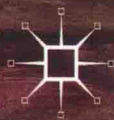


The Novels of Walter Scott and his Literary Relations

Mary Brunton, Susan Ferrier and Christian Johnstone

Andrew Monnickendam



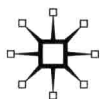
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Mary Brunton, Susan Ferrier and
Christian Johnstone

Andrew Monnickendam
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain



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Also by Andrew Monnickendam

CLAN-ALBIN A NATIONAL TALE (*ed.*)

BACK TO PEACE: Reconciliation and Retribution in the Postwar Period
(*ed. with Aránzazu Usandizaga*)

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Introduction

A new volume on the Scottish national tale might meet with one of two reactions. The first would be ‘a study of three of Scott’s contemporaries is of interest only to a tiny minority of students and scholars’ and the second would be something akin to ‘yet another book about Scott and his contemporaries’. The first reaction might have made some sense several decades ago, but it fails to recognize the extent to which the canon of romanticism has increasingly admitted national tales into its pantheon, a situation that would not have been necessary in most European countries where the demotion of the historical romance to the level of children’s fiction would be baffling. The second response recognizes those efforts, but suggests either that the work has been somewhat repetitive or else there is little more of value to be said. Obviously, I do not share such opinions because this critical study hopes to contribute to the burgeoning interest in the national tale precisely by adding to work undertaken by prominent scholars in the field over the past two decades or so, as I shall now go on to explain.

Its contribution comprises two major exercises. Although there have been two short studies of Ferrier (Grant 1957 and Cullinan 1984), this is the first volume which draws together the work of Mary Brunton, Susan Ferrier and Christian Isobel Johnstone with the aim of analysing their fiction on its own grounds. It uses two original strategies: the first is, as a point of departure, the examination of contemporary memoirs, correspondence and views of their life and work in order to assemble a literary persona. Second, it is only once their fiction has fully been examined that their relationship to Walter Scott can be best determined. In other words, the underlying hypothesis is that, by giving the three novelists critical independence, a more complex and diverse picture of their writing is produced, as we are no longer fettered by

their supposed subordinate position which predetermines, or at least foresees, where criticism is going to take us in the end. That in itself would perhaps be interesting, but it could never be considered anything approaching innovative or ground-breaking. However, what I propose in the final chapter would, if successful, require a re-engagement with the way that Scott, the Scottish novel and, in a few cases, the history of English fiction are read. I will argue that if we look at Scott after close examination of these supposedly secondary writers, it is possible to see a rather different Great Unknown than we have been accustomed to. In purely abstract terms, it is logical to assume that the works of contemporaries would influence one writer as much as the works of this one writer would influence the others. As we all know, in practice, the dominant role of Scott has made this well-nigh impossible, and, until recently, would have been deemed pointless. Now, the situation is somewhat different. In other words, rather than a question of foolishly trying to overturn literary history, the objective is to remove the blinkers that have impeded a wider look at the sides, or, in the terms of this study, at Scott's contemporaries.

Before explaining how this book is organized, I would like to trace the recent development of our understanding of the national tale. In 1991, Peter Garside published his influential article 'Popular Fiction and National Tale: Hidden Origins of Scott's *Waverley*'; its findings and procedure have laid the foundations for numerous critical publications, of which this is simply the latest one.

It is worth reminding ourselves both of what Garside proposes and how he builds up his argument. As the title suggests, he is looking for evidence that will fix the date of composition of the early chapters of Scott's first novel. His approach is empirical: he collects his material clues before drawing up his proposal. In the 1829 'General Preface' to the *Waverley Novels*, Scott explains that he had started writing the novel in 1805, then abandoned the project, before taking it up again when he discovered the manuscript while searching for fishing tackle. The greater part of the novel was therefore written between October 1813 and the following June. However, Garside points out that *Waverley* had been advertised for publication by John Ballantyne in his 1809–10 catalogue. Consequently there is no correlation between Scott's own account, this advertisement and the other documentary evidence that Garside outlines; in short, '[n]one of this fits' (33). This healthy scepticism towards grand pronouncements smoothes the way for a completely new project, namely a reappraisal of contemporary fiction, as the way the fishing-tackle story is written indicates two crucial features of modern Scottish

