The Speech of Ayrshire in the Time of Burns

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The subject of 18th century Ayrshire speech is a somewhat more complex one than might appear at first sight in view of the fairly large corpus of material that has been preserved in the works of Burns and his local contemporaries, like David Sillar, Alexander Tait, James Fisher, John Lapraik and a good many others. We have firstly to remember that almost nothing in Ayrshire dialect had been recorded in that century till 1786 when the Kilmarnock edition appeared. There is nothing in the way of continuous prose or dialogue (though of course this is true for most places except the North-East of Scotland) and there was a singular lack of interest in Scots speech as such except among the poets, though Boswell toyed with the idea of making a Scots dictionary. In the well-known and interesting description of Ayrshire by the Rev. John Mitchell, for instance, written about 1780 there is no reference at all to the way people spoke, except the vague general statement that "the common language of society is more delicate."[1]

There are certainly the poets but we cannot be quite sure just how much of Burns is pure Ayrshire and how much is due to the literary influence of his predecessors, nor again of how much his own poetic contemporaries and correspondents were really independent of his vocabulary.

Fortunately a fairly exact analysis of the sounds of the Ayrshire dialect has been left us by a contemporary of Burns to whom he sent his famous poetical epistle on his ambition to celebrate Ayrshire in verse, William Simson, schoolmaster of Ochiltree and later of Cumnock, and this was printed as an appendix to Aiton's *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Ayr*, published in 1811. Simson's article is concerned first with the sounds of the dialect which he illustrates by a rather irrelevant and quite misguided comparison with the dialects of ancient Greece but useful as a rough guide to the pronunciation of his time.

He notes various words where the Scots vowel differs from the English, in circumstances which are now formulated according

1. *Scottish History Society Miscellany*, Vol. VI. (1939), 334.

to certain rules, as, that Scots may have *a* for Eng. *e* or *o* where a *w*, *wh*, or other consonant sounded with the lips, *b*, *p*, *f*, *v*, *m*, precedes or follows; hence *wat*, wet; *twall*, twelve; *fallow*, fellow; *whatstane*, whetstone; *drap*, drop; *Tammas*, Thomas; *wast*, west; *pat*, pot; *aff*, off; *apen*, open; *Rabert*, Robert, of which the last two are no longer heard in Ayrshire, though *Rab* survives.

Again, because of a different development of the original Anglo-Saxon vowels in Scots and English, we get correspondences like *snaw*, snow; *shaw*, show; *nane*, none; *hame*, home; *taes*, toes; *saul*, soul; *lang*, long; *tangs*, tongs; *stibble*, stubble; *simmer*, summer; *rin*, run; *nits*, nuts; *hinny*, honey. Simson notices too that the pronoun I unstressed is pronounced *A*.

What is technically called the lowering of *i*, characteristic of all Scots dialects, occurs in *ruck*, rick; *grunstane*, grindstone; *opunion*, opinion. This last example of Simson's is rather surprising in view of the regular and still prevailing pronunciation *opeenion* and it is not easy to explain. If it is correct, one must assume some fashionable though short-lived pronunciation of the standard English rather than the Scots form of the word and it may help to explain the otherwise awkward rhymes of the second verse of "To a Mouse." Another clearer instance of this kind of alternative pronunciation occurs in Burns's rhyming of *joy* with *eye*. There were two alternative developments of this originally French diphthong in Scots, one to the *-igh-* sound of Eng. *fight*, *right* and one to a simple *o* sound. In most cases in Scots it is the first which has survived, hence the modern Scots pronunciation of *choice*, *voice*, *rejoice*, *join*, *point*, etc., where in earlier Scots *choce*, *voce*, *-joce*, *jone*, were also found. Similarly *joy* went both to *jo*, which survived in the sense of "sweetheart", and to "jye" as in Burns, though the standard English pronunciation has now replaced it everywhere. Burns in fact criticises Clarinda for rhyming *joys* with *those* and says *prize* would be a better rhyme.

