Walter Scott and the Matter of Landscape: Ecologies of Violence for our Time

By Susan Oliver

Walter Scott is receiving more attention than at any time since the early nineteenth century. Reasons for his prominence in the literary landscape are not difficult to conjecture. The bicentenary of *Waverley*, the Scottish Independence Referendum, the seven-hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn, and the reopening of Abbotsford with its award-winning Visitor Centre have contributed to a renaissance of interest in his works. Television and radio, opera houses, book clubs, and university courses have fostered a climate of discussion of his poems and novels. Conferences this summer brought academic scholars together, enriching a soil from which emerged the new International Association for Studies in Scottish Literature. The most exciting feature of contemporary Scott studies must be the turn they are taking in archival, textual, and theoretical interpretation. Scott is being read and reread as an author whose works resonate with meaning for the twenty-first century world.

As a planter and farmer as well as a writer, Scott was interested in the land and what grows from it. His engagement specifically with soil as a key component of landscape in *The Tale of Old Mortality* (1816) can help us with the problem of reconciling his constructed, literary nation with what can be known about a real Scotland that had gone though, and continues to face social, political and environmental change. Thinking about the matter of the landscape and the dirt surrounding the roots of the nation involves acknowledging connections between metaphor and something more physical. In this post-Referendum moment, does the relationship between words and land in Scott's 'Covenanter' tale – based as it was on events behind the cementing of the British Union – reveal anything significant about the implications of the word 'country'?[1]

To understand a country as district from a nation or even a region requires looking closely at the land. Country conjures a sense of permanency and

belonging. The OED defines it as 'the *land* of a person's birth, citizenship, residence'. We might add to that, the land of a person's death. The 1829 introduction to Scott's novel *Rob Roy* (1817) informs readers that the hero 'died lamented in his own wild country'. Etymologically, the Anglo-Norman and Old French sources *contré* and *cuntree* are more collectively cultural, denoting 'an *area of land* delimited by natural or political boundaries', while the Latin root *contrata* suggests 'that which lies opposite the view, the landscape spread out before one' (OED). The opposition of view and landscape in the last instance foregrounds a longstanding instability underpinning how we see and relate to the land, or the country, itself: although country is homely, we rely on seeing landscapes from a distance. Country consists of the soil beneath our feet, to which we are intimately connected; landscape is the horizontal extension into a distance of something above ground that can be looked at and enjoyed.

Wordsworth's 'Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree which stands near the Lake of Esthwaite, on a desolate part of the shore, yet commanding a beautiful prospect' (1798) is concerned with the problems of reconciling view with a sense of rootedness.[2] That poem turns on the relationship between the comfortable familiarity of a framed local landscape, looked back upon in reflection, and universal anxieties relating to human existence in a wider historical and geographical world. The interlocutor prompts us to ask to what extent charmed viewpoints transform nostalgia and grief into something redemptive; or do they, on the contrary, remain damaged, or damaging, forms of memory? 'Lines left upon a Seat' explores how a landscape seen from the edge of the public way (the path of familiarity) becomes a counterfeit and increasingly partial view of the world commanded by a solitary figure who has reached a point of physical and intellectual stasis. From that standpoint of desolation, first occupied by a man decaying into death, then by the poet narrator and the detained reader, the seductive, distant vista seen from the seat in the yew tree (it is by degrees 'lovelier', 'beautiful', and 'more beauteous') metamorphoses into a degenerate and narrow worldview. Ultimately, the visionary, distanced prospect and the memories it hides or reveals are seen as the products and ongoing sustenance not of a healthy perspective, but of human ruin. The yew tree that provides the seat for the traveller symbolizes death.

Scott also confronts the sustainability of distant views and the false comfort that can too easily attach to homeliness. In the 1829 introduction added to his

earlier *Tales of my Landlord* series of novels (the first series was published in 1816), Jedediah Cleishbotham casts the tales that he is about to tell as 'such fare as the mountains of your own country produce'. Fiction is analogized with food to be consumed and enjoyed, in novels that themselves contain numerous references to the healthiness of local produce: kebbocks, beer and salmon in *The Tale of Old Mortality*. Through processes of cultural digestion, stories are internalized in an organic cycle of production that ultimately collapses the fiction that mountains and valleys are places apart.

