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“POETRY THAT DOES NOT DIE”: ANDREW LANG AND SCOTT’S “IMMORTAL” ANTIQUARIANISM

Lucy Wood

Between 1892 and 1894, Andrew Lang published his illustrated and annotated ‘Border Edition’ of Walter Scott’s works in forty-eight volumes. Textually, the edition was, according to the “Editor’s Note,” “a reprint of the magnum opus of 1829-1832,” yet it could also boast such additional materials as introductions to the novels written by Lang himself, as well as supplementary letters and reviews contemporary with the novels’ original publication. By the end of the nineteenth century, there was certainly no shortage of editions of the Waverley Novels to choose from. Readers could select from the Magnum Opus Edition (Cadell & Co., Edinburgh, 1829-33); the Fisher Edition (Fisher, Son & Co., London, 1836-39); the Cabinet Edition (Cadell, 1842-47); the Abbotsford Edition (Cadell, 1842-7); the Library Edition (Adam & Charles Black, Edinburgh, 1852-3), and the Centenary Edition (A. & C. Black, 1870-1). Clearly Lang felt that in his new Border Edition, he could offer or perhaps illuminate something in the works that the other, existing editions could and did not; and, certainly, his choice of title presented a marked contrast to the grandiose and celebratory names given to previous editions.

However, in many ways, for Lang, the title “Border Edition” is also perhaps an unsurprising choice. Like the ‘Author of Waverley’, Lang was a child of the Scottish Borders. He spent his childhood in Selkirk, not twenty miles from Sandyknowe Farm, the home of Scott’s paternal grandparents in Roxburghshire, where Scott had spent a deal of his childhood. Furthermore, Selkirk lies within ten miles of Abbotsford, Scott’s romance in stone built upon the banks of the Tweed; a house which was, by the time of Lang’s birth in 1844, open to the public. The two men shared not only a geographic association but also a passionate devotion for the landscape of the Scottish Borders. Both were from a young age fascinated by the ballads, stories, fairy tales and folklore of the region; for both men, these interests filtered into their writings in abundance.

For Lang, born twelve years after Scott's death, the source of his passion for the Borders was twofold. This land was significant, first of all, as the scenery of his youth. The Scottish Borders was for Lang a landscape rich with story, romantic in its association with tales of Border reivers and famous outlaws in countless ballads and tales of the region. The second source of appeal was entirely owing to the products of the pen of Scott. As for many others, for Lang the Borders appeared as a landscape abundant with the sites and spaces to be found within many of Scott's works. Scott's poems and novels were filled with topographical, geographical and architectural antiquities of the Scottish Borders, and of the Scottish nation. For Lang, living and writing sixty years since Scott's death, Scotland had been irrevocably and eternally altered by the invention, and intervention, of Scott's pen; and, as such, Lang's own reading of that landscape owed much to Scott's writing upon it.

Certainly, by the end of the nineteenth century, the landscape of Scotland was mapped and mediated by Scott's fictions, to a significant extent. Tourists flocked to the crumbling castles, ancient abbeys, and picturesque panoramas which populated Scott's poetry and prose. As Ian Brown and Nicola J. Watson have demonstrated, tourism in the Trossachs and especially at Loch Katrine escalated exponentially in the wake of the publication of *The Lady of the Lake* (1810).¹ Although certain other sites in the Borders such as Melrose Abbey had, as Paul Westover has noted, certainly enjoyed life as a tourist attraction for many years prior to the publication of *The Lay*, it would be true to say that, post-1805, visitor numbers notably increased, with significant numbers of pilgrims journeying to the enthralling scene of wizard Michael Scott's exhumation.²

Like so many of Scott's readers, Lang relished the opportunity to trace the topographical features of Scott's works as they appeared in the landscape itself. His delight in such an activity is evident in an anecdote of what seems to have been a particularly pleasurable reading experience, sitting in a boat in the middle of St. Mary's Loch. Lang evidently felt that in such a location he was at best advantage to survey the "Scott scenery" that surrounded him:

I read "The Lay of the Last Minstrel" over again, *here*, in the middle of the scenes where the story is laid and where the fights were fought. For when the Baron went on pilgrimage ... it was to

¹ See Ian Brown *Literary Tourism, The Trossachs, and Walter Scott* (Glasgow: Scottish Literature International, 2012); Nicola J. Watson *The Literary Tourist: Readers and Places in Romantic & Victorian Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

