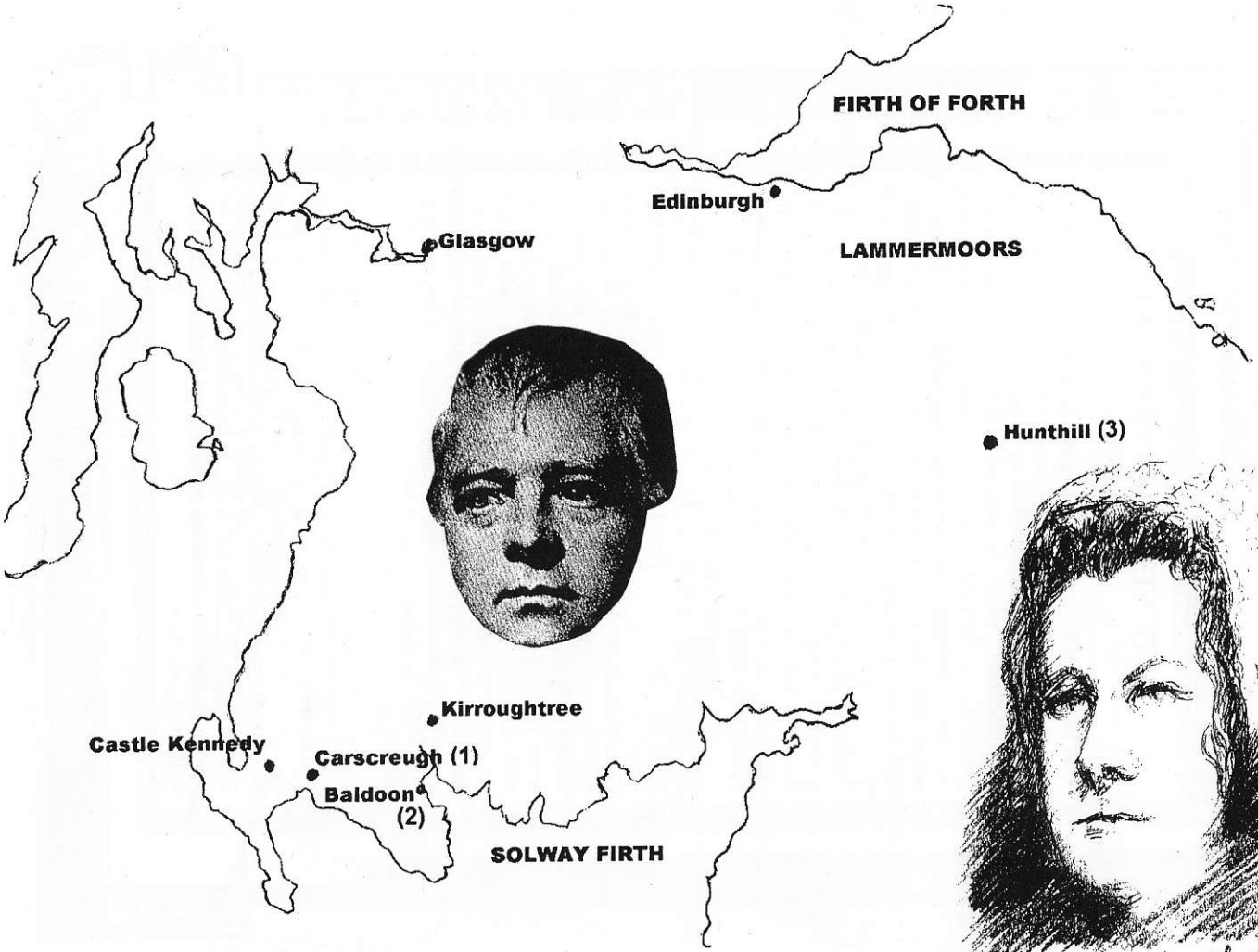

FIRTH OF FORTH
Edinburgh
LAMMERMOORS
Glasgow
Hunthill (3)
Kirroughtree
Castle Kennedy
Carscreugh (1)
Baldoon
(2)
SOLWAY FIRTH
Janet Dalrymple?

LUCIA: some accidents of Locality

Douglas M. Bennett

INTRODUCTION

People seem to fall into two categories; those who exude their personality, character or presence in all places and at all times with consistency and recognisable sameness, and those who are only fully realised in their 'home' or familiar environment and who therefore present a different (and perhaps more diffident) personality in other contexts.

