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Author: Linda M. Hagan

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The Revival Of The Ulster-Scots Cultural Identity At The Beginning Of The Twenty-First Century

Linda M. Hagan

The Scotch and Irish friendly are,
Their wishes are the same,
. . . Our historians and our poets
They always did maintain
That the origin of the Scottishmen
And Irish are the same. . .
(From 'The Social Thistle and Shamrock' partly attributed to Henry Joy McCracken)

These sentiments from 'The Social Thistle and Shamrock', partly attributed to Henry Joy McCracken, a leader of the United Irishmen, a Presbyterian and an Ulster-Scot, reflect the close links which have existed between Ireland – especially the north-eastern part of the island – and Scotland. It is perhaps at least partially because of these links it is still possible to differentiate on a cultural basis between the inhabitants of its northern and southern parts. The province of Ulster has always been unique and distinct. '. . . there has been an otherness to the region and its people that has mystified strangers and created difficulties . . . with its neighbours'.[1]

One aspect of this 'otherness' is the influence of the Ulster-Scots, who at the beginning of the twenty-first century have an increasing awareness of their own language and cultural traditions. A sense of cultural identity is becoming increasingly important in a world of globalisation, since 'it provides a sense of belonging. It is a root in a rootless age . . .'[2] Increasing interest in all things Ulster-Scots could be seen as part of a much wider global search for meaning and identity rather than simply as a political reaction to demands for the revival of a specifically Irish culture.

The popular 'understanding' of who the Ulster-Scots are and when and where they originated tends to focus almost solely on the Plantation period. However, 'Ulster was always close to Scotland both physically and culturally

[1] John Killen, *The unkindest cut: a cartoon history of Ulster 1900–2000* (Belfast, 2000), 1.
[2] A. Alcock, 'Ulster-British Identity and Ulster', in *W. F. Marshall Summer School, 2001* (Coleraine, 2001).

and this was merely reinforced during the plantation in the seventeenth century'.[3] The people of Ulster have always tended to look eastward to their Scottish neighbours more readily than southward. From 'Mesolithic settler and missionary saint to migrant seasonal worker and twentieth-century medical student – the narrow waters of the North Channel have witnessed and carried a constant traffic of people and ideas between the two coasts'.[4]

Until a few years ago, mention of the term 'Ulster-Scots' outside of academic circles would probably have received the response, 'What cultural tradition or language?' Professor Michael Montgomery of the University of South Carolina asserts that ' for a long time . . . information on Ulster-Scots could be found only in a few scholarly tomes and academic journals, and these were usually published abroad'.[5] Since the Belfast Agreement of 1998, however, the term 'Ulster-Scots' has been heard more frequently. In this document all parties acknowledged the 'importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity . . . the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic communities, all of which are part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland.'[6] It established a North South Language Body to promote both the Irish language and the Ulster-Scots language and culture. In recent years there have been significant moves made to overcome the dearth of knowledge about this cultural tradition and to promote an interest in the spoken language. The founding of the Ulster-Scots Language Society in 1992, the Ulster-Scots Heritage Council in 1995 and the Ulster-Scots Agency in 1999 have played significant and important roles in promoting interest and informed opinion about Ulster-Scots language and culture. But, in spite of official acknowledgment, popular and media references have often continued to ridicule the very notion of such a language or cultural identity; to poke fun at the people who would claim this culture or to level accusations of solely political motivation at its proponents.

There has been much debate over the status of Ulster-Scots and controversy persists as to whether it is a language or a dialect of Scots. However, in

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[3] J. Dingley, 'Unionist Contra Nationalist Identity', in *W. F. Marshall Summer School, 2001* (Coleraine, 2001).

[4] J. Erskine, and G. Lucy (eds), *Cultural Traditions in Northern Ireland Varieties of Scottishness* (Belfast, 1997), 1.

[5] M. Montgomery and A. Smyth (eds), *A Blad O Ulster-Scotch Frae Ullans* (Belfast, 2001), 15.