² Paul Westover, *Necromanticism: Travelling to Meet the Dead, 1750-1860* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 34.

the ruined chapel *here* that he came.... Branksome, where the lady lived, *is twenty miles off*, towards the south, across the ranges of lonely green hills. Harden, where her ally, Wat of Harden, abode, is *within twelve miles*; and Deloraine, where William dwelt, is nearer still; and John of Thirlestane had his square tower in the heather, “where victual never grew,” on Ettrick Water, *within ten miles*.³

That Lang could trace the geographical contours of Scott’s poem here so firmly and accurately appears to be a point of some triumph; and, crucially, of some considerable value to his reading experience. Here, Lang presents his reading *The Lay* in the centre of St. Mary’s Loch as an immersive experience, in which the “real” landscape of the Borders can be (and perhaps should be) used as an imaginative aid to the experience of reading Scott’s poem.

However, for Lang, the ability to trace Scott’s fiction across the physical landscape was not only something which could contribute to the quality of his own, touristic and readerly experience; nor was this was not simply a case of Lang’s enthusiastic, romanticised reading of Scott into the landscape. Rather, in the rest of this essay, I will suggest that throughout several of his introductions and essays upon the subject of “Scott,” Lang acknowledged a critical and mutual connection between Scott’s fiction, and the geographical and architectural heritage of Scotland. This is posited by Lang as a potentially preservative connection which could help those tangible traces of Scotland’s heritage to survive the ravages of time. Though the tourism boom of the nineteenth century suggests that the *Waverley Novels* acted as a point of popularisation for certain geographical and architectural locations throughout Scotland and especially the Borders, it is also possible to argue that the poems and novels also acted as vehicles of preservation, encouraging the care and protections of ruins and relics across the nation. According to Lang it is through their romantic representation in Scott’s fiction that Scotland’s architectural and topographical treasures find preservation. Across several of his publications, including the *Border Edition*, Lang makes the claim that, through the act of writing, Scott was involved in a process of “immortalising” the antiquities of the Scottish nation.

Central to Lang’s thesis concerning Scott’s writing as a force of preservation was an open acknowledgement of his being an antiquarian in both inclination and in practice, collecting and revering the material remains of the past. As readily as Lang suggested that Scott’s powers as a great imaginative force had vitally changed the landscape of the nation, this imagination, he claimed, came very much from the ground up. As

³ Andrew Lang, “The Poems of Sir Walter Scott,” *Essays in Little* (London: Henry and Co., Bouverie Street, E.C., 1891), 171-2 (my italics).

much as he regarded Scott as a romantic force, Lang also importantly acknowledged that the writer was a materialist, who was expressly concerned with the tangible relics and remains of the past. Fittingly, Lang states his case most clearly the introduction he wrote to *The Antiquary* for his Border Edition of the Waverley Novels. Introducing a novel which made liberal reference to antiquarian scenes and pastimes of Scott's own life—even of objects within his extensive collection housed at Abbotsford—Lang made the claim that Scott “had entered literature through the ruined gateway of archaeology.”⁴

Today, we might define archaeology as a field of scientific study concerned with the material remains of past civilizations and cultures, yet this strict definition of the discipline crystallised only in the early twentieth century when the practice came to be regarded as a profession rather than a pastime. Prior to this, “archaeology” was used as a term to describe a range of activities undertaken by scholars of antiquity, or “antiquarians.”⁵ Like modern-day archaeologists, antiquarians took as their subject matter the material remains of the past, though their interests were often exceedingly vast in scope: artefacts, art, architectural and historical sites, monuments, inscriptions, manuscripts, and books might indicate just some of the objects involved in antiquarian study.

It was this earlier usage which was current in Lang's day, and it was to this definition that he referred when he claimed that Scott had “entered literature through the ruined gateway of archaeology.” Indeed, Lang listed for his readers Scott's varied, lifelong antiquarian pursuits of ballad collection, the acquisition of artefacts and other material curiosities, and exploring historically resonant architectural or topographical sites. In claiming that Scott's entrance into literature had been conditioned by his antiquarian endeavours, Lang suggested that Scott was an “antiquary among poets.”⁶ He claimed that Scott's antiquarian activities and his literary imagination were connected from the very beginning; that Scott's interaction with the material culture of the past had vitally affected the tenor of his fictional writing. Antiquarianism, in Lang's reading, might be regarded as the founding stone of Scott's entire literary corpus.

