CHAPTER VI

SHELTA

I. A History of the Discovery of Shelta

It appears that there are occasional references in literature, published during the last three centuries, to the fact that itinerant tinkers have a secret jargon of their own. But in any case these references do not take us very far: and they must not be made to bear a greater weight than they can carry. For example, the frequently quoted boast of prince Henry, that he 'can drink with any tinker in his own language',[1] does not appear, on a critical examination of the context, to mean much more than a recent acquisition of a few words of ephemeral cant or slang.

It was not until 1876 that any very definite facts came to light. In that year Charles Godfrey Leland chanced to encounter an itinerant knife-grinder on a road near Bath.[2] He knew a little Romani, but said that his fraternity were giving up Romani because, as he expressed it, it was getting 'to be too blown'. He further stigmatized back-slang, canting, and rhyming as 'vulgar', and Italian as 'the lowest of the lot'. Indeed, in a passage suppressed on republication, he is reported as expressing surprise, on learning that Leland could speak Italian, that he should have come to such degradation. But, he added, there is another tongue that is *not* 'blown'—mostly Old Irish, 'and they call it *Shelter*'.

At this point it must be remarked that the use of the expression 'Old Irish' by Leland and his tramp informants is misleading. 'Old Irish' has the specific philological meaning of a language spoken and written in Ireland down to about A.D. 900: but in Leland's pages it does not appear to have any more significance than the language of the stage Irishman's 'Ould Oireland', irrespective of its historical development. Further, it may be suspected that the expression was not used by the tramps themselves, but has been put into their mouths by their reporter.

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[1] Shakespeare, *First Part of King Henry IV*, Act II, Sc. iv.
[2] C. G. Leland, *The Gypsies* (London: Trübner, N.D. [1882]), p. 354: reprinted *Journal*, G.L.S. II, i (1907–8), p. 168. Also *New Quarterly Magazine*, New Series, vol. III, p. 136 (London, 1880).

The Bath tramp led Leland no further than this: and Leland admits that he was not greatly impressed, assuming 'that the man merely meant Old Irish', that is, presumably, Modern Irish. But, a year later, Leland was on the coast at Aberystwyth, in the company of that extraordinary and ill-fated linguist, E. H. Palmer: and there they fell in with a wretched outcast, shewing withal some evidence of having had a fair amount of education. Finding that this vagrant possessed some knowledge of Romani, he was invited by the two enthusiasts to join them. In answer to a question as to what he did for a living, he puzzled the experts by replying, *Shelkin' gallopas*; and when pressed for an explanation, he told them that in 'Minklas' Thari'—as Leland writes the words—otherwise 'Shelter' or 'Shelta', the expression meant, 'Selling ferns'. From this man Leland obtained the first vocabulary of the newly discovered language. In the list of words below, those from this vocabulary are marked L'.

Some time later, Leland had the good fortune to discover a polyglot Irish tramp in the neighbourhood of Philadelphia. He prints his name as Owen Macdonald, but as this form of the surname is essentially Scots, we may suggest that it was more probably MacDonnell. This tramp claimed to speak 'Old Irish' (*sic*), Welsh, a little Gaelic (presumably Scots Highland), Romani, and also Shelta, to a knowledge of which he confessed after some pressure: and he consented to impart to Leland a second and much longer list of words, the items of which are marked L (without accent) in the vocabulary below. It must be mentioned that Leland appends to this list the following discouraging admission (expunged on republication): 'Of Celtic origin it [Shelta] surely is, for Owen gave me every syllable so garnished with gutturals that I, being even less of one of the Celtes (*sic*) than a Chinaman, have not succeeded in writing a single word according to his pronunciation of it.'

From both these vocabularies (L', L) a number of words have to be excluded as being Romani, Cant, or Slang, and not true Shelta.

In 1886 Leland read a paper before the Oriental Congress in Vienna on 'The Original Gypsies and their Language', in which he returned to the subject of Shelta. A long extract from this paper was published in *The Academy*,[1] from which it appears that he went over the same ground as in his previous publication;

[1] 20 November 1886, p. 346.

adding, however, the following as an indication of the widespread
knowledge of the language—a point which he was fond of em-
phasizing: 'I doubt if I ever took a walk in London, especially
in the slums, without meeting men and women who spoke
"Shelta"; and I know at this instant of two...little boys who
sell groundsel at the Marlborough Road Station, who chatter in
it fluently.' We hear of these little boys again, in a paper pub-
lished after Leland's death.[1] They are there transferred to 'Euston
Road or Saint John's Wood Road Station'—a curious alternative
—and their 'fluent chatter' has dwindled to a comprehension
of some of the words and phrases which Leland had picked up
from MacDonnell.

