Scots Word of the Season: ‘Ceilidh’

By Maggie Scott

ceilidh *n. (originally)* an informal social gathering among neighbours, often involving music and storytelling, etc; visit, chat, gossip; (from the twentieth century onwards) an organised evening of entertainment involving Scottish traditional dance, music and song, etc.

Ceilidh is a word that could be associated with a number of different languages. It existed in Irish and Scottish Gaelic before being adopted into both Scots and English. Some commentators seem reluctant to agree that a term can belong to both Scots and English, but language is a sleekit creature with boundaries that are notoriously difficult to find. It should perhaps come as no surprise that *ceilidh*, a very social word, has stravaiged through many lands. The spelling given above is very much the usual form at present but going back a little further in time, spellings of the word in Scots varied considerably. A more Gaelic-looking form emerged as the standard in the early twentieth century.

In the online Dictionary of the Scots Language, some of the information about the word’s history is documented under the headword *kailie* rather than the current form. Here we find an early example in the Ulster-Scots of William Carleton’s *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (1840): ‘As he came over on his kailyee, he had brought a drop in his pocket to sweeten the discoorse’. A similar spell-it-as-it-sounds-to-you approach is adopted by William Anderson Smith in his *Lewsiana; Or, Life in the Outer Hebrides* (1875). He describes ‘ranges of peat-stacks, representing many a gathering of neighbours to the cutting, and many a “caley” over the consuming in the long winter nights’. Here Smith’s inverted commas emphasise the otherness of the word’s cultural origins. The dictionary also reports that the term *kailiers* was found in northern Scotland and in Ulster in the early twentieth century, not simply meaning ‘people who go to ceilidhs’, but with the rather euphemistic sense ‘people who stay too long in other folks houses’.

As the dictionary notes, from around the 1930s onwards the increasing popularity of the ceilidh as an organised event, historically linked with Celtic traditions,

encouraged the reintroduction of the Gaelic spelling as standard. There are lots of other cases of so-called 'etymological respellings', where a word's spelling is deliberately changed to better reflect its origins. Very often, however, these changes are inspired by misunderstandings. The English word *debt*, for example, acquired its —*b*– from people spelling it in order to better resemble its Latin equivalent and historical ancestor *debitum*. It was of no consequence to those using the term that English borrowed the word indirectly, via French forms like *dette* in which no —*b*– was present. The popularity of the spelling *debt* ensured it would become the standard form when dictionaries developed. In contrast, the history of *ceilidh* tells a different story, as in this instance the etymological respelling is quite genuinely closer to the Gaelic forms and reminds us of the word's heritage.

Another term with Celtic connections embodied in its spelling is *craic*, pronounced like 'crack', and generally taken to mean 'gossip, banter, entertaining chat, etc'. Those unfamiliar with Gaelic sounds and spellings may have to work a little harder to feel comfortable with words like *craic* and *ceilidh* in their written and spoken forms, but may perhaps do so less grudgingly if they view them as living artefacts that visually connect with the hybrid nature of our modern languages and cultures.**ceilidh** *n. (originally)* an informal social gathering among neighbours, often involving music and storytelling, etc; visit, chat, gossip; (from the twentieth century onwards) an organised evening of entertainment involving Scottish traditional dance, music and song, etc.

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