

1978

Book Reviews

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(1978) "Book Reviews," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol13/iss1/22>

This Book Reviews is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

Book Reviews



David Buchanan. *The Treasure of Auchinleck: the Story of the Boswell Papers*. New York, McGraw-Hill Book Co. 1974. 377 pp. \$14.95.

It could be argued that the title is a misnomer. This "story of the Boswell papers" has an opening chapter of some forty pages that traces what was known of them from the time they were written in the eighteenth century until the 1920s. The rest of the book is a detailed account of what happened to them during the next twenty-five years--that is, from the time Ralph Isham became interested in them. The chapter headings reflect this emphasis. The second chapter, "Col. Isham came to tea," is followed by "Long of Books, Short of Money," a phrase applied to Isham by a fellow-collector. Then comes "Operation Hush," the code name of what surely must have been the greatest of the many blows Isham suffered, which is succeeded by three chapters dealing with his long-drawn-out legal battle that this caused. The final chapters are entitled "Headaches and Heartaches" (whose? chiefly Isham's) and "Fulfillment of Hopes" (whose? chiefly Isham's). Clearly this is Ralph Isham's book.

Nor does Buchanan attempt to hide the fact. In his admirably straight-forward preface he indicates how he became interested. His father had been Isham's lawyer in Scotland,

and he himself was a partner in the same law firm. Donald Hyde, a New York lawyer who had become involved on Isham's behalf in the problems raised by the discovery of new Boswell papers, was convinced that no history of Boswell's letters and journals could be written without a thorough understanding of the many complications of the long-drawn-out legal battle in Scotland. Young Buchanan agreed to examine the records and clarify them; soon he found himself so involved that in his own words "a detailed history of the Boswell papers became the logical end-product." In this he was encouraged by Donald and Mary Hyde; thanks to them Buchanan was introduced to Isham's sons, who allowed him full use of their father's papers; and thanks to Joyce, Lady Talbot de Malahide, and to Mrs. Peter Somervell, he was permitted to use family papers in Ireland and Scotland that pertained to Isham's quest. In short, it is only natural that the hero of this book is Ralph Isham; from the beginning he was at the heart of the considerable research Buchanan carried out.

A brief history of the papers had served as introduction to a limited edition of the first volume of the Yale editions. This was written by Frederick A. Pottle, who for over fifty years has devoted practically all of his time and his very considerable skills to Boswellian studies. He succeeded Geoffrey Scott as editor of the sumptuous edition of Isham's collection, preparing for the press the last twelve of the eighteen volumes. Throughout the long-drawn-out negotiations of the '30s he was at Isham's elbow, advising him as only the expert could on proper interpretations of the record. No one can speak with more authority on the subject of Buchanan's book. Pottle's extended history, not yet published, was written after the original account appeared. Planned as introduction to the forthcoming catalogue of the papers at Yale, it contains, among other matters, a careful examination of Boswell's will (especially the circumstances surrounding its inception) and a detailed study of Boswell's direct descendants and their claims to the papers. Of course Pottle is well equipped to discuss what happened after Isham's initial successes. This history, the result of countless hours of research and meditation, Pottle turned over to Buchanan to be used as he might think proper. Surely such unselfishness must set some kind of record in the history of scholarship. Buchanan of course makes special mention of his "great debt," but the casual reader can have no idea of how great that debt is.

As it is, the reader of the book is getting the story from someone who took no part in the events he narrates. Buchanan is careful to write with supporting documents before him (indeed his legal training often leads him to be meticulous in

footnoting each "fact"), and he is patently objective (his hero "could and occasionally did act outrageously"). Those who had the privilege of hearing Isham tell how he acquired the Malahide papers will be particularly interested in Buchanan's account. "Isham was an exceptionally gifted raconteur," he says, "with a very fertile imagination. According to his friend A. E. Newton, he could never resist embellishing the truth for the sake of a good story. The prevailing inaccuracy of popular accounts of the story . . . stems to a considerable extent from Isham's own colorful narration." A personal experience will support what Buchanan writes. Some time in 1947 Isham invited me to come to his apartment for an early supper (caviar with blini). That was the beginning of a long-drawn-out and unforgettable evening during which among other matters he convinced me that his memory was phenomenal. I then heard his version of how he had acquired the Malahide papers. When he asked me, the next day, to put down in writing what he had said (he felt he had never before told the story so well), I attempted to do so--without success. Nevertheless the outlines of the story are still very clear in my mind. Telling of his first visit to Malahide, he explained that, knowing a direct attack would fail and hearing that Lord Talbot was a dog-fancier, he hastily read up on the subject and, when he reached Dublin, at once went to a conveniently scheduled dog show. There Lord Talbot was pointed out to him. Immediately after that Isham "just happened" to find himself standing near him and made sage comments about the dogs that attracted his Lordship's attention. A conversation followed that resulted in an invitation to tea at Malahide Castle. Well, this charming story (at least Isham told it charmingly) simply cannot be true. Buchanan's account is based on authentic records: a letter Talbot wrote to Isham's London solicitors, a letter from Isham to Talbot and the reply in which Talbot agreed to see him. What Lady Talbot wrote to Isham a year later suggests that it was she who was interested in dogs.

Buchanan is unable to prove or disprove certain stories--the destruction of six leaves from Boswell's journal recounting his affair with Rousseau's mistress, but over and over again he refers to existing documents that authenticate what otherwise we might question. He has been thorough in his research, writes with tact (although he can be blunt when bluntness is called for), and he is fair-minded. Furthermore he tells the story in a lively way, excerpting colorful phrases like the fifth Lord Talbot's spending hours in the attic at Auchinleck working through boxes of family papers and coming down, according to one report, "as black as a miner," or Lady Talbot's secretary describing Isham's search

for more papers at Malahide: "he nearly ate the whole castle."

