**EXTINCTION REVIVAL: IS SCOTS HAUNTED?**

*Hard Roads an Cauld Hairst Winds; LI BAI an DU FU in Scots,* translated by Brian Holton, Taproot Press 2021.

**Intro**

In the week that the 2022 Census form has to be completed a new book of Chinese poetry in Scots translation has come in for review. The coincidence might seem unremarkable but for the fact that the Census asks citizens for information on who can speak and understand Scots, who can read it, and write it. We naturally assume that the line of questioning is, amongst other things, aimed at calculations regarding the survival and the future of the language and its dialects. Yet are those different abilities -speaking, reading and writing the language – related in any necessary, or even obvious or straightforward way? Reception of this new book might indeed provide fortuitous evidence for meditation on these very questions.

**I**

Is it possible to predict the future of a language? No more, surely, than to foresee the rise and fall of peoples and nations … or, are those not mibbes the same thing anyways … mair or less?

In the 17th chapter of *Ulysses* James Joyce asserts of his characters’ respectively putative ancestral languages, Bloom-Hebrew and Dedalus-Irish Gaelic, that they are the ‘extinct and revived’. It’s not quite clear from the text which status is designated to which language, and the historical record wouldn’t seem to clarify that relation for us either: at the time of *Ulysses* writing and publication – early 1920s – there were said to be a quarter of a million native Irish speakers in Ireland. So, it was not extinct, but then numbers were falling (and for decades now have stood at around or below 50k), thus neither was it ‘revived’ strictly speaking. In the Hebrew case, the language had never become extinct in the sense that it was always that of the ritual, scripture and religion of the Jews. Arguably it was extinct as a native daily spoken tongue, but it was revived from the late 19th century onwards as the daily language in Palestine/Israel, and later became the official language of the Israeli state. Thus, it might be surmised that the ‘revived’ designation in *Ulysses* is being assigned in particular to the Hebrew language. Though, as the new Irish state of the early 20s was just inaugurating a policy of a universal Irish language education for non-native speakers (-regardless of the subsequent success or otherwise of that policy - ) that language could also be considered as being ‘revived’ at that time. Yet where does that leave us with the designation ‘extinct’? It seems natural to assume that Joyce had meant one of those terms to describe the state of the Irish language and the other term the Hebrew. But perhaps this was not his intention at all.

The two terms appear, on the face of it, to be mutually exclusive -even Lazarus could not be both extinct and revived at the same time. Extinction is an absolute quality of zero quantity, whereas revival is a relative, almost qualitatively measurable state. Yet perhaps Joyce’s oxymoronic intention was indeed that both these terms were applied simultaneously to the state of both languages –‘the extinct and the revived’. Could it be that the absolutism in extinction is to be understood in relative application to the minoritarian and marginal status of Irish extinction as the daily first language of all or most citizens, and equally to the preservation of the long-unused quotidian speech of Hebrew through sacred forms alone? And by extrapolation, is Joyce applying these apparently irreconcilable qualities together as a characteristic paradox inherent in a ‘national’ language as one of generations, literally extinguished every day on the tongues of the old and dying, and revived each day in the mouths of new-born babes?

That conception would certainly have some resonance with the numerous other visions of genealogical formations (from Eve, mother of humanity, to Finn McCool and his Fenians, to the sources of the Gaelic alphabet, the Pisgah sight of Palestine and so on…) which run all through and structure the entire literary form of *Ulysses*.

Might it not also be that the application of these particular terms -and in a peculiar paradox – was deemed specifically apt by Joyce for the precarious nature -hanging between life and death – of both those languages and the fortunes of those peoples? In both cases, the language – even when it was not used for daily everyday communication by the vast majority of the population – still had a strong value as a shibboleth – a token of the identity, and some kind of guarantor for the very survival and continuity of these nations, the Irish and the Jews, as specific peoples with a definite (and perhaps also esoteric) culture and history. Just the very existence of those languages, at once evidently nurtured and revered, yet ignored and abandoned, seems to embody those peoples’ threatened sense of themselves in their own precarious position, waxing and waning in their fortunes, on the margins of a world ruled by bigger and more powerful interests.

