

# Outlander is Boosting a Renaissance of the Scots Language – Here's How

*What would ye twa cotters ken o' battle, eh? I bet ye Lallybroch tumshies will turn arse and run at first blast o' cannon fire...*

Pithy Scots brogue and throwaway insults punctuate [Outlander](#), the phenomenally successful TV series that explores the final great [Jacobite uprising](#) of 1745 – the rebellion against King George II led by [Bonnie Prince Charlie](#). Like 18th-century period dress or columns of troops, the Scots language is colourfully employed to lend authenticity to the drama.

The Scots spoken in Outlander may not be the language spoken today in Scotland, but rather a stage-Scots – essentially English dressed in tartan and [cockade](#) – yet it is still to be cheered. In fact, the presence of Scots in Outlander is a sign of how far an historically repressed language has come in just a few decades.

But what is Scots exactly, and what is it doing in this time travel drama? Scots is the tongue of much of Scotland, particularly the rural areas. According to the 2011 census, Scots has 1.6m speakers in Scotland, with more in Ulster, Northern Ireland, making it the largest minority language in Europe.

Germanic words such as “ken” and “bairn” are used where in English you might say “I know” and “child”. There are many loan words from [Gaelic](#), such as “glen”, “loch” and “burn” (a small stream); from Dutch there is “keek” (to look), and from French “assiette” (plate). There are also 400 shared words

between Scots and Norwegian.

Scots is the stuff of poets [Gavin Douglas](#), [Rabbie Burns](#) and [Violet Jacob](#), and of Scottish Twitter (often to [hilarious effect](#)).

But this language has been repressed – forced out of education, media and business life. Interestingly, the fate and fall of Scots were bound together with those of [Jacobitism](#), a movement intended to restore Scotland's former independence, religious tolerance and the Stewart dynasty to the Scottish and English thrones.

## Ken your history

A shift towards English was accelerated when the [Act of Union](#) – which joined the parliaments of Scotland and England – was signed in 1707. As the court, the parliamentary power and the economic centre of gravity moved south, so linguistic fashion followed. Scots was seen as part of the old Scotland by many elites, English a mark of the new Britain.

This is where Jacobitism enters the tale. In the run-up to [the '45](#) rebellion, the Jacobites drew heavily upon all manner of symbols to emphasise the Scottishness of their cause. They declared support for an independent Scotland, clad themselves in tartan and bore the cross of Saint Andrew. They also weaponised the Scots language to endear their cause to the common man.

Jacobite “makars” (poets) produced reams of outlaw poems and songs in Scots. Fascinating characters such as [Alexander Ross](#) of Lochlee emerged, and pumped out Scots propagandic verse from the depths of the Angus countryside, which was then spread by travelling minstrels. His words ensured the Jacobite message was heard on the streets of Aberdeen, Forfar, Brechin and other Scots-speaking communities – towns vital in

supplying men for the '45.

In the south, Scots became a shibboleth for Jacobitism among wealthier classes in Edinburgh. A wave of poets, led by Jacobite [Allan Ramsay](#), went on to produce a huge body of Scots poetry that would cause some modern academics to argue that Scottish "18th-century literature is the product of a Jacobite century".

According to [Jacobite letters to Lord Pitsligo](#), Bonnie Prince Charlie himself is said to have "spoke good broad Scotch" to the troops he marched alongside, although raised in France "never attained to the perfect knowledge of the English language, prevented in great measure ... [by] his over fondness to speak broad Scots".

The [Hanoverians](#), supporters of the replacement of the Stewart monarch in London, could not engage the public in the same way. Their propaganda, as seen in the broadsides published pre-'45, was in English, sometimes imported from London. This communicating in a foreign manner from a foreign land seems to have played right into the hands of the Jacobites.

For all the success in bringing out soldiers – and the majority of Jacobites across the 1715 and '45 rebellions were Scots speakers – the rising was unsuccessful, with final defeat at [Culloden](#) that ended in slaughter. Jacobite failure to unseat the Hanoverians saw many of their symbols, Scots included, experience a plunge in status. It remained spoken throughout Scotland, but was excluded from education and most media, derided as backwards.



Outlander is a time travel drama set around the period of the Jacobite uprisings in the first half of the 18th century. Starz! Movie Channel

## The Outlander renaissance of Scots

As Jacobitism is rehabilitated through Outlander and other [popular books](#) that present it as an organised, dangerous and international movement, Scots has also experienced something of a tectonic shift in status. As recently as 1985, academic AJ Aitken wrote:

*Officially Scots does not exist. It is not the subject of any accepted official policy, and no one dreams of teaching it to foreigners.*

While true then, it no longer holds today. Scots is beginning to [feature in the media](#), with Outlander at the vanguard, and is backed by the [EU charter on Minority Languages](#). The Scottish government has some [initiatives](#) in place for its promotion and teaching, although they are not particularly

well funded.

