

The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club

On Tuesday 21st April 2026 **Dan Mulhall** gave a talk on
King Dan and the King's man: Daniel O'Connell and Sir Walter Scott

The Liberator and The Great Unknown: Daniel O'Connell was the most prominent Irishman of the first half of the 19th century while Walter Scott was the leading personality of that era in Scotland. Both enjoyed global reputations on account of their respective political and literary achievements.

On account of his success in delivering Catholic Emancipation in 1829, O'Connell became known in Ireland as 'King Dan' and as the country's Liberator. While Walter Scott only rarely ventured into politics, he played a major role in Scottish public life, including as chief orchestrator of King George IV's historic visit to Scotland in 1822.

Daniel O'Connell was born in County Kerry in 1775, which means that he was just four years younger than Walter Scott. O'Connell outlived Scott by almost 15 years, dying in Genoa in the summer of 1847 while he was on his way to Rome. He is buried under an imposing Round Tower at Dublin's Glasnevin Cemetery.

O'Connell and Scott: O'Connell and Scott were both born before that great turning point in world history, the American revolution whose 250th anniversary we mark this year. Both lived in countries that had been reshaped by the upheavals of the 17th century and the Williamite settlement of the 1690s which included the Act of Union of 1707.

Ironically in light of subsequent developments Ireland had a calmer 18th century than Scotland. In Ireland, that century saw the triumph of 'the Protestant nation' with its literary and philosophical luminaries Swift, Burke, Berkley and Goldsmith.

For its part, Scotland experienced the glories of the Enlightenment but also a number of Jacobite upheavals. The events of 1745 had no parallel in Ireland although Jacobitism was certainly alive among many Catholic Irish who yearned for the return of the Stuart dynasty. It was not until 1798, in a radically different world, that violent confrontation erupted in Ireland with the rebellion of the United Irishmen which was driven by the ideals of the American and French revolutions. One of the effects of that revolutionary era was that it prompted the British government to press for the Act of Union of 1800. The Union was no accompanied by concessions to the Catholic Irish that had been anticipated. Throughout the 19th century and into the 20th, the Union became of bone of contention in Ireland, something that had no parallel in Scotland.

The respective achievements O'Connell and Scott can, I believe, throw light on the course of Irish and Scottish history during their lifetimes and beyond.

Political Influences: Daniel O'Connell's life was shaped by the French Revolution. He came from a prominent Catholic family that was able to withstand the ravages of the 18th

century Penal Laws. His uncle Maurice 'Hunting Cap' O'Connell was a wealthy landowner while his uncle Daniel was an Officer in the French army. O'Connell and his brother were sent to English Catholic schools in St. Omer (which later became the Jesuit school at Stonyhurst in Lancashire) and Douai (which became Ushaw College in Durham) where they lived through the upheavals of the revolution, which caused them and their fellow pupils to flee France. Those experiences gave O'Connell a lifelong aversion to violence which shaped his political outlook.

Scott's life's work was deeply influenced by his appreciation for Scottish history and tradition, which he conveyed to his readers, not least those in Scotland.

Scott and O'Connell drew different lessons from their shared aversion to violence. Scott biographer A.N. Wilson has said of him that "he had a horror of revolutions and applauded the Peterloo 'massacre'" (1819). Wilson concluded that it "would have been hard to be more reactionary" than Scott. (Wilson, *A Life of Walter Scott: The Laird of Abbotsford*, p. 57). O'Connell, who as a young lawyer in Dublin joined a government militia raised in Ireland in the 1790s to help fend off a possible French invasion, believed that reform was possible without recourse to revolution. His political career became an authentication of that principle.

O'Connell's admiration for Scott: O'Connell was a great admirer of Scott's work. He snapped up his novels as soon as they appeared and read them voraciously on his travels around Ireland for his legal work as one of the country's leading barristers. *The Fortunes of Nigel*, which A.N. Wilson has described as 'one of the finest of his later novels', caused O'Connell to stay up till midnight and to neglect his legal reading as he was absorbed by what he described as the novel's beautiful story.

