

The Scots Language in a Future Scotland

A Submission
to
the Cultural Commission

presented by



Itchy Coo

Braw Books for Bairns o Aw Ages

The Scots Language in a Future Scotland

Itchy Coo's Submission to the Cultural Commission

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1. The Itchy Coo project: who we are and what we do

Itchy Coo was established in 2001 as a partnership between Dub Busters, an organisation delivering Scots Language resources to education run by writers James Robertson and Matthew Fitt, and Edinburgh-based publishers Black & White Publishing. This submission is being made by James Robertson and Matthew Fitt.

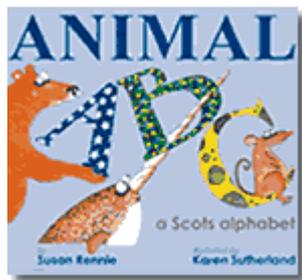
James Robertson is Itchy Coo's General Editor. A writer of fiction and poetry, he has extensive experience as an editor and of working in the Scots Language. He edited the short story collection *A Tongue in Yer Heid* (1994) and *Selected Poems* of Robert Fergusson (2000), and has written or edited various other books of fiction, non-fiction and poetry. He has also written two novels, *The Fanatic* (2000) and *Joseph Knight* (2003): the latter won both the Saltire Society Book of the Year Award in 2003 and the Scottish Arts Council Book of the Year Award in 2004. Most

recently, during November 2004 he was the first writer-in-residence at the Scottish Parliament.

Matthew Fitt is Schools Officer for Itchy Coo. He is a writer and qualified teacher with five years experience of delivery of Scots Language education. His groundbreaking Scots sci-fi novel *But n Ben A-Go-Go* was published in 2000, and was followed by his first poetry collection, *Kate o Shanter's Tale*, in 2003.

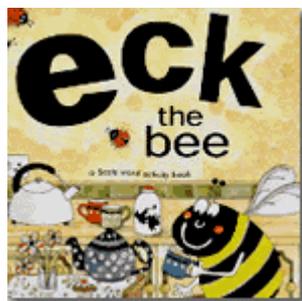
In 2001 Itchy Coo was awarded Scottish Arts Council National Lottery funding for a two-year project, the aims of which were “to establish a publishing imprint which would provide a range of high quality texts and other resources in Scots, for use in education from nursery to Advanced Higher; and through these to work with teachers and young people in developing appreciation of and confidence in their Scots usage”.

These aims were successfully accomplished, on time and within budget, between January 2002 and December 2003. The sixteen titles published include:



Animal ABC

This Scots alphabet introduces young readers to a menagerie of birlin bears, feart flamingoes, greetin gorillas and wabbit walruses.



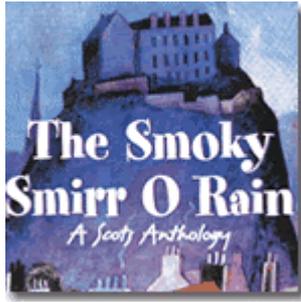
Eck the Bee

The Scots word activity book packed full of games, riddles, word squares, stories and poems, which has become an essential classroom resource.



King o the Midden

Oxters, knickers, bahookies and a parrot in a breid bin. This best-selling anthology of manky mingin rhymes has been a hit with children and adults alike.



The Smoky Smirr o Rain

An innovative selection of Scots poetry, drama and prose from medieval literature to contemporary writing, *The Smoky Smirr o Rain* is a major new resource for the student and the general reader.

In addition, Itchy Coo produced an award-winning collection of Greek myths (*The Hoose o Haivers*), a book of plays (*Tam o Shanter's Big Night Oot*), a book of fairy tales, themed short stories for secondary schools (*Pure Ghosters*) two novellas by Hamish MacDonald and Sheena Blackhall (in one volume, *Double Heider*), a counting book called *A Moose in the Hoose*, a book of Scots dinosaurs, (*Sweetieraptors*), two instalments in the *Planet Fankle* series, the first text book in Scots (*A Scots Parliament*), an audio CD collection (*The Compact Coo*) featuring Tony Roper and Forbes Masson, and *The Braille Coo*, the first ever Scots Language publication in Braille.

In support of these publications, Matthew Fitt delivered workshops, in-service training, help and advice in over 300 schools, libraries and communities throughout Scotland.



