

SIR WALTER SCOTT'S FRENCH VISITORS

R. K. GORDON

IN Sir Walter Scott's *Journal* under date of 14th September, 1827, the following entry occurs: "Enter Miss Sinclairs, two in number, also a translator, and a little Flemish woman, his wife—very good-humoured, rather a little given to compliment; name Fauconpret. They are to return at night in a gig as far as Kelso—a bold undertaking." The reference to the Frenchman is kindly enough, though there is a hint of irritation at the compliments, and perhaps a slight shrug of amusement at foreign manners. This person, so casually dismissed as "a translator", had his share of fame in his own country. The translation of the *Waverley Novels* by A. J. B. Defauconpret had beaten all rival versions, had brought wealth to Gosselin its publisher, and had made Scott one of the most popular authors in every part of France. It is still the standard French version. And Defauconpret not only won readers for Scott; he was responsible also, in part at least, for the stream of French tourists to Scotland in the 20's of the last century, for some of Scott's French admirers could not rest satisfied till they had seen the places described in the poems and novels, and till they had at any rate tried to behold the great man himself. To have made the Voyage d'Abbotsford, and to be able to say, "I have seen Walter Scott," gave one a claim to some literary distinction in France, until at last so many could make the claim that it lost all value.

Anybody who has read the *Journal* will remember the fairly frequent complaints which Scott makes about his foreign visitors. Some of the Frenchmen, such as the two young men who heralded their advance on Abbotsford by sending laudatory verses the day before, dealt heavily in adulation. "I detest the impudence," wrote Scott, "that pays a stranger compliments, and harangues about his works in the author's house, which is usually ill-breeding." Whether given to flattery or not, they wasted precious hours when Scott wished to be at his desk. Some of the intruders, he noted, wore fine waistcoats and breast-pins upon dirty shirts. "Hoo he maun scunner!" exclaims the Shepherd in one of Christopher North's *Noctes* ("Maga," November 1830), speaking of Scott's suffering from foreign tourists. Not all the references in the

Journal are hostile or contemptuous, but Scott must sometimes have wished for the old happy Ashestiel days when he had less fame and more time for himself and his friends.

Some of the travellers were artists, who, using Scott's poems and novels as a guide, searched for picturesque views from Berwick to the Highlands. Others were writers, who on returning home put what they had seen and felt into books, which, though of no importance in the literature of travel, yet make a pleasant chapter in the story of Scott's fame abroad.

To some of these literary tourists the country was a little disappointing. Their highflown romantic notions, nourished on such food as *The Lady of the Lake* and *Rob Roy*, were disturbed by some things in the Scotland of everyday reality. Most of them had also read Ossian, who had reigned in France before Sir Walter, and that did not much help matters. Léon de Buzonnière tells us how he and his companions in the stage coach, muffled to the eyes and yet shivering with cold, were thrilled when the coachman solemnly turned to them and announced in a grave tone: *L'Écosse, messieurs*. At once the miseries of travel were forgotten. De Buzonnière began to glance eagerly about him, but what he saw was wild-looking shepherds, persistent beggars (not in the least like Edie Ochiltree), and then Jedburgh, which seemed to him merely an ugly little town. Another of these delicate souls, Adolphe Blanqui, has the same sad tale. When, on crossing the border, he saw thin horses, ragged children, and miserable houses with conspicuous middens, he asked himself if, after all, their guide had not led them astray, and if this could indeed be the country of romance and Walter Scott. He might have felt sure he was in the right place if he had remembered the description of Tully-veolan. Another pilgrim, de Custine, admits the same sense of disillusion, but with him it came more slowly. A cold climate and bleak landscape did not discourage him, he stoutly declared; this was Nature in her majestic independence. He looked north to "the Ossianic mountains", and was impatient to be wandering in those solitudes. After all, how tame England had been, how uninteresting! This was the country for him, the country which, thanks to Walter Scott, he had long inhabited in imagination. In due time he reached the Highlands, and found them less satisfactory close at hand. Of course Loch Katrine was beautiful, but the storms—*The Lady of the Lake* had said nothing about storms—were so frequent, he complained, that nobody paid any attention to them. Then, too, there were some misadventures on Ben Lomond with a tipsy guide. In short, he was as glad to

be safely again in England as Bailie Nicol Jarvie was to see once more the Gorbals of Glasgow and Saint Mungo's steeple. "I can sum up my opinion of Scotland in two words," he wrote from the sweet security of Keswick: "I was delighted to cross the boundary of that country; I am very pleased to recross it." He made the comfortable decision that the best way to see Scotland was from the corner of the fireside, with the help of Ossian and Scott.

