



Riach, A. (2017) Masterly studies of divided loyalties: Approaching Sir Walter Scott - Part Two. *National*, 2017, 20 Jan.

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Deposited on: 30 April 2018

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Approaching Walter Scott: Part Two

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Last week we began an approach to Walter Scott discussing how his first novel *Waverley* continues to ask pertinent questions about divided loyalties in a Scotland oppressed by Anglocentric authority. This week we're going to take a look at some of his other novels, including his masterwork, *The Heart of Midlothian*.

Waverley takes its time but *Old Mortality* (1816) is as fast, lean and violent as the best of modern thrillers, dealing in a series of battles, negotiations and further confrontations between fanatics of different extremes and moderates caught in the middle.

In the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution, the American War of Independence and a violent rebellion in Ireland, Scott was writing in the period of peace following Waterloo, but the questions arising from extremes of religious beliefs finding expression in military conflict press upon him. The fear of revolution was in the air. The historian Angus Calder's insightful introduction to the Penguin Books edition emphasises this. Scott sets the novel in 1679, when Scotland was divided into three parties: the Kirk Party of extreme Presbyterians (led by Argyll), absolute Loyalists (followers of Montrose), and moderate Presbyterians. Three characters represent these parties in the book: Burley, Claverhouse and Morton. One battle described in the book, at Loudoun Hill, was commemorated in 1815 – the year before the novel was published – by thousands of West-of-Scotland textile workers proclaiming democracy in a demonstration celebrating the escape of Napoleon from Elba. Large-scale social conflict was terribly close to Scott when he was writing, and his opposition to fanaticism, his belief in moderation, is conveyed in a story full of tension, colour and urgency.

If intensity characterises *Old Mortality*, one of the delights of *Rob Roy* (1818) is its extraordinary structure. Part 1 (chapters 1-18) is set in England, chapters 1-4 in London and 5-18 in Northumberland, at Osbaldistone Hall: this is about half the length of the whole book. Then in Part 2 (chapters 19-26) we move to Glasgow. Part 3 (chapters 27-36) finally gets us into the Highlands north of Glasgow, with the final chapters 37-39 returning us via Glasgow to Osbaldistone Hall. Each of the three main sections gets faster, more unpredicted and action-packed, leading to the story's astonishingly swift climactic violence and resolution.

Layers of intrigue and conspiracy sweep around and over each other as you read into the book. When Rob Roy himself appears he's a strangely reassuring figure, even when we only suspect who he is because he's in disguise, intervening in some crisis to save or help the narrator, young Frank Osbaldistone, who is recounting his story in 1763 as an old man. We look back with him on the events of the tale, which take place in 1715, when he was twenty-one, so there's a multi-faceted quality about the book, reaching back through time with a sense of different political priorities appropriate for different eras, and a personal sense of tragic loss in Frank's elderly state as a widower, still grieving over the loss of his wife, Di Vernon.

She is one of two of the greatest women characters in all fiction, who vitalise the novel in ways that could not have been predicted: Di Vernon, dark, elusive, mysterious, decisive and self-determined, is complemented by the immensely powerful Helen MacGregor, Rob Roy's wife, who commands her own agenda with ruthless authority. They are counterpoints of feminine self-possession and their actions are always impressively independent of the men who would match them. Thus the structure of counterpoints, balanced characterisations – at the centre of the book, the Highlander Rob Roy is balanced against his cousin the Lowlander Bailie Nicol Jarvie – and the narrative of the whole novel, as it unfolds, or rises, from bounce to bounce, to third bounce and return, increases tension and gathers suspense. The character of the resourceful, elusive and marvellously sympathetic hero is summed up in the closing paragraph: "Old Andrew Fairservice used to say, that 'There were many things ower bad for blessing, and ower gude for banning, like Rob Roy.'"

The Heart of Midlothian (1818) is Scott's greatest novel, with the widest range of characters and locations, the deepest insights into human motivation, and a compelling story. The novel overflows with characters, social and family situations, intrigues and plot twists, conflicting national priorities.

