

William Simpson's Account of the Ayrshire Dialect

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In 1811, William Aiton published his *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Ayr*, an elaborate and detailed report running to over 600 pages, and covering not only the set of topics suggested by its title but the geography, history and climate of the county, its roads and railways, public and private buildings, the system of land management, provision for the poor, and even the moral and religious quality of the farming community. As an appendix, a brief section headed 'Provincial terms and glossary' is included in the final chapter, 'Miscellaneous articles', between a section on 'Agricultural societies' and one on 'Means of improvement' (on Simpson's article see further Murison 1959). Aiton informs his readers that the article is by 'my friend Mr. William Simson,¹ school-master in Cumnock': this is of course Burns' 'Winsome Willie', the recipient of one of his finest Epistles, and also a poet in his own right: one of the many minor but not negligible poets who had made of eighteenth-century Ayrshire 'as much a nest of singing birds as Elizabethan England is reputed to have been' (Crawford 1976: 7). He had flitted from Ochiltree, where he was born and was employed when Burns wrote his Epistle, to Cumnock in 1788, and was still in post there when he supplied the note for Aiton's book. He died in 1815. Most of his poems have never appeared in print, though anecdotal evidence suggests that Burns tried to persuade him to publish them; but the few which have show a definite talent for both serious and humorous verse and a notable skill in metre. They also show that, notwithstanding the familiarity with his native speech which enabled him to write the note for Aiton's book, his use of Scots as a medium was at best sporadic: an epistle *To Tom Walker in Affliction* begins in a fairly thin Scots but ends in unmixed English. (For information on Simpson's life and some extracts from his poetry see Paterson 1840: 64-78 and Macintosh 1910: 32-4. The Tom Walker of this poem is the recipient of Burns' *Answer to a Trimming Epistle Received from a Tailor*.)

A chapter on the language of the region is tangential to the book's main subject; but Aiton was sufficiently interested in the local speech to make passing mention of several words while discussing the related subjects: the

¹ Aiton uses this spelling throughout: it and *Simpson* appear to have been used indiscriminately. Except when quoting Aiton, I will use the more familiar form.

wooden structure of a roof is called the *buggars* (p.114), the effluent from a byre runs into an *aidle-hole* (p.395), the first milk from a cow that has just calved is the *forebroads* (p.442: Aiton's reference is the only illustrative quotation for this word given in the SND), milk is strained through a *milsey* ('milk seive') into a *boyn* (tub; p.451), butter in which the salt has been incompletely mixed becomes *pyotty* (variegated in colour; p.462), different patterns of black and white on a cow's hide cause it to be termed *bassened*, *hawked*, *rigged* or *tagged* (p.425). These and others are specifically cited as local words and printed in italics: it would require a much more thorough examination of the book to determine the extent to which Aiton actually *uses* local words in context with no sign that he regards their use as anything but normal. He practised as a lawyer and served for a time as Sheriff-Substitute in Lanarkshire, but he had been brought up on a farm and expected to adopt farming as his vocation; and in the Preface to his book he offers a disarming apology for any 'grammatical errors and vulgarity of style' which may be detected in his writing, since he 'had not the benefit of a regular education'. Aiton's book is patently the work of a man of knowledge, intelligence and wisdom; but his attitude to the Scots language was, unsurprisingly, very much that of his class and time.

His introduction to Simpson's glossary is a textbook illustration of this. He defers to the schoolmaster's learning, acknowledging that 'I am not able fully to appreciate the merits of [his] remarks, being ignorant of Greek'. This refers to Simpson's imagined analogies, to be discussed shortly, between Ayrshire speech and the Doric dialect of classical Greek. Aiton goes on to argue thus:

Every thing, which is not exactly according to English pronunciation, is now generally termed illiterate and vulgar; but if it shall appear, as it seems to do from Mr Simson's remarks, that many of our greatest deviations from what is called pure English pronunciation, and which, of course [!], are termed Scotticisms or vulgarisms, are consonant to the Greek classics, in the purest state of that language, we ought neither to be ashamed of them, nor ought our southern neighbours to exult so much over us on that subject. The *Kirk* of Scotland, for instance, has long been so much sneered at, all over England, that even Scotchmen begin to be ashamed of using the term. But it appears from Mr. Simson's ingenious remarks, that it is the true classical term, and that the English word *church*, is, when compared with the *Kirk* of Scotland, a modern and provincial vulgarism. The English language

has its vulgarisms as well as ours, and when they attempt to sneer at a term, evidently derived from the purest of the Greek dialects, they ought not to be followed by Scotchmen. (pp.681-2)

