Scots Word of the Season: ‘Clamjamfry’

By Maggie Scott

clamjamfry *n.* (disparaging) a company, crowd of people, rabble; rubbish, junk

Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) is credited with introducing to the wider world many Scottish words including *Gael* ‘Celt; Scottish Highlander’, which appears in *The Lady of the Lake* (1810), and *Glaswegian* ‘a person from or living in Glasgow’, which appears in *Rob Roy* (1817). Although *Glaswegian* has endured, some consider it ‘incorrect’ and it provoked strong words from the *Glasgow Herald* newspaper in 1923 — one writer thought it ‘both ugly and absurd […] Let us in the name of etymology and common sense be Glasgovians’. (Compare for example *Shavian* ‘an admirer of George Bernard Shaw’.)

Not all of the terms Scott popularised are now (or were then) exclusive to Scotland, and *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) credits him with the first written use of over 460 words and phrases, spanning the lexicon from *All Soul’s Eve*‘the evening before All Soul’s Day’, to *zizz* ‘a buzzing noise made by a wheel turning at speed’. His visibility and influence as a writer has also resulted in the inclusion in the OED of a number of more unusual terms which failed to achieve wider currency, such as *appeteesement* ‘hunger’, *dislikelihood* ‘improbability’ and *doodle* ‘play the bagpipes’. Such inventiveness is not always celebrated. The Victorian OED editors viewed his spelling of *embroglio* ‘entanglement’ as no more than a ‘[b]ad form of *imbroglio*‘ and took umbrage at his term *ambagitory* ‘wordy’, deeming it ‘not etymologically defensible’ – the ‘problem’ being Scott’s creative adaptation of the Latin word *ambāges* ‘circumlocutions’ on analogy with words like *dilatory* and *transitory*.

Given the twists and turns of Scott’s linguistic experimentations, it is perhaps appropriate to dwell slightly longer on the Scots word *clanjamfry*, a variant of *clamjamfry*, typically used dismissively of a collection of people or things. Scott is credited with the first written example of this term. In *The Black Dwarf* (1816), when Earnscliffe and the Elliots, seeking Willie Graeme, are refused entry to the

Tower of Westburnflat, the ‘old dame’ of the Tower asks: ‘”And what will ye do, if I carena to thraw the keys, or draw the bolts, or open the grate to sic a clanjamfrie?”‘

As with most words first used by Scott, it is hard to know whether he is simply the first person to write it down in a document dictionary-makers would later regard as culturally important, or whether he is directly responsible for this new lexical contrivance. It has been conjectured that the *clan–* of *clanjamfry* may imply a connection with the idea of a clan or family, which would be apt in relation to the tale’s belligerent Elliots, and with Elliot being a well-known, kenspeckle Scottish Border clan. As for the *jamfry* aspect, it is perhaps appealing to connect it to Scots *jampher* ‘a jeerer, mocker’ which *Dictionary of the Scots Language* identifies in several nineteenth century sources. Nevertheless, this theory is as yet not proven, and the ultimate solution to the word’s origins remains obscure.**clamjamfry *n.*** (disparaging) a company, crowd of people, rabble; rubbish, junk

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