

The current stooshie around the announcement of a Scots Language Policy made me think of a similar debate held over a century ago. What ‘guid’ or proper Scots is has long been an issue of heated discussion. Crockett tackled it head on in his work more than once.

His 1904 work ‘*Raiderland*’ is more than merely a collation of some of Crockett’s best loved work. He also has sections on Scottish humour (in which he employs his own dry ironic style particularly well) and language, most notably what was described as the vexed question of dialect (and which is still something of a ‘vexed’ question.) Crockett wanted to give broad Scotland a right to speak once more of a Scottish language and not merely English with a Dundee, Gallowa’ or ‘Doon the Watter’ accent. He wanted to give Scotland a literature frankly national, written in her ancient language, according to the finest and most uncorrupted models. This is an opinion which might surprise many of the literary critics who have either dismissed or misunderstood Crockett and his fiction over the years.

The following is part of a chapter from ‘*Raiderland*.’ A version of this was published as an article in The Contemporary review, vol 67 (Apr 1895): 515-532. But for those who cannot access historical articles, here is the 1904 ‘*Raiderland*’ version.

III.—WHAT WE SAY THERE, AND HOW WE SAY IT

No one can pass even a short space of time among the people of our Galloway countryside without being made aware, in ways pleasant and the reverse, of the great amount of popular humour ever bubbling up from the heart of the common people. It is to them the salt of intercourse, the grease on the dragging axles of their life. Not often does it reach the stage of being expressed in literary form. It is lost in the stir of farm-byres, in the cheerful talk of ingle-nooks. You can hear it being windily exchanged in the greetings of shepherds crying the one to the other across the valleys. It finds way in the observations of passing ploughmen as they meet on the way to the mill, and kirk, and market.

For example, an artist is busy at his easel by the wayside. A rustic is looking over his shoulder in the manner of the free and independent Scot. A brother rustic is in a field near by with his hands in his pockets. He is not sure whether it is worthwhile to take the trouble to mount the dyke, for the uncertain pleasure of looking at a mere picture. ‘What is he doing, Jock?’ asks he in the field of his better-situated mate. ‘Drawin’ wi’ pent!’ returns Jock, over his shoulder. ‘Is’t bonny?’ again asks the son of toil in the field. ‘Ocht but Bonny!’ comes back the prompt and decided answer of the critic. Of consideration for the artist’s feelings there is not a trace. (It was that admirable Galloway artist and our good friend Mr W.S.M’George A.R.S.A) Yet both of these rustics will appreciatively relate the incident on coming in from the field and washing themselves, concluding with this rider: ‘An’ he didna look ower weel pleased, I can tell ye! Did he, Jock?’

This great body of popular humour first found its way into the channels of our historic literature mainly in the form of ballads and songs—often very free in taste and broad in expression, because they were struck from the rustic heart, and accordingly smelt of the farmyard, where common things are called by their common names.

But in time these rose higher in the poems of Lindsay, in some of Knox’s prose—very grim and humoursome it is—and in Dunbar and Henrysoun, mixed in each case with strong personal elements. Burns alone caught and held the full force of it, for he was of the soil, and grew up near to it. So that to all time he must remain the finest expression of almost all forms of lowland feeling. As to prose, chap-books and pamphlets innumerable carried on the stream, which for the most part was conveyed underground, till, in the fulness of time, Walter Scott came to give Scottish humour worldwide fame in the noble series of imaginative

writings by which he set his native land beside the England of William Shakespeare.

Scott was the first great harvester of our old national stock of humour, and right widely he gathered, as those know who have striven to follow in his trail. Hardly a chap-book but he has been through, hardly a generation of our national history that he has not touched and adorned. Yet, because Scotland is a wide place, and Scottish humour also in every sense broad, no future humourist need feel straitened within their ample bounds.

Of all the cherished delusions of the inhabitant of the southern part of Great Britain with regard to his northern brother, the most astonishing is the belief that the Scot is destitute of humour. Other delusions may be dissipated by a tourist ticket and the ascent of Ben Nevis—such as that, north of the Tweed, we dress solely in the kilt—which we do not, at least, during the day; that we support life solely upon haggis and the product of the national distilleries; that the professors of Edinburgh University, being ‘panged fu’ o’ lear,’ communicate the same to their students in the Gaelic—a thing which, though not altogether unprecedented, is, I am told, considered somewhat informal by the Senatus.

These may be taken as examples of the grosser delusions which leap to the eye, and are received upon the ear as often as the subject of Scotland arises in a company of the untravelled, and, as we should say, ‘glaikit Englisher.’

I should much like to say, here and now, as Professor Blackie used to remark vigorously, that ‘every person who despises Scottish national humour proves himself to be either a conceited puppy or an ignorant fool.’ Personally I should like to add—‘or both!’

