

Scots Word of the Season: 'Provost'

By Maggie Scott

Provost *n.* the head of a Scottish municipal corporation or burgh, chair of the town or burgh council, corresponding to English *mayor*

Provosts still play an important role in the governance of many Scottish towns and cities, but the word has a long history that is perhaps not so well known, and the current Scottish meaning ceased to be used in England many centuries ago. Major city councils are often led by a Lord Provost, including Glasgow (since the fifteenth century) and Edinburgh (since the seventeenth century), and *provost* is applied as a courtesy title in some local authorities, including North and South Ayrshire.

The word *provost* is first recorded in Scots in the late fourteenth century, both in the general sense of 'ruler' or 'governor', and in the specific use designating 'the head of a municipal corporation or burgh'. An early documented example occurs in an Edinburgh charter of 1387, where one "Androw Yutsoun" is described as "prowest of the Burgh of Edynburgh and the communitie of that ylke [ilk]". (The word can look a little different in medieval texts, where the symbols w and v are used interchangeably.) Evidence for the historical uses of the term typically survives in legal and official documents. Provosts were often involved in meting out justice, although in some medieval and early modern contexts the title *provost marshal* was applied to those who caught and punished offenders. Sir Thomas Kellie's *Pallas Armata, or Militarie Instructions for the Learned* (1627), warned that each military regiment had a provost marshal to deal specifically with "delinquents".

In fifteenth century Scotland, *provost* could also refer to other authority figures including the principals of colleges at St. Andrews University. *Provost* passed into Scots from several sources, including medieval English *profost* and French *provost*, and their post-classical Latin ancestor *propositus*, which is related to and has the same meaning as classical Latin *praepositus*, 'a person

placed in charge'. In medieval Britain, a *provost* was frequently a person responsible for a religious community, such as a convent or monastery. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes, in English contexts the word *provost* has been used historically to designate a wide range of officials, leaders and representatives. These include (in no particular order): an assistant fencing-master, a protestant clergyman, a Muslim muezzin, the head of an educational college, and the archangel Michael.

Similar uses of *provost* denoting a person in a high-status role can be found in modern day North America, where a senior university academic or administrator might hold this title. The heads of several Oxbridge colleges and of Trinity College in Dublin are still known as provosts, and the title also applies to the heads of some English private schools, including Eton. In part this connection is a link with the past, when heads of educational establishments would also have had a religious role by default. Other religious links can also be traced in modern Scotland; the minister of a Scottish Episcopal cathedral church has been known to use the title *provost* since the late nineteenth century.

(c) *The Bottle Imp*