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**AFTERWORD:
NEW REWORKINGS OF WALTER SCOTT
FROM DUNDEE COMICS CREATIVE SPACE**

Christopher Murray

One of the key ideas behind the “Reworking Walter Scott” symposium was to celebrate the “afterlives” of Scott’s literary legacy through discussion of adaptations of his work, as well as other texts and artworks indebted to Scott’s writing. Since the symposium host, the University of Dundee, is also home to the Scottish Centre of Comics Studies and Dundee Comics Creative Space (DCCS), a hands-on comics workshop was planned as part of the event.

Before the workshop, several comics artists based in DCCS worked to produce stories and artwork that either responded to Scott’s fiction or told anew some aspect of his own life story. The result was *Reworking Walter Scott*, a 32-page comics anthology published by UniVerse Comics, the University’s comics imprint, that was commissioned by Daniel Cook, the project director, and given away to symposium participants and distributed to local and national institutional partners.¹ The striking cover was produced by artist Helen Robinson, who also created an atmospheric four-page comic adaptation of *The Bride of Lammermoor*. As described below, the anthology also included stories by Norrie Millar and Rebecca Horner, Monica Burns, Damon Herd, and David Robertson, with additional artwork by Andrew Strachan, Elliot Balson, Catriona Laird, and Ashling Larkin.

The first story featured in the anthology is Norrie Millar’s *Joust*, a wordless comic strip inspired by the final sequence from *Ivanhoe*, where the hero fights as Rebecca’s champion, saving her from condemnation as a witch. As Millar says,

Adapting *Ivanhoe* into a short strip would be madness. Instead, I chose to focus on what is probably the most well-known scene—the joust—with no set-up to the characters, no background to the story, just jumping right in. Removing dialogue from the characters, and making

¹ *Reworking Walter Scott* (Dundee: UniVerse Comics, 2017). All artwork in this Afterword is copyright and used here by permission; enquiries about copyright or permissions should be directed to UniVerse.



Fig. 1: from Norrie Millar's *Joust*, based on Scott's *Ivanhoe*

it a “silent” comic, makes it the opposite to the original verbose text and also changes the dynamic of the two knights, showing them as equals rather than “hero” and “villain.”²

Millar’s treatment of this iconic moment in the novel owes much to the way the brief battle is depicted in Marvel’s 1976 Classics Comics version, which also takes only a few panels. The artwork was coloured by Rebecca Horner, and this supports the drama of the sequence. Opening on a peaceful view of the forest, the second panel breaks the silence with the shattering of lance against shield. But rather than rely on sound effects, the effect is produced visually through composition and colour, and is all the more effective for it (Fig. 1). However, whereas the battle is over very quickly in the novel, and is dealt with economically in the Marvel Comics version, Millar draws the action out a little more, bringing in some of the brutality seen earlier in the novel during the tournament. The brevity of the battle in Scott’s telling of the final confrontation is designed to bolster the notion that providence has brought about the death of Bois-Guilbert from a heart attack. As the Grand Master proclaims, “This is indeed the judgment of God.” For a largely secular modern audience, however, this is perhaps a little unsatisfying, so Millar adopts the same solution as the 1952 film adaptation of *Ivanhoe* directed by Richard Thorpe, namely transposing the depiction of combat seen in the earlier tournament to the final battle. Millar, like Thorpe, extends this scene dramatically, taking from the film the detail of Ivanhoe wielding an axe and Bois-Guilbert a mace. However, whereas the film has Ivanhoe strike a fatal blow against his opponent, Millar retains the depiction of Bois-Guilbert dying of a heart attack, and even foreshadows this in several earlier panels. Millar combines the novel and the 1952 film, with additional influence from the 1976 Marvel comic. His version of the story’s ending is in dialogue both with Scott’s novel and with other adaptations and remediations of it, very much in keeping with the theme of the larger project, Reworking Walter Scott.

The second story in the comic is Helen Robinson’s *The Bride of Lammermoor*. Rather than being wordless like Millar’s comic, Robinson’s version replaces Scott’s third-person narrator by the bride Lucy herself. There are no speech balloons or thought bubbles depicting reported dialogue; instead, Lucy’s voice telling her own story appears throughout in caption boxes (Fig. 2). In her narrative, Lucy reflects on the events of the story, which are revealed through analepsis, recalling a series of vivid images, including memories of her first meeting with Edgar, the growth of their love, the efforts of Lady Ashton to end this relationship and marry Lucy to Francis, Laird of Bucklaw, and finally, the wounding of Francis, Lucy’s new husband, and her descent into madness. The colours and muted

² Norrie Millar, in email correspondence with Christopher Murray, May 1, 2018.

