Constancy and Change: The Process of History in Scott's Redgauntlet

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The historical novels of Sir Walter Scott embody a process of history; their invented characters and incidents seem to partake of the logic of real history, or rather, to impart to historical events new order and intelligibility. This paper attempts to describe in detail this process of history as it may be seen in a single novel of Scott's, to see exactly what the pattern is behind its invented characters and incidents, and to define from this pattern some of the historical ideas that shaped Scott's fiction. Process of history can mean two different things: a trend or direction of history, that pattern which a long line of historical events reveals; or the method of history, that pattern visible within each separate event. The first pursues outcomes; the second, interactions. Scott, this paper will argue, beheld a common pattern within separate historical events and formed his fiction as an imaginative exploration of that pattern; but he denied (as far as he could, given the knowledge of actual outcomes he shared with his readers) that history has much direction.

*Redgauntlet* offers an excellent opportunity to see Scott's
ideas of history in his fiction, because in it the invented characters and incidents which offered widest scope to the novelist's imagination have free rein. The novel's historical background is slight. The protagonists Darsie Latimer and Alan Fairford are more passive than other Scott protagonists, being literally carried about on parts of their tours of the Border; and the conclusion is more crudely huddled. More than in other Scott novels, secondary characters carry the weight of the interest. In the foreground of the novel, for exposition there are tales or apologias confided to Darsie and Alan by those they meet on their travels—Joshua Geddes, Peter Peebles, Maxwell of Summertrees, Nanty Ewart, Wandering Willie, and Redgauntlet himself. Instead of battles, there are trial-like confrontations among the protagonists, Jacobites, and legal authorities. These tales and trials form the main incidents of the novel; and in them, if anywhere, Scott's process of history is to be found.

The first tale is the story of Joshua Geddes' Quakerism. His beliefs shape his confrontation with Redgauntlet; but they have also shaped opinions on law, sport and etiquette which Darsie, and most readers, find "a little too highstrained." Geddes himself is unable to conform to them, as his interactions with Benjie show. The Quaker code is adapted to neither the Border tradition of violence nor its emerging civil law; when Darsie is kidnapped, Geddes can neither defend him by force nor swear to a complaint. The Quaker is almost a character of farce until he tells his family story, tracing the hasty temper and fierce name to the "'ravenous and bloodthirsty'" men of the Border, and the creed to an impulsive grandfather and a period of religious ferment (R, letter VII, 108). New values have changed Geddes' estate, but not his temperament, which bespeaks a common past with his more troublesome neighbors. Geddes' tale gives historical meaning to the contradictions in his life by connecting them with two different stages in the past—the quaint, rigid code, and the lawless life of the Border it was intended to remake.

Peter Peebles, the pauper litigant, exemplifies the miseries of litigation and tells of its satisfactions:

"It's very true that it is grandeur upon earth to hear ane's name thunnered out along the long-arched roof of the Outer-House . . . a' the best lawyers in the house fleeing
like eagles to the prey; . . . reporters mending their pens to take down the debate—the Lords themselves pooin' in their chairs, like folks sitting down to a gude dinner, and crying on the clerks for parts and pendicles of the process, who, puir bodies, can do little mair than cry on their closetkeepers to help them. To see a’ this . . . and to ken that naething will be said or dune among a’ thae grandfolk . . . saving what concerns you and your business—Oh, man, nae wonder that ye judge this to be earthly glory!” (R ch. XXIII, 244-5).

This bustling public scene is more real to Peebles than his lost private life as a tradesman, with regular food "just as if fairies had brought it" (R ch. XXIII, 295). His tale, like Geddes', by linking past and present, gives meaning and pathos to a seemingly irrational was of life.

Though their codes are products of modern times, Geddes and Peebles are drawn essentially as Scott draws characters from the past in other novels. Baron Bradwardine, Rob Roy, and David Deans, for instance, also live by indivisible codes, never abandoned or altered whatever tragic contradictions new circumstances may oppose to them. The codes, so obviously formed in distinct times and places, give the characters their historical quality. The chief difference between Redgauntlet and other Scott novels (and it is not a great difference) is that in Redgauntlet Scott shows the moment after change, instead of the moment before, showing the codes as incongruous with earlier ways, as well as with new circumstances.

