AN INTERVIEW WITH SALLY MAPSTONE

Abstract

In this interview, Dr. Mapstone (University of Oxford) talks about her research and teaching. The former concentrates primarily on Scottish political literature written during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as well as on book history in Scotland (both the production of manuscripts and early printed texts), whereas her teaching involves any aspect of medieval literature. As President of the *Scottish Text Society*, she discusses publishing issues, such as types of edition followed for their texts. She also reflects on the current situation of Medieval English Studies and their importance for society.

Keywords: Older Scots, literary culture, book history, edition, Middle Ages.

Resumen

En la siguiente entrevista, la Dra. Mapstone (Universidad de Oxford) habla sobre su labor investigadora y docente. La primera de éstas se centra principalmente en la literatura política escocesa escrita durante los siglos quince y dieciséis, así como en la historia del libro en Escocia (tanto la producción de manuscritos como de los primeros textos impresos). Su docencia, sin embargo, incluye cualquier aspecto relacionado con la literatura medieval británica. Asimismo, como Presidenta de la *Scottish Text Society*, explica cuestiones editoriales, como los modelos de edición que siguen sus publicaciones. También reflexiona sobre la situación actual de los estudios medievales ingleses y sobre la importancia que estos tienen para la sociedad.

Palabras clave: escocés antiguo, cultura literaria, historia del libro, edición, Edad Media.

Dr. Sally Mapstone (B.A., M.A., D.Phil.) has been a Fellow of St. Hilda's in Oxford University since 1984, where she is part of the College's English School. She is President of the *Scottish Text Society* and currently Chair of the English Faculty Board at Oxford. She is also involved in many other aspects of administration in the University.

Her research and publications are on Older Scots literature, dealing primarily with literature in Scots and in Latin, political literature, and book history. She also has interests in Middle English literature, particularly Chaucer, and in comparative European literature. She has published extensively on Older Scots literature. Her major publications include: (ed.), *Older Scots Literature* (2005); (ed.), *William Dunbar, 'The Nobill Poyet'* (2001); and *Scots and their Books in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (1996).

FIRST of all, thank you very much for agreeing to being interviewed and sharing your thoughts with SELIM *readers. Let us start with your research. You*

have devoted a great part of it to Older Scots literature. Which are the main aspects you have focused on?

Thank you for inviting me to do this interview. I'm very honoured and privileged to do it. My research has focused on two main areas. One of these is Scottish political literature. I've always been very interested in the relationship between politics and literary culture in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Scotland in literature in Scots and Latin. Secondly, in very broad terms, book history. A lot of my earlier work was about how later, particularly manuscript witnesses of Scottish texts, reinterpreted and reused these texts. More recently, I've got very interested in how books were made in Scotland, both the production of manuscripts and early printed texts, which is what I'm doing a lot of work on at the moment. So, I suppose it would be fair to say that my main interests are political literature and book history.

YOU have also written vastly on fifteenth-century Scotland and the relationship between literature and the court at that time. What could you highlight about this?

I think what I would want to highlight is that I very strongly believe that there was not what in other cultures we would call a court literature in Scotland before the early sixteenth century. One of my major early articles was about "Was there a Court Literature in Fifteenth-Century Scotland?", as you know. There, I argued —and I still very strongly believe— that a court culture in the sense of a royal court culture cannot be shown to have existed in Scotland until really the beginning of the sixteenth century and that it's a mistake to use English models, or indeed French models, to talk about Scottish court culture. Scotland was a much less centralized country than England and literary culture was very much diffused into aristocratic households and ecclesiastical centres. And so, the royal court wasn't a dominant centre for patronage, it was intermittently a centre for patronage, but not the dominant one in the way that the English court would be until the beginning of the sixteenth century. I think that's one of the very distinctive aspects of early Scottish culture.

WHAT role did language play at the time in that milieu? (Latin, French, English, Scots...)

