Reviews


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*Nineteenth-Century Scottish Rhetoric: The American Connection* provides composition specialists and students of the history of rhetoric with insight into how rhetoric and composition were taught at Scottish universities during the nineteenth century. As Horner rightly observes, while historians have long identified the significant influences on American rhetorical theory of Scottish rhetoricians George Campbell and Hugh Blair, nineteenth-century Scots such as George Jardine, William Edmonstone Aytoun, and David Mason have received little to no scrutiny. Horner argues that the contributions of these and other widely known lecturers at the universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, St. Andrews, and Aberdeen constitute the “missing link” in the chain of connection between the proponents of the New Rhetoric and the modern field of composition.

Unlike most histories that concentrate on the analysis of background, events, theories, and figures, Horner’s approach is unique: she provides background on the development of higher education in Scotland for the purpose of providing a context for the annotated guide to archival materials that constitutes a major portion of this book. Horner’s motive is to encourage further study of the nineteenth-century tradition in Scotland: “The primary purpose of this study is to make these archival materials known to scholars, so that if they wish to order copies they will have some idea of their content, or if they work with these collections in Scotland, they can more readily select useful materials.”

Horner offers a general discussion of the social, cultural, and political milieu that influenced how rhetoric and composition were taught in nineteenth-century Scottish universities. In contrast with the major English universities which catered to an elite and which were largely “schools of manners,” nineteenth-century Scottish universities sought to provide a “broad and general education” that would allow the sons of farmers and merchants to become more intelligent and better spoken. Horner argues that the rising popularity of the vernacular and the spread of literacy in Scotland supported an approach to composition teaching which stressed
correctness and the development of critical abilities. Strong feelings of Scottish nationalism reinforced the status of the vernacular and demanded a form of education that would allow Scots to advance socially and economically. Scottish curricula placed a high premium on language studies, and rhetoric was a central subject. Horner identifies three developments that encouraged this status: the first was "the gradual abandonment of Latin as the language of education and culture; the second was the shift from an oral culture to a basically literate culture, from an emphasis on speaking to an emphasis on writing; and the third was the proliferation of books and periodicals." Another important influence on the Scottish approach to writing instruction was Scottish common-sense philosophy, which promoted the notion that perceptions and feelings can be communicated reliably through language. As Horner explains, "Psychology emerges an appropriate partner to rhetoric in a period where truth depends on observable physical phenomena rather than on dialectics and philosophical disputation."

Nineteenth-century Scottish rhetoricians stressed the centrality of rhetoric studies to a liberal education and reinforced the developments in late eighteenth-century education that linked rhetoric with logic, psychology, and criticism. Horner makes clear that in Scottish universities the subject of rhetoric was theoretically and pedagogically aligned with logic, psychology, philosophy, metaphysics, and English literature; in fact, rhetoric was often taught under these curricular headings. Several of the archival sources Horner annotates indicate this curricular integration quite clearly. For example, in a detailed volume of student notes covering David Masson's lectures on rhetoric and English literature (available in the University of Edinburgh archives), the close relationship between rhetoric and literary studies is obvious in the lecture title "Rhetoric and the Principles of Literature." This section of Masson's course covered the principles of rhetoric involved in "the art of effective writing and speaking" as well as an outline of the major genres of literature. Similarly, "Notes of Lectures on Philosophy, Psychology, Logic and Rhetoric Delivered by Professor Veitch in Glasgow University" outlines a course in which the study of rhetoric (defined by Veitch as "the doctrine or theory of literary composition") is presented as a sister art to psychology and logic, fields that explain human nature and the workings of the mind.

Other informative aspects of Horner's analysis of Scottish pedagogy include her observation that "what we now call basic English was an important part of writing instruction in the Scottish universities." Scottish educators saw instruction in rhetoric, composition, and elocution as means of "eradicating" provincial accents and vocabulary; as a consequence, grammar was a major component of composition instruction. Horner also describes a number of pedagogical practices that have modern corollaries: lectures, weekly theme-writing, essay exams, discussion sessions, sequenced assignments, outlining, and peer evaluation. In summarizing the pedagogical
practices of George Jardine at the University of Glasgow, Horner makes the point that “although Jardine had never heard such phrases as peer evaluation, writing as discovery, writing across the curriculum, and writing as process, he was quite familiar with the concepts.”

One of Horner’s major interests in this book is to trace a common lineage between the nineteenth-century Scottish emphasis on “belletristic composition” and the orientation of composition instruction as it developed in America about the same time. She argues that a shift took place in nineteenth-century Scottish rhetoric that defined rhetoric more as “an interpretive, analytical act” than a “generative, creative act.” Horner implies that this shift parallels, and in fact influences, a similar direction in American composition teaching. Those interested in the complete lineage of “current-traditional rhetoric” will find this aspect of Horner’s argument particularly informative, as is her insistence on the contribution to the history of American composition teaching of Scotsman Alexander Bain, whom Horner describes as a crucial link in the importation of Scottish pedagogy to America.

What Horner makes clear in this work is that the Scottish influence on American rhetoric came in several forms, including the direct influence of Campbell and Blair and Bain, and the more subtle contributions of Scottish immigrants such as James Blair, who was founding president of the College of William and Mary, and John Witherspoon, who introduced the Scottish lecture system to Princeton and promoted an approach to rhetoric that stressed rhetoric as political art. Looking beyond the realm of rhetoric and composition, Horner also notes the influence of the Scottish approach to language studies on the development of literary studies in American universities and points to the contribution of George Saintsbury (Regis Chair of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at the University of Edinburgh, 1895-1914), whose textbook History of Nineteenth-Century Literature was widely used in American universities and helped to shape the literary canon that is still taught.

The clarification that Horner provides with her overview of Scottish education and its approaches to rhetoric and writing is a convincing prompt to examine this chapter in the history of rhetoric and composition. The annotated archival material is an admirable contribution in and of itself. As historians well know and as Horner proves here, there is no substitute for the study of primary materials in the reconstruction of history of context. Horner’s identification and use of student notes, lecture material, education reports, and university calendars can be profitably construed as a guide to historical fieldwork. Horner does us a double service by opening up what was a “closed book” in our disciplinary history and by providing the data that will allow other scholars to explore the territory she defines.