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SCOTT'S REPARATIVE LAND ETHIC

Nigel Leask

Susan Oliver's book is a welcome addition to the burgeoning field of romantic ecocriticism, and the first dedicated "green" study of Walter Scott.¹ Addressing a wide range of his poetry and prose, both fiction and non-fiction, the book studies Scott's contribution to debates about Scotland's environment from the practical perspective of an "improving" land owner, a man who in addition to his global celebrity as a writer, claimed to have planted a million trees on his Borders estate of Abbotsford. As an historical novelist, Scott is renowned for charting the human consequences of the stadial progress of society, but Oliver proposes that, in contrast to romantic advocates of a transcendent nature, he believed that the natural environment was also a constantly changing entity, possessed of its own kind of agency. This derives from the fashionable "new materialist" theories of Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, and Tim Morton, among others, whose work Oliver engages with throughout the book. And yet she argues that Scott's "land ethic" was always mindful of the moral intentions of human agents acting upon the natural environment. To this extent his views are placed in dialogue with the urgent ecological concerns of the 21st century, which gives the book a welcome polemical thrust. Susan Oliver shows that Scott's sense of the "conflicts of interest between business-orientated economics, local communities and their traditions, and the land itself" (p.56) offers important historical insights into the current crisis of the anthropocene era.

Although Oliver credits Scott with anticipating a version of Aldo Leopold's "land ethic," one strength of this book is that he isn't set up here as a romantic eco-hero. Abbotsford was one of the first houses in Britain with gas heating, and Scott played a significant role in developing Scotland's carbon economy, although as a major share-holder in the

¹ Susan Oliver, *Walter Scott and the Greening of Scotland: Emergent Ecologies of a Nation* [Cambridge Studies in Romanticism, 132] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). Pp. xiv + 229. Hardback, \$90. ISBN 9781108831574.

Scottish Oil and Gas Light Company, he unsuccessfully sought to light Edinburgh with gas manufactured from whale oil rather than coal (hardly an acceptable “green alternative” by modern standards). At Abbotsford, Scott demonstrated an early example of “carbon offsetting” by employing lime used in his domestic gas plant as a fertilizer for the trees planted on his estate. He described his planting program in a manuscript journal *Sylva Abbotsfordiensis* (1819-1825), which reveals his detailed understanding of the ecological relations between wildlife, domestic animals, plants and trees on the banks of the Tweed.²

Connections with the ballads collected in *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* are underlined by Scott’s creation of “Rhymer’s Glen,” in which ash, larches and Spanish chestnut competed with indigenous flora and fauna, situated near the spot where Thomas the Rhymer allegedly composed his verses beneath the mysterious Eildon Tree. The Rhymer’s seven-year underground sojourn with the Elf Queen invokes Heather Sullivan’s “dirt theory,” the marvellous power of the soil “connecting the human world with the material earth and with hidden histories” (p. 23).³ The subsequent chapters argue that Scott developed a “land ethic” through storytelling that engaged with “topical ecological anxieties including overfishing, the extension of sheep farming and the planting of non-native trees in unsuitable locations” (p. 27).

The six chapters that follow analyse a range of environmental zones (grasslands; rivers and shores; wild places; trees; stone, water and air) and themes (“toxic ecologies,” “rarity and extinction”) in relation to nuanced ecological readings of Scott’s poems and novels. Chapter two addresses the “shifting ecologies” of grasslands, rivers and shorelines. Opening with *The Monastery*, the disappearance of indigenous birch trees from the banks of the Tweed is evoked by a spectral White Lady, weeping for lost riparian plants and animals as well as the beliefs and legends of a past age. Moving to grasslands, a “brief history of farming” addresses Scott’s views of agricultural improvement, revealing his resistance to “industrialized” farming of the sort condemned by Cobbett and others, especially large scale sheep husbandry. As I’ve argued in *Stepping Westward*, I’m not convinced that he was always willing to stand up and criticise landowners

² Scott never published his *Sylva Abbotsfordiensis: Memoranda concerning the woods and plantations at Abbot's Ford*, but a description and full diplomatic transcription by Alison Lumsden and Gerard Carruthers is linked from the Faculty of Advocates web-site at: <https://www.advocates.org.uk/faculty-of-advocates/the-advocates-library/significant-finds-at-abbotsford/sylva-abbotsfordiensis>.