In later characterizations in Redgauntlet Scott elevates the technique into complex stories having as their explicit themes problematic changes in the characters' ways of life. Maxwell of Summertrees' tale, introduced as a choice after-dinner performance, opens at the moment when Summertrees suddenly finds his loyalty a fatal encumbrance. Unlike other similarly situated characters in Scott, he can escape without submitting to the enemy. His breakneck flight—or fall—symbolizes the disorientation a social being must suffer at abrupt, lasting separation from those who shared his ethos. Though without comrades the old code is impracticable, no new code replaces it: Summertrees scorns his contemporaries, asking eagerly for news, then petulantly objecting to new ways. His tale trails off into
"indistinct mutterings" (R ch. XI, 65) which express a deadlock between acknowledged impotence and continued defiance. The sociable man has become a misanthrope, the gentleman has learned to act perfidiously (betraying Alan Fairford with his letter), the light-hearted adventure of Jacobitism has become a "dream" and folly. Summertrees has every reason to change; yet constancy is the outcome Scott asserts.

A dramatic turn of history has voided Summertrees' code; Nanty Ewart's has suffered the same fate in a series of private incidents. What more homely tale than that of a divinity student ensnared by his landlady's flirtatious daughter and disowned by his minister father, the dénouement prompted by a grasping landlord? It is all ordinary enough to be told in proverbs, folk allusions, common metaphors. Yet though the steps are small, the route from manse to smuggler's brig is from highest to lowest—"O, Criffel to Solway Moss!" Ewart exclaims (R ch. XIV, 114). The tragic point of Ewart's story is that though he adopted new ways under the press of circumstances and though he blames the old code—"Kirk would not let us be" (R ch. XIV, 115)—it retains its hold. His language reflects this fact, for divinity-student learning and the smuggler slang jostle each other throughout the tale. Moreover, the astonishment at the disjunction between past and present, which the reader feels in Geddes' and Peebles' stories, is felt by Ewart himself; he feels himself both Presbyterian and pirate. In the disjunction the reader sees change, though the character has been more faithful than he wishes.

If process of history means trend or direction of history, it cannot be found in the welter of creeds, professional habits, and political causes which make up the lives of the minor characters of Redgauntlet, all roughly contemporaries and fellow countrymen. Religious orthodoxy and libertinism, trade and glory-seeking, rebellion, freebooting and law, comradeship and isolation—the characters move in either direction between these poles. Even the historical circumstances affecting them Scott shows as widely diverse, including the taming of the Border after Union, the democratization of law, Jacobite reaction and New World commerce. Such diversity baffles speculation about a direction to history; instead it implies that historical changes will impinge in individual lives in ways essentially diverse. Nor does any character have an advantage in the outcome of the novel, for
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Geddes, Peebles and Ewart, potential opponents of Redgauntlet and rescuers of Alan and Darsie, are ineffectual, and Summertrees' contribution to the Jacobite conspiracy is a counsel of despair. The stories are these characters' chief actions in the novel; and the historical outcomes they show are irreducibly various.

On the other hand, the tales show a single common pattern of change within the individual life. Its basis, paradoxically, is constancy to a code. Since a code is an historical artifact, it cannot fit all temperaments and circumstances. Thus it may become obsolete, growing remote from changing circumstances and gradually (or suddenly) transformed from a means of action to a hindrance, even though its adherent refuses to abandon it. Some of Scott's most arresting incidents are those in which this transformation figures. The trial of Evan Dhu Maccombich in Waverley and the confrontation of Hamish with Sargeant Cameron in The Highland Widow dramatize these characters' inability to acknowledge alternatives to their codes, though constancy condemns them; Baron Bradwardine's meditations on defeat, Balfour of Burley's vocal dreams, and Rob Roy's confiding talk of his sons show characters' conscious facing of the disjunction between code and circumstances. The individual's constancy to values no longer capable of being expressed in action becomes the yardstick of the change that has taken place around him.

