

# The History of SCOTTISH LITERATURE

Volume 1  
Origins to 1660

edited by R D S Jack

general editor Cairns Craig

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(Mediæval and Renaissance)

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# Abbreviations

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| BL:   | British Library  |
| CUL:  | Cambridge University Library                               |
| DNB:  | <i>Dictionary of National Biography</i>                    |
| EETS: | Early English Text Society                                 |
| ELH:  | <i>English Literary History</i>                            |
| FMLS: | <i>Forum for Modern Language Studies</i>                   |
| GGB:  | <i>Gude and Godlie Ballatis</i>                            |
| K:    | Kinsley edition of Dunbar                                  |
| NLS:  | National Library of Scotland                               |
| PMLA: | Publications of the Modern Language Association of America |
| SGTS: | Scottish Gaelic Texts Society                              |
| SHR:  | <i>Scottish Historical Review</i>                          |
| SHS:  | Scottish History Society                                   |
| SLJ:  | <i>Scottish Literary Journal</i>                           |
| SS:   | Scottish Studies   |
| SSL:  | <i>Studies in Scottish Literature</i>                      |
| STS:  | Scottish Text Society                                      |
| TGSI: | Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness            |

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# Introduction

R D S JACK

The twin tasks I have set myself in this Introduction are to discuss the ways in which I believe this history helps us to see Scottish Literature in a more accurate light and what directions it points for further research. Before I tackle these issues, however, it is necessary to indicate two features which distinguish this volume from those which follow it, features which pose particular problems and impose particular constraints upon the contributors.

The first of these concerns the time span. The earliest poems mentioned are Latin hymns dating from the second half of the sixth century and the earliest prose writer is Adomnan, ninth abbot of Iona, who flourished in the mid and later seventh century. As the remit of this volume ends in 1660, this implies that one volume covers about a thousand years of literature and the latter three, just over three hundred years between them. Of course, the amount of literature preserved in the later periods exceeds ours, but historically we move from the very founding of the kingdom of Scotland to the Restoration of Charles II. This vast historical time span is particularly important, not only because of the very different political and social pressures of the different centuries but because there is a danger of forgetting chronological differentials the further back in time we go. Would those, for example, who label Henryson a Scottish Chaucerian, do so with so easy a mind if they remembered that he lived as long after the English poet as T S Eliot after Wordsworth?

Secondly, there is the evidence with which we are working. Although, throughout, we base our conclusions on the best available texts, the date, provenance and reliability of the witnesses vary greatly, as Priscilla Bawcutt and Felicity Riddy correctly highlight in their 'Note on the Texts' for *Longer Scottish Poems* Volume I.<sup>1</sup> The first major vernacular Scots poem, *The Bruce*, for example, was written in the late fourteenth century but survives in two manuscripts dated 1487 and 1489. The best witnesses for Henryson's *Morall Fabillis*, with the exception of the Asloan copy of 'The Two Mice', are dated almost a century after the poet's death. The major vernacular anthology of the sixteenth century, the Bannatyne Manuscript, has an editor who sometimes alters religious poems to bring them into conformity with the theological views of the Reformed church. And as Scottish texts come to be printed in England anglicised forms are introduced by the intermediaries in the printing houses, making conclusions about language singularly difficult to maintain. Such niceties may not greatly concern all readers of this book. Yet it is as well to be aware of them at the outset.

'But to our tale.' Most obviously an attempt has been made not only to assess written vernacular prose and verse but also the oral tradition and the very important contributions made by writers in Gaelic and Latin. Hamish Henderson in 'The Ballad and Popular Tradition to 1660' links the Scottish ballad to European analogues but also to the work of storytellers from Turkey, Iran and India. In a more 'parochial' context he addresses himself to the question of why folklorists and singers generally agree that of all the ballads of the British Isles, the Scots contribution is the finest. Professor Gillies traces the very different social and educational forces which produced the verse of the Gaelic bards and in particular the major contribution made by the MacMhuirich family, reminding us that geographical proximity can go along with a quite distinct poetic tradition.

