

# Writing the Nation: Walter Scott's Narrative Poetry

*Ainsley McIntosh\**

## ABSTRACT

The opening decade of nineteenth-century Britain was one marked by intense debate over what constituted British nationhood. This debate was prompted by the Act of Union of 1801, which united Ireland to Great Britain, and by the Napoleonic Wars, which continued to rage across Europe and beyond. Critics have long read Scott's poetry as buying wholesale into the event of Unionism: but how fair is this assessment? In this essay, I will show that Scott complicates the dynamic between British Unionism and Scotland's distinctiveness throughout his narrative poetry. Through a discussion of *Marmion* (1808), *The Vision of Don Roderick* (1811) and *The Lord of the Isles* (1815) this essay will argue that Scott's narrative poetry formulates a recuperative national narrative for Scotland within the context of the Napoleonic wars. It will demonstrate that what may initially read as pro-Union narratives in each of these texts can be read afresh as a destabilising and derailling of the terms and conditions upon which that Union is based. It will further show that Scott's poetry does not unambiguously celebrate war: careful reading of his poems reveals a more ambivalent, compassionate response to the events of his day that has hitherto been recognised.

**KEYWORDS:** Walter Scott, Poetry, British Romanticism  
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\* Received: March 1, 2019; Accepted: October 25, 2019  
Ainsley McIntosh, Walter Scott Research Centre, University of Aberdeen, United Kingdom  
([ainsleymcintosh@gmail.com](mailto:ainsleymcintosh@gmail.com)).

The opening decade of nineteenth-century Britain was one marked by intense debate over what constituted British nationhood. This debate was prompted by the Act of Union of 1801, which united Ireland to Great Britain, and by the Napoleonic Wars, which raged across Europe and beyond. Critics have long read Scott's poetry as buying wholesale into the event of Unionism, and as unambiguously celebratory of war: but how fair is this assessment? In this essay I will show that Scott complicates the dynamic between British Unionism and Scotland's distinctiveness throughout his narrative poetry. In particular, the backdrop of the Napoleonic Wars disrupts and even dismantles readings of his poetry as pro-Union narratives. It is war's capacity to provide Scotland with a context within which to reassert its unique national voice that Scott celebrates, rather than the event of war itself.

Scott's most ambitious, and complex, exploration of these issues is presented in *Marmion* (1808). Written after the height of the invasion crisis of 1803 and Nelson's victory at Trafalgar in 1805, but during the political vacuum created by the deaths in quick succession of Pitt and Fox, the poem conveys the sense of despondency within Britain at this time. In the opening epistle, Scott appeals to "every British heart" (*Marmion* 1.69) to cast aside party prejudice and unite in action against the ongoing threat of Napoleonic invasion. On the basis of this passage, critics have been virtually unanimous in their reading of *Marmion* as a pro-Union tale. However, a new reading is possible: one that demonstrates, as the poem progresses, more oppositional impulses are at work. These have enormous implications for our reading of Scott and his purportedly Unionist poetry, as shall be shown.

These impulses can be discerned in Scott's choice of poetic mode, which he self-consciously draws attention to in the advertisement to *Marmion*'s first edition, the half-title page of this same edition, and the poem's dedication to Lord Henry James Montague Scott: each reiterates *Marmion*'s generic identity as a romance. In the epistles and in the poem's extensive notes, Scott references French medieval lays, Middle English romances, Chaucer's metrical romances, Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485), the outline that Dryden sketched for his planned Arthurian epic, and the literary epics of Spenser and Milton. These latter two poets provide an especially valuable precedent, producing works of national epic scope; Dryden offers a model for incorporating "living friends and patrons" into the framework of the national romance epic (see Note 3 to Canto First, 212-13), which inspires Scott's inclusion of the first-person verse epistle

format. Adopting and adapting (politicising) the literary romance, and reconstructing the contemporary wars in romance terms, places Scott's poetics at the heart of a wider reappropriation of the form during the period.<sup>1</sup> More importantly, by electing to work in the "literary form of feeling," Scott is situating his poetry within a distinctively Scottish tradition; one that ties him to Robert Burns and to James Macpherson, and which places what Penny Fielding has called "that Scottish emphasis on a society bound together by feeling and imaginative engagement" (106-07). Scotland is the driver for both the form and content of Scott's work here.

The poem's mid-point, its structural and conceptual heart, is where we see its oppositional impulses at their most striking. In the third introductory epistle, Scott rejects Erskine's advice to frame his eulogies to the dead heroes of the Napoleonic wars within classical, English forms of poetry (*Marmion* 3.229-30). Instead, he asserts that he will perform the minstrel's elevated function of singing heroic verse, and will formulate his national epic, within a specifically Scottish framework (Lumsden 43). Scott symbolically rejects the gentle English landscape of trimmed "hedge-rows," "neat cottage[s]" and "meads" in favour of Scotland's rugged mountain ranges (3.145-50). He reiterates both the romantic and patriotic dimension to his poetic mode in the fifth epistle, declaring that "like his Border sires of old" he will wake "a wild measure rude and bold" (5.178-79):

The Bard shall scorn pedantic laws;  
And, as the ancient art could stain  
Achievements on the storied pane,  
Irregularly traced and planned,  
But yet so glowing and so grand;  
So shall he strive, in changeful hue,  
Field, feast, and combat, to renew,  
And loves, and arms, and harpers' glee,  
And all the pomp of chivalry.(5.183-91)

Within the scheme of his Scottish romance, Scott will "renew" and reanimate chivalric Scotland's feelings: her "loves" and "glee." Like Macpherson, and Burns, Scott "exemplifies . . . the double pull of assimilation and distinctiveness:

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<sup>1</sup> For fuller discussion of this point see Duff 120-23; Bainbridge 136; and Watson 113.

his poetry both looks “backwards to a mythical and self-contained past, and . . . forward to a progressive British future” (Sassi and Stroh 150). However, is it Scotland’s decisive role in shaping that future that is Scott’s focus here.

