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‘All that is curious on continent and isle’: Time, Place and Modernity in Scott’s ‘Vacation 1814’ and *The Pirate*

The islands of Britain and Ireland form a scattered archipelago in which it is tempting to trace forms, shapes, borders and continuities. We have tended to think of the geography of early-nineteenth century Britain as part of a historical process of assimilation. In Linda Colley’s influential model Britons came to identify themselves as people of an island nation, increasingly homogenised under a banner of ‘liberty’.¹ In a more sophisticated formulation, Franco Moretti’s analyses of the geographies of the historical novel show how the genre turned its attentions to the internal borders of nations, a point where history and geography can be seen to produce each other, but with the final design ‘to represent internal unevenness, no doubt; and then, to abolish it.’² In this essay I pursue Moretti’s general point about the way the time and space of the historical novel meet on imagined internal borders, but I focus on how this cultural process generates a surplus of space that prolongs both the indeterminacy of specific places and the difficulty of absorbing them into larger cultural wholes. The formation of a national geography around a political centre (England or Edinburgh) or by a dominant cultural figure (in my case, Walter Scott) will always leave unresolved spaces that cannot quite be accommodated by the taxonomic geographic decisions that borders require (urban/ rural, centre/periphery, Anglophone/Gàidhealtachd and so on).

Some spaces fit awkwardly into national structures, or remain incompletely assimilated—not fully subject to the processes of national acculturation. These may be different from more familiar spaces that lay claim to be resistant to historical incorporation or to be threatened by what Saree Makdisi describes as a process of modernisation. Such heterotopias (which for Makdisi include Scott’s Highlands as well as Wordsworth’s spots of

time) are examples of a ‘hitherto untransformed enclave that, when discovered and colonized by the outside world, is seen to experience a fall which erases or, rather, rewrites it, by weaving it tightly into the history of the outside world.’³ Rather, I want to look at a location which in the early nineteenth century had been neither idealized as a natural space nor constructed as a bearer of national history, and to see what happens to it when it is visited by visited by that great instrument of historicisation, Walter Scott.

My subject is Scott’s two visits, first in person and then in fiction, to Orkney and Shetland, the Northern Isles of Great Britain, and their place in his literary-historical geography. The first time, in the summer of 1814, Scott accepted an invitation from the lighthouse engineer Robert Stevenson to accompany the Commissioners of the Northern Lights on their annual inspection of the lighthouses around the coast of Scotland. In 1821 Scott revisited the unpublished diary he had kept on this voyage to compose his novel *The Pirate*, set on Shetland and Orkney. These encounters allow us to think about the meeting points of place, time and narrative more generally--the relation between the accumulated cultural forms that give places their historical contours and the contingencies and demands of the present. Both of Scott’s narratives, seemingly excursions into history, turn out to be permeable in unexpected ways by their immediate contexts in which history becomes mediated by disruptive forms of present temporality.

1814: Europe

In 1814 the Northern Islands were not firmly etched on the literary landscape. Four years after Scott’s visit, Orkney would feature briefly in *Frankenstein* as the embodiment of that most negative and formless aspect of the Burkean sublime—privation. Deflected from his aesthetic tour with Henry Clerval, Victor Frankenstein decides upon one of the most remote of the Orkney islands to work on his female creature:

It was a place fitted for such a work, being hardly more than a rock whose high sides were continually beaten upon by the waves. The soil was barren, scarcely affording pasture for a few miserable cows, and oatmeal for its inhabitants, which consisted of five persons, whose gaunt and scraggy limbs gave tokens of their miserable fare. [...]

In this retreat I devoted the morning to labour; but in the evening, when the weather permitted, I walked on the stony beach of the sea to listen to the waves as they roared and dashed at my feet. It was a monotonous yet ever-changing scene.⁴

Geographically, Britain's Northern Islands were not, in 1814, on what James Buzard has called 'the beaten track'—the institutionalisation of travel that awards to places authentic cultural identity and to individual travellers a concomitantly authentic experience of travel.⁵ In practical terms, the islands were hard to reach—the mail service from Leith (Edinburgh's port) was intermittent and an attempt to reach Orkney from the north coast of Scotland meant a crossing of the dangerous Pentland Firth. Despite their long interactions with Scandinavia, the Northern Islands seemed to have slipped away from literature and history. Arthur Edmonston, a Shetlander and author of the most widely read early nineteenth-century account of the islands, regrets the loss of historical record:

There were few to describe [Shetland's early history]; and in an illiterate age, many important events take place, of which posterity receives no intelligence. As the pronunciation of the names, both of individuals and of places, is subjected to the ignorance of the inhabitants and the caprice of foreigners, it is liable to frequent changes, and but a few places retain long their first appellations. These causes operate, no doubt, more or less in every country, but their effects will be the most conspicuous in rude societies, where language having been reduced to no fixed standard, is liable to perpetual variation.⁶

It was to these unfamiliar islands that Scott set off in 1814. That summer was a time of waiting. For Scott, the waiting was for the reception of *Waverley*, published on July 7. By the time he left with Robert Stevenson on July 29, the novel had already gone into a second edition, and notices were appearing in the Edinburgh press, but he was yet to see the reviews in the London journals. Europe was also in a state of political anticipation. Napoleon had arrived on Elba on May 30, and European politicians were anticipating the Congress of Vienna, which opened on September 18, ten days after Scott's return to Edinburgh. The map of Europe remained in suspension as the victors in the Napoleonic wars were yet to meet to redraw its territorial divisions.

