

Scots Word of the Season: ‘Skoosh’

By Maggie Scott

skoosh v. (cause to) gush, splash, squirt; dart, move rapidly with a swishing sound; etc

n. a splash, spurt, jet (of liquid); carbonated drink such as lemonade; etc

Skoosh is an onomatopoeic word that ably echoes the sound of the speedy, swishy, splashy things it describes. Although it may be much older, written evidence for *skoosh* (sometimes *scoosh*) first appears in the late nineteenth century according to the *Dictionary of the Scots Language* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Both sources cite James Coghill’s poem ‘The Trystin’ Burn’ (1890), a metaphorical rendezvous river in which guddling trout (catching them by hand) is akin to the pursuit of love: ‘When maist I thocht the prey secure— / Ere ane could crack a whup / ‘Twad scoosh awa’ roon’ muckle stanes, / Or ‘neth the weed sae green’.

A Scots Quiz in the Scottish *Daily Mail* from April 19th of this year included the question ‘What form of transport was known as a skoosh-car?’ (Answer: an old-fashioned tram-car, such as those once seen on the streets of Glasgow.) The speed and sound of the vehicle accounts for this adaptation of the term. In *Erchie, My Droll Friend* (1904), Hugh Foulis (better known as Neil Munro) writes of his eponymous character planning ‘a perusal doon the length o’ Yoker on the skoosh car’ to observe the primroses and buds heralding the spring.

Speed and sound also combine in one of the reminiscences collected by Anna Blair in *More Tea at Miss Cranston’s* (1991). One of her interviewees recalled ‘the “automatic” chippery’ at a Glasgow Exhibition ‘where, for tuppence, a poke of vinegared chips came scooshing at you down a chute’. Scooshing also moves with the times. Fiona Foden’s *Life, Death and Gold Leather Trousers* (2011), sees excessive aromas likened to ‘scooshing yourself with all the perfume testers in the chemist’s’, and in a character in Fiona Gibson’s *The Woman Who Met Her Match* (2017), is ‘scooshing hairspray all over her coppery curls’.

The versatility and evolution of *skoosh* effectively illustrates ways that words take on new meanings. An exploration of the *Dictionary of the Scots Language* reveals

that in the early twentieth century, *skoosh* was the name for a particular game of marbles, and that since at least the 1970s, a utensil for sprinkling or spraying has often been described as a *skoosher*.

Skoosh has developed further meanings relating to liquids and speed. In Iain Banks's novel *The Crow Road* (1993), a request for *skoosh* is met with 'a half-finished bottle of Irn-Bru', and in Liz Lochhead's play, *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* (1989), the term is a command to flee: 'Wee Betty: Skoosh! Richie: Skedaddle. Wee Betty: See you later, alligator!'

A *skoosh* can also be something easy, or performed with little effort. In 1997 *The Scotsman* reported a comment by the late Donald Dewar on reinstating Scotland's Parliament: 'Writing the bill to give legal flesh to the bones of the Scottish parliament white paper, was not, he said, a downhill "skoosh"'. **skoosh v.** (cause to) gush, splash, squirt; dart, move rapidly with a swishing sound; etc
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