

Distinctive semantic fields in the Orkney and Shetland dialects, and their use in the local literature

J. Derrick McClure

The various dialects of Orkney differ from each other; so too, perhaps to an even greater extent, do those of Shetland; and the sets of dialects found in the two island groups show common features which mark them off from each other; yet despite this internal diversity it can be stated as a fact that Insular Scots, as the two sets are styled collectively in the introduction to the *Scottish National Dictionary*, is the most distinctive of all forms of Scots: in phonology, grammar and above all vocabulary (for discussion see Millar 2007, especially Chapter 4). Some evidence of the extraordinary size of the Orkney-Shetland word list is provided by the well-known fact that when the *Concise Scots Dictionary* was being prepared, the biggest single section of the material from the *Scottish National Dictionary* omitted from the smaller work was a huge part of the Orkney-Shetland vocabulary. According to the Introduction of the *CSD*, ‘material from these areas [Shetland, Orkney and Caithness] which belongs not to Scots but to Norn’ has been omitted. This is unmistakable question-begging, for notwithstanding their Norn derivation the words thus defined must have been sufficiently naturalised into the Scots dialects of the islands to appear in Scots texts – otherwise they would not have been included in the *SND*. In this essay I will not examine, except incidentally, the derivation of the distinctive words in the Insular Scots vocabulary or their degree of ‘naturalisation’, still less attempt to assess the extent to which they were (or still are) in general use among the islands’ Scots-speaking population: rather, I will look at some of the semantic fields in which the dialects are particularly rich – the areas of their word stock that contribute most to their individuality – and at some instances of the use that has been made of them in the islands’ literatures; for just as North-East Doric literature abounds in references to the culture which developed in the *ferm-touns* of the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth, with its associated vocabulary, so it is to be expected that the landscapes, seascapes, flora and fauna and material culture of the islands will be conspicuous in their literature. For this reason, Shetland will receive decidedly more attention than Orkney: not because the Orkney dialects themselves are less distinctive in their vocabulary than those of the more northerly archipelago, but because they have, for whatever reasons (for some suggested ones, see

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Marwick 1949: 11-12 and 77-78), been much less extensively developed as vehicles for a local literature. It is also the case that more scholarly work has been done on the dialects of Shetland than of Orkney: for an excellent summary of the field, see Millar 2007: Chapter 6.

The Shetland dialect emerged into vivid independent life as a medium for poetry and other literary forms in the 1870s, its first major figures being James Stout Angus, Basil Anderson and James Haldane Burgess – who in *Scranna*, the first poem in his collection *Rasmie's Büddie*, (Burgess 1891: all quotations are from this edition) shows his hero's suspicions of a visitor, actually the Devil, aroused by the fact that he 'spaeks up i da Engleeis tongue'. Angus's slim but fascinating collection of poems, *Echoes from Klingrahoole* (published in 1920 but containing poems which had been written and in some cases printed much earlier: references are to the third edition, published in Lerwick by T. & J. Manson in 1926) proclaims its credentials right from the outset: a prefatory poem in English ends with the place-name Klingrahoole, and the author explains in a note that it is derived from *klungr*, the Old Norse word for the briar rose which grows there. Here is not only a poet with the responsiveness to the sound and meaning of words proper to his calling, but a scholar with an interest in their origins: an even more important landmark in the literary development of Shetland speech than his poems is his *Glossary of the Shetland Dialect* (Angus 1914). And the first poem in the collection is called *The Kokkilurie*: this is the Shetland word for daisy, but whereas contemporary writers like Haldane Burgess are content to give it the naturalised spelling *cockaloorie*, Angus pointedly uses a form suggesting its Norse derivation (*kokul* 'cluster', according to the DSL). The flower is 'kurkie an shaela combined': the first of those words, a Gaelic (not Norse) derived term meaning purple or crimson and also applied to the lichen from which the dye of this colour is obtained, is found in other parts of Scotland, mainly the South-West, as well as Shetland; but *shaela* is decidedly a Shetland word: its normal sense is dark grey or brown, as in Vagaland's line 'Whaar da riggs is lyin, gold an shaila' (Robertson ed. 1975: 12: all references are to this edition); but the meaning of white which it must clearly have in reference to a daisy is probably another instance of Angus referring back to the Norse source of the word: its original meaning is 'hoar-frost'. Another dye-yielding lichen which he mentions in his glossary, this time orange, is *skrotti*.

