

**The Royal Society of Edinburgh**  
**supported by the University of Strathclyde,**  
**Abbotsford House**  
**and the University of Edinburgh**  
**Discussion Forum**  
***Sir Walter Scott's Legacy and the New Science of Reading***

Monday 16 June 2014

Report by Jennifer Trueland

The event was introduced and chaired by RSE President Sir John Arbuthnott

Speakers were: Dr Elspeth Jajdelska of the University of Strathclyde; Dr Viccy Coltman of the University of Edinburgh; and Dr Sandra McNeil of Abbotsford House.

*Sir Walter Scott remains hugely relevant today, but we need to be more imaginative, both in how we read him, and in how we use his work as a springboard to creativity. Drs Jajdelska, Coltman and McNeil brought their very different perspectives of Scott together for an evening which stimulated debate about the author's place in our reading and our lives.*

**Elspeth Jajdelska, University of Strathclyde**

Sir Walter Scott's best-known works might still be selling, but not to everyone. *Ivanhoe*, for example, still sells well, but there's a worry that it's not much read, particularly by young people. That's possibly why Professor David Purdie decided to abridge it, cutting it from 179,000 to 80,000 words.

But Scott's readers have always gone to his books for different things: in his own lifetime and in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, there were those who devoured them in solitary reading for the plots (such as Byron), but also those who relished his descriptive passages (often the casualty in abridging), particularly for reading aloud with expression in the home. The plots are still 'tubthumping' – they're not the problem, she said, but the descriptions are cut in the shortened versions.

In Scott's day, anthologies were very popular: extracts of Scott's novels and poems were often included in these books, which were designed to be of interest and entertainment to the whole family. Like the family cookbook, they were there to share, and to be read aloud. There was no shame in dipping in to Scott, rather than reading the whole thing; indeed, silent reading was to some extent for plot, whilst oral reading was perhaps more for description, she said.

The writer John Ruskin admired Scott, particularly for his descriptions, which he compared to the work of the artist Claude, with its real appreciation of landscapes. Many readers loved the descriptions, enjoying the pictures they painted; they didn't consider that they were holding up the plot. Science is giving us new information about how we read and how it affects us. Dr Jajdelska showed some fascinating slides of brain scans, which show that when we imagine things, we use the same bits of the brain as we do when we see them; the degree of overlap is extensive. Language can embody experience, she said.

She rejected the notion that literature is just a mental simulation of real life, however. There are complexities in what we see and how we see it. For example, the way we see faces is different from the way we see objects, because face perception is holistic and feature based. If we break faces down into objects, by describing them verbally, we actually remember them less well. This is of particular relevance in criminal identification – once witnesses have broken the face up into words, they don't remember them in the same way. We see body

parts as separate concepts, and faces as a whole – and language can describe things on several levels and mix them up.

Dr Jajdelska demonstrated how powerful language can be in painting a picture of a character. She quoted a description of the character Rebecca from *Ivanhoe*, which breaks her features down into separate elements – for example, teeth like pearls, the ‘brilliance’ of her eyes, her ‘well-formed, aquiline nose’ suggesting a Roman statue. As a whole, it sounds luxurious, but taking each comparison individually is a bit different – after all, you wouldn’t want to wear your teeth in the same way as you would a string of pearls. So language can use the brain’s perceptual resources to do more than just simulate reality.

Long, luxuriant descriptions worked well for Scott’s readers, she said; and even today, they work in themselves, by showing us what we might otherwise overlook. We shouldn’t see descriptions as obstacles to the story, but rather, we should look at different ways of reading Scott: we should consider shared oral reading of texts, and we should use science as a hook to enter the mind of the past. We should not be afraid to cherry pick, and to read slowly, Dr Jajdelska concluded.

### **Vicky Coltman, University of Edinburgh**

Comparisons between Scott’s writing and pictorial art are well documented, said Dr Coltman. She began by displaying an extract from the *Quarterly Review* for May 1810, which described Scott as seeing everything with a ‘painter’s eye’. Art and artists played an important part in Scott’s work and in his life: he had a tendency to mention artists by name in his fiction and sat for portraits an unusually large number of times; he sat for Raeburn four times, for example.