The publication of Leland's communication in *The Academy* led
to a letter from Mr H. T. Crofton, giving a short vocabulary,
which he had acquired from two wanderers,[2] and pointing out,
apparently for the first time, that Shelta was formed by the
application of 'back slang' to Irish or, as he regrettably calls it,
'Erse'. Thus *od* 'two' is the Irish *dō*, reversed. He also observed
some ordinary rhyming slang derived from English words, such
as *grascot* 'waistcoat', *grawder* 'solder', *grupper* 'supper'. Words
from this list are marked C' in the vocabulary.

Among the MSS. placed in my hands was a notebook in
Crofton's handwriting, containing what at first sight appears to
be an extensive Shelta-English and English-Shelta vocabulary.
This is, however, disappointing; its contents consist almost exclu-
sively of an uncritical collection of every word in the published
vocabularies enumerated in this survey of the material, without
any attempt to weed out even the most obvious non-Shelta
elements.[3] The few words from this source which I have included,
and which I have found it impossible to trace to any other au-
thority, are marked C (without accent) in the vocabulary.

Shortly afterwards another collector, Mr T. W. Norwood, sup-
plemented Crofton's list with further words, which he had acquired
more than thirty years previously,[4] twenty years before Leland
first heard the name of Shelta. Most of the words in Norwood's
list are very strange, unlike anything recorded by other collectors.

[1] *Journal*, G.L.S. II, i (1907–8), pp. 73–82.
[2] *Academy*, 18 December 1886, p. 412.
[3] Many of these are derived from the vocabularies in Andrew McCormick's
Tinkler Gypsies—a canting thieves' jargon that has little or nothing in
common with Shelta.
[4] *Academy*, 1 January 1887, p. 12.

The true Shelta element among them seems to be very small. Words in the vocabulary adopted from this list are marked N.

In 1891 Mr G. Alick Wilson published a short list of words, taken down from a child belonging to a tinker family in the island of Tiree.[1] They were originally noted by a lady on the island, and the child's mother afterwards endeavoured to persuade her that the child herself had invented them. That this, however, was a falsehood, prompted by the desire to keep the language secret, is shewn by the similarity of the words to those in other lists. The name of the lady collector not being recorded, words from this list are denoted with W.

In publishing this list of words, Mr Wilson indicates certain faults in Leland's arbitrary orthography: he also notices that the numerals, as given by him, are nothing but mis-spellings of the numerals of ordinary Gaelic. This obvious fact had already been detected by at least one of the reviewers of Leland's *Gypsies*, and had even aroused the suspicion that Leland had been the victim of a 'mystification' on the part of his tinker friends.

In the same issue of the *Journal* of the Gypsy Lore Society there appeared another short vocabulary, taken down by 'Mr Ffrench of Clonegal': otherwise the rector of that parish in County Wexford, the Rev. Canon J. F. M. ffrench—for in this awkward manner he habitually spelt his name. In strange contrast to Leland's difficulty with MacDonnell's gutturals, the Canon confesses that *he* found it hard to note down the words 'as the pronunciation is very soft and liquid': so that he was not certain that he had recorded them all quite correctly. Such as they are, however, they are given below marked F.

Two other vocabularies, both from Scotland, belong to about this time. The first of these is in manuscript, found among Dr Sampson's papers: the words were taken down from tinkers named MacDonald in the island of Barra. The second is a long list of words derived from tinkers in the island of Arran, and appended to a paper by Mr David MacRitchie.[2] This latter list is, however, overloaded with Romani and cant, and it has to be drastically weeded with the help of Mr Alexander Russell's most valuable vocabulary of *Scoto-Romani and Tinker's Cant*.[3] Both these collections are due to Mr Alexander Carmichael, and

[1] *Journal*, G.L.S. I, ii (1891), p. 121.
[2] *Transactions* of the Gaelic Society of Inverness, vol. XXIV (1899–1901), pp. 429 ff.
[3] *Journal*, G.L.S. II, viii (1914–15), p. 11 ff.

as the initial C has already been pre-empted, their contributions
to the vocabulary are marked K' and K respectively.

In 1890, Mr John Sampson, as he then was styled, came upon
the scene, and immediately put the enquiry upon a scientific
basis. He had the advantage of an extensive experience in the
noting of Romani, and he possessed in consequence a skill in
practical phonetics not at the command of any of his predecessors.
Moreover, his unique knowledge of Romani, and his wide ac-
quaintance with cant jargons, enabled him to distinguish between
true Shelta and borrowings from these other sources.