If I lay most emphasis, in this context, on the Latin contribution, it is for two major reasons. First of all, while modern critics have dealt well and at length with both the ballad and with Celtic writings, there has been very little attempt to link Scottish vernacular literature with Latin and that despite the fact that the origins of Scottish literature are Latin; Latin was also for most of our period the preferred medium for literary composition and the universal language of the Universities. Secondly, the Latin and Scots traditions very often (and not surprisingly) go hand in hand. To study the work of late sixteenth and early seventeenth century vernacular writers such as Alexander and Drummond without being aware of the contemporary Latin verse contained in the *Delitiae Poetarum Scotorum* is resolutely to study a tradition with one eye determinedly shut.

To provide an example of what I mean, I turn to the tradition of regal panegyric. Prior to the Union of the Crowns panegyrics in both Scots and Latin conform to the major characteristics of classical panegyric. They are usually part of a ceremony or at least presuppose an audience. They establish the monarch as a personification of virtue and the writer, often for clear political reasons, adopts the voices of counsellor and prophet. Dunbar's *The Thrissill and the Rois* for example clearly meets all these criteria. It is written for an occasion, the marriage of James (the thistle) to Margaret Tudor (the rose). The virtues of both are ingeniously presented not only through the central idea of Dame Nature calling representative animals, birds and plants but by heraldic symbolism. The poet in prophetic mode looks forward to a future drawing together two opposed nations but also takes the opportunity to warn the King against continuing his philandering ways. The same traditionalism and conventionality can be found later in Montgomerie's *The Navigatioun*, which celebrates James VI.

But all the methods employed in *The Thrissill and the Rois* or *The Navigatioun* are also used by the Latin writer Patrick Adamson in 'Gene-thliacum Serenissimi Scotiae, Angliae et Hiberniae Principis Jacobi VI'. The extravagant optimism of the piece begins with the title. James is referred to as the ruler of Scotland, England and Ireland. His personal virtues are somewhat hopefully deduced from the character of his parents, greathearted ('magnanimus') Darnley and Mary of the generous heart ('generoso pectore') and chaste morals ('casti mores')! It is, however, James's own destined great-

ness which forms the major concern of the poem. He is seen as the Sun bringing light to a darkened land and ushering in the golden age of Saturn. The unification of Britain this time takes the form of a vision in which the River Tweed as boundary obeys a divine command. On the west it returns to its source and on the east rejoins the sea. It then addresses its Nymphs who, presumably, have suddenly found themselves out of their element:

Non has Superi regnator Olympi  
Perpetuas dederat sedes, nec littora nobis  
Haec semper pulsanda: alio sub sole penates  
Quaerendi.

(The ruler of celestial Olympus had not given this seat in perpetuity, nor must we always beat against these shores. Beneath another sun we must seek a dwelling).

The last mark of division thus eloquently disappears.

Adamson is addressing a clearly defined audience, he highlights the virtues of James, he prophesies his future greatness and he warns him against hubris. Both Latin and Scots writers are following the same conventions. Recently, however, Robert Cummings has brilliantly analysed the ways in which the Union of the Crowns at once destroyed the natural audience for Scottish panegyric, and the mood of optimism both with regard to James's political virtues and Scotland's future role.<sup>2</sup> As a result when Drummond composes his seventeenth century vernacular panegyric *Forth Feasting*, he subtly reinterprets the panegyric mode. The loss of a Scottish court results in a personal rather than a public focus. Praise of James, though still strong, mingles with a line of complaint addressed to an absentee monarch. The striking thing from our point of view is that Latin panegyrists made very much the same alterations. Thomas Craig, who in 1566 had welcomed James's birth with a powerful traditional panegyric, addresses the absentee king in another poem 'Dulcis amor populi'. This, while it remains true to all the central criteria of the panegyric, entirely changes the spirit and the focus of the mode. The King is still praised as sole light of the fatherland ('Patriae lux unica'); the poem still celebrates an occasion (though now a private one); and he still draws on evidence from the past and divination of the future to see James's virtue re-affirmed by his predecessor and carried on by his children. But the context and the content is now domestic. For a Scot returning to his homeland the greater political plans are irrelevant so he proffers personal love rather than political counsel. The image of the Sun is continued but to bless James's wife and family rather than herald a united land.