[6] Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of Ireland, *Agreement Reached in the Multi-party Negotiations* (Belfast 1998).

the matter of the revival of an Ulster-Scots culture and the facilitation of a discrete sense of identity, such linguistic debate is somewhat irrelevant. The fact is that Ulster-Scots has been awarded status as a minority language under Part 2 of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and this is an important but not crucial component in the encouragement of interest in Ulster-Scots culture and the revival of an Ulster-Scots cultural identity. It is, however, interesting to note that Gerry Adams argued from a nationalist perspective that 'the restoration of our culture must be a crucial part of our political struggle and that the restoration of the Irish language must be a central part of the cultural struggle'.[7] It is hardly surprising therefore that attempts to promote the Ulster-Scots tongue have been met with the criticism that it is a politically-motivated movement to counter the Irish language revival.

This paper is not concerned with the language issue, however, but with the increasing sense of identification with Ulster-Scots culture – a phenomenon which encompasses more people than those who would claim to speak Ulster-Scots. It examines their perceived communal or ethnic characteristics and explores how the Ulster-Scots present themselves through looking at some humorous writing in both Ulster-Scots and English. It also examines how others outside the Ulster-Scots community have used humour about the people, the culture and the language as a weapon against them.

When we think of humorous writing we automatically think of something designed to entertain. Humour, however, can equally well be used to criticise and ridicule or provide an opportunity for political comment. Whenever we consider the great writers of Irish or Anglo-Irish literature such as Sean O'Casey or Oscar Wilde we do not only think of their stunning comic creations but also of the vivid picture of a society they portrayed or the jibe beneath the veneer of humour which lambasted the accepted norms of behaviour in that society.

Those who form the butt of humour – depending on their self-esteem – may either feel threatened or be able to join in the laughter. The language of a play such as *The Plough and the Stars* is an important element in creating the comedy but the language is being used to develop the comic situation or character, not as a means of poking fun at the language per se. Herbison, however, has described the Ulster-Scots language and literary tradition in the latter years of the twentieth century as 'downgraded to a pseudo-literary or sub-literary dialect, the object of satire and ridicule'.[8] In an audit and needs analysis prepared

[7] Gerry Adams, *Free Ireland: towards a lasting peace* (Dingle, 1986), 147.

[8] I. Herbison, *Language, Literature and Cultural Identity: An Ulster-Scots Perspective* (Ballymena, 1989), 7.

for the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (2004), 22% of the Ulster-Scots groups questioned cited marginalisation and the questioning of the legitimacy of Ulster-Scots culture resulting in low self-esteem as a major issue for them and it is easy to understand why this should be so. Popular perception has remained that Ulster-Scots is merely a dialect, or even in extreme cases has been dismissed as merely a funny accent, and few would even be aware of its fine literary heritage dating back beyond Robert Burns' influence on the Weaver poets to Francis Boyle from County Down and *The Ulster Miscellany* published in Belfast in 1753, the latter including nine 'Scotch Poems' written in the Laggan area of east Donegal.

The media has played its part in the denigration of Ulster-Scots cultural identity. A SWOT analysis compiled to inform future planning in the Arts defined 'the perceived open hostility to Ulster-Scots including from the media' as a major threat to progress.[9] A couple of newspaper articles will exemplify this hostility. *The Sunday Herald* of 16 May 1999, under the punning headline 'Europe says it's good to talk with Irish ayes', reported the decision of the then Secretary of State, Mo Mowlam, to protect the Ulster-Scots language. 'Or rather a deceesion o tha Narlin Airlann secretar o stat cud weel scug tha oulrife Ulster-Scotch leid an gie it a heft in Euraip'. It then went on to refer patronisingly to the 'eccentric voice of the Glens of Antrim', perpetuating the myth of an isolated and somewhat ludicrous or archaic group of people. Similarly, in his weekly column in the *Irish News*, Tom Kelly, as recently as 29 October 2002, described Ulster-Scots as gibberish. He wrote: 'I've always had the impression that Ulster-Scots was the remnant of the dialect of my grandparents generation held together today by those reminiscing over a few pints. A sort of John Pepper's guide to Ulsterisms'.