literary history. First, that Scott strove successfully to dominate the novel not only commercially but also through the careful creation of his own literary persona: the fishing-tackle story locates him as the founding father who had really invented the national tale as far back as 1805. The date is of paramount importance, as Scott is insinuating that he had more or less formulated the national tale before the publication of, say, Mary Brunton's *Self-Control* (1811), which I discuss, as well as other similar novels, like Jane Porter's *The Highland Chiefs* (1810), which I do not. Scott's desire for aggrandizement, I would propose, is evident even in such a familiar term as 'the Great Unknown', which primarily fosters stature: however known or unknown his identity, he is automatically depicted as great. In other words, even though grammatically 'great' could qualify 'unknown', in practice it qualifies Scott alone, by suggesting that only the name of the great genius is missing; that we are dealing with a genius is irrefutable. Indeed, the mundane nature of the discovery of his sporting equipment additionally suggests that casualness, but only the casualness of a great master, was sufficient to engender a literary revolution. To determine what Scott's motives were for the fishing-tackle story is open to debate; some evidence is circumstantial, other suggestions are merely speculative, but what is indisputable is that it underlines his attempt to consolidate his number one slot at the expense of his contemporaries. Such a situation emerges, and in logical terms I would say inevitably, from an awareness – immeasurably greater than that of his many critics since 1814 – of their existence-cum-status as writers. If there were no rivals on the field, there would have been no need to be so assertive.

Garside's scientific caution leads him to conclude that possibly the mysterious birth of *Waverley* may never be completely clarified, yet there is enough information to suggest that Scott was part of a continuum and it is precisely there that '*Waverley*'s position in relation to other contemporary novels invites reappraisal' (48), as one research question leads on to the next. The extent of the reappraisal is patent when we briefly consider three cases. Garside points out that before accepting *Waverley*, Constable had 'turned down works of fiction on Scottish subjects by both James Hogg and John Galt' (47). Their destiny has turned out to be radically different. Chiefly through the auspices of the late Douglas Mack, Hogg has emerged as a major figure, evident in the magnificent Stirling–South Carolina edition of his collected works, a scholarly biography by Gillian Hughes (2007) and the journal *Studies in Hogg and his World*. John Galt has not enjoyed such aura, despite the appeal of his political novels, like *The Member* (1832), and satirical novels

of manners, like *The Entail* (1823), both of which have been recently published by mainstream companies. Galt is not greatly unknown, but has not benefited greatly from reappraisal. In the field of the national tale, one writer who certainly has taken on a status only superseded by Jane Austen is Maria Edgeworth. This is a result which, arguably, has less to do with the revaluation of the national tale along Garside's lines and more to do with the attention she receives from women's studies. As we shall see, Ferrier did not think highly of Edgeworth, and Johnstone subjected her to a ferocious attack (Monnickendam 2000). That said, the national tale is arguably as open a field as ever it has been since its heyday; the differing fortunes of Hogg, Galt and Edgeworth show how the situation has shifted.

A vital part of our understanding of the national tale derives from inquiries into gender. As an example, Dorothy Blakey's *The Minerva Press* (1939) goes so far as to suggest that 'reviewers were sometimes known to temper their criticism to the fair sex' (52) and that in the early days so great was the demand for fiction that occasionally titles and covers changed, but not the content (29–32)! Ina Ferris's *The Achievement of Literary Authority: Gender, History, and the Waverley Novels* (1991) is the major exponent of how crucial the change from biology to culture – from sex to gender – has become. In fact, Blakey's example of extreme behaviour fits neatly into Ferris's now classic distinction between female reading and feminine writing. The former is defined by being 'an act of the body rather than the mind. More specifically, it typifies it as a form of eating, hence as part of the material realm repudiated by the republic of letters' (37). This reinforces the firm distinction between body and mind, the emotional and the rational, that which requires control and that which controls, and a lengthy list of other gendered polarities. Only a small movement is required to extend the metaphor into one of an eating disorder, something which really calls for stern remedial treatment after bingeing on fiction. Feminine writing is defined as 'the proper novel that directly functioned as a corrective counterfiction' (52). 'Proper' indicates something moral, didactic or instructive, or a combination of all these interlocking elements.

