

A Test of Decadence

by [Matthew Wardour](#) (November 2020)



Rebecca and the Wounded Ivanhoe, Eugène Delacroix, 1823

In a 1903 essay G.K. Chesterton offered what he said was “almost a test of decadence”:

If ever we lose touch with this one most reckless and defective writer, it will be a proof to us that we have erected round ourselves a false cosmos, a world of lying and horrible perfection, leaving outside of it [this writer] and that strange old world which is as confused and as indefensible and as inspiring and as healthy as he.

Our mystery writer was perhaps the most successful British writer of his time. John Gibson Lockhart’s ten-volume biography of his life was among the most popular and brilliant of its kind. By half-past ten on the morning of publication 7,000 copies of his novel *The Fortunes of Nigel* had already been sold in London alone. 35,000 copies of the 1829 collection edition of his novels were sold each month. Novels were expensive things and these were astonishing figures.

One hundred and fifty years ago almost any literate person in Europe would have known of this great man and moreover his works. Yet today the name Sir Walter Scott is, for most, only vaguely familiar. He shares a similar fate to Samuel Johnson, that other “great unread” British writer, in that he still lives on in our cultural memory even though so few read him. Cities, towns, streets, rivers and railway stations all over the Anglosphere are named after Scott novels. Our modern image of Robin Hood comes in large part from *Ivanhoe*: the name “Locksley,” the splitting of the arrow in an archery contest, the jolly Friar Tuck, the backdrop of a Norman-Saxon conflict, the mysteries of an old English forest. Operas, overtures, ballets and songs inspired by Scott’s works are still performed—most notably Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*. And people often unknowingly quote Scott: when we say “O, what a tangled web we weave / when first we practise to deceive” we are in fact quoting from Scott’s poem *Marmion*.

When we use terms such as “bread-winner,” “beserk,” or “tongue-in-cheek” we probably have Walter Scott to thank for their becoming mainstream.

The Waverley novels (so named because Scott did not reveal himself to be the author until 1827; each subsequent novel was “by the author of *Waverley*”) were works which people were thrilled to read and hear about. They were the sorts of stories, as with popular television and film series today, about which people argued intensely—every reader had his favourite characters and incidents. Scott did something remarkable in his novels: he moved history beyond sources, documents, chronologies and legends and inhabited it with real, complex people. Indeed for all his antiquarian obsessions, where Scott truly excelled was in writing speech not description. He made the reader live in the past with characters who were not merely modern people in costumes but real people with different values, beliefs and manners. They were the first great historical novels, and they enchanted all those who read them.

Scott is now seldom read—often out of prejudice. His writing, we are usually told, is turgid and stiffly formal. Yet anyone who actually opens up a novel by Scott will find a gentle and pleasing storyteller. Scott is sometimes guilty, being both an unabashed antiquarian and a lover of eighteenth-century digressive novels, of overwhelming the reader with detail. In his remarkably honest and endearing *Journal*, Scott wrote that “I have rarely, if ever, found any one, out of whom I could not extract amusement or edification.” Still, he confessed, if given the choice between “eternal company, without the power of retiring within yourself, or solitary confinement for life, I should say, ‘Turnkey, lock the cell!’” This combination of generosity and introversion is what makes him such a great writer, but it also makes him a writer whose stories can unfold rather slowly, and whose fascinations can seem dull to some readers. Yet we are not supposed to read him

with careful attention to every word; he is not making a careful philosophical argument but rather telling a story. He wrote an astonishing amount (not all of it good) and wrote it quickly, so you should feel no qualms about skipping the odd passage—"the laudable practice of skipping," as Scott himself termed it—but instead let your eyes glide easily over his prose. Soon you will become enthralled in the adventure, which can be breathless. I defy anyone to read the tournament chapters in *Ivanhoe* or Royalist versus Covenanter "Battle of Drumclog" in *Old Mortality* and not come away a nervous wreck.

Great art, or at least great novels, usually begins as entertainment; the profundity is almost incidental. Those authors which force a message into their stories may be celebrated at the time but are later forgotten—or at least their message is. Scott himself claimed to be "no great believer in the moral utility to be derived from fictitious compositions." He thought it a sufficient justification for novel-writing that it granted people a temporary escape from the sufferings of the world—Scott once wrote that "life could not be endured were it seen in reality." Yet his works clearly have at least one moral purpose—the moral purpose which all good novels should possess—in that they expand our sympathies for the lives of others. This is why William Hazlitt, in almost all ways hostile to Scott's worldview, went as far as to write that "his works are almost like a new edition of human nature."

