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Angus McIntosh and Scottish Studies (1981)¹

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Editor's note: Angus McIntosh died in 2005 aged 91.

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[xix] It is no coincidence that Angus McIntosh's appointment in 1948 as the first holder of the Forbes Chair of English Language and General Linguistics in Edinburgh University was immediately followed by a dramatic expansion in studies ranging from English philology, general linguistics and pedagogic linguistics to Scottish traditions in the widest sense. Some of these had already been thought of by other people, others were first put forward by McIntosh himself. But the practical realisation of them all depended to a very large extent on the inspiration given to a group of young scholars by McIntosh himself, on his personal example, and on his energetic persuasion of the authorities of Edinburgh and other Universities to provide the financial means.

Even before he had settled in Edinburgh, McIntosh was committed to bring into being a Linguistic Atlas of Scotland. This had long been a vision of his friend and mentor, John Orr, Professor of Romance Linguistics. Following McIntosh's advent came the practical steps needed to accomplish this. An adequate Linguistic Atlas would need the support of a Phonetics school and phonetics laboratory. McIntosh's own appointment was very shortly followed by an invitation to his friend David Abercrombie, a distinguished pupil of Daniel Jones, the doyen of phoneticians, to a lectureship in Phonetics, out of which was to grow Edinburgh's famous school of Phonetics. The Linguistic Survey itself was conceived as being in two sections, each, as it turned out, to apply radically different approaches – a Gaelic section under the head of the Department of Celtic, Professor K. H. Jackson, and a Scots section under McIntosh.

Initially, the plans and preparation for the latter took place from within McIntosh's Department, with the appointment in 1950 of H. J. Uldall to a Linguistics lectureship in the English Language department, charged primarily with the development of the Survey. McIntosh's Department was housed partly on the top floor and partly in the rather gloomy basement of Minto House, Chambers Street. The basement also held the phoneticians, their lecture-room and their laboratory, and representatives of some other institutions, of which more below. This warren of linguists and phoneticians became a centre of the influence of the

¹ Originally published in Michael Benskin and M. L. Samuels eds., *So Meny People Longages and Tonges: Philological Essays in Scots and Mediaeval English presented to Angus McIntosh* (Edinburgh: privately published, 1981), xix–xxvi. Reproduced by kind permission of Prof. Michael Benskin.

All notes are editorial. The text has been edited for uniformity of style with other Aitken papers and some bibliographical references have been expanded or added. The original page numbers are shown in square brackets.

distinguished linguists J. R. Firth, Daniel Jones and Louis Hjelmslev. A main pre-occupation of McIntosh, Abercrombie, Uldall and the other inhabitants of the warren and some associates from outside was experimentation and discussion towards settling the theoretically and practically most desirable methods for the future Linguistic Survey of Scotland. In due course ^[xx] these discussions received their summing up and some further development in McIntosh's *An Introduction to a Survey of Scottish Dialects* (1952). In this small book McIntosh focussed on the problems of a particular regional dialect survey and a particular linguistic situation. But it was early recognised by scholars that the book is full of suggestions and insights which apply outwith as well as within the Scottish situation. And later students have seen in the book foreshadowings of attitudes and approaches which were to become central to regional and social dialectological studies a decade and a half later. Many of these insights were further developed – still in advance of their general vogue – in the widely read and authoritative *The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching* (Halliday *et al.* eds., 1964), in which McIntosh collaborated with his Edinburgh colleagues of the early sixties, M. A. K. Halliday and P. Strevens.

The decision reached in 1950–51 to conduct the Linguistic Survey (Scots Section) lexical investigation by postal questionnaire, quite separately from the phonological investigation by phonetically trained field-worker, was by consensus of all the minds involved. But its initial instigation and final confirmation came from McIntosh, and its practical commonsense is characteristic of him. This has proved to be a most happy decision. It has provided for the resultant Atlas an unrivalled density of coverage of lexical information, a theoretically secure phonological base, and a very close mesh of phonological information which makes possible highly sophisticated and subtle comparisons between dialects at this level. Since laying these excellent foundations for the Survey around 1950, McIntosh has continued, along with his colleagues Abercrombie and Jackson, to oversee its work down to the present conclusion of its first stage. Very properly, the foreword to the *Linguistic Atlas of Scotland* vol. I (1975) is his.

The second of McIntosh's extra-curricular concerns of his early years in Edinburgh followed only a little later. Again the prime movers were a group of Edinburgh University Arts Faculty professors with McIntosh and John Orr prominent among them. Again the new institution's first home was the basement of Minto House. This was Edinburgh University's School of Scottish Studies, which first engaged staff officially in 1952, but which had been adumbrated for a year or two earlier. The now magnificent specialist library of the School had its very modest beginnings in a collection of Scottish historical source-books assembled by the author of this memoir in his own workroom in the basement of Minto House from about 1950.

