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Ulster-Scots in Northern Ireland today: Language,
Culture, Community

Common Identity

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Common Identity

Ian Adamson

I am grateful for the assistance of my colleague Helen Brooker of Pretani Associates and Chair of the Ullans Academy in the preparation of this paper.

- 1 On 13th January 1992 Professor René Fréchet of the Sorbonne wrote to me to ask for permission to translate my book, *The Ulster People*¹, into French and have it published by his University Press. He had spoken to his colleague, Paul Brennan, later to become Professor of Irish Studies at the Sorbonne, who had agreed to do so. Sadly, Fréchet's tragic death on April 24th of that year obviated the possibility of that proposed translation and publication².
- 2 It was during this time that I began to become more involved in the promotion of Ulster-Scots with my founding chairmanship of the Ulster-Scots Language Society and the establishment of an Ulster-Scots Academy³. Although Fréchet had not lived to see these projects develop, I would like to think that my vision for Ulster-Scots, as an integral part of an inclusive culture that stretches across the sectarian divide, would have met with his interest and approval.
- 3 In 1992, therefore, the year of Fréchet's death, I published, under my imprint, Pretani Press, the three-volume *Folk Poets of Ulster* series⁴, thus initiating the modern Ulster-Scots revival in Northern Ireland.
- 4 I had also suggested the new name "Ullans" for the Ulster-Scots Academy which I proposed in June 1992, and formally established in Northern Ireland following a meeting in Vancouver between Professor Robert Gregg and myself on Thursday, 23rd July that year. The Ullans Academy was to be based on the Frisian Academy of Sciences in the Netherlands, which I had visited in 1978, and again in 1980, with a group of community activists from Northern Ireland, including Andy Tyrie, then Chairman of the Ulster Defence Association, and now Patron of the Ulster-Scots (Ullans) Academy. The essential characteristic of the Frisian Academy was its division into three departments: Linguistics and Literature, History and Culture, and Social Sciences. This tripartite division was to become our model.

- 5 The new Ullans Academy was intended to fulfil a need for the regulation and standardisation of the language for modern usage. These standards were to have been initiated on behalf of the Ulster-Scots community, Protestant and Roman Catholic, nationalist and unionist, and would be academically sound. What we didn't need was the development of an artificial dialect which excluded and alienated traditional speakers⁵. It seemed clear to me that it was fundamentally important to establish a standard version of the language, with agreed spelling, while at the same time maintaining the rich culture of local variants. Therefore in 1995, I published for the Ulster-Scots Language Society a regional dictionary by James Fenton, *The Hamely Tongue: A Personal Record of Ulster-Scots in County Antrim*⁶, under the imprint of the Ulster-Scots Academic Press, from my premises in 17 Main Street, Conlig, County Down. This was the most important record yet produced of current Ulster-Scots speech and is now, under the imprint of the Ullans Press, in its third edition. It was distributed by my friend David Adamson, who did so without remuneration.
- 6 Like the Frisian Academy on which it was based, the Ulster-Scots or Ullans Academy's research was intended to extend beyond language and literature to historical, cultural and philosophical themes such as the life and works of Frances Hutcheson and C.S. Lewis, and to studies of the history of Ulidia in general, especially Dalriada, Dalaradia, Dal Fiatach, Galloway and Carrick, not forgetting Ellan Vannin, the Isle of Man.
- 7 The failure to establish a statutory Academy at this period meant that the work that went on over the years in each of these fields was on an exclusively voluntary basis, with all the constraints that such involvement implies. Hope of a new initiative returned in 2008 when Professor John Corbett of Glasgow University agreed to write a draft report⁷ and recommendations for the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee. In it, he suggested that an institute or centre for research and teaching that focused on the Scots language in Ulster and the West of Scotland should be set up. This Centre of Excellence would have been drawn from staff of three contributing universities, the University of Glasgow, the University of Ulster and the Queen's University of Belfast. Ian Paisley and I met the then Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Gregory Campbell MP MLA, on 23rd July 2008 to discuss this proposal. We were well received and a meeting between Professor Corbett and the Minister's officials was arranged. The Minister wrote to me on 15th August 2008 informing me that this meeting had taken place on 12th August 2008. Arrangements were made for him to meet Deloitte who were in the process of refreshing the business case for the Ulster-Scots Academy and this meeting was described as "very useful". Officials were to develop a paper for the Minister's consideration and he had asked them that Professor Corbett's proposals should receive due consideration in the development of that paper.
- 8 This initiative has since been progressed. On 23rd March 2010, the then Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Nelson McCausland MLA, eventually announced his plans for the Ulster-Scots Academy. Speaking at North Down Museum in Bangor, County Down he talked of the importance of Ulster-Scots as one of Northern Ireland's main cultural traditions. I attended on the invitation of the Ulster-Scots Agency of which I was a member. Among the subjects broached on this occasion was the creation of a Ministerial Advisory Group to develop an Academy. Referring to this presentation, the Northern Ireland Executive site explains:

