The art of the blurb in the Renaissance Mark T. Riley, Sacramento CA USA

We are all familiar with blurbs on modern novels and non-fiction works. Some are by the author. Some are by friends or other respectable or prominent people who can recommend the book. These might be effective: Stephen King, for example, recommends another horror novel writer: “I have seen the future of horror, and his name is Clive Barker” (on the novel *Books of Blood*). Some are pretentious. This is from a review of a novel, *Dziewięć* ("Nine"), by Andrez Stasiuk, a Polish writer on Eastern European themes: “Stasiuk is an accomplished stylist with an eye for telling detail. I caught a flavor of Hamsun, Sartre, Genet, and Kafka in Stasiuk's scalpel-like, but evocative, writing” (Irving Welsh in NYT 2007). This about a Polish-language novel which the reviewer read in translation! Then of course some are even true: “This novel is so bad that it gives bad novels a bad name” (Salmon Rushdie on *The Da Vinci Code*). Needless to say that wasn't on the cover.

Blurbs are all short, not book reviews. They, along with the short dedications so common in our texts, are the descendant of far more elaborate and well-thought-out Renaissance techniques, which connected the modern purposes of advertisement and promotion to a combination of recommendation, justification, and appreciation, all expressed in intricate and allusive verse. Many, if not most, Renaissance books are printed with dedicatory poems, liminary poems (*limen* = threshold), which were felt to be an integral, indeed necessary part of the humanistic furniture of any scholarly text. An illustrative example can seen in Cotton Mather's history of religion in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702). The book is in English, but it is prefaced by five Latin poems celebrating the book and the author, as well as a couple of English poems. By including these Mather put his book in a humanist context, despite its publication in what most of Europe would have considered a wilderness.

The custom of including these poems seem to be connected with the spread of printing and the expansion of the world of Humanism. The ancient world provided no models: ancient books occasionally included prefaces (as in Livy's *Histories*) or an introductory poem (as in Catullus' collection of poems), but nothing by a third party. It is my impression that liminary verse becomes less common towards the end of the 17th century. All this prefatory material, prose and verse, as well as the marginal notes often seen in books of the period, have been labelled paratexts and serve to illuminate the primary text. Often in modern editions these are omitted, but they should not be, since they can serve several important functions:
If written by the author, the poems

1. Thank the dedicatee for previous support with the hope that it continue;
2. Explain what the author is trying to do;
3. Display his qualifications for the task.

If written by friends, the poems

4. Recommend the author and praise the usefulness of the book;
5. Show how the work fits in whatever controversy the book addresses;
6. Disparage enemies and critics.

I'll illustrate these points with Latin examples from a couple of obscure textbooks which I have have recently looked into, Latin grammar books published in England and Scotland in the 1580's. The fact that even these low-level productions are adorned with liminary verses, some by or to rather prominent people, shows how common the practice was, and the quality of the verse shows how seriously the authors took their tasks. One of my examples is an introductory Latin book (Andrew Duncan*, Studiorvm pverilivm clavis miro quodam compendio ac facilitate, Latinæ linguæ ac poeticæ Rudimenta complectons.* Edinburgh: Waldgrave, 1597 – hereafter *Rudimenta*), the other (James Carmichael, *Grammatice Latinae, de etymologia, liber secundus...* Cambridge: Thomas Thomasius 1587) a more advanced Latin textbook. Duncan's text is introduced primarily by poems by friends, Carmichael's by poems by himself, for reasons I'll mention later.

Duncan begins his introduction with a prose dedication to John Kennedy, Earl of Cassilis, with a defense of his teaching methods. (This is not in the handout.) After this prose, the liminary poems begin. In the first poem, Richard Wilkie, principal of St Leonard's College (part of St. Andrews), praises Duncan for laying a foundation on which a beautiful building may be constructed; i.e. a grounding in his *Rudimenta* can lead to a student's knowledge of advanced Latin. The next-to-the-last line includes an anagram on Duncan's name, iucundus “pleasant”/Duncanus. These are not rare in liminary verse.[1] In the second poem Wilkie compares this textbook to the *elementa* which God summoned out of nothingness. In poem #3 John Johnston, of St. Mary's College (another part of St. Andrews), continues the foundation metaphor: even the person who lays the unseen foundation deserves praise. In #4 Johnston lists Duncan's glorious predecessors Festus, Varro, Scaliger, Lipsius, and adds Duncan to this list of heroes; Duncan's qualifications equal those of earlier path-making grammarians. In poems #5 and #6 Thomas Ramsay, minister at Rossie, Scotland, says that Duncan

1 J. W. Binns, *Intellectual Culture in Elizabethan and Jacobean England.* (Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1990) 463 and 48. The poems in Cotton Mather's *Magnalia* include four Latin anagrams on Cottonus Maderus: Est duo Sanctorum, Natus es Doctorum, Unctas demortuos, Senatus Doctorum. (The spelling Maderus is a variant which indicates the pronunciation of the name Mather.)

has adapted his book to beginners in the same way a nurse soothes uproarious children and tempers her words to their needs. These poems explains Duncan's methods. Ramsay also compares Duncan to someone who gives food to the starving Tantalus, with Tantalus presumably representing the Scots who are starved for learning. In poem #7 John Echlin, Professor of Philosophy at St. Andrews, disparages by name what appear to be the standard Grammars in Scotland, Johannes Despauterius *Grammatica* and Alexander of Villedieu's *Doctrinale Dei*, a medieval grammar in verse. Whoever keeps using these rotten works are like pigs rooting for acorns in the woods. The last friend, David Lindsay, of St. Mary's College, compares Duncan to one starting a fire: you don't pile on any old material, only that which will burn; Duncan has supplied material suitable for making a strong flame of learning. Finally come two short poems by the author. The first compares critics to atheists: "They don't like my work – hey, they don't like God either." The last poem makes the obligatory attack on Zoilus, an ancient critic of Homer whose name became synonymous with carping critic. Duncan relies on his friends to present recommendations of the author, explanations of what he's trying to do (in this case elementary instruction), and criticism of competing works.

