The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club

The Ninety Fifth Annual Dinner

2004

The pleasure of returning to our old haunt, The N.B., or The Balmoral as it is now, somewhat regretfully, known, was tempered by the announcement by the Chairman, Mr. Michael McIntosh Reid, of the illness of the President, Dame Jean Maxwell-Scott, and her inability to be present. Fortunately we did not appreciate then the extreme seriousness of her condition which a few weeks later resulted in her untimely death, and the evening continued in an enjoyable but somewhat restrained manner as a result. After welcoming members and guests and introducing the Top Table the chairman announced that Professor Ian Campbell had kindly agreed to propose the main toast in the unfortunate absence of Dame Jean. The Club is most indebted to Ian for stepping in at such short notice and we are pleased to reprint here an abbreviated version of his address.

TRAVELLING IN AN UNCOUTH LAND

This should have been an address by Dame Jean Maxwell-Scott, and the best way to begin would be with our united wishes to Dame Jean for a speedy recovery and return to Abbotsford. We all owe her a large debt.

Three weeks ago, I was lucky enough to tour the new parliament buildings at Holyrood, in fluorescent jacket, protective boots and hard hat. The building is already obviously magnificent, and set to become more so as the finishing stages a re completed. Already, it seems a very suitable place for politicians to practice their craft, with many dark corridors, quiet corners, loose floorboards, unexpected steps to trip you up. Sir Walter would have been very impressed by the scale and the confidence with which Scotland approaches its newly independent parliamentary status, and he would have appreciated the boldness of the new – the architecture, the styling of the magnificent debating chamber – and the traditional, the Scottish oak of the ceilings, the Saltire embossed on the bold vaulted ceilings. He would have been amused by the MSPs' offices with their windows, the rows of translators' booths as the Scottish debates face a polyglot audience, the signage in Gaelic as well as in English. He would have been fascinated by the word processors being unpacked on every table, the coils of IT wiring still visible under the unfinished floors and walls. The thought of Sir Walter with the power of a word processor at his command is seriously alarming. But best of all, Scott would have enjoyed the moment stepping out of the building site back into everyday reality, shedding hard hat and protective gear, taking in the juxtaposition of the new building with the unchanging grandeur of Holyrood and Arthur's Seat, the shock of the Dynamic Earth building, the skyline of the distant Old Town which was one of Scott's unchanging love affairs. Everything about Holyrood is the shock of the old and the new, the unexpected side-by-side, the calculated reminder of the past in the presence of the present.

And it could hardly be a better preparation for toasting Scott this evening. The shock of the new was something he valued as much as he would have valued the information technology of our own century had he been able to put his hand to it. As David Daiches writes, "though Scott believed in progress and welcomed it, and though he accepted eagerly any technological aids to the easing of the condition of life that he could find – whether it was gas or railways or pneumatic bells – he was deeply troubled at the break-up of organic structures in society which the industrial revolution brought with it".[1] Scott faced up to change in detail as well as in those organic structures with courage and with a variety of approaches which make his novels transcend place and particular setting: he lived in a society which had survived in living memory the French Revolution, the memory of the Napoleonic conflict, Waterloo, the social upheavals which followed (which Scott lived to see reach his territory in Melrose), the development of the Reform movement. Just beyond living memory, they had survived

two Jacobite rebellions and their aftermaths. Tales of those days in Scotland were Scott's delight in his boyhood, and they were very obviously present in the years of his manhood when he wrote his greatest fiction. Many people have pointed to the openness of mind which Scott showed to make his changing society inclusive. John Buchan wrote that Scott's habit was "to take a great mass of life and show it in all its infinite variety."[2], and William Power (in his disappointingly little-read *Literature and Oatmeal* wrote pugnaciously of Scott that "His gentry are seldom much more than lay figures, and their womenkind are insipid to a degree that ought to have astonished a period in which passionate episodes were not uncommon in Edinburgh. . . On the other hand, this Tory of Tories, who rose from a sick-bed to protest passionately against the political enfranchisement of the common people, attained Shakespearean heights in his portrayal of the humble folk of Scotland."[3]. Buchan made the point that Scott was someone who actually mixed in the rough and tumble of his world (contrasting him with the library-bound critic Thomas Carlyle whose view of revolution was shortly to eclipse Scott's): Francis Jeffrey, one of Scott's acutest contemporaries, noted that "It is very remarkable, however, that, with propensityies thus decidedly aristocratical, the ingenious author has succeeded by far the best in the representation of rustic and homely characters; and not in the ludicrous or contemptuous representation of them – but by making them at once more natural and more interesting than they had ever been made before in any work of fiction" [4]