tones, and the haunting style of the artwork, evokes elements of gothic horror. Particularly effective are the moments where Lucy feels that Edgar has abandoned her and that her letters to him have been ignored. Here Robinson places some of the text from captions in the spaces between and outside of the panels, making Lucy's voice seem all the most distant, isolated and alienated. The final image is of the bride daubed in red,

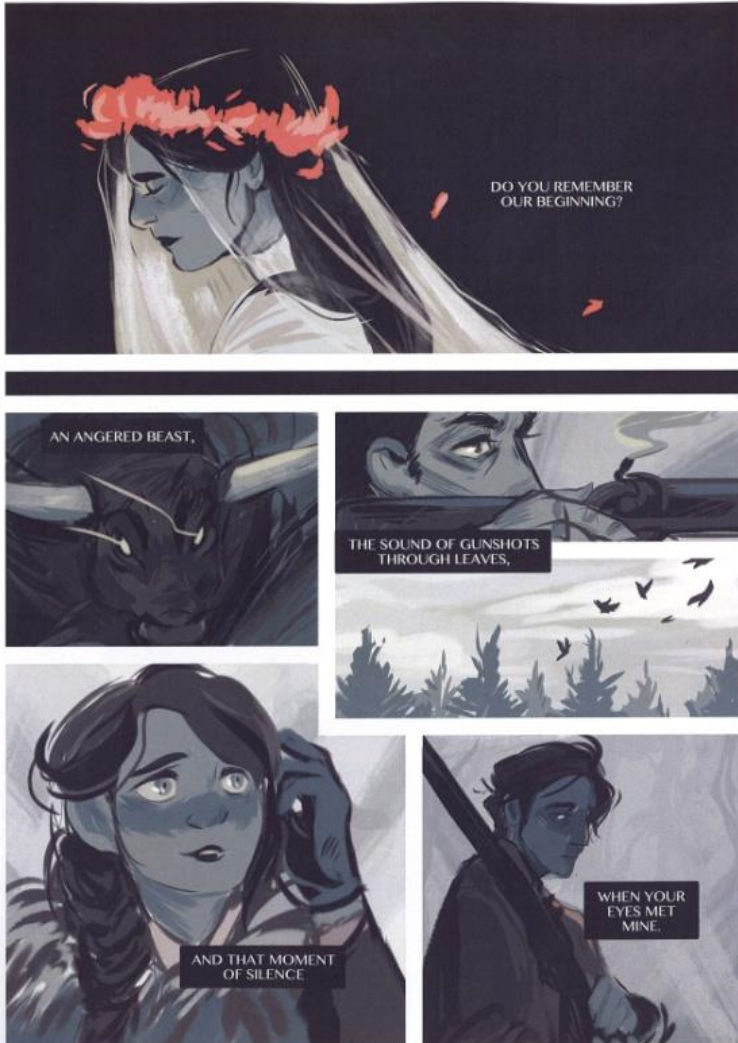


Fig. 2: from Helen Robinson's *The Bride of Lammermoor*

denoting blood and violence, but also the flowers that signify their love throughout the comic. This haunting image recalls the influence of the Gothic on Scott, but also the supernatural and tragic nature of the Border Ballads that inspired *The Bride of Lammermoor*. The relative decline in Scott's critical reputation, and that fact that he is less read now than in the nineteenth century, means that there persists a notion that Scott is a dry-as-dust traditionalist rather than a writer who explored darker themes. Robinson's comic captures the darker aspect of Scott's writing in a way not commonly seen in graphic adaptations of his work.

The next story in the anthology is by Monica Burns, who wrote and drew a six-page comic, *Walter Scott and the Honours Three*. Rather than making an adaptation of Scott's own writing, as Millar and Robinson do in their stories, Burns recounts an incident from Scott's life, visualizing Scott's role in the rediscovery of the lost Honours of Scotland (Fig. 3). In 1650, the Honours—the Scottish crown, sceptre and sword of state, used to signify assent to legislation—had been smuggled out of Dunnottar Castle when it was besieged by Cromwell's troop, and hidden to avoid confiscation. They were returned following the Restoration of the Monarchy but following the Act of Union in 1707 they were largely forgotten. In 1818, a group led by Scott and authorised by the Prince Regent searched for and located the Honours in Edinburgh Castle. The finding of the supposedly "lost" regalia that led to Scott being knighted. Burns had worked as a tour guide at Dunnottar Castle, which features prominently in these events, and was very familiar with this story. She opens her comic with Scott poised to enter a gloomy room, leading his team as they search the vaults of Edinburgh Castle. As they search, Burns's Scott weaves the dramatic tale of the Honours, which a companion (Jardine) observes "sounds exactly like something out of one of your novels." One of the key themes of Scott's writing is explored here—the relationship between history and fiction, and the way in which each constructs the other. As Burns points out, her comic also engaged with earlier visual responses to Scott, and in particular, she reveals that "the colour scheme of the artwork was inspired by Henry Raeburn's portrait of Walter Scott."³

The fourth story in the anthology was created by Damon Herd, a comics studies scholar specialising in autobiographical comics, and co-ordinator of Dundee Comics Creative Space. Herd's four-page comic, *Wee Wattie*, draws from Scott's autobiographical writings to construct a story about Scott's early years, specifically how childhood illness saw him moving from Edinburgh to the nearby countryside, where he was cared for

³ Monica Burns, email correspondence with Christopher Murray, May 4, 2018.



