

REVIEW: POSSIBLE SCOTLANDS

James Robertson

Caroline McCracken-Flesher, **Possible Scotlands: Walter Scott and the Story of Tomorrow**, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 239 pp, hb, £35.99, ISBN: 0 19 516967 0

In 1926, concluding **Contemporary Scottish Studies**, his excoriating series of articles on Scottish writers, and having dispensed with the Burns Cult, C.M. Grieve (already becoming better known as the poet ‘Hugh MacDiarmid’) posed the question: ‘Is it desirable that there should be a return, especially on the part of the Scottish people, to Scott?’ Efforts were being made ‘in certain quarters to revive interest in his work, and, in particular, the Waverley Novels.’ But these efforts, Grieve believed, were being made by writers whose political and literary loyalties, though they themselves were Scots, lay with the English tradition: the movement to reinstate Scott ‘must therefore be regarded as one designed to conserve and reinforce certain elements in English culture, while taking it for granted that Scotland and England have identical cultural interests.’

Grieve went on to complain that Scott’s apologists never advanced any ‘new view’ of him – ‘any special applicability to the present and the future of elements in Scott hitherto overlooked or misprized.’ And he approvingly quoted the critic Georg Brandes, who said that Scott was the kind of author whom ‘every adult has read, and no grown-up person can read’.

This summation, it seems, has transmuted over the intervening period into something else, at least as far as general appreciation of Scott is concerned: he is nowadays an author whom few adults have read, and whose works, because

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they apparently promulgate a past-bound, romantic, tartanised myth of Scotland, nobody needs to read.

Possible Scotlands: Walter Scott and the Story of Tomorrow by Caroline McCracken-Flesher, Professor of English at the University of Wyoming, disputes this view, arguing for the Wizard of the North as the key-holder who can unlock unlimited numbers of doors to both Scotland's past and its future. It 'tracks the many possibilities of place, person, time, and telling through which Scott construes a living Scotland.' (p.25) Scott writes 'across time and shifting literary space', constructing 'tales and modes of telling that refuse to be locked in time.' (p.9) As an antidote to the view, current now for the best part of a century, that Scott's works trap the Scottish nation in a time-warp – a view which I largely shared when I wrote a PhD thesis on him in the 1980s – **Possible Scotlands** is most welcome. Whether it heralds a new wave of Scott appreciation – let alone whether it marks the start of a popular, non-academic 'return to Scott' by the Scottish people – remains to be seen.

'How,' Professor McCracken-Flesher asks, 'can Scott constitute a problem undermining modern Scotland? Or how can an author dead one hundred and sixty-seven years (in 1999) continue to energise the nation?' (p.5) The answers seem to lie in critical responses to his work, right from the outset. The **Scots Magazine**, reviewing **Waverley** in 1814, commented that the Author's depiction of Scottish manners 'is characterised by the strictest truth, though presenting features which almost surpass the wildness of romance.' It is this interplay between 'truth', or reality, and 'romance', or unreality, that has most exercised Scott's 'anxious' readers, one of whom McCracken-Flesher admits to being (p.12), down the years.

It was during the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s that Scott was most rigorously, and negatively, analysed in an effort to understand the cultural and political situation Scotland was in. Edwin Muir published his immensely provocative study **Scott and Scotland** in 1936, and found 'a very curious emptiness ... behind the wealth of his imagination.' Neil Gunn, reviewing Muir's book in the **Scots Magazine**, wrote that the Scottish history Scott used as material for his work 'no longer enriched or influenced a living national tradition ... it was story-telling or romance set in a void; it was seen backwards as in the round of some time spyglass and had interpretive bearing neither upon a present nor a future.' Donald Carswell, in his **Sir Walter Scott: A Four-Part Study in Biography** of 1930, made the astonishing claim that Scott was 'an historian who knew everything about history except its meaning'. And then, of course,

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there was MacDiarmid, decrying the Waverley Novels in **Lucky Poet** (1943) as ‘the great source of the paralysing ideology of defeatism in Scotland, the spread of which is responsible at once for the acceptance of the Union and the low standard of nineteenth-century Scots literature ...’ It was not until the 1950s that academic critics, led by David Daiches, began to look more favourably upon Scott. Until then – and in many ways, in spite of Daiches et al, this continued right through to the pre-devolution intellectual assessments of the 1980s – Scott constituted a problem undermining modern Scotland because his shadow seemed to hang over every aspect of the country’s sense of itself.