There is a classical passage in the works of Mr. R. L. Stevenson, which, with the metrical psalms, the poems of Burns, and the Catechism, ought to be required of every Scottish man or woman before they be on the allowed to think of getting married. It is sad to see young people setting up house and so ill-fitted for the battle of life. The passage from Mr. Stevenson is as follows. I protest that I never can read it, even for the hundredth time, without a certain sympathetic moisture of the eye, for it might have been written of Galloway, and even of Balmaghie:—

‘There is no special loveliness in that grey country, with its rainy, sea-beat archipelago; its fields of dark mountains; its unsightly places, black with coal; its treeless, sour, unfriendly-looking corn-lands; its quaint, grey, castled city, where the bells clash of a Sunday, and the wind squalls, and the salt showers fly and beat. I do not know if I desire to live there; but let me hear, in some far land, a kindred voice sing out, Oh! why left I my hame?’ and it seems at once as if no beauty under the kind heavens, and no society of the good and wise, can repay me for my absence from my country. And though I would rather die elsewhere, yet in my heart of hearts I long to be buried among good Scots clods. I will say it fairly, it grows upon me with every year; there are no stars so lovely as Edinburgh street-lamps. The happiest lot on earth is to be born a Scotsman. You must pay for it in many ways, as for all other advantages on earth. You have to learn the Paraphrases and the Shorter Catechism; you generally take to drink; your youth, so far as I can make out, is a time of louder war against society, of more outcry, and tears, and turmoil, than if you were born, for instance, in England. But, somehow, life is warmer and closer, the hearth burns more redly; the lights of home shine softer on the rainy street, the very names, endeared in verse and music, cling nearer round our hearts. An Englishman may meet an Englishman tomorrow, upon Chimborazo, and neither of them care; but when the Scotch wine-grower told me of Mons Meg, it was like magic.

From the dim shieling on the misty island, Mountains divide us and a world of seas;
Yet still our hearts are true, our hearts are Highland, And we in dreams behold the Hebrides.’

Our humour lies so near our feeling for our country that I would almost say, if we do not feel this quotation—aye, and feel it in our bones—we may take it for granted that both the humour and the pathos of Scotland are to be hid from us during the term of our natural lives.

However, as Mr. Whistler said when a friend pointed out to him a certain suggestion of the landscape Whistlerian in an actual sunset—‘Ah, yes, nature is creeping up!’ So we may say, with reference to its appreciation of Scottish humour, England is certainly ‘creeping up.’ The numbers of editions of Scott, edited, illustrated, and annotated, plain and coloured, prove it. It is always a good brick to throw at a literary pessimist, to tell him the number of editions of Scott that have appeared during the last half-dozen years. I do not know how many there are—I have no idea—but I always say fifty-three and four more coming, for that sounds exact, and as if one had all the statistics up one’s sleeve. If you say these little things with a confident air, you are never contradicted. No one knows any different. It is a habit worth acquiring. I am not proud of the accomplishment, but I don’t mind saying that I learned the trick from listening to the evidence of skilled witnesses in His Majesty’s Courts of Law.

Let us look for a moment at our national humour of fact. We Galwegians were, for instance, a people intensely loyal to our kings and queens. Yet, so long as they were with us, we dissembled our affection.

Alas, we never told our love! In fact, we generally rebelled against them, so that they might have a good time hanging us up in the Grassmarket and ornamenting the Netherbow with our heads. But as soon as we had driven these same kings and queens into exile, we became tremendously loyal, and kept up constant troikings with the exiled at Carisbrook, in Holland, or drinking to ‘the king over the water.’ Our very Galloway Cameronians became Jacobites and split on the subject, as our Scottish kirks always did—being apparently of the variety of animalcula which multiply by fission. So we went on, till we got them back, and again seated on the throne with a firm seat and a tight rein. Then we rebelled once more, just to keep them aware of themselves. Thus our national humour expressed itself in our history.

Or again we had our family feuds. It mattered not whether we were kilted Macs of the North, or steel-capped, leathern-jacked Kennedies and Douglasses of the South, we loved our name and clan, and stood for them in feuds even against king and country. But, nevertheless, we arose early in the morning and had family worship, like the respected and respectable Mr. John Mure of Auchendraine. Then we rode forth, with spear and pistolet, to convince some erring brother of the clan that he must not do so. I came upon a delightful entry from an old family register the other day. It was much mixed up with religious reflection, but it had this trifling memorandum interpolated to break the placid flow of the spiritual meditation: ‘This day and date oor Jock stickit to deid Wat Maxwell in Traquair! Glory be to the Father and to the Son!’

This also is a part of our national humour of history.

A certain Master Adam Blackadder was an apprentice boy in Stirling in the troublous times of the Covenant. The military were coming, and the whole Whiggish town took flight.

