“We never get ony fun here!” – The Scottish Comic Strip *Oor Wullie*

By Anne Guenther

Everybody knows *Oor Wullie – Oor Wullie! Your Wullie! A’body’s Wullie!* This is the well-known tagline on the cover of every annual collection of the *Oor Wullie* comic strips. Wullie, the fair-haired eight- or nine-year-old boy who lives in the fictitious Scottish town of Auchenshoogle, is the hero of many hilarious situations, getting into trouble with the authorities as he goes to school or church. With its nostalgic “Scotticized” language – and outfits – one simply must like Wullie. And this is the way it has been now for a remarkably long time.

The first *Oor Wullie* comic strip was published in the Sunday Post on March 8, 1936. Since then, these comics have been printed every weekend as part of the Sunday Post’s Fun Section and again at the end of the year in annuals. From 1940 to 2015, these were published every other year, alternating with *The Broons*, a comic strip about a Scottish family, and in Special Collections that come out every few years. Fortunately, as its consistently large readership would put it, since 2015 the annuals have been published every year.

Publication of these comic strips and their stunning popularity continue to this day –no less than eighty-five years now! *Oor Wullie*’s fame shows in its widespread circulation (with 100,000 copies each year[1]). Today some of the older annuals sell for more than £5,000.[2] After *Oor Wullie*’s eightieth anniversary in 2017, a charity fund-raiser called “The Oor Wullie Bucket Trail” was launched. This turned out to be Scotland’s largest mass public art project, which raised the astounding amount of £1.3 million for three children’s charities. Subsequently, in the summer of 2019, more than 150 human-sized Wullie sculptures were sponsored and put on display in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee, Aberdeen and Inverness, and eventually sold at auctions.

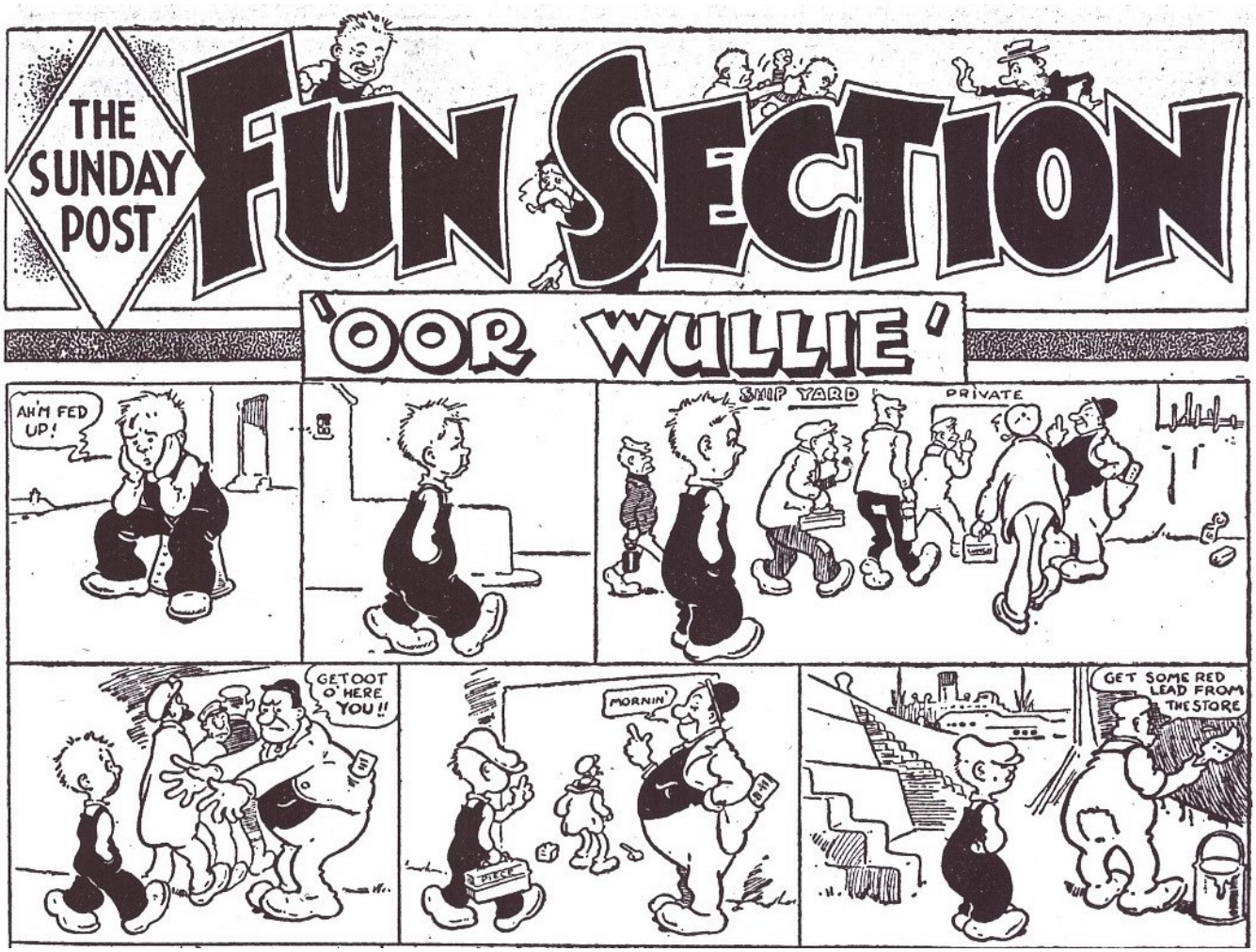
Wullie has become a true Scottish national symbol, as the figure underlines a feeling of shared experience among many Scots. It is not least due to this popularity that *Oor Wullie* has also raised significant interest among scholars. For