And if the positive side of panegyric becomes in this way more personal, domestic concerns replacing political; love becoming not so much the King's supreme virtue as the supreme appeal of the poet himself, so the negative side of warning becomes a direct complaint on behalf of Scotland. She, for Craig as for Drummond, becomes a neglected lover. The unifying image of the Sun is cleverly employed to bring home this message:

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Iam repeto patrii tristia tecta soli.  
Triste solum sine Sole, suo sine Principe cernam.

(Now I seek again the sad roofs of my native country. I will look upon a country that is sad without its Sun and without its own Prince).

Craig ends his poem by relinquishing his barren songs ('steriles Musas et carmina'). Their purpose, once enjoyed in the presence of the King, has disappeared now that they are separated. James must live on, as the double call of 'Vive, vale!' proclaims but that optimistic cry is seriously undercut by our knowledge that it goes along with Craig's own poetic death.

Both Drummond and Craig work their way towards a re-definition of regal panegyric, capable of coping with the changed political situation as it affects Scotland. But this is only a slight example of the sort of comparative criticism which becomes possible once the wealth of Latin literature within the period is seriously studied. I, therefore, make no apology for devoting some space within a general Introduction to these particular analyses for they pinpoint perhaps the greatest single critical failure within our period. I equally hope that the attention paid to the Latin tradition within this volume will encourage students to redress it.

The aim of the remaining chapters—those concerned with vernacular prose and verse—is a simple one. They aim to chart with as much precision as possible and in as comprehensive a manner as possible the development of Scottish literature through historical events as cataclysmic as the Wars of Independence, the Reformation and the Union of the Crowns. A number of quite important editorial decisions, however, further shape the particular approach adopted. First it was decided to open with a Chapter devoted entirely to language in its relationship to the literature of the Mediaeval and Renaissance periods. Apart from in itself acknowledging the crucial importance of a proper understanding of linguistic change in discussing the work of our authors, this decision was made with two further aims in mind. Most basically, a clear account of the distinctive features of Middle Scots is essential for those readers not directly acquainted with it. And, at a greater level of sophistication, it was thought valuable to have a professional linguist's views on the crucial problem of the gradual erosion of the Middle Scots Standard by the Southern English Standard from the late sixteenth century onwards.

The second decision in this area was to achieve maximum coverage by using chapters which were chronologically defined (e.g. Chapters 8, 9, 11 and 12); chapters which focused on literary movements and forms (e.g. Chapters 2 and 3) and chapters dealing solely or primarily with the work of the acknowledged 'greats' (e.g. Chapters 4 and 5). This triple approach seems to me to have worked well, although I am conscious that a few poems of more than passing interest (such as *The Three Priests of Peebles* and *The Freiris of Berwick*) receive less attention than is their due. It implies, of course, that occasionally the same texts will be approached from different viewpoints. In such cases I tried to ensure that new insights were being offered

and that there was no needless repetition. No attempt was made to reconcile value judgements passed by different critics on the same work.

Finally, this *History* is being written at a time when genuine critical interest in all of vernacular Scottish Literature, and not just the work of a chosen few, has been at last awakened. Consequent on this, the defensive stage of critical patriotism with its tendency to overpraise in order to counterbalance long seasons of neglect should have passed. It is, therefore, hoped that the book, while transmitting the enthusiasm of the specialists concerned, will serve as an accurate critical assessment of the literature of the period.