Fig 3: from Monica Burns, *Walter Scott and the Honours Three*

by his aunt, Janet Scott, who introduced him to a wide range of songs, poems and stories that greatly influenced his career (Fig. 4). Herd comments:

As an autobiographical cartoonist I wanted to do a short strip based on Scott's own life rather than adapting his work. Researching Scott's life, I became fascinated by his aunt Jenny Scott, who was a great influence on him. I wanted the strip to be a tribute to Jenny Scott as much as it was to Walter Scott, as I don't think he would have become the writer he was without her influence. As a child, Scott contracted polio and was sent to convalesce in his family's farm at Sandyknowe, in the Scottish borders. My own family on my mother's side came from Selkirk, which is less than 15 miles from Sandyknowe, so I felt a connection to the area. It was here that Jenny Scott would read to him, often from *The Tea-table Miscellany: or, a Collection of Choice Songs, Scots and English* by Allan Ramsay. The stories in the book and the country life around the farm would inspire Scott's own writing. Most of the details of Scott's life that I used came from his own writings. I quoted from *Scott On Himself: A Selection of the Autobiographical Writings of Sir Walter Scott*, edited by David Hewitt (1981). He did not write extensively on his childhood but what he did write was full of odd details such as being dressed in the skin of a freshly killed sheep to ease his suffering. The image I drew of the sheep pre-slaughter has an (unintentional) worried look on its face, which added to the humorous tone of the story.⁴

This last point is key. Herd's story juxtaposes a dark, cramped, modern Edinburgh with the bright open spaces of the Scottish countryside, echoing the tensions that exist in Scott's work, between history and fiction, between modernity and the past, and between suffering and pain on the one hand and irony and humour on the other. Scott's voice, drawn from his autobiographical writings, interjects his perspective, revealing his time in Sandyknow as intellectually nourishing, while undercutting the "odd remedies" that were sought to cure his physical ailments. Using one of the key strengths of the comics medium—the ability to present ironic tensions between what is written and what is shown in the images, Herd brings some of Scott's often over-looked wit to the fore.

The best example is, as Herd suggests, the comically worried sheep who breaks the fourth wall, looking out of the page at the reader, creating a sense that the sheep is aware of its looming fate, and is aware of the reader's presence. The sheep is a victim of circumstance, just as Wee Wattie is, both in terms of his illness and the bizarre treatments that are foisted upon him.

⁴ Damon Herd, email correspondence with Christopher Murray, May 4, 2018.

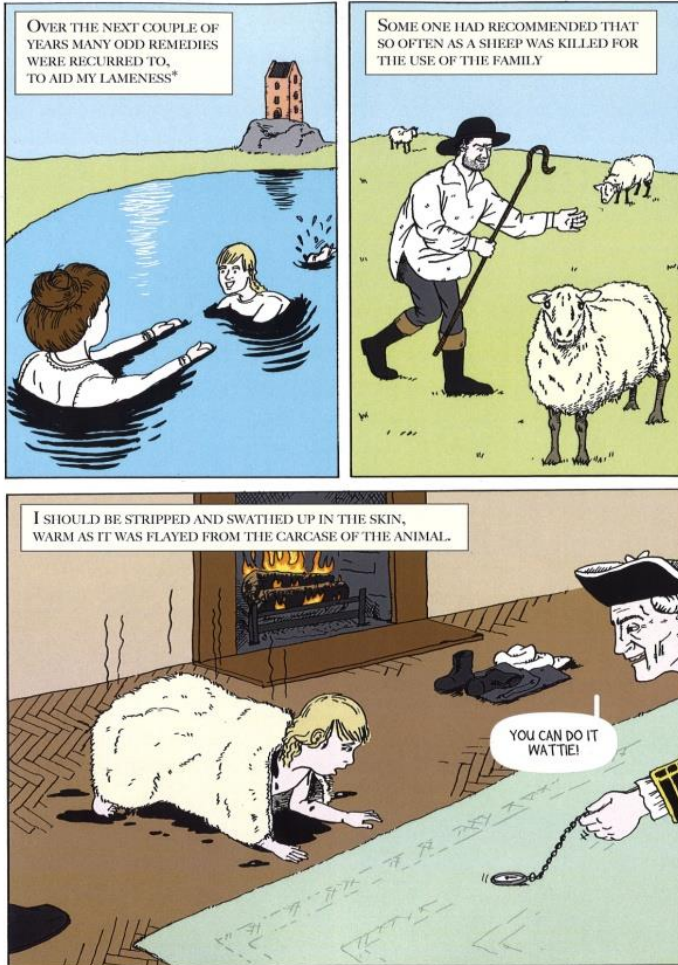


Fig. 4: from Damon Herd's *Wee Wattie*

The final story is *Patriotism*, drawn by artist David Robertson, who notes that he

toyed with a couple of ideas for this comic, including adapting Scott's ideas to a genre setting, or writing an interview with him. In the end I thought it best to use Scott's own words, with any commentary or input from me occurring in the images.⁵