the record, it is worth recalling here some of the most prominent examples in this respect: In 1987 Sandy Hobbs[3] analysed the *Oor Wullie* comics with the focus on their portrayal of education. Michael Stubbs [4] directs our attention to the image of Scots and called *Oor Wullie* an example of entertaining writing which depicts Scots in typical contexts of amusing situations and jokes. John Corbett[5] and Manfred Görlach[6] look at *The Broons* and establish a connection to stereotypes of Scotland, in studies specifically addressing the language. Ingvild Haavet Bjørnson, [7] in turn, examines linguistic features in *Oor Wullie* and *The Broons* that add Scottishness to the comics while concentrating on the degree and consistency of their representation. Maureen Farrell,[8] furthermore, addresses the social pressure to "clean up" the language that Wullie has been subject to and the role of the comics in helping to shape the identity of young readers. More recently, Axel Koehler[9] has drawn attention to *Oor Wullie* as being an integral part of Scottish popular culture along with the other very popular DC Thomson comic strips, *The Broons*, *The Beano*, *The Dandy* and *The Topper*.

I myself spent at one point a school year in Great Britain and became fascinated by *Oor Wullie*. Later, I decided to make it the subject of my PhD thesis.[10] This study, entitled "The Scottishness of *Oor Wullie*", looks at a range of questions. It investigates, for example, the dynamics of the stereotypes, along with the linguistic changes and the mechanisms of the great success *Oor Wullie* has been enjoying now for so many years. Given these premises, the thesis analyses phonological, morpho-syntactic and lexical features in *Oor Wullie* in the context of the changing topics between 1936 and 2004.

What are the most visible features of Scottishness in terms of language in *Oor Wullie* and how are they changing over time?

"We never get ony fun here"



Oor Wullie, Sunday Post, March 22 1936
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For the early *Oor Wullie* comics, the use of the word *ony* was very typical. In fact, the first story (from March 8, 1936) both began and ended with *We never get ony fun here*; as for the next two stories (March 15 and March 22, 1936), we find this famous catch phrase only at the end (although without “here” as the last word). *Ony* also occurs in other *Oor Wullie* stories. Indeed, in a corpus of nearly 230 *Oor Wullie* stories, dated between 1936 and 2004, the expression *ony* occurs fifty-seven times, with forty-two times alone in the first thirty-four years of the comic strip’s publication.