Two examples of what borders on literary schizophrenia are provided by Jane Austen and Ann Radcliffe. *Northanger Abbey* (1817) is well known for its intertextual discussions of popular fiction: it might not be great literature, but the reading public's appetite – to continue Ferris's metaphor – for it is insatiable across gender and social classes, extending to Austen's own reading practice as evident in her borrowing habits from circulating libraries. The heroine's education consists

in learning that the drama of popular fiction, dark secrets, castles and despots does not correspond, thankfully for all concerned, with reality: hence Tilney's patriotic defence of Western civilization, despite its neighbourhoods of voluntary spies: 'Remember that we are English, that we are Christians' (199). Minerva-style fiction is a pleasant form of entertainment, nothing more, nothing less, only once its potential for distortion is held firmly under control. Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance* (1790) has a marked split in form: on the whole, it operates as a Gothic tale, but it is often interspersed with brief lectures on education, for example on elegant conversation, which is sufficiently important to be included in the form of a disquisition in chapter 1 (1998: 7–8). These two examples provide clear proof of how female reading and feminine writing may inhabit the same pages of the same texts. Similar cohabitation is evident in the three novelists under consideration. The most blatant example is Ferrier: quite often a humorous scene is rounded off by a moral statement, or a string of humorous scenes is followed by an extended lecture on morality, for example the notorious 'The History of Mrs Douglas' section of *Marriage*. Diners (or readers) after enjoying a series of tasty dishes topped with a frothy chocolate mousse do not take kindly to a dose of castor oil. Instead of entering into an argument as to how well or badly the pieces fit together, it is sufficient to note that these two forms of literary expression are yoked together, hence, first, the diagnosis of schizophrenia is not as incongruous as might first seem, and second, conceivably it was not judged as such in that period.

The value of Ferris's analysis derives in part from the lucid manner in which she defines and illustrates the binary opposition and in part from the realization that it has a venomous sting in its tail. Male equivalents to female reading and feminine writing might exist, but in no way can we ever approach a situation equivalent to separate but equal: the subordinate position is evidently that of the female. Following Jean-Jacques Rousseau's belief that nature is more powerful than nurture, feminine writing has a privileged access to feeling, but this wild zone is an entity whose shapelessness cannot be reined in by formal methods; consequently, feminine writing is definitely writing but it will definitely never be art. These parameters have an easily identifiable source, the reviews: as arbiters, they are responsible for moulding taste. Ferris points out that Jeffrey, as a representative example of a powerful reviewer, sees Edgeworth as a limited author because of her didacticism and gender (65), which turns out to be a completely circular argument since Edgeworth, as an individual author, could be substituted by the generic term feminine writing; again, it might be excellent writing, but

it could never aspire to art. As a consequence, the importance of Scott is that, from the reviewers' angle, he rescues fiction by infusing it with the virtues which female reading and feminine writing did not, or, more likely, as a taxonomic category, could never possess. His fiction has the stamp of quality that female writers lack. This description of Ferris's study is admittedly brief, given that its impact is enormous. For, as a consequence of her terms of reference, it is virtually impossible to talk about the national tale without entering into the arena of gender. The literary schizophrenia, in addition, highlights the fact that questions of gender and form are inseparable. A graphic and sadly ironic illustration of the latter is Walter Scott's fall from literary grace in the terms used by E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927); it shares similarities to the arguments used by Scott's contemporary supporters in enthroning his superior fiction far above the sensational Minerva novel. For Forster, the Waverley Novels had become little more than a form of cheap entertainment for unsophisticated readers; they were definitely not art. The wheel had come full circle: he saw Scott as a supplier of something akin to female reading, the very thing he had supposedly superseded.

Katie Trumpener's *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (1997) starts off with an exploration of how 'the bard symbolizes the central role of literature in defining national identity' (xii). The bard is a traditional, aristocratic figure, embedded in antiquarianism, yet is able to break free from what might be seen as an extremely limiting context to become a supra-national figure. By this, I mean that not only does the bard represent one culture, not only are songs and poetry vital to one dominated group, but that Trumpener is able to extend the coverage of the national tale; in brief, the question of imperialism enters the equation. Relationships, whether cultural or political, between Ireland and Scotland, for example, are always going to be tricky, as religion and emigration (in both directions) complicate the picture; Johnstone's *Elizabeth de Bruce* (1827) is probably the novel that shares greatest awareness of these complex issues. However, Trumpener, as the title of her work suggests, is able to extend the implications of the debate across the Atlantic, consequently not only into the empire as a whole but into the very concept of imperialism. Trumpener emphasizes affinity and common experience. She sees 'the constant copying and cross-pollination between the Irish and Scottish novel' (1997: 17) as standard practice. What they share is not simply a series of national symbols with the bard at the centre, but they are both products of a similar historical situation: that of the imposition of English, 'coercively imposed on the British peripheries' (16). The new immigrants take with

them the experience of occupation, though memory tends to chip away at its most unsavoury and violent events and manifestations.

