

When antiquarians looked at the thistle - Late Modern views of Scotland's linguistic heritage

By Marina Dossena

In a letter to his cousin Bob, dated Vailima c. 9 September 1894¹, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote:

DEAR BOB, - You are in error about the Picts. They were a Gaelic race, spoke a Celtic tongue, and we have no evidence that I know of that they were blacker than other Celts. [...] The Picts furnish to-day perhaps a third of the population of Scotland, say another third for Scots and Britons, and the third for Norse and Angles is a bad third. Edinburgh was a Pictish place. But the fact is, we don't know their frontiers. Tell some of your journalist friends with a good style to popularise old Skene²; or say your prayers, and read him for yourself; he was a Great Historian, and I was his blessed clerk³, and did not know it; and you will not be in a state of grace about the Picts till you have studied him. [...] Get the Anglo-Saxon heresy out of your head; they superimposed their language, they scarce modified the race; only in Berwickshire and Roxburgh have they very largely affected the place names. The Scandinavians did much more to Scotland than the Angles. The Saxons didn't come.

Enough of this sham antiquarianism.

After discussing genealogy and family history in a broader national perspective, Stevenson seems to change the subject in a rather abrupt and perhaps modestly dismissive way. But in the previous lines it is clear that, almost at the turn of the century, the great Tusitala, whose interest in Scotland's history, languages and literature was unending, discussed with undoubted competence a topic that had been the focus of much investigation for several decades. In particular, the century that followed the publication of Johnson's *Dictionary* in 1755 saw a growing debate on the origin of English, its 'antiquity' and its connection with prestigious ancient languages. In Scotland this had great significance, as at the time the country was undergoing one of the most important changes in its

linguistic history. The Union of Parliaments in 1707, little more than a century after the Union of Crowns, and the suppression of the Jacobite rebellions in 1746, deeply influenced the Scots' self-perceptions from a socio-linguistic point of view. An increased awareness of their 'provincial dialect' and an attempt to imitate the ideal language standard of the south were manifested in a kind of linguistic witch-hunt: 'Scotticisms' were seen as tokens of uneducated, impolite language and numerous prescriptive publications sought to establish models for Scottish speakers and writers (Dossena 2005: 56-82).

On the other hand, in complete contrast with the typical eighteenth-century lists of proscribed Scotticisms, James Adams' *Vindication of the Scottish Dialect* (1799) recommended a list of Scots lexical items for adoption into English (Dossena 2005: 85-90), and attributed their semantic richness to the fact that Scots preserved "the Saxon original in spite of the attempts of the Norman invaders and tyrants who endeavoured totally to extirpate its antient form" (Adams 1799: 148) - an attack on the influence of French on English which, ironically, would not have displeased Johnson himself, and which had very deep roots, stretching back at least a century.

Already in the second half of the sixteenth century we find a comment on the Saxon origins of Scots and English: Justus Scaligerus, who visited Holyrood in 1566 or 1567, stated that "Les Escossois et Anglois parlent mesme langage Saxon, vieux Teutonique, ils se servent de mesme Bible, et ne different pas plus que le Parisien d'avec le Piccard" (Mitchell 1901: 462) [the Scots and English speak the same Saxon language, old Teutonic, use the same Bible and do not differ more than Parisians do from Piccardians]. About a century later, the greater proximity of Scots and Northern English to the original Saxon forms was stressed, in relation to the distance that Southern English had developed from them on account of the Norman influence. The reference is in the pamphlet *Ravillac Redivivus* (1678: 77), and is explained with a note in the margin in which the "Preface to Mr. Liles Saxon Monuments" is cited. This work, published by William Lisle in 1637, was to become a keystone in the debate on the lineage of Scots on the part of nineteenth-century antiquarians; the National Library of Scotland hosts numerous publications on this topic, and in what follows I'll attempt to provide a summary of the main views.

Following Sir John Clerk of Pennycuik, James Sibbald (1802: 4/ii) had stated that "the Scottish dialect has a much greater affinity with the Anglo-Saxon and with

the Teutonic or Belgic than with any of the Scandinavian dialects". Chalmers disagreed forcefully and cited Lisle:

Lisle, the Saxon scholar, says, in the Preface to his *Ancient Monuments of the Saxon Tongue*, that he improved more, in the knowledge of Saxon, by the perusal of Gawain Douglas's Virgil, than by that of all the Old English he could find, poetry, or prose; because it was nearer the Saxon, and further from the Norman." Thus far the Saxon Lisle! Not so, the Belgic Sibbald! (1806: 146fn)

