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Local Explanations: Editing a Sense of Place in Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*

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*This essay examines Walter Scott's engagement with concepts of place and regionality in the ballad collection *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802-3), revealing ways in which the editor represented and re-imagined the ballads, their associated sense of place and their physical settings.*

Introduction

"Their memory, therefore, lived in the traditions of the country"

(Scott *Minstrelsy* 2:260; 1st ed.).

In editing the ballad collection *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, Walter Scott sought to recover and protect the collective memory of the Border region, preserving "popular superstitions, and legendary history, which, if not now collected, must soon have been totally forgotten" (Scott *Minstrelsy*, 1:cix; 1st ed). The collection marked Scott's first significant venture into the literary market when first published in 1802. Its compilation was inspired by the movement towards cultural nationalism, which in Scotland, as in Europe, saw interest in traditional material reinvigorated by a widespread zeal to recover, polish and publish 'relics' of local traditional culture threatened by encroaching modernity.

This essay analyses Scott's negotiation of regionality in the *Minstrelsy*, both in editing the ballads themselves and in framing them with an editorial commentary that included extensive introductions and notes. It will be shown how editorial interaction with place in the *Minstrelsy* invests the landscape of the Scottish Borders with a peculiar cultural and emotional power that reaches beyond the romantic aesthetic and engages with the mediation of cultural memory. An outline of Scott's interest in the regional ballad and an overview of his editing methods will first be offered, leading to a discussion of contemporary theoretical approaches to memory and place. Finally, the provision of examples in the form of extracts from ballads and their editorial commentary will clearly show Scott's editing process at work regarding the location, re-location and explanation of sites of memory in the *Minstrelsy*.

Placing the *Minstrelsy* Ballads

The collection's full title, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border, collected in the Southern counties of Scotland, with a few of modern date, founded upon local tradition* is indicative of the strong regional theme integral to the collection's literary identity and cohesion. However, the ballad material itself was not exclusively derived from within the Scottish Borders. The *Minstrelsy's* first edition contained

fifty-two ballads in two volumes, with the ballads subdivided into three sections which Scott termed “Historical Ballads”, “Romantic Ballads” and “Imitations of the Ancient Ballad” (the latter section of the first edition containing two poems by Scott and two by his assistant John Leyden). Most of the collected material, particularly those ballads in the historical section, were prefaced and annotated with extensive notes which sought to place them in their historical and regional contexts. Scott’s research into the ballads and their history continued after the publication of the first edition in 1802, and a second expanded edition of the *Minstrelsy* was published in 1803. By the time it had reached the market, Leyden had left Scotland for Madras to take up a medical position with the East India Company. However, Scott continued to add ballads to the collection as it was re-edited and republished at intervals up until 1830, just two years before his death. The *Minstrelsy* may therefore be seen as an ongoing concern that spanned Scott’s entire literary career.

Scott’s subdivision of his ballad material allowed him to circumvent certain issues regarding the inclusion of particular ballads without specific Border associations, namely, the significant number of ballads in the “romantic ballad” section which came from the North East of Scotland via the manuscripts of the singer Anna Gordon, Mrs Brown of Falkland.¹ In the following discussion, my main examples will be drawn from those ballads classed as “historical,” or as Scott described them, “border raid-ballads, the fame of which is in general confined to the mountains where they were originally composed” (Scott *Minstrelsy* 1:ciii; 1st ed.). As Scott indicated, these ballads tell of clan feuds, cattle raids, and cross-border conflicts between the Border ‘reivers.’ The reivers were raiding families who occupied the Anglo-Scottish border between the 15th to the early 17th centuries. Their way of life was governed by family loyalties and depredations upon their rivals’ property. In describing their lives the historical ballads dealt with subjects close to Scott’s heart as he took great pride in the fact that he could trace his ancestry back to many of the characters involved, such as the notorious Border reiver “Auld Watt,” Walter Scott of Harden (c.1563-1629).

Scott did not include music alongside the *Minstrelsy*’s ballad texts, instead reconceptualising the material with an editorial commentary that sought to emphasise and elucidate the ballads’ historical context and their capacity to evoke an innate sense of place. In selecting ballads for the collection, Scott assigned high priority to those ballads which demonstrated a strong regional connection. In a letter to James Currie in July 1801, whilst preparation for the *Minstrelsy* was in progress, he writes of counting locality “among the highest graces of which the old Ballad is susceptible” (Grierson 1:120). Further evidence of his views on the subject may also be found in a letter to William Laidlaw of Blackhouse farm in Yarrow, Selkirkshire, who was at that time collecting many of the ballads that would be added to the *Minstrelsy* between the second edition of 1803 and the fourth of 1810. In this letter, Scott urges Laidlaw to continue in his endeavours to track down the ballad “Tushielaw’s Lines” on the grounds that “the locality and traditional history of such a ballad gives it great interest above a mere legend” (Grierson 1:170). In editing the collection, therefore, Scott consistently gave precedence to those ballads that demonstrated their historicity and regionality.

