

# Scots Word of the Season: Gloaming

By Maggie Scott

**gloaming** *n.* evening twilight, dusk; (less commonly) morning twilight, dawn

Gloaming seemed an apt choice for this issue, now that the nights are fair drawin in. Yet the word is by no means restricted to couthy remarks. Ian Banks refers to 'the calm summer gloaming' in *The Crow Road* (1992) and Matthew Fitt describes a place 'wi nae nicht and nae gloaman tae guide ye through the oors' in *But n Ben A-Go-Go* (2000).

The word is derived from Old English *glomung* 'dusk, twilight', but in England the word appears to have fallen out of use by the twelfth century, as it is not recorded in any Middle English sources. Gloaming would have stravaiged its way to Scotland with one of the waves of Anglo-Scandinavian immigration that took place during medieval times. It is first recorded in Scots in fifteenth-century texts; a reference to 'the glomyng of the nycht' is found in the *Original Chronicle of Scotland*, and in Robert Henryson's *The Preiching of the Swallow*, the bat (and man's soul) 'in the gloming cummis furth to fle'.

While it usually refers to evening twilight, gloaming has also been used in some areas of Scotland to describe the dawn. In S. R. Crockett's nineteenth century novel *The Raiders*, a character makes his way home 'in the gloaming of the morning'. This may be a usage that was known to Crockett from his native Galloway.

Lewis Grassic Gibbon found more than one use for gloaming in *Sunset Song*. Events may take place 'at gloaming' and in descriptive passages we read such phrases as 'the gloaming was down on the countryside'. But it has a different force when Rob passionately defends the argument that Scots should be spoken without shame: 'You can tell me, man, what's the English for sotter, or greip, or smore, or pleiter, gloaming or glunching or well-kenspeckled? And if you said gloaming was sunset you'd fair be a liar'.

Perhaps because it has no real equivalent in English, gloaming has been taken up by many writers furth of Scotland. In Will Self's *How the Dead Live* (2000), characters 'paced through the Dulston gloaming' and an article from the *Economist* from 2002 there is a description of 'the gloaming half-light of a London afternoon'. Another example occurs in Seamus Heaney's translation of the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*. When the dragon discovers that one of his treasures has been stolen, he is furious, but has to wait until nightfall to take revenge. In Heaney's words: 'the guardian of the mound, the hoard-watcher, waited for the gloaming with fierce impatience'. Considering its origins, gloaming is an apt choice, yet in the original poem the unknown poet does not use the Old English *glomung*, but instead uses *aefen*, an earlier form of the word even, from which evening is derived.

Many Scots words have been borrowed into International English over the centuries, including *rampage*, *guffaw* and *cosy*. Gloaming is another that appears to be following suit. **gloaming n. evening twilight, dusk; (less commonly) morning twilight, dawn**

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(c) *The Bottle Imp*