The initiative has three strands: Language and Literature; History, Heritage and Culture; and Education and Research.

The Minister added: “I believe great damage has been done to the development of the sector by opponents who have sought to characterise this as being all about the status of the Ulster-Scots language. Clearly, it is about much more than that – this is a rich and vibrant culture which has shaped many aspects of life in Northern Ireland⁸.

- 9 And so it came to pass that Minister McCausland announced the appointment of a Ministerial Advisory Group for the Ulster-Scots Academy. Following open competitions for the appointment of a Chairman and four new Members, these were appointed with immediate effect for a period of up to four years. Yet another four members to “represent the Ulster-Scots Sector” were appointed by the Minister himself⁹.

- 10 At the launch of the “MAG(USA)” on 24th March 2011, the Minister reiterated the tripartite basis of the strategy:

This group has been established to provide advice on the strategic development of the Ulster-Scots sector and to rapidly build confidence within the sector by progressing projects under the three streams of activity for the proposed Ulster-Scots Academy, i.e. Language and Literature; History, Heritage and Culture; and Education and Research¹⁰.

- 11 Although we wish this excellent initiative well in its attempts to establish a statutory Ulster-Scots Academy in Northern Ireland, it remains difficult to see how the damage done to the Ulster-Scots movement over the years can be rectified at this stage. Actually, most of the blame must surely lie with those who were imbued with narrow sectarian and political attitudes – in some cases bizarrely so, particularly British Israelite theories –, some of whom achieved high status in government and stifled any attempt to promote the true ideals of the Ulster-Scots movement, while always remaining astute enough to present themselves as non-political and non-sectarian.

The Ullans Academy – Common identity

- 12 As for the original Ulster-Scots (Ullans) Academy which we had established in 1992, it has continued to promote aspects of shared heritage and community relations between the nationalist and unionist sections of our community in Northern Ireland, particularly in Belfast. The group was established with the idea that bringing people together through their shared cultural heritage would raise awareness of those things that bind us together rather than divide us and thus foster a sense of mutual tolerance and respect, and this it has achieved. Its members believe that this will lead to the development of stronger inter-community relationships in future years.

- 13 Thus, the key objectives of the group are:

1. – To encourage and promote the shared Ulster-Scots, Ulster Gaelic and Ulster English heritage and to raise awareness throughout Northern Ireland of this shared cultural heritage through delivery of high quality and engaging events and activities, particularly our Saint Patrick’s Breakfast and the Feast of Columbanus¹¹;
2. – To go into the community and encourage inter-community activity and exploration of the diversity of community learning as an extension of education.

- 14 As Northern Ireland moves further into the post-conflict period there are still many people who are struggling to develop their potential and who experience minimal inter-community contact in their everyday lives. These “hard to reach” areas, both unionist and nationalist, Protestant and Roman Catholic, are some of the key areas that the Ullans

Academy has sought to engage and will continue to target over the coming years to facilitate the ongoing development of a more prosperous and peaceful society in the local community across Northern Ireland.

