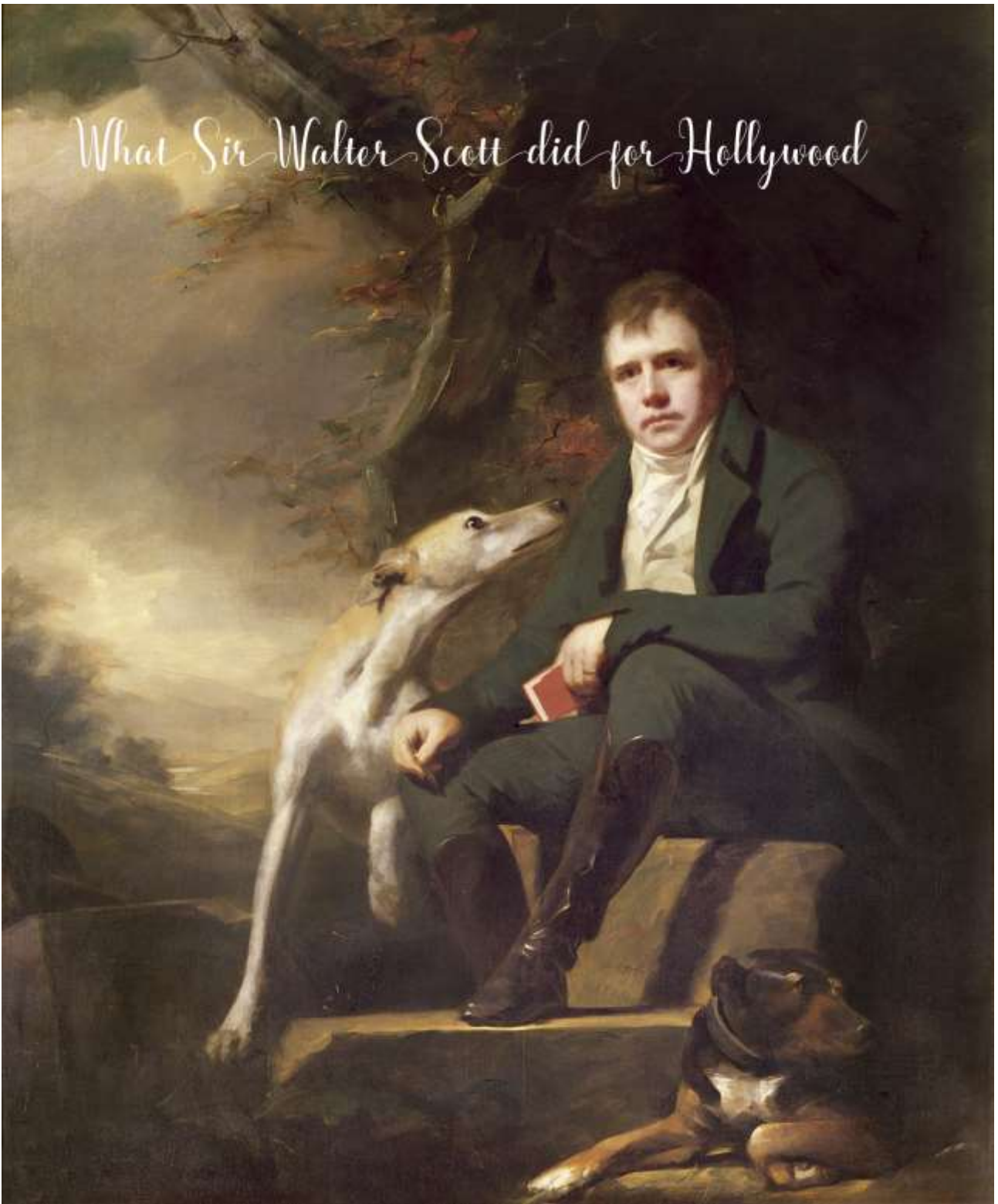


What Sir Walter Scott did for Hollywood





Scott Portrait, (Raeburn)

An American professor, teaching an advanced literature course online, begins by saying to her students, ‘You won’t have heard of Walter Scott’. Nearer home, is he any longer found among the set authors? And indeed, of course, how many of us have read a Scott novel or poem in the last year, last five years, last ten years?

