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HOME TO A GHOST: ULSTER-SCOTS LANGUAGE AND VERNACULAR IN NORTHERN IRISH CULTURE SINCE THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

Abstract: The Good Friday Agreement (1998) stated: “All participants recognise the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, including in Northern Ireland, the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic communities, all of which are part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland.” However, since that time the development of the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic communities has often been fraught. Despite much good will, investment and initiatives much work remains to be done to generate the state of linguistic and cultural respect, understanding and tolerance that the Belfast Agreement envisaged.

In this article I shall explore the history and development of the Ulster-Scots language and writing from the time of the Good Friday Agreement to the present day. I will examine the various models of literary and linguistic development that have occurred since. I will argue that the focus on developing Ulster-Scots predominately as a lesser used language has at times led to an impasse in generating widespread acceptance and created barriers to the mainstreaming of Ulster-Scots. The article will suggest that as a major component of Ulster English dialect, Ulster-Scots is a major element of the vernacular and literary tradition and experience of the great majority of individuals in Northern Ireland. Indeed, given the significance of Ulster-Scots dialect in the work of Seamus Heaney, I will suggest that opportunities have been lost in the promotion of Ulster-Scots to audiences in Ireland and abroad. By the adoption of new, inclusive approaches to the comprehension and propagation of Ulster-Scots, I will suggest a methodology through which accommodation and understanding might be effected for the dissemination of Ulster-Scots language, culture and literature for the various linguistic and cultural communities in Northern Ireland and beyond.

Keywords: Good Friday Agreement, minority languages, culture war, Ulster-Scots, Northern Irish literature, vernacular literature

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In an area where semantics are fraught and shibboleths abound, the history of Ulster-Scots language in Northern Ireland has proved to be a difficult one. The Good Friday Agreement placed Ulster-Scots at the forefront of Northern Irish cultural and political life when it affirmed:

All participants recognise the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, including in Northern Ireland, the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic communities, all of which are part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland.²

Despite the laudable efforts generated to afford respect towards the concepts of diversity and accommodation, such statements did not articulate the differences that abounded between the resourcing for and acceptance of Ulster-Scots in the local community. For example, when questioned about the levels of funding for Ulster-Scots compared to Irish, the former Northern Ireland Minister for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure disclosed that the ratio of funding of Ulster-Scots to Irish was 1:3.³ The very nature of what a “language” means at a social level has proved very much a troubled one. Accusations were levelled that Ulster-Scots was very much

¹ *The Good Friday Agreement / The Belfast Agreement*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-belfast-agreement> [access: 9.12.2018].

² *Ibidem*.

³ See: <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/ni/?id=2015-02-24.3.11> [access: 9.12.2018].

a Unionist construct, aimed to appease those in the Protestant Unionist Loyalist communities who might seek cultural and financial equivalency when steps were being taken to fund the further development of the Irish language.⁴

At times it has been very difficult to ascertain what is actually meant by Ulster-Scots. To some groups it is viewed and celebrated as an official “Lesser Used” or “Minority” Language, protected by European Charter⁵, which has many of the markers of linguistic singularity including a dictionary, a grammar, translations, a historic literature and recognisable language communities in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.⁶ To others it is a dialect or an accent or even a form of slang, which it is felt for various reasons should not engender the interest and funding which was implicit within the Good Friday Agreement. Perhaps few concepts could trigger the level of cultural anxiety and cultural cringe as Ulster Scots in Northern Irish cultural discourse. It is difficult at times to ascertain why the concept should generate such hostility. Scottish inflection of Ulster speech and writing has played a role in Irish letters from the seventeenth century onwards. Ulster-Scots was visible within the public imagination in the printed realm from the early eighteenth century. A recovery of a section of an Ulster-Scots inflected literature had been carried out by John Hewitt in his study on northern Irish weaver poets and much work on Ulster-Scots in the linguistic sense had been mapped by Robert J. Gregg.⁷ In the 1980s Ulster-Scots had been championed by writers such as Tom Paulin who saw a means to render a new, revitalized Irish English, in which Ulster-Scots would play a major role in shaping an invigorated civic language.⁸ To a writer such as Paulin, Ulster-Scots was a medium used by the classical Republicans of Ulster’s Presbyterian radical past, which could be used to reinvigorate contemporary Ireland. Edna Longley rebelled against such ideas:

