

How to find Scotland?

By Gerard Carruthers

Recently, a celebrated Scottish writer remarked to me that Hugh MacDiarmid was an 'authentic' artist and that, by contrast, Walter Scott was a 'phoney' writer. In the face of Scotland's most widely successful purveyor of fiction, is this the Calvinist or the post-Romantic ideal of keeping it real in Scotland? Probably a bit of both. At a conference panel on Robert Tannahill, Robert Burns and Scott, a retired academic's decisive contribution on the 'Wizard of the North' was to read out a poem showing that Scott opposed parliamentary reform. So, we can sort writers into piles according to their party political predilections and game over? Would the last to leave punch Sir Walter's lights out? The Scottish cultural establishment, a largely middle-class soft leftist-nationalist grouping of critics, academics, arts administrators and journalists (a kind of artistic-intellectual quango exercising a concentrated power probably impossible in a bigger, less uptight nation), has played its part in shaping a limited literary canon, reclusive to the extent of frequently excising Scotland's biggest international writing successes. It is a curious phenomenon that James Thomson, James Macpherson, Walter Scott, James Bridie and Muriel Spark continue to be treated so sniffily in their country of origin, either ignored or pigeon-holed too neatly, when the reception of each of these writers furth of Scotland has been by far more positive, at least to the extent that these are all writers who importantly promulgate, participate in and provoke large scale debates. Yet another national conceit: the rest of the world doesn't get Scotland.

Scott, like James Macpherson, is now part of a highly ambitious series, 'The Reception of British Authors in Europe'. Edited by Murray Pittock, *The Reception of Sir Walter Scott in Europe* (Continuum, 2006) is a collection of essays, timeline and bibliography that provides a vastly rich portrait of the writer's reach in Austria, Catalonia, the Czech lands, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Norway, Poland, Russia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden (with material alluding also to many other regions and nations on the continent). A few random nuggets gleaned from Paul Barnaby's excellent timeline: the first critical notice of Scott beyond Scotland occurs in Denmark in 1802; it is

not until 1821 that the first Italian translation occurs (something that flew in the face of my own previous assumption, given that Rossini is at work turning Scott into opera by 1819); Turgenev visits Edinburgh in 1871 to lavish praise on Scott in commemoration of the birth centenary; the first Catalan translation (of *The Talisman*) occurs in 1922 (it is interesting that this comes on the back of the Spanish edition of the Collected Novels from 1891-1920); and the run of first-time translations has remained unabated, to pick a few, into Portuguese in 1834, Greek in 1847, Romanian in 1857, Serbian in 1867, Belarusian in 1935, Albanian in 1959, Basque in 1980, and Bosnian in 2005. From the index, we can also discern that Scott has had at least 114 foreign translators to date.



Murray Pittock begins his 'Introduction: Scott and the European Nationalities Question' in goading fashion: 'Along with Byron and Macpherson, Sir Walter Scott was one of the three Romantic writers who exerted an immediate and powerful influence on European literature.' Byron, of course, is traditionally claimed as part of the big six English Romantic poets (Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats) and this latter idea is one that, obviously, excludes Scott (even though for a time

during the Romantic period the biggest selling poets in Britain and elsewhere are the Irishman, Thomas Moore, Byron and Scott), as well as the much earlier 1760s Macpherson (so that we should notice Pittock obliterating previous, prissy critical period-boundaries to include a poet whose huge impact on literature, painting and music, and on particular individuals (including David Hume, Goethe, Napoleon and Tennyson) shows his first phase lasting effectively 100 years. One the real strengths of this series in general (Virginia Woolf, Laurence Sterne, James Joyce, Byron, Yeats and Swift among others are already published), and this volume in particular is the way in which critical pecking orders and emphases within the Atlantic Isles are not necessarily attested through a wider European lens. Though, at the same time, there are often simultaneous echoes as well as strangeness in reception. It is striking, for instance, that Scott can be taken as an inspirer of colonial resistance so far as the Catalans are concerned; Andrew Monnickendam in his essay cites Tubino pointing out Catalan identification with both rebellious Jacobites and



Covenanters. Monnickendam concludes a fascinating survey of the Catalan situation that Scott's 'reception switches back and forward between a more liberal Enlightenment model and a more conservative, strongly Catholic view of nationhood'. For the Catalans, as for the Scots, the reception of Scott's romantic-fictional presentation of Scottish history, with its cast of moderates, fanatics, historical players and ordinary people, is both inspirational and received without unanimity, a fact that should perhaps be reassuring of the novelist's universally human reach. Fiction is most authentic when it allows debate, not when its view is internally uncontested or externally uncontested.