One of O'Connell's biographers has written that 'Scott struck many chords' in O'Connell, 'sentimental, romantic, costume-historical' (Oliver MacDonagh, *O'Connell: the Life of Daniel O'Connell, 1775-1847*, p. 194). In 1841, he reread all of Scott's novels in succession and concluded that 'there never was such a novelist and there never again be another such.' (MacDonagh, p. 299)

Scott's Visit to Ireland: Scott paid a visit to Ireland in the summer of 1825 where he spent time with the Irish novelist, Maria Edgeworth, and may have gathered material for a novel set in Ireland that was never written. Scott was lauded everywhere he went, and received an Honorary Doctorate from Trinity College and the Freedom of Cork. Scott was appalled by the poverty he witnessed but believed the country was on the up. It wasn't. In his Journal he noted that many Irish people lived 'on the extreme verge of human misery.' His biographer, Lockhart, accompanied him and, when they visited Killarney, he reported that 'a Roman Catholic gentleman named O'Connell' had refused access to his land for a hunt in Scott's honour. Lockhart attributed this refusal to O'Connell's mistaken view that Scott was an opponent of Catholic Emancipation.

Lockhart offered an extraordinary summary of Scott's eccentric views of the Catholic question which was attracting considerable political attention at that time. Scott is said by

Lockhart to have favoured continued application of the Penal Laws (which were phased out in the 1770s, '80s and early '90s in response to the American and French Revolutions) for a further 50 years, but thought that Catholics should be allowed to serve in parliament. In 1829, he attached his name to a petition supporting Catholic Emancipation. He welcomed the move to allow Catholics to be members of the House of Commons where he thought they would be 'tractable'. O'Connell was the first Catholic to become an MP, but was anything but tractable during the years he spent in the House of Commons.

Scott's visit cost him £500 as, by his own account, he travelled with a large party and 'in style'.

O'Connell in Scotland: O'Connell visited Scotland in 1835 by which time Scott was three years dead. It was part of a Northern tour he undertook for the purpose of pushing the cause of further political reform. Scott had vehemently opposed the Great Reform Act of 1832 of which O'Connell was an unrelenting champion of reform. O'Connell's main targets during his Scottish visit were Scotland's politically-influential Dundas family and the hereditary principle in the House of Lords, which O'Connell was determined to reform, something that did not happen for a further 80 years.

O'Connell was a voluminous letter-writer, especially to members of his family during his frequent absences from home. It is unfortunate that there are no O'Connell letters from Scotland although a letter he wrote from Manchester probably captures what he would have experienced in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Falkirk, Paisley and Greenock, where he addressed substantial audiences. He estimated that 'the procession of trades' that met him in in Manchester 'exceeded 30,000'. He spoke for an hour and a half and felt that he 'carried the day with 'the Whigs, Radicals, Neutrals and Tories' that attended (Politicians routinely exaggerate their own persuasive powers). Reviewing his speaking tour, the *Annual Register* said that 'the respectable classes' steered clear of him, leaving 'the ignorant rabble' to attend on him. (Political journalists can get things badly wrong too!)

We have a contemporary account of his Scottish visit. A pamphlet, *Ireland and O'Connell*, was published by a Scottish ally of O'Connell's in the cause of political reform. The publisher James Tait was a member of Edinburgh's reformed town council, and was one of those behind the erection of the Martyrs Monument on Calton Hill.

Tait depicts the enthusiastic welcome O'Connell received in Scotland. In Edinburgh, here was a banquet in his honour at a hall belonging to a local gas company with an attendance of 1,400. It must be said, however, that numbers attending political gatherings can tend to be exaggerated. In Edinburgh, O'Connell was introduced as a champion of the people's rights and 'a friend of the oppressed in every clime'. O'Connell said that being in Scotland had made his heart glow 'with a fresh love for human freedom.' He spoke at Falkirk to a reputed audience of 5,000, and in Glasgow Tait puts the size of his attendance on Glasgow Green at 200,000, which was certainly a huge exaggeration.