One of Scott's finest inventions is Jonathan Oldbuck, the titular character of *The Antiquary*, a novel which is perhaps the greatest exploration of the joys of good company. Oldbuck is partly (though only partly) an autobiographical character: Scott was mocking his own pedanticism. The result is comic brilliance: a cantankerous, antiquarian-obsessed bore. Oldbuck frequently mentions "my trivial Essay upon Castrametation" ("with some particular Remarks upon the Vestiges of Ancient Fortifications lately discovered by the

Author at the Kaim of Kinprunes"). He is always vexing against "womankind," a term he uses "to denote the fair sex in general, and his sister and niece in particular." He comes out with some gloriously miserabilist lines: "the clergy live by our sins, the medical faculty by our diseases, and the law gentry by our misfortunes." (Scott often enjoyed satirising the legal class to which he belonged.)

Indeed, Scott excels at comic characters. I think of Caleb Balderstone, the servant in *The Bride of Lammermoor* who tries all sorts of desperate and hilarious schemes to disguise the destitution that has befallen the House of Ravenswood. Or Peter Peebles, the mad and drunken plaintiff who has become a perennial feature of Edinburgh's Parliament House because of his obsessive love of litigation. Scott's humour can sometimes be cruel, for example in his treatment of the Laird of Balmawhapple who died "when some dozen of the fugitives took heart of grace, turned round, and cleaving his skull with their broadswords, satisfied the world that the unfortunate gentleman had actually brains, the end of his life thus giving proof of a fact greatly doubted during its progress."

(For the phrenologically-inclined it is interesting to note, as an aside, that when Scott died physicians cut open his cranium so that they could extract his brain for autopsy. It was considered by the public and his physicians to be of great importance to ascertain the exact cause of death. They found the left side of the brain was in a poor state, and Lockhart in his biography made this curious comment: "the brain was not large –and the cranium thinner than it is usually found to be.")

Yet Scott's comic characters are often so much more than mere comic foil. The pedantic and misogynistic Jonathan Oldbuck begins as entertainment, but the reader soon discovers that Oldbuck's prickly character hides a remarkably good heart. In a much-loved scene in *The Antiquary* the fisherman Saunders Mucklebackit feels unable to carry his son's coffin,

and so Oldbuck volunteers himself (despite having a less than favourable opinion of the Mucklebackit family). Soon after, upon finding Mucklebackit repairing the shattered boat in which his son had died, Oldbuck says,

"I am glad," he said in a tone of sympathy—"I am glad, Saunders, that you feel yourself able to make this exertion."

"And what would ye have me to do," answered the fisher gruffly, "unless I wanted to see four children starve, because ane is drowned? It's weel wi' you gentles, that can sit in the house wi' handkerchers at your een when ye lose a friend; but the like o' us maun to our wark again, if our hearts were beating as hard as my hammer."

...

[Mucklebackit attempted] to resume his labour,—but Oldbuck took him kindly by the arm. "Come, come," he said, "Saunders, there is no work for you this day—I'll send down Shavings the carpenter to mend the boat, and he may put the day's work into my account—and you had better not come out to-morrow, but stay to comfort your family under this dispensation, and the gardener will bring you some vegetables and meal from Monkbarns."

"I thank ye, Monkbarns, [Oldbuck is often referred to by the name of his house]" answered the poor fisher; "I am a plain-spoken man, and hae little to say for mysell; I might hae learned fairer fashions frae my mither lang syne, but I never saw muckle gude they did her; however, I thank ye. Ye were aye kind and neighbourly, whatever folk says o' your being near and close; and I hae often said, in thae times when they were ganging to raise up the puir folk against the gentles—I hae often said, neer a man should steer a hair touching to Monkbarns while Steenie and I

could wag a finger—and so said Steenie too. And, Monkbarns, when ye laid his head in the grave (and mony thanks for the respect), ye, saw the mouls laid on an honest lad that likit you weel, though he made little phrase about it.”

Oldbuck, beaten from the pride of his affected cynicism, would not willingly have had any one by on that occasion to quote to him his favourite maxims of the Stoic philosophy. The large drops fell fast from his own eyes, as he begged the father, who was now melted at recollecting the bravery and generous sentiments of his son, to forbear useless sorrow, and led him by the arm towards his own home.

