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Observations on Scottish Studies

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TOM SCOTT

Observations on Scottish Studies

THIS periodical is a most welcome and necessary contribution to Scottish studies. No such publication exists in Scotland and no Scottish university has a Department of Scottish Studies, literary or otherwise. Glasgow has a readership in Scottish literature, held by Mr. Alexander Scott, attached to the Department of Scottish History. This about sums up the ghastliness of the position here in Scotland where Scottish literature is reckoned to belong to the past, not the present and the future; and Professor Roy's admirable enterprise in Canada puts Scottish universities to shame. Here in Edinburgh, it is true, we have, nominally, a "School of Scottish Studies." While Vice-Principal Sir Edward Appleton has put Scotland eternally in his debt by the creation of this school, it must be said that it is, as at present constituted, a misnomer: since it is concerned only with folklore studies, it would be more properly called "The School of Folklore Studies in Scotland," as such central areas of study as literature and language are not included; even such as it is, Sir Edward's school is harassed by lack of financial support.

Perhaps I had better make it clear from the outset that I have no pretensions to academic detachment in this matter. I am as disinterested as a husband who sees his wife slowly flogged to death under his captive eyes. Since the late 13th century, Scotland has been oppressed by a neighbour, England, whose amiable intentions towards Scotland have been, and are consistently, those of cultural and political genocide. The Treaty of Union of 1707 gave England the perfect weapon with which to achieve these aims, and the state of Scottish studies today, literary and otherwise, is indicative of the degree of success achieved by the English and the Anglo-Scots. This simple fact, however incredible it may seem to countries outside the circle of English domination, is the first thing to be grasped by any

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student or would-be student of Scottish matters of any sort whatsoever. The so-called Union of 1707 was an "incorporative" one — that is, one that allowed the devouring of Scotland by England, under the euphemism "Britain," which invariably means "England," as "British" means "English."

The first problem of Scottish literary studies is the problem of texts and their availability. Much good work has been done in the past by such clubs as the Bannatyne and the Spalding, and and the Scottish Text Society is still doing admirable work. But these scholarly editions are not easily available to the general public, and above all, to students in universities and elsewhere. There is therefore a great need for the publication of cheap one-volume texts, such as the Oxford University Press Standard Authors series. The immediate need is for some publisher or publishers — why not the combined university presses? — to make available in such format all texts already printed by the Scottish Text Society, and other such editions. The bulk of Scottish mediaeval poetry, for instance, is to be found in the Maitland and Bannatyne MSS. These have been published by the Scottish Text Society — they should be made available as soon as possible in cheaper editions.

One of the first things to strike a student of Scottish literature is the failure to develop a Scots prose. This has been ascribed, of course, to the passing of the homogeneous literary language under the impact of the Kirk's adoption of the Sudron versions of the Bible, as part of their anglicising New Alliance; and to the passing of the Scottish Court to London in 1603 when James VI decided to rule his two kingdoms from London instead of from Edinburgh, with the consequent anglicisation of the court and official writings. Yet before 1603 there was a great deal of Scots prose of considerable quality: had it been developed, I would not be writing this article in the *lingua franca* of Standard. There is need to publish such prose as there is: Murdoch Nisbet's *New Testament* for example, and the works of Buchanan, Bellenden, Major, Pitscottie and others, as well as the magnificent *Complaint of Scotland*. The easy circulation of such works might lead to a prose revival similar to the present poetic one, and to the much-to-be-desired creation of a Scots critical prose.

Perhaps the most fertile ground for students intending to do work of thesis length is the 17th century. It is usual to regard the Scottish seventeenth century as a bleak time for creative

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literature, an era of religious strife, in which little was written but tracts and sermons. Poetry had gone underground together with the native language, except for such poetasting anglicisers as Drummond of Hawthornden, and when it re-emerged in the eighteenth century it was a folksy vernacular poetry culminating in Burns. The truth is that little is really known about this period in literature, and diligent research might produce a very different picture from this current one — and in any case the ecclesiastical literature wants looking into. There is still room for standard editions of the works of such men as Knox, Calderwood, Spottiswoode and others. Certainly the seventeenth century in Scotland is a field that is well worth the tillage of pioneering scholars.

