

Remembering Jim Mather

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On May 26 2001 Scottish scholarship lost a valued and much respected contributor with the death of J. Y. Mather. James Young Mather was born in 1911 in the fishing village of Seahouses in Northumberland and grew up in the neighbouring village of Bamburgh, where he died.

He was educated at the Duke's School in Alnwick. There he acted a great deal, playing in the Shakespeare plays performed on Speech Day. He wrote poetry, played the cello and sang. Later, in Edinburgh, he sang in the University Choir. He loved the hills and moors of Northumberland, which made him a life-time walker.

In the early 1930s he entered Edinburgh University to take an Arts degree, but he was much affected by the troubles of the period – the Depression and political turmoil, and this led to his leaving before finishing his degree. This concern caused him, at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, to join Spanish Medical Aid (the Duchess of Atholl's organisation). He drove a bus, evacuating women and children from the large cities.

Living on the Northumberland Coast he had, from his boyhood, a passionate interest in the sea and small boats – after his retirement he built his own Northumbrian coble, which had a televised launching in Budle Bay, Northumberland. So it is not surprising that at the outbreak of the Second World War he immediately volunteered for the Merchant Service as an Ordinary Seaman. At sea he made time to study and was able to come ashore to take his Certificate of Competency and served for the rest of the War as a deck officer.

After the War he returned to Edinburgh to complete his Degree, and there he also earned the Diploma in Phonetics, a subject in which he excelled. He enlarged his linguistic training by entering the University of Iceland to study Old Norse. During the War he had frequently sailed into Reykjavik and had already begun to learn the language, and to read the Sagas, which he continued to do for the rest of his life. He had also visited the Faeroes, and published an article in a Faeroese journal (1964).

When he joined the Linguistic Survey in the 1950s he brought with him a great amount of valuable knowledge and skills; a practical knowledge of language, and a sensitivity to linguistic nuances, a considerable knowledge of linguistics, including great competence in phonetics, a detailed knowledge of ships and sea-faring and an outstanding facility in interaction with country people, and particularly with the fisher people of the East Coast. His competence as a dialect field worker was outstanding, and was utilized to the full by the Linguistic Survey. Of the 189 locations covered by

the phonological field survey, he was responsible for the investigation of 90, that is 48 per cent.

He was, however, much more than a collector of dialect data. As he wrote in a review of the *Shetland Folk Book IV* in 1965, 'as every field-worker knows, the excitement of continued collection can sometimes conceal a morbid shrinking from other not less arduous disciplines.' Jim Mather was deeply concerned with the philosophical and methodological bases of Linguistic Geography, in particular with the distinction between the internal linguistic systems of dialects and the relationship of these to the outside world, and he did not shrink from these 'not less arduous disciplines'.

His series of three articles on 'Aspects of the Linguistic Geography of Scotland', published in *Scottish Studies* are a case in point. In the first of these (1965) he shows that the distribution of names for the chaffinch are suggestive of a northward advance and establishment of the birds, and how the correlative ornithological data tend to corroborate this. The second article (1966) deals with fishing boats, gear and techniques, and the third (1969) on 'Fishing Communities of the East Coast' deals with a 'remarkable coincidence between the distribution of certain conventions and techniques in the traditional small-line fishing and the use of certain vowel systems in dialect speech'. In the latter two articles he brought to bear his enormous professional knowledge of boats and sea fishing.

After his retirement he was made a Fellow of the Faculty of Arts and continued working on the Linguistic Survey. By far his most 'arduous' and most important works are the three volumes of the *Linguistic Atlas of Scotland* (1975, 1977 and 1986) which he edited together with Hans Speitel. These volumes are an invaluable source of information on the state of Scottish dialects in the mid 20th century, and will be an enduring memorial to his name.

Jim Mather was a serious scholar, but, as all his associates will remember, he also had a great sense of humour. When Jim was around, working on the Linguistic Survey was always great fun. We had fantasies, fostered by Jim, about ourselves as linguistic surveyors, known as 'lingies' (on the analogy of 'sannies' – the once popular name of the sanitary inspectors, who used to travel round the country inspecting drains and so on). We imagined ourselves going around the country, chapping at doors and announcing 'Linguistic Survey. We'd like to inspect your vowels'.

And there was that great day when, browsing in Jakobsen's *Dictionary of the Norn Language of Shetland*, I came across this entry.

Bogel . . . a large cake (of oat- or barley-meal) . . . formerly baked and eaten on a kind of holiday, the so-called 'Bogel Day' . . . March 29th, the day on which the fieldwork . . . began.

This occasioned great hilarity, for late March (when rural Scottish roads were largely clear of snow) was indeed about the time when we used to start our field-work! Jim enthusiastically adopted 'Bogel Day' as a red-letter day for the Linguistic Survey, and

evolved a kind of phoney ceremonial folklore about it, and my wife baked a 'Bogel Cake' (of a more palatable kind than the Shetland bogel).

It was always fun to be with Jim whether in the Linguistic Survey office, in the field together, or hill-walking in our beloved Cheviots.

His scholarship, humanity, and sense of humour will be sorely missed.

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