Much of the comic spirit of Redgauntlet is due to Scott's refusal to judge the codes he portrays. Their obsolescence or success is shown to be no measure of their worth. Peebles' litigation, though ruinous to him, can continue as long as circumstances (such as lawyers' charity and ambition, and a general belief in justice through law) favor it. Summertrees' Jacobitism, though shared by "many a pretty fellow" (R ch. XI, 65), was driven from history by the force of an opposing party. Geddes' Quakerism, neither successful for its devotee nor encouraged by his milieu, was preserved because its privatism limited its risks. Scott concerns himself deeply with the shortcomings of codes, with the pain and corruption their obsolescence may bring their adherents. Nonetheless, his underlying attitude is one of cheerful appreciation of the variety of ways of life history displays, and sympathy for those who cultivate them.
Even obsolescence has exceptions. Wandering Willie's tale narrates a successful survival of a change in circumstances. The piper Steenie Steenson, Willie's grandfather and hero of the tale, is a trimmer, a Tory "just out of a kind of needcissity, that he might belong to some side or other" (R Letter XI, 163), in contrast with his landlord, Sir Robert Redgauntlet, a fanatic partisan, punished after death with his fellow fanatics who tried to maintain by violence an obsolescent code. Steenie's task is to win a rent receipt to clear him with the Tory's Whig heir, without being recruited into this hell of constancy as his friend Dugald has been. Steenie's appeal is voiced in terms that transcend code:

So he spoke up like a man, and said he came neither to eat, or drink, or make minstrelsy; but simply for his ain—... and ... he charged Sir Robert for conscience' sake—(he had no power to say the holy name)—and as he hoped for peace and rest, to spread no snares for him, but just to give him his ain (R, Letter XI, 182).

He asserts his own manhood, and addresses Sir Robert as a fellow soul only; and so he extricates himself from his seemingly hopeless plight.

A great point of the tale is that the apparently easy transition from old proprietor to heir opens as a broad gap which Steenie barely leaps. The leap really occurred, for each incident in the story has a natural explanation; yet it was a prodigious leap, such as supernatural terms alone can convey. Wandering Willie insists that change is really as chancy as it appears in his tale; for when Darsie asserts that the adventure ended happily, Willie admonishes him that Steenie and his landlord "had baith to sup the sauce o't sooner or later" (R, Letter XI, 190). Willie's own situation is proof that the successful adaptation is as impermanent as the unsuccessful. Though the past shapes the present, it does so in unpredictable ways.

Finally, Sir Hugh Redgauntlet's family legend celebrates constancy. For Alberick Redgauntlet, progenitor of the family, the first choice is the last. When he places his political loyalty above paternal love, causing the death of his son, he entails this destiny upon his line:
on account of his unshaken patriotism, his family should continue to be powerful amid the changes of future times; but . . . in des testation of his unrelenting cruelty to his own issue, Heaven had decreed that the valor of his race should always be fruitless, and that the cause which they espoused should never prosper (R, ch. VII, 13).

Like most of Scott's supernatural tales, this makes good sense in naturalistic terms: devotion is rewarded by a continued power to act, while lack of broader humanity renders the action vain. In effect, Redgauntlets are to be permanent actors in history, never reaching a resting-point in triumph or defeat. Sir Hugh Redgauntlet believes that "the privilege of free actions belongs to no mortal" (R, ch. VII, 15), and that he is bound to action on behalf of his code, despite considerations of failure or success. Redgauntlet is a hero, in a very literal sense: this character instigates the action of the novel, and controls, at least for a time, all its other characters.

Scott recognized heroism as a rare but important fact of history. Some men did defy change:

Some gifted individuals have raised means of defense when hope seemed altogether lost, and by their own energies and example, have saved communities and states, which ever, in the estimation of all others, were doomed to despair.³

Scott uses similar language of Redgauntlet, when a Jacobite states that "probably nothing short of [Redgauntlet's] strenuous exertions, and the emulation awakened by [his] noble and disinterested conduct" could have convened the Jacobites (R, ch. XXII, 267). Such men as Bruce, Montrose, and Claverhouse, though neither free of personal faults nor "exempted from the evil qualities of their time,"⁴ were exemplars of great achievement. In history Scott saw the hero marked by "the smallness of the means which he had for accomplishing so great a purpose,"⁵ in novels he represents the heroic character by means of an apparatus of fatality which makes perseverance in the face of certain defeat a fact of the character's own consciousness. In Old Mortality, for instance, Claverhouse and Burley both feel themselves doomed to futile action, and Scott prolongs the novel until both are indeed defeated. Few heroic characters in Scott's
novels succeed, because failure provides the context in which their heroism can be shown unequivocally. How can General Campbell's dedication be displayed when, as every reader knows, his side will win? To show successful heroism, Scott must create a Louis XI in *Quentin Durward* who achieves his far-reaching aims only because his schemes consistently are foiled.