Admitting the range of Scott's character presentation, we admit also the deftness with which he identifies those moments of choice which confront individuals, perhaps once in a lifetime, and make their stories more than mere personal record, but indicative of something which transcends time and nationality. Writing of Hoffmann's *The Entail,* Scott pinpointed this: "What we admire, therefore, . . . is not the mere wonderful of terrible part of the story, though the circumstances are well narrated, it is thee advantageous light in which it places the human character as capable of being armed with a strong sense of duty, and of opposing itself, without presumption but with confidence, to a power of which it cannot estimate the force, of which it hath every reason to doubt the purpose, and at the idea of confronting which our nature recoils."[5]

Change, Scott realised, faced people with these difficult life choices: in Scott's greatest novels (or to put it more selfishly, the ones I have chosen to talk of tonight) we see again and again people with these very powers – a strong sense of duty, and a willingness to challenge an unknown opponent in circumstances where right and wrong are not easy to lay out in black and white. For that is what makes Scott's novels living discussions of our society and our new emerging Scotland as well as of the particular times he chose to set them in. Again and again – taking examples from the novels we have been studying this term in our department – we see people against this moment of choice. Whether it is Edward Waverley caught up almost by accident in the '45. or Alan Fairford and Darsie Latimer caught up equally accidentally in Redgauntlet's (happily purely fictional) plot in 1765 to kick-start another Jacobite rebellion among the disaffected rump of Stuart supporters, Scott delights not only in the creation of the 'Scott hero'-observer but in pinning the observer and those around them to the difficult decision – usually a choice between past and present or between past and present values, one choice re-establishing a Scotland perhaps in threat of extinction or eclipse, the other in reluctantly surrendering that Scotland to 'progress' which brings prosperity and security, at the cost of some loss of Scotland's identity, history, independence, language.

Scott was more than alert to the danger of this surrender. In his prefatory essay to *Redgauntlet* (disappointingly little read by people who rush to get into 'the story') he writes of the survivors of the Jacobite years in Scotland. "Those who remember such old men, will probably agree that the progress of time, which has withdrawn all of them from the field, has removed, at the same time, a peculiar and striking feature of ancient manners. Their love of past times, their tales of bloody battles fought against romantic odds, were all dear to the imagination, and their little idolatry of locks of hair, pictures, rings, ribbons, and other memorials of the time in which they still seemed to live, was an interesting enthusiasm; and although their political principles had they existed in the relation of fathers, might have rendered them dangerous to the existing dynasty, yet as we now recollect them, there could not be on earth supposed to exist persons better qualified to sustain the capacity of innocuous and respectable

grandsires.“ These are the Jacobites, tales of whom fascinated and overjoyed the youthful Scott, a generation just out of living memory in his own manhood, but stories still alive to his *grandparents'* circle even if not to his parents'. It's a distinction which crops up several times in Scott – one generation ago, we understand through experience how people behave: two generations, and we have to use our imaginations, try to understand historical features we know through books rather than through experience. Think of Jeanie Deans who appreciates and respects her father's experiences in the last stages of a Covenanting conflict she did not herself know: his humourlessness, his paranoia, his wearisome insistence of the finer points of theology Her children, we learn late in *The Heart of Midlothian*, will move out of that shadow, live 'normal' lives and assimilate into their society (the law, the army, the ruling aristocracy) without the burden of history on their shoulders: for Jeanie and her sister Effie, history hangs heavy on their lives and their personal freedom.

The celebrated final chapter of *Waverley*, which Scott said should have been a preface, underlines the point: it is worth quoting at length. "There is no European nation which, within the course of half a century or little more, has undergone so complete a change as this kingdom of Scotland. The effects of the insurrection of 1745, — the destruction of the patriarchal power of the Highland chiefs, — the abolition of the heritable jurisdictions of the Lowland nobility and barons,— the total eradication of the Jacobite party, which, averse to intermingle with the English, or adopt their customs, long continued to pride themselves upon maintaining ancient Scottish manners and customs, — commenced this innovation. The gradual influx of wealth and extension of commerce have since united to render the present people of Scotland a class of beings as different from their grandfathers as the existing English are from those of Queen Elizabeth's time.