I use this opening for my subject because I believe (but have no way of ever being sure) that Sir Walter Scott was of the second category. And to prove that assertion conclusively would require evidence from personal contact and not just because our objectivity has become compromised by Scott's image becoming tarnished as a cultural identity within modern Scotland. It requires a trip to Abbotsford to appreciate the extent to which Scott found it necessary to manufacture a particular ambience for himself. The 'real' Scott is unlikely to survive the distortions of the two-way mirror of history so we must seek for his personality by other means. The obvious source of evidence must be his fiction with its special blending of character and place.....

PART 1

The purpose of this essay is to explore a childhood memory of mine, and thereby illuminate the background to Lucia di Lammermoor. In my youth I stayed from time to time on a farm in Galloway in south-west Scotland. The farm lies on the kind of windswept boggy heath that works best supporting sheep. Just in front of the farmhouse in the midst of a large field is a small hillock crowned with a few trees. It is the greenest field of the farm, but among the trees there is a forbidding ruin that on approach casts a cold clammy girdle round one's shoulders. I was told that the ruin 'had something to do with an opera.' The ruin is Carscreugh Castle, just outside Glenluce, where the events on which Scott claimed to have based The Bride of Lammermoor took place. The memory of that desolate place and its vague association with opera has lurked in my mind ever since, and is in need of cauterisation.



Carscreugh now (1)

The tale of Janet Dalrymple's bloody bridal night with David Dunbar in Carscreugh Castle, near the Solway Firth, has been well rehearsed in Don Carlos and Company by Christopher Morgan and elsewhere. The story goes that the bride had formed an attachment, unknown to her parents, with Lord Archibald Rutherford of Hunthill (some distance away near Jedburgh) that amounted in her mind to a commitment to marriage. Citing religious law her parents divested the young lady of her self-delusion that she had the right to chose her own husband and presented for her signature instead a contract of marriage to a more local land-owner, Dunbar of Baldoon, whose father's house boasted an extravagant neo-renaissance gateway (complete with broken pediments) that has survived, though the house has not.



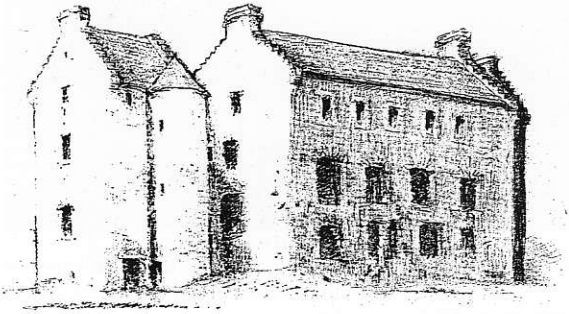
Baldoon now (2)

The distant, and older Rutherford intervened to claim his bride (thus transforming a matter of girlish foolishness into a legal issue). Under duress, it is claimed, the girl conformed by signing the contract of marriage to Dunbar (which still exists). Rutherford's parting rejoinder to his lost bride was, allegedly, 'You will be a world's wonder,' whatever that means. The sealed chamber into which Janet and Baldoon were placed in order to consummate their marriage was sole dispassionate witness to a diabolic bloodletting that allegedly threatened the life of the groom. Forced entry in response to screams found the bride in one corner whilst her spouse cowered in another. She remained sufficiently corpus mentis to invite the intruders to 'Tak up yer bonny bridegroom'. Neither human participant would speak of the event afterwards, and anyway the bride was dead within a month-a very convenient circumstance from which a tale of possession, violation and female martyrdom could take root. The oration that accompanied Janet's early funeral is also extant, but it fails to evoke more than conventional sorrow at a circumstance that was probably quite common in those days-a sudden death from natural causes, probably easily preventable by modern medicine. The firm signature of Janet Dalrymple on the contract that she supposedly abhorred, and the complete lack of exactly contemporary evidence of anything unusual about the wedding totally undermines the myth, which has some of the hallmarks of a botched deflowering.

ARGUMENT

I err in favour of the view given by Sir Andrew Agnew (in The Hereditary Sheriffs of Galloway, Edinburgh 1893) that the tale was a fabrication by the opponents of Sir James Dalrymple, Viscount Stair (the bride's father, and an eminent and rather too successful lawyer). That said, there are certain plausible aspects of the 'old wife's tale' that have contributed to the longevity of its melange of gossip and rumour. Scotland in 1669 (the year of the

actual marriage) was both in thrall to events in England and in need of maintaining its distance. The Episcopalian vs Presbyterian divide that would signify events in Scotland for some decades could easily be overlaid on the family tragedy of a young bride cruelly cut down a month after her marriage. Add to this the inhospitable house



Carscreugh 'riconosciuta' (1)

in which the wedding party took place and the essential ingredients for spontaneous speculation seem to be complete. Again the truth intervenes to frustrate such facile analysis: Dalrymple, although advantaged by the Stuart restoration, was no Jacobite. Rutherford, in spite of the link in name with the rabid Presbyterian Samuel Rutherford, was certainly no Covenanter. The selected bridegroom was, we know, a loyal Episcopalian. No, the religious factor in the original events was at best neutral.