In fact, some commentators saw the historical roots of Scots in the Pictish language - though whether Pictish itself was of Gothic or Teutonic or Celtic origin was a further question (see Skene 1886: I/196)⁴. A Gothic lineage was hypothesized for Scots by Robert Sibbald (1710), John Pinkerton (1789) and John Jamieson (1808 and 1818). In particular, Pinkerton (1789: I/122-123) expressed his opinions in terms that differentiated Scots from Celtic languages, following an ancient prejudice against the Celts (Dossena 2005: 42, 45). Indeed, Pinkerton's even racist views (1789: I/340-343) were challenged by Murray (1818: 135-149). However, Pinkerton was defended by John Jamieson, who found fault with Murray's own etymologies, restricted to place-names (1818: 259-260). Previously, Jamieson had presented his own theory in an extensive study of etymologies of names and place-names in the 'Introduction' to his *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* (1808), a real and perhaps under-investigated milestone in modern lexicography.⁵

The lively Ossian debate certainly influenced the controversy on the Celtic or Germanic roots of Scots; however, Scottish Teutonism was not exempt from political overtones: Sweet (2004: 189) quotes the words with which, in 1722, Edmund Gibson dedicated the revised edition of his translation of William Camden's *Britannia* to George I:

Not only our Histories, but our Language, our Laws, our Customs, our Names of Persons and names of Places, do all abundantly testify, that the greatest part of your Majesty's Subjects here, are of SAXON Original. And if we enquire from where our Saxon Ancestors came, we shall find, that it was from your Majesty's Dominions in *Germany*.

A few years after the Jacobite rebellion of 1715, a link was established between the mutual Saxon origins of Britain's language, law, customs, names and place

names - and the House of Hanover.

In addition, the negative influence of French was stressed whenever the Saxon roots of English were highlighted. Alexander Geddes did not believe that “that the language of the Picts was a Gothic dialect,” but a Celtic one; as for the “Saxon dialect” of Scotland, this had been imported from England (1792: 410), but its spelling was closer to the original one, because it had not “adopted a very erroneous orthography” from modern French (1792: 428). Geddes concluded recommending the adoption of a “Scoto-Saxon Lexicon” in English literature; to obtain this, however, it would be necessary to collect “the old terms as soon as possible, and from the mouths of the oldest inhabitants. [...] no word should be omitted, however barbarous it might appear; no phrase rejected, howsoever vulgar.”⁶ James Adams’ views, though based on Geddes’ *Dissertation*, were (as we saw) even more radical; as for Chalmers, who described Sir David Lyndsay’s language as “*better Saxon but worse English*, than the language of England” (1806: I/147), he dubbed French “that intruding tongue” (1806: III/227).

The search for ‘pure Saxon’ persisted throughout the nineteenth century (see Dury 1992). James Paterson, whose *Origin of the Scots and the Scottish Language* argued in favour of Pictish as the original “Scottish dialect” (1855: 109), linked “Dano-Saxon”, i.e. “the northern Saxon of England”, to Icelandic, “which is the elder branch of the Teutonic, and, of course, the senior of the Anglo-Saxon” (1855: 119). Paterson, who also referred to Geddes’ *Dissertation*, thus acknowledged the Scandinavian influence on Scots, but he also claimed that Scots was not “wholly indebted to the Gothic [...] the great body of the people, ancient Picts and Britons, being Celtic” (1855: 135).

As late as 1888, when Charles Mackay published *A Dictionary of Lowland Scotch with an introductory chapter on the poetry, humour, and literary history of the Scottish language and an appendix of Scottish Proverbs*, emphasis was still placed on the closer connection of Scots with the older ‘Anglo-Teutonic’ vocabulary described as obsolete in English, but still fully comprehensible in Scotland (1888: xii).

Unfortunately, the letter to which Stevenson responded in 1894 is untraced, but his response shows that the debate was still of interest as the new century approached. Although Scots was stigmatized in ‘polite’ usage, its literary value and its antiquity gave it a significant aura of respectability - maybe a somewhat

contradictory attitude, but certainly one that could and did survive into our own times.

References & Further Information

¹ See Booth/Mehew (1994/1995, vol. 8, letter no. 2782).

² RLS read Skene's *The Highlanders of Scotland* (1837) in November 1880 - see Booth/Mehew (1994/1995, vol. 3, letter no. 745, fn. 4). However, here reference might be to Skene's more recent *Celtic Scotland* (1876).

³ RLS worked as a copyist for Skene, Edwards & Bilton, W.S., between May and July 1872 - see Booth/Mehew (1994/1995, vol. 1, letter no. 117, fn. 3).

⁴ Skene approvingly refers to Innes' identification of Pictish as a Celtic language (see Innes 1729: I/73).

⁵ The *Dictionary* has recently been made available as an electronic resource - see www.scotsdictionary.com.

⁶ This is clearly a very modern approach to dialectology, recommending as it does unbiased field work.

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