As we said in our end of project report to the Scottish Arts Council:

The project has done a huge amount to raise awareness among the public of the existence of Scots as a spoken and written language with its own extensive literature. There has never before been such a significant and concentrated input of Scots language materials into schools, and we believe this has greatly enriched the education of those children and young people who have had access to the Itchy Coo books. Furthermore, the continued availability of these books and resources means that these benefits will continue for many years. We believe this will achieve major benefits in terms of young people's appreciation of their own linguistic culture and heritage."

To date more than 50,000 units of Itchy Coo's now eighteen titles have been sold. The website www.itchy-coo.com is a widely used resource containing information for schools, teachers, young people and general readers, and a comprehensive programme of school visits, teacher-training and educational development has continued to complement the publication of the books.



In the wake of the successful completion of the original project, further SAC funding was received for 2004–05. So far this year, Itchy Coo has been featured on the BBC programme *Writing Scotland*, toured the Czech Republic through the British Council and published its eighteenth title, *Blethertoun Braes*.

We have gone into some detail about our own activities because we believe that they demonstrate the huge cultural need and appetite for access to the Scots Language that currently exists, and that building upon this need and appetite should be integral to a national cultural strategy.

2. Cultural Rights and Education

Our belief is that access to the learning, reading, writing and speaking of Scots is a cultural right which should be available to all the people of Scotland.

It is also the case, in our view, that without an understanding of Scots it is not possible fully to appreciate, and participate in, Scottish culture and daily life. Scots is present everywhere: in our geography and topography (Braehead, Bonnyrigg, Sauchiehall Street, Kirk Wynd), in our names (Baxter, Strang, Lang, Soutar, Tam, Broon), in our everyday speech (“I’m awa tae ma bed”, “Whit a scunner!”, “Come ben the hoose”), in our popular culture (*Chewin’ the Fat*, *River City*, *Oor Wullie*, *The Singing Kettle*), in our traditional culture (Border and Bothy Ballads, storytelling, the folk music scene), in our history (Acts of the old Scottish Parliament, burgh and other civic records, inscriptions, legends and anecdotes – “I’ll mak siccar,” “It cam wi a lass, it’ll gang wi a lass”, “There’s ane end to ane auld sang”), in our law (hamesucken, homologation, deforcement, culpable homicide) and in our written literature from the medieval Makars through Burns, Scott, Stevenson and MacDiarmid to our contemporary makars, Edwin Morgan, Liz Lochhead, Kathleen Jamie and Irvine Welsh.

It is a denial of individual and collective cultural rights not to give such a vital and intrinsic part of Scottish life due recognition, status and protection, and financial, institutional and educational support.

Yet there has never been a systematic, officially sanctioned or initiated educational policy on Scots. There are some well rehearsed reasons for this: the language's loss of status and the cessation of royal patronage of its literature following the departure of the Scottish court to London in 1603, the Authorised Version of the Bible in English a few years later, and the adoption of English, during the 17th and 18th centuries, as the language of educated discourse and learning.

Scots has also had to cope with the difficulty of its close relation, based on shared origins, to the dominant language English. For all its historical neglect and suppression, Gaelic has always been recognisably a completely distinct language from English: Scots has suffered from its proximity to English, being too often dismissed as "bad English", "the language of the gutter" and so on. Not surprisingly, if people are consistently told that their language is inferior, debased and an impediment to success in life, if they are denied formal access to the great bulk of the literature written in that language, and if they are discouraged from using that language in the context of education, they develop a highly ambivalent attitude towards it. Our experience from our work in classrooms and communities has confirmed this. It is clear that provision for the language is currently insufficient to secure Scots as a cultural right.

With limited resources, Itchy Coo has been able to change this and demonstrate to a small part of the Scottish education sector the power of Scots as a cultural learning tool. In primary and secondary schools which have had access to Itchy Coo books and to Scots Language in-service or classroom visits, we have found that there can be, in some circumstances, a correlation between the density of a pupil's spoken Scots and the level of his/her disruptive behaviour in class, poor attention span and reluctance to read. When the language of the classroom becomes, albeit temporarily, Scots, these problems are often largely eradicated and the same pupil can become articulate, attentive and interested. We have also found that educating young people in and about Scots not only gives them a greater knowledge of Scots but also improves their ability in English and gives them a better understanding of language generally.

