Chapter One

Eppie Elrick: a Doric tour-de-force

J. Derrick McClure

University of Aberdeen

In the long, productive and varied history of literature in the North-East dialect, William P. Milne's (1881–1967) *Eppie Elrick* occupies a distinctive place. Firstly, it contains one of the largest corpora of continuous prose in the dialect.[1] During the Vernacular Revival of the eighteenth century, when the Doric (as it is now popularly called, the name having been unilaterally commandeered by North-East speakers and writers) made its first spectacular appearance as a literary medium in the poetry of Alexander Ross (1699–1784) and John Skinner (1721–1807) (see McClure 2013), one notable prose text was produced, the *Journal from London to Portsmouth* of Robert Forbes (dates unknown), first printed in 1755 (see McClure 2017: 71). This had no immediate successors;[2] and for much of the nineteenth century the dialect ceased to flourish in either poetry or prose. John Burness (1771–1826), a distant relation of Robert Burns, was the last poet in this period to use the dialect for work of any merit; and for several decades after his death North-East poets who used Scots were for the most part content to remain under the shadow of Burness' eminent kinsman and express themselves in the Scots of the Ayrshire-Edinburgh axis. Continuous prose is virtually non-existent in this period; but the well-established practice of using Scots for dialogue in works of fiction received its North-East initiation in the novels of a figure of

[1] On the dialect itself, the foundation text is Dieth (1932). See further e.g., Murison (1963 and 1979), McClure (2002) and Millar (2007).

[2] With one *possible* exception, though not from the North-East (see McClure 2017: 77–78).

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real distinction, namely George MacDonald (1824–1905: see McGillis 1981). Fictional dialogue was the genre in which the Doric was ushered into the phase of continuous productivity which has never faltered since, by the seminal figure of William Alexander (1826–1894). His *Johnny Gibb of Gushetneuk*, first published in instalments in the *Aberdeen Free Press* in 1868–69 and in book form in 1871,[3] has an unchallenged place as the classic literary account of life in the North-East ferm-touns as well as arguably the finest monument to the expressive vitality of the dialect as a spoken tongue, the religious, political and social aspects of the Disruption being discussed knowledgeably and eloquently in pristine North-East Scots. Other works by Alexander likewise exploit the riches of the dialect. Another fiction story with Doric dialogue, *Mains of Yonderton* by William Robbie (1829–1914), was serialised in the *Free Press* in the 1880s; another journal, the *Buchan Observer*, serialised a fine novel by the eminent folklorist and ballad collector Gavin Greig (1856–1914), *Logie o' Buchan*, in 1897–98,[4] the Doric dialogue here being particularly fitting for its period setting in the early eighteenth century; John Wight and Dufton Scott (1880–1944) are two writers of lasting local reputation who made exuberant use of the dialect in humorous short stories and anecdotes. Documentary works such as William Watson's *Glimpses o' Auld Lang Syne* (1903) and Helen Beattie's (1847–1928) *At the Back o' Benachie* (1915) (see McClure 2020) record the dialect without the literary guise of a fictional setting.

The status of *Eppie Elrick*, however, differs from those in an important respect.[5] Alexander, Watson, Beattie and the other writers so far mentioned were born, grew up and spent their lives either within or at any rate in close

[3] With the localisms of vocabulary and expression in the narrative sections punctiliously, and irritatingly, marked off by inverted commas, as they were not in the *Free Press* texts.

[4] The importance of the press in contributing to the efflorescence of local dialect writing in this period is fundamental. See Donaldson (1986 and 1989).

[5] For a brief discussion of the novel and its literary background see Kidd (1967).

contact with the farming communities of Buchan, and made daily use of the dialect as their normal speech throughout their lives. W. P. Milne, by contrast, spent most of his career as Professor of Mathematics at the University of Leeds; a post which he held with high distinction. He was born in Longside in 1881 and was educated at Peterhead Academy, Aberdeen Grammar School and Aberdeen University, and therefore no doubt had the dialect as his mother tongue and used it regularly during his formative years; his wife, too, to whom he pays a generous tribute in his introduction, was a native of the region with a full knowledge of the dialect and an intimate understanding of the life of the community. Neither his professional field nor his domicile during his post-student life, however, would seem fertile ground for the production of a Doric novel; and indeed it was completed only after his retirement in 1946.[6] Once again, its first publication was in serial form, in the *Buchan Observer*, from October 1954 to September 1955; and it appeared in book form, from publisher P. Scrogie of Peterhead, the same year.

Eppie Elrick is a historical novel, with a carefully researched and accurately presented setting. *Johnny Gibb* is also a novel, but the events which form its background were well within living memory at the time of its writing, and the ferm-toun culture had scarcely changed; *Mains of Yonderton* has a contemporary setting, with the changes in agricultural techniques currently taking place as an important theme. *Eppie Elrick*, which is subtitled 'An Aberdeenshire Tale of the '15', is to that extent more comparable to *Logie o' Buchan*, also set in the period of the first Jacobite uprising, and like it offers a literary reconstruction of a past age; but by the date of Milne's novel social, political and technical developments, and two world wars, had consigned the society depicted more conclusively and irrecoverably to history than was the case for Greig.

