

Guid Fer A Laugh: A seriously fun look at Scottish comedy for those who take fun seriously

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Scots Language and Laughter
Guid Fer a Laugh

A SERIOUSLY FUN LOOK AT SCOTTISH COMEDY

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Goan an tak the remedy
Hae a laugh at
Scottish Comedy

FOR THOSE WHO TAKE FUN SERIOUSLY

Guid Fer A Laugh has always sought to place itself as part of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls 'the open-ended dialogue that enters into the dialogic fabric of human life' (Morson & Emerson, 1990). It places a central value on the contributions of the participants and the active discourse that they create. As Buber (1965) states '[it is only] when we meet in the narrow ridge of the between' that we discover for ourselves new discourse, new knowledge and truth. This 'meeting in dialogue', especially applies to laughter.

Since its inception in 2012/13 Guid Fer A Laugh has had to adapt itself to the rapidly-changing conditions and contexts of recent history. That history has been profound, divisive, isolating and full of uncertainty. Events that have been encountered have included the Scottish Referendum, the General and Scottish Elections, the European Referendum, Brexit and currently the Coronavirus Pandemic. The latter poses severe restrictions on our capacity for discourse and dialogue. The rise of right wing populism and authoritarianism has been a deeply disturbing element of these events. This element displays itself in what Bakhtin called 'a monologisation of discourse and culture', (in Morson & Emerson, 1990). This monologisation is characterised by both dogmatism and relativism that excludes all argumentation, all authentic dialogue by making it either impossible (dogmatism) or unnecessary (relativism). Dogmatism excludes any view or conviction that is at variance with itself, making dialogue impossible. Relativism renders all truth equally arbitrary (a pre-condition of fake news) and produces an infinity of monologues. In effect, any truth is as good as any other truth. It then becomes a struggle for dominance, not a search for new meaning through dialogue. What is left is what Emerson calls 'the worst cumulative effects of our own echo chamber of words', (in Morson & Emerson, 1990). As dialogue is the core value of Guid Fer A Laugh it has faced considerable challenges in the face of such troubling circumstances. Using a developmental approach that included the participants, Guid Fer A Laugh has had to evaluate and reconstitute itself as it evolved. It is best to see it not as a finalised product but as an ongoing development project. A short history of the development of the project is given below. Before we move on it is best to answer two basic questions.

- **Why the Scots language?**
- **Why Scottish comedy?**

Why the Scots language?

In 2012, coming out of Royston Wardieburn Community Centre Edinburgh after a locally organised Burns Supper, some participants voiced their concerns that they 'did nae ken a lot o ra words'. What did 'roch and heilster gowdie' mean? The same year, the Prentice Centre ran a still ongoing series of courses on Scottish Cultural Studies*. At the end of a course on Modern Scottish Literature, many of the same concerns

about Scots were raised. In discussion with the participants, feelings of anger, frustration and humiliation were raised: why were they 'ignorant of their own language, history and culture?' Participants related stories of being systematically humiliated for using Scots in schools. In some cases, they faced corporal punishment. Crowther & Tett, (2010) reported the case of a young man held for contempt of court for using 'aye' instead of 'yes'.

Sadly, these experiences were not uncommon, nor were they accidental. They were the result of policy, particularly Education Department Policy. Although it was, in places, well intentioned The Fyfe Report (1947) clearly outlines the dominance that English was to play in the education of the Scottish populace. It states the following under the heading 'Every teacher is a teacher of English', Fyfe (1947):

We accept it is the plain duty of schools to give every child a mastery of Standard English speech. We summarise our conclusions thus: More must be done if a barely literate populace debased by vulgarism and corrupted by Hollywood is to be transformed into an educated people capable of understanding and using its inheritance of English speech. With the oppressiveness of merely debased and incorrect speech the schools have an immediate and lasting concern – to war against it unceasingly (Fyfe, 1947)

The methodology of such schooling matched the intention of its purpose and is succinctly illustrated by Alexander Scott (1994) in the description of 'Scotch Education': 'I telt ye I telt ye. Should that fail, until 1987, the Lochgelly tawse lay in wait to belt ye, belt ye'.

Through the use of mono-linguism, the education system in Scotland sought to impose a monologisation of speech upon its people in order to reinforce the dominant culture. This was further reinforced through the embedded arguments inherent in other social fields such as work, the media, and in particular through the BBC. Until the publication of Lorimer's Bible in 1983 God did not speak in Scots! There were, and are, further profound implications of this social action. Wittenstein (2010),

convincingly argues that language is only understood 'within the language game'. As he highlights, the 'meaning of a word presupposes an ability to use it'. Thought and language therefore are inherently intertwined. To suppress the use of Scots as speech was to destroy the inner creative and aesthetic sensibilities that are entailed in 'playing the language game'.