Simpson's suggestion is that the word *kirk* is derived from the Greek *kuriou oikos* 'house of the Lord'. The irony is that *kirk* does in reality deserve respect as an older or at any rate a more conservative form than *church*, retaining the original Germanic [k] instead of palatalising it as English has done; though *church* is at least of sufficient antiquity to refute Aiton's description of it as 'a modern and provincial vulgarism'.² That Aiton and Simpson wish to defend their native language against the fashionable contempt of the English and their own Anglicised compatriots, but feel it necessary to do so by an appeal to the authority of Classical Greek, is a measure of how sadly prevalent and pervasive the disparagement of Scots had become in the ninety years since Allan Ramsay vigorously defended it, in the introductions to his first volume of poems and *The Ever Green*, as an expressive tongue in its own right.

Kuriou oikos is only one of several cases, though it is the most imaginative, where Simpson offers a Greek etymology for a Scots word. *Sod* in the sense of a makeshift saddle consisting of a sack stuffed with straw, simply an application of the familiar word, is according to him from the Greek *sodzo* 'which signifies to preserve' (being as ignorant of Greek as Aiton was, I reproduce Simpson's spellings *literatim*); *crethen* or *gredden* (see the SND s.v. *graddan*) 'grain dried, or rather scorched in pots [...] is evidently the same with the Greek noun *crithen*, which signifies corn of oats or barley'; *oe* 'grandchild' is from Greek *ouios* 'son' (those two are actually from Gaelic); *kaff* 'chaff' is from *kouphos*, 'a word which signifies light, or of little gravity' and a different derivation from the same word 'to express emptiness, or lightness, in another point of view, is *coof* or *cuiff* 'an empty or silly fellow'; and *brose* is from *brosis*, 'which signifies meat of all kinds'. The immediate response to these proposed etymologies of a reader equipped with a modern understanding of the processes of language change is likely to be amusement, yet it should be remembered that they are of a piece with countless fanciful derivations, for words in Greek, Latin and the vernaculars, proposed by

² And there is strong if not absolutely certain evidence that *kirk* and its cognates in all the Germanic languages actually *are* from the Greek *κυριακον*, borrowed into continental Germanic early in the Christian era: see the OED s.v. *church*. Surprisingly in view of his claim of seniority for *kirk* over *church*, Simpson later includes *church-kirk* in a list of words in which 'CH is converted to K', along with *breeches-brecks*, *birch-birk*, *pitch-pick*, *chaff-caff* and others, most of which are straightforward examples of the retention in Scots, because of Scandinavian influence, of the original [k].

writers on language from Plato (in his *Cratylus*) onwards.

In the same way, Simpson offers perfectly sound observations on Ayrshire pronunciation, but with spurious explanations in terms of supposed resemblances to Greek.

That particular dialect denominated the *Doric*, which was first used among the Lacedemonians, and the inhabitants of Argos, and afterwards in Epirus, Lybia, Sicily, Rhodes and Crete, and which appears exemplified in the writings of Archimedes, Theocritus and Pindar, seems to have had a predilection for the sound of A, in preference to that of E, I, O, U, EA, and AI. In imitation of that dialect, the people of Kyle in their departures from the true English pronunciation; substitute in precisely the same manner, 1. A in place of E and EA, 2. A — O, 3. A — U, 4. A — AI. (p.682)