For the last two centuries Scott has defined a culture that imagines Scotland not as a political entity, but as a country comprising connected yet distinct landscapes and seascapes. The descriptive sketches, picturesque vistas, and prospect views that run through his poetry and prose have long been recognised as structural to his writing. But those commonplaces, drawn from theories of art as distinct from actual environmental awareness, prompt questions. The privileging of a picturesque in action over one in scenery, a distinction that Scott makes in the *Ashestiel Autobiography*, shows how the familiar aesthetic discourses of his time could be undermined to question the wholesomeness of those same aesthetics. Getting down onto the field rather than just looking at it removes the distance that is necessary to a conventional picturesque, or even sublime, experience. The resulting intimacy with the land itself, and the close-up encounter with the ecology that it supports, reveals a messy natural archive that involves getting one's intellectual hands dirty and taking risks.

I have written elsewhere about the disruption of soil that occurs towards the end of *Waverley*, where the frantic removal of tree roots during the re-landscaping Tully-Veolan disembowels the body of the country in a visceral echo of the execution of Highlanders Fergus MacIvor and Evan Dhu Mccombich.[3] Scott foregrounds the role of redesigning Scotland in that novel, while as author he takes on the task of commemorating what has been lost. But is the body of Scotland that is left in *Waverley* held up as a form of literary taxidermy: a static, preserved, reminder of what once was? *The Tale of Old Mortality*, written and published two years later, as Sam Baker has said, is Scott's most violent novel and a response to both the Battle of Waterloo and a redress of what he only obliquely described in *Waverley.*[4] It is certainly the more directly graphic novel in its accounts of terror and cruelty. But what do *Old Mortality*'s accounts of the Lanarkshire countryside add to the descriptions of intimidation, torture, and

murder that carry the action of the main story? And what does the ultimate uncanniness of the soil portend for reading it as an archive either of environmental or human history?

Old Mortality insists from its point of departure that the most disturbing cultural memories must be read ecologically as well as in the form of things written (whether in stone or printed on the page). Early in the frame narrative, the soil is introduced as the key agent in an act of natural alchemy in which the stuff of a horrific episode in human history – a bloody massacre of Covenanters – is converted into the continuing, visible living matter of plants and trees. Scott's fascination here with flora as war memorials asks questions about the adequacy of conventional monumentalism: are the inscriptions on the half-buried gravestones, however legible they may be, sufficient to go on sustaining a sense of horror at what happened? If they are, why did Scott need to pay so much attention to the organic material accumulating on the stones, the flora that grows around them, and – most fundamentally – to the earth in which they are half embedded? The connections between subtext and the subsoil in this novel, as literary and natural correlatives that are easily overlooked, allow for a more sophisticated reading. The 'Monuments', Scott writes, 'which were the objects of the care' of his most Wordsworthian character, the eponymous Old Mortality, 'are hastening, like all earthly memorials, into ruin or decay'. This seems to me like a concurrence with 'Lines left upon a set in a Yew-tree' and a pessimistic response to another poem by Wordsworth, 'Resolution and Independence', where the self-obsessed gloom of a wandering narrator is dispelled through the admonishment of the uncanny figure of the leech-gatherer, a man who seems himself to be half stone in his extreme age and solid resolve to keep on going.

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Cleishbotham's source manuscript, supposedly compiled by the much-loved and prematurely dead Schoolmaster Peter Pattieson, begins by recalling a group of boys fishing for trout and minnows in a 'small stream' that winds 'through a "lone vale of green bracken"'. Rushes and wildflowers grow in profusion on the stream's banks, nourished by the combination of water and soil. This idyllic vista creates a literary context that alludes to songs such as Burns' then still recent 'Their groves o' sweet myrtle', and perhaps to the older catechism song 'Green grow the rushes, O'. A pastoral and religious view of Clydesdale is established that would have seemed unproblematic and natural to polite early nineteenth-century readers who knew the area or were familiar with it from John Sinclair's *Statistical Account of Scotland* (1795).[5] But the illusion of carefree childhood is abruptly shattered. A change of scenery and tone introduces a motif of fear and violence that looks below the visible surface of the land: out of a terror that they already feel, the boys never venture further upstream because to do so would take them to a spot where seven or eight rough stones, 'half sunk in the ground and overgrown with moss', commemorate the massacre. The stream, with all its natural abundance, runs through and carries traces of a haunted soil. Scott has shifted attention to the place where the boys do not dare to go.