[6] The biographical information is taken from the obituary by W. L. Edge and H. S. Ruse (1969).

Eppie Elrick, that is, is an academic exercise as its predecessors in Doric writing were not. The impressive list of people whose help Milne acknowledges in his introduction includes the Swiss scholar Eugen Dieth, author of *A Grammar of the Buchan Dialect*, David Murison, editor of the *Scottish National Dictionary*, the well-known local journalist, historian, literary editor and dialect enthusiast Cuthbert Graham, and W. M. Alexander, probably the nephew of the author of *Johnny Gibb* who was one of Dieth's informants.

A well-recognised literary convention in being since the first works in novel form by Scottish writers has been the reservation of Scots to dialogue passages, the narrative being in literary English. Exceptions, and skilful manoeuvrings of this convention for literary effect, have always been readily observable; but the convention has clearly been taken as a given by Milne; and, his intention being to write a book which is maximally Doric both in the density of the dialect and the extent of its use, his response to it has been the unsubtle and simplistic one of making his characters talk in Doric even when the fictional situation makes it unlikely that they would be talking at all; and often giving them monologues of, if realism is expected, ridiculous length. And almost from the outset – to be precise, from the first passage of spoken dialogue which begins at line 7 – it is as clear as in *Johnny Gibb* with its arresting opening 'Heely, heely, Tam, ye glaiket stirk — ye hinna on the hin shelvin' o' the cairt' that no concession is going to be made to readers unfamiliar with the Doric: even less than in *Johnny Gibb*, indeed, for *Eppie Elrick* has no glossary or annotations of any kind. The title character[7] is introduced at once; and we are told that 'Like most people who live alone she

[7] In keeping with his meticulous presentation of the authentic background to his story, Milne quotes a passage from the Aberdeenshire Poll Book of 1696 recording the valuation of the lands and properties of the Elrick family. Even to readers unfamiliar with the family history, Eppie's surname will claim a familiar ring by recalling a hill of that name a short distance from Aberdeen.

was prone to speak aloud to herself and to argue out the plans and motives for her actions'. Whatever value the generalisation 'like most people who live alone' actually has, the licence which Milne claims from it to write passages in Doric presented in the fictional context as soliloquies is unlimited. Eppie Elrick's first quoted words are: 'I'se jist dyae 'wa oot for anidder aapronfu o' peats fae the stack an' maybe a hedder cowe ur twa tae get a gweed lowe, an' seen A'se sattle doon tae hae a bit floan afore 'e fire an' birsle ma shins; ur maybe A'se tak ma shank an weive in 'e glowmin.' (p. 1) *I'se* for 'I sall' is regularly attested (there is no reason for the inconsistent variation between this and *A'se*: Milne generally writes the first-person singular pronoun as *A*, and the initial *I* is probably simply a misprint). *Dyae* is dubious: *gang* is often *gyang* or *dyang* in this dialect, but this palatalisation is rarely attested for *gae*: in view of Milne's general meticulousness it may be taken as authentic. *Anidder* illustrates the change of medial [ð] to [d], a characteristic of the dialect exemplified in *midder, fader, bridder* and the like, and shortly in this passage by *hedder*: another example from later in the chapter is *naider* ('neither'). *Aapron* indicates the low vowel which distinguishes the Scots word from its English cognate: Helen Beattie also uses this spelling, and *ahpron*, *awpron* and *aupron* are attested in other North-Eastern writings. Other spellings indicating pronunciation shibboleths of the Doric are *gweed* and *glowmin*. *Cowe* 'twig' is a common word, particularly in East and North-East dialects: of the other Scots vocabulary items, *lowe* ('fire') and *birsle* ('to warm, to toast') are general Scots; *floan* (here meaning 'relax', though it has other senses) and *shank* ('a stocking in the process of being knitted') are mainly local; *weive* represents the Doric pronunciation of the word though the sense of 'knit' is general Scots.

This short speech is the merest foretaste of what is to come. Almost immediately afterwards, we hear Eppie saying: 'Gweed preserve a' livin' crater […] dingin on aye yet an' smore drift at 'at. It's naider upplt nur divallt for comin on for twa ur three weeks. 'Ere's fower ur five fit o' snaa a'ready