‘I would have been for running too,’ says young Adam, being a merchant’s loon. ‘I would have been for the running too, but my master discharged me from leaving the shop. For,’ said he, ‘they will not have the confidence to take the like of you, a silly young lad.’ However, a few days thereafter I was gripped by two messengers early in the morning, who, for haste, would not suffer me to tie up my stockings, or put about my cravat, but hurried me away to Provost Russel’s lodgings—a violent persecutor and ignorant wretch! The first word he spak to me (putting on his breeches) was, ‘Is not this braw wark, sirr, that we maun be troubled wi’ the like o’ you?’ I answered (brave loon, Adam!), ‘Ye hae gotten a braw prize, my lord, that has claucht a poor ‘prentice!’ He answered, ‘We canna help it, sirr; we must obey the king’s lawes!’ ‘King’s lawes, my lord,’ I says, ‘there is no such lawes under the sun!’ For I had heard that, by the bond, heritors were bound for their tenants and masters for their servants—and not servants for themselves (and here Adam had him!) ‘No such lawes, sirr!’ says our sweet Provost; ‘ye lee’ed like a knave and traitour, as ye are. So, sirr, ye come not here to dispute the matter. Away with him, away with him to the prison.’

So accordingly they haled away the too humorous apprentice of Stirling to Bridewell, where, as he says, and as we should expect, he was never merrier in his life—albeit with iron gates about him, and waiting on the mercy of the ‘sweet provost,’ whom he surprised ‘putting on his breeks.’

But how exquisitely Scottish and humorous is the whole scene—the lad, not to be ‘feared,’ and well content to get the better of the Provost in the battle of words, derives an admirable satisfaction from the difficulties of his enemy, who has perforce to argue while ‘putting on his breeks,’ a time when teguments, not arguments, are most fitting. Meanwhile the Provost is grimly conscious that he is getting the worst of it, and that what the ‘prentice loon said to him will be a sad jest when the bailies congregate round the civic punchbowl. Yet, for all that, he is not unappreciative of the lad’s national right to say his say, and, not without some reluctance, silences him with the incontrovertible argument of the ‘iron gates.’ This also is Scottish and national, and could hardly be native elsewhere.

As we go on to consider these and other similar circumstances chronicled in our lowland history, certain ill-defined but obvious sorts and kinds of national humour emerge. They look at us out of all manner of unexpected places—out of the records of the Great Seal, out of the minutes of the Privy Council, out of the State trials, out of the findings of Galloway juries. ‘We find that the prisoner killit not the particular man aforesaid, yet that nevertheless he is deserving of hanging.’ On general grounds, it is to be presumed, and to encourage the others! So hanged the acquitted man duly was, much as Mossman was hanged, on May 20, 1785, because he ‘cam’ frae Carrick!’

Disentangling some of these threads of humour which shoot scarlet through the hoddern grey of our Southland records, we can distinguish four kinds of historical humour—first, the humour which I propose, without any particular law or licence, to call by analogy ‘Polter Humour.’ The best attested of all spectral apparitions is a certain Galloway ghost—the spirit which troubled the cothouse of Collin, in the parish of Rerrick, for many months, and was only finally exorcised after many wrestlings with all the ministers of the countryside in Presbytery assembled. It was a merry and noisy spirit, of the type called (I am informed) the Polter Ghost, a perfect master of the whistling, pinching, vexing, stone-throwing, spiritualistic athletic. Hence, following this analogy, we may call a considerable part of our lowland humour ‘Polter Humour.’ It is the same kind of thing which, mixed with the animal spirits and primitive methods of the undergraduate, leads him occasionally to thump upon the floor of philosophy class-rooms in a manner most unphilosophic. I am, it may be, thinking of the things that were in the good old times, when it was a mistake, trivial in the extreme, to forget one’s college note-book, but an offence capital to leave behind one’s stick. But still the historic Polter Humour of Scotland is largely the humour of the unlicked cub, playing with such dangerous weapons as swords and battle-axes, instead of bootlaces and blacking.

‘There is no discourse between a full man and a fasting. Sit ye doon, Sir Patrick Grey,’ says the Black Douglas to the king’s messenger, sent to Thrieve Castle to demand the release of Maclellan of Bombie. Sir Patrick, who might have known better, sits him down. The Black Douglas moves his hand and his eyebrow once, and even while the messenger is solacing himself with ‘doo-tairt’ and a cup of sack, poor Maclellan is had out to the green and beheaded. Sir Patrick finishes, and wipes his five-pronged forks in the national manner underneath his doublet. He is ready to talk business, and so is the Black Douglas—now.

‘There is your man. Tell His Majesty he is most welcome to him,’ says the Douglas; ‘it is a pity that he wants the head!’ This, though doubtless wholly invented by the historian, is a good example of the Polter Humour in excelsis—the undergraduate playing with the headsman’s axe instead of the harmless necessary cudgel.

This is a primitive kind of humour of savage origin; and how many varieties of it there are among savage tribes, and amongst that largest of all savage tribes, the noble outlaw

Ishmaels of the world, Boys —Mr. Andrew Lang alone knows.

