Nutritionists regard the modern Scottish diet with a mixture of fascination and horror. High on gashach (rubbish food), which has recently found a new incarnation in the form of the deep-fried Mars Bar, and low on fruit and vegetables, it has produced the highest mortality rate from coronary heart disease in the world. Scots are more likely to die before the age of sixty-nine than the citizens of any other Western nation. However, it was not always thus, as these two excellent little books by Wallace Lockhart serve to remind us.

The first is a revised and updated edition of a work initially published in 1983 under the title *The Scot and His Oats*. As the introduction suggests, it “traces the journey of the oat crop not only from field to factory but over the centuries as an integral part of Scottish life” (xiv). It is a fascinating journey, and one made more vivid by frequent and apposite quotations from poetry and prose (Dr. Johnson’s famous dictionary definition of oats among them). There are sections on the required soil and climate conditions, on the evolution of harvesting implements, on the processes of milling and on the method of weighing and measuring the crop. There are brief, clear descriptions of implements such as querns (still in use in some areas of Scotland at the beginning of the twentieth century) and discussion of the best methods of dressing millstones. The second half of the book consists of short chapters on the chief cooking uses of oats, such
as oatcakes, haggis (all you wanted to know but were afraid to ask) and porridge, this last for hundreds of years the staple food of the poorer people of Scotland (p. 31). We learn, for example, that left-over porridge was frequently ladled into the drawer of a chest to cool by farm-servants before they went out to the fields and then retrieved at the end of the day, sliced into sections and used to supplement an egg or fish dish. (I understand that occasionally unretrieved porridge has been discovered in dresser drawers by prospective buyers at sales of Scottish antique furniture). The book’s photographic illustrations take us back to a period before the existence of the combine harvester, to the horse-teams at work in the harvest fields and to the bothy communities of the migrant agricultural workers in Aberdeenshire and elsewhere. Recipes and a useful and necessary glossary complete the work.

*The Scots and Their Fish* follows the same successful formula. Once again, the author surveys the historical background, taking us to the present day. Once again he has ranged far and wide for his materials, consulting for this study the Scottish Sea Fish Authority and the Scottish Fisheries Museum at Anstruther among other sources. The mysteries of the movements of herring shoals, the seasonal work of the herring lassies, the dangers and hardships of the fisherman’s life and the evolution of steam drifters, seine-netters and other types of boat are all investigated with the same engaging touch which characterises the volume on oats. The fortunes of the various types of fishing are followed and once again there are well-chosen photographs, recipes and a glossary. Canadian readers from the central provinces of Canada, however, will find it less easy, given the shortage of really fresh raw materials, to try out the fish recipes than the oat (and alcohol) based delights of crannachan and Athole Brose.

These books, although clearly meant for a general readership, will nonetheless provide, and in entertaining fashion, useful background knowledge for those proposing to investigate the longer and more demanding works of such historians as Christopher Smout and Tom Devine on food, crop production and prices, labour mobility and other such topics; for those who
wish to stick with a less formal approach, David Kerr Cameron’s trilogy of rural life and Billy Kay’s oral history, *The Complete Odyssey: Voices from Scotland’s Recent Past*, delve more deeply into some of the topics covered by Lockhart.

*Barbara C. Murison*
*University of Western Ontario*