a' roon 'e cuntraside an' lickly tae be a hantle mair. It's nae ahin time 'at A hid in a pucklie mair peats.' (p. 1). Worthy of mention here are the opening exclamation with the common euphemism *gweed* (the local pronunciation of *guid*) for 'God', *smore drift* (a term for 'dense drifting snow'), the expression *naider upplt nor devallt* with the use of two synonymous verbs meaning 'come to a stop', though *upple* is virtually restricted to rain or snow and *devall* is not. On finding a strange object outside her door she at once gives a detailed description of it: 'Gweed guide's gin't binna an aal oo ruskie wi a hollipiet seck raxt ower 'e mou o't an' wuppit wi a stoot tow roon its edge tae haud it on tummlt aff' (p. 4): besides the words *ruskie* ('a basket woven of straw') and the much more unusual *hollipiet* ('full of holes': the original application of the word to open-work embroidery is unlikely to be intended here), the most interesting feature is the idiom *tae haud it on tummlt aff* 'to keep it from falling off'. A highly distinctive feature of the dialect, singled out for special attention by Dieth (see McClure 2022), is this use of *on* in the sense of 'without' (the word is related to the negative prefix *un-* and not to the preposition *on*[8]) with a past participle to indicate the non-occurrence of an action in present time. The ruskie, as Eppie immediately discovers, contains a new-born infant with 'an aal dud ('rag') packit roon aboot it […] tae haad it *on been shochlt aboot* […]' ('to prevent it from being shaken about': *shochle* is a local form of a word more frequently pronounced *shoogle*); and elsewhere in the same chapter we find *A aye canna be on thocht upo them 'at's 'e furth an' hisna a reef abeen 'eir heids* (p. 3) 'I can never help thinking on those who are outside and haven't a roof over their heads'. This grammatical feature occurs regularly in the Doric passages throughout the book: 'Hae ye iver made milk pottage on sung 'em ('without singeing them') A winner?' (p. 35); 'Midders canna be on thocht ('cannot avoid thinking') aboot 'eir sins' […] 'Sins can easy be on thocht aboot 'eir midders though'

[8] See *DSL*, s.v. *on-*, pref. 2.

(p. 38); ‘Her an’ Charlie Coutts can niver be on carblt (‘can never help quarrelling’: *carble* is a rarely-attested local word) fin ’ey’re ’egidder’ (p. 39); ‘Baabie badd ma gie ye this piece (universal Scots word for ‘a small food item carried and eaten as a snack’: oatcakes and cheese in this case) tae haad ye on fun hungry (‘to keep you from feeling hungry’ (p. 40): *fun* is ‘found’, the verb *finn* being used in this dialect to mean ‘feel’, as hunger, pain, cold)’.

The infant in the ruskie, to whom Eppie gives the name Davie (otherwise Daavit or Daavitie), eventually plays a part in the story as the novel progresses through the years of his childhood and youth; but it is typical of the novel that the question of his identity and of how and why he suddenly appears on Eppie’s doorstep, which might be expected to form a central theme, passes completely unexamined: Eppie conjectures ‘Misbegotten little geetie (‘child’, often used contemptuously) nae doot an’ naebody tae pey the paans (‘a sum deposited with the Kirk Session by a betrothed couple, as surety for good behaviour before marriage’)’ (p. 4); but at once, taking the situation completely in her stride untroubled by speculation on the why and wherefore of it, sets about feeding the child with warmed milk, fortified with whisky, from a *flaskie* (‘a clay vessel with a nozzle and a finger hole by which the flow of milk can be regulated, designed for feeding young lambs’). It is, no doubt, an intentional comment on the quiet, unexamined level-headedness and resourcefulness which the harsh conditions of life in this time and place breeds in its inhabitants that the middle-aged and childless Eppie seems completely unperturbed by such an unexpected development but simply takes the necessary means to accommodate it.

Eppie’s next speech ‘Faar cud A hae laid ma knifie ur A get ’e towie cuttit?’ (p. 4) shows two examples (other instances in the chapter are so numerous that they need not be listed individually) of the diminutive *-ie*, used frequently in Doric even when no significance is attached to the actual size, absolute or relative, of the object referred to (Eppie’s ‘knifie’ appears to be an ordinary kitchen knife), and, a more interesting because less stereotypical

feature, the use of the conjunction *or*, unnecessarily re-spelt *ur* by Milne, meaning 'until'[9] but here with the implication of purpose: the simple sense is exemplified later in the chapter by 'A'se jist hae tae rink ('rummage') aboot ur ('until') it comes tae ma han. A canna vera weel wite ('wait') ur ('until') 't casts up ('turns up')'. Having found the 'knifie' she remarks 'There's naething gotten but faar't is, as ma aal midder eest tae say', one of many examples in the book of local proverbs, aphorisms or folk-sayings in general appearing in the characters' speech: prior to this we have learned that 'if [Eppie] heard someone's weaknesses being roundly condemned, she would quote in extenuation the old saying 'A'body his 'eir faats an' oor Geordie lees', or she would remark when someone's character was being besmirched 'A doot 'at story's obleeget tae the upmakker'; and another follows shortly when she reacts to her discovery of the foundling with 'Weel, weel, ahin 'is ('following this') a cat an' (this is certainly a mistake for *in*) cweetikins ('gaiters')': the sole attested instance in the *DSL* (s.v. *queetikin*, n.) of this expression of surprise and puzzlement.

As the chapter progresses, the cataract of traditional Doric proceeds apace. Pronunciation shibboleths abound: as well as the medial [d] for [ð] already noted, these include the best-known of all, the replacement of initial [ʍ] by [f] in pronouns and adverbs (*fat*, *fa*, *faar*, *fin*, *foo*) and in other words too, examples being *fusky* and *fommle* (the local form of *whummle*, 'turn over'); the [i] arising from MSc [ø:] (*seerly*, *reef*, *abeen*, *peer*) and from MSc [a:] before [n] (*neen*, *steen*); the loss of [d] in the cluster [ld] (*aal*, *caal*); the raising of [ɛ] to [ɪ] before [n] (*vintrin* ('venturing'), *tint* ('tenth'), *kint* ('kent')); the initial palatalisation in *dyaan* ('going') and *tyangs* ('tongs'); and – a form which even seasoned readers may not recognise instantly – *ma* as the unstressed form of *me*.