⁴ Andrew Lang, “Editor's Introduction,” *The Antiquary* (London: John C. Nimmo, 1893), xxi.

⁵ On the history of the term “antiquarianism,” see Arnaldo Momigliano, “Ancient History and the Antiquarian,” *Studies in Historiography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 1-39 (5); and cf. also Piggott, below.

⁶ Lang, “Introduction,” *The Antiquary*, xxii.

More recently, Stuart Piggott has reiterated Lang's claim in suggesting that "Romantic and antiquarian: the two are inseparable in Scott."⁷ Rather pleasingly, Scott had himself acknowledged this connection in irrefutable terms many years before. Writing to Robert Surtees in April 1808, Scott declared that he had "been an antiquary many years before I thought of being a poet."⁸ Indeed, from a very young age, Scott had participated in antiquarian practices of collection and curation. His romantic rides across the Liddesdale wilds in the company of Robert Shortreed as a young man are well-documented; the principle treasures procured upon these journeys were ballads, mostly in manuscript form, though some also in recitation. However, ballads were not the only relics sought by Scott on these journeys: it was at this time that Scott developed an interest in the material things of the past, from castles and ruins, to objects and artefacts. At Hermitage Castle, Scott discovered a wealth of objects and artefacts to add to his budding collection, including an ancient bridle, an antique ring of the house of Douglas, an iron ladle and, Scott's crowning treasure, a Border Warhorn. This embryonic collection would form the foundations of his astonishing museum at Abbotsford; a vast collection of artefacts from armour and weapons to personalia and curios. It was at this time, too, that Scott's love for architectural antiquities began in earnest, ranging from the peel tower of Smailholme where he spent much of his youth, to Hermitage Castle, and Melrose Abbey.

Nor were antiquarian expeditions to sites of architectural and historical remains confined to an adventurous youth. Rather, Scott continued such frequent forays into adulthood in the form of the Blair Adam Antiquarian Club, founded with the intention of assembling annually at Blair Adam House to enjoy a protracted weekend of "antiquarian excursions" about the surrounding area.⁹ The sole commentator upon this Antiquarian Club, W. Stephen has noted Scott's dedication to these excursions: "so devoted was Scott to the amenities of club life at Blair Adam that during the entire period from 1817-1831, when his health failed, he never missed a single meeting" (*ibid.*, 39). Excursions included visits to Castle Campbell, Dunfermline and Cleish Castle; to Newburgh, in search of MacDuff's Cross; to Lochleven and Burleigh Castles, Magus Moor and St. Andrews (*ibid.*, 39-40). It seems to have been a conscious jest amongst the members of the Club that Scott's tramping through the Scottish countryside with the

⁷ Start Piggott, *Ruins in a Landscape: Essays in Antiquarianism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976), 133.

⁸ *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. H.J.C. Grierson, Davidson Cook, W.M. Parker and others, 12 vols (London: Constable, 1932), 56.

⁹ W. Stephen, "Sir Walter Scott and the Blair Adam Antiquarian Club (1817-31)," *Scottish Review*, 36 (1900), 37.

Blair Adam Club had resulted in the appearance of several localities in the Waverley Novels. For Lord Chief Commissioner Adam, for example, it was a description found in *The Abbot* of the Keiry Crag, “a picturesque piece of scenery in the grounds of Blair Adam” which indicated Scott’s authorship of that and the previous publications (*ibid*, 38). Stephen notes the contemporaneousness of the Club’s visit to Lochleven and surrounding sites to Scott occupation in the composition of *The Abbot* (1820); so too the proximity the Falkland Palace visit and *The Fair Maid of Perth* (1828).

Such accounts as these appealingly suggest that the architectural sites which so frequently populate Scott’s work, whether the real sites of Melrose Abbey or Kenilworth Castle or the fictional Wolfs Crag and Tully-Veolan, came to be known and represented by Scott as a direct result of antiquarian activity. This is not to say that the fictionalised locations are entirely reducible to a corresponding “real” location; rather, that such visits, observations and attentions were participant in informing Scott’s descriptions and shaping the castles of his imagination. What we can say perhaps is that, as James Reed has suggested:

whatever fictional gloss may be applied, when he is writing of Scotland, and especially of his own Border region, Scott is recording, not inventing; his vision grows out of an objective world.¹⁰

Reed suggests that Scott read this objective world through the relics and remains left behind by previous generations:

Scott’s man leaves in his wake ruined towers, decaying abbeys, flints, spearheads, broken helmets, bones; legacies of a feudal faith and a romantic chivalry (*ibid*, 9).

