

The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club

Toast for Sir Walter Scott

*Toast to Sir Walter given on Thursday 6th May 2021 at 7:00pm by **Professor Iain Torrance** to members of The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club via Zoom.*

Before anything else, I want to thank Michael Wood for his different and very creative idea of a virtual dinner and Paul & Lisa Wedgwood for rising to the challenge so generously. And we are really grateful for Paul's account of the menu and for actually delivering it to the Edinburgh members. And as ever, we are grateful to Lee. And I enjoy his Walter Scott tweets every day.

An online occasion like this is different from a convivial meeting across the dinner table. Zoom is a new torture and I shall be brief.

We all know that Sir Walter Scott was born on the 15th of August 1771 in a third-floor apartment on College Wynd in Edinburgh. So this is in the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary year of his birth.

We know, of course, that he was the greatest Scotsman of his day, the J K Rowling of the 19th century, the toast of Europe the former colonies to the west.

Ian Duncan tells us that 'Waverley has a strong claim to be the most influential work in the modern history of the novel'. I am not a Walter Scott scholar, but inspired by David Hewitt, and now Peter Garside, I have read all the novels, many more than twice.

I continue to do so. During lockdown, to whom do you turn if not to Sir Walter Scott?

I re-read *Waverley* and *Old Mortality*, trying to grasp the depth and extent of the sectarianism which is so graphically portrayed. Who can forget the heart-stopping tactlessness of Mause Headrigg or the deluded ranting of Ephraim Macbriar? Who can forget the horrific account of Ephraim's judicial torture as the wedges are slammed into the boot?

In contrast to such undaunted spirits, one is struck by the insipid characters of the moderately presbyterian Henry Morton and the passionless Edward Waverley who was so scorned by Flora MacIvor.

There are critics who have marked these portrayals as weaknesses in Scott.

As a kind of theologian and trying as I was to understand sectarianism, I read the novels through the lens of St Augustine who died in the fifth century. Augustine did something

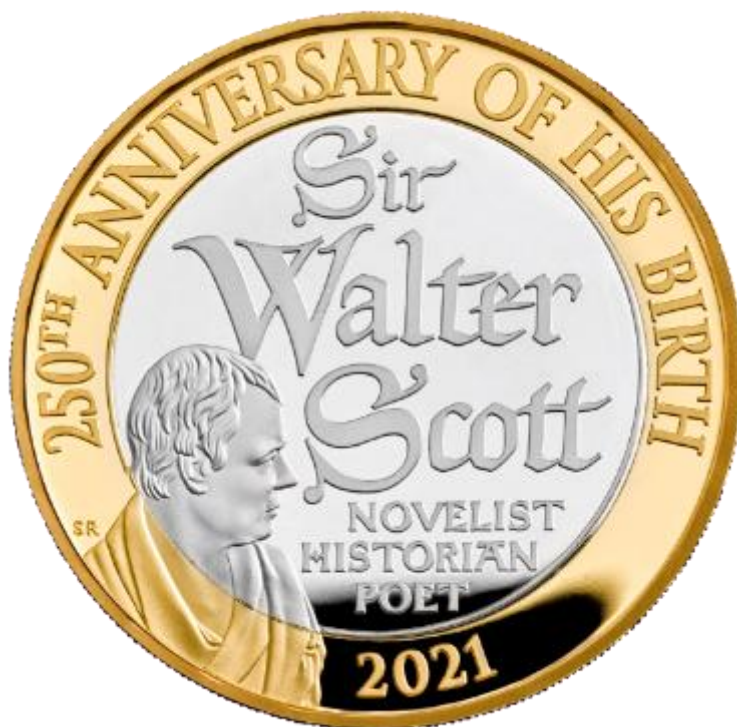
which is easily forgotten but critically important today. Augustine invented the notion of 'the secular'. The ancient world understood very well the distinction between the sacred and the profane. The sacred was the realm which belonged to the deity. The profane – the *pro fanum* – was the area outside the sanctuary. It was a polarisation. Augustine's invention of the 'religious secular' was, as Robert Markus puts it, the 'shared overlap' between insider and outsider groups. The shared overlap. It was the reverse of sectarianism which is essentially centrifugal.

Augustine called this Christian mediocrity. Without mediocrity, shared overlap, Augustine feared Western Christianity would lapse toward an inward looking woke self-satisfaction, dismissing all others as the unspeakable un-woke who lived in outer darkness. His view was that without creative overlap, without engagement with the other, we wither and die.

It seemed to me that Augustine's model captured well Sir Walter Scott's *subtle* account of polarisation and inner social hatred. Edward Waverly and Henry Morton, far from being insipid, exemplify the virtue of mediocrity, something to which we may all need to aspire, if we are to survive the coming months.

You may not know, but in January the Royal Mint produced a new £2 coin to celebrate Sir Walter Scott. Here is one. There is a small portrait and it says, "Sir Walter Scott, novelist, historian, poet" and around the rim it has the words, "The will to do, the soul to dare". And that seems a very good toast for today.

Please life a glass: Sir Walter Scott, The will to do, the soul to dare.



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