However, growing popular interest in the language and the culture, the promotional work of the Ulster-Scots Agency and academic research have all helped to create a more measured response to any debate about the language. In an Irish News editorial of 15 November 2002, the writer acknowledged that in the past the language's detractors had ridiculed Ulster-Scots as 'a DIY language for Orangemen', but concluded that 'The hostility experienced by the Ulster-Scots linguistic and cultural community and the ongoing disparagement of the Ulster-Scots language are clearly breaches of both the letter and the spirit of the Belfast Agreement'. There is a need to redress a situation where native Ulster-Scots speakers have been encouraged, if not actually forced, to

[9] Arts Council of Northern Ireland, *The Arts of Irish and Ulster Scots* (Belfast, 2004), 11.

give up their own way of speaking in favour of some perceived more acceptable or standardised Ulster English. One such experience is vividly described in 'Thae Tuk mae Ain Tung' by Charlie Reynolds:

> Hooinver whun wae moved tae tha toon things changed for iver. A wus lached at deh an nicht aboot tha wye A ta'ked. Tha maist o tha wains at tha schuil thocht A wus a kinna o an oddity frae tha garry boag, naw that thae micht hae kent whaur tha boag wus onywye.
>
> Things went frae bad tae worse an owre tha years wae tha tants o mae plae-mates an tha goulin' o ha aul' teachers, thae tried tae tak mae ain tung aff mae. Even mae ain yins wha still tak tha aul tung thocht it wus better that their aff-spring got redd o it in tha name o progress.[10]

Reynolds' experience is in no way unique. Scots speakers will be only too familiar with it. The speaking of Ulster-Scots and the validity of this cultural tradition is beginning to build up momentum but it takes time to restore self-esteem and pride in one's own heritage.

When discussing the print media we should also consider political cartoons. On 7 February 2003 a cartoon featuring Lord Laird of Artigarvin, at that time Head of the Ulster-Scots Agency, appeared in *The Irish News*. Lord Laird was pictured at 'Cairnryan Immigration' with a disparate group of farming folk pictured huddled behind him. The caption read:

> Customs man: I canny onderstand these yins.
> Lord Laird: They're trying to tell you that they're seeking asylum to escape persecution for speaking their native Ulster-Scots.
> Customs Man: Seeking asylum! I thought they'd escaped from one.

This might well be dismissed as a bit of fun but it might be difficult to see the funny side when it can seem to Ulster-Scots proponents that this is one attack among many. In this cartoon the implication certainly seems to be that those involved in the Ulster-Scots revival are crazy. Much more controversial was the cartoon of May 2004 after the premiere of the Ulster-Scots musical 'On Eagle's Wing'. The cartoon featured Hitleresque dancers in the chorus line of the show and seemed thereby to be making an association between Ulster-Scots cultural identity and the Nazis or Fascism. The show's cast, if

[10] M. Montgomery, and A. Smyth, (eds), *A Blad O Ulster-Scotch frae Ullans* (Belfast, 2003), 229.

not by implication the audience, seemed to be equated with the public rallies of Hitler's Germany. The editor of *The Irish News*, defending the cartoon on the BBC Radio Ulster Talkback programme, pointed out the reference to *The Producers*, a Mel Brooks' film which would have been lost on the vast majority of readers. In such circumstances it is perhaps hardly surprising that the Ulster-Scots are defensive and feel under attack.