The examples which he gives for the first of these correspondences, (among others) *wrack, wat, wather, wast, wab, twall*, are mostly straightforward: [a] corresponding to the [ɛ] of SSE is still to be heard in the Ayrshire pronunciation of such words. Under the second heading he conflates the results of several distinct and unrelated sound changes: *home-hame, bone-bane, alone-alane; drop-drap, long-lang, off-aff; snow-snaw, crow-craw, show-shaw*. Here, a failure, arising simply from the undeveloped state of linguistic knowledge at the time, to recognise the nature of the relationship between letters and sounds has led him into an error of classification; as it previously had done in Scotland with Thomas Ruddiman and Allan Ramsay (see McClure 2012); but again the correspondences themselves are accurately observed. He offers several other instances of sound correspondences, for some of which he gives only one or two examples: some are trivial (*sailor-sailer*) and one erroneous (*lake-loch*: not phonological cognates like *many-mony*, with which he classes the pair, but a French-derived and a Gaelic-derived word); but those most extensively illustrated and most clearly correct are the [ʌ]-[ɪ] correspondence in *summer-simmer, nuts-nits, stubble-stibble*, which he attributes to an imitation of the Aeolic dialect of Sappho, Alcaeus, Theocritus, Pindar and Homer, and the loss of [l] and [v] (he notes as if surprised that these correspondences ‘seem to bear no analogy to the differences which subsisted in various parts of Greece’) as in *colt-cowt, gold-gowd, malt-mawt, salt-sawt; oven-oen, shovel-shoel, devil-deil, love-loe*.

Finally, he claims that the dialect 'abounds in those figures of speech,³ such as Aphæresis, Pleonasm, Synalœpha, Metathesis, &c, which ornamented the language of Greece'. For Aphæresis, his examples include *find-fin*, *I shall - I'se, upon-upo*, *penny worth-pennirth*, and the place names *Cambuslang-Kemslang* and *Blairquhan-Blahan*: not, in fact, examples of aphaeresis, which is strictly the omission of an unstressed syllable at the *beginning* of a word; for Pleonasm (this usually means the repetition of an idea in different words, but Simpson considers it applicable to the addition of an extra syllable) *parish-parochin, dock-dockan, mitts-mittens, rat-ratton, snot-snotter, rump-rumple*; for Synalœpha (merging of two syllables into one) *for a' that - fithit, favour'd-far't, instead of that - astit*,⁴ *quoth I - quy*; and for Metathesis (reversing the order of adjacent sounds), where he has hit on several instances of sound correspondences for which modern linguistic thought would actually accept his term, *ask him - ax'im, wrestle-warsle, grin-girn and gristle-girsle*. He concludes this section by re-affirming the distinction which those resemblances to the dialects of Greece 'in her purest times' imparts to the speech of Kyle.

Continuing to proceed on the assumption that his native dialect requires an external authority to counter the charge of provincialism or vulgarity, he next produces a list of words derived from French (he mentions that the dialect also contains many words derived from Latin or Celtic, but does not provide examples). In many instances his proposed derivation is perfectly correct; and though not all the words are still to be heard in common speech several are easily recognisable from their use in literature. Some are authentically Scottish, never or virtually never attested in English usage: *biggie* or *biggen* 'a linen cap', *coil* or *queyl* 'a cock of hay', *gou* or *gue* 'taste or relish', *gamashons* or *gramashons* 'gaiters', *fashious* 'troublesome', *jigot* 'leg of mutton', *taillie* 'teilzie [i.e. a cut] of meat', *linge* 'shoemaker's thread', *jupe* 'part of female dress' and *gean* 'wild cherry'. An interesting example is *papingo* or *peppingo* 'to shoot at a wooden bird': by Simpson's time this had become a local tradition in Kilwinning, referred to by later

³ They are 'figures of speech' in nonce alterations of the forms of words for metrical or other literary reasons (an example from English would be Shakespeare's extending the name Arachne to 'Ariachne' (*Troilus and Cressida*, V.ii.150). This is of course a different matter from general sound changes.

⁴ He also includes this word, spelt *astet*, in his glossary, with the meaning 'rather'. The degree of elision required to produce *astit* from 'instead of that' would be unusual but not impossible; however, the SND proposes as the etymology 'as tit' (*tit* = 'quickly'), which is somewhat more plausible.