Nor can Ulster-Scots, either for conversational or literary purposes, be cordoned off in some linguistic zoo-park as a backward species whose robust primitivism may one day contribute to the national bloodstock. The natural spectrum of Seamus Heaney’s vocabulary shows the way that Paulin would harshly floodlight with academy or dictionary. Moreover Paulin has invented a new form of poetic diction by sprinkling his poems with dialect, or would be dialect words (in Edward Thomas’s phrase) like the raisins that will get burnt in an ill made cake’ scuffy, choggy, glooby, claggy, biffy, keeks, glup, boke.

If that’s meant to be Ulster Scots idiom, the implications are almost racist.⁹

⁴ Editorial in the *Irish News*, 15.11.2002. For a further negative view of Ulster-Scots see: <https://ansionnachfionn.com/2012/06/15/ulster-scots-full-marks-for-invention/> [access: 9.12.2018].

⁵ This was ratified by the British Government in 2000, <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/european-charter-regional-and-minority-languages> [access: 9.12.2018].

⁶ See: <http://www.ulsterscotlanguage.com/en/texts/what-is-ulster-scots/> [access: 9.12.2018].

⁷ J. Hewitt, *Rhyming Weavers and Other Country Poets of Antrim and Down*, Belfast: Blackstaff, 1974; A. Smyth, M. Montgomery, P. Robinson (eds.), *The Academic Study of Ulster-Scots: Essays for and by Robert J. Gregg*, Holywood: National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland, 2006.

⁸ T. Paulin, *A New Look at the Language Question*, Field Day Pamphlet, no. 1, Derry, Field Day Theatre, 1983.

⁹ E. Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1987, p. 194.

Such damning statements have themselves been attacked by those who would question Longley's understanding of the authentic Ulster-Scots which Paulin is credited with—arguably “keeks” and “boke” are the only Ulster Scots words here and the belief that limited deployment of Scots works more effectively is open to question.¹⁰ But such statements, no matter how well meaning, point to difficulties in developing Ulster-Scots for literary or linguistic purposes. By seeking to preserve and conserve the language and forbid that which does not appear to move beyond the example of exponents like Seamus Heaney, in itself quite a feat!, Longley places Ulster-Scots in a form of stasis which makes it very difficult to create in, or indeed learn as one might another language. Ulster-Scots could be endangered by being understood as a birthright in which one can only be born into, not taught or learned in another place or setting. One of the most lucid early examinations of Ulster-Scots literary history by Liam McIlvanney posited a distinction between what were perceived as a strong tradition in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and a contemporary literature that was tending towards the bathetic. The more effective contemporary Ulster-Scots writers, he argued, were those who used a light or strategic deployment of the language, rather than those who tended towards a denser utilisation.¹¹ While it would be hard to posit that a grand literature in Ulster-Scots has developed since the time of McIlvanney's analysis, a small but creditable number of writers has developed.¹² The great difficulty with this understanding of Ulster-Scots is that it tends to generalise towards a binary approach to literature in Ulster-Scots that celebrates lightness of touch with words, idiom and syntax over denser forms of linguistic expression. This approach, driven it could be said from a lack of familiarity with more involved utilisations of the language, tends to be motivated by Anglocentric or Hiberno-Anglocentric readings and does not grasp the nuance or influence of Scots or Ulster-Scots.¹³

It could be argued that this short-sighted method of comprehending the literature of Ulster-Scots is symptomatic of how the Ulster-Scots language is viewed. In one sense this does have a positive result in that it allows for a belief that there is a group

¹⁰ W. Maley, “Ireland, verses, Scotland: crossing the (English) language barrier”, [in:] G. Norquay, G. Smyth (eds.), *Across the Margins: Cultural Identity and Change in the Atlantic Archipelago*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002, p. 18.