Of course there is nothing new in poking fun at the Ulster-Scots and their language. Robinson has traced the tradition back to that greatest of satirists, Jonathan Swift.[11] 'The North Country-Man's Description of Christ's-Church, Dublin In A Letter to a Friend' of 1731, which was purportedly written from Portaferry in County Down by an Ulster sailor who had been laid over in Dublin on a Sunday and wanted to attend a Presbyterian church but by mistake ended up in the Anglican cathedral, was originally published along with four other pieces all caricaturing dissenters.[12] We can clearly recognise Swift's comic presentation of the narrow-minded and ill-educated Ulsterman and the ridicule the author wished to pour upon him as being typical of the Ulster-Scot. This tradition of mocking the Ulster-Scots speaker continues in its most modern incarnation on the internet. The *Ballygobackwards* website features spoof 'news' articles poking fun at a wide range of people and events in Northern Ireland. The July 2002 edition of 'Northern Ireland's alternative look on life' featured a piece entitled 'The Ulster Scots Corner/ Da Carnear fir Ullah Scot': 'One of the features of this online magazine is a unique column where you can learn, yes learn, ten new Ulster Scots sentences each edition! Think of it, you can now travel to Glenarm and converse in comfort with the locals'. The article then goes on to offer ten phrases which are 'translated' as being exactly the same in both English and Ulster-Scots, the implication being that there is no such language.

The September 2002 edition of *Ballygobackwards* featured an article entitled 'Good News for Latin Lovers' which took another swipe at Ulster-Scots. The report was of a decision of Queens University to translate Horace's Odes from Latin into Ulster-Scots. Names given to characters in the report included Professor Bill McTattie, John O'Scetpic and Billy McSack o' Spuds. The report stated that 'There's a huge demand for classics in Newtownards and night classes in Greek and Latin are oversubscribed'. Billy McSack o' Spuds

[11] P. Robinson, 'Jonathan Swift: His Early Writings in Ulster-Scots?', *Ullans*, Nummer 3, Spring 1995.

[12] P. Fitzgerald and M. Montgomery, 'An Early Letter in Ulster-Scots', *Ullans*, Nummer 2 (Spring 1994).

was quoted as saying, 'We're more into Greek in this area, we were really hoping that they would translate Homer's Illiad fair ye. This is typical of the Council, they've always favoured the Romans and what the hell have they ever done for us?'

Today Ulster-Scots are portrayed as serious – even humourless – hard-working, verging on the puritanical and of course Protestant – a caricature which completely overlooks the significant number of Catholic Ulster-Scots speakers in the Glens of Antrim and especially in East Donegal. But is the 'dourness' ascribed to the Ulster-Scots a defence mechanism to protect against the criticism and attack under which they have lived? Paton posited, in relation to the Ulster actor Stephen Rea, that '. . . one can see a good reason for the self-protective dourness that he sometimes wraps around him like a cloak.'[13] Have the Ulster-Scots used dourness to protect themselves? Or is there, rather, a myth of 'soda farl chauvinism' which has been perpetuated by Ulster-Scots writers and humourists themselves?[14] For instance, a photograph of Harry West, one-time leader of the Unionist Party, offers an image which may seem simply to reinforce all the characteristics which critics have employed to describe the 'typical Ulster-Scot'. He looks a forbidding and dour character indeed. We find, on reading the caption[15] however, that West had deliberately posed in this way to fulfil the stereotype for the photographer and had burst out laughing afterwards, appreciating the joke. Does such humour pander to the tendency 'to elevate folksiness into an art form – a kind of macho parochialism or inverted snobbery'[16] – and has such an outlook allowed the Ulster-Scots language and culture, albeit unwittingly, to be marginalized and to be prevented from taking its rightful place in contemporary society? Has the content and style meant that both the language and the culture could be sidelined as outdated, restricting Ulster-Scots to a predominantly older rural audience that is fast disappearing?

The finest writing in the Ulster-Scots Literary tradition is acknowledged to be that of the Rhyming Weavers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. While much of their work was serious in tone reflecting the economic and political upheavals of their time they could take a humorous look at contemporary society too. Porter's self-teasing 'On seeing His Name In Robinson's Book of Poems, with 'Esq.' Added to it' illustrates the ability to laugh at oneself.