What do these figures tell us? First, during all these years the editorial teams of *Oor Wullie* seem to have considered *ony* to be a typical Scottish expression, an insight that is supported by the scholarly literature to some degree. Karl Luick,[11] for example, states that *ony* is a northern variant of Old English *any*, whose early written occurrences can be traced back as far as *c*. 1300 in Middle English. Interestingly, it also occurs in John Barbour's *The Bruce* (1375).[12] Second, *ony* seems to have become used much less frequently over time, and appears to be obsolete by the time of the newer strips, since 1990.

But let us not forget: No matter how 'modern' *Oor Wullie* might have become over the last two decades, his charming, somewhat old-fashioned flair is still reflected in the language. In many scholarly articles (cf. the aforementioned Farrell, Bjørnson) as well as non-scientific publications, *Oor Wullie* is associated with three exclamations: *jings*, *crivvens* and *Help ma Boab*. What these interjections mean will become clear in the following.

Jings, Crivvens and Help ma Boab

"Jings! That wis a narrow escape!"[13] The exclamation slips out of Wullie's mouth quite frequently. Needless to say, Wullie has sometimes been criticised for using the swear word *jings*. In a story from 1948,[14] Wullie's mother scolds her son rather harshly, saying: "I'm fed up hearin' you say 'jings' and 'crivvens' – jings, it's awfy language – how can ye no try tae stop it?"

According to the *Scottish National Dictionary*, *jings* is a 'mild expletive'.[15] Its English equivalent would be *(by) jingo*.[16] Furthermore, the *Oxford English Dictionary* explains *high jingo!* as 'a piece of conjuror's gibberish'.[17] Very similar to *Oor Wullie*'s use of the expression, the *Oxford English Dictionary* records that *by jingo*relates to the French *par Dieu*, meaning "by God". [18] The occurrence of the word in the expression *high jingo* can be proven as early as the late seventeenth century (1670, to be precise).[19]

The *Oxford English Dictionary* also states that *jings* apparently was a sacred name which may have been introduced to the English and the Scottish language through Basque sailors. *Jinko*, *Jainko* (*Yinko*, *Yainko*), *Jincoa* and *Jaincoa* are

Basque spellings of references to God.[20] In another context, in the Russian war against the Turks in 1878, the Russian tendency to feel superior was sometimes described as *jingoism.* Likewise, still today, *jingoism* refers to a "mood of inflated patriotism".[21]

Nowadays, the use of this word has become obsolete in English. However, *jings* or *by jings* is occasionally still in use in Scots and Scottish English. In its first recorded usage, *by jing* was shown to have been a swear word. The expression *by jing* was, for example, included in the poem "Halloween" by Robert Burns from 1785.[22] Similar occurrences of *jings* have also been noted in Australian English, even today. The *Macquarie Dictionary* defines *jings* as "A remark or whinge of derision when one is told one cannot have what one wants (i.e., go to the pictures, swimming, have money etc.): Jings! Also, jingies" – this is exactly the meaning evident in *Oor Wullie*."[23]

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"Help m' Boab! The hoose is fa'in' in!". Next to *jings* and *crivvens*, the third key exclamation in *Oor Wullie* is *Help ma Boab*.[29] The expression occurs in *Oor Wullie* in varying orthographic representations: *Help ma boab, help mah bob, help mah boab* and *help m' bob*. Help ma Boab or helpmabob is "an ejaculation expressing astonishment or exasperation … *bob* being euphemistic for *God*".[30] The *Scottish National Dictionary* traces *help ma boab* back to 1922, in a book by the Argyllshire poet J. B. Salmond.

All in all, the expressions *jings*, *crivvens* and *Help ma Boab* are true landmarks in *Oor Wullie*, linguistically and culturally. In a corpus of 224 comic strips, *jings* is the most often used of the three. *Jings* shows a clear increase in use in the 1980s. It was then that the editors of the comics apparently felt obliged to increase somewhat the Scottishness in these stories. Not only was the language made to sound more Scottish (by using older expressions less common today); certain components were also added that were seen as typically Scottish. Now Wullie had a West Highland Terrier; he went hiking in the Highlands, and often attended traditional Scottish celebrations. This publishing policy, however, was changed in the late 1990s, as the *Oor Wullie* editors seem to have felt that this strategy was focusing too much on traditional Scottish symbols. In an attempt to attract more younger readers, the Scottish English was now slightly diluted.