The temporality of politics can be imbricated with that of narrative. Mary Favret has shown how times of war introduce their own experience of duration: 'wartime is an affective zone, a *sense* of time that, caught up in the most unsettled sort of present, without knowledge of its outcome, cannot know its own borders. It indicates a dislocation of the bounded terrain usually associated with war and the extension of war into a realm without clear limits.'⁷ In 1814 the Napoleonic Wars were, it was assumed, over, yet the 'unsettled sort of present' that Favret describes was far from becoming settled. She demonstrates how, in the case of *Persuasion* (published in 1816 and set in 1814), that disrupted wartime temporality of painful waiting and anxiety is translated into the plot of a domestic novel. And we can trace another kind of unexpected connection in the relation of the apparently distant Northern Islands—seemingly on the edge of Europe—with European post-war dislocations at the time of Scott's visit.

Peter Fritzsche's account of the period following the French Revolution describes an affective temporality that he calls the feeling of being 'stranded in the present.' He starts from the familiar position that the Revolution inaugurated a form of modernity that radically cut the present away from a past history that could be narrated on a grand scale by a public class

of individuals or institutions called ‘historians’. Displaced physically by war, and socially by political upheaval, all sorts of people now come into conversation with each other and, faced with the anxiety of a radically cut-away past and an unknown future, they create new, multiple, imaginative and spontaneous forms of history:

Insofar as the present moment was characterized by the new, the past appeared increasingly different, mysterious, and inaccessible. Cut off from the present, the past turned opaque, which invited a new, more subtle scholarship to take its measure. More aware of the distinctiveness of their own contemporary present, men and women came to invest the past with their own historicity and to understand it in terms of ‘time’ and ‘place’. This enlarged the scope of history to include the most ordinary artefacts and the most undistinguished subjects that reflected a particular ‘spirit of the age.’⁸

This is a Europe of exiles and fractured communities where common experience was no longer easily recordable, or, if it was, that experience was one of being estranged from one’s own time and dispossessed from history. Fritzsche follows James Chandler’s argument in *England in 1819* where Chandler identifies in a proliferation of historically self-conscious works around 1819 a complex and often self-contradictory version of *Zeitgeist*. In the move to identify the new concept of a distinct and homogenous ‘Spirit of the Age’, a specific present different from the past, writers in fact produce a literature that addresses differences and incongruities, and tackles the problem of history as a ‘case’ to which there may be exceptions.⁹ That is, the foundation of modernity as a universally recognisable present simultaneously generates a historicism of multiple and often contradictory actors.

Against these fractures and uncertainties new forms of historicism were—sometimes literally—erected. Britain, with its territorial borders intact during the war years, was

particularly adept at visualising this geographical stability in historical terms. Ann Rigney has documented the historical monuments constructed in the year 1814 to give a visual object for the public memory of history and to arrange that history into coherent or sequential events.¹⁰ Just before Scott left Edinburgh, the 500th anniversary of Battle of Bannockburn was commemorated with a statue of William Wallace at Bemersyde, close to Scott's own home at Abbotsford. While he was away, an extensive historical pageant in celebration of Nelson's 1798 victory at the Battle of the Nile, timed to coincide with the centenary of the Hanoverian succession, was held in Hyde Park in London. Scott was himself to include an account of it in the *Edinburgh Annual Register for 1814*.

Other forms of historicism adapted themselves to the sense of history in ruins by rendering the narrative of history as partial or fragmented. Fritzsche argues that antiquarian objects no longer indicated a generalised pre-historic past but were drawn back into a narrative of history that could reimagine something of the national stories that seemed to have been occluded or fractured in war-torn Europe. Just as the discourse of the present resided in the coming-together of individual subjects, so the past could be summoned in the fragment remains of pasts that had not entered into formal historical narratives: 'The work of archaeological recovery in this period aimed at the reconstruction of the multilayered contexts that historical victories had effaced.'¹¹ This, then, offers us both a historical and a historiographical context for Scott's lighthouse voyage—a journey that was to prove an encounter with forms of the present that could not be easily assimilated into temporal rationalisations—structures such as improvement, progress, or the stabilizing of the past in tangible antiquarian objects.

With the publication of *Waverley*, Scott had nominated his own act of historical commemoration, titling his account of the Jacobite rising *'Tis Sixty Years Since*, and here he places his narrative squarely in its year when he heads his diary with the title 'Vacation

1814'. But the diary is far from an act of historical recollection; rather, it explores the experience of the present, even when it seems to call upon an ancient past. The title refers partly to the legal period of vacation when the law courts do not sit—another period of suspended time. 'Vacation' also carries the sense of vacancy or emptiness, and 'to vacate' has another legal meaning of removal from legal validity. Freed from legal and official regulation the diary announces its own emptiness and its own status as a voyage into the unknown and unregulated newness of time and space. Scott's temporal experience is, in this sense, one of a continuous present that finds its expression in the form of a journal, in which events are encountered in an expected sequence without a recognisable narrative form. A diary proceeds in episodic steps, recorded at short intervals that are not always plotted on a predetermined line. The trip had a clear purpose for the Commissioners of the Northern Lights, but not an obvious one for Scott. He did have the idea of collecting material for his next poem, *The Lord of the Isles*, but that was for the return trip down the west coast—a much more familiar land- and seascape which Scott sees as already historicised. There is no indication that Scott already had any idea that he was going to write *The Pirate* eight years later—and in fact, as we shall see, that novel was brought about by a rather different set of circumstances. Scott was not going to Orkney and Shetland for any particular reason other than to go *on vacation* and the language of his diary has often the feeling of an experience that is simply unfolding itself in the present.