The problem of available texts does not apply to literature written after 1707; compared to the greater age of Scots literature, there is almost an abundance, although even here the quality leaves much to be desired. Certainly Fergusson has been shabbily treated, and a standard edition of his works (taken from the S.T.S. edition by Professor Matthew MacDiarmid) is long overdue, and should lead to the clear recognition that this boy who died aged twenty-four was no mere "precursor" of Burns but a major poet in his own right, and in certain respects even more important to Scottish poetry than Burns. There is still room also for thoroughly scholarly texts of Scott. Much is available through such series as the *Everyman*, but there is room for improvement here too — glossing is particularly bad in popular editions. One would hope that the appearance of the *Scottish National Dictionary* and the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* will make paucity in this regard less excusable than at present. There is much here for Scottish presses to get down to.

The two dictionaries I have mentioned above are each rather more than half-way through the alphabet, and each has already published paperback volumes suitable for binding when complete. This work is of an importance impossible to exaggerate yet each is run on a skeleton staff of no more than the editor and one or two assistants, and each is constantly under sentence of financial death. These dictionaries, housed in the same building in George Square as the School of Scottish Studies, under the aegis of Edinburgh University, will ultimately run to some ten volumes each, comparable to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. It is clear that such an edition will not be easily

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available to the public, and few who have not been regular subscribers will be able to possess them. It is therefore of prime importance that there should be, now that each is in its latter half, competent staffs already at work compiling shorter versions to be published in one volume for sale to the general public and students. At present there is not the slightest sign of this being done, and indeed, the very continuation of the full-scale dictionaries is, as I have said, problematical.

The School of Scottish Studies is itself in desperate need of hard cash. In one small building, formerly an eighteenth-century dwelling-house, next door to where Walter Scott once lived, in George Square, there are housed collections of Gaelic song, verse, tales, and music; a large library of tape collections; Mr. Hamish Henderson's collection of (mainly Scots) folk-songs, ballads and tales; a place-name survey; a material culture section; the Scottish linguistic survey of dialects of both Gaelic and Scots from all parts; an Orkney and Shetland culture section; a very fine library of folklore and other studies; and a transcription section. All this is supported on a shoe-string. More money is spent on the Gaelic side of this work than on Scots — indeed, the major and lowland culture is grossly neglected — partly, it is argued, because Gaelic is disappearing faster, and therefore needs collecting and recording more urgently. This may be so—but it points to the utterly wrong and inadequate attitude underneath the whole concept: that of collecting museum specimens of a supposedly dying culture before it is too late, instead of rushing in to keep the patient alive. We need doctors and medicines, and what we get is an undertaker. The School does publish an admirable magazine twice yearly, but of all the masses of work collected, nothing is being printed or otherwise reissued to the nation from which it is gathered. The heart of the School of Scottish Studies is all in-beat and no out-beat — a mortal abnormality. But of course there is no money for publication—the patient is less expensive dead than alive, a coffin less costly than a living house. The School should engage a financier with the task of digging up money for its maintenance and expansion—he would be well worth it.

But the work of the School of Scottish Studies, as we have seen, is not strictly relevant, since it bypasses the greatest study of all — literature, which is my concern here. Yet the Scottish universities, and perhaps Edinburgh, my own alma mater, in particular, are better placed than ordinary commercial firms for

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the production of critical editions of standard authors. Not only have they the appropriate scholastic authority and connections, but they are in the position to raise funds (to cover possible losses) from such sources as the Carnegie Trust. It is long past time that we had an E.U.P. series of standard Scottish authors comparable to that series of the O.U.P. standard authors mentioned above, and well-known to students and lay readers alike. If the project seems too challenging for one university press to undertake, surely all the Scottish universities could combine resources over a period of time — say ten years — to float the venture. I for one will not be fobbed off with the usual excuse that "there is no money." The money is there — let the universities demand it.

