

## BOSWELL: THE NEGLECTED LEXICOGRAPHER

Prof. David Crystal 18 May 2013

Literary discoveries don't happen very often, but when they do they send a collective tingle around the author's fans. I felt such a tingle when I first heard of the discovery of James Boswell's *Scottish Dictionary* - and moreover, from the mouth of the discoverer herself, Glasgow university academic Dr Susan Rennie. As the find is recent, and little relating to it has yet been published, I thought it would be a good subject for today's talk, as it shows yet another dimension to Boswell's remarkable personality, and warrants a description of him that previously we would expect to make only of Johnson: lexicographer. And a remarkably modern-minded one at that, for Boswell did something that Johnson never did, as we shall see.

The fact that Boswell was planning a dictionary is of course well known. We read about it in his *Life of Johnson*, in a much-quoted exchange:

On Thursday, October 19 [1769], I passed the evening with him at his house. He advised me to complete a Dictionary of words peculiar to Scotland, of which I shewed him a specimen. 'Sir, (said he) Ray has made a collection of north-country words. By collecting those of your country, you will do a useful thing towards the history of the language. He bade me also go on with collections which I was making upon the antiquities of Scotland. Make a large book; a folio'. BOSWELL. 'But of what use will it be, Sir?' JOHNSON. 'Never mind the use; do it'.

The specimen had been around for some five years. We first hear of it in the letters he wrote while studying law in Utrecht for several months in the first part of 1764 - in particular to the sections written in French on 7 and 24 February (I quote from the translation used in Frederick A. Pottle's *Boswell in Holland*, 1763-4). The earlier reference is simply a passing mention, but the later one contains real detail, both about Boswell himself and his view of lexicographers:

When I enter an assembly, I appear to be a young man of family on my travels, elegantly dressed in scarlet and gold. I am seen to chat pleasantly with the ladies of wit and beauty; I am seen to play a game of cards and to be as fashionable and as frivolous as the rest. No doubt, therefore, it would seem safe in talking to me to make fun of the author of a dictionary as being a heavy man; it might even be supposed that in talking thus one would be paying a compliment to a man of vivacity, and that he would be charmed to hear the most piquant witticisms directed against a man so different from himself. It might seem that in abusing the blockhead one would be praising the man of genius. But how taken in they are when they learn that the blockhead and the man of genius are one and the same! How surprised they are when they learn that I am writing a dictionary myself!  
...It is a Scots dictionary.

He then briefly explains the early history of Britain, the emergence of Scots and Saxon as 'the tongues of the two districts of Great Britain', and goes on to talk about Scottish English and the differences between it and English English:

Half the words are changed only a little, but the result of that is that a Scot is often not understood in England. I do not know the reason for it, but it is a matter of observation that although an Englishman does not understand a Scot, it is rare that a Scot has trouble in understanding what an Englishman says ... It is ridiculous to give as the reason for it that a Scot is quicker than an Englishman and consequently cleverer in understanding everything. It is equally ridiculous to say that English is so musical that it charms the ears and lures men to understand it, while Scots shocks and disgusts by its harshness. I agree that English is much more agreeable than Scots, but I do not find that an acceptable solution for what we are trying to expound. The true reason for it is that books and public discourse in Scotland are in the English tongue.

He then talks about the need:

There are several English dictionaries, especially the excellent work of Mr Johnson; and doubtless to have such a work is a thing of great importance, for English in time will become the universal language of our isle. We have not a single Scots dictionary. Really, that is amazing. I believe there is not another language in Europe (or dialect, to use that terminology they are all dialects) of which there is not some sort of lexicon. Allan Ramsay, a Scottish poet who has written some very pretty things in his mother-tongue, has given us a little glossary in which he has explained some words, but very few of them. Nor has he made the least attempt to give etymologies. There was an excellent reason for it: he could not. He had been bred a wig-maker, and for some years followed his trade in Edinburgh. ... He did not know any foreign language, and so was incapable of making a dictionary of his own.

Boswell, of course, was trying his hardest at the time to learn foreign languages. He worked every day at his French, and began to make some progress in Dutch. And he was sure that he would be able to make a contribution to the study of Scots which would be comparable to what Johnson had achieved for English. He looks ahead in time, in an important passage:

People in England do not know how much wit there is in Scottish authors. It must be confessed that these authors make only a very small number. All the same, it is well worth while to preserve them. The Scottish language is being lost every day, and in a short time will become quite unintelligible. Some words perhaps will be retained in our statutes and in our popular songs. To me, who have the patriotic soul of an old Scotsman, that would seem a pity. It is for that reason that I have undertaken to make a dictionary of our tongue, through which one will always have the means of learning it like any other dead language. I confess that I look forward some centuries from now and see with romantic pleasure the Scots of that day applying themselves to

the study of their ancient tongue as to Greek or Latin, and considering themselves much indebted to the work of Old Boswell, who has made it possible for them to taste the excellent works of their brave, happy, and venerable ancestors. ...

