

## VIII

### SCOTT AND NORTHUMBERLAND

*Frank Whitehead and Philip Yarrow*

ALTHOUGH SCOTT is associated with the Scottish Border, he was well acquainted with the English side, and it figures in some of his best works. Nor let us forget that he was one of the original members of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne.

As a boy and a young man, Scott stayed in Northumberland on at least four occasions. The date of the first one is uncertain, but, writing to a friend in 1812 about the battle of Otterburn, he says:

It is many, many years since I was on the spot, a little boy on a little pony, and with a travelling companion too careful to permit any of the researches which, even then, I had much inclination to make concerning the locality of the battle. (27th February 1812)<sup>1</sup>

In 1816 he writes that the ground "confirms [Froissart's] account of the battle wonderfully".<sup>2</sup> The travelling companion was, of course, his uncle, Captain Robert Scott, of Rosebank, Kelso. They may well have visited Northumberland together on occasions other than those mentioned here.

His next recorded visit took place in August 1791. Scott was then just twenty. He gives an account of it in a letter to William Clerk, dated 26th August, and written from Northumberland.

Behold a letter from the mountains; for I am very snugly settled here, in a farmer's house, about six miles from Wooler, in the very centre of the Cheviot hills, in one of the wildest and most romantic situations which your imagination, fertile upon the subject of cottages, ever suggested.

According to Tomlinson,<sup>3</sup> Scott stayed at Langleeford, at the foot of the Cheviot. Unfortunately, he does not say how he knows, and Scott's biographers are silent on the point; but Langleeford is about six miles from Wooler, and there is no reason for doubt. Scott goes on:

And what the deuce are you about there? methinks I hear you say. Why, sir, of all things in the world—drinking goat's whey—not that I stand in the least need of it, but my uncle having a slight cold, and being a little tired of home, asked me last Sunday evening if I would like to go with him to Wooler, and I answering in the affirmative, next morning's sun beheld us on our journey, through a pass in the Cheviots, upon the back of two special nags, and man Thomas behind with a portmanteau, and two fishing-rods fastened across his back, much in the style of St. Andrew's Cross. Upon reaching Wooler we found the

accommodations so bad that we were forced to use some interest to get lodgings here, where we are most delightfully appointed indeed.

An interesting glimpse of travel in these parts in the late eighteenth century. Scott continues:

To add to my satisfaction, we are amidst places renowned by the feats of former days; each hill is crowned with a tower, or camp, or cairn, and in no situation can you be near more fields of battle: Flodden, Otterburn, Chevy Chase, Ford Castle, Chillingham Castle, Copland [i.e. Coupland] Castle, and many another scene of blood, are within the compass of a forenoon's ride. Out of the brooks with which these hills are intersected, we pull trouts of half a yard in length, as fast as we did the perches from the pond at Pennyquick, and we are in the very country of muirfowl.

Scott was always passionately fond of seeing the scenes of historical events, and giving free reign to his imagination. Although he mentions Otterburn, he cannot have visited it on this occasion if we accept the assertion in the letter of 1812 that he had not seen it since he was a little boy. In J. L. Robertson's edition of Scott's *Poetical Works*, there is a fragment, "At Flodden", dated 1799. Lockhart prints the poem without a date.<sup>4</sup> We have found no evidence of a visit to Flodden in 1799; the date is almost certainly wrong.

Finally, a glimpse of life at Langleeford:

My uncle drinks the whey here, as I do ever since I understood it was brought to his bedside every morning at six, by a very pretty dairy-maid. So much for my residence: all the day we shoot, fish, walk and ride; dine and sup upon fish struggling from the stream, and the most delicious heath-fed mutton, barn-door fowls, poys [pies], milk-cheese, &c., all in perfection; and so much simplicity resides among these hills, that a pen, which could write at least, was not to be found about the house, though belonging to a considerable farmer, till I shot the crow with whose quill I write this epistle.<sup>5</sup>

This visit influenced two of Scott's major works, *Marmion* (1808), and *Rob Roy* (1817). In the first canto of *Marmion*, Lord Marmion spends a night in Norham Castle on his way to the Scottish court. In the second, a party of Benedictine nuns travels by sea from Whitby to Holy Island, described with its castle and its abbey. There, the abbess of Whitby, the prioress of Tynemouth, and the abbot of St. Cuthbert's on Lindisfarne condemn Constance de Beverley, seduced by Marmion, to be walled up. There is a reference to the hermitage of Warkworth, made famous by Bishop Percy's ballad. Canto 6 contains a fine account of the battle of Flodden.