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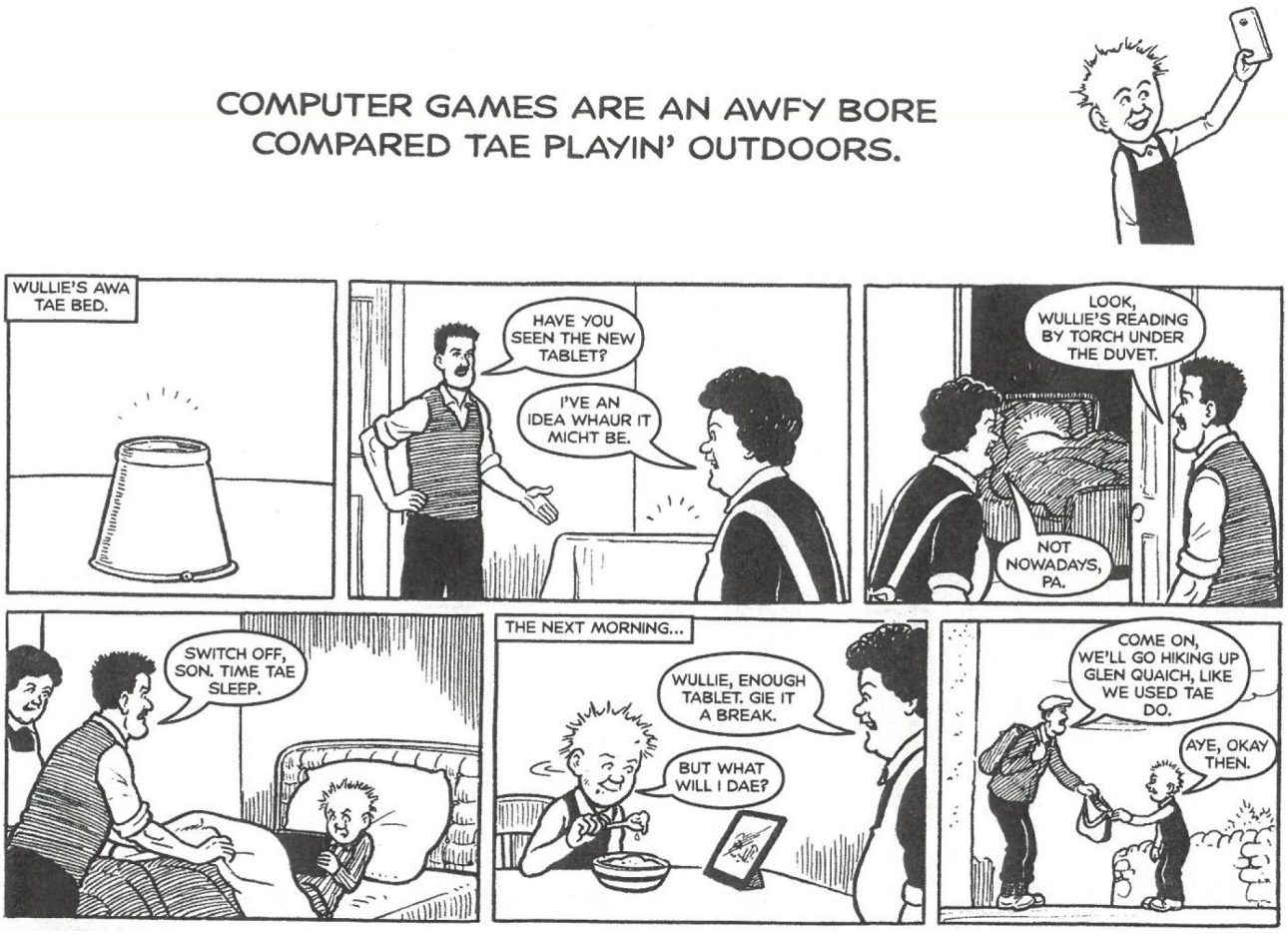
The stories of the recent years picture our protagonist in more contemporary everyday situations, including the boy's demands for more screen time in his family.[31] Fortunately, Wullie still spends a lot of time outside the house, playing soccer, hiking, fishing or racing with his 'cartie'. In this, he is setting a commendable example for young readers.