³ E.g., in Heather Sullivan, “Dirt Theory and Material Ecocriticism,” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 19.3 (Summer 2012): 515-531.

like the Marchioness of Stafford for clearing her Gaelic tenants to make way for sheep (exemplified here by Sgt. MacAlpine's narrative in the introduction to *A Legend of Montrose*).⁴ Regarding the dire historical legacy of sheep clearance, Oliver reminds us that in 2020 there were more sheep (6.73 million) than people (5.46 million) living in Scotland (p. 40). The chapter is excellent on fish and fishing, both riverine and marine, offering new insights into *The Pirate*, *The Antiquary*, and the two Dumfriesshire novels *Guy Mannering* and *Redgauntlet*. Scott's best-selling novels drew public attention to the depletion of river salmon stocks by stake net fishing, as well as weirs, dams and caulds, exploitative practices of the sort associated with *Redgauntlet*'s Joshua Geddes. The chapter closes by proposing that Scott's use of the picturesque rejected the distanced viewing practices of Uvedale Price *et al.* in favour of a more immersive, ecological sense of the environment, although given the slipperiness of the concept, this perhaps needs more ample demonstration.

In chapter three, Susan Oliver focuses on "ecogothic" narratives and "violence against the land," discussing "Thomas the Rhymer," "The Battle of Otterburn" and other ballads in *The Minstrelsy*, "ecophobic" to the extent that some of them register "unhomely" flora and fauna as visible reminders of hidden histories. An especially disturbing instance of a "toxic ecology" in *Minstrelsy* is John Leyden's gruesome gothic "Lord Soulis," whose protagonist is punished by his rebellious tenants by being wrapped in a sheet of lead and melted: the pollutive legacy of this prevents even weeds from growing in the soil in which he is buried (p. 74). An excellent section on *Waverley*, developed from Oliver's 2013 essay on "Scott's Transatlantic Ecology" in *The Wordsworth Circle*, discusses state-sponsored ecophobia in the razing of Tully-Veolan, as triumphant Hanoverian soldiers employ gunpowder to blow up ancient forest trees, alongside the defeated claims of Jacobitism: "the end of *Waverley* is concerned with an act of 'improvement' that can also be construed as an act of environmental genocide" (p. 79).⁵ This act of ecophobia provides an important caveat to *Waverley*'s rather triumphalist conclusion, giving it an ideological nuance that critics have long searched for in vain.

Chapter 4 addresses wild places, rarity, and extinction in *Lady of the Lake*, *Legend of Montrose*, and *Bride of Lammermoor*. Despite demonstrating Scott's sympathy for wild places threatened by encroaching modernity and "improvement," Oliver is cautious about fetishizing ideas of wilderness. In discussing Scott's notion of the precarity of bird and other

⁴ *Stepping Westward: Writing the Highland Tour, c. 1720-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), chs. 5 and 6, esp. 225-230, 249-251.

⁵ Susan Oliver, "Scott's Transatlantic Ecology," *The Wordsworth Circle*, 44.2-3 (2013): 115-120.

animal species like aurochs, beavers, and wolves, she includes the Gaelic-speaking human occupants of wild land in *Lady of the Lake*. Yet in her concluding remarks on the defeat of the villainous Roderick Dhu and his MacAlpine myrmidons, Oliver reads the Trossachs setting as “a closed environment,” a “wild place that needs an extension of its ecologies rather than a narrowing of them for it to survive” (p.100). This judgement seems “progressive” only in an 18th century stadialist sense, not in relation to contemporary ideas of environmental justice, given the subsequent fate of the Gaelic inhabitants of the area, purged like wolves, raptors, and wild cats, to whom they are likened in Scott’s poem. “Re-wild the Gaels!” *The Lady of the Lake* certainly tamed the Trossachs by making it into one of Britain’s major tourist destinations, whose flora and fauna are now protected by the area’s inclusion in the Queen Elizabeth National Park, while Loch Katrine provides clean drinking water to the city of Glasgow.

Chapter 5 represents an important contribution to our understanding of Scott’s “radical ecocentrism” (p. 138) in addressing his little-known obsession with forestry and plantation, drawing on his two published reviews in the mid-1820’s dedicated to this topic, as well as his personal preoccupations as a land-manager at Abbotsford as schematised in *Sylva Abbotsfordiensis*.⁶ Scott’s planting strategies on heavily deforested Borders land overlapped with his antiquarian sensibility. In Oliver’s description, Scott’s was “an early attempt at restoration land management that mirrors one of his most overwhelming literary passions: collecting old ballads and stories, ‘repairing’ them where he felt it necessary” (p. 118). Of nineteen tree species named in *Sylva* as planted on his land, only four were exotic species, and regarding native species his preference was for the magnificent Scots pine. Birches planted at Abbotsford (almost extirpated from the Borders) were grown from seed gathered while visiting the Trossachs, connecting Scott’s domestic ecology with the environment represented in *The Lady of the Lake*.