⁵ David Robertson, email correspondence with Christopher Murray, May 9 2018.

Robertson's comic is an adaptation of Canto Six of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), one of the works that established Scott's fame. Scott appears here, speaking the words of the poem, but positioned as if sitting to have his portrait painted (indeed, the images of him are drawn from portraits of the writer). Given that the poem has an ancient minstrel as its narrator, the transposition of Scott into the role of narrator/ancient minstrel is significant, evoking an older bardic tradition that is in threat of disappearing. Robertson's Scott, occupying this curious position, fixes a young, contemporary or modern Scotsman in his gaze, lamenting the young man's lack of patriotism, with images of a twenty-first-century Scotland dominating the narrative.

The comic places Scott's call for patriotism in the context of present-day Scotland, where such issues were again a hot topic, especially in the aftermath of the 2014 Scottish Referendum. One reading of the comic is that it offers a critique of a lack of patriotism among the younger generation, but this is offered by Scott, who arguably created the somewhat false sense of Scottish identity in which much of this patriotism is rooted. Patriotism can be seen as a mode of self-aggrandisement, one that is mannered and highly codified, like portrait painting itself. Drawing so overtly on the portraits of Scott for the depiction of the writer, Robertson establishes a degree of ambiguity in his comic, which reflects a key aspect of Scott's writing that is often overlooked. As Lumsden points out,

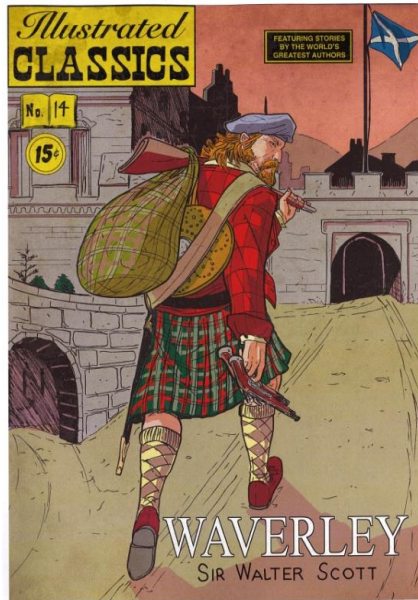


Fig. 5: Elliot Balson's *Waverley*

Throughout his work Scott is fascinated by the relationship of the past to the present and the ways in which we can simultaneously commemorate history without being trapped by it. His novels offer a wealth of questions about how national identities are shaped, how political frameworks emerge and re-emerge, and how moments of

conflict resonate collective memories. But they seldom offer us any solutions.⁶

In addition to the stories discussed above, the anthology includes several other pieces. Among these are two comics covers, one by Andrew Strachan is based on *Rob Roy*, and reflects the style of Marvel Comics' *Classics Comics* series that appeared in the 1970s, and the other, Elliot Balson's *Waverley* (Fig. 5), echoes the style of the *Classics Illustrated* series and uses as its inspiration the painting "Disbanded" (1877) by John Pettie. Pettie himself drew inspiration from Walter Scott's novels for his subject matter, and his painting has been used as the cover for the Penguin Classics edition of *Waverley*. On the inside back cover of the comic is an illustration of the Scott monument, focusing on the statue of Scott, by Catriona Laird.

Also in the comic are two biographically-focused cartoons by Ashling Larkin, to accompany a short article on Scott's life by Lucy Linforth Wood. The first of Larkin's cartoons shows the ghost of Scott beaming with pride as contemporary tourists visit his monument in Edinburgh. The second (Fig. 6) shows Scott furiously writing, with Abbotsford in the background and money on his mind, as shown by pound signs appearing in a thought bubble.



Fig. 6: Ashling Larkin on Scott at work

Taken together, these young, mostly Scottish comics creators (Robinson is Irish) have created a remarkable range of responses to Scott's work and legacy.

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⁶ Alison Lumsden, "Walter Scott was no bland tartan romantic, he was dumbed down," *The Conversation*, July 9th 2014: <https://theconversation.com/walter-scott-was-no-bland-tartan-romantic-he-was-dumbed-down-28933> (accessed 09/05/18).