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gravestones, but also the environment in which only a living human presence has been lost. Three ‘gigantic ash trees’ mark the site drawing their vitality also from the same soil, while the wind blowing through their branches produces a melancholy, sighing air of loss. Scott’s extraordinary account of a thriving, living flora dependent on a soil that is nutritionally enriched by the effects of torture and murder is extended as Cleishbotham describes how, with the moss and lichen growing on the tombstones, the natural scene does not hide but merely ‘softens the horror’ of what is contained in the dirt that lies beneath. The grass, wildflowers, and trees are real and their existence is a vivid reminder that the horrible history contained in the ground cannot be kept at the temporal distance of a marked place of burial that conventional history might suggest.

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> [H]e advanced up the narrow dell which had once been a wood, but was now a ravine divested of trees, unless where a few, from their inaccessible situation on the edge of precipitous banks, or clinging among rocks and huge stones, defied the invasion of men and of cattle. […] These too, wasted and decayed, seemed rather to exist than to flourish, and only served to indicate what the landscape had once been. But the stream brawled down among them in all its freshness and vivacity, giving the life and animation which a mountain rivulet alone can confer on the barest and most savage scenes, and which the inhabitants of such a country miss when gazing even upon the tranquil winding of a majestic stream through plains of fertility, and beside palaces of splendour. The track of the road followed the course of the brook, which was now visible […] only to be distinguished by its brawling heard among the stones or in the clefts of the rock that occasionally interrupted its course.[6]

The burn by the broken ash tree becomes the stream in which the boys of the frame narrative would later fish for trout and minnows, establishing a connection between experience and innocence worthy of William Blake. I'd like to conclude by returning to the motif of country and nation, and to the role of soil and recycling in Scott's literary production. The introduction to the 1829 magnum opus edition of *Old Mortality* contains a ghoulish anecdote about secular transubstantiation that says much about the distance at which we prefer to keep horrible histories: local people are horrified when they realize they have been sold 'ladles, caups, bickers, bowls, spoons, cogues, and trenchers, formed of wood' made from the disinterred coffins of local Covenanters. Rumour has it that the vessels 'impart a reddish tinge to whatever liquor was put into them'. The 'country people', as Scott describes them, are filled with 'confusion and disgust, on reflecting how many meals they had eaten out of the dishes'. Yet the soil that feeds their apple trees and oats, and the grass on which their sheep grow fat, is infused by the water of the stream that carries traces from the 'wild wastes' where atrocities took place into the valley. The problem with the utensils is the directness of their role in eating and drinking. *Old Mortality* is uncomfortable reading and in his shift from the frame to the main narrative, Scott redresses any charge of looking the other way of which he might be found guilty in *Waverley*. The two novels need to be read as counterparts and it is no coincidence that *Old Mortality* became included in the *Waverley* novels, as they became known. In a sense, *Old Mortality* abrogates the act of environmental violence that ends *Waverley* by re-establishing the indelible rootedness of internecine genocide.

Yet *Waverley* stands as Scott's sinister warning about the extent of what can be done to present a dressed-up, palatable version of the nation.