Edwin Muir, poet, critic and former principal of Newbattle Abbey College, points out that the Scots speaker is left 'with emotions bereft of thought'; Scots are left 'to think in English but feel in Scots' (Noble, 1982). The Scottish psyche's inner voice is disturbed with the difficulties of articulacy. This kind of enforced monologisation of culture Bourdieu (1984) calls an act of 'symbolic violence'. In Scotland's case this was often visceral. In a seminal work *The Eclipse of Scottish Cultures* Beveridge and Turnbull (1989) characterise the effects of these acts of symbolic violence as 'the Scottish cringe', where a sense of inferiority is inculcated. Through the process of 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1984), this sense of inferiority is internalised. Scots therefore collude in, and co-produce, their own forms of subordination. As Franz Fanon outlines in Beveridge and Turnbull (1989), the colonised are colonised to the extent that their inner belief system reflects that of the coloniser. An illustration of the reach and depth of this cultural colonisation came during the Scottish Referendum in 2014, when no less than Lord George Robertson stated, sadly without a hint of irony, that 'Scotland has no language or culture (in Burnett, 2019).

Ortega Y Gasset in 'The Revolt of the Masses' points out that, 'Rancour emanates from a sense of inferiority (in Weintraub, 1966). The Scottish cringe, often with a chip on its shoulder, displays this rancour in hard-edged aggression that manifests itself in other characteristics. It not only seeks to inferiorise, but it also seeks to infantilise and to belittle. The latter is seen in the work of J M Barrie's *Peter Pan* and the *Lost Boys* and is epitomised by the bucket philosophy of the bucket boy philosopher Oor Wullie. The former is demonstrated by former First Minister Lord McConnell. Notwithstanding his acceptance of a peerage on the grounds that he wished to continue his fight against inequality, McConnell stated that his great vision

for Scotland was it to become, 'The best WEE country in the world' (in Burnett, 2019). In terms of the Scottish cringe no more needs to be said.

In a well-argued paper 'Scots wha hae or Scots who have', Macfarlane (2012), outlines the difficulties and ambivalence about using Scots in a literacy context. In choosing Scots, Guid Fer A Laugh believes that the 'power of the powerless' (Havel, 1987), resides with the Scots wha hae a language that allows them 'to be themselves and tae mak it worth being' (MacDairmid, 2004), a language where they are at hame with themselves. In doing so Guid Fer a Laugh seeks to challenge the dominant hegemony, the monologue of culture. In seeking to place the participants in dialogue in their own language with their own culture, the project hopes that they will discover the wonder of the wurd, wherein searching for the wurd, the wurd finds them, wherein reading the poem the poem reads them. Guid Fer A Laugh hopes to place all of its participants in what Hamish Henderson (1960) called 'the carrying stream', where they rediscover in dialogue their own worth and value; where 'a roch wind blaws' and where they are 'at hame wi freedom'.

Why Scottish comedy?

Scottish comedy and comic verse have a long history stretching back to the Makars and Balladeers of the 14th and 15th Centuries. In his 1725 *Reflections on Laughter and Self Love*, Francis Hutcheson was one of the first philosophers to examine the philosophical significance of comedy (Broadie, 2010). Hutcheson challenges both Aristotle and Hobbs' limited view of comedy and argues that, while there are many forms of laughter, comedy must be deployed for a morally acceptable purpose. In accepting that purpose, Guid Fer A Laugh sees the long history of Scottish comedy as a rich resource of discourse and dialogue. As Broadie (2010) highlights, Adam Smith, a student of Hutcheson, argued brilliantly in *The Theory of Moral Sentiment* that the basis of moral purpose lay in the sympathetic capacity to perceive oneself as if perceived by others. Burns' genius succinctly articulates this, 'Some power the giftie gie us to see oorsels as ithers see us' (Noble & Hogg, 2001). The power is the imagination, and the gift the sympathetic capacity to see ourselves as others see us. In the deepest radical sense, the Scottish imagination is sympathetic. Burns also quietly

reminds us that its purpose is to 'free us frae mony a blunder or false notion' (Noble and Hogg, 2001).

The other key characteristic that lies at the heart of the Scottish imagination is what Gregory-Smith in 1919 wonderfully called the Caledonian Antisyzygy**. It is defined as: 'the presence of duelling polarities within one entity' (Gregory Smith, 2010). This dualism, inherently dialogical like Jekyll and Hyde, divides both the Scottish psyche and the Scottish imagination. The Scottish imagination, sympathetic, dualistic and dialogical, expresses itself in two dichotomous forms. It is not unlike looking into a cracked mirror from both sides at once.