Of this Polter Humour, perhaps the finest instances are to be found in the chap-books of the latter half of the eighteenth century and the first ten years of the nineteenth. So soon as Scott had made the Scottish dialect into a national language, the edge seemed completely to go off these productions. With one consent they became flat, stale, and unprofitable. Indeed, they can hardly be called strictly ‘profitable’ reading at the best. For it is like walking down a South Italian lane to read them, so thickly do causes of offence lie around. But for all that, in them we have the rough give-and-take of life at the country weddings, the holy fairs, the kirns and christenings of an older time. I never realised how great and clean Robert Burns was, till I saw from what a state of utter depravity he has rescued such homely topics as these. Yet in these days of family magazines we are uneasily conscious that even Robert Burns has need to have his feet wiped before he comes into our parlours. As a corrective to this over-refinement, I should prescribe a counter-irritant in the shape of a short but drastic course in the dialect chap-books of the final thirty years of the eighteenth century.

In the novels of Smollett is to be found the more (or less) literary expression of this form of humour. True, one cannot read very much of it at a time, for the effect of a score of pages acts physically on the stomach like sea-sickness. But yet we cannot deny that there is this Polter element in Scottish humour, though the fact has been largely and conveniently forgotten in these days. There are, however, some few pearls distributed among an inordinate number of swine-sties. Yet we can see the origin, or at least the manifestation, of this peculiar humour in the old civic enactment which caused it to be proclaimed that any citizen walking down the Canongate upon the side-causeways after a certain hour of e'en, did so at ‘the peril of his head.’ There is, also, to this day a type of sturdy, full-blooded Scot, who cannot imagine anything much funnier than the emptying of a pail of ‘suds’ out of a window—upon someone else’s head. Sometimes this gentleman gets into the House of Commons, and laughs boisterously when another member sits down upon his new and glossy hat, which cost him a guinea that morning.

Among the tales of James Hogg (who, though not of Galloway, deserved to be) there are many examples of Polter Humour. Hogg is, in some of his many rambling stories, the greatest example in literature of the Scottish picaresque. He delights to carry his hero—who is generally nobody in particular, only a hero—from adventure to adventure without halt or plot, depending upon the swing of the incident to carry him through. And, indeed, so it mostly does. ‘The Bridal of Polmood,’ for instance, is of this class. It is not a great original work, like the ‘Confessions of a Justified Sinner,’ or a delightful medley of tales like ‘The Shepherd’s Calendar.’ But it is a sufficiently readable story, at least as like the life of the times as Tennyson’s courtly knights are to the actual Round Table men of Arthur the King. In the ‘Adventures of Basil Lee’ and in ‘Widow Watts’ Courtship,’ we find more of the Polter Humour. But, on the whole, the finest instance of Hogg’s rattling give-and-take is his briskly humorous and admirable story of ‘The Souters of Selkirk.’

From recent Scottish literature this rough and thoroughly national species of humour has been almost banished. But there is no reason why, having cleaned its feet a little, the Polter Humour might not be revived. There is plenty of it, healthy and hearty, surviving in the nooks and corners of the hills.

The second species of Galloway (and Scottish) humour which I shall try to discriminate is what, for lack of a better name, I shall call the Humour of Irony. It is a quieter variety of the last. Of this sort, and to me an exquisite example, is the advice Donald Cargill offered to Claverhouse as he was riding from the field of Drumclog, after his defeat, as hard as his horse could gallop. ‘Will ye no bide for the afternoon diet of worship?’ A jest which did credit to the grim old ‘faithful contender,’ considering that he had been so lately a prisoner in the hands of John Graham himself. I am sure that Claverhouse appreciated the ironical edge of

the observation, even if he did not forget the jester. But my Lord Dundee could be ironical himself with some pith.

'Two soldiers reported a squabble between two of their officers to Colonel Graham.'

'How knew ye of the matter?' said Claverhouse.

'We saw it,' they replied.

'But how saw ye it?' he continued, pressing them.

'We were on guard, and, hearing both din and turmoil, we set down our pieces and ran to see.'

'Whereupon Colonel Graham did arise, and gave them many sore paiks, because that they had left their duty to gad about and gaze on that which concerned them not.'

In like manner, and in the same excellent antique style, it is told of Duke Rothes that, finding that his lady was going just a step too far in the freedom with which she entertained proscribed ministers under his very nose, he sent her ladyship a message, that it behoved her to keep her 'black-coated messans' closer to her heel, or else that he would be obliged to kennel them for her.

Perhaps the finest instance of this humour is the well-known story, probably entirely apocryphal, but none the less worthy on that account, of the south-country laird, who, with his man John, was riding to market. (The tale is, I think, in 'Dean Ramsay,' and, writing far from books, I quote from memory.) The laird and John are passing a hole in the moor, when the laird turns his thumb over his shoulder, and says, 'John, I saw a tod gang in there! '

'Did ye, indeed, laird?' cries John, all his hunting blood instantly on fire. 'Ride ye your lane to the toon; I'll howk the craitur oot!'