It begins with the supposed murder of a child by his mother, and ends with the actual murder of his father by the same child, who returns and fails to recognise his own connectedness to a society which has abandoned him. The Whistler, illegitimate child of George Staunton and Effie Deans, escapes capture and heads west, crossing the Atlantic and taking up with a tribe of native American Indians in the last pages of the novel, never to be heard of again. His fate resembles that of Frankenstein's monster in Mary Shelley's novel, which Scott in fact reviewed around the time he was writing his own novel, and referred to as

his favourite book. The social stability affirmed for the major characters at the close of *The Heart of Midlothian* cannot accommodate *The Whistler*, or the wildness he represents. Scott's recognition of this is courageous. The novel centres on distinct individuals whose stories carry us through, but it also has the power to evoke the threatening growth of mob feeling, imminent civic unrest that rises to moments of violence – a social circumstance that might be fuelled by political anger, an understandable sense of injustice, the desire to redress wrongs, but that might lead directly to bloody violence and unknown outcomes. In Chapter 4, the sound of the voices of Edinburgh protestors against the imposition of unjust law is described fearfully, as the people turn into a mob: “the hitherto silent expectation of the people changed into that deep and agitating murmur, which is sent forth by the ocean before the tempest begins to howl.”

The Bride of Lammermoor (1819) is his darkest book, a gloom-enfolding tragedy in which a very black humour, prophetic of the God-bereft world of Samuel Beckett, infects the whole atmosphere, and the exaggerations of grand guignol drama do not distract from the pathos of vulnerable individuals, helpless in the face of oncoming events that readers can sometimes see approaching, though the ending is stunningly abrupt. The English novelist Thomas Hardy described it as “a perfect specimen of form” and Scott's great biographer Edgar Johnson said it was “the most perfectly constructed of all Scott's novels.” This is perhaps surprising, since Scott wrote it while suffering intense pain from gallstones, was drugged on opiates, physically unable to lift his pen, and dictated most of it through groans and moans. Once recovered, reviewing the book before publication, he couldn't remember a single character or incident it contained.

Donizetti's opera, *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835), elaborates Scott's drama, especially in the famous “mad scene” where Lucy's wedding night ends in her death. I once saw a Scottish Opera production in which the leading singer slipped and fell on stage in the first act, but agreed to carry on if there was anyone in the audience who could lend her a wheelchair. The whole opera was intensified by this unexpected incident and the climax, with a flashing knife and Lucy's white nightgown lavishly spattered with crimson blood as she wheeled herself around in the chair, singing at the top of her voice, has always stayed with me as a crazily appropriate adaptation, mixing Scott and Beckett in an Italian musical gorefest: the piercing flamboyance of the music and the terrible pathos of the story within the production, ultimately confirmed the resilience and flexibility of Scott's imagination. Like all great writers, he always needs to be read in new ways, and always repays your attention.

Scott was elected to the Presidency of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1820 and in 1822 he was central in organising the first visit of a Hanoverian monarch to Scotland, and King George IV made a grand tour of Edinburgh in a spectacle of garish pageantry. In the aftermath of such successful public performance, Scott wrote his most poignant novel, *Redgauntlet* (1824). Perhaps it was an endorsement of his deepening commitment to the establishment, ending with the conclusion that “the cause is lost forever!” Or maybe it was a reclamation of what that cause might have been, and, by its vivid evocation, a reminder that the dream doesn’t ever entirely die?

Just as *Rob Roy* is set at the time of the first Jacobite rising in 1715 and *Waverley* during the second rising in 1745, *Redgauntlet* takes place during a third, apparently entirely fictional approach to a rising that never happens, in 1765. There are wild things going on in the dangerous borderlands around the Solway Firth, where the tidal estuary comes and goes with such speed that anyone caught on the sands at the wrong moment may drown in a matter of minutes. The specific geography stands for the general atmosphere of risk: quick movement is required, uncertainty is constant, and the novel unfolds through different narratives, letters, accounts that gradually come together in an anti-climactic denouement, the dissipation of romantic idealism. Embedded in the novel is “Wandering Willie’s Tale”, a self-contained short story in Scots, an eerie representation of supernatural forces coming in contact with the necessary rectitudes of fiscal and economic authority.