One of the cardinal vowel distinctions between Scot and English lies in the pronunciation of what is usually written *oo* in English and *ui* or *u* + consonant + *e* in Scots, as in *spune*, spoon; *fuil*, fool; *bluid*, blood; *brume*, broom. It is known that in the south-west of Scotland this sound developed like the French *u* or German ü and that it still survives in the Stewartry. But in Kyle and Cunningham as in most other parts of industrial Scotland, the sound has become plain *i* as in *pin* or *bit* and Simson by his spellings *foreninn* and *blidd* makes it quite clear that this change had taken place in Ayrshire at least by the second half of the 18th century. Burns shows this too in his couplet in "Guid Ale,"

> "I sell'd them a' just ane by ane,
> Guid ale keeps my heart abune."

There *ane* is pronounced as today, *yin*, and rhymes with *abin*; similarly in the fourth stanza of "To a Mouse." Where this original vowel however was a final one or came before *r*, *v*, *z* and sometimes *l*, the Scots pronunciation went to *ai* rather than *i* as in *pair*, poor, *mair*, moor, *flair*, floor, *yaize*, use, *dae*, do, *shae*, shoe. So in "The Holy Fair." Burns rhymes *dails* and *stools*, which he presumably pronounced "stails." But the older sound, which was again nearer the French *eu* or German ö, persisted longer than with the shorter form and even now can be remembered by older folk as typical of an earlier generation. This would explain Simson's comparison with the Greek upsilon and his spelling *smoer*, smother, and *shoel*, shovel, for the more modern *smair*, *shil*.

There is also the rounding of the vowel, still characteristic of modern Ayrshire speech, as in *faw*, *snaw*, *lawd* for *fall*, *snow*, *lad*. Early in the century we find the spelling *fosh* for *fash* in the Dundonald Session Records which suggests this, and Burns rhymes *Annie* with *bonie* in "Corn Rigs," and *caup* with *chap* in "Scotch Drink." The universal pronunciation of *dog* in West Scotland today is substantiated in his rhyme with *lug*.

Finally there remains the question of the pronunciation of *a* before *r* or *s* + another consonant and before some other consonants or groups of consonants. This is a problem that still requires thorough investigation but it seems pretty certain that in earlier Scots this was universally *ai* which under the influence of standard English in certain words has now tended to give way to the southern *ah*. So the pronunciations *airm*, *cairrie*, *hairst*, *glaiss*, *hesp*, *Glaisca*, *aix*, *aifter*, are still in regular use and it is obvious from Burns's rhymes that many other words used to belong to this category too.

Thus in "Corn Rigs" *barley* is made to rhyme with *early*, *sincerely*; in "Ca' the Yowes," *art* with *hert*, *pairt*; in "Duncan Gray" *wrath* with *death*, *baith*; in "Halloween," *dazzle* with *hazel*; in the "Epistle to Lapraik" *warms* with *terms*. Similar features should be constantly looked for in Burns's rhymes by those who would wish to read him as he should be read in the authentic Ayrshire manner described by Sir James Wilson in *The Dialect of Robert Burns* and the *Scottish Poems of Robert Burns*.

The consonantal system of Ayrshire speech is much less complex and can be briefly dismissed. It has all the general characteristics of Scots, *ch* preserved as in *licht*, etc.; the dropping of final *l*, as in *ca*, *fa*, *staw*, stole, leading to a diphthong after *o*, as *bow*, boll, *pow*, poll, *cowt*, colt, *gowd*, gold; the disappearance of *v* between vowels as in *hae*, *gie*, *abune*, *loe*, *deil*, (Simson adds *oen*, oven, *seenteen*, which now appear to be obsolete in Ayrshire); the

transposition of consonants as in *warsle*, wrestle, *ax*, ask, *girn*, grin, *girsle*, gristle. Again in West Scots as in some other dialects, *d* disappears after *l* and *n*, hence *aul*, *caul*, *waurl*, *frien*, *Lun'on*, *min*, (rhyming with *Auld Lang Syne*); Simson notes the rather out-of-the-way fact that *p* tends to become *b* before *t*, as *cabtain*, *babtist*, the latter of which is still familiar in Ayrshire.

