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A talk given to the Vernacular Circle, Burns Club of London, in February 1925.

I have been asked to speak tonight on the subject of the use of the Scots Tongue by George MacDonald, whose centenary was celebrated last December. The subject is one which will appeal to this Association, for George MacDonald laid the scenes of his best stories in our country, and his most remarkable characters speak our language.

I will try to answer two questions—Why did George MacDonald write in Scots? And why, writing in Scots, did he not adopt the peculiarities of the Aberdeenshire dialect?

It will be convenient to take the second question first: why was it that when he placed the scenes of most of his stories in the North East, he did not in his conversations follow the special characteristics of the Aberdeenshire dialect? Why does he not say “meen” and “skweel” instead of “mune” and “schule” and “fa” and “fite” instead of “wha” and “white”?

I once asked this question of himself, and his reply was that that he wrote was for a much wider audience than Aberdeenshire, and if he used the Aberdeenshire dialect people outside the North Eastern counties could not or would not read it, whereas if he used the classic Scots tongue he could appeal to Scotsmen all over the world and to the many Englishmen and Americans who read Sir Walter Scott and Robert Burns. In this he was right. If you are an Aberdonian and know your own dialect, you can read his Scottish stories with the Aberdonian pronunciation as easily as if he had used the Aberdeenshire spelling. If you are not an Aberdonian, you are not puzzled and repelled by the Aberdeenshire peculiarities.

If you want to study Aberdeenshire in its purity, there is *Johnny Gibb of Gushetneuk*¹ to your hand. It may not be a great work of literature, but it is an extraordinarily true and interesting record—almost photographic—of the language, life and manners of the country folk of

central Aberdeenshire among whom Dr Alexander lived 80 years ago.

Yet, even as a record, Johnny Gibb represents the dialect of only one narrow area, the Buchan district, which varies occasionally from that of George MacDonald’s Strathbogie. It sometimes annoys me, in a dialect so like my own, to be pulled up by such curious old forms as “fadder” and “midder” for “father” and “mither” and such weak forms as “mith” and “mithna” for the broad “micht” and “michtna” of Strathbogie and of classic Scots.

But there is no end to it if you go into the minutiae of Scottish dialects. Skeat, who finds thirty dialects in England, gives nine to Scotland, and yet he includes in the area of the Aberdeenshire dialect the counties of Aberdeen, Banff, Elgin and Bairn, taking no note of variations between Deeside and Buchan, Buchan and Strathbogie, Strathbogie and Moray. The main point is that they are all part of the Scottish language, and so long as we have a Scottish language and a Scottish literature we need trouble little about minor dialectical variations. Robert Louis Stevenson in the preface to Underwoods\(^2\) says:

> I note again that among our new dialecticians the local habitat of every dialect is given to the square mile. I could not emulate this nicety if I desired—for I simply wrote my Scots as I was able, not caring if it hailed from Lauderdale or Angus, from Mearns or Galloway: if I ever heard a good word I used it without shame; and where Scots was lacking or the rhyme jibbed, I was glad (like my betters) to fall back on English . . . . Let precisians call my speech that of the Lothians, and, if it be not pure, alas, what matters it?

A Scottish writer who writes for all his countrymen and for all the world, as did Scott and Burns and Stevenson and George MacDonald, should be free in his choice of words and untroubled by phonetic spelling, and should leave to others the interesting but non-literary task of recording the dialects.

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But while I say this I cannot agree with one passage in Mr John Buchan’s admirable introduction to The Scottish Muse\(^3\) in which he suggests that the language of Scottish poetry is no longer a living speech. He says of Charles Murray, whose dialect is precisely that of my old school days, that he
is “an exponent of a literary convention and not a singer of the speech of the common day.” He applies that remark also to Mrs Jacob and to Stevenson, and doubtless he would apply it also to George MacDonald. Even of Burns he says:

He used a language which was, even in his own day, largely exotic. His Scots was not the living speech of his countrymen, like the English of Shelley . . . . It was a literary language subtly blended from the old “makars” [poets] and the refrains of folk poetry, much tinctured with the special dialect of Ayrshire, and with a solid foundation of English, accented more Boreali.

Mr Squire, misled by these remarks, plunges still further. He seems to think that Stevenson learned his Scots from books, and after quoting one of his verses he asks: “Does anybody suppose Stevenson talked like this, or wrote it in any other way than that in which a schoolboy writes Latin verses?” Mr Squire hardly needs an answer. If he really imagines that Stevenson couldn’t talk Scots to a Scotsman or to a Scots lassie, he must know less than I supposed he knew of Stevenson’s boyhood, and the haunts and companions of his youth.

To Buchan the answer is that if Burns did not use the living speech of his day neither did Shelley nor any other poet. I turned by accident to Shelley’s “Skylark,” and the first words are

Hail to thee, blithe spirit!

Bird thou never wert.