Scott, as anyone who reads but a few pages he wrote will realise, belonged to the best of mankind. When he found himself £130,000 in debt following the collapse of the Ballantyne press, he refused to accept financial aid (which was readily offered) or declare himself bankrupt. He wrote himself to death—almost literally—in an attempt to pay off his debts—it was a matter of honour. During this time he wrote his *Journal*, one of the finest autobiographies in the English language. The whole *Journal* is of an honest man without affectation or pretension. Indeed, just about any page of the *Journal* gives you a keen sense of Scott's character. While essay-writers sometimes disingenuously claim to have opened a book at a random page and serendipitously found an apt quotation, this really is possible with the *Journal* (a boast only shared by a few others, notably Boswell's *Life of Johnson* and Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*). For instance, I open my copy at random:

December 31 [1826] –It must be allowed that the regular recurrence of annual festivals among the same individuals has, as life advances, something in it that is melancholy. We meet on such occasions like the survivors of some perilous expedition, wounded and weakened ourselves, and looking through the diminished ranks of those who

remain, while we think of those who are no more. Or they are like the feasts of the Caribs, in which they held that the pale and speechless phantoms of the deceased appeared and mingled with the living. Yet where shall we fly from vain repining? Or why should we give up the comfort of seeing our friends, because they can no longer be to us, or we to them, what we once were to each other?

Though Scott may be today counted among the “great unread,” some of the most notable public figures, especially conservatives, have been and continue to be drawn to his work. Russell Kirk for example wrote insightful praise in *The Conservative Mind*:

In the Waverley novels, Scott makes the conservatism of Burke a living and a tender thing ... The foundations of a civilized moral order are reverence for our forefathers and compliance with our prescriptive duties, Scott seems to say in all his romances; history is the source of all worldly wisdom; contentment lies in piety.

Past prime ministers have been admirers: Arthur Balfour, Harold Macmillan, Alec Douglas-Home. Woodrow Wilson encouraged the reading of the Waverley novels to help immigrants assimilate. Robert Louis Stevenson clearly inherited a tradition beginning with Scott and references the great man throughout his writing (though he is at times keen to distinguish himself from his literary forefather). C.S. Lewis was a great enthusiast of Scott—he admitted in a letter that Scott “is despised by everyone (except a few fogies like myself) in England.” Indeed, the list of Scott enthusiasts, particularly modern Scott enthusiasts, can seem rather fogyish. But one may also be surprised to know that the list also includes Karl Marx, Virginia Woolf and Tony Blair. (And in one of the most unusual historical fates, the nation of Sweden: every year Sweden watches the 1982 British television film version of *Ivanhoe* as part of its New Year’s tradition.)

There is a reason many modern Scott enthusiasts are fogyish. The astonishing decline in the popularity of the Waverley novels is in part because we no longer share Scott's values. It is not his fascination with the past that is to blame. We continue, despite our confidently progressive age, to be romantic about the past. Think of the most popular television shows of our time: *Game of Thrones*, *Downton Abbey*, *Outlander*, *The Crown*, and a host of other historical dramas. But whereas *Game of Thrones* is full of the vices of an amoral pagan Dark Age, Scott's medieval novels are full of the virtues of Christendom and chivalry (as well as their vices). John Henry Newman wrote that Scott set before the reader "visions, which, when once seen, are not easily forgotten, and silently indoctrinating them [his readers] with nobler ideas, which might afterwards be appealed to as first principles." It is no wonder that Scott is seldom read, nor adapted for television and film, in an era that cares little about honour, duty, hierarchy, or any inheritance which is not monetary.

Providence or fate tend to power Scott's plots. It is the villains who tend to purely follow their own ambition. His heroes and heroines are swept up by events; they do not shape the world but are shaped by the world. In *Rob Roy*, Frank Osbaldistone wants to be a poet and escape his father's family business, but another future awaits him, one which he recognises as more noble. He ends up in Northumbria and then the Scottish Highlands, among those whose religion and politics he distrusts, whose language he only half understands, and who he effectively (and reluctantly) ends up allied with in spite of his deep-rooted sympathies for the opposite side. In the end, he returns to his father from whom he had fancifully tried to escape. And the nuisance gardener Andrew Fairservice, who became Frank's servant for the journey, returns to his gardening duties at Osbaldistone Hall. Nor can Rob Roy, for all his noble spirit, escape the outlaw life into which he and his family have been forced. In other words, there is no "getting ahead," no story of achieving

one's goals through hard work and perseverance; people tend to have their place and that's where they remain. But at least, if only once in life, a rather melancholy and uninspired dilettante such as Frank Osbaldistone is permitted a romantic adventure.