Ayrshire writers such as Galt and Service, and still in use.⁵ Some are correctly cited as Scots but are not in fact from the French words which Simpson cites as their sources: the most egregious examples are *Oay* [sic.] or *hoo ay*, which he takes to be from *oui*, and *ohon*, actually of course from Gaelic, which he proposes to derive from *o*, *honte*; but a more convincing instance is *hotch* 'to stir, shake, or jog upwards or downwards', which might reasonably be thought to be from French *hocher* but is actually from Dutch. In the cases of *moutre* 'multure', i.e. the portion of grain taken by the owner of a mill in payment for the grinding, and *mouilly* 'mouldy', only the forms are Scots, the words being equally common in English; and the latter is not from French but from Old English (though the homonymous *mould* meaning shape or pattern is from French). Unexpectedly this list also includes *jacket* and *mittens*: for both of these he gives a correct French derivation; but neither has ever been a Scotticism; and *mitts*, which he takes to be the English for 'mittens', is simply a shortened form of much more recent attestation.

The last section of Simpson's article consists of a list of 205 Ayrshire dialect words: a 'mere sample' of the 'very great number' which he has collected. As an exercise in lexicography, this is tiny compared to what had already been achieved in Scotland by 1811: the first edition of Jamieson's Dictionary had been published three years previously; but neither in itself nor in its place in the history of the field is it to be dismissed as negligible. A fact of some importance is that it is not associated with any written text. The practice among poets of compiling glossaries to accompany collections of their works was well established by this time: Allan Ramsay had set the precedent with the very substantial, though not always reliable, glossaries which he appended to *The Ever Green*, *The Tea-Table Miscellany* and his first two volumes of poems. The Aberdeenshire Doric poets Robert Forbes, Alexander Ross and Andrew Shirrefs provided glossaries to their works, the last-mentioned being a particularly elaborate and thorough example; and Burns' two glossaries, those of the Kilmarnock Edition and the much longer one in the Edinburgh Edition, not only provide a fund of linguistic information but are enlivened by samples of the poet's wit and erudition. Editors and anthologists of Scots poetry also provided explanatory word lists: the fountainhead for this practice was Thomas Ruddiman's monumental glossary to his edition of Gavin Douglas's *Eneados*; and he was followed later in the century by David Dalrymple, Lord Hailes in his *Ancient Scottish Poems Published from the MS. of George Bannatyne* — specifically presented as a

⁵ See the article on the Ancient Society of Kilwinning Archers at <http://www.scottisharchery.org.uk/aboutpopinjay.php>

more scholarly edition of the mediaeval poems than Ramsay had produced in *The Ever Green* — and James Sibbald in his *Chronicle of Scottish Poetry from the Thirteenth Century to the Union of the Crowns* (see McClure 2012). Simpson's word list, however, differs from these in not being associated with any literary work, but rather a list of words which, presumably at least, were selected to illustrate the distinctive *speech* of the area. He remarks that 'The Glossary to Burn's [sic.] poems, gives a good idea of the provincial terms in Ayrshire'; and it is noteworthy that there is very little overlap between Simpson's glossary and either of Burns', as if his were being offered as a supplement to that of his literary friend.

Simpson's glossary is specifically a regional word list, and one of the first of its kind. Not, by a chronologically long way, the very first: that distinction belongs to James Wallace's *Description of the Isles of Orkney* of 1693, which includes a list of Orkney and Shetland dialect words; but in the long interval between that and Simpson's word list there appears to be no recorded attempt to compile a lexicon of any specific local form of Scots. In this respect, Simpson's list is a predecessor, if a humble one, to such impressive works as John Mactaggart's *The Scottish Gallovidian Encyclopedia*, Walter Gregor's *The Dialect of Banffshire* and George Watson's *The Roxburghshire Word-Book* (see Macleod 2012; on Mactaggart see also McClure 2004).

In its format Simpson's word list is a glossary of the simplest type: words listed in alphabetical order with short, usually single-word, definitions. A few have brief explanations: *frample* 'disordered yarn or clothes', *gamphrell* 'a presumptuous forward person', *glawm* 'to take hold of a woman indecorously', *glawmery* 'deception on the sight by witchcraft', *kitchen* 'animal food, milk or anything eaten with bread', *scud or skelp* 'to apply the hand forcibly', *stech* 'to groan when overcharged with food', *withershins* 'contrary to the sun's motions'. This selection illustrates a feature which Simpson's glossary shares with nearly all regional word lists: some of the words have indeed a currency restricted, or virtually so, to the locality, but the greater number are common Scots. *Kitchen* in this sense, *scud* and *skelp*, *withershins* and (despite the idiosyncratic spelling) *glawmerie* are examples of the latter class. By contrast, *frample* and *gamphrell* are rarely attested, the former extremely so; *stech*, though familiar enough in the sense of 'overeat, cram the stomach' is here given a somewhat different and much less common sense, and *glawm*, usually just 'grab, snatch', has a more specific and restricted definition.