In what ways does the exemplification in this essay engage with problems raised in contemporary environmental theory and ecocriticism? I have taken *Old Mortality* as a case study that shows how issues about subjective and objective views of the landscape and cultural history lie at the heart of Scott's fiction. There are three prominent theoretical positions to which I have responded. Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*(2009) and *The Ecological Thought* (2012) consider the problem of 'environmental ambience'. Morton's argument is that we are immersed in a 'natural world' that we falsely want to venerate as something that is outside ourselves. It seems to me that Scott's awareness of the problems caused by aesthetic distance, and his express preference for a new picturesque that allows him to get his hands into the dirt (actual and metaphorical) recognizes that central issue raised by Morton about complicity in constructions of the environment. Dana Phillips argues in *The Truth of Ecology* (2003) that one of the biggest dangers for ecocritics is being drawn into an intellectual world of hyperreality where texts and criticism come to matter more that the real world that they attempt to represent. Phillips's point is that the world is phenomenal, and that the material environment is what is really in crisis.[7] Here and in my other work on Scott I am interested in the manner in which Scott attends to a plausible ecology of plants, trees, animals and people that inhabit a country known as Scotland. While it isn't possible to separate Scott's fiction from a symbolic representation of the nation that uses conventions of landscape to root human history, it is clear that his writing reveals a deep understanding of the relationship between presence, place, and a real natural world.

Finally, Ashton Nichols's theory of 'urbanature' contends that literary representations of the environment from Romanticism onwards cannot avoid urbanizing nature because for reasons associated with literary production 'there can be no urban spot where nature does not remain' just as 'there can be no fully wild spot, where the world of humans has been left completely behind'.[8] This last approach says much about Scott as a Romantic and a modern writer. Scott's sense of country rejects the fractures and fragmentations that fed nineteenth-century anxieties about an increasingly dichotomous view of the country and the city, because he renders unsustainable the aesthetic and cultural distances on

which those distinctions depend. That is my argument in this essay. Scott moved seamlessly between the enclosed, condensed archive of his library and the expansive archive that he recognized in the land itself. As a novelist he undertook the role of his character *Old Mortality*, keeping a curious and half-hidden history visible with his pen rather than with a chisel, but always in the awareness that his was a narrative that needed to be read alongside that offered by the landscape itself.Walter Scott is receiving more attention than at any time since the early nineteenth century. Reasons for his prominence in the literary landscape are not difficult to conjecture. The bicentenary of *Waverley*, the Scottish Independence Referendum, the seven-hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn, and the reopening of Abbotsford with its award-winning Visitor Centre have contributed to a renaissance of interest in his works. Television and radio, opera houses, book clubs, and university courses have fostered a climate of discussion of his poems and novels. Conferences this summer brought academic scholars together, enriching a soil from which emerged the new International Association for Studies in Scottish Literature. The most exciting feature of contemporary Scott studies must be the turn they are taking in archival, textual, and theoretical interpretation. Scott is being read and reread as an author whose works resonate with meaning for the twenty-first century world.

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To understand a country as district from a nation or even a region requires looking closely at the land. Country conjures a sense of permanency and belonging. The OED defines it as 'the *land* of a person's birth, citizenship, residence'. We might add to that, the land of a person's death. The 1829 introduction to Scott's novel *Rob Roy* (1817) informs readers that the hero 'died

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Towards the end of *Old Mortality* and after a penultimate temporal shift that situates the massacre of the Covenanters already in the past, Scott uses one of his trademark devices: Morton undertakes a ride that reads like a journey through the history not only of a country but also of the nation. The episode is dependent upon an environment that can be read as an ecological archive. Beginning at 'a broken ash-tree that stands at the side o' a burn', Morton passes through a latterly degraded environment associated with loss of species as well as human absence. Eventually he emerges into a landscape bursting with vitality:

> [H]e advanced up the narrow dell which had once been a wood, but was now a ravine divested of trees, unless where a few, from their inaccessible situation on the edge of precipitous banks, or clinging among rocks and huge stones, defied the invasion of men and of cattle. […] These too, wasted and decayed, seemed rather to exist than to flourish, and only served to indicate what the landscape had once been. But the stream brawled down among them in all its freshness and vivacity, giving the life and animation which a mountain rivulet alone can confer on the barest and most savage scenes, and which the inhabitants of such a country miss when gazing even upon the tranquil winding of a majestic stream through plains of fertility, and beside palaces of splendour. The track of the road followed the course of the brook, which was now visible […] only to be distinguished by its brawling heard among the stones or in the clefts of the rock that occasionally interrupted its course.[14]