Scott was an anti-democratic Tory. He cared about hierarchy and was ardently opposed to the Reform Bill. He was, I think, somewhat prejudiced against the middle class; they are seldom a heroic class in his stories and are far too interested in money. It is usually the underclasses and, to a lesser extent, the aristocracy who are portrayed more favourably (as the above passage between the upper class Oldbuck and working class Mucklebackit shows). Indeed, it is often the underclasses which are portrayed with the greatest nobility, while the aristocracy can sometimes seem common, low and useless (the idle family of Sir Hildebrand in *Rob Roy* comes to mind). However, Scott does not seek revolution. He sees the world as necessarily unfair and unequal, but within this social structure he finds potential for an astonishing amount of charity, loyalty, courage, beauty and virtue. This is perhaps why Chesterton described "that strange old world which is as confused and as indefensible and as inspiring and as healthy as [Scott]."

This "strange old world" was of course deeply Christian. In his *Oxford History of English Literature: 1815-1832*, Ian Jack comes to the mistaken though understandable conclusion that "though [Scott] rebelled against the austerity of Presbyterianism and was never a deeply religious man, in later life he was a supporter of the English Church on moral and political grounds." The opposite is in fact true: Scott was deeply religious but not an observant member of the Church, possibly owing to the fact that, being part of the Edinburgh literary class and therefore strongly influenced by Enlightenment thought, he may have been prejudiced against the practise of Christianity even though he

held its tenets to be undoubtedly true. Nevertheless, he found proof of God, as Jack suggests, in the social good of Christainity, writing in his *Journal* that, "I would, if called upon, die a martyr for the Christian religion, so completely is (in my poor opinion) its divine origin proved by its beneficial effects on the state of society."

One extraordinarily beautiful example of his deeper religious sensibility is in this letter. He was responding to a fairly common criticism about the plot of *Ivanhoe*, wherein Rebecca, the noble persecuted Jewess who won over so many readers, can not and will not marry Wilfred of Ivanhoe, who she clearly loves. Although written about a faith, Judaism, to which he did not belong, it is a letter which could only have been written by a sincerely and thoughtfully religious man:

The character of the fair Jewess [Rebecca] found so much favour in the eyes of some fair readers, that the writer was censured, because, when arranging the fates of the characters of the drama, he had not assigned the hand of Wilfred to Rebecca, rather than the less interesting Rowena [a Saxon]. But, not to mention that the prejudices of the age rendered such an union almost impossible, the author may, in passing, observe that he thinks a character of a highly virtuous and lofty stamp is degraded rather than exalted by an attempt to reward virtue with temporal prosperity. Such is not the recompense which providence has deemed worthy of suffering merit; and it is a dangerous and fatal doctrine to teach young persons, the most common readers of romance, that rectitude of conduct and of principle are either naturally allied with, or adequately reward by, the gratification of our passions, or attainment of our wishes. In a word, if a virtuous and self-denied character is dismissed with temporal wealth, greatness, rank, or the indulgence of such a rashly-formed or ill-assorted passion as that of Rebecca for Ivanhoe, the reader will be apt to say, verily Virtue has had its reward. But a

glance on the great picture of life will show, that the duties of self-denial, and the sacrifice of passion to principle, are seldom thus remunerated; and that the internal consciousness of their high-minded discharge of duty produces on their own reflections a more adequate recompense, in the form of that peace which the world cannot give or take away.

Scott's treatment of cultural and religious difference is one of the most remarkable features of his novels. He is a useful novelist to help guide us through the perils and dangers of a multicultural era. We are often told that differences are merely surface-level and that, fundamentally, we are all the same. Scott knows this is false, and moreover knows that culture is more fundamental to us than we recognise, and that we cannot be abstracted from the traditions, habits and beliefs which form us. The modern world says differences do not matter; Scott's novels show us just how much they really do matter.