Scotland was a multilingual culture in a very real way and the one language we haven't yet mentioned was Gaelic, which was a dominant language on the West Coast of Scotland and in the Highlands of Scotland. And probably the last Scottish king who was fully conversant with Gaelic was James IV, who ruled from 1488 to 1513. Scots writers right up to the beginning of the sixteenth century often refer to their vernacular language as English or 'Inglis' —as they would call it. They clearly saw their language as very closely related to Middle English and felt indeed some quite strong connections with Middle English writers, which is ironically interesting given that, politically, Scotland and England were frequently at odds with each other in the fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth centuries. So, there is an irony there and an interesting distinction. Latin was clearly the language of the clerical elite and then the important language in Scotland. But it's very remarkable that the first texts printed in Scotland were dominantly vernacular Scots texts. There was clearly on the part of Scotland's first printers a quite deliberate attempt to make a virtue of the qualities of Older Scots, particularly for poetic texts in the early sixteenth century. So, it's a very rich linguistic mix and, interestingly, it's not until the early sixteenth century that writers start talking about their language as Scots and make a big thing of the language being Scots rather than English. It's something that comes in later than we might expect.

One of your current projects is as co-editor of volume one of The Edinburgh History of the Book in Scotland ...

That's right.

Could you tell us what does your work involve?

Yes. This is a very long-term project but it's now my major research priority. *History of the Book in Scotland* is a project that looks at book history in Scotland from the origins right through to the present day and, as you say, I'm the co-editor of the first volume, which goes up to 1707. What we are trying to do is to chart the practical history of book culture, manuscripts, prints, and so forth, but we also have chapters on function and use of books in different contexts and major issues in book publishing, such as Reformation politics, humanism, etc. I am actually writing quite a lot of the book myself because ultimately I should draw

on my own expertise, but my role has also been to commission with my co-editor, Alastair Mann, all the various contributions from contributors and edit them. It's extremely exciting and interesting work. Inevitably, we can only give a snapshot of the major aspects of Scottish book history as research on them stands now, but bringing all this material together would be a very significant contribution to Older Scots Studies.

In which ways does this project relate to volume one of the Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature, *published in 2007, to which you contributed?*

I think they are rather different projects in that the emphasis of the *Edinburgh Literary History* is very much literature, so it's looking at what particular genres were distinctive, popular, successful in Scotland and also what the major issues in Scottish literary culture are, whereas *History of the Book* is much more focusing on, as it were, how books were experienced by people as material objects, who had the manuscripts, how did they circulate, who bought the printed books, who produced the printed books, what it's got to do if they were producing their own, where did they get them ... So, there's a lot of study, for instance, on how books came into Scotland from the Low Countries, France, indeed from England, whereas the *Edinburgh Literary History* is much more a straightforward study of who was writing what, when. But it's a very good study I must say, even though I only wrote a chapter of it.

What type of books produced during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in Scotland are you particularly interested in?

That's a very interesting question. I'm afraid I'm going to give you a rather boring answer in that, at the moment, I'm extremely interested in grammars and people think that grammars are rather dull. I think grammars are extremely interesting and I've been doing a lot of work on the history of grammar books in Scotland, particularly the printed history of grammar books. About five years ago, I made quite a significant discovery of the preface to an unidentified copy of a Scottish grammar from the 1520s, which is full of annotation by schoolboys who had been taught Latin grammar, and the annotation is in Scots. It shows you how very difficult people found it to learn Latin, as perhaps today they still do. So, I'm extremely interested in grammar texts at the moment, that's

just an aspect of my research. I also go on being profoundly interested in straight, old-fashioned, literary poetic texts on which there's still a great deal of work to be done. When I first started doing research, 30 years ago, most of the texts about which I wrote in my thesis hadn't been edited and the only way in which to read them was to read them in manuscript. That's changed now; most of the texts that I read about then have been edited, but the editing and study of many major Scottish poetic texts still lags a little way behind the equivalent texts in Middle English. So, I have these areas of specialist interest like grammars, but I'm also very interested in mainstream Scottish literature.

YOU'VE already answered the following question: Who was the audience or target of these books? You said schoolboys ...

