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## A Handbook of Volapuk

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A HANDBOOK OF VOLAPUK. Andrew Drummond. 320pp. Edinburgh: Polygon. Paperback, Pounds 9.99. - 1 904598 67 6.

A Handbook of Volapuk is Andrew Drummond's second novel. His first, *An Abridged History* (2004), rewrote the historical account of an unfinished Victorian railway project; this one rediscovers an abandoned language. We are presented with "the Gathered papers" of Mr Gemmell Hunter *Ibidem* Justice, organ-mender to churches in the East of Scotland and principal defender of the "universal language" of Volapuk against the encroaching forces of its immediate rival, Esperanto.

As a "universal language", the historical Volapuk proved to be a derelict siding of linguistic history, losing out to its better-known relation in the nineteenth century's attempts to reverse Babel. If few people learned Esperanto - a famous and depressing statistic suggests that more enthusiasts have mastered Klingon - then fewer still learned Volapuk. Drummond turns this obscurity to good comic effect: one of the interesting quirks of his book is its thoughtful inclusion of a number of tidups (lessons) modelled on a non-fictional Hand-Book of Volapuk, so that the whole novel is in fact an incomplete textbook of the language.

This is a risky fictional conceit, but Drummond's witty prose sustains interest by lampooning the textbook style: "The dog sees the goose" / "The dog brings the goose to the man" / "The fat man has the goose". As the standard inanities give way to apt comment on the narrative ("Make haste, for the policeman is angry!"), a comically laconic summary lightens the stark tables of declensions.

More engaging still is Drummond's way with caricature. Mr Justice, endearingly oblivious to his own pomposity, is a fine narrator for the novel's Caledonian picaresque. His foil and travelling companion is the spirited corpse of Sir Thomas Urquhart, the 200-year-dead Royalist, linguist, eccentric and translator of Rabelais. Urquhart's fictional afterlife has already taken him through Alasdair Gray's *Unlikely Stories*, *Mostly*, and Gray's droll metafictional ploys are also in evidence here, from the title page and preface (penned by "Professor Charles Cordiner", eminent phrenologist and tutor of that "promising young pupil, Mr. Sherlock Holmes") to the concluding series of parodic advertisements. These postmodern jokes may be past their best, but Drummond's writing happily bears comparison with Gray's brand of Gothic fantasy.

Volapuk offers an intelligent take on the risks and pleasures of the might-have-been, the linguistic and imaginative fuel of utopian "improvement", and its world -the legacy of Hogg and Stevenson -is appropriately filled with strange translations: cross-dressing, supernatural possession, lunatics and chimeras. The novel is also a send-up of academic squabbling, bureaucratic faffing and intellectual egotism: common failings that infect attempts to regulate and schematize not only language, but all complex human processes.

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