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Preserving the Scottish Past: Walter Scott's Fabrication of Historical Scotland

Isamu TAKAHASHI

'The Scottish Bard' — even if this grand title may have been given to that deliberately local and rustic poet, Robert Burns, no one would question Sir Walter Scott's achievement first as a poet and then as a novelist, who was often styled 'the Wizard of the North'. In this paper, I would like to demonstrate the way Scott projected himself as a Scottish and modern minstrel recounting the historical events of his motherland, by romanticizing, fabricating, and, ultimately, commercializing them. Of crucial importance here is the 'minstrel' figure, whereby Scott was enabled to protect and conserve the Scottish past, both remote and recent, which otherwise could have been dangerous politically as well as socially.

Scott's choice of the settings in his poetry would provide a good starting point. He was born in Edinburgh but spent his early childhood in Roxburghshire, an experience that made him feel a strong sympathy with people and legends of the Borders. A native Lowlander as he was, Scott naturally came to view literary remains of the region as something at his disposal. The following table of his works in his early career shows that he published one ballad collection, one edition of a romance, and five long narrative poems. (Here I do not count the anonymous poems *The Bridal of Triermain* and *Harold the Dauntless*, and the occasional and topical pieces *The Vision of Don Roderick* and *The Field of Waterloo*.)

These settings were deliberate, and *The Lady of the Lake* provides a case in point. This piece, the third of Scott's long narrative poems, was in fact commenced as his second poetic project. In a letter of 1806 to the Marchioness of Abercorn, he reports on 'a grand work'. In his words, '[t]his is a Highland romance of Love Magic and War founded upon the manners of our mountaineers'. At the same time, however, Scott confesses his 'great deficiency [*sic*]':

Table of Scott's Works in his Early Career

Year	Work	Form	Setting(s)
1802	Vols 1 & 2 of <i>Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border</i>	ballad collection	the Borders
1803	2nd edn with additional vol. 3 of <i>Minstrelsy</i>		
1804	<i>Sir Tristrem</i>	edition of a romance	the Borders
1805	<i>The Lay of the Last Minstrel</i>	poem	the Borders
1806	<i>Ballads and Lyrical Pieces</i>	collection of short poems	
1808	<i>Marmion</i>	poem	the Borders
1810	<i>The Lady of the Lake</i>	poem	the Highlands
1811	<i>The Vision of Don Roderick</i>	poem	the Iberian Peninsula
1813	<i>The Bridal of Triermain</i>	anonymous poem	Cumberland
	<i>Rokeby</i>	poem	Northern England
1814	<i>Waverley</i>	novel	England, the Lowlands, the Highlands
1815	<i>The Field of Waterloo</i>	poem	France
	<i>The Lord of the Isles</i>	poem	the Western Isles
1817	<i>Harold the Dauntless</i>	anonymous poem	Denmark

'being born and bred not only a lowlander but a borderer I do not in the least understand the Gaelic language and therefore am much at a loss to find authentic materials for my undertaking'.¹ In another letter Scott also admits that, to write a Highland romance, he does not have 'quite the same facilities as in describing border manners where I am as they say more at home'. He makes it clear in this letter that the new poem is intended to give 'a real picture of what that enthusiastic race [the Highlanders] actually were before the destruction of their patriarchal government'.²

'To give a real picture', all right, but to whom? Obviously not to the Highlanders themselves. As an author without authority, Scott plans to introduce the Highland customs and manners to the audience *outside* the Highlands. This lack of materials, or, perhaps more precisely, of confidence, forced Scott to put this project aside for a while, and a new poem about the Lowlands, *Marmion*, came in and was published in 1808.

Critics have recently recognized the importance of his work as an editor of ballads and romances. What formed Scott's editorial style is usefully summed up by Leith Davis:

In Scott's view, Macpherson conveyed the impressive spirit of chivalry of the Scots in a language designed for the entire British nation, but he compromised the culture he ostensibly represented by ignoring standards of scholarly accuracy. Burns offered the authenticity which Macpherson lacked, but was unable to translate that authenticity to an English public. Moreover, his authenticity lacked the "chivalrous feeling" and, often, the masculine energy which Scott wanted to associate with the Scottish nation. In contrast, the *Reliques* of Percy offered Scott a model of a national identity that combined masculine chivalry with authenticity, as it presented adventurous Riding Ballads alongside antiquarian notes.³