Too often, Scott is read in Scotland as a peculiar product. The most ludicrous appraisal (still in currency) being that by Edwin Muir who in *Scott and Scotland* (1936) sees Scott as unable to write with authentic freedom because he lacks a healthy national (Scottish) tradition, devoid of political authority and linguistic wholeness, to inhabit.

And, this is the same Muir who translated Franz Kafka into English! Muir implies that Scott's fiction is essentially anachronistic as he writes about national history in the futile context of a nation now superseded. Would-be but despairing nationalist, Muir reads Scott as noisily re-enacting past religious and highland conflagrations to attest the messy Scottish cultural turbulence, by Scott's time, done away with via the progressive and cohesive reality of the British superstate. The question must be asked, however, is it Scott who sees things in this light or is it Edwin Muir? Scott throughout his fiction shows people of principle, common sense, ruthlessness, expedience and indifference everywhere and at all times, whether in Scotland, England, France, Switzerland or the Holy Land. It is not, as Muir implies, that Scotland has a particular problem with its vulgar, dislikeable, unruly people (a view of the Scots in fact held by Muir, as evidence from across his oeuvre shows). Muir also claims that because the outcome of the history written about by Scott was known – the marginalisation of the Covenanters of *The Tale of Old Mortality* or the abject defeat of the Jacobites of *Waverley* — this 'inevitably' leads to meaningless romantic adventure. The logic then would be that the 'losers' of history should not be written about imaginatively. More importantly, though, history is never as conclusive as Muir seems to suppose. The language of the Covenant, even something of its zeal, was to be found in the eventually successful vigil by those camped out and campaigning for a restored Scottish parliament. The re-imagining of a Highlands identity has, perhaps, had its downside (the tartanry to which Scott undoubtedly contributes), but Scott's presentation of the honourable (as well as cunning) highlander in *Waverley* or 'The Two Drovers' played a



part in rehabilitating the Scottish Gael after an 18th-century stereotype ('Johnnie Hielandman') of the lazy, dirty, culture-less Gael. The post-1745 assimilation of the highlands was not simply a story of colonisation, but, gradually, of recognition of equal human beings with special cultural and economic needs that goes on to the present day (with the Clearances widely recognised now as the opposite of progressive in any sense at all). Scott's defence of the dignity of the underdog, of marginalised cultures, whether of the Gaelhealtacht, or of the Presbyterian milkmaid, Jeannie Deans in *The Heart of Mid-Lothian*, or in his protest at the treatment of the gypsies in *Quentin Durward* is extensive (contrast this latter stance with that of more usually approved Scottish cultural and political commentator, Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun in his contempt for the gypsies whose freedoms he wished radically to curtail). All too often, Muir and many others have taken the unionist Tory Scott at large face value and ignored the much less predictable attitudes and more fulsome possibilities in his writing. Other countries have been more open.

A fascinating area opened up in *The Reception of Scott* by Annika Bautz is Scott in post-war Germany. As she explains, considerably more effort was expended on accurate historical explication of Scott's novels in East as compared to West Germany. This was because in East Germany, 'the state [...] saw realistic classical novels as part of [...] educational literature.' If at times he is 'read as promoting communist ideals of literature and society', this is, of course, highly questionable but at least goes some way to recognising Scott's consistent concern with ordinary

people, something, as much as his forays into chivalric adventure, that made Scott recognisably as romantic in his own day as Wordsworth. It is interesting that in Hungary, from where Georg Lukács in the 1937 hailed Scott as the inventor of the historical novel, provides some of the most trenchant debate over the novelist. As Gertrud Szamosi details, Scott either 'was seen as a writer "struggling with Romantic extravagance" or as "the pioneer of Realist novel writing"'. Mirroring something of the debate over Scott in Scotland, nonetheless as the intense Hungarian site for this shows (across two centuries and in two chapters of the volume), this ambiguity is not to do with the especial (warped) nature of Scotland/Scottland, but speaks more widely of the post-Enlightenment and post-romantic cultural and political condition of the western world.