In an unfinished MS. found among his papers, he tells how he
had come to take up the study. Leland's chapter in *The Gypsies*
had been his first introduction to it, but he had regarded it with
the same scepticism as the reviewer mentioned above. Mr David
MacRitchie, at the time president of the Gypsy Lore Society, had,
in Sampson's words, 'a more robust faith' in Leland's discovery,
and he wrote to Sampson, urging him to take the matter up.
'Probably', says Sampson, plaintively, 'he selected me as the
least squeamish of his members. But even to me it sometimes
occurred that Shelta was a language which no gentleman should
be asked to collect.'

The quest took him into vile and even dangerous slums in
Liverpool, and involved him in some very unpleasant adventures.
'My first collections', he writes, 'were made from a knife-grinder
named Brennan,[1] who, as he afterwards confided to me, took me
for "an old lag as was making himself a bit wide". From this
man I collected a moderate vocabulary, of which a large propor-
tion were obviously mere flash or cant words.' Brennan, as the
other MS. referred to in the footnote tells us, 'disclaimed any deep
acquaintance with Shelta, which he stated was gradually passing
into disuse.... While making use of a few Romani and cant words,
he discriminated pretty accurately between the indigenous and
foreign elements of his vocabulary.

'Later, in a low quarter of the city, I met two knife-grinders
leaving their model lodging-house to start out on a day's work,
and an umbrella-mender working in partnership. These men were
not encumbered by any prejudices in favour of personal decency
or cleanliness, and the language used by them was, in every sense,
corrupt. Etymologically it might be described as a Babylonish,

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[1] In another MS. this man is called *Mahmon*, which can hardly be correct.

model-lodging-house jargon, compounded of Shelta, "flying cant", rhyming slang, and Romani. This they spoke with astonishing fluency, and apparent profit to themselves.

'I worked for some time with these men, until I had collected all their words. Three more uncleanly and evil-looking men I never saw. One, an Irish tinker, passed under the name of "Manni" Connor: another was known as the *Re-Meather* or "Double Devil":[1] and the third was a tall cadaverous man called "The Shah".

'My collections from these men were made in tinkers' taverns: and on the last occasion I was in their company we were seated in an inner room with wooden table and sanded floor. For obvious reasons I had placed them on the bench against the wall, occupying, myself, the other side of the table. Something, I forget what, aroused suspicion in their minds, and there was an air of immense trouble which I hoped at any rate would not be mine. I saw Manni rise to get between me and the door, while the Re-Meather was surreptitiously unbuckling his belt. Grasping the table with both hands, I turned it on its side, jamming them to the seat, the three blue and white pots of beer sliding down on them. Glancing back as I left the room, I saw those three worthies framed in a kind of triptych against the wall, and as I passed through the door I wished that I had more time to admire their astonished faces.'

He was now obliged to seek another instructor: and he had the good fortune to make the acquaintance and to win the confidence of one John Barlow, a tinker aged seventy-nine years, whom he found 'in the Irishries of Liverpool, in a street which at the time was safe only for...the dispensary doctor and the Catholic priest'. Barlow 'possessed a large stock of words, and his Shelta was unmixed with Irish, Romani, or Cant'. Sampson acquired from him an extensive vocabulary, as well as other materials for the study of the language.

Leland says of the Bath tramp from whom he first heard the name of Shelta that 'of course he knew a little Romani: was there ever an old traveller who did not?' But Sampson says definitely that none of these Liverpool vagrants spoke or understood Romani, although they had adopted some Romani words.

According to Barlow, the speakers of Shelta 'constitute a caste rather than a mere class: their common bond is one of heredity

[1] Or perhaps 'king-devil'. See **ri-mider** in the vocabulary.

as well as of craft. They intermarry, are not recruited from other classes of society, and do not turn to other forms of livelihood.' Barlow professed to be able to recognize a tinker woman by her face, as though this exclusiveness had affected the physical type. They 'travel from place to place, in small bands or families, plying their craft, frequenting fairs, and trading in calves and asses; while their women gain money by hoaxing, telling fortunes, cutting cards, and tossing cups [divination by tea-leaves]'. On the other hand, incredible though it may appear, we have been told that tinkers in America 'consider fortune-telling wicked'.[1] Barlow gave to Dr Sampson a long list of the surnames usual among the Irish tinkers; a similar list for American tinkers is given by Mr Arnold in the paper just quoted; and these lists are amplified in a paper by Mr Patrick Greene, Ballinalee, Co. Longford, the latest recruit, and one of the most valuable, to the study of the tinkers and their language.[2]