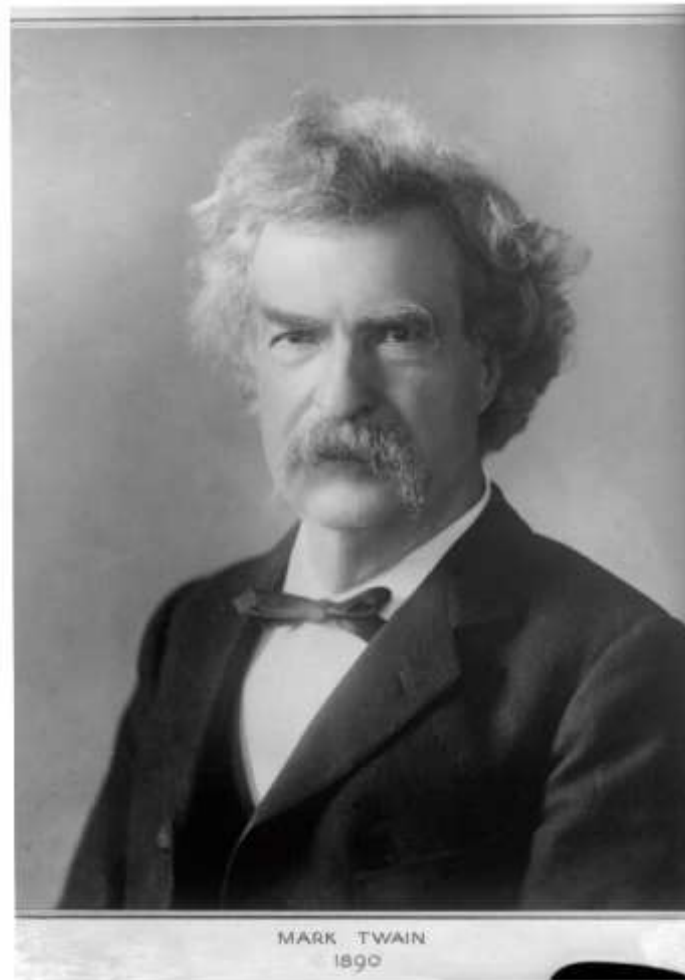
It is therefore hard for us to comprehend just how important and immensely popular, globally, Scott’s work was, in his lifetime and for at least a hundred years afterwards. Indeed, for the sake of context, it is worth considering the chronology. Scott was born in 1771, two years to the day after the birth of Napoleon Bonaparte, whose biography Scott would write. 1771 is more than one hundred and twenty years before the birth of cinema. ‘The Lady of the Lake’, which triggered the so-called ‘Highland Revival’, was published in 1810; *Waverley* in 1814. Scott died in 1832, still 60 years ahead of the movies, and even seven years before the formal announcement of the invention of photography, though, to be fair, the world’s oldest photograph does date from 1827 so we can claim that he did live just into the era of images captured from the light by optics and chemistry. But we still have to explain why his work was being mined by the medium of cinema from the moment of its invention. That is despite the paradox that his medium, the written word, could really only show up as snippets in inter-titles in silent films and was never spoken from the screen for a further thirty years.

But, from the very start of his writing career, Scott’s continuity of influence was enormous and reached well beyond the literary world into quite unexpected places. Not always, however, was his influence seen as entirely benign. He was even accused of being responsible for a war.

Mark Twain it was, who said the southern states of America suffered from ‘Sir Walter Disease’ and that Scott, particularly through *Ivanhoe*, was responsible for starting the

American Civil War, as The South spent more time on chivalry, even mounting tournaments, than establishing industry.

Stuart Kelly, in his excellent book *Scott-Land, the man who invented a nation*, describes Twain as ‘the arch detester’ of Scott. And I am grateful to Mr Kelly who publishes Twain’s invective in full, which I quote for something that comes up later on.



QUOTE Kelly page 150 etc.

Then comes Sir Walter Scott with his enchantments, and by his single might checks this wave of progress, and even turns it back; sets the world in love with dreams and phantoms; with decayed and swinish forms of religion; with decayed and degraded systems of government; with the sillinesses and emptinesses, sham grandeurs, sham gauds, and sham chivalries of a brainless and worthless long-vanished society.

He did measureless harm, more real and lasting harm, perhaps, than any other individual that ever wrote. Most of the world has now outlived a good part of these harms, though by no means all of them; but in our South they flourish pretty forcefully still. There the genuine and wholesome civilization of the nineteenth

century is curiously confused and commingled with the Walter Scott Middle-Age sham civilization; and so you have practical, common sense, progressive ideas, and progressive works; mixed up with the duel, the inflated speech, and the jejune romanticism of an absurd past that is dead and out of charity ought to be buried.

But for the Sir Walter disease, the character of the Southerner – or Southron, according to Sir Walter's starchier way of phrasing it – would be wholly modern, in place of modern and medieval mixed, and the South would be fully a generation further advanced than it is. It was Sir Walter that made every gentleman in the South a Major or a Colonel, or a General or a judge, before the war; and it was he, also, that made these gentlemen value these bogus decorations. For it was he that created rank and caste down there, and also reverence for rank and caste, and pride and pleasure in them. Enough is laid on slavery, without fathering upon it these creations and contributions of Sir Walter.

Actually, Mark Twain got his revenge on Scott. The wrecked river boat in *Huckleberry Finn* is called 'Sir Walter Scott'.