Trumpener's ideas are backed up by a meticulous and thorough examination of many national tales, such as Johnstone's *Clan-Albin*. Although this side of her work is generally recognized, perhaps other aspects, crucial to this study, have not received as much attention or acceptance. Trumpener stresses that the national tale undergoes a transformation into the historical novel. This affects its three key motifs: the journey, the marriage and national character, as they sometimes do not take easily to the change. Trumpener states that '[t]he culminating acts of union become fraught with unresolved tensions, leading to prolonged courtship complications, to marital crises, and even, in two of Susan Ferrier's novels, to national divorce' (146). What is put under strain or into quarantine is the strength of the love-plot to sustain the arguments for national identity which the bardic figure, *ipso facto*, represents. This will be one of my central concerns.

Trumpener highlights the importance of Scott in providing a solution to – or perhaps an escape route from – what seems the insurmountable problem of the private and public sphere purportedly acting in unison but in fact misbehaving. Trumpener proposes that 'with the historical novel, a progressivist history of linear progressions, paradigm shifts, and epistemic breaks seems to have gained a clear victory' (151). The progressions, shifts and breaks all point to a major change of perspective which probably cancel out the note of caution carried by 'seems'. Of course, in no way is this a seamless argument, starting with the very terms of reference, as it is debatable to what extent the two overlapping literary genres can be so easily separated. Yet, the emphasis on progressive history is not just a reference to Scottish Enlightenment historiography but to the importance of Georg Lukács as Scott's most influential reader. It serves as a timely reminder that much, if not the majority of, Scott criticism centres on discussion of the political implications of his tales, or, in Trumpener's terms, the strength of bardic resistance or the degree of national capitulation. In her hypothesis, these implications spread all across the empire, aided by a collective amnesia of the bitter struggle originally chronicled by bards, old and new. In the latter category lies Scott's unobtrusive, ubiquitous narrator (151) who preaches progress rather than resistance. Trumpener's evolutionary model might seem to contradict my earlier statement that gender and genre are inextricably linked, but it is clear that same evolution requires the removal and extinction of those tiresome problems that could lead to national divorce. It was Scott himself who, by placing the marriage in

the last-but-one chapter and the political postscript as the conclusion, must take the responsibility for lessening the potential friction that the marriage of his heroes and heroines might otherwise produce. The order of these final two chapters necessarily quashes gender difference. If that appears to be an unwarranted blanket statement, let us consider whether *Waverley* would have been a different book and Scott criticism a different discipline if the novel had closed differently, if the last two chapters had been switched round, with the postscript on Scotland's progress in the previous centuries coming last-but-one. Were the final scene to depict Waverley and Rose chastely kissing to seal their marriage, we would surely have given that wedding photograph more attention.

If there is an ur-text for the idea of union, we have to move, temporarily, several centuries back, to William Shakespeare's *Henry V*, a popular play in the nineteenth century. It beams a strong light on the structure of military codes and strategies, and the incorporation of peripheral national character in the minor roles of Gower, Jamy, Macmorris and Fluellen, who complement the virile, heroic figure of the Christian Prince. The concluding act is a courtship scene, an act of union, in which the stripping of royal titles for Hal and Kate does not obscure the real nature of power and gender questions. Scott's Rose (*Waverley*) or Lady Morgan's Glorvina (*The Wild Irish Girl* (1806))¹ would never say anything like 'Is it possible dat I sould love de *ennemi* of France?' (5.2.166) nor would Waverley speak in terms like 'I love France so well that I will not part with a village of it, I will have it all mine' (5.2.169–70). And yet these surely are the central issues which are located but somewhat hidden in national tales and historical novels. In addition, Kate's marked French accent shows an awareness of how important language is in marking difference and subordination. We are earlier shown her taking some bizarre English instruction in 3.4 which is so burlesque in nature that it subverts the language of occupation through projecting its potential for double entendres of a sexual nature. There are two major differences between the Shakespearean drama and fiction. One is that the former is considerably blunter or honester in its cultural representation of power struggles. The second is that whereas Shakespeare identifies national identity in terms of dynasty, in the national tale, despite its aristocratic origins, it is the more bourgeois Waverley and his peers who accrue wives and territory.