. . . But the change, though steadily and rapidly progressive, has nevertheless been gradual; and, like those who drift down the stream of a deep and smooth river, we are not aware of the progress we have made until we fix our eye on the now distant point from which we have been drifted. Such of the present generation as can recollect the last twenty or twenty-five years of the eighteenth century will be fully sensible of the truth of this statement; especially if their acquaintance and connexions lay among those who in my younger time were facetiously called 'folks of the old leaven', who still cherished a lingering, though hopeless, attachment to the house of Stuart. This race has now almost entirely vanished from the land, and with it, doubtless, much absurd political prejudice; but also many living examples of singular and disinterested attachment to the principles of loyalty which they received from their fathers, and of old Scottish faith, hospitality, worth and honour. "

And there you have the problem. You lose a lot when you gain a stable society, prosperity, 'progress'. Scott must have been wryly aware of it when he organised the royal visit of 1822, recreating a Scotland which most of those there (certainly those who lived in the Scotland of everyday) knew was at best a partial recreation. Some younger people (Carlyle, for instance, an impecunious freelance writer in Edinburgh) left town in disgust, knowing that their rooms would be snapped up by the thousands who poured into Edinburgh for the event. Basil Skinner summed up the result: "For Scott the visit probably achieved all that he foresaw or imagined. It produced an outburst of national fervour throughout Scotland such as the country had never known before in modern historic times. It provided a medium for the embodiment of his ideas of traditional grandeur and for the re-enactment of such moments of historic splendour as he had occasionally described in the novels; and for Scott the Tory there was the satisfaction of seeing the semblance of temporary political unity in a general expression of popular loyalty"[6]

And so to *Redgauntlet*. With a fictitious Jacobite rising which never happened, Scott is free to dramatise the confrontation of old and new, secure and insecure without fidelity to an actual conflict – much as he evokes a real South- West in the settings, the mid-eighteenth century atmosphere of Dumfries, the reality of the evolving fishing industry of the time in the Solway. But even more interesting than the 'real' was 'Wandering Willie's Tale' inserted in the larger fabric of *Redgauntlet*, a story of characters caught between the old world of danger, arbitrary power, the whiff of hellfire, and the more genteel, moneyconscious world of the new laird who wants Steenie's receipt for the rent, not his word of honour, who sends Steenie on the quest that takes him to Hell to meet the shade of the old

laird and demand that receipt which clears his name back on earth, but carries with it a whiff of brimstone which makes people glad to be rid of it. “Burn it would not for them, though; but away it flew up the lum, wi’ a lang train of sparks at its tail, and a hissing noise like a squib”. As Willie says, wrapping up his story to Darsie, “Ye see, birkie, it is nae chancy thing to tak a stranger traveller for a guide, when you are in an uncouth land”.

‘Wandering Willie’s Tale’ is in miniature the confrontation that Scott encompasses between the old and the new: not only does it underline that shift from the old feudal values exemplified by the old laird to the smoother moneygrasping of his son – but it underlines too the long vista of Scottish history that lives in the folk-memory of Steenie and his fellows, so that Hell for them is populated by the villains of Scottish history, the worst of them Claverhouse, and the suggestion from real preaching that Hell is a place of torment, deftly suggested by Scott’s touches of realism, the shaky signature on the laird’s receipt suggesting a sudden spasm of pain, and the chilling but brilliant detail of the noises Steenie hears, looking at the revellers round the table, “their smiles fearfully contorted from time to time; and their laughter passed into such wild sounds, as made my gudesire’s very nails grow blue, and chilled the marrow in his banes”. Steenie survives, but it is to a more cautious world where he keeps his head down, and enjoys a lighter rent from the new laird in exchange for keeping quiet about his adventures. Better a quiet life than adventures with a stranger traveller: Wandering Willie himself, by the end of the novel, gives up wandering for a comfortable existence at Alan Fairford’s fire side. Not very exciting, but safer than trying to make a living as an itinerant musician in a world where they are passing out of fashion.