Scott negotiated the difficulties presented by Macpherson's *Ossian* and Burns's rustic songs, but Bishop Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* provided him with a model case, as is attested by his recollection:

I then first became acquainted with Bishop Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. As I had been from infancy devoted to legendary lore of this nature, and only reluctantly withdrew my attention from the scarcity of materials and the rudeness of those which I possessed, it may be imagined but cannot be described with what delight I saw pieces of the same kind which had amused my childhood and still continued in secret the Delilahs of my imagination considered as the subject of sober research, grave commentary and apt illustration by an editor who shewed his poetical genius was capable of emulating the best qualities of what his pious labour preserved. [. . .] To read and to remember was in this instance the same thing and henceforth I overwhelmed my schoolfellows, and all who would hearken to me with tragical recitations from the ballads of Bishop Percy.⁴

The editorial manoeuvre was not the only thing that Scott learnt from Percy's instance, however. Scott found considerably useful the noble figure of 'minstrel', which Percy had so forcefully invoked throughout the three volumes of *Reliques*. Medieval 'minstrels', fancies Percy, were inspired poets on their own right and were welcomed in the Middle Ages

by kings and nobles, although their race declined in the course of modernization. It was precisely along this line that Scott created a medieval Scottish minstrel, Thomas the Rhymer of Erceldoune.

How Scott imagined the celebrated 'True Thomas' can be perceived from the following lines:

True Thomas rose, with harp in hand,
When as the feast was done:
(In minstrel strife, in Fairy Land,
The elfin harp he won.)

[. . .]

Yet fragments of the lofty strain
Float down the tide of years,
As buoyant on the stormy main,
A parted wreck appears.

He sung King Arthur's Table Round:
The Warrior of the Lake;
How courteous Gawaine met the wound,
And bled for ladies' sake.

But chief, in gentle Tristrem's praise,
The notes melodious swell;
Was none excell'd in Arthur's days,
The knight of Lionelle.⁵

This is from Scott's own ballad imitation attached to the ballad 'Thomas the Rhymer' collected in *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. Here Thomas is depicted as an inspired, musical, original poet performing before Scottish barons after a banquet he has held. Now, Thomas sings of the deeds of King Arthur and his knights, among whom Sir Tristrem takes the pride of place, for whose praise 'the notes melodious swell'.

Thomas for Scott was not merely a Scottish version of Percy's Anglo-Saxon minstrel. He was a historical figure who serves as *the* prototype of all the poets writing in English. Scott edited and published the Middle English romance *Sir Tristrem* in 1804, where he contends that the original romance was composed by Thomas of Erceldoune in the early thirteenth century, thus inciting Gottfried von Strassburg and others to fashion their own versions of the legend. In Scott's theory, the 'Thomas d'Angleterre', or 'Thomas of Britain', is none other than Thomas of Erceldoune of the Scottish Borders. The corollary of this assumption is:

[I]f Thomas of Erceldoune did not translate from the French, but composed an original poem, founded upon Celtic tradition, it will follow, that the first classical English romance was written in part of what is now called Scotland; and the attentive reader will find some reason to believe that our language received the first rudiments of improvement in the very corner where it now exists in its most debased state.⁶

More than a century before Chaucer, the first *English* romance was written in *Scotland*. Scottish literature is as authentic as, or perhaps *more* authentic than, English literature, and the native Scottish minstrel holds as venerable a place as his English colleagues.

Scott's first poetic enterprise, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, accordingly adopts the well calculated narrative device of 'the last minstrel'. In this poem, the charge of narrating the main plot — sixteenth-century Border adventures — is assigned to an 'infirm and old' minstrel with his harp, now 'his sole remaining joy'; he is a survivor of the Glorious Revolution, whose 'wither'd cheek, and tresses gray, / Seem'd to have known a better day'.⁷ In the days of the Stuart reign, he, as a young minstrel, proudly sang chivalric tales in front of lords and ladies, but in the new world which would soon continue into the Hanoverian eighteenth century, he is the last of the race of minstrel, degraded and belittled. Put another way, he is a historical bridge transmitting an old, romantic tale from the bygone age, to the modern United Kingdom. The minstrel arrives at the castle of the Duchess of Buccleuch and Monmouth and receives her warm welcome, in return to which he determines to sing a lay from his long-forgotten repertoire. In spite of the initial uncertainty, the poor minstrel gradually resumes his

old confidence in front of his noble audience and emerges as a worthy descendant of Thomas the Rhymer, 'With all a poet's ecstasy [. . .] while his harp responsive rung'.⁸

