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Approaching Walter Scott: Part Three

Alan Riach

In the final part of this series, Alan Riach looks at Scott's late work and legacy: powerful in the 19th century but greatly diminished in the 20th century. Why? And, since the brilliant new Edinburgh edition of his works (Go to: <http://www.walterscott.lib.ed.ac.uk/index.html>) has made thorough revaluation possible, what would be good reason to read him in Scotland's circumstances now?

In the late 1820s, Scott's health declined and in 1831, after a stroke, he travelled to Italy to try to recuperate, returning, still very ill, in 1832. As his carriage approached home, he seemed to be unconscious, but when the Eildon Hills appeared, he roused himself and according to his first biographer, John Gibson Lockhart, Scott became "greatly excited" and when he saw Abbotsford, "sprang up with a cry of delight." Lockhart was determined to present an idealised picture of the last days of Scott, to give the impression that his characteristic decency was rewarded with a tranquil passing. Doubts have been raised about this, but Lockhart's account is undeniably touching: "About half-past one p.m. on the 21st of September, Sir Walter breathed his last, in the presence of all his children. It was a beautiful day – so warm, that every window was wide open – and so perfectly still, that the sound of all others most delicious to his ear, the gentle ripple of the Tweed over its pebbles, was distinctly audible as we knelt around the bed, and his eldest son kissed and closed his eyes."

At his funeral procession, from Abbotsford to Dryburgh Abbey, Lockhart tells us, the hearse and the horses halted on the summit of the hill overlooking the Tweed valley, Scott's favourite view: "The day was dark and lowering, and the wind high."

In his *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott*, first published in seven volumes (1836-38), Lockhart was giving a version of the story of Scott's life the public wanted to hear. His popularity was international. The later 19th century saw numerous adaptations of his novels for stage as plays and operas. The composer Hamish MacCunn (1868-1916), in *Jeanie Deans* (1894), produced a rich and concentrated version of Scott's novel *The Heart of Midlothian*, packed with beautiful orchestration, intensifying individual characters and dramatic developments. (Come on, Scottish Opera, give us a full-scale production! It's MacCunn's 150th birthday in 2018.) Among numerous songs in the opera, especially notable

are Effie's aria of longing for her home while she is locked up in prison awaiting trial on the charge of murdering her own child ("Oh! Would that I again could see / The little cot that sheltered me..."). She protests her innocence and the lyrical tenderness of the song is convincing testament to the quality of her feeling. But there are numerous examples of MacCunn's technical proficiency in the extracts from the opera and the other pieces collected on Hamish MacCunn (hyperion CDA66815), including the breathtakingly splendid setting of Scott's famous lines from *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*:

Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,

Who never to himself hath said,

This is my own, my native land!

Then the full orchestra comes ravishingly in with:

O Caledonia! Stern and wild,

Meet nurse for a poetic child!

Land of brown heath and shaggy wood,

Land of the mountain and the flood.

In context, this isn't merely patriotic self-glorification: it's an assertion of identity in response to hostility or disdain. In Scott's work, pride of this kind is almost always tender and vulnerable. When truly warranted, it's hard won. Yet gloriously affirmative as MacCunn's orchestral setting remains, it was part of a development of defining Scott which led to a reaction against the certainties and assurances he seemed to represent, and that Lockhart had been at pains to endorse. Modern biographies have compromised and complicated Lockhart's idol, and critical approaches to Scott's work have revised his popularity, downvalued, then extensively revalued his significance.

Scott remained widely-read until three things lowered his status in the first half of the 20th century. Modernism, in its various formulations in the aftermath of the First World War, had no time for him. For TS Eliot, Ezra Pound and James Joyce, by far the preferred exemplar of prose fiction was Gustave Flaubert, prioritising aesthetic precision in language. Also, the contemporary Scottish Renaissance writers of the 1920s rejected Scott for endorsing the Union, for his making money a priority, and for what they thought of as a compromised political position. For them, Scott was the main source of “false” ideas of “Scottishness”, the “Romance” of the Highlands, and generally, imagery made popular for tourists, “Phoney Bonnie Scotland”. Finally, English literary criticism, concentrated in the title of FR Leavis’s book *The Great Tradition* (1948), undervalued Scott (and to a large extent Dickens), and favoured Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad. Under all these assaults, Scott was discredited. However, increasingly in the second half of the 20th and into the 21st century, his work has been reappraised. This has become possible not least through the indefatigable work behind the new Edinburgh edition of the *Waverley* novels, whose editors have done an astonishing service to all who care for Scottish literature. They deserve the Oscars for scholarship.

Many of the novels have their inevitable longeurs. Allegedly, there is a copy of *Pevekil of the Peak* (1823) in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, opened to the page, surrounded by a black band, which shows the point at which, while Victoria was reading it out to him, Albert finally died. However, the almost interminable passages challenge the reader to a different kind of appreciation from that to which we have become accustomed since Flaubert, Joyce and Modernism. You have to immerse yourself in Scott’s language to get a sense of its movement, its long rhythms and sometimes startling quicknesses, such as that in the climactic pages of *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819).

Even the novels which seem wordy in prospect contain passages of vivid depiction. In *Kenilworth* (1821), a sunny and lavish occasion of Elizabethan pageantry covers over one of the most ghastly sudden murders in fiction (think *Kidnapped*, but Ebenezer wins). In *The Fortunes of Nigel* (1822), which is steeped in Scott’s knowledge of Shakespeare, Jonson and the dramatists of Jacobean London, the city streets are sensually realised: noisy, smelly, colourful, ever-active, making themselves both refuge and threat.