The burn by the broken ash tree becomes the stream in which the boys of the frame narrative would later fish for trout and minnows, establishing a connection between experience and innocence worthy of William Blake. I'd like to conclude by returning to the motif of country and nation, and to the role of soil and recycling in Scott's literary production. The introduction to the 1829 magnum opus edition of *Old Mortality* contains a ghoulish anecdote about secular transubstantiation that says much about the distance at which we prefer to keep horrible histories: local people are horrified when they realize they have been sold 'ladles, caups, bickers, bowls, spoons, cogues, and trenchers, formed of wood' made from the disinterred coffins of local Covenanters. Rumour has it that the vessels 'impart a reddish tinge to whatever liquor was put into them'. The 'country people', as Scott describes them, are filled with 'confusion and disgust, on reflecting how many meals they had eaten out of the dishes'. Yet the soil that feeds their apple trees and oats, and the grass on which their sheep grow fat, is infused by the water of the stream that carries traces from the 'wild wastes' where atrocities took place into the valley. The problem with the utensils is the directness of their role in eating and drinking. *Old Mortality* is uncomfortable reading and in his shift from the frame to the main narrative, Scott redresses any charge of looking the other way of which he might be found guilty in *Waverley*. The two novels need to be read as counterparts and it is no coincidence that *Old Mortality* became included in the *Waverley* novels, as they became known. In a sense, *Old Mortality* abrogates the act of environmental violence that ends *Waverley* by re-establishing the indelible rootedness of internecine genocide. Yet *Waverley* stands as Scott's sinister warning about the extent of what can be done to present a dressed-up, palatable version of the nation.

In what ways does the exemplification in this essay engage with problems raised in contemporary environmental theory and ecocriticism? I have taken *Old Mortality* as a case study that shows how issues about subjective and objective views of the landscape and cultural history lie at the heart of Scott's fiction. There are three prominent theoretical positions to which I have responded. Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*(2009) and *The Ecological Thought* (2012) consider the problem of 'environmental ambience'. Morton's argument is that we are immersed in a 'natural world' that we falsely want to venerate as something that is outside ourselves. It seems to me that Scott's awareness of the problems caused by aesthetic distance, and his express preference for a new picturesque that allows him to get his hands into the

dirt (actual and metaphorical) recognizes that central issue raised by Morton about complicity in constructions of the environment. Dana Phillips argues in *The Truth of Ecology* (2003) that one of the biggest dangers for ecocritics is being drawn into an intellectual world of hyperreality where texts and criticism come to matter more that the real world that they attempt to represent. Phillips's point is that the world is phenomenal, and that the material environment is what is really in crisis.[15] Here and in my other work on Scott I am interested in the manner in which Scott attends to a plausible ecology of plants, trees, animals and people that inhabit a country known as Scotland. While it isn't possible to separate Scott's fiction from a symbolic representation of the nation that uses conventions of landscape to root human history, it is clear that his writing reveals a deep understanding of the relationship between presence, place, and a real natural world.

Finally, Ashton Nichols's theory of 'urbanature' contends that literary representations of the environment from Romanticism onwards cannot avoid urbanizing nature because for reasons associated with literary production 'there can be no urban spot where nature does not remain' just as 'there can be no fully wild spot, where the world of humans has been left completely behind'.[16] This last approach says much about Scott as a Romantic and a modern writer. Scott's sense of country rejects the fractures and fragmentations that fed nineteenth-century anxieties about an increasingly dichotomous view of the country and the city, because he renders unsustainable the aesthetic and cultural distances on which those distinctions depend. That is my argument in this essay. Scott moved seamlessly between the enclosed, condensed archive of his library and the expansive archive that he recognized in the land itself. As a novelist he undertook the role of his character *Old Mortality*, keeping a curious and half-hidden history visible with his pen rather than with a chisel, but always in the awareness that his was a narrative that needed to be read alongside that offered by the landscape itself.

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