

I.

SOME REMARKS ON THE SCOTTISH LANGUAGE, PARTICULARLY AS EMPLOYED BY THE EARLIER SCOTTISH POETS. BY THE HON. LORD NEAVES, F.S.A. Scot.

By the Scottish Language is here meant that form of Teutonic speech which was used in the vernacular literature of Scotland in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries; or, generally speaking, from the death of Alexander III. (1286) to the accession of James VI. to the English throne (1603).

The condition and history of the language previous to the commencement of that period, are involved in obscurity, as no earlier monuments of it can be said with certainty to exist; while after the Union of the Crowns, and even from the date of the Reformation, there was a growing tendency in Scottish writers to discontinue its peculiarities, and to assimilate their idiom to the language of England. The Scottish tongue, indeed, continued after the departure of the Court, and still continues, in common use in Scotland, but, degenerating into a provincial dialect, it has lost much of its original richness and purity, though it still retains many relics of high antiquity, and has shone forth from time to time with great sweetness and beauty in the compositions of men of genius, who have employed it as the best means of embodying their own thoughts and of reaching the hearts of their countrymen.

Without entering on any lengthened discussion as to the origin of

the Scottish Language, it may be proper here to state the opinion—*1st*, That Scottish and Old English are sister dialects, of which the main texture is Teutonic, with an addition of French or Norman. *2d*, That the chief Teutonic element in Scottish belongs to the Low German family of languages, though there is an admixture of Scandinavian words. *3d*, That the particular Low German dialect which is the basis of Scottish must have differed considerably in its structure and forms from the language of the West Saxons, which became the Anglo-Saxon of literature. *4th*, That, with slight local diversities, the same dialect prevailed over the whole Eastern district of Britain lying between the Humber and the Forth, and extended sooner or later as far as the Dee or the Don. It would require more acquaintance than I possess with the local dialects of Northern Germany to determine whether any, and which of these, can be fixed upon as representing the Teutonic speech out of which the Scottish and Northern English have been formed. It is possible that none such can now be found, and that this precise variety of language has perished on the continent. It has been supposed that some entire tribes emigrated from Germany to England, and the Angles may have been among these. My impression is, that their language must have been something intermediate between Frisian and the dialect of Holstein.

I have no hesitation, however, in saying that our knowledge of Scottish and of its affinities is best to be improved by the study, not of individual words nor even of roots, but of grammatical forms. Many words are introduced into a language which lie insulated and unconnected like the boulder stones which are found on the surface of a country, and which are foreign to its native soil or strata. In the Teutonic languages, too, some words are precisely the same in all the different forms of speech, and one and the same root can be assigned to different forms of words. But grammatical formations are also deep-seated and tenacious of their position, and it is by these more especially that cognate dialects can be differentiated from each other. Not that grammar in any language is unchangeable; but it follows laws of its own in the transformations it undergoes; and it rarely or never happens that a language borrows the grammar though it may import the words of another.

Until within the last half-century too little attention was paid to grammar by philologists; and this negligence is particularly conspicuous in our Scottish inquirers. The only one among them who saw its importance was David Macpherson, whose excellent edition of Wyntoun is in this respect particularly valuable. It is indeed not very creditable to us that the first attempt at a Scottish grammar should have been made by Mr Collin, a Swede, whose late modest publication is extremely meritorious though somewhat imperfect. By Jamieson the subject was almost wholly neglected, and to this circumstance we may mainly ascribe his erroneous views as to the Scandinavian character of the Scottish dialect. No one could compare the grammars of the two, the Scottish and the Scandinavian family, without seeing their palpable and radical diversity. In particular, the Scandinavian languages have two peculiarities which I may mention; the one is the method of suffixing the definite article at the end of substantives, instead of prefixing it; the other is the possession of a proper passive voice formed by inflexions and not by auxiliaries. Both of these striking features are unknown in the Scottish.

