Scott's Wandering Tales

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Scott's shorter fictions came in different shapes and sizes, and continue to live in different types of publications, whether the periodical, short story collection, anthology, gift book or multivolume novel. Or even graphic novels and short films. Extracted from *Redgauntlet* (1824), "Wandering Willie's Tale" is typically anthologized as one of the first modern Scottish short stories – sometimes even the very first.[1] But it is not even Walter Scott's first major short story. That would be "The Fortunes of Martin Waldeck", an interpolated tale included in the second volume of his third novel, *The Antiquary* (1816). After that, two pieces appeared in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (1817-18) that have been securely attributed to Scott: 'Alarming Increase of Depravity Among Animals' and 'Phantasmagoria'. In *The Shorter Fiction* volume for the Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels, Graham Tulloch and Judy King include an even earlier work, 'The Inferno of Altisidora' (which appeared in *Edinburgh Annual Register*, 1811), as well as 'Christopher Corduroy' (from *The Sale-Room*, 1817). A third major interpolated tale, "Donnerhugel's Narrative", appeared in *Anne of Geierstein; or, The Maiden in the Mist* (1829) at the end of Scott's career. Plus, there's *Bizarro* (1831), an unfinished novella. And then there's *Chronicles of the Canongate* (1827), a story cycle of sorts. In this talk I'm going to look at just one of what I am calling the wandering tales: the perfectly named, "Wandering Willie's Tale". A wandering tale is a short story that can feasibly stand apart from the novel in which it first appeared but whose textual mobility depends on, and can have an impact upon, the host novel. Scott also surrounds his wandering tales with fictional audiences who comment on the meaning of the story delivered in real time, hijacking the conventions of improvisatory oral storytelling.

Wandering tales appear to be digressive but they are equally propulsive: symbolism buried or prominently displayed within the story may take on sudden significance later in the host novel. Sometimes the level of significance may be structurally integral, or it may be a throwaway remark.

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Willie's arrival in *Redgauntlet*, ahead of his delivery, positions him as a master storyteller ambling over the lea "with the confident air of an experienced pilot", whistling "several bars with great precision" from an overture of Corelli (84-85). We also quickly learn that the affable piper has a broad range: "when I am tired of scraping thairm or singing ballants, I whiles make a tale serve the turn amang the country bodies" (86). He is especially skilled in supernatural tales, by his own claim: "I have some fearsome anes, that make the auld carlines shake on the settle, and the bits o' bairns skirl on their minnies out frae their beds". A fan of tales of superstition, the law student Darsie Latimer "begged to have a sample" from Willie. ("Sample" implies smallness, even incompleteness; but an experienced tale-teller can marshal materials as the audience needs.) If the student is an audience surrogate, he is an unusually prominent one. Willie duly delivers a masterclass "in a distinct narrative tone of voice, which he raised and depressed with considerable skill". "I will not spare you a syllable of it, although it be of the longest", Darsie Latimer writes to Alan Fairford, "so I make a dash – and begin".

Without wishing to downplay the orality of the story, I regard "Wandering Willie's Tale" (this version at least) to be knowingly textual – the typographical dash fixes the words to the printed page.[2] As Penny Fielding amply demonstrates, Scott's story as written thrives on the creative possibilities of oral re-creation, as opposed to documentary reproduction, in the construction of history (103-10). And, as Alison Lumsden reminds us, the label "tale" used in the

