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

The Irish Ulster Scot

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The Irish Ulster Scot

Liam Logan

- 1 Ulster Scots, Ulster-Scots, or as I personally prefer, the “Hamely Tongue”, a name given it by James Fenton, the poet and lexicographer and very much the Doctor Johnson of the Tongue. As for Dr Ian Adamson, the distinguished paediatrician and cultural historian, he coined the term “Ullans” to designate the language derived from the transfer of the Lowland Scots tongue (Lallans) to the north-east corner of Ireland (Ulster).
- 2 Not that it had a name back in the 1950s when I was born and first encountered Ulster Scots.
- 3 The man who introduced me to the notion of a language not used by my favoured Scottish authors Robert Louis Stevenson, R. M. Ballantyne and Walter Scott, or English and American writers like Jane Austen, R. D. Blackmore and Mark Twain, was a family friend and neighbour, Alex Calderwood. Alex worked for/with my grandfather and was a friend and contemporary of my father. I knew Alex as “Catherwood” but had caught sight of the spelling of his name as “Calderwood”. He explained that the pronunciation differed from the spelling and gave me examples from round our locality: the Ellots (neighbouring farmers) were actually spelt Elliott, the Aikesons – Alex was himself married to an Aikeson/Atkinson – were in fact the Atkinsons, etc. This was my first introduction to the arcane (to me anyway) world of Ulster Scots. Again, not that it had a name.
- 4 I was brought up in North Antrim, in the townland of Galdanagh, near the villages of Dunloy, Loughgiel and Cloughmills on the outskirts of the town of Ballymoney. The geography may not seem important but I mention it since all these places had what I now realise were linguistic communities. It was possible to detect subtle distinctions of vocabulary or accent that identified the speaker’s home. Villages like Dunloy and Loughgiel would be perceived as being more nationalist and Catholic, while the main market town of the area, Ballymoney would be predominantly, but not exclusively Protestant and unionist. However, the more subtle linguistic distinctions crossed over and blurred the more easily recognisable lines of religious and political affiliation, so that the speech of many in the area, from the mainly Protestant market town or the surrounding Protestant and Catholic villages, was deeply affected by Ulster Scots.

- 5 When I was asked to describe myself for this publication I suggested “broadcaster and author”. Both are true but bear little or no relation to my academic background (I hold business qualifications including an MBA) or professional life (as a planner for the National Health Service). In fact, both the descriptions I chose flow from a chance hearing of an Ulster Scots radio broadcast, *A Kist o Wurds*¹, the flagship programme for Ulster Scots on our local BBC station, BBC Northern Ireland, around 2001. The programme (a magazine format) dealt with preparations for the 12th July celebrations (a commemoration of the victory of the Protestant Prince William of Orange over King James at the Battle of the Boyne, an exclusively Protestant event), reminiscences of Sunday School (another exclusively Protestant experience) and another item with the emphasis firmly on another religious group of the non-Catholic variety. I would have been in my mid-forties then and knew enough of the world to know that radio shows were the creations of producers. So I telephoned the producer and berated him for portraying Ulster Scots (for it had acquired a name by this stage) as being exclusively the domain of one part of the community in Northern Ireland. Ulster Scots was, as I could personally testify, used across the sectarian divide and indeed, across social and economic classes. It is entirely possible that my tirade was liberally larded with Anglo-Saxon expletives.
- 6 After he had heard me out, the producer, Chris Spurr, now a friend and still producing top quality Ulster Scots programming, noticed my Ulster Scots twang and suggested I come in and record my comments (*sans* the expletives) for broadcast the following week. After I did so, he suggested that I record other pieces for broadcast. This I did with increasing regularity and eventually I became one of the hosts of the show, a role I have discharged for the past 10 or 11 years and continue to this day.
- 7 My background is Irish Nationalist. I was brought up as a Roman Catholic and yet I was an Ulster Scots speaker from an Ulster Scots speaking area. And I knew I was not alone. Hence my concern that a narrative without factual foundation should be promulgated, either directly or by implication, by the BBC. For me, it is the difference between saying that “Ulster Scots is spoken exclusively by one section of the population” and “Ulster Scots is spoken *mostly* by one section of the community”...
- 8 I do worry about a narrow ethnic or sectarian basis for Ulster Scots. It is wider than that, both inside and outside the north of Ireland.
- 9 Inside Northern Ireland, it is difficult to have a balanced idea as to the attitudes towards Ulster Scots in the Catholic/nationalist community as there has been no detailed work in that community on the question comparable with the work that has gone on in the Protestant/unionist community regarding attitudes towards Irish². This in itself says a lot. But, despite the stereotypes, it is perfectly clear that Ulster Scots continues to be used across the sectarian divide, especially in rural districts. In my work on the *Kist o Wurds* circuit, I myself have made many programmes about cross-community activities – horse fairs, ploughing matches, sheepdog trials – that draw on Ulster Scots speakers from both religious and political traditions.