Oor Wullie Annual 2018 p. 40
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But Wullie is still wearing his black dungarees and old shoes, and the stories still begin and end with an image of Wullie's old bucket that gives the comic strips their unique narrative frame. Regarding these depictions of the boy's appearance, but more so concerning the portrayed demographic and the "purely" Scottish environment he lives and plays in, these comics are still relevant to contemporary life in the year 2021. This "updated" *Oor Wullie* also shows the tension between archetypical, recognisable landmarks on the one hand and the modern world with its digital media on the other, while Wullie's peers and pranks continue to be part of his adventures.

As the case may be, the kaleidoscopic mix of traditional and modern is what the readers – many of them adults – genuinely enjoy in *Oor Wullie*. It has always been a highly respected piece of artwork and an expression of societal belonging, promoting a feeling of connection across the Scottish nation. DC Thomson do a wonderful job of producing a traditionally brilliant comic strip: one that is

entertaining, engaging, empathetic, sometimes soothing and more often tremendously amusing. But what is perhaps more, *Oor Wullie* gives its readers enough room to create their own little Auchenshoogle. The old walls and little shoppies, as well as the characters, are dynamic enough so that they do not need to be drawn to their perfect finish. A good portion of specifically Scottish features of the language is still kept up in these comic strips and underscores their Scottishness. The proportion of Scots features strikes the perfect balance: not too much and not too little. The comic strip's constant allusions to "the good old times" invite the reader to set the images and dialogues together like pieces of a puzzle and *experience* Scotland. This is what makes *Oor Wullie* a timelessly traditional, yet light and artful piece of literature that seems to reflect the values and the conscience of Scotland. *Oor Wullie* not only holds up a mirror to Scottish readers but also evokes thoughts of Scottishness, including a number of well-known associations, such as Highland Games, Haggis and tartans. Among those, *Oor Wullie* continues to hold a prominent place.