And there's more. A conference in Canada in 1987 was told that such was Scott's popularity on the U.S. frontier that it influenced not only the fictional shapes of Wild West novels and films, but also the behaviour of real cowboys. It was also told that 'The Lady of the Lake' was translated into the Mohawk tongue as early as 1814, just four years after its publication, when the native peoples saw some relationship between the Gaelic clan society and their own way of life.



**Lady of the Lake
(Talbot)**

However, here is a different sphere of influence: Scott and the birth of photography. In January of 1839 William Henry Fox Talbot of Lacock announced his invention. He did so in panic because Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre had just made the same announcement in Paris. In fact, their systems were entirely different, and Talbot's negative positive process was the father of all photographic methods, including cinema film, till the coming of the digital. Talbot's first, *the first*, book of photographs was *The Pencil of Nature* in 1844. His second, also in 1844, the first book to be offered for sale that included photographs, was *Sun Pictures in Scotland*, quite explicitly in the footsteps of Walter Scott because Talbot was a great admirer. This is Talbot's Loch Katrine, famous for Scott's 'Lady of the Lake'.

Scott Mon (Hill and Adamson)



This edifice in Princes Street, Edinburgh, is near Waverley Station; it is 200 feet 6 inches high and is the largest monument to a writer in the world. The photograph, a calotype by David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, dates from 1845, for though the monument was built, the statue was not yet in place. Also by Hill and Adamson is this:

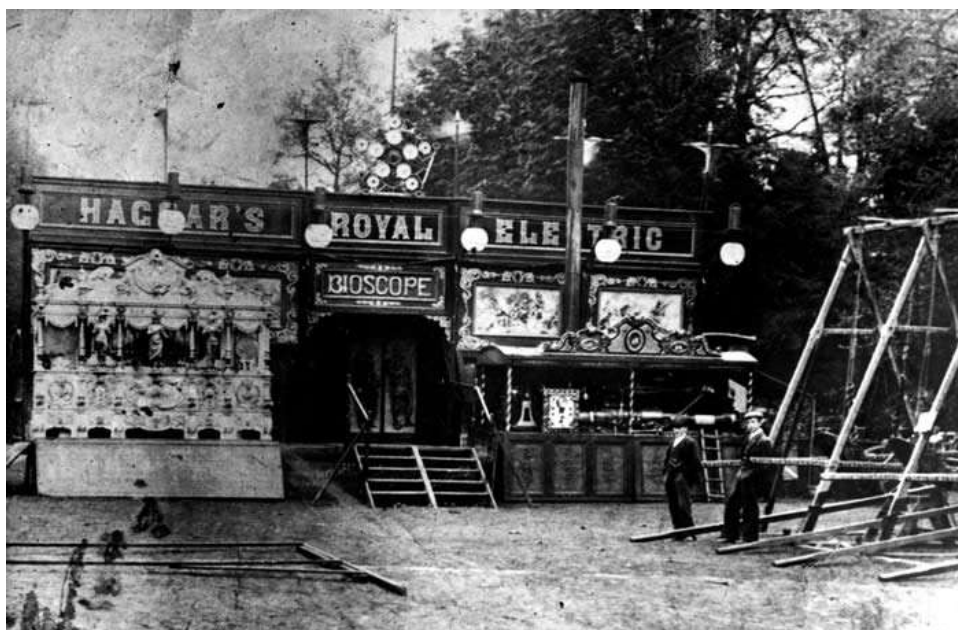


[H/A John Henning as Edie Ochiltree – the Antiquary with Miss Cockburn as Miss Wardour]

John Henning, like Scott, was born in 1771. He was a sculptor who made busts of the famous, including Scott, the Duke of Wellington, James Watt, and Sir Humphrey Davey, who was, incidentally, an early explorer of the idea of photography. Henning was so fascinated by the Elgin Marbles that he spent twelve years modelling them for a frieze on the exterior of the Atheneum. Miss Cockburn was the daughter of Henry Lord Cockburn, and this image was made at Bonaly Towers, the Cockburn family home.

The Victorians were very keen on tableaux – useful if you want people to stay still for a while to be photographed.

But a few decades on, the pictures and the tableaux begin to move.



Cinema, at its birth, at the end of the nineteenth and very beginning of the twentieth century, was essentially a creature of the showgrounds as panoramas and dioramas had been before, and like them it had grand pretensions. And what better way of aspiring to sophistication than attempting the high ground of culture – the novels of Sir Walter Scott, a major figure in world literature.

It may not be so surprising, then, that in cinema's first decades, there was a rash of Scott-based movies. The first of two Rob Roys were both made in 1911.



This one is particularly interesting because it was, in fact, the first British three-reel fiction film. Based on a theatrical version of the story, it was made entirely in Scotland by United Films of 4 Union Street, Glasgow, and was even shot in the places specified in the novel. Sadly, the film is now lost, but there is a fragment of a few frames showing Rob Roy at the Clachan Inn at Aberfoyle.

