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Approaching Walter Scott: Part One

Alan Riach

As Burns season rolls round once again, let's spend some time with Walter Scott. In the first of a three-part essay, we're going on the DH Lawrence principle, "Never trust the teller, trust the tale." Scott had his limitations. Who doesn't? But don't damn him with "unionism" and leave it at that. His greatest novels have things as relevant today as ever, questioning the worth of the union, and its terrible cost to the people of Scotland. Where to begin?

When Walter Scott was fifteen, in Edinburgh in the winter of 1786-87, he attended a number of literary evenings at the home of the philosopher Adam Ferguson, one of which hosted as guest the adult Robert Burns. Burns asked the assembled company for the name of the poet who prompted the artist who was responsible for a picture hanging on the wall, and when all the learned men in the room were stumped, the wee boy Scott was able to answer the question. Scott later recollected Burns's presence. His eyes, he said, "glowed under the influence of feeling."

That meeting is loaded with portent, Burns perhaps seeing something valuable to come in the wee boy's aptitude and appetite for knowledge, Scott surely seeing something in the presence and forthright curiosity of the adult poet.

The vastness and dignity of diversity in human character in history and across geography is the lasting pleasure Scott gives us. It arises from the sensibility of a humane and tirelessly curious, hopeful, optimistic, sympathetic man. The characters in *Woodstock* (1826) range from fanatic puritan materialist to credulous, superstitious believer: that range is born of an author neither credulous nor fanatic but committed to remaining open to experience and an understanding of extremes of commitment and the force involved in confrontation. The end of one social order and the decency by which people may try to live their lives in times of violent change are Scott's central subjects. Burns's dates (1759-96) overlap Scott's (1771-1832) and locate both men as witnesses to the most violent revolutionary era of the western world before the second decade of the 20th century, in the aftermath of Culloden, in the time of the revolutions in America and France.

Scott was born in a flat in a narrow alley named College Wynd, in Edinburgh's Old Town, but his family soon moved to the cleaner, more refined George Square, where he grew up. As a boy, he spent a lot of time in the wild landscape of the Borders with his grandfather

at Sandyknowe farm next to Smailholm Tower. He suffered from polio and was sent to England to the spa town of Bath, but there was no cure and he walked with a limp all his life. He attended school in Edinburgh and in Kelso, again in the Borders, before going to Edinburgh University to follow his father's profession as a lawyer.

As a teenager, he visited the Highlands to meet a client of his father who had fought with Rob Roy and while there he witnessed forced evictions, the Clearances, at first hand. The immediate economic attraction was simply that of removing people who paid low rents and introducing sheep which provided large profits. The motive here was all calculation, no sympathy. Those who benefited usually lived somewhere else, in Edinburgh or indeed London. Scott witnessed the law at work and the injustice of its effect.

In 1799 he became Sheriff-Deputy of Selkirkshire, a position he continued to hold throughout his life; he was deeply and increasingly connected with the Borders and the workings of the law. The Scott household in Edinburgh and, after 1812, at Abbotsford, was the centre of a varied, lively, cultural, literary scene. In 1805 he entered a secret business partnership with James Ballantyne, publisher, and in 1809 he became half-owner of the company. Meanwhile, he had become Principal Clerk to the Court of Session, so he was able to earn a living from the law.

Throughout his youth, Scott was reading widely, translating poems and collecting Border ballads from oral sources and revising them in his own more polished style. One story has him being taken by James Hogg to visit Hogg's mother, who, when she heard what Scott was doing, chastised him severely for taking the ballads out of their oral context and away from song, and placing them between the hard boards of a silent book, from which she thought they would never be sung any more. The ballads were published as *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802-03). He went on to write his own extended narrative poems, at that time a popular literary genre: *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), *Marmion* (1808) and *The Lady of the Lake* (1810). *The Lord of the Isles* (1811-15) centres on Robert the Bruce and in *The Field of Waterloo* (1815), Scott capitalised on Wellington's victory over Napoleon. The battle had been fought on 18 June and Scott sailed for Belgium in August. He was one of the first British civilian visitors to the battlefield, but authentic details and immediate observation guaranteed nothing. According to the Edinburgh University Walter Scott digital archive (<http://www.walterscott.lib.ed.ac.uk/home.html>), for the *Critical Review*, this poem was "absolutely" its author's "poorest, dullest, least interesting composition" – though it did prompt a memorable, anonymous squib:

On Waterloo's ensanguined plain
Full many a gallant man was slain,
But none, by sabre or by shot,
Fell half so flat as Walter Scott.

The vogue for the long poem was finding its most popular proponent in Byron. Scott recognised Byron's genius. After they met in 1813, Scott turned his attention to the novel. His first published novel, *Waverley; or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since* (1814), marks a significant moment of change, in terms of literature might do, possibilities of characterisation, explorations of moral complexity, Scottish national history and the comprehensiveness of its author's vision.