In all these senses—his own literary career and that of the novel as a genre, the political state of Europe, and the form of the diary—Scott is in a state of suspension. And he finds himself in a strange kind of historical present when he reaches the islands which themselves seem to him to lack a clear position in linear or incremental history. Temporally adrift in two ways, the Northern Islands cannot be understood through written history, nor do they seem properly inserted into Scottish Enlightenment ideas about historical progress.

Faced with the apparent lack of historical inscription and the precedent of cultural representation, his two most abiding interests—improvement and antiquarianism—fail to provide the temporal/historical narrative that they are called upon to serve.

Scott's loosely optimistic account of the islands is predicated on a suspended temporality of things always just about to happen. Agriculture should be improving, given the progressive views of the landowners he encounters, but Scott finds it hard to chart such improvement on the Enlightenment map of stadial historiography. Instead of a nicely progressive or stadial model in which one form of subsistence gives way to another (herding to farming to commerce), all of these are mixed up on the islands. Scott complains that the people live an undifferentiated lifestyle that confuses the categories of economic progress. This is the case both spatially and temporarily. The ownership of land is not, for Scott, sufficiently demarcated--'there are several obstacles to improvement, chiefly the undivided state of the properties'--and 'the labouring people and are often absent at the proper times of labour'.¹² This latter problem Scott ascribes to the amphibious character of Shetland's workforce who appear to him to move indiscriminately between fishing and farming. In Smithian terms, the division of labour is lacking not only within trades but also between them. The clear separation of these labouring practices is necessary to place Shetland in the course of progress, and Scott hopes that this will happen, even though, in the diary's characteristic temporality, it has not quite happened yet and awaits an unspecified future:

The improvement of the arable land, on the contrary, would soon set them beyond the terrors of famine with which the islanders are at present occasionally visited; and, combined with fisheries, carried on not by farmers, but by real fishers, would amply supply the inhabitants, without diminishing the export of dried fish. This separation of trades will in time take place, and then the prosperous days of Zetland will begin.

(p.154)

If the agricultural condition of Shetland makes the future a conjecture without immediate security in the present, then the past fails to reveal itself in the way an antiquarian visitor to the islands might expect. Or perhaps more accurately, Scott's antiquarian expectations are subject to the particular insecurities of war-time temporality.

Scott's interest in collecting was piqued by war—the following year he was to travel to Belgium—his first journey outside Britain—to acquire items from the field of Waterloo, and covered one wall of his house, Abbotsford, in the most ferocious military hardware. Fritzsche argues that nineteenth-century antiquarianism is both inspired by war and an attempt to ward off its dislocations. The revolutionary conflicts of the late eighteenth century renewed European interest in the religious wars of the seventeenth century, and offered a way of thinking through a violent present by revisiting these disruptive energies from history. Antiquarianism can become the modern mode of historicism, when modernity seeks ways of rendering its own fractured and unstable temporality as objects. It offers the lure of access to the objects of the past that can be experienced as empirical and tactile, but that simultaneously acknowledges the unavailability of historical continuity. Antiquarian objects are uprooted from the past, are often fractured or incomplete, and signify the gaps and interruptions of history rather than its inevitable progress. Modern antiquarianism takes up this doubled and paradoxical position, on the one hand seeking the reassurance that the temporality of history can return the subject to something than has already been experienced (the antiquarian object or practice), while on the other hand announcing the temporal gulf that separates us from that past.¹³

Thus deracinated, antiquarian objects are themselves exiled from the very historical, tangible or empirical moment they are supposed to represent. Scott knew quite a lot about old Nordic literature: 1814 saw not only the publication of *Waverley* but also his retelling of the

Icelandic *Eyrbyggja Saga*.¹⁴ Yet he finds that the things and the cultural performances that he seeks to collect are vexingly unavailable, just on the cusp of living memory, always somewhere else, on some other island, just out of reach. Here is his account of the Shetland sword dance, which he believes to be the only surviving example of ‘the warlike dances of the northern people’ (p.163) and therefore a way of anchoring Shetland in a Northern European history:

At Scalloway my curiosity was gratified by an account of the sword-dance, now almost lost, but still practised in the Island of Papa, belonging to Mr. Scott. [...]. Some rude couplets are spoken (in *English*, not *Norse*), containing a sort of panegyric upon each champion as he is presented. They then dance a sort of cotillion, as the ladies described it, going through a number of evolutions with their swords. One of my three Mrs. Scotts readily promised to procure me the lines, the rhymes, and the form of the dance. I regret much that young Mr. Scott was absent during this visit; he is described as a reader and an enthusiast in poetry. Probably I might have interested him in preserving the dance, by causing young persons to learn it...[.] (p.162)

We witness Scott reaching for continuities that constantly elude him. The ritual is ‘almost lost’ but can still be found on an island that is at once a distant, primitive location and the property of a modern landowner. The dance is on the verge of disappearing from history, but the modern ladies have described it as ‘a sort of cotillion’ --a recognisable social function. These contemporary friends have promised Scott a transcript of the performance, but he has yet to receive it. And if only Scott could have met with ‘young Mr Scott’ (unrelated to him) then a line of continuity could have affected the progress of the ancient ritual into the modern world. Scott remains in a present whose promises are a gamble on an uncertain future that may or may not revive an ancient past.