It is chiefly, I think, by grammatical tests that we can determine the locality of those more ancient poems which are sometimes supposed to be Scottish, but of which the nationality is merely matter of conjecture. In order, however, to obtain a good grammatical standard, it seems necessary to methodize the grammar of those compositions which are undoubtedly of Scottish growth, and of these the most important seem to me to be Barbour's Bruce and Wyntoun's Chronicle. Especial weight, I think, is due to these works for several reasons. *1st*, The nationality of the subjects treated in them afford a strong presumption, amounting to a moral certainty, that as the authors must have composed for their countrymen, they would use the vernacular speech. *2d*, The near and almost exact correspondence between the idioms and forms of the two writers referred to support the idea that they wrote in a dialect well established and fully matured and systematised. Their mutual agreement in idiom also, tends to prove the comparative purity of their texts, as far as that idiom is concerned, and to guarantee us against the corruption which might be suspected to arise from the time and place where some of the manuscripts of their poems have been written. *3d*, They

wrote at a time antecedent to the return of James I. from captivity,—an event which, from the English education of that prince, must have introduced influences to bear upon the language and literature of the Scottish Court, which would naturally affect the style employed in elaborate composition. *4th*, The transcendent genius of Chaucer, and still more, perhaps, the variety and charm of the moral Gower, must have further helped to modify and draw from their native tendencies the forms of expression of those poets who arose in Scotland after Barbour and Wintoun, and whose early tastes might be moulded on those English models.

We meet, no doubt, with a great deal of genuine and good Scottish writing in Henryson and Douglas, in Dunbar, and in Sir David Lindsay, particularly in those parts of their writings which relate to popular subjects. But we cannot be sure that they are always writing in pure Scottish, and that particular forms or phrases which resemble English, may not have been imported. I venture, therefore, to say, that while the later writers may well be resorted to for illustration and expansion of our views, the fundamental character of Scottish grammar, and consequently of the Scottish language, is best to be derived from a careful and exhaustive study of the older poets whom I first mentioned.

In what manner any grammatical system deduced from them will bear upon the paternity or nationality of our anonymous writings, such as *Tristrem*, *The Green Knight*, &c., is a subject on which I shall not now attempt to enter. By digesting a consistent grammar out of Barbour and Wyntoun, we do not prove that that was the only grammar, or that theirs were the only forms in use in Scotland in or about their times. We know that there were then different dialects even of literary English, and in different parts of Scotland; or in different spheres of Scottish society there may have been diversities of form and idiom. But I venture to think that there would be a close family resemblance among them all.

I now propose to put together a few remarks on some conclusions which may be deduced from the works of those earlier writers, and particularly of Barbour.

It is a remarkable and important fact, that Barbour and Chaucer are as nearly as possible contemporaries. We have thus an excellent oppor-

tunity of comparing the dialects, and in different parts of the island at the same time, by two men of learning, position, and mental power, though of very unequal genius. The Vision of Pierce Ploughman belongs to the same era as The Bruce, having been written manifestly soon after the great Saturday-e'en's storm of 1362, to which it refers, while Barbour's poem was being composed in 1375. In Longland's remarkable work we have a third form of English speech, though more nearly resembling that of Chaucer than that of the Scottish poet. We have also within the same half or quarter century the writings of Gower and the prose of Mandeville and Wicliff, all affording important materials for comparison. And generally I would say that the systematic and scientific study of the English and Scottish Languages in the works of the fourteenth century, is one of the most interesting and instructive fields of inquiry that our literature presents.

1. The first peculiarity which I notice in Barbour, and I think also in Wyntoun, is the total, or almost total, absence of the prefix *y* or *i*, which occurs so often in Chaucer and Longland. The history of this prefix is well known. It is a remnant of an old inseparable preposition which in Gothic is *ga*, and in other dialects *ge* and *gi*. It corresponds in meaning to the Latin *cum* or *con*, and *possibly* has some affinity with that word. It was originally prefixed to nouns and verbs, to denote sometimes companionship and sometimes completeness, and its use in ancient Scottish is very extensive. In later languages it came to be prefixed to the participles passive of verbs that had it not in any other part, and it is so used to this day in German and Dutch, and partially also in the mutilated form of *i* or *e* in some dialects of Northern Germany. But it is singular that its use diminishes as we proceed eastward along the shore of the North Sea, and in the Scandinavian languages it seems to be wholly unknown and, I believe, is scarcely to be found in their oldest monuments. Its absence in Old Scottish is a symptom not necessarily of Scandinavian, but it may equally be of East German origin or influence. The past participles in Barbour are, so far as I have observed, entirely without it, and there are very few Scottish words that contain it in any of our writers.