A good deal of *Rob Roy* is set in Northumberland. The hero, Francis Osbaldistone, is brought up in London, but his father is a Northumbrian, and he hears about Northumberland from his father's nurse. She sings "the favourite old ditty, which I then preferred, and—why should I not tell the truth?—which I still prefer to all the opera airs ever minted by the capricious brain of an Italian Mus. D.—

'Oh, the oak, the ash, and the bonny ivy tree,  
They flourish best at home in the North Country!'"

He is sent to stay for a while at the family seat, Osbaldistone Hall, in Northumberland.

According to Tomlinson, Biddlestone Hall "is said to be the Osbaldistone of *Rob Roy*". Osbaldistone Hall in the novel is west of the Great North Road and in the Cheviots, which fits. It is "a large and antiquated edifice, peeping out from a Druidical grove of huge oaks". Tomlinson's description does not conflict with Scott's. He describes Biddleston Hall, reached from Netherton, as

the stately mansion of the Selbys, which is built on the top of a gradual slope, and commands a fine prospect of the vale of Coquet and the hills beyond. Behind it rise the stern, dark hills of Harden and Silverton, separated from the house by a deep and wooded dell, through which a moorland streamlet tumbles in a succession of pretty falls. Flourishing groves of oak and pine add to the picturesque surroundings of the place. (p. 352)

Biddlestone Hall, which stood a couple of miles east of Clennel, near Alwinton, was pulled down a quarter of a century ago. Moreover, the Biddlestone Hall known to Tomlinson was built for the most part in 1796 and modified in 1820; the building Scott saw in 1791 and described, or may have described, in his novel was an earlier one.

There are references to Rothbury, and to Morpeth and Hexham gaols. The inhabitants of Osbaldistone Hall get their sea fish from Hartlepool and Sunderland.<sup>6</sup> Did they really have to go so far afield, or are memories of sojourns further south—at Rokeby, for instance—blending with memories of the stay at Langleeford? More detailed knowledge is shown by the references to Otterscope Hill and Blackstone. "Take my advice," says Diana Vernon, "and when you speak of Rashleigh, get up to the top of Otterscope-hill, where you can see for twenty miles round you in every direction—stand on the very peak, and speak in whispers [...]" Otterscope must be Ottercops, about twelve miles due south of Biddlestone as the crow flies, and just north of the modern road from Otterburn to Belsay. Blackstone, mentioned in a song,—

He that gallops his horse on Blackstone edge  
May chance to catch a fall

—may well be Blaxter. Blaxter Lough is about two miles due south of Elsdon; there is a quarry nearby.

In the course of the novel, Francis Osbaldistone and Andrew Fairservice make their way from Osbaldistone to Glasgow. They go over Ottercops, proceed more or less due west into Scotland, and the first town they reach there is Lochmaben. If one looks at the map, this seems a likely way to choose, especially as Francis Osbaldistone's guide, Andrew Fairservice, has been a smuggler, and is therefore best acquainted with the way to the Solway Firth: as we know from *Guy Mannering*, liquor was smuggled into England from the Isle of Man. It is puzzling that there is no mention of Lockerbie; perhaps it was an insignificant village in Scott's day, or in the early eighteenth century, when the action of the novel takes place.

Lastly, it was Sir John Fenwick's plot, we are told, that caused Archie Osbaldistone to be hanged, and Di Vernon's father to be condemned to death. This was a plot to assassinate William III in 1696 and 1697; and Sir John Fenwick was M.P. for Northumberland. All in all, *Rob Roy* has an authentic Northumbrian flavour.