The first of these forms is rooted in the chiselled realism of the harsh social reality from which its romantic aspirations arise. This form can be described as romantic realism. Its polar opposite form arises when, loosed from its realistic ballast, the Scottish imagination expresses itself as sentimental rationalism. The difference between romantic realism and sentimental rationality is best illustrated by comparing examples from the Scottish ballads and Sir Walter Scott's version of them. On the one hand, we have real intellectual vigour and relish: 'I lighted down, my sword to draw, I hacked him in pieces sma', (Muir, cited in Noble, 1982). Contrast this with Scott's version where, led by the courage of his prudence, Scott displays feelings untouched by thought and genteel sentiment designed to appease middle class gentility. 'Charge Chester charge, on Stanley on was the last words of Marmion' (Muir, cited in Noble, 1982).

The Scottish imagination gives us the power to see ourselves as others see us, and this lies at the heart of Scottish comedy. Scottish comedy also embodies the polarities, tensions and possibilities that are found within the Scottish imagination. It has the capacity to challenge the existing hegemony, the existing monologue of culture, to challenge the Scottish cringe. At the same time, it has and does co-produce The Scottish cringe's various forms and stereotypes, and it confirms the existing habitus across a variety of social fields and dispositions. Scottish comedy therefore simultaneously celebrates MacDiarmid's exultant declaration that 'I begin where

extremes meet' (2004), while also going along with Sir Harry Lauder, roaming in the gloaming. Sadly, the kailyard Minister and the ever-vigilant Presbyterian tut tut stalks the vitality of the Scottish Renaissance. Scottish comedy revels in the romantic realism of Billy Connolly while producing the sentimental rationalism of The White Heather Club. In doing this it provides a rich source of cultural capital, notwithstanding its contradictions. Bourdieu (1984) believed class distinctions and preferences were 'most marked in the ordinary choices of everyday existence which are particularly revealing of deep rooted and longstanding dispositions'. Surveying the everyday choices of existence and class distinctions, Scottish comedy has a great capacity to give voice to 'the power of the powerless', where 'the false notions' of the existing habitus are exposed and illuminated (Bourdieu, 1984).

A Glesca joke serves to illustrate this capacity. During the opening ceremony of 'Glasgow City of Culture' a rich, prominent celebrity sought to jump the queue by going to the front, demanding entry by announcing loudly:

'Do you know who I am?'

Razor Wit turned to the queue and said:

'Can any of youse help this pair bastard? He disnae ken who he is'

In Scotland, arguably the organic intellectuals are its radical comedians.

The great Scottish novelist Robin Jenkins once remarked that the Scots had 'their own particular peculiarities' (in Murray, Tait & Murray, 2001). Scottish comedy has its own 'peculiarities' in terms of the range of its themes across a variety of social fields. It also has its own unique methods of expressing these themes. Such themes range from Calvinism and the Presbyterian tut tut, authority, class to relationships and identity. The methods include put downs, puns and exaggeration. They demonstrate that Scottish comedy is well disposed to the earthy laugh, although it may well be said to be ill-disposed to wellbeing.

At its height Scottish comedy displays an acute sense of the nuances involved in the language game of meaning. In this realm, it stands in comparison with the best. Compare the following from Samuel Beckett and Chic Murray. Beckett, while tutoring at Campbell College Belfast, a public school for the children of the very

wealthy, was asked by an interviewer, 'Mr Beckett you teach the crème de la crème. What are they like?' Beckett replied, 'Rich and thick', (in Knowlson, 1996).

Chic Murray observed the following exchange between landlord and tenant:

'Oh c'mon, am no a complete eidjit.'

'Oh aye, which part is missing?', Murray (2010)

The brevity of the word play displays an aesthetic asteism of the highest order. Scottish comedy, in the form of romantic realism, has an inherent tendency towards the carnaptious, reflecting its roots in rancour. This often expresses itself in the form of the inverted praise poem, its long history dating back to the flytings of the Makars. A good example of this is in the following:

Yu've a fais (face) that wid turn a funeral up a side street wi a voice that wid
shell a prawn wi wan screech.

The reposte is always worth the wait:

Aye an you've a heid fu o doors an they are a' bangin, Duncan (2004).