Many of the words listed by Simpson were part of the general Scots

vocabulary in his time, and in some cases survived until within living memory or are still in active use; several of those no longer to be heard in common speech are familiar from their appearance in Burns or other Scots writers. A far from exhaustive selection of the words in his list which even a slight acquaintance with spoken or written Scots would enable a reader to recognise is *aiblins* 'perhaps', *auldfarran* 'sagacious', *brash* 'sudden sickness', *buskit* 'dressed', *carline* 'old woman', *chafits* 'chops' [i.e. cheeks], *daft* 'deranged mentally', *dink* 'neat', *eldritch* 'ghastly', *ettle* 'to aim or design', *feck* 'quantity', *gab* 'mouth', *gane gyte* 'lost his senses', *hecht* 'promise', *hirsel* 'flock of cattle', *kemp* 'strive', *ken* 'know', *lippen* 'trust to', *lirk* 'wrinkled fold', *mawkin* 'hare', *mell* 'wooden hammer', *neeve* 'fist, hand', *niffer* 'barter', *pickle* 'small quantity', *pith* 'power', *rowth* 'abundance', *rung* 'long staff', *sib* 'related', *snod* 'neat', *tint* 'lost', *toom* 'empty', *ween* 'several', *wyte* 'blame', *yap* 'hungry'. Occasionally his spelling is idiosyncratic: *bachells* 'slippers', *donart* 'under dotage', *fuseon* 'strength'; *eevery* 'hungry' suggests a local pronunciation of the common word *aiverie*; *yeattle* 'snarl, grumble' is a deviant form of the familiar *yatter*; in the cases of *fernger* 'last year' — *recte fernyear*, and *leer* 'rather' — *recte leifer*, the spellings suggest pronunciation changes which have masked the etymology. In all such cases the words are easily recognisable as familiar Scots lexical items.

In other cases, the definition which he gives is only one, and not necessarily the commonest, of several possible senses: examples are *blawflum* 'imposition', the usual meaning being idle talk or some kind of trick or deception; *breenge* 'unsteady exertions', usually a headlong rush; *bumbazed* 'dejected', usually confused or bewildered; *misken* 'forbear', usually fail to recognise or deliberately ignore somebody, *misleart* 'uncivil, greedy', usually mistaken or misguided; *moyen* 'solicitation', usually a recommendation or some good office performed on another's behalf; *sad* 'solid' (often used of heavy indigestible food), *stuff* 'grain' and *ubit* 'dwarfish', an unusual adjectival sense for what is normally a noun meaning a hairy caterpillar, or a person of a size or quality to earn a metaphorical application of the word. *Gansell* 'scolding' is a well-established expression from the use in proverbs of the word in its original sense of garlic sauce to accompany roast goose; the first definition which he gives for *flisk* 'to toss' (e.g. one's hair or a horse's tail) is common, but his second 'to act as a coquette', though an obviously natural semantic development, is not otherwise recorded; *mou'ban* 'halter', which might be assumed to be the basic meaning of the word, is in fact extremely rare, though the sense of 'an utterance' or 'to utter' are fairly common; *pawvis* 'dally with a girl' is an unusual form and an unusually

specific sense for *pavie* 'cavort, caper, strut affectedly about'; *haivins*, which he glosses as 'good sense', usually means 'good manners': could he have been led astray by Burns' linking of 'havins, sense an' grace' in his *Epistle to J. Lapraik*?

