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The Leverock, Licht as Wun: The Poems of James Fenton

Blue-a-knowe

Bing'd sticks bleezed roon dulled troots an blues ill-fun,
Whar Roabin bowl, Lang John, Hakeye lay a',
Wae blid-wat seggan bled an het esh gun;
The ither worl sae mony worls awa.

Dark boortries flured an clooded whuns bleezed bricht,
Whun hizzies cried frae lang aheid gien in;
An graipin fing'rs trimmled in the nicht
Whun Brock riz oot: dark nichts o darkest sin.

They shaped bricht wies they'd trevel yince they leed,
An thon dark pads they sweeted wat tae tak,
Far empty wies, quait-waitin oot aheid,
They'd flee alang, nae thocht o luckin bak.

Noo yin, gan by, maks bak tae luck ower in,
Bak ower the scroag an strippit knowe; ower whar,
For bleezin wies an blid-rid dreams, they'd fin
Blak birns, grey haggit stumps, a roostin car.

—from *Thonner and Thon*, 2000

Blue Knoll

Piled sticks blazed round snared trout and blues ill-found, *blue potatoes*
Where Robin bold, Long John, Hawkeye all lay,
With blood-wet iris blade and hot ash gun;
The other world so many worlds away.

Dark elders flowered and clouded gorse blazed bright
When young girls cried from long ahead giving in;
And groping fingers trembled in the night
When Brock rose out: dark nights of darkest sin.

They shaped bright ways they'd travel once they left,
And those dark paths they sweated wet to take,
Far empty ways, quiet-waiting out ahead,
They'd flee along, no thought of looking back.

Now one, gone by, makes back to look over in,
Over the thicket and stripy knoll; over where,
For blazing ways and blood-red dreams, they'd find
Black burns, grey chopped-up stumps, a rusting car. *Burnt-over gorse or heather*

THIS IS A POEM IN ULSTER-SCOTS WRITTEN by James Fenton—not the Englishman of that name who was once Professor of Poetry at Oxford, but Jim Fenton, born in 1931 and still going strong, living in the outskirts of Belfast.

Translating the poem is quite difficult, although Ulster-Scots (or any Scots —that of Garioch, for example) "should" be easy to translate, especially if you think it is merely a dialect of English. Fenton argues in his dictionary *The Hamely Tongue* that it is a language in itself. It not only has a distinct vocabulary (though overlapping with English) but a distinct grammar—for example, in the above poem "bleezed" and "riz" with their Germanic sound change in the past tense, mainly lost in English. Actually the vocabulary and pronunciation are so substantially different from English that I have managed to reproduce only some of the rhymes. The metre is easier to preserve, as it is in translation from any Germanic language.

In part Ulster-Scots is the invention of this poet. He has defined the language in *The Hamely Tongue—a Personal Record of Ulster-Scots in County Antrim* (1995; expanded edition in 2006). For decades he collected examples of the language, along rigorous principles: he did not accept a word if it was not reported in at least one of eleven different localities in Antrim. Here are entries for some of the words in the poem just translated:

> **dull**: *n*. a noose, esp. one made of fine wire or plaited hairs from a horse's mane or tail, attached to a long rod and used to snare trout.
> *v*. capture (fish) in this way. (Also **dool—L.T.**) [Ir. *dul* a snare (O'R)]
>
> **bing**: *n*. a heap, a pile. **bings** lots (*Whut odds whut he lucks lake—haesn't he bings o money*?). v. occas. (usu. w. **up**) pile or heap up. [ON *bingr* heap (CSD)]
>
> **seggan**: the wild iris. [prob. *seg* sedge + Gael. Diminutive *an* (CSD)]
>
> **birns**: the blackened stumps and roots of burnt whins and heather. (**Br. E.G.T.**) [pres. Sc. *birn* burn]

These few examples show some of the main elements of Ulster-Scots vocabulary: Middle and Old English, Old Norse, and Irish Gaelic—this latter being an element lacking in Scots where Lowland speakers have not been living cheek by jowl with Gaelic speakers as in Ulster in the 17th century.