There were two *Rob Roys* in 1911 and this one had a rival production made by Gaumont. There is a fine account of the tussle between them in a new book, *Early Cinema in Scotland*, published by Edinburgh University Press. The relevant chapter, by Caroline Merz, 'Britain's First Feature Film', tells the full story.

Incidentally, 1911 also saw the release of *Robert Bruce, Épisode de la Guerre de L'Indépendance Écossaise*. So French awareness of Scottish history was alive, very probably due to Scott.

The next *Rob Roy* was an American version, made in America by Eclair in 1913; and there was also another Gaumont one in 1922.



The Bride of Lammermoor from Vitagraph appears as early as 1909; there was an Italian *Lucia di Lammermoor* in 1910, and an American *Bride of Lammermoor* in 1914, so Scott was already in the productions and on the screens of the USA.



Kenilworth too was made in 1909 and so was *Lochinvar*, also 1911, 1915, 1924 etc. French Pathé made *Quentin Durward* in 1910 and again in 1912, the same year as an American *Guy Mannering*, the latter being described by *Moving Picture World* as ‘A rattling good story of Scotch smugglers, Gypsies, a lost heir, and charming women’.

Ivanhoe was produced in 1913, and there was a *Heart of Midlothian* in 1914. There were two American versions of *The Lady of the Lake* in 1912 (one shot in Scotland), another in 1913, and yet another in 1928; there was a *Fair Maid of Perth* in 1923.

So there were a great many movies with credits to Walter Scott, many, perhaps most, of these films being seen all over the world, because of course before the coming of sound the only thing needed to make a film intelligible in any country was to translate

the inter-titles into the local language. No dubbing, no sub-titles, and no great expense.

Which again raises the paradox that the words of the great writer, the vehicle for the plot and transmission of emotion, could only be glimpsed between the pictures. So why were there so many Scott-based movies in the silent era? Clearly the strength of the tales must have a lot to do with it but is it not just possible that such was the universal availability of the texts, in so many languages and thus familiar to so many millions of readers, that for movie-makers in a hurry, they were a very obvious, convenient, attractive source for scripts. That *Fair Maid of Perth* of 1923, 'filmed in the authentic locations in Scotland' was described by Bioscope as 'Purely a title booking that may get over with suitable music and effects'. The title, then, was the audience bait, Scott's fame was the draw, whatever the quality of the movie.

But lest we forget, it is not just Scott. As Richard Butt points out in his 'Literature and the Screen Media since 1908', in the *Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, Robert Louis Stevenson adaptations are there in quantity too. A version of *The Bottle Imp* was made in 1909, a *Kidnapped* in 1917, and the first of hundreds of *Jekyll and Hyde* films came out in 1910, the same year as a Norwegian version.

From a twenty-first century perspective, then, Stevenson does seem to be more likely than Scott as the purveyor of raw material for the movies.



Here is *The Master of Ballantrae* (1953) with Errol Flynn, Anthony Steel and Roger Livesey. It is true that there have been fewer Scott movie adaptations than Stevensons in recent years, though there was a *Lucia* in 1998 and on television Scott has done reasonably well. Another *Lucia* was made for Italian tv in 2003, *La Jolie Fille de Perth* was made for French tv in 1998 and there have been a couple of *Ivanhoes* and *Talismans*.

But Stevenson is way ahead of that. In the last few years, there have been at least fifteen Stevenson-adapted cinema and tv films including six *Jekyll and Hyde* clones – I can't wait to see *Dr Jekyll and Mistress Hyde* or *The Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde Rock n' roll Musical* – will they live up to *Dr Pyckle and Mr Pryde* (Stan Laurel 1925), Hammer's *Dr Jekyll and Sister Hyde* or *Abott and Costello meet Jekyll and Hyde* or *Dr Jekyll et les Femmes* or, come to that *The Pirates of Treasure Island* or *Treasure Planet? Flint and Silver* was currently also in pre-production when I first gave this talk some years ago. Haven't heard of it since.

If Scott is currently less in vogue with film makers, what about the third Scottish writer whose name was on the early screen as much as Scott and Stevenson? J M Barrie's recent credits in the last few years have almost all been for *Peter Pan*, but in the early years of cinema it was all about *The Little Minister* (1913, 1915, 1921, 1922) or *The Admirable Crichton* (1913, 1918 etc).