Trumpener concludes that a process of homogenization takes place whereby a fictional model more than smoothes away rough edges of conflict; in the end, it erases them through 'collective amnesia'

(246), which might read as a resounding defeat for the old bard: resistance seems to have been pointless if not a complete waste of time. Trumpener's assignment of monumental power to the Waverley Novels ironically confirms the much-commented remarks by Scott himself in the 'General Preface' when he proposes that Edgeworth's fiction has 'done more to completing the Union than perhaps all the legislative enactments by which it has been followed up' (Scott 1985: 523). For if Trumpener is correct, Scott enthroned not only Edgeworth as cultural Empress of the Union but himself as her successor, with the additional distinction of Cultural Supremo of the British Empire. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that Trumpener would never deny that this is anything other than a temporal title. Just as the bard had his moment of glory, ditto, the Waverley Novels. In addition, Trumpener's thesis correlates the co-existence of a change from content to form: from resistance to inclusion; from the bard to the ubiquitous narrator. Furthermore, as Wolfgang Schivelbusch points out, Scott was a powerful figure not only in the empire but in the United States, more concretely in the South, Twain's famous denouncement of Scott being the most famous example. Schivelbusch argues that 'Scotland was the model of an anti-England that young America could emulate in its struggle to form itself into an independent nation' (2003: 48). What I am emphasizing is that fiction was an important vehicle for political cohesion as Scott, Trumpener and Schivelbusch all recognize in an explicit fashion. Schivelbusch also insists that the defeated rapidly recover in cultural terms, as they instinctively believe that they are culturally superior to their victors; the conquered might not be Romans, but the victors certainly look like barbarians. The apocryphal cry from a member of the audience – 'Whaur's yer Wullie Shakespeare noo?' – during the first performance of Home's tragedy *Douglas* in 1756 makes better sense when we consider that this incident took place only ten years after Culloden. Home is perceived not as being the artistic equivalent to Shakespeare (one would hope), but as having the equivalent standing as Scotland's bard; in other words, he is not necessarily a superior bard but the bard of a superior culture, which, in the end, is a much more potent political message than any which could be produced by comparing individual authors or their works. The adage that the best English literature at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century is Irish – the Abbey Theatre, Oscar Wilde, William Butler Yeats and James Joyce for starters – is similarly an argument that skips between asserting superior literary quality on the one hand and bardship status on the other.

These final illustrations lead to the ongoing arguments about national identity. Where did Brunton, Ferrier and Johnstone see themselves with regard to that rather old-fashioned but useful term? Is their position any clearer than Scott's? These questions are better understood if we briefly note where the tensions or contradictions stem from. If Scott is languorous in his fiction, to use a term close to Thomas Carlyle, then Scott's *Letters of Malachi Malagrowther* (1826) are certainly thunderous in their defence for Scotland's claim to take major decisions over its own affairs; after all, what is more important than banks and currency? That highly vocal Scott does not have much in common with the Scott who institutionalized tartanry by stage-managing the 1822 royal visit of George IV to the land of (oat)cakes (known as the 'King's Jaunt'). The former promotes independence, if not politically, at least at certain moments, while the latter promotes total assimilation. How can a sense of Britishness and Scottishness co-exist? Epistemologically, what is at stake are two ways of identifying allegiance: the older way centred on religion, dynasty or empire, and the more modern vision of the nation state. That said, the co-existence of allegiance to England and Scotland is always going to be potentially uneasy. In Ferrier, particularly in *Marriage*, there are satirical portraits of Scotland from various viewpoints, and harsh pictures of England from others. In Johnstone, a similar unforgiving array of critical postures is discernible; I will discuss in particular her use of the term 'national prejudice'. This might seem a case of having your cake and eating it, but, in the case of Ferrier, it emerges that relentless puns and fun-making indicate that, in the end, inconsistency does not trouble her.

If that is the case, then perhaps one explanation is that the ubiquitous term 'imagined community' has been used very freely or even irresponsibly, simply as a discursive term void of specific historical or political content. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1991) sets very clear parameters on this subject, as far away as possible from the general use of the 'imaginary' as romantic vaporousness. Actually, one of his central arguments is that Marxist revolutions after World War Two used a national term to delineate their national revolution; for example, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) defines itself in these very terms. However, Anderson's contrastive analysis of the power of language and religion as community markers sheds great light on Brunton in particular.

One recent outstanding monograph is Caroline McCracken-Flesher's *Possible Scotlands: Walter Scott and the Story of Tomorrow* (2005), whose third chapter 'Chancing Scotland' analyses the 1822 visit. McCracken-Flesher