Many of his words are less frequently attested than these, but apparently never restricted to Ayrshire or any particular region. Some examples are *blacksole* 'assistant at courtship', i.e. one who acts as a go-between for a courting couple (such as Burns for his friend David Sillar and Margaret Orr): the form *blackfit* is also found, *cudeigh* 'bribe', a word with an interesting Gaelic derivation *cuid oidhche* 'night's portion', i.e. payment for a night's lodging, found in MSc., *daupet* 'silly, inactive', *dishort* 'a mischief', *erch* 'scrupulous, afraid' (if anything commoner in the North-East than the South-West), *flewat* 'a blow', *forfluthered* 'disordered, agitated', *gaunch* 'snarl', *groof* 'belly or foreshore' (usually in the phrase *on [one's] groof* or the derived adverb *agroof*), *hallyon* 'lubberly fellow' (the first attested user of this word happens to be Burns, but other instances come from all over Scotland),⁶ *lisk* 'groin', *lizor* 'pasture', *tickle* 'bustle', *tarloch* 'weak, peevish', or a person of that description, *tift* 'in condition' (actually *tift* means 'state, condition' and *in tift* or *a-tift* means 'in [good] condition'), *tout* 'fit of sickness' and *wanworth* 'at under value'. For *mump* 'whisper, surmise' and *boot* 'balance in barter', the only other attestations for Simpson's sense of the word are North-Eastern, although they are recorded elsewhere with other meanings.

However, a substantial number of the words listed are predominantly or exclusively attested in Ayrshire or the South-West; or are common Scots words with a special sense recorded only in Ayrshire. For some, Simpson provides the only or almost the only attestation: in such cases we of course have no alternative, pending further discoveries, but to take his word for it that those are words which he knew from his observation of local speech. Some which are most firmly associated with the region are *aidle* "urine of cattle", *cosenent* "wages without food" (also attested for Ulster), *cloyt*, which he glosses as "a heavy burden" but can also mean a dull or stupid person, *elshin* 'awl', an implement which has many local names, *faik* 'to give up with', i.e. release a debtor from all or part of the sum owed, *gineough* 'greedy of meat', *gommawshens* (another idiosyncratic spelling: usually *gamashins* or similar) 'leggings', *grashloch* 'stormy', *sosh* 'lizzy' [sic.] and *ware* 'spring', the same word as the *voar* of the Northern Isles

⁶ In this and similar cases, of course, the possibility arises that later users of the word may have simply learned it from Burns: a question beyond the scope of the present paper.

dialects. Words for which the SND provides no or virtually no other attestation besides Simpson's list are *clippynet* and *clipfart*, which he brackets together as meaning 'an impudent girl', *hochen* 'fireside', *knusky* 'a strong firm boy', *ontron* 'evening' (according to Jamieson, 'the afternoon or early evening repast'), *loatch* 'corpulent person', *reckless* 'not intended'.

Surprisingly enough, a number of Simpson's 'provincial terms' are not Scots at all but of regular occurrence, then and now, in general English: *bluster* 'rant', *droll* 'merry, odd', *fumble* 'work ill executed' (the inclusion of this would have been understandable if he had given it in its Scots form *fummle*), *fun* 'merriment', *giggle* 'laugh', *hubbub* 'uproar', *inklin* 'whisper, surmise', *ryfe* 'prevalant', *swap* 'barter'. Some of these may have been, or mistakenly thought to be, more widely current in Scotland: Dr Johnson in his *Dictionary* noted that *giggle* and *inkling* were 'retained in Scotland'. Others may have been regarded in polite circles as 'common': the same authority described *fun* as 'a low cant word' and *swop* as 'a low word'; and Simpson's inclusion of them in his list may be a small but telling illustration of the regrettable tendency of some of his compatriots to class Scotticisms and vulgarisms together (for discussion see McClure 1992).

In its limited scale and compass, Simpson's essay is a valuable document; not only for the face-value information which it provides on Ayrshire phonology and vocabulary in the early nineteenth century, but for what it reveals about beliefs and attitudes concerning the Scots tongue, even in an area like Ayrshire where the dialect, as well as being well-preserved in itself and the medium of a local literature of exceptional vitality, had the accolade of being associated with the best-loved of all Scottish poets — for Burns had earned that status in his lifetime, and his recent death had done nothing to diminish it. Until some scholar unearths and edits Simpson's poems we will be unable to assess his status as a creative writer; but this at least establishes for him a slight claim to be remembered in his own right and not solely as a friend of Burns.

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