Scott is eager to discover traces of the Picts, the supposed aboriginal people of Scotland and the subject of a continuing debate over their language and ethnicity. He ascribes a number of artefacts and buildings to Pictish origin. But he also includes a story, narrated to him by Robert Stevenson, of a visit Stevenson had earlier made to the island of South Ronaldsay when Stevenson is invited by the islanders to give his opinion on a man whom they claim to be an ‘ancient Pecht’(p.195). On meeting this individual, Stevenson finds that he is in fact an ironmonger whom he had known in Edinburgh—the imagined ancient origin is a modern arrival.

Not only is Scott’s experience mediated by an uncertain temporality, the geography of the Northern islands turns out to be less homogenous, or less isolated, than he might have expected. Just before leaving Edinburgh Scott had written to J. B. S. Morritt that he hoped the tour would present him with ‘all that is curious on continent and isle’,¹⁵ evoking a fractal archipelago in which islands and continents do not form a clear hierarchy. In the story of the ancient Pecht, the supposedly ancient origin turns out to be outsider, washed up on the shores of Orkney, and the fractal geometries of Orkney and Shetland start to mimic curiously a Europe of displaced persons where the rules of hospitality and practices of cosmopolitanism are no longer in harmony with each other. The islands are a much more international locality than Scott expects, and their population more transient. Instead of Picts, he finds a mobile community of disparate nations—Dutch, Norwegians, Danes. These people disrupt any idea of the rude primitivism of the native Shetlanders, by importing luxury goods into their diet ‘the proportion of foreign luxuries seems monstrous, unless we allow for the habits contracted by the seamen in their foreign trips. Tea, in particular, is used by all ranks, and porridge quite exploded’(p.147). This is again the work of what we might think of as a kind of antiquarian sociology: when confronted with hybridity, Scott looks for continuities and origins which turn out not to be fully realisable.

Shetland bears more traces of the political present that Scott might have supposed. He records the presence of foreign sailors who have been marked by the war with France, as if they were refugees: ‘They seemed very poor, and talked of having been pillaged of everything by the French, and expected to have found Lerwick ruined by the war’(p.182). The number of foreign vessels around the archipelagos gives rise to frequent shipwrecks, often of Dutch or Scandinavian vessels, and the local legends tell of ships of the Spanish Armada that foundered on the rocky coastlines in the sixteenth century. Far from being the primitive racial origin that the Picts were supposed to stand for, Shetland bears traces of the wrecked cosmopolitanism of the rest of the Europe where to be a citizen of no particular nation means to be in exile as much as on a Grand Tour. And in these wrecks Scott comes up against the edge of what it means to be human. He is shocked by the pillaging of wrecks by the locals, and the superstition that to save a drowning man will end with the rescued man doing his saviour some harm or injury, He has become an exile in his own nation, unable to understand its customs through the familiar enlightenment routes of sympathy or historical progress:

Several instances were quoted to-day in company, in which the utmost violence had been found necessary to compel the fishers to violate this inhuman prejudice. [...] It may seem strange that the natives should be so little affected by a distress to which they are themselves so constantly exposed. But habitual exposure to danger hardens the heart against its consequences, whether to ourselves or others. (p.156)

Scott is now dependent on the past as bricolage—not so much history as romance, but rather as a disparate conversation between people who may not share the same forms of historical knowledge. The vacation that the diary fills up is not so much a journey into a romance past as into a set of diverse ways of understanding the present.

1821: Empire

In 1821 Scott had the opportunity to revisit Orkney and Shetland. Perhaps mindful of the huge success of Byron's *The Corsair* in 1814, Scott's publisher, Archibald Constable, tried to persuade his best-selling author to write a book on a piratical theme. Constable's idea for a novel entitled *The Buccanier* was set in the aftermath of the Restoration and followed the adventures in America of three of the regicide of Charles I. Scott rejected the title, but the idea of piracy seems to have turned his thoughts to John Gow, a notorious Orkney pirate about whom he had heard just before he left the islands. *The Pirate* was composed throughout 1821 (a long time for Scott to spend on a novel) and published right at the end of that year (although the colophon bears the date 1822). Scott turned back to the 1814 diary, but seems to have felt that his first-hand experience of the islands did not provide the historical and topographical heft that he need for a whole novel. He conducted further researches into the history and present agricultural state of the islands, and corresponded with his friend William Erskine, Sheriff Depute of Orkney and Shetland, commenting 'I want to talk to you about the locale of Zetland, for I am making my bricks with a very limited allowance of straw.'¹⁶ The brick-making metaphor points backwards to the gaps I have already discussed in the diary and also raises the question of the form and structure that Scott used to construct his fictional edifice, *The Pirate*. In this section I explore Scott's revisiting of the Northern Isles in novel form, and look at the ways in which the fractured present of his first visit is replayed in fiction.