All in all, hundreds of films with Scottish literary origins have been made. Richard Butt reckons that as many as a quarter of films with Scottish subjects made before 1920 were literary adaptations and based on the work of just the three authors, Scott, Stevenson and Barrie. Though not immediately germane to this exercise because his subject matter is not tartan, it is worth noting that there is actually a fourth Scottish author with major input to cinema – Arthur Conan Doyle. His novel *Rodney Stone* was made as *The House of Temperley* as early as 1913. I need not, could not, recite all the Sherlock Holmes movies... The director of the 1913 effort was Harold Shaw, an American working in London who claimed he was, quote, 'pure Scottish by descent'. In fact, there were plenty of 'pure' Scots in Hollywood, several, no doubt, took the Waverley Novels with them when they emigrated.

All of this is fascinating and good fun, but a while ago, in the context of the Mohawks being keen on *The Lady of the Lake* I uttered the word 'clan', and that takes us into much darker territory. The television programme, *Scotland and the Ku Klux Klan*, presented by Neil Oliver, took as its starting point the very quotation from Mark Twain about Scott that I referred to earlier, but the Oliver programme did so with none of the irony that Mark Twain surely intended.

Sufficient to say that on the first page of what passed for the Constitution of the first Ku Klux Klan in 1870 there is a quotation, not from Scott but from Burns, signalling the undoubted Scottish connection, indeed perceived origins, of that movement. More troubling for us when considering the influence of Scott is that the second, and even

more dangerous, manifestation of the Ku Klux Klan came about in 1915, greatly encouraged by the release of D W Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*.



The first part of the film deals in extraordinary and brilliant epic style with the American Civil War; but the second part was based on *The Clansman*, a novel by

the Revd Thomas Dixon, who seems to have had an impossibly romanticised view of 'Old England and Scotland' – 'Old England' presumably from *Ivanhoe*, and Scotland from *Waverley*.

In the book, Dixon glamorised the story of the first Klan and clearly drew on the work of Scott as its phoney cultural underpinning. The characters' names are Cameron, McAlpin, Stuart, McAllister, and McDuffie (through whose veins flowed the blood of Scottish kings). They are 'The children of the men who speak the tongue of Burns', 'Old-fashioned Scotch Presbyterians'. With the heritage of 'the heroic blood of the martyrs of old Scotland', they are the 'reincarnated souls of the clansmen of Old Scotland'. 'Mr President', she cried bitterly, 'You are of Scotch covenanters' blood'.

All this, Griffith, who was the son of a southern general, translated into the film without regard to the racism or the facts.

In the second part of the film, as the Ku Klux Klan are being gathered in huge numbers to rescue the besieged whites from the wicked blacks, the message is spread by the use of the 'fiery cross of old Scotland's hills' – the practice first described, if not actually invented, by Walter Scott in 'The Lady of the Lake'.

As David Olusoga has said, apropos *Birth of a Nation*, 'People died because of that film'. And it is a fact, that the first use of the fiery cross by the Ku Klux Klan was ten months after the release of the film, not in the 1870s as depicted by Dixon. This, then, is surely an inconvenient truth for us when considering what Sir Walter Scott did for Hollywood, or indeed what Scotland did for America.

Actually, there is also a sort of redemption for Scott and 'The Lady of the Lake' in that Frederick Douglass, the former slave who became a celebrated abolitionist, chose 'Douglass' as his surname specifically because of the heroic Lord Douglas in Scott's epic poem.

And then there is 'Hail to the Chief', from 'The Lady of the Lake' Canto 2, becoming the US President's signature tune. But perhaps that is beyond redemption.

In the late 1970s, there was a great deal of debate in the film community in Scotland. There were books and an exhibition: 'Scotch Reels', and a couple of key events.



There was 'Film Bang' in 1976, and 'Cinema in a Small Country' in 1977. 'Film Bang' was described as a cross between a union meeting and a demo. It was supposed to be about the future of film making in Scotland, and indeed to some extent it was, but by no means entirely.

The time we are considering was at the end of a long period in which the only genuine mode of Scottish film expression was in documentary – a most estimable genre to be sure – with its roots in the movement founded by one of the other great Scots, John Grierson, Father of the Documentary.

However, in the 1970s the biggest employer of Scottish cinema film-making talent, the Films of Scotland Committee, was in decline following the retirement of its extraordinary director, Forsyth Hardy, who had supervised the making of over 150 documentary films, all financed by public and private organisations and firms with

nary a penny from government to sustain the effort. Films of Scotland had been set up by government to promote Scotland, but with no money. The Chairman, Sir Alexander B King, said it was 'A remit without a remittance'. By the 1970s also, television rather than the cinema was becoming the natural home for documentary, and many of the film-makers, people like Bill Forsyth, Lawrence Henson, Charley Gormley, Michael Alexander, and a few others, talents nurtured by Hardy, were desperate to make story films. Indeed some had already begun to do so in a small way through the Children's Film Foundation, which was run in London by another encouraging Scot, Henry Geddes.