Originally the School was intended to be exclusively an institution for field-collection and research on aspects of Scottish tradition, other than linguistic and lexicographic, especially those aspects which were then believed to be under threat of obsolescence. The areas of concern include place-names alongside the oral and material traditions, all of these discussed briefly in ^[xxi] McIntosh's *Introduction*. The choice of these particular subjects hints strongly at an important role played by McIntosh in determining the direction to be taken by the School's researches. By 1954, when the School moved its headquarters from Minto House to its present premises in 27–29 George Square, it was well established, with four researchers and a Secretary-Archivist. Today, as a large Arts Faculty Department with its own Board of Studies, it has largely outgrown the more limited aims with which it set out. But the general direction of these, as laid down by McIntosh and others in the early 1950's, has not changed.

In those early years of the Linguistic Survey of Scotland and the School of Scottish Studies, McIntosh visited a number of already established foreign centres of dialectology and of ethnology, including those of Dublin, Uppsala and Oslo, in order to see for himself how

these were run and to discuss the planning of the new institutes with similar concerns which Edinburgh was now setting up. During these visits he lectured on Scottish dialectology and the initial problems of the Linguistic Survey of Scotland, as indeed he was also doing in other countries, such as France and the U.S.A. Among the distinguished foreign scholars of these subjects who visited him in Edinburgh during this period, as his own friends and as consultants for the new Edinburgh institutes, were Seumas Delargy of Dublin and Dag Strömbäck and Åke Campbell of Uppsala.

Not long after 1953 and 1954 when McIntosh had paid these visits to Scandinavia came the creation in 1956 of the Scandinavian Scholars Committee, later renamed the Northern Scholars Committee. This is a committee of Edinburgh University's Senatus which also includes a representative, commonly the Cultural Attaché, of each of the five Scandinavian lands. Angus McIntosh had a leading part in the organisation and formation of this committee, of which he was a founder member and later, from 1966 to 1971, its Convener. The Committee continues to be successful in its aim of promoting contact between Edinburgh academics and Scandinavian scholars active in areas of common interest, chiefly by arranging visits by the latter to Edinburgh.

Still another extra-curricular venture of McIntosh's of the early years of his professoriate was something of a rescue operation. In 1948 Sir William Craigie, the distinguished Scottish lexicographer, had carried his *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* to the letter G, between one-quarter and one-third of its whole extent. But Craigie had also just attained his eighty-second year. Before McIntosh's arrival in Edinburgh, an assistant to Craigie had been appointed with a fellowship and a salary provided jointly by three of the four Scottish Universities, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh. That assistant was myself, and it had already been decided that my place of work was to be Edinburgh. Prior to McIntosh's intervention I worked from my digs and in the National ^[xxii] Library of Scotland, and my library consisted of as many books as could go into a large revolving bookcase supplied by the Library. A year later I had an office in (as the reader may have anticipated) the basement of Minto House, and grants from the University of Edinburgh and the Carnegie Trust to begin assembling a library for DOST. It appears that Craigie and McIntosh had been discussing what help McIntosh could give me and McIntosh's intervention had had this practical outcome. Another of McIntosh's interventions in my affairs is mentioned later.

Discussions with Craigie and others on DOST's problems continued. How could the future of the Dictionary be secured after Craigie's death, which, in the nature of things, could not be too long delayed? (In the event Craigie died in 1957, aged ninety.) McIntosh had also, since his arrival in Scotland, been similarly concerned for the future of the *Scottish National Dictionary*, then based in Aberdeen, and he had been invited to join its Executive Council. SND was more securely based than DOST, since it had a small staff and so was less exclusively dependent on a single individual, and since it had enthusiastic support and financial backing from the Scottish National Dictionary Association Ltd.² But doubts existed about its financial security also. It seemed improbable that the Association could fund it to completion.

McIntosh saw these two enterprises as closely related projects and found an integrated solution for the problems of both. This was to persuade the Principals and Courts of all four Scottish Universities to establish a representative body which would administer the two dictionaries and secure the funds necessary to provide adequate editorial staffs for them and to help to print SND. This body was the Scottish Dictionaries Joint Council, of which McIntosh himself has been the very active Chairman from 1953. Without the energetic

² The successor body to both DOST and the Scottish National Dictionary Association is Scottish Language Dictionaries.

backing of this Council, the *Scottish National Dictionary* could never have reached completion, as it did in 1976, and the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* would no doubt long since have fallen by the wayside. McIntosh was of course far from alone in all the consequent efforts of administration, financial and other decision taking, planning, preparing written and oral submissions, meetings with senior University and public figures, arranging and running fund-raising functions and producing propagandist literature, lobbying in this country and abroad, and general publicity. He had much help and support from the Joint Council's succession of energetic Secretaries, provided by the University of Edinburgh, and from his fellow delegates on the Joint Council. But there was never any doubt where the lead came from and who of all of these carried the largest burden of responsibility and effort. This memoir is a very small return for a vast service rendered by him to Scottish lexicography in this way.