story's title (marked out clearly in the heading of Letter 11 within the novel) occupies the liminal space between a formal prose narrative and an oral performance (173). (Scott subtitled *Redgauntlet* with *A Tale of the Eighteenth Century*, which is more in keeping with the formal openness of the European *conte* as it comprises letters, journals, folktales, songs, family chronicles, law cases, stage comedy, and other pluralized forms.) If a tale is to survive it needs a willing community of listeners and a capable storyteller who can shape the material for that specific audience. David Brown calls "Wandering Willie's Tale" a "problematic digression" (159). Such a claim downplays the improvisatory skill of Wandering Willie, who is a sort of historical artist invested in, and the current proprietor of, a common stock of fictional truth (to adopt Brian Nellist's phrase, 69). In *The Antiquary*, Isabella Wardour relied on the fraudulent Dousterswivel for the outline of her "wandering" German story "The Fortunes of Martin Waldeck", an antiquary's error. And she relinquishes control of the material to the story's reader, the reluctant Lovel, even though she had hoped one of the elder antiquaries would bring it to life. That is the cause of her perceived failure among her in-text audience. Curling up his nose in distaste of the supernatural, Oldbuck ironically quotes poetry to assert his preference for solid antiquary inquiry (T. J. Mathias's *The Pursuits of Literature*: "I bear an English heart, / Unused at ghosts and rattling bones to start").

A verbal palimpsest of the heard and overheard, the witnessed and the half-seen, "Wandering Willie's Tale" is best read not as a single story, as Brown's phrasing implies, but as a series of visceral episodes expertly knitted together by Willie as a means of enacting a palpable past. "Wandering Willie's Tale" operates its own mythopoeic process, offering a cogent view of the effects of the decay of feudal paternalism on the peasantry of a generation or so ago, as represented by the story's protagonist, Willie's grandfather. The novel itself, as Brown

recognizes, provides "*other* views of the same historical process: Darsie's 'escape' from his hereditary obligations is finally to be weighed against the tragic fate of Redgauntlet himself" (160). The tale can be both the symbolic center of the entire novel, as Edgar Johnson has it, and an extractable parable about courage and prudence, as Francis R. Hart claims, or even a prefiguration of future plotlines and a flagrant commentary on the violent history of Scotland (Johnson 2.924; Hart 57).[3] Willie is not the only significant tale-teller in the novel: Lilias, Maxwell, and even Redgauntlet also deliver stories relating to incidents in the Redgauntlet family history and its relationship with the history of Scotland. The wandering tale-teller cannily brings in enough of the supernatural to give it "the air of an old Scottish folk tale", as David Daiches has it, "yet enough shrewd and humorous realism to make it also a *critical* piece about master-servant relations in old Scotland" (159). Willie's supernatural tale is grounded in Scottish history. He chiefly focuses on two figures, Sir Robert Redgauntlet, a seventeenth-century anti-covenanting royalist, and Steenie Steenson, Wandering Willie's piper grandfather, a hardened survivor of wars and rebellions.

Willie brings the main antagonist vividly to life: "Glen, nor dargle, not mountain, nor cave, could hide the puir hill-folk when Redgauntlet was out with bugle and bloodhound after them, as if they had been sae mony deer" (87). Steenie, a piper, is one of the fearsome landlord's tenants – and patently a favorite with Redgauntlet and his loyal butler, Dougal MacCallum. With the Hanoverian succession underway, we are briefly led to believe that Redgauntlet and his employees will be punished ("Weel, round came the Revolution, and it had like to have broken hearts baith of Dougal and his master", 88). But – with quite literally the next word – "the change was not a'thegether sae great as they feared", and their lives continue as before, albeit with some financial losses. To recover the lifestyle to which he had been accustomed, he

becomes an even greedier landlord: “his face looked as gash and ghastly as Satan’s” (89). Steenie, dropping off his fees and waiting for his legal documentation one day, watches in shock as the landlord meets a sudden, devilish demise:

> Terribly the Laird roared for cauld water to his feet, and wine to cool his throat; and Hell, hell, hell, and its flames, was aye the word in his mouth. They brought him water, and when they plunged his swoln feet into the tub, he cried out it was burning; and folk say that it *did* bubble and sparkle like a seething cauldron. He flung the cup at Dougal’s head, and said he had given him blood instead of burgundy; and, sure aneugh, the lass washed clottered blood aff the carpet the neist day. (90)