[13] M. Paton, 'Stephen Rea . . . the actor, not the star', *Belfast Telegraph*, April 16, 2004.

[14] I. Knox, *Culture Vultures – Political Cartoons 1990 – 1999* (Belfast, 1999), 79.

[15] The photograph featured in Brian Turner (ed.), *Merely Players – Portraits from Northern Ireland by Bobbie Hanvey* (Newtownards, 1999). The caption reads *'Give me a real dour Protestant look, Harry. And he did. I said , 'Practice makes perfect'. And he roared laughing'.*

[16] Knox, *Culture Vultures – Political Cartoons 1990 – 1999*, 79.

Poems such as Orr's light-hearted 'Address to Beer' where he describes himself as 'The Bardie whom thou fill'd yestreen', along with Porter's humorous epigrams and epitaphs all offered light-hearted amusement for their subscribers. Such light and amusing topics are balanced by serious poems addressing issues of social and political concern. It could be argued that it is this interspersing of the comic and the tragic and their concern to address contemporary life and problems that is at least part of their greatness.

Among the extensive writings of W. F. Marshall, 'The Bard of Tyrone' in the early twentieth century, is an unpublished three-act country kitchen comedy entitled *The Corduroy Bag*. His writing was rediscovered by a modern audience in 1983 when Blackstaff Press published a collection of his poems *Livin' in Drumlister*. Marshall's poetry has elements of Ulster-Scots but also of Ulster English. In his comic poetry did he offer a realistic picture or a nostalgic look at a culture already disappearing? Is Marshall's work, as Herbison suggests, 'regressive', because in it, 'acute social comment [is] replaced by comic caricature, sympathy by ironic distance'.[17] His best-known poem 'Me An' Me Da' is a humorous tale of the speaker's two romances with 'Wee Margit' and Brigit who 'tuk the pock disayse' and pokes fun at the farmer whose procrastination led him to miss his chance with Margit only for him to be, in his turn, rejected by Brigid. 'John the Liar' similarly turns the tables on the narrator. The colloquial conversation used in the poem has the ring of authenticity and shows Marshall's genuine affection for these country folk among whom he was brought up.

Sez he,
'Be gomentays, I went an' killed two pigs,
Ye niver seen the like of them two pigs,
Throth they wor tarra: jist the five months oul'.'
'The deil a hair I care,' sez I, 'ye killed
A score of pigs; stan' out the road!'

The business acumen, or lack of it, of McFadden in 'Bad Luck' demonstrates again one of the recurring themes for Ulster-Scots humour – the wheelin'an' dealin' of the countryside where to strike a hard bargain is the sign of success, while 'Sarah Ann' picks up another theme – rural courtin'. The narrator's practical bargaining for the girl he wants – '. . . a neighbour man an' tuk him

[17] I. Herbison, 'The Rest is Silence': Some Remarks on the Disappearance of Ulster Scots Poetry', in J. Erskine, and G. Lucy (eds), *Cultural Traditions in Northern Ireland: Varieties of Scottishness* (Belfast, 1997), 138.

down to spake for me' – reminds us of bygone days and practices. The sequel poem, 'The Runaway', finds the narrator's plight even more difficult when the ensuing wedding party descends into an all-out knockabout brawl which has more of the comic stage Irishman about it than the traditional dour Ulster-Scot. The pragmatist, however, is always the success: his choice of Liza Jane and belief that he really is better off with the one who 'diz what she's bid' bring us back to a familiar version of the Ulster-Scot.

John Wier, author of 'Bab McKeen on Things in General', a regular feature in the *Ballymena Observer* for over thirty years up until 1910, used his column to reflect on contemporary events. He was part of a new style of writing where fictional characters in local newspapers were the *vox populi* for their area, expressing local concerns and interests. A simple comic story such as 'An Expensive Vote', pokes fun at local parliamentary candidates as well as acknowledging the business acumen of the locals.

