

The Royal Society of Edinburgh

A la Recherche du Temps Perdu: The Past in Literature from Scott to Proust

**Professor David Hewitt FEA, FRSE
Regius Chalmers Professor of English Literature Emeritus,
University of Aberdeen,
Editor-in-Chief, Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels**

Monday 9 June 2014

Report by Jennifer Trueland

On the bicentenary of the publication of Sir Walter Scott's Waverley, Professor Hewitt described how the author used public and private memory to create the world's first historical novel. He also examined different ways of exploring and re-finding the past, linking Scott to other great writers, from Wordsworth to Proust.

Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* was an 'extraordinarily innovative work', said Professor Hewitt. It is rightly regarded as the first historical novel, for whilst other works of fiction – such as Mrs Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* – had been set in the past and others had written books covering historical events, *Waverley* was the first novel to provide real history. Even Shakespeare's history plays could not be taken 'for' history, he said. Indeed, Scott's own long poems, especially *Marmion* and *The Lady of the Lake*, including as they did quotations from contemporary sources, were perhaps the real precursors.

Professor Hewitt said that Scott was writing social history, and that he drew on many oral and written sources. He argued that Scott made use of some of the analytical tools of social history, but *Waverley* being a work of fiction, he also required literary structures and procedures. In the second part of the lecture, Professor Hewitt examined the search for a personal past in the works of William Wordsworth, John Ruskin and Marcel Proust, and demonstrated that their procedures for recovering the experience of childhood could also be recognised in *Waverley*. But the prime focus of the talk was Scott, and *Waverley* in particular.

As Editor of the lauded Edinburgh Edition of Scott's 28 Waverley novels – the first scholarly edition of Scott's fiction – Professor Hewitt is well-placed to give an intimate picture of *Waverley* and its author. He called on the audience to look again at Scott's work, and to appreciate its extraordinary use of innovative techniques and skills, as well as its immense influence on others.

What Scott was doing was new, Professor Hewitt said. Scott was writing social history, which in itself was an innovation. He drew upon oral accounts (another innovative procedure) from both sides of the '45: for the Jacobites, from his own father (who had volunteered for the Prince but had been brought back by his father), from Stewart of Invernahyle, and from the stories of an uncle who had witnessed the executions in Carlisle (which generated Scott's hatred of Cumberland); and from John Home, who had fought on the Government side at Prestonpans, his father's friend George Constable, and Alexander Carlyle of Inveresk. He also used contemporary sources, such as the *Caledonian Mercury* newspaper, the *Scots Magazine*, and many other works.

Scott was “fully aware that oral accounts are immediate, but unreliable” and he corrected the unreliability of memories and the partiality of contemporary pamphleteers and historians by reference to John Home’s *History of the Rebellion in the Year 1745* which did not appear until 1802. He used other sources for information on Highland life and Gaelic culture, such as Edmund Burt’s *Letters from a Gentleman in the North of Scotland*, Donald Macintosh’s *Collection of Gaelic Proverbs, and Familiar Phrases*, and John Gunn’s *An Historical Account respecting the Performance of the Harp in the Highlands of Scotland*. Professor Hewitt said that this all justifies what Ruskin wrote in his autobiography *Praeterita*: “It has been impossible, hitherto, to make the modern reader understand the vastness of Scott’s true historical knowledge, underneath its romantic colouring, nor the concentration of it in the production of his eternally great poems and romances”.

Scott recovered the past by recording memories, but was also in complete command of the printed sources. His next task, said Professor Hewitt, was to develop a strategy to bring these together, and fashion them into a narrative which would represent what the historian thinks is important. He dated the narrative: it was not precisely the ‘sixty years since’ the events of 1745, as the sub-title would have it, but in 1805 the events were still a living memory for some, but sufficiently distant to provide an historical perspective. He chose an historical event which would catch the reader’s attention, for it was the one which, above all others, has come to represent Jacobitism. He placed the action in invented places, which he made representative of the NE, Lowland, Episcopal strand of Jacobitism on the one hand, and the Highland, Celtic, and Catholic strand on the other.

Within these sites, Edward Waverley experiences startling cultural contrasts, involving feasting, music and song, and he obtains insight into the problematic social and political relationships of Lowland with Highland. The Baron of Bradwardine and Fergus MacIvor are the embodiments of the two traditions. Professor Hewitt remarked that in the 19th and 20th centuries there was an obsession with finding the actual persons on whom characters were based. That, however, is missing the point, he said; in social history what is important is not that a character existed but that he or she is the average, or the mean, or representative of some social or historical trend, or of some party or class. It is because the Baron and Fergus are composite characters that they become sociologically significant.