In summary, we have no doubt that any strategy for creating a culturally confident, articulate and self-aware future Scotland must include measures for raising the status of Scots across our society, and specifically for raising the profile of the language and its literature in education.

3. Developing Talent and Realising the Potential

We are pleased to see such a strong emphasis already being placed, in the Commission's interim report, on the crucial importance of Scotland's indigenous languages to the cultural wellbeing of Scotland:

We also recognise the need to explore opportunities which will develop Scotland's rich linguistic heritage through the arts and culture, and we will be pursuing these themes over the coming months through consultation with Bòrd na Gàidhlig, the Gaelic and Scots cultural groups and stakeholders from Scotland's other linguistic communities. [3.12]

We are also delighted to see the role of education being highlighted as vital to the creation of a culturally and socially healthy future Scotland:

If a generational change is to be made then it surely begins in schools. The idea of new partnerships across the cultural sectors to produce better services for the young citizen is a universal objective. It has been remarked that there is already a proliferation of cultural resource in Scotland open to all school children. It was counter-argued that we remain in the same social redoubts as did our grandparents with many of us deciding that culture – in its individual manifestations – is ‘not for the likes of us’. That is indeed a free choice but it can be an uninformed choice born of lack of contact with creative experience. What schools can do inside and outside the curriculum is to offer those initial cultural experiences that, in the end, create the audiences and artists of the next generation. It has also been passionately argued that the development of cultural skills, such as creativity and design, are of great benefit not just to the young person but to the society in which they will live and work. The importance of lifelong learning was asserted consistently and this will be explored as the work of the Commission progresses. [3.1]

We believe that these two points are intimately linked. What follows is a summary of what we believe needs to happen regarding the Scots Language in order for Scotland to be a whole and healthy society with a vibrant linguistic and literary culture. These views are based on our conviction, arising out of our experience, that the Itchy Coo approach to the challenges of working with the Scots Language in education and in the wider community works better than anything else that has hitherto been tried.

1. The Scottish Executive needs to provide resources to enable the training of teachers across Scotland who can deliver Scots language and literature education into our schools. Ideally, in the long term, every primary and secondary school should have at least one teacher designated as its Scots Language provider. Realistically, in the short to medium term, every council’s education department should be obliged to develop a Scots Language strategy, and to put in place, in the first instance, peripatetic teachers of Scots. As a network of such teachers develops, they could provide support and training to other teachers. At present, Itchy Coo is developing a programme of training one or two teachers as a model of what can be achieved, but our financial and human resources are limited and enable us to do little more than scratch the surface of the task that needs to be addressed.
2. To facilitate the development of such a teacher network, we propose a website-based Scots Language teaching resource, possibly developed in collaboration with Learning & Teaching Scotland, which could act as a “virtual academy” for Scots language and literature studies. This would require detailed planning, building and maintenance, but such a resource could revolutionise the way teachers, who are at present given no official training in this area, and who themselves often have the same ambivalent or even negative attitudes to Scots discussed under **Cultural Rights**, access Scots resources and then deliver them in the classroom.

3. The support shown by the Scottish Arts Council towards books and other publications in Scots needs to be continued and enhanced. Our experience shows that there is a clear demand for such publications, but that for most people reading in Scots is initially difficult and demanding, since they have never been formally taught it. By creating a consistently available range of Scots texts we increase the potential readership; by educating potential readers we normalise the reading of Scots and make the publication of Scots texts more viable.

4. The scope for releasing and realising the creative potential, especially of our young people, in drama and literature through their increased familiarity with and competence in Scots, is unlimited. We do not seek to create a ghetto in which the Scots Language survives on a life-support system, but rather to give it the resources with which to engage with the modern world. We submit that the perceived weakness of the Scots Language's proximity to English may also be one of its great strengths: that the interaction between Scots and English, which is something many of us live with on a daily basis, can be a source of energy, renewal and versatility; and that giving people the tools and thus the confidence to use their language(s) to the full can only benefit the cultural and general health of our society.

Scots is a national resource that has not yet been allowed to be fully developed. As Itchy Coo has shown, with commitment, energy and skill this situation can be changed. Educators and community workers in increasing numbers have seen at first-hand the positive effect Scots can have on the lives of young people and adults in modern Scotland. We feel strongly that the Commission must explore ways of supporting this incipient change in attitude towards the language, and work towards helping Scots find its due place in the life of the nation.

James Robertson & Matthew Fitt
(December 2004)