Is that the common speech of Shelley’s day? If he met a cheerful friend could he have addressed him, “Hail to thee, my blithe friend, thou wert never better met”? Would he have addressed him continually as “thou” and “thee” and “thy”? Would he in conversation have used such words as “an embodied joy,” “unbeholden,” “joyance,” or “fraught”?

3. Sir Edward Troup was probably referring to a work compiled by Buchan entitled *The Northern Muse: an Anthology of Scots Vernacular Poetry*. It was published by Nelson & Sons in 1924. Troup refers to it again, correctly, on page 28. [26]

The truth is that every poet in every language has the right to use poetic expressions and, when they are appropriate, archaic words. It is perfectly true that Burns uses here and there words from the old “makars” and refrains of folk poetry, but the solid foundation of his best poems is the simple Ayrshire Scots, and when he strays into classical English, as he is
entitled to do, it is not always to the advantage of his poetry. To quote Mr Henley:

When Burns wrote English he wrote what was practically a foreign tongue; but when he wrote the dialect he had babbled in his babyhood, and spoken as a boy and youth and man, he revealed himself its greatest master since Dunbar.

As for George MacDonald, we know that Scots was as much his native language as English. He was made to speak English at table and in school hours, but in the nursery, among his school and college friends, and to the country people, he spoke Aberdeenshire Scots; and when, as in *Ranald Bannerman*, he translates the Scots talk of boys into English, he does it with an effort. Read the poem which Sir William Robertson Nicol described as “the most perfect expression of Aberdeen Doric in literature,” “The Waesome Carl” and I would challenge anyone to say it was not written in the living speech of the common day.

I now return to my first question. Let us assume that a Scottish writer may write in standard Scots, in the tongue which Burns used and which Sir Walter Scott put into the mouth of Edie Ochiltree and Meg Merrilees; and that he has liberty like Stevenson to borrow from any dialect when he finds a good word. Why did George MacDonald in about a dozen of his stories, and those his best, use the Scottish tongue as the medium for his teaching? We must remember that before he wrote any of them he had shown himself (as in *Phantastes*) a master of English prose, and that he could if he chose write a thoroughly Scottish story wholly in English, as he did in *Ranald Bannerman*. We must remember too that his overwhelming concern was not merely to tell a good story or to illustrate Scottish life and character, but to bring home to men the truth that he believed was given to him. This being so, why did he make David Elginbrod a Scottish peasant and put his highest teaching into his Scottish tongue?

The answer is, he found that for certain purposes—not for all—Scots was a more powerful vehicle of expression than English. Mr Buchan, in *The Northern Muse*, has discussed this question with reference to Scottish poetry. He finds in it much overdone sentiment and no ability to “enter for the greater contests of the Muses.” But, he says, the qualities in which Scottish vernacular poetry excels are on the one side its touch with the common life
of plain people—"a hardy and joyous realism," "a constant sense of men moving in a world riotously alive"—and on the other side with the world of the ballad—"the horns of elfland," "an airy and diaphanous romance."

Following Mr Buchan, but extending our view to include prose, I think we can put under four heads the things that can be said more tellingly in Scots than in English. It is, first, a better vehicle than English for humour, for humourous wit and for satire; next, it is a good language for the simple things of everyday life, for the expression of the simple emotions, and for plain homely narrative. Then there is the ballad, Buchan’s “airy and diaphanous romance”; and lastly I venture to think it is the language, not for theology or for sermons, but for a homely philosophy of life and for the plain personal appeal of religious thought and feeling. All these things we find in George MacDonald’s Scottish stories and poems.

Let us take a few examples, and first a specimen of humour from 

*Alec Forbes* which Chesterton is fond of quoting. Mr Cupples had been spending a Sunday morning among the hills about Glamerton and was carrying home a purple foxglove when he met Eobert Bruce. “I’m surprised,” said Bruce, “to see ye carryin’ that thing o’ the Lord’s day, Mr Cupples. Fowk’ll think ill o’ ye.” “Weel, ye see, Mr Bruce, it angert me sae to see the ill-faured thing positeevely growin’ there upo’ the Lord’s day that I pu’d it lip ‘maist by the reet. To think o’ a weyd like that prankin’ itsel’ oot in its purple and its spots upo’ the Sawbath day!”

I heard Mr Chesterton give an English version of this the other day and


it came off quite well, but is this really the same thing in translation? “Well, you see Mr Bruce, it made me so angry to see the nasty thing positively growing on Sunday that I almost pulled it up by the root.” Without “angert” and “ill-faured” it seems to me to lose at least a third of its force.

Next let us try a specimen of vigorous homely narrative. It is a passage from *Alec Forbes* in which Charlie Chapman and Andrew Constable are talking:

“Did ye hear, Mr Constable, what the loons did to Robert Bruce the nicht afore last?”

“No. What was that? They hae a spite at puir Rob, I
believe.”