- 15 We support the promotion of our shared culture, heritage, history, literature, language and music through a community-based approach which identifies three strands for development as modelled on the Frisian Academy:
 1. – Culture and History;
 2. – Research in Language and Literature;
 3. – Social Science and Community Development.
- 16 In 2010 our current Management Committee reaffirmed the principles and philosophy of the Ullans Academy and its commitment to cross-cultural and inter-community work in their widest possible context – preserving and developing interest in and understanding of Ulster-Scots, Ulster Gaelic and Ulster English culture and heritage right across the community¹², especially at grass-roots level in a manner which encourages contact, dialogue, respect, mutual understanding and parity of esteem with a view to reconciliation. The people we were trying to reach were primarily people from working-class, urban areas, those most directly affected by the violence of the Troubles and those who had the fewest opportunities for access to “Culture”, especially when that was in any way remotely associated with a political agenda of a different colour.
- 17 It was with this particular aim in mind that in 2012 we started a series of lectures in the community¹³ supported by funding from Belfast City Council and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Dublin. To ensure the highest level of openness to potential audiences, lectures were given in each of two prominent sites: Belmont Tower in (the predominantly Protestant) East Belfast¹⁴, closely associated with C. S. Lewis¹⁵, and An Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich, at the heart of the (predominantly Roman Catholic) Gaeltacht area of West Belfast¹⁶. As a fulfilment of our original Memorandum of Association (2003), we are preparing *The Bible in Plain Scots* for publication translated by Gavin Falconer and Ross G Arthur¹⁷.
- 18 Our focus at the Ullans Academy is now on “Common Identity”, an expression I first used in my book, *Cruthin, The Ancient Kindred* (1974), and which I continued to explore in all my later publications. By this term “Common Identity” we understand the total expression of all the inter-relationships within the island of Ireland which define who we are. It creates a sense of belonging, which takes people beyond the confines of their side of the religious divide. Understanding Common Identity will empower all sections of our community to achieve cultural expression and allow freedom of thought. Common Identity is by its very nature politically plural and inclusive.
- 19 The Ullans Academy has therefore been involved, for example, in assisting former loyalist combatants to take a wider perspective on their history and culture, especially in relation to the myths of ancient Gaelic history. Thus, the Dalaradia organisation was formed in County Antrim several years ago as a way of engaging working class loyalists in the peace process. Although key members were involved in enabling the peace process to move forward, especially by facilitating decommissioning of the loyalist arsenal, many members and associates had not bought into the process because they saw no benefits to their community. It is precisely this kind of area that interests the Ullans Academy.
- 20 The first official representation of Dalaradia was in 2011 at Belfast City Hall when the chairman of the group was co-opted on to the Ulster Centenary Committee, of which the

present author was founder chairman, to organise the ongoing decade of events. This has involved the highly successful Balmoral Review and the Centenary of the founding of the original UVF at Craigavon House. Key members of Dalaradia were previously involved in founding the Loyalist Commission after the loyalist feud (2003), meeting with all loyalists, MLAs, clergy and Secretaries of State. In 2011, members of Dalaradia went on a week-long, inter-community trip to the Somme to try to give everyone involved a deeper understanding of this key period of history. Individuals from either side of the political divide who took part in that project have remained in touch.

- 21 Although the Somme is paramount in their minds, the members of Dalaradia are eager to engage with people from across the board within a Common Identity logic to move towards a shared future. Thus, with the Dalaradia chairman, we have accompanied them both to Crew Hill, Glenavy, to see the site of the inauguration stone of the Kings of Ulster and in liaison with Brian Ervine, who has a particular interest in the area, to a Caledonian “Scottish” Dalriada Residential – again inter-community – in Argyll in September 2013. Similarly, the group, who meet at the Hubb on the Shore Road, North Belfast¹⁸, have recently visited the Bogside Bloody Sunday Museum, the Orange Museum and Derry’s walls¹⁹.
- 22 Its members see Dalaradia as a broadly Ulster-Scots body open to all aspects of our culture relating to all who share our land. However, in many ways they have already moved beyond the two traditions frame, developing strong links with the Polish and Black communities who have become an integral part of the ever-broadening tapestry of Northern Ireland society. They are also determined to learn from other people’s experience of divided societies. Thus, in 2012 the chairman was one of a small group of senior loyalists who visited Israel to study the conflict there, engaging with Israelis and Palestinians, as well as with university, Kibbutz, military and UN personnel.
- 23 They are also involved in facilitating the formation of a Dal Fiatach Group in North Down, complementing their own group, as well as the Kingdom of Dalriada group in North Antrim, linked to the Ullans Centre in Ballymoney, County Antrim. And Pretani Associates will promote the formation of a Manapian group in Taughmonagh (South Belfast) linked to Monaghan and Fermanagh.
- 24 Our vision is to promote Common Identity in order to contribute to creating stability for the people on the island of Ireland resulting in lasting peace for the benefit of the whole community in Northern Ireland and for future generations. In this spirit, it was therefore proposed by our Chair, Helen Brooker, that we should recommend to our Board that the Ullans Academy be henceforth known as the Academy promoting Common Identity, in line with Pretani Principles.