Buchanan writes with malice towards none, as often as not letting individuals establish themselves by well-selected excerpts from their letters. I have already spoken of Professor Pottle's remarkable unselfishness. This book brings out fine traits in many of those who move through its pages. We learn of the exceptional generosity of James H. Van Alen, without whose financial backing Isham could not have succeeded; we hear of the support provided by the Hydes when things looked blackest; the self-control and understanding of Lady Talbot comes out well in the many excerpts from her letters. But what chiefly remains in one's mind is "the patience, perception, and skilled strategy" of Ralph Isham, the "energy, courage, and enthusiasm" that carried him through blow after discouraging blow, his highly ethical behaviour, seen particularly in his carrying out of the preparation and publication of the Malahide papers, and his extraordinary generosity, notably towards R. W. Chapman after Operation Hush had ended. Lady Talbot's remark to Sir Gilbert Elliott is testimony of what is again and again evident in this book. After observing Isham over a number of years in fair weather and foul, she wrote: "I do not think that he has ever been prompted by any wish for personal gain."

FREDERICK W. HILLES †
Yale University

Alexander Scott. *Selected Poems 1943-1974*. Preston, Akros Publications. 1975. 80 pp. £1.60.

It has always puzzled me how an academic can also be a poet--I mean a real academic, with his particular, necessary habit of mind, not a poet disguised as a Fellow in Creative Writing, grazing on the campus to keep body and soul together. I know such "two-handed engines" exist: there are several in Scotland itself, and Alexander Scott is one of them.

This is not irrelevant, for the scholarship is there, masked but formative, not in the subject matter but in the very substance of the poetry. Scott teaches Scottish literature in the University of Glasgow and, being the man he is, he continuous and adroitly exploits the many elements in the Scottish tradition of poetry--and the Anglo-Saxon, come to that--that suit his own individual purposes--making them new, of course: there never rises from his pages the dehydrating whiff of

either library or museum.

A reason for this must be that he started with the enormous advantage of having Scots as his first language (not dialect, please) in the north-east corner of Scotland, where the Scots (not Gaelic) vocabulary, idiom and ethos have survived more richly and purely than in any other. I've heard him myself, in company with local people in his native Aberdeen, slip into their vivid and idiosyncratic expressiveness as if he'd never left the place.

This clearly colours and shapes the poetry. If you were to list the characteristic and distinguishing qualities of poetry in Scots over the last five centuries, you would find more of them in Scott's poetry than in any other contemporary writer's--more even, perhaps, than in the work of the maestro himself, Hugh MacDiarmid.

His poetry is always grounded in reality (though how can a thing that's grounded fly?--a question I've no answer to) and he deals with it with a total and compulsive honesty. He won't inflate (deflation, now--he's good at that) or sham or falsify or attitudinise. "Great Eneuch," the opening poem in his collection *Mouth Music*, begins thus:

Gin I was great eneuch, thon naukit tree
 Wad bleeze its lane in beauty's lowe for me.
 To fleer the wae o winter out o my een
 And mak a Mey o Mairch, a glamour lee
 Mair true nor truth to tell what truth micht mean,
 Gin I was great eneuch.

Each stanza ends with that same last line, a humility rarer than is decent. It's not, of course, a whining humility. He knows fine he's written a good poem--which allows him to eat his cake and have it, a gift all true poets have.

The forthrightness of his thought and his feeling finds its embodiment in language and rhythms of the same hard masculine directness. The nature of the Scots language lends itself to this and, indeed, its tough, physical qualities, in the hands of lesser practitioners than Scott are often so abused the poem goes off like a splinter bomb of consonants. But one of Scott's remarkable achievements is that out of this linguistic granite he has coaxed and carved poems of a moving grace and tenderness, without (as lesser practitioners do) lapsing into gruesome sentimentality. He does this in "Love is a Garth"--an instance of the scholar taking an old thing and making a new thing out of it.

Love is a garth whaur lilies are gay
 O pree them early!

And roses breir on the emrod brae
 Sae reid and rarely
 To lure the lover's hand to play
 And pree them early.

Love is a garth whaur aipples are fair
 O pree them early!
 And cherries jewel the ryces' hair
 Sae reid and rarely
 To gar the lover linger there
 And pree them early.

Love is a garth whaur lassies are licht
 O pree them early!
 Their lips beglamour the eident sicht
 Sae reid and rarely
 To mak the lover lang for nicht
 And pree them early.

(Incidentally, a kind of "song" impossible to imagine, these days in English.)

It is a fact, which critics who confuse seriousness with solemnity ignore, that all the great poets in Scots have had, amongst other things, a gift of comic (not necessarily witty) invention and Scott has his rich share. Imagine tightly-controlled gusto. He's got it. It finds a spectacular place in that longish, rich, loving and hating poem about his own city of Aberdeen, "Heart of Stone," an extraordinary work and possibly his finest achievement to date.

. . . Our sins in stane,
 The graveyards sprauchle gantan, their granite teeth
 Asclent wi a deid skinkle, a gless girn
 At nichtgouned angels far owre lourd to flie,
 And napped cherubs far owre cauld to flichter,
 And whim-wham scrolls, and whigmaleerie urns,
 The hails jing-bang bumbazed in a sacred scutter
 To fleg the deid wi a fate that's waur nor death.