The debate was surely to be about money, structures, studios, training – and to some extent it was. But what is really surprising, looking back at the record now, is the amount of effort and air that was expended not on practicalities or even politics, but on Representation. One could then blame a combination of the academics present, the writers, critics, and Walter Scott, for contributing to the loss of an opportunity to get film-making going properly in Scotland.

In fact, it took Bill Forsyth's courage with *That Sinking Feeling* and *Gregory's Girl* to demonstrate that it was possible to make genuinely indigenous and popular fiction films in Scotland, and the best part of another twenty years before the money and the structures began to catch up with where they should have been all that time ago.

Back to the 1970s and the hijacked agenda. The issues, as far as the academics and writers were concerned, were all to do with the regressive, corrupting influences of tartanry, the kailyard, the Walter Scott legacy, and the Scots' pathetic acceptance that their culture was there for the taking by anyone who cared to exploit it. The most celebrated instance of that latter crime, and the totemic movie for all subsequent debate, was of course *Brigadoon*, made back in 1954.

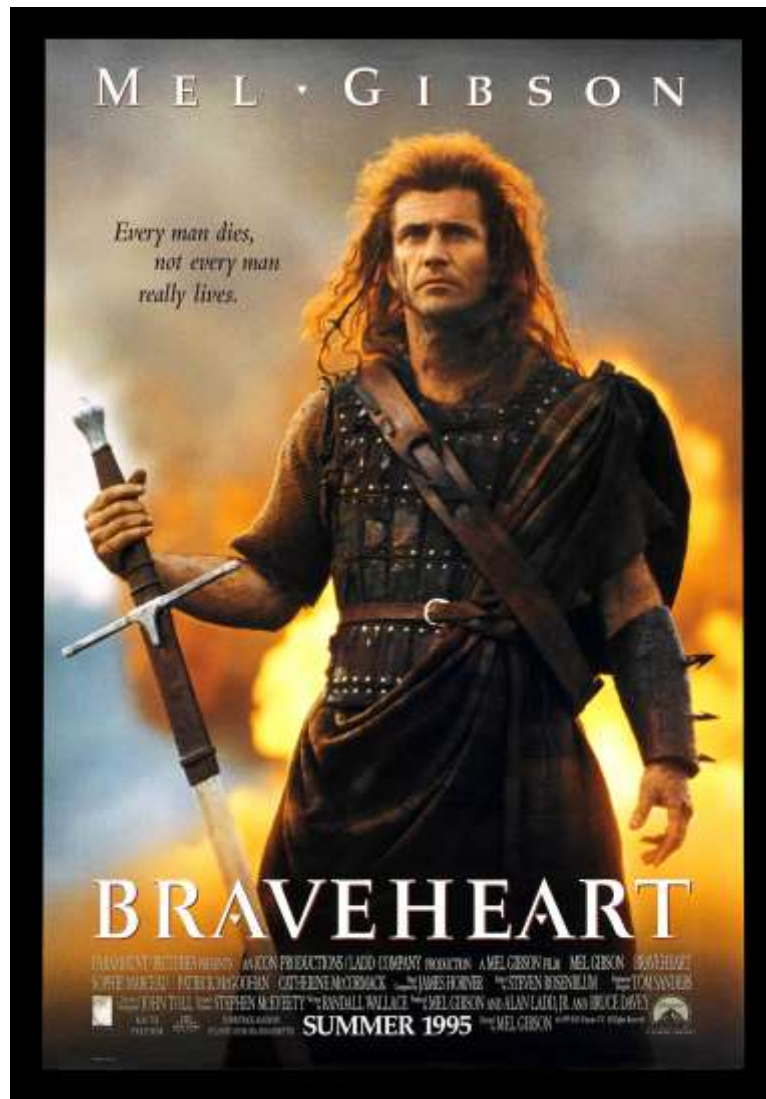


The case against its perpetrators began with the tale of how the producer, Arthur Freed, was toured around Scotland by Forsyth Hardy seeking locations for the film. Culross, Dunkeld, Braemar and Inverary were all rejected as unsuitable. Freed returned to Hollywood having found nowhere in Scotland that looked like the Scotland he was seeking, so the movie was made in Burbank. Maybe there is some comfort in that, but was the Scotland he had in mind the one that he had imagined, essentially at root thanks to Scott?

There were, indeed are, plenty of things about *Brigadoon* to stoke the fires of your indignation, if you are so inclined, the story itself for a start. And of course there are lots of other movies to get upset about and, to a greater or lesser degree with traces of Scott, or at least tartan. I would recommend you try *Geordie* (1955); *Trouble in the Glen* (Yes, with Orson Welles) (1956); *Happy Go Lovely*, set at the Edinburgh Festival, would you believe? (1951); *Bonnie Scotland* (1935 with Laurel and Hardy); *The Ghost Goes West* (dir. Rene Clair, 1935) – the biggest grossing British movie in 1936; *Bonnie Prince Charlie* (with David Niven, Finlay Currie, etc); (1948); *Annie Laurie* with Lillian Gish setting out, improbably, to stop the massacre of Glen Coe; (1936), *Mary Queen of Scots* (Redgrave), (1971); *Mary of Scotland* (Hepburn) (1936) --and there are many more.

