Wattie Goes to Hollywood: Scott, Scotland and Film

By David Manderson

When Walter Scott sat down to plan George IV's visit to Edinburgh and the pageant that would go along with it in 1824, he knew what he was doing. He was branding a nation, giving it an identity that would last outside itself, something that would be instantly recognizable and travel abroad, something that showed everyone in the English-speaking world what Scotland was. There was every chance, after all, that that identity might disappear, swept away by the tsunami of empire and become merely part of a larger entity, the northern bit of Britain. It was happening in other parts of the world as the empire and its 'benefits' took hold. With its all-powerful navy commanding the seas, its European rivals crushed, and the profits of the tobacco, textile and slavery industries pouring into its coffers, there was little any small nation could do against the mighty imperial machine.[1]

Scott was inventing a country, or reclaiming it, depending on how you look at it. He was making up not just the present but the past, a carnival version of what had led to the place Scotland was now and what should be known about it in future. And, great fiction-writer that he was, and deeply interested in history, he filled it with exciting, swirling colours, great adventures enacted against sublime landscapes, and tales of ancient clans and loyal followers, traditions and honours that stemmed from notions of independence, freedom and courage.

Conventional Scott-detractors accuse him of making the whole place up. To them Sir Walter was the arch-collaborator, smugly colluding with right wing London governments in the Clearances and the industrial revolution by papering over the reality of exploitation with a cheap, garish wallpaper of false symbols — thistles, tartan and Highland chieftains. Others portray his efforts as evidence of his intention to protect Scotland's status within the Union, ignoring the fact that throughout his life and in his work he fought to preserve Scottish identity for

working men and women as well as the ruling caste to which he belonged, and to defend them as distinct and equal, proud of who they were, and capable of absorbing outside influences without being subordinate to them. These commentators will inevitably portray Scotland's currently devolved status as a degeneration from the 'beautiful Union' that Scott tried to reinforce, and nationalist culture as debased, commonplace art.[2] Still others, more interestingly, view his actions as an attempt to preserve Scottish identity within and despite empire by re-creating it in the minds of those who came to the king's procession — Lowland, Highland and English (and, in the monarch's case, part-German) — and providing a celebratory vision of its existence that allowed it to survive. They claim that Scott brought together existing Scottish elements — the clans, tartan, Ossianic myth, Highland legends, militarism, and so on — and made them into a cultural stamp, one that would ensure that Scottish identity would survive and flourish, both in the minds of those who lived in it and in the consciousness of the wider world.

The representation of Scotland Scott created that day was hugely successful, probably much more so that he realized himself at the event, when the grossly overweight monarch crammed himself into flesh pink tights and strutted through the Scottish capital to a huge welcome from the crowds. Not only did the Scottish brand go on to travel at home and abroad, it became a key and instantly recognizable element of Romanticism, one at the centre of the European novel and so at the heart of contemporary thought, through the influence of Scott's own fiction. The spirit of courage, honour and freedom in the 'land of the mountain and the flood' which he evoked through the badge of Scottishness would become the inspiration of thousands of later novels, plays, symphonies, poems and paintings, many of them with hardly anything Scottish about them.[3] Later, as Romanticism flagged as an artistic force and degenerated into a commercial one, the same symbols would be used as cultural markers in tourism, sport and advertising for a host of internationally distributed products, everything from whisky to golf to tweed to shortbread.

But not even in his wildest imaginings could Wattie have realized that the greatest impact of his marketing of all things Scottish would come in a medium that hadn't even been invented when he thought the whole thing up, and that it would be the moving pictures that broadcast the magical myths of his beloved native land to the widest possible audience.

It was starting to happen even within his lifetime. Film existed long before the invention of the cinema, and the early nineteenth century visitor to the Scottish capital could visit the panoramas, galleries filled with giant paintings of scenery hung so that viewers could walk among them as if walking among the sublime mountains of the Trossachs. Or they could drop in to the theatre and see the wonderful scene painting that reproduced, in all its misty splendor, the peaks and sunsets of the Romantic Highlands. Only four years after The Great Unknown's death, they could visit the newly opened Camera Obscura at the top of the Royal Mile and be enthralled by moving images of the streets outside reflected downwards onto the saucer-shaped screen. There was only one thing missing to turn all this into a film: the ability to share it with a mass, international audience. But Sir Walter had already done that it in his tales:

> They had taken up their situation on a rising ground in the centre of the little valley of Aberfoil […] The appearance of the picqueted horses, feeding in this little vale; the forms of the soldiers, as they sate, stood or walked […] formed a noble foreground, while far to the eastward the eye caught a glance of the lake of Menteith.[4]

Many words have been taken out of this passage from Walter's hit novel of 1817, *Rob Roy*, but it's obvious that this stripped-down description is really a film shot. We could go today to almost any spot in the hills above Aberfoyle, set up a camera and see exactly the modern equivalent of this scene. At all the moments when Scott's novels excite us and grab our attention, such as the scene where the Highlanders drown Morris, or where Rob Roy and Baillie Nichol Jarvie talk above the mist-swirling bridge, Scott's books are exactly like films, filled with action, conflict and drama.