Dr Coltman quoted from Scott’s *Bride of Lammermoor* (1819), where a portrait of the character John Girder is described. Scott tells us about the mode of display, about who painted it, and is dismissive of both; it was ‘impossible to look at it without laughing’, he wrote, mocking the character both for having it painted and for having the presumption to hang it. The narrator’s artist friend Richard Tinto also plays an important part in the novel, which essentially parodies portraiture, said Dr Coltman.

By 1819, Scott had sat for 13 portraits, and that number rose to 52 by the time he died – more than anyone else bar the Duke of Wellington. We have a kaleidoscope of views of Scott, from the child to posthumous; we can follow his changing appearance. But whilst some might see these images as unmediated access to Walter Scott, Dr Coltman says it’s more problematic than that. Likeness can be a slippery thing; Scott himself said of one portrait that he thought it was a ‘fair one’ and that he felt poorly served by some others.

The sheer number of portraits was an indication of Scott’s immense popularity. There was cultural capital to be had from Scott. James Northcote, who painted Scott in 1828, included himself in the picture (he painted himself painting Scott) and said it was a great honour to be on the same canvas as the author. We also get an indication of Scott’s transatlantic reputation from the fact that he was painted at the behest of US patrons. He was a celebrity in his time, and painters clamoured to portray him.

### **Sandra McNeil, Abbotsford House**

Dr McNeil was appointed to the position of Learning and Engagement Officer with Abbotsford House in 2011. She spoke about the journey to develop Scott’s former home into the tourist attraction it is today, and also described the impact of engaging with the local community, particularly schoolchildren.

Sir Walter Scott bought the then Cartleyhole Farm in 1811. A relatively modest farmhouse, the writer immediately set about renovating and extending to build the grand house it would become. The name (the farm used to be called ‘Clarty (dirty) Hole’ by local people) was

changed, and the farmlands were also added to over the years. Scott set about creating a splendid building, indulging his antiquarian instincts and building the setting for a fantasy life of a laird of a tenanted estate – whilst living half the year in Edinburgh.

The first major change was the addition of a classical portico, then three different architects helped him to ‘Scottify it’ (it’s not known whether this meant to make it more Scottish, or more Walter Scott-ish). Essentially, he created a type of medieval building inspired by the castles and abbeys he loved. The cottage survived the first extension, but was removed during the second extension, which effectively turned it into a Gothic revival building with a strong Scottish baronial influence.

It was full of what we would now call salvage, she said, such as the Tollbooth door from Heart of Midlothian; Scott was a keen collector of objects and used them as inspiration. He himself called it a ‘conundrum castle’, a flibbertigibbet of a house for an antiquarian, and his drive to build, extend and fill it with cherry-picked delights went hand in hand with the rise in his fame and income.

Abbotsford House was a family home (and tourist attraction) until 2007, when it came under the care of the Abbotsford Trust, which began the enormous task of fundraising to upgrade the visitor experience and preserve the house, its contents, and Scott’s legacy, for future generations. More information can be found on the website ([www.scottsabbotsford.com](http://www.scottsabbotsford.com)).

Dr McNeil was brought on board to develop projects to engage with under-represented groups, including children, adults and community groups. An initial review discovered that whilst local people had an attachment to Scott, they weren’t necessarily passing on why that was to the younger generation, and visitors to the site tended to be restricted to those who already had an interest in Scott.

Dr McNeil spoke to local teachers, in particular, about the barriers to bringing children to Abbotsford – these included a lack of personal knowledge and scarcity of relevant teaching materials – and set about developing projects to support children to explore Scott.

More information about specific initiatives can be found on the website, but they include encouraging children to read and perform Scott’s works and to take inspiration from the surroundings to create their own works of art and literature, and working with local schoolchildren to develop a new play trail. It’s wonderful to see children using Abbotsford as a springboard for their own creativity, and to see it firing their curiosity, Dr McNeil said.