The real trouble is not money, in this regard, but will. There is far too little sense of urgency among the Scottish or Anglo-Scottish academics. Most of these latter whom I have talked to regard the culture they are supposed to advance, having been taught to regard it with a sneer as something inferior to that of our sudron neighbours. In America, in Canada, in many parts of the world, there is great interest in Scottish literature; but when students come to Scotland to follow up this interest they too often meet with ignorance, prejudice, and downright obstructionism. The students therefore starting off with eagerness and enthusiasm, are gradually scunnered and depressed by these defeatists, and lose heart and interest. Sometimes they give up and go home. I have heard of one such going back to America after three months of obstructionism in this country, and saying of a certain professor who had helped to defeat him: "That man is ASHAMED of being a Scot." As long as Scottish literature is treated as an inferior branch of English literature, and as long as universities hold out no education in their own traditions to Scotsmen, offering them nothing better than to become honorary Englishmen, so long will Scottish professors be encouraged to feel ashamed of being Scots, and so long will the Scottish universities fail those overseas students who are more interested in Scottish literature than English. After all, Shakespeare apart, the most influential "English" writers abroad have been Scott, Byron, and "Ossian" Macpherson — Scotsmen all. One of the tasks before students of Scottish literature is to sort out how many writers disguised under the name of English are in fact Scots. So far as I know, T. S. Eliot's trenchant observation that Byron is an instance of Scottish genius achieving itself as best it may in the

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foreign medium of English has not been taken up by any Scottish critic.

I know of a case of a Scottish professor who applied for a literature chair in one of our universities — a chair of English, of course, there being no such thing as a Scottish one. He is a man of international repute as a critic of Scottish literature, apart from his work as a teacher in English and American universities. When asked what he would do with his chair if he got it, he replied that he would make this university the world centre of Scottish literary studies, and when he went on to outline his plan, remarking on the acute interest in Scottish studies in America, he was made so uncomfortable that he had to leave. This is the position here today. No Scots academic who has contributed anything to Scottish literature holds a chair in Scotland. The three most prominent men in this regard have their chairs in English universities — redbrick of course. Another is in Ireland. This is part of what seems to be the English policy of getting all potential Scottish leaders out of Scotland and keeping them out, so that the people and their natural leaders are kept apart. Fortunately there are signs that the Scots may wake up in time to save the nation. Every student of Scottish matters should constantly bear such facts in the forefront of his mind.

My own interest being chiefly in Scots, which is the central literature, I can say little about the Gaelic. Such editions of the Gaelic Text Society as Watson's edition of the *Book of the Dean of Lismore*, which contains Ossianic fragments among two hundred-odd poems, are excellent. Much of what I have said in regard to Scots literature is even more true of the Gaelic. It is too little realized that Scottish literature does not begin with Barbour's *Brus* in the fourteenth century, but with the Erse and Latin hymns of Columba in the sixth. A true survey of Scottish literature would include work in Irish, Gaelic (a development from Irish), Welsh (Taliessin and Aneurin), Latin (Buchanan and Johnston), Scots and English.

If in the course of this article I have concentrated mainly on publishing problems, I hope it is clear that this is because publishing is the main problem at the moment. Without textbooks, what can students do? Postgraduate men may be able to come over and specialize in Edinburgh, which, having the School of Scottish Studies, however inadequate, plus the magnificent Advocates' Library (now the National Library), ought certainly to be the world centre of Scottish studies. But these are specialists,

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and it is of the essence of these studies that less specialized readers and undergraduates should have access to what writers have bequeathed and scholars made available, but which has not yet been published. The truth is that the state of Scottish publishing is so bad that it is past time for the nation to consider whether this essential service to the community and to humanity can be left any longer in private hands. It is ironic that the greatest ballad authority up to date should have been Professor Child, and that his great collection should have been published at Harvard. The tunes to these ballads, collected and edited by Bronson, have also been published at Harvard. Almost the whole history of the Scottish Renaissance has been one of works printed cheaply and almost clandestinely, as if it were a dirty secret, by jobbing printers. The latest disgrace is that the *Collected Poems* of Hugh MacDiarmid (and only now in his seventieth year) have been published in New York and not by any Scottish publisher. Goodsir Smith still awaits collection, and the great Gaelic poet Sorley MacLean goes almost unread now in his own lifetime, although he is a major poet by international standards, and as deserving attention as, say, Dylan Thomas.