We do not need to list all *Brigadoon's* outrages here, but a little word of caution. Whisper it softly in the hearing of the Saltire Society or other worthy bodies, but *Brigadoon* is actually not that bad a film. It is very well crafted and it is genuinely entertaining. It's just that somehow it is about us, in a strange sort of way – and perhaps that's what is upsetting.

To blame Sir Walter Scott for *Brigadoon* seems a bit harsh.



But *Braveheart* (1995) by Mel Gibson from Australia via the USA is another obvious target for those who want to plough that furrow – and in that case more plausibly, as far as I am concerned. There is a book by one of those academics I was castigating earlier, Colin McArthur, *Brigadoon, Braveheart and the Scots* which deals in depth with these issues.

Ironically, there was a much more legitimately Walter Scott-related film which came out at the same time: *Rob Roy*, directed by Michael Caton-Jones from Broxburn, was actually very good. The fact that it received only one Oscar nomination (quite an achievement in itself) to *Braveheart's* ten says something about the benefits to be had

from exploiting the right culture in the most commercial way. A recent debate between film historians concluded that *Braveheart* was the worst historical film ever.

But should we really be troubled by all this? Well, just perhaps we should. It may be that the ‘Scotch Reels’ gang of the 1970s, the ‘Brigadooners’, had a point, particularly in relation to Scott’s tartanry and Barrie’s kailyardery, though they did rather tend to ignore evidence that did not suit their argument, notably the films of Bill Douglas or indeed Peter Watkins and his seminal *Culloden*; and they were ambivalent about, for example, Alexander Mackendrick’s *Whisky Galore* and *The Maggie*.

What is certainly true is that the image of our beloved Scotland that has been literally projected to the world over the last hundred years is mostly of a quaint country full of nostalgic, sentimental people given to loud music and bright clothing.



Whatever else, it has scarcely been representative of the nation of the Scottish Enlightenment. You could argue that if the world wanted – could be bothered – to perceive us in those colourful terms, what harm could it do? Good, surely, to have a unique national identity; good, surely, for tourism. But what might be of greater

concern is that these curious and distorted images of Scotland and the Scots have of course been fed into our own cinemas and thereby been given currency among our own population and therefore back into our own culture. If these then become our perceptions of ourselves, if we believe that is what we are really like, do they not become a key negative influence? And then there is a vicious circle and real regression. Would Scott have wanted that?

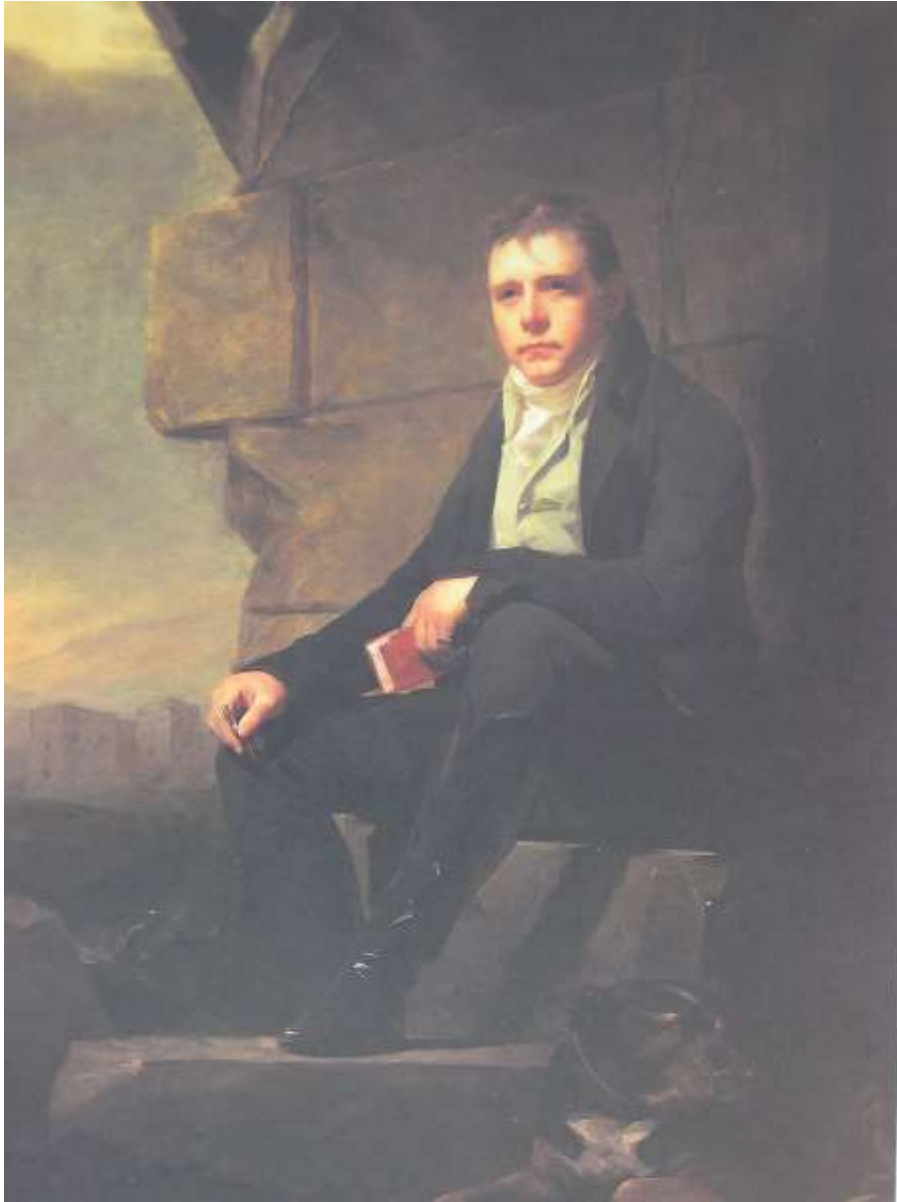
So, a hundred years ago, was this extremely important development in world entertainment and communication – the cinema– a cultural Trojan horse for us, so to speak? Are we still even yet suffering from the arrival of the most popular, accessible, pervasive form of pre-television, pre-internet entertainment? Are our manners and tastes still shaped by the distorting mirror of Hollywood, and are our modes of cultural expression still affected by it – by the exaggerated, ludicrous way in which we have allowed ourselves to be portrayed? For 1911 *Lochinvar* read 2014 *Outlander*?