But some things gave delight and hurt not. The sight of Highlanders recalled Roderick and Rob Roy, and gave a chance for romantic laments over lost causes and vanishing civilizations. The frontispiece to Charles Nodier's *Promenade de Dieppe aux Montagnes d'Ecosse* shows a very highly-coloured, theatrical "chef de clan." Nodier saw them in Edinburgh in their "demi-nudité sauvage," hurrying along the streets "comme des lions égarés." They seemed somewhat less lion-like to his friend Amédée Pichot, who was in Edinburgh at the time of George IV's visit, when all kinds of people were in Highland costume. Eager for new emotions, Pichot followed the first person he saw in this attire, in order to contemplate his easy noble gait. Here, he said to himself, is one of those free children of the mountains who have preserved as a sacred tradition the costume and proud liberty of their fathers. But presently the Highlander turned, and the spell was broken, for Pichot saw that he wore spectacles. He decided that he had been wasting his admiration on a mere nobody dressed up for the occasion—probably a lawyer. Other novelties for the travellers, not wholly unpleasant, were "le cri sauvage de la bagpipe" and oatcake, "to which you easily become accustomed, especially if you are hungry."

The solemnity of a Scottish sabbath was another thing which attracted the notice of the Frenchmen. They contrast it with Sunday in France, as Francis Osbaldistone does in *Rob Roy*. Blanqui speaks of the deserted streets, the crowded churches, the earnest singing of the congregation in a way that would have satisfied even Andrew Fairservice; but de Custine tells us with indignation that in Edinburgh two men had recently been arrested for whistling in the street on Sunday, and that in Glasgow a hair-dresser had been put in prison for shaving three men.

In describing the idle barking dogs in Tully-Veolan, Scott remarks that a French tourist had recorded it as one of the notable curiosities in Scotland that the State maintained in each village a relay of curs to chase the feeble post-horses from one hamlet to another. Some of our Frenchmen make comments hardly less strange, for mistakes are easily made by men who write about

tourists a month, had suffered in the same way. He felt, as Keats and Brown had done a few years before, that steamboats had no business there; and, although there was a piper on board, his dress did not suit the Frenchman. "Such, we are told, was the costume of Rob Roy," he writes, "but did Rob Roy ever stoop to wear trousers?"

Pichot's *Voyage* fills three substantial volumes, two of which are given to England; the third is mostly Scott. But even in the English part Pichot strains his ingenuity to bring Scott in. At Canterbury he reflects that the story of Becket is one that Scott should tell; at the tombs of Fox and Pitt he quotes the lines about the trickling tear from *Marmion*; at Richmond he mentions Pope, but also remembers that Jeanie Deans had been there; in Fleet Street he thinks of the London of James I as described in Scott's new novel, *Les Aventures de Nigel*; at Sheffield he contrasts a modern knife with Gurth's rude blade; and at York he recalls Marston Moor, and that allows him to mention *Rokeby*. Pichot clearly shows that even England need not be wholly uninteresting if you know your Scott well enough.

"A few miles still to go, and we shall be in Walter Scott's country," wrote Pichot as he approached the Tweed. Later, as they drove on to Edinburgh, he amused himself by imagining that the people whom he saw from the stage coach were characters out of the *Waverley Novels*. A kindly looking old laird becomes the Baron of Bradwardine; a queer fellow singing a meaningless snatch of song is David Gellatley; a dignified young lady must be Flora MacIvor, and a farmer with his dogs is, of course, Dandie Dinmont. In Edinburgh Pichot spent several weeks, and was an active sight-seer. He made the acquaintance of Blackwood, Laing and Constable, whom he likes to call M. Archibald. In spite of the French consul's warning to beware of anything resembling music as long as he was in Scotland, he went to a concert to hear some piping, and asserts that he was able to distinguish a lament from a reel. He visited Melrose; and at Abbotsford he picked some rose leaves for his friend Nodier and some oak leaves for Gosselin, his publisher. On his return to Edinburgh he was persuaded by Scott to postpone his trip to the Highlands in order not to miss the visit of George IV. "The mountains and lakes are always there," Scott told him. Later, he went to the Hebrides and wished that he had been with Scott on his 1814 tour. "What a precious journal I should have written!"