I've named a few of his most obvious qualities. It's when you find them all mixed together--homogenised, not separate--in one poem that the critics divide. My test piece, used more than once, is "Hollywood in Hades."

Jayne Mansfield, strippit mortal stark
 O' aa her orra duddies--
 For thae that sail in Charon's barque
 Keep nocht aside their bodies--

Comes dandily daffan til Hades' dark,
A sicht to connach studies.

Yet Pluto, coorse as King Farouk,
Gies only ae bit glower--
She's naukit, ilka sonsie neuk,
But he's seen aa afore--
And turns to tell the t'ither spook,
"Marilyn, move outowre!"

I've known people of some general discrimination, who have dismissed this as brash, vulgar, coarse, unfeeling. I think not. I think only a superficial reading could find it so. It's tough enough, there's not a tear or a sigh in it; it's even a kind of joke; but it's a very woeful joke, and under that surface--as part of it, rather--I recognize a true tenderness, a true pity for the fate of the two tragic "sexpots" it's concerned with and a resenting acceptance of what the world and death can do to frail human beauty. That note, not unknown in Scots poetry, is to be heard more than once in these poems--in "Dear Deid Dancer" for instance, on the life and death of Isadora Duncan. It's a loving, bitter and rebellious note in spite of the black humour of its expression.

Notice the subject of these two poems. Scholar and historian of literature as Scott is, he finds the material for his poetry very much in the here and now: Glasgow gangs, pop singers, the dying life in the Hebrides, day to day events both public and private--all is his grist.

Of comparatively late he has taken to writing in English also, and for him, being bilingual, the language question (Scots or English? too often argued on grounds that have nothing to do with literature) doesn't exist. He has made his own position very clear: "I'm not bothered . . . by having to make a choice between my two languages. The choice is already made for me, by the initial words themselves, as they rise into the consciousness. If they speak in Scots, I write the poem in Scots. If they speak in English, that becomes the speech of the poem."

Allowing for the differences in the nature of the languages, one finds, of course, the same qualities of mind and sensibility in the English poems as in the Scots, the same satiric, sometimes outrageous wit, the same gentleness, the same passion, the same "coarseness," the same psychological energy that makes a poem something almost solid enough to be lifted off the page with the hand. I feel all the same, in spite of considerable achievements in the Suddron tongue ("From You, My Love," for example) he is, as yet, more at home in Scots--or is it somehow the other way around? At any rate no one

is handier at exploiting the extraordinary *pithiness* of the Scots language. Indeed, he has put his own earmark on poems like "Scotched," where the briefest of lines carry the maximum of satiric meaning. Here are some of its tiny explosive stanzas. (There are forty-four of them in all.)

Scotch God

Kent His
Faither.

Scotch Religion

Damn
Aa.

Scotch Education

I tellt ye
I tellt ye.

Scotch Fraternity

Our mob uses
The same razor.

Scotch Initiative

Eftir
You.

Scotch Generosity

Eftir
Me.

Scotch Geniuses

Deid
--Or damned.

Scotch Passion

Forgot
Mysel.

NORMAN MacCAIG
Edinburgh

David Buchan, *The Ballad and the Folk*. London and Boston. Routledge and Kegan Paul. 1972. xii + 326 pp. \$15.00.

David Buchan (editor). *A Scottish Ballad Book*. London and Boston. Routledge and Kegan Paul. 1973. xi + 232 pp. \$11.75.

It would be difficult to deny that the five volumes of Francis James Child's *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (Boston 1882-1898) constitute the beginning of systematic scholarship in the field of research into the traditional ballads transmitted in the English language. Derived from principles developed by the Danish scholar Svend Grundtvig, the Child canon of 305 individual ballads and their variants--from 'Riddles Wisely Expounded' to 'The Outlaw Murray'--has with justification been the basic corpus and categorization for twentieth-century ballad scholarship, whether in the search for more variants, the quest for "living" versions in current oral tradition, the comparative study of renderings of the same ballad type, or more general and theoretical statements regarding form, contents, and transmission of these "songs that tell a story". Similarly, Bertrand Bronson's extensive four-volume edition of *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads* (Princeton 1959-1972) has undoubtedly become the definitive published counterpart of the musical aspects of Child's texts, adding at the same time numerous variants to the original type catalogue. Indeed, if it were not for the retention of Child's organization and numbering, one might well now be referring to 'Bronson Ballads' instead of Child Ballads. Matching landmarks in the interpretative study of traditional ballads in English are presumably books such as Gummere's *The Popular Ballad* (1907), Louise Pound's *Poetic Origins and the Ballad* (1921), Gerould's *The Ballad of Tradition* (1932), Entwistle's *European Balladry* (1939), Coffin's *The British Traditional Ballad in North America and Laws' Native American Balladry* (both 1950), and, despite its foreign subject matter, Lord's *The Singer of Tales* (1960).

It is this reviewer's opinion that David Buchan's *The Ballad and the Folk*, significantly winning the Chicago Folklore Prize for 1973 in worldwide competition, is another such milestone in ballad scholarship and will in years to come act as a stimulus to both research and teaching (it has already done both these things for me). Even those who refuse to be stimulated by it will not be able to ignore and circumnavigate it. Its impact is bound to come. Why?