He then describes how he is going to do it. And it is here that we see he really does have a lexicographer's temperament, and anticipates present-day dictionary method in a novel way:

Here is the plan which I propose to follow in compiling this work. I shall not put into it a single word which is recognized as English; and to determine that, I shall not count as English any word which has not been ratified by the authority of Mr. Johnson. To qualify myself to trace the etymologies, I am applying myself to the European languages, and I hope to acquire a sufficient knowledge of them. But I shall not stop there. I shall not trust to my own labours alone. I shall establish a literary correspondence with scholars in different countries. I shall send them from time to time lists of words, and they will send them back to me with conjectures on their origins.

Now this was new. It is, as it happens, exactly how I proceeded when making a plan for a *Dictionary of English-Speaking Peoples* back in the 1960s, when I wrote to academics around the world asking them for lists of words and definitions for inclusion. And it is how the *Oxford English Dictionary* works today. In a section called 'OED Appeals' on the *OED* website, we read this:

The Appeals are a new part of the *Oxford English Dictionary* website where *OED* editors ask for your help in uncovering the history of particular words and phrases.

The *OED* did that from the very beginning. James Murray, the first editor, began the practice of publicising 'desiderata' lists of words for which additional evidence was wanted. And in the 2000s, the *OED* collaborated with the BBC to do the same thing, in a project called 'Wordhunt', which many people encountered through the associated television series, 'Balderdash and Piffle'. Boswell was there first. He had no Internet or television, but he did have newspapers:

Besides that [writing to scholars], I have another idea which is perhaps a bit fantastic, but which nevertheless may be practical. I am thinking of publishing in a Scottish newspaper similar lists of words, begging all those who can give derivations to send them to my publisher. In that way I should have countless conjectures, from which I could choose those which appeared to me the most ingenious and plausible. Those who granted me the favour would have to send their conjectures anonymously; in that way I should be at full liberty to choose without partiality; and I hope that no one would be offended if his derivations were not accepted.

'I should have countless conjectures, from which I could choose those which appeared to me the most ingenious and plausible'. This is exactly how a modern dictionary editor works.

Boswell's aim was truly ambitious:

I shall make a careful collection of dictionaries in all languages. I shall consult them all, and I shall enter in my dictionary all the words which have any resemblance to the Scots words: that is, which not only resemble them but have the same meaning or practically the same, either literally or figuratively. In this way we shall get a general view of the connection between languages so far as Scots provides a basis of comparison.

Ambitious, yes - and he knew it. He had met Johnson by this time - indeed Johnson had seen him off on his trip to Holland - and seen the toll that this dictionary project had taken on its author. So he decides to stand on Johnson's shoulders:

As Mr Johnson has already given us full definitions of the English words, I should give only the bare English word for a Scots one, and should send my readers to Mr Johnson's Dictionary to get the definitions. Consequently my task will not be nearly so great as if I had followed Mr. Johnson's method. ... the work of printing will not be so great, for my dictionary will be a third the size of his. There are words to express usages and customs peculiar to our country; and also original words, to express the complete sense of which the English have no terms. And there is my plan for a Scots dictionary. Courage!

And then reality takes hold:

The Scots dictionary of which I have been speaking at such length ought certainly to be an excellent work. Well and good. But when shall we have it? As to that, gentlemen, I cannot give you any reply that will be very illuminating. For the fact is that I do not know myself how much time I shall take to compile it. I have many other things to do which are more important to me and which I am resolved not to neglect. My dictionary will be merely the task of my leisure hours. Since I wish very much to do a thorough piece of work, I shall not hurry. I shall go quietly on, with all the help I can get, and I hope that in time you will see it done very satisfactorily. My indolence shudders when the idea of so laborious a work presents itself, but consoles itself when it considers that the labour will be shared, and that it will be necessary to do only small bits of it at a time. In this way horror is dissipated, my mind is calmed, and I am at peace. Without having peace of mind one cannot accomplish much. It is true that the poet *says* *Facit indignatio versus* ['Indignation gives birth to verses' Juvenal]. But I doubt that indignatio will help us in a long work.