In Scott’s short miscellaneous poem “The Bard’s Incantation” (subtitled “Written under threat of an invasion in the Autumn of 1804”), the fictional bard of Glenmore entreats the “Minstrels and bards of other days” to awaken and tell “every deed in song enroll’d, / By every chief who . . . fell” (*Poetical Works* 703) fighting for Scotland in a long warrior tradition that stretches from Calgacus, the heroic but doomed leader of the Caledonians defeated by Tacitus at the battle of Mons Graupius (AD 43), to the Scottish soldiers serving under Abercromby’s command who had recently died at Abukir in 1801. Similarly, in *Marmion*, Flodden provides the primary historical framework for the poem’s events, but Scott reminds his audience of their collective narrative as a nation engaged in conflicts throughout the centuries, and shaped by these very conflicts. Furthermore, by bringing into focus older worlds of war (ancient Rome, Troy, and the Vikings of Denmark and Sweden [4.112-15; 6.6-23]), Scott creates a national space that is both specific to Scotland and which has resonance across all warrior cultures and ages (Baker 72-73; Sassi and Stroh 150-51).

The *Marmion* story focuses on Scotland’s most devastating military disaster, which saw its own King, James IV, and the majority of the Scottish magnate class slain. Little wonder then that Scott recalls how, as a boy, he would listen, spellbound, to tales told around the fire:

Of patriot battles, won of old  
By Wallace wight and Bruce the bold;  
Of later fields of feud and fight,  
When, pouring from their Highland height,  
The Scottish clans, in headlong sway,  
Had swept the scarlet ranks away.  
While stretched at length upon the floor,  
Again I fought each combat o’er,  
Pebbles and shells, in order laid,  
The mimic ranks of war displayed;  
And onward still the Scottish Lion bore,

And still the scattered Southron fled before.  
 (*Marmion* 3.196-207)

Scotland's military victories, rather than her defeats, are what Scott rejoices in. Scotland's sovereignty and autonomy bring him the sheer delight and pride we can sense in these lines. It is exactly this celebration of Scottish valour and Scotland's distinctive contribution to the war effort that underpin the *Marmion* epistles. Praise is particularly forthcoming for the efforts of the volunteer regiments at home in Edinburgh and the exploits of the Highland regiments serving overseas. Parallels are drawn between Scott's depiction of Marmion's march to Scotland and the poet's activities as a volunteer yeoman (4.183-215).

Scott disrupts his medieval narrative in Canto Fourth, and projects his audience forward to his own time, by claiming Edinburgh as "Mine own romantic town" (*Marmion* 4.832). He also interjects childhood memories of Edinburgh and outlines the ways in which it has been modified into the modern city of 1807 (4.705-30). In the fifth canto, Scott's voice interrupts the narrative once again to note that Edinburgh's Mercat Cross, the site at which a supernatural summons takes place within the story, has now been razed to the ground (5.904-12). If Edinburgh's topography has changed over the centuries, however, Scotland's landscape connects present and past. The sight of Edinburgh from the top of Blackford Hill, and the panoramic view this vantage point affords across the Ochil Hills and the long bay stretching from Portobello to Prestonpans, taking in North Berwick, Fife and the Firth of Forth, causes the English Knight Fitz-Eustace to cry "Where's the coward that would not dare / To fight for such a land!" (4.848-49). Note that it is an English voice expressing admiration for Scotland: again, challenging the unionist horizon of expectation that we have become so familiar with. Whilst acknowledging that Edinburgh has changed from the version that Fitz-Eustace gazes upon (significantly, in the dismantling of its historic defences during the construction of the New Town [see Note 1 to Canto Fifth, 254]), Scott proudly declares:

Nor deem that from thy fenceless throne,  
 Strength and security are flown;  
 Still, as of yore, Queen of the North!  
 Still canst thou send thy children forth.  
 Ne'er readier at alarm-bell's call

Thy burghers rose to man thy wall,  
Than now, in danger, shall be thine,  
Thy dauntless voluntary line;  
For fosse and turret proud to stand,  
Their breasts the bulwarks of the land.  
Thy thousands, trained to martial toil,  
Full red would stain their native soil,  
Ere from thy mural crown there fell  
The slightest knosp, or pinnacle. (5.93-106)

This is not about Edinburgh changing. Here Scott praises the patriotism of her inhabitants and their readiness to defend their city, and by extension their country. This patriotism has never been extinguished, never faltered. As Scott declares, they have never been readier than “now” to guard the city’s wall. Some readers argue that, in this passage, Edinburgh is “the very centre of resistance to Napoleon,” with the volunteer movement leading the way in “defending Britain against the threat of invasion” (Franklin 178-79). Yet, Scott is describing the determination of the volunteer regiments to defend “their *native soil*” (5.103-04; emphasis added). War has created both the context and the means of restoring Scotland’s confidence and pride.

It is with just such confidence and pride that, in a note of 1812 added to the “War-Song of the Royal Edinburgh Light Dragoons” (1802), Scott recalls: “The noble and constitutional measure of arming freemen in defence of their own rights was *nowhere more successful than in Edinburgh*, which furnished a force of 3000 armed and disciplined volunteers” (*Poetical Works* 758; emphasis added). This was a deeply personal matter to Scott, who had been enthusiastically engaged as Quartermaster of the Royal Edinburgh Light Dragoons (1797), one of three volunteer regiments raised in Edinburgh in the 1790s. In *Marmion*’s fourth epistle, Scott names most of the founding members of the corps’ Committee of Management: Colin MacKenzie, Sir William Forbes, Sir William Rae—all friends of Scott; and, not least, James Skene, to whom the epistle is dedicated (Marshall 529-31). Major J. R. Marshall describes Scott as “the life and spirit of the corps” (513). He regularly trained on the same beach that Fitz-Eustace gazes upon, composing parts of the Flodden battle scene whilst dashing on horseback along Portobello’s shore (Lockhart 8). This play

at war, or rehearsal for war, echoes the “mimic ranks of war” that Scott engaged in as a child, prompted by listening to tales of Scotland’s bygone days.