Quick destruction also ends *St Ronan’s Well* (1823), a novel which begins in a world very similar to that of Jane Austen, would-be high society, a domestic scene of characters in a

provincial spa-town in the Scottish Borders (including an English Baronet, Sir Bingo Binks). However, there are darker motives at work in the rivalry of two half-brothers, a brilliant characterisation of the landlady of the guest-house (Meg Dods of the Cleikum Inn) and a shockingly sudden violent duel concludes the book – not Austen terrain at all. It had tourists flocking to Innerleithen, near Peebles, where you can still visit the wells in summer.

In *The Surgeon's Daughter* (1827), set mainly in India, the villain meets his unexpected end by sudden execution in the form of an elephant obedient to its master, throwing the unsuspecting man on the ground and “stamping his huge shapeless foot upon his breast” thus putting an end “at once to his life and to his crimes.” Grand guignol indeed. In *Anne of Geierstein* (1829), though Scott never visited the Swiss Alps, there are unforgettable episodes in the high mountains, which counterpoint the underground trial of a central character at the sinister court of the “Wehm” – hooded lawgivers delivering absolute judgement.

Not one of Scott's novels is without considerable pleasures, even *Count Robert of Paris* (1831), written when he was ill and near to death. This evidently shows Scott's conservatism in his endorsement of hierarchical social structure and preference for order: Normans and Saxons and women and men keep their appropriate places. But there's an unforgettable chapter in which Count Robert, awakening from a drugged sleep in a Byzantine dungeon, is set upon by a ferocious tiger, which he manages to kill by throwing a wooden footstool at its head. There is also a rather sad Orang Outan, referred to as “The Sylvan”, who comes and goes more or less threateningly in the gardens of Constantinople, leaping from the undergrowth or lurking in basements, foreshadowing Edgar Allan Poe's killer ape in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”.

Scott's legacy is immense beyond literature, imagining Scotland through visual, musical and theatrical media, in paintings, symphonic music, plays and operas. From the early narrative poems through the great Scottish novels to the later disillusionment of the dark novel *Redgauntlet* and the story, “The Two Drovers”, Scott built up a picture of Scotland, its terrain and cities, its people, the way they spoke, the languages they used, their codes of culture and difference. One view of Scott's legacy emphasises its potential as caricature and cliché but that is to miss the complex human sympathies at work in the novels. Their basic premise is bewilderment and the struggles to reach through that to a kind of understanding, stability and justice. The conclusions of many of his novels are records of compromise,

failure or loss. His aspiration was towards hopeful accommodation but maybe his vision was finally tragic. In many novels, a central character travels into unfamiliar territory, meets dangerous people and gets caught up in uncontrollable events, usually drawn from history with specific accuracy. In discovering the difficulties of contradictory loyalties and sympathies, this main character, while longing for romantic flair and absolute commitment, chooses economic stability and social compromise. The rewards of security follow, with an adult sorrow for that which remains unreclaimable.

The central theme of all Scott's work, in Donald Davie's words in *The Heyday of Sir Walter Scott* (1961), is "the question of the rule of law in a society where loyalties are legitimately divided." Ask that and you see that Scott's novels explore both the costs and values of action and patience. This is what puts him beside Hugo and Tolstoy.

It's been said that Walter Scott was a unionist and that's all you need to know. That's just a lazy reflex. Reading Scott closely won't guarantee either a positive or a negative preference when you're alone in the ballot-box. He knew the needs in his time as we do much more urgently now, of practising a social commitment to repel misinformation and regulate blatantly effective forms of misleading mass persuasion, and of endorsing state support of better and broader political self-knowledge among people, generally. He knew as deeply as we should that if you say certain things to certain people, you'll bring out the worst in them. So how to bring out the best?

I'd argue that reading Walter Scott seriously, deeply, critically, whether again and again or for the first time, would be good practice anyway, for anyone who still thinks the answer to Scotland's independence is yes. And for those who still think it's no, it could be just as helpful.

[Boxed, off-set:]

The horrifying anti-climax of *The Bride of Lammermoor* is the culmination of an increasingly awful spiraling vortex of helplessness and confrontations that fail to resolve anything equably. Scott's recognition of tragedy arriving as a result of inflexible commitments and fanatic conviction, cruelty and vanity opposed to love, the pathos of affection torn apart by hostile priorities, the implication that there might have been a better way to resolve the conflicts, is delivered here with dramatic but understated force. Devious lawyer Ashton has impoverished Lord Ravenswood, but Ravenswood's

son falls in love with Ashton's daughter, Lucy. Things don't go well. After Lucy's awful descent into madness and death, the two are set to confront each other.

Colonel Ashton, frantic for revenge, was already in the field, pacing the turf with eagerness, and looking with impatience towards the tower for the arrival of his antagonist. The sun had now risen, and shewed its broad disk above the eastern sea, so that he could easily discern the horseman who rode towards him with a speed which argued impatience equal to his own. At once the figure became invisible, as if he had melted into the air. He rubbed his eyes, as if he had witnessed an apparition, and then hastened to the spot, near which he was met by Balderstone, who came from the opposite direction. No trace whatever of horse or rider could be discerned; it only appeared, that the late winds and high tides had greatly extended the usual bounds of the quicksand, and that the unfortunate horseman, as appeared from the hoof-tracks, in his precipitate haste, had not attended to keep on the firm sands on the foot of the rock, but had taken the shortest and most dangerous course. One only vestige of his fate appeared. A large sable feather had been detached from his hat, and the rippling waves of the rising tide wafted it to Caleb's feet. The old man took it up, dried it, and placed it in his bosom.

The inhabitants of Wolfshope were now alarmed, and crowded to the place, some on shore, and some in boats, but their searches availed nothing. The tenacious depths of the quicksand, as is usual in such cases, retained their prey.

[Boxed-off:]

Next week, Alan Riach and Alexander Moffat discuss the paintings of Joan Eardley, consider their limitations and identify what makes (some of them) great.