This leads me directly to the most difficult portion of this Introduction. It is not my intention in any major fashion to anticipate the findings of the various chapters and where possible I have chosen to back up general conclusions with examples other than those found in the body of the text, rather than steal the thunder of the contributors, who would rightly resent such highhandedness. There is one area, however, in which this approach does not work for, with great frequency, writers have called into question some of the rather simplistic conclusions until now confidently held as truths. Dr Carpenter, for example, shows how the Reformers, generally held to condemn drama in all its forms, actually used dramatic performances to further their case. Professor Lyall subtly reassesses the notion that as a prosewriter Knox was an out and out angliciser. And a number of authors from different viewpoints challenge the belief that the Union of the Crowns was the sole influence, drawing writers away from Middle Scots to English. The full arguments I shall not anticipate hoping to stave off interference through brevity. It is, however, surely inevitable that as research becomes more sophisticated, so simple answers give way to rather more complex ones and apparently obvious conclusions fall in the face of more detailed knowledge.

Throughout our period Scotland is of course a separate nation, but its literary tradition while different from England's is not totally separate and the various types of interrelationship form an important part of this volume's concern. Sometimes, for example, a notable English movement simply takes longer to arrive in Scotland. This is the case with alliterative poetry and with the sonnet form. Usually too, the delay goes along with distinctively Scottish features. For the sonnet, the popularity of the interlacing rhyme scheme, the reluctance to compose long love sequences and the broader thematic range all mark out a specifically Scottish re-interpretation of English conventions.

This phenomenon comprehends source preferences. The political closeness for much of the period between France and Scotland resulted in Scots writers turning more regularly for inspiration to France than to other countries (often including England). Notably, when Petrarchism was at its height in England Scottish lyric writers generally preferred to base their imitative works on the writers of the *Pléiade*. Only after the Union, when Petrarchism was on the decline in England, did Drummond and others turn to Italian sources with enthusiasm.

The reasons for the popularity of Petrarchism among Scottish courtier poets at this time are fairly obvious. Petrarch's work had long been known in Scotland but these poets had not been associated with the glut of Petrarchan

imitation during Elizabeth's reign and so did not share the general English satiety with the Italian's work. Those who came to London came to a foreign court, aware of their foreignness; aware particularly that English was a language not wholly natural to them but anxious to cultivate this new poetic diction and align themselves with English poetic practice. What more natural than that they should imitate the mode until that time most widely practised? In addition, as Leonard Forster has highlighted,<sup>3</sup> Petrarchism offered 'something supremely imitable' for those trying to create a new poetic diction. Petrarch's own association with the quest for purity in language, the clearly defined conceits and rhetorical devices of the Petrarchan mode, had drawn the creation of new poetic dictions and the influence of Petrarch together before and, not surprisingly, did so again.

Once more, however, major differences between Scottish and English practice emerge. Alexander and Drummond prefer to imitate closely the later Petrarchists rather than the master themselves. When they do use Petrarch as a model, their imitation is much freer. More importantly, while English lyricists had shown more interest in the physical side to Petrarchan love, the Scottish lyricists come much closer to the original in valuing the spiritual lessons of love for a Laura. This bias had been anticipated by William Fowler whose *Tarantula of Love* ends by admitting that the lady had led him unknowingly towards a true understanding of the love of God. Likewise, for Drummond as for Petrarch, the visions after his beloved's death teach even more valuable lessons than those taught in life. Once more we are concerned not only with a gap in time but with important modifications of the English tradition.

For the most part Scottish and English literatures work with the same poetic forms, bringing them to the forefront of popularity perhaps at different times, perhaps with different biases but the overall tradition within which they are working is essentially the same. There are exceptions to this generalisation, however. The flying tradition was one which was enthusiastically developed in Scotland but not in England. Yet, major differences between the two countries from a literary viewpoint are usually due to unique religious or political movements or outstanding political figures drawing literature into their service. The Calvinistic Reformation in Scotland with its distrust of certain types of imagery and its heavy reliance on Biblical material inevitably produced a very different sort of poetry and prose than did the more pragmatic religious revolution under Henry VIII. The proclaimed intention of James VI to be a Maecenas to his chosen poetic group at the Edinburgh court along with the set rules and warnings he mapped out for them equally guaranteed that verse written under his auspices would be distinguishable from English verse composed at the same time.