¹¹ See L. McIlvanney, “Across the narrow sea: the language, literature and politics of Ulster Scots”, [in:] L. McIlvanney, R. Ryan (eds.), *Ireland and Scotland: Culture and Society, 1700-2000*, Dublin: Four Courts Press 2005, pp. 216-220.

¹² Of this group Philip Robinson and James Fenton could be seen as being the most significant exponents: J. Fenton, *Thonner an Thon*, Belfast: The Ullans Press, 2000; J. Fenton, *On Slaimish*, Belfast: The Ullans Press, 2009; P. Robinson, *Alang tha Shore*, Belfast: The Ullans Press, 2005; P. Robinson, *Oul Licht, New Licht*, Belfast: The Ullans Press, 2009.

¹³ For a more inclusive understanding of contemporary Ulster-Scots writing see W. Hutchinson, “A selection of Ulster-Scots writing. Selection and commentary by Wesley Hutchinson”, *Études Irlandaises* 2013, no. 38-2: “Ulster-Scots in Northern Ireland Today: Language, Culture, Community”, pp. 181-202.

of native speakers of Ulster-Scots and for a group who do not speak Ulster-Scots.¹⁴ However, employing a ‘two distinct worlds’ model of speakers and non-speakers/natives and non-natives provides an exclusionist and deeply troubling taxonomy and one that is not actually born out in the literary traditions of the North of Ireland, nor in the speech performance of individual communities or dialectical regions. It would be much better to comprehend the literature and language of Ulster-Scots, operating on a spectrum that shades perceptibly, and sometimes unperceptively from *dense* minority language to *light* usage of occasional words or phrases. Arguably, this reflects the ability of many in Northern Ireland who can comprehend the words cited as markers for Ulster-Scots even when they are situated far from the areas listed as Ulster-Scots cultural zones.¹⁵ Comprehending the extent, diversity and indeed universality of Ulster-Scots within a wider Northern Irish framework might have fitted more cogently within the aspirations of the Good Friday Agreement and made language a means to unite communities.

Unfortunately, Ulster-Scots quickly became viewed as within the purview of the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist community, as a means to gain leverage for funding and resources in a climate where the highly vaunted parity of esteem often became ensnared in parity of resourcing. Social commentators, fired by the sense of new opportunities and potential politico-cultural shifts that might occur within unionism if it embraced the concept of Ulster-Scots as a political tool, opined that post Good Friday Agreement it was a multipurpose phenomenon:

It is, variously, a myth of origin, a language and culture, a communal consciousness, a reaction against Irish nationalist cultural assertiveness in Northern Ireland, an embryonic nationalism, and a component part of the British identity.

If embraced strongly enough it might:

... provide the Ulster Unionist identity with the cultural booster required to deliver security and continuity to an identity experiencing chronic insecurity and doubt during a period of political transformation.¹⁶

However, such optimistic prognostications were not necessarily founded upon an awareness of the actual development which had taken place within the Ulster-Scots movement, if such a term could be employed, prior to the Good Friday Agreement. Or indeed on the willingness for unionists to embrace what was perceived as a niche minority interest. While the unionist community may long have held strong ties to Scotland this did not necessarily mean that it would embrace a language movement

¹⁴ Of course, there is another group which denies all existence of a “language” termed Ulster-Scots.

¹⁵ See P. Robinson, “A Test for Ulster-Scots”, <http://www.ulsterscotslanguage.com/en/texts/test/> [access: 9.12.2018]; P. Robinson, “The Mapping of Ulster-Scots”, <http://www.ulsterscotssacademy.com/research/gregg/mapping-ulster-scots.php> [access: 9.12.2018].

¹⁶ C. McCall, “Political transformation and the reinvention of the Ulster-Scots identity and culture”, *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 2002, no. 9, p. 197.

as well as it might the various other historic, religious, familial, political, sporting and cultural associations. Arguably, the success of inculcation of Ulster-Scottishness has been seen in the fostering of Scottish musical and dance tuition, rather than in the raising of a literary or linguistic consciousness. But whether such a movement could reach the same level of community engagement as the Gaelic Athletic Association does in the nationalist and republican sections of Northern Irish life remains to be seen.

