



Scots in a Scottish library from an early edition of Sir Walter Scott's 1816 novel *The Antiquary*.

A native Scots speaker from Ayrshire, Billy Kay's work promoting Scots has been a major catalyst for the language's revival in education and the media in recent years. He produced the television series "The Mother Tongue" and the radio series "The Scots Tongue," and wrote the influential book, *Scots, The Mither Tongue*. He has published successful plays, poetry, and short stories in Scots and also frequently visits Scottish primary and secondary schools to talk to the students about Scots.

## Scots

BILLY KAY

Scots shares the same Germanic roots as English, but the two languages developed separately during the Middle Ages when Scotland and England were independent, mutually hostile nations. Then, Scots absorbed distinctive words from French, Dutch, and Scandinavian languages, while ironically preserving its Old English roots better than the English of England in words like *hame* (home) and *stane* (stone). Scots was spoken by every sector of Lowland society.

The hegemony of Scots was eroded by important historical events such as the Reformation (16th century), when the first vernacular Bibles were printed in English; the Union of the Crowns (1603), when Scots poets lost royal patronage; and the political union of Scotland and England in 1707, when the prestige of the language of the larger partner, England, was firmly established.

Yet three centuries later, despite enormous pressures toward linguistic conformity, Scots remains a vital component of Scottish cultural life, the medium of plays, novels, poetry, and a rich and beautiful song tradition.

Scotland hes aye been a multi-lingual kintrae, fae the foundin o the natioun whan French, Flemish, Gaelic, an Scots wes spoken in the early burghs, richt tae the present day wi the Celtic leid Gaelic an the Germanic leids English an Scots yet tae the fore. O thir thrie leids, Scots is by faur the maist negleckit an hauden doun in offeicial terms, yet ironically is spoken in ae dialect or anither by the feck o the fowk. Wi gey pickle status, it is maistly uised in informal, familiar situations.

Whiles I compare it tae an underground activity preed by consentin adults in the privacy o their ain hames! Despite this restrictit uis o the leid for a lang time, it hes aye been the medium o a great literary an folk tradeition at the makars o the praisent day is eident tae continue.

*Scotland has always been a multi-lingual country, from the founding of the nation, when French, Flemish, Gaelic, and Scots were spoken in the early towns, right to the present day when the Celtic language Gaelic and the Germanic languages English and Scots [remain preeminent]. Of these three languages, Scots is by far the most neglected and held down [oppressed] in official terms, yet ironically is spoken in one dialect or another by the majority of the folk. With very little status, it is mostly used in informal, familiar situations.*

*Sometimes I compare it to an underground activity practiced by consenting adults in the privacy of their own homes! Despite this restricted use of the language for a long time, it has always been the medium of a great literary and folk tradition that the writers of the present day are keen to continue.*

The makars ar also pairt o a process tae normalise Scots, tak it frae the private tae the public domain an gie fowk a sense o whit it wes and whit it will be again—a leid o mense an virr that will aye express the smeddum o the Scots fowk an their ties tae the land an its culture.

In daein this we ar takin pairt in a process that is dingin doun barriers an biggin brigs aw ower Europe, whaur aince suppressit leids an natiouns ar reassertin theirsels. They ar threapin for their veice tae be heard in a Europe o a Hunder Flags an a hunder tongues, a Europe whaur linguistic diversity is regairdit wi pleasure raither than wi suspesion. For the relationship atween Scots an English hes monie parallels in a wheen European kintraes: Friesian an Dutch in the Laigh Kintras, Occitan an French in France, Catalan an Spanish, or Galician an Spanish in Spain. Aw thay leids cam frae similar ruits, but gaed their ain gait through belangin separate poleitical entities.

In maist cases it wes anely whan they got thirlit tae political unions wi mair pouerfu neebours at their mither tongues stairtit tae erode in competeitioun wi the standard language o the centrist states they belangit. The naiture o fowk's identity houever is sic that aw thae leids hes tholit the straits agin thaim an bidit on in a mair restrictit uis as the ilka-day language o the fowk. In monie cases this strang fowk-feelin wi the leids gart thaim that spoke thaim aw the mair determinit tae haud on tae whit they hed.

It is aw aboout heizin up the vernacular o the fowk tae its richtfu place in our national life.

Hugh MacDiarmid (1892–1978), the faither o the Scots Literary Renaissance, scrievit thir words that gie hope for the future o Scots as a leivin European leid o the 21st century. “For we hae faith in Scotland’s hidden poo’ers. The present’s theirs, but a’ the past an future’s oors.”

*The writers are also part of a process to normalize Scots, take it from the private to the public domain and give people a sense of what it was and what it will be again—a language of dignity and vigor that will always express the spirit of the Scottish people and their ties to the land and its culture.*

*In doing this we are taking part in a process that is smashing barriers and building bridges all over Europe, where once suppressed languages and nations are reasserting themselves. They are insisting for their voice to be heard in a Europe of a hundred flags and a hundred tongues, a Europe where linguistic diversity is regarded with pleasure rather than with suspicion. For the relationship between Scots and English has many parallels in a number of European countries: Friesian and Dutch in the Low Countries, Occitan and French in France, Catalan and Spanish, or Galician and Spanish in Spain. All these languages came from similar roots, but went their own path [evolved separately] through belonging to separate political entities.*

*In most cases it was only when they became bound to political unions with more powerful neighbors that their mother tongues started to erode in competition with the standard language of the centralized states they belonged to. The nature of a people's identity, however, is such that all these languages have borne the strikes against them and lived on in a more restricted use as the everyday language of the people. In many cases this strong [popular identification] with the languages made those who spoke them all the more determined to hold on to what they had.*

*It is all about elevating the vernacular of the people to its rightful place in our national life.*

*Hugh MacDiarmid (1892–1978), the father of the Scottish Literary Renaissance, wrote the words that give hope for the future of Scots as a living European language of the 21st century. “For we have faith in Scotland’s hidden powers. The present’s theirs, but all the past and future’s ours.”* ■