Scots is generally remarkably uniform in grammar and idiom and the 18th century records do not reveal features from Ayrshire that are not to be found in any good Scots author of the period. The Dundonald Kirk Session minutes report a malediction "God nor ——," an idomatic use of *nor* found in Burns's "Twa Brigs" and elsewhere; more interesting is the use of *thou*, addressed by a man to his wife. *Thou* (pronounced *thoo*) seems to have survived unusually long in familiar address in the South-West and is recorded as still current at the end of the 19th century in Renfrewshire in the form *tou*, giving rise to the local nickname of Paisley, *Seestu*, *i.e.* "sees thou, d'ye see?" which was apparently a characteristic mannerism of speech in that town.[2] This usage is corroborated by Galt who puts it into the mouths of his older characters, as in *The Entail* or *The Last of the Lairds* and that it was still living in Burns's time is shown by the fact that he uses with it the correct Scots form of the second person of the present tense in *-s*, as *thou kens*, *thou is*, *thou loes*. There is thus no question of its being a mere poetical revival. Other grammatical forms worth noting are the old plural in *-en* in *owsen* and Burns's regular use of the form *'se* (for *sall*, shall) in the first person singular of the future tense. But his usage in this fluctuates somewhat and his contemporaries generally use *will*, which is also usually attributed to Scotland, and it may be that by the end of the century it was going rather out of fashion. Today it survives only in one or two stereotyped phrases like *I'se wad* (wager), *I'se warrant*. One feature, however, needs a little fuller mention, as Burns is quite specific about it in the introductory notes of his Kilmarnock glossary where he says "the participle present, instead of *ing*, ends, in the Scotch Dialect, in *an* or *in*; in *an*, particularly, when the verb is composed of the participle present, and any of the tenses of the auxiliary, to be."

Put somewhat more accurately and technically, this means that the participle ended in *-an* (for the earlier Scots *-and*) and the verbal noun in *-in* (for *-ing*, as in English), and that it was possible to distinguish the two in 18th century Ayrshire speech. Corroborative contemporary evidence is hard to find, the distinction has disappeared from the modern dialect of the county, and Burns himself abandoned the variation in spelling in his second edition, no doubt under pressure from his printer, but it survives today in

2. See also D. McNaught, *Kilmaurs*, 295.

areas as far apart as Roxburgh and Shetland, with some traces formerly in the North-East and in Perthshire, and it is reasonable to infer that it was more wide-spread still two hundred years ago.

