

Kocmanová, Jessie

**Lallans today : the evolution of modern Scots (Lowlands) prose**

*Brno studies in English*. 1987, vol. 17, iss. 1, pp. [141]-147

ISSN 0231-5351

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104158>

Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

## LALLANS TODAY: THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN SCOTS (LOWLANDS) PROSE

Jessie Kocmanová

THIS ARTICLE HAS BEEN ADAPTED FROM A LECTURE FOUND AMONG  
THE LATE DOC. KOCMANOVÁ'S PAPERS

In the following pages I shall endeavour to define the language situation in the literature of Scotland at the present time with particular regard to the development and use of a modern Scots prose (fiction and general) that employs what is termed by its users "Lallans" (the Scots form of the word "Lowlands"). Lallans is the vernacular or demotic language spoken in the home by most working-class, lower middle-class and country working inhabitants of Scotland east and south of the "Highland line", which runs roughly from Glasgow to Inverness. (North and west of this "line" the basic language is, or was in the past, Scots Gaelic; the English spoken there is that learned by previous generations as a foreign language, though we know from as early a source as Scott's *Rob Roy* that the inhabitants of Scotland beyond the "Highland line" were perfectly capable at times of speaking Lallans.) "Modern Scots prose" is simply an acceptable, comprehensible and viable manner of expressing in print this vernacular language, for which hitherto many of those who would naturally seek to express themselves in this language in writing – whether as professional writers or ordinary citizens – have had to substitute English simply because they have not known how to write it or how to differentiate it from English, and have rightly rejected the method of sprinkling the page with apostrophes indicating omissions in the traditional manner of Burns and Scott.

It is perhaps best to begin by looking at the official definition of Lallans (or Scots or Braid Scots) given by the *Scottish National Dictionary*, completed in 1976. "Scots II.n.I. The Scots language, the speech of Lowland Scotland, which became distinct from Northern English in the 15th c. and was the official language of the Kingdom of Scotland until 1707, though gradually anglicised from the mid-16th. c. and now surviving as a series of dialects and in a modified literary form, the speech treated in this dictionary. See LALLANS. Freq. also called braid Scots."

It is clear from this definition how complicated the linguistic situation in Scotland has always been, and no one was more aware of this than Sir Walter Scott. The following passage from *Rob Roy* seems to me remarkable for showing the range of speech available to a Highlander of the 18th century. It describes the moment when, after making a midnight assignation with Frank Osbaldistone, Rob conducts him to Glasgow Tolbooth prison, where his father's servant is wrongfully imprisoned. In this passage, the speech of Rob Roy ranges from the same type of Augustan, rather stilted English spoken by Osbaldistone

himself, through a sincerer Scots-coloured variety, as he warms to his theme of courage and friendship and his own dangerous situation, to what Christopher Grieve would have called "a full canon of Scots". And this in turn leads to further variety, when the turnkey's deputy, Dougal, is heard, first of all in the very "Hieland" variety of Lowland Scots, which substitutes "f" for "wh": "Fa's tat?" he calls, only to correct himself, in the interests of making himself clear in the west of Lowland Scotland, to "Wha's that?" The rest of this remarkable conversation is conducted between Rob and his clansman, Dougal, in Gaelic. All this in hardly over a page of printed text.

As I ceased to speak, he made a step towards me. I drew back instinctively, and laid my hand on the hilt of my sword. "What," said he, "on an unarmed man, and your friend?"

"I am yet ignorant if you are either the one or the other," I replied; "and, to say the truth, your language and manner might well entitle me to doubt both."

"It is manfully spoken," replied my conductor, "and I respect him whose hand can keep his head. — I will be frank and free with you — I am conveying you to prison."

"To prison!" I exclaimed; "by what warrant, or for what offence? — You shall have my life sooner than my liberty — I defy you, and I will not follow you a step farther."

"I do not," he said, "carry you there as a prisoner. I am," he added, drawing himself haughtily up, "neither a messenger nor sherriff's officer; I carry you to see a prisoner from whose lips you will learn the risk in which you presently stand. Your liberty is little risked by the visit; mine is in some peril: but that I readily encounter on your account, for I care not for risk, and I love a free young blood, that kens no protector but the cross o' the sword."

