

A. J. Aitken

Letters to *The Scotsman* on the subject of Scots (1972–1995)¹

Edited by Caroline Macafee, 2015

How to cite this paper (adapt to the desired style): Aitken, A. J. (2015) 'Letters to *The Scotsman* on the subject of Scots (1972–1995)' in †A. J. Aitken, ed. Caroline Macafee, 'Collected Writings on the Scots Language' (2015), [online] Scots Language Centre

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1. 24 June 1972

Editor's note: the first item is AJA's contribution to a discussion in the letters pages of the *Scotsman* following news of the formation of the Lallans Society (now the Scots Language Society) and the appointment of Janet Templeton as Lecturer in Scots Language at the University of Glasgow.

The study of Scots

Department of English Language, University of Edinburgh, June 22, 1972

Sir, – The pioneer of the teaching of Scots in Scottish universities was, I suppose, George Gregory Smith, who taught Middle Scots in Edinburgh from 1894. Both Miss Templeton and I, and also David Murison, who has been teaching Scots in the English Department at Aberdeen for ten years or so, follow in the tradition initiated by Gregory Smith and continued in Edinburgh by such people as Bruce Dickins and O. K. Schram.²

It is true that there has been some expansion of our subject-matter beyond the narrower field of "Middle Scots," influenced by recent changes in attitudes to native language study, and, in our own special case, by the work of such institutions as the Linguistic Survey of Scotland and the Scottish dictionaries.

The Lallans Society is a welcome new arrival to the Scottish cultural scene; clearly it will complement most usefully the activities of other bodies already concerned with Lowland Scots, such as the Scottish Text Society and the Saltire Society. Another body which has

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² AJA includes reminiscences of his teacher and colleague O. K. Schram in his 1995 talk, 'The Playboy of the West Germanic World', in †A. J. Aitken, ed. Caroline Macafee, 'Collected Writings on the Scots Language' (2015), [online] Scots Language Centre

[http://medio.scotslanguage.com/library/document/aitken/The_Playboy_of_the_West_Germanic_World_\[1995\]](http://medio.scotslanguage.com/library/document/aitken/The_Playboy_of_the_West_Germanic_World_[1995]) (accessed 29 April 2015).

Lowland Scots as its central concern is the Association for Scottish Literary Studies, and, in particular, that association's Language Sub-committee.

The latest issue of the association's journal, "Scottish Literary News," includes my survey of the recent history and present state of the study of Scots;³ this anticipates several of the points made by contributors to this correspondence. An earlier issue (August 1971) has a paper by Dr J. T. Low on "Scottish Literature in the Schools," which touches also on matters of language. The editor of "Scottish Literary News," who is also secretary of the ASLS, is Mr T. Crawford, of the Department of English, University of Aberdeen.— I am &c.

A. J. Aitken

2. 11 April 1973

Scotland's language

TO THE EDITOR

Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue, 27 George Square, Edinburgh, April 10, 1973

Sir, — If he had found time to attend the recent conference of Lowland Scots,⁴ Mr Masson might have concluded that simple anthropomorphic interpretations of a linguistic situation as complex, varied and ridden with misconceptions as the present Lowland Scots one were unhelpful. He would have heard a stimulating historical survey of the use of Scots in prose and would have gained the impression that everyone at the conference sympathises strongly with his plea on behalf of fiction, drama and belles lettres in Scots prose.

Of course I and the others at the conference are eager to further the cause of Scots in the various ways we can — in my own case as a reasonably hard-working if not always effective student, teacher and writer on Scots and editor of a fundamental tool for its study.

But we do this, I take it, not so much for the sake of the language itself — a wide range of abstract systems of signs used in varying ways and with varying social implications by the individuals who speak it and write it — but for the sake of the people who have it as part of their history and as something they need for use and are affected variously by.

But Mr Masson is right in understanding that I have no idea of compelling the great majority of Scots against their own will to change their speech habits, whether or no this is judged to be therapeutic and for their own good, even if it were possible — which it probably is not. On the other hand, I am very much for persuading them away from social prejudices against others' Scots speech and to use as they feel the need the different forms of Scots and the considerable Scots elements in our kind of English. And we are eager to extend the study of Scots in its various manifestations in universities and training colleges and to encourage the sympathetic treatment and use of local and national Scots in schools.

Of course I have nothing but goodwill for my colleagues pursuing similar aims to my own in work with Gaelic. And I am not worried that Scots and Scottish English share much in common with the English of England and with overseas varieties of English. This is simply a fact.

³ 'The present state of Scottish language studies', *Scottish Literary News* 2: 2-3 (March 1972) 34–44.

⁴ The conference in question was held in Edinburgh on 12–13 May 1972. The papers, published in A. J. Aitken, ed., *Lowland Scots* (Association for Scottish Literary Studies, Occasional Papers no. 2, 1973) include Janet M. Templeton's 'Scots: an outline history', with illustrative texts drawn from Scots prose of the 15th–17th centuries.