To deal fully with the vocabulary of 18th century Ayrshire would need a treatise in itself far beyond the limits of this paper, but one or two general points can be made here. As in grammar there is a good deal of uniformity in historical Scots speech, much more than the decayed and fragmentary condition of the modern dialects might lead one to suppose. Ayrshire belongs to the large dialect area called mid-Scots which covers all Lowland Scotland except Roxburgh-, Selkirk- and East Dumfries-shire, as far north as the middle of Angus. As far as literature is concerned, this is the area which has produced nearly all the great writers of Scotland who use Scots speech, Henryson, Dunbar, Lyndsay, Montgomerie, Ramsay, Fergusson, Burns, Scott, Galt, Stevenson. Its forms and vocabulary it therefore shares with the classical or metropolitan Scots of the Forth region, the old national speech of Scotland, and not much will be found in it which is unfamiliar to the general reader of Scottish literature. The language of Burns especially is well-known and easily accessible, though it has to be remembered that Burns himself was much influenced in his phraseology by the ballad and folk-song traditions and by his literary predecessors, like Ramsay, Fergusson, and Dougal Graham, the chap-book writer, and that in his turn by his extraordinary sensitiveness and felicity in his choice of words Burns powerfully influenced the writing of the hordes of versifiers who came after him. We have, however, Simson's express statement that " the Glossary to Burns's Poems, gives a good idea of the Provincial terms in Ayrshire " and the other Ayrshire poets of the last thirteen years of the century, though no doubt very imitative of Burns as has just been said (David Sillars's Glossary is little better than a crib of the Kilmarnock one), do not, even incidentally, reveal a much different or more extensive vocabulary. Among such words which are known from elsewhere to have a specifically West Country currency are *aidle* (urine), *crunt* (thump), *daimen* (occasional), *kiaugh* (anxiety), *messan* (cur), *raucle* (strong, tough), *risk* (make a rending sound), *rockin* (a ceilidh), *snirtle* (snigger), *tawie* (tractable), *rummelgarie* (obstreperous child), *thummart* (polecat), *wiel* (deep pool), *winze* (an oath), *wintle* (to reel, wobble). To these may be added *sunk* (to mope), *yaker* (to gabble words) and *swash* (to splash) from the poet, James Fisher, of Ochiltree ; and *kelter* (to capsize) and *smutch* (smudge, shred) from Saunders Tait of Tarbolton.

Simson gives a selection of some 250 words common in Ayrshire, few of which are in fact peculiar to that county but most of the following had a currency restricted to the general area between the Galloway hills and the Clyde :—*clippynet. clipfart* (an impudent

girl), *cosenent* (wages without board), *daupit* (stupid), *frample* (to rumple), *gineough* (greedy, of Gaelic origin), *grashloch* (stormy), *hochen* (fireside), *knusky* (stout lad), *lizor* (pasture), *loatch* (fat person), *pawvis* (to dally), *cosh* (lazy, complacent). There is some evidence that Simson made use of the works and glossaries of the various Ayrshire poets in compiling this list, but they were of course his contemporaries and no doubt in several cases, *e.g.* Burns Sillars, Tait, and Fisher, his acquaintances as well, and they would all have spoken Scots together. It was in fact to Simson that Burns wrote one of his raciest verse epistles, saying explicitly :—

" They spak their thoughts in plain, braid lallans,
Like you or me."

There was apparently much greater enlightenment among Scots schoolmasters in those days than now.

This brings us to a brief consideration of how far Scots was spoken in Ayrshire in the 18th century. The direct evidence as has already been said is tantalisingly elusive, but there is no reason to suppose that it differed in this respect from the rest of Scotland and to judge from the relative vitality of Ayrshire Scots today everything points to that part of Scotland having been conservative rather than otherwise in speaking the mother tongue. It is certain that Scots was spoken among all classes in Scotland at the beginning of the 18th century although English had already established itself as the written language with an admixture of Scottıcisms. The greater gentry, especially those who had business at court, were naturally bilingual. With the Union of 1707 and Scottish representation at Westminster this class gradually grew, and the fashion of speaking English with them. But the small gentry and bonnet lairds kept their Scots going in the main and the ordinary folk spoke nothing else though they were taught and read and wrote in the best English they could muster. Stray clues from time to time reveal what the situation was. Already before the century began the Sempill lairds of Beltrees on the borders of Ayrshire had initiated that revival of Scots poetry that was to culminate in Burns. In its first decades the records of Kirk Session and Baron Court, though written in the formal English of the Clerk, contain an odd verbatim record of expressions used by witnesses, *e.g.* the disarming excuse of the husband caught by his wife *flagrante delicto* with another woman, " It is well wared in your hand (*i.e.* it serves you right). You might have come sooner home," from an entry of 1725 at Dundonald.