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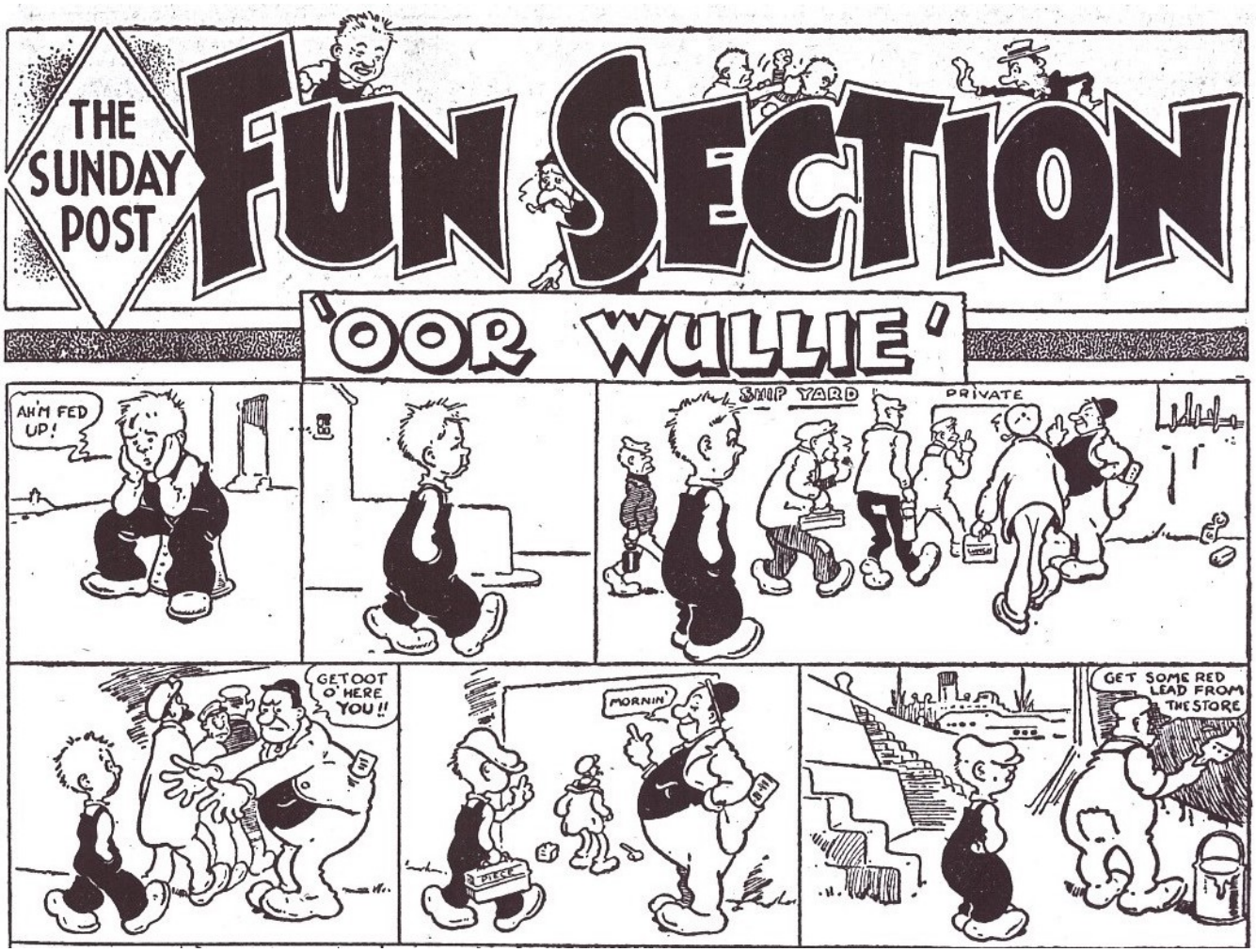

