Notes and Comments

'Caller Ou!'
An Edinburgh fishwives' cry and an old Scottish sound change

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It is often the case that very familiar features in the history and life of an area escape the interest of the scholar. This seems to have happened with regard to the Newhaven fishwives whose cries and unusual dress drew comment from many popular writers on Edinburgh. They even found their way into Charles Reade's novel *Christie Johnson* (1853), but their quaintness was usually attributed to Scandinavian or Dutch and Flemish origin,[1] and after having been thus labelled no further thought was lost about it.

In this paper I should like to concentrate on cries, and in particular on *caller ou!* which is well attested phonetically during the last century. I hope to show that it originates in the Scots area around the Forth.

In his delightful book *Life Jottings*, Sir J. H. A. MacDonald introduced me a long time ago to the now extinct Newhaven fishwives and their ways. Casting back his mind to the middle of the last century, he describes their physical build and their costume and continues

> 'Caller herrin'—'Caller cod' were called sonorously during the forenoon, and 'Caller ow-oo' at night, when the oysters were offered for sale. Must I say for the English reader that 'caller' means fresh and that the vowelled word was the cry of oysters; I despair of expressing the delightful sound of it. The first syllable was as the 'ou' in 'hour', and the last syllable as the 'oo' by which 'you' is sometimes expressed in doting language . . .' (MacDonald 1915:54).

It has always puzzled me what word lay behind the mysterious *ow-oo* or, as it is also spelt, *ou* or *oo*. The present day dialect word for oyster is *ister* [ˈɛɪstər] where the 'i' is pronounced as in 'Christ'. This is in line with other English words with the sound 'oy', like 'boil, point, voice, toil, ointment, boisterous' which appear in (old) Edinburgh and Lothian dialect as *bile, pint, vice, tile, intment, bist(e)rous* [bɛɪl, pɛɪnt, vɛɪs, tɛɪl, ˈɛɪntmənt, ˈbɛɪstrəs]. Obviously this will not explain *ou*.

The *Scottish National Dictionary* (SND 1965:482) lists the word under '*oo*, n.[2] (obsolete). Also *ou*; *oost*, *oyse*. Only in the street cry *Caller Oo!* fresh oysters (Edb. *c.* 1920)'. No further information about its derivation is given. The pronunciation is indicated by [ou] which is a phonetic transcription of the southern English exclamation 'oh'.

Let us return to MacDonald's description. He says that the fishwives produce the cry in two syllables. The first of these is sounded like the vowel in 'hour' (*i.e.* [ʌu] which would rhyme with English 'how'), the second, as I understand it, is a long drawn out *oooo* [u:], which is really a continuation of the preceding diphthong 'ou' and lengthened to produce a more effective cry. This is supported by Cuthbert Bede (Edward Bradley) who describes the call as 'a caallerr owhoo-oo-oo pitched in a high note that ended in a prolonged and smothered howl' (Bede n.d.:308–9). He adduces a London cry *o clo!* (old clothes!), (which, by the way, sounded *ole clo!* in Edinburgh) where the words are shortened for economy of effort, *i.e.* it is easier to shout 'o clo' than the full form. The reverse is true, Bradley says, and this is where I differ from him, of 'caller ou'. A short word (*ou*) is lengthened to give an 'owlish cry' which is a kind of trade-mark which cannot be counterfeited.[3] There is, however, no such word in Scots dialect in this meaning. In my opinion 'ou' is, on the contrary, a shortening from 'oyster'. But how is this to be explained?[4]

The first *Statistical Account* reports on the parish of Kilconquhar, 'the common people in this and the neighbouring parishes, pronounce the diphthong *oi* with a long and broad accent, giving it the sound of *ow*, for instance, they make no distinction of sound, between *boil* and *bowl*' (SA 1793:297). This evidence on its own is not conclusive as *ow* has two values [o] and [ʌu], *cf.* Scottish English *bowl* and *howl*. In present-day Scots dialect pronunciation 'bowl' (a basin) rhymes with English 'howl' and this latter *ow* is meant here, as vol. xv of the same work proves: 'and I have often heard in this part of the country [Dalgety] a sound given to the diphthong *oi*, which is not, I believe, so usual in other places: it is frequently pronounced as if it consisted of the letter ou, as for *bowl*, boil, *pount* for point, *vouce* for voice, etc.' (SA 1795:265).

Now, there is still at least one common word which, in certain dialects of the east coast of Scotland (including Fife and Mid- and East Lothian), shows even today 'ou' [ʌu] for English 'oy' [ɔe], namely 'buoy' [bʌu] (the suspension buoy). It rhymes with English 'how', say in (old-fashioned) Newhaven or Fisherrow. Moreover, an old man from Edinburgh gave me the same vowel in the local place-name 'Royston' [ˈrʌustən]. Sir James Wilson (1926:226–76) reports *bow* [bʌu] for 'buoy' (see above), *bowl* [bʌul] (obsol.) for 'boil', *dowtit* [ˈdʌutɪt] for 'doited' (crazy), all for Fife. *The Scottish National Dictionary* lists *e.g. towl* for toil, *stout* for stoit (bounce), *stouter* for stoiter (slouch), *bousterous* for boisterous, *etc.*, all for Fife and reported obsolescent. (See also SND 1965: 455, 'O', 26.)