Is there indeed a trail here, a link from Scott via the movies, to contemporary Scottish culture?

Some of us hoped very much that the status of Scottish culture would change with devolution. Culture would be key to matters of national policy, as well as identity. The tartanry, the kailyardery, would be put in its place. New modern modes of expression, digital of course, would obliterate the cultural sins of the fathers.

Well, perhaps. There are still plenty of tartan dollies out there. One might observe that nowadays the national dress as promoted by Scott, the kilt, is *de rigueur* at every wedding and international football match. How much of a connection we can legitimately make between the superficial exploiting of Scott's work (for that is really what it was – not an addressing of his real genius as a writer) – and our current condition, I do not know. Were Scott and other Scots writers of the 19th century good news for Hollywood but not good news for us? Is the nature of cinema itself to blame? Or are there signs in Scottish cinema that we are getting over it? *Red Road*, *Shallow Grave*, *Trainspotting*, *Hallam Foe*, *Sweet Sixteen*, *Dear Frankie*, *Ae Fond Kiss*, *Rat Catcher*, *My Name is Joe*. *Etc.* Or are we still in thrall to the Walter Scott derivations and distortions that gave rise to *Brigadoon*? But let's look at the balance sheet.



If Scott is to get credit for

influence on Hollywood, for example in the cowboy convention of the one-on-one shoot-out in the dusty main street with its origins in the chivalric medievalisms of *Ivanhoe*, or indeed the idea that Scotland is a romantic and attractive country, then that is probably something to be proud of. If, on the other hand, his version of Scotland leads to *Brigadoon* and a perception by others and even by ourselves that we are simply quaint, then that is hardly to be welcomed.

On that latter note, let me end with a couple of brief quotes:

This one from Murray Grigor about *Brigadoon*:

What makes Brigadoon's fantasy of a past that never existed important is its potential to fuel the 'themeparkisation' of Scotland today. In a country which allows standing stones to be bulldozed away and awards tourist grants to historical blasphemies, the fakelore of Brigadoon begins to dominate the folklore of our real yesterdays.

And on the same theme, from Carl MacDougall:

The extent to which the Brigadoon perceptions have distilled down to us who live here is obvious, when there is a serious lobby to turn 'Flower of Scotland' into a national anthem. The sentiments are, to my mind, even more distasteful: romantic nonsense, which is clearly nonsense, is one thing, but dying for a wee bit hill and glen, is another.

And finally, from Donald Campbell:

Brigadoon's success has promoted a perception of Scotland which, though grossly erroneous, is curiously persistent, creating a very real obstruction to the understanding of genuine Scottish culture throughout the world. I have lost count of the number of times that people from other countries have told me – intending it as a compliment – that my work 'isn't really Scottish'. What they mean, of course, is that my drama has nothing in common with Brigadoon.

This makes me feel like the grandson of Cochise, who, on applying for work as an extra on a film about his grandfather, was turned down on the grounds that he didn't look like an Apache.