It was precisely these sorts of material details discovered by Scott as he traversed the Scottish Borders, the ruined towers, broken helmets, and other fragments of the past, to which Lang referred in identifying Scott’s “archaeology.” It was Scott’s engagement with such material traces which brought Scott to literature; and it was also these material traces which would vitally shape his fictions.

Yet, according to Lang, the connection between antiquarianism and literature in Scott went even further. For, as much as Scott was an antiquarian amongst poets, underpinning his fictional works with fieldwork, expeditions, collections, and other forms of active engagement with antiquities; Lang suggests that Scott was also a poet amongst antiquaries. For the antiquarian matter introduced by Scott in his poems and novels was not presented as the dry bones of antiquarian research; rather, they were infused with vigour and vitality. Whilst other antiquarian

¹⁰ James Reed, *Sir Walter Scott: Landscape and Locality* (London: Athlone Press, 1980), 6.

poets and authors such as Thomas Leland and Joseph Strutt may have wished to exhibit erudition by way of the novel as a cabinet, for Scott the work of fiction gained animation in the many relics summoned to the page.

Lang sought to illuminate and make the case for this lively aspect of Scott's imaginative antiquarianism in his essay on 'The Poems of Sir Walter Scott'. In this essay, Lang offered a more elaborate explanation of the connection between Scott's "archaeology" and his fictional output. Countering criticisms levelled at Scott's poetry regarding historical inaccuracy, Lang emphasised the rich, historic, and vitally material texture offered to the reader in these works:

They say that the archaeology is not good. Archaeology is a science; in its application to poetry, Scott was its discoverer. Others can name the plates of a coat of armour more learnedly than he, but he made men wear them. They call his Gothic art false, his armour pasteboard; but he put living men under his castled roofs, living men into his breastplates and taslets. Science advances, old knowledge becomes ignorance; *it is poetry that does not die, and that will not die.*¹¹

Here, Lang explicates the relationship between a material archaeology or antiquarianism, and the physical manifestations of this in Scott's poetry and prose. According to Lang, Scott was able to "apply" material antiquarianism to the process of writing; not merely incorporating these artefacts within his poems as exhibits and inanimate matter, nor indeed as staid, scenic descriptions which provided generic temporal context. Rather, the materiality within Scott's fictions was for Lang something vibrant; something living.

Furthermore, as a result of this profound materiality Lang suggests that Scott's fiction becomes something immortal: by virtue of its textured, antiquarian materiality, Scott's poetry is poetry "that does not die, and that will not die." Lang would return to this assumption a few years later in the aforementioned introduction to *The Antiquary* when, using an antiquarian of Scott's own invention, the reverend Doctor Dryasdust, as a contrast, Lang states:

Scott, in brief, was not a Dryasdust; all the dead bones that *he* touches come to life. He was as great an archaeologist as a poet can be, and, with Virgil, was the greatest antiquary among poets.¹²

The antiquarianism which Lang attributes to Scott, and which Scott integrates within his fictions, was concerned not only with antiquities, but also with their connections to a living world: "here was a world made alive again that had been dead for three hundred years - a world of men and

¹¹ Lang, "Poems of Sir Walter Scott," 181.

¹² "Editor's Introduction," *The Antiquary*, xxii.

women”.¹³ According to Lang, Scott’s materials are constituent parts of a past which is materially resurrected within the context of Scott’s fictions, in contrast to the lifeless practice of other antiquarian authors.

Further still, it is significant to note that in this passage Lang also attributed to Scott’s poetic archaeology a potentially “preservative” aspect: “science advances, old knowledge becomes ignorance; *it is poetry that does not die, and that will not die*” (*ibid*, 181, my italics). In this declaration, Lang suggests that through permitting these artefacts of the material past to enjoy a textual life within the context of his works, Scott performs an act of preservation. Just as Scott’s antiquarian instinct compelled him to collect ballads and material artefacts, and to purchase the land upon which the “Turn Again” stone was to be found; so too did his antiquarian instinct see him endeavour to transfer antiquities to the safe-keeping museum of prose. According to Lang, Scott restored and reanimated, preserved and conserved the material remnants of the past through the telling of tales. Thus, when the ballads he collected were no longer sung; when the castles, abbeys, and other architectural locations named and unnamed within his fictions had been rendered ruinous, or run to the ground; when breastplates and taslets had disintegrated, or the graves no longer discernible: when these material remains were no longer physically extant and to be experienced, replacement could be offered in the form of Scott’s novels.