Words for flowers, grasses, herbs and the like abound in the northern dialects. Elsewhere in the same book of poems, horses are said to crop the *lubba*, a word for a mixture of rough grasses and sedges growing on boggy

ground: Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster, who compiled the first *Statistical Account of Scotland*, noted that sheep which feed on *lubba* produce excellent wool. John Spence (1911: 183-7 and 1912: 67-72) in a prose monologue reminisces ‘Whan da mussacruppan rises amang da lobba ... an whan da bonny baim-floors raise bae tha burnside’: *mussacruppan* is cotton grass, and *baim-floors* are star-like flowers, chiefly daisies. A memorable line in Angus’ poem *Eels*, one of the finest in the collection, recalls how in the Lammas spates ‘Da tatti shaas an bulwand taas, Wer wuppled lek a gasket’ (p.37): *bulwand* is glossed by Angus as ‘mugwort’, but is also attested in the Northern Isles as meaning a bulrush or a docken and in Watson’s *Roxburghshire Word-Book* (1923) as ragwort (that is, it can refer to any of four wholly distinct and dissimilar plants). Another word for a rush used by Angus is *floss*: attestations of this word begin in the seventeenth century, and refer to its use for thatching and plaiting into ropes. *Banksgirse* is scurvy-grass: ‘da lang banks girse waves fitfully, Ta every pirr at blaws’, he writes in *Eels* (p.39), and, noteworthily, uses it also in a poem predominantly in English (*The Shetland Muse*: p.28); and the *banksflower* is sea-pink, both compounds of *banks* in a peculiarly Shetland sense of a steep and rocky shore. *Girse* forms several other compound names in Insular Scots, not all of which refer to grass-like plants: Angus in his *Glossary*, though not in his poems, refers to *ekel-girse* (butterwort), *eksis-girse* (which he glosses as ‘dandelion’, though it can refer to other plants too), *gaa-girse* (stonewort, a kind of pond weed), *gulsa-girse* (buckbean or marsh trefoil) and *yül-girse* (meadowsweet). Interestingly, three of these names refer to the medicinal uses of the plants: *eksis* or *axies* is a word, not always restricted to the Northern Isles, for an ague or hysterics, which an infusion of dandelion leaves is supposed to cure; *gaa*, gall or bile, gives its name to the pond weed for its use as treatment for liver disease in cattle; *gulsa* (or elsewhere *gulsoch* or *gulshoch*) is jaundice, cured by an infusion from the plant. *Yül-girse* is also known, still according to Angus, as *blekkin girse*, since it yields a black dye; similarly *yellow-girse*, the persicaria, is named for its corresponding property. Other flower and plant names cited in the *Glossary* are *arvi* (chickweed), *buggifloer* (sea campion: the first element is the same as *bag*, referring to the conspicuous swollen calyx of the flower), *klonger* (wild rose: as in his Klingrahoor), *meldi* (corn-spurrey), *okrabung* (oat grass), *whigga* (couch grass: this is the same as the mainland Scots *quickens*, with the characteristic Shetland change of *qu-* to *wh-*), *witchi floer* (ox-eye daisy) and *runshik* (charlock or wild radish).