Conclusion

- 25 Martin Hay, writing about Ulster-Scots communal origins, refers to: “the thesis forwarded by Ian Adamson in various publications where he argues that the contemporary Ulster-Scots are descendents of the original inhabitants of the island of Ireland and that the cultural connections between Ulster and Scotland are of ancient origin²⁰”. It is precisely this extensive yet inclusive narrative for Ulster-Scots that I wish to promote. The presentation of that narrative through the medium of Common Identity signals a more

confident and more open approach, which I am convinced will be to the benefit of the Northern Ireland community as a whole.

NOTES

1. Ian Adamson, *The Ulster People, Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern*, Bangor, Pretani Press, 1991.
2. See Ian Adamson, "The Ulster-Scots Movement, A Personal Account", in Wesley Hutchinson & Cliona Ní Ríordáin (eds.), *Language Issues: Ireland, France, Spain*, Brussels, Peter Lang, 2010, p. 33-42.
3. NB The reader will understand that this body is distinct from the body referred to later in the paper, The Ulster-Scots Academy, whose creation is currently being envisaged within the framework of the Ministerial Advisory Group on Ulster-Scots.
4. The three titles in the series are: *The Country Rhymes of James Orr, the Bard of Ballycarry 1770-1816*; *The Country Rhymes of Hugh Porter, the Bard of Moneyslane c. 1780*; and, *The Country Rhymes of Samuel Thomson, the Bard of Carncranny 1766-1816*, all published by Pretani Press, Bangor, 1992. Series editors: J.R.R. Adams and P.S. Robinson.
5. Unfortunately, this is exactly what has happened, to the detriment of the language itself.
6. James Fenton, *The Hamely Tongue: A Personal Record of Ulster-Scots in County Antrim*, Conlig, The Ulster-Scots Academic Press, 1995.
7. Personal communication, 25th June 2008.
8. See: « Minister outlines way forward for Ulster-Scots », Thursday 24 March 2011, available at : <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/index/media-centre/news-departments/news-dcal/news-dcal-march-archive-2011/news-dcal-240311-minister-outlines-way.htm> (13/11/2013).
9. The Chairman of the Ministerial Advisory Group was Dr Bill Smith, and the Members were Dr Caroline Baraniuk, Dr John McCavitt, Dr David Hume MBE, Dr Ivan Herbison, Tom Scott OBE, Iain Carlisle, Alister McReynolds and John Erskine. Appointees were to serve for a period of up to four years.
10. See: "Appointments to the Ministerial Advisory Group for the Ulster-Scots Academy", Thursday 24 March 2011, available at: <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/index/media-centre/news-departments/news-dcal/news-dcal-march-archive-2011/news-dcal-240311-appointments-to-the.htm>(13/11/2013).
11. These events were first organised in March 2005 with the first St Patrick's Breakfast, followed by a Feast of Columbanus in November, based on the Farset "Steps of Columbanus" project of the mid-eighties. Farset was led by Jackie Hewitt, formerly of the Northern Ireland Labour Party, who was responsible for the later development of Farset International Hostel on the Springfield Road, Belfast, interface. These events have been addressed by prominent speakers from across the whole community, for example, Rev Dr

Ian R.K. Paisley, the Lord Bannside, and President Mary McAleese, who spoke together in the Park Avenue Hotel, East Belfast on Tuesday, 23rd November 2010. The 2013 event was addressed by Rev Dr Ian R.K. Paisley, the Lord Bannside and President Michael D. Higgins.

12. In my introduction to Ian James Parsley's superlative *Ulster Scots: A Short Reference Grammar*, Belfast, Ulster-Scots Academic Press, 2012, p. v, I wrote: "At the Ullans Academy, although Ulster Scots has been our focus, we have always wanted to emphasise the interrelationships between English, Scots and Gaelic as they are spoken in Ulster. What is exciting about this book is that it provides an exhibition of Ulster-Scots grammar, but also how it relates to other languages spoken in Ulster and Scotland".