[9] See *DSL* s.v. *or*, prep., conj. 1.

An unobtrusive detail of syntax is *Yon's it again*: in his first few weeks in Aberdeen the author noted the frequency of 'There's it!' or 'There's him!' in the speech of local children, contrasting with the 'There it's!' of his own Ayrshire speech. An interesting idiom is *A wis 'e weers o' forgettin you a'thegidder*: this peculiarly North-East expression is derived from *weer* in the sense of 'doubt, fear' and originally meant 'in danger of…', but in recent usage suggests simply 'on the point of…'. Expressions like *the riggin o' the nicht* ('the middle of the night'), *dingin doon haill teer* ('raining or snowing very heavily'), *as 'eel* ('barren') *'s the bull* (the middle-aged spinster Eppie's description of herself) and *Craig Roy* ('the throat as a passage for food') add local and expressive colour.

Equally remarkable is the abundance of Scots vocabulary items. Some of these are general Scots: *birr* ('energy, passion'), *brosy* (simply a derivative of 'brose', with various applications, sometimes derogatory, but here applied to the infant and presumably meaning 'healthy-looking'), *easens* ('eaves of a house'), *fuzhion* ('strength, vitality'), *hoven* ('swollen, distended'), *mowse* ('a joke, a laughing matter'; used in the negative as in 'It wisna mowse tae hae a young bairn sleepin wi an aal boddy', Eppie's deduction from the story of the Judgement of Solomon,[10] to mean 'wise, sensible, commendable'), *nethmaist* ('lowest, furthest under', here used of a garment), *rowt up* ('wrapped up'), *royt* ('unruly, mischievous'), *sine* (more often written *synd*, 'rinse out'), *snotter* (various senses but here meaning 'snooze, doze'), *spean* ('wean', here in the past participle *spint*), *stime* as in 'A canna see a stime' ('I can't see anything at all') and *yap* ('hungry'). Many more, though, are specific to the North-East: *ablach* ('a small, stunted person or animal', here referring to the infant), *beddle* ('bedridden person'), *cadge* ('jostle, knock about'), *cantle* ('brighten up, recover health or spirits'), *cwyte* (the local cognate of 'coat', which has acquired various specialised senses, including among the North-

[10] A passage on which her extended meditations incongruously recall those of Huck and Jim in Chapter 14 of *Huckleberry Finn*.

East fishing communities that of 'an oilskin jacket', but here meaning 'petticoat'), *dossie* ('fling down carelessly'), *eemaist* ('uppermost'), *flag* ('large snowflake'), *gibbles* ('tools, equipment, assorted articles'), *ginkum* ('a trick, dodge'), *hippick* (this has no attestations in the *DSL* but is evidently a metathesised form of *hiccup*), *hirin* ('something to enrich or enhance the taste of food'), *littlinie* (*littleen*, still the usual Doric word for 'child', with the diminutive), *pae-wae* ('pallid, sickly'), *protticks* ('pranks, tricks': a North-Eastern development of a word which originally meant simply 'deeds' or 'actions'), *scutter* ('a botch, bungle, trivial or time-wasting occupation'), *trock* ('rubbish, assorted broken or useless material'), *weezhin* ('puny emaciated person or animal'), *wutteroch* ('restless, impatient, fretful person').

All these examples are from actual dialogue passages; but from the start – literally so, since the opening sentence of the novel begins 'In the days of the *douce* Queen Anne […]' – Milne allows himself the liberty of bringing Scots words and expressions into the narrative sections, usually (not invariably) marking them off with inverted commas: a device found also in *At the Back of Benachie* and, as already noted, in the first (and subsequent) printings in book form of *Johnny Gibb*. Sometimes these come in such rapid succession as to tempt a reader to regret that Milne did not simply write the whole passage in Doric: 'A constant icy draught blew in at the bottom of the outer door of the 'but' end, across the earthen floor and up the open 'lum' down which poured at frequent intervals 'flans' of acrid peat reek that 'half smoret' those sitting at the fire beneath': *flan*, 'a puff of smoke blown down the chimney into the room', has a North-East ring. We find in the paragraph which immediately follows this dialogue passage 'The wind was blowing a 'bliffart' ('squall') as well'; and later in the chapter the device is used to emphasise expressions such as *nae sma' drink* ('people of consequence'), *bonnet lairds* ('farmers who owned their land'), *black upo fite* ('black upon white', i.e., written or printed text) and *the Auld Byook* ('the Bible'), as well as common vocabulary items such as *backet* ('wooden box for (e.g., as here)

peats'), *brochan* (defined as 'milk gruel'), *brod* ('outer cover of a book'), *but an' ben* ('outer and inner room'), *cruisie* ('a kind of oil-lamp'), *elbock* ('elbow'), *kail runts* ('cabbage stalks'), *nicht mutch* ('night cap'), *rottans* ('rats'), *scaam* ('scorch'), *timmer troch* ('wooden trough'), as well as distinctively local words like *carble* ('wrangle'), *drush* ('powdery fragments of e.g., peat'), *rist* ('cover [the fire] with ashes under which the embers will continue to burn'), and a term for a local cultural item *stob-thackit hoosie* ('house thatched with straw pushed into and held in place by *stobs* ('forked sticks')'). Even words illustrating the characteristic North-East diminutive suffix are thus highlighted: *hennies, closetie, estaitie, wundockies* (the spelling of the last item is peculiar, as the *d* had long vanished from the pronunciation and the spelling *winnock* or *wunnock* was long established). When it is recalled that all these examples are from the first chapter alone, and that each of the subsequent twenty-nine is likewise full of passages in the most uncompromising Doric, it is at once obvious that a full account of the language of the book would be of encyclopaedic proportions.