Willie’s telling mingles the dramatic and the speculative, the actual and the figurative (“folk say that it *did* bubble and sparkle like a seething cauldron”). His folkloric description relies on rapidly transformative language (“they plunged his swoln feet into the tub”, almost as if the feet swell before our eyes). The verbs could hardly be more insistent (*roared*, *plunged*, *cried*, *flung*), which is further underscored by the quiet grimness of the servant later washing clotted blood off the carpet. (The carpet cleaning also confirms the grisly truth: “sure aneugh” it was not wine in the glass.) Scarpering from the scene, Steenie becomes a mere bystander; but, by implication, he is the sole source for Willie, save for Dougal the servant, and a jabbering jack-an-ape Major Weir (named after the covenanting officer who confessed to crimes of bestiality, adultery and wizardry). He hears the shrieks that grew fainter and fainter, but it is the storyteller who shapes the scene.

With Steenie outside of the house, Willie can only speculate on the actions Dougal took next. Even so, he presents the account as a matter of fact, thereby realigning our perspective with his: “The night before the funeral, Dougal could keep his ain counsel nae langer” (91). He drinks brandy in his room with Hutcheon, another servant, for an hour, during which time he sternly informs him that his master’s service bell continues to ring, even after his death. Refusing to “break my service to Sir Robert”, he vows to answer the next call with the help of Hutcheon. They enter into a miniature Gothic story:

> When midnight came, and the house was quiet as the grave, sure aneugh the silver whistle sounded as sharp and shrill as if Sir Robert was blowing it, and up got the twa auld serving-men, and tottered into the room where the dead man lay. Hutcheon saw aneugh at the first glance; for there were torches in the room, which shewed him the foul fiend, in his ain shape, sitting on the Laird’s coffin! Over he cowped as if he had been dead. He couldna tell how long he lay in a trance at the door, but when he gathered himself, he cried on his neighbour, and getting no answer, raised the house, when Dougal was found lying dead within twa steps of the bed where his master’s coffin was placed.—As for the whistle, it was gaen anes and aye; but mony a time was it heard on the top of the house on the bartizan, and amang the auld chimnies and turrets, where the howlets have their nests.

Within a single paragraph Willie sets up a dark mystery (the ringing of the bell), racks up the dread (as the servants pursue the sound), delivers a death, and establishes the legendary aftermath of the episode (the bell continues to ring). The new laird, Sir Robert’s son Sir John,

enters the tale and quickly "hushed the matter up". Is the story finished, literally and figuratively? Not quite. A new episode begins: seeking to settle the affairs of the estate, Sir John calls every tenant to meet with him. During his turn, Steenie rewrites history, out of politeness more than anything: "Your father was a kind man to friends and followers", he says (92). Sir John accepts the compliment but moves on to his main interest: "Here he opened the fatal volume", the rental book. Switching to theatrical dialogue (with their names marked out on the page like actors' prompts), Willie ramps up the tension of the ensuing scene. The new landlord does not believe that Steenson had paid his father: "*Sir John.* 'I have little doubt ye *borrowed* the money, Steenie. It is the *payment* that I want to have some proof of'" (93).

Sir John becomes increasingly frustrated: "the Laird, assuming a look of his father, a very particular ane […] it seemed as if the wrinkles of his own frown made that self-same fearsome shape of a horse's shoe in the midst of his brow". The vividness of the image hints at a renewal of the demonic gothicism of Sir Robert's death. (Some one hundred pages later, the image takes on another role within *Redgauntlet* as Latimer learns the truth of his heritage when he sees on his uncle's face the same mark "not unaptly described" in Willie's wandering tale. With remarkable control over his materials, even in sampling them, Scott demonstrates a powerful way in which a tightly woven interpolated story can still impact the main novel much later on.) Harangued, Steenson blurts out an unkind response to Sir John's demands for an answer. Where is the money? "'In hell, if you will have my thoughts of it,' said my guidsire, driven to extremity, – 'in hell! with your father and his silver whistle.'" (94). (His flippant remark will become a reality soon enough.) Steenson flees – again, as he did after the sudden death of Sir Robert. However, he cannot convince anyone; he is in a rhetorical sense a failed storyteller: "when he tauld his story, he got but the warst word in his wame – thief, beggar, and dyvour, were the safest terms".