McCracken-Flesher argues against this view, maintaining that Scott provides a positive template for his country’s future. His use of multiple authorial personae and narratives within narratives, his cross-genre mixing of history and romance, and his forays into the politically unstable territories of George IV’s 1822 visit to Edinburgh and the 1826 banking crisis (the one which caused his own financial ruin), all combine to make him a national figure, yet one constantly questioning the idea of nationhood. His fictions and his ‘real-life’ acts – even his supposed ‘last words’ as reported by son-in-law John G. Lockhart – undermine the idea of a single meaning or one historical truth, and repeatedly cast doubt on his own assertions and those of his characters.

In this respect, I would like to know what McCracken-Flesher thinks of **Redgauntlet**, a novel she does not mention. Redgauntlet’s outburst ‘Then, gentlemen, the cause is lost for ever!’ – when a Jacobite rebellion that never, in actuality, happened is defused by a government general sympathising with his potential foes and letting them disband without penalty, allowing even a paunchy Charles Edward Stuart to slip away unhindered – seems a vital moment in Scott’s invention of possible past, possible future. It is a declamation that supports various interpretations, and begs interesting questions about how history looks from different viewpoints. When Winnie Ewing, at the opening of the new Parliament in 1999, declared, apparently without dissent from her Unionist fellow-MSPs, ‘The Scottish Parliament, adjourned on the 25th day of March 1707, is hereby reconvened’, was she embroiling the assembled members in a kind of reverse Redgauntlet moment?

Possible Scotlands is grounded in a good deal of literary, postcolonial and nation theory which, I confess, I skimmed over. I found more meaty material in the treatment of the multiple possibilities of narrative as discovered in the novels **The Antiquary**, **Old Mortality** and **The Heart of Midlothian**. McCracken-Flesher also usefully bucks the literary trend by moving away from these and other major Scottish novels, which are rightly considered to be the

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core and quality of Scott's enormous output, to deal with lesser works like **The Talisman**, **Woodstock** and even Scott's last complete work **Castle Dangerous**, and she has interesting things to say about all of these. Her integration of his fiction with key moments in his life, particularly the Malachi Malagrowthier affair when he charged to the rescue of the Scottish paper currency, is also valuable. She reminds the reader that Scott, over and over again, took action or made statements – either as himself, or as Author of **Waverley**, or in some other authorial disguise, or through his characters – which quite clearly showed his conscious and deliberate concern not just to preserve Scotland but to equip it for the future. Hence the joke reference to the new Scottish Parliament building in the book's cover illustration – a bust of Sir Walter wearing a construction worker's hard hat – and the explicit placing of a renewed appreciation of Scott's achievement in the context of that restored Parliament. Scott, McCracken-Flesher is saying, is back, and he can show us many things about ourselves that we thought we knew, or that we thought we wanted to forget.

In her conclusion, McCracken-Flesher suggests that Scott 'haunts us not as one possible and deniable Scotland ... but as a condition that disrupts our processes and keeps them self-conscious.' (p.186) The harder we fight against what we think Scott represents, the more we find that he represents something else, and that his life and work act as a positive space in which to discuss and develop new versions of Scotland. Thus he 'constitutes not a curse, but an opportunity'; he is 'the gift that keeps on giving'. (p.187) I am sure this is the case. But will that opportunity be exploited, and that gift gratefully received?

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