## **Discussion**

The Chair, RSE President Sir John Arbuthnott, kicked off the discussion by asking about the sheer number of portraits there were of Sir Walter Scott. He was highly unusual amongst private individuals to have been painted so many times, said Dr Coltman; only members of the Royal Family tend to have so many portraits done.

Asked how much income Scott received for his work, Dr McNeil said that he was a best-seller in his time, with his poem, *The Lady of the Lake*, selling 40,000 copies. He had needed an advance from his publisher and a family loan to buy Abbotsford House, however, and kept adding to the land. He was attracting a huge income, but it never seemed to be enough, she said.

Asked whether there was a connection between his writing style and his creation of Abbotsford, Dr Jajdelska said he was interested in the gothic visually, and as a literary form. He owed a great deal to the gothic novel and a love of real gothic buildings.

Dr Coltman said that Scott didn’t really have a commitment to visual art; he was an unwilling sitter, and was sometimes critical of his portraits and the English artists who illustrated his early works. He was not his own patron, she added – the portraits were generally commissioned by his publisher, or by people who liked his work.

Dr McNeil added that Maida, his deerhound, shared her master's disdain for being painted and used to get up and walk out of the room whenever an artist would start shuffling brushes and paint. Scott's image had a currency, she added, and some of it – such as the Chancery bust – was sculpted without a commission.

Asked whether Scott's work should be shelved in bookshops in the Scottish or British literature section – and whether he would be voting for Scottish independence in the forthcoming Referendum – Dr Jajdelska said there was no doubt that he'd vote in favour of the Union. "He was a Tory all the way," she said. As for the book categorisation, in an ideal world she wouldn't split off Scottish books from other literature in English, but she recognises that if bookshops want to attract tourists, they'll want to promote Scottish books. In any case, she said, the best of Scott is set in Scotland.

Asked how come Scott had become an impresario, orchestrating the famed visit to Edinburgh of George IV, a member of the audience contributed that Scott had done so at the request of the Edinburgh City Council.

Did Scott have an eye to the likelihood that his work would be read aloud, and therefore write with that in mind?

Dr Jajdelska said that Scott was writing in the glory days of clubs and societies, and that her feeling is that he would be thinking 'this will be a nice thing to read aloud' when he was writing. He was conscious of how his work would be used. Indeed, she said, there might be a place for an 18<sup>th</sup>-Century-type book group today – where people chose passages and would 'really go for it'.

Scott wrote quickly, Dr Jajdelska said, in response to another question, and had a great facility for writing poetry in rhyming couplets. In his later books, he tended to rely on the same plot over and over again, she added.

Asked who influenced Scott, Dr McNeil said he was known to have liked German romanticism, including writers such as Schiller and Goethe, and had corresponded with some of them. He was also influenced by the poetry of the Borders, which he heard in childhood in the family circle.

The discussion turned to abridged versions of Scott. Dr McNeil said that even in Scott's lifetime, people were adapting and abridging his work. He was a master of popular culture and, in her view, anything that widens access is to be applauded.

Dr Jajdelska said that she would like to see adapters and abridgers be bolder and more open about it: don't apologise, she said. Dr Coltman said the abridgments were useful for students.

Asked whether there should be a review of how literature is taught in schools, the panel pointed out that the Curriculum for Excellence means that teachers can choose what texts they want to teach. Scottish literature teaching is more prescriptive, said Dr Jajdelska. She said that Burns tends to be in a privileged position and is taught a lot, but that she would like to see writers such as Scott or James Hogg taught more in schools.

Asked whether a *Game of Thrones*-style television series or film based on Scott's works would bring a new audience to the books, Dr Jajdelska was unconvinced that this would get more people reading Scott. Film adaptations might sell books, but they tend to stay on the shelves unread, she said.

*Sir John Arbuthnott thanked the speakers and thanked members of the audience for participating in the discussion.*