The Pirate bears some signs of the national tale, and of narrative patterns established in Scott's early novels to explore the political geographies of the nation.¹⁷ As in *Waverley*, the hero moves to an outlying region where he must choose between a dark, dangerous proponent of regional independence, and a more nationally compliant fair woman whose father agrees to the marriage when 'his Norse blood gave way to the natural feeling of

the heart, and he comforted his pride while he looked around him, and saw [...] that as well “his daughter married the son of an English pirate, as of a Scottish thief.”¹⁸ But this resolution, with its national tale telos, is not quite a summary of the topographical trajectory of the characters. Mordaunt Mertoun, the hero (though not the titular character) is the geographical reverse of Scott’s earlier heroes who set out to explore the wider world and although he ‘eagerly longed to see more of the world than his lonely situation had hitherto permitted’ (p.81) Mordaunt never gets further than Orkney.

The principal incomer to Shetland is not the hero (Mordaunt is a child when he arrives), but the hero’s father, Basil Mertoun, who arrives with no obvious identity. He is a stranger, but the antithesis of the outsider who is an object of local curiosity: ‘No one asked him whence he came, where he was going, what was his purpose in visiting so remote a corner of the empire, or what was likely to be the term of his stay’ (p.7). Basil himself, spokesman for global homogeneity, rejects the entire basis in climate of Enlightenment geographical determinism. Montesquieu’s careful formulation of the production of national character through the somatic-social reaction to climate means nothing to him. Invited to his neighbour’s house, where the air is said to be better, he declaims: ‘I am indifferent to climate; if there is but air enough to fill my lungs, I care not if it be the breath of Arabia or of Lapland’ (p.11).

Basil’s atotopical expansion is at odds with Scott’s request to Erskine for information on the local and the specific—the peculiarities of the ‘thick description’ of localities and costumes that create a sense of topical realism in the national tale. The novel gives Scott the opportunity to revisit his antiquarian interests from the diary (he is this time able to imagine the absent Sword Dance). But *The Pirate*’s sense of spatiality continually pulls away from these anchors in a particular time and place. Even more than the diary, the novel is set in a fictional present, dissolving history and geography opening out its perspectives to global

space and a-chronological time. As Scott was writing *The Pirate*, Napoleon died on the very distant island of St Helena. British interests were now less in Europe than in its global territories. And Scott, as Ian Duncan has noted, is in the midst of an ‘intermittent but decisive widening of scope across [his] career, from the philosophical domain of national history to that of world history.’¹⁹ As Scott widens his geographic lens, *The Pirate* marks a strange focal point in his return to the Northern Islands. On the one hand the islands mark the extreme point of Britain, an outlier waiting to be drawn back into the national geography. But on the other, as they were on Scott’s first encounter, they remain unfixed, porous, and elusive in their historical positioning.

The Pirate resists its own opportunities to be a story about Britain. Scott provocatively sets the events in 1689 against a historical background, as Minna Troil reminds us, ‘the Highlands against the Lowlands--the Williamites against the Jacobites--the Whigs against the Tories’(p.210) but the novel pays very little attention to these developments. Instead, Scott turns the national tale’s British perspective outwards to a global one. Minna and Norna plan a kind of violent Zetland Independence movement that will restore the past glories of Norway, which Minna sets in an imperial context:

‘My father is a Zetlander, or rather a Norwegian,’ said Minna, ‘one of an oppressed race, who will not care whether you fought against the Spaniards, who are the tyrants of the New World, or against the Dutch and English, who have succeeded to their usurped dominions. His own ancestors supported and exercised the freedom of the seas in those gallant barks, whose pennons were the dread of all Europe.’

(p.210)

Minna articulates Shetland independence on an imperial rather than a national stage—a claim that the novel undercuts with a certain dramatic irony, for Shetland is already part of a global

empire based not on military conquest but on the commercial expansion of modern imperialism.

The story of imagining Orkney and Shetland in global terms had started before Scott arrived on the archipelagos, but where to situate them in relation to the empire was not clear. In his 1809 account of Shetland, Arthur Edmonston (one of Scott's sources of information) worries about how to place them in relation to larger geographies. The islands, he complains, are not faring well in the public consciousness, as even more distant outposts of Empire are being added to the map of the world:

while the most trivial observation respecting New Holland, and those isles which lie scattered in the Pacific Ocean, is read with interest, and remembered with satisfaction, many valuable and useful communications, which relate to our native country, are soon overlooked and forgotten.

The Zetland Islands, although they have long constituted an integral part of Great Britain, and their utility to it, especially in a maritime point of view, be obvious and acknowledged; yet their productions, resources, and internal economy, are less generally known than those of the most distant colony of the empire.²⁰

Edmonstone's geographical frame makes the Shetland Islands both more and less familiar. These islands can be understood by means of comparison with other islands in the British Empire, but the latter's newly-discovered status serves to diminish Shetland's older position as archetypically British. Instead of acting as the origin of national-spatial identity, Shetland is in a sense *terra incognita*, waiting to be discovered and to find a place in Britain's expanding global reach.