Edinburgh is portrayed, then, not only as the seat of Enlightened commerciality, as many scholars assume. In addition, the city’s ancient martial spirit had been retained (Cronin 100). The militarised, pre-Culloden version of Edinburgh that is described in Canto Fifth of *Marmion* is one that had seen a resurgence in many ways in Scott’s day. In *Memorials of his Time*, Henry Cockburn recounts that in the early 1800s, and particularly at the height of the invasion crisis in 1803, “Edinburgh, like every other place, became a camp, and continued so until the peace in 1814” (181). In his *Life of Napoleon* (1827), Scott similarly recalls, “On a sudden, the land seemed converted to an immense camp, the whole nation into soldiers” (86), and this reaches further back into Scott’s account of preparations for Flodden. Tellingly, Scott devotes nearly twice as many stanzas to a description of the Scottish army’s camp as to the actual battle. The streets of Edinburgh in 1513 are described as “bustling” and “alive with martial show,” filled with the sights and sounds of preparation for war (*Marmion* 5.333-47). When Marmion enters the Scottish camp, he notes an array of soldiers who have been gathered from every social sphere and region of Scotland: knights and squires, yeomen, the war-hardened Borderer, the Lowlander, the Celtic clans from the Highlands, and the men from the Isles of the West and North of Scotland (5.209-325). The Scots are presented as a multifarious host; a regionally and ethnically diverse collection of men bound together by the necessity of war. These disparities are most marked amongst the Highlanders (5.293-94, 298-99), and the proximity of this “wild” and “savage” race to the city causes fear amongst its wealthy burghers (6.6). This functions as an analogy for the mutual distrust that marked relations “between Highland regiments and the British government at the turn of the nineteenth century” (Shaw 224). Scott, however, challenges this negative stereotype of the Highland warrior.

Reframed in the larger context of the early nineteenth-century British nation-state, the event of war creates the means for the Highland soldier to be integrated into both the pan-Scottish and British national narrative: performing a vital, frontline role in contributing to national security (D’Arcy 26; Davidson 119). His localised valour is sublimated into a higher national purpose. Conversely, the might of the British Army reaches its fullest expression in the legendary bravery of its Celtic contingent; and this is the crucial point for Scott.

Throughout the introductory epistles, he celebrates examples of Scottish heroism and highlights the victories of Highland participants in the war. He pays elegiac tribute to General Sir Ralph Abercromby, an eminent Scottish soldier and politician who defeated Napoleon at the Battle of Alexandria in 1801 (*Marmion* 3.94-96). Similarly, he assigns the significant British victory at the Battle of Maida, fought in Calabria, southern Italy, on 4 July 1806, to the actions of the Highland regiments, including the Black Watch: it was “The Highlander, whose red claymore / The battle turned on Maida’s shore” (6.161-62).

The arena of war gives Scott a framework within which to develop a recuperative national narrative for Scotland. His poetry is less a celebration of war itself, than a recognition of its value in creating the means for reawakening a sense of national purpose, and reigniting a spirit of self-determination, within Scotland. Even as the narrative advances towards its tragic climax, the epistles foreground an oppositional progression from mournful dejection, to joyful determination, to seasonal celebration: in the final epistle, the preservation of Christmas traditions in Scotland is presented as a further marker of the superiority of Scottish over English culture (*Marmion* 6.50-106). As Andrew Lincoln recognises, *Marmion* is shot through with oppositional “gestures of resistance” to the Britishness it ostensibly seeks to assert (35-38).

I have demonstrated in *Marmion* how Scott constructs and celebrates a resurgent Scottish nationality out of the events of the Napoleonic Wars. These ideas are taken further in *The Vision of Don Roderick* (1811), which was published to raise funds for Portuguese victims of the Peninsular War and to rally flagging British support for involvement in this conflict. In Scott’s poem, Roderick, the last King of the Goths, is granted a series of allegorical visions of key moments in Spain’s future. The poem’s deepest interest, however, lies in the final, contemporary stage of Spanish history that is revealed to Roderick, concerning Britain’s role in liberating the Iberian Peninsula during Napoleon’s invasion. Assuming the guise of Bard once more, Scott entreats the specifically Scottish muses to inspire in him “a nation’s choral hymn for tyranny o’erthrown” (*Vision* 1.2).

Scott’s patriotic agenda emerges once again in an arresting account of the arrival of the British army, heralded by the sight of their “gallant navy” (*Vision* 2.15). Note Scott’s description of the flags flying from their fleet: “From mast and stern Saint George’s symbol flow’d, / Blent with the silver cross to Scotland



dear” (2.55). The reader is offered a fascinating depiction of British identity: while failing to accommodate Ireland within its narrative, by omitting St Patrick’s cross, Scott places Scotland on an equal footing with England. This is the earliest recorded use in post-1707 Modern Scots of “blent” to signify “a flash,” as if the sun has just broken through the clouds. This reading is exactly the one we find here in Scott’s writing: he describes the sun flashing on the soldier’s weapons. Further, the term is related to the Older Scots “blenk” as in “to glance, to glitter, to turn aside,” which we find in the poetry of the Scottish makars Robert Henryson and William Dunbar. This is about turning our gaze away from England and to Scotland: it appears that Scotland is not only interrupting, but eclipsing, England’s presence.<sup>2</sup>