“Weel, it didna look a’ thegither like respeck, I maun alloo.—I was stannin’ at the counter o’ his shop waitin’ for an unce o’, sneeshin’; and Robert he was servin’ a bit bairnie ower the counter wi’ a pennyworth o’ triacle, when, in a jiffey, there cam’ sic a blast, an’ a reek fit to smore ye, oot o’ the bit fire, an’ the shop was fu’ o’ reek, afore ye could hae pitten the pint o’ ae thoom upo’ the pint o’ the ither. ‘Preserve’s a’!’ cried Bob; but or he could say anither word, butt the house, scushlin in her bauchles, comes Nancy, rinnin’, an’ opens the door wi’ a scraich: ‘Preserve’s a’!’ quo’ she, ‘Robert, the lum’s in a low!’ An fegs! atween the twa reeks, to sunder them, there was nothing but Nancy hersel. The hoose was as fu’ as it cud haud, frae cellar to garret, o’ the blackest reek ‘at ever crap oot o’ coal. Oot we ran, an’ it was a sicht to see the crater wi’ his lang neck luikin’ up at the chimleys. But deil a spark cam’ oot o’ them—or reek either, for that matter. It was easy to see what was amiss. The loons had been o’ the riggin, and flung a han’fu’ blastin’ powther down ilka smokin’ chimley, and syne clappit a divot or a truf upo’ the mou’ o’ t.6

Now let me quote one or two instances of what was to George MacDonald the final aim of nearly all he wrote, to illuminate the mystery of spiritual truth. As Professor Grierson has said: “he wrote not for fame... but to deliver a special message to his nation and generation, the invincibility of divine love.” MacDonald gives this message in story, in poem and in sermon, and sometimes in sermons embodied in stories and not welcome at all to his readers. He gave it in direct teaching and in the mouths or the lives of a hundred different characters. He gave it in English and in Scots, but he felt, I think, he could give it with most force in the mouths of plain Scottish people speaking their own tongue. There is no better example than the passage which follows the famous Martin Elginbrod epitaph:

Here lie I, Martin Elginbrodde:
Hae mercy o’ my soul, Lord God;
As I wad do, were I Lord God,
And ye were Martin Elginbrodde.7
But that passage has been quoted so often that I will not dwell on it. The same idea occurs again and again in his works.

In *Alec Forbes* Thomas Crann says to Jamie Dow, “Sin’s sic an awfu’ thing and I hae sinned sae aften and sae lang, that maybe He’ll be forced efter a’ to sen’ me to the bottomless pit.” And Jamie Dow, who “had no reputation for piety though much for truthfulness and honesty” replies, “Hoot, hoot, Thamas, dinna speyk sic awfu’ things. They’re dreadfu’ to hearken till. I’s warran’ He’s as kin-hertit as yersel.”

Again old Mrs Falconer in her prayer for her reprobate son says, “Eh! the torments o’ that place! and the reek that gangs up for ever an’ ever, smorin’ the stars I And my Anerew doon i’ the hert o’ t cryin’! And me no able to win till him! O Lord! I canna say thy will be done. But dinna lay’t to my chairge; for gin ye was a mither yersel’, ye wadna pit him there.”

Then let me take one more passage where the idea is different. The old blind woman Tibbie Dyster, and little Annie Anderson are in bed in the cottage surrounded by the great flood.

“The watter’s i’ the hoose!” cried Annie in terror, and proceeded to rise.

“Lie still, bairn,” said Tibbie, authoritatively. “Gin the watter be i’ the hoose, there’s no ootgang. It’ll be doon afore the mornin’. Lie still.” Annie lay down again, and Tibbie resumed:

“Gin we be i’ the watter, the watter’s i’ the how o’ his han’. Gin we gang to the boddom, he has only to open’s fingers, an’ there we are, lyin’ i’ the loof o’ ‘s han’, dry and warm. Lie still.”


I will not attempt to turn these passages into English. I do not think anyone can doubt how much of their living force they owe to the vernacular. And George MacDonald himself has given the reason:

The fact is, it is easier to speak the truth in a *patois*, for it lies nearer to the simple realities than a more conventional speech. I do not however allow that the Scotch is a *patois* in the ordinary sense of the word. For had not Scotland a living
literature, and that a high one, when England could produce none, or next to none—I mean in the fifteenth century? But old age, and the introduction of a more polished form of utterance, have given to the Scotch all the other advantages of a *patois*, in addition to its own directness and simplicity.11

And now I should like to give an example of Scots in the “realm of romance and elfland” by reading one of MacDonald’s Scottish ballads called “All Soul’s Eve.” Here there is no question of Aberdeenshire dialect. The Scottish ballad has a traditional form and language of its own which he was free to use. This example is founded on the traditional belief that at midnight on Hallowe’en the dead walked and visited the houses of their friends. It tells how the living Janet kept tryst with her dead lover and sat by his side from midnight till cockcrow. Once a year for seven years she meets him thus. On the seventh Hallowe’en she meets him and goes with him to the world of the dead.

I think the Vernacular Circle does well to keep alive a language in which such a ballad as this can be written, and in which the highest teaching can be conveyed in such simple words as those of David Elginbrod and Robert Falconer.