
This is the most significant ‘state of the discipline’ monograph within the field of Renaissance Scottish literature since Helena Shire’s *Song, Dance and Poetry at the Court of James VI of Scotland* (1969). Clearly the result of many years of academic exposure to these texts and to the ideas that they have generated, it is an engaging, well-written attempt to revise not only the literary achievement of Alexander Montgomerie (c. 1550-1598), the most prominent poet at the court of James VI, but also the terms of reference in which texts of that period have hitherto been analysed.

The introductory chapter sets out the book’s major objectives. The most ambitious of these is that, by situating Montgomerie in a comparative, European and British rather than solely English, poetic and political context, Lyall aims to rescue not only Montgomerie’s and Scottish, but also English, contemporary lyrical verse from an established Anglo-centric critical teleology. The latter, Lyall argues, often relies too exclusively on ‘indigenous categories of “Metaphysical” and “Jacobean”’, which has given a ‘spurious sense of uniqueness’ to English verse c.1600, largely by virtue of ignoring ‘the European development of Elizabethan literature’ (26). Chapters 2-5 provide a profile of Montgomerie and his oeuvre by aligning key poems to an extremely detailed historicisation, as well as analysis, of both the author’s life events and the various cultures in which he operated. These chapters rely on painstaking scholarly research in libraries and archives across Western Europe; they provide significant new insights, not just into Montgomerie’s life and work but also into military history, literary and intellectual networks, and religious and international politics. Chapters 6-8 have a more purely literary emphasis, exploring a range of genres and themes (satirical, amatory, devotional) through a large number of close readings; they provide invigorating nuances and at times unexpected links to contemporary West-European literature. The ninth and last chapter returns to the introduction’s metacritical claims.

While some readers will appreciate the sometimes teacherly, often masterly, and invariably comprehensive range of reference of this kind of *Kulturgeschichte*, others may feel that too much is shoe-horned into a quantitatively already quite full book, in which the various lines of inquiry regarding religion, politics, poetry and cultural expression more generally
have to converge within a strictly defined textual corpus, itself set in a
detailed chronological, biographical format. The book indeed occasionally
struggles to combine, in linear format, its conceptual lines of inquiry with
the at times quite digressive analyses offered to the reader. But for this
study there is no such thing as ‘the’ reader. The level of detail in the many
close readings of individual poems, as well as their contextualisation, may
serve students and critics of Renaissance Scots verse rather than those who
have a more distant acquaintance with these texts, but the latter may
appreciate the non-literary dimensions that such details bring into play, or
the way in which Lyall uses such readings cumulatively to challenge estab-
lished critical reference points for the study of Renaissance literature.

Tensions between these different (textual v. conceptual) emphases arise
in interpretations of individual poems, which at times marshall evidence
through an accumulation of ‘ifs’ and ‘perhapses’ (e.g. p. 154) and some-
times revel in providing several interpretations of a text rather than select-
ing the most pertinent one. Moreover, what initially appears to be the
book’s most radical claim (that Montgomerie’s verse is not just Mannerist
in style but Baroque in potential) is more or less lost sight of in the book’s
attention to textual and historical detail, and, as Lyall concedes, ultimately
remains unproven, even becoming a somewhat marginal concern. Such
abandonment of a larger critical récit in favour of ‘the triumph of local
effect over larger patterns of meaning’ is indeed, like Montgomerie’s writ-
ing itself, ‘characteristically Mannerist’ (111). Critical practice here mir-
rors the phenomenon it analyses, its modus operandi as informative about
the poet’s art as any abstract and potentially much more totalising conclu-
sion could ever be. On more religious and political fronts, moreover, such
an inductive manner of argumentation effectively dissolves, for example,
overly determinate boundaries between contemporary Catholicism and
Protestantism that have been imposed in past criticism.

This book thus, despite its open-ended speculative nature, indisputably
adduces sufficient material to demonstrate how Montgomerie indeed pio-
niered a ‘new poetics’ (347) and that we need new (configurations of)
critical perspectives in order to map Jacobean Scotland’s cultural achieve-
ment, as well as that of Britain as a whole (‘neo-Petrarchan’ is another term
that Lyall’s book engages with but is unable to theorize more fully within
its covers).

The volume is handsomely produced, with few typos and such-like irri-
tants. Index and glosses have a few gaps but are largely reliable. Footnotes