And indeed, in Scott’s vision, Scotland assumes prominence; Highland regimental gallantry at Fuentes d’Honoro and Barossa is most keenly celebrated. The Highland soldier is the focus of Scott’s praise: “But ne’er in battle-field throbb’d heart so brave, / As that which beats beneath the Scottish plaid” (*Vision* 2.58). What initially reads as a tribute to Wellington, ends (quite literally) as an elegy to Scottish military commanders and their Highland troops. Colonel Cameron is honoured for his sacrifice at Fuentes d’Honoro (3.10). Scott’s notes to the poem (which themselves abound with Scottish topics), tell us that Cameron “fell at the head of his native Highlanders, the 71st and 79th,” upon which his men “charged, with irresistible fury, the finest body of French grenadiers ever seen,” inflicting one thousand wounds and tearing almost to pieces the Frenchman who had shot their Colonel (618n18). Emphasising the distinctive role of the Scottish soldiers in this encounter, Scott concludes: “Massena pays my countrymen a singular compliment in his account of the attack and defence of this village, in which he says the British lost many officers, *and Scotch.*” General Thomas Graeme receives higher praise still. Referred to variously as “Dauntless Grame” and the “Victor of Barosa,” Graeme’s name is literally the last word of the narrative; a name, Scott writes that is “sacred to ages for heroic verse” (3.13). Undeniably, most poignant of all is the stanza dedicated to the unnamed Highland soldier (a Scottish everyman) who dreams of Caledonia and the hills and streams of his native Perthshire that he sees magnified in the mountains and surging rivers of Iberia (3.16).

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Dr Kylie Murray, an Older Scots specialist, for pointing out these meanings to me, and for identifying Scott’s usage of the term in this sense as its earliest recorded use in post-1707 Modern Scots. See also *Dictionary of the Scots Language*.

Of equal significance is the one Scot who is conspicuously absent from this tribute to fallen Scottish heroes: Sir John Moore, a far more prominent player in the Peninsula than either Cameron or Graeme (Valladares 121). Moore's crime, as Scott's letters reveal, was to order the evacuation of British forces from Corunna in January 1809 in an attempt to save them from annihilation by a French expeditionary force. Francis Jeffrey's fury at Scott's failure to honour Moore is palpable in his review of *The Vision* for the *Edinburgh Review*. He deems it

a sin not easily to be expiated, that in a poem written substantially for the purpose of commemorating the brave who have fought or fallen in Spain and Portugal, —and written by a Scotchman— there should be no mention of the name of MOORE! —of the only commander in chief who has fallen in this memorable contest, — of a commander who was acknowledged as the model and pattern of a British soldier, when British soldiers stood most in need of such an example. . . . (Article VI 390)

Echoing the accusations that he had made in his review of *Marmion* concerning Scott's neglect of "Scotish [sic] feelings" and failure to show "scarcely one trait of true Scottish [sic] nationality or patriotism" (13), Jeffrey once again suggests that Scott has acted unpatriotically as a "Scotchman" in omitting mention of Moore. Scott, however, was unrepentant. Discussing the critical backlash in a letter to his friend John Morritt, he wrote: "I must hold myself excused for not giving praise where I was unable to see that much was due" (*Letters* 2: 543). As Susan Valladares recognises, Moore is written out of the narrative of "absolute Scottish glory" that Scott is so carefully constructing because, in Scott's eyes, he is a coward and a "national disgrace" (121-22). Contrary to Jeffrey's claims, *The Vision* reveals Scott's acute sense of Scottish patriotism.

Cumulatively, then, Scott provides a selective representation of Scottish military identity, and a revisionist history of Britain's Peninsular campaign. He attempts to account for this in his Preface and in his notes to the poem: suggesting, for example, that the Don Roderick frame he is drawing upon is one that is particularly suited to the "transition of an incident from history . . . to romance" (612n6). This is a characteristic Scott move: in *Marmion*, as we have noted, he similarly stresses that he is presenting romantic fiction rather than a

history lesson. This explains why his treatment of the Don Roderick legend digresses from its representation in Walter Savage Landor's *Count Julian* (1812), or Robert Southey's *Don Roderick: Last of the Goths* (1814).<sup>3</sup> It further explains why Scott's depiction of the British government's Iberian military campaign differs markedly from the critical stance that is adopted by Wordsworth in *The Convention of Cintra* (1808-1809) and Byron in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812). In *The Vision*, Scott self-consciously uses the theatre of war to restage Scottish nationhood.

Scott once again explores the relationship of nationhood and war, and maps the concerns of the modern nation onto those of its feudal past, in his final major metrical romance set in Scotland, *The Lord of the Isles* (1815). The poem's point of genesis can be traced to 1808, but the bulk of its composition took place during the brief interlude of peace in 1814, and it was published in early January 1815, while Napoleon remained in exile on the island of Elba (Corson 540; Todd and Bowden 299, 346). Like Scott's previous poems, *The Lord* is a synthesis of history and romance: episodes from John Barbour's epic narrative romance poem *The Brus* (c. 1375), and elements from Scott's imagination, are blended into the historical framework provided by Lord Hailes's *Annals of Scotland* (1779). The poem's formal hybridity is particularly well suited to its subject: Robert the Bruce, a quasi-mythical figure drawn as much from romantic legend as from historical record. Like William Wallace, Robert the Bruce is a symbol of Scotland's struggle for independence. The story of Bruce is the story of Scotland: his triumphs and tribulations are synonymous with those of the nation itself. He is "Scotland's hope, her joy, her pride" (Scott, *Lord* 4.22). In the absence of an official national anthem, the "Flower of Scotland" is commonly sung at national events, its lyrics celebrating Bruce's victory at Bannockburn. This demonstrates the inextricability of Bruce's feats with the nation's psyche and sense of self-determination. In his "Introduction to the Edition of 1833," Scott acknowledges the risks of attempting a poem on a subject so popular in Scotland (*Lord* 474).