These were perhaps McIntosh's most important contributions to Scottish studies. But the story does not end with them. In 1970 at a meeting of the ^[xviii] Scottish Dictionaries Joint Council, McIntosh first publicly put forward the idea of producing a smaller Scots Dictionary "for popular use", abridged from the two larger dictionaries, following earlier informal discussion between members of the Joint Council. Subsequently he advanced this idea to the Scottish National Dictionary Association at a meeting in 1971 of its Executive Council. The present result (1979), after some years of discussion and experimentation, is that a *Concise Scots Dictionary*,³ which will provide historical and dialectological as well as simple semantic information, is approximately half-way to completion and may be completed in five years.

Since 1956 McIntosh has been a member of the Council of the Scottish Text Society. In 1976 the Council showed its appreciation of his shrewd and helpful contributions to its discussions by electing him to the Presidency when this fell vacant.

During the sixties and early seventies McIntosh was a Member also of the Scottish Education Department's Central Committee on English. His paper 'The Dynamic Study of English', contributed to the Committee's bulletin *The Teaching of English Language* (1972), excites admiration for its characteristic sanity and moderation: while accepting the need for terminology with which to talk about language use, its emphasis is on encouraging children to get to know words as such rather than on teaching them formal grammar, on encouraging the use of language rather than a knowledge of linguistics.

For the first sixteen years of his incumbency, McIntosh's chair was of English Language and General Linguistics. In a whole variety of ways he fostered the second of these responsibilities as well as the first. As well as helping to secure adequate staffs for the Linguistic Survey, the School of Scottish Studies and, from 1955, the Scottish Dictionaries, McIntosh was concerned to diversify the range of expertise of his own Department. From the late fifties a number of new recruits, added to a staff mainly of language historians, were specialists in general linguistics. This led in 1964 to the emergence from English Language of an autonomous department of General Linguistics with its own Professor. The earlier foundation in 1957 of the University's School of Applied Linguistics was largely a consequence of McIntosh's realisation that the time had come to harness the sophisticated skills of twentieth century linguistics to the needs of foreign learners and pedagogy generally. In those days too some of the great linguists of the day were making pilgrimages to Edinburgh to exchange ideas and hear of activities there – such men as Louis Hjelmslev, Roman Jakobson and Kenneth Pike.

The hiving off of the Departments of Phonetics and General Linguistics and the School of Applied Linguistics (followed later by their amalgamation into a single Department of

³ *The Concise Scots Dictionary* (1985).

Phonetics and Linguistics) did not in any way weaken the Department of English Language itself. Within the general field of English ^[xxiv] and Scots Language, the range of interests covered by this Department continued to diversify, into such areas as Early Modern English, Linguistic Stylistics, Metrics, Functional and Regional and Social Varieties of English and Scots, both of the present and the past, alongside the Department's continued and developing concern with a range of Anglo-Saxon and Middle English studies and Old Norse. It was characteristic of the Department, though hardly insisted on by McIntosh, since his method of running the Department was always democratic rather than autocratic, that its members in general complemented these essentially philological interests with an up-to-date understanding of the ideas of theoretic linguistics. Several members of the Department might fairly claim to be among Britain's front runners in certain aspects of theoretic linguistics as well as in the more pragmatic areas of English philology. At one time, indeed, in the fifties and early sixties, there were indications that McIntosh's own interests might have moved in this direction and several of his writings at that time were general and discursive rather than particular and data-focussed. But the need to concentrate on the vast task of the Middle English Dialect Atlas⁴ took him off in a different course. A fair idea of the form that the Department's interests had taken by 1970 is given by the contents of *Edinburgh Studies in English and Scots* (Aitken *et al.* eds., 1971). This was a book brought out by the Department in honour of McIntosh's predecessor as head of the English Language department of Edinburgh and for many years the senior member of his staff, O. K. Schram. The topics covered include Old and Middle English dialectology, Early Modern English typography and palæography, stylistics (of Shakespeare and of Kingsley Amis), Modern English grammar, phonetics, and various topics in Scots.

