
Billy Kay's book on the Scots tongue has two main purposes. Firstly, it presents in a readable popular form some of the results of scholarly research into Scots. Secondly, it argues the case for the value and importance of Scots to Scottish people. Overall, these purposes are fulfilled and fulfilled with considerable skill and energy; any shortcomings are relatively minor matters.

Using the work of various scholars, including and especially that of lexicographers, Kay presents us with a lively and well-organised history of Scots from the first arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in southeastern Scotland until the present day. While he provides a useful outline of the main sources of Scots vocabulary and a few comments on the pronunciation, spelling and grammar of Scots, as well as a separate chapter on the local varieties of the language, Kay's main subject is the fascinating one of the role and status of Scots over the centuries, or, to put it another way, a history of how it has been used in both speech and writing. He traces the rise of Scots to its highest point in the first half of the sixteenth century when it was the national medium of speech and the vehicle of a vigorous literature which he describes as 'possibly the greatest literature that existed in Europe of that day' (39). He then follows its subsequent fall and the various, sometimes herculean, efforts which, along with its underlying strength as the language of the people, have kept it strongly alive to this day. In presenting this story he quotes appositely from a number of literary and other works, but to me the absence of any references to identify his sources is irritating. The gap is hardly filled by a poorly set out bibliography which, amongst other things, includes articles in books only under the name of the book's editor. Lest this be seen as mere academic nitpicking, I point out that readers, academic or not, might well want to read more of, for instance, a certain 'diarist' quoted on page 79: this will be difficult to do in the absence not only of a reference but even of a name. Possibly the author and/or the publishers wanted to avoid making a popular book look too academic and technical. This is a valid concern but it would not preclude a section at the end of the book setting out the details of sources. Similarly in chapter 7 Kay has made sensible use of Keith Williamson's valuable work on the role of Scots in education ('Lowland Scots in Education: An Historical Survey', Scottish Language 1 (1982), 54-77, 2 (1983), 52-87); a reference to Williamson's articles would enable the reader to follow this subject in more detail. As it is, Williamson does not even appear in the bibliography even though he is directly quoted on page 76.

While I believe the book presents an accurate view of the varying role of Scots since it first separated from northern English there are some details I disagree with. Kay rightly points out that we should not read into the makars' comments about Scots our modern sense of the low status Scots enjoys in Britain today. Yet he dismisses Gavin Douglas's comments on the occasional deficiencies of Scots as merely 'a rhetorical device' as though he feels that if Douglas were to genuinely recognise deficiencies in Scots he would be like a modern Scot suffering from cultural cringe towards England. In fact it seems to me that Douglas's position was stronger than Kay allows: he was so thoroughly secure in his language as the speech and written medium of his nation, and so little conscious of any idea that it might be under threat, that he could afford to take the view that it had some mild deficiencies. Moreover, he recognised that any borrowings he might

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make from Latin, French or English would have a parallel in Latin borrowings from Greek. That a language has something to gain from another language does not show it is inferior.

The second purpose of this book is partly fulfilled by the first. By describing the history of Scots Kay makes it clear that Scots is not merely corrupt English. He shows, too, how this view of Scots was reinforced by the style of spelling adopted by Ramsay and almost all subsequent writers of Scots until this century. Further, by illustrating the use of Scots in literary texts over the centuries, he reminds us that Scots has been the vehicle of a valuable literature which is clearly basic to the cultural heritage of Scottish people. Kay’s chosen subject matter quite reasonably does not include any discussion of the development of Scots vocabulary over the last few centuries. This has one disadvantage. Many readers will come to this book with an already formed impression that distinctively Scots vocabulary has done nothing but decline over this period. In fact borrowing from other languages has continued and Scots has also been productive even in our own century in using its existing vocabulary with new meanings and in new compounds and derivatives. Scots is not a conservative tongue unable to adopt to new circumstances. Yet Kay, because he offers such comments as that ‘most of the features which still characterise the Scots dialects today’ (39) were already established by the end of the fifteenth century and that ‘if time travel were feasible, a courtier speaking the Standard Lothian Scots of the 15th century would have little difficulty communicating with a contemporary Angus chield’ (149) and at the same time does not describe the considerable innovations in Scots over the intervening period, gives, by default and no doubt unintentionally, the impression of Scots as a static, conservative tongue. In fact, the ability of the Scots tongue to change and innovate is a strong reason against dismissing it as a spent force and is a powerful support for the general drift of Kay’s defence of Scots.

Kay goes beyond the defence of Scots implicit in recounting its history and explicitly draws our attention to the cultural value of Scots as well as outlining the forces ranged against it. He writes forcefully against those who, as he sees it, would reduce the heritage of Scots to recitation of a few Burns party pieces but in an interesting chapter comparing the position of Scots with that of some other European languages/dialects, he pragmatically accepts that Scots is unlikely to undergo the kind of major revival that has taken place in Hebrew. Instead he hopes that it might follow the path of Nynorsk in Norway, functioning alongside English in a partnership of two mutually intelligible but distinct languages. As he notes, however, even this aspiration is a long way from fulfilment: ‘Standard Scots as an official language of Scotland is a million miles away - most of us would settle in the short term for our children being taught Scottish culture one period a week in the schools’ (138).

The penultimate chapter deals with regional variation within Scots. This is a good general introduction to this interesting but complicated subject. Although it is impossible to convey the details fully without a phonetic alphabet, Kay covers the most characteristic features. He also makes the important point that dialect speakers tend to overestimate the distinctiveness of their speech: glossaries of local varieties of Scots ‘the fact that 90% of the words are common Scots is played down, and the uniqueness of the local dialect played up’ (150). As Kay makes us aware, any revival of Scots as a national language must first overcome the ‘myth that Scots is only intelligible within a short radius and that one dialect

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Kay ends with a plea for the recognition of the distinctive qualities of Scots. In particular, he points to 'its lack of duplicity, its vigorous directness, its ability to see through the false and the phony' (178). There is no doubt that Scots has traditionally been associated with such qualities. Scott, to name but one, more than once contrasts forthright Scots-speakers with less straightforward English-speakers. (On the other hand he also created Andrew Fairservice.) But do not these qualities arise in part from the limitation of Scots over the last few centuries to colloquial and informal contexts? If Scots were to undergo the sort of renaissance which Kay would like and politicians, for instance, were to take up the unselfconscious use of Scots again, can we believe it would remain free of phoniness? I fear that is hoping for too much. Curiously, the limitations imposed on the use of Scots have, I suspect, given it certain strengths.

The book is attractively designed, an important point in any book but especially one intended to tempt the general reader to enter into a scholarly field. It is true that there is a tendency for 'its' to appear as 'it's' but perhaps some irreverence about English apostrophes is legitimate in a book about Scots!!

I would be unhappy if the space I have given here to criticising some minor features were to be seen as detracting from my generally very favourable view of this book. Scholars have contributed enormously to the cause of the Scots tongue but, as with any subject, there must also be popularisers who bring the results of scholarship to a wider public. (The one individual can, of course, fulfil the two roles as recent writing on Scots has shown.) When I was in Scotland in 1986 I heard many favourable comments about Billy Kay's radio and television series on Scots. Now he has added to these a highly readable and informative book.

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