Multiculturalism in Scott's novels is less a story of happy and co-beneficial cultural enrichment and more about cultural loss. We too are experiencing a kind of cultural loss, among both native and immigrant populations. If any novelist can guide us to a future more tolerable than the one I otherwise expect, it is Scott. In his novels he manages to show the apparent paradox of differences which are both irreconcilable and reconcilable. The paradox of the Saxons in *Ivanhoe* who say they will not assimilate into Norman culture, but they will unite under King Richard, a Norman king. The adventures of Sir Kenneth and the Saracen who, in the magical opening scene of *The Talisman* when they first meet travelling alone in the sandy deserts near the Dead Sea, initially engage in combat, and in fact never waver in their fatal differences, yet form a friendship based on mutual respect of each others' virtues. Adversarial friendships are often a feature of Scott's novels. They are compelling because Scott treats each

culture with the seriousness it deserves. While he does not think differences can be blended into one pleasing tapestry, he also understands the necessity of tolerance, and often some form of reconciliation. Scott is realistic, however: one culture eventually wins, the others lose. The Saxons have to be ruled by a Norman; the Highlanders cannot keep their way of life; the Jacobites have to accept the legitimacy of the Hanoverians. These cultures are not lost, but they are no longer what they were. We still have cultural fights which echo the divisions of Norman and Saxon, Cavalier and Roundhead, Whig and Tory, Jacobite and Hanoverian. But there is of course no hope of re-establishing the House of Stuart, kicking out the Normans or resurrecting the Highland clan system. "Tradition," wrote Samuel Johnson, "is but a meteor, which, if once it falls, cannot be rekindled." Yet even when the cultural aspects of a cultural divide have long since become purely historical matters, somehow the divide can still live on.

This sense of resignation is memorably depicted in the ending of *Redgauntlet*, which novelist John Buchan described as "an anti-climax which is more moving than any climax." A fictional third Jacobite rising led by Herries of Birrenswark, known as "Redgauntlet," has failed just as it was about to start: the Jacobites were betrayed, the British government was tipped off, and the army had arrived. This scene ensues:

'It is the way of our house,' said Redgauntlet; 'our courage ever kindles highest on the losing side. I, too, feel that the catastrophe I have brought on must not be survived by its author. Let me first,' he said, addressing Charles [Stuart], 'see your Majesty's sacred person in such safety as can now be provided for it, and then'—

'You may spare all considerations concerning me, gentlemen,' again repeated Charles; 'yon mountain of Criffel shall fly as soon as I will.'

Most threw themselves at his feet with weeping and entreaty; some one or two slunk in confusion from the apartment, and were heard riding off.

...

Amid this scene of confusion, a gentleman, plainly dressed in a riding-habit, with a black cockade in his hat, but without any arms except a couteau-de-chasse, walked into the apartment without ceremony. He was a tall, thin, gentlemanly man, with a look and bearing decidedly military. He had passed through their guards, if in the confusion they now maintained any, without stop or question, and now stood, almost unarmed, among armed men, who nevertheless, gazed on him as on the angel of destruction.

'You look coldly on me, gentlemen,' he said. 'Sir Richard Glendale—my Lord ---, we were not always such strangers. Ha, Pate-in-Peril, how is it with you? and you, too, Ingoldsby—I must not call you by any other name—why do you receive an old friend so coldly? But you guess my errand.'

'And are prepared for it, general,' said Redgauntlet; 'we are not men to be penned up like sheep for the slaughter.'

'Pshaw! you take it too seriously—let me speak but one word with you.'

'No words can shake our purpose,' said Redgauntlet, were your whole command, as I suppose is the case, drawn round the house.'

'I am certainly not unsupported,' said the general; 'but if you would hear me'—

'Hear ME, sir,' said the Wanderer, stepping

forward; 'I suppose I am the mark you aim at—I surrender myself willingly, to save these gentlemen's danger—let this at least avail in their favour.'

An exclamation of 'Never, never!' broke from the little body of partisans, who threw themselves round the unfortunate prince, and would have seized or struck down Campbell, had it not been that he remained with his arms folded, and a look, rather indicating impatience because they would not hear him, than the least apprehension of violence at their hand.

At length he obtained a moment's silence. 'I do not,' he said, 'know this gentleman'—(making a profound bow to the unfortunate prince)—'I do not wish to know him; it is a knowledge which would suit neither of us.'

'Our ancestors, nevertheless, have been well acquainted,' said Charles, unable to suppress, even at that hour of dread and danger, the painful recollections of fallen royalty.

'In one word, General Campbell,' said Redgauntlet, 'is it to be peace or war? You are a man of honour, and we can trust you.'

