



Creative Work

The Auld Words or ‘Every Language Matters’

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Thanks to Irene Watt and Janey Todd for the Doric

Introduction

I wrote this poem on board the Swan, a traditional herring boat, sailing round Shetland in 2023 with a group of musicians, including fiddle player Nessie (Carol Anderson) and clarsach player Irene Watt, both of whom had been stopped from speaking their own language at school. The poem was a response to the conversations I was hearing, and a retelling in verse of my assignment for the “Language and Global Identities” module in the King’s College London MA in Global Cultures.

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The Auld Words or ‘Every Language Matters’

In Aiberdeen in ‘79 I culdna spik ma tongue
 The teachers beat it oot o ma, they telt me it wis wrang
 We hid tae spik their English or they said we’d get i strap
 They said that we were cheekin’ tham – to spik like ma and pap

But at the end o school A fand the world made sense again,
 The wirds we spak wi mam and da wis far A felt at hame
 My grunny and my ma would sing us sangs and tell us tales
 They sang o clearances and crofts, of fishing boats and whales

*Fae Scotland tae the Amazon, the story’s still the same
 We need wir local languages tae un’erstand wir hame*

That wis mony years ago, but noo we’ve got it richt

They're lairn'n Scots to bairns in Bamff without a strap in sicht
The Doric's noo official in the country o ma birth
I couldnae be mair happy that they're valuin ma wirth

But o'er in Brazil, it's nae the case ma dear
Mony local languages are deein oot each year
And wi the language and the wirds, the knowledge disappears
The local wye o living for the past twa thoosan years

*Fae Scotland tae the Amazon, the story's still the same
We need wir local languages tae un'erstand wir hame*

The colonists destroyed our worlds, it didnae tak them lang
They telt us we wis savages and how we lived wis wrang
Our speerit guides wor deils and we hid tae weer mair claes
We hid tae spik their Portuguese and lairn their white man's ways

But noo the world is burnin up, the watter's rinnin dry
The forest's turning intae san', the birds nae langer fly
The ancients hid the knowledge for i future o the sky
The auld words hiv the answers, oor language mustna die!

*Fae Scotland tae the Amazon, the story's still the same
We need wir local languages tae un'erstand wir hame*

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Biography

Fiona Frank lives in Lancaster. She has a PhD from the Scottish Oral History Centre, University of Strathclyde, and in 2022 organised the “For Dom, Bruno and the Amazon” festival in Lancaster in honour of Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira. Her interest in endangered languages comes partly from having arranged interpreting for a conference during that festival and finding that indigenous ideas cannot easily be translated into the languages of the coloniser, and partly from having lost Yiddish in her own family two generations back.