Wi’ different clocks; bat yet in truth / we ca’ it gushet*, he actively proclaims the distinctiveness of his own speech: *gushet* meaning ‘ornamental pattern in silk thread on a stocking’ is another North-East usage. The many possible classes of customer for whom he can provide range *frae ladies to a servant wench* (rhyming with *inch* and *pinch*, showing the raising, characteristic of the dialect, of [ɛ] to [i] before [n]), and from *the mucklest man* to *wary-draggle, or sharger elf*: *sharger* is a still locally familiar word meaning the youngest child in a family, the weakest animal in a litter, or by extension any puny or undersized person or animal; *wary-draggle*, a word familiar (in a slightly different form) from Dunbar, is here

used not only with a local pronunciation but — presumably — in a less derogatory sense than his to mean, again, simply a person of stunted growth. And besides stockings and gloves he also sells napkins *to dight your nib*: even today, schoolchildren in the North-East can recite John C. Milne's poem *Dicht yer nib, Geordie!* Forbes' output is regrettably small; but his place as one of the pioneers of Doric writing is incontestable.

Poetically the finest, beyond cavil, of the three mid-eighteenth-century monuments to Buchan Doric is *Helenore, or The Fortunate Shepherdess* by Alexander Ross, Schoolmaster of Lochlea. (For biographical and bibliographical information see Walker 1887 and Wattie (ed.) 1938: all quotes from the latter.) Its date of composition, and its place in the chronological sequence of Ross's works, are impossible to ascertain: as is well known, it was through the agency of James Beattie in 1768 that it was published along with a selection of Ross's songs; this being after they had become locally well-known through circulating in manuscript for several years. Of the language of the poem, Beattie remarked in a pseudonymous article in the *Aberdeen Journal* of June 1<sup>st</sup> 1768, 'This writer has given us the provincial dialects of Angus, Mearns and Aberdeenshire, in great perfection' (quoted Wattie (ed.) 1938, p.xiii); and in a personal letter 'The dialect is so licentious, (I mean it is so different from that of the south country, which is acknowledged the standard of broad Scotch,) that I am afraid you will be at a loss to understand it in many places' (quoted *ibid.*, p.xiv). The contrasting evaluations of Ross's achievement which Beattie expresses in public and in private statements is notable, but equally notable is his recognition that Ross *has*, for good or ill, been strikingly successful in presenting the local dialect; and in view of Beattie's hostility to the Scots tongue in its entirety his favourable response to Ross's work is striking.

Ross's indebtedness to Ramsay for inspiration is stated at the outset, in the opening of his 'Invocation':

Say, Scotas, Thou that anes upon a day  
Gar'd Allan Ramsay's hungry hart strings play  
The merriest sangs that ever yet were sung ... (ll.1-3)

and his muse Scotas responds with an injunction to

Speak my ain leed, 'tis gueed auld Scots I mean:  
Your Southren gnaps I count not worth a preen,  
We've words a fouth, that we can ca' our ain,  
Tho' frae them now my childer sair refrain. (ll.56-59)



Ross abides by his instruction, and produces a delightful pastoral epic in a rich and consistently-maintained Doric.

