The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club

Annual Dinner, Friday 7th March 2008

It was decided by council recently that the venue of the dinner should be altered from the Balmoral Hotel to The New Club, Princes Street, where so many of our meetings take place. Prof. David Purdie was in the chair to welcome a full house of members and friends. After a brief introduction of those at the Top Table the Very Rev. Allan Maclean of Dochgarroch said Grace. Thereafter dinner of the most acceptable standard of The New Club was served. Following on a short interval members reassembled to be inspired by the President A.N.Wilson, who proposed the main toast of the evening to the Memory of Sir Walter Scott. The following is a transcript of his address which is greatly appreciated and greeted with acclamation

Ladies and gentlemen, the Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club has done me a singular honour in electing me as its President, and I can simply and candidly say that there is no author, no not even Shakespeare, in whose praise I should rather speak. This evening, in the year of grace 2008, we meet in national circumstances which would I think have entertained Sir Walter not a little. We have in Westminster a Scottish Prime Minister and a Scottish Chancellor of the Exchequer who have presided, with considerable lack of aplomb I think Sir Walter might have believed, over the collapse of a bank. In these interesting circumstances, I wonder, ladies and gentlemen, if you would allow me to meditate not upon Sir Walter's poems and novels *per se* – we all know them and love them and will in a little space raise our glasses to salute them as we honour their sometimes anonymous author – but to meditate, upon Sir Walter's view of what it meant to be a Scotsman. And in particular, can I share with you a few recollections of his response to the banking crisis of 1825.

If my thoughts come into any kind of focus, they will enable me to answer a question which has puzzled many admirers of Sir Walter's work but more especially those of a left-wing or radical persuasion. The question is this. How could the penetrating historical intelligence which produced *Rob Roy* and *Old Mortality* have emerged from a man who was – according to this point of view – so out of touch with the political atmosphere of his own times. The anecdote which supposedly illustrates this failure to grasp the march of events is that of Sir Walter's walk with the Lords Jeffrey and Cockburn as they made their way back from the Parliament House. Jeffrey and Cockburn had been proposing a reform, minor as it seemed to those two radicals, of the Faculty of Advocates in Edinburgh, and as they walked away with Scott, who had opposed it, they ribbed Scott about being an old reactionary. Scott, who was normally a good-humoured, laughing man exclaimed, "No, no – 'tis no laughing matter; little by little, whatever your wishes may be, you will destroy and undermine, until nothing of what makes Scotland Scotland shall remain." And so saying he turned round to conceal his agitation – but not until Mr. Jeffrey saw tears gushing down his cheek – resting his head on the wall of the Mound.

Cockburn, like Scott, was a patriotic Scotsman, but to his Whig way of looking at things, Scott's attitude was merely sentimental. Scott felt there had been a decline in Scottish character and habits during his lifetime – that in some nebulous way Scotland was getting less Scottish. "Properly applied", Cockburn wrote, "this was a sentiment with which I cordially sympathised. But it was misapplied by Scott, who was thinking of feudal poetry, not of modern business."

This is a restatement, really, of the idea, expressed by a gentleman on the occasion of George IV's visit to Edinburgh and quoted in the Creevy papers, that "Sir Walter Scott has ridiculously made us appear to be a nation of Highlanders."

Scott is all very well if you want a man to put on a pageant, but he is scarcely at home in the real world of modern politics.

This, if true, is surely very surprising. Scott's historical judgement in the best of his novels is strong and realistic and, even if you disagree with it, sure. He is above all, in his art, a realist. Why should his sense of realism have been thought to desert him when surveying the Scotland of his day? And did it? Just because a man is not a radical does not mean he is not a realist.

To illustrate this fact, I want to look first at one very specific involvement which Scott had with a major public issue – that is the question of Currency Control in the early months of 1826.

Towards the end of 1825, there was a collapse of the London Stock Market, a run on the banks and a calamitous national economic crisis which led to many people, including Sir Walter Scott, being ruined. Because of the various business ventures in which he was involved (and which involved investment in London) Scott found himself personally in debt for something in the region of £120,000.