The reasons are several. Following in the footsteps of Parry and Lord, Buchan deliberately and persuasively argues for a closer correlation of literature and society in the study of oral literature, i.e. he regards the ballad, as well as other folk-narrative genres, as a folk-cultural phenomenon which cannot be dissociated from the singer, the society in which he lives, the locale in which he happens to find himself, even the picture on his wall. The folk society which the author depicts to illustrate this point of view (by no means as accepted as one would have expected in the eighth

decade of this century) is that of the Scottish north-east "benorth the Mounth", an area whose comparative isolation helped to produce a distinct regional culture between the mid-14th and mid-18th centuries, an agricultural society whose nucleated farming townships served as corporate units in communal organization and co-operative activities, a "border region" where Highlander and Lowlander, Celt and non-Celt strove for supremacy, where societal patterns clashed and customs mingled, where the familial fused with the feudal, an environment "eminently suitable for a sturdy oral tradition," indeed a life-style and a habitat so ideal for ballad making and telling (singing) that Buchan feels justified to emend J. E. Housman's famous dictum to: "Traditional balladry flourished in a nonliterate, homogeneous, agricultural society, dominated by semi-independent chieftains, that is situated in a remote, hilly, and border region where cultures meet and feuds and wars abound; this kind of society provided both subjects for ballad-story and occasions for ballad performance, and lasted till the advent of widespread literacy" (p. 47). This, of course, describes the north-east in a nutshell, and it is perhaps a little unfair and more than bold to single out this particular region in a Scotland which, at least in the eighteenth century, has been claimed to have been "a nation of ballad singers and lovers"; but when one remembers that almost two-thirds of the one thousand or so Scottish texts in Child's volumes come from the north-east tradition, and when one recalls that this high proportion (within the British Isles) is likely to be higher rather than lower in the much increased Bronson compendium, one is perhaps more inclined to forgive the author his understandable regional pride. Anybody not convinced by figures should also take a closer look at the evidence provided by Buchan for the direct influence which the regional social conditions and individual families and persons of the north-east have had on the contents of so many ballad stories.

It is against this folk-cultural backcloth of northeastern agricultural society that the author parades and examines the role and importance of the individual singer and his or her repertory in the recreation and transmission of ballads, and of course of other items of (oral) tradition. The central, and undoubtedly weightiest and most innovative section of the book is therefore devoted to an account of the balladry of Mrs. Brown of Falkland who, as Anna Gordon, was born in Old Aberdeen in 1747 and also died there in 1810. Despite Child's high opinion of her artistry, this may at first glance appear to be a surprising and rather incongruous choice when one considers her social standing and upbringing (her father a university professor, her husband a minister of the church),

as well as Bronson's evaluation of her considerable re-creative skills and her "higher than average level of well-bred literacy". No fermtoun lass this! And yet, although she may never have sung a single one of her ballads to the farming folk, her repertory, of which a corpus of 33 ballad stories has survived in written form, clearly has its origins among those farming folk, particularly in the agricultural communities around Braemar where her main source, her aunt Anne Forbes (Mrs. Farquharson) learned most of her songs. The fact that her other two chief sources, her mother (Lillias Forbes) and a family nurse, were also women is largely responsible for her taste in ballad stories and her choice of wording. For David Buchan therefore, "Mrs. Brown's stock . . . may perhaps represent a woman's tradition within the regional tradition". What further makes Anna Brown a fascinating singer to study is the observation how, standing at the very end of the oral period, she managed to keep her oral tradition, learned largely when she was still a preliterate child, mentally quite distinct and separate from written material.

That hers is the oldest Scottish ballad corpus surviving for an individual tradition bearer and that in several instances the three manuscripts in which it has been preserved allow us to gather first-hand information about the changes made in the course of time and as the result of a strongly aural process of ballad recitation, is another set of factors which recommend her as one of the most rewarding persons to investigate, with regard to both the substance and the format of her ballads. Naturally, one would have preferred a singer completely immersed in, and belonging to, the rural communities of the north-east, but as so often in life one presumably cannot have everything, and the Jeannie Robertsons of Anna Gordon's days simply did not leave any written (or tape-recorded) records behind.

If we can accept Mrs. Brown as a true representative of that ideal ballad region, the Scottish north-east, then we have no difficulty in understanding the heart of the book, the three very fully substantiated chapters on "The Structure of the Ballads," in terms of that tradition, while recognizing this particular singer's special gift for formal balances and smooth transitions. To this reviewer, the real value of the book stands or falls with the degree to which readers can accept the premises underlying these crucial chapters, and he for one, acknowledging that they do not exclusively apply to ballads but in many ways also to other folk-narrative and poetic genres, has been persuaded by the author's arguments to find them acceptable, indeed to regard them as extremely illuminating and as opening up all kinds of new and exciting approaches to ballad scholarship. Vague notions of "incre-

mental repetition" will no longer do, and college teachers had better read Buchan before subjecting their students to a treatise on ballad structure. What is so productively convincing about these chapters is not the realization that ballads do have discernible and definable structure, but the discovery that these structures can be accommodated in a small number of discrete models--the binary, the trinary, and the annular--and, above all, that these are pervasive and therefore to be found on all levels of ballad recreation--the linguistic realization, the metric form, the melodic shape, the narrative strategies, and the deployment of characters. It is unfortunately impossible for a review to deal adequately with this whole complex of questions concerning architectonic organization and formulaic patterning. Suffice it to say that Buchan has finally found a way of proving, and of making visual, the long suspected structural maneuvers necessary to facilitate, nay make possible, a satisfying oral ballad tradition, and to understand fully each performance as a recreational act producing a new "original" and yet the "same" narrative song.