Yes, for grammars. As for poetic texts, we have to remember that when we talk about Older Scots culture, we're talking about really the period from the late fourteenth century through to the end of the sixteenth century, that is to say, we can't find vernacular Scottish literature before about 1375. Clearly, the immediate audience would have been an aristocratic and clerical elite. But as time goes on, we find that the professional classes, the burgesses, the gentry —if you want to call them that— can be demonstrated to be the consumers of Older Scots texts and so there's more middle-class readership, including sometimes female readership. That's something that interests me very much, a lot of my work has been on provenance and identifying readers. And I think quite a bit of my work has changed how we regard audiences. I'm also very interested in regions in Scotland, localities, places where you can see that there was scribal culture and an audience for the text that would be produced.

YOU are President of the Scottish Text Society, *which has played a significant part in reviving interest in the literature and languages of Scotland. What sort of texts are published and from what period?*

Well, the *Scottish Text Society* is willing to publish any text from the fourteenth century really through to the eighteenth century, and we will go into the nineteenth century if we are publishing ballad texts. We've recently published the Harris' ballads from the early nineteenth century and we're probably going to publish the corpus of Mrs. Brown of Falkland,

one of the early and important female ballad singers. So, we will go that far, but really the high point in which we publish is the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This year we've brought out three editions: one DVD edition, which I edited, and two book editions. Both of these are Scottish texts from the early sixteenth century: *The Poems of Walter Kennedy*, the first full printed edition of his poems, and the alliterative poem, *Golagros and Gawane*, again from the early sixteenth century. So, the real concentration of the *Scottish Text Society* is on literature of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

WHY do you think that scholarly societies such as the Scottish Text Society *or the* Early English Text Society *are important for Medievalists?*

I think they are absolutely crucial for Medievalists. I think they put into print and keep in print major texts in a way that is absolutely essential. One of the great things now about digital reprints is that it's possible to reprint out of printed editions published by both the *Early English Text Society* and the *Scottish Text Society,* which make those editions available again to a new generation of readers. I think this is a responsibility that scholars we all bear to make sure that the important texts on which we base our work are as accessible as possible. So, I think the *Scottish Text Society* and the *Early English Text Society* are absolutely fundamental to the work we all do.

WHEN editing, do you advocate for keeping faithful to the original text as much as possible or for introducing editorial interpretation in order to produce a more "reader-friendly" final text?

Well, this is a very interesting question, isn't it? And it tends to bifurcate linguists and literary critics. I think it depends entirely on what the purpose of the edition is. In the *Scottish Text Society*, we tend now not to publish diplomatic editions. In the past, the *Scottish Text Society* published a lot of diplomatic editions of the major manuscript collections and it was important to do so. Now, we tend to produce semi-normalised editions and we're very careful when we do semi-normalised editions to make sure that all the significant original readings can be abstracted if it's necessary. But I think these days, unless one is producing exclusively for a

linguistic audience, a small degree of semi-normalisation is helpful if you are envisaging a student audience.

Is there such a thing as a definitive edition?

No, I don't think so. I don't subscribe to the view that you can ever have a definitive edition, particularly if you have multiple witnesses or even if you have one witness —which itself is very flawed—, but you can have enormously important and influential editions. For me, Denton Fox's edition of Robert Henryson's poems is close to being the definitive and perfect edition. I'm hugely admiring of his editorial decisions, of his accuracy and the learning in his notes. I think that it's an impeccable edition. Priscilla Bawcutt's edition of the poems of William Dunbar is a very, very good edition. It would have been a better edition if it had been published with the *Scottish Text Society,* where she would have had more space to present her textual apparatus. But I think in these days, where there are so many options in terms of how to present texts and where new technologies have given us some many possibilities, I'm not sure I think there should be a definitive edition.

Is your research connected to your teaching? Could you tell us a little bit about your teaching profile?