Critics of Scott's work have rightly drawn direct comparisons between the medieval Wars of Anglo-Scottish independence and the conflict between Britain and Napoleon. Indeed, the text invites such analogies in both subtle and explicit ways. For example, the terms "patriot" and "freedom" recur with

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<sup>3</sup> For an excellent analysis of how Spain and the Roderick theme are reconstructed and reimagined in British Romantic poetry see Saglia 65-143.

relative frequency throughout the text. The Priest who blesses Bruce's small band of troops describes them as "patriots" who fight for "freedom" (*Lord* 5.12). In stirring language, Dunvegan equates Bruce's cause with "Freedom's cause" (2.27). Following the battle with Lord Clifford's troops and the retaking of Carrick Castle (events which serve as a precursor to Bannockburn and its aftermath), Bruce pledges an oath to Scotland's "rights" and "freedom" (5.34), proclaiming any man a "disloyal Scot" who fails to match him, and at Bannockburn itself he urges his troops to fight on for "Scotland, liberty, and life" (6.28). Douglas and Ronald pledge that "each brave and patriot heart" (5.16) will fight, with Ronald declaring:

I will not credit that this land,  
So famed for warlike heart and hand,  
The nurse of Wallace and of Bruce,  
Will long with tyrants hold a truce . . . . (5.16)

"Patriot" is anachronistic here: *The Oxford English Dictionary* traces its etymology to c. 1460; it only gained currency more than a century after the historical events of Scott's tale. Its presence removes the reader from the world of the narrative and inserts them back into that of the author with its contemporary concerns. It is impossible to read the poem's frequent references to tyranny, and to the ideals of patriotism, liberty and justice, other than through the filter of a host of early nineteenth-century connotations. By associating Robert the Bruce with the self-proclaimed virtues of British national character (Bennett 24-45), Scott sets him up as the exemplar of leadership for early nineteenth-century Britain. He is the original bearer of a "patrotic heart—as PITT!" (*Marmion* 6.1416).

Much of *The Lord* is dedicated to legitimising Bruce's claim to the Scottish throne and his violent means of obtaining it, and establishing the incontestability of his rule is vital to Scott's purposes. As Scott explains in his brief headnote to the poem, his story opens in the spring of 1307: the point at which the historical Bruce returned from exile on Rathlin Island, off the north-east coast of Ireland, to resume his struggle to be recognised as Scotland's lawful king. Bruce had fled following his role in the murder of John III Comyn (nicknamed "the Red Comyn") in the chapel of the Greyfriars, Dumfries on 10 February 1306, and his subsequent defeat at the battles of Methven and Dalry

(Pugh 52-61). Bruce's actions have turned him into an enemy of England and of the holy Roman Catholic Church; he has become both rebel and outlaw.<sup>4</sup> Bruce counters, however, that he attacked Comyn out of a sense of patriotism: "No selfish vengeance dealt the blow, / For Comyn died his country's foe" (2.29). He asserts that, by stabbing Comyn he has achieved his "first and dearest task," which is to relieve Scotland from Edward I's subjugation (2.29). Nonetheless, Bruce expresses regret over his "soon-repented deed" and pledges to undertake a holy pilgrimage to Palestine to atone for his sins and pay the debt to his conscience (2.29). At this point the Abbot is moved by divine intervention to legitimise Bruce's claim to the throne and to prophesy his legendary feats. He declares that God has blessed the King and that he shall be

Bless'd in the hall and in the field,  
 Under the mantle as the shield.  
 Avenger of thy country's shame,  
 Restorer of her injured fame,  
 Bless'd in thy sceptre and thy sword,  
 De Bruce, fair Scotland's rightful Lord,  
 Bless'd in thy deeds and in thy fame,  
 What lengthen'd honours wait thy name!  
 In distant ages, sire to son  
 Shall tell thy tale of freedom won,  
 And teach his infants, in the use  
 Of earliest speech, to falter Bruce!  
 Go, then, triumphant! sweep along  
 Thy course, the theme of many a song! (2.32)

The Abbot is granted a vision of the time when Bruce will be immortalised in the annals and songs of a future Scotland that does not yet exist (at this point it operates under a feudal system and is riven apart by vicious internecine struggle). Half of the Abbot's listeners regard Bruce as a rebel traitor, an opportunist, and a murderer; none of his hearers can know that he will eventually become celebrated as one of Scotland's greatest heroes by the

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Bruce's crime bears a resemblance to that of Roderick Dhu's in *The Lady of the Lake*: Dhu is outlawed for stabbing and murdering a knight in Holyrood Palace (2.12). Whereas Bruce is redeemed by Scott and by history, Roderick's death signifies the illegitimacy of his rebellion against James IV.

nation's historians and poets. Of course, Scott's audience, who live in these "distant ages" do; and they are equally alive to the knowledge that, to some degree, the poem they are reading forms part of this literature of celebration. The epistolary framing device employed in *Marmion* may be gone, yet this passage offers a very subtle example of how Scott continues to elide temporal distance, flitting between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries, from one line of *The Lord* to the next.