A new story begins: Steenson rides home alone through the wood of Pitmarkie, a fictional name evoking atmospheric dreariness (*pit* and *mark*, meaning dark or gloomy). “I ken the word”, Willie claims, “but the firs may be black or white for what I can tell”.

Briefly stopping at Tibbie Faw’s small change-house, he downs a brandy, raising an ironic toast to the memory of Sir Robert: “might he never lie quiet in his grave till he had righted his poor bond-tenant”. (Again, his petulant comment will soon become a textual reality.) “On he rode, little caring where”, when his horse suddenly “began to spring, and flee, and sturt”. A mysterious stranger quietens the horse, but something about his aspect half angers, half frightens Steenson, even though he claims he only wants to help; “So my guidsire, to ease his ain heart, mair than from any hope of help, told him the story from beginning to end” (95). This time Steenson is a successful storyteller: “‘It’s a hard pinch,’ said the stranger; ‘but I think I can help you’”. The stranger proposes a journey into hell: “your auld Laird is disturbed in his grave by your curses”, a common enough belief at the time, we are told; “if ye daur venture to go to see him, he will give you the receipt”. They arrive at an uncanny version of the house (“but that he knew the place was ten miles off, my guidsire would have thought he was at Redgauntlet Castle”). Seeing the late Dougal again, Steenson does not believe him to be dead (“Ha! Dougal Driveower, are ye living? I thought ye had been dead”, 96). Fiction and reality collapse together.

The whole scene is almost an exact replica of the late laird’s set up, in fact: “there was as much singing of profane sangs, and birling of red wine, and speaking blasphemy and sculduddry, as had ever been in Redgauntlet Castle when it was at the blythest”. A satirical parade of ghastly historical figures flash before us (among them, “Dumbarton Douglas, the twice-turned traitor baith to country and king”). A gothic spectacle, the scene captures in glimpses the grimaces of the ghouls, despite their spirited carousing. And the wild sounds “made my guidsire’s very nails

grow blue, and chilled the marrow in his banes". Fully cognizant of the devilishness at play, he refuses to take the white-hot pipes offered to him, even though he knows all of the ghastly songs enjoyed by the anti-covenanters. Gnashing its teeth, the thwarted ghost of Sir Robert finally hands Steenson the receipt he came for. Before leaving, Steenson heeds some final words, the sort of prophetic words a character in a tale would be foolish to ignore: "Here we do nothing for nothing; and you must return on this very day twelvemonth, to pay me your master the homage that you owe me for my protection" (98). But that is not the end of the tale; or, rather, a related episode now gets under way. Steenson takes his newly acquired proof to the current laird: "Sir John looked at every line, and at every letter, with much attention; and at last, at the date, which my guidsire had not observed, – '*From my appointed place*,' he read, '*this twenty-fifth of November*.'—". Sir John quickly realizes that this post-dates his father's death. In a post-Ossianic culture attuned to clever fakes, the putatively forged document has a major blunder. Like oral stories, documents remain prone to human interference.