O'Connell and Scott compared: As far as I can tell, O'Connell and Scott never met. When Scott was in Ireland, O'Connell would have been viewed by many of those Scott

encountered there as a dangerous radical. There is no mention of O'Connell in Scott's *Journal*.

O'Connell was a major political presence in London during the last years of Scott's life but they probably moved in different circles. While Scott was among the founders of London's Athenaeum Club in 1824, some years later O'Connell helped found the Reform Club, a haven for reformers and radicals who supported political reform of which Scott was a sharp critic.

O'Connell and Scott came from similar relatively privileged backgrounds within Irish and Scottish society of that time. Both became lawyers and both were often financially straitened. They relied respectively on politics and literature as their main income stream.

Until our era, the late-18th and early 19th century was one of the most transformative times in history driven by those dual revolutions, political and industrial. Both O'Connell and Scott were transitional figures with a foot in two worlds. In Scott's case, it was the Borders and Edinburgh, Abbotsford and the Signet Library. For O'Connell it was Country Kerry, Derrynane, Dublin's Mayoral Residence, his fine home on Dublin's Merrion Square (now the Irish campus of the University of Notre Dame) and the Palace of Westminster, where he served as an MP for 17 years. O'Connell's first language was Irish but he had a casual attitude to the language. He was indifferent to its decline and endorsed the practical utility of English, something O'Connell's critics among later generations of nationalists held against him.

Another thing that unites O'Connell and Scott, and this will seem odd to those who know their Irish history, was an affection for monarchy. Both were involved with Royal Visits to their respective countries. When George IV visited Ireland shortly after his coronation in 1821, he became the first king to visit since James II in 1690 (and that was in inauspicious visit culminating in the Battle of the Boyne and the eclipse of the Stuart dynasty). O'Connell had risked alienating some of his supporters by a display of fealty to the visiting monarch in the hope that the King would soften British resistance to Catholic Emancipation. O'Connell proposed raising funds to build a Royal Palace in Dublin for use during future royal visits (it was never built) and presented the King with a laurel crown when departed from the newly-named Kingstown, now Dun Laoghaire.

O'Connell's effusive welcome for the monarch was criticised as unduly fawning by, among others, Byron and the Irish poet, Thomas Moore, author of Moore's Melodies. Later in his career, O'Connell drooled over Queen Victoria. O'Connell's reputation in Ireland suffered during the 20th century because of his preference for Ireland to remain within the United Kingdom, but with its own devolved parliament. His standing has been renewed in more recent times by his image as a proponent of human rights and a fierce opponent of slavery.

It was not long before O'Connell realised that the King was a dedicated opponent of Catholic Emancipation, which caused him to dismiss George as 'a most hideous object ... come to Ireland to humbug the Catholics'. It took a further 8 years of political agitation to convince a reluctant King to concede Emancipation in order to avoid a descent into violence.

While the King's Scottish visit probably in 1822 in which Scott played a pivotal role had the desired effect, George IV's biographer wrote that 'the king's visit to Ireland appeared like a blink of sunshine on the island but the dubious splendour was only the precursor of the storm.' (quoted in Karina Holton, 'All our joys will be completed': the visit of King George IV to Ireland, 1821, *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 166, p. 266). That storm was stirred up initially by Daniel O'Connell who learned one lesson during the Royal Visit, the power of performance and pageantry. He applied that lesson during the remaining 26 years of his political career.

Divergent Political Pathways: The prime differences between O'Connell and Scott were in the field of politics. Scott was a high Tory while O'Connell was, by the standards of his time an arch liberal. In a speech in Edinburgh, he described himself as 'a good radical, and as ultra as need be in abstract opinions: but I am a practical man'. That just about sums up O'Connell's brand of politics. He took a lawyerly approach to politics, seeing it as a series of challenges to be resolved through peaceful agitation and parliamentary activity. Gladstone, who knew O'Connell in the early years of his long political career, had a positive assessment of O'Connell: 'Having adopted the political creed of Liberalism, he was as thorough an English liberal as if he had no Ireland to think of ... He had energies to spare ... for whatever tended, within the political sphere, to advance human happiness and freedom.' (MacDonagh, p. 204).