This is echoed in wider Scottish cultural life, where Scots is reappearing in places it has been absent for generations. There suddenly exists a plethora of excellent books such as [Harry Potter in Scots](#), [The Gruffalo in Scots](#), the new [Sanners Gow book of folktales](#). The language is finding itself back in favour in academia, with researchers such as Neil Kirk at Abertay University studying Scots' effect on the brain, our work at the Elphinstone Institute supervising numerous PhDs on the subject, and the [National Library of Scotland](#) appointing a "Scots Scribe" to produce new work in the tongue.

The past for Scots may have been bleak, but the present is improving and the future is starting to look optimistic. Outlander is part of the rehabilitation, putting Scots back on the lips of our ancestors where it belongs, in its central place in Scottish identity and heritage.

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*Now have a go at reading this article in proper Scots, below.*

## Scots: the leid o Outlander

There's an unco couthie wee scene in Outlander, just afore the bluidy battle o Gledsmuir taks place. Twa reivers, farmers, neebors an soon-tae-be sodgers are sat thegither, haverin about wha'll dae whit fir the ither should he dee in battle. Then a mair experienced sodger comes in wi:

*What would ye twa cotters ken o battle, eh? I bet ye Lallybroch tumshies will turn arse and run at first blast o cannon fire...*

The dialogue in Outlander is thrang wi Scots wirds. The hail

thing isnae whit ye'd ca 'braid' Scots or onythin like it. It's mair sib tae English wi a lick o tartain pent owre it. Scots is yaised, much as wi the period claes an accurate troop movements, tae gie Outlander authenticity. Yet I cry this progress. Fowk ken that, gin they are settin a programme in oor bonnie wee country they maun tak tent o Scots an wark it in tae the dialogue. Whit a lang gait the leid's been on tae get here.

## Ken yir history

It's richt an guid that Scots features sae heavily in this bauld retellin o the Jacobites' tale, as the leid wis gey important tae the Jacobite cause.

Efter the flittin o King Jamie Saxt doon the road tae England in the early years of the saxteen hunners, an mair especially efter the Union o croons in 1707, Scots tint its status as national leid.

Jacobitism weechit Scots up oot the sheuch, dichtit it doon an pit it tae the propagandists purpose. Ilka layer o the cause yaised Scots, fae the fit sodgers tae the high heid yins owre fae France an Italy.

Jacobite makars sic as Alexander Ross o Lochlee screivit screeds o sangs an verses in Scots an circulatit them through the networks o minstrels operatin ootthrough Scotland in thae deys.

Mony minstrels wad get in bather fir singin sangs that spreid a Jacobite message, but wad dae it onygates oot o passion fir the cause an cause thae sangs were the anes that selt theirsels. Sangster Mussel Mou'd Chairlie wis mair in the Aiberdeen tollbooth than oot fir his constant singin o Jacobite anthems aboot the toun afore the '45 rising.

Mair wealthy Jacobites yaised Scots tae indicate their support

fir the cause. Aibly led bi Allan Ramsay, a hail bourach o Scots makars screivit poems an verse wi a Jacobite, independent edge. This muckle whummle o Scots verse in effect thirled the leid tae the cause in the popular mind.

Ae fellow sodger recordit in his diary that Bonnie Prince Chairlie spake ‘good braid Scots’ whan he mairchit wi the troops. Chairlie’s pal Jamie Drummond the Duke o Perth, born in France, never kent English, due tae his “over fondness to speak broad Scots.”

The scale o wark in Scots has caused academics tae suggest that Scottish “18th-century literature is the product of a Jacobite century”.

Fir aa the success in bringin oot troops – an the majority o aabdy ‘oot’ fir the 1715 an 1745 rebellions were Scots spickers – the cause wis a failure. Scots went intae shairp decline in high-status usage efter that, thirled tae the same fate as Jacobitism as bein seen as auld-farrant an barbaric. Alang cam the kailyaird, comedy shaws an the exclusion o Scots fae serious public life.

## **Braw wee stories and drama**

It’s guid tae see Scots back in the mous o oor ancestors whan they are representit o the tele, an Outlander is just a pairt o a sudden upbiggin in the status o Scots aboot the hail country. There’s noo a wheen braw beuks in Scots, including owresettings o Harry Potter an a new Doric Sanner’s Gows folk tales collection comin oot. There’s the academic wark bi Neil Kirk at Abertay University, the numerous PhDs an associatit researches intae the leid supervised at the Elphinstone Institute as weels braw wark in ither universities.

Outlander is pairt o this rehabilitation, ane that will soon eneuch see Scots oot o the sheuch, dichtit aff an skinklan in

its rightful place at the heart of Scotland's modern identity and heritage.

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