Two Hundred Years of ‘Waverley’ in Australia

By Graham Tulloch

When *Waverley* appeared in July of 1814, the colony of New South Wales was just over twenty five years old, and Walter Scott was on a cruise of the Northern Isles in the company of Robert Louis Stevenson’s grandfather. Stevenson was to visit Australia some eighty years later when he had become an internationally renowned author with a fame well on the way to rivalling that which Scott was about to achieve in 1814 – although Scott himself never came to Australia, he was destined to have a profound influence in the southern continent which certainly surpassed that of Stevenson. Scott’s great novel changed the map of the novel; it also changed the map of Australia.

Of course Scott was well-established before 1814 as a widely read poet and we can be sure his work was known in New South Wales. Even though the colony was little more than a quarter of a century old in July 1814, there was the beginning of a print culture in Australia. The *Sydney Gazette* has been published from 1803 and, although it was an official government newspaper, it eventually began to feature literary material in its columns. As Scott’s fame grew, items concerning his life and work began to appear regularly in the newspapers, as did samples of his work, mostly in the form of extracts from his novels. However the first piece of Scott’s writing that I have found in Australian newspapers is the poem ‘For a’ that an’ a that. *Being a new Song to an old Tune*‘, which he wrote for the Anniversary Dinner of the Pitt Club of Scotland on 28 May 1814 after the first defeat and abdication of Napoleon in March and April of that year. It appeared in the *Sydney Gazette* on 15 July 1815. (Ironically, by this time Napoleon had both returned from Elba and suffered his final defeat at Waterloo but, because of the time delay in ships reaching Australia, readers in the colony were as yet unaware of Napoleon’s return as emperor for the Hundred Days before Waterloo.)

The next Scott item reprinted in Australia was an extract from *The Field of Waterloo*: headed ‘Ode to Bonaparte’ it appeared in the *Sydney Gazette* of 29 March 1817. If this gives the impression that literate people in the colony were

primarily interested in Scott as the poet of the Napoleonic wars, such an impression might not be entirely unfounded, at least if we judge by the extraordinary claim of the *Hobart Town Courier* on 24 November 1827 that Scott's life of Napoleon 'will live where the Lady of the Lake and Waverley are forgotten. The hand of genius appears in every line.' Needless to say, this judgement has not stood the test of time. In any case it is clear that interest in Scott was not confined to his writing about Napoleon: his other poems were circulating and an advertisement in the *Sydney Gazette* on 18 January 1817 suggests a local market for Scott's poems had already developed. Along with 'London-made Wellington, Hessian, and top boots, shoes of the best quality, Brazil tobacco, green and black teas', buyers were, somewhat incongruously, offered the 'Poetical Works of Walter Scott, Pope's Poetical Works, Goldsmith's Poetical Works & Animated Nature, all illustrated with plates, and elegantly bound, and fit for any Gentleman's Library'. Evidently Scott had already joined the pantheon of English poets alongside Pope and Goldsmith!

Not surprisingly I have found no really early references to *Waverley*, but when they do begin to appear they suggest the novel is well known to Australian readers since they assume close knowledge of it. For example, a piece in the *Sydney Gazette* of 27 June 1827, refers to a minor scene, 'old Janet Gallatley's [sic] examination before the justices', with evident confidence that readers will know the scene well and consequently understand how it relates to the anecdote related in the article. This item was almost certainly copied from an English newspaper or journal, but that it was reprinted in Australia tells us much about the expected audience there. Similarly in reprinting, from the *London Literary Gazette*, a review of a play based on *Waverley* and staged at Covent Garden, the editor of the *Sydney Gazette* of 6 April 1833 could rely on his readers to understand this comment: 'the story of "Waverley" is essentially undramatic; and therefore, with the exception of a few striking and well-acted scenes, we found it drag heavily along upon the stage, during its endurance for three hours and a half. The relief of a ball at Holyrood House was so welcome, that it was encored.' Although the ball has a strong symbolic function in the novel (a Stuart prince once more in his ancestral palace), it is not one of the most dramatic scenes in the novel, as readers would have known, but it evidently relieved the tedium of a dull play. By implication the novel, though undramatic, was not dull.