However, prior to the Good Friday Agreement, the development of Ulster-Scots language and literature was very much a grass roots phenomenon fostered by small groups and individuals.¹⁷ That is not to say that these were not successful or significant in their aims or achievements, but they lacked the backing of major government investment. In many ways these provided resources for language development and acted as a focal point for further expansion but never perhaps seen as mainstream initiatives. Even those individuals such as John Hewitt, who were credited as pioneers in the field did not perceive themselves as champions of “Ulster-Scots”.

A major difficulty that might arise in language development is the pace of change that might occur if a serious injection of investment is offered. The expansion envisaged by Ulster-Scots activists might had been set at a more organic and measured rate. The Good Friday Agreement changed this incredibly with a profound level of funding which had been hitherto non-existent. The creation of The Ulster-Scots Agency and the addition of government-backed funding propelled groups and individuals into the public arena. The aims of Ulster-Scots Agency provided a broad and comprehensive support:

The Ulster-Scots Agency, or Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch as it is known in Ullans (another name for the Ulster-Scots language), has been given the legislative remit of the “promotion of greater awareness and use of Ullans and of Ulster-Scots cultural issues, both within Northern Ireland and throughout the island”.

The aims of the Ulster-Scots Agency are to promote the study, conservation, development and use of Ulster-Scots as a living language; to encourage and develop the full range of its attendant culture; and to promote an understanding of the history of the Ulster-Scots.

The Agency was established as a part of the North/South Language Body set up under the Belfast Agreement of 1998. The other part of the Language Body is Foras na Gaeilge which has responsibility for the development of the Irish (Gaelic) language. Each of these agencies has its own Board whose members together constitute the Board of the North/ South Language Body – otherwise known as Tha Boord o Leid in Ullans.

The Agency is jointly funded by the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland and the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs in the Republic of Ireland and is responsible to the North/South Ministerial Council.¹⁸

¹⁷ See F. Ferguson (ed.), *Ulster-Scots Writing: An Anthology*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008, pp. 1-22.

¹⁸ See <http://www.ulsterscotsagency.com/about-us/> [access: 9.12.2018].

However, the setting up of an institution such as this provided difficulties for other language groups. For instance, which body was the one which decided upon the standards in Ulster-Scots, the self-appointed Academy or the Governments' sanctioned cross-border Agency? How could one fund the other? Which body was the best situated to police and encourage the language? These questions in many ways remain unanswered.

Also, the imagining of what constitutes Ulster-Scottishness has proved intriguing. For the Agency, Ulster-Scots is a 400 year-old phenomenon that stems from the Plantation period and:

The term Ulster-Scots has, for nearly 400 years, referred to people, not place—the people who migrated from the Lowlands of Scotland to Ulster, and to the Ulster-Scots communities that they established right across the nine counties. It is important to recognise that migrations between the two coastlines have been ongoing for thousands of years, but it is generally accepted that it was the Hamilton & Montgomery Settlement of May 1606 that saw the floodgates open.¹⁹

Such conceptualisations touch more on a unionist history of the north of Ireland and underplay the diaspora of the Irish into Scotland. One might argue if the traffic has all been one way? Certainly there has been a certain level of resistance in embracing Ulster-Scots writers within Scottish literature. Though Scottish literature has recognised some elements of Ulster-Scots writing, suspicions remain. Gerry Carruthers writing in *The Cambridge Companion to Scottish Literature* remarks:

However, several factors continue to militate against the reception of Ulster-Scots texts...there has been a still-current tendency to see these individuals [the weaver poets] as historically interesting rather than in literary terms. Their reception as “folk poets” or “rhyming weavers” has tended to emphasise their value, undoubtedly present, as documents of social and cultural reality.²⁰

