2. Scottish Radicalism and Jackie Kay's Red Dust Road

By Joan Garden Cooper

In this paper, I investigate Jackie Kay's memoir, *Red Dust Road*, published in 2010, as a contemporary moment of Scottish radicalism that connects with earlier moments of radicalism. A poet, dramatist, and author of novels and short stories, Kay frequently draws on her own life story, explicitly, in her writing. A mixed-race child of a Scottish mother and Nigerian father, she was adopted into a family with a strong ethos of working-class activism, which she grew up to share. However, I suggest that Kay's radicalism can also be connected to that of Sir Walter Scott, and in particular his response to 'Peterloo', the name given to the events of 16 August 1819, when armed forces broke up what had been planned as a peaceful demonstration on St Peter's field in Manchester. The name, of course, alludes to Napoleon's defeat at the Battle of Waterloo.

Critics characterise the events of the assembly at St Peter's Field in Manchester as a vital historical moment for effecting political and social reform. Working people in London, in the north of England, and in Scotland gathered to demonstrate in pursuit of annual parliaments and universal suffrage. James Chandler has observed that after Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, the Reform movement had fashioned a new set of tactics – demonstrations and marches to effect political and social reform (1). He further notes that the Peterloo assembly's claim to distinction in modern political and social history, says James Chandler, is that it was at the time probably the largest peaceful demonstration ever gathered.

Critics have also perceived the events described in Scott's *Ivanhoe* and the events of Britain in 1819 – the year of the Peterloo Massacre – as connected. Scott's usual progressive stance was not wholly aligned with that of the populist 'radicals' attempting to effect parliamentary reforms. Generally, Scott looked on matters, like the class struggle – between 1815 and 1832 and even in the period leading up to the Reform Bill – with a critical eye. And yet, according to Julie Kipp, Scott's classical liberal position can be understood as yet another variety of

the story told by the radicals. Scott's narrative in *Ivanhoe* remains an optimistic affirmation of historical progress – a multicultural vision that considered how personal relationships might signify the innate human desire for peace and compassionate interconnectedness (Kipp 231). For Scott, the political was embodied in the personal.

I argue that Kay's radicalism can be seen as branching both out of and away from Scott's narratives of historical progress in *Waverley* and *Ivanhoe*. Despite their differences in historical period, gender and social circumstance, I suggest that Kay, like Scott, exemplifies a radicalism that is individualistic. Kay's quest for knowledge of her birth parents and consequently her extended families lead to her healing from the trauma of social and racial discrimination and to personal growth. She survives and grows from her search because she can subsequently reflect on traumatic personal situations with humour, sarcasm, insightfulness, and creativity.

Key episodes in Kay's writing demonstrate her individualistic response to social, racial and sexual discrimination. In a telling episode, she recalls that, in the autumn of 1980, when a first-year undergraduate at Stirling University, and a member of the leftist Women's Collective, she was targeted by students affiliated to the fascist British Movement who displayed a poster contemptuously describing her as 'that Irish Catholic wog, Jackie Kay' (Kay 180). Kay confesses, with typical wry humour, that while she was deeply upset by the racial slur, she was also irritated at being incorrectly labelled an Irish Catholic. Supported by her mother, friends and lecturers from the Sociology Department, Kay organised a public meeting at which she spoke, citing Angela Davis who in turn was quoting James Baldwin: '*If we know, then we must fight for your life as though it were our own …. For if they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night*' (Kay 183). The story characterises Kay's politics as human: she acknowledges the personal hurt, laces it with self-deprecating humour, demonstrates her courage in facing up to discrimination, finding comfort in a collective response while asserting the importance of inclusion.

The personalisation of radical politics is also evident in Kay's account of her search for her natural parents, which involves taking a stance against legal and social conventions of the day. But she also must cope with the human experience of acceptance and rejection by members of her natural family. Her perseverance in the face of obstructive officialdom leads her to a reunion with her birth mother,

Elizabeth, and her aunts, who, happily, regard her as 'joyful, a wee bundle of joy' (Kay 163). However, her search for, and her relationship with her birth father, Jonathan, were more complicated. She discovers that, in Nigeria, he is a well-known ethnobotanist, studying the healing *Moringa oleifera* plant. On meeting him in Abuja, Kay also learns that he is a born-again Christian who regards her existence as evidence of his sin and who, at one point, subjects her to a healing ceremony and, at another, interrogates her about her sexuality. As she recalls, her father has suddenly become interested in something about her. She says 'not in my son, not in my childhood, not in my university days, not in my books, not in my parents, but in my *sex drive*!' (Kay 103–04).

The hybrid *Moringa oleifera* tree that her father studies is intricately intertwined with the memoir's theme of Kay's personal growth. The tree's medicinal qualities become a metaphor for Kay's healing process:

> *[T]he leaves are used to treat malnutrition, how they can have a stabilizing effect on blood pressure and treat anxiety; how the leaf juice can used as a diuretic and the leaf sap as a purgative, and the leaves can be used to treat malaria and jaundice (Kay 254).*

The tree is native to both Africa and India. While learning more about her African birth father, Kay realises that she can still thrive and maintain the loving and intimate relationship with her Scottish family, living in Glasgow, her Scottish birth mother Elizabeth, now living in Manchester, England, and her newly found stepbrother Sidney as well. In the memoir's final chapter, *2009,* Kay decides to try her luck at planting, in the front garden of her house in Manchester, the *moringa* pods that one of her new-found Nigerian uncles gave her. She says,

> *I try and imagine my own moringa growing in the front garden of my terraced House in Manchester, far away from its home. I wonder if the pods will ever take root. I picture my healthy, tall moringa in ten years' time (Kay 289).*

The *moringa* tree, then, is symbolic of hybridity, existence, displacement, but also the possibility of growth if tended with the necessary love.

For Kay, the arts – her poetry, fiction, drama and memoirs – are about personalising the radical to allow for growth. She has spoken positively about the

National Theatre of Scotland's adaptation of *Red Dust Road*, affirming that the drama recreates the material in the present moment. Kay observes that theatre makes audiences feel affected by things – as if they are part of the drama (YouTube 2019). The communal experience can be healing, and so lead to social change. As an artist, Kay says *Red Dust Road* can enlarge people's lives – 'if it just makes them feel like they are not alone, and to feel bold and courageous in their lives, then that would be a fantastic outcome' (YouTube 2019). As an adopted, mixed-race lesbian who grew up in a hostile, urban Scottish environment in the 1970s and 1980s, Kay could be caricatured as a stereotype of radical activism. Instead, her sharp but self-deprecating humour, her warmth, and above all her generous humanity align her with the inclusive radicalism of Walter Scott, whose fiction asserts racial and ethnic inclusiveness, and a human need for connection amidst social and political turmoil.

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