Here is another entry which illustrates the raw humour of some of Fenton's definitions:

> **po**: chamber-pot. **full as a po** coarse very drunk. **striddled ower the po** a posture deemed to afford a more realistic (down-to-earth) image of a new bride ('Wait tae he sees hir, etc.') is an observation frequently heard from married men at a wedding-reception.

In his introduction to *The Hamely Tongue* Fenton remarks about Antrim speech, "The nether parts, particularly, and their darker functions, figure prominently in a dialect not typically debilitated by euphemism."

Fenton is the Dr Johnson of Ulster-Scots. His is a one man dictionary, though resting on the evidence of a spoken (seldom written) language of which perhaps 200,000 people in the North of Ireland (mainly in Antrim, but also in parts of Down, Derry and Donegal) have a passive knowledge—that is, they don't speak it but can, largely, understand it. Ulster-Scots is spoken daily by perhaps 80,000. In comparison, over 300,000 people in Ireland state they speak Gaelic at least some time daily, with about 30,000 full-time speakers. In Scotland 60,000 or so speak Gaelic daily and about 1.6 million speak Scots; many more have a passive knowledge. There is a movement among academics in Northern Ireland and the USA (in

areas such as North Carolina which were settled heavily by Ulster Scots in the 18th century—see *The Scotch Irish* by the Virginia Senator Jim Webb) to establish Ulster-Scots as a subject of study, and inevitably it has become a political football in Northern Ireland as a rival to Gaelic. But Fenton will have none of this. His devotion to his language is intense and personal. He has stated that "for myself Ulster-Scots is the rich living (if declining) tongue of the world I grew up in—oor ain wie o it." To those who insist Ulster-Scots is not more than a dialect, Fenton asserts that with its range and richness it has all the attributes of a language. And here history and philology are on his side: for example, Norwegian and Portuguese have been considered at various times dialects of Danish and Spanish. But Fenton points out that Ulster-Scots is spoken by Protestants and Catholics, Unionists and Nationalists; he rejects language politics. Whether Ulster-Scots is "a dying tongue" in the sense I have discussed in previous essays for *The Dark Horse* on Sorley MacLean (from whom the phrase comes: "cainnt bhàsmhoir") and Robert Garioch, or "declining", Fenton is a similarly dedicated poet. After all, if you write in the dying or declining tongue of your childhood rather than in the world language English which you happen to speak every day, you cannot be accused of wanting recognition. Fenton has remarked that most of the present-day speakers of Ulster-Scots would prefer him to write like Robert Burns—not just in the sense of using the same metrical forms as Burns at times, but of writing comically. This is the trap (which Garioch agonised about) of Scots being associated with cod humour and sentiment.

It is true that Fenton in several poems uses the Scots metre known as "Standard Habbie", after a 17th-century poem by Robert Sempill about "Habbie Simpson, the Piper of Kilbarchan", which is associated above all with Burns. But this metre was also used in the 18th century by others such as Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson, and in the 20th century it is used beautifully in a poem by Garioch written in homage to Fergusson:

> Fergusson, tho twa-hunder year
> awa, your image is mair clear
> nor monie things that nou appear
> in braid daylicht.
> What gars perspective turn sae queer?
> What ails my sicht?