Scott's Editing of the *Minstrelsy* Ballads

Scott's editing of the traditional material tracked down by his network of correspondents does not stand up to the rigorous processes demanded of folklorists today. Nevertheless, the contemporary anxiety surrounding issues of authenticity, which followed the James Macpherson *Ossian* controversy of the 1760s, meant no self-respecting editor could remain unaware of the public scrutiny to which publications claiming to be harvested from traditional sources was likely to be subjected. Discussing his sources in the *Minstrelsy's* introduction, Scott openly declared that he had assembled his ballad material through a process of collation and had made subjective editorial decisions in selecting the "best" reading: "No liberties have been taken, either with the recited or written copies of these ballads, farther than that, where they disagreed, which is by no means unusual, the editor, in justice to the author, has uniformly preserved what seemed to him the best, or most poetical, reading of the passage" (Scott *Minstrelsy* 1:cii; 1st ed.). In fact, comparisons between the *Minstrelsy* texts and extant manuscript material used by Scott and his colleagues suggest that he frequently understated his editorial involvement. However, while ballad scholars Francis James Child and Thomas Finlay Henderson (who re-edited the *Minstrelsy* in 1902) both held the view that Scott frequently introduced whole stanzas of his own creation into the *Minstrelsy* ballads¹¹, more recent scholarship has questioned the accuracy of these judgments. In particular, comparative research by Keith Harry, Charles Zug and Valentina Bold have shown that it was more common for Scott to synthesise a large variety of versions rather than insert sections of entirely new material. Harry's detailed analysis of Scott's editing of the *Minstrelsy* ballad "Archie of Ca'field," for example, draws attention to Scott's selection and intricate assembly of his sources and demonstrates that the practice of combining different versions was applied to single ballad lines as well as whole stanzas (see Harry 1976, 1:92-96). Taking into account this highly developed editing practice, it is little surprise that Scott also extended his editorial reach to negotiate aspects of place and regionality within the ballads.

Memory Dynamics and Sense of Place

The *Minstrelsy's* portrayal of place may be seen as a fascinating example of dynamic mnemonic interpretation of specific "sites of memory," a concept first given shape by the French historian Pierre Nora, who suggested that sites of commemoration (*lieux de mémoire*) proliferate in the face of loss or erosion of places of "real memory – social and unviolated" (Nora 8). Nora's concern with decay and preservation echoes 18th century antiquarian discourse that Scott also subscribed to. In the letter to Currie quoted above, Scott opined "as our old Sennachies are yearly dying out & as the present generation 'care little for these things' the sources of traditionary knowledge are fast drying up" (Grierson 1:120). Towards the end of his life, he expressed a more general opinion of the inevitable degradation of traditionary knowledge over time in the essay "Introductory remarks on Popular Poetry" (1830) which was attached to the reprint of the fifth edition of the *Minstrelsy* published in 1830:

...our popular and oral minstrelsy has lost, in a great measure, its original appearance; and the

strong touches by which it had been formerly characterised, have been generally smoothed down and destroyed by a process similar to that by which a coin, passing from hand to hand, loses in circulation all the finer marks of the impress.” (Scott *Minstrelsy* 1:22; 5th ed).

More recently, however, memory theorists such as Aleida Assmann, Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney have sought to explore alternatives to the intrinsic discourses of loss and nostalgia perpetuated by Nora. Instead, they focus on the dynamic processes through which sites are constantly re-invested with meaning and freshly reinterpreted, engendering and mediating collective remembrances of the past which are so often concentrated in places. This turn towards “memorial dynamics” is characterised by a fundamental acceptance of the process of collective and cultural remembering as fluid and evolving rather than stable or fixed. As Erll and Rigney argue, memory becomes collective “as part of a continuous process whereby memories are shared with the help of symbolic artefacts that mediate between individuals, and, in the process, create communality across both space and time” (Erll 1).