The heroic character, who refuses to accept the obsolescence of his code, completes the fictional representation of the range of individuals' experience of historical change. The hero holds out the tenuous but real hope that one might shape history. In addition, Regauntlet's great foredoomed actions give the novel a plot which readers immediately see is *not* the true pattern of history; it does not obscure the process of history shown in other characters' lives. By means of such a plot, inane as it may seem in itself, Scott evades the question of outcomes, and represents both the codes which give human life through history its distinctive forms, and the changes which destroy these forms.

If the tales show the actors in history, the trials plumb their interactions with each other. Darsie's appeal to Justice Foxley and Alan's to Provost Crosbie and then to Charles Edward constitute the major complications of the plot. They are parallel incidents, in which the relationship to society of the young protagonists, who appeal to the law for protection, and the rebel, who asserts his independence of law, are explored in turn. In these incidents the legal process works as a metaphor for society, in which rebel and young stranger must find places.

The first issue in Darsie's and Alan's appeals is the young men's standing. Justice Foxley's first demand is for Darsie's real name, which of course, he does not know; the Justice briskly responds, "*Omne ignotum pro terribili*, as we used to say at Appleby school; that is, every one that is not known to justice, is a rogue and a vagabond" (*R*, ch. VI, 307). This is almost a parody of Major Melville's questioning of Waverley, or Queen Caroline's of Argyle, as these authorities tried to 'place' unknown suppliants. Since, without knowing it, Darsie is Redgauntlet's legal ward, Foxley is more correct than he knows in demanding that social recognition precede an appeal to law.

The English Justice Foxley is ignorant and independent; the Scottish Provost Crosbie, whom Alan approaches, is learned and conscious of a constituency. But the result is similar. Though Saunders Fairford is known to Crosbie, Alan's standing is not
weighty enough when balanced against other influences on Crosbie as civic bigwig, social climber, and henpecked husband. Redgauntlet "counts kin" with important people, including Crosbie's wife \( (R, \text{ch. VII, 41}) \). The Provost attained his office by making sure "nobody could ever find out whether he was a Whig or a Tory" \( (R, \text{ch. XII, 79}) \). So he grants Alan a personal introduction to the Jacobite Summertrees, and a whispered warning against him; and Summertrees in turn taunts the young man with his lack of standing. Thus the magistrates leave both young men to the mercy of the rebels.

The second issue of the trials—the rebel's relationship to law and society—is also unexpectedly complex. The crudeness of legal categories protects him. The law prescribes drastic action for the magistrate: Foxley must arrest his neighbor "Ingoldsby" if he is shown to be Redgauntlet, named in a legal warrant, and Crosbie must pursue a Jacobite if he is known to be behaving oddly. To avoid such strenuous duties, the legal authorities cultivate ignorance. Foxley admonishes Darsie to avoid "conversations about names, and such like... which I have no humor to witness" \( (R, \text{ch. VI, 309}) \); Summertrees neatly sums up why he and Crosbie cannot help Alan contact Redgauntlet: "It would be *infra dig* in the Provost... to associate with Redgauntlet; and for me it would be *noscitur a socio*" \( (R, \text{ch. XI, 74}) \). Their fears are justified. When mad Peter Peebles blurts out Redgauntlet's name, Foxley responds as law requires:

\begin{quote}
Neighbor Ingoldsby—... when you were coming and going markets, horse-races, and cock-fights, fairs, hunts, and suchlike—it was—eh—neither my business nor my wish to dispel... the mysteries which hung about you.... But when there are warrants and witnesses to names—and those names Christian and surname, belong to—eh—an attainted person—charged... with—ahem—taking advantage of modern broils and heart-burnings to renew our civil disturbances, the case is altered; and I must—ahem—do my duty \( (R, \text{ch. VII, 325-6}) \).
\end{quote}

The magistrate's unusual courage (he is in Redgauntlet's own house at the time) is the strongest possible testimony to the power of the law.