The use of Scots words, some but not all being specific to the North-East, is an integral part of Milne's evident intention of reconstructing the life of the period in every material detail. Eppie's house is a *but an' ben* (a familiar, indeed stereotyped, term for 'a two-roomed dwelling': the two words, ultimately from Old English *be-utan* and *be-innan*,[11] refer to the outer and inner rooms, the former having a door opening to the exterior) with a *closetie* between the rooms: this suggests that instead of a single partition dividing the *but* from the *ben* this cottage has two, the space between them being full of *aal trock* ('old rubbish'). Built against one inner wall of the *but* is a *timmer troch* ('wooden trough') open via a *widden spoot* (presumably 'a construction forming a short sloping channel') to the outside, this being the *jaa-hole* (*jaw* is often used intransitively of surging waves; transitively it

[11] See *DSL* s.v. *ben, Benn,* adv., prep., adj. and n.1, 3, and s.v. *but, butt,* adv., prep.1, adj., n.1.

suggests pouring or dashing out a quantity of liquid; the *jaa-hole* is thus 'an aperture through which dishwater or the like is emptied', taking with it *ingan* ('onion') *peelins* and *kail-runts* ('cabbage stalks')). Eppie's bed is a *bun-breest* ('a box-bed with a built-in cupboard') with a *caaf-bed* ('canvas bag stuffed with chaff serving as a mattress') and an *eelie-pig* ('earthenware jar originally for oil', which she uses as a hot water bottle).

The next couple of chapters introduce another principal character, Eppie's cousin Mains of Endriggs (so spelt in the chapter heading, but as Eynriggs in the dialogue) and his family. This character's appellation is in accordance with a practice still universal in Scotland: a farmer is called by the name of his farm.[12] His own name, we are told before he actually appears, is Adam Elrick; but nobody in the novel ever addresses him as anything but 'Mains'. Characteristically of his thorough and detailed exposition of the speech habits of his characters in the context of a full picture of their manner of life, Milne tells us that the Mains is 'the largest farm on the estate of Tullymachar', and is called for 'the 'endriggs' or 'heidriggs' ('the land at the end of a furrow where the plough is turned') of a cultivated 'feedle' (a local metathesised form of *field*)', or alternatively known as Mains of Fleeds, another name for the same thing. This is followed by a detailed account of the layout of Mains' farm; a quadrangle of buildings surrounding the 'closs' ('courtyard') which contains the 'midden' ('dungheap'): Milne's comment on the latter, 'The stench (*ramsh kneggum* is how one character describes it, the adjective, meaning 'rank or pungent', being common Scots and the noun, meaning 'stink', markedly Buchan[13]) stood as the omnipresent symbol of

[12] Cf. Burns' referring to himself as 'Rob Mossgeil' in the song 'O leave novels, ye Mauchline belles!'; and from *Johnny Gibb of Gushetneuk*, the use of the nicknames 'Gushets' and 'Clinkies' for (and by, when addressing each other) the farmers of Gushetneuk and Clinkstyle.

[13] See *DSL*, s.v. *kneggum* n.: except for one citation from a contemporary poet whose Scots is decidedly idiosyncratic, all the examples given here are from the North-East.

home and all that that sacred name betokens […] the contents of the 'midden' in the 'closs' fed the farmer's soil and gave him of the good things of the earth', whimsical though it seems, reinforces his picture of the integrated, self-sufficient nature of farming life in the period. And a small and otherwise irrelevant detail relates to a feature of the local culture which is not developed in the novel but well attested in other writings, the mutual antagonism between the farming community and the fishers of the coast:[14] a speech by 'Eelie Meggie the fishwife', who is mentioned here for the first and only time, reveals the preference of the fisherfolk for the smells of their own trade over those of the farms: 'Eelie ('oil, especially fish oil') 's nae a foolin ('fouling, polluting') thing, but gweed keep's fae earth and sharn ('dung').' (p. 22).

When Mains appears at Eppie's house, his first speech relates how he moved his 'sheepies' from the *pumfle* ('pen') at the back of the *plantinie* ('small grove') to the *buchtie* ('small pen') for better shelter from the snow: these words are common enough, at least without the diminutives, but Eppie's description of her cousin as *verty*, 'energetic in rising early', utilises a distinctively local word. Again in accordance with the imperturbable character of the North-East farming stock as presented in the novel, several sentences of conversation between Eppie and Mains pass before she broaches the topic of the foundling child: 'A waager A've something 'at 'll paal ('puzzle') ye' (p. 14); Mains, after commenting 'Exteroardinar!', proves as ready as Eppie to take a hand in looking after the child; and once it is fed and replaced quietly in its ruskie, is not mentioned again by either character for some time: what follows is that, Mains being *dooms yap* ('very hungry'), Eppie gives him breakfast; and the meal is described in Milne's usual full detail and with maximal use of Doric vocabulary.