Next year, Scott was back again. On 30th September 1792, he wrote to the same friend, William Clerk:

I have had an expedition through Hexham and the higher parts of Northumberland, which would have delighted the very cockles of your heart, not so much on account of the beautiful romantic appearance of the country, though that would have charmed you also, as because you would have seen more Roman inscriptions built into gate-posts, barns, &c., than perhaps are to be found in any other part of Britain. These have been all dug up from the neighbouring Roman wall, which is still in many places very entire, and gives a stupendous idea of the perseverance of its founders, who carried such an erection from sea to sea, over rocks, mountains, rivers, and morasses. There are several lakes among the mountains above Hexham well worth going many miles to see, though their fame is eclipsed by their neighbourhood to those of Cumberland. They are surrounded by old towers and castles, in situations the most savagely romantic; what would I have given to have been able to take effect-pieces from some of them!

He goes on to mention the countryside round Hexham, Beaufront and its eccentric owner, the battle of Hexham Levels and Dukesfield, but not the Queen's cave, and the Northumbrian dialect. He adds that the ignorance of the Northumbrians

is surprising to a Scotchman. It is common for the traders in cattle, which business is carried on to a great extent, to carry all letters received in the course of the trade to the parish church, where the clerk reads them aloud after service, and answers them according to circumstances.<sup>7</sup>

Memories of this visit may have enriched *Rob Roy* and *Guy Mannering*, but it inspired no separate work.

The fourth visit, the most momentous, was Scott's stay in Gilsland in 1797, when he met his future wife. This is the subject of a separate article.<sup>8</sup> In 1830, Scott sent Abraham Cooper seventeen stanzas of *The Ballad of Percy Reed*, with notes on Percy Reed, Keeper of Reedsdale (*sic*) "about the 16th Century". "I took down the story from the recitation of a shepherd belonging to these wilds".<sup>9</sup> Presumably he did this during one of the four visits mentioned.

Scott, of course, must often have passed through Northumberland on his way southwards. Sometimes, he went by sea—as he did in 1775, when, as a child, he was taken to Bath.<sup>10</sup> He liked the sea journey. In one of his letters (10th May 1813), he tells a friend that the sea passage costs a third of the journey by mailcoach, and that "the accommodations on board the smacks are now in most cases very comfortable"; in another (10th January 1815), he expresses a preference for the voyage, saying, "if there is a route I am tired of it is that vile North road which has less to interest one than the same extent in any direction in Great Britain"; and in yet another (April 1815),<sup>11</sup> he describes his journey:

... we came up by sea very successfully and even pleasantly bating three circumstances—  
1<sup>st</sup>, that the wind was in constant and methodical opposition.

2<sup>nd</sup>, that a collier brig ran foul of us in the dark and nearly consigned us all to the bottom of the sea.

3<sup>rd</sup>, and last we struck on a rock and lay hammering for two hours untill we floated with the rising tide.

On this occasion, despite the contrary wind and the mishaps, the journey took only five days. Later, when steamships came in, the journey from Leith to London took only sixty hours.<sup>12</sup>

Scott's memories of the sea journey are embodied in the second canto of *Marmion*, in stanzas 2 and 8. They are, we suspect, responsible for an anachronism in the latter, the reference to Seaton Delaval Hall, built by Vanbrugh in the early eighteenth century, and not there in Marmion's day.

