



ISSN 1754-1514

The Bottle Imp

Issue 7, May 2010

Scots Word of the Season:

Wean *n.* A child, especially a young one.

Maggie Scott

Scots has a number of words for children and young people, the most well-known being *bairn* and *wean*. While *bairn* is traditionally associated with dialects of the north and east of Scotland, *wean* is more often found in the south and west, and both terms occasionally appear in northern English dialects, reminding us of the fluidity of linguistic 'boundaries'. *Wean* is a good example of an entirely Scots compound, deriving from *wee ain* 'little one', unlike the term *bairn*, which was inherited from Old English *bearn*, and reinforced by Old Norse *barn*.

Wean therefore reminds us that Scots, as a living language, can generate new vocabulary from its existing word-stock and does not always borrow new terms from other sources. Early uses of the word, including the following example from Alan Ramsay's *The Gentle Shepherd* (1725) evidence this shift from two words to one: "Troth, my Niece is a right dainty we'an".

A young man might also be described as a *chiel* or *chield*, as in Robert Burns' description of his friend Francis Grose, the noted antiquarian:

"Hear, Land o' Cakes, and brither Scots, Frae Maid-enkirk to Johnie Groat's, If there's a hole in a' your coats, I rede (advise) you tent (pay attention to) it: A chield's amang you takin notes, And faith he'll prent it".

The two men were good friends and Burns' epic poem *Tam o'Shanter* was created to complement the illustration of Alloway's Auld Haunted Kirk in Grose's *Antiquities of Scotland* (1791).

Talented or promising weans and bairns are often described as lads and lasses o' pairts, the most famous lad o' pairts being our aforementioned bard. This popular expression also crops up in non-Scottish English, and is of relatively recent invention. It derives from a section title

in Ian Maclaren's couthy tale of pastoral life, *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush* (1894), hailed as one of the first of the so-called Kailyard school of literary works that idealised rural Scotland.

A quick browse through the multi-volume *Dictionary of the Scots Language* at www.dsl.ac.uk reveals more unusual terms like *ungadrenge* 'a young man', used in the taboo language of Shetland fishermen until the early 20th century. Dangerous occupations like fishing and mining often generate elaborate superstitions, and this term, deriving from a Norwegian dialectal phrase *unge drenge* 'young men', was used to minimise bad luck when discussing the topic on board ship – similarly, a minister was a *black coat* and a mouse was an *umik*.

Wean is extremely commonplace in Glasgow and is often uttered with *smeddum* by Members of the Scottish Parliament keen to show their affinity with the western *vox populi*. Illustrating examples of everyday Glasgow vernacular to the uninitiated in an April 2009 article, *The Scotsman* newspaper employed such phrases as "Wharlla stick ma wean's buggie?" The article celebrated the achievements of local bus driver James Lillis, who won an award for learning Polish so that he could translate Glaswegian more effectively for Polish immigrants working in the industry. While this may raise a smile, it also makes an interesting and subtle point about translation into Scots, which should inspire lads and lasses o' pairts of all ages.



ASLS is a registered charity no. SC006535
ASLS is supported by the Scottish Arts Council



www.thebottleimp.org.uk

The Bottle Imp is the ezine of the Scottish Writing Exhibition www.scottishwriting.org.uk
and is published by the Association for Scottish Literary Studies www.asls.org.uk