Despite their extent (covering more than a third of the book), the last three parts of Buchan's study, the chapters on "The Tradition in Transition" (1750-1830) and on "The Modern Tradition" (since 1830), turn out to be a kind of coda, not only in a chronological but also in a thematic sense. That does not mean that they are a mere codicil, redundant maybe or superfluous, but rather a sketching out of later and less "classical" processes of ballad performance and tradition. The ballads of James Nicol and Bell Robertson, as well as the newly developed sub-genre of the Bothy Ballad are depicted against the background of changing social patterns and altered material and economic environments, the impact of literacy on the learning and retention of ballad texts is traced with the help of numerous examples, and the work of some of the most important regional ballad collectors--Peter Buchan, Gavin Greig, amongst others--is presented with insight and an astounding amount of detailed knowledge. Anybody interested in the highways and byways (and maybe even the hedges) of the canonizing activities of eminent folklorists and in the all too human practices of editors, collectors and contributors alike, will find the relevant chapters a rich source of information, attempting to cut through prejudice, personal chemistry, pious nonsense, and misinformed controversy. When one considers the many distorting influences involved in the process of getting a ballad out of audible circulation into visible print, it is surprising that the printed version should bear any resemblance at all to the narrative song first collected from a ballad singer of tradition but, then, how much visual permanency is rightfully to be accorded to the fleeting

product of an aural process, anyhow?

One may regret the absence of at least a few pages on the music of the ballads, one may disagree with certain terminological contrasts such as "oral" vs. "verbal" or "Pict" vs. "Celt", one may even, in places, wish to hear more about the shattered pieces that do not fit the jigsaw so neatly and that subtract maybe just a little from the ideal image of the Scottish north-east as God's own ballad paradise, but however one may feel about such, largely peripheral matters, there can be no doubt that this is a book that has set new standards--in the meticulousness of its scholarship, in the presentation of its views, in the unraveling of many strands, in the felicity of its language. One pities those authors whose books were candidates for the Chicago Folklore Prize in 1973 when *The Ballad and the Folk* was their competitor.

It was a happy idea on the part of the publisher to ask the author for a volume of Scottish ballad texts (and some tunes), as an extension to the first volume in which there is no room for complete ballads, and one notes with pleasure that the ballads used to illustrate the various periods of the ballad tradition of the northeast also form the corpus of *A Scottish Ballad Book*: Anna Brown's ballads for the period of "Oral Tradition," James Nicol's ballads for the "Tradition in Transition," and Bell Robertson's ballads, as well as the Bothy Ballads, for the "Modern Tradition." Obviously, such a choice is restricting but it certainly makes sense in conjunction with the earlier book and provides unlimited scope for those who wish to test David Buchan's theories for themselves or who would like to have a collection of ballads representing several phases of one particular Scottish tradition. An additional advantage, and by no means the least, lies in the very nature of the texts printed, i.e. actually realized, non-normalized versions which do not pretend to be in any false and misleading sense "definitive."

Each one of these two volumes is eminently worth having but together they are the best thing to have come along in the study of Scottish folklore, for many a year. How did we ever do without them?

W. F. H. NICOLAISEN

State University of New York at Binghamton

Robert Kirk, *The Secret Common-Wealth & A Short Treatise of Charms and Spels*. Edited with a commentary, by Stewart Sanderson. (The Folklore Society: Mistletoe Series.)

Cambridge/Totowa, New Jersey: D. S. Brewer Ltd/Rowman and Littlefield. 1976. 133 pp. 2 plates. £3.

When the Wife of Bath, commenting upon the ubiquity of friars, says, "This maketh that ther ben no fayeryes" (D 872), she expresses a view which, however reasonable it may appear to be, is ultimately unfounded. From its inception, Christianity has shown a remarkable ability to accommodate within its many mansions the most disparate theological bedfellows, among the most persistent of which is what Evans-Wentz calls "the fairy faith."¹ Thus, John, the carpenter in *The Miller's Tale*, includes in his pater-noster a "nyght-spel" directed against elves and "wightes" (A 3479-85),² and some three hundred years later we find the same combination of Christian doctrine and fairy lore flourishing in the Scottish Highlands. The nature of this lore and its somewhat surprising compatability with Christian belief provide the basis for three treatises by the Rev. Robert Kirk of Aberfoyle (1644-92), all recently edited by Stewart Sanderson for the Folklore Society.³ In addition to being delightful--Sanderson rather daringly calls them "enchanting"--Kirk's essays are of considerable importance, not only to folklorists, but to students of Scottish culture, religion, history, and literature as well. In spite of some minor deficiencies, Sanderson's edition serves all of these interests effectively.

A minister of the Church of Scotland, Robert Kirk served first at Balquhider (1664-85) then at Aberfoyle (1685-92), his father's parish and the place of his birth. Throughout his career, Kirk was engaged in projects resulting from his concern for the spiritual well-being of his parishioners. Kirk's concern was not misplaced, nor was he, like some of his contemporaries, guilty of sentimentalizing his flock; rather, in 1674, he writes of "this most illiterat people among whom heaven has designed me to be" (p. 6). The language of Perthshire at this time was still Gaelic, and Kirk believed that the evangelical mission of the Church could be advanced by the translation into Gaelic of the psalms, catechism, and Bible. Kirk's industry, which produced a Gaelic metrical psalter (1684), a revision of Sir Hugh Campbell's Gaelic translation of Laurence Charteris's catechism (1688), and a transliteration into Roman characters of the Bedell Gaelic Bible (1689), established him as a linguistic authority, and he compiled a glossary of Gaelic terms for inclusion in John Ray's *Dictionarium Trilingue*. Kirk's contribution was published posthumously as part of W. Nicholson's *The Scottish Historical Library* (1702).⁴