The Pirate exploits the islands' apparently free-floating spatiality to conjure up a version of Empire cut free of its political and historical anchors. The pirates in *The Pirate* have their origin in the Caribbean. Basil Mertoun was formerly the owner of a plantation on the West Indian island of Tortuga. When their estate is raided by the Spanish, Basil and his older son (Mordaunt's half-brother) become pirates. Both men, after conflicts with their respective crews, are marooned on different islands and, by very different routes and at different times, end up in Shetland. But the piratical localities are very thinly drawn in the novel. *The Pirate* is set mainly on Shetland and with its later chapters on Orkney and although the pirates have been plying their trade around the West Indies these distant locations are not directly realised geographically or ethnographically.²¹ The novel makes almost no mention of slavery. Rather, the world beyond the islands is represented by the circulation of commodities seemingly unsecured to any regular origin or route and driven by an extra-legal—or piratical—economy of smuggling and *ad hoc* trading.²²

The Shetland islands are globally permeable and the lives of their inhabitants intersect with the commodities of empire in unofficial capacities—the Shetlanders trade with the Dutch, the local pedlar has Spanish items on offer, cane sugar is in plentiful supply, and the local hostelry serves rum because of 'the commerce of the Zetlanders with foreign vessels, and homeward bound West Indiamen' (p.128). Magnus Troil owns 'a punch-bowl of uncommon size, the gift of the captain of one of the Honourable East India Company's vessels, which, bound from China homeward, had been driven north-about by stress of weather into Lerwick-bay, and had there contrived to get rid of part of the cargo, without very scrupulously reckoning for the King's duties' (p.127). This energetic economy of black-marketeering and the improvised acquisition of goods is something different from the local pursuits of fishing and farming that Scott notes in the diary. The islanders, alert to their economic opportunities, combine an ancient primitivism with the commodity-based,

globalised modernity that makes them more, not less, advanced than mainland Britain: ‘with the foreign delicacies of tea, coffee, and chocolate; for, as we have already had occasion to remark, the situation of these islands made them early acquainted with various articles of foreign luxury, which were, as yet, but little known in Scotland’ (p.154). These deracinated commodities stand in sharp contrast with the antiquarian objects that the novel promises to deliver to its readers. The antiquarian object should anchor history as a visible or tangible confirmation of the reality of the past as it was lived in a particular locality, thus calling on the specificity of place—the local habitation of the object—to illuminate time. But although Scott does include a number of the Norse or ‘Pictish’ discoveries he either made or narrowly missed on the 1814 tour they often evade the role of acting as this kind of historical evidence. Scott repeats from the diary the idea that the ‘Stones of Stenniss’ as an apparently druidical monument, have ‘no rival in Britain, excepting the inimitable monument at Stonehenge’, but our attention, focalised by Clement Cleveland (the titular pirate), is almost immediately diverted as Cleveland is ‘less interested by this singular monument of antiquity’ (p.359) than he is by the prospect of being reunited with his ship. A discovery of old silver coins leads to a discussion of their financial value and taxable status as treasure trove rather than any antiquarian interest.

The novel repeats a move of enfolding a supposedly primitive past into commercial modernity in a way that removes its temporality from linear, incremental or causal history. Its most extreme example is the meeting point between Norna, self-styled seer and Zetland nationalist, with the novel’s motif of global commerce. At a number of points *The Pirate* associates Norna’s attempts to control events by magic with the modern discourse of capitalism--the market, the price of labour, buying and selling--as in this exchange between the landowner Magnus Troil and Claude Halcro:

‘She bade me begone about my business, and told me that the issue would be known at the Kirkwall Fair; and said just the like to this noodle of a Factor--it was all that either of us got for our labour,’ said Halcro.

‘That is strange," said Magnus. ‘My kinswoman writes me in this letter not to fail going thither with my daughters. This Fair runs strongly in her head;--one would think she intended to lead the market, and yet she has nothing to buy or to sell there that I know of.’ (p.285)

Magnus’s trope of creating a market out of nothing substantial is dramatically voiced by Basil Mertoun as he discourses on Norna’s claim to be able to control the winds through supernatural powers. Basil makes no distinction between the allegedly superstitious, primitive practice of selling favourable winds to sailors to assist them out of the port and modern, global commerce in which the natural world itself is subsumed in an economy where everything is for sale:

Every thing in the universe is bought and sold, and why not wind, if the merchant can find purchasers? The earth is rented, from its surface down to its most central mines;--the fire, and the means of feeding it, are currently bought and sold;--the wretches that sweep the boisterous ocean with their nets, pay ransom for the privilege of being drowned in it. What title has the air to be exempted from the universal course of traffic? All above the earth, under the earth, and around the earth, has its price, its sellers, and its purchasers. In many countries the priests will sell you a portion of heaven--in all countries men are willing to buy, in exchange for health, wealth, and peace of conscience, a full allowance of hell. (p.65)

Basil absorbs Shetland’s local economy of fishing into a totalizing state of universal buying and selling in which everything melts into air, or in this case wind. His nightmare vision

imagines a fully-monetised globe where all places are alike in a sort of hypermodern global commercialism whose temporal and spatial homogeneity removes local or national distinctions altogether. Again the origin and materiality of commodities evaporate into a generalised economy. We might further note that Norna represents one of the novel's very few (albeit lateral) acknowledgements of African slavery. Clement Cleveland (the pirate of the title) describes her as 'a person whom I had frequently seen while in Zetland, and to whom they ascribe the character of a sorceress, or, as the negroes say, an Obi woman'(p.297). The novel glances at the political realities of an empire built on trade, only to absorb them back into a world in which modern global commerce takes on the insubstantial character of 'primitive' superstition and all enslaved or marginalised subjects disappear from view.

