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## Amanda Thomson: Collecting nature's words

- [Lynsey May](#)
- 14 September 2018



**In A Scots Dictionary of Nature, Thomson shows us some**

# of the most alluring and inventive words for describing world around us.

In *A Scots Dictionary of Nature*, artist and art lecturer Amanda Thomson had created a stunning wee book detailing some of the wonderfully inventive Scots words that document the world around us. Always interested in the poetics of place, Thomson's time exploring the forests of Scotland during her practice-based PhD helped her see old places with new eyes.

When she later discovered a host of fascinating words in a secondhand copy of John Jamieson's 19th century *A Dictionary of the Scots Language*, her background in printmaking combined with her love of the words to inspire her own handmade artists' books. These were later amalgamated and expanded upon to become an illustrated edition published by Saraband. We caught up with her to find out about the words she uncovered.

**In some ways, the book contains several dictionaries – each covering a different aspect of nature or being in nature – what made you group them that way?**

Because my PhD was about the forests of Scotland, the first dictionary I made was the *Dictionary of Wood*. It's slightly different from the others because it contains words that aren't just related to forests and trees, but things that are made out of wood, for example 'cannle firs' were splinters of firewood used as candles. There are Scots Pines in Abernethy forest where you can still see where these fir candles used to be cut. But of course there are lots of different elements that make up place, and so I then gathered words related to weather, birds, water, land and then, later on walking.

Land contains a variety of related words, that relate to animals, flowers, farming amongst other things, which I simply couldn't break down. I collected words related to walking later on, as I began to think about we can tell a lot about a place by the words we use to move through it.



Rannoch

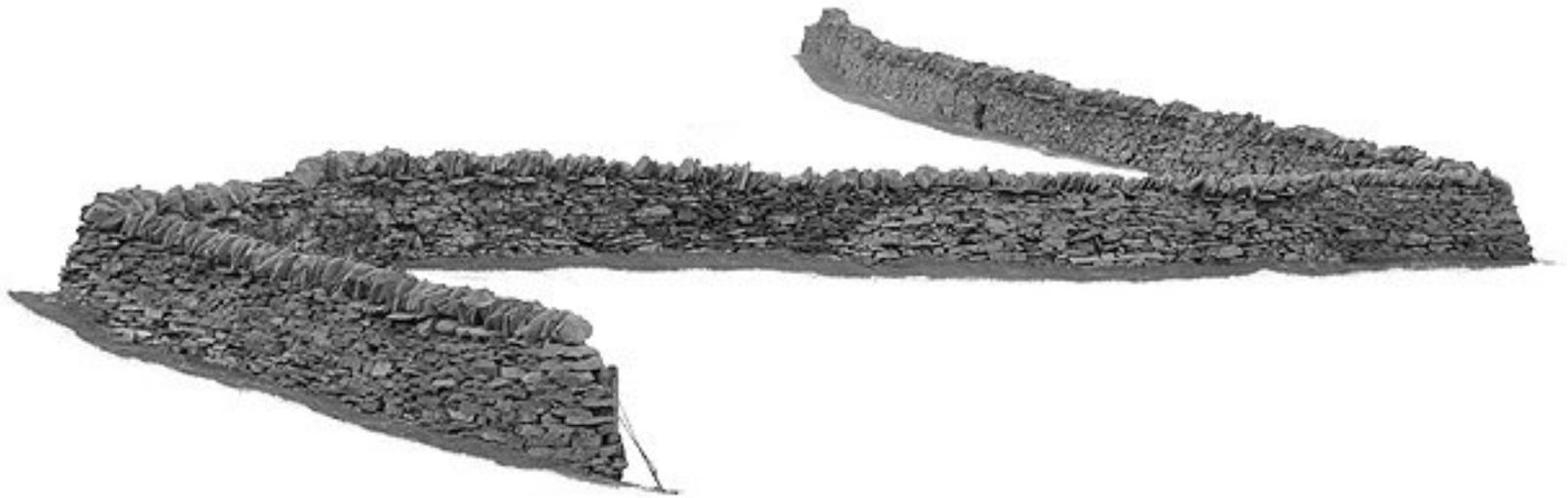
**There are some stunning words in here and many that have fallen out of common usage. How did you research and discover them?**

I found each of the words by systematically going through Jamieson's, and then a couple of other 19th century sources, looking for relevant words. As I was doing the next few dictionaries at the same time, I could sort these found words into the different categories, though of course there are spillovers and some words can fit into one or more categories. I know there will be words I've missed and others that could potentially go in other sections than where they are, but that's hopefully part of the uniqueness of the book and people can make their own connections.

**In your introduction, you mention the ways that the meanings of some words have a different significance today compared to their usage in years gone by, could you tell us a little more?**

I suppose I was particularly struck by the different and very specific words for kinds of weather. A water-gaw, for example, is a rainbow, but seen in the north or east as a sign of bad weather. I was struck by the words for clouds that weren't just relating to the clouds, but what they might

foretell, for example 'doggindales', 'clouds of mist clinging to hillsides, betokening southerly winds'; or Banff-baillies', 'white snowy-looking clouds on the horizon, betokening foul weather', and how it was probably more important to understand them in relation to signs of good and bad weather, and how that might affect one's work, whether or not to harvest, fishing etc. There are words for birds that appear to have been common then that are much rarer now; words related to agriculture that speak to a very different way of farming; and indeed, landowner and tenant relationships...



drystone dyke

### **Do you feel that knowing new words for things makes you see them differently?**

Not always, and I think it relates to the context of where you are and what you are doing, but some of these words I think makes you more attentive to different things and ways of seeing, and that's what draws me to them. The harvest moon, for example used to be called 'break-back', 'so called by the harvest labourers for the extra work it entails'. I love that the phrase 'lang sang', long song, is 'a noise made by waves on the bar of a harbour'. Sometimes the words make you pay more attention to everyday things that we wouldn't ordinarily pay attention to. The fact that a hoodie, short for a hooded crow, can also mean a hired mourner.

### **Can you choose a favourite word?**

I have so many and every time I go back in and look I find other ones. I keep returning to 'huam', 'the moan of an owl in the warm days of summer'. 'To startle' is lovely, and the definition and example given is great - 'to run wildly about, as cows do in hot weather, as in "I saw the foolish auld brute, wi' her tail o' her rigin, startling as fast as ony o'them"; 'to windle' which is 'to walk wearily in the wind'. I also love 'to breek', "(used by females shearing on a windy day) tucking up their petticoats to their knees in form of breeches. The question is often asked 'are ye gaun to breek the day?'".

*Amanda is appearing at Wigtown Book Festival, 27 September, Wigtown, £6.*

# [Amanda Thomson](#) || [A Scots Dictionary of Nature](#)

From an owl's call on a summer's evening ("huam") to walking in wet mud ("splorroch"), Scots has a myriad of words relating to nature. Amanda Thomson, a lecturer at Glasgow School of Art, was determined to preserve them. She reveals her stroll through the undergrowth of language. [609] Sponsored by East Knockbrex Farm

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