Scott is again rendered very contemporary by Martin Procházka's very subtle reading of how in Czech culture, the novelist helped supply an impetus of cultural nationalism (where patriotic expression could exist in the absence of instituted state). Procházka's reading of Scott in this and in other spheres as



representing an 'intertext' in Czech culture makes for the kind of exciting modern reading from which Scottish literary studies might learn. For instance, while there might be a great deal of critical comment on how James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* is an intertext for Robert Louis Stevenson, Muriel Spark or James Robertson, to name but a few, not enough is made of Scott's deployment of dangerous landscape, or of interlopers into strange cultures (*Guy Mannering* is here the great under-read text), features that shed myriad influences on 19th and 20th-century Scottish fiction and poetry. Intertextuality is also served in *The Reception of Scott in Europe* by informative essays on Scott's impact on opera and 19th-century painting. Dealt with by Jeremy Tambling, the former phenomenon (perhaps yet another one that has not always endeared the novelist to his countrymen in their frequent distaste for high cultural expression), shows Scott as source for the development of strong female character roles and psychological drama. Beth S. Wright, in her essay on 'Sir Walter Scott's Challenge to Nineteenth-Century Art', shows Scott influencing on French historical painting enabling it to depict 'rather than lapidary precept [...] insight into [...] thoughts and emotions' precisely because Scott's imagined histories are ones full of multi-layered, competing, sometimes even uncertain ideas and aspirations. Once again, Edwin Muir's idea of Scott's cul-de-sac historical imagination goes by the board.

That Scott electrified a wide range of artists and ordinary people across Europe in his heyday is well-known, but the detail provided by *The Reception of Scott in Europe* represents a fresh portrait of impact that will make it virtually a handbook for anyone working on almost any aspect of Scott. One thing that particularly impresses is the strength of feeling towards the novelist. Jorgen Erik Nielsen quotes the Swedish novelist, Fredrika Bremer writing to a friend in 1834, 'Walter Scott! [...] how I love him [...] Reading Walter Scott I feel vividly that the direction the novel and the drama have taken in several countries towards the ugly and the uncanny is really bad.' Bremer has here in mind criminal main protagonists, or Balzac's intense, twitchy depictions of mundane, everyday life, and so alludes, implicitly, to what has come to be seen as something rather distasteful about Scott's fiction. Edwin Muir identified Scott's 'insipid heroes', individuals such as Edward Waverley or Henry Morton (in *Old Mortality*) who lack commitment to causes in which they are briefly carried along. These are individuals who follow conscience rather than simply cause, and this is what Muir dislikes (he perhaps has a point, up to a point,



in that Morton, in particular, during the 'Killing Times' of the later 17th-century seems, anachronistically, to have a rather post-Enlightenment idea of even-handed humanitarian conscience). Bremer, on the other hand we can infer, approves of the scrupulous, non-predisposed, goodness of such protagonists, who are not it should be emphasised, simply 'romantic' 'goodies' but individuals who represent what Scott himself is: someone open throughout his historical fiction to an epic sweep of humanity where the whole spectrum of life and ideology has something to say for itself, has positives and negatives, clear-sightedness and tunnel-vision, often in equal measure. This is the very modern ultimate indeterminacy as part of the human condition which seems often to be lost on readers (or non-readers) of Scott today.

Walter Scott has been castigated for creating 'Scotland', escapist pageantry and, it should not be discounted, this 'entertainment' value had a long lasting impact across Europe. The broad, richly coloured historical canvas that he paints had an immediacy of appeal that has become naturally outmoded by formal developments in the history of literature and in other genres (very obviously, cinema), but this does not mean that there is nothing else. Just as we do not dismiss Shakespeare because of his now ancient theatrical technique or Daniel Defoe because of his 18th-century novel technique, we should see also that Scott's impact lies not only in novelty or innovation in his own time, but in the dissonances between romantic and realistic outlooks, ideology and humanity, important people and common people, environment and inspiration. Beneath the wide historical

sweep in Scott there is a place of uncertainty, not Scotland or any other location themselves, but in the dynamic of human action that propels a history that is only set in stone in official versions of history. 'Scotland' is a place that inhabits and even embellishes official or received versions of history, but with the intrusion of unvarnished doubt into all its corners because ultimately humans are surer of their fictions than of their histories. Towards the end of *Waverley* the 'hero', Edward Waverley, looks uneasily upon the fine formal portrait of Charles Edward Stuart, and tensely paces a library full of books; everything after the rising of 1745-6 has been safely catalogued, put away in recorded order for posterity. Waverley knows, however, that but for a throw of the dice, Bonnie Prince Charlie's future might have been more real than romantic. It is time that Scott's novels in their often sceptical but deeply human fabric were seen as real rather than romantic, fictional rather than historical and modern rather than moribund. In Walter Scott, Scotland has one of its few great European writers.