

Older Scots: A Linguistic Reader

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A Review of

Jeremy J. Smith, *Older Scots: A Linguistic Reader*.

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£45

It is a sad truth that, until this book's publication, a teacher wishing to teach Older Scots or older Scottish Literature could not present a fair range of the period's writing with ease. Indeed, beyond the works of the Makars (and possibly writings on religious controversies), most writing from the Older Scots period was only available either in older, sometimes outmoded, editions, if at all. The advent of historical corpora in many ways lessened these issues, but heightened other problems in relation to textual relationships and histories. Jeremy Smith's *Older Scots: A Linguistic Reader* therefore represents a great step forward in the sheer availability of representative texts from the Older Scots period. The fact that the work is presented within a linguistic, not a wholly literary or cultural, framework is to be doubly welcomed. In a sense the book represents the first fruits of a combination of the final phonological and other work of the late Jack Aitken with the philological concentration on the centrality of the text.

The book is divided into two central sections – Part I: Introduction and Part II: Texts (a third section – Part III: Appendix, dealing with 'Older Scots: the first hundred words', is not as central to the book's purpose, perhaps). Part I begins with a section 'About Older Scots', analysing Scots as an historical variety from its first inception to its decline as a written form in the later sixteenth century. Space is given to the 'survival' of spoken and written Scots down to the present, including a discussion of the language's future written. Although the brevity given to the topic means that the discussion is not as nuanced as it might have been, it is welcome nonetheless. The section ends with recommendations for further. 'Transmission' follows, including lengthy discussions of the phonology (as represented by orthography) of Older Scots, along with a discussion both of endonormic standardisation and the exonormic forces which Standard English eventually brought to bear upon the Scottish written form. This linguistic analysis is continued in 'Grammar and Lexicon', which provides a great deal of information on syntax, morphology and lexis in the varieties – chronological and regional – which made up Older Scots. Part I ends with the discussion of 'Style in Older Scottish

Texts', one of the central points of discussion in the critical literature on both literary and linguistic analyses of the corpus. In a relatively short discussion it is not, of course, possible to present *all* elements of the debate surrounding this topic. Users of the book are pointed towards just such debates should they wish to read further.

Part II consists of the texts and the apparatus behind them, beginning with a discussion of the editorial principles underlying them. Essentially this amounts to as diplomatic as possible a representation of the text, not merely in relationship to spelling and capitalisation, but also punctuation, a fairly gentle introduction to the reading of manuscripts and printed texts from this period. Less overtly described, and even more of a good thing in my view, is Smith's desire to introduce students as much as possible to the full range of Scots writing from the time. Central figures are not, of course, ignored; but their contributions are often from less well-known works. The amount of material derived from their work is around the same as that derived from other sources. This must represent something like the experience which literate Scots speakers had at the time. Each text is discussed in linguistic and philological terms. Wherever possible, alternative versions of the same texts are provided, some manuscript, some print. What is exhilarating is the discussion of manuscript or print versions which were produced in the eighteenth century, representing evidence of the connection between the 'golden age' of Scots and figures like Ferguson and Ramsay. Smith also provides texts from the mid seventeenth century where what Scots features they have are few and far between, but still occasionally present.

The section is divided into six parts, based upon a (fairly basic) genre analysis: Documents; Letters; On Language and Literature; Poetry; Prose; Bible Translation. The last is particularly eye-opening, since it permits a glimpse into less well-known. Excerpts come from many different sources, running the gamut from religious controversy to rather dry (and fascinating) legal documents. It is particularly illuminating to observe well-known writers – Douglas being a good example – writing about matters associated with their 'day jobs'.

As must be apparent from this review, I consider this book a major breakthrough in how Older Scots is studied in linguistic *and* literary terms. Inevitably, however, some minor issues might be brought up. The most striking of these is the treatment of the Middle Scots rounded front vowel pronunciations (p.21). When discussing vowel pronunciations, Smith relates /y/ to French *tu*, an exact correlation. With /ø/, however, the word *work* is given as equivalent, with the explanation 'as pronounced by a Southern British English speaker who is 'non-rhotic' (i.e. does not pronounce /r/ in **clerk**, **bar**, **farm**, etc.)'. This is a puzzling equation,

since the vowel in question would be, in RP (Received Pronunciation), /ɜ:/, which shares – approximate – height with /ø/, but is central, barely rounded (if at all) and always long (at least in that accent). It is true that many RP speakers would use this vowel to represent the tense rounded front vowel it lacks, so that *Goethe* might be /gɜ:tə/, but the equation muddies the waters for almost everyone else in the English-speaking worlds. It is surprising that there was not at least an attempt to equate the sound with those found in French *peu* or German *Öl*. This is a very minor point. *Older Scots: A linguistic reader* will become the standard textbook for these matters for the foreseeable future, not only for students but also academics. Professor Smith should be rightly proud of his achievement as well as his commitment to the language and literature of Stewart-Stuart Scotland.