In the *Minstrelsy* we can extend this concept of “symbolic artefacts” to include places. Concentration on this area can offer a bird’s eye view on these processes of construction and reconstruction through which the collection engages with and reinterprets existing memory cultures. Issues of memory and place lie at the heart of oral traditions and the ballads in the historical section of the *Minstrelsy* are grounded in place as much as time, recounting violent tales of a past riven by family feuds, cattle stealing, or reiving, and cross-border conflict. Memory retention is evidently required for the maintenance and transmission of traditional knowledge that situates a group both temporally and spatially through reference to the past. Spatial reference, meanwhile, draws together social groups and reinforces a sense of belonging, cohesiveness and ownership through the naming of familiar landmarks and the recognition and reinforcement of property rights. As Scott himself was acutely aware, the invocation of place is self-reflexive, inducing recollections of the two main components of cultural memory: people and the past. In a letter written to the poet Anna Seward in 1802, Scott expounds upon the “peculiar charm” of locality, noting that “a very commonplace and obvious epithet, when applied to a scene which we have been accustomed to view with pleasure, recalls to us not merely the local scenery, but a thousand little nameless associations, which we are unable to separate or to define” (Grierson 1:146-147). As this extract suggests, Scott’s acute awareness of the emotive power of association led him to set great store by the phenomenological experience of space, or, as we may term it, “sense of place” which he found reflected in ballads from the Scottish oral tradition.

Discussing “sense of place” in relation to the Cibecue Apache of Arizona, anthropologist Keith Basso devotes some attention to the concept of “sense of place,” observing that human connection to places is most often taken for granted until separation occurs. Basso describes sense of place as “one of the most basic dimensions of human experience – that close companion of heart and mind, often subdued yet potentially overwhelming” (106). Referring to Heidegger’s concept of “dwelling” to explore this form of consciousness through which human beings observe and make sense of their geographical surroundings, Basso sees the connection between people and place as one which is

played out within multiple “lived relationships” (107), and notes that the perception of such relationships varies in intensity, from brief instants of barely perceived recollection to intensely charged moments of deeply resonant awareness. At such points, Basso contends, the physical world and the plane of the imagination become intertwined, as “the physical landscape becomes wedded to the landscape of the mind” (107). We will now turn to examples of landscape representation in the *Minstrelsy* where this effect may be traced.

Editing Place in the Ballads

Discussing the inextricable connection between memory and place, the cultural geographer David Lowenthal saw landscape’s embodiment of permanence as a key feature, because “unlike objects and structures, landscapes are fixed, immovable, hence secure; we can rely on landscape to stay put” (Lowenthal 184). However, Scott’s representation of the ballad’s ability to narrate an antiquated landscape rested on a delicate balance of change and stability: both landscape and place may be seen to simultaneously embody continuity and reflect changes that time has wrought on its surface features. Throughout the *Minstrelsy*, these “memory spaces” are explored in the editorial commentary, where the phrases “still shewn” or “still to be viewed” crop up time and time again. In this regard the provision of details concerning the location of ruins and graves creates a textual map of this region through which to read the past. For example, in the introduction to the ballad “Johnie Armstrang,” which recounts the murder of the famous outlaw and his retinue by supporters of King James V, both directions and a description are given concerning the ruins of Armstrong’s former tower: “His place of residence (now a roofless tower) was at the Hollows, a few miles from Langholm, where its ruins still serve to adorn a scene, which in natural beauty have few equals in Scotland” (Scott *Minstrelsy* 1: 45; 1st ed). The remaining ruins described in the *Minstrelsy* have stood the test of time, even if they are now teetering on the brink of obliteration, and their maintained import is presented in terms of a symbiotic relationship between the land itself and the inhabitants of the area. Scott presents the destruction of Armstrong and his men as a memory retained not only by those local to the area but by the very ground itself:

Johnie, with all his retinue, was accordingly hung upon growing trees, at a place called Carlenrig Chapel, about ten miles above Hawick, on the high road to Langholm. The country-people believe that, to manifest the injustice of the execution, the trees withered away. Armstrong and his followers were buried in a deserted churchyard, where their graves are still shown. (Scott *Minstrelsy* 1: 47; 1st ed)

In the case of the ballad “The Outlaw Murray,” meanwhile, a physical tower no longer exists, but this presents no barrier to Scott, who provides an imaginative description in its place. Two possible sites are given in the notes for Murray’s original stronghold: Newark Castle (later to become the setting for Scott’s “Lay of the Last Minstrel”) and the derelict tower at Hangingshaw, the ancestral seat of the Philiphaugh family. Nor is it only the building itself which must be imagined: the “wild copse” in which it stood must now be also envisaged in place of the treeless landscapes which Scott encountered during his expeditions:

That tower has been totally demolished for many years. It stood in a romantic and solitary situation, on the classical banks of the River Yarrow. When the mountains around Hangingshaw were covered with the wild copse which constituted a Scottish forest, a more secure stronghold for an outlawed Baron can scarcely be imagined. (Scott *Minstrelsy* 1: 3-4; 1st ed)

Another feature of place is the mnemonic quality inherent in the folkloric naming of places. Although this feature is most distinctive in the listing of place-names in the prose and verse of the early Irish *Dindsenchas* (translatable as ‘the lore of places’), this important function of place-name poetry is also present in Scottish balladry. This is clear in the ballad “Jamie Telfer of the Fair Dodhead”, which is classed as a historical ballad in the *Minstrelsy* owing to its distinctly regional character although its events cannot be traced to one particular historical event. Although its dubious historicity has been a source of some critical contention in the past (see for example Elliot; Lang), “Jamie Telfer” is unmistakably a ‘Border ballad’, rich in its sense of place, recounting a characteristic tale of reiving and revenge. At the ballad’s outset, Telfer’s home is raided by a band of men led by the Captain of Bewcastle, Border official of the English Middle March. Bewcastle’s men drive off Telfer’s meagre herd of cows and turn his house upside down for good measure. Following the theft of his cattle, Telfer makes a frantic dash for martial assistance, appealing for help at the gate of each Border family to whom he has paid blackmail, or protection money. The journey is recounted in the ballad through the runs of place-names, which are in turn connected to family names, mapping the territory traversed by the ballad’s protagonist:

“Warn Wat o’ Harden, and his sons,
Wi’ them will Borthwick water ride;
Warn Gaudilands, and Allanhaugh,
And Gilmanscleugh, and Commonsie.

“Ride by the gate at Priesthaughswire,
And warn the Currors o’ the Lee;
As ye cum down the Hermitage Slack,
Warn doughty Willie o’ Gorrinberry.”

(Scott *Minstrelsy* 1:85; 1st ed)

Ballad characters mapped onto their territory and interwoven with the landscape that they command through their depredatory activities is also a feature of “The Lads of Wamphray.” This ballad recounts a historical skirmish of 1593 between the Johnston and the Crichton families and begins by locating the characters firmly in their fiercely held territory:

‘Twixt Girth-head and the Langwood end,
Lived the Galliard, and the Galliard’s men;
But and the lads of Leverhay,
That drove the Crichton’s gear away.

[...]

The lads of Fingland, and Hellbeck-hill,

They were never for good but aye for ill;
 'Twixt the Staywood-bush and Langside-hill,
 They stealed the broked cow and the branded bull.

(Scott *Minstrelsy* 1:211-212; 1st ed)

For an example of how Scott engaged with this inherent sense of place in so many of the historical ballads, it is interesting to compare the ballad text to the editorial commentary provided alongside it. Here Scott's provision of information concerning the location of the place-names helps to place the ballad in its geographical space, but is also an act of displacement, lifting it from its context and presenting it as an antiquarian curiosity: "Leverhay, Stefenbiggin, Girth-head, &c. are all situated in the parish of Wamphray [...] Ricklaw-holm is a place upon the Even water, which falls into the Annan, below Moffat [...] With these local explanations, it is hoped the following ballad will be easily understood" (Scott *Minstrelsy* 1: 210; 1st ed).

Here Scott is writing to replace a loss context; his editing of place connected to the perceived failure of human memory. Although recognised as a key constituent of oral tradition, memory is also presented in the *Minstrelsy* as hopelessly inaccurate and doomed to failure, necessitating the introduction of editorial emendations regarding place and regionality. An interesting case is presented in the ballad "Kinmont Willie", a daring tale of escape and rescue of William Armstrong of Kinmont. Here Scott admits to having changed the name of the river that flows by Carlisle to fit with the historical background: "This ballad is preserved, by tradition, on the West Borders, but much mangled by reciters; so that some conjectural emendations have been absolutely necessary to render it intelligible. In particular, the *Eden* has been substituted for the *Eske* [...] the latter name being inconsistent with geography" (Scott 1:125; 1st ed).

On one level, this explanation appears simple enough. The Eden river flows past Carlisle, the town in which Kinmont Willie is imprisoned. The verse in question runs as follows:

Then on we held for Carlisle toun
 And at Staneshaw-bank the Eden we cross'd
 The water was great and meikle of spait
 But the nevir a horse nor man we lost.