On the basis of the foregoing considerations we can now postulate a form *ouster* [ˈʌustər] for 'oyster' and we may assume that the sound change was not restricted to Fife, but also found in Newhaven, and possibly other fishing villages of the Forth. This leaves us to consider how *ouster* became 'ou'. We have already seen that economy of effort is a force which might shorten words (see 'o clo' above) at the cost of intelligibility but at the same time transforming them into more expressive cries. I think that our word 'ou' fits into this pattern and that evidence from an anonymous article on

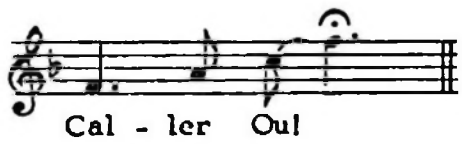
'Edinburgh Cries' in *Blackwood's Magazine* (Anon. 1821:400) might show us a path which this shortening took. The form 'caller oost' is reported there which could be 'ouster' with the loss of final '-er'.

W. McDowall's Poems 1838 (quoted SND 1965:482) has

caller oyse—caller oyse—
Wale o' my caller oyse

which would point to a rival cry 'oyse' from 'oyster' and probably pronounced to rhyme with 'ice'. This is obviously not the precursor of our word but it is further proof of words being changed in cries. Others, also peculiar to Edinburgh, are '(caller) partee'[5] from *partan* (edible crab) and 'peeryorries'[6] from *pitawties* (potatoes). MacDonald (1915:68) tells of his heartless nurse who interpreted a china-mender's cry which was unintelligible to him as a call for naughty children to be taken away and burnt, whereas the shout was 'Cheeyna, cerusstl, and stunwa-e-re to get mendit' (china, chrystal and stoneware to get mended). Some ten years ago a newspaper man at the corner of Hanover Street and Princes Street would shout 'Patch ae Nooze' [ˈpatʃeˈnyz] (Dispatch and News, *i.e. Edinburgh Evening Dispatch* and *Edinburgh Evening News*).

All these examples show that words, often with a dialect pronunciation, can be changed out of all recognition in cries. 'Ou' is just one more case. The earliest mention of it which I have been able to trace so far occurs in a footnote to the letterpress in the first edition of Kay's *Portraits* (1838:338) 'Wha'll o' caller ou!' Kay himself had entitled his original engraving (1812) 'Wha'll o' caller oysters!'[7] It seems then that 'ou' became a fashionable cry only during the middle of the last century. We even know how the syllables were pitched, from an article by J. H. Jamieson (1909:186).



By the 1860s we hear that the business in oysters was waning, the *scaups* (oyster beds) were beginning to be over-exploited, and fish shops started to spring up in the town making many of the fishwives redundant. However, some cries of 'caller ou' were still heard at the beginning of this century in 'fashionable West-end streets and crescents' (Jamieson 1909:187). Selling oysters had become a luxury trade, no longer to be shared by the whole town of Edinburgh. Its trademark 'ou-ooo' has long disappeared.

The author would welcome information from readers about the sound change described in this paper—whether, for example, anyone has heard the vowel in words like 'boil, voice, buoy' etc., *and especially 'oyster', pronounced with 'ou' in Scots dialect. It is essential to obtain as much information as possible on* where *this was heard,* who *used it (age, provenance, sex) and* when *this was observed (recently or quoting from memory).*

NOTES

1 This is repeated as late as 1884 (Groome 1884:109). The development of the dress is described in detail for the first time by K. Michaelson in *Bulletin of the Costume Society of Scotland* v (1970), pp. 8 ff., but no suggestion as to its origin is given.

2 This quotation is slightly adapted.

3 It might be apposite to quote Bradley in full on this (Bede [n.d.]:308–9):

'When Coleridge interrogated an old Jew vendor of still older clothes, why he snuffled "O clo!" instead of saying, "Old clothes!" the Jew is reported to have replied, "Sir, I can say old clothes distinctly when I so please; but, when you consider the labial difficulties that attend upon the full pronunciation of these two words, when repeated many hundred times in a day, I think you will allow that I save my lungs from considerable and unnecessary fatigue by repeating that contracted form of my cry, which is best known to my customers, instead of adopting that pronunciation which I grant you is undoubtedly correct, and which would probably be more agreeable to the refined ears of the scholar. In future, therefore, sir, when you hear my accustomed cry, I trust you will give me credit for a knowledge of correct pronunciation, although, for sufficient and satisfactory reasons, I have preferred to adopt a popular contraction." Upon which the old man passed on, with his cry of "O clo!".

Now, it is just the reverse with the Newhaven fishwomen, as "Caller Ou!" is shorter, and may be quite as readily pronounced as "A Caaller owhoo-oo-oo!". But, there is a trade advantage attending their cry, that it cannot be counterfeited: there is not the slightest danger of an infringement on their patent, and when householders hear the owlish cry, they know from whence it proceeds, and what articles may be purchased.'

4 I see that Christie (1955:40) also suggests that ' "ou" was an abbreviation for "oyster" '. He does not, however, go further into this.

5 See Jamieson 1909:186:

'caller parte-e-e . . . the fishwife delights to prolong the last syllable not only for the purpose of rendering her cry more effective, but to save herself the necessity of calling too frequently.'

6 See Jamieson 1909:193:

'Buy my fine peeryorries, saxpence a peck and awa they go.'

7 See Kay 1838: plate no. 113 and p. 338 n.: 'In calling oysters the cry now is "Wha'll o' caller *ou*!" '. The reference in the letterpress is to 'Edinburgh Fishwomen' in *Chambers Edinburgh Journal* VI (1837), pp. 258–9.

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