With his peaceful struggles for Emancipation and the Repeal of the Union (in which he failed), O'Connell set Ireland on a political path of resistance and discontentment that persisted into the 20th century and eventually drove the country towards independence.

For me, the most interesting contrast between Scott and O'Connell relates to their attitude to Scottish and Irish culture. Scott's life was shaped by his effort to 'repossess the special territory of Scotland's past' (Scott's entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*). He defined Scottishness in cultural rather than political terms and preserved the idea of Scottish nationhood which, until recent times, had no political institutions to support it.

Scott's two ventures into political controversy involved resistance to what he saw as English encroachments on Scottish privilege. He stood up to proposed changes to Scottish law to make it conform more with the English system. Scott viewed that as a breach of the Act of Union of 1707. He thought the move would undermine 'what makes Scotland Scotland.' In 1826, he opposed changes to the banking system which he saw as an attempt to assert English power over Scotland. He published three polemical *Letters of Malachi Malagrowth* in the manner of Swift's *Drapier's Letters* in which he warned the English that 'if you un-Scotch us, you will find us damned mischievous Englishmen.' Scott therefore was an advocate for and defender of Scotland's separateness, but within the Union. He provided Scots with a compelling image of their national history.

By contrast with Scott, O'Connell was remarkably casual about the native Irish culture in which he was steeped from birth. Throughout his political career, O'Connell's priority was to improve the lot of the Irish people through agitation and parliamentary activity. He gave

Ireland a political identity and didn't seem to give much thought to the cultural dimension. There was no Irish novelist of that time akin to Scott. O'Connell did not go in for sentimental evocations of Ireland's historic struggles as in Yeats's 'September 1913'

Was it for this the Wild Geese spread
The grey wing upon every tide;
For this all that blood was shed,
For this Edward Fitzgerald died,
And Robert Emmett and Wolfe Tone,
All that delirium of the brave?

His late-in-life nationalist opponents within the Young Ireland movement talked about the 'soul of Ireland', something O'Connell didn't generally do. In their cultural outlook, the Young Irish were closer to Scott than to O'Connell, except that they were prepared to endorse an insurrection if conditions warranted it.

It took 40 years after O'Connell's death for Ireland's history and culture to become part of the political armory of nationalism in the hands of late-19th century figures. By that time and beyond, Scotland's cultural distinctiveness had become a core element here, but without generating any powerful urge towards independence.

The years after the Act of Union could have been a watershed for the emergence of an accommodating attitude to the Union on the part of Catholic Ireland similar to what prevailed in Scotland. The failure to grant Catholic Emancipation with the Act of Union provided Daniel O'Connell with an opportunity to lead a groundbreaking movement that drove Ireland's politics in a new direction. He refused to accept the Act of Union, campaigned to restore the pre-1800 Irish parliament and wanted Ireland to have a place within the Union roughly equivalent to what Scotland enjoys today. The Great Famine of the 1840s put paid to the prospects for 19th century Anglo-Irish reconciliation. That opportunity flowered again with the passage of the Home Rule Bill in 1914 but was derailed by the outbreak of World War I.

My argument is that O'Connell and Scott were central figures in mapping out their countries' respective political pathways, ones that continue to be traversed to this day.

Daniel Mulhall is a retired Irish Ambassador who now divides his time between Scotland and Ireland. He was Ireland's first Consul General in Scotland and subsequently served as Ireland's Ambassador in Kuala Lumpur, Berlin, London and Washington. He is a board member of the Yeats Society Sligo. His most recent publication is *Pilgrim Soul: W.B. Yeats and the Ireland of his Time* (Dublin, 2023).

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