The rebel could meet law with force. Thus, Foxley
remonstrates with Darsie, "Here is a young fellow now, thinks that I carry the whole statute law of England in my head, and a posse comitatus to execute them in my pocket" (R, ch. VII, 328-9). Crosbie draws a metaphor; if Alan were drowning, Crosbie says, "I have little chance of helping you, being a fat, short-armed man... and what would be the use of my jumping in after you?" (R, ch. XII, 76-7). Yet though Scott shows clearly enough that law might be defied with force, he has Redgauntlet quibble and conciliate as well. After burning the warrant for his arrest, Redgauntlet reminds Foxley and his clerk that "there is no such warrant in existence now" and expresses the hope that you, my good neighbor and brother sportsman, in your expostulation, and my friend Mr. Nicholas Faggot here in his humble advice and petition that I should surrender myself, will consider yourselves as having amply discharged your duty to King George and Government (R, ch. VII, 326-7).

Redgauntlet avoids defying the legal order; and his opponents refuse to sacrifice themselves to it. Instead, magistrate, rebel and stranger turn from law to drink together, the punchbowl motto capturing their quandary:

God bless the King!—God bless the Faith's defender!
God bless—o harm in blessing the Pretender.
Who that Pretender is, and who that King,—
God bless us all!—is quite another thing.
(R, ch. VII, 329)

As comrades in an uncertain social order, they regard their comradeship as more important than the law on which they disagree.

Together, the trials present an intricate and quite specific view of law and society. First, the functioning of law depends on prior social relationships; where they do not exist, law cannot make them. Scott contradicts the idea of a social contract expressed in a rational system of law, an idea which would envision the rebel as rejecting law and social ties together, not mollifying them, and members of society as refusing accommodation with the rebel, their common enemy. Secondly,
Scott shows that law, despite its formal authority, has no power over society comparable to the power of the code over the individual. Authorities and fanatics alike evade or bend the rigid categories of law, producing compromise and transmuting opposition into tolerated deviancy. Scott's view denies revolution; but it is radical, for in showing the insufficiency of law to define or shape society, Scott shows society's liability to change, as men remake law to fit circumstances. Though venality, fear, and ignorance figure in the trials, the comic freedom of these incidents as wholes expresses Scott's evident conviction that this representation of the uses of law is right and true to the nature of social life.

Scott shows that cooperation among men is not achieved through law. When Alan finds himself the prisoner of Charles Edward (disguised as a priest), Scott sets up his strongest conflict about law. Charles Edward can neither enforce nor relinquish his claim to Alan's obedience; Alan marvels at the supposed priest's personal authority yet withstands it. They spar futilely until Alan states: "If I were to meet the Pretender himself in such a situation, he should, even at the risk of a little stretch to my loyalty, be free from any danger from my indiscretion" (R, ch. XVI, 152). While revealing Alan's hostile allegiance, this statement wins Charles Edward's help, for no agreement on principles, if attainable, would be more useful than the promise of confidentiality. The Pretender sets Alan free without conditions, "since we are so situated that one must rely upon the other's faith" (R, ch. XVI, 158). Experience has taught him "how far mutual confidence is requisite in managing affairs of consequence" (R, ch. XVI, 159).

The "mutual confidence" Scott shows here is such as he believed brought about great actions of history such as the Restoration and Glorious Revolution. For great projects actors must "lay aside their mutual suspicion and animosity" to join "in the enthusiasm of a favourable moment." Advantages gained by close bargaining merely "operate as so many principles of decay by which the security of the league is greatly endangered, if not actually destroyed." These statements, among the most emphatic generalizations of Scott's narrative history, underline Scott's conception of social ties which precede formal agreement among men. So in the novel Charles Edward and Alan meet only after their fates have become intertwined; and in exchanges of
information and favors they multiply their obligations to each other. The incident breaks out of the format of the trial to resemble more nearly the exchange of rescues between members of opposing parties so often found in Scott's novels. Freely given trust, prior to law or code, is shown as the peaceful resolver of conflict.