**II**

No doubt discussion of this Joycean subtlety in the dialectical understanding of the relationship between identity and language will already have pushed many readers of *Bella Caledonia* to a parallel meditation on the ontological status of the Scots language. Can the comparison of Scots with those other two languages stand strictly on those Joycean terms however? Scots certainly has undergone various revivals over the centuries from Burns and Scott and the 19th century publishing boom to the twentieth century so-called Scottish Renaissance and beyond. Scots might also be said to have its own distinct flavour of the ‘extinct’ as have those other two languages, inasmuch, in its own authentic case, as its atavism of the generations seems to call on the largely pre-industrial character of its vocabulary and modes of expression. For a country like Scotland which was, alongside its partner, at the forefront of the first and most thoroughgoing Industrial Revolution, that language can then represent in some ways, a long steadying rudder which reaches deep into a past before industrial trauma and rapid urbanisation, with an attendant closer relationship to the native land. That is one explanation for the one-time controversy over whether the Glasgow dialect – as that of the overcrowded city par excellence – could be considered as an authentic dialect of Scots language, rather than as some debased and deracinated post-hoc patois of industrial expediency. It is also the reason why one critique of MacDiarmid’s poetic project was that he was attempting to retrofit his modernist Marxist -Leninist forms and intentions with a pre-industrial peasant dialect with sometimes bizarrely anachronistic, not to say couthy -and on occasion, racist results – extinct and revived indeed!

Thus, while for many Scottish people, the Scots language does perform somewhat like the Irish and the Hebrew (in Joyce’s time) as a national shibboleth guaranteeing origins and continuity in what is felt as the precarious cultural position of Scotland as a small nation in the wider world, that is far from being a universally shared attitude to the language. Indeed, many others, feel acutely embarrassed by the perceived couthiness of that language, and see it as a thing of the past which bears little relevance for the strong position Scotland established for itself in the modern world through its industrial partnership. The range of attitudes and opinions to the language is indeed complex and diverse between these binary poles, and would include those who believe Scots only lives at the level of individual dialects – in a fortiori example in rural dialects like Doric or Shetlandic, and any attempt at constructing, or far worse, speaking a universal Scots could only ever be inauthentic at best.

**III**

Obviously, the above passage constitutes only an extremely abbreviated take on the position of the Scots language in national life, and one approached principally from a very particularised literary view. I’m suggesting now, however, that as such it is apt as an ironically somewhat lengthy introduction and work of contextualisation towards an understanding and a critique of the new translation of classical Chinese poetry into Scots by Brian Holton.

Published in a fine pocketbook-sized bilingual hardback edition *Hard Roads an Cauld Hairst Winds* brings into synthetic Scots the work of two great 8th century lyric poets, Li Bai and Du Fu. Holton is a scholar of and specialist in the Chinese language, and the work is a really welcome addition to the repertoire of published literature in the Scots language. The poems are delight to read and that has no doubt been facilitated by the particular ease and grace with which that countrified peasant nature of Scots (as noted above) can carry the lyrics from 8th century China. Holton speaks of the ‘hamelieness’ of Scots in reference to this point, and one can’t but feel that modern English might indeed strike a tone too knowingly distant from the culture here to bring these ancient Chinese poems alive. The important point about Holton’s expertise in both languages -Chinese and Scots – here, is that these are not adaptations, whereby some anonymous translator has put the Chinese into some basic English (or Scots) and Holton as poet has then jazzed them up. What we have here are ‘versions’, as Holton calls them, calling on a citation from fellow poet Don Paterson to define such ‘versions’ as ‘trying to be poems in their own right’.

