

# Scots Word of the Season: ‘Croup’

By Maggie Scott

**croup** *n.* an inflammatory affection of the larynx and trachea of children

Scots has a wide array of terminology relating to the body and its ailments. An uncle of mine, originally from Argyllshire and more familiar with *Ivanhoe* than the demotic of the lowlands, learned much about everyday language while working as a GP in Ayrshire. He regularly encountered patients hoasting loudly with respiratory infections, sporting plooky teenage complexions, or suffering from the boak due to food poisoning. One man had pain in the pap o’ his hass (also known as the uvula), and there were innumerable smits requiring antibiotic treatment. Broken bones were encased in white stookies while they healed, and children were dosed with potions that would gar you grue. Local knowledge is very useful for communication, and an examination of linguistic history can reveal further insights about stravaigin Scots words.

Now regarded as the standard English word, *croup* was originally a regional Scots word for the childhood disease. The term gained wider currency in 1765 when Edinburgh physician Professor Frances Home wrote his ‘Inquiry into the nature, cause, and cure of the Croup’ (SND).<sup>1</sup> This specialised meaning developed from the earlier verb *croup*, originally meaning ‘croak; cry hoarsely like a crow, frog or other animal’, found earliest in Scottish poetry written in the early sixteenth century. There is a ‘Cursit croapand craw’ (cursed croaking crow) in Walter Kennedy’s historic flyting with William Dunbar (1508), and in Gavin Douglas’s Scots translation of the *Aeneid* (1513), birds are described ‘crouping in the sky’. The word was later used of humans, with the meaning ‘speak hoarsely, as one does under the effects of cold’, recorded by the Reverend John Jamieson in his *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* (1808).<sup>2</sup>

William Buchan’s *Domestic Medicine* (1769) notes that the disease was typically called *croup* on the East coast, but was typically known as *the chock* or *stuffing* in the West of Scotland. *Chock* was included in Jamieson’s *Supplement* to his dictionary (1825),<sup>3</sup> and shows a specialised use of Scots *chock* ‘choke’. A person

suffering from tonsillitis could be described as *chockit*, and the compound *chock-rope* denoted 'an appliance of slightly flexible material, having the appearance of rope, used for clearing the throat of an animal from any obstruction'. *Stuffing* also appears in texts written in England, where it denotes an 'obstruction of the throat, nose, or chest by catarrh' (OED).<sup>4</sup> Both *chock* and *stuffing* emphasise the croup sufferer's difficulty breathing. These alternate names appear to have fallen out of use in Scots, unless of course readers know better. Do let us know!

Illness and superstition have an ancient symbiotic relationship, and historical Scottish vocabulary contains a treasure-trove of lexical curiosities. *Elf-shot* was a cattle disease, 'thought to have been inflicted by elves', *the Macdonald's disease*, a chest complaint, was 'cured miraculously by particular members of the family', and one sixteenth-century poem alludes to a disturbingly named mysterious ailment known as *Cannogait breikis* (literally 'Canongate trousers'). Edinburgh's Canongate is welcome to keep such secrets.

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(c) *The Bottle Imp*