Over the Water

- 10 Similarly, outside the purely Northern Ireland context, Ulster Scots also raises important issues about the complexity of the paradigms linking Ulster and Scotland. There has been

an ongoing relationship between Ulster and Scotland for thousands of years. Many parts of Ulster are closer to Scotland than they are to Belfast and, especially for those living along the coast, you could be in Scotland and back in the day, as sea journeys could be much faster than travelling by road. Trade, intermarriage, employment – these are the traditional reasons for emigration and immigration, and this has not changed much over the years.

- 11 However, these links are not always seen as positive.
- 12 Take sport. Today, a significant physical link between Ulster and Scotland is football. Many hundreds, perhaps thousands, make that journey across the Irish Sea to follow “their” respective football teams. Both Celtic and Rangers draw support from Northern Ireland, with rival supporters drawn largely but not exclusively from nationalist and unionist communities but with some concomitant sectarian rivalries. Indeed, when people look at this experience they see only difference, dramatic divisions, rivalry and fierce competitiveness. When I look at it, I see only similarities: the dawn rise, the early boat, the seasickness, the magnificent stadium, the game, the joy, the despair, the late return, more seasickness and the journey home.
- 13 These regular maritime links with Scotland go back to the time of Columba, Columbanus, Comgall and the monasteries they established on either side of the Irish Sea. Evangelical links are maintained to this day and, interestingly enough, the common language is Gaelic not (Ulster) Scots.
- 14 And while Christianity has deep roots in the Western Isles, there are religious divisions similar in nature to those in Northern Ireland. Thus, owing mainly to the different allegiances of the clans in the past, the people in the northern islands (Lewis, Harris, North Uist) have historically been predominantly Protestant, and those of the southern islands (Benbecula, South Uist, Barra) predominantly Roman Catholic. However all churches have Gaelic-speaking congregations throughout the Western Isles. For people in the North of Ireland the association between Irish and the Catholic population is obvious. By extension, many people have great difficulty understanding that there are Scots Gaelic-speaking Protestants and Scots-speaking Catholics. For some people in Northern Ireland, educated to believe a model which analyses linguistic communities simplistically as equating Irish/Gaelic with Catholic nationalism and Ulster Scots with Protestant unionism, this is clearly a challenging concept. If it has long been established in Ireland, North and South, that you can be a Protestant and an Irish speaker, and if Scotland proves that language and identity frames are capable of interesting subtlety, then it should be accepted that you can be a Catholic nationalist in Northern Ireland and well disposed – indeed – committed to Ulster Scots.

The *culchie*³ and the elite

- 15 I studied French at school, along with German and Latin. I finally made it to France when I was 21. One of the things I remember about my first trip was the poor interaction between my friends, all of whom came from Paris, and a farmer somewhere in the middle of France. When I asked why relations seemed frosty between them I was told that he looked down on them as ignorant city dwellers while they looked down on him as an ignorant yokel.

- 16 In the intervening years, I have come across the same metropolitan/sticks divide in many countries and this is part of a problem which has dogged Ulster Scots – the ignorant yokel encountering the sophisticated city slicker. I often say that the most vigorous supporters of Ulster Scots I meet today are exactly the same people – the sophisticated metropolitan elite – who made such sport of the way I talked back in the day. Or a section of that elite anyway. This attitude was ostensibly changed by the Good Friday Agreement. It was as a result of that document that “oor hamely tongue” was defined as “the variety of the Scots language traditionally found in parts of Northern Ireland and Donegal”⁴. However, keeping alive the tradition of the metropolitan elite looking down on the *culchie*, the ink was hardly dry before the language element began to be diluted. “Culture and heritage” were to be promoted ahead of the language. The battle was joined by various elements within the Ulster Scots community, many of whom were a lot more interested in filthy lucre than language, in order to wrest Ulster Scots from the speakers.
- 17 Amongst other things, a hyphen was falsely introduced between Ulster and Scots. “Why”? –you ask. Because the hyphenated Ulster Scots could be portrayed as a separate language, unrelated to Scots.
- 18 The language, as I have tried to show, is cross-community; it is also cross-border as it is spoken in the Laggan district of Donegal in the Republic of Ireland; neither of these qualities fitted with some politicians’ agendas. And so we saw a sudden interest in a range of things like kilts and highland dancing (nothing to do with the Lowlands from whence came so many of our Ulster Scots ancestors), or pipe bands (flourishing north and south of the border and either side of “the sheugh”⁵, indeed all over the world, for years before the GFA and the implementation bodies) and a focus on the Plantation as the birth of Ulster Scots⁶.
- 19 Needless to say, this reduced the share of the cake available for language. It also tended to reduce the community with which the language could be associated. Both factors have contributed to hindering the development of work on and in the language.

Ulster Scots – its own worst enemy?