Again one might see this as an indicator of the level of cultural and analytical sophistication that has been lacking historically in Ulster-Scots writing. As critics once used to ask why Belfast had no novel of the equivalent of *Ulysses*, one might ask why Ulster-Scots do not have a *Trainspotting*? The reasons for this are of course legion, and again may betray a disinclination to celebrate what a culture possesses rather than what it might have in comparison to others. The means still have to be found to create a writer brave enough to write within a powerful vernacular that steps outside the unofficially ordained Ulster English of the Troubles and Post-troubles novel. Anxiety levels might be said to still be too high within the Ulster-Scots world to do this. The cultural backlash for terming oneself Ulster-Scots is too difficult to overcome. Even a cursory glance at the Agency's website underscores the culture war that is still ongoing in debates between what is a language and what is a dialect:

¹⁹ See <http://www.ulsterscotsagency.com/what-is-ulster-scots/> [access: 9.12.2018].

²⁰ G. Carruthers, “Scottish literature in diaspora”, [in:] G. Carruthers, L. McIlvanney (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Scottish Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 275-288.

Is Ulster-Scots a language or a dialect?

There are no objective criteria to distinguish a language from a dialect. Mario A. Pei, the Italian-American linguist, made this very point in his first book, *The Italian Language* (1941):

‘There is no essential difference between “language” and “dialect”, a language being a dialect which has met with literary or political favour, while dialect is a language which politically or culturally has not met with the same good fortune’.

Max Weinreich, one of the leading figures in modern Yiddish linguistics, makes essentially the same point: ‘A language is a dialect with an army and navy’.

Norwegian provides an excellent example of this. In the 1840s Norwegian was regarded as a collection of peasant dialects. In 1905 Norway secured its independence from Sweden. What 60 years previously was a collection of peasant dialects suddenly was transformed into a national language.

Political recognition that Ulster-Scots is a language, and not simply a dialect of English, flows from the Belfast Agreement of 1998 and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

This question really ought to be regarded as completely redundant.²¹

The creation of bodies to inculcate awareness of Ulster Scots and to create re-sourcing for it have led to some issues perhaps not envisaged in the optimistic days of the nineteen nineties. In one sense they do recover a historical sense of the singularity of Ulster-Scots communities and culture from the past. However, this comes at removing broader, more energising ways of contemplating demotic and colloquial forms of language.

The impact of the Good Friday Agreement for Ulster Scots has been both a remembering and forgetting of the power of Ulster-Scots and one which has tragically failed to comprehend the linguistic potential of Scots that was realised in the twentieth century by commentators on both sides of the narrow sea. Writing in 1932, Hugh MacDiarmid celebrated the power of “the Vernacular”:

The Vernacular is a vast unutilized mass of lapsed observation made by minds whose attitudes to experience and whose speculative and imaginative tendencies were quite different from any possible to Englishmen and Anglicized Scots today.²²

Though still very much focused on Scots his motivation was also for literary and civic revival through the medium of the *vernacular*. Something which the Good Friday Agreement alludes to but which ironically has been diluted through the three-way vision of Irish, Ulster-Scots and other tongues. This splitting of focus has sadly

²¹ See: <http://www.ulsterscotsagency.com/what-is-ulster-scots/language/> [access: 9.12.2018].

²² H. MacDiarmid, “From «A Theory in Scots Letters»”, [in:] W.N. Herbert, M. Hollis (eds.), *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, Highgreen: Bloodaxe Books, 2002, p. 77.