Rightly outraged by what he construes to be a poorly judged joke at his family's expense, Sir John threatens Steenson. When Steenson promises to tell him about his improbable meeting with his deceased father, he paused, "composed himsell, and desired to hear the full history" (99). Never had Steenson's storytelling skills been so important: "my guidsire told it to him from point to point, as I have told it you – word for word, neither more nor less". (Making such a claim for unembellished storytelling, Willie validates his grandfather's skills as well as his own.) It works: Sir John is convinced enough to at least investigate further. (If he is lying, Steenson will have a red-hot iron driven through his tongue, a damning fate for any tale-teller.) In a partial replaying of Dougal and Hutcheon's Gothic mini-story, in which they answered the bell of their

late master, Sir John ventures to the dubious site; tying the episodes together, Hutcheon even makes a reappearance as a guide:

> It was a dangerous place to climb, for the ladder was auld and frail, and wanted ane or twa rounds. However, up got Sir John, and entered at the narrow door, where his body stopped the only little light that was in the bit turret. Something flees at him wi' a vengeance—maist dang him back ower—bang gaed the knight's pistol, and Hutcheon, that held the ladder, and my guidsire that stood beside him, hears a loud skelloch.

The action is slight: Sir John merely climbs a ladder, gets spooked, and fires his weapon. But ever the master storyteller, Willie creates tension in the delivery. Sir John has shot Major Weir, the monkey (assuming we should take the derisive label "jack-an-apes" literally), whose body he flings down. He also found the missing money. Making amends with Steenson, Sir John considers the situation to be happily resolved. He even begins to rebuild his family's reputation by hushing up the story ("you are sensible that ill-dispositioned men might make bad constructions upon it, concerning his soul's health", 100). He finally tosses the recovered receipt, our major textual evidence, into the fire.

By recounting the "real" version of events to others, in the avowedly unaltered retelling by his grandson, Steenson fails to heed his new master's request; but he thrives as a storyteller instead. We might wonder if Steenson's account has been affected by Sir John's wishes in some way. After all, Willie says that "Sir John made up his story about the jack-an-ape as he liked himsell; and some believe till this day there no more in the matter than the filching nature of the brute" (101). Has Steenson left something out of our extant version, beyond Sir John's casual

killing of the monkey? Perhaps it is a complete fabrication: is Major Weir a victim or a villain? Conversely, does that short episode make up the basic story that Sir John has been telling? And does he embellish it? Some unnamed folk think as much: it was not the devil they saw on Sir Robert's coffin but the capering monkey. It was not the ghost of Sir Robert ringing the bell to summon Dougal to his death – "the filthy brute could do that as weel as the Laird himsell, if no better". Despite Sir John's concern, it is not really the Redgauntlets' name under threat, but Steenson's own. After the minister's wife spread the tale, long after Sir John's death, Steenson was "obliged to tell the real narrative to his friends".

Ostensibly a salacious account of the Redgauntlets, the tale-teller shapes the story for his own benefit. Now the retelling of the tale has ended, Willie reshapes it again for present purposes. "[M]y conductor", writes Darsie Latimer, "finished his long narrative with this moral – 'Ye see, birkie, it is nae chancy thing to take a strange traveller for a guide, when ye are in an uncouth land.'" Darsie thinks the moral is misapplied: "Your grandfather's adventure was fortunate for himself, whom it saved from ruin and distress; and fortunate for his landlord also, whom it prevented from committing a gross act of injustice". Alternatively, we might wonder if it is the *story* that has been misapplied to the moral, having been buffeted and polished for the sake of Sir John, Steenson and others. Either way, Willie has more than fulfilled the brief set out by Latimer, "a law-student, tired of my studies, and rambling about for exercise and amusement" (86). Only later will he realize the full symbolic importance of "Wandering Willie's Tale". A literary sample for the student, the tale wanders back into *Redgauntlet*, and into his life, many chapters later.

[1] See *The Devil & The Giro*.
[2] On sources see Parsons, *Witchcraft and Demonology in Scott's Fiction*, pp. 179-82. On the role of the Gothic imagination in *Redgauntlet* see Fiona Robertson, *Legitimate Histories*, pp. 246-64.
[3] See also James Kerr, *Fiction Against History*, pp. 117-20; Rohan Maitzen, "By No Means an Improbable Fiction"; and Mary Cullinan, "History and Language in Scott's *Redgauntlet*".