

Scots Word of the Season: 'Eldritch'

By Maggie Scott

eldritch *adj.* Weird, ghostly, uncanny, unearthly, hideous, esp. of sound; often applied to persons, things and places, usually to denote some connection with the supernatural

Eldritch is a word that often appears in Scottish poetry and literature that deals with odd or otherworldly sounds, sensations and experiences. The term is quite frequently attested in texts written by sixteenth century makars like William Dunbar, who describes Pluto, the elrich incubus, In cloke (cloak) of grene in his poem, *The Golden Targe*. In his 1513 translation of the Prologue to Virgil's *Aeneid*, book 6, Gavin Douglas anticipates his readers' reaction to the tales contained within: All is bot gaistis (ghosts) and elrich fantasyis, Of browneis (brownies) and of bogillis (boggles) ful this buke . Those of you unfamiliar with Scottish mythological beings such as *brownies* and *boggles* should perhaps count yourselves lucky. Brownies, in most traditional descriptions, are benevolent spirits, though they can also be evil spirits (particularly in Shetlandic tales). Boggles are typically phantoms or goblins.

Eldritch has often been thought to have some sort of etymological association with words denoting elves , but recent scholarship suggests a strong connection with an unattested Old English term **ælr-ce* meaning otherworldly . An excellent account of past and present arguments that supports this view may be found in [Alaric Hall's article](#) in the journal *Scottish Language* (2007). The suggestion of a connection with Old English **ælf-r-ce* (literally meaning something like elf-kingdom) was first made by John Jamieson in his [Dictionary of the Scottish Language](#) (1846), and has been repeated in many subsequent Scots dictionaries.

The popularity of the word in Scottish literary fiction has persisted from the Middle Ages to the modern day. Robert Burns uses it in his famous ghostly poetic tale of [Tam o' Shanter](#). When Tam is discovered spying on the devilish happenings

at Alloway's Auld Haunted Kirk, he is pursued by the hellish legion and makes his escape over the river Doon on Maggie, his terrified steed: Maggie runs, the witches follow, Wi monie an eldritch skriech and hollo. Ah, Tam! Ah, Tam! thou'll get thy fairin! (just deserts) In hell they'll roast thee like a herrin! Other texts from the Scottish literary canon yield further examples. In Walter Scott's novel, [*The Fortunes of Nigel*](#) (1822), we encounter a character who set up an elritch screech, which made some think his courage was abated and in Robert Louis Stevenson's novel, *Kidnapped* (1886), a woman's eerie voice rises to a kind of eldritch sing-song .

Eldritch has not confined itself to Scottish texts, but has sleekly insinuated itself into eerie English literature. Readers may have encountered the word in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798): I look'd upon the rotting Sea, And drew my eyes away; I look'd upon the eldritch deck, And there the dead men lay . Given its spooky connotations, eldritch has become a popular term in various otherworldly arenas, being adopted, for example, as a surname by Andrew Eldritch of the English Goth band, The Sisters of Mercy.

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