To this point, there seems to be nothing unusual about Robert Kirk although his scholarship, directed toward the im-

provement of his parishioners, is certainly admirable. But Kirk was a seventh son, "a distinction," as Sanderson says, "which is commonly held to confer the power of second sight" (p. 5), and his father's parish was the location of a celebrated fairy mound which, appropriately enough, was not only to become the site of Kirk's death, according to local legend, but was undoubtedly connected with the belief, still held by some in Aberfoyle, that Kirk had gone to Fairyland (pp. 18-20).⁵ Kirk's scholarly inclinations, his intense interest in his parishioners, and the circumstances of his birth combined to produce in him a lifelong curiosity about what are now referred to as parapsychological phenomena: fairies, ghosts, divination, second sight, charms, talismans, etc. In a notebook kept during a visit to London in 1689, Kirk writes, "It may be supposed not repugnant to Reason or Religion to affect an invisible polity, or a people to us invisible, having a Commonwealth[,] Laws and Oeconomy. . . ." A few lines later, he adds, "it is no more necessity for us to know there are such Beings and Subterranean Cavern-inhabitants, then . . . to know distinctly the polity of the 9 orders of Angels . . ." (p. 15). In short, one who trusts only in the evidence of his senses cannot possibly be a Christian. This attitude pervades Kirk's several investigations of parapsychological phenomena, all of which were copied by one Robert Campbell into "a small leather-bound notebook" (p. 24) in 1691. This notebook, now in the library of Edinburgh University and designated MS. La. III. 551, is here edited for the first time.⁶

In the first part of Kirk's investigations, *The Secret Common-Wealth*, he describes fairies in terms of their origins, physical appearance, food, dress, speech, dwellings, customs, laws, books, social organization, and especially, their relationships with human beings. Along the way, we are also informed about ghosts, witches, prophetic dreams, and second sight. The last of these is treated at some length since "Seers" can often detect the presence of fairies when those not similarly gifted, or afflicted, cannot. Kirk tells us that fairies are "of a midle nature betwixt man and Angell" (p. 49) and have literally been driven underground by the coming of Christianity (p. 51). Since they cannot, in their subterranean dwellings, produce their own food, they are forced to take ours, although they sometimes provide some small service in return, entering houses late at night, for example, and cleaning kitchens (p. 50); thus, whether we know it or not, we "labour for that abstruse people, as well as for ourselves" (p. 51). Fairies adopt the speech and dress of the country in which they live (p. 55), but they change residences "at the beginning of each quarter of the year" (p. 51). Some people have fairy doppelgangers (Kirk says, p. 52, that each

of these "Reflex-men" is called a "*coimimeadh* or co-walker") which may haunt them "both befor and after the Originall is dead" (p. 52). Among the more unusual particulars in Kirk's description are his reference to fairy books "much like the Rosicrucian stile" (p. 57) and his judgment that "for swearing and intemperance they are not observed so subject to these irregularities, as to Envy, Spite, Hypocrisy, lying and dissimulatione" (p. 62).

Of the fifteen sections into which *The Secret Common-Wealth* is divided, the first eleven deal principally with fairies, the last four largely with second sight. Kirk prefaces his treatise with six Biblical quotations and refers to other Biblical passages quite frequently within the treatise itself. For him, the existence of the phenomena he describes is beyond question; he says, "the Historys of all Ages give as many plain exemples of extraordinary occurrences as make a modest inquiry, not contemptible" (p. 62). One can, however, distinguish between the respective treatments of fairy lore and second sight. Usually, the information concerning fairies is presented either without evidence or is attributed to the testimony of anonymous informants.⁷ For second sight, however, Kirk says "I add these subsequent relationes, Som wherof I have from my acquaintance with the actors and patients, And the rest from Eye-witnesses to the matter of fact" (p. 69).

The Secret Common-Wealth is followed by *A Succinct Account of My Lord Tarbott's relationes* and *A Short Treatise of the Scottish-Irish Charms and Spels*. The first of these contains the text of a letter from Tarbat to Robert Boyle⁸ together with extensive "annotations with animadversions" (p. 73) written by Kirk. Tarbat's letter is an account of second sight in the Scottish Highlands during the period 1652-55. Beginning as a skeptic, Tarbat now is willing to put himself "on the hazard of being laughed at for Incredible Relationes" (p. 75). Kirk's commentary consists largely of corrections to and amplifications of Tarbat's remarks. The first part of the commentary lists ten general points, several of which are subdivided, the second, nine hypothetical questions and objections "against the Realitie, and Lawfulness of this Speculation" (p. 94); Kirk's employment on the catechism seems to be an obvious influence here. Although some of the information in Kirk's commentary repeats material from *The Secret Common-Wealth*, most of it is new. We learn, for example, "of a verie young maid . . . that in one night learned a large piece of Poesy, by the frequent repetition of it from one of our nimble and courteous Spirits, whereof, a part was pious, the rest superstitious (for I have a copy of it)[.] But no other person were ever heard to repet it befor, nor was the maid capable to compose it of her selfe" (pp. 86-87). Regrettably,

Kirk does not quote the poem. As in *The Secret Common-Wealth*, he uses the Bible to argue on behalf of the Christian basis for belief in fairies and second sight. He also makes a rather ingenuous appeal to science: ". . . Every Age hath som secret left for it's discoverie, and who knows, but this intercourse betwixt the two kinds of Rational Inhabitants of the sam Earth may be not only beleived shortly, but as freely intertain'd, and as well known, as now the Art of Navigation, Printing, Gunning, Riding on Sadles with Stirrops, and the discoveries of Microscopes, which were sometimes as great a wonder, and as hard to be beleiv'd" (p. 90). The comparison of "Sadles with Stirrops" and the existence of fairies, whatever else it proves, attests to the depth of Kirk's convictions.