'I have many other things to do...' Indeed, like tour Europe. But just occasionally, in later journals, he shows that it is still on his mind. For example he makes a list of useful

etymological books in the library of a colleague whom he visited in Leipzig in 1764; and on his *Grand Tour of Italy, Corsica and France, 1765* he finds himself in Vado on 12 December, waiting for good weather to sail, and comments:

I also thought that in my Scots Dictionary it might not be amiss to give little cuts of particular words, as *quaich*, *luggie*.

[a quaich was kind of shallow drinking cup; a luggie was a small wooden vessel with a 'lug' or handle].

In a letter to his friend Lord Hailes in 1777 he discusses the difficulty of working out the meaning of a word (*enfunding* 'a chill'), adding 'I wish I had it for my Scottish Dictionary which you may remember I began at Utrecht, & which Dr Johnson encourages me to carry on'.

And that, we all thought, was that. If there was a manuscript version of what he had done, it seemed to have been lost. It certainly existed. When Boswell's younger son's library was sold in 1825, Lot 3172 of *Bibliotheca Boswelliana* was headed 'A Dictionary of the Scottish Language, in MS by James Boswell, Esq., Sen.' It went to the London bookseller, Thomas Thorpe for 16 shillings. He then sold it on the following year, doubling the price to £1.11s.6d and making a tidy profit.

And then the trail goes cold, and the reason is John Jamieson, aged only 4 when Boswell wrote the above account, but who in 1808 would publish a massive 2-volume *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language*, doing in effect what Boswell had hoped to do. And in one of those quirks of bibliographical fate, someone - probably not knowing anything of Boswell's plans - assumed that a draft manuscript of Scots dialect words could only have belonged to Jamieson, so it was put together with a Prospectus that Jamieson had written in 1802 for his *Dictionary*, and bound in with it - something that had happened by 1859, where it is listed in a sales catalogue along with the explicit statement that the pages are 'in the handwriting of Dr. Jamieson.' At least, that is one theory: Susan Rennie speculates that it might have been deliberate rebranding by an unscrupulous bookseller wanting to exploit the growing trade in Jamieson manuscripts. But whatever the reason, when the Bodleian Library in Oxford bought this item in 1927, the curators, like everyone else, simply assumed that these were the compilation notes for Jamieson's *Dictionary*.

And that is how things would have stayed, if Susan Rennie had not been researching the history of Jamieson's *Dictionary* for her PhD in 2008. The Bodleian holds a number of Jamieson's letters, and it was evident that the handwriting was not the same. Moreover, the content showed a very different style to the way Jamieson wrote, and there were no references after 1764. She approached Boswell scholars, who confirmed that the writing was indeed Boswell's. So, as often happens in academic research, Dr Rennie found herself with a new project: *Boswell's Scottish Dictionary*. She launched a website and blog in March 2011, and plans a complete edition of the dictionary material in due course. There is quite a lot to be transcribed and analysed. There are 37 leaves of material, several written on both sides, including a title page (*Dictionary of the Scots*

*Language*) and a list of reference books. The manuscript contains 55 sample entries and a rough draft of 800 more - none in alphabetical order.

It was the first work of its kind in Scottish lexicography. The research is at an early stage, but already it has provided useful data on the Scots vocabulary from the period. For example, the earliest reference to *bubbly-jock* 'turkey-cock' was previously in Jamieson. It is found in Boswell. And Rennie lists several lovely idioms, some of which are also first recorded instances, such as to *take a penfull* 'take a hearty drink'. These snippets of contemporary Scots, as she says, 'animate the manuscript and show the exuberance of a language that may have been endangered, but still had its characteristic gusto'. *Dight*, for example, means 'wipe'. And Boswell gives us the lovely comic quotation: 'I'll dight his nose wi'a stick'.

To present this paper, you will see that I have had to stand on Susan Rennie's shoulders. You can see her work for yourself at the website, and also in a journal paper which gives many more examples and two photographs of pages. It is time to conclude, and I do so using Boswell's words with which he ended his own account of his planned project in 1764:

I have spoken so much of my dictionary that you must surely be bored with it. I am dreadfully bored with it myself. Let us drop the subject ...

#### *Reference*

Susan Rennie, 'Boswell's Scottish Dictionary Rediscovered', in *Dictionaries Journal of the Dictionary Society of North America* 32 (1022), 94-110.

<<http://boswellian.com/>>