When asked in a discussion in 2007 which came first, the dictionary or the poems, Fenton replied it was the dictionary, for which he has been collecting words for most of his adult life while working as the principal of a primary school which, in a very dangerous area, haemorrhaged pupils during the Troubles. He only began to write poems in middle age. And he has only written 50 or so. None of them are about politics—the usual kiss of death for Northern Irish poets. None of them are directly

love poems either—a pity, unless Fenton has some love poems in his desk drawer. (He lives with the love of his life, Pam Fenton, who comes from mid-Ulster and is not a native Ulster-Scots speaker.) Some are indirectly love poems, however—if I am reading them right; notably, the title poem in his collection *Thonner an Thon*, in effect an elegy to two couples, possibly Fenton's parents and their lost world, and Fenton himself and his wife. Here are the last three stanzas of this poem, the intensity of which is sustained over ten stanzas. I'll annotate, not translate, the text—though most of the language is comprehensible if the spelling is viewed imaginatively. (And this is the Standard Habbie metre):

Wantherin strange bae Lagan's broo,	*by bank*
Baith aply affen wunthered hoo	*assuredly*
Blin clod micht iver lee sitch two	*ever leave such two*
(Hir wie: mine's twa)	*(her version; mine's twa [–i.e. for 'two'])*
Thegither. Weel, it's hel tae noo,	*it's held till now*
Wae clesp, wae thra.	*understanding; disagreement*
Tae Bellycastle baith wur taen,	*both*
Doon whar for quait they affen gaen,	
The frettin ower, the spaein daen,	*foreboding done*
Their bother by;	
An thonner, redd o worl an wain,	*yonder rid of child*
In quait they lie.	
Lake gress, a boady's while, that's a',	*like grass*
Or lake a flure, nae last ava:	
A flooch o wun an al's awa	*A puff of wind*
As shane as ruz.	*As soon as risen*
Och mine him lake a shedda ga!	*see him like a shadow go*
(Wha's this he wuz?)	

The language here is not always easy, even using *The Hamely Tongue* as dictionary, because of Fenton's terseness and knottiness: the compression of meaning is not due to the Ulster-Scots in itself, although undoubtedly it suits such compression. "Wae clesp, wae thra" is a highly economical way of saying "With the clasp or embrace of understanding or with disagreement". And there can also be layers of meaning reinforced by the etymology, as in "The frettin ower, the spaein daen" where "spaein" means "foreboding" (*Chambers's Scots Dictionary*) but also "destiny" or "prophesy": in *The Hamely Tongue* "spae" is defined as "foretell, prophesy", with "spaewife" being "a female fortune-teller; a woman given to prophesying misfortune, disaster, etc." The word in this sense, like so many in Scots and Ulster-Scots as compared to English, is from the Old Norse.

The density of Fenton's poems is supported by the density of Ulster-Scots itself. The title *Thonner an Thon* means literally "Over there and that" (Modern English), or "Yonder and Yon" (Middle English) but in response to a query Fenton states that "it really means 'that world and what happened/was thought/experienced etc. there.'"

Most of Fenton's poems are about his childhood: his mother and father, household servants, local characters, his playmates and friends. The inspiration of his poems appears linked to the density of the language surrounding their subjects. His childhood "was the time of the heavy horse, of flax-growing and the scutch-mill, of corn-growing and the corn-mill, of hard manual labour in the hayfield and the potato-field, of long days in the moss, of hand-milking and home-churning; and of much else that has gone, probably for ever. Gone or going is much of the expressive and often colourful language associated with all of these…". But his poems are not linguistic archaeology. (He has tried this in a few prose pieces included in *Thonner an Thon* which describe the working life he knew as a child.) And what poems they are. Here is 'Leein':

It wuz aye the best time: the ithers
A'oot an awa an hir
Bent ower the skillet an plumpin brochan, *boiling porridge*
The saft scad frae the peats, quait- *fleeting appearance*
Burnin, comin an gan
Ower the flure. *floor*
Noo,
Hir bak turned, thonner, the spurtle *over there* *stirring stick*
Hingin:
'For luck at ye!' She said, naw luckin. 'Lake *look at you* *like*
The en o the worl.
Or lake maesel,' she said.

An ower bae the dorr, luckin oot
An doon the lane, rinnin awa
Tae the Knockahollet road, waitin
For the morra: *tomorrow*
'Frae yin worl tae anither,' she said.
'An nae gan bak.'