The main dish is *pottitch* (a local form of *pottage*, of course meaning 'oatmeal porridge'): the method is to '*meess* ('measure out') the meal into the

[14] This and a distinctive sociolinguistic result of it are discussed, for a different part of Scotland, in Dorian (1981), esp. in Chapter 2.

boiling water […] stirring with the *spurtle* ('purpose-made stirring-stick': this implement has various local names, *spurtle* and *spurkle* being the commonest)' and ensuring that the mixture does not get 'aider sung or knottit' ('either singed or lumpy'). Later we learn that *sung* porridge is actually appreciated by Buchan bairns, who by *claain* or *scryaapin* (the dialect forms of 'clawing' and 'scraping') the pot obtain the burnt mixture for their enjoyment. The universal Scots practice of pronominalising porridge (also soup, and other oatmeal preparations such as brose and sowens) as plural is illustrated in 'They've begoot tae hotter ('begun to boil') […] I'se jist gie them anidder bit steeroch (a local derivative of *steer*, here meaning 'stir') an saat ('salt') 'em'; and immediately afterwards 'I'se meess oot 'e pottitch nou an' strake ('sprinkle') a starnie ('small quantity, a pinch') meal o' the tap o' them.' (p. 17). The porridge is dished from the pot into a *bicker* ('a wooden vessel made of staves': the word often refers to 'a drinking vessel', but here it designates 'a bowl') and each spoonful is dipped in a *timmer caap* (the *aa* spelling suggests the local pronunciation, and the word means 'a wooden bowl': the distinction between a *bicker* and a *caap* is not precisely defined) containing milk before being eaten. The breakfast pottitch is followed by *bilet eggies* and *corters o' breed aff the trincher* ('quarters of oatcake off the wooden platter'); and 'a crinchie ('small quantity') o' cheese' he replies 'Jist a kneevelock': this suggests 'a fistful', from the common word *neive*, though in the context it must imply a smaller quantity than a *crinchie*.

The first we hear of Mains beyond a bare mention is Eppie's recollection, at the end of the first chapter, of his 'ruggin ('dragging') 'e Episcopal minister [...] oot o' the poopit an' haein a bit han at 'e preachin 'imsel' (p. 11). This is also the first hint at the presentation in the novel, as an authentic part of the society depicted, of the guarded mutual tolerance of the Presbyterian and Episcopalian churches and the common antagonism between them and the Roman Catholic church. The unassuming and unquestioned part played by religious faith in the lives of the characters is

conveyed by their routine prayers before retiring at night and graces said before eating: even a *tweestichen* (an otherwise unattested form meaning 'a small quantity') of whisky calls for the invocation 'Lord hilp's tae drink an' refresh wirsels tae Thy glory, Aimen' (p. 16). More entertainingly, it gives rise at various points in the novel to meditations by various characters on the significance of Scriptural passages. Mains' wife Kirstan, Leddy Eynriggs, relating the inequitable distribution of domestic labour between her and her husband to the transgression of Eve, comments 'Fat rodd ('what way', i.e., 'how') cud 'e peer umman iver hae thocht 'at siccan a hantle o' mischance ower a' the wardle wis tae come oot o' her giein 'er man a moufu o' that oonfortinit bit aipplie?' (p. 40); The Reverend Potiphar Prott's[15] catechising of Mains' and other children draws from Mains the opinion that Rahab the harlot's shielding of the Israelite spies was 'a gey doobious transack a'thegidder' and, in response to one child's recollection that 'An angel can doon fae hivven an' badd 'er [Hagar, whom Daavit indentifies as 'Sarah's kitchy deem'] gae 'wa back hame an' behave 'ersel', that 'I wad haad 'e vyow ('view') that 'at angel kint his business. Fat he said maan hae pitten 'er oot o' tig-tire (a local idiom for 'a state of uncertainty or indecision')' (p. 72); and – the most extended and most irresistible example – the Aberdeen landlady Luckie Lindsay in defence of Noah's lapse into drunkenness exclaims 'Eh, sic a sotter ('mess') 's 'at Airk maan hae been in. Haad yer tongue. Can ye winner bit 'at Noah peer aal stock sud hae been clean scunficet ('disgusted, or suffocated': probably both senses are present simultaneously, the latter

[15] This character's curious use of the archaic forms *quha*, *quhat*, *quhatna*, *quhaar*, the only respect in which his dialogue as written differs linguistically from that of the other Doric-speaking characters, is unexplained. Conceivably its implication is that although there is textual evidence that this dialect's characteristic replacement of historic [xw], spelt *quh*, by [f] was in being as early as the sixteenth century (see the Introduction to the *Scottish National Dictionary*, Vol. I p. xxxv), the minister's familiarity with old Scots manuscripts has led him to affect what he takes to be a more historically respectable pronunciation.

with reference to the state of the vessel after holding its cargo of assorted animals for forty days), crivv't up ('confined, shut in') a' that time in 'at stinkin Airk! Fat wid ye expeck bit 'at 'e wid mak stracht for 'e fusky pig ('whisky jar') 'e meenit 'e wan oot o' the Airk in o'the caller air an got 'is fit upo dry lan?' (p. 52).

