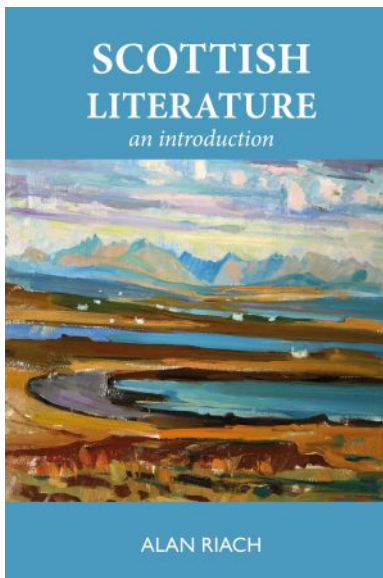


'Scottish Literature: An Introduction', by Alan Riach

Review by John Purser



An introduction? Coming in at over seven hundred pages one might describe the title as disingenuous. It is not. Such are the riches, temptingly revealed, that I would describe this book as having the great virtue of making one wish to read virtually all the literature that it describes, which is a lot. The book is clearly organised in seven sections of which the sixth is punningly entitled 'A Loose Canon'. Three subsections discuss 'The idea of a canon', 'What a canon is' and 'What a canon is for'. The final subsection is the loose canon. It has 412 entries. As Riach himself states, 'Ultimately, this list is simply an invitation.' One might say the same of the entire book - but what an invitation!

Were this encyclopaedic coverage not cleverly presented, it would be daunting, but it is surprisingly approachable. First of all is the basic structure as listed in the Contents. The seven sections are divided into chapters similar in form to short essays. Some are as few as three pages in length, and this tidy and economical presentation makes the book eminently readable. You can pick it up, read a chapter, and put it down with a sense of having gained a genuine insight into the matter in hand.

By far the largest section is the fourth 'Authors and Works', consisting of eighty

chapters. These are presented roughly chronologically, but Riach is for ever leaping across centuries and artistic and historical boundaries so the context is always rich, sometimes provoking, and often curiously apt. The chapter titles are succinct, informative and frequently intriguing: 'Defy them all: Elizabeth Melville', 'Tender strengths: Robert Fergusson', 'What can this thing be? James Hogg'. They include interesting pairings such as 'Oddfellows: William Lithgow and Thomas Urquhart'. I have never read Lithgow, but on the basis of the passages quoted, I know I must. As for Urquhart (a personal hero), Riach disarmingly concludes: 'In any case, a national literature that boasts an author who died laughing has something going for it.'

The book is full of quotations from the works discussed and, in this, it makes a vast improvement on the more academic approach of the various histories of Scottish literature which, fine as they are, keep one somewhat at arms' length from the raw material. The book is also full of opinions, many delightful, all engaging. Riach finds value in every kind of Scottish writing which, notably, includes proper reference to writings in Latin and Gaelic as well as Scots and English. There are two on the Latin tradition and at least eighteen chapters on Gaelic poetry, prose and plays, with extensive quotations in the original Gaelic, but always with translations. Scots is, naturally enough, by far the most prevalent and the reader is expected to be able to tackle it without the intrusion of a glossary. In concluding 'The Rule of Compassion: Robert Henrysson', Riach writes movingly:

What the poem gives us of Cresseid's humanity, her suffering, aspiration and hope, is what counts. It matches anything in Chaucer or Shakespeare. It bites so deep at the heart.

He then quotes the last two stanzas, which are indeed heart-breaking, and the tragic musicality of which would be molested by marginal Anglicisations.

'Was there ever a 'British' literature?' is the title of the second chapter. As a Professor of Scottish Literature at the University of Glasgow, Riach's answer is obvious, but it is fearlessly and cogently argued. The reader is being led by an enthusiast and that is always a real positive. Take the end of a beautifully expressed chapter entitled 'Love is all you need: James I, *The Kingis Quair*'.

Marriage, in this poem, is freedom. The harmony of all things is the affirmation

of all the celestial and earthly realities we have encountered. In the Allegory of Love (1936), C. S. Lewis said of this poem:

In it the poetry of marriage at last emerges from the traditional poetry of adultery; and the literal narrative of a contemporary wooing emerges from romance and allegory. It is the first modern book of love.

We live and learn.

Indeed we do, for though many of the opinions are Riach's, we are given many others such as Lewis's, or George MacBeth's broad insights into the world of John Buchan and Ian Fleming. Fleming's Bond comes in for interesting treatment:

Fleming referred to Bond as a 'cardboard booby' and [...] described him as 'on the whole a rather unattractive man'. Subsequently, critics have seen him as either a template for fantasy or a stooge of Empire. But he is more than merely pathetic. Fleming's Bond is tragic.

More recent Bond films have paid some attention to that assessment.

When it comes to the works of the living, Riach continues his enthusiasm, not least in noting the welcome presence of many outstanding female writers such as Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Meg Bateman and Jackie Kay. The variety of their work and its freedom from expectations is announced in the chapter title 'Nothing in uniform', an assertion neatly resolved by a quotation from MacDiarmid: 'If there is ocht in Scotland that's worth hae'in / There is nae distance to which it's unattached.'

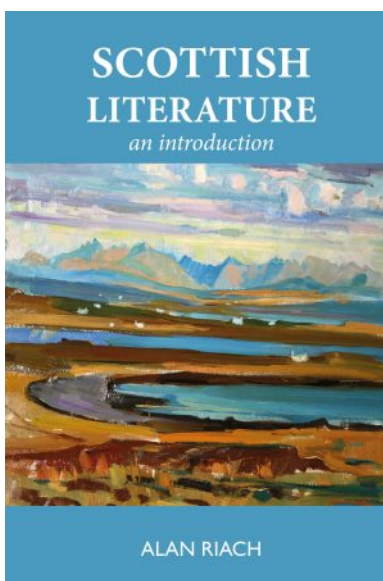
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he gets seven entries: Erik Chisholm, five. These references are by no means confined to Scots. Braque, Beethoven and Sibelius find their places and when such mentions occur they are intelligently included, and especially so when it comes to works such as MacCunn's *Jeanie Deans* - 'a rich, concentrated version of *the Heart of Midlothian* packed with beautiful orchestration, intensifying individual characters and dramatic developments.' The reader is always being taken to gates that open into pastures new.

The typeface and layout are fine. In particular, the deep indentation for quotations gives clarity and visual relief, which is welcome in the understandable absence of any form of illustration. The margins may be a touch on the narrow side, but in a book of such size, that is to be forgiven. The paper quality is good. I have made ignoble efforts to break the spine of this book in order to get it to lie flat when opened. It is a credit to the binders that I have failed and that it is gracefully yielding to persuasion.

Should this book have been more selective? Should we have been carefully led through the maze by one who already knows the way out without leading us up stray paths into dead ends? Emphatically not. There are no dead ends as such, just different ways around what is a garden in bloom in many environments and seasons. Buy it and consume it bit by bit, here and there and, since that is where it belongs, everywhere.

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