

Chapter Four

The Ulster-Scots Language Society and recent developments in the study of Ulster Scots¹

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1 Introduction

That the proximity of southwest Scotland to the north of Ireland has long formed a sea-bridge for cultures and languages is a commonplace among historians as well as linguists. Major scholarly efforts in Scotland have seen inclusion of the historical province of Ulster as a given, and so it was that the *Scottish National Dictionary* and the *Linguistic Atlas of Scotland* extended their fieldwork and documentation to several counties of Ireland. The comings and goings of both Gaelic and Scots has of course been enshrined in the name of the Forum for Research on the Languages of Scotland and Ulster since the early 1990s. Today also offers the timely opportunity to recognize that the Ulster-Scots Language Society recently turned twenty-five. Since its inception the latter has been the primary agent documenting Ulster Scots through its publications.

By any measure the best-known early work on Scots speech in Ulster was William Hugh Patterson's *Glossary of Words and Phrases Used in Antrim and Down* (1880), employed extensively for both Joseph Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary* and Grant and Murison's *Scottish National Dictionary*. The latter features more than twelve hundred citations from Ulster. Use of Ulster sources has continued down to the present day, with the recently published second edition of the *Concise Scots Dictionary* utilizing

¹ Editors' note: This paper was given by Professor Montgomery at the FRLSU conference in Glasgow in 2018 (where it was read by Robert McColl Millar, with Michael 'present' via Skype). Because of his death the following summer, the paper was left unrevised. The version presented here is therefore very close to the original paper, with some light editorial amendments.

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the electronic version of one of the works I will focus on today.

Still, the fact that publication in Ulster has had an extensive life of its own since Patterson has been largely unknown on the Scottish mainland. The extent of this literature can be gauged from the one chapter ‘Annotated Bibliography of Ulster-Scots Language and Literature’ by John Erskine and yours truly in the volume you now have in hand, the ‘Gregg Volume’, as it has come to be known. This bibliography compiles and provides descriptive annotation for around 350 publications on the Scots and English of the historical province. A large proportion of published items, especially local word-lists, may primarily be of antiquarian interest, but for the record is one of a considerable range, and it bespeaks native speaker interest in their own speech.

Today I will present the Ulster-Scots Language Society and then profile contemporary Ulster Scots speech. Then I will turn to the contributions of two sons of the County Antrim, Robert J. Gregg and James Fenton, whose works rank at the forefront of scholarship on Ulster Scots. In presenting their work I will introduce two essential websites.

First is *The Academic Study of Ulster-Scots: Essays for and by Robert J. Gregg* (<https://www.libraryireland.com/gregg/index.php>). We are most grateful to the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, part of National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland, for generously providing copies of Gregg volume. While **all** the contents can also be found online (thanks again to the museum), the volume’s editors are confident that conferees will welcome the hardback to their personal libraries for consultation. The second website is that of the Ulster-Scots Academy (<http://ulsterscotsacademy.com/>). Here one can find a searchable version of Fenton’s dictionary (*The Hamely Tongue: A Personal Record of Ulster-Scots in County Antrim*) as well as much more.

Robert J Gregg (1912-98) was the first President of the Language Society, and James Fenton is the third. Yours truly was the second, serving from 2000 to 2015. I joined the Society in 1993, a year after its founding. From early on the Society has pursued coordinated goals through its research and documentation arm, the Ulster-Scots Academy.

The Society gives readings and other presentations at local festivals, but the main activity has been steady, stealthy publishing program. I use the latter adjective because its Society’s publications are known outside Northern Ireland in very few quarters, especially academic ones. I hope to change that today. At the top is its magazine *Ullans*, whose fifteenth issue appeared in the spring of this year [2018]. The over-arching goals of the Society have been to

promote and preserve Ulster Scots and to support research on and use of it in both speech and writing as a European regional language. The society is and always has been comprised overwhelmingly of native speakers and writers. Fenton, for example, is widely regarded as the foremost contemporary poet (c.f., Fenton 2017). It is a charitable, educational, and apolitical body that is not an agent, much less a front, for anyone or any other cause.

For a small, voluntary body having few funds for publication from external sources, the Ulster-Scots Language Society has achieved an extraordinary record through its Ullans Press over the past quarter century, an outflow that includes collections of poetry, a grammar, a dictionary, a translation from the Greek of the four gospels of the New Testament, fifteen issues of a magazine, a psalter, and other works. Previously the Society marketed titles by word of mouth and through a tiny handful of bookshops, but since 2014 the advent of publish-on-demand technology has revolutionized its marketing capacity.

2 Contemporary Ulster Scots

Ulster Scots is a geographic variety spoken across communities. It is not a ‘Protestant’ language variety. Jim Milroy, originally from Galloway I believe, always maintained that one’s community orientation could not be identified from one’s speech in Ulster, and I’ve never seen any good reason to doubt him. It is spoken in rural areas and is often unheard by urban residents. Depending on the observer, Ulster Scots has been called many things. It’s real, certainly not a ‘DIY language for Orangemen’, one of the canards spread by sneer brigades.

Ulster-Scots, like Scots on the mainland, forms a continuum with local and more standardized varieties of English. Both individuals and communities command varying ranges of this continuum. Having little overt prestige, the lowest or deepest extreme is a folk variety that increasingly can often be only overheard in public contexts other than in recitations or other scripted events. Native speakers are cautious when talking with strangers. The twenty recorded conversations one can find at the Academy website were all conducted between native speakers.

