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Dekker, Kees

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Jamieson's Dictionary of Scots: The Story of the First Historical Dictionary of the Scots Language

Kees Dekker

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Jamieson's Dictionary of Scots: The Story of the First Historical Dictionary of the Scots Language

SUSAN RENNIE

Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012

xvi + 282 pp., ISBN: 978-0-1996-3940-3, £75.00 hc

The codification of a lexicon is not only an essential step in the standardisation of a language, but it also lays a corner stone to the foundation of cultural identity. Susan Rennie's monograph on the making of Robert Jamieson's *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* outlines this dual purpose. On the one hand, Rennie offers a very detailed and meticulous account of the heroic struggle of an individual who, for the first time, succeeded in compiling a dictionary of Scots on historical principles. On the other, Rennie's book chronicles a period in the history of Scotland in which the country reclaimed and regained its cultural morale.

In seven well-documented chapters Rennie takes the reader through the life stories of both Jamieson and the *Dictionary*. In her set-up Rennie elegantly interweaves information about Jamieson himself, his scholarly and commercial network, his ideas about the Scottish language, the publication of the *Dictionary*, Jamieson's lexicographical practices and the afterlife of the *Dictionary*. At the beginning of the book we get to know Jamieson—born in Glasgow in 1759—as an endearing example of a clergyman who combined the ministry and a family life with substantial intellectual work. In overcoming the adverse circumstances of a provincial parish, low pay, a resulting lack of books and funds and a turbulent relation with subscribers and booksellers, Jamieson's efforts in publishing his dictionary are no less than heroic, and Rennie's book certainly generates well-deserved sympathy and admiration.

Rennie rightly places Jamieson's work in the tradition of the Scots glossarists to whom she devotes a very interesting Chapter Two. No less important, however, for the inception of the *Dictionary* was the Danish scholar Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin (1752–1829), whom Jamieson met in Forfar in 1787 (p. 61). Best known for his transcript and *editio princeps* of *Beowulf* (1815), Thorkelin is an intriguing figure who was driven by a romantic notion of a Northern people and language that originated from the ancient Goths. Such ideas, often subsumed under the term “Gothicism”, were not new to Jamieson, as Rennie explains in Chapter Three (p. 63). For the Scots this meant that their language was not a dialect of Anglo-Saxon but, rather, a sister language of English, with which it shared a common Gothic ancestor. This shows that Jamieson's motivation for compiling his *Dictionary* was rooted in ideas dating from the seventeenth century, when Gothic and Anglo-Saxon were first studied jointly.

The results of Jamieson's work are discussed by Rennie in Chapter Five, which analyses the contents and methodology of the *Dictionary*. Jamieson never included a section on editorial principles, and it is interesting to see how Rennie assesses Jamieson's methodology. Jamieson advanced lexicography by his adherence to

historical principles in the arrangement of his citations. He structured his lemmata in such a way that the oldest form of a lexeme always came first. He incorporated earlier glossaries critically, with an eye to the various opinions expressed in them. He selected authorities based on a profound, critical knowledge of all older Scottish literature available at the time. He used varying types of sources, including modern authors and spoken language. Having started the project as a glossary of terms from Angus, Jamieson made an effort to do justice to dialect forms. Rennie's qualitative and quantitative analyses of the *Dictionary* and its lemmata gives evidence of her profound knowledge and detailed study of the book. Her examples are always relevant and interesting illustrations of her arguments. At the end of this central chapter Rennie includes an eight-page section (5.3.7) on the "other features" in the *Dictionary*: encyclopaedic material, synonymy, scientific nomenclature and, finally, etymology. Rennie's final two chapters, in which she discusses the *Abridgement* and the *Supplement* (Chapter Six), and the editions of the *Dictionary* after Jamieson's death (Chapter Seven), show the impact of Jamieson's work in the nineteenth century.

For a book on Jamieson's *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language*, Rennie's section on etymology is short (two and a half pages) and somewhat apologetic in tone. Although acknowledging that modern assessments of Jamieson's etymologies are linguistically anachronistic (p. 156), Rennie also explains that these etymologies are the least cited part of his work and carry no weight with modern scholars (p. 155). Instead, Jamieson's key legacy is the evidence of older Scottish words (p. 233). Without disputing these conclusions, I should like to add that his etymologies and antiquarian arguments are essential for our understanding of his purpose and result from the antiquarian tradition within which we should consider his work. A mention of John Considine's *Dictionaries in Early Modern Europe* (2008) would have sufficed to point the reader to relevant information concerning this aspect of historical lexicography.

In conclusion, Rennie's book presents not only the history of the making of Jamieson's *Dictionary*, but also the story of how a project inspired by antiquarianism slowly evolved into a monument of lexicography—and, implicitly, of how the foundations of cultural identity shifted from romantic antiquarianism to modern lexicographical empiricism. With its three appendices, twenty-page bibliography and judicious index, Rennie's outstanding book provides its readers with a very well documented view of the early history of Scottish lexicography. It is, moreover, a delight to read and must not be missed by anyone interested in the lexicography, language and history of Scotland.

KEES DEKKER

University of Groningen

Email: c.dekker@rug.nl