

# Scots Word of the Season: 'Leerie'

By Maggie Scott

**Leerie** *n.* a lamplighter, who lit gas lamps in towns and cities (before electric light)

The word *leerie* is perhaps best known nowadays from the nostalgic poem 'The Lamplighter' by Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894). The character, 'Leerie', is depicted as a romantic wanderer who charms the imagination of the child-narrator, trapped behind the window of his house in the evening dusk and musing on ambition:

Now Tom would be a driver and Maria go to sea,  
And my papa's a banker and as rich as he can be;  
But I, when I am stronger and can choose what I'm to do,  
O Leerie, I'll go round at night and light the lamps with you!

Later on, W. D. Cocker's poem *Dandie* (1929) similarly focuses on the mystique of this shadowy figure:

Carryin' his magic wand,  
Like a sceptre beamin',  
Up the street the leerie comes;  
A' the lamps are gleamin'

The word has inevitably fallen out of use as the twentieth century progressed. A fairly late example occurs in *The People's Friend* (1953), noting it is 'only about 20 years since most "leeries" disappeared.'

The oldest known evidence for use of the term *leerie* is found in an article from *The Scotchman*, a short-lived Scots newspaper of the early nineteenth century, where we read that 'the Scotsman may lang be the leery o his countramen's min's' (1812). As a point of interest, the paper ran only briefly, from 1812-1813, and was published by John Mennons, who in 1783 initiated publication of the *Glasgow Advertiser*, now better known as *The Herald*. In the spirit of the quotation, the present author set out in pursuit of further linguistic illumination, but with some chagrin must now relate the murky origins of this

word of the season. Our oldest quotation evidence records a metaphorical use of the word, linking light with clear thinking. Typically, we would expect a metaphorical meaning to evolve from a more literal one, but earlier evidence for *leerie* as a literal 'lamplighter' is not forthcoming. While it is probably safe to assume that *leerie* was in use on the lips of Scots speakers before it was captured in print, in 1812 the trail goes cold, and the etymology of the word is unclear. The *Dictionary of the Scots Language* attributes the word's inception to the children's alliterative rhyme: 'leerie, leerie, light the lamps', but how this rhyme arose still remains a mystery.

*Leerie* can also refer to the light of a lamp or candle, or the lamp itself, though these uses of the term are less widely known and attested. Again, many illustrations of this meaning are literary and metaphorical. In a poem of 1888, Robert Bennett wrote: 'Noo the gowan shuts its e'e, And the starnie lights its leerie', the brightness of the daisy's eye receding as the stars come out in the gloaming. Use of the word *leerie* is rare and usually historical after this time, so with twilight falling on this aptly autumnal term, this seems an appropriate place to end.

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(c) *The Bottle Imp*