That's a nice question. At the level of graduate teaching, my research is very closely connected to that. I currently have eight doctoral students under my supervision and I regard that as one of the most important things that I do. At the undergraduate level, much less so. The Oxford English syllabus is extremely inclusive, it's famously inclusive. Students have to study all periods of English literature, from Anglo-Saxon through to the present day. As a Medievalist, I am expected to be able to teach any aspect of medieval literature from 650 to 1550, whatever aspect the students want to do. The emphasis in Oxford is still very much on Middle English literature; it is possible to study Older Scots —and my students tend to want to study Older Scots. But actually, I think my training as a teacher has been very good because I've always taught everything. I've taught the full range of Anglo-Saxon, absolutely the full range of Middle English and the great advantage of that is that it gives you a very wide, as it were, textual archive which fits into one's own research very well. So, I

have no regrets about the fact that I've spent 25 years mostly teaching Old English and Middle English. I think it's been very good for me.

WHY do you think that Old English is no longer compulsory in most places for students reading for a degree in English?

Yes, it's a shame, isn't it? I mean, that, to some extent, includes Oxford, in that Old English used to be compulsory in Oxford. As soon as we made it non-compulsory, most of the students decide they want to do it. So, most students in Oxford do Old English in their first year. I think that there's a kind of fearfulness on the part of Medievalists, which is quite unjustified, that Old English is difficult and disincentive to students, who are frightened by the unfamiliarity of the language. I think that Medievalists have been rather feeble in this respect in that I find that if you teach Old English well, students love it, no matter how much linguistic background they have. I think we should simply be more upfront and proactive about how we teach it and not embarrassed about it. Some of the greatest literature in England is in Old English, like *Beowulf* and *The Dream of the Rood*. And generally, when students do these texts, they find them absolutely fascinating. So, I think there has been a bit of a kind of cringe in the face of criticism with Old English, which Medievalists have subscribed to. I think it's time to turn it round and just say this is a great aspect of English literary culture.

WHAT do you think of the future of Medieval English Studies? (in Oxford, other UK Universities, English speaking countries, Europe ...)

[Laughing] The world ... I think it's actually, providing we are proactive about it, I think Middle English Studies and Medieval Studies have every chance of surviving and doing very well. I'm very lucky to be in Oxford with the largest English Department in the UK and certainly the largest concentration of Medievalists. I regularly work with people who are in my bibliography, as it were, and so that's a very privileged position. But I think it's a very responsible position and we're trying to do much more these days in the way of having conferences and consciousness-raising, as it were, about Middle English and Old English Studies. I think increasingly what people are interested in is cultural difference. And I've always found that working on the Middle Ages forces me to think very

hard about what was different about medieval culture, about the things that I don't understand or I don't immediately recognise. And in terms of things which I think are important for society, I think that attitude is tremendously important. It's part of globalisation. Globalisation shouldn't be about uniformity, it should be about respecting, and appreciating, and valuing difference. Working on the Middle Ages is actually a great way of acquiring those abilities.

WHAT would be your advice to a young postgraduate student who would like to pursue an academic career in Medieval Studies?

[Laughing] I think I would say, if you really want to do it, do it. And you will really enjoy it if you really want to do it, but don't be under any illusions. Research is a lonely business and there are a lot of cul-de-sacs. And there will be lots of occasions when you do some work and you can't see what the point of it is —and you may not see the point of it for 20 years. That happened to me, things that I read or worked on 20 years ago, which I just felt I had to do, have borne fruit 20 years later. I think you have to also understand that if you want to work on the Middle Ages, this kind of work done properly takes longer than if you're working on later periods because you need to know so much more: you need a full range of languages, you need a full range of skills, you need to be able to read manuscripts, you need to be able to understand about how printed books were produced... and these things take a lot of time. So, the apprentice element is a long one, but the return is a fantastic one. And what I often say to prospective students about academia is that it just gets better and better because you know more. The longer you go on working, the more you know and the more exciting your work becomes. When I look at contemporaries of mine who were at University with me, who have been advertising executives, or bankers, or publishers ..., they're getting to 50 also and they all feel they're getting towards the end of their careers, whereas I feel I'm in my prime. And I think that's one of the great things about being an academic, that your work just gets more interesting as you get older.

THANK you very much for your conversation.

Thank you for some excellent questions. That was very good and I hope it was helpful.

YES indeed. Thank you very much.

This interview took place on October 2nd, 2008 at the University of Oviedo, in the context of the 20th International SELIM Conference, where Dr. Mapstone participated as a plenary keynote speaker.[1]

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