Just as important here is the framing voice of the narrator. While the character of the last minstrel is described, the reader cannot help noticing a more neutral voice of *the* poet, that is, that of Walter Scott, Esq., of nineteenth-century Scotland. Besides the formal division between the Introduction and the body narrative, their metrical patterns signal the difference of voices. The Introduction, which also introduces the old minstrel, the narrator in the poem, is composed in regular iambic tetrameter couplet, while the body narrative supposedly sung by him is metrically more irregular than the Introduction. The regularity of the framing voice and the irregularity of the inspired minstrel succeed in producing a contrast between the voices historically (and, implicitly, politically) separated. At the end of the whole poem, the framing voice takes over the narration and tells us that the vagrant minstrel was at last accepted by the Duchess and given 'a simple hut' to dwell in. This can be construed as a sign of a containment of the pre-Revolution sentiments in the Unionist, emerging Britain. But we have to remember that the minstrel's tale itself is preserved untouched. It can remain romantic, nostalgic, and fabulous while the modern sensibility may be unable to accept it as contemporary.

This 'romanticizing' effect is achieved also by a generic manipulation. It is well known that the metre of the body narrative was influenced by Robert Southey's oriental romances on one hand and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Christabel* on the other. Scott mentions those fellow poets in the collected edition published in 1830, but in 1805, he had given a different explanation. The advertisement to the *Lay* declares that its aim is 'to illustrate the customs and manners which anciently prevailed on the Borders of England and Scotland', and that therefore the author adopted 'the plan of the Ancient Metrical Romance'.⁹ The 'Ancient Metrical Romance' also provides the 'machinery', which refers to the magical objects and incidents found in the *Lay*. In terms of form and contents, Scott tells us, this modern poetic production is based on an older, historically more authentic literary genre. The poetic novelty, which had been harshly criticized in the case of Southey and others, is exempted from the charge under the aegis of the native tradition of 'romance'. As I have argued, the frame structure functions to distance the body narrative from the poet as well as the audience. The generic manipulation concerning 'romance' serves a similar end, foregrounding the presence of the poet who is conscious enough of the historicity of the genre of 'romance',

which, in striking contrast, the minstrel recounts ingenuously.

Seeing the enormous success of the *Lay*, Scott decided to discard the device of the minstrel. And yet, the distancing gesture is manifest in the poems that followed. *Marmion* has an introductory epistle to each Canto, which addresses a friend of Scott's. Those epistolary verses have almost no connection to the body narrative about the Battle of Flodden Field fought in the sixteenth century, but they help to generate the figure of a sophisticated middle-class poet in the nineteenth century. *The Lady of the Lake*, on the other hand, opens each Canto with a preliminary section that introduces the main story. Significantly, the preliminaries are written in the Spenserian stanza, which conveyed a modern and sophisticated impression though it was originally used for the most celebrated of modern romances, *The Faerie Queene*. With these devices, Scott was enabled to retain his status as a modern man of letters, while unabashedly assuming the role of 'minstrel' as his own.

By romanticizing the narrative materials, the poet is permitted to evoke the sense of immediacy and distance at once: the tale is to be sympathized with because it is based on stories that once fascinated our ancestors; yet the tale is to be accepted as a sheer fiction because it belongs to the world that is irretrievably passed and gone. This strategy can be seen at its best in his works dealing with Scotland's most difficult recent past, the Jacobite uprisings among others. I would like to conclude this paper by arguing that *Waverley*, Scott's first novel, should be counted as the culmination of this strategy.

In *Waverley*, published in 1814, the details of the Forty-Five Rising are presented before the reader through the perspectives of the hero, Edward Waverley. Our hero is characterized as a most indecisive youth, who has received a very 'desultory' education. Left alone, he preferred to read more romantic and exciting works, filling his brain with such stuff as dreams are made on. As the adjective 'desultory' indicates, the narrator of the novel keeps an ironic distance from the experience of the hero, while following his footsteps faithfully.