So back goes John for pick and spade, having first, of course, stopped the earth. The laird rides his way, and all day he is foregathering with his cronies, and 'preeing the drappie' at the market-town—ploys in which his henchman would ably and very willingly have seconded him. It is the hour of evening, and the laird rides home. He comes to a mighty excavation on the hillside. The trench is both long and deep. Very tired, and somewhat short-grained in temper, John is seated upon a mound of earth, vast as the foundation of a fortress. 'There's nae fox here, laird!' says John, wiping the honest sweat of endeavour from his brow. The laird is not put out. He is, indeed, exceedingly pleased with himself. 'Deed, John,' he says, 'I wad hae been muckle surprised gin there had been a fox in the hole. It's ten year since I saw the tod gang in there!'

Here the nationality of the ironical humour consists in the non-committal attitude of the laird. It is none of his business if John chooses to spend his day in digging a fox-hole. It is, no doubt, a curious method of taking exercise when one might be at a market ordinary. But still there is no use trying to account for tastes, and the laird like a kindly man leaves John to the freedom of his own will. History does not relate what were John's remarks when the laird had fared homeward. And that, perhaps, is as well.

This, the Method Ironical, with an additional spice of kindliness, is also Sir Walter's favourite mode of humour. It is, for instance, the basis of Caleb Balderston, especially in the famous scene in the house of Gibbie Girder, the man of tubs and barrels:—

'Up got mother and grandmother, and scoured away, jostling each other as they went, into some remote corner of the tenement, where the young hero of the evening was deposited. When Caleb saw the coast fairly clear, he took an invigorating pinch of snuff to sharpen and confirm his resolution. 'Cauld be my cast,' thought he, 'if either Bide-the-Bent or Girder taste that broche of wild fowl this evening.' And then, addressing the eldest turnspit, a boy of eleven years old, and putting a penny into his hand, he said, 'Here is twal pennies, my man; carry that ower to Mistress Smat rash, and bid her fill my mill wi' sneeshin', and I'll turn the broche for ye i' the meantime—an' she'll gie ye a gingerbread snap for yer pains.'

'No sooner had the elder boy departed on his mission, than Caleb, looking the

remaining turnspit gravely and steadily in the face, removed from the fire the spit containing the wild fowl of which he had undertaken the charge, clapped his hat on his head, and fairly marched off with it.'

It will not surprise you to hear that in Scott's own time this mode of humour was thought to be both rude and undignified, and many were the criticisms of bad taste and the accusations of literary borrowing that were made, both against this great scene, and against similar other chapters of his most famous books. Their very success promoted the rage of the envious. We find, for instance, the magazines of the time full of the most ill-natured notices, which, in view of the multiplied editions of the great Wizard, read somewhat strangely at this day. Let me take one at random:—

'Scott is just going on in the same blindfold way, and seems, in this as in other things, only to fulfil the destiny assigned to him by Providence—the task of employing the hundred black men of Mr. James Ballantyne's printing office, Coul's Close, Canongate—for I suspect that this is the only real purpose of the Author of 'Waverley's' existence.'

I read this over when the critics prove unkind. For these words are only the beginning of as satisfactory a 'slating' as ever fell to the lot of mortal writer.

But nothing tells us more surely of the essential greatness of the master than the way in which, by a few touches, he can so ennable a humorous figure that he passes at a bound from the humorous to the pathetic, and touches the springs of our tears the more readily that up to that point he has chiefly moved our laughter.

Thus, at the close of Scott's great humourous conception of Caleb Balderston, we have a few words which like a beacon serve to illuminate all his past humours—his foraging, his bowl-breaking, his unprecedented readiness to lie for the sake of the glories of his master's house. It is the last scene in 'The Bride of Lammermoor':—

'But I have a master,' cried Caleb, still holding him fast, 'while the heir of Ravenswood breathes. I am but a servant; but I was born your father's—your grandfather's servant—I was born for the family—I have lived for them—I would die for them! Stay but at home and all will be well!'

'Well, fool, well!' said Ravenswood, 'vain old man; nothing hereafter in life will be well with me, and happiest is the hour that shall soonest close it!'

'So saying, he extricated himself from the old man's hold, threw himself on his horse, and rode out at the gate; but, instantly turning back, he threw towards Caleb, who hastened to meet him, a heavy purse of gold.

'Caleb,' he said, with a ghastly smile, 'I make you my executor,' and again turning his bridle, he resumed his course down the hill.

'The gold fell unheeded on the pavement, for the old man ran to observe the course which had been taken by his master. Caleb hastened to the eastern battlement, which commanded the prospect of the whole sands, very near as far as the village of Wolfs Hope. He could easily see his master riding in that direction, as fast as his horse could carry him. The prophecy at once rushed on Balderston's mind, that the Lord of Ravenswood would perish on the Kelpie's Flow, which lay halfway between the tower and the links, or sand-knolls, to the northward of Wolfs Hope. He saw him, accordingly, reach the fatal spot, but he never saw him pass farther.

'... Only one vestige of his fate appeared. A large sable feather had been detached from his hat, and the rippling waves of the rising tide wafted it to Caleb's feet.

'The old man took it, dried it, and placed it in his bosom.'