Towards the middle of the century we get a glimpse, though an exaggerated one, of two extremes of speech in Ayrshire between

two generations in Lord Auchinleck and his son, the famous Bozzy. Of the judge, Ramsay of Ochtertyre says " he was at no pains to improve his colloquial Scots, which people of fashion would have considered as vulgar, in the beginning of the century." And it was he who called Johnson " an auld dominie ! he keeped a schule and caud it an acaadamy " and praised Cromwell for having " gart Kings ken they had a lith in their neck." [3]

The opposition between the aggressively Scots-speaking father and the mincing son, who was terrified of a Scotticism, is indeed a sign of the revolution towards English speech and ways which was in full swing after 1760 among the fashionable and in the next twenty years had spread to other classes and grades of society. In 1795 the Rev. William Auld, Burns's antagonist, not only describes the linguistic situation but his own perjink attitude towards it in his contribution on Mauchline to the *Statistical Account*, " The Scots dialect is the language spoken, but it is gradually improving, and approaching nearer to the English."

Perhaps the best picture of Ayrshire speech and its social status however is given by Galt (born in Irvine in 1779) in the novels which deal with his own country. He was one of the first to " do " the village genre novel and was in a sense the precursor of the Kailyard. He paid special attention to characters and " bodies", types familiar to him in his youth, and we know that on his visits to Scotland during his most prolific period he kept his ears open for idioms and sayings to be put into the mouths of his creations. He was thus giving a pretty good picture of the speech of the older generation of the second half of the eighteenth century, the talk of the old-fashioned ministers in the *Annals* and the *Ayrshire Legatees*, of the old-fashioned lairds and their households in *The Last of the Lairds* and *Sir Andrew Wylie*, and of the old-fashioned town dignitaries in *The Provost*. One passage from *The Last of the Lairds* must suffice as an example :—

> " Ye see, it cam to pass that the minister, being weel stricken in years, stretched out his legs on the bed of sickness and departed this life ; whereupon his wife, Mrs. Glebantiends, being sequestrated from the stipend, left the manse and went to live in the town on Sir Hairy's Fond, which is, as you know, a grand provision for the like o' her. Thus it came to pass, that auld Gilbert was ordained to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow, which is the portion of man that is born of a woman, and his lot was to howk ditches. When he had laboured at that some dozen years or the like, after the death of his master, he was afflicted wi' an income, and

3, Lockhart *Life of Scott*, xxi.

> no being able to handle spade or pick, he was constrained to beggary ; and so it happened that on the very first morning that he took up the meal-pock for eikrie o' life, as the folk called it, I was standing at the yett looking to see wha might be going to the town, and wha coming frae't, when, lo and behold ! I saw an auld beggar-man, wi' a grey head and a cleaner pock than usual, and it was toom—ye see it was his first morning at the trade—hirpling wi' a stilt towards the avenue ; and so hirpling, when he saw me he stoppit and swither't, and turned round, and was blate to come, the which made me wonder ; but belyve, he took off his bonnet and cam to me wi't in his hand, wi' his bald head bare ; and when I was marvelling wha this new-set-up beggar could be, (for I had no thought o' Gilbert), he said, ' Laird, will ye hansel my pock ? '—for he was aye a jocose body,—' Will ye hansel my pock, for auld langsyne, Laird ? '—' For auld langsyne ! ' quo' I, ' a hansel in the jougs would better serve you than an almous—gae awa wi' you, ye fause loon ! an ye come within the bounds o' Auldbiggins, I'll set the dog on you, for what ye did to me in the manse garden—that's the auld langsyne ye did to me in the manse garden—that's the auld langsyne I keep in memento.' "
>
> " And did he knock you down with his crutch ? "
>
> " Na, na, he durstna do that—but I trow he was dauntit, for he turn't on his heel and put on his bonnet wi' a splurt like a Highlandman in a pet, and powled himsel awa wi' his stilt."
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> " But," continued the Laird after a pause, during which he looked somewhat doubtfully at me—" but I see ye think I didna do right," adding, " I'm no, however, so hard-hearted as I let wot—for when I saw that I had made an impression, I ran after him and touched him on the shoulder, and putting my hand in my pouch, I gave him a whole penny—twa new bawbees, gude weight, for it was then the days o' the tumbling Tams."
>
> " And what did he say ? "
>
> " Ye'll aiblins think he was full o' thanksgiving—nae sic thing, but as proud as when he was the minister's man—he took the penny—twa beautiful bawbees it was, and he looked at them, and what do you think he said ?—' I'm a beggar noo, and I oughtna to refuse God's charity ! ' so, withouten a bethank, he hobbled on his way, leaving me standing in the middle of the road wi' my finger in my mouth."