In this story, rational, reasonable explanation covers up the unanswerable mysteries of the hellish world that lies beneath, but its legacies carry on through future generations. The sleep of reason produces monsters. But who wants reason all the time? Scott knew as surely as Shakespeare that monsters have their value.

The story of the last six years of Scott’s life is told in his *Journal*, posthumously published and edited by WEK Anderson in 1972, a day-by-day account of his life through financial disaster, personal bereavement, sickness and ageing. It’s a work about growing old while maintaining an even temper, a generous spirit and a strength of will and disposition to fairness that remains uniquely valuable. In his later fiction, in *Chronicles of the Canongate* (1827), the short stories “The Highland Widow” and “The Two Drovers” are outstanding examples of his art, succinct to the point of abruptness, yet emotionally devastating. It’s as if he knew he simply did not have time to elaborate. These were stories he had to tell with as much intensity and urgency as possible. Other late, posthumously published works are more

prolix yet all retain some aspect of his character, a fascination with everything always in evidence, from *The Siege of Malta* to *Reliquae Trotcosienses*, a self-consciously ironic ramble through the contents of his own Gothic home, Abbotsford, its library and artefacts, and therefore, an excursion through the fragments and facets of his own, vast, centripetal imagination.

We'll return to Scott's later works and his posthumous reputation in the last of these three essays, next week.

[Boxed off:]

This is the climactic dialogue between Jeanie Deans and Queen Caroline in Chapter 37 of *The Heart of Midlothian*. Jeanie has walked from Scotland to London to seek a pardon from the King for her condemned sister Effie, imprisoned in the Tolbooth (known as the Heart of Midlothian, in Edinburgh). Prior to this, the Edinburgh mob has killed the officer Porteous, hence the reference to the "Porteous mob". But the English and Scots languages in the voices of the characters energise this confrontation as much as the narrative context. Jeanie addresses the Queen:

"I would hae gaen to the end of the earth to save the life of John Porteous, or any other unhappy man in his condition; but... He is dead and gane tae his place, and they that have slain him must answer for their ain act. But my sister – my puir sister Effie, still lives, though her days and hours are numbered! – She still lives, and a word of the King's mouth might restore her tae a broken-hearted auld man [her father], that never, in his daily and nightly exercise, forgot to pray that his Majesty might be blessed with a long and prosperous reign, and that his throne, and the throne of his posterity, might be established in righteousness. O, madam, if ever ye kenned whit it was to sorrow for and with a sinning and a suffering creature, whose mind is sae tossed that she can neither be ca'd fit to live nor die, have some compassion on our misery! – Save an honest house from dishonour, and an unhappy girl, not eighteen years of age, from an early and dreadful death! Alas! it is not when we sleep saft and wake merrily ourselves, that we think on other people's sufferings. Our hearts are waxed light within us then, and we are for righting our ain wrangs and fighting our ain battles. But when the hour of trouble comes to the mind or to the body – and seldom may it visit your Laddyship –

and when the hour of death comes, that comes to high and low – lang and late may it be yours – O, my Leddy, then it isna what we hae dune for oursells, but what we hae dune for others, that we think on maist pleasantly. And the thought that ye hae intervened tae spare the puir thing’s life will be sweeter in that hour, come when it may, than if a word of your mouth could hang the haill Porteous mob at the tail of ae tow.”

Tear followed tear down Jeanie’s cheeks, as, her features glowing and quivering with emotion, she pleaded her sister’s case with a pathos which was at once simple and solemn.

“This is eloquence,” said her Majesty to the Duke of Argyle.