Of more significance as we move towards the circumstances through which Sir Walter Scott enters this 'history' is an examination of the background of Archibald Rutherford, in some sources referred to as an 'uncle' of Dunbar. A claim that Rutherford was the last heir to his title is an exaggeration, but it is true that the line did peter out. Another large landowner in the Galloway area was the Earl of Selkirk, part of the Douglas Hamilton family. Curiously in Scott's reworking of the story the bride's mother becomes a Douglas by birth. Scott's mother had been a Rutherford, and the possibility of a family clash as a source can't be totally ruled out. It is interesting that a Hamilton penned the doggerel poem that started the myth of the blighted wedding. The house of Hunthill survives as a family home, unlike either of the other houses involved in the story, and was occupied by scions of the Rutherford family until the young fantasist Walter Scott reached the age of 19. I can find no evidence that he visited the house, but it is possible. The house has an inviting air and the natural glen that forms part of the policies is the kind of scene likely to spark a young imagination with vaguely romantic notions such as saving a girl from a charging bull.

But enough of innuendo and circumstantial allusion: Scott's acquaintance with the dubious 'facts' that he quotes as being an 'owre true tale' hardly signifies, as it happens, because Sir Walter pays scant attention to the 'facts'. The location becomes the Lammermoors, near Edinburgh just south of the Firth of Forth, and the era is moved to that of Queen Anne by which time the Union of the Crowns had somewhat numbed the political sensitivities north of the border whilst putting Scottish political life under a shadow cast



Hunthill environs now (3)

from Westminster where it has since remained. In this half-light personal gain can become more focussed. Ashton represents the new man willing to use the law to further his own acquisition of land-the traditional measure of power-and usurp the home of the Ravenswoods, banishing them to Wolf's Crag. The mechanism is not unlike that used by Dalrymple used to expand his estate when he found it convenient to quit Carscreugh and move to Castle Kennedy nearby. But there are some notable differences. In contrast Scott makes Ashton a weak character in thrall to his harridan wife, an unjustified slur on Dalrymple who, in spite of having a tough spouse (a Ross of Balneil, who brought the seeds of the Dalrymple lands as dowry), was in no need of toughening by his marital partner. The very success of the Stair/Dalrymple dynasty, which still continues, owes itself to the strength of that partnership; not to any imaginary flaw. Yes, land is a more likely wellspring for this tragedy.

Scott distracts the reader by engulfing his tale in an elaborate story-telling 'frame' intended to preserve his anonymity (he did not initially admit to authoring the Waverley novels) in which he rails against novels that merely report conversation. But to expect a tale told solely through description would be a mistake: on the other hand, it may surprise readers without previous experience of Scott's novels that The Bride of Lammermoor as not a romance. The majority of the tale reads like a Jane Austen social satire seen from the male angle as Ashton, having established that he holds the power of life or death over the financially strapped Ravenswood, is wooed by the young man into considering him as a potential suitor for Lucy and thus bringing the Ravenswood family back to their lost ancestral home through an equitable union. This version of events masks the younger man's hatred of the older. Only with the return of Lady Ashton from her travels does that scheme get brusquely rejected in favour of the insidious machinations of the opportunist Bucklaw and his sidekick Craigengelt. The subsequent explosion of disorder seems inevitable, but this muddle of motivations misrepresents the known facts whilst maintaining few links with the original events.

My own favourite scene comes with the return of Lady Ashton to Ravenswood, which coincides with the arrival of the slightly Jacobite Marquis of A. The two carriages are described converging across the broad

coastal plain with all the inevitability of a collision to come, only for Lady Ashton to cede precedence to old regime aristocrat at the last moment. We would call such writing 'cinematic' nowadays. Subsequent events at Ravenswood leave no doubt that her concession was only temporary.