2. Another peculiarity of Scottish grammar is the absence of the final *n* in some parts of the verb where it is general in Chaucer and Longland: as in the infinitive and in the third person plural.

3. But perhaps the great characteristic of the Scottish is the prevalence of the termination *s* in the inflections of the verb, particularly in the plurals. This peculiarity, which is also extensively found in northern English, has often given to southern readers the impression that Scottish writers were ungrammatical, when they were correctly following the idiom of their language. This inflection is almost universal in the third person plural of the present indicative, and in the very remarkable form of the second person plural of the imperative mood, of which I shall here give some examples.

Barbour tells us how the English officers brought their Scottish prisoners before Edward I. in his dying moments, for directions as to what should be done with them,—

“ And how tha till his will war brocht,
 To do of them quhatevir he thoct ;
 And askit quhat tha suld of them do ;
 Than lukit he awfully tham to ;
 And said, girnand, *Hangis and drawis.*”

I may notice here what is perhaps a still older specimen of Scottish :—

“ Wend King Edwarde, with his lang shankes,
 To have gete Berwyke, all our unthankes ?
 Gar pikes hym,
 And after gar dikes hym.”

These forms in this obscure fragment seem to me to be imperatives, and to mean, “ Go pierce or slay him, and afterwards go ditch or bury him.”

This form is the regular imperative of the Scottish dialects. We find it everywhere in Barbour ; we find it also in the Rushworth and Lindisfarne Gospels, published by the Surtees Society, as in the phrase, “ *audite me omnes,*” which is translated, “ *heres gie mec alle.*” The “ Four Gospels ” of Northumberland, lately published by Bouterwek, exhibit this form in almost every page.

I may here notice in a cursory way some other grammatical peculiarities :—

The Indefinite article is *Ane*, used alike before vowels and consonants ; but *a* is sometimes used before a consonant. This article, as in the

modern European languages, is borrowed from the cardinal number, ANE, *one*.

“ Ane feind he was in likeness of ane freir.”—*Dunbar*.

“ Ane prince, ane conqueror, or ane valzeand knycht.”—*Douglas*.

The Definite article is THE, used as in English for all genders and both numbers.

This article is originally a demonstrative pronoun. It probably also at an earlier period had the form of *that* or *thet*, which may explain the otherwise anomalous phrases, *the tane*, *the tother* = *that ane*, *that other*; so like the Frisian, *that ene*, *thet other*. *The tae* is also used for *the tane*.

Examples.

“ Thai strave,¹ for athir king wald be,
Bot the barnage of thair cuntré
Gert thaim assent oñ this manèr,
That *the tane* suld be king a yer;
And then *the tothir* na his menyie
Suld nocht be fundin in the cuntré,
Quhile the first brothir ringand wer.
Syne suld *the tothir* ring a yer;
And than the first suld leve the land,
Quile that *the tothir* war ringand:
Thus ay a yer suld ring *the tane*,
The tothir a yer fra that war gane.”

Barbour's Bruce, 1133.

“ That bargane cum till sic ending
That the *ta* part dissavit was.” (*i.e.* the one party.)

Id. 74.

“ Thare beyn twa luffis, perfyte and imperfyte,
That ane leful, *the tothir* fowle delyte.”

Douglas's Virgil, i. 179.

In the very curious Burgh Records of Aberdeen (published by the Spalding Club), there is entered, under date 4th October 1448, an obligation or appointment betuex Alexander of Wardlaw and others “on that a part,” “and John Stephinson, burgés of this burgh, on that othir part.”

¹ Eteocles and Polynices.

The inflection of nouns is made nearly as in English. The possessive singular is formed from the nominative by the addition of *is*, which regularly, though not always, constitutes a separate syllable; as *king*, *kingis*.

“ And syn to Scone in hy rade he,
And was made king, but langar let,
And in the *kingis* stole was set.

Barbour's Bruce 31.

Several nouns, particularly those expressing family relationship, are often used as possessives without the inflection.

“ Bot yet, for all his gret valour,
Modret, his *sistir son* him slew.”—*Ibid.* 23.

“ The knight said : ‘ I wes nevir born,
Bot of my *Modir wame* wes schorn.

Wyntoun's Chron. i. 240.