An stud thonner, luckin ower
Thon wie: *way*
'But you'll aye be comin bak,' she said,
The steam cloodin up roon hir,
Ower thonner bae the appen dorr.

There is something in the deadpan conversation here that makes me think of Hardy and Frost, but to talk of influences in such a poem is not to do it justice. Any good poet has a voice of his or her own, and here Fenton appropriates an entire language – economical, terse – as it were more Ulster-Scots than the Ulster Scots. Here is the end of 'The Biryin' ('The Burying'):

Gan oot, they stapped, yince, luckin bak	*once*
Ower the wat grey heidstanes.	
'Ay, London, wuzn't it? Bak tae	
Dee, ye micht say. An yersel—	*die*
Did ye—?'	
'Naw. Ower late. Hard he wuz hame an	*heard*
Hard it wuz a' by.'	*all over*
'Ay. A'by. Ay so.'	

Fenton stands on the shoulders of the Ulster-Scots weaver poet James Orr of Ballycarry (the Ulster Scots contemporary of Burns), in the same way Sorley MacLean stands on the shoulders of William Ross. In 'On Slamish' (Slemish, the holy mountain associated with St Patrick), Fenton writes:

Whar nicht-wantherin Orr dreamed yit, for a'
The bitter wakkenin o ninety-echt:
This lan that cried the dreamers bak, for
This is hame.

Orr was "out" with the United Irishmen in 1798. His poem 'Donegore Hill' (where he was captured after a skirmish and exiled to America, from which he eventually returned) is written in four pairs of alternating 4- and 3-stress lines, ending with a 2-stress line—the descendant of the Middle English and Scots "bob-wheel" metre originally used in transition from alliterative to rhyming verse, and eventually used or adapted by Burns and others and known as Christis Kirk metre. 'Donegore Hill' begins:

The dew-draps wat the fiels o' braird,	*new shoots*
That soon the war-horse thortur'd;	*ploughed up*
An falds were op'd by monie a herd	*folds*
Wha lang ere night lay tortur'd;	
Whan chiels wha grudg'd to be sae tax'd	*people*
An tyth'd by rack-rent blauth'ry,	*riff-raff*
Turn'd out en masse, as soon as ax'd—	*asked*
An unco throuither squath'ry	*disorderly crowd*
Were we, that day.	

This metre occurs, intact except for the omission of the final "bob" line, in Fenton's 'Dailygan' (a word still widely used in Ulster for "dusk"):

An noo the lichts ower Brochanor	
mak blak the brae behin;	
The sallies, hoovin saft an grey,	*willows, swelling*
come getherin, cloodin in;	
The watter, glancing ower its dark,	
babs lippin, whusperin by;	*bobs*
The boag's dark-sweelin, quait, aroon	*dark-swelling*
the tummock whar A lie.	
The peat's quait low, the week's saft licht	*quiet flame*
mak blak the ootby noo;	*outdoors*
The prootas plowt; the neeps' sweet steam	*The potatoes boil; the turnips'…*
cloods roon hir sweetin broo;	*sweating brow*
Bae qua an boag, ower queelrod wa,	*By swamp and bog, over reed wall*
thon licht's a gleekin ee	*a peeping eye*
Frae whar A come an whar A'll gae	
but tae nether stie or lee.	*stay or leave*

Although Fenton is at home with the music of so much traditional Scots and Ulster-Scots verse he also writes often in free verse, though of an intricately musical kind, as in 'Leein' and 'The Biryin', above. And take 'Jeerin the Jum'. (In Fenton's definition a **jum** is "a large, unreliable, trouble-giving car or other machine; a large, lazy and probably none too clean woman. [prob. Sc. *Jamb* anything big and awkward]" and it may be worth pointing out that "Jim" is pronounced in Ulster-Scots "Jam" and elsewhere in Ulster "Jum".)