Note that these writers of the liminary verses are all connected with Duncan in some way, one as a fellow minister, the others as teachers at St. Andrews University, where Duncan himself had been a student and later a regent, before he became head of a school at Dundee. Also note that these poems are not written for the beginners who would use the textbook. They employ all the resources of classical culture: allusions to myths, wordplay, various metrical schemes, and are written for the teachers and parents who might buy the book. The poems' quality show how seriously the writers took their task. As you can see by glancing at the Latin, the poems are in various meters. Most common is the elegiac (the first three), which is the default for this type of poem. #5 and #8 are dactylic hexameter, also common. But #4 is a pythiambic meter used in Horace's *Epodes*, and the long #7, as well as the two by Duncan himself, are hendecasyllabic, made famous by Catullus and used frequently in the Renaissance for emotional love and hate poems. The "pigs rooting in the woods" motif of #7 or "my critics are atheists" motif of #9 are typical of the genre. Even though these poems were solicited (or volunteered) before the book was printed, clearly the friends knew in advance the nature of Duncan's book—note the motif "he may be simply laying a foundation, but he still deserves praise for that" in the first few poems. They were prepared to comment in a sophisticated way.

Now to Carmichael's book, a much more elaborate production, printed at Cambridge in 1587, while Carmichael was in exile from Scotland. (The title page calls this "Book II" which to us would imply

a Book I in a series. But in fact Carmichael wrote no Book I. Something like Duncan's *Rudimenta* would be Book I.) I presume that it is because of this exile that these liminary poems are all by the author, with one exception. After an introductory prose essay, Carmichael's liminary poems begin. Poem #1 expresses thanks to Archibald Douglas, Earl of Angus, with the author's excuse for dedicating the book to the king, rather than to Angus. Carmichael and Angus had been in exile in England at the same time and knew each other. This poem claims a very high social or political status for the book: it is fit only for a king, not a mere nobleman. Poem #2 addresses Patrick Lord Lindsay, another nobleman, with the hope that his grandson John Lindsay might become a Latin scholar. Poem #4 expresses thanks to James Wilkie, Carmichael's old teacher at St. Andrews and the brother of the Robert Wilkie who wrote a poem for Duncan's *Rudimenta.* Poem #5 asks for gentle treatment at the hands of Andrew Melville, the most prominent Presbyterian religious and intellectual figure of the time. Melville and Carmichael were well acquainted from their time in exile in England. Poems #4 and #5 claim a high intellectual status for this book: the author studied at St. Andrew's, and he is on familiar terms with the most prominent Presbyterian of the time. This claim for high status is a specific reason for mentioning the connection between Carmichael and these men.[2] The other poems, also by Carmichael, express his reluctance to publish this book and thus expose himself to abuse (probably an excuse for the long-delayed publication of the book). These poems also explain what he is trying to do. Poem #6 states that he is writing a complete Grammar based on classical models and texts (this distinguishes him from Alexander's *Doctrinale*, which was medieval), but at the same time he does not want to overburden the student. In furtherance of this aim, he is using two sizes of type: the large type for learners, the small type for difficult material unsuited to beginners. He mentions that he is including some Greek as well and he displays his qualifications for including this Greek by scattering Greek words throughout the liminary poems.

As mentioned, poems written by friends recommend the author and place the book in context. Poem #8 is the only friend poem in Carmichael's paratextual material. Carmichael was in exile in England, along with Melville and several other prominent Presbyterians. Even after Melville and the others returned to Scotland, Carmichael stayed in London at the house of Thomas Thomas the printer, presumably finishing this book and perhaps working on a large Latin-English dictionary. He may have had difficulty soliciting contributions from friends in Scotland, and recommendations by

2 It was of course not confined to Latin. Just to take one contemporary example from 1590: Edmund Spenser prefaced his *Faery Queene* with poems by friends (including two by Walter Raleigh) and fifteen elaborate sonnets of his own to the Lord High Chancellor, the Lord High Treasurer, the Lord High Chamberlain, various Earls, and (perhaps most important) the Countess of Pembroke, Sir Philip Sidney's sister. Spenser was moving in the highest circles.

Englishmen would not have helped. One friend did oblige. G. Simonides may be William Simpson, perhaps a scholarly relative of Carmichael's father-in-law. In Poem #8 Simpson mentions the widely used competing Grammar by Johannes Despauterius (line 10, *Ninivita*, “the man from Ninove,” Despauterius' home town in Holland), a formless mass which dulled the sleepless eyes of students by its bulk (750+ pages). In contrast, Carmichael has compacted all of this in a digestible form and has even included some Greek. Simonides' final poem further reinforces the author's qualifications. Everyone knows Latin, but this author can write in Greek. The last line is the Homeric “By this you alone have won fame sweet as honey amongst the best.” Quite a few Latin texts of the period contain Greek, Hebrew, Syriac liminary poems as display items. In 1588 the scholar Theodore Beza wrote a pamphlet congratulating Queen Elizabeth on the defeat of the Armada; it contains poems in eight languages.

The liminary poems in Duncan are typical of what can be seen in many Renaissance texts: poems by authors and his associates which review the book and place it in context. Examination of liminary poems in different books can reveal literary circles and relationships between scholars. Such studies have been done for Cambridge humanists. Carmichael's poems are less revealing, because of its paucity of friend poems. But the author still felt the need to have multiple poems, which in this case he supplied himself, reviewing his own work. In the days before mass advertising, this type of liminary verse was considered necessary.