A more recent Shetland poet, T.A. Robertson ('Vagaland'), devotes a poem (*Shetland Gairden*: Robertson 1975: 60) to '...da wild flooers growin ta mak / A gairden o da Isles': in this poem, though he dwells with delight on the colours of the flowers, the only ones he names are *tae-girse* 'wild thyme': the first element is *tea* and the name refers to the fact that the leaves can be infused to make a drink, *blok-flooers* 'marsh marigolds' and heather; but another of his poems, *Hjalta*, contains several more plant names. It opens thus:

Da eart-bark in among da girse
Is glintin whaar you stride,
An antrin seggie lowin up
Closs be da burn side.
Da blugga, laek da golden sun,
is blazin far an wide. (p.6)

Seggie is not mysterious, being simply the diminutive of the common Scots word for the wild iris; but *eart-bark* is an Orkney and Shetland name for tormentil, a shrub whose roots were used from early times for tanning leather and nets and to produce an infusion with the property of curing diarrhoea; and *blugga* or *blogga* is the bright yellow marsh-marigold: Vagaland has a whole poem on *Blugga-flooers* (p.48). Other wild plants listed in *Hjalta* are *lukkaminnie's* (also *Lucky Minnie's* or simply *luckie's*) *oo* – bog cotton: Luckie Minnie in the Northern Isles is not simply a general word for 'granny' but the name of a witch who, according to Spence (1911: 187), 'sat i Fusbar ... seevan year o' Yule daes!'; *mey-floer* 'primrose', not a uniquely Shetland usage; *smora* 'clover' (in Orkney this is *smaroo*) – 'Sweet is dy lips, laek dew-weet smora' Vagaland says in another poem (p.12); and of course the *kokkilurie!* Vagaland also has a poem on the *Tuslag* or coltsfoot (p.67), one of the first signs of spring: the Shetland name of this flower is a reduction of the MSc *tussilago*; and one on *Grice Ingans* (p.31), a flower whose official name is the vernal squill, 'sae tick dey're laek a mist o waarm blue'.

If the dialects of the Northern Isles are rich in names of wild plants, their store in this field pales in comparison with the truly extraordinary range of their names for birds. Spence, in the prose essay cited (pp. 185-6), tells us 'whit wi da teeauws and horse-goks an' mony anither burd ... hid was a gret peece for burds. Than dere was a' kinds o' burds, fae tha gret, muckle anyonyou doon tae da peerie moorid burd no bigger ar me toom ... Yea, wirt o' tha bit a skitter broltie hid was dere!': *teeauw* (which looks like

a reduced form of *tee-whaup*, also attested) is a peesie and *horse-gok* a snipe (the second element is the same as *gowk*), *anyonyou* is a word for ‘eagle’ so memorable that we are tempted to wish it had remained in use, and a *skitter broltie* is a corn bunting: *moorit* in the description is a local word for brown or reddish brown.

The Linguistic Atlas of Scotland (Mather and Speitel 1975: 119 and 297), under the heading ‘Seagull’ – a word, of course, which can refer to several distinct species of birds – includes, for Orkney and Shetland alone, *maw*, *loch ma*, *peerie maw*, *swabbie ma*, (a boisterous girl in one of Haldane Burgess’s poems goes ‘screecghin laek a swaabie’: p.44), *white maw* (*White-Maa’s Saga* is the title of one of Eric Linklater’s novels, the term in this context being a nickname which the hero acquired from being found in childhood with his face white from stolen curds), *baakie*, *black back*, *black hatto*, *cullya*, *kittack*, *ritto*, *scorrie* (this word is sometimes restricted to gulls in juvenile plumage), *waiko*, *white fall*, and *white fool*. Angus in his Glossary provides, in addition to some of those listed, *bagi* for the black-backed gull and *hüdikraw* for the ‘peewit gull’ – he means the black-headed gull; and the oddity of calling this bird a *craw* of any kind is matched by *sea craw* as a local name for the razorbill. In his poems, we find several bird names which are not peculiar to his own dialect except, in some cases, in respect of their pronunciation (*leverik*, *tirrik*, *plivver*, *sporrow*); but we also find in a single verse:

Da muckle skerri be-oot da teng
Is covered ower, in raas,
Wi flaachterin scarfs, an plootshin looms,
Dunters an swabbimaas ... (p.39)

Scarfs are cormorants – another local name for this bird is *lorin*, and *brongie* for a young one; *A Guide to Shetland Birds* (Tulloch and Hunter 1979) gives *tobielingey* too – and *looms* are either red-throated divers or great northern divers: probably the former in Angus’s poem, since elsewhere he uses the word *ember* (Scott in *The Pirate* uses the form *imber-goose*) for the larger bird: ‘...da ember sails lek a laden ship’ (p.26). The latter word is not entirely restricted to the Northern Isles, being attested also in the North-East: a more exclusively island name for the red-throated diver is *rain goose*. Angus includes this word in his glossary (*raingüs*) but not in his poems: Vagaland, however, who also makes poetic capital out of the birds and their names, opens his poem *Starka Virna* (p.10) with ‘Rain-gös,

rain-gös, whaar is du fleein?’, and refers to the superstition which gives the bird its name:

[Dey] mak aa fast for a boo o wadder
Whin dey see da rain-gös gyaain ta da sea —

— and Christine de Luca (see Graham and Graham 1998: 196; quotations from Christine De Luca, Rhoda Bulter, Mary Ellen Odie, Jim Moncreiff and Stella Sutherland are all from this source) gives a poignant overtone to the seaward flight of the raingeese in her poem *On the Death of my Mother at Midsummer* (Graham and Graham 1998: 196). The onomatopoeic verbs in Angus’s lines evoke the characteristic actions of the birds: *flaachter* is flap or flutter (though it does not necessarily imply the heavy beat of a cormorant’s wings: Angus refers elsewhere to ‘the flaachterin *laverik*’) and *plootsh*, a more specifically Shetland word, suggests a sea-bird’s flat-footed waddle. *Dunters* are eider-ducks, a word common in the Northern Isles but again not unique to them: another much-loved Shetland poet Rhoda Bulter in her *Macarism* (Graham and Graham 1998: 159), of which the opening stanzas are surely one of the most beautiful and enticing evocations of the natural world in any Scots dialect, mentions them along with another kind of duck, the *caloo* or pintail; and with *swabbimaa*, i.e. great black-backed gull, we return firmly to the exclusively Insular Scots vocabulary. (The lesser black-backed gull is referred to as a *peerie swabbie*.) Christine de Luca in *Roond da Wirld* (Graham and Graham 1998: 197) has, besides ‘a raft o dunters’,

...ledge upo ledge o solan,
maalies, a mafia o swaabies...

... *solan* (gannet) is a general Scots word (Norse in origin), but *mallie*, also *mallimoke* or in Orkney *mallimauk*, is a word much more specifically restricted to the Isles, meaning a fulmar; and in another poem ‘a *tystie* triggitt up in black and white’ (Graham and Graham 1998:190): that is, a black guillemot. And Rhoda Bulter mentions ‘da shaalders pleepin near da burn’ (Graham and Graham 1998: 152): those are oyster-catchers.

Angus’s poem *To the Kittiwake* (1920: 11), surprisingly enough, does not use the bird’s local names *rippack-maa* or *weeg*; but its opening ‘Peerie mootie! peerie mootie!’ consists of two decidedly Shetland words meaning small, combined into a phrase suggesting affection; and the poem includes local words describing some aspect of the bird: the *mesterpen* (longest feather) of its wing, or its actions *tirse* (sudden hasty movement), *swittle*