Perhaps the most vehement articulation of Lang’s belief in Scott’s “immortal antiquarianism” emerged in Lang’s very Victorian, overly morbid project, *Letters to Dead Authors* (1886). Amongst what is perhaps for modern readers a rather morose epistolary series, Lang wrote a letter to Scott. This letter, notably, addressed Scott not as the “Author of Waverley”, but as “the Border sportsman and the Border antiquary.”¹⁴ Of all the posthumous literary correspondents called upon in Lang’s epistles, as something of a tribute to Scott, Lang suggested that it would be Scott with whom most of his readers would wish to converse: “if one might call up a poet, as the scholiast tried to call Homer, from the shades, who would not, out of all the rest, demand some hours of your society?” (*ibid*, 153). Lang’s desire to speak to the dead author seems to not only emerge from his desire for Scott’s society, but also on account of Scott’s apparent ability, “almost alone among men of letters”, to “win and charm us out of the past” (*ibid*, 152).

Lang’s suggestion of Scott’s powers of resurrection closely recalls the powers alluded to by Scott’s son-in-law and biographer J. G. Lockhart over half a century earlier. Writing in *Peter’s Letters to his Kinsfolk*, Lockhart

¹³ Lang, “Poems of Sir Walter Scott,” 180.

¹⁴ *Letters to Dead Authors* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1886), 153.

described Scott's own desire and furthermore his ability to commune with the dead:

The heroes of old times spring from their graves in panoply.... But they are honoured, not privileged- the humblest retainers quit the grave as full of life as they do...these are all alike, not names, but realities- living, moving, breathing, feeling, speaking, looking realities- when he speaks of them. The grave loses half its potency when he calls. His own imagination is one majestic sepulchre, where the wizard lamp burns in never-dying splendour, and the charmed blood glows for ever in the cheeks of the embalmed, and every long-sheathed sword is ready to leap from its scabbard, like Tizona of the Cid in the vault of Cardena.¹⁵

Living, moving, breathing, feeling, with "charmed blood" flowing through their veins: it seems that in this passage Lockhart is claiming that Scott can perform a physical reanimation of dead bodies, to live once more at his command. However, upon closer inspection, what both Lockhart and later Lang truly suggest is that, once again, Scott's close acquaintance with and understanding of Scotland's material past permitted him to most accurately and effectively transcribe this past into the safekeeping of poetry and prose. It is this essential step into writing, Lang suggests, which may be considered to be responsible for the longevity of the fragments of the past.

Lang elaborated upon this theory of preservation through poetic intervention in his 1886 letter to the spirit of Scott:

All the spirits of the river and the hill, all the dying refrains of ballad and the fading echoes of the story, all the memory of the wild past, each legend of burn and loch seem to have combined to inform your spirit, *and to secure themselves an immortal life in your song*. It is through you that we remember them; and in recalling them, as in treading each hillside in this land, we again remember you and bless you.¹⁶

According to Lang, Scott's writing offered an essential space in which Scotland's past might be protected and inscribed; a space in which the relics might "secure themselves an immortal life." To be written by Scott, Lang suggested, was to secure immortality.

Yet, to this collection of relics and remains preserved and made immortal by Scott's pen, one must also include the Waverley Novels themselves. Just as the novels act as spaces for exhibition, protection and perpetuation; by this process so too do they become precious cabinets to be preserved, and custodians of the past to be revered by the nation. Indeed,

¹⁵ *Peter's Letters to his Kinsfolk* (Second Edition). Vol. 2. (Printed for William Blackwood, Edinburgh; T. Cadell and William Davies, London; and John Smith and Son, Glasgow, 1819), 313-14.

¹⁶ *Letters to Dead Authors*, 154 (italics added).

Lang's texts frequently point to this mutually beneficial strain of immortalising antiquarianism. Antiquarian materiality offers animation to Scott's fiction where it finds preservation, in turn creating "poetry that does not die, and that will not die."¹⁷ The *Waverley Novels* share in the protection of immortal antiquarianism. In Lang's words, "even pessimism can scarcely believe that the *Waverley Novels* are mortal" (*ibid.*, 173).

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¹⁷ Lang, "Poems of Sir Walter Scott," 181.