One or two of Scott's other journeys through Northumberland should be mentioned. Incidentally, he preferred the route by Wooler to that by Alnwick.<sup>13</sup> In June 1799, he and Mrs Scott stayed in Newcastle.<sup>14</sup> In March 1807, he had a very cold journey to London through Northumberland. "We were almost stopd by the snow at Morpeth & I have seldom felt colder weather than we had every night & morning."<sup>15</sup>

In September 1812, he passed through Northumberland on his way to Rokeby, "travelling on horseback, his eldest boy and girl on their poneys, while Mrs Scott followed them in the carriage".<sup>16</sup> Lockhart says they went by way of Flodden and Hexham, and tells two amusing anecdotes, which, he says, Scott was fond of telling to the end of his days. It is, however, clear from Scott's letters<sup>17</sup> that they intended to spend the night of the 24th with John Rutherford, M.P., at Edgerston, and the next at Hexham. Now, Edgerston is on, or just off, the road from Jedburgh to Carter Bar, about three miles north of Carter Bar. To go to Hexham from Edgerston via Flodden would be a roundabout way to choose. In any case, Scott intended to revisit Otterburn, which is on, or near, the direct road from Carter Bar to Hexham, and no doubt did so.<sup>18</sup> Edgar Johnson<sup>19</sup> says that they went to Flodden on their way from Abbotsford to Edgerston, which would have been even odder. It is highly unlikely that Scott visited Flodden on this occasion—all the more so since Lockhart's first anecdote requires Scott to have returned home by way of Flodden as well, whereas his letters make it clear that from Rokeby he travelled via Bowes, Stainmore Forest, Brough, Appleby, Brougham Castle, and Carlisle, to Dalkeith House. Lockhart's error about the visit to Flodden makes us wary of the anecdotes—"interesting, but tough," as Huck Finn says.

Scott spent a night in Newcastle with three companions on 28th July 1815; they were on their way to visit the field of Waterloo and Paris. And finally, in his *Journal*, he records a stay at Ravensworth in October 1827. He travelled by coach:

We dined at Wooler and I found out Doctor Douglas on the outside, son of my old acquaintance Dr. James Douglas of Kelso. This made us even lighter in hand till we came to Whittingham. Thence to Newcastle, where an obstreperous horse retarded us for an hour at least to the great alarm of my friend the toy-woman [his fellow-inside-passenger]. N.B. She would have made a good featherbed if the carriage had happend to fall and her undermost. The heavy roads had retarded us near an hour more. So that I hesitated to go to Ravensworth so late. But my good woman's tales of dirty sheets and certain recollections of a Newcastle inn induced me to go on.

This was on 2nd October. Scott left Ravensworth on the 6th and travelled via

Whittingham to Alnwick. He spent a couple of nights there with the Duke and Duchess of Northumberland. He left on the 8th,

and took coach at Whittingham at eleven o' clock. I find there is a new road to be made between Alnwick and Wooler which will make the communication much easier and avoid Remside [i.e. Rimside] Moor.<sup>20</sup>

Scott was interested in Northumbrian antiquities and local history. He was chagrined that one of his works had led to the destruction of an ancient statue. In 1816, he tells a friend:

Between a miserable inn calld Tom-pill\* and Otterbourne (that is supposing you to come from Hexham) on a small brook near a place calld Wood[b]urne is the curious roman town or camp of Risingham. Near this stood the figure calld Robin of Risingham now not existing. It was mentioned in the notes to a certain poem calld Rokeby and acquired such celebrity that the Boor on whose ground it stood teased with the number of visitors broke it to pieces. I wish the fragments were in his bladder with all my heart. (*Letters*, IV, 271)

Incidentally, the inns on this road do not seem to have been good, since he tells his friend that the inn at Otterburn is "an indifferent sort of hedge inn".<sup>21</sup>