Throughout the trials, Redgauntlet's repeated successes create an odd suspense as to what will destroy the conspiracy. The finale of the novel maintains the surprise: Redgauntlet's followers rather than his opponents defeat him. Cristal Nixon has brought into Redgauntlet's own household the spirit of selfish interest, at odds with any code. (It seems that Scott cannot make a genuine villain of anyone who sincerely adheres to an historical ethos). Worse, the Jacobites, though feeling the "desire of preserving consistency" with their principles *(R, ch. XXII, 269)*, bow to circumstances. Charles Edward himself insists upon "the freedom of will which I allow all my subjects, and without which a crown were less worthy wearing than a beggar's bonnet" *(R, ch. XXII, 280)*. Redgauntlet has brought together the Prince and his followers in part through his own belief that "the privilege of free actions belongs to no mortal" but ordinary, unheroic mortals—ordinary Jacobites and princes as well as ordinary squires, haberdashers and sailors—are free and feel themselves so; and to their freedom Redgauntlet's plan must yield.

Throughout Scott's novels we find a similar pattern of small men's unconsciously resisting and cancelling great plans. In *Waverley* the Pretender cannot unite his army; Major Melville cannot command Gifted Gilfillan; Gilfillan has a sergeant who has volunteered more for the sake of his horses than of Kirk and King; and Fergus MacIvor controls neither the mischief nor the loyalty of his clansmen, whose interests lie in pathetic opposition to their leader's ambition. In *Old Mortality* Claverhouse's council of war at Drumclog ends with the commander's turning his sword against his own men in a vain attempt to keep order; and

the camp of the Covenanters, even at the very moment of success, seemed about to dissolve like a rope of sand, from want of the original principles of combination and union.9

In *Redgauntlet*, the development of secondary characters' life
changes in their tales gives firm grounds to the small man's freedom which baffles great schemes. Ultimately, the process of history, shown as constancy and obsolescence in humbler characters, and as compromise between authorities and the hero, constitutes the necessary, "destined" failure of Redgauntlet's attempt to shape his society by his own unchanging code. Redgauntlet thus speaks for the novel as a whole in blessing Darsie with the hope that he will not change his victorious code, "should it in turn become the losing one" (R, ch. XXIII, 314). He wishes the individual constancy, in a world of free, continuous change.

Though heroism is a pretender to the direction of history, it is the legitimate monarch of moral life. Faced with defeat, the Jacobites and their Prince compete in self-sacrifice. Darsie feels the Redgauntlet courage that "ever kindles highest on the losing side" (R, ch. XXIII, 305), as all devotion must. And he feels love; Darsie, Lilias, and Alan draw together and clasp hands "as those who . . . determine to take their chance of life and death together" (R, ch. XXIII, 305). Even the victorious foe joins in sympathy for the defeated and disdain for the treacherous. The "principles of combination and union" are moral and personal; though not means to historical action, they stand revealed as ends in themselves. More than in Waverley's or Morton's marriages, in the abrupt ending of Redgauntlet Scott acclaims the private life—because he shows it within history, not apart from it.

Scott's historical ideas in Redgauntlet are subtle and consistent. He understands how men form their characters upon given historical ways of life, how despite their devotion to these ways their lives can change, and how for society as a whole law constitutes a comparable way of life which is yet open to accommodation. Representing in the novel such a process of history is a great technical achievement. Scott's dramatic method in the tales and trials of Redgauntlet brings to the foreground of the narrative both the separate historical situations and ethics of quite disparate characters and contests among characters in which, taking their words again—as they could not take blows—several alternative responses to the conflict are explored with equal vividness. Technical achievement springs from intellectual achievement: an idea of history reconciling the demands on the individual of society and circumstance, the freedom of change and the beauty of constancy.
NOTES

1 Sir Walter Scott, *Redgauntlet*, Vol. VII of *Waverley Novels* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1857), Letter VI, p. 97. Subsequent quotations from the novel will be designated *R* and given in the text. For ease of reference chapter numbers will also be cited.

2 The sharp disagreement among critics as to the trend of history represented in *Redgauntlet* and the places of individual secondary characters within it indicates, I believe, deliberate ambiguity in the novel. Mary Cullinan offers an interesting interpretation of this ambiguity, arguing that "the reader must be an interpreter, creating his own truth from the historical fragments placed before him" ("History and Language in Scott’s *Redgauntlet*," *Studies in English Literature* [18: 659-75], p. 673).