A big wachlin, wabblin jum,	*shuffling*
We'd ca'd hir, an sa hir	
Noo,	
Wabblin an juntherin an riftin	*juddering belching*
Yit, as she	
Gret—	*wept*
'Al A iver had in the worl'—	
An mined noo wer jeerin	*noticed now our*
O the wabblin,	
An the riftin,	
An the traitlin an glammin o her	*trotting devouring*
Wee pappin, an sa	*child*

The easy it wud be tae
Jeer hir greetin — *weeping*
Tae.

Fenton is as accurate as John Clare in the close observation of his nature poems (e.g. 'Grunt' [Loach], 'Heatherbleat' [Snipe], 'Watter Quail' [Water Rail]). Here is the beginning of 'Hare':

Nae ither soon wuz there, efter — *sound*
The spalter an plowt, but deed — *floundering and splashing; died*
Broon quait a'roon
The tummock whar A sprachled, — *sprawled*
Daen, luckin an listenin — *done*
For naethin. Sae
Wuz it the boag-owl crinin, — *bog owl shrinking*
A furst canny hirsle, or aiblins — *careful wheezing perhaps*
Somethin ither, owler yit, that brocht — *older yet*
Ee tae watchin ee? — *Eye*

Yince fun, thon bricht ee wuz, — *Once found*
For a wee, — *For a while*
A' there wuz, bricht an brichter …

'Watter Quail' begins:

A fissle unther the deed, saft-hingin thatch, — *rustle; dead*
A strippit shedda, a wheekin scad, — *striped darting glimpse*
Ye jook crotched an shairp an quait — *dodge crouched*
Amang the queelrods … — *reeds*

But eventually Fenton (like the quail) breaks, as he sometimes does, out of his terse and objective description into an anguished, personal cry:

For, wae the dark creepin, quait
As daith,
Frae oot the boag, amang the queelrods an — *reeds*
A'ower yer wuthered worl, — *our withered world*
Comes thon ra, rivin screech – — *raw forceful*
Agane the nicht's comin? Or
Whut the nicht micht bring? Or
Wull bring?

The way to read Fenton is to use *The Hamely Tongue* to translate and gloss on his poems. And this is a double pleasure, in that we can learn the poems and the language too—a language which like Scots itself has a syntax and vocabulary, although partly lost in everyday English, which can strengthen us in our use of English by reminding us how much its backbone is Old English and Old Norse.

Although *The Hamely Tongue* was written first, perhaps – if time is the illusion some modern physicists now propose it to be – in the timeless world of poetry Fenton laboured on a scholarly dictionary of the poems he would one day write.

A new *Selected Poems* is due this year in which ten or so poems will be added to those in *Thonner an Thon*. In his latest poems Fenton is his old self, although perhaps more philosophical. As always he is at his best, when, in a poem of dense observation and meditation on the "minute particulars" (Blake's phrase) of Ulster Scots life, the lyric cry breaks out. In a letter he describes the poem 'He'd Awa' as "a swansong perhaps—but hardly a lament." It ends:

He'd prog the thochts o speerin men,	*search out prying*
Where naw a questin jooks the pen	*question dodges*
In wechty books, a despert power:	*terrific*
But a' the prent's thoom-blurried ower.	*thumb-smudged*
He'd whiles awa tae Slaimish tap,	*Slemish mountain top*
A brither tae the hare an whap,	*curlew*
An wutless in the rashes lie:	*witless*
But thrang's the road, the brae sae stie.	*thronged steep*
But noo he's fun this pair o wings,	*found*
An leppin frae the greeshoch, sings,	*leaping embers*
An lake the leverock, licht as wun,	*skylark wind*
Flees heech an heecher nixt the sun.	*higher and higher towards the sun*

A real poet then. And yes, writing in a dying tongue. But aren't we all? Fenton is under no illusions about poetry and fame, although finally, in his late seventies, he is getting some attention in the world of minority language studies and of his fellow Ulster-Scots speakers. But we English speakers can also be possible readers of this extraordinary poet.