There is no doubt that Shelta is a hereditary possession of the Irish tinkers, handed down from father to son. From the tinkers it naturally filters in a greater or less degree to other classes of vagabonds, but these do not speak it in its purity. The story $\gamma 3$, below, shews that a knowledge of Shelta might be expected from sieve-makers, pipers, and beggars; presumably from other vagrants as well. Barlow himself learnt Shelta in infancy from his mother, who spoke it habitually; and Brennan had an uncle, Ezekiel Brennan, who never spoke anything else unless he was actually obliged to do so. Indeed, 'an old Connaught tradesman', whom Sampson came across, told him that the tinkers made such a habit of conversing in their own tongue that they could speak neither English nor Irish correctly. (Clearly a jargon which is essentially a perversion of these languages would predispose the speakers to unconscious solecisms when they endeavoured to converse in them.)

Barlow frequently dwelt upon his father's threats and warnings against divulging the language to outsiders. We have seen something of the same kind in the episode of the child in Tiree. He

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[1] Frederick S. Arnold, 'Our old Poets and the Tinkers', *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. XI (1898), p. 210.

[2] See his papers in *Béaloideas*, the journal of the Folklore of Ireland Society, vol. III (1931–2), pp. 170, 290, vol. IV (1933–4), p. 259. These papers are indispensable to the student. Besides materials for the study of the language second in bulk only to Sampson's, they give by far the fullest available account of the mode of life of the speakers of Shelta. There are a few folk-tales printed in translation only. I have drawn on the vocabularies, with the Society's kind permission.

further related how upon two occasions he pretended not to understand a conversation between a farmer and a herd-boy, who had somehow contrived to acquire a knowledge of Shelta. Barlow had a very exaggerated idea of the antiquity of the language: according to a note found among Dr Sampson's MSS., he seems to have told him 'to my knowledge (!) it has been spoken generation after generation for the last 800 years'. In the West of Ireland, he went on to say, the talk was different: 'they can't pronounce the word[s]: they put too much of a drone and [blank in MS.] about it'. Apparently he also made the statement that [the speakers were] the old original travellers [who had] no connexion with [the] Irish, good, bad or indifferent; [adding that] 'there's only one on them (*sic*) living now, and she kilt her husband, poor man—hit him on the head with a razor'. The bracketed words are my conjectural linkages of these disconnected sentences; the latter are no more than rough jottings of which Dr Sampson made no further use, and to which he probably attached little importance.

Following Leland, who first popularized the name, the language is usually called 'Shelta'. This, however, is not quite accurate. The right name is 'Sheldrū' or 'Shelŏrū', 'Shelta' being a corruption due to imperfect speech or hearing. Other variants are 'Shelter' or 'Shelteroχ'—all being perversions of the Irish *bēlra* or *bērla*, in modern spelling *bēarla*, meaning 'speech, language, jargon', and now most commonly, though not exclusively, used in the sense of 'English'. It may also be heard of under the names *Mink'ers' tāri* or *Mink'er-tāral* ('tinker-speech') or in Gaelic *Cainnt cheard* ('craftsmen's speech') or *Laidionn nan ceard* ('craftsmen's Latin').[1] It is also called *Gam* (or *Gamoχ*) *cant*, which would seem to mean 'Bad Talk'. Dr Sampson makes the interesting suggestion that this may be a corruption of *Ogam-cant*, which is, however, inadmissible, as the *g* is probably palatalized (*g'am*). Other names are 'Bog Latin', 'Tinkers' Cant', and 'The Ould Thing'.

Dr Sampson published a paper upon this collection,[2] which attracted the attention of Professor Kuno Meyer, then resident in Liverpool. Through Dr Sampson, the latter got into touch with Barlow; and his study of the old man's speech enabled him to publish an analysis of Shelta word-formation which advanced the

[1] In the Gaelic Dictionary of the Highland Society (1828), vol. I, p. 113, under the word *Beurl'eagair*.

[2] 'Tinkers and their Talk', *Journal*, G.L.S. I, ii, p. 204.

THE SECRET LANGUAGES OF IRELAND

WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE
TO THE ORIGIN AND NATURE OF

THE SHELTA LANGUAGE

partly based upon Collections and Manuscripts of
the late

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