Eppie's concern for the foundling child includes a recognition of the need to have him *kirsent* (a common Scots methathesised form),[16] lest 'he mith tak a dose o' the kinkhoast ('whooping cough') or the mirrles ('measles') an' dee an' dyang stracht doon tae the Ull Place' (p. 21). Eppie and her cousin Mains are Episcopalians: 'the Jesimy Sundays' mentioned in a mysterious reference by Eppie are the Sundays before Lent designated, in the Anglican Church calendar, Septuagesima, Sexagesima and Quinquagesima, terms ignored in Presbyterian worship. Mains' wife Kirstan, however, is a Presbyterian: 'A hae nae patience wi thae Episcopaalians an' a' their fal-de-rals […] a'thing vrutten doon in a byook ur on a daad o' pepper ('paper') instead o' comin straucht an' het fae the hert like 'e Presbyterrians.' (p. 25). The difference of belief is an ingredient, though seemingly a minor one, in the noisy and obstreperous atmosphere in the family home of this energetic and domineering lady, her easy-going husband ('a fine canny humoursome styogue': the North-East form of a word elsewhere attested as *stog* or *stug*, here meaning a stubborn or determinedly placid person) and their *swatterich o' geets* ('swarm of brats'): predictably, Milne has a fine resource on which he draws enthusiastically to suggest the clamour of this *helm* ('crowd'; a rare word principally attested in the North-East) *o' skyallachin* (a uniquely local form of a word more commonly hears as *skelloch*, 'scream') *vratches* ('wretches', with the characteristic local change of historic *wr-* to *vr-*) and *the conteeniwal steer* ('disturbance') *an' stramash* ('commotion') *o' you smatchets* ('little rascals, scamps'), *skirlin* ('yelling') *an' skryaachin*

[16] See *DSL*, s.v. *kirsten*, v., adj.

('screeching': all these words are general Scots, but the form of the last, more commonly *scraich*, is distinctively North-East). Chapters describing the childhood of Eppie's foundling, christened Daavit, and his rambunctious upbringing with Mains' large family as his playmates not only are irresistibly entertaining but depict in full and fascinating detail, and with humorous understanding and sympathy, family and community life in the period. The use of Doric appears wholly uncontrived here, since it is employed for actual conversational exchanges rather than soliloquies or unspoken thoughts.

The religious theme becomes gradually, and at first unobtrusively, more conspicuous when a new character called Charlie Coutts is introduced, firstly in a conversation between Mains and Eppie, and described by the former as: 'a dour sanshich runt o' a cheil, a plyooman an' a Catholic fae the Hielan' eyn o' Aiberdeenshire' (p. 30) (*sanshich*, here meaning 'haughty, reserved, withdrawn', is again a predominantly North-Eastern word). Gaelic was of course spoken over far more of the Scottish mainland in this period than is the case today and extended well into the western parts of Aberdeenshire,[17] and Charlie, we are told, speaks 'sometimes in his native Gaelic, sometimes in the book English which he had learned from Father Farquharson the priest at Inverey in Mar, and sometimes in the Laich Cuntra Scots of Eastern Buchan which he heard all around him' (p. 32). Charlie when we first meet him is employed as a ploughman on Mains' farm, his taciturn demeanour drawing the description by his fellow ploughman Jock Cheyne as 'a cheil 'at his niver fun oot 'e naitral eese o' his tongue' — the cheerful Jock in his turn is dismissed by Charlie as a 'peer wutless sumph wi his feel sangs' (p. 34).

[17] Mrs Jean Bain, the last native speaker of Aberdeenshire Gaelic, died as recently as 1984. When not speaking Gaelic (which in the latter years of her life was virtually always, as there was no one with whom she could speak it) her language was pure Buchan Doric. See Watson and Clement (1983).

Charlie's intention is to become a priest; and the presence of this assertively Catholic character brings to the fore the underlying tension between his religious community and that of most of the other characters: in a later scene he leaves his lodgings in Aberdeen when his landlady, observing a figure of a saint in his room, responds by throwing it out the window with 'Wad ye set up 'e Paap upo ma vera ain chumley-skilf ('mantelpiece')? […] 'em at's nae bidden inside bides 'e furth' (p. 54). Typically of Milne's technique of describing in full detail every aspect of the lives of his characters with maximal use of the Doric, we follow him as he parts company, with little regret on either side, with Mains and his household, makes his way back through Upper Deeside, his route being precisely and accurately described, to his home and his Gaelic-speaking family, where he spends the season working on the croft and pursuing his studies. The few passages in which their conversation is quoted are in accurate Gaelic; and passing authorial comments are made on the fact that Gaelic has regionally variant forms, a professor from Skye remarking of Charlie's Buchan speech 'Is i droch Ghàidlig a bha aige' ('he had bad Gaelic') (p. 50). It is an incidental point worthy of some note that Milne's acquaintance with Gaelic coupled with his abounding expertise in Scots shows a mindset which in the 1950s and even now is unfortunately rare: a recognition that Gaelic and Scots are equally aspects of the national culture and deserving of the attention of anyone professing an interest in that. By the date of *Eppie Elrick*, Hugh MacDiarmid's clarion calls for recognition of Gaelic and his translations, with the help of Sorley MacLean, of masterpiece Gaelic poems of the eighteenth century, Douglas Young's *Auntran Blads* with its Scots translations of poems by Sorley MacLean and George Campbell Hay and Hay's own poetry in all three of the national languages had made their mark on the national literary scene; but had scarcely had any effect on the rooted ignorance of and prejudice against Gaelic among the general non-Gaelic population: Milne's taking advantage of the linguistic facts of the period his novel evokes to make of Gaelic a small but significant