Repeated readings deepen the pleasure of Scott's poems. The more familiar they become, the richer the pictures and quicker the movement. In literature, language has to be working both through movement as it progresses, and through form as it structures itself. The liability of Scott's poetry is felt when the structures dull the movement. In prose, however, the sentences unfold over long paragraphs and accumulate at their own pace, building vast, layered narrative labyrinths in which individual characters are closely described, both physically in their often exotic outward appearance, but also inwardly, as conflicts of sympathy, attraction, courage and fear rise within them. Also, giving the characters in his fiction different voices allowed Scott to write not only in standard English but also in an English that represented the Gaelic of his Highlanders, and in the broad Scots of the Lowlanders. In fact, his writing in Scots is one of the great attractions of his novels, the language itself carrying gestural and dramatic power.

The language Scott employed in his Scottish novels made their texture so much richer than that of the poems. It also earthed the conflicts of political allegiance in an intimate sensing of linguistic disposition. Preference in terms of social justice is connected to the honesty characters have towards their own language. And the novels arise from a lifetime's marinating in the compromised politics of Scottish history and the political context of Scott's contemporary world.

Let's sample a few of them.

The sub-title of *Waverley* is crucial: Scott is assuring his readers that it is sixty years since the Jacobite rising which ended so disastrously for Highland Scotland, and with the passing of time, it is now possible to look back on those events dispassionately and with sympathy, to write and read a novel about them and try to come to terms with the complex

loyalties and long grievances they bequeathed to Scotland and Britain. The central character, Edward Waverley, is a young Englishman who travels north and finds his loyalties divided between the people he has come from and the people he meets and lives with in Scotland.

The novel begins in England, then takes us over the border, and then into the Highlands, before returning south. It moves slowly to start with, so slowly you begin to wonder where it is taking you, but then you begin to meet characters and encounter Waverley in situations which follow each other before he understands what they mean, and involve him in prompt actions and commitments, leading to circumstances he could not have predicted, and dangers he could not have foreseen. It appears to be a story of an innocent abroad, seduced by novelty, exotic landscapes and the promise of adventure, to which he is susceptible because of an upbringing more indulgent of his sense of fantasy than reality. Yet it takes us into a hard world of real politics and violent conflict, in which choices have fatal consequences. And when we get to the Highlands, the narrative moves with increasing and unstoppable velocity.

Waverley is officially an officer in the Hanoverian army, but unresistingly travels with friends, companions, a possible lover, in the company of the Jacobites, ultimately joining the Jacobite troops in battle, where, seeing his own Hanoverian battalion on the opposite side, he is driven in anguished self-consciousness to ask what he has done, what he has come to, how to deal with his own divided loyalties. Things are out of his control, as he marches with the Jacobites on London, then retreats with them back to the Highlands, is wounded and drops out, only returning to the story after Culloden has happened. He meets once again his former Jacobite comrades, now prisoners-of-war, witnesses their trial and sees them taken off to brutal execution.

Things end happily enough for him, married and secure in his own property, but the ambiguity of his moral dilemma is not easily or comfortably resolved. Questions still hang in the air. His ultimate good fortune is not a comprehensively assuring conclusion. Far more impressive than anything Waverley does, the behaviour of the Jacobite prisoners in their trial, resolute in the face of their sentence, is deeply moving. The complex oppositions of honour and law, comfort and hard choices, property and poverty, the differences of language, manners, belief-systems and priorities of humour, all build a world of ambiguities, threats and enactments of violence. Cliffs and forests, plunging waterfalls and imminent dangers characterise the landscapes of the Highlands. Waverley is seduced and lost among them. He finds security and home in the end, but cannot deny there is more than one truth, more than one story in the narrative he has taken us through.

Similarly, the whole series of Scott's *Waverley* novels unfolds a comprehensive vision of his nation, geographically from the Borders to Shetland, and historically through centuries. *Waverley* is where it begins.

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This is the confrontation of cultures and meaning in the Trial of Evan Dhu, in Chapter 68 (or Book 3, Chapter 21) of *Waverley*. The climax of the trial is the proposition diffidently made by Evan Dhu Maccombich to find six of his clansmen to give their lives for their captured chief, Vich Ian Vohr:

[R]ising up, [Evan] seemed anxious to speak, but the confusion of the court, and the perplexity arising from thinking in a language different from that in which he was to express himself, kept him silent. There was a murmur of compassion among the spectators, from the idea that the poor fellow intended to plead the influence of his superior as an excuse for his crime. The judge commanded silence, and encouraged Evan to proceed.

"I was only ganging to say, my lord," said Evan, in what he meant to be an insinuating manner, "that if your excellent honour, and the honourable court, would let Vich Ian Vohr go free just this once, and let him gae back to France, and no trouble King George's government again, that ony six o' the very best of his clan will be willing to be justified in his stead; and if you'll just let me gang down to Glennaquoich, I'll fetch them up to ye mysell, to head or hang, and you may begin wi' me the very first man."

Notwithstanding the solemnity of the occasion, a sort of laugh was heard in the court at the extraordinary nature of the proposal. The judge checked this indecency, and Evan, looking sternly around, when the murmur abated, "If the Saxon gentlemen are laughing," he said, "because a poor man, such as me, thinks my life, or the life of six of my degree, is worth that of Vich Ian Vohr, it's like enough they may be very right; but if they laugh because they think I would not keep my word, I can tell them they ken neither the heart of a Hielandman, nor the honour of a gentleman."

There was no further inclination to laugh among the audience, and a dead silence ensued.

The judge then pronounced upon both prisoners the sentence of the law of high treason, with all its horrible accompaniments.