That remarkable story does not immediately concern us here. Once Parliament reassembled after Christmas, early in 1826, Lord Liverpool's administration set to work to prevent the crisis by forbidding the private clearing banks from circulating their own notes as currency, and limiting even the Bank of England to the issue of £5 notes and upwards.

They naturally thought that it would be possible to apply this stricture to the Scottish banks likewise. This caused something of an outcry in Scotland: partly because it would have curtailed the profits of the Scottish banks and therefore been bad for Scottish trade: partly as a matter of principle since this represented a case of unnecessary interference by Westminster in what was an autonomous private Scottish concern. So it becomes a *constitutional* issue.

Scott enters the fray partly because in his own misfortune the Edinburgh banks had been kind to him and he owed them a debt of gratitude, and partly because of this patriotic issue of Scottish independence, with the publication of three letters, purporting to be from

the disgruntled descendant of a character in the *Fortunes of Nigel*, one Malachi Malagrowther. The first is dated February 21, 1826:

"... when I look back on the last fifteen or twenty years, and more especially on the last ten, I think I see my native country of Scotland, if it is yet to be called by a title so discriminative, falling daily into more absolute contempt. So late as my own younger days, an English minister would have paused, even in a favourite measure, if a reclamation of national rights had been made by a Member for Scotland, supported, as it uniformly was then, by the voice of her representatives and her people."

The first letter concedes that some of the innovations in Scottish law to bring it into line with England – the introduction of Jury Courts for instance, have been welcome but that the principle that Scotland must always be brought into conformity with England is a bad one. In the present crisis, for instance, it is simply not true that the Scottish banks (like so many English provincial banks) are being unable to pay the bearer on demand. *Let Weel bide* is his motto. The Ayr Bank crashed 50 years before, The Merchant Bank of Stirling "about 30 years since" crashed and the East Lothian Banking Company was "very ill conducted by a villainous manager". The Union Bank of Falkirk became insolvent within the last 15 years but paid up its creditors. Apart from these cases Malachi argues, there have been no instances of banks in Scotland going bust.

Moreover, he argues, that Scotland is richer as a result of the existence of these banks, anyway in Lowland regions:

"Through means of the Credit which this system has afforded, roads have been made, bridges built, and canals dug, opening up to reciprocal communication the most sequestered districts of the country – manufacturers have been established unequalled in extent or success – wastes have been converted into productive farms – the productions of the earth for human use have been multiplied 20 fold, while the wealth of the rich, and the comforts of the poor, have been extended in the same proportion. And all this in a country where the rigour of the climate, and the sterility of the soil, seem united to set improvement at defiance. Let those who remember Scotland forty years since bear witness if I speak truth or falsehood."

Perhaps Scott wanted things both ways. He wept that Scotland was less Scottish: but he rejoiced that it was more prosperous. And he claims:

"We are no longer a poor, that is, a *very poor* country and people ... and it is this advance which the Chancellor of the Exchequer thinks to cut.

We still do not wholly conform with England in law. We do not conform in religion. Why should the banks suffer – and Scotland be put back 40 or 50 years to the times of desperate poverty which followed the 45?"

Scott argued that when Scotland was left alone by the English, it had

"... increased her prosperity in a ratio more than 5 times greater than that of her more fortunate and richer sister, i.e. England."

In the second letter of Malachi Malagrowther Scott goes on to consider the position of the Scottish MPs. The Irish Union he points out has added 100 members to Parliament. Still, the Scots have only 45 seats. "It requires but little arithmetic to compare that fated number, 45, bears a less proportion to 613 than to 513, the number of the House of Commons at the time of the Scottish Union" ... Nevertheless even though Scotland is proportionately worse represented than at any time in history and than any other part of the Kingdom, the block vote of the Scottish members could prevent the Government's economic policy working. "The Scottish members of Parliament should therefore lose no time – not an instant – in uniting together in their national character of the Representatives of Scotland."