'I thank you, sir,' said the general; 'and I reply, that the answer to your question rests with yourself. Come, do not be fools, gentlemen; there was perhaps no great harm meant or intended by your gathering together in this obscure corner, for a bear-bait or a cock-fight, or whatever other amusement you may have intended, but it was a little imprudent, considering how you stand with government, and it has occasioned some anxiety. Exaggerated accounts of your purpose have been laid before government by the information of a traitor in your own counsels; and I was sent down post to take the command of a sufficient number of troops, in case these calumnies should be found

to have any real foundation. I have come here, of course, sufficiently supported both with cavalry and infantry, to do whatever might be necessary; but my commands are—and I am sure they agree with my inclination—to make no arrests, nay, to make no further inquiries of any kind, if this good assembly will consider their own interest so far as to give up their immediate purpose, and return quietly home to their own houses.'

'What!—all?' exclaimed Sir Richard Glendale—'all, without exception?'

'ALL, without one single exception' said the general; 'such are my orders. If you accept my terms, say so, and make haste; for things may happen to interfere with his Majesty's kind purposes towards you all.'

'Majesty's kind purposes!' said the Wanderer. 'Do I hear you aright, sir?'

'I speak the king's very words, from his very lips,' replied the general. "'I will," said his Majesty, "deserve the confidence of my subjects by reposing my security in the fidelity of the millions who acknowledge my title—in the good sense and prudence of the few who continue, from the errors of education, to disown it." His Majesty will not even believe that the most zealous Jacobites who yet remain can nourish a thought of exciting a civil war, which must be fatal to their families and themselves, besides spreading bloodshed and ruin through a peaceful land. He cannot even believe of his kinsman, that he would engage brave and generous though mistaken men, in an attempt which must ruin all who have escaped former calamities; and he is convinced, that, did curiosity or any other motive lead that person to visit this country, he would soon see it was his wisest course to return to the continent; and his Majesty compassionates his situation too much to offer any obstacle to his doing so.'

'Is this real?' said Redgauntlet. 'Can you mean this? Am I—are all, are any of these gentlemen at liberty, without interruption, to embark in yonder brig, which, I see, is now again approaching the shore?'

'You, sir—all—any of the gentlemen present,' said the general,—'all whom the vessel can contain, are at liberty to embark uninterrupted by me; but I advise none to go off who have not powerful reasons unconnected with the present meeting, for this will be remembered against no one.'

'Then, gentlemen,' said Redgauntlet, clasping his hands together as the words burst from him, 'the cause is lost for ever!'

One cannot help but feel Scott is always on the losing side. He indulgently wrote about lost causes and decline, and the reputation of Scott himself has declined considerably since his death. It is perhaps true that every side is eventually a losing side—there is no culture which lasts forever. Yet Scott's decline feels premature. The fact of his becoming a literary lost cause is not from neglect as much as rejection; he has not been forgotten but excluded from a canon to which he rightfully belongs. William Hazlitt's chief criticism of Scott was that "he knows all that it has been; all that it is to be is nothing to him." In the modern world, we might be said to live by the motto "all that is to be is everything." Yet all that has been *is* all that will be; Scott knew that to guide us through the present we need to relive our past. When people now invoke history they often refer, as I have indeed done, to "sides": a right side and a wrong side. The presumption is that the future is settled, that there is a wrong side of history which shall not define the future and a right side which will. The right side is the side which conforms to the values of the present. Scott is arguably on the wrong side—which is one reason it is so important we read him. He shows what we have lost. Through his imagination we

better understand history, not as an argument or a metaphysical force, but as lives lived, communities built, religions practised, where no side is immune to virtue or vice, and where no conflict is unambiguous.

Have we failed Chesterton's "test of decadence"—have we "erected round ourselves a false cosmos, a world of lying and horrible perfection"? Scott's world, despite its fancy and adventure, somehow seems more real than ours—where difference is flattened out, where the past is condemned, where history is propelled by an unambiguous progressive ethic, where inequality is regarded as unnatural. "Had I lived in troublesome times," wrote Scott in his *Journal*, "and chanced to be on the unhappy side, I had been hanged to a certainty." Though we would not hang Scott were he alive today (we are too perfect for such backwards punishment), I tremble to think how we would have tried to exclude this remarkable man from decent society—for he would doubtless have been on the unhappy side of our cultural divide—and how blessed we are that he was instead born into an age which could appreciate him.

«[Previous Article](#) [Table of Contents](#) [Next Article](#)»

Matthew Wardour is an English musician and occasional writer.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)