There we seem to hear the authentic accents of Ayrshire about the time of Burns's birth—the echoes of the Bible and the field-preachers, the sentimental touch of auld lang syne, the proud independence of the poor, the pathetically comic turns of the description of the beggar and the cannieness of the laird, and then the terse tragic dignity of the speech of acceptance all come vividly through the plain but supple Scots of the speaker. Galt indeed is very good in subtle touches of this sort but it is to Burns that we must turn to see the Scots tongue used with the most powerful and telling effect. Indeed it is not too much to say that it was Burns who restored it, broken and mutilated though it was, to the status of a full poetic language and gave it a new lease of life which even yet, in spite of a whole array of hostile forces, is not exhausted. I have written elsewhere about the language of Burns and need not repeat what is there said.[4] But since this volume is in itself a tribute to him, it may not be inappropriate to end by pointing out some of the literary qualities of his speech.

In his hands it is remarkably varied and versatile. We have the plain farmer's idiom admirably suited for its purpose in " The Death of Mailie " and " The Salutation to the Auld Mare," the brilliant wit, the double-entendres, the remarkable polish of " Death and Doctor Hornbook " and " The Twa Herds," the subtle interweaving of the language of Calvinism and rustic ribaldry in " Holy Willie's Prayer " ; we see it flexibly and skilfully adapted to politics and social commentary, with genial humour in " The Author's Earnest Cry " or " The Twa Dogs," with burning scorn in the " Address of Beelzebub," or to theology in " The Ordination " and " The Holy Fair." He can tone down the peculiarly Scottish element in it as he does in so many of his songs or step it up for the sheer love of the words themselves as in " Halloween." It is wonderfully attuned to all his moods.

Linguistically his chief and abounding merit lies in his almost unerring flair for the right word in the right place which gives his verse its great strength and apparent economy of effort, where every word, like Burnewin, " comes on like death at every chap." In " Tam o' Shanter " for example there is not a word misplaced or unnecessary. It is no depreciation to his innate genius to attribute much of this terse and potent use of language to his 18th century Scottish background, to the awakening of applied science in agriculture and industry, to the growth of speculative philosophy in which Scotland played a leading role, to the rigorous logic of the Shorter Catechism and the theology of the Presbyterian Kirk, to the self-conscious cultivation of literary style derived from Augustan England and the rationalism of pre-revolutionary

4. *Burns Chronicle*, 1950, pp. 39-47.

France, and above all to the common traditions of the Scots themselves in ballad, folk-song and proverb where the wit and wisdom and passions of centuries of national life were crystallised in the short dry telling phrase and the stark clear metaphor. And so we get from Burns : " The best laid schemes o' mice and men gang aft agley," " O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us tae see oursels as others see us," " Man's inhumanity to man," " I'll be a brig when ye're a shapeless cairn," " The fear o' hell's a hangman's whip tae haud the wretch in order," " Wha does the utmost that he can, will whyles do mair."

In the social pictures and satires of the little world of Tarbolton and Mauchline, in the epistles and tales, in the greatest of his songs, the pithy raucle Scots of the Ayrshire farmer in the hands of genius transcends the shrinking limits which history and circumstance had imposed upon it and becomes for a few brief glorious moments the language of humanity.