Scott is the most filmic of writers, something which explains why his stories lasted as long as they did, well into the twentieth century. He may be considered difficult to read today, long-winded and meandering by modern standards, but his narratives still come alive when the characters move dramatically in a visual world. Stevenson spotted this sense of energetic action and spectacle in Scott's stories and used it in his own tales, many of which, like Scott's, have been made time and again into films (think of how many versions of *Kidnapped* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* you've seen). When cinema came along, it looked around for stories from literature that were tried and tested, safe bets to put its studio's money on, and Scott's famous historical novels, with their sweeping action, grand settings,

big themes and clearly delineated characters were obvious candidates. In the early years of cinema he was by far the most adapted of novelists. But his influence doesn't stop there. He invented the historical novel, or drew existing elements together to create it, so that every adaptation of a historical story into film owes something to him.

It's interesting to see the history of adaptations of Sir Walter's books in the twentieth century.[5] It shows that from the nineteen thirties the number fell until by the nineteen sixties there were almost none. The decline of Scott's popularity as a novelist is the best-known fact about him today. It was well into the twentieth century that film began to turn its back on him. But the backlash had been going on in literature for a long time before that, starting with MacDiarmid and Muir ("a sham bard of a sham nation") in the early nineteen twenties.[6] In both film and literature, new genres such as social realism and the thriller began to replace the historical epic, and wherever a film was made that was based on history from the nineteen sixties onwards, it was often suffused with bitter, anti-establishment values related to contemporary events, such as the western *Ulzana's Raid* written by Scottish writer Alan Sharpe, which used the atrocities against civilians in Vietnam as its template. There was simply no space for tales of honour and derring-do, and Walter Scott's name and his version of Scotland, attacked in print by so many, ultimately became synonymous with tea-towel kitsch. Just as Scottish writers throughout the twentieth century aimed to subvert the cliché, so Scottish film-makers such as Bill Douglas and Bill Forsyth endeavored to throw off the Romantic mist and seductive Hollywood vapours which had reached their peak in the nineteen fifties with *Brigadoon*, a Technicolor chocolate box of dancing, singing and Scotch mist, whose producers had famously returned to California after a visit to Scotland in search of locations saying they hadn't found anything particularly Scottish there.[7] The film world's hostility to all things Scott-ish culminated in the accusation of Tartanry leveled against the Romantic tradition in the Scotch Reels collection of comment and criticism in 1981.[8] It, along with Kailyardism and Clydesideism, was found guilty of misrepresenting 'true' Scottishness, although the contributors to the volume failed to define what that was. It was a judgment that was to last. More recent writers such as Irvine Welsh and Kevin Williamson have carried on the anti-Scott tradition.

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criticism is to reinstate Sir Walter in his true position as one of the western world's most important writers, one whose influence, through his impact in film, is central to the way others see us. This move towards bringing him back to the public memory has already begun. His family home of Abbotsford, where he spent the last years of his life writing his way out of the debts incurred by the crash of 1826, has been given a ten million pound makeover. Its visitors centre will become one of the most popular tourist attractions in Scotland over the next few years, and everyone who goes there will learn something about who 'The Great Unknown' really was, as opposed to the misleading myth he has become. His Romantic impulse, if not his books, came back with a bang in mid-nineteen nineties film with *Braveheart* and, even more so, with *Rob Roy*, starring Jessica Lange and Liam Neeson. The film's producer Peter Broughan, who helped develop early versions of the script, has said he never read Scott's book, as if any direct connection with him would taint it, and indeed the film was more based on the partisan biography of Rob Roy by W. H. Murray than anything Scott wrote. But scriptwriter Alan Sharpe, the same who wrote the westerns and also the novel *A Green Tree in Gedde* in 1966, certainly did read Scott's original, bringing the forces of honour and commercialism into conflict in just the same way Scott did, if to different effects.[9] And that film was produced and made in Scotland and distributed through the Hollywood system, so once again the Walter Scott brand of misty mountains and tartan courage was sold to the world. Not so with his books, once on the shelf of every household in Europe, from mighty aristocrat to humble working class family. You can't give them away now. Just a mention of his name is enough to have people walk away.

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References & Further Information

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[2] Stuart Kelly, *Scott-Land: The Man Who Invented a Nation* (Polygon, 2010), pp.213-217.

[3] Sir Walter Scott, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* Canto IV, St 2 (Ulan, 2012) p. 45.

[4] Sir Walter Scott, *Rob Roy* (Penguin, 1995), pp.395-6.

[5] Richard Butt, 'Literature and the Screen Media since 1908' in Ian Brown, Thomas Clancy, Susan Manning, and Murray Pittock eds. *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature: Modern Transformations: New Identities (from 1918)*(EUP, 2007), p.55.

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[8] Colin McArthur ed., *Scotch Reels: Scotland in Film and Television* (BFI Publishing, 1982).

[9] David Manderson, *Directed by Michael Caton-Jones: Rob Roy (1995)*, *Scotnotes Study Guides* (ASLS, 2009), pp.68-79.

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