Edward the English young man is then made to travel from England through the Lowlands and the court of Bonnie Prince Charlie to the home of the Mac-Ivor clan, Glen-naquoich in the Highlands. In the course of journey, Edward often romanticizes his encounter with things foreign to him. At the Lowland estate of Baron Bradwardine, he finds the Baron's garden exotic and picturesque:

A bartizan, or projecting gallery, before the windows of her parlour, served to illustrate another of Rose's pursuits, for it was crowded with flowers of different kinds, which she had taken under her special protection. [. . .] The formal garden, with its high bounding walls, lay below, contracted, as it seemed, to a mere parterre; while the view extended beyond them down a wooded glen, where the small river was sometimes visible, sometimes hidden in copse. The eye might be delayed by a desire to rest on the rocks, which here and there rose from the dell with massive or spiry fronts, or it might dwell on the noble, though ruined tower, which was here seen in all its dignity, frowning from a promontory over the river. To the left were seen two or three cottages, a part of the village; the brow of a hill concealed the others. The glen, or dell, was terminated by a sheet of water, called Loch Veolan, into which the brook discharged itself, and which now glistened in the western sun. The distant country seemed open and varied in surface, though not wooded; and there was nothing to interrupt the view until the scene was bounded by a ridge of distant and blue hills, which formed the southern boundary of the strath or valley. To this pleasant station Miss Bradwardine had ordered coffee.¹⁰

The garden is, as the text indicates, in the care of the Baron's daughter Rose, with whom Edward is to be married at the end of the novel. But the mention to 'coffee' in the last sentence is significant: it implies the domestic and civilized nature of the Lowland estate, which makes a stark contrast to the estate of the Mac-Ivors, to which Edward is later allowed entrance.

The head of the Mac-Ivor clan, Fergus Mac-Ivor, is an ardent supporter of Charles Edward Stuart, the young pretender, and can never accept the modern government of the Hanoverian Britain based on economy and commerce. His sister, Flora Mac-Ivor, is a majestic, noble lady, faithful to her brother and her clan. On offering to sing a Gaelic song in her own English translation, she invites Waverley to 'one of [her] favourite haunts' amid mountains,¹¹ because, for one thing, 'the scenery would interest [him]' and for another 'a Highland song would suffer still more from [her] imperfect translation, were [she] to produce it without its own wild and appropriate accompaniments'. Then she goes on to say:

To speak in the poetical language of my country, the seat of the Celtic Muse is

in the midst of the secret and solitary hill, and her voice in the murmur of the mountain stream. He who woos her must love the barren rock more than the fertile valley, and the solitude of the desert better than the festivity of the hall.¹²

This 'declaration' is made 'with a voice where harmony was exalted by pathos', and Waverley cannot but feel that 'the muse whom she invoked could never find a more appropriate representative' than Flora herself, and 'the wild feeling of romantic delight, with which he heard the few first notes she drew from her instrument, amounted almost to a sense of pain'.¹³

The verse put into Flora's mouth is also worth our attention:

Mist darkens the mountain, night darkens the vale,
But more dark is the sleep of the sons of the Gael:
A stranger commanded — it sunk on the land,
It has frozen each heart, and benumb'd every hand!

[. . .]

Be the brand of each chieftain like Fin's in his ire!
May the blood through his veins flow like currents of fire!
Burst the base foreign yoke as our sires did of yore,
Or die like your sires, and endure it no more!¹⁴

These lines, the first and the last stanzas taken from her 15-stanza song, are not in regular iambic foot, but four stresses are kept for each line — this is the *Christabel* metre, which had been adopted in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*. Unlike *Christabel* and the *Lay*, however, Scott gives us a tantalizing but distinctive idea about the air that accompanies the verse:

Flora had exchanged the measured and monotonous recitative of the bard for a lofty and uncommon Highland air, which had been a battle-song in former ages. A few irregular strains introduced a prelude of a wild and peculiar tone, which harmonized well with the distant water-fall, and the soft sight of the evening breeze in the rustling leaves of an aspen which overhung the seat of the fair harpess.¹⁵

Here Flora is acting as a Highland, almost muse-like minstrel, though in this scene it is herself, not the tale she relates, that is romanticized. The agent of romanticization is Edward, a youth of romantic inclination, whom in turn the detached narrator keeps observing and describing. Like the ancient, last minstrel of the *Lay*, Edward serves as a medium to bridge the gulf between the present England and the romantic Highlands, thus rendering the *present* Highlands something past and gone, though worth remembering and cherishing. It might be useful to point out here that the first chapters of *Waverley* were most probably written as early as 1806, the period during which Scott was contemplating *The Lady of the Lake*.