But Scott’s ecological and aesthetic considerations are also shown to have been balanced with commercial motives, including the planting of exotic larches and firs as well as drainage and soil enrichment. Scott’s enthusiasm for moorland reclamation on William Adams’s Fifeshire estate at Blairadam, and Lord Kames’s at Flanders Moss, studied by Fredrick Albritton Jonsson in *Enlightenment’s Frontier*, typified enlightenment

⁶ On this, see also Oliver’s essays, “Planting the Nation’s ‘Waste Lands’: Walter Scott, Forestry and the Cultivation of Scotland’s Wilderness,” *Literature Compass*, 6.3 (May 2009): 589-598; and “Trees, Rivers, and Stories: Walter Scott Writing the Land,” *Yearbook of English Studies*, 47 (2017): 279-299.

improvement;⁷ in an era where the vital role of bogs as carbon sinks was unknown, peat represented a “primitive” energy source to be replaced by coal, given the deforestation of Britain as a whole, and the commercial exploitation of its subterranean carbon “ghost acres.” It is often forgotten that in 1800 Britain imported nearly all of its commercial timber, a supply threatened by Napoleonic blockades, which acted as a spur on domestic plantation. But Scott braked the enthusiasm of many of his contemporaries for fast-growing plantations of imported foreign trees, especially Douglas Firs and Sitka Spruce, and he was wary of the “transatlantic exchange” of cleared Gaels for Canadian timber, as “increasing demands for manpower in Canadian lumber industry primed migration from Scotland” (p. 131). In his review of Monteith's *The Forester's Guide*, Scott proposed an attractive plan for what might today be called “forest crofts,” established for Highland forestry workers and their families to tend plantations of Scots Pine in order to forestall emigration (p. 134).⁸ In a severely deforested nation, as Oliver reminds us at the end of this excellent chapter, trees function as “a sentinel species” (p. 137), warning us of the dire consequences of replacing biodiversity with commercial monocultures like sheep ranching.

The final chapter, “Stone, Air and Water,” takes a more impressionistic tack in exploring the role of elemental “assemblages” in Scott's writing, “challenging assumptions about the characteristics and boundaries that constituted those ecological components” (p. 142). Lithic impressions take up the first part of the chapter, from Huttonian unconformities to stone dogs, or “Old Mortality's” re-chiselling Covenanter gravestones. The section on water moves from the sound of torrents and the Tweed to the “ecogothic” effects of the wild oceanic cliffs of *The Pirate*, with its seabirds, mermaids, and whale fishers. The final section explores miasmic and salubrious airs in Scott, from “auld Reekie” to the “smoke-pennoned steamboats” of the Clyde, closing with a lyrical passage on stargazing in what is now Dumfriesshire's Dark Sky Park in *Redgauntlet* and *Guy Mannering*.

⁷ Fredrick Albritton Jonsson, “The Enlightenment in the Peat Moss,” in his *Enlightenment's Frontier: the Scottish Highlands and the Origins of Environmentalism* [Lewis Walpole Series in Eighteenth-Century Culture and History] (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

⁸ [Walter Scott], review of Robert Monteath, *The Forester's Guide and Profitable Planter*, *Quarterly Review*, 36 (October 1827): 558–600; review of Henry Steuart, *The Planter's Guide; or, a Practical Essay on the Best Method of Giving Immediate Effect to Wood, by the removal of large Trees and Underwood, being an attempt to place the Art in fixed principles...*, *Quarterly Review*, 37 (March 1828): 303–44.

The achievement of this excellent book is to present a cumulative literary history of Scotland's ecologies that is "as varied and densely full of life" as the human figures who populate Scott's writings. Read in the light of Susan Oliver's important and convincing study, Scott's poetry and novels do indeed appear to be "vibrantly and marvellously ecological." In that light they assume a new relevance for 21st century readers wrestling with the dire consequences of the forces of industrial modernity which Scott addressed two hundred years ago.

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