A few years later, on 10 November 1840, the *Courier of Hobart* reports an item

from the *Liverpool Journal*: 'Vich Ian Vhor (Glengarry) the head of the Macdonnell, sailed amongst the passengers from Glasgow, on Monday, the 15th June, for New Zealand, where, or in Australia, he proceeds to establish a new Glengarry settlement. He takes out a retinue of followers, consisting of shepherds and agriculturists of all description, as well as a splendid stack of Scottish cattle and improved agricultural implements. After having formed his settlement, he intends returning for the whole of his clan and dependents. The grandfather of this Glengarry is the Fergus M'lvor of Waverley.' Full understanding of the passage requires a reader who knows that Fergus was a Highland chief and that Vich Ian Vhor is Scott's version of his Gaelic name: in short, intimate knowledge of *Waverley* is assumed.

In time the newspapers were less reliant on reprinting British material and Australian residents begin to write for the papers. They too write as if *Waverley* is familiar territory for their readers. Thus the writer of a letter to the *Colonist*of 11 May 1837 expects readers to appreciate the sly suggestion that 'Orion [a previous correspondent], like Donald Bean Lean, the cattle lifter in Waverley, is but, a queer sort of Christian after all'. The reader will remember exactly the kind of Christian Donald was even if the letter writer leaves nothing to chance and offers a quick reminder of Donald's identity. Likewise in 1845 the Scottish-Australian writer and politician Thomas McCombie writes how the hero of his novel, *Adventures of a Colonist*, 'often neglected his lessons to indulge in his passion for novel-reading; he made little distinction between the good and the bad; indeed, he devoured everything in the shape of a romance which came within his reach.' He then goes on to remark that 'many may observe […] some resemblance to the character of Waverly [sic]',[1] a comment that takes for granted that the reader will recognise the similarity to Waverley's early reading habits with his love of 'romantic fiction, of all themes the most fascinating to a youthful imagination'.[2]

As time goes on we can perhaps detect a diminishing assumption of such explicit knowledge. Nevertheless into the twentieth century *Waverley* remains a significant text for Australian writers. In *Australia Felix*, the first of her trilogy, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, Ethel Richardson, who wrote under the name Henry Handel Richardson, describes Richard Mahony's attempt to interest his wife Polly in the novel: 'There were also those long evenings they spent over the first hundred pages of *Waverley*. Mahony, eager for her to share his

enthusiasm, comforted her each night anew that they would soon reach the story proper, and then, how interested she would be! But the opening chapters were a sandy desert of words, all about people duller than any Polly had known alive; and sometimes, before the book was brought out, she would heave a secret sigh.'[3] Any reader of the novel will know that it takes some time before *Waverley* reaches Scotland and the central action begins but that these early chapters provide fascinating background to the hero's development, a fact not at all obvious to Polly!

Richardson's book appeared in 1917 but described events in the Victorian gold-rush of the 1850s. It is possible, however, that this incident is founded on real events recorded in family stories since Mahony and Polly are based in large measure on Richardson's own parents. In any case Polly (and perhaps Richardson's mother) was probably not alone in failing to find much interest in Scott's first novel: an article in the *West Australian* of 1 October 1914 while celebrating the centenary of its publication remarked that *Waverley* was 'to some […] the least attractive of the Waverley series'. Fortunately not all readers shared this view. For instance, the records of the South Australian Institute for 1861 and 1862 which can be accessed on the 'Australian Common Reader' website tell us that there were two hundred borrowings of Scott's *Waverley* (197 men and 3 women) in those two years, far ahead of the next most popular novel, *Ivanhoe*, with only seventeen borrowings. Borrowing does not mean reading but the disparity of figures is certainly suggestive.

Waverley, of course, has a special position amongst Scott's novels, being not only the first but the one after which the whole series, the Waverley Novels, was named. We might speculate that people set out to read Scott's novels and started with the one which had given its name to the series. If so, did *Waverley* prove a disappointment? And is this why the figures fall off so dramatically after *Waverley*? We cannot know. What is almost certainly true is that *Ivanhoe*coming in second was no accident. As the century wore on *Ivanhoe* became Scott's best known novel: we can see this by turning to the borrowing figures for his novels for the Miners and Mechanics Institute of the New South Wales town of Lambton for 1903–1912 where we find *Waverley* has only three borrowings compared to seven for *Ivanhoe* and even *Rob Roy* has six, although none of these can compete with the fourteen for Stevenson's *Treasure Island* – the replacement of Scott by Stevenson as the world's favourite Scottish

novelist is well under way.[4]