While he spoke thus, we had reached the principal street, and were pausing before a large building of hewn stone, garnished, as I thought I could perceive, with gratings of iron before the windows.

"Muckle," said the stranger, whose language became more broadly national as he assumed a tone of colloquial freedom — "Muckle wad the provost and bailies o' Glasgow gie to hae him sitting with iron garters to his hose within their Tolbooth, that now stands wi' his legs as free as the red-deer's on the outside on't. And little wad it avail them: for an if they had me there wi' a stane's weight o' iron at every ankle, I would show them a toom room and a lost lodger before tomorrow. — But come on, what stint ye for?"

As he spoke thus, he tapped at a low wicket, and was answered by a sharp voice, as of one awakened from a dream or reverie, — "Fa's tat? — Wha's that, I wad say? — and fat a deil want ye at this hour at e'en? — Clean again rules — clean again rules, as they ca' them."

The protracted tone in which the last words were uttered, betokened that the speaker was again composing himself to slumber. But my guide spoke in a loud whisper, "Dougal, man! hae ye forgotten Ha nun Gregarach?"

"Deil a bit, deil a bit," was the ready and lively response, and I heard the internal guardian of the prison-gate bustle up with great alacrity. A few words were exchanged between my conductor and the turnkey, in a language to which I was an absolute stranger.<sup>1</sup>

The remarkable richness and accuracy of the vernacular speech in Scott's novels is pointed out by David Murison in a fascinating booklet entitled *The Guid Scots Tongue*. Murison is a very serious scholar — after completing thirty years' work on the *Scottish National Dictionary* he was appointed Reader in the English Language at the University of Glasgow — as well as an accomplished broadcaster and publicist. His booklet on the Scots language has the following fascinating chapter headings: "Where and When Did It Start?", "What Does It Look Like?", "How Does It Sound?", "How Do You Say It in Scots?", "What is Left of It?" and "What is Its Future?". Murison traces the development of Scots from its beginnings in the fourteenth century. After giving some examples of the use of Scots at its high point in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, he is obliged to jump more than a century (i.e. from about 1660 to about 1780) "over the important period when Scots ceased to be a full language and survived only partly as a literary vehicle for poetry and as a series of local dialects. But limited as its range was, in the hands of a genius with words, such as Burns, it took on a new lease of life. His outstanding skill was to make ordinary folk speech fit for the nuances of poetic imagination . . . and he is probably at his best in the epistles and addresses composed in the stanza metre so eminently suited to the twists and turns and asides of conversation."<sup>2</sup> I think there is one very important point made in this passage which is relevant to our purpose, namely that Burns preserved and passed on not only the lyrical poetic legacy, but also, in those forms which echoed conversation, the prose of Scots.

Murison distinguishes two methods followed by prose writers endeavouring to write in Scots from the time of Scott and Galt onwards. He quotes Scott's own words from his correspondence dealing with the publication of *Waverley*: "Burns by his poetry has already attracted attention to everything Scottish and I confess I can't see why I should not be able to keep the flame alive, merely because I write Scotch in prose and he wrote it in rhyme."<sup>3</sup> But of course with a few exceptions like the celebrated "Wandering Willie's Tale", which is also ostensibly oral narrative, it is mostly in conversation that he uses Scots. Although Scott certainly makes an attempt at phonetic rendering — and I should say a more thorough attempt than that of Burns, who frequently ignored in his orthography the actual pronunciation demanded in his poetry — he cannot avoid the "spray of apostrophes", as Grassie Gibbon calls it, which undoubtedly antagonises the reader and makes him feel some degree of artificiality.

"We wad hae tried, cousin," answered my guide, "that I wot weel; but I doubt ye wad hae come aff wi' the short measure; for we gang-there-out Hieland bodies are an unchancy generation when you speak to us o' bondage. We downa bide the coercion of gude braid-claith about our hinderlans; let a be breeks o' freestone, and garters o' iron."