(plash), *lauve* (glide, hover): Christine de Luca too refers to ‘a mird (crowd, also a Shetland word) o maas *laavin* an *divin*’ (Graham and Graham 1998: 195). *Mootie* is used in Shetland as the name of another bird, the storm petrel, otherwise known as *spensi*: it also appears in the compound form *alamootie*, the title of a poem by Vagaland (Robertson 1975: 42). Angus uses the local onomatopoe *claug* of the crying of gulls, describing it, perhaps unexpectedly, as ‘a most melodious soond’; and in another of Vagaland’s poems we hear of the *sheerlin* of the laverik, the *skriechin* of the swaabee and the *kurrip* of the craa: of those three words the first is the Shetland form, with again the replacement of *ch-* by *sh-*, of the general Scots *chirl* and the second a common Scots word; but the third is a uniquely Shetland onomatopoe. Another, for the crying of gulls, is *kilya*, used by Vagaland in his poem *Voar Wadder* (Robertson 1975: 12):

Whin da green paeck comes, an you hear da kilya
Among da fleein clouds o maas.

In other poems too, this poet associates specific birds with seasons: the *snaaie-fool* (snow bunting) with winter and the *horsegok* with spring: since another local name for the snipe is the *voar-bird*, this association seems to be well recognised.

One of the islands’ iconic birds is the great skua: its local name is *bonxie*, another Shetland word with which Scott in *The Pirate* adds to the authenticity of his setting. The related Arctic skua is called an *alan-hawk*, *shooi*, or, because of its habit of pursuing smaller birds and forcing them to disgorge swallowed fish, a *scootie-alan*. The insular use of the word *ebb* to mean the foreshore gives *ebbsleeper* and *ebbsnippik*: according to Angus’s Glossary both words refer to the dunlin, but according to Jakobsen (1928) an *ebbsnippik* is a turnstone (*snippik* itself is ‘snipe’). Similarly, Angus attests to *tang*, ‘the yellow seaweed with small pods which grows in the ebbs of still voes’, and its derived bird names *tang maa* ‘a small species of mew’, confirmed in Tulloch to be the common gull, *tang sparrow* ‘shore pipit’ and *tang whaap* ‘whimbrel’. Mary Ellen Odie’s short poem *Da Nort* (Graham and Graham 1998: 166) evokes the latter:

I laek ta watch da wild flights o da Nort
Da flocks fleeing high efter rain:
Tang-whaap an plivver an ebb-sleeper tö,
An swans baetin hame ta der ain.

A *haigrie* or *hegrie* is a heron: a poem in English on the bird by Jim Moncreiff (Graham and Graham 1998: 208) nonetheless uses the Shetland word as its title; and a word known in both island groups for a ring-plover, *sandy-loo*, appears in Rhoda Bulter's *Macarism* – 'Whaar da horse-guk kyemps wi da saandiloo' – and in Emily Milne's wonderful bairnsang *Da Baa-Baa Bokies* (Graham and Robertson 1964: 42.).

Naturally, not all bird names have attested literary usages: some which are to be found in lists such as those of Angus, Graham or Tulloch have not even found their way into the SND or the DSL. Among those found in the first two lists are *leerie* or *lyrie* 'Manx shearwater', *stenkle* or *stinkle* 'wheatear' (Rhoda Bulter mentions this bird by the name *stenshakker*, but this, though the pronunciation is local, is a common Scots word), *teetik* 'meadow pipit', *longie* or *tjuggi* 'guillemot' and *rotshi* 'little auk' (on this see also Spence 1920); and the last adds also *stock duck* 'mallard' and *stock hawk* 'peregrine falcon', *kjoorlie* 'redshank', *burgie* 'glaucous gull' (a bird almost unknown in the British archipelago outwith the Northern Isles) and *catyogle* 'snowy owl'.