For many years McIntosh's Department was alone in attending to the past and present condition of Lowland Scots, as an integral part of the study of the English Language in Scotland. This involvement with Scots was a deliberate and sustained act of policy on McIntosh's part. It began with an invitation from McIntosh to me, shortly after my installation in Minto House in 1949, to give a series of lectures to each of the two pre-honours classes in English Language, on the history of Scots and on Middle Scots texts respectively. Doubtless this action was not solely inspired by a concern for the subject; after all, McIntosh was perfectly capable of tackling these topics himself. Part of the motive was thought for my interests: that I should not be confined exclusively to the drudgery of lexicography, and, more importantly perhaps, that I should have the opportunity of gaining teaching experience should I wish to return to this after the conclusion of the Dictionary or merely a fair stint of dictionary work. The outcome of this action of McIntosh has been (he and I may fairly claim) that his Department has pioneered most aspects of the University study of Scots. Though, happily, other Universities, Glasgow most ^[xxv] notably, have followed Edinburgh's lead in introducing a significant element of Scots Language studies into their programme, Edinburgh's English Language Department still leads in the variety and depth of its treatment of Scots, offering an extensive range of part-courses on every aspect of this study, from the first to the Fourth undergraduate years, as well, of course, as post-graduate supervision.

In all these ways, Scottish studies have been central to McIntosh's arduous but highly successful endeavours since his arrival in this country from England in 1948. No doubt the Scottish patriotism which has guided him has been inspired by a sense of duty to his particular job in this particular place at that particular historical juncture, as well perhaps as more atavistic inducements. It has never let up. A very recent manifestation is his Foreword (1979) to *Languages of Scotland* in which he urges continued study towards greater

⁴ *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English*.

understanding “of the whole tangled complex of our heritage and our present ways of life, in both of which language so centrally sits” (p.vii). As far as I recall, he has, perhaps since his arrival in 1948, never thought of himself as anything but a very Scot. In the end it has been, I suspect, this sense of loyalty to Scottish concerns and the conviction that it was here that he was most needed, that persuaded him to refuse the temptations to move to more prestigious and far more lucrative posts that have on occasion been offered to him. He has marvellously lived up to the *dédicace* he wrote into the copy of his *Introduction to a Survey of Scottish Dialects* which he presented to me in 1952:

Quharfor in Scotland come I heire
With 3ow to byde and perseveire
In Edinburgh.

It will have emerged from the foregoing that one leading aspect of Angus McIntosh’s behaviour in scholarly concerns has been self-effacement, or, put more simply, unselfishness – a willingness to subordinate his personal aggrandisement to the most effective furtherance of his subject. He has devoted massively of worry, time and effort to making possible glorious scholarly productions by others. His has been the satisfaction and the limited share of limelight of the midwife rather than the mother. He has a history of identifying an area of study which ought to be developed, finding a young scholar or group of scholars capable of so doing, seeing that they were provided with the necessary means and encouragement, then quietly leaving them to get on with it. Commonly this has been without any interference at all in the day to day work, but by maintaining a general oversight and support.

Manifestly, to accomplish all that he has achieved, McIntosh is an immensely dedicated head of department, teacher and supervisor, and a prodigious worker. Yet, unlike the Man of Lawe, he has contrived to seem less busy than he was.⁵

^[xxvi] He is readily accessible for consultation to all – colleagues, supervisees, students and innumerable academic visitors. Somehow he has given all of these the time they needed, always with time for a joke or a turn of wit, and has also managed to prepare carefully for meetings, to write innumerable administrative or research letters (giving or, less often, seeking scholarly guidance), many in his own elegant hand, as well as composing lectures, classes, curricula, speeches. The number of persons who have received gentle but firm guidance and help with more or less personal problems must be huge and the number of job references he has ungrudgingly turned out must be legion.

Certainly one of his leading characteristics is unselfishness. He willingly takes on, in addition to the special duties which come to him as a result of his headship and his eminence, more than his share of the Department’s routine teaching and marking chores. Moderately urbane, the feat of riling him is nevertheless not an impossible one and some have achieved it. In committee and council, he is far-sighted and persuasive, and consequently almost always gains his point. His writings and lectures vary between the elegantly reflective and those which consist chiefly in forcefully copious presentation of evidence; but the first of these seems more characteristic of the man than the second.

With all this, he enjoys the good things of life, but though not quite as lean as a rake, he still maintains his tall and slim figure, with just a hint of the academic’s droop. His humour is not always strictly delicate.

Though public and academic honours have by no means passed him by, he has received fewer of these than his friends believe he has deserved. Let us hope this may be put right.

He could not of course have achieved so much without the very happy and secure base he has in his home. Throughout a long and joyful marriage he has been befriended, loved,

⁵ The reference is to the ‘General Prologue’ of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*.

encouraged and, on some of the more delicate personal negotiations which have arisen among his friends or colleagues, helped in more practical ways by his gentle and sensitive wife, Barbara.⁶ He has had much happiness from his children and grandchildren, his home and 'the cottage', and the myriads of friends from virtually every country in the globe.

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⁶ Barbara McIntosh, née Bainbridge, died in 1988. Angus McIntosh later married Karina Williamson.