Scott is the most unquotable of authors, yet I should be prepared to stake his genius on a few passages like this, in which, by one or two magic touches, his usual kindly and careless style suffers a sea-change into something rich and rare—the irony of the gods and of insatiable and inappeasable Fate. Then, indeed, one actually sees the straw and stubble, the

wood and stone of his ordinary building being transmuted before our eyes into fairy gold at the touch of him who, whatever his carelessness and slovenliness, is yet the great Wizard of all time, and the master of all who weave the Golden Lie.

I now come to a humour which is less represented in the trials and tragical records which constitute the main part of the inheritance of our tumultuous and unpeaceful province. This, again, for lack of a better name, I call the ‘Humour of About-the-Doors.’

It is hard to say when this began; but probably with the first of the race—for the Galwegian has ever been noted for making the most of his man-servant and his maid, and his ass, and especially of the stranger within his gates. Concerning the Scot’s Doors.’ repute for haughtiness, John Major says in 1521

(I am quoting from Mr. Hume Brown’s admirable ‘Early Scotland’):—

‘Sabellicus, who was no mean historian, charges the Scots with being of a jealous temper, and it must be admitted that there is some colour for this charge to be gathered elsewhere... A man that is puffed up strives for some pre-eminence among his fellows, and when he sees that other men are equal to him, or but little inferior, he is filled with rage and breaks out into jealousy. I do not deny (says this most honest Major) that some of the Scots may be boastful and puffed up, but whether they suffer more than their neighbours from such like faults, I have not quite made up my mind. Sabellicus also asserts that the Scots delight in lying; but to me it is not clear that lies like these flourish with more vigour among the Scots than among other people.’

It is pleasant to see Major, nearly four hundred years ago, as the Americans would say, ‘spreading himself’ like the rest of us, in praise of his own particular district of Scotland, after having made out that, in spite of all faults and all temptations, the Scots are yet the noblest people in the world. He is a worthy predecessor of all such as celebrate their Thrums, their Swanston by the Pentland edge, their Yarrow and Tweedside, their Lang Toun, their Barncraig and Gushetneuk and Drumtochty, their St. Serfs and Carricktown.

Major has been celebrating the fish of the rivers of Scotland:—

‘Besides these there are the Clyde, the Tweed, and many other rivers, all abounding in salmon, turbot, and trout. [How Mr. Andrew Lang would admire to catch a turbot in the pool beneath the Kelso cemetery, where lies Stoddart, that mighty angler.] And near the sea is plenty of oysters, as well as crabs, and polyps of marvellous size. One crab or polyp is larger than thirty crabs such as are found in the Seine. The shells of the jointed polyps that you see in Paris clinging to the ropes of the pile-driving engines are a sufficient proof of this. In Lent and in summer, at the winter and summer solstice, people go in the early morning from mine own Gleghornie and the neighbouring parts of the shore, drag out the polyps and crabs with hooks, and return at noon with well-filled sacks.’

The poor French nation! One native polyp from ‘mine own Gleghornie’ equal to thirty misbegotten polyps of the Seine! And how much nobler ‘tis to the polypodic mind to be dragged out with hooks, and stuffed in a bag at the summer and winter solstice than to cling to the ropes of wretched pile-driving engines in the insignificant city of Paris. ‘Paris for pile-driving, Gleghornie for pleasure,’ is thus the motto for all true polyps!

And so was it ever, and so, please the pigs, shall it be, so long as this sturdy knuckle-end of Britain sticks out into the Arctic wash of the northern sea.

To every Scot his own house, his own gate-end, his own ingle-nook is always the best, the most interesting, the only thing domestic worth singing about and talking about.

So, deep in the lowland nature, began the Humour of About-the-Doors. It is little wonder, then, that the Scottish romancers have generally begun with descriptions of their own kailyairds—which are the best kailyairds—the only true kailyairds, growing the best curly greens, the most entrancing leeks and syboes, lying fairest to the noon tide heat, and blinked upon, as John Major says, by the kindliest sun, the sun of ‘mine own Gleghornie.’

It appears to me that John Galt, with all his poverty of imagination, is yet the most excellent, as he was the first of all these students of ‘my ain hoose,’ and ‘my ain folk.’ Galt’s names, his characters, the description of the places, delight me like a bonny Scots song sung by a bonny Scots lass—and that is the best kind of singing there is. I care not so greatly for his plots. I can make my own as I go. I am not greatly interested in what happens to the characters. But his Humour of About-the-Doors interests me past telling; and I read Galt arching my back by the fireside, like a pussy-bawdrons when she is stroked the right way. I should like to see an edition of Galt reprinted—it would not need to be edited, for learned comment would spoil it. I am persuaded that an edition of all the Scottish books of Galt would sell today better than they ever did in his own time.

Yet I should be sorry, too, for he is a fine, tangled, unexplored garden wild for the wandering Autolycus, and for that I should miss him.