"Ye'll find the stane breeks and the airn garters, ay, and the hamp cravat, for a' that, neighbour," replied the Bailie. "Nae man in a civilized country ever played the pliskies ye hae done — but e'en pickle in your ain pock-neuk — I hae gi'en ye warning."<sup>4</sup>

John Galt, on the other hand, in Murison's words, "tried to infuse Scottish words into the narrative as well as the dialogues of his novels, giving added verisimilitude to this by the fiction that the whole story is being told by some old-fashioned person who would retain more Scots in his speech than an up-and-coming author."<sup>5</sup> But Ian A. Gordon, the editor of a volume of Galt's short stories I shall quote from, thinks Galt goes rather further than Murison seems to indicate. I quote from the Preface: "Galt is in firm control of his material

and his medium . . . Because it demonstrates Galt's seriousness of purpose in his deliberate and considered choice of Scots as his ultimate literary medium, I have retained the introduction he wrote for 'The Seamstress'. Galt knew what he was up to."<sup>6</sup>

Here is Galt discussing "the beautiful inflexions which help to make the idiomatic differences between the language of Scotland and England" and the richness of Scottish vocabulary: "No doubt something may be due to the fortunate circumstance of the Scotch possessing the whole range of the English language, as well as their own, by which they enjoy an uncommonly rich vocabulary . . . For example, the English have but the word 'industry', to denote that constant patience of labour which belongs equally to rough and moderate tasks: but the Scots have also 'eydency', with its derivatives, descriptive of the same constancy and patience, in employments of a feminine and sedentary kind. We never say a ditcher or a drudger is eydent: but the spinster at her wheel, or the seamstress at her sewing, are eydent; and to illustrate a genuine case of industry free from labour, as we conceive eydency to be, we have recourse to a reminiscence of our youth, in itself at once simple, interesting and pathetic."<sup>7</sup>

Murison endeavours to sum up this development while leaving the final result open to question: "Later prose writers tended to follow Scott's method in their use of Scots" — and he mentions, among others, Stevenson, Barrie, George Douglas Brown, Neil Munro, John Buchan and Fionn MacColla. "But the line tried out by Galt was continued by D. M. Moir, Mrs Oliphant and some minor writers, and the whole question was reopened by the 'Lallans' movement and a new approach made by Lewis Grassie Gibbon in his *Scots Quair*."<sup>8</sup>

In the introduction to his trilogy, Grassie Gibbon explains the treatment of language in this, his masterpiece:

If the great Dutch language disappeared from literary usage and a Dutchman wrote in German a story of the Lekside peasants, one may hazard he would ask and receive a certain latitude and forbearance in his usage of German. He might import into his pages some score or so untranslatable words and idioms — untranslatable except in their context and setting; he might mould in some fashion his German to the rhythms and cadence of the kindred speech that his peasants speak. Beyond that, in fairness to his hosts, he hardly could go — to seek effect by a spray of apostrophes would be both impertinence and mis-translation.

The courtesy that the hypothetical Dutchman might receive from German, a Scot may evoke from the great English tongue.<sup>9</sup>

I tend to think that at the time Murison was writing (1977, revised 1978) he could have been rather more optimistic about the achievements and potential of Scots, but doubtless as a well-known broadcaster he was very much open to attack on controversial issues and thus may have acquired his clearly somewhat jaundiced view of the awareness of the Scots public. He says in his chapter on phonetics and orthography: "The writers of the last two centuries have adopted a kind of haphazard compromise between old Scots and newer English spelling, but as their Scots speech gets thinner, more bookish and detached from real knowledge of historical Scots, the problems of writing it multiply."<sup>10</sup> Here I think Murison is being less than fair to the several generations of Scots writers who have striven to bring a new Scottish prose to birth. Some of the earlier writers it is true were somewhat dilettante, confused as to whether they were writing in dialect or in a national language, and even hunting assiduously for "ink-horn" terms to eke out their half-remembered speech of childhood — but

contrary to what Murison appears to suggest, the writers of Scots have become more (rather than less) serious, less bookish and consciously closer to traditional Scots, and their Scots speech, instead of getting thinner, appears to me, especially on the evidence of the periodical *Lallans*, to have become richer, more aware of the contemporary world and its problems, and capable of dealing with everything that concerns mankind. I shall develop this thought later, but at present I should like to make one or two further references to Murison, mainly because of the clarity and objectivity of his historical exposition.