There are traces of an inflection for the possessive singular in *an*, as *Sunanday*, *Monanday*, for Sunday, Monday. Examples are to be found in Barbour, the Burgh Records of Aberdeen, and elsewhere, and the form long continued in Scotland. The first line of the Scots song to the tune of Sir Roger de Coverley is—

“ The nautman comes on Monanday.”

The plural of nouns is formed in various ways—

1. By adding *-is*, as in the possessive singular.
2. By adding *-in* or *-n*, according as the nominative ends in a consonant or a vowel, as *ox ox-in*; *ee, ee-n*; *schoo, schoo-n*; but I should add, that I think the plural in *n* is rarer in Scottish than in English.
3. By adding *-ir*, as *child, child-ir*; to which sometimes the syllable *-in* is further added, making a double plural, *child-ir-in*. Lammer, in the local names, *Lammermuir*, *Lammerlaw*, &c., seems an example of this form of plural.
4. By changing the vowel of the singular, as *man, men*; *cow, ley*; *fute, feet*; *brother, brethir*.

Of this last form, which is truly Scottish, I give an example from Bellenden's *Livy*; but I believe the plural *brethir* is still in use.

“ The twa princis afore namit tretis with thir sex brethir to fecht aganis uthir with scharpe and grundin swerdis to the deith, for defence of thair naciouns and pepill, with sic condicoun, that the empire and liberte sall stand perpetually with the samin pepell, quhare victorie war presentlie fallin. Thir sex brethir refusit nocht ther condicounis, and sone eftir they war aggreit baith of day and place for batall.”

Some nouns are uninflected in the plural, as *horse, sheep*, and some other animals; others are occasionally so, of which nouns denoting time or measure are frequent examples, as *yer, month*.

The possessive case in the plural is formed the same way as in the singular, where *-is* has not already been added, as *men, men-is*.

Other examples of the inflection of nouns may be given.

“ The thrid is, that we for our *lifis*,
And for our *childir*, and for our *wifis*,
And for the freedom of our land,
Ar strenyit in battale for to stand.”—*Barbour's Bruce*, 2232.

“ And at that cours born down and slane,
War of their *fais* ane gret parly.”—*Ibid.* 214.

The English plural of this word is often *fone*.

The following passage may show the accentual of the plural suffix :—

“ This was in the moneth of May,
Quhen birdis singis on the spray,
Melland thar notis with sindry soun,
For softness of that suet sesoun,
And lefis on the branchis spredis,
And blumis bricht besid tham bredis,
And feldis florist ar with flouris
Wele savourit, of ser colouris,
And all thing worthis blith and gay,
Quhen that this gud king tuk his way.—*Ibid.* 362.

Among the forms and inflections of the pronouns, some, I think, are characteristically Scottish.

- There is no doubt that the original pronoun of the first person must have been *ic*, and in old English we meet it constantly as *ic* and *ich*, but I have not observed it in Barbour, nor I think in Wyntoun, in any other form than the modern *I*.

The proper Scottish form of the feminine pronoun of the third person is I think *scho*, though *sche* is sometimes borrowed from the English by the later writers.

The plural of the third personal pronoun is peculiar. In old English it is made up of two elements or roots, being partly derived from *he* and partly from the same demonstrative pronoun that has supplied the definite article. Thus in Chaucer the nominative is *they*, but the dative and accusative is not *them* but *hem*; and the possessive is not *their* but *hir*. In Scottish their plural forms are taken wholly from the demonstrative pronoun, being *thai*, *thaim*, *thair*: and it is singular that in this respect the Scottish corresponds with modern English.

The plural *thai* is not only the simple personal pronouns, but is specially used as a demonstrative. Indeed to this day in Scotland *thai* is used as the plural of *that* instead of the English *those*, while *thir* is the plural of *this* instead of *these*. The Scottish forms in this respect led to a tendency which long existed, and perhaps still exists, in Scotsmen writing English, to confound *these* and *those*, which I think are not old Scots words. Where a more distant object is referred to, the Scottish uses *yon* instead of *that* or *thai*, and does so more extensively than is known in English. *Thir*, as the plural of *this*, is a very frequent and characteristic Scottish word.