The undoubted success of the novel owes itself, I believe, to two main factors: its subtle portrayal of the shifting politics of Scotland in the transitional time under Queen Anne, and the strangely melodramatic but inconclusive ending. The scene in which Lucy unwisely plights her troth to Ravenswood is understated, the novelistic raconteur having absented himself from the scene. Instead long passages are devoted to the comic antics of Ravenswood's servant Caleb Balderstone in his efforts to support his paupered lord in a manner to which he would like to have remained accustomed. Ashton is sympathetic to Ravenswood's desire to marry Lucy but is overruled by his hideous wife, who rears like a Baroque diabolus ex machina on page 236 of a 350 page novel. The legal establishment in Edinburgh appear from time to time as a sort of mocking chorus to comment on the shifts in power that affect Ravenswood's protector, the shadowy Marquis of A...., who causes Ravenswood's sudden departure for the 'Continent' during which his rival for Lucy's affections is favoured (that bit survives in the opera). Ironically the legal process is also in the process of overturning its previous decision to favour Ashton in his claim for the Ravenswood estates. So if Ravenswood had only 'stayed cool' he would have recovered his family's fortunes without the complication of becoming entangled with the poco più pazza Lucy. But then the final tragedy of Ravenswood's fatal stumbling into the bog removes the whole dilemma. It is interesting to speculate where this 'bog' came from because the Solway Firth over which Baldoon commands a generous prospect is famous for mudflats that blend into quicksand, unlike the shores below the Lammermoors which do not. Did Scott hear of these from the same source as he did the tale of the wedding? So far as I know he never visited Galloway, unlike the youthful James Boswell who visited Kirroughtree, a large house across the Cree river estuary (and visible from Baldoon) where he tried to seduce the daughter of the house, or the mistress, or maybe even both. Scott's more puritanical 19th century mind would not have approved. Perhaps he saw the quicksands as a purifying fate. Ironically the recent London ROH production that featured the glass harmonica (which failed to be used at the prima) had a lovely scene of grey and mauve sky over a flat terrain that evoked dusk over the Solway Firth, but I doubt that the designer had had realism in mind.

The treatment of the Marquis of A... is a typical example of Scott's technique of signifying shades of politics through character. The Marquis is 'placed' as being a Jacobite, but Scott never says so explicitly. By surrounding the man with a kind of baroque pall and by giving him vague 'continental' friends Scott achieves his objective, and indirectly taints Ravenswood with the same problematic aura. By not making the allegiance explicit Scott also portrays the equivocation adopted by many in those times. Thus the religious theme, explicit at the outset and the end of the story, is also latent throughout the novel. It should not be necessary to point out that such an allusive technique owes something to the chameleon as I

suggested in my opening remarks, and succeeds in illuminating the nature of Scott's own personality as well as throwing a convenient cloak over his own beliefs. Thesis writing has benefited from this lack of clear definition ever since. Most notable of the changes he wrought on the tale as told by his Rutherford relatives is the shift in time from 1669 (pre-Covenanting) to the time of Queen Anne, the last Stuart monarch, by which time Scotland had become irrevocably Presbyterian, and the Episcopalians were in retreat (the Rev Sympson, who had conducted the funeral of Janet Dalymple had lost his parish, which was how he came to publish his poetry, including the afore-mentioned funeral oration). It was a period that favoured both political and religious equivocation and, perhaps, the adoption of a cloak of literary disguise such as later used by Scott.

FINALE 1

If you ask anyone familiar with Scott's work about The Bride of Lammermoor you are likely to get a rather haughty response; 'Oh yes, the one he wrote under the influence of laudanum.' Well, yes, he was suffering greatly at the time from chronic gallstones. According to the comprehensive introduction to the paperback edition I have read (Oxford) it is only the final 20% of the manuscript that shows that the incapacitated Scott had dictated it. A clear caesura can be established on page 276 of the Oxford paperback edition at the paragraph that opens "Speak out you old fool....." This is the part that he later read but allegedly could not remember ever having 'written', which in a sense he hadn't. Whether it is typical of the whole or, on the other hand, more melodramatic is a matter of opinion. In terms of the proportions of the novel it certainly looks perfunctory, dismissing many of the participants with scant attention to detail and without bothering to maintain the elaborate balance between maintenance of old tradition and the push for change that had characterised the politics of the book up to that point.

STRETTA

Given the subtle social interplay of the first 275 pages of the novel the adjustment to the curt telegrammatic style of the closing pages is difficult to absorb. It might be tempting, given the respect that Scott acknowledged to such progenitors as Ann Radcliffe, and to Austen's Northanger Abbey, to look to the Gothic Novel for precedents but any attempt to draw too close a parallel would, in my opinion, be doomed. Gothic novels tend to be discursive rather than brief. They also use locality as pure background-perhaps because many of them were written by stay-at-homes with copious use of travel guides and such second-hand reportage. Although the genre is famously 'operatic' (many incorporate music, both actual and imaginary, into landscape to enhance moods) it needs careful treatment for successful transfer to the lyric stage. The term 'Gothic' embraces a 'tongue-in-cheek' laconic irony (released in the predictably happy ending) that can play merry hell if 'seria' rather than 'semi-seria' is to be the intended result. This is where the skills of Cammarano and Donizetti would be in greatest demand and between them they delivered a notable success.

(pause)

[Part 2 will follow in Newsletter 94]