How admirable, for instance, to pull down the first volume of Galt that comes to hand, is the following description of the office-houses of an old Scottish mansion, as it might be seen, even to this day, between Cree and Dee :—

‘Of somewhat lower and ruder structure was a desultory mass of shapeless buildings—the stable, sty, barn, and byre, with all the appurtenances properly thereunto belonging, such as peat-stack, dung-heap, and coal-heap, with a bivouacry of invalidated utensils, such as bottomless boyns, headless barrels, and brushes maimed of their handles—to say nothing of the body of the cat which the undealt-with packman’s cur worried on Saturday se’ennight. The garden was suitable to the offices and mansion. It was surrounded, but not enclosed, by an undressed hedge, which in more than fifty places offered tempting admission to the cows. The luxuriant grass-walks were never mowed but just before hay-time, and every stock of kale and cabbage stood in its garmentry of curled blades, like a new-made Glasgow bailie’s wife on the first Sunday after Michaelmas, dressed for the kirk in the many-plies of her flounces.’

Now there are people who do not care for this sort of thing, just as there are folk who prefer the latest concocted perfume to the old-fashioned southernwood that our grandmothers used doucely to take to the kirk with them folded in their napkins. For me, I could not spare the stave of a single barrel, nor the ragged remains of a single boyn. I take them with a mouth like an alms-dish; and, like the most celebrated of charity boys, I ask for more.

I need not point the moral or enter into the history of the Humour of About-the-Doors in recent fiction. Mr. Stevenson, in ‘Portraits and Memories,’ Mr. Barrie and Dr. Watson in all their books, have chronicled how the world grew for them when they were growing, and how the young thoughts moved briskly within them. Mr. Stevenson, being more subjective, was interested mainly in these things as an extension and explanation of his own personality. He saw the child he was, the lad he grew to be, move among these surroundings, and they took substance and colour from the very keenness and zest of his reminiscence. Mr. Barrie, stiller and less ready to be the world’s friend, waits round the corner, and grips everything as it passes him. But all his life Mr. Stevenson adventured out to seek strange lands. Already, as a child on the shores of an unseen Samoa, he had built him a lordly pleasure-house to the music of the five waterfalls. For he was the eternal Argonaut, the undying treasure-seeker. Each morning he woke and went out with the hope that today he would find a new world. To him the sun never grew old, and verily the hunter hunted the hill to the day’s ending ere he came to ‘lay him down with a will.’ Rare, very rare, but almost heartbreaking when they do occur, are Mr. Stevenson’s tendernesses about his native land—

‘Be it granted me to behold you again in dying, Hills of home! And to hear again the call—Hear about the graves of the martyrs the pee-wees crying—And hear no more at all!’

Mr. Barrie’s feet, without ever straying so far, yet carry him on the track of many a romance, woven of tears and laughter, when the world was young for us all. The skies may be

unkindly, the seasons dour, the steps steep, and the bread bitter—in Angus and in Thrums. Hard the lot and heavy the sorrow there! Up the steps the bowed woman goes to write a letter, in which the only cry of affection, ‘My dear son, Queery,’ is never uttered by her lips. The bent-backed weaver wheels his web up the brae with creaking wheelbarrow, and lo, in a moment Thrums melts away—we see before us the Eden door, at which stands the angel with the sword of flame, and Adam, bending to his mattock, is earning the first bairn’s bread in the sweat of his brow. There sits Jess by her window, and there Leeby lies in her quiet grave, while never any more comes a ‘registrardy’ letter from London, when the blithe postman’s knock had scarce time to fall before flying feet were at the door to welcome Jamie’s letter. For Jess is Eve, the ancient mother, bearing her heavier burden. Because the secret of Eve is that woman’s sorrow only begins with the bringing forth. Then, deepest and dreadest of all, there is Cain going out upon the waste—a bloodless if not a guiltless Cain, who has only broken those three hearts that loved him—and with them his own. I never want to read any more what I once read of Jamie fleeing hot-foot over the commonty—yet, like a hunted thing, ever and anon looking back through the darkness. I want to go upstairs and look at some bairns that He asleep, each in his cot—to make sure!

There are other humours which are sib to our Galloway people—and to them alone. These I cannot presently deal with, for time would fail me to tell of the Humour of the Out-of-Doors, the humour of byre and stable—the humour of ‘When the Kye Comes Hame,’ of the lowsing-time, of Hallowe’en and the Holy Fair. I know not whether there is as much of it now as there once was. They say that there is not. I only know that there was enough and to spare in my young time, and that we in those days certainly did not kiss-and-tell. We said little about these jocund humours to our grave and reverend seniors. And now when we are growing such like ourselves, I think analogy will help us to believe that there are yet humours in the lives of our juniors as innocent and gladsome, as full of primeval mirth as those of the departed days which we now endeavour, generally so unsuccessfully, to recall.