The poem's third canto, which departs from the historical record and into the fictional realm of romance, also takes Bruce on a journey to "Skye's romantic shore" (*Lord* 3.12). From Loch Scavaig, his party travels on to Loch Coruisk with its dramatic views of the Black Cuillin mountain range and into a landscape that is inscribed with interpretative significance. The terrain becomes increasingly wild, stern, and devoid of human touch. In language that evokes Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), its "savage grandeur wakes / An awful thrill" (4.1), it elicits "strange and awful fears" (4.1) and it is "dread" in its "sublime . . . barrenness" (3.12-15). In the opening stanza of Canto Fourth, Scott emphasises the lonely, sad quality of this empty expanse. Bruce, however finds a "graver moral" in the "solemnity" (4.1) of his stark surroundings:

These mighty cliffs, that heave on high  
 Their naked brows to middle sky,  
 Indifferent to the sun or snow,  
 Where nought can fade, and nought can blow.  
 May they not mark a Monarch's fate, —  
 Raised high 'mid storms of strife and state,  
 Beyond life's lowlier pleasures placed,  
 His soul a rock, his heart a waste?  
 O'er hope and love and fear aloft  
 High rears his crowned head. . . . (3.17)

Bruce's observations are supported by the poet's personification of the region: the cliffs are "proud," the "lofty" mountains wear a "crown" (3.15), and "the proud Queen of Wilderness" has elected to seat her "throne" in this spot (4.1). This transference of regal imagery between monarch and mountains suggests an organic connection between leader and land. This impression is strengthened

by the passage's repetition of the language used by the minstrel Ferrand to describe Bruce in Canto Second, when he detects in Bruce the "impartial mind" that gives "indifferent weight" to rank and state (2.8): here it is the "mighty cliffs" who stand "indifferent" to the elements. The time spent in the literal heights of Scotland confers the moral high ground on Bruce and his future actions.

Nancy Moore Goslee convincingly reads Bruce's journey to Skye in terms of a romance quest, during which he undergoes a process of romance transformation from rebel to rightful King of Scotland.<sup>5</sup> Goslee argues that Bruce's quest culminates in the expiation of his sins, and that Bruce's metaphor of soul as rock represents his mastery over the tempestuous passions that led to Comyn's murder (156-57, 174). It further signifies the end of Bruce's oscillating allegiance to England and Scotland and his rocklike commitment to the Scottish nation. Just as his sister Isabel becomes married to Christ, Bruce becomes wed to Scotland, declaring "what have I with love to do? / For sterner cares my lot pursue": his sole desire is to see Scotland's "hills" and "dales" and "people free" (*Lord* 4.30). The third canto closes with Bruce "cleans[ing]" his bloodstained sword "from its hue of death" (3.31) and with a description of how the mountain's head throws "lustre red" on the dark Loch and "Bright gleams of gold and purple streak / Ravine and precipice and peak" (3.32). This act of cleansing and nature's display which "Reveals his splendour, hides his woes" (3.32), clothing the landscape in the powerful colours of papacy and monarchy, suggests that the Bruce has been sanctified and exonerated by church and state. He is granted an absolution that is afforded to neither Lord Marmion nor James IV in *Marmion* (Hewitt). As he prepares to return to the mainland, Bruce receives the welcome news that Edward I has died en route to Scotland. It is from this moment, the point at which Bruce steps back into history, that his star is in ascendance and he begins to fulfil not only the Abbot's prophesy of his fabled deeds but also an ancient Gaelic legend that tells of Albyn's victory when a "royal bark should sail / O'er Kilmaconnel moss" (4.12). The realms of romance and reality are blended, transferred even: the process of romance

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<sup>5</sup> For further detailed analysis of Scott's narrative poetry, see also Nancy Moore Goslee's *Scott the Rhymers*. This remains the only book-length study of the poetry and offers an indispensable starting point for any critical engagement with it. Other notable criticism includes Penny Fielding, *Writing and Orality: Nationality, Culture, and Nineteenth-Century Scottish Fiction* (Clarendon Press, 1996), Susan Oliver, *Scott, Byron and the Poetics of Cultural Encounter* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), and the work of J. H. Alexander and Alison Lumsden quoted elsewhere in this essay.

transformation is complete only, I would argue, after Bruce is reinserted back into the historical framework of Scott's tale. This in turn allows for the "pan-British appropriation" of Bruce and his "legendary events into the eclectic myths of a larger British nationhood" (Goslee, "Contesting" 35; Kidd 16-17, 86-87).

Scott draws explicit parallels between medieval Scotland's struggle for independence and modern Britain's fight against Napoleon in his stirring apostrophe to war in Canto Fourth:

Oh, War! thou hast thy fierce delight,  
Thy gleams of joy, intensely bright!  
Such gleams, as from thy polish'd shield  
Fly dazzling o'er the battle-field!  
Such transports wake, severe and high,  
Amid the pealing conquest-cry  
And as each comrade's name they tell,  
Who in the well-fought conflict fell,  
Knitting stern brow o'er flashing eye,  
Vow to avenge them or to die!  
Warriors! —and where are warriors found,  
If not on martial Britain's ground?  
And who, when waked with note of fire,  
Love more than they the British lyre?  
Know ye not, hearts to honour dear!  
That joy, deep-thrilling, stern, severe,  
At which the heartstrings vibrate high,  
And wake the fountains of the eye!  
And blame ye, then, the Bruce, if trace  
Of tear is on his manly face,  
When, scanty relics of the train  
That hail'd at Scone his early reign,  
This patriot band around him hung,  
And to his knees and bosom clung? (*Lord* 4.20)

As Evan Gottlieb suggests of *The Vision of Don Roderick*, in these few lines, Scott compresses "centuries of warfare into a single, all-encompassing conflict"



(Gottlieb 90); the five hundred years that have passed between 1314 and 1814 dissolve. How does Scott achieve this? He sees the universality between warriors of all generation, and suggests the emotional thrust of war (encompassing its joys and its pain) is the same in any age (Bainbridge 137). Further, he presents Robert the Bruce as the paradigm of “manly” military behaviour in the modern age. Significantly, Scott locates the somatic responses that are elicited by war within an Enlightenment discourse of thought and feeling: “heartstrings vibrate,” eyes flash and stream.

