

Sarah Dunningan and Suzanne Gilbert (eds), *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Traditional Literatures*

Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2013, 216 p.

Cyril Besson

---



**Electronic version**

URL: [http://](http://etudeseccossaises.revues.org/1144)

[etudeseccossaises.revues.org/1144](http://etudeseccossaises.revues.org/1144)

ISSN: 1969-6337

**Publisher**

Ellug / Éditions littéraires et linguistiques  
de l'université de Grenoble

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 25 avril 2016

Number of pages: 174-175

ISBN: 978-2-84310-324-7

ISSN: 1240-1439

**Electronic reference**

Cyril Besson, « Sarah Dunningan and Suzanne Gilbert (eds), *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Traditional Literatures* », *Études écossaises* [Online], 18 | 2016, Online since 01 January 2017, connection on 03 January 2017. URL : <http://etudeseccossaises.revues.org/1144>

---

The text is a facsimile of the print edition.

© Études écossaises

disciplinary range, this volume is a highly useful compendium to various aspects of Scottish nationhood, its relationship to Britishness, devolution, the continuing independence debate, and its relevance to wider international discussions on regionalism, secession and social justice.

---

**Cyril Besson**

*Université Grenoble Alpes*

Sarah Dunningan and Suzanne Gilbert (eds), *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Traditional Literatures*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2013, 216 p.

“Traditional literatures” is a rather elusive concept that has always been confronted to an intractable problem of definition. Because it comes into sharp contrast with *printed* literature and its “fixed” objects, the notion is confronted to instability at every step, from initial performance, through intergenerational transmission, to ultimate cultural relevance, making the concept a particularly slippery one, so much so that subsuming such varied components (ballad, romance, folk song...) under one label may at times seem futile. Attempts at a rationalization of the phenomenon are often unconvincing, as the purported reductionism of well-meaning authors tends to oversimplify and exclude the “genre’s” infinite variety, leading to a vision of things that, for being consistent, cannot but be incomplete. This is especially true when the sort of taxonomy emerges under specialists’ pens that in the end identifies nothing but its own intrinsic prejudices.

The editors of *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Traditional Literatures* have wisely decided to tackle the subject without resorting to excessive categorizing or theorizing, as their clear, precise, and thought-provoking introduction establishes, although this is no indication that every contributor shies away from classification, as can be seen in the volume’s second chapter (“Genre”). The frustration with this approach is that a suspicion of nominalism may loom over the brand, “traditional literatures”, especially since historical record of the many variants of one ballad (all the more so its origins, and the phenomenon as a whole) is frequently spotty, leaving an impression that the researcher is fated, Danaïdes-like, to strive vainly for the bottom of things. This could have led the volume to indulge in the ambiguous pleasures of micro-history, with all the pit-

falls of that approach, but fortunately, throughout its chapters, the book never loses sight of its main focus: “to restore a more dynamic, inclusive and holistic understanding of the subject whilst working outwards from a core starting point of literary history” (p. 2). It might have benefitted from a clearer admission, or at least explanation, of some of its choices: for example, one cannot escape the feeling that performance theory as an analytical tool is somewhat hastily dismissed whenever it is mentioned, the reason for which is not really dwelt upon. The all-important concept of “tradition” (this “invention”, if we are to believe Hobsbawm) in the volume could perhaps have been developed more fully, and the insistence on diasporic transmission, made more of. In this respect, such propositions as the assertion that the Scottish Folk Revival is necessarily “distinct from the mass marketing of popular music” should at least be rationalized, for fear of being accused of partisanship. Also, although this writer is very much aware of the difficulties of dating “texts” and tracing their progress when there is no historical record except oral tradition, the modes of transmission (and possible deformations that they may have led to, at least in principle) should have been studied in greater detail (after all, the ideological tinge of the work of the early compilers does not escape the contributors’ scrutiny), as the reader can on occasion feel more informed but none the wiser. This outlining could have been attempted for example by tracing one ballad’s evolution, and would have given substance to a number of arguments that without this endeavor, feel a bit disembodied—although to be fair, these elements are discussed at several points in the book. The last drawback of the volume is that for a tome concerned with orality, there is very little effort paid to concretely deal with that dimension: the reader would like nothing better than to participate in the communal spirit of oral tradition, but when music is present only through transcribed musical scores, and some contributors occasionally indulge in the succession of endless lists of titles known only to specialists (the appeal of erudition has its limits), one cannot but feel that there must have been ways to flesh out the object of study a bit more: online resources are recommended p. 25, but why was a database of copyright-free material (surely a number of ballads and songs are in the public domain?) not created to accompany the volume?

All these reservations, however, amount to nit-picking when compared to the excellence of the research displayed in the pages of the book, and the involvement, the fervor, even, of everyone concerned. In addition to being serious academic work, this is a pleasant read that will come to be an indispensable resource for students not just of “traditional” literature, but of literature in general, and of its socio-historical import.