13. To date, the lectures have been as follows: Dr Ian Adamson OBE (Somme Association), "Breaking Stereotypes of the First World War at the Somme", 1st & 5th November 2012; Liam Logan (Ulster-Scots Academy), "Ulster-Scots Language", 3rd & 6th December 2012; Dr Ruairí Ó Bléine (Ultach Trust), "Presbyterians and Irish", 7th & 9th January 2013; Nicky Gilmore (Dal Fiatach), "King William", 4th & 7th February 2013; Brian Ervine (Former Leader of the Progressive Unionist Party), "St Patrick", 4th & 7th March 2013. All lecturers are Board members of the Ullans Academy. On the first date given, the lecture was held at Belmont Tower (East Belfast); on the second date at An Cultúrlann McAdam/ÓFiaich (West Belfast). All lectures are available on Youtube.

14. On 29th November 1999 the Old Belmont School Preservation Trust (OBSPT) was established as a company limited by guarantee. The Trust, chaired by Helen Brooker, was established in November 1999 as a result of a community driven campaign, the main aims of which were to secure and restore the former Belmont Primary School – a Grade B1 listed building for the benefit of the local community and future generations. As such, OBSPT was one of the first single building preservation trusts to be established in Northern Ireland. The Patron of the Trust was Lady Carswell OBE.

The Trust acquired the building in April 2001 and the building was restored with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the DOE Environment and Heritage Service. It was officially opened by HRH Prince Charles on 1st September 2004 and was named Belmont Tower. The building has won a number of prestigious awards, including that from the Royal Society of Chartered Surveyors for "Excellence in the Built Environment". The building also featured in the BBC's second *Restoration* series in 2004, as being a first-class example of a community-led regeneration project.

Since then, Belmont Tower has become a multi-use facility offering classes, conference facilities, a coffee shop and a CS Lewis exhibition. On the 31st August 2013 the trustees of the Old Belmont School Preservation Trust passed ownership of the building to the National Trust. The future of the building and its use within the community has been secured.

15. Lewis's magisterial work, *Poetry and Prose in the Sixteenth Century*, Volume IV in the Oxford History of English Literature (1954), was particularly important, dealing as it does with language and literature at the close of the Middle Ages in Scotland. Characteristically, Lewis writes "Scotch" not "Scottish", claiming the freedom of "my ain vulgaire", which has historical precedence.

16. An Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich is an arts and cultural centre with a strong focus on Irish language and culture. It is named after the Presbyterian Gaelic scholar, Robert Shipboy Mc Adam, and my old friend Cardinal Tomas Ó Fiaich. The centre offers a vital arts programme, including theatre, music, visual arts, poetry, literary events, workshops

and classes catering for all ages. Located in a former Presbyterian church on the Falls Road, Belfast, the building has had a number of incarnations during its often troubled history. As an arts centre it is at the heart of a vibrant cultural community. An Cultúrlann also houses a café / restaurant, book and gift shop and a tourist information point.

17. Publication pending by the Ullans Academy with a grant from MAGUS.

18. The Hubb is the last Second World War Civil Defence Hall left in Northern Ireland and was preserved mainly due to the fundraising efforts of local community worker, Jim Crothers.

19. Future plans will be on www.dalaradia.co.uk

20. Martin Hay, *The Elite Promotion of Ulster-Scots Identity: Origins, History and Culture*, Working Papers Volume 1, Institute of Ulster-Scots Studies, The University of Ulster, 2009.

ABSTRACTS

This paper is designed to show how my involvement in the development of the early Ulster-Scots movement has evolved in recent years towards using the Ulster-Scots tradition as part of a broader panoply of cultural expression. It highlights the ways in which the search for parity of esteem can be enhanced for that important section of our community, the ordinary People, through an awareness of their Common Identity.

Cet article essaie de montrer comment mon engagement aux débuts du mouvement Ulster-Scots a évolué récemment vers l'insertion de la tradition Ulster-Scots au sein d'une gamme d'expression culturelle plus large. L'article souligne les façons dont la recherche d'une parité d'estime peut être mieux mise en valeur auprès de cette composante importante de notre communauté – les gens ordinaires – à travers une sensibilisation à l'identité commune qu'ils partagent.

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Keywords: collective identity, cultural heritage, Northern Ireland, reconciliation, Ulster-Scots

Mots-clés: héritage culturel, identité collective, Irlande du Nord, réconciliation, Ulster-Scots

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