

Scots Word of the Season: 'Lift'

By Maggie Scott

lift *n.* the amount of fish that can be lifted aboard by hand in the net; a collection; etc.

v. to take up out of the ground; (in golf) to take up the ball; etc.

Several of Naomi Mitchison's novels and non-fiction works are quoted as evidence for Scots words and meanings in the online [Dictionary of the Scots Language \(DSL\)](#) because of their cultural and linguistic insights. Her Jacobite novel, *The Bull Calves* (1947), provides a rare published instance of Scots *shallock*, 'yellow flag-iris', and terms such as *wastry* 'wastefulness, extravagance' and *graip* 'a pronged fork used in farming and gardening' appear in her modern West Highland novel, *Lobsters on the Agenda* (1952). There is also a good amount of Scots in Mitchison's study of the fishing industry, *Men and Herring: A Documentary* (1949), co-authored with fisherman Denis MacIntosh. This work illustrates everyday language such as Scots *skirl*, describing the sound of the 'wind from the nor'-east' and names for creatures such as the *stainlock* or coalfish. Furthermore, the book records words specific to industrial history, such as *zulu*, a term for a fishing-boat frequently used in the Firths of Moray and Clyde in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Subtler examples of technical Scots fishing terms include *lift*, with the specific meaning, 'the amount of fish that can be lifted aboard by hand in the net', reckoned to be 'about half-a-basketful', and often used in reference to catches of herring. Mitchison and MacIntosh (1949) provide the earliest evidence for this term. It is further documented in other mid-twentieth century contexts as a measure of quantity, including an article from the *Buchan Observer* in 1961: 'The catch? — 650 'lifts' of cod.'

Many 'ordinary' words shared by Scots and English have developed usages that are not shared by both languages. In Scots, a *lift* can be an ocean swell, as in the *New Shetlander* (1958): 'There was a lift in the sea and there was no proper landing place.' Additionally, *lift* can denote a collection or whip-round, as noted in the *Statistical Account for Ayrshire* (1951): 'money [...] is got by a door-to-door

“lift” and by benefit concerts’.

In golf, *lift* meaning ‘to take up the ball’ is regarded as a Scots usage by DSL and the [Oxford English Dictionary \(OED\)](#). Evidence dates back to the early nineteenth century in Charles Smith’s *Golfer* (1815): ‘The player shall at all times have it in his power to lift his ball from a hazard upon losing a stroke.’

Both DSL and OED record the verb lift ‘to take up out of the ground’ as a Scots usage. Unlike more kenspeckle words such as *scunner* or *dreich*, Scots terms which evidence minor distinctions from their English counterparts may quietly pass their reader or listener, their wee saltire tightly furled. Robert Louis Stevenson uses the ‘take up out of the ground’ meaning in *Treasure Island* (1883), where the word’s Scottishness remains comparatively blate: ‘There is still treasure not yet lifted.’ Ongoing lexical research continues to unearth such distinctions.

(c) *The Bottle Imp*