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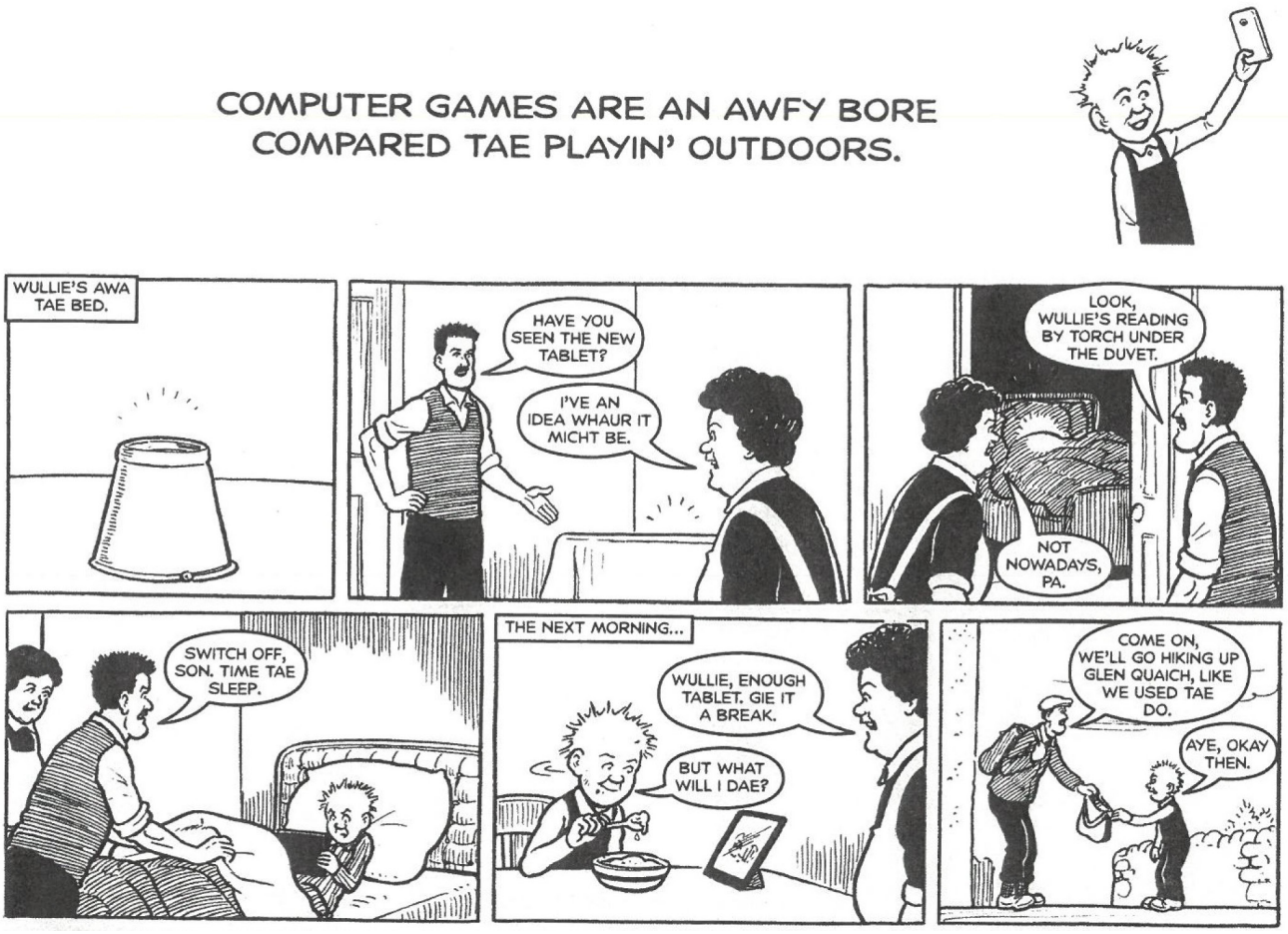

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But Wullie is still wearing his black dungarees and old shoes, and the stories still begin and end with an image of Wullie's old bucket that gives the comic strips their unique narrative frame. Regarding these depictions of the boy's appearance, but more so concerning the portrayed demographic and the "purely" Scottish environment he lives and plays in, these comics are still relevant to contemporary life in the year 2021. This "updated" *Oor Wullie* also shows the tension between archetypical, recognisable landmarks on the one hand and the modern world with its digital media on the other, while Wullie's peers and pranks continue to be part of his adventures.

As the case may be, the kaleidoscopic mix of traditional and modern is what the readers – many of them adults – genuinely enjoy in *Oor Wullie*. It has always been a highly respected piece of artwork and an expression of societal belonging, promoting a feeling of connection across the Scottish nation. DC Thomson do a wonderful job of producing a traditionally brilliant comic strip: one that is

entertaining, engaging, empathetic, sometimes soothing and more often tremendously amusing. But what is perhaps more, *Oor Wullie* gives its readers enough room to create their own little Auchenshoogle. The old walls and little shoppies, as well as the characters, are dynamic enough so that they do not need to be drawn to their perfect finish. A good portion of specifically Scottish features of the language is still kept up in these comic strips and underscores their Scottishness. The proportion of Scots features strikes the perfect balance: not too much and not too little. The comic strip's constant allusions to "the good old times" invite the reader to set the images and dialogues together like pieces of a puzzle and *experience* Scotland. This is what makes *Oor Wullie* a timelessly traditional, yet light and artful piece of literature that seems to reflect the values and the conscience of Scotland. *Oor Wullie* not only holds up a mirror to Scottish readers but also evokes thoughts of Scottishness, including a number of well-known associations, such as Highland Games, Haggis and tartans. Among those, *Oor Wullie* continues to hold a prominent place.

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