I may notice here, some promininal adverbs which are a little peculiar, *thyne* and *hyne* are the Scottish forms for *thence* and *hence*. I have an impression that I have met with *quhyne* for *whence*, but if so I have not preserved my reference.

I shall now proceed to notice some peculiarities in the Scottish conjugations of verbs, and in the outset I would say that in those conjugations which the German philologists call *strong*, and which may be considered as more *primitive* than the others, the Scots long preserved the ancient character more entire than the English did. In particular the past participles in the Scottish which here end in *in*, remain almost always unmutilated in that termination, though I have already observed that they want the prefix *y*, which is so common in English.

The first form of conjugation I shall notice is that where the vowel in the present is *a*, and in the past is *o* or *oo*—sometimes spelt *w* or *ue*—and in the participle is again *a*, the formula being, *a*, *oo*, or *u* and *a*.

Some Scots verbs long retained this form, as *wax, wox, waxin*; *cast, coost, castin*; *bake, booke, bakin*; *lauch, leuch, lachin*; *fare, fure, farin*.

Near akin to this form, and sometimes running into it, is that which has the formula, *aw, ew*, and *aw*: as *blaw, blew, blawin*; *craw, crew, crawin*; *schaw, schew, schawin*; *saw, sew, sawin*. In manuscripts or at least in printed books, the distinction between the present and past of the verb *schaw* is often confounded, but it ought to be carefully observed, *schaw* being the proper present, and *schew* the proper past, just like *knav, knew*; *blaw, blew*.

The third form of conjugation I shall notice is grounded upon the simple and diphthongal varieties of the vowel *i*. In English the formula is *i, o, ï*, as *ride, rode, riddin*; but in Scottish we meet with a rule of permutation, by which the English long *o* comes to be changed into a Scottish *ā*. It may seem strange to say it, but both of these sounds, the long *o* and the *ā* are truly diphthongs of *i*, which indeed appears more clearly in Scottish particularly, if we were to spell the long *a* as *ai*; though *a* with the final *e* is the common spelling; we thus have *ride, raid, riddin*; *slide, slaid, sliddin*; *glide, glaid, gliddin*; *smite, smait, smittin*; *write, wrait, writtin*. This permutation of the English *o* for the Scots *a* is common also in nouns, wherever the vowel sound appears in German as *ei*: thus, *stone, stane, stein*; *home, hame, heim*; *bone, bein*; &c.

I shall notice only one other conjugation which embraces a great many verbs, and of which the formula is *i, a, u*, or *o*: as *sing, sang, sungin*; *ding, dang, dungin*; *ring, rang, rungin*. This last is rather a remarkable verb in one of its meanings, as being the corruption or conversion of the Latin word to *reign*, into a native Scots word of the primitive class, and thus confounded with *ring, tinnire*. *Ring* was long so used in modern Scottish; e.g., "In days when good King Robert *rang*." We have also *yield, yald, yoldin*; *find, fand, fundin*; *grind, grand, grundin*; &c.

Some anomalous forms of conjugation might be noticed, but I shall mention only one, the verb to *begin*, which has two forms of the past tense, *began* and *begouth*. This last form, which is also found in some of the low German dialects, is derived from the other form *began*, in the same way as *could* is derived from *can*. I need scarcely here say that

our English word *could* is wrong spelt in having an *l* inserted, from a false analogy with the word *would*. *Would* is properly spelt with an *l*, for it is the past tense of *will*, but *could* has no *l* in it, being formed from *can*, with the omission of the *n* before the *d*.

In now bringing these observations to a close, I feel that they require apology, as being both desultory and incomplete. I am conscious also that various interruptions have prevented me from testing their perfect accuracy by that repeated examination of sources and authorities which inquiries of this kind ever demand. The main use of what I have now read may be to show the importance and indeed the necessity of a minute and critical analysis of our early language; a department of study in which Dr Guest and some few others have done so much good service for the early literature of England. I feel convinced that much may be done in this way amongst ourselves, and that means may thus be afforded of making the texts of our early writers more accurate and more consistent than they at present are.

I shall conclude with a few general remarks as to the history of our language, suggested by the matters I have been considering.