Since this poem, alone among the three which I am discussing, has a standard critical edition in which the language is examined in some detail with reference to its characteristic Doric shibboleths (Wattie 1938: xliv-lx), these will not be listed here. Regarding the vocabulary, however, it is of interest to note that as the Scots and in particular the distinctively North-East lexis in *The Christmass Bawin* show a preponderance of words from the semantic fields of violence and physical deformities, so the much more genial tone and atmosphere of Ross's poem calls forth numerous words relating to family and social life, dress, eating, gossip, courtship and the like: *littlean* 'child' (still the general local word), *gangrel* 'child just able to walk, toddler' (a distinctively North-East sense for a word used with other meanings elsewhere), *bobby* 'grandfather', *buckie* 'a child's rattle made from plaited rushes and containing dried peas', *corsy-belly* 'a child's first shirt', *turse* 'put on clothes', *keek* 'a woman's linen cap', *glack* 'a snack, short or hasty meal', *gnap* 'to crunch, bite; or a snack, a morsel' (also in the phrase *in gnapping earnest*, dead earnest), *hailse* 'to greet, salute', *curcudduch* 'sitting close together', *floan* 'to give unbecomingly obvious signs of affection', *cushel-mushel* 'whispering, rumour, gossip'. Also noteworthy are words relating to the natural world: *bralans* 'red whortleberry', *averen* 'cloudberry', *camawine* 'camomile' (the flower), *scrab* 'dry root or stump of heather', *earn-bleater* 'snipe', *mang* 'chorus of birdsong', *caut* 'heat haze', *meeth* 'hot, sultry', or of people, 'exhausted with heat' and *onbeast*, literally 'monster' but referring in the poem to a fox and an owl. Since most of the characters in the poem, with the notable exception of the *ugly, hulgie-backed, canker'd wasp* at first destined as a bride for the unfortunate Lindy (and even she, he admits, is 'wond'rous kind' despite her appearance), are attractive people, local words referring to human qualities are more often complimentary than otherwise: *bardach* 'bold, fearless', *kibble* 'active, agile'; *gnib* and *kneef*, meaning smart or keen, which Forbes makes Ajax apply ironically and disparagingly to Ulysses, are used approvingly here. Other Doric words with positive overtones are *thram* 'thrive, prosper', *raff* 'plenty, abundance' and *kyle* 'a chance, opportunity'. Characters can suffer an occasional *antercast* (mischance): they can be *hamphis't* (crowded, oppressed) and can *swaver* (totter), *flaunter* (tremble with excitement or agitation) and *glamp* (grope in the dark); they can be *hallach* (crazed) or *ourlach* (wretched-looking from cold, hunger etc.); but as befits a pastoral poem set in the time

When yet the leal an' ae-fauld shepherd life  
Was nae oergane by faucit, sturt an' strife,  
But here and there part o' that seelfu' race  
Kept love an' lawty o' their honest face, (ll.74-77)

the language contributes to the predominant atmosphere of charm and content: one of the most striking achievements of the poem is the combination of this with wholly convincing scenes of country and village life, fine evocations of landscape and scenery, and dialogue as lifelike as the decasyllabic couplet form allows.

With the works of Skinner, Forbes and Ross, by the end of the eighteenth century the North-East dialect was in flourishing life as a poetic medium. Shirrefs contributed some noteworthy poems of his own as well as publishing the works of others in his *Caledonian Magazine*, and other poets of no inconsiderable talent, such as William Beattie and John Burness (a cousin of Robert Burns) seemed poised to hold it on its course. Unfortunately the momentum was not maintained. The standard of Scots poetry (that is, at any rate, *published* Scots poetry) as is well known, declined lamentably in the decades following Burns' death; and the linguistically distinctive identity of poetry emanating from the North-East was one of the casualties: local colouring in poetry of the region for much of the nineteenth century was almost exclusively confined to references to towns and geographical landmarks (for discussion see McClure 1988). But the Aberdeenshire dialect endured and flourished; and as the region transformed itself, in one of the great socio-economic developments of the nineteenth century, from a sparsely-populated wilderness to one of the most productive agricultural areas in the British Isles, an integral part of the farming culture that emerged was the superb tradition of folk song embodied in what are popularly known as the bothy ballads. This mighty corpus, unsurpassed in Europe for quality or quantity, burgeoned as the more formal genres of poetry declined; and when Charles Murray set out to re-launch the dialect as a poetic medium, the song tradition (with which he was thoroughly familiar) was a major influence on his work, and the language and way of life which it embodied was the soil, so to speak, in which his poetry was rooted. The line of continuity linking Murray to the poets discussed in this article appears tenuous if sought for in the sequence of published poems by North-East writers; but it does not inhere solely in this. And the undiminished potential of the Doric was released again in

1900, when Murray's *Hamewith*<sup>12</sup> re-launched it on a trajectory of poetic productivity which has never faltered since.

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<sup>12</sup> Most recent edition Milton (ed.) 2008, q.v. for a useful introductory discussion of Murray's cultural and linguistic background.

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