Another semantic field productively exploited in the literature of the islands is that of weather conditions and states of light and darkness. Hugh Marwick's remark in his classic essay on the topic (Marwick 1933), 'To adopt a Stevensonian phrase, the climate of Orkney is one of the vilest under heaven', may well be founded on fact; but the compensation – at least for those whose acquaintance with the Orkney climate extends mostly just to reading about it – is a treasure-trove of colourful weather-words: especially, it must be acknowledged, words for rain, mist, wind and snow. Several of the words cited in Marwick's article are general Scots, as is usual in lists of this kind: in the case of *scuther*, a strong windy shower of short duration, only the pronunciation is local, *scudder*, with the same meaning, being attested from various parts of Scotland. Some, more interestingly, are words which, though occurring in other senses elsewhere, have acquired special applications to weather in Orkney or Orkney and Shetland: he cites *cool* (locally *køl*) and *grey*, in Orkney meaning a light breeze, as examples of the latter class; and *skyelly*, applied to the sky when 'covered with bright glittering white clouds' is a local pronunciation of 'scaly' (cf. Dunbar's *The Golden Targe* 26: 'The purpur hevyn, *ourscaillit* in silvir sloppis'). Some such examples using exclusively Scots words are *hagger*, elsewhere to hack or cut roughly and unevenly but in this dialect a heavy drizzle; and *goller* or *golder*, *screiver* and *swap*, all meaning in Orkney a gusty or blustery wind: elsewhere, the first generally means a howl, roar or angry outburst; the

second is a uniquely Orcadian derivative of *screive* meaning to move swiftly and smoothly; and the last is used in other parts of Scotland for a fast sweeping movement. A doubtful case is *hushle*, a strong gale, possibly a special sense of the common Scots word meaning ‘move about awkwardly or clumsily’ but more probably an independently-developed onomatopoe; and a mere coincidental near-homophony is *kirk* or *kyirk*, blow round in circles (as eddies of snow or dust), wholly unrelated to *kirk* in the familiar sense. *Skolder*, which he gives as meaning ‘a strong dry gale’, is apparently a special application of an Orcadian word for an outburst of loud talk.

Angus as well as Marwick attests *gussel* (also *guzzel*, *gowsel* and other forms) for a strong blustery wind; a *sweevil* or *sweevy* is a short sharp gust; and Haldane Burgess in the poem *Da Oobin Wind* (1891: 56) uses *snitters*, glossing it as ‘biting blasts’: *oobin* in his title is a Shetland word for ‘moaning’; in Peter Jamieson’s poem *Da Vodd Noost* (Graham and Robertson 1964: 14), too, ‘Da Nort wind *nöned* and oobed’, *nön* being hum or croon. Marwick gives *brin* as the name for ‘a cold dry parching wind that causes plants to wither’. Even in the Northern Isles, however, the wind is not always fierce: Emily Milne’s line in *Isles Asleep* (Graham and Robertson 1964: 21) ‘Da wind faan tired begins ta *neeb*’ applies a local word for nod or drowse to suggest its dying down, and the literal word for this is *daachen* or *dill*: ‘tha wind’s doon, an’ tha wather’s dillan’, Spence 1912: 71) says. The first line of the first poem after the Prelude in Vagaland’s collection, *Kwarna farna?* (Robertson 1975: 12), is ‘A *laar* o Wast wind blaain...’; and Angus in *Simmer Dim* (1920, 26) has the evocative lines ‘Da nicht wind blaws in anterin laars, Lek breathed sighs frae lovesick stars.’ *Laar* is a light steady breeze; and a local word for a sudden but soft puff of wind is *bat*. A complete absence of wind is in Shetland a *plat calm*.

Rain as well as wind leaves its mark on the local speech and literature. Marwick in his article cites no fewer than nine words for drizzle, most of which are confirmed by Jakobsen and other local authorities: *driv*, *eesk*, *fizz*, *murr*, *neest*, *rav*, *roost*, *rug* and the expressive *muggero-fue*, besides *aitran* for a piercingly cold drizzle. A light shower is a *dister*, still according to Marwick, and a downpour a *hellyiefer*: Vagaland has another word for this, *vaanloop* (Robertson 1975: 37):

Whin da lift is black wi thunder-lumps
An da vaanloop sokks da laand.