I. We are still, as I have said, very much in the dark as to the form or forms of speech which prevailed in the Teutonic parts of Scotland before or at the time of the Norman conquest. This obscurity is intimately connected with the loss we have obviously sustained of the early literature of the Anglian or Northern parts of England. It can scarcely be doubted that the kingdom of Anglia, in the north, which extended a great way into modern Scotland, must have produced much native literature, and certainly its men of genius were not inferior to those of the southern kingdoms; but the amount of that literature which has been preserved is as nothing compared with the Anglo-Saxon monuments of the south. Important fragments, however, have been lately brought to light, and special attention has been directed to the subject, particularly by the labours of the Surtees Society, and it is to be hoped that much more may yet be done in this direction. I venture to say that the works of genuine Scottish writers will be found of the greatest use in the prosecution of those inquiries.

II. We are altogether unacquainted with the manner and circum-

stances in which French or Norman came at or after the Conquest to be mixed with the Scottish Teutonic, so nearly in the same fashion and proportions as we meet with in the Southern English. We can scarcely suppose that operations so similar in their nature and results could take place separately; and it seems more probable that the Norman admixture having found its way into the language of the better ranks in the North of England, had spread by degrees among their Teutonic kindred in the South and East of Scotland. French influences were at work in England long before the Conquest; and the reign of Malcolm Canmore connected Scotland with England more closely than had formerly been the case. We have after that period an interval of upwards of two centuries before the death of Alexander III., about which time we begin to have distinct traces of the Scottish Teutonic in that Normanised form which was adopted by Barbour and Wyntoun.

III. I ought here to add, what seems to be certain, that beneath the more polished diction of these educated men, there must have lain a ruder form of speech in use among the multitude, and of which we see remarkable traces in some of the more homely or ludicrous compositions of a later period. The singular poem of the "Howlat," by Holland, the comic and coarser verses of Dunbar, and the Prologue to Gavin Douglas's Eighth Book of the *Æneid*, are all written in an idiom much more antique, and, as far as I am concerned, much less intelligible than that of Barbour and Wyntoun. But I have no doubt that they contain a great store of genuine Scottish words and forms, obscured, perhaps, and exaggerated by the necessity of alliteration, but still deserving of attentive study, and full of instruction as to the ancient character of the language.

IV. I have neither time nor knowledge to consider the important but dark and difficult question, Where and how it was that the Celtic tongue was supplanted among us by the Scottish Teutonic? That Celtic customs and the Celtic language existed at and after the time of Malcolm Canmore, in parts of Scotland which in a few centuries afterwards were wholly Teutonic, seems to be a well-established fact; but the means by which this was effected do not appear to me to have been well traced or explained; and I will venture to make this remark, that in the Scottish language, as ultimately formed, there is a singular absence of that amal-

gamation which might have been expected between two languages so closely brought into contact. The French and Teutonic seem to have blended kindly together, though the French words are subjected to Teutonic inflections; but between the Teutonic and the Celtic there seems to have been a sort of repulsion which I cannot explain. In one of the earliest fragments of Scottish which remains, the verses preserved by Wyntoun, as written on the death of Alexander III., I believe the word *sons* alone to be Celtic; and the modern Scottish words "*sonsy*" and "*donsy*" confirm that view: but, as a general rule, the importation of Celtic words into Scottish seems to me to be very limited. It might perhaps be worth the while of a dispassionate Celtic scholar to investigate this subject more minutely than has yet been done; and an accurate ascertainment of the result, whatever it might be, would assist us in our attempts to speculate upon this obscure portion of our history.

V. The remarks I have already made show the importance, to Scottish philologists in particular, of carefully studying the early poetry of the North of England. The key to many of our Scottish difficulties is to be found in the consideration, that the Teutonic parts of Scotland and the North of England were essentially possessed by one and the same people. The language, the manners, and the customs which formerly prevailed, and which still linger, in those noble districts which lie between the Humber and the Don, are all traceable to a common source, and all afford united illustrations of the most important and interesting kind. Scandinavian and other foreign influences had a partial effect upon them, but they merely swept over the surface of the country; the basis of the character and habits of the people seems to me to indicate a unity of origin and an identity of history from the time they first transferred themselves from Northern Germany to our British shores, and commenced that career of industry, enterprise, independence, and self-improvement, which have acted so powerfully and harmoniously in aid of the more softened tendencies of the South, and have contributed so much to the ultimate formation of the British mind in its fullest and most perfect development.