These differences are fully treated in the text by Professor MacDonald, by David Reid and by myself. As an additional example, I turn to the reign of Mary Queen of Scots.<sup>4</sup> Here the combined notoriety of the Queen and the rules for writing 'Reformed' verse resulted in a distinct tradition, devoted to discrediting the Queen and all she stood for. Extreme protestants such as Robert Sempill employed the vogue for broadsheets to criticise the Queen

for her behaviour throughout her reign. I shall concentrate on this group, looking first at its treatment of other characters in the drama before focusing specifically on Mary.

Within this tradition there is always stern opposition to Rizzio:

And brocht in ane to reule with raggit clais:  
 Thocht he wes blak and Moriane of hew, [swarthy, Moorish]  
 In credit sone and gorgius clais he grew:  
 Thocht he wes forraine, and borne in Piemont.

This is coupled with an almost incredible idealizing of Darnley, whose murder is presented in the most pathetic light possible:

Ane King at evin, with Sceptur, Sword, & Crown,  
 At morne bot ane deformit lumpe of clay.

His achievements, when viewed posthumously, assume a heroic dimension quite at odds with established fact:

In deidis he sould have bene lyke Deiphoebus,  
 Had feinyeit Fortoun favourit him to ring, [reign]  
 Or Theseus, or gentill Julius,  
 In gentill featis ferand for ane King.

Bothwell is 'ane monstuire full of fylthyness', worse than Sardanapalus, Nero or Heliogabalus, who is more than once accused of having employed his knowledge of the black arts to bewitch the Queen. The action of the confederate Lords in deposing a ruling Scottish monarch is resolutely defended:

Behalding than the actis execrabil  
 That in this countrie hes committit bene,  
 The schame, the lack, the bruit abhominabil, [rumours]  
 That saikles men with sorow did sustene, [innocent]  
 Ane privat hart it mycht prik up with tene, [anger]  
 To seik redres and mend that cairfull caice;  
 Far mair the nobillis of the Royall raice,

while the joint hope for the future is firmly placed on the shoulders of the regent Moray and the infant James.

The bitterness and spite vented against Mary herself and conveyed mainly by comparisons with classical and Biblical villainesses may most economically be exemplified by analysing in detail one of *The Sempill Ballatis*, 'Declaring the Nobill and Gude Inclination of our King'. In this work the poet meets a youth, lamenting the death of Darnley and questions him on the subject. The boy, while drawing a grossly inflated portrait of the dead King, likens Mary to Delilah, being the betrayer of a brave and godfearing husband; to Jezebel in her viciousness and in having drawn her husband into a false religion; to Clytemnestra and Semiramis as husband murderer and voluptuary. He urges



the Lords to sweep to vengeance like Joshua but also fervently hopes that his Queen may die in horrible agony like Creusa and Dido. He wishes on her head all the curses which Ovid crowded into his venomous invective Ibis (though actually having managed quite well on his own!); goes through a series of imaginary encounters in which the Queen plays hare to his hound, mouse to his cat, bairn to his boar or rabbit to his ferret before finally plunging her deep in Hell:

My spirit hir spirit sall douke in Phlegethon,  
 Into that painfull fylthie flude of hell;  
 And thame in Styx and Lethee baith anone,  
 And Cerbereus, that cruell hund sa fell  
 Sall gar hir cry, with mony yout and yell,  
 O wallaway that ever sho was borne!  
 Or with tresoun be ony maner mell  
 Quhilk from all blis sould cause hir be forlorne.

[hound]

[cry]

[alas]

[mingle]

The poet then thanks the child for having delighted him with this 'sweit figureit speiche' and they part to spread the tale of the Queen's viciousness throughout the world in song and verse.