And the larger novel picks up the theme and amplifies it. Not for the first time, Scott takes the confrontation between the hopeless but admirable courage of one character, and the pragmatic calculation of another – and casts a Campbell, almost inevitably, in the second role. At the climax of the plot, on the shores of the Solway, Scott imagines Charles Stuart returned to English soil at peril of his life to lend his authority and his presence to Redgauntlet’s Jacobite desperate last throw. And he quite credibly imagines General Campbell, the Scot who has given up such hopes and learned to live with the reality of London power, central authority, a better bet in the long run for Scotland than a succession of wounding civil wars. This is the new world of *Realpolitik* and Campbell knows how to play that game.

“’I do not’, he said, ‘know this gentleman’ – (Making a profound bow to the unfortunate Prince) – ‘I do not wish to know him; it is a knowledge which would suit neither of us’”.

Even more, he articulates the new way of waging war, not with desperate courage against superior odds, but with the advantage of better espionage, better information, forces available off-stage whenever he wants them to reinforce his argument. But the argument itself is the killer. “‘Exaggerated accounts of your purposes have been laid before government by the information of a traitor in your own counsels . . . I have come here, of course, sufficiently supported both with cavalry and infantry, to do whatever may be necessary; but my commands are – and I am sure they agree with my inclinations – to make no arrests, nay, to make no farther enquiries of any kind, if this good assembly will consider their own interest so far as to give up their immediate purpose, and return quietly home to their own houses’”.

Add to that the recognition of the political reality: after two exhausting and debilitating rebellions, people would really prefer not to suffer again the humiliations and financial ruin that would follow a third. “’You, sir – all – any of the gentlemen present . . . are at liberty to embark uninterrupted by me; but I advise none to go off who have not powerful reasons, unconnected with the present meeting, for this will be remembered against no one.’

‘Then, gentlemen’, said Redgauntlet, clasping his hands together as the words burst from him, ‘the cause is lost for ever’.”

Scott catches the historical moment perfectly. The significance of the moment is far gre a t e r, of course, than the plotters’ own hopeless little predicament. And a distant government knows perfectly well the weak spot to hit – this will be remembered against no one. Stop looking to the past, says the subtext, it’s over. Turn to the present, live in the present. Yes – but the past? The glory, the national

identity, independence, scores to settle? Scott's message is clear: with a regretful glance back, he moves forward. Basil Skinner notes the irony: "On 28 June 1830 Scott heard the minute-guns of Edinburgh distantly thundering the news of the King's death. By a curious trick of fate, he afterwards recalled, he was standing at that moment on the Battlefield of Preston, lost in thought upon the ephemeral glory of the Jacobite Prince who provided the inspiration for the programme of 1822." With the pageant of 1822 cleared away, in 1824 Scott's message is magnificently encapsulated in that scene on the Solway. Certainly his credentials need no defence as a supporter of Scotland, its currency, its regalia, its history – indeed its place in the world's consciousness in the wake of his extraordinary literary career. But the image which remains is that broad and powerful stream he evoked in *Waverley*'s last chapter, down which we are steadily carried even if at the time we do not quite realise how quickly. His power to evoke that reality – to make people realise how complicated are the choices history placed before individuals real and imagined – to set particular predicaments in a larger canvas and make the whole credible – these are the reasons that bring people to dinners in his honour in the twenty-first century. Let us drink a toast to the Author of Waverley for that achievement: a better guide to us in looking back than a stranger in an uncouth land.

1 David Daiches, "Scott and Scotland", *Scott Bicentenary Essays* ed. Alan Bell (Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press, 1973), 42.
2 John Buchan, *Homilies and Recreations* (London, Hodder, 1939), 19.
3 William Power *Literature and Oatmeal* (London, Routledge, 1935) 104-5
4 *Jeffrey's Literary Criticism* ed. D. Nicol Smith (London, Henry Frowde,1910), 95
5 *On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition*, from *Essays on Chivalry, Romance, and the Drama* (London, Frederick Warne, n.d.), 301.
6 Basil Skinner, "Scott the Pageant-Master", *Scott Bicentenary Essays*, 232.