But I would not therefore follow Mr Mac a' Ghobhainn and (470 years ago) Walter Kennedy in concluding in some way from this that Erse which happens to differ more from these thus becomes "all trew Scottismennis leid."⁵ Plainly most Scotsmen are involved in the more complex Lowland situation and their leid is within the range of the different sorts of Scots and English.

A. J. Aitken

3. 20 November 1976

Bipolarism

University of Edinburgh, Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue, 27 George Square, Edinburgh, November 18, 1976

Sir, – Harry Reid's article, "Vernacular in the classroom" (November 17), seems to suggest that my friend Tom McArthur and I invented the term "bipolarism" to describe the present Lowland Scots linguistic situation. In fact the term, and the concept, approximately as Mr McArthur expounds it, were first advanced by Mr Trevor Hill in a learned journal in 1958.⁶ In a somewhat cruder form and terminology, the same notion had been current in Edinburgh University for some years before that.

For a number of years, too, many sociolinguists of English have been advocating a "bidialectal" approach for the teaching of standard English to non-standard speaking pupils (who, of course, *mutatis mutandis*, exist in all English-speaking countries, not only in Scotland).

If by "language planning" Mr McArthur means the sort of activity which has been proceeding for well over a century in Norway (see the same issue's "Wednesday Word"), Lowland Scotland seems to me still far from being ready to imitate this. Justifying it, which no-one has yet seriously attempted here, would involve difficult questions of democracy and personal liberty. But admittedly it would be a salutary exercise to short-circuit the answer to these questions – an indispensable preliminary nevertheless to any political action – and anticipate some of the many and complex detailed decisions concerning target and method which the advocates of such a course of action have as yet scarcely touched on.

Certainly, though, Mr McArthur is right to suggest that one thing we have to aim at is greater linguistic tolerance of "freedom of speech" in and out of the classroom, to learn to accept the fact that different people talk differently and are no worse for that, and that the dialects and accents of the majority should receive the same favour as those of the minority. This and similar ideas are developed further in the recent SED report, "Scottish Literature in the Secondary School,"⁷ as well, of course, as in the Bullock Report,⁸ and many recent writings by linguists in and furth of Scotland.

⁵ Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn is the Gaelic name of the poet Ian Crichton Smith. The allusion to Walter Kennedy is to 'The Flying of Dunbar and Kennedy' stanza 44:

Thou lufis nane Irische, elf, I vnderstand,
Bot it suld be all trew Scottis mennis lede.
It was the gud langage of this land ...

(From Priscilla Bawcutt, ed. *The Poems of William Dunbar*, Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1998, vol. I.)

⁶ Trevor Hill, 'Institutional linguistics', *Orbis* 7 (1958), 441–455.

⁷ *Scottish Literature in the Secondary School*, Scottish Central Committee on English (Edinburgh: HMSO, 1976). This includes Aitken's 'The Scots language and the teacher of English in Scotland'.

4. 3 September 1988

Editor's note: the subject of the following letter is a television programme and related newspaper article, 'The English Conquest', by George Rosie, expressing concern that the upper echelons of Scottish civil institutions are dominated by English appointees.

5 Bellevue Crescent, Edinburgh, August 31, 1988

Sir, – If George Rosie had inquired the nationalities of the President, Vice-president, Chairman and Deputy Chairman of the National Trust for Scotland as well as of its Director, he would have found that all or almost all of these are Scots.

But quite a high proportion of them don't sound like Scots. I am thinking particularly of the three members of the nobility – Lord Wemyss, President, the Duke of Atholl and Lord Bute, Vice-presidents. Like the rest of our gentry, they went to school and university in England and speak very like their English compeers. How many members of the Royal Company of Archers or Knights of the Thistle have Scottish accents?

The fact that the top-dog accent in Scotland is this non-Scottish one has a knock-on effect down the social scale and its influence pulls the whole system of accent and dialect in Scotland in an anglicising direction. Appointments of English people to senior administrative posts in Scotland help to confirm this tendency. The Englishing of upper- and middle-class Scottish speech in one more nail in the coffin of the Scottish nation.

A. J. Aitken

5. 1 April 1995

Editor's note: A. Mackie and AJA were both participating in an on-going debate in the letters pages of the *Scotsman*. Mackie took the view that Scots is expressive of everyday life, but not suitable for serious prose. He stated that Scottish men of learning in the past probably discoursed in Latin.

A. Mackie (Letters, 25 March) appears to have forgotten that between the 15th and the 17th centuries Scots scholars and preachers produced, in fluent and mostly lucid Scots prose, works of theology, morality, history and political and theological polemic.

John Knox, it is true, composed and published all his work of this sort in English or anglicised Scots, but his Catholic disputants used impeccable Scots. Nor is there anything inherently impossible to the writing of philosophical or other learned works in modern Scots either.

A. J. Aitken, Edinburgh

⁸ 'A language for life. Report of the Committee of Enquiry appointed by the Secretary of State for Education and Science under the Chairmanship of Sir Alan Bullock FBA' [known as the Bullock Report] (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1975).