reinforced difference and separateness between those languages and does not comprehend how language connects and strengthens association between individuals and communities. Often the articulation of difference has stimulated the underlying sectarian and community boundaries. Given Northern Ireland's long held culture wars, it is unfortunate that the heritage, language and literature which forms the creative inheritance of everyone in a place, should so easily and so quickly have been weaponised for ongoing political skirmishing. The creation of resources, the depiction of motivation and the corporate branding of groups and organisations have also generated difficulties. There is a sense of how to create access and creative playfulness within the sector. Too often exclusion and exclusiveness have held sway. A *dailygan* [twilight], mentality of an ebbing, vanishing culture seems to now pervade the approach. Yet, paradoxically, recent exhibitions by Lise McGreevy depict an embattled series of desolate cottages, exposed to the elements and to decay, and ironically seek to challenge the symbolism of the desolated cottage.²³ The recourse to traditionalist models also preclude the opportunity to play and move the culture forward into new and dynamic places. This is a challenge felt by all endangered minority languages and cultures where it is felt that protective measures must be introduced and the rights and needs of native speakers supported and maintained. But this brings with it the concept of ring fencing and protection, and which ultimately excludes. In providing security for Ulster-Scots language, this is often at the expense of Ulster English dialect, a linguistic form that contains much influence from Scots and Ulster Scots within it. Furthermore the relative neglect of key writers like James Fenton, makes the wider exploration of such writing practically impossible and inhibits not merely the literary exposition and analysis that such significant work requires, but also makes his oeuvre very difficult to employ in creative and critical exegesis. At a time when the examination of such work in the classroom might yield fruitful discussion it is withheld from the hands of teachers, critics and readers. The inaccessibility of such material will have consequences for the development of Ulster-Scots and Northern Irish culture as a whole, beset as it is with a panoply of similar impasses. In many senses this can be averted, and one can see areas of growth and positivity within creative writing where it is allowed to manifest itself in the mainstream. John Erskine's treatment of 'The Blackbird of Belfast Lough' demonstrates how Ulster-Scots translations can write themselves into the Irish canon. This seminal short poem about the area around Belfast, based on a 9th century manuscript, which poets such as John Hewitt, Seamus Heaney and Ciaran Carson have provided versions of, finds powerful iteration in its Ulster-Scots equivalent:

Tha bricht wee burd	
haes wheeple't furth	<i>whistled</i>
an airra frae	<i>arrow</i>
a yella neb;	<i>yellow; beak</i>

²³ See <https://www.cpartscentre.com/2018/01/the-monthly-talks-to-lise-mcgreevy-regarding-her-multi-disciplinary-exhibition-abandoned-not-forgotten-part-1/> [access: 9.12.2018].

blythe, skails its sang	<i>scatters</i>
owre Lagan's Loch:	<i>over</i>
a merle, atap	<i>blackbird; on top of</i>
a yella whun.	<i>whin</i> ²⁴

In poems like this, one senses a coming of age moment for Ulster-Scots, and indeed the last twenty years have seen a variety of these occurrences. But alongside this have become broader more difficult issues to deal with. One of these has been the determination of Sinn Fein and other groups to gain a separate Language Act. This seeks to give Irish equal status with English in Northern Ireland. The measures which are sought include:

- The use of Irish in courts, in the Assembly and for use by state bodies including the police
- The appointment of an Irish language commissioner
- The establishment of designated Gaeltacht areas in the North [of Ireland]
- The right for education through Irish
- Bilingual signage on public buildings and road signage.²⁵

In response the Democratic Unionist Party, despite near agreement recently on this matter, has publically claimed no desire to agree to the legislation or the introduction of such measures.²⁶ Ulster-Scots and other minority languages have not really figured in the debates, and one fears that the sense of integration of languages envisaged in the Good Friday Agreement has now been abandoned. This failure to realise the unifying animus of the Good Friday Agreement in terms of dealing with indigenous and other minority languages speaks of a failing in the aims and intentions of one of the key aspects of the Agreement and indeed the Peace Process in Northern Ireland.

Despite the current state of malaise over the language question, it is worth considering developments which have occurred in public life which suggest that alternative solutions may be found to move beyond the impasse which has occurred. These solutions are not government-sanctioned ones, but those brought about by dramatists and creative writers and it is perhaps from the creative sector in the north of Ireland that alternative solutions to fostering communal acceptance of linguistic difference and diversity may be found. It is worth citing a recent television programme that portrayed a very successful use of Ulster vernacular: *Derry Girls*. This comedy, set during the Troubles, in Derry/Londonderry, brought with it a highly sophisticated deployment of Derry slang and idiom which is very much beholden to the linguistic

²⁴ Used with permission of the author.