> A wheen years ago a Scotch candidate wus luckin' for a sate in Parlymint, an' ca'd at a hoose whur an auld couple lieved. Finnin' the auld wife on her lane, he begun tae crack wi' her, an' axed hir tae try an' get the auld man's vote, an' while they wur crackin', he spies a kitlin' haein' fun wi' a bit o' string on the flure, an' offered £5 for it, an' the auld woman closed the bargin immediately, an' on leein', the man said he hoped she wad secure the vote for him. 'Weel,' quo she, 'as I said afore, John's a man o' his ain min', an' juist daes what strecks in his ain noodle; but at ony rate, sir, ye hae got a real chape kittlin', for yer opponent who was in nae farer nor yesterday, an he gaed me £10 for its brother.[18]

Wier's keen wit and wry observations on local and world news offered a unique Ulster-Scots voice. His writing, although invariably light-hearted in tone, often dealt with quite serious topics. Robinson in his foreword to *Bab M'Keen, The Wit and Wisdom of an Ulster Scot* states that this writing 'tended to be more realistic and less romantic than . . . kail-yard books',[19] thereby offering a less nostalgic presentation of the Ulster-Scots than Marshall.

The ulster-scotsrhymes internet site states that it 'haes bain gathered tae gither bae tha Poocher tae pit forrit Rhymes, Yarns an' Sangs in tha aul Ulster-Scots tongue'. The collection includes the work of both contemporary writers

[18] Jack Adams (ed.), *Bab McKeen, The Wit and Wisdom of an Ulster Scot* (Ballymena, 2002), 23.

[19] Ibid, 1.

and poems collected from newspapers and passed down through the oral tradition. The contents include 'Poor Wee Aggie', 'How Pat soul' the pig', 'Coortin' in the Plantin' and 'Lukin Bak' – poems which appeal mainly to an older generation and once again deal with country matters and customs. Interestingly however it also includes some older poems such as 'Smokin Weans' by Bab McKeen where he laments:

When I was young it ustae be
That naew yin smoked till thirty-three
Or thereabouts, but noo the weans
Maun puff awa' their bits o' brains,
An' think it manly exercise
Their Maker's work tae Darwinise

Among the contemporary poet/humourists featured on the site is Charlie Gillen, The Wizard, a well-known County Antrim storyteller. His performances of poems such as 'Wavin' Guidbye' – the tale of his receding hairline:

At this sure I riz in a panic
Tae tell ye the truth I feel't strange
Oor Tracey seys sit doon tae I finish
For ye luk lake a doag wae the mange

entertain packed halls up and down the country. He writes about his own experiences growing up in County Antrim with poems such as 'Tha Pratas, Ach! I miss them', and 'Scartin' Midges'. His verses are about rural life but a life which The Poocher concedes is : '. . . aboot tha moss an tha cutting o' tha peats, something that naw ower mony ken any thing aboot noo a dehs'.

There is of course a place for remembrance and reflection but Herbison was correct to identify Ulster-Scots cultural identity as having been based on a sense of belonging to stable rural communities – and the fact is that these are fast disappearing. The Ulster-Scots language and culture will only be able to flourish if its literary tradition, including its humorous writing, can find relevance to life in the twenty-first century. To gain parity of esteem and status in an increasingly culturally-diverse and culturally-enriched society, the Ulster-Scots need contemporary writers who can build on their eighteenth-century 'golden age'; writers able to recover their radical Scots literary past who will use humour not just to entertain an aging audience but to make relevant social

comment, and to reflect the concerns of their own and the wider community. Whatever the political and legal developments that have given Ulster-Scots an enhanced position in contemporary Northern Ireland, to hark back constantly to a way of life long gone, or to find identity solely in events and experiences from the past, will not prevent a culture from becoming merely a historical relic.

Stranmillis University College