The connection between present and past is again evident in Canto Sixth, which opens with a description of the “thrilling joy” that was felt upon news of Napoleon’s abdication in 1814 (*Lord* 6.1). The overwhelming emotion of this moment is linked directly to the collective sense of joy experienced in Scotland when news spreads of Robert the Bruce’s victory at Bannockburn. Drawing upon the discourse of sympathy in the opening lines to Canto Sixth (“O who, that shared them, ever shall forget / The emotions of the spirit-rousing time”), Scott recalls:

O these were hours, when thrilling joy repaid  
 A long, long course of darkness, doubts, and fears!  
 The heart-sick faintness of the hope delay’d  
 The waste, the woe, the bloodshed, and the tears  
 That track’d with terror twenty rolling years  
 All was forgot in that blithe jubilee!  
 Her downcast eye even pale affliction rears,  
 To sigh a thankful prayer, amid the glee,  
 That hail’d the Despot’s fall, and peace and liberty! (6.1)

Through his use of the possessive pronoun in the line “our glad eyes,” Scott once again projects himself into the poetic narrative: he is recording his own emotional response to the events of his day; expressing both personal and collective sentiments. In these lines, the parallels that Scott draws between the despotic figures of Edward I and Napoleon are at their most explicit.

Scott urges his English audience not to grudge the Scots this victory, when so often the Scottish side has lost against their historical foe and when they are but fighting for their “freeborn rights”; rights, he reminds them, which are “dear to all who freedom love, / To none so dear as thee” (*Lord* 6.35). Highlighting

their shared emotion, experience, and philosophical investment in the ideal of freedom, Scott asserts a sense of harmony between his English and Scottish audience. This sense is achieved further through his careful depiction of valour displayed in equal measure by either side in the battle of Bannockburn of 1314. What may initially present as a tale of national division is reformulated by Scott into one of synthesis. Nonetheless, in presenting Bruce as the exemplar of the qualities that nineteenth-century Britain self-identifies with, Scott is positing a construction of national identity based on Scottish values, co-opting Scottish heroes, articulated in the Scottish Enlightenment discourse of sympathy, while rooted firmly in the pre-Union Scottish past. He emphatically resists the idea that Scotland has merely been absorbed into England, and demands acknowledgement of a particular, heroic conception of Scotland's contribution to the Union. What may initially seem a pro-Union narrative, not just in *The Lord of the Isles* but also *Marmion* and *The Vision of Don Roderick*, can be read afresh as a destabilising and derailing of the terms and conditions upon which that Union is based.

## II

In the second section of this essay, I would like to briefly address a further claim made by most readers of Scott's poetry: that it is pro-war. Using *The Lord of the Isles* as my case study, I will argue that here too there are dialectical impulses at work which undercut this reading. There are glimpses of a distaste for war in various Scott poems: In *Marmion*, for example, Scott declares Edinburgh to be "lovelier far" in her modern, demilitarised state "[t]han in that panoply of war" (5.90) which characterised earlier eras. He gladly averts his thoughts from fearful bodings of "invading men" to contemplation of "Fiction's fair romantic range" (5.121-36). In *The Field of Waterloo* (1815), Scott does not shy away from describing the damage caused by war: the "shatter'd" landscape and damaged crops (stanza 2-3); the "ghastly harvest" of human corpses (stanza 5); the "ghastly sights" and "mangled plight" of wounded soldiers piled into waggons that roll through the streets of Brussels, their blood dropping like rain onto the dusty streets (stanza 9). *The Lord*, however, offers

the most sustained acknowledgement of both the horrors and the futility of warfare than any other Scott poem (Bainbridge 143).<sup>6</sup>

Scott wrote *The Lord* during the first period of peace that Europe had known in over twenty years. Nonetheless, the spectre of war appears to haunt his mind even many years later when he writes the “Introduction to the Edition of 1833” and employs the metaphor of honourable surrender to convey the sense in which his hopes for *The Lord*’s success had failed to be realised. He offers himself the consolation that, “Although the poem cannot be said to have made a favourable impression on the public, the sale of fifteen thousand copies enabled the author to retreat from the field with the honours of war” (*Lord* 474). This imaginative projection of the poet into the arena of war is reminiscent of his figurative participation in *Marmion* in a literary joust with the masters of romance writing (1.286-89). It further suggests the indelibility of the memories associated with living through more than two decades of continuous conflict; *The Lord* is shot through with a sense of post-conflict fatigue.

If *Marmion* ends with Scotland’s most crushing defeat, *The Lord* culminates with its most celebrated victory: the Battle of Bannockburn of 1314. However, despite its focus on this significant military success, which paved the way for Scotland’s independence with the signing of the treaty of Edinburgh-Northampton in 1328, the poem’s tone is every bit as melancholy as that of *Marmion*. The opening stanzas to Canto First echo the wintry setting and language of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805) (see Introduction to Canto First) and the introductory epistles in *Marmion*. The time of year is once again “wild November,” autumn is departing, and the landscape lies suitably waste and bare. Scott again aligns himself with the bardic tradition, casting himself as “a lonely gleaner” toiling in poetic fields that have yielded a “richer harvest” to those who have preceded him. The sense of belatedness that William Deresiewicz finds in *Marmion* is, as he suggests, evident here again: the imagery implies that “traditional Scotland’s spiritual date is a perpetual” winter (148). Scott’s semantic field is densely sown with allusions to sterility, degradation and death: shroud, saddened scenes, time-wasted, withered, expiring, waste, pain, lonely, decay, and mortal coil are some of the words and phrases used to build a picture of a desolate world of sorrow and suffering, and these themes are revisited

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<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Simon Bainbridge’s groundbreaking work on Scott and war. See also *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (Cambridge UP, 1995); and “The New Century: 1800–1815” (*The Oxford Handbook of British Romanticism*, edited by David Duff, Oxford UP, 2018, pp. 44–58).

throughout the poem. At the start of the second canto, woe is cited as being present in every “scene of mortal life”, while Canto Third expresses the futility of man’s endeavours: “mortal schemes prove vain, / And mortal hopes expire” (3.7). Scott’s repeated recourse to such imagery, and his return to the pattern of “attrition and diminution” that marked *Marmion* (Alexander 3), undercuts reader expectations that *The Lord* will unambiguously glorify Bruce’s exploits, revealing instead its central concerns to be mourning and loss. This state of mourning is expressed at both the personal and the collective level and it arises in part from the cessation in hostilities in 1814: with the fighting over, the time for reflection and for counting the cost of war’s atrocities had begun.