In *A Short Treatise of the Scottish-Irish Charms and Spels*, Kirk reasonably assumes that "most of these Spels relate to som-thing in the Christian Religion" since they "have words taken out of the Holy Bible . . ." (p. 105). Various charms and spells are both reported and quoted in the *Treatise*, most of them "Exorcisms used for casting out Diseases and pains, as heretofore they were, to cast out Devils" (p. 113). The remainder of the manuscript contains a glossary of the terms used in all three treatises, a brief discussion of charms, superstitions, and the King's Evil, and some random notes (see Sanderson, p. 24).

Kirk's glossary is an extremely interesting document. Modeled on the "hard-word" dictionaries of the day, Kirk's list contains more than 100 entries⁹ and seems to perform at least two functions simultaneously. First, of course, the most important terms in his treatises are defined; if, as Sanderson suggests, Kirk was writing for a wide audience, such definition, especially of the Gaelic terms, was essential. But the very nature of a glossary, with its connotations of authority, serves to legitimize precisely those concepts for which Kirk was seeking acceptance. To define "Faunes" as "a Rank of daemons betwixt Angels and men" (p. 116; cf. the same definition used for fairies, p. 49) places them within the Christian hierarchy of creation by definition; as far as I can tell, this definition is not found elsewhere. "Siths," which had been used as an alternate term for "fairies" at the beginning of *The Secret Common-Wealth* (p. 49) are here defined as "people at rest and in peac" (p. 119), and in a splendid example of folk-eyymology, elves are defined as "a Tribe of the Fayries that use not to exceed an ell in stature" (p. 115). A "bier," we are told, is "a coffin that is alwayes reserv'd for the corps of the *poor people*, and kept within the church" (p. 114; my italics), another apparently indiosyncratic definition. I have not checked all of Kirk's definitions in the *OED*, *DOST*,

and Jamieson, but I suspect that several others may upon examination prove to be unparalleled.

Stewart Sanderson has provided us with the first edition of Kirk's treatises which is both reliable and complete. The amount of scholarly apparatus is limited by the requirements of the series in which the edition appears but still should be adequate for most purposes. Sanderson's commentary contains a brief statement of the significance of Kirk's treatises, a discussion of Kirk's life and literary endeavors, an admirably lucid treatment of textual matters, and a cogent discussion of fairy lore. There are notes to both the commentary and text, a highly selective bibliography, an index and two photographic plates of the manuscript.

In his treatment of the text, Sanderson has attempted to reproduce Ms. La. III. 551 as faithfully as possible, deletions and revisions included. Thus he has retained the original orthography and punctuation. Considering the errors which characterize earlier editions, one can understand Sanderson's fidelity to a manuscript which is not in itself an important document either linguistically or paleographically, but the end result is somewhat unfortunate. The idiosyncracies of Campbell's or Kirk's spelling while curious are not significant, and Sanderson's transcription makes it virtually impossible to distinguish orthographic eccentricities from typographical errors (e.g., *veiw*, p. 59). Had the spelling been normalized, and the punctuation modernized, the text would have been made far more readable without obscuring the nature of the original.

Sanderson's notes to the text are generally helpful, but they are rather inconsistent. Some of Kirk's references to the Bible, for example, are fully noted, whereas others are not noted at all. There are virtually no cross-references in the notes in spite of Kirk's tendency to discuss the same issues in different places (the index is of some help here), and there are very few notes to other primary sources on fairies which either contradict or support Kirk's views. The bibliography, brief though it is, nevertheless has a curious omission; it includes Martin Martin's *A Description of the Western Islands* and Dr. Johnson's *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* but unaccountably fails to mention Boswell's *Tour of the Hebrides* which contains an extended discussion of second sight. Boswell fares no better in the index from which he is excluded in spite of a reference to him on p. 33; the index also omits most of Kirk's Biblical references as well as Nicholson, Pepys, and perhaps others referred to in the commentary, text, or notes.

However carefully a book is made, and considerable care has gone into Sanderson's edition, it is rarely free from error;

fortunately, the errors and omissions in this book are neither numerous nor crucial. What is important is that Sanderson has made available a very good edition of several extremely interesting and valuable works.

Errata

- p. 34, 1, 1. 12 *awakening* and *awaking*
 p. 47, n. 1 *was* for *were*
 p. 47 two passages in parentheses should be in brackets
 p. 50, n. 1, 1. 3 *and* for *as*
 p. 127 s. v. "Colosnach" *dopplegangers* for *doppelgangers*
 p. 128 " "

NOTES

1. W. Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* (Oxford, 1911; repr. University Books, 1966).

2. For similar spells, see Kirk, pp. 110-13.

3. Although Sanderson's title mentions only two treatises, there is a third, "My Lord of Tarbott's Relationes," included as well.

4. See Sanderson, pp. 3-12.

5. Whether Kirk was "taken" by apoplexy, fairies, or both is still locally in dispute; see Evans-Wentz, pp. 89-90.

6. Kirk's *Secret Common-Wealth* was first published in 1815 and was based on a manuscript which has since disappeared; see pp. 21-30 for a discussion of textual matters.