Reflecting the bleakness of Knox's Kirk and Calvin's Cemetery on a wet Sunday, Scottish comedy, in its romantic realistic mode, can express itself with an austerity and economy of expression. This is compressed into a fearfully terse version of the Caledonian Haiku. Scott (1994) provides the following examples:

Scotch Co-operation:

Pu the gither

My wey

Scotch Equality:

Kaa the feet frae

Thon big bastard

In the name of equality, Scottish comedy in both its modes likes to deflate pompous authority. The young birkie has long been a target of Scottish wit. The man in the dock highlighted by Crowther and Tett has his sense of justice restored by his own

Scottish wit, the power of the powerless. He persistently replied to questions in Scots and the lordly QC booms out at him with great theatrical style:

'Do you know the Queens English?'

'Is she?' he replied.

As a source of cultural capital, and as a product of habitus, Scottish comedy has a capacity to collude with, and confirm, the existing hegemony. Equally, it has a great capacity, when rooted in romantic realism, to challenge the existing hegemony by illuminating the false notions that underpin a wide variety of social fields and dispositions. At its best, Scottish comedy displays both an intelligent imagination and an imaginative intelligence. Like all comedy, its effect is intelligibly palpable before it is critically and intellectually fully understood. We laugh and then we are illuminated.

Guid Fer A Laugh chose Scottish comedy because of its capacity to illuminate. It can be said that such illuminations provide the participants with landmarks to here. These landmarks point to the carrying stream, to the road 'hame' where the participants are at hame with being at hame, where they meet in dialogue to learn to laugh and laugh to learn . . . in Scots.

A short history of the project

In all its variety of forms and stages of development Guid Fer A Laugh has a consistent set of aims. These were and are:

- To learn about Scots language and auld words.
- To learn about Scots comedy, songs, poetry and writing.
- To have a guid laugh at oorsels and others.

Depending on the course, class or session, the emphasis on each can change, based on the needs of the participants. In the longer courses there may be a greater emphasis on the history of Scottish comedy, on the shorter courses, greater emphasis is placed on language. A literacy approach runs through all sessions and the recurrent requirement is tae hae a guid laugh.

The general format is a loosely-structured conversation, where participants are invited into a dialogue. They are encouraged to participate and contribute as much as possible. There are often themes that run throughout the session, such as work, schooldays or class accents. The sessions begin with a Frierian Say yer own wurd set. Participants are asked for their favourite Scots words or, if it is theme-based, what Scots words come to mind in relation to that theme. This is extended to phrases and sayings. Following this there is generally a section involving 'language game'. The format can become like a game show, where games played are Ca Ma Bluff and Scrabblin About. Playing the language game is important for learning. A variety of materials can then be introduced including pieces of writing, poems, DVDs and songs. A favourite is Joke fae the Poke where participants choose a joke from a bag or bring in a joke of their own to share. They then select the best joke to tell others outside the group. For example, the participants chose the following as the best joke to represent romantic realism.

Ah forgot ma self an wis kissing ma girlfriend passionately when all of a sudden ah goat a lump in ma throat. She'd been chewin oan a pickled onion (Murray, 2010).

On longer courses, the history of Scottish comedy is examined in some depth, starting with the penny geggies, through Variety, to the present time. The vast majority of the material used has been found, discovered and donated by the participants themselves. These include books and DVDs found in second-hand stores. The following is a good example. While studying Harry Lauder, one participant found pictures of him presented as a malnourished pit hewn miner along with pictures of the effete, kilted, hideous caricature that he portrayed, displaying the worst excesses of the Scottish cringe. The physical change was described by the participant as a 'menacingly comic version of Jekyll and Hyde'. The same participant also gave this account of the advice a Glesca wit gave Sir Harry during his early career. Being mercilessly heckled with loud shouts of 'Get aff! Get aff!', Sir Harry stopped his act and pleaded with the audience, 'Oh come oan folks this is ma bread and butter'. A short time later,

two objects hurled over the heads of the audience and landed on the stage. The Glesca wit shouted out: 'There's your breid and butter. Now get tae fuck aff'.

Over the years there have been literally hundreds of people who have attended Guid Fer A Laugh. Their contributions have enhanced the project immensely. Time has been spent evaluating the various aspects of the project and the participants' feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. In some cases, it has been humbling. The feedback has also fed into the development of the project, shaping it and refining it.

The current phase: the packs and Covid 19

When the Pandemic started, and lockdown kicked in, the outreach sessions and classes stopped. As many of the participants were vulnerable and isolated, and some had mental health issues, the project had to re-evaluate itself. Given the nature of lockdown it was felt that Guid Fer A Laugh needed to sustain its commitment to its participants and to those other people who would become vulnerable and isolated as lockdown persisted. The Lifelong Learning Worker in South West Edinburgh discussed with participants and organisations what would benefit them, and packs were suggested as the way forward. The worker then persuaded management to fund the packs and a tutor was engaged. It was decided that the packs would be literacy-based and a community development approach would be used to shape and develop them. In form and tone, the packs were to match the sessions as much as possible. Say your word and language games were integral. Participants were asked to contribute as much as possible. In the packs on Burns, two poems by participants were featured. Hae Yer Say at the end of each pack provides constant feedback and ideas, and these feed directly into their development.

