Review


*Older Scots: A Linguistic Reader* makes a vital contribution to Older Scots studies beyond linguistic aspects to encompass the literary, cultural, and book history of Scotland in the medieval and early modern periods. Those working on pre-modern Scotland have long awaited a volume with a focus on language rather than literature. As the first readily accessible guide to the workings, contexts, and transmission of the Scots language, Smith’s *Linguistic Reader* will be much appreciated by scholars and students alike. It would be an asset to any university library, and any course on Scottish literature or language for both undergraduates and postgraduates. The book’s objective is that “readers will have acquired not only an understanding of essential characteristics of Older Scots but will also be able to engage with some of the fascinating textual and linguistic problems with which this variety presents us” (p. 1), and it succeeds admirably.

It is structured in two principal parts, with a glossary of the hundred most used Older Scots words forming a smaller third section. The first part comprises introductory material, in the form of four discursive chapters about the Scots language, and the second constitutes a series of Older Scots texts from sources that are documentary, epistolary, literary, and translations of scripture. The first chapter, “About Older Scots,” advises readers how to make best use of the book, particularly if they are beginning their study of Scots. It accommodates new learners, although more experienced scholars can simply omit these basic introductory sections. Clear sign-posting is essential for a work involving complex and detailed material: the numbered paragraphs also make the material manageable and accessible, thus helping to establish the *Linguistic Reader* as both a teaching text and a reference work. This first chapter’s broad historical overview of the Scots language to the present day is particularly welcomed, as are the setting out of
key manuscript and printed witnesses of Older Scottish literary landmarks, and of up-to-date resources, including the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* and the *Edinburgh Linguistic Atlas of Scots 1380-1500* (LAOS). The second chapter, “Transmission,” covers linguistic terminology, Older Scots sounds and orthography, followed by standardization and Anglicization. Chapter three, on “Grammar and Lexicon,” provides detailed yet accessible overviews of both of these, whilst the final chapter, “Style in Older Scottish Texts” discusses the range of registers in both verse and prose, with sharp, clear-cut definitions and explanations throughout.

The *Linguistic Reader*’s interdisciplinary significance is most fully realized, however, in the series of diplomatically edited primary texts that constitutes the book’s second part. The book’s focus extends beyond the purely literary by foregrounding documentary and epistolary material in a useful manner. Indeed, texts in these first two sections span a range of eclectic material from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, including *The Scone Glosses* (1312), an exemption of Melrose Abbey from customs (1389), and letters from Gavin Douglas, from John Knox, and from James VI of Scotland in the sixteenth century. The inclusion of non-literary texts, as Smith rightly points out, makes possible “direct comparisons between these texts and other important collections now becoming available” (p. 73). Further text categories, “On language and literature,” “Poetry,” “Prose,” and “Biblical Translation” are all commendable for presenting a range of canonical and less-well known texts to readers.

The quality of detailed and scholarly exposition of the material in this section and throughout the book as a whole is a defining feature of the *Linguistic Reader*. Smith’s introductions to the texts always include historical, cultural, and biographical information. Particularly importantly for researchers, the availability of the sources’ shelfmarks makes it possible for the reader to examine the original witness in the flesh. One of Smith’s principal aims in diplomatic editing is to “make accessible the spellings, punctuation and layout found in the witnesses for the text in question” (p. 2). He has very successfully accomplished his other objective of ensuring readers “encounter Older Scots more directly
than in…modern editions” (p. 2), replicating the experience of reading texts in their original manuscript or print witnesses. The Linguistic Reader presents the workings of Older Scots in a colourful, lively way, especially through vignettes and localized detail, such as the 1609 legal case when a writer’s unusual spelling conventions led to his prosecution for a series of anonymous treasonable letters (p. 35). The combination of high caliber scholarship, carefully selected texts, and a lucid, engaging written style, ensures that Smith’s Linguistic Reader makes the Older Scots language comes alive for students and researchers alike.

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