7. A notable exception is Kirk's report of "a marvellous illapse and visione" (pp. 61-2).

8. For Kirk's connections with Boyle, see esp. pp. 9-12.

9. For some reason, these are not alphabetically ordered after the initial letter.

WALTER SCHEPS

State University at Stony Brook

Philip Bradley. *An Index to the Waverley Novels*. Metuchen,

N. J. The Scarecrow Press. 1975. xiv, 681 pp. \$25.00

When Bradley's *Index* came to my door, I happened to be reading Roy Bongartz's article on "Dowsing" in *Americana* (September 1975). This started me on a vain search for *dowsing* in the *Index*. Instead I found DOUSTERSWIVEL, Herman, whose name incidentally is the novelist's playful neologue (*douster*, water-diviner, and *swivle*, a great wind sometimes following use of the hazel rod to discover treasure, etc. as in Scott's *Secret History of the Court of James the First* and his note to *The Fortunes of Nigel*). The sole entry in the *Index* under *divining rod* cites that note, and one of the nineteen entries under *Dousterswivel* reads "German adept working for Sir Arthur Wardour (ch. 17)."

What goes without mention is that the fullest use of the divining rod in the Waverley Novels comes at the end of ch. 17 of *The Antiquary*, with Dousterswivel cutting a forked hazel twig and pacing the ruins of St. Ruth's Priory until "the divining-rod" pointed down in the former kitchen, where a servant easily dug through rubbish to a living well. The next chapter opens with the gullible Sir Arthur taking up "the mysteries of the divining-rod, as a subject on which he had formerly conversed with Dousterswivel."

Then I read Mr. Bradley's disarming introductory statement that the "Index has taken nearly three years of spare time," that it "does not claim to be complete," and that choosing headings "has not always been easy." To this should be joined the biographical data that Philip Bradley is Senior Librarian at the College of Technology, Dundee, a professional indexer, and a Fellow of the Library Association, the FLA having been awarded for an earlier "index to the supernatural in all the important work of Scott."

Yet the present *Index* has no entry under amulet, charm, conjuring, curse, demonic possession, destiny, divination, evil eye, familiar, giant, gnome, guardian spirit, metamorphosis, palmistry, racketing devil, ritual, sibyl, soothsaying, spell, sylph, taboo, warning spirit, will o' the wisp, or worriecow. The references under diablerie, magic, and omens are certainly too few. And the coverage of astrology ignores *The Pirate*, in which that mistress of the elements, Norna of Fitful Head, wears an apron embroidered with astrological figures and a girdle with "silver ornaments, cut into the shape of planetary signs."

For a change, consider Scott's occasional practice of calling on the typical Claude or Rosa landscape to serve instead of a full scale description by the author. Anyone interested would find no Claude entry, only one under "a Claude Lorraine glass," and in Art 1. By name of person, two allusions to

ROSS, Salvator.

But any further quibbling about human error would be misleading. The overwhelming fact remains that Bradley's *Index* is an abundantly useful improvement on its forerunners:

Rev. Sidney W. Cornish's THE WAVERLEY MANUAL (Edinburgh, 1871);
 May Rogers' THE WAVERLEY DICTIONARY (Chicago, 1879);
 Henry Grey's KEY TO THE WAVERLEY NOVELS (London, 1882);
 and
 Margaret F. A. Husband's DICTIONARY OF THE CHARACTERS IN THE WAVERLEY NOVELS (London, 1910--reprinted New York, 1962).

Bradley omits the plot summaries that moved Grey's *Key* through several printings, but these are readily got at in the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* and--of the major novels--in compilations of book digests.

Nor would an apparently uncalled for comparison of the *Index* and the *Scottish National Dictionary* prove Bradley an inferior lexicographer. Take the one Gaelic phrase that every Lowlander--and many a Southron--knows, the variously spelled doch-an-dorris. Under *deuchadorris*, *deochandorus*, etc., the *S.N.D.* has "a stirrup-cup; Gaelic, *deoch an doruis*, literally a door-drink" and offers four quotations, Sir Walter being represented by *The Two Drovers*. Under DRINKS (alcoholic). 2 By purpose, the *Index* has "stirrup-cup, given by landlord at door of inn, not charged . . . drunk by party in liquor adapted to their various ranks . . . bad luck not to drink . . . the last drink before parting." Eight passages are cited in which two bovine beneficiaries of the genial custom are not neglected.

The topical inclusiveness of Bradley's work is most evident in his "Principal Subject Entries." Let any user start with Animals and he will be tempted on to other headings such as Dogs and Horses or perhaps Birds and Fish. His fancy may then lead him to Food, Meals, Drinks, Inns, and Landlords. Columns of references await him if he turns next to Houses, Clothing, and Castles. The military come under the ample rubrics of Army, Battles, Wars, and Weapons. Lawyers are listed near supporting data on Laws and Law Terms. But the professions are chiefly represented by Clergymen, distant cousins of Monks and Nuns. Before a searcher is through, he has probably moved on to Monasteries and Churches, Covenanters and Cameronians, Roman Catholics and Saints. He can linger in cities, Edinburgh, Perth, and London, or revel in Words and Proverbs. Such byways as Art, Music, Songs, and Newspapers will not keep him from the main highway of Books, ninety columns long. But

the greatest usefulness will probably be found in the fourteen columns on the Author of Waverley and the twenty-two on the Waverley Novels. The latter provides lists, dates of publication and of narrative events, settings, fictional conception and development, motivation and characterization, sources, authorial purpose and incidental criticism, something about manuscripts and the first collected edition, short stories, and rejected titles.

The arrangement is almost consistently governed by common sense. The easy references are to chapter and paragraph. The base is broad, going beyond Scott's long and short prose fiction to the notes and introductions of the first editions and of the Magnum Opus collection as well. If any purchaser hesitates over the price, \$25.00, let him consider that, with approximately 25,000 entries, the *Index* exchanges ten entries for every penny invested. No better bargain can be found in these inflated times.

COLEMAN O. PARSONS
Yale University