In terms of using the packs, they can be adapted to the needs of the participants. As little or as much as is needed can be used. Ultimately, the participants can be given accreditation. They can be used by families, carers, support workers and individuals. The activities are suitable for all adults, particularly those who do not have access to computers or the internet. To date, the packs have developed partnerships with three

organisations: Edinburgh Museums and Galleries, Edinburgh Libraries and, importantly, Age Scotland. Age Scotland's Elizabeth Bryan has supported Guid Fer A Laugh since its inception. As WEA organiser she funded the very first sessions and continues to give great support. We would also like to thank Laura Starkey from Education Scotland who has included the packs on their website. Guid Fer A Laugh can be downloaded free at:

<https://www.idevelopcld.org.uk/course/view.php?id=159§ion=16>

In terms of distribution, the numbers on the database have risen rapidly. There are currently 125 organisations and 45 individuals on the base. This increases with each issue. To celebrate Burns Day, Guid Fer A Laugh linked up with Age Scotland's 'Burns in a Bag' initiative. Age Scotland printed off hard copies of the Burns packs and sent them out in their Burns Bags to all of the 3,000 members of Age Scotland. Guid Fer A Laugh reviews evaluations for each of the packs and the positive response has been universal. It can definitely be said to be meeting its own aims while also making a valuable contribution to reduction in the isolation of its participants. That this is the case is due to the hard work, organisational skills and sheer dogged commitment of the Lifelong Learning Worker for South West Edinburgh. The cover of the Burns edition is shown on the next page below.

Introduction to Scots Literacy *Guid Fer a Laugh* Level 2 - Pack 5

Speakin
,
Scots



◆ EDINBURGH ◆
THE CITY OF EDINBURGH ~~COUNCIL~~ *COONCIL*

The future: Tasks and aspirations

Tasks

- Guid Fer A Laugh, for the immediate and foreseeable future, will continue to produce and distribute the packs.
- The project will actively seek new and suitable partners to promote the work.

Aspirations

- The project will actively pursue the restoration of face-to-face community-based lifelong learning sessions. These will play a fundamental role in restoring community life, where participants meet to facilitate dialogue and discourse. This is a necessity in a democracy.
- Guid Fer A Laugh would hope to support a network of local independent groups who meet to research and enjoy their own local language, history and culture.
- Since the Education Act 1872 (Scotland) there has been little encouragement, and much active hostility, from all sections of Scottish education to the inclusion within the curriculum of Scots language and culture. Born in the era of the North British movement, Scottish education's primary purpose was to equip its learners to be British subjects rather than Scottish citizens. Guid Fer A Laugh would hope to contribute to the participants' ability to participate fully in their own culture, allowing them to be fully active Scottish citizens.
- Guid Fer A Laugh would hope to contribute to the development of a truly inclusive multi-lingual Scottish education system, where the participants are taught in their own languages about their own history and culture.
- In a truly inclusive Scottish education system, Guid Fer A Laugh would hope that Scottish comedy is given its true and proper place within the curriculum, recognising that it is a rich source of Scottish cultural capital.

Finale

As we bring this piece to a close, we are reminded of an account of the legendary Scottish comic Chic Murray's funeral. As the coffin went to cremation, the curtain closed over. Once closed, Murray's voice was heard yodelling 'Encore! Encore!'

Encore!'. Given the length of this piece, MacDairmid's (2004) Drunk Man's remarks at the end of the poem may have some resonance. After herculean feats of verbosity, he says with some defiance 'Yet I hae silence left!'. The reply may well apply here: Aye, an weel ye micht.

Finally we leave you with the incomparable Francie and Josie's trademark farewell: 'We wud just like tae thank youse for the opperchancity tae expose wursels'.

Scottish Comedy is COMMON SENSE ... gone jigging

Hamish Gramsci and Antonio Henderson

Learn to Laugh Laugh to learn.

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***The Prentice Centre**

Since 2011 the Prentice Centre has run classes in Scottish Cultural Studies. The classes are currently on hold.

** The Caledonian antiszygy: This is mistakenly attributed to MacDiarmid. In the 1990s, there was a Caledonian antiszygy Society formed. Not seeking a large membership or longevity, a condition of membership was that the members agreed to be immediately expelled.