²⁵ See <http://www.thejournal.ie/irish-language-act-explainer-3851417-Feb2018/> [access: 9.12.2018].

²⁶ See also the 2006 St Andrew's Agreement which promised an Irish Language Act, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/136651/st_andrews_agreement-2.pdf [access: 9.12.2018].

impact of Ulster-Scots. In this programme, it is possible to see the deployment of a rich combination of hiberno-English and Ulster-Scots language without any fanfare or glossing. While many Northern Irish productions might be censured for having an unpalatable longing for the Troubles, *Derry Girls* might be said to represent a longing, not for the Troubles but for the time that led up to the optimism of the peace envisaged by the Good Friday Agreement. In a series, that has been described as the best Irish sitcom since *Father Ted*, we witness an ability to mesh the strongly Ulster-Scots inflected Derry vernacular in situations that are meaningful, not merely to Irish audiences but to UK ones who can deal with the dense dialectal terms.²⁷ There are no apologies needed for this, and nothing is lost in translation. By moving towards splitting up the cultural synergy of Irish, Ulster-Scots and other minority languages there is a risk of new cultural ghettoization and indeed for the silencing of new voices. *Derry Girls* shows that public accommodation and indeed appetite for new, hybrid *Ulster/Scots* voices is possible, and the means to leap beyond the tangles of culture war is apparent and refreshing. This is necessary not merely to find a means to accommodate the indigenous “minority” languages in Northern Ireland but to make room and welcome the new and not so new “minority” languages of various migrant groups who have made their home in Northern Ireland since the 1990s.

Those “new” languages are making themselves felt in Northern Irish daily life, and move far beyond the inclusion of *pirogi* in the food aisle in Tesco’s. A poem by Niamh McNally charts the voices which are manifesting themselves within the Northern Ireland workplace:

Taking pride in every tray,
Another repeat of yesterday,
Of *zielone jablka*, one by one-
Countless hours of mundanity.

As he studies that machine,
With those eyes of glacial sheen,
Underneath the factory lights-
Thinks of a time more riveting.²⁸

However, as much as those workers require rights to protect them, their words need room to play and breathe too. Amanda Mironova-Stronge writing on the sense of her Eastern European background and how it informs her daily life as a young woman in Northern Ireland describes such memories as a “ghost town once played in”:

²⁷ R. Nicholson, “Daft, profane and absolutely brilliant: Derry Girls is the funniest thing on TV”, *The Guardian*, 19.01.2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/jan/19/derry-girls-channel-4-the-funniest-thing-on-tv-lisa-mcgee> [access: 9.12.2018].

²⁸ Niamh McNally, 2017 unpublished.

Nonetheless, deep down in the corners of the mind, an imprint of a country is left strong. A ghost town once played in, among the ruins we were all warriors and rebels, hunters and seekers; we ran through the fields with grass to our knees. Memories like these don't fade even with time, instead, they ignite a unity with the people of my parents, my ancestors and their countries of birth. Holding a family line that has long since been displaced and dispersed, we seem to each embrace our nationalities of the countries we were born into, but also form connections with the roots our new individualities and origins.²⁹

Mironova-Stronge's articulation of her childhood home underlines the need to accept the significance and potential of change. It suggests that in the minds of at least some of the next generation of writers and commentators in Northern Ireland have already moved beyond the literary and linguistic binaries, twilights and hard borders that aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement has manifested. Their work points to new ways of making connection with the singular and ever changing stock of language that exists in the North of Ireland. They approach the words with dignity and sensitivity, and understand the possibilities that words becomes texts and poems and move far beyond simple reductions to single meanings or indeed are owned exclusively by one language community. It is with this hope and expectation that our comprehension of Ulster-Scots as part of a spectrum of speech and language, underpinned and enhanced by the optimism of the Good Friday Agreement, might still reach across the stale paradigms of the past and connect with new and vital expression of language in English, in Irish and other tongues.

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²⁹ A. Mironova-Stronge, "Belonging to a Place", <https://literaturelifeexpress.wordpress.com/> [access: 9.12.2018].

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