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BOOK REVIEWS


The title page of this book has been quoted in full, including the names of Mackay's books, the second in particular, which he apparently thought fit to insert as credentials for compiling this Dictionary. That in itself should have given the republishing company some pause. A glance at the entry under Mackay in the Dictionary of National Biography, where it is said, "He devoted much time in his later years to wayward and eccentric excursions into Celtic philology," should have increased their misgivings. But when they claim that "the copious selection of words and the appropriateness of the illustrations combine to make the Dictionary an authoritative reference book" and that "the scholarly etymological explanations serve as invaluable aids in the explication of the works of Sir Walter Scott, Robert Burns and Scottish poets in general," they place themselves firmly in the category of Mackay himself.

Mackay, who was really a journalist, and by modern standards, a highly educated one (he reported the American Civil War for the London Times), as well as a popular song-writer, starts off with an excursus on the origin of the Scottish language and its literary history. We are told first that Scotch is for the most part Old English, a reasonably unexceptionable statement. English, however, seems to be derived from Dutch or Flemish and is a harsh-sounding language full of cacophonous consonants whereas Scots has melodious vowels in all their pristine purity though it too is a Teutonic language. The term, however, never to be used is Anglo-Saxon. Saxon is historically objectionable and Angle has nothing to do with the Angles of West Germany but is really Gaelic "An Gaidheal, The Gael," and Great Britain was known to the Romans as Anglia long before the Saxons
or the so-called "Angles" arrived. This farrago of nonsense informs all the rest of the work which was originally intended to be a guide "to the better comprehension by English readers of the immortal works of Robert Burns and Walter Scott" and to the ballads and songs of Scotland.

To be fair this has been reasonably well done, though one searches in vain for any of the constituents of Burns's "daimen icker in a thrave" or for his blellum, bock, branks, coble, crimmock, fausehouse, gar, bag, bistie, Lallan, new-ca'd, raible, risk, shone, sleekit, snapper, sprottie, stechin, tarrow, vogie, to quote a few. And where are Scott's assailzie and birn, bodin in feir of weir, clevel, cuimzie, dead-thraw, fongs, lammer, raid, tammenorie, sealgh, and a great many more?

The choice of words seems to be quite arbitrary and apparently depended on whether Mackay felt they were poetic or humorous or "Gaelic" enough to warrant inclusion. Nevertheless the definitions are on the whole reliable and the illustrative quotations usually correct enough according to the text then available. The notes which are appended to the words are of the nature of obiter dicta and vary violently in quality and relevance. The anecdotes which are dragged in are largely derived from collections such as Hyslop's and Dean Ramsay's. All this might pass in the garrulous rambling vein of the hundred and one similar pawkie collectanea of "Scottish Life and Humour" so popular with the Victorians and the kail-yard.

But it is when we come to the etymology, which appears to be the real fons et origo of the book, that we find ourselves in Cloudcuckooland or its Gaelic equivalent. Mackay's standpoint is formulated in his lengthy note to glamour (originally a variant of grammar, with allusions to witchcraft) which he derives from Gaelic glaodh mor, "a great shout," going on to explain that "The Gaelic, supported as it is by the primitive but highly philosophic ideas that gave rise to the simple but now grandiloquent words of 'fame' and 'glory,' merits the attention and study of all students who love to trace words to their origin, and endeavour by their means to sound the depths of human intelligence in the infancy of society and of language." After this apocalyptic utterance, anything goes for etymology provided it is Gaelic. We are now at the stage described by Voltaire, "where the consonants count for very little and the vowels for nothing at all."

American readers will be intrigued to learn that in the Mackay system of philology skeddie is from the Gaelic spoken by "Irish or Scottish soldiers under General MacClellan's command [at Bull Run],"
viz. *sguit alta*, "disperse wild" or perhaps *sgath adhbh* [sic] "to cut off a hook," either will do so long as it's Mackay Gaelic. There is indeed no evidence that Mackay could speak Gaelic or even knew its vocabulary beyond what he could dredge from a dictionary—and even here he as often as not gets it wrong. As for Gaelic grammar and ordinary declensions and genders, rules of aspiration, lenition, eclipsis, nasalisation, vowel mutation, and all the multifarious complications of Gaelic phonology, he apparently knew nothing. When it comes to applying this non-Gaelic to the etymology of a basically Teutonic dialect, of course the whole thing becomes preposterous. A sample of words under A and B shows that out of 47 for which he has offered an etymology, 36 are absurd and another 3 are very dubious speculations or inaccurately expressed. The remainder are in the main so obviously French that any other explanation is impossible. Readers ignorant of Scots (and Gaelic) might just possibly be led astray by some of his derivations, but when he claims words and expressions like *Black Watch, eyrie, greyhound, Kirk, lunch, landlord, mare's nest, neuk* (nook), *postman, shaver, sockdoler, steward, to catch a tartar, womb*, as Gaelic, it is time to shut the book.

Mackay let his pan-Celtic obsessions run away with him. When he compiled his "Gaelic Etymology of the Languages of Western Europe" in 1877, it might have been some little excuse that the science of English etymology was only beginning. By 1887, Skeat's *Etymological Dictionary* and one volume of the *Oxford English Dictionary* had appeared and had made Mackay's work both useless and ludicrous.

There is no excuse at all for its reissue in 1968 when the *O.E.D.* and *E.D.D.* are complete and the two large-scale Scottish Dictionaries are more than half-finished. If Scottish language is going to be a growing interest in America, as one hopes it will, why reprint rubbish when classic works like Murray's *Dialect of the Southern Counties of Scotland* and Gregory Smith's *Specimens of Middle Scots* are now practically unobtainable?

The only good thing about this reprint is the collection of Ramsay's *Proverbs*, though $18 seems a stff price to have to pay for them. The other appendix, "A List of the Principal Writers in the Scottish Language," is full of omissions, inaccuracies and names of writers who never used Scots. There has been far too much cranky amateurism in Scottish scholarship already. Why perpetuate it?

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