Scott uses literary devices: the hero is an ingénue on a journey; he’s a ‘nice lad’ who explores for us, and who is saved by those who are older and wiser. The ‘Bildungsroman’ part is obvious, said Professor Hewitt, but the most important of Scott’s techniques for writing social history is the use of direct speech. There is an extraordinary variety of dialects within *Waverley* which represent people from different geographic areas, different social classes, different genders, different ages, and different political outlooks. ‘Lexis’ (the total bank of words and phrases of a particular language) is the principal marker, but sound is a second, with Scott providing distinct indications of what characters sounded like without giving us a phonetic transcription. Carlyle suggested that Scott shows that ‘bygone ages of the world were actually filled by living men’, but Professor Hewitt said the implications are more profound. Most works of history are univocal; in Scott the past is not articulated through a single dominant voice; people of opposing views express their outlook unmediated. Scott’s are the first truly polyphonic novels.

Further, Scott’s learning is often introduced through direct speech, added Professor Hewitt. He puts quotations from historical and political works into the mouths of his characters; the effect is to naturalise Scott’s huge learning within the fiction so that we do not see that we are reading historical documents. Others might try to do this, but Scott, like Shakespeare’s Sir Andrew Aguecheek, does it “more natural”, smiled Professor Hewitt.

Was Scott creating cultural memory? Professor Hewitt does not think so: ‘the memories on which he draws are not homogeneous in their tenor, and they are not homogenised into a

single outlook ... he is not trying to create a simplistic *patrimoine*, but a history that is complex and pluralistic’.

Nineteenth-century writers also wrote much about the personal past. For those who rely on memory, the personal past is unreliable, he said. Wordsworth’s *Prelude* may feel ‘fixed’ but was actually revised frequently, and sometimes significantly. Do the differences suggest changes in the audience, in the idea of the poem, in political and religious outlook? Or do they mean changes in what Wordsworth thought of himself? The successive versions of *The Prelude* suggest an unstable self, constructed through successive acts of writing, said Professor Hewitt.

Proust based *A la Recherche du temps perdu* upon his own life, but every event is transformed, using the instability of remembered past as a justification for fiction. Proust – whose narrator, based on himself, famously unlocked his memory with the taste of a madeleine biscuit – knew that conscious memory doesn’t work, but that the unconscious one might bring back past experience. This is imposing the past on the present, and for Proust it raised questions about which time he was existing in. It was the means by which the past became eternally present.

Wordsworth and Proust may have had radically different ideas of the past to Scott, yet there are possible connections. Proust believed that the books we read as children not only affect later life but act as a way back into what the child felt; which prompts us to re-examine Scott’s reading – particularly his reading of accounts sympathetic to the Jacobites. It is likely that he was affected by the tales of slaughter he heard in childhood, and the personal trauma of witnessing mutineers killed by Lowland troops in 1779. The trauma permeates Scott’s novels, Professor Hewitt argued, with several characters killed in extraordinarily violent ways. It is his personal past, conveyed through public narrative. This aspect of Scott may have been overlooked, but in *Waverley* we have public history suffused with personal feeling, Professor Hewitt concluded.

Questions

Professor Hewitt was asked how he thought Scott would have voted in the forthcoming Referendum on Scottish independence. He responded that he had heard Nationalists say he would have voted ‘Yes’ and Unionists say he would have voted ‘No’, but that both were wrong because we simply don’t know how he would have voted. He did, however, say that Scott would have been well aware that in the 1820s there were questions about how much Scotland was self-governing, and how many decisions on economic and social matters were made in London.

Asked about the key differences between the new Edinburgh edition of *Waverley* and previous versions, he said that the Editors had gone back to the manuscripts and had found many readings that were lost either accidentally or deliberately because the printers had thought that “they knew better”. Also, he said that previous versions had been ‘improved’ in terms of punctuation, whereas the Edinburgh editions provide a more ‘open text’ and are less hidebound in their use of punctuation.

Asked whether Scott should be taught to young adults, Professor Hewitt said that Scott’s popularity had suffered after he became compulsory reading in schools. Many of the books are ‘huge’ by contemporary standards, and some of the books are heavily political. Scott could be taught, but you’d have to choose the pupil, and you’ve have to choose the book, he said. *Ivanhoe*, although long, is one of the most accessible, he said, because it is a kind of “never-never” history which allows simplification of historical, political and moral issues.

Asked whether we get the 'natural' Scott, or a writer with an eye to his audience, Professor Hewitt said that he cannot be authoritative because we cannot trust Scott's own statements on the issue. For example, he might have written that he was being eclipsed by Byron, but he knew that his works outsold Byron's. He might have a veneer of politeness about it, but he was driven to write about what interested him, and would fight with publishers and printers to be allowed to do so.

Asked if Scott's attitude to his Scottish novels differed to how he thought of his other novels, Professor Hewitt said that it did. Whilst he called the novels from *Waverley* to *The Bride of Lammermoor* 'novels and tales', *Ivanhoe* in 1820 was described as a 'romance'. Although ostensibly set in the Middle Ages, it was set in a *faux* past that allowed him to simplify intellectual issues.

The Vote of Thanks was offered by Professor Graham Caie FRSE.

Opinions expressed here do not necessarily represent the views of the RSE, nor of its Fellows

The Royal Society of Edinburgh, Scotland's National Academy, is Scottish Charity No. SC000470