(Scott *Minstrelsy* 1:131; 1st ed)

Scott's admission is intriguing, however, as it is part of a conundrum revolving around the dynamics of editing and representations of authenticity. A degree of uncertainty surrounds the origins of this ballad itself. Although the character after whom the ballad is named certainly existedⁱⁱⁱ, Scott acknowledged no source for the ballad and in the absence of manuscript evidence, doubts have historically been cast on its provenance. The folklorist Andrew Lang speculated that "conjectural emendations' is a way of saying 'interpolations'" (Lang 11) and suggested that Scott might have created "Kinmont Willie" from a version of the tale in Walter Scot of Satchells' 17th century chronicle *A true history of the several honourable families of the right honourable name of Scot* (1688) which Scott consulted liberally whilst editing the *Minstrelsy* (see Lang 126-147). However, Scott himself acknowledges this source of historical information in the ballad's introduction, and in fact suggests the Satchell's account must have been influenced by the ballad. It is quite possible that Scott had

heard fragments of this ballad in his youth, or during his travels in Liddesdale as a young man. Scott's acknowledgement of the alteration could be interpreted in two ways. Either he was aware of extant versions of the ballad not acknowledged in the *Minstrelsy* (and therefore wished to protect himself against allegations of undisclosed tampering) or his admission may be viewed as a sophisticated sort of bluff which simultaneously propounded both the antiquity of his source material and his credentials as an editor (making sense of "mangled" traditional versions, and acknowledging editorial intervention). In either case, however, this example highlights the importance Scott placed on setting the ballad in physical space.

Conclusions

Engaging with topographical description and the lore of places as well as recognised historical sources, the *Minstrelsy* provides within its pages a textual tour of historical sites as well as sites described in terms of their romantic aesthetic. Accordingly, the ballads are invested with the power to evoke a strong sense of place and the past. The collection may be seen as the first regional miscellany of its kind and as such contributes to a community's shared sense of place at the same time as it reinforces a collective sense of the past. In editing the collection, Scott achieved these effects by securing what we might call "memory spaces" within the landscape from which the ballads spoke directly. Through this process, both the Border landscape and their songs became self-perpetuating sites of memory through which the past could be recollected and viewed afresh.

Recounting his own travels through the Borders in *Circuit Journeys*, Henry Cockburn, contemporary and acquaintance of Scott's, recollected Scott's influence on his perception of the area's memorial landscape and sense of place. His words provide a tantalising insight into the dynamic perception of place brought about in part by Scott's editorial treatment of place in the *Minstrelsy*:

The old stories and ballads, and the genius of Scott lingering in every valley, and embellishing every feature and every tale. The bareness, openness, and sameness of the valley might seem to preclude its being interesting, but these are the very things that aid the old associations, and impart that feeling of pleasing melancholy which belongs to the region. There is inspiration in the words Newark, Yarrow, and Dryhope. (Cockburn 55-6)

Cockburn eloquently describes his experience of the sense of place which, for Scott, the historical *Minstrelsy* ballads encapsulated. Whether hidden or visible to the naked eye, physical sites bear the marks, visible and invisible, tangible and intangible, of a past and give physical settings to intangible memories. The process of creating the ballad collection involved the formation of networks of meaning and significance that were distinct from, but connected to, the physical space and artefacts that maintained the existing frames of reference outside the *Minstrelsy*'s mediated space. Such mediated local knowledge was brought to a wider, non-local audience through the publication of the collection, with the result that both the Border landscape and its songs became self-perpetuating sites of memory through which the past could be re-imagined and re-envisaged.

Notes

ⁱ The wife of a Fife minister, Anna Gordon's roots lay in Old Aberdeen. She had learnt many of her ballads from her nurse, mother and aunt (see Rieuwerts).

ⁱⁱ In the case of the Scott ballad manuscripts, Child received invaluable help from the collector William Macmath (1844-1922) who gained access to the ballad manuscripts held in Scott's library at Abbotsford in 1890 (see Montgomerie, 1963).

ⁱⁱⁱ Historical evidence surrounding William Armstrong's capture and rescue may be found in "The Border Papers: Calendar of Letters and Papers Relating to the Affairs of the Borders of England and Scotland Preserved in Her Majesty's Public Record Office" a 16th century record of affairs relating to the English and Scottish Border.

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Author Biography

Lucy Macrae is researching a PhD on cultural memory in Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. She is part of an international project being carried out jointly between the University of Edinburgh and the Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, which will publish the first critical and scholarly edition of the *Minstrelsy* in Spring 2014.