- 20 The “hamely tongue”, Ullans, Ulster-Scots, Ulster Scots... Since I got involved, I have heard all the criticisms. And never met so many experts, so many knowledgeable authorities. It’s not a language they say; it’s only a dialect. It’s bad English; even worse, it’s bad English with a Ballymena accent – a remark I find particularly hurtful. It’s Protestant Irish. Or again: it’s a totally made up language, and an imperfect one at that.
- 21 In many ways, this is a nationalist and/or republican response to the often visceral – and equally uninformed – hostility of many unionists and/or loyalists to the Irish language.
- 22 But hostility to Ulster Scots is by no means limited to a nationalist or republican agenda. It has also suffered further impediments from the most unexpected points on the political spectrum. Within the ranks of unionism, there is a particular mind-set which, broadly speaking, takes the view that anything that challenges the status of people in Northern Ireland as supposedly as “British-as-Finchley” is a threat to the Union. Allied to this position within the unionist camp is an anti-Ulster Scots philosophy which would be happy to see it denied funding as long as Irish is similarly deprived.
- 23 In the end, Ulster Scots is perhaps its own worst enemy. It is a hardy tongue for a hardy people and to my mind contains far more pejorative terms than praise. If I look at one

single letter of the alphabet, say G, there are some 24 terms of abuse, 25 if you count “galoot” – but some people think this an American import. Let’s have a quick run through them.

1. Gaederel a stupid person, a simpleton
 2. Gam, foolish, lightheaded person
 3. Gansh, an empty chatterbox
 4. Gebberloon, a clown, an idiot
 5. Geek, a fool, an idiot
 6. Get, an idiot, a nasty or objectionable person
 7. Gillie, a fool
 8. Girn, someone never done whining
 9. Glipe, a raw youth, a fool
 10. Glump, a fool, a gawky, awkward person
 11. Glunter, a dull-witted person, a clumsy greenhorn, one easily fooled or taken advantage of
 12. Glunterpudden, a slow fat person
 13. Goam, a numskull
 14. Gomerel, a simpleton, a fool
 15. Gorb, a greedy person, a glutton, a sybarite
 16. Gornet, a greenhorn, a gauche person
 17. Gornicle, a ludicrous person, an oddity, a simpleton
 18. Gostran, a raw youth, an awkward simple fellow
 19. Gowster, a loud mouthed, blustering person
 20. Gral, a puny insignificant person
 21. Grulsh, a slow awkward obese person
 22. Grumph, a surly scowling person, a continual complainer
 23. Gulpin, a raw youth, a growing boy, a fool
 24. Gype, a fool, a clown, as in: “ect the gype”...
- 24 Is it any wonder Ulster Scots is hard to fall in love with? And yet I could say that my interest in Ulster Scots is indeed that of an amateur, a lover. I enjoy the nostalgia for a rural tongue in an age of technology, a tongue with a razor’s edge and a directness so far removed from the political correctness and diplomatic insipidness of the modern age.
- 25 And then, like it or not, I would contend that Ulster Scots informs – or perhaps infects – much of our everyday speech here in Northern Ireland.
- 26 Mostly, I love that Ulster Scots is a force for bringing people together rather than a divisive one, that the links with Irish are so close, that the tongue is so full of humour.
- 27 There is a bright future for something tasty in a bland world.

NOTES

1. The programme goes out weekly on BBC Northern Ireland some 48 weeks of the year. It has a broad audience and figures have recorded it at over 60,000 listeners. See: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007d4s0>
 2. See the work of the Ultach Trust for example, or Roger Blaney, *Presbyterians and the Irish Language* [1996], Belfast, Ulster Historical Foundation, 2012.
 3. A word used in Ireland to designate a redneck.
 4. Statutory Instrument 1999, No. 859, The North/South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies) (Northern Ireland) Order 1999.
 5. “Sheuch”, meaning “a narrow, open drain or ditch” (James Fenton, *The Hamely Tongue*, The Ullans Press, 1995) is also used to refer to the North Channel, between Scotland and the north-east of Ireland.
 6. A few years ago, I attended a celebration in Donegal of Francis Makemie, who is credited with bringing Presbyterianism to North America. As part of the celebrations, the late Finlay Holmes, the noted Presbyterian historian, gave a talk about the Plantation. Holmes was keen to underline that the planters had been largely Presbyterian but not exclusively so: they also had within their ranks Episcopalians, Roman Catholics and even atheists. The point here is that there was no exclusivity there.
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ABSTRACTS

Liam Logan, someone from an Irish nationalist background, gives his perspective on Ulster Scots as a cross-community tongue. Ulster Scots has been unfairly burdened with politics and has suffered misunderstanding as a result. The article also attempts to show how Ulster Scots is part of a broader network of relationships between Scotland and Ulster. The article also attempts to show how Ulster Scots is part of a broader network of relationships between Scotland and Ulster and how it has been the victim of various elite agendas.

Liam Logan, originaire de la communauté irlandaise nationaliste en Irlande du Nord, livre sa perspective personnelle de l’Ulster-Scots en tant que langue trans-communautaire. L’Ulster-Scots a été injustement encombré de facteurs politiques, ce qui a été source de regrettables malentendus. L’article essaie également de démontrer comment l’Ulster Scots s’insère dans la multiplicité des rapports qui existent entre l’Écosse et l’Irlande. L’article essaie également de démontrer comment l’Ulster Scots s’insère dans la multiplicité des rapports qui existent entre l’Écosse et l’Irlande et comment il a été malmené par différentes élites.

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