Of particular relevance here is Ian Baucom's exploration (amid a very extensive and multiple study) of what happens in the history of Atlantic slavery when the liberal abolitionist discourse of humane sympathy tries to engage with the abstracting, evaluating force of capital. For Baucom, the example of Scott illustrates what is at stake in the adoption of liberal sympathy as a modern position that is really a kind of transaction with the past, one that exchanges the spectator's sympathetic investment in the past for a performance of sympathy itself, and that relegates the lessons of that engagement *to* the past: 'Scott figures any time but the time of cosmopolitan capital as wounded and dying, worthy, finally, of no more than a passing expression of sympathy and an honorable burial.'²³ *The Pirate*, as it picks at the fissures of Enlightenment progress, demonstrates continuities between a modern world of abstract commercialism and a primitive superstition that to rescue a drowning person brings bad luck to the rescuer. Acknowledgement of the suffering of the dying or injured, is in *The Pirate* is another Enlightenment ideal squeezed between the twinned forces of the primitive and the modern in which both require a calculated interestedness that excludes the suffering subject.

Such radical interventions of non-chronological time or undivided space haunt the novel and push against the containment of literary form. Arthur Edmonston's complaint that Shetland has not been taken as seriously as more distant islands in the empire identifies a weak point in a strand of imperial writing that calls up the archipelagic structure of Great Britain in order to imagine a global empire linked by patterns of islands. In his study of imperial georgic poetry of the late eighteenth century, Markman Ellis uses this geographical structure to show how the georgic themes of cultivation and civilization underpin economic networks of empire. Ellis points to the way in which geographic homologies came into use to define the continuities between Britain and its empire—the figure of archipelago at the imperial centre could duplicate itself hierarchically across the globe: 'As well as elaborating the individual insularity of the Caribbean islands, this poetry explores ways in which the sugar islands cohere together. This sense of the imperial organisation of discrete entities might be described as the archipelagic trope, conceptualising the empire as a collection of islands in relation to each other.'²⁴

As we have seen, the archipelagic structure of Shetland in *The Pirate* is porous and unstable. Rather than establishing geographical patterns, or establishing trade routes, the islands benefit from the haphazard para-economy in which the goods of empire arrive by chance, singular encounters, or extra-legal activities. The pedlar Bryce Snailsfoot sums up this situation as an unpredictable but providential force that delivers goods, without any seeming material causality at all, as he moves through the novel on his 'quiet walk round the country, in the way of trade--making the honest penny, and helping myself with what Providence sends on our coasts'(p.73). The Shetland Islands' refusal in *The Pirate* to be incorporated into a fixed geography of world trade echoes Scott's eroding of the generic forms of literature. The novel fits awkwardly into the plot- and character-structure of the national tale, and the genre of the imperial georgic that had underpinned Britain's island

empire now becomes the object of scrutiny in a way that robs it of its traditional poetic functions. Georgic traces a movement from the material conditions of working the land, through the metonymic expansion of this labour as economic value, to its metaphoric confirmation as an act of literary cultivation. Studies of Romantic-period Georgic cover a wide field in which the mode is either rejected, absorbed into new forms, or allowed to work as a disruptive presence literature.²⁵ Most immediately relevant here is Samuel Baker's identification of a 'maritime Georgic' that traces the Virgilian synthesis of husbandry and poetic reflection from the eighteenth century into new poetic forms and cultural functions for Britain's maritime empire. Baker argues that Romantic Georgic requires a new abstraction that allows writers to transfer the mastery of land into the space—made possible by the technologies of modern navigation—of the global extent of oceans and in doing so 'characterised literary work as in its own right a national tradition of production, one that evoked the land all the more ardently because it spanned the seas.'²⁶

The generic home of Georgic is poetry and the examples Baker discusses in his study of the absorption of the local in the maritime global are poetic. *The Pirate* takes a step back from exercising the cultural labour of Georgic itself, to offer a critique of the cultural force of literature from within the structures of the historical novel as it adapts the influences of the national tale. More precisely, Scott re-imagines and puts under scrutiny Georgic as a once-classical and universal mode that harmonises land, literature and cultivation to assess its uses in the contemporary genre of the national tale—a genre which has a rather different interest in the improvement of the land, not for the cultivation of the social individual but for the rapidly-changing nation.