The letter continues as a great defence of capitalism, worthy of the creator of Baillie Nicol Jarvie in *Rob Roy*. Since Scottish farmers began to have bank accounts, it is his argument, the crime rate has diminished. (The man who has just sold his cattle at market gets a credit note whereas in the past he would get a money bag and be mugged on the way home.)

It is the banks who have provided agricultural subsidies in the poor areas of Scotland. They have also supported fisheries. Scott in an eloquent passage turns his attention to the Highlands and Isles where as he says, men were living on "the tenth part of an English coal-heaver's wages".

"Those sterile and remote regions have been endowed by Providence with treasures of their own, gained from the stormy deep by their hardy inhabitants. The fisheries in the distant Highlands and Isles, under the management of an enlightened Board, have at length accomplished what was long the warmest wish of British patriots and have driven the Dutch out of all rivalry in this great branch of national industry. The northern fisheries furnish exports to our colonies and to the Continent, exceeding half a million of money annually and give employment to a very great number of hardy seamen."

It is the Scottish Banks, Scott argues, who have subsidised and supported the fisheries until they became a profitable industry. Likewise with the manufacture of kelp, "which is carried on to an immense extent through all the shores and isles of the Highlands, supporting thousands of men with their families, who must otherwise emigrate or starve ..."

If the Government in effect close down the Scottish banks the means of paying those people is destroyed leaving the state with the choice of "feeding idle paupers" or "transporting the inhabitants to Canada and New South Wales", and leaving the country "totally waste" ... "Can anything short of the utmost NECESSITY justify an experiment which threatens to depopulate a part of the empire and destroy the happiness of thousands?"

Poverty on this scale is not merely wrong, it is dangerous and Scott warns menacingly that brigandry not to say open rebellion is likely to break out if the Government insists on bleeding Scotland of its wealth. “I am a pretty staunch Tory myself but not to this point of humility.”

The Malachi Malagrowther letters were debated in Parliament and even if Lockhart exaggerates when he says they produced a greater sensation “than any political tract had excited in the British Public at large since the appearance of Burke’s reflections on the French revolution”, they did cause a sensation and, what is more, they achieved their objective: or their immediate limited objective. The Scottish part of the measure against the private banks was dropped which is why – very roughly – Scottish banks continue to have their own notes, and why Sir Walter Scott is the only bankrupt man whose face has been used to decorate a bank note. Scott himself saw the full irony. “It is ridiculous enough for me in a state of insolvency for the present to be battling about gold and paper currency – it is something like the humorous touch in Hogarth’s ‘distressed Poet’ where the poor starveling of the muses is engaged when in the abyss of poverty in writing an Essay on the payment of the National Debt”.

So this would be my reply to an angry Scotch nationalist who claimed that there was a grotesque divide between the rather frivolous fantasies Scott constructed around the Highlands and the historical realities. Scott’s may have been the first lame old foot to step on the road which was going to lead to Balmorality and tartan shortbread tins and haggis on the tourist menu. I do not myself think there is anything much wrong with any of those things. But it could very decidedly *not* be said that Sir Walter Scott did not care about his country being turned into a dingy little English province: nor could it be said that he did not care about the plight of the Highlands. The very opposite is true.

“A proud nation cannot endure such experiments when they touch honour – a poor one cannot brook them when attended with heavy loss”.

I think these words show that there is no artificial division in Scott’s mind between fake Highlanders all dressed up for a royal occasion in kilts and bonnets and real ones desperately trying to make a living out of the manufacture of kelp or of fishing. The pageantry laid on for George IV’s visit to Edinburgh was as absurd or as splendid as pageantry always is. But the observer got it wrong who crossly said, “Sir Walter Scott has ridiculously made us appear to be a nation of Highlanders, and the bagpipe and the tartan are the order of the day.” It was on the contrary right to remind the king – and the townspeople of Edinburgh – that the independent identity of Scotland depended on the Scots standing together – Gaels and Picts, Highlanders, Islanders, Lowlanders, City-folk: and that you could not speak of the prosperity of Scotland simply in terms of the mercantile wealth of Glasgow and forget the boat-loads of half-starved Highlanders making their way to the new world.