Edward's and Scott's romanticizing the Jacobite Highlands can easily be interpreted as a Unionist manifesto that celebrates the status quo of the eighteenth century and the nineteenth. But I would contend that this is a gesture of a much more ambiguous nature. To 'romanticize' something is to alienate it, drawing a line between 'our' world and the 'other' worlds. The Highlands depicted in *Waverley* are demarcated as an otherworld definitely different from the modern, industrial, and united Britain, but at the same time it is a world protected and conserved, capable of invoking nostalgic yearnings.

This, I would argue, reflects Scott's own sentiments for the Jacobite cause: in a letter of 1813, he confesses that, had he lived at the time of the Forty-Five Rising, he would have fought for Bonnie Prince Charlie against all his better reason:

Seriously I am very glad I did not live in 1745 for though as a lawyer I could not have pleaded Charles's right and as a clergyman I could not have prayed for him yet as a soldier I would I am sure against the convictions of my better reason have fought for him even to the bottom of the gallows. But I am not the least afraid nowadays of making my feelings walk hand in hand with my judgement though the former are Jacobitical the latter inclined for public weal to the present succession [. . .].¹⁶

It is this juxtaposition of the 'feelings' and the 'judgement' that is of primary importance. After *Waverley*, Scott would take up topics of very problematic nature, such as the conflict between the Scottish covenanters and England, but mediators and devices are always there,

which allow the author to make it romanticized, that is, depoliticized. And at the core of *his* Scotland, lay the ‘fantastic’ Highlands with its timeless feudal society. As a sophisticated Lowlander, Sir Walter Scott provided, for the *British* audience, Scotland as ‘an otherworld’ embracing a kind of fairyland within, and in this way commercialized and commodified his native land by the authority of a Scottish, Lowland, Border, and modern Minstrel.

Notes

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- * This essay is a revised version of the paper I delivered at a symposium entitled ‘A Foreign Country in Great Britain: Inventing the Scottish Middle Ages’ in the 28th Congress of the Japan Society for Medieval English Studies held at Hiroshima University, 2 December 2012. I would like to express a sincere gratitude to the other participants, Professor Graham Caie, Professor Toshiyuki Takamiya, Professor Noriyuki Harada, and Dr Ryoko Harikae for their invaluable comments on the draft.
- 1 Letter to Lady Abercorn (9 June 1806), in H. J. C. Grierson and others, eds, *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, 12 vols (London: Constable, 1932–37; New York: AMS Press, 1971), vol. 1, pp. 301–04 (p. 303).
 - 2 Letter to Anna Seward (probably September 1806), *Letters*, vol. 1, pp. 319–25 (p. 324).
 - 3 Leith Davis, *Acts of Union: Scotland and the Literary Negotiation of the British Nation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 148.
 - 4 David Hewitt, ed., *Scott on Himself: A Selection of the Autobiographical Writings of Sir Walter Scott*, Association for Scottish Literary Studies ser., 10 (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1981), pp. 27–28.
 - 5 Walter Scott, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border, Consisting of Historical and Romantic Ballads*, vols 1–3 of *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott, Baronet*, 11 vols (Edinburgh: Cadell, 1830), vol. 3, pp. 221–22.
 - 6 Scott, *Sir Tristrem: A Metrical Romance of the Thirteenth Century by Thomas of Erceldoune, Called the Rhymer, Edited from the Auchinleck MS*, vol. 4 of *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott, Baronet*, 11 vols (Edinburgh: Cadell, 1830), p. li.
 - 7 Scott, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, in J. Logie Robertson, ed., *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott* (London: Frowde, 1904), p. 1.
 - 8 Scott, *Lay*, p. 2.
 - 9 Scott, *Lay*, p. 1.
 - 10 Scott, *Waverley*, ed. by P. D. Garside, Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels, 1

(Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 63–64.

11 Scott, *Waverley*, p. 112.

12 Scott, *Waverley*, p. 114.

13 Scott, *Waverley*, pp. 114–15.

14 Scott, *Waverley*, p. 115 and p. 117.

15 Scott, *Waverley*, p. 115.

16 Letter to Miss Clephane (13 July 1813), in *Letters*, vol. 3, pp. 301–03 (p. 302).