

Scots Word of the Season: 'Sassenach'

By Maggie Scott

Sassenach *adj.* and *n.* English; an English person

Sassenach is derived from the Scottish Gaelic word *sasunnach*, literally meaning 'Saxon', and originally used by Gaelic speakers to refer to non-Gaelic speaking Scottish Lowlanders. Scots, after all, is descended from northern varieties of the medieval language known as Old English or Anglo-Saxon, and although Scots and English evolved into their own distinctive forms, they have much more in common with each other than with Gaelic. As Tobias Smollett wrote in the novel, *Humphrey Clinker* (1771), 'The Highlanders have no other name for the people of the Low country, but Sassenagh [*sic.*], or Saxons'. In modern Scotland, however, the Gaelic term has been adopted into general usage as *sassenach*, denoting something or someone English. Labels for specific groups of people can of course be problematic, encouraging a sense of cultural and ideological division, and evoking an air of tribalism or inequality. The assertion that 'this is *our* word for *you* (whether you like it or not)' is clearly a political statement, even when the word is not used intentionally as a term of abuse. The Scots and the English, over the centuries, have had some issues. Catherine Tate's comedy sketch, where the English grandmother 'cannot' understand her Scottish neighbour except in terms of 'something about kilts', lampoons a stereotype that is more often fiction than fact, yet real enough to make many a viewer laugh when he or she sees it.

Sassenach, while a potentially loaded term, is found in a wide range of contexts, sometimes for stylistic effect. *The Herald* asserted in 2002 that: 'BBC Scotland is hoping [the soap opera] *River City* will be just as long-running as its *Sassenach* equivalents'. In this instance, 'Sassenach equivalents' makes the geographical point more clearly, sidestepping the ambiguities of 'English equivalents' which could signify language rather than location. Furthermore, *Sassenach* is well suited to journalese writing that welcomes any opportunity to evoke a sense of 'us' and 'them'. There are of course more extreme cases. The actor Maurice Roeves, who was born in Sunderland, recalled some unpleasant childhood experiences after his

family moved to Partick. In a *Daily Record* interview last year he said: “I’d be talking in a Geordie accent and the other kids would be: ‘sassenach’. I got beaten up to hell. I had to learn Glaswegian pretty quick to join the gang.”

The divisive aspect of *sassenach* is mitigated somewhat by its adoption by English people. Writing in the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* in February, Jeremy Cresswell stated: “Strictly speaking I’m a sassenach, but I have spent the bulk of my working life north of the border”. Social, cross-border initiatives, such as ‘Burns in the Buff’, held this year in Dunoon, are clearly good examples of occasions when people can get to know each other better. The volunteers’ co-ordinator for the largest naked Burns Supper of its kind was quoted in *The Herald* as saying: “As a mere Sassenach, I found the haggis absolutely wonderful”.

You can also see our article on ‘Scots Language in Diana Gabaldon’s *Outlander*’ for a list of Scots words used in the novel and programs. **Sassenach** *adj.* and *n.* English; an English person

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