# Reading Waverley in 2014

## By Robert Irvine

The producers of TV and radio programmes love a good centenary, and this summer provided them with a real peach: the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. Readers of Scottish fiction marked another, happier anniversary. On 7 July 1814 appeared for sale in Edinburgh an anonymous novel set in the Jacobite Rising of 1745: *Waverley*. This was the first novel by its author, Walter Scott, already famous for nearly a decade as a poet, and it was an immediate and spectacular success. It has also been claimed as the first 'historical novel', most influentially by the Marxist critic Georg Lukács, who hailed Scott as the progenitor of a tradition of epic fiction continued in the work of Balzac, Cooper, and Tolstoy (*The Historical Novel*, 1937).

The idea of the solitary (almost always male) genius creating something totally new from the resources of his own fecund intellect entrenched itself in Scott's own lifetime: it remains the basis for Scotland's claim to have invented almost everything in the intervening two hundred years. Yet the story told in *Waverley* takes a form familiar to contemporary readers from Irish fiction, and in particular the work of Sydney Owenson and Maria Edgeworth. In Scott's novel, a young Englishman of the landed elite, Edward Waverley, travels to Scotland where he encounters the unfamiliar ways of life that survive on the peripheries of the United Kingdom. Our hero's fascination is deepened by falling in love with a girl from this alien culture; and the novel ends with a marriage between the English gentleman and the Scottish girl, a domestic allegory for the political union between the two kingdoms. Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806) had already told this sort of story about Ireland. Young English aristocrat Horatio Mortimer is banished by his father to the estate in Connaught taken by their family during the Cromwellian conquest of the country. Here his anti-Irish prejudices are overcome and then reversed by the beautiful Glorvina, daughter of the area's original Catholic ruling family, now living with her father in a half-ruined castle on the coast. Glorvina is an enthusiast for Irish song and storytelling, dress and customs; she is also represented as a guileless child of nature, in contrast to the artful young ladies of metropolitan high life with whom Horatio has been previously entangled. The novel ends with their marriage: the

jaded Englishman is spiritually and morally renewed by an infusion of the Gaelic sublime, while the old Irish elite is rescued from its poverty and alienation by its incorporation into a new Anglo-Irish family. A postscript from Horatio's father explicitly imagines this marriage as representative of the political incorporation of Ireland in the Union which will come into effect in 1801.

The variations that *Waverley* plays on this pattern are significant. Flora Mac-Ivor, with whom Waverley falls in love, is the sister of a Highland chieftain, Fergus, and like Glorvina, an enthusiast for Gaelic poetry and song. But she is also an enthusiast for the cause of the exiled Catholic claimant to the British crown, James Stuart. *The Wild Irish Girl* was published just eight years after the Irish rebellion of 1798, one inspired by the new French republic (a Jacobin rising, not a Jacobite one) and suppressed with great brutality by the British army. Owenson's novel alludes only briefly to this context, and takes great care to separate Ireland's claim to respect as a rich and ancient culture from any claim to political self-determination. The use of the word 'culture' to name inherited traditions and ways of life as distinct from political institutions was not yet current in English: yet the word seems on the tip of this novel's tongue, as it were, as it formulates, in the figure of Glorvina, a distinctly cultural nationalism, compatible (we are assured) with a political union with Britain. Flora, in contrast, is first and foremost a rebel, and an enthusiast for Highland culture because it provides a base for the Jacobite cause. Waverley does not marry Flora; he marries the lowland laird's daughter Rose, the novel's other, thoroughly apolitical, heroine. After the defeat of the rebellion, Flora retreats to a French convent; her brother Fergus is executed at Carlisle. Owenson's hero Horatio is redeemed by falling in love with Glorvina; Waverley's seduction by Flora, and the Jacobite cause she represents, is just a terrible mistake, made possible by his own adolescent longing for 'romance'.

*Waverley* certainly contributed to the Scottish cultural nationalism that identified the nation with images of Highland-ness: tartan, mountains, stags. But Scott is much less confident than Owenson that traditions of story and song could be made politically safe except by a considerable passage of time: the subtitle of his novel is "Tis Sixty Years Since' (the narrator claims to be writing in 1805) to emphasise that songs and stories are all that now remain of Jacobitism. And Scott also departs from Owenson in refusing to romanticize the poverty of those at the bottom of a traditional society as closeness to 'nature'. In this respect, he draws

on his other Irish model, Maria Edgeworth. Novels like *Ennui*(1809) and *The Absentee* (1812) also send an upper-class young Englishman on a journey to a distant Irish estate; but where Owenson's hero finds cultural riches, Edgeworth's heroes find material poverty and political corruption. The traditions that define Ireland for Owenson are, for Edgeworth, just so many prejudices standing in the way of the material improvement of the country. Scott's genius in *Waverley* is to offer us both perspectives simultaneously: the attraction of a traditional way of life for the naïve modern metropolitan, and the historical necessity of its replacement by something more economically productive: in a word, capitalism.

In both Scotland and Ireland, over the last few decades, the cultural nationalism promulgated in the novels of Owenson and Scott has largely been displaced by a more purely political nationalism, which imagines a nation composed of citizens, rather than singers: 'Scottish' or 'Irish' by virtue of their shared relation to political institutions in the present, rather than a common cultural inheritance from the past. *The Wild Irish Girl* and *Waverley* set themselves the task of imagining how national tradition might survive the loss of political sovereignty as a humanising counterweight to capitalism. In the twenty-first century, in Scotland as in Ireland, with so much power ceded to the money-men of London and Frankfurt, and with such disastrous effects, the nation as a vehicle of political agency looks pretty much the only tool to hand for shovelling financial capitalism back in its box. But the legacy of *Waverley* lives on, whenever a people tell themselves a story about who they once were, and the war that changed them so completely that only the story itself connected them to their past. Edward, left behind by the retreating Jacobite army, in disguise and in hiding, realises 'that the romance of his life was ended, and that its real history had now commenced'. It is a moment of disillusion echoed in many of the experiences of the Great War being dramatized for us as part of this year's other centenary; and in any experience of history as a force that sweeps us up from the outside, but makes us complicit in its violence through our inability to see ourselves as we really are.The producers of TV and radio programmes love a good centenary, and this summer provided them with a real peach: the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. Readers of Scottish fiction marked another, happier anniversary. On 7 July 1814 appeared for sale in Edinburgh an anonymous novel set in the Jacobite Rising of 1745: *Waverley*. This was the first novel by its author, Walter Scott, already famous for nearly a decade as a poet, and it was an immediate and spectacular success. It has also been claimed as the first 'historical novel', most influentially

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