Scott directly addresses his audience in the introductory stanzas to four of *The Lord*’s six cantos, referencing contemporary events both here and in the poem’s story. As previously demonstrated, this suggests the confluence of present and past, and blurs the line between the material world of the author and the fictional world of the narrative. The imposition of Scott’s voice further inscribes the poem with a sense of personal sorrow. In Canto Fourth, a description of Scotland’s western isles abruptly recalls the loss of Scott’s close friend and fellow balladeer John Leyden (4.11). In a brief postscript to the poem, Scott offers elegiac tribute to the Duchess of Buccleuch: her sudden death had prevented Scott from making her the poem’s dedicatee. In his “Introduction to the Edition of 1833,” Scott refers to her passing as “a circumstance which occasioned so many tears and so much sorrow,” and recalls how he struggled to complete the poem under the weight of his grief (*Lord* 474). This postscript brings the poem full circle: it both opens and ends with a bridal scene that is planned but not performed (the story concludes with the promise rather than the enactment of marriage). This ceremony is displaced in the first instance by the threat of violence and in the second by death, which again indicates the dominance of these themes in the text.

Bannockburn was a battle fought over two days, and in *The Lord* each day begins with a presentation of events from Edith’s perspective. Just as Clare has an elevated view of Flodden’s battlefield in *Marmion*, and “the full array / Of either host, for deadly fray” (6.915-16), Bannockburn is presented via Edith’s vantage point of Gillie’s Hill where she stands with “serf and page unfit for war / To eye the conflict from afar” (6.20). Despite her physical distance from events, war’s horrors are magnified by being mediated via her female gaze. Unaccustomed to such scenes of violent bloodshed, Edith is “aghast” at the

“wild show of war” (6.11) that she observes. She unwittingly becomes an active participant in the conflict when, in her mounting concern for Ronald’s safety, she forgets her guise of silence and implores the crowds to lend their aid, enquiring “are your hearts of flesh or stone?” (6.29). The “multitude” are already keen to enter the fray, for:

Each heart had caught the patriot spark,  
Old man and stripling, priest and clerk,  
Bondsman and serf; even female hand  
Stretch’d to the hatchet or the brand. (6.30)

They are now whipped into a “frenzy” when they misinterpret Edith’s sudden ability to speak as a miracle from God. This mass mobilisation mirrors the national scale of participation in the war effort in Scott’s day (Emsley 1-4).

*The Lord* graphically depicts the physical horrors of war and of localised acts of violence alike. When Bruce avenges Allan’s death, we are given the lurid detail of how the “spatter’d brain and bubbling blood” of his victim “hiss’d on the half-extinguished wood” (3.29). The term “gore” is used repeatedly: In the fray at Carrick, the Scottish combatants are said to be “drunk with gore”: “Unsparring was the vengeful sword, / And limbs were lopp’d and lifeblood pour’d” (5.31); Bruce’s sword steams hot “with Southern gore / From hilt to point ’twas crimsoned o’er” (5.33). On the battlefield at Bannockburn, the marshes grow “dark with human gore” (6.19), and the ground becomes “Slippery with blood and piled with dead” men and horses (6.19, 25). Throwing away his “gory axe” and “Clearing war’s terrors from his eye,” Bruce draws Edith towards him and presumably away from the sight of Sir Henry De Boune’s corpse (6.16). Bruce feels pity at taking a “life so valued and so dear” (6.16). However, as the battlefield piles ever higher with horribly mangled corpses, and the noblest amongst England’s ranks are left to die “in their gore” (6.29), the value of life lost increases incrementally. This challenges the argument made by critics that Scott’s poetry offers a picturesque romance of war which reduces the distance of the reader from its devastation (Bainbridge 130). In *The Lord* aesthetic grandeur gives way to sensory immersion in the horrors of violence: we hear the shrieks of mortally wounded men and horses (6.24), we see the blood spatter and the severed limbs fly, we smell the hot metal and death. Scott zooms in, diminishing the distance between reader and

events, and creating visceral images of the devastation wreaked on the battle's participants.

Just as Scott paints a compelling picture of the grisly human cost of war, he makes explicit the overwhelming futility of this "waste of life": "Yet fast they fell, unheard, forgot, / Both Southern fierce and hardy Scot" (*Lord* 6.26). Whatever the motivations of the men who fight, be it for honour and glory, love or revenge, fame or financial gain, they all end up in the same place: "the grave" (6.26). The catastrophic loss of life is symbolised by the empty relics of "broken plate and bloodied mail, / Rent crest and shatter'd coronet" which are all that remain of the "best names that England knew" (6.35). The opening epistle of *Marmion* makes this same point: "heroes, patriots, bards, and kings" are alike laid together at "the end of earthly things" (1.142-43). Death is the great leveller of rivalries, ambition, class and strife; it offers men the most compelling sympathetic bond of all.

Scott was the foremost war poet of his generation. His poetic career was inextricably bound up with the advent of war: an initial draft of his first major poem *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* and parts of *Marmion* were composed whilst he was stationed with his volunteer regiment in Musselburgh; and, as readers have noted, it was undoubtedly his military activity that suggested "the light horseman sort of stanza" in which the most compelling passages of these works were written (Lockhart 8; Marshall 525-26). The wars of Scott's day are specifically addressed throughout the course of his poetic writing; conflict (cultural, religious, political and artistic) is at the heart of every one of his narrative verse romances. Nonetheless, this poetry does not unambiguously celebrate war. It offers a more ambivalent, compassionate response to armed conflict than has been recognised to date.

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