In this one small matter of the currency, Scott had actual, practical influence. In general terms, he knew that he was powerless. His final years are overshadowed not only by the appalling series of personal calamities which overcame him: his financial ruin, the loss of

his wife, the collapse of his health and so on, but fear that the world was cascading inevitably towards anarchy and ruin. It is appropriate that he should die in 1832.

James Hogg believed the coming of the Reform Bill killed him. "I say again, and I am certain of it, that the democratic ascendancy, and the grievous and shameful insults that he received from the populace of his own country, broke the heart of and killed the greatest man that country ever contained."

But in his view of Scotland, I do not think Scott was at all wide of the mark. Defeatist he certainly was not, if we judge from the letters of Malachi Malagrowther which spell out in such clarity what he thought made Scotland Scotland: it was an independent kirk, an independent legal system, it was an independent commercial life. And in a thousand smaller ways it was the preservation of local language, dialect, university and intellectual life, customs, tastes, but Scott feared that in the two main areas – legislative independence and commerce, Scotland had no future. He saw it as being anglicised, and exploited by the English. Cockburn thought that Scott was naive because he was thinking of feudal poetry and not of modern business. Scott thought Cockburn and other like-minded radicals were naive because they were thinking of modern business and not feudal poetry. They could not see (as the Irish nationalists by contrast in the next century *could* so plainly see) that commerce, legal power, political representation and a nation's "culture" (for want of a better word) were all of a piece; that Anglicisation in one area led to an inevitable provincialisation.

"I am a pretty staunch Tory myself but not to the point of humility", said Sir Walter. He was not a tory in the English sense of the word. He was a Scottish Tory as Hume had been. He was a Scotsman first and a Tory a good way second. He viewed both as a Tory and as a Scotsman, the world with increasing distaste and increasing certainty that everything was cascading into disaster. If, in English terms this is an absurd and melodramatic way of viewing 1832, it is not absurd in Scottish terms. Most of Scott's fears and predictions about the general decline of Scotland (though not his fears of mob rule and riots) were born out in the hundred and fifty years which have passed between his death and this day.

The Union between the people of Scotland and the people of England is in our own day in the process of breaking up: which as an Englishman, I find very sad. Scott was not simply a Scotsman. He was a universal genius, one of those few authors like Shakespeare and Milton born in this archipelago whose work transcends national boundaries, and is worthy to be placed alongside Goethe and Dante. But he knew – which our two countries today on both sides of the border have forgotten – that societies cohere only when they respect the past, only when they are aware of history, only when they treasure, rather than lightly discard, the institutions handed on to us by our forefathers. His collected works are an extraordinary imaginative recapturing of the past – beginning with the Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border, and the Lay of the Last Minstrel, down to the later novels and, yes, to his involvement in the currency dispute of 1826. We lose touch with our old stories, with our historical memories, with song and memory, and we begin to break up. That was what made him weep when he conversed with Jeffrey and Cockburn. We do not

need to be satirical enough to wonder what he would make of Gordon Brown or Alastair Darling or Alex Salmond. This deep and great genius still speaks us to us through his great works. We revisit them again and again, but the messages they bring us today, in an England and a Scotland which have lost touch with their past and their heritage, are increasingly sad ones. Our melancholy, however, does not diminish our love for Sir Walter – who as well as being one of the greatest British writers was, surely, the most loveable as a man.

So, my friends, and fellow admirers, if it does not seem impertinent for such a request to fall from English lips, I ask you to salute not only Sir Walter Scott the poet, Sir Walter the novelist, but also Sir Walter – the Scotsman – Ladies and gentlemen I give you – SIR WALTER SCOTT!