Scotland is probably the richest country in Europe for folklore, excepting Hungary: but where is our Bartok? And who would publish him if he came? Harvard? Yale? Oxford? or is there any chance that our Scottish universities might wake from their sleep of centuries to some sense of their responsibility to the Scottish nation and its culture? Here in Edinburgh recently has been published by the Edinburgh University Press a book by a member of the staff of the Department of Philosophy, Dr. George Davie. It is called *The Democratic Intellect*, and has been described by Hugh MacDiarmid as the most important book to be published in Scotland in his lifetime. It is a book of immense erudition, a product of the phenomenon which gives the book its title, and which Scotland and Scottish education gave to the world, and an exemplar of the kind of broad general Scottish education the slow but sure destruction of which by Anglicisers throughout the nineteenth century is its main subject. Yet I have never heard any Edinburgh academic remark on this book except in the most superficial and defensive manner. The Anglicisation has done its work of corruption only too thoroughly, and taught the child to despise the father. It is no consolation to us in Scotland, as we see our own university traditions crumble and decay, to witness also the signs of a

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similar fate, in part government-engineered, overtaking the English universities. Yet the publication of Davie's book has given, I understand, a new lease of life to Saunders's *Scottish Democracy in the Nineteenth Century*, by creating a revived demand for it.

Occasionally one comes across certain *really* disinterested English scholars who promote Scottish studies despite their national background. One of these seems to me to be Professor Croft-Dickinson (died May 1963) of the History Department in Edinburgh, and his editions of historical documents and other works are of great value. What is needed now, in the matter of history, is a thorough study of the Union since 1707 from a Scottish point of view, doing for the nation as a whole (saving the word) what Davie has done for the universities. Edinburgh also boasts Professor T. B. Smith, a man dedicated to the independence of Scottish Law, always menaced by English Law, and whose publications, especially of institutional writings, are compulsory reading. *Scottish Manuscript Sources*, by Dr. William Montgomerie, is a must for the advanced students. But without publication, as Dr. David Craig has recently pointed out, there can be no writing and no reading; it is today and its work on which all else depends.

The supremacy of our own time is paramount not only in relation to the literature of our own time, but also in relation to the literature of the past; the present is not so if it is not forward-looking. So far I have been concerned chiefly with texts and their availability, because that is the first condition of literary studies of any sort. But after the textual problem comes that which interests me most (after creative writing): criticism. As Professor David Daiches has pointed out in his essay on the subject, in his *Collected Essays*, the first need of Scottish literary criticism is for full-length works on individual authors, periods, trends, and the like, as the ground work of a critical history of Scottish literature. Apart from Burns and Scott, and perhaps not even excluding them, the whole of this work remains to be done. This does not mean that nothing at all has been done: a good deal has, but almost entirely worthless. Academic theses which go in for such harmless sports as source hunting, or proving that a mediaeval poet is a mediaeval poet, or that James I had read his Chaucer, or that Dunbar was or was not Dunbar, are so much waste product of literature. Like the examination papers to which they bear so much resemblance, their proper goal is the

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waste paper basket. It does not matter so much whether Dunbar did or did not write a certain poem; it does matter whether the poem was worth writing by Dunbar or anybody else, and that means not whether it is an example of the ballade at its best but whether it embodies values which can help us today, and our children tomorrow, to lead better lives. To decide this, we must ourselves have a vision of human life *sub specie aeternitatis* to which all literature of any age can be referred, and by which the critic must judge it, while acknowledging that his own vision will itself be judged by reality itself. Anything else is not criticism but at best idle and harmless doodling. "Why should I read Dunbar at all?" said an English undergraduate to me once. That is a serious question and one which every reader ought to ask, and not be fobbed off with humbug for an answer.

To answer this question in relation to any piece of literature under his study is the minimal task of the critic. This involves, not merely presenting facts and leaving the educated reader to draw his own conclusions: it is precisely those who cannot draw their own conclusions who most need critical help — the uneducated. This is particularly true today when the future of the race and the welfare of society depend on the rising proletariat. It is for them, the best of them, that we write particularly, and our work must be at once a critique, an interpretation, an evaluation, and a teaching. The people must NOT be left to draw their own conclusions—they must be told in no uncertain terms, where possible, exactly what is going on in a given work, and its significance for them today. No risk is too daring in the attempt to accomplish such a task, and the critic must fearlessly confront the sacred cows of establishments and drive them out of his path where necessary, and smash idols and destroy their temples where necessary, in his pursuit of true value. Anything less belongs in Swift's Academy.

It is my belief that the bulk of Scottish literature has much to give the present day in terms of life more abundant, and is thoroughly permeated by a spirit of genuine, as distinct from nominal, democracy. It is our task as students and critics to prove this to our fellow men to the best of our ability.

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