– and Angus’s *kokkilurie* perishes in a fearsome night with ‘an odious *tüimald* o rain’ (1920:10). Another of Marwick’s words for a light shower is *skub*: Angus, however, in reference to his line ‘A skubby hask hings, icet-gray’, glosses the word as ‘hazy clouds driven by the wind’. *Hask*, also *ask*, is a mist or haze: another word for a freezing sea-mist is *barber*, as in Angus’s lines (*ibid.*, 14)

... oot whaar da icy barbers flee;
 Aboot Greenland’s frozen shore.²⁵

For snow, a very common verb is *moor*, fall densely: a *moorie-caavie* or just *caavie* is a blinding snowstorm: ‘Da wind blaas lood fae da Nort da nicht, An da moorin-cavie fills da air’, in Vagaland’s poem *Aboot da Nicht* (Robertson 1975: 47). *Flukkra snaa*, mentioned in this poem, is snow in large flakes: a word of similar sense is *skalva*, in Stella Sutherland’s line ‘Skalva an flukker, hail an sleet an gale’ in *At da Croft Museum* (Graham and Graham 1998: 132). A light fall of snow is a *feevil* or *fivvil*, and a snowdrift is a *fann*.

That *good* weather at least sometimes comes to the Northern Isles is hardly to be doubted, though not a single word glossed in Marwick’s article refers to a pleasant weather condition; but the dialect vocabulary seems strangely lacking in distinctive words for warmth or sunshine. On the other hand, a favourite theme of writers from the Northern Isles is the *hömin* or twilight, and the *simmer dim* during nights when the sun is barely below the horizon. Rhoda Bulter’s lines on sunset in *Da Gaet* (Graham and Graham 1998: 151) are only one example from many passages evoking the unique light of the far north:

... As da sun dips doon an hoids ahint da hill.
 Reek rises fae a peerie taekit lum,
 An as I staand an waatch it slowly drift,
 It disappears in blue an rid an gold,
 An blends in wi da colours o da lift.

I began this essay with the intention of examining several other semantic fields productively exploited in the literature of the Isles: conditions of the sea and tide, geographical features of the coastlines, fish and fishing, food and drink. *Stap*, a dish of fish-heads and fish livers, would have featured in the latter group; and Angus in his poem *Hoddledrossie* (1920, 57) gives an impressive list of drinks but ends ‘I dunna ken

²⁵ In the edition consulted the word is misprinted as *harbers*.

“Hoddledrossie”. (The reason for this is that it is not a Shetland word: the SND’s only attestation for it is from Selkirk, and it is defined as ‘A kind of thin broth or stock made from dripping and water seasoned with pepper and taken with mashed potatoes as a substitute for milk’.) But the semantic fields of plants, birds and weather alone have surely served to illustrate the remarkable individuality of the Orkney and Shetland dialects. Our brief examination of the importance of dialect vocabulary in the literature of the islands, too, demonstrates how the fortuitous combination of a natural environment which is both highly distinctive and not entirely friendly to human endeavour, a culture (including a local speech) which has arisen within this environment and is adapted to it with great if hard-won success, and a well-developed tradition of literacy and literary expression, offers limitless potential for creative exploitation. Within the extensive and diverse field of Scots literature, the poetry of the Northern Isles holds a place as integral, as vital and as distinctive as that of the islands themselves in the history of the kingdom.

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The Shetland dialect is an amalgam of Norse, Lowland Scots and English, each element reflecting a period in the islands' history dominated by those respective nations. From the ninth century, when the Norse colonisation of Shetland began, until well into the seventeenth century, the Shetland people spoke a variant of the Scandinavian tongue which became known as Norroena (Northern) or Norn. In 1469 the islands were handed over by the Danes to Scotland as the dowry pledge of the Princess Margaret of Denmark when she was married to King James III of Scotland. At first, Scottish influence ma