It is difficult for modern readers to adapt to such outspoken, dogmatic bitterness, especially when placed in the mouth of a youth and given a supposedly religious context. Yet this poem follows the approved techniques of protestant vituperative verse in the period. Similar invectives, employing similar literary devices could be analysed in 'The Testament and Tragedie of umquhile King Henrie Stewart', 'Ane Exhortatioun to the Lordis', 'Ane Declaratioun of the Lordis Just Quarrel' and the 'Diallog betwix Honour, Gude Fame, and the Author heirof in a Trance'. Such an investigation would not, however, add much to the vision presented in 'Declaring the Nobill and Gude Inclination of our King'. For this group, with Sempill at its head, Mary was and remained the 'whore of Babylon' and 'double Daliday'.

There was a less powerful group of poets countering vituperation with Marian panegyric. But *The Sempill Ballatis* show how the combination of a particular religious movement with firm views on the limits of poetic expression coupled with a Queen who did not, like Elizabeth or James, know how to manipulate literature into her service, can produce verse not precisely paralleled anywhere in the English tradition.

Inevitably comparisons with English literature will reveal the smaller, Scottish movement more often omitting than complementing. This is especially the case towards the end of our period. The late sixteenth and early seventeenth century in England produced drama of the highest quality, the poetry of Spenser and Milton as well as a rich and varied prose tradition. In the equivalent period Scotland saw only the turgid Senecan dramas of Alexander and the lightweight *Philotus*. Its finest poet was the 'literary chameleon' Drummond and its most talented prosewriter the idiosyncratic Thomas Urquhart. It would, in short, have been nice to end the volume on a high point but this is not the case.



Contributory reasons can be adduced to account for this state of affairs. Perhaps one should first ask, however, whether it is reasonable to expect a relatively small country such as Scotland to vye with its much larger sister at all times. One of the reasons for the nadir of the seventeenth century is simply that chance and circumstances did not combine to produce a writer of the highest quality, from a relatively much smaller population.

That said, the Reformation was not, generally, a friend to drama in Scotland. The powerful classical tradition urged writers towards Seneca and the 'armchair theatre movement', while James VI showed no sustained interest in plays and, certainly in the Edinburgh part of his reign, was anxious not to follow English dramatic fashions. Later, when the court had moved to London, the major audience for theatrical performances was no longer in Scotland, all of which must have been rather discouraging to any budding native playwrights.

For all genres the increasing pressure to write in English posed further problems, for not all writers made the transition with Drummond's ease. This movement began prior to the Union of the Crowns but that event certainly acted as a catalyst. James, for example, began anglicising while still based in Edinburgh but his motivation for so doing almost certainly lay in his vision of what the future held for him. For poetry I still feel that a more important factor was the general loss of confidence in a specific Scots identity; the loss of the vision of the 'Golden Age' in which the Union, being led by a Scottish king, would predominantly mirror Scottish values. However unrealistic such a view was, it was widely held. In fact James became an absentee monarch and although he did encourage Scots writers in London, they felt outsiders and mostly turned to pale imitation of the movements just about to go out of fashion in London. In this context it is no coincidence that Drummond is above all an imitative writer, building any originality by modifying the ideas of others rather than striking out boldly on his own.

For Prose, as David Reid notes, ecclesiastical writings dominated on both sides of the Tweed but two major differences stand out. First, Scottish writers in general preferred the plain style. Elaborately mannered writing, for Scots, was very much the exception. Also, ecclesiastical writings were more or less the whole story. Where on earth is Scottish prose fiction? Where, above all, is the Prose Romance? One could draw Urquhart in, I suppose, or move just a little beyond 1660 and mention George Mackenzie's *Aretina*. But Urquhart is so much a law unto himself and *Aretina*'s date in fact serves painfully to highlight the length of the earlier silence. The naked fact is that we missed out on the most exciting advances in all three genres and the reasons we can adduce for this provide at best part accounts. In short, a volume which contains some of the finest Scots writing of any time does end with a whimper rather than a roar. Further research is necessary to explain precisely why this is so but no amount of further research will alter the conclusion itself.

Finally, there are one or two practical points to be explained. At an initial meeting of contributors we decided on the best texts to follow. We also agreed