It can definitely be asserted that the attempt succeeds, and something must be said about the way in which it does so. If the designation ‘Synthetic Scots’ seems to take us right back into the territory of ‘the extinct and the revived’, then, as per the respective cases of Joyce’s Irish and Hebrew, it does so in its own idiosyncratic way. The ‘synthetic Scots’ as MacDiarmid used it in his early poetry from the 1920s on, was a relatively loose and spare Scots compared to more recent developments from the later twentieth century on. So where MacDiarmid did draw on many dialects (the ‘synthetic’ element) his poetry included a good quotient of more or less standard English too, in terms of vocabulary, grammatical structure and idiom. Indeed, MacDiarmid did famously claim that the Scots language incorporated all of the English language too as an expressive resource. The more recent synthetic Scots -in which category I would include, for example, Lorimer’s *New Testament* translation of 1983 as well as Holton’s Chinese translations here – is much more dense in its attempt to avoid any standard English vocabulary or structure whatsoever. Thus, it always seeks out the Scots word or way -which often means reviving the old, the abstruse, the obscure, the little used, the dead and the forgotten, and hitching them all to a more purely Scots wagon. Thus from Li Bai via Holton:

The year faas awa wi a routh o dwynin flouers,

This saison the meikle heat’s on the turn;

Rimie cauld’s early come out the norland,

Drumlie clouds cross the hairst watters.

This is fine poetry, but some would object that with its dense collection of words from different dialects and different eras (- would anyone use the word ‘Rimie’ now, and how many urban dwellers (the vast majority of contemporary scots) would understand the thick connotations of ‘hairst’ as noun or adjective? -) it is not a language that is, or was ever spoken by anybody. In response for sure, we could say that this is writing, it is poetry, it is a special, unique and heightened employment and awareness of words, it is not supposed to represent daily speech. -After all, no-one ever spoke the language of Shakespeare’s works, nor of Proust’s works either! The rejoinder in turn to that last might be to say that, yes, that is exactly how it appeareth -as if somebody were attempting to write modern English poetry in the seventeenth century synthetic English culled from Shakespeare!

The argument here is surely that Scots is not being revived in this type of writing, for it never existed with such an integrated form as proposed by synthetic Scots; and neither can it be extinct if it never existed as such anyway. Is it not significant, to follow that line of thought, that the notes to this poetry are published completely in standard English (‘needed to show the skill and delicacy with which the poet deployed his allusions’) and in both Holton’s *Introduction* and his *Eftirwird,* and for example, in the excellent interview which you might hear him give about the work on the *Scots Whay Hae* website ( <https://www.scotswhayhae.com/post/translated-accounts-the-swh-podcast-talks-to-brian-holton> ) he employs a standard English (respectively written and verbal) studded with a few Scots phrases (by way, it appears, of Shibboleth demonstrating who and what he is and where he belongs…).

It might be suggested that those latter pieces of writing and speaking from Holton represent a more ‘realistic’ scope for the use of Scots. But perhaps a surreal approach can furnish deeper insights into why, despite all these cavils, this poetry (- specifically in these ‘versions’) is *so* damnably enjoyable. I’d propose that we might see this dense synthetic Scots as engaging a type of reverse hauntology. That is to say that this language is constructed and projected now as some hypothetical future standard of an historical ground of an assortment of different dialects and words ‘of some antiquity’(Holton), just as Dante’s ‘lingua italiana in bocca toscana’, drawing on many dialects, ultimately and actually became the standard Italian language. But unlike the Italian case, for various political and historical reasons, this potential future synthetic standard Scots never *actually* came into being as a universal vernacular. It remains as a hypothesis -that is to say that the words are like pieces in a jigsaw of some sort of idealised language, objects moved about and fitted into place around one another, in calculation, and with the absence of any vernacular spirit. Thus, the reverse hauntology: it is the past which is haunted with the spirit of this what-might-have-been, this potential. The present of this language consists in a materialist positioning of words as things, of its use in a spatialised art. As if by ghostly confirmation of this reality, Holton speaks of the ‘muscularity’ and of the ‘flexibility’ of the Scots language.

This view in turn permits us to see another variation of extinction going on here – that of the spirit of the vernacular, so that from these vocally redundant materials (the words) we derive delight in positioning, design and patterning of a similar quality to say, that we find in embroidery or fretwork. This is writing not just as a literary art (for it is that) but also as a decorative art. And maybe we should all be more relaxed about that and celebrate the fact that we have access to this linguistic resource, howsomever ‘real’ it may be. Holton is not claiming that these are originals, they are ‘versions’ which through his exquisite virtuosity bring us a set of works which are unique in history, special in expression and timeless in their universality.