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Two Notes on Sir Walter Scott's *The Antiquary*

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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

Two Notes on Sir Walter Scott's *The Antiquary*

1. An Error by Scott.

As is well known, Sir Walter Scott's rapid composition occasionally led him into blunders. One mistake in *The Antiquary* has long been famous: in Chapter Seven, Scott describes the sun setting in the ocean—on the east coast of Scotland. So far as I know, another mistake in the same novel has never yet been noticed. In Chapter One, a handbill informs us that the date is Tuesday, July 15, 17—. ¹Lovel and Jonathan Oldbuck leave Edinburgh on that day, arriving in the town of Fairport "about two o'clock on the following day" (Chap. ii, p. 27). Lovel pays a visit to Oldbuck five days later (Chap. iii, p. 28). After an indeterminate passage of time, Oldbuck decides to give a dinner party. He accordingly sends to Sir Arthur Wardour and his daughter an invitation for "Tuesday the 17th" (Chap. v, p. 47). Lovel has also been invited, and he arrives "about five minutes before four o'clock on the 17th of July" (Chap. vi, p. 54). Thus, Scott places the party two days after the opening scene, even though the time lapse has clearly been greater than a week. Furthermore, we find that in the year 17—, both the 15th and the 17th of July fell upon a Tuesday.

2. An Error by the Critics.

Most critics have placed the setting of *The Antiquary* in Forfarshire, Scott's town of Fairport being identified with Arbroath. Typical is W. M. Parker's statement in his introduction to the novel:

Arbroath is generally accepted as being the Fairport of the novel. . . . Hospitalfield, once a pilgrim's hospice near Arbroath, may have suggested Oldbuck's haunt. Auchmithie, farther north on the coast, answers more or

¹Sir Walter Scott, *The Antiquary*, intro. by W. M. Parker (Everyman's Library ed.; London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1907 [But Parker's Introduction is dated 1954]), p. 13. Subsequent quotations from the novel are taken from this edition.

less to the Mucklebackits' home, the Musselcrag, and yet farther north is Red Head, the scene of the escape of Wardour and Isabella, Ethie Castle, also to the north of Arbroath, may be taken as Knockwinnock, Wardour's residence.²

This interpretation of the novel's setting is plainly contradicted by Scott's own geographical details. The story takes place, not in Forfarshire, but in Fifeshire.

My view of the setting is supported principally by Scott's allusions to the directions of the compass. The coast of Forfarshire extends from Arbroath to the northeast, and previous critics have located the principal scenes of the novel on this northeast coastline. Yet Scott tells us that Monkbarns, the residence of Jonathan Oldbuck, was "secluded from the town by the rising ground, which also screened it from the north-west wind" (Chap. iii, p. 28). Thus, Monkbarns is located to the southeast of Fairport, which is entirely plausible if we identify Fairport with St. Andrews in Fifeshire. On the other hand, if we follow the northwest wind from Arbroath, we find that Oldbuck must have lived in the North Sea.

A few chapters later, Scott alludes to the direction of the wind once again:

The wind began next to arise; but its wild and moaning sound was heard for some time, and its effects became visible on the bosom of the sea, before the gale was felt on shore. . . .

The beach under Halket-head [was] rapidly diminishing in extent by the encroachments of a spring-tide and a north-west wind, . . . (Chap. vii, pp. 69-70.)

In this passage, the northwest wind is obviously blowing from the sea toward the land. It could do so on the coast near St. Andrews. The correspondence is better if we suppose the wind's direction to be somewhat north of northwest, but for the setting to lie near Arbroath, the wind's direction would have to be entirely opposite to that which Scott intended.

In still another passage, Lord Glenallan receives directions from the beggar, Edie Ochiltree. Speaking of old Elspeth, the Earl says, "She lives, I think, on the sea-shore, to the southward of Fairport?" Edie replies, "Just between Monkbarns and Knockwinnock Castle,

²P. x; see also, Andrew Lang, Editor's Introduction, *The Antiquary* (vol. III of *The Waverley Novels* [Border ed.; 1892; rpt. London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1900]), p. xxvii; and "Arbroath," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 11th ed., II, 339.

but nearer to Monkbarns" (Chap. xxviii, p. 266). If it were necessary, additional passages could be cited to show that Oldbuck and Wardour live to the south of Fairport. Furthermore, the bulk of the evidence indicates that the coastline extends from Fairport toward the southeast.

By now, it is clear that Forfarshire is not the correct setting. Of several other coastal shires, Fife is the most logical candidate for a number of reasons. Its coastline runs in the right direction, and it is about the right distance from Edinburgh.³ As Scott specifies, it is within sight of the Grampian Mountains.⁴ Finally, several place names in Fife are noticeably similar to those used by Scott. The Earl of Glenallan lives at some distance from the other main characters; his seat could well be Earlshall, located to the northwest of St. Andrews. The rising ground which separates Fairport from Monkbarns corresponds to the Boar Hills; these lend their name to the fishing hamlet of Boarhill. Transforming the boar into a marine creature and the hill into a crag, we have Scott's Musselcrag. Most convincing of all, both in nomenclature and in geographical location, is the correspondence between Scott's Monkbarns and the present-day hamlet of Kingsbarns.

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³Less than a twenty-four hour journey by coach (Chap. ii, p. 27).

⁴Chap. iv, p. 39; and "Forfarshire," *Ordnance Gazetteer of Scotland* (6 vols., Edinburgh: Grange Publishing Works, 1883), iv, 403.
