Scots Word of the Season: Quaich

By Maggie Scott

quaich *n*. a shallow, bowl-shaped (silver or wooden) drinking cup with two handles

This is the time of year when students are graduating and prize-giving ceremonies mark the end of the academic year. Quaichs are often presented as prizes at such events, perhaps to the dux of the school. While the audience are cheering, they might spare a thought for the local and international linguistic connections these words and events recall — with the term *dux* 'the best pupil in a school, class or subject' coming from Latin *dux* 'leader', and *quaich* from Gaelic *cuach* 'cup, bowl'. Just like English, Scots draws on many languages for its rich vocabulary.

The earliest known incidence of the term is found in a record from the *Scottish Acts of the Lords of Council and Session* dating from 1546, in which 'ane drinking quhaich' is priced at ten shillings and four pence. Quaichs were initially made out of staves of wood surrounded by metal hoops, and usually with two 'ears' or handles, sometimes with silver mountings. The presence of these handles is sometimes indicated in historical sources, as for example the 1685 description of a typical 'large silver quech having two lugs', or in the more elaborate 'big quech cup with three lugs' recorded in 1703, both noted in the *Dictionary of the Scots Language* (DSL). *Lugs*, as most Scots will know, are ears, but they are not always part of the design of a quaich. An inventory of 1697 in DSL includes an entry for 'three round queichs without luggs'.

The more current usage of the object as a trophy often occurs in contexts with a strongly Scottish cultural connection. One of the prizes on offer at the annual Fiddler of Strathspey Festival in Grantown is the Reidhaven Quaich; Scotland and Ireland's Rugby Union teams compete against one another for the annual Centenary Quaich during the Six Nations Championship; the winner of the National Library of Scotland's Callum Macdonald Memorial Award for publishing poetry receives a cheque for £1,500 and a commemorative quaich.

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in the journalism that covered the story was the instruction to mispronounce the word as *quake* (as in *earthquake*). This bad advice can indeed still be found on the websites of Britain's *Telegraph* newspaper and the United States' NBC (National Broadcasting Corporation). Full marks, however, go to the *Financial Times*, and the website *emmasaying.com* (with its handy recording), which do not inflict such torments. Take a moment to demystify the final sound — a voiceless velar fricative, to give it its more technical phonetic designation. Dictionaries using the International Phonetic Alphabet will represent this with the symbol [x] also heard at the end of *loch* and Johann Sebastian *Bach*. So maybe language purism isn't your thing and I sound unnecessarily prescriptive here, but if you are going to insist on anglicising loch to 'lock' and Bach to 'Back', for reasons of your own, please do so consciously rather than by unhappy accident. Thank you!**quaich** *n*. a shallow, bowl-shaped (silver or wooden) drinking cup with two handles

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