

Scots Word of the Season: 'Swither'

By Maggie Scott

swither v. to be uncertain or perplexed about what to do or choose; doubt; hesitate; dither

Swither is a word that many Scottish people use without realising that it is a relative stranger outwith Scots and Scottish English. My spell-checker has in fact just proven the point, underlining both 'swither' and 'outwith', which have clearly bemused its limited lexicon. A number of stealth Scots words like these have so comfortably established themselves across all Scottish linguistic contexts, from the formal to the informal, that speakers may only become aware of their exotic character when quizzed about them by puzzled non-Scots. *The Official Report of the Scottish Parliament* (2000) includes former MP and MSP Winnie Ewing's account of events when she uttered the word in the House of Commons: "The members all stopped and said, 'I don't understand'. I wondered what the English word for 'swither' was, and they shouted, 'prevaricate' and 'hesitate'. Neither of those words is exactly the same as 'swither' ... That illustrates part of the strange experience of speaking Scots".

Used as a noun, swither often indicates a state of indecision or doubt, as we see in Alan Ramsay's description of the errant knight that "stands some Time in jumbled Swither, To ride in this Road, or that ither" in his *Epistle to James Arbuckle*, Belfast poet (1719). It can also indicate a state of nervous agitation, as in John Mayne's poem, [The Siller Gun](#) (1808): "Wull Shanklin brought his firelock (a type of musket) hither, And cock'd it in an unco swither". In Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Sunset Song* (1932), the word describes literal confusion: "A great swither of a crop with straw you could hardly break and twist into bands for sheaves".

Swither can trace its documented history back to the sixteenth century, where it appears in a number of different spellings. In William Stewart's *Buik of the Cronicles of Scotland* (1535) we are told of bugle-blasts that "causit mony for to

sueit and swidder” (caused many to sweat and swither) during the great legendary battle between Roman general Maximinian and Fergus of Dál Riata. Robert Sempill’s [Satirical Poems of the Time of the Reformation](#) (1570) cautions: “Lat na mans feid (hostility), throw feirfull dreid, your hartis mak to swidder”. The origins of swither are unclear, although connection with an Old English verb of similar form and meaning has been suggested. Besides faltering or hesitation, the word can also indicate fluctuation or fitful movement, and the [Dictionary of the Scots Language](#) (www.dsl.ac.uk) records a number of instances of swithering cloud formations and unstable markets.

Uncertainty is always with us, though its causes also fluctuate across time. In Anna Blair’s historical novel, *The Rowan on the Ridge* (1980), “Maggie Blair was standing at the ribbon-booth swithering over the choice between a green or pink sash for her bodice on summer Sabbaths”. [Liz Lochhead](#)’s *Bagpipe Muzak* (1991) provides something of a contrast: “buggerlugs is swithering over the part on our menu called Soup Kitchen, wondering should he sample the Depression Broth at only £4.50 for a generous brimming plateful”.

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