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Brief Notice

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R. P. Draper, ed. *The Literature of Region and Nation*. London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's Press. 1989. xii + 265 pp.

This volume makes available a selection of papers from what was obviously an exciting conference, held at Aberdeen in 1986. The Aberdeen organizers, rather than simply re-evaluating the literature of their own region or nation, instead wanted to explore on a comparative basis the special qualities of literary traditions that are geographically based and consciously differentiated from a central or universal high cultural canon. Along with the expected contributions of such English or American regionalists as Wordsworth, George Eliot, Hardy, and Faulkner, conference papers ranged over Ireland, Wales, Australia, Canada, Nigeria, South Africa, Belgium, and Luxembourg.

Several of the essays focus on specifically Scottish topics. Tom Crawford compares attitudes to history and region in Gunn's *The Silver Darlings* and Gibbon's *A Scots Quair* (incidentally providing one of the clearest structural analyses available for the Gibbon trilogy). David Hewitt re-examines eighteenth-century attitudes to Scotisms, to argue that the conflict over language was ultimately productive for Scottish writers, in stimulating Scottish linguistic scholarship, flexibility and self-consciousness. Iain Crichton Smith contributes a rather glum, but thoughtful, autobiographical essay on his experience writing both in Gaelic and English. Robin Lawson-Peebles uses a previously unnoticed letter from William Carlos Williams to Neil Gunn to raise some interesting comparative

points about the two writers' attitudes to locality, giving particular attention to Gunn's *The Drinking Well* (1959). And Bruce Clunies Ross's essay on the contemporary Australian poet Les Murray raises fascinating questions about Murray's conscious use in writing about Australian of his Scots Gaelic ancestry and of Gaelic poetic models.

But it will not only be the specifically Scottish essays that interest *SSL* readers. Many of the other pieces here raise points of comparison or contrast with the Scottish experience, but two are especially relevant. The editor's introduction gives a useful overview of changing critical attitudes to "anti-metropolitan" literature, balancing his ringing assertion that "We are all regionalists now" against some cautious comments on the negative literary consequences of an over-strident nationalism. Seamus Heaney contributes a masterly and closely-argued essay on Joyce's refusal to accept the stereotyped role of "Irish writer"; Heaney takes as his starting point the old regional BBC weather forecasts and the authority they had for the Irish farmers of his youth and develops from this, through a consideration of James Stephen and Joyce, into an extended meditation on the constraining influence of a centrally-defined regionalism.

Students of Scottish literature should be heartened at the evidence this volume provides of widening interest in critical issues they have long debated. The Aberdeen conference initiated a continuing conference series (Nottingham 1988, Luxembourg 1990), and the Aberdeen department has since issued a modest journal, *Literature of Region and Nation*, now in its third number. The kind of transnational juxtapositions provided by this volume can open up new perspectives on old topics. Indeed, Aberdeen's "New Regionalism" may, as an international movement, afford an unusual opportunity for Scottish literary studies to exert wider influence and find a wider readership.

WILLIAM J. ATKINSON

The Pocket Scots Dictionary. Ed. Iseabail Macleod, Ruth Martin and Pauline Cairns. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press. [1988]. xxiv + 360 pp.

"And the *Scottish National Dictionary* begat the *Concise Scots Dictionary*, and the *Concise Scots Dictionary* begat the *Pocket Scots Dictionary*, and the *Pocket Scots Dictionary* begat..." it somehow reads like a continuation of the Book of Genesis. This handy wee bairn of such illustrious forefathers is meant, we are told in the Introduction, for those who are primarily interested in the language of today, although the book "also

includes all the more important words current in the last two centuries." And in an excellent essay, A. J. Aitken tells the reader that Scots "matters because much of the best of Scotland's unique national literature is written in it..." going on to cite Burns, Scott, MacDiarmid and W. L. Lorimer's translation of the New Testament.

A quick check of some of the words which Burns appended to his poems shows us that indeed we can find out what the poet was offering to the mouse when he referred to "A daimen-icker in a thrave." We are not told, however, what he meant when he wrote in "Halloween":

They hoy't out Will, wi' fair advice:
They hecht him some fine brow ane;

for the *Pocket Scots Dictionary* tells us that *hecht* means: *Noun*, 1) height; 2) a high place, a hilltop; 3) (of behaviour, emotion), a high pitch; *Verb*, raise higher, heighten, lift. Burns, however, glosses the word: *Hecht*, to forebode. In MacDiarmid's *Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* there are words which do not appear in the *Concise Scots Dictionary* at all—for instance, *ragments*: odds and ends.

It is fascinating to see how many of the words in this compilation are used only in one locality. These are not necessarily words which had a broader distribution at an earlier time, rather they are words which have always been local. Their survival attests to the vitality of Scots as a language made up of many dialects welded together by the genius of the nation's writers. This dictionary makes their rich vocabulary easily available to the general public.

ARTHUR DAVIDSON ROSS

William Soutar. *Diaries of a Dying Man*. 2nd edition. Ed. Alexander Scott. Edinburgh: W & R Chambers. 1988. 214 pp.

When the edition of William Soutar's *Diaries of a Dying Man*, unobtrusively but admirably edited by the late Alexander Scott, appeared in 1954, the Scottish Renaissance was still little known outside of Scotland. We should not forget that the first book devoted to the writing of Hugh MacDiarmid appeared only in 1962, and it was not until 1961 that a good representative selection of Soutar's poetry became available in an edition edited by W. R. Aitken. Soutar's reputation as a first-rate poet of Scots preceded this, but it is probable that the selections from his diaries were the first acquaintance many readers made of this remarkable man. His debilitating illness and his "human virtues—the courage to endure, and the

courage to create" as Scott calls them, give him a special place in twentieth-century Scottish poetry.

Soutar kept diaries for most of his adult life, but Scott's selection begins 21 May 1930 and continues until the last entry made on 14 October 1943, the day before the poet died. What a wonderful life of the mind the bed-ridden poet wove for himself. And there were friends with whom he kept in touch by letter or who dropped by—Hugh MacDiarmid amongst them. In fact Grieve edited the first collection of Soutar's work—*Collected Poems* of 1948. Soutar makes an interesting comparison in his diary entry for 17 March 1933: "Neil Gunn called....He seems a much more potent man than his books suggest. He has the certainty which Grieve lacks—and yet lacks the wonder of Grieve." Interspersed with literary entries we find personal introspection: "I feel a mindless clod these days—if only I could fall in love, or experience anything else so unreasonable..." And the cryptic entry for 3 November 1933: "*Three years.*"

Chambers has done a service to Scottish literature in reissuing this important book which is essential for understanding Soutar in addition to being the source for several of his poems.

ALEXANDER FRASER