Future Scotts: The Aliens have Landed

By Caroline McCracken-Flesher

Walter Scott, we take for granted, wrote within the historical and realist tradition. Yet Scott's true heirs may write not of the past, but of the future – not of Scotland, but of boldly going 'where no one has gone before'.[1]

Certainly, whether as poet or as novelist, Scott favored the past. Writing of events 'sixty years since' (the 1745 rebellion) or only yesterday (Waterloo), his perspective was historicist. Thus, the fictional Edward Waverley subsists within the interstices of actual events: walking the corridors of Holyrood, the emotionally underdeveloped Englishman falls briefly into conversation with Charles Edward Stuart on the subject of love. And thus, too, although Waterloo continued to resonate in Britain, with soldiers coming home through 1816, in 1815 Scott wrote of a foreign field already returned to other days and romanticized pursuits: fosse and fence have disappeared so that 'Not the most timid maid need dread / To give her snow-white palfrey head / On that wide stubble-ground' ("The Field of Waterloo", v. III. ll. 20-22).

The author's successors, we might presume, should then be sought among today's practitioners of the historical novel – among writers like Philippa Gregory (*The Other Queen*) or Hilary Mantel (*Wolf Hall*).[2] Not surprisingly, a *Times*critic implies the inheritance in Mantel, invoking terms familiar to critics of Scott to describe her story of Thomas Cromwell. It offers a 'wonderful and intelligently imagined retelling of a familiar tale from an unfamiliar angle.'[3] We might note, too, that Gregory's Bess of Hardwick, entertaining that cuckoo the Queen of Scots in exile, aligns even more closely with Scott's emphasis on peripheral persons experiencing a history that is consequently differently perceived.

But perhaps it is the future that echoes most fully Walter Scott's displacements of persons and of pasts. Could it be that today's science fiction owes a debt to Walter Scott? Typically, we think of speculative and science fiction as springing

from what Darko Suvin, in his classic analysis, terms 'a fictional "novum" […] validated by cognitive logic.'[4] Scott, we should not forget, was a longstanding member of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and served as President from 1820-32. His letters are packed with his speculations as an agricultural improver – in June 1818 we find him sending down to his expanding country estate at Abbotsford instructions to fertilize ninety two acres 'at the rate of 30 cart load [of marl] per acre'.[5] With some regularity, he converted the Society's learned talks to practical applications for his home – Mr. Robison, the general secretary, provided perhaps Scotland's first air conditioning in the form of a 'capital stove […] with a communication for ventilating in the summer'.[6] Scott even got enthusiastic enough, in the year after the comet of 1819, to order a telescope with which, he was assured, he would see 'Jupiters moons and his belts […] and likewise Saturns ring'.[7] Yet neither Scott's agricultural and technological innovations nor his interest in distant planets turn his texts toward the future.

Still the imagined future, Suvin suggests, is necessarily historical – and takes a form familiar to readers of Walter Scott. Suvin argues for 'a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment.'[8] Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. takes the further step to recognize the historical and realistic ethos that allows the expansion of an imaginative framework as the site for estrangement and cognition. Science Fiction's 'main narrative strategy', he writes, 'has been to create convincing images of life in the future, through precise details and historical cause-and-effect relationships, recounted in the familiar voices of bourgeois subjects.'[9] 'SF relies on the historical past tense, both because narrative requires it, and because sf's particular construction of the future does. It is the illusion of a completed future that allows science fictions to be told, and for a parable-space to be formed, through which readers can shuttle back and forth between the fictive world and consensus reality' (77).

Thus far, thus Walter Scott, for Scott is renowned as the author who sets one world, historically and realistically depicted and motivated, beside another. Waverley moves from an England he takes for the norm to a distinctly different Scotland. Realized through his contemporary politics, the north seems to

Waverley not only distant in place, but askew in time. Yet this 'past', with its seemingly belated campaign for Stuart return, is not just the present, it is Waverley's future. After a brief sojourn in the way station that is Tullyveolan – between lowland and highland, apparent present and supposed past – he finds himself well within the territory of surprise. At first, he boldly goes, insisting, for instance, on showing his English hardiness by crossing streams by foot. Soon, he is borne along insensible yet complicit. Having journeyed into the past, within this 'historical' novel, Waverley finds himself on the cusp of an unknown future.

That is, although Scott may offer no scientific innovations, his characters' encounter with what seems distant in place and different in time provokes an altered possibility. Indeed, Waverley is in the contact zone theorized by Homi Bhabha as the place where worlds collide and futures change.[10] It is a domain, too, of language. Waverley experiences cognitive estrangement not simply because he doesn't know where or when he is (and he literally falls out of time, losing track of days); he cannot make himself understood, and is actively misunderstood in a language impenetrable to him. Listening to a bard chanting 'a profusion of Celtic verses', Waverley grasps structure – 'he seemed […] to recite many proper names, to lament the dead, to apostrophize the absent'; he can even hear his own name. But he has no idea of the meaning for which he is being misrecognized by those who, similarly, do not speak his tongue.[11] Language, as W. Meyers argues in *Aliens and Linguists*, is the almost impossible to express territory of encounter, the foremost site of cognitive estrangement. Here we are named other than we think ourselves to be and thus precipitated toward a consequently unimaginable future. And Scott paved the way well before the future that is science fiction.

Can we see in Walter Scott, then, the roots of science fiction, or at least a precursor for alien encounter narrative? Certainly Jules Verne recognized an affinity, writing his novels in conscious imitation of Scott, and even situating *Les Indes noires* (known as *The Underground City*) under Loch Katrine and in the contact zone between worlds upper and lower, past and present.[12] Scott, perhaps, laid patterns that anticipate those pursued by writers who seek to express the strangeness of worlds as experienced within the contact zone. When we read the reports of Naomi Mitchison's ambassador and linguist in *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*, follow the hero's meanderings into other civilizations and relative,

slower time in Iain M. Banks's *The Algebraist*, or struggle to keep up with the fragmented and distributed sensibility of posthuman selving in Ken MacLeod's *The Stone Canal*, we might remember Walter Scott.[Naomi Mitchison, *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (London: The Women's Press, 1962); Iain M. Banks, *The Algebraist* (2004; San Francisco: Night Shade Books, 2006); Ken MacLeod, *The Stone Canal* (New York: Tor, 1996).[/note] A historical novelist in the contact zone, in Bhabha's terms he 'touched the future on its hither side'. He taught us to boldly go – but with some humility, and knowing that worlds shift with each step and every estranging word.Walter Scott, we take for granted, wrote within the historical and realist tradition. Yet Scott's true heirs may write not of the past, but of the future – not of Scotland, but of boldly going 'where no one has gone before'.[13]

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