

Scots Word of the Season: 'Stravaig'

By Maggie Scott

Stravaig v. roam, wander about casually or aimlessly; traverse, travel up and down (a place)

Stravaig is one of many Scots words found casually traversing a range of formal and informal contexts and genres. In 2003, *The Guardian* described author and broadcaster Alastair Borthwick's *Always A Little Further* (1939) as "a vivid memoir of a decade's carefree and impetuous stravaiging through the Scottish highlands", and in 2002 the *Sunday Herald* discussed "The Queen's decision to stravaig her realm on a jubilee tour". Whether hiking through the Scottish Gaeltacht, or bletherin aboot royalty, this gallus wee word gets around. The term often adds a degree of cultural colour and identity to Scottish English. In 1990 *The Scotsman* reported on the Scottish Landowners Federation concerns about tensions between "owners and those who stravaig over their land". Here, in a formal, national, prose article, the word quietly reminds readers of the location of that land.

Stravaig derives from eighteenth-century Scots *extravage*, meaning 'wander about; digress, ramble in speech', in turn derived from Medieval Latin *extravagari* 'wander, stray beyond limits'. *Stravaig*, in various forms, is found in a wide range of Scottish texts from the late eighteenth-century onwards. Robert Fergusson's poem 'Hame Content, A Satire' tells of the honest cottar folk's "Pith, that helps them to stravaig / Our ilka cleugh and ilka craig", and in the *Old Lore Miscellany* of Orkney (1911), it is said "Dey wad fund da fok i tha Hillside gaun stravaigan aboot i heather jakets". One can also be a *stravaiger*; in John Galt's *Annals of the Parish* (1821), "Lady Macadam's hens and fowls" were "great stravaggers for their meat". Since the early nineteenth century you could go for a *stravaig*, often in a picturesque setting. Joseph Grant's *Tales of Glens* (1836) mentions "Taking a stravaig amang ... braw mountains", and Peter Drummond takes readers on a geographical and linguistic "stravaig around Skye's Norse and Gaelic hill names" in his *Scottish Hill and Mountain Names* (1991).

Wanderers in the city of Glasgow might chance upon the word as it appears – very aptly – in the name of the restaurant, Stravaigin, with its trademark combination of global and local cuisine. Stravaigin currently plays host to the intriguing Cleikum Club, which no doubt channels the spirit of the ‘original’ Cleikum Club in Sir Walter Scott’s *St Ronan’s Well* (1823). Topical issues are regularly debated here by artists, writers and critics, and this year a session on the question: ‘What is Scots?’, was inaugurated with the symbolic sacrifice of a deep-fried Mars Bar; a poignant act of resistance against a (frankly) poisonous stereotype.

Since the eighteenth century people have written that Scots is a dying language. Nevertheless, words like *stravaig* have remarkable powers of endurance, perhaps aided in part by the activities of intrepid adventuring Scots like David Livingstone, who once took a wee dauner through Africa. As stated in a *Scotsman* article in 1989, “The Scots have always been stravaigers, complacently regarding the trait as evidence of their easy internationalism”.

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