Further, Ulster Scots is international. Quite a few speakers reside in east Donegal, in the Republic of Ireland. On the basis of this fact, some years ago I advised Derrick McClure that he should label Scots an international language, should he again revise *Why Scots Matters*.

3 Robert Gregg

Robert Gregg of Larne completed an MA at Queen's University Belfast before migrating to British Columbia in the 1950s and subsequently complete a doctorate at Edinburgh University under Angus McIntosh in 1968. His scholarship, extending across more than thirty years into the 1980s, focused on the phonetics and historical phonology of traditional Ulster Scots, which he called 'Scotch-Irish' in his writing but toward the end of his life referred to as 'Ulster-Scots.' Except for his doctoral thesis, which was published in 1972 in monograph form, the Gregg volume reproduces everything Gregg published on the subject, including his MA dissertation. These were collected from many now-inaccessible outlets. He maintained close ties with the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum and arranged for his papers to be deposited there. Shortly after their arrival back in Northern Ireland, Philip Robinson, a curator at the museum, conceived the idea for the volume that was ultimately published in 2006, thanks to funding made available from the Ulster-Scots Agency by the late John Laird. Now a few additional words about the Gregg volume. Philip and Anne Smyth and I commissioned or exhumed more than a dozen further items (as, for instance, that by Brendan Adams). We recognize that the coverage is somewhat expansive. It features, for example, Bruce Boling's 'A Hiberno-English Dialect of West Tyrone', a survey of linguistic features distilled from the letters of one emigrant family, the Sproules of Castlederg, in the nineteenth century. The book contains nearly all of the best of the old and the new, plenty to send students to or to feast on oneself.

While his early work explored the Ulster-Scots sound system by concentrating on nearby Glenoe, he later conducted fieldwork across four counties (including Donegal in the Republic of Ireland). He used a checklist of 14 crucial features (all but two of them vowels) to pin down where Scots speech shifted into English and proposed the first empirical mapping of Ulster Scots speech. It is his formulation of the maximal extent of the Ulster-Scots vowel system that has so often been reproduced in later overview works, such as *The story of English* (1986). Gregg's map stretches in a crescent across the north and northeast of the historical province, from the Foyle Valley in east Donegal across to Tor Head, which overlooks the Mull of Kintyre, and then down through the Ards Peninsula and inland along estuaries where Scots speakers settled in the seventeenth century.

4 James Fenton (1931-), poet and lexicographer

One of the first Language Society publications was James Fenton's *The Hamely Tongue: A Personal Record of Ulster-Scots in County Antrim* (1995, 2014), a 300-page dictionary based on forty years of indefatigable fieldwork. Fenton's ear for the vernacular in tandem with his precision as a schoolmaster gave rise to what is arguably the most suitable orthographic system yet devised for Ulster-Scots. Blessed with natural gifts of one straddling two worlds, that of a schoolmaster and that of 'the hearth and hame'. Around 1960 he began the hobby of collecting rural vocabulary from his in-laws and other speakers 'down the country'. Fenton also possessed the gifts of a lexicographer, able single-handedly to glean practices of the *CSD* and other Scottish works, to devise his own slightly variant orthography, and to instill internal consistency throughout his work. His entry format was founded on the *Concise Scots Dictionary* (1985).

By some point in the 1980s Fenton decided to test the Antrim boundaries of Gregg's earlier mapping, in this process enlisting eleven highly alert, older native speakers. Each of these primary consultants he visited in a circuit time and again. As his work developed, he queried each of these eleven about hundreds of terms and usages on the list that had become the draft of his eventual dictionary. He then provided in entries the initials of however many attested the lexeme. For example, consider the entry for *brock* lemma 2 below. Here we see in parentheses the initials of the four speakers who attested the term (Ba, C, G, L):

brock² rubbish; broken pieces; kitchen refuse (esp. used for feeding pigs). (Ba, C, G, L) [ME *broke*, OE *broc* f. *brecan* to break (CSD)]

The entry for the definite article shows the same highly compressed format of this self-taught lexicographer:

the (as) to- (*the day, the morra, the night*); how (*The heech he's the baith both. the best* (see BEST). **the maist** most (*the maist o yins; drunk the maist o it*). (Also often used (1) for possessive pronouns: *the da, the dochter, the wife; the han, the heid; the health*; (2) before (a) disease)

In his spellings, Fenton opted for internal consistency over historical precedent as his guide, but he does provide frequent cross-referencing to the *CSD* as well as words indicating borrowed from Irish and other languages. Such scholarship belies the label of ‘popular’ given the volume in some quarters, but the volume has been a sales success and captivated thousands of readers through its extensive, often wry, illustrative collocations. Now eighty-seven and no longer writing, Jim Fenton continues to review his decades of work distilled into *The Hamely Tongue*. He proudly maintains that not a scrap of Ulster-Scots usage has escaped his attention. Perfectionist to the end, he continues to proof *The Hamely Tongue*, now in its fourth edition, thanks to publish-on-demand capacities.

The editors sincerely trust that conferees will value the copies that the National Museums of Northern Ireland has made available today and will sense the pride of the editors in presenting it to the Forum. Ulster-Scots is now securely on the map, maybe even in Scotland.

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The Ulster-Scots Language Society

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