I do not think that any one will succeed in setting down these things—the humours of his country, his lost years, his lost loves, without finding the tears come as often to his eyes as the smile to his lips. But he will not succeed only because he sets himself to do it. He must be purposeful, yet conceal his purpose, and write with his heart. Perhaps no great romance was ever written with what is known as ‘a purpose.’ The purpose may indeed emerge, but it must not be thrust before the reader’s nose, else he will know that he has strayed into a druggist’s shop. And all the beauty of burnished glass, and all the brilliancy of drawer labels will not persuade him that medicine is a good steady diet. He will say, and with some reason, ‘I asked you for bread—or at least for cakes and ale—and lo! ye have given me Gregory’s Mixture!’

So he will walk out, and not deal any more at that shop, save when he wants medicine—for some other person. A lady once sent me a book, and she wrote upon it that she hoped it would do me good. Now, I did not want it for myself particularly, but I had a friend, a wicked lawyer, and I instantly recognised that this good book was the very thing for him. So I sent it to him; and he has never even thanked me.

Thus is it true what the poet sings—

‘*Man’s inhumanity to man Makes countless thousands mourn.*’

Scott did not write with any purpose, save the primitive instinct to tell an entrancing story. And in spite of Gervinus and cartloads of commentators, chiefly Teutonic, I do not believe Shakespeare did either. On this point, however, I am open to conviction; but, like that great ecclesiast, the late Dr. Begg, ‘I wad like to see the man that could convince me!’

Finally, I desire to say a few words upon the so-called Scottish dialect, not by any means as one who speaks ex cathedra, but only in order to express my own feelings and beliefs as a dialect-speaking and writing Gallovidian.

We are not of those who look upon Scottish dialect as merely a corrupt kind of English.

It would be, indeed, much truer to say that modern English is a corrupt and much-adulterated variety of Scots.

For the old Scottish language has had a history both long and distinguished. In it the first of Scottish romancers, John Barbour, wrote his saga-tales of Wallace and Bruce. In it Dunbar sang songs; Robert Henrysoun, dominie and makkar, fabled; while Ramsay, Burns, Scott, Hogg, and Galt carried down to this generation its roll of noble names.

Of recent years, with the increasing localisation of fiction, there has arisen a danger that this old literary language may be broken up into dialects, each one of which shall possess its interpreters, accurate and intelligent, no doubt, but out of the true and legitimate line of the succession apostolic.

Now, what I understand to be the duty of the Scottish romancer is, that he shall not attempt to represent phonetically the peculiarities of pronunciation of his chosen district, but that he shall content himself with giving the local colour, incident, character, in the noble, historical, well-authenticated Scots language, which was found sufficient for the needs of Knox, of Scott, and of Burns, to name no other names. Leave to the grim grammarian (of Aberdeen) his ‘fous’ and ‘fats’ and ‘fars.’ Let the local vocabulary-maker, excellent and even indispensable man, construct cunning accents and pronunciation-marks. Leave even great Jamieson alone, save for amusement in your hours of ease. As Mr. Stevenson once said, ‘Jamieson is not Scots, but mere Angus-awa!’ A pregnant saying, and one containing much solid sense.

There is another danger. To write correctly and intelligibly the Scottish dialect is difficult. But it is easy to be vulgar in dialect. Shall our noble literary language be brought down by the vulgarisms of the local funny man to the condition of a mere idiom? Certainly, if the people want it so. But there is no need to call the jumbled rubbish Scottish dialect.

For myself, I love to discern a flavour of antique gentlemanship about a man's written Scots, something that takes me back to knee-breeches and buckled shoes, to hoddens grey and Kilmarnock bonnets. They might be a little coarse in those days, but they were not vulgar.

And, indeed, there never was a nobler or more expressive language than the tongue of the dear old ladies who were our grandmothers and great-grandmothers in this our own Galloway. Let us try to keep their speech equally free from Anglicisms which come by rail, Irishisms which arrive by the short sea-route, from the innuendo of the music-hall comic song, and the refinements of the boarding-school—in fact, from all additions, subtractions, multiplications, and divisions, by whomsoever introduced or advocated. There is an idea abroad that in order to write Scottish dialect, it is enough to leave out all final g's and to write dae for do—which last, I beg leave to add, is the very hall-mark of the bungler!

Now this honest Doric of ours is a sonsy quean, clean, snod, and well-put-on. Her acquaintance is not to be picked up on the streets or at every close-mouth. The day has been when Peg was a lady, and so she shall be again, and her standard of manners and speech rank at least as high as that of her sister of the South.

The result may not show in the reports of the Board of Trade; neither will it make Glasgow flourish yet more abundantly, nor the ships crowd thicker about the Tail of the Bank. But it will give broad Scotland a right to speak once more of a Scottish language, and not merely English with a Dundee, a Gallowa', or a 'Doon-the-watter' accent. And, above all, it will give her again a literature frankly national, written in her ancient language, according to the finest and most uncorrupted models.

If you have enjoyed this, or even if you've found it challenging, and would like to read more of and about Crockett, please join [The Galloway Raiders](#). Membership is free and gives you access to all sorts of other information about Crockett and his writing as well as to

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