However, even as readers leaked away from *Waverley*, the novel was to prove a much more enduring and visible presence in Australia in quite another way – through place names. The Geoscience online gazetteer for Australia records no less than seventy-six places or buildings named after Waverley. This includes five suburbs: two named simply Waverley (one in Sydney and the other in Launceston, Tasmania), and Glen Waverley, Mount Waverley and Waverley Gardens in Melbourne as well as thirty-one homesteads named Waverley, three named Waverley Park, and one named Waverley Downs. In addition there are streams, hills, tanks, and other features with this name. Thus Scott's novel has been inscribed on the landscape of Australia many times.[5]

Almost certainly the first of these place names is the Waverley which is now a suburb in Sydney. On 12 November 1827 the *Sydney Gazette* reported that 'The splendid building which Mr. B. Levey is erecting at about three miles on the South Head road, which has a commanding view of Sydney to the west, and of the ocean to the east, has been named by the proprietor, Waverley House, in honor of Sir Walter Scott.' Barnett Levey was a prominent free settler in Sydney. A man with many commercial interests, he also had strong cultural interests in the theatre and literature: he established the colony's first lending library and towards the end of his life he achieved his long-standing ambition to create Australia's first real theatre, opening the Theatre Royal in 1833. It is not surprising therefore that he named his new house in honour of the most popular author of the age. As well as building Waverley House in what was then open country he became one of the colony's first property developers, constructing a set of cottages in what became Waverley Crescent. Over time a suburb grew up around Waverley House and took on the name Waverley. The suburb has in its turn given its name to a municipal council. However Barnett Levey's home was not the only Waverley House in Australia. In Adelaide, for example, there were at least four houses with this name: one in the city centre at South Terrace and others in the suburbs of Woodville, Brighton, and Glen Osmond. None of these, however, led to the naming of a suburb.

Waverley is the most popular Scott-associated place name in Australia, being well ahead of both Ivanhoe and Abbotsford. As a place name or house name Waverley had several advantages for anyone wanting to commemorate Scott: it was

associated with not just one novel but with the whole series and it had virtually no other connotations, being, as Scott himself pointed out in the first chapter of the novel, 'an uncontaminated name, bearing with its sound little of good or evil, excepting what the reader shall be hereafter pleased to affix to it'.[6] What the reader affixed to it was ultimately the whole of Scott's long series of novels. Perhaps people thought it presumptuous to adopt the name of Scott's own home, Abbotsford, for their humbler Australian homes, although his protege and former gardener George Harper gave the name to the estate he was granted at Picton about fifty kilometres from Sydney and even wrote to Scott to tell him so.[7] As for *Ivanhoe*, maybe the increasing perception of it as a boy's book made it seem less suitable as a house name – or was it that a house named Ivanhoe should look medieval? Whatever the reason, Waverley is the clear winner.

So, two hundred years after its first appearance in Edinburgh, what mark has *Waverley* made on the continent at the other side of the world? Readers of *The Bottle Imp* will probably hope that the novel itself would still be widely read. Sadly this is not the case. However, on the map of Australia *Waverley* has impressed itself deeply. In this Australia is not alone: as Ann Rigney has pointed in the opening lines of her *The Afterlives of Walter Scott*, 'There are towns called Waverley spread across the globe: in Victoria, Australia; in Nova Scotia; near the border of South Africa with Swaziland, and in no less than twenty-two states in the USA.' Moreover she is undoubtedly right in suggesting that 'It is unlikely that the present-day residents of Scott Road/Scott Weg in Cape Town or Waverley Gardens in Melbourne will be aware of the literary origins of their street.'[8] Nevertheless the enormous influence of *Waverley* and its successors, the Waverley Novels, remains very visible on Australian maps: from its small beginnings *Waverley* has become an international marker which shows no signs of leaving us yet. Rather than regretting that *Waverley* is no longer the immensely popular work it once was we should perhaps instead celebrate its enormous influence on Australian readers of the past: after all evidence of that influence is all around us, in our streets, our suburbs, and even in the names our ancestors chose for their houses, that most personal (and significant) of choices.When *Waverley* appeared in July of 1814, the colony of New South Wales was just over twenty five years old, and Walter Scott was on a cruise of the Northern Isles in the company of Robert Louis Stevenson's grandfather. Stevenson was to visit Australia some eighty years later when he had become an

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(c) The Bottle Imp