Of his interest in Northumbrian history and literature there is plenty of evidence. In 1813, he gives details of the 1715 rebellion in a letter to James Ellis of Otterburn.<sup>22</sup> He was pleased when John Bell, Junior, bookseller of the Quayside, Newcastle, sent him "a curious parcel of broadsides" printed in Newcastle, and when Bell went bankrupt, bought his collection of ballads.<sup>23</sup> In one of his letters, he quotes the song "sair faild hinny"; according to the editor's note, he knew it from John Bell's *Rhymes of Northern Bards*, Newcastle, 1812.<sup>24</sup> In 1812, when the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne was being founded, Bell invited him to become a member. He refused to be an ordinary member, on the reasonable grounds that he would be unable to attend the meetings, but accepted an invitation the following year to be a non-residing member.<sup>25</sup> His name duly appears in the list of Honorary Members at the end of the first volume of *Archaeologia Aeliana*. In 1812, he asks James Ballantyne to send him Hutchinson's *History of Durham and Northumberland*.<sup>26</sup> In 1822, he published *Halidon Hill, A Metrical Drama*, in which he transposed to Halidon Hill the battle of Homildon Hill, near Wooler. In 1823, he asks Constable to try to send him *Edwin and Anna, a Northumbrian Tale, founded on Facts*, 3 vols. in 1, 1785. "As I remember for it is many years since I saw it [it] contains some singular particulars about incidents and families on the east border about sixty or seventy years ago".<sup>27</sup> In 1824, the Duke of Bedford, wanting details of the death of his ancestor, Sir Francis Russell, on Windy Gyle in 1585, asked Scott if he could identify Oswyne middle and Hexgate Pathhead. Scott, in his turn, appealed to his friend, Robert Shortreed. Shortreed says the first is Usway Middleford, but neither he nor another correspondent can explain Hexgate Pathhead (presumably what is now known as Cocklaw Gate or Hexpeth Gate).<sup>28</sup> In 1827 we find him reading two plays by William Percy, a son of the eighth Earl of Northumberland.<sup>29</sup> His name appears in the list of subscribers to Sykes's *Local Records*, published in 1833, the year after Scott's death.

His contacts with some Northumbrians show his interests and his reputation. John Davidson of Newcastle wrote to Scott in 1802, pointing out that Otterburn is thirty-two miles from Newcastle, not twelve, as stated by Scott in the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*.<sup>30</sup> The Rev. Joseph Cook of Newton Hall, Northumberland, sent Scott, in 1814, his *Memorandum relative to a Curious Stone Coffin, lately found near Chillingham in Northumberland*; Scott agreed with him that the coffin might well be that of a Douglas.<sup>31</sup> Miss Jane Bell of North Shields called on him in Edinburgh in 1826. A Methodist minister, from hatred of her brother, a fellow-preacher, had sent two libellous letters to her lover and caused her marriage to be broken off. She had gone to law, lost one suit, won another, and ruined herself. She wanted Scott to work, or help her work, her story into a novel. "What is odd enough the Conference or Congress or whatever they are did not depose him but only degraded him a step in their church. It gives a very curious peep into the inside of the methodistic system & the tenderness of their clergy towards each other."<sup>32</sup> There was also a correspondence with Jemima Layton, "a mad woman, from about Alnwick", who

baited me with letters and plans—first for charity to herself or some protegee—I gave my guinea—then she wanted to have half the profit of a novel which I was to publish under my name and auspices—She sent me the manuscript and a *moving* tale it was for some of the scenes lay in the *Cabinet a l'eau*. I declined the partnership. Lastly my fair correspondent insisted I was a lover of speculation and would be much profited by going shares in a patent medicine which she had invented for the benefit of little babies I believe. I declined to have anything to do with such a Herod-like affair and begged to decline the honour of correspondence in future. I should have thought the thing a quiz but that the novel was real and substantial.<sup>33</sup>

The letter in which she asks him to publish her novel is dated Great Gransden (Bedfordshire), 12th August 1817. She says, in fact, "the profit I will entirely relinquish to you", and says that she "had permission to dedicate to the late Duke of Northumberland"<sup>34</sup>

We may conclude with two anecdotes from his letters. A propos of the mutual dislike of Border lairds and squires:

So when the road to Jedburgh was first mentioned a Northumbrian squire started up and said with accents of great scorn "A road into Scotland! *Cui bono?*" (*Letters*, IV, 47)

And he related the following anecdote about Newcastle keelmen to Maria Edgeworth:

The keel [...] had run ashore under the ruins of the old abbey of Jarrow, and the shock startled an owl from her place of strength. The Hand who was afore never having seen such a bird in his life concluded from its appearance and cry that it must be a spirit and exhorted his comrade to come ahead and speak to it which he did to this purpose. The supposed ghost you must understand had treated them with two or three shrieks. "Hoo! hoo!" said the keeler who thought the expressions of the owl's wonder too strong for the occasion "What's thee hoo-hooing at—didsn't never see a keel ashore before?" (*Letters*, IX, 45-6)

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Letters*, ed. H. J. C. Grierson, 1932-7, III, 80-81.
- <sup>2</sup> *Letters*, IV, 271.
- <sup>3</sup> William Weaver Tomlinson, *Comprehensive Guide To Northumberland*, David and Charles reprint, 1968, 479.
- <sup>4</sup> O.U.P., 1904, 699; J. G. Lockhart, *Memoirs of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. A. W. Pollard, 1900, I, 273-4.
- <sup>5</sup> *Letters*, I, 18-20.
- <sup>6</sup> *Waverley Novels*, Magnum Edition, vol. VII, 1828, 88.
- <sup>7</sup> *Letters*, I, 23-4.
- <sup>8</sup> Forthcoming in the *Durham University Journal*.
- <sup>9</sup> *Letters*, XI, 426-7.
- <sup>10</sup> *Letters*, III, 62; *Autobiography* in Lockhart, I, 16.
- <sup>11</sup> *Letters*, IV, 42.
- <sup>12</sup> *Letters*, VI, 468 (1821).
- <sup>13</sup> *Letters*, VII, 372-3.
- <sup>14</sup> *Letters*, I, 92.
- <sup>15</sup> *Letters*, XII, 87.
- <sup>16</sup> Lockhart, II, 229-30.
- <sup>17</sup> *Letters*, III, 157 (Sept. 1812); 163 (20th Sept. 1812).
- <sup>18</sup> *Letters*, III, 90 (2nd March 1812). According to a note in *Letters of James Ellis, Esq., and Walter Scott, Esq.*, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1850, p. 19, Scott and his family spent the night of 25th September with James Ellis at Otterburn Castle. This conflicts with Scott's letter to Lady Louisa Stuart of 20th September (III, 163); presumably Scott had changed his plans. According to the note, Ellis and Scott visited the Roman fort the following morning, and Scott saw Robin of Risingham apparently for the first time. See also James C. Corson, *Notes and Index to Sir Herbert Grierson's Edition of the Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, 1979, 93 (note on III, 245(d)).
- <sup>19</sup> *Sir Walter Scott. The Great Unknown*, 1970, I, 399-400.
- <sup>20</sup> Scott, *Journal*, ed. W. E. K. Anderson, 1972, 357, 363.
- <sup>21</sup> *Letters*, IV, 270-71. For Robin of Risingham, see note 18 above.
- <sup>22</sup> *Letters*, III, 245-7.
- <sup>23</sup> *Letters*, III, 208 (22nd December 1812); 209n.
- <sup>24</sup> *Letters*, XI, 277.
- <sup>25</sup> *Letters*, III, 242-3, 248.
- <sup>26</sup> *Letters*, I, 422.
- <sup>27</sup> *Letters*, VIII, 10.
- <sup>28</sup> *Letters*, VIII, 380-81. Oswyne middle appears as Oswald Myddle in Joseph Bain's *Calendar of Border Papers*, 1894, I, 189. Scott's enquiries are the subject of an article, "A disputed locality: Oswyne Middle and Hexpethgatehead", by W. M. Parker, in *Transactions of the Hawick Archaeological Society*, 1949, 36-9.
- <sup>29</sup> *Journal*, 356.
- <sup>30</sup> *Letters*, XII, 377-8.
- <sup>31</sup> *Letters*, XII, 419-20.
- <sup>32</sup> *Letters*, IX, 402. See also *Journal*, 74, 324.
- <sup>33</sup> *Journal*, 85.
- <sup>34</sup> *The Private Letter-Books of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. Wilfred Partington, 1930, 227-8.

\* i.e. Tone Inn, formerly known as Tone Pitt Inn, see Tomlinson, 233.