
Simply put, this is the most important essay collection on early Scottish poetry published in recent years. It is, however, more than that. *A Companion to Medieval Scottish Poetry* lives up to its title in that it is truly a companion for anyone wanting more insight into his or her reading of the poetry of medieval Scotland. Few ‘companions’ or ‘introductions’ to fields of study adequately meet the needs of the diverse readerships they address: scholars working in the particular area who want access to the latest findings, graduate students wanting to familiarize themselves with a field of study, undergraduates looking for a good reference for an essay, and, no less importantly, the general reader who just wants to know more about a subject of interest. This is especially the case when the book is an essay collection rather than the work of a single author; a collection’s editors have to work very hard to ensure that the work stays coherently unified while balancing the contributions that each essay brings to the whole. This is no small job.

Priscilla Bawcutt and Janet Hadley Williams have managed just such a task, and the essay collection they have guided to completion really does have much to offer that diverse readership I listed above. Their joint contributions that open and close the volume, the introductory ‘Poets “of this Natioun”’ and bibliographical ‘Guide to Further Reading’ provide readers with a comprehensive overview of the issues surrounding the study of Scottish poetry from the fourteenth up to the opening of the sixteenth century, an era that produced many of the most powerfully original and important poets in Scottish literary history. Scholars working on the poetry of the Scots Makars and general readers coming to this...
literature for the first time will both profit from a careful reading of the introduction, which, among its other insights, very usefully reorients recent debates about the influence of Geoffrey Chaucer upon some Scots poets of the period in claiming unequivocally that ‘there can be no doubt that Chaucer—and to a lesser extent the other courtly poets termed ‘Chaucerian’—much impressed Scottish readers’ (p. 11) while also noting that claims of Chaucer’s influence have been ‘over-simplified’ and have ‘distort[ed] the sense of Anglo-Scottish literary relations in this period’ by failing to acknowledge the important influences of other English poets such as John Gower and John Lydgate (p. 13). Their ‘Guide to Further Reading’ is a treasure trove of references to manuscript and printed collections as well as important editions and secondary sources that will provide scholars and students with a valuable guide to further research for years to come.

The essays that comprise the body of A Companion to Medieval Scottish Poetry are written by an impressive range of some of the most important scholars working in early Scottish studies today. Elizabeth Ewan’s historical essay, ‘Late Medieval Scotland: a Study in Contrasts,’ mirrors the introduction of Bawcutt and Hadley Williams in its deliberate and careful balancing of the need to orient readers to the history of the period while offering important new insight into that history. Thus, while reminding her readers of the tumultuous reigns of Scottish monarchs during the late middle ages, she also marshals convincing evidence for a view that sees Scotland as essentially stable during this period, ‘a kingdom [that] was an amalgam of many identities, with different languages, ethnicities, and loyalties’ (p. 31).

What follows are a series of essays devoted to specific authors and texts. R. James Goldstein examines historical narrative in Barbour, Wyntoun, and Blind Hary, Nicola Ryan foregrounds the political content of Richard Holland’s Buke of the Howlat, Julia Boffey situates the unique extant copy of The Kingis Quair within the context of its manuscript anthology, Bodleian Library MS Arch. Selden. B. 24, and Joanna Martin reviews the work of Sir Gilbert Hay and The Buik of King Alexander the Conquerour. This is followed by a series of chapters devoted to more well-known Scottish poets and forms, opening with Roderick J. Lyall’s essay on Robert Henryson’s Morall Fabillis followed by Anne M. McKim’s reading of
Henryson’s *Orpheus and Eurydice* and *The Testament of Cresseid*. John Burrow writes on the poetry of William Dunbar, Douglas Gray on the work of Gavin Douglas, and Janet Hadley Williams, editor of the poetry of Sir David Lyndsay for the Association of Scottish Literary Studies series of annual volumes, outlines Lyndsay’s contribution to early Scottish poetry. This section of the companion is rounded out by two insightful essays on literary forms, ‘Religious Verse in Medieval Scotland’ by Priscilla Bawcutt and ‘Medieval Romance in Scotland’ by Rhiannon Purdie. What all of the essays share is a similar balance of review and insight combined with a coherence and clarity that makes them accessible for the specialist and non-specialist alike. This is an important volume that is not to be missed, and we owe the editors a debt of gratitude for not just responding to the urgent need for an overview of the field of medieval Scottish poetry but for producing a work of consistently high quality.

*Douglas W. Hayes*

*Lakehead University*