

# The language of Joseph Lowe

## *Standard English with Scottish influences*

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The language of a private journal provides a conundrum: it is a personal record, almost a form of talking to oneself, and yet by being written it becomes rather more public. It tends to be rather formal and this affects the vocabulary and the syntactic constructions employed. But because it is also a personal record it tends to be an informal document. This tension can give rise to a great deal of variability in the style of such writing. In the case of Joseph Lowe's *Journal*<sup>1</sup>, the fact that it records his dealings with royalty, and that it is intended to relate, for his descendants one suspects, a very important time in his life, pulls towards the formal side.

It does not take a sophisticated linguistic training to see that Lowe is not a highly literate man to whom writing a formal document comes naturally. This pulls him in the direction of including many informal characteristics in his *Journal*. His spelling and punctuation (normalised in the published version) are erratic (both *rabits* and *rabbits* in the entry for 1 Jan 1856, for example); he strings main clauses together in the way of spoken language without any sophisticated attempt at variability in syntactic structure and without any great variety of subordinate clauses. He uses dangling participles, as in *While walking along the road, the Queen and Prince Albert drove past* (22 Sept 1852) or *While engaged with the lesson Her Majesty and Prince Albert came into the room* (29 Sept 1854), and the occasional solecism with a pronoun, as in *The princes shook hands with Johney and I* (1 Oct 1853). Such constructions are part of everyday speech, but are generally considered out of place in formal writing. Lowe was not writing for publication, and it is in places like this that it can be seen.

Yet in saying that he is not highly literate I do not mean to imply that he is not intelligent or educated. He uses formal vocabulary on occasions. For example, he says *sufficient* where *enough* would be possible (29 Sept 1852); he speaks of *attire* where *clothes* would be sufficient (28 Sept 1853); he might spell *geological* in an unusual way, but he uses the word correctly, as he does with phrases like *the time appointed* (28 Dec 1853) or words like *caprice* (22 Dec 1854). Indeed, as a general principle he does not commit malapropisms.

In this context, two usages which might appear incorrect by present-day standards are worthy of comment. Firstly, Lowe speaks on a number of occasions, and with some degree of approval, of the condescension of the Royal

Family, or of the fact that they did something condescendingly (2 Oct 1853, 28 Sept 1857, *et passim*). The *Oxford English Dictionary*<sup>2</sup> (*OED*) defines *condescension* as 'affability to one's inferiors with courteous disregard of difference of rank or position', with *condescend* correspondingly defined as 'to stoop voluntarily and graciously'. The negative connotations of these words are recent, and post-date Lowe's writing. The second usage is similar in this regard. Lowe consistently refers to *Scotch* steps, friends or music (19 Sept 1853, 5 Jan 1856, 23 Sept 1857 *et passim*). As the *Scottish National Dictionary*<sup>3</sup> (*SND*) comments, *Scots* 'has gradually re-established itself as a preferable alternative to the Eng. reduced form *Scotch* among Sc. speakers when speaking English'. Lowe does use the form *Scotsman* (30 Dec 1852, 5 Jan 1855), but not the form *Scots*. However, since this change is commented on in the *SND* from about 1915, it is scarcely surprising that Lowe does not use it.

Generally speaking, Lowe writes in standard English rather than in Scots (another sign of his education). There are, however, occasional glimpses of the underlying Scottishness of his speech, in spelling, grammar and vocabulary.

The majority of Lowe's 'spelling mistakes' do not show anything about the kind of English he spoke. They arise not from his own pronunciation, but from a lack of appreciation of the system of English spelling or from genuine mistakes. Forms such as *corridores* (4 Jan 1854), *exquisate* (1 Jan 1855) or *affible* (28 Sept 1857) are not unusual today in unedited writing such as undergraduates' essays. The only spelling which clearly reflects Lowe's pronunciation is that in *togewater* (30 Dec 1854 *et passim*), *altogewater* (4 Oct 1852 *et passim*), *geathering* (1 Jan 1856). The <ea> does not represent the English sound in this vowel, but a long sound, as in Scottish *day* (see the *SND*). There are some other spellings which probably indicate something about the way Lowe spoke. The spelling *showen* (18 Sept 1852), for example, will make sense to many New Zealand speakers who also have a vowel before the <n>, and the same is probably true of the extra <e> in words such as *dazeling* (5 Jan 1853), *fiddeling* (19 Sept 1853 *et passim*) or the extra <i> in *partiner* (28 September 1854).