The great thing for Pichot was that he met Scott, met him more than once, and talked to him. His first glimpse of Scott

did not much attract him. The great man, who was pointed out to him on Princes Street, seemed commonplace. But a few days later, when he used the fact that he had translated *Marmion* and *The Lady of the Lake* into French prose as an excuse for calling, he found Scott all that he had hoped for. On another occasion, he breakfasted in Castle Street when Crabbe also was of the party.

Pichot paid Scott effusive compliments about his poetry, and would have liked to do so about the novels also. There was, however, an obvious difficulty; Scott had not admitted that he was their author. Pichot tried to worm the secret out of Constable, but was met with polite evasions. Not that he himself had any real doubts on the matter. He takes it for granted in his book that Scott is the author; and, indeed, as early as 1819 Scott's name was frankly attached to the novels in France. But it was not so with us. Pichot, therefore, had to restrict himself to hints. He remarked to Scott that he admired his prose, and then made the remark harmless by referring to the *Life of Swift*. Scott in replying mentioned his *Life of Dryden*.

Pichot's account of his meetings with Scott must have stirred the envy of some of his less fortunate fellow-countrymen. De Buzonnière came to Edinburgh, provided with a letter of introduction from Gosselin, and some volumes of Scott's works in French. These were to be his "Open Sesame." The letter bore no address, but that, he was sure, would not matter. Walter Scott was known everywhere and to everybody—probably even to the bootblack at the hotel. De Buzonnière tried him:

"Where does Walter Scott live, boy?"

"I don't know."

Next he tried the landlord, who asked:

"Who is this gentleman?"

"Why, he's a famous writer."

"Oh, yes; author of some novels, I know; but I don't know his address."

He called at the law-courts, only to find them closed. At the Advocates' Library, however, he was told that Scott lived in Walker Street. "Distracted by the pleasure," says de Buzonnière, "which I felt at finding myself at last so near one of the most famous men of our century, I forgot to knock with that tone of authority which announces a gentleman." The diffident sound, however, was heard by the servant, but all she could tell him was that Scott had left that house two years before. So the chase ended. As de Buzonnière and his friends were sadly returning to the hotel,

a sign caught their notice: "Archibald Constable, Bookseller". Hope flickered up again. They ventured in, and learned from Constable that Scott had gone to York to meet the Duke of Wellington.

Ducos, another Frenchman who failed to see Scott, was consoled when he read the *Life of Napoleon*. "The regret is less keen," he wrote, "since the author of *Waverley* . . . has thought that his literary talent would give him the power to blast Napoleon's glory. His poisoned shafts have returned upon him, and he has fouled his fame where he thought to give it a new splendour." *Paul's Letters* and *Napoleon* were hard for some Frenchmen to forgive.

Scott disappointed some of those who did see him, just as Scotland itself had done. Neither the man nor the country suggested pure romance. The cool hard-headed part of Scott's character, and something solid and prosaic in his appearance, were to some admirers a little unexpected and distressing. This poet, wrote Simond dismally, has a flat nose, a large space between nose and mouth, little chin, a great surface of pale clean-shaven cheek, and a heavy commonplace general appearance. The only redeeming touch was that, when he talked, his features lit up and his eyes shone.

This was in 1810. Sixteen years later, when Scott was in Paris, many of those who flocked to see him felt as Simond had done. The trouble with these people was that, although they appreciated the Scott who imagined Ellen Douglas and the Master of Ravenswood, they did not altogether appreciate the Scott who made Cuddie Headrigg and Meg Dods. But some Frenchmen did justice to all sides of Scott's character and art; and the greatest of these was Balzac, who was always proud to own his debt to "le grand écossais."