Murison is undoubtedly correct when he speaks of what has been the great weakness of the Lallans movement, its emphasis on poetry. To recall the historical points: after the pioneering work of C. M. Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid) in the twenties and early thirties (partly damped down towards the end of the thirties by Edwin Muir's despondency over a future for Scotland, Scots culture and the Scots language), a new generation, many of them in direct contact with Grieve and undoubtedly inspired by him, arose during World War II in an atmosphere favourable to progressive national aspirations, and confirmed the use of the term "Lallans". William Soutar, Sydney Goodsir Smith, Robert Garioch and Douglas Young were neither ignoramuses nor dilettantes, but serious poets in search of a mother tongue which they felt had been stolen from them and, in addition, serious scholars. A further important point was the potentiality of the matter becoming a concern of the whole nation, for this generation — as of course Grieve had always insisted — did not cut off the Lallans culture from the Hielan, but was in close contact with the young Gaelic poets of the period, of whom Sorley MacLean, for example, is considered by some well-qualified critics to be perhaps the greatest living poet in Britain today. (This aspect of the interlinking of the two cultures, whether from the socio-political, linguistic or purely literary aspect, demands quite separate treatment, but I merely mention it to indicate the extreme complexity of the Scottish cultural situation.)

To continue with Murison: "A real weakness of the Lallans movement has been that the writers have restricted themselves almost entirely to poetry. In contrast to poetry, however, continuity in Scots prose was broken in the sixteenth century. There are no real models after that date and medieval prose of a feudal society cannot be simply adapted to the needs of modern industrial life, having missed the evolution which English underwent in the intervening four centuries."<sup>11</sup> This leads Murison to conclude his booklet with the rather dire warning that "Scots will continue to be spoken *diminuendo* in familiar circles, especially in the outlying areas like the Borders, Ayrshire, Angus, the Moray Firth area and in Shetland; and the Scots voice will continue to utter the English language in its own peculiar way. But it cannot be restored until the Scots know what it is and want it so, and that means that it must be given an assured and permanent place in our schools and colleges. Certainly no other European nation would tolerate anything less."<sup>12</sup> Here Murison practically leaves the field of linguistics for that of politics, which is all the more fascinating when we realize that his publisher is the good old Scottish firm of Blackwood's, over two hundred years old and still publishing its famous *Magazine*: in spite of the fact that it was the publisher of George Eliot, it has by no means been considered at any time wildly progressive, but thoroughly representative of the Conservative Scots middle-class businessmen of Edinburgh.

However, in contrast to this pessimism of Murison's, the attitude of the editors of and regular contributors to the periodical *Lallans* (one of the latter, ironically enough, being Murison himself) is exceedingly refreshing and, unless

I am very much mistaken, completely new. This magazine is published by the Scots Language Society, which was founded in 1971 and has succeeded in a remarkable way in uniting the efforts of the oldest pioneers (C. M. Grieve was Honorary President, and after his death, Robert McLellan, the distinguished Scots dramatist, also of the older generation) with those of the youngest, and even runs literary competitions for schoolchildren as well as adults. The editor, J. K. Annand, is one of the most interesting personalities on the Scottish scene, a school-teacher who, though a fine poet in Scots, has never made literary fame his goal, but has instead spent a long and distinguished life in the service of Scotland, Scottish education and the Scots language. One of the most promising aspects of *Lallans*, published twice yearly on Whitsunday and at Martinmas, "wi the help o siller frae the Scottish Arts Council", is that it seeks to take the whole question of the future of Scots down, as it were, into the streets and above all as far as possible into the newspapers and radio and onto the TV screen. To do this, of course, some kind of standard must be set up. Some of the problems connected with this were described in the magazine by A. D. Mackie:

My ain aim is to mak the Scots I scribe as true as I can manage til Scots as it is still spoken by guid speakers, but no to keep it owre nerrie-lic til my ain neeborheid or onie ither neuk o Scotland. Ma first buik o rhymes, pitten out fiftie-twa years syne, uised a spellin based on the wey we say things in Edinburgh and Lowden, but nou I ettle to mak it mair standart sae that Scots readers in ither airts ken right awa what I mean.