feature of what is overwhelmingly a Scots novel may be seen as an intended contribution, if only a minor one, to the ongoing attempts to build a bridge between the two sections of the national culture.[18]

Charlie's time as a student in Aberdeen is the peg on which Milne provides information on school and student life, including the rivalry between King's College and Marischal College (then separate universities) and between the Bajans and the Semis (first- and second-year students: these terms remained in use at Aberdeen until recently). His landlady reminisces about a student lodger who, after an encounter with the rival university, came home 'wi' his nib ('nose') 'e size o a peat clod an 'e shacklebeen ('wrist bone') o' his richt han near cad clean throwe, an' 'is nivv ('fist') shakkin upo the eyn o's airm like a kail blade ('cabbage leaf') waggin upo 'ts castick ('cabbage stalk') fin 'ere's a pirrie ('breeze') o' win' soochin roon'; and Charlie himself comes off worst in a conflict with a group of Semis. This leads to an interesting glimpse of what student life could entail in the early 1700s: Charlie is rescued and befriended by a student from Fraserburgh who reached Aberdeen by boat and lives during the term in a shelter consisting of 'wa's o steen an' divots three ur fower feet hich' and the boat 'fommlt an clappit on 'e tap o' the wa's for a reef.' Charlie's naive question 'Fat wye feess (past tense of *fess*, 'fetch') ye the boat fae the Broch (still the local nickname for Fraserburgh) tae Aiberdeen?' gets the response 'A sailt doon in't of coorse. Div ye think I pat a tow ('rope') tull't an' ruggit ('dragged') it ben 'e rodd?' (p. 56). The two young men live in this shelter through the winter, sustaining themselves on fish, trapped rabbits, and the supply of oatmeal with which the Broch loun has come equipped (as students did, for generations).

The passing of the years in the fictional context leads to the time of the Jacobite uprising, one important social and political aspect of which has

[18] On this important cultural development and its literary manifestations, see for example Barnaby (2000) and McClure (1994 and 2010).

been introduced in advance by the Protestant – Catholic antagonisms among the characters; and to Milne's attempt, an unqualified success as far as it goes, to portray the hardships and dangers, endured with stoicism and good humour, which the ordinary people suffer through being drawn into a conflict of little relevance to their day-to-day lives. Memorable episodes in these chapters include a sustaining meal of brose enriched with the meat of trapped rabbits and stolen hens, an impromptu ceilidh with music supplied by a piper from Skye, and the Battle of Sheriffmuir itself.[19]

As the book progresses and the passages in Doric become ever longer, realistic conversations being interspersed with absurdly long monologues and soliloquies (including one in which Daavit's hitherto unidentified mother relates her autobiography to her dog), a reader might be inclined to wonder whether Milne's conscientious adherence to the convention that Doric must be confined to dialogue was a misjudgement, and decide that the book would have been improved by simply being written in Doric throughout. Clearly Milne would have been perfectly capable of such a proceeding had he so decided. Since he did not, however, the judgement on this remarkable novel must be that the whole is rather less than the sum of its parts. As a literary record of the dialect in its pristine purity, utilised with all the opulence of vocabulary, idiom and expression which it contains, it is unsurpassed; and as an imaginative reconstruction of community life in Buchan in the early eighteenth century it deserves high praise. As a specimen of the novelist's art, however, it is irretrievably handicapped, not only by the impossibility of

[19] Its subtitle notwithstanding, this is not really "a tale of the '15" in the sense of a fictionalised treatment of the Jacobite rising itself: the events are presented only in their effects on the characters, and no attempt is made to examine the social and political issues leading up to the rebellion in any depth. Milne is no Sir Walter Scott, able to combine profound understanding and clear exposition of great historical events with lively dramatisation of their effects on the lives of characters representing the ordinary populace: his interest is firmly in the latter, and the rising is, in the last analysis, simply a peg on which to hang an evocation of their lives and their language.

suspending disbelief to the extent of accepting that all the Doric passages were actually *spoken*, but by a plot element, namely the question of Daavit's parentage, which was presumably intended to link the whole narrative together and raise it above the level of a simple chronicle of sequential events, but which comes across merely as an unimpressive re-use of a clichéd device from melodrama only tenuously linked to the story. Nonetheless, the truly astonishing skill with which Milne has recreated the dialect and sustained the quality of his writing in it through nearly three hundred pages entitles *Eppie Elrick* to a place among the classics of Doric literature.

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