Scottish grammar is shown in the reported words of the Queen on 18 Sept 1853. Lowe had brought a doll for one

Facsimile from the manuscript of Joseph Lowe's Journal, 26 December 1853.

Monday Dec<sup>r</sup> 26<sup>th</sup>  
Breakfasted at 9 then went to the Castle  
to see Colonel Shippis, Saw the Colonel  
he asked one of the Queens Maids to tell  
Her Majesty that Mr Lowe was here, the  
Maid said, Her Majesty Aint at home  
Yet Sir, the Colonel then told one of  
the footmen to inform Lady Barrington  
that Mr Lowe was here, the footman  
came back and asked me to wait till  
Mr Haldyard and the children came in  
from their morning walk.

of the children in the village at Balmoral, and the Queen, on seeing the doll, was reported to have said *Was it not very kind of Mr Lowe to bring you such a nice doll?* The use of the full word *not* is typical of Scottish English. These are thus unlikely to have been the Queen's precise words, though whether they are Lowe's or the little girl's is less clear. In one other place, however, Lowe shows a sharp ear for the language of others. In the entry for 26 Dec 1853 (see illustration) he notes *the maid said, Her Majesty Aint at home Yet Sir*, apparently repeating the maid's words accurately. The citation above may very well, therefore, be an accurate noting of the little girl's words.

There are a few words and phrases which clearly show Lowe's Scottishness, and a few others which may or may not. The clear ones, in order of appearance, include the following. The consistent use of *forenoon* for 'morning' (27 Dec 1852, 8 Jan 1853, 25 Dec 1855, *et passim*). *I began Johny to the Fiddle* (19 Sept 1853). The *SND* lists *begin* to with the meaning 'commence on'. *I got Sandy McDonald to hurl my Trunks to the Castle* (20 Oct 1853). *Hurl* means 'to convey in a wheeled vehicle' (*SND*). *There was no press in the lodgings* (23 Dec 1854). In the English of England, a *press* may contain books or clothes, and is usually built-in. In Scottish English, it may contain anything, and may be free standing (*SND*). In this case, the press is specifically mentioned as being wanted to hold *tea and sugar &c &c*, so that the Scottish meaning is intended. *We got back to the park side in the darkening* (30 Dec 1855). *Darkening* is a synonym of *gloaming* in Scottish English, and the *SND* gives citations from the appropriate period. The less clear cases include the following: *The sight was grand in the extreme* (7 Jan 1853). *Grand* could mean 'magnificent in

size and adornment' (*OED*) or 'fine, splendid, capital' (*SND*). Either would make sense in context, although the English meaning is perhaps more likely. *Lady Augusta was bantering me for not dancing with her* (30 Sept 1855). The *OED* lists a transitive use of *banter* in the sense 'make fun of', but the *SND* has a transitive use in the sense 'scold, rebuke'. Lowe might even have interpreted what was supposed to be *bantering* in the *OED* sense as *bantering* in the Scottish sense! Putting the castanets on the Queen's hand *put her [Charlotte] in a great futter* (5 Jan 1856). In the published version, *futter* has been interpreted as *flutter*, which is perfectly possible. However, there is also a Scottish dialect word, *fudder* or *futher* meaning 'a sudden bustle, ... flurry' (*SND*), which also seems to provide a possible interpretation, and which is recorded from the area north of Brechin well into this century.

Although Lowe's journal is largely written in standard English, there are some linguistic hints of why he should have been so pleased to meet 'genuine Scotsmen' (30 Dec 1852, 5 Jan 1855) when staying among Sassenachs.

#### FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> References here are to the unpublished manuscript which in a modern edition is: Allan Thomas (ed) *A New Most Excellent Dancing Master...* (New York, 1992)
- <sup>2</sup> Simpson, J.A. & E.S.C. Weiner (eds), *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Second edition. (Oxford, 1989)
- <sup>3</sup> Grant, William & David D. Murison (eds), *The Scottish National Dictionary*. (Edinburgh, 1934-1976)