Nou, this wes what the Makars were daean in the fifteent and saxteent centuries . . . There were dialects in thae days juist as nou, but the srievers and the scholars were in tuich wi ane anither and it wes they that warkit out a standart tongue . . .

Ettlin at a Standart Scots needna hinder onie sriever frae turnin til his ain "auld speak" whan the notion taks him, and the standart itsel needna be sealit againe intak frae orra dialects frae time til time. The day Scots bydes still it will be weill on its wey til turnin intil a deid language.<sup>13</sup>

The ability of *Lallans*, as it has been worked out as a practical and viable contemporary standard of the written language, to deal with acute current events, can be seen in the following passage, the opening of an editorial attacking cuts in BBC programmes for Scottish schools: "For owre lang nou, we in Scotland hae had to fecht an ongaun battle agin them that was ettle to mak us tyne our native weys o dalin wi our laws, our leid, our airts and our schuilin. In education, tho we were for lang aheid o our southron neibors in giein the feck o our folk the chance o a dacent learnin in baith schuils and colleges . . . we hae seen hou we hae been, bit by bit, made to cheyng closer til a fremit pattern in the runnin o our schuils, and in the examinations for the certificates that our scholars get at the end o their days at the schuil. Bairns whase mither-tongue was Scots or Gaelic were made to say their lessons in a fremid leid, and for lang the mither-tongue was forbid even in the playground."<sup>14</sup>

But though *Lallans* is controversial and contains a good deal of polemical material — which is, after all, very much in the cultural tradition of Scots and especially of Gaelic literature (a really good Celtic bard was supposed to be able to raise blisters on his opponent by the vehemence and appositeness of his accusations) — it is above all devoted to literature. There were many earlier "little magazines" in Scotland — the *Saltire Review*, *New Saltire* and *MacDiar-*

mid's *Voice of Scotland*, to name the best known — but though they contained plenty of material, both poetry and prose, most of the prose was in short forms. And in my opinion, there really could not have been any full-length novel in Scotland before the working out of a Lallans norm. The remarkable thing about the periodical *Lallans* is that, while it offers much more of a standard, an official norm, for the writing of Scots than has existed since the fifteenth century, it does not seem to have curbed the originality of writers, and in fact there is a very great variety of styles and much divergence from perhaps imaginary norms. Doubtless if the great Scots novelist does arrive, or even the great Scots prose stylist, norms will become more severe, but at present it is rather enchanting to survey the great diversity evident, even within a single number of *Lallans*, in the polemical articles, essays, talks, short stories, reminiscences and contemporary “folk narratives” the magazine offers its readers. As a literary vehicle, as a journalistic medium, Scots has not been so alive for centuries.

## SOUČASNÉ POSTAVENÍ JAZYKA LALLANS Vývoj moderní skotské literatury psané jazykem skotských nížin

Jazyk lallans, jehož jméno vzniklo jako skotská verze anglického lowlands, plnil v minulosti i funkci spisovného jazyka. Dnes mluví lallans většina prostých lidí ve skotských nížinách, ale pouze v domácím prostředí. Za návrat lallans do funkce spisovného jazyka usiloval známý marxistický publicista a spisovatel Hugh MacDiarmid. Hlavním úkolem v současné době je vyjasnění normy lallans.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sir Walter Scott, *Rob Roy*, OUP, London 1912, Chapter XXI, pp. 233–234.

<sup>2</sup> David Murison, *The Guid Scots Tongue*, Blackwood, Edinburgh 1977, reprinted with revisions 1978, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Scott, Chapter XXIII, p. 254.

<sup>5</sup> Murison, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Ian A. Gordon in John Galt, *Selected Short Stories*, Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh 1978, p. VIII.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Murison, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis Grassie Gibbon, *A Scots Quair*, Jarrolds, London 1937, p. 12.

In fact, this statement plays down very much the degree of experimentation with language which can be found in *A Scots Quair*. I have dealt with this elsewhere, but there are at least three, almost certainly four levels of style and implication of Scots in Gibbon's language. He makes much more free with English, if English is the basis of his language, than the above statement suggests.

<sup>10</sup> Murison, p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>13</sup> A. D. Mackie in *Lallans*, No. 15, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> The editor (presumably J. K. Annand) in *Lallans*, No. 14, pp. 4-5.