The Pirate is shot through with Virgilian references, but ones which work against the associated harmonising of agriculture, sea-faring, and the sphere of literature. The twinned Georgic forms of agricultural and artistic meditation are comically pulled apart and

represented by two different characters. Triptolemus Yellowley, a factor or land agent on the islands, is an improver, named after the classical inventor of the plough and given to ‘thumbing his old school-copy of Virgil’ (p.40), but one whose efforts bear very little fruit, despite his having learned the *Georgics* off by heart. He complains that no one makes any money out of improvement and all his schemes for better roads, new horticulture and modern agricultural implements come to nothing. He mismanages his Virgilian notion of importing bees into Shetland (they all die), a motif that operates in the novel on at least three levels. In a literal sense, it works against the forward historical momentum of improvement driven by the importation of knowledge to the margins from a metropolitan centre. And this is underscored by the association with Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees* with its early Enlightenment ideas about the openly cooperative commercial societies and legible economic structures—both of which are notably weak in *The Pirate*’s Shetlandic society. More widely, the isolation of Georgic as a comic object within *The Pirate* presses up against the novel’s own status as a literary artefact.

We are reminded again how *The Pirate* plays with its own historiography, and uses its ‘marginal’ geography not to bind the outlying parts of Britain to its centre in the present, but to disrupt its own relation to the historical past. It is set in a period that had been of considerable interest to Scott, who had edited the complete works of Dryden, published in 1808 with a second edition appearing in 1821 as he was composing *The Pirate*. In the ‘Life of Dryden’ that introduced the edition Scott identifies the period around 1688 as a new opportunity for literature to become absorbed into civic life: ‘Instances began to occur of individuals, who rising at first into notice for their proficience in the fine arts, were finally promoted for their active and penetrating talents, which necessarily accompany a turn towards them.’²⁷

In *The Pirate* no such ‘necessary’ turn is evident. Although Dryden does feature in the novel as the obsession of the local self-appointed bard, Claude Halcro, this preoccupation, like Triptolemus’s interest in Virgil, has no homologous correspondence with the novel itself. That is, instead of exemplifying ways in which literature and social development are coterminous and mutually supportive, the literary instances from the seventeenth century remain isolated and functionless. Halcro’s knowledge of Dryden has no agency in the novel, and he is soon co-opted by the other characters to address Norna in her pseudo-runic verse that testifies to her madness. Georgic, the genre which should gather and repair all the novel’s inconstancies (the relation of land to sea and, and of both to literary contemplation) is overwhelmed by a crazed version of Romance.²⁸

In more general terms, a clear historical/political discourse cannot take root in the novel because the time, in Shetland, is out of joint. As we have seen with its early adoption of global commodities, Shetland is both more ancient and more modern than the rest of Scotland. And the principle spokesman for the linear, forward-looking temporality of improvement, Triptolemus Yellowley, is himself caught in a strange form of dislocated time. Yellowley expresses the intention ‘to introduce into the *Ultima Thule* of the Romans, a spirit of improvement, which at that early period was scarce known to exist in Scotland itself’ (p.29). In his own words, he collapses three different temporalities into each other and the narrator explicitly tells us that Triptolemus is premature, embodying modernity as a kind of living anachronism who has ‘come into the world a century too soon’:

it is plain that Triptolemus Yellowley had been shaken out of the bag at least a hundred years too soon. If he had come on the stage in our own time, that is, if he had flourished at any time within these thirty or forty years, he could not have missed to have held the office of vice-president of some eminent agricultural society, and to

have transacted all the business thereof under the auspices of some noble duke or lord.
(p.35)

Modernity here is not the product of gradual, stadial change but of ruptures and discontinuities.²⁹ Triptolemus is not only ahead of his own time, he would also, the narrator insists, seem a strikingly modern figure at the time of the novel's publication. Fictional time, it seems, is not subject to the incremental progress of Enlightenment historical time, and this brings us to the kind of novel that *The Pirate* represents—one that works against literary ways of containing its geographical and temporal fluidity. If we accept that the novel as a genre has a crucial role in proposing, repeating, and testing the space of the nation, then *The Pirate* has a complex relation to British national temporality. As we have seen, the novel does not easily accommodate itself to the spatial-historical dimensions of a chronotope at all. A chronotope—the organisation of time and space and their mutual dependency in fictional narrative—should be governed by genre and vice versa, but where the generic contours of a work of fiction are as unstable as they are in *The Pirate* no clear space-time world emerges. Britain's northernmost islands slip out of the containing frame of the nation as they do from the narrative structures of the historical novel and its associate form, the national tale to form wider and less fixed allegiances with other parts of the world. Scott's visits, in person and fiction, both inhabit shifting temporalities or presents that integrate only unevenly—if at all—the causal past of history or the telos of the historical novel that knows the future of its own narrative. As he recalls his own imperfect investment in past antiquities and future improvement from the Lighthouse Diary, Scott reinvents the incommensurable as a form of fictional temporality.

Notes

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- ¹ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992).
- ² Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel* (London, Verso: 1998), p. 40.
- ³ Saree Makdisi, *Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.12.
- ⁴ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: the 1818 text*, ed. by Marylyn Butler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.136. In 1822 (and having recently read *The Pirate*) Byron also seems unconcerned about the exact location of the islands. Torquil, hero of his poem *The Island*, is described as ‘The fair-hair’d offspring of the Hebrides, / Where roars the Pentland with its whirling seas’ despite the Pentland Firth in fact being the stretch of water that separates Orkney from Scotland. Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome McGann, 7 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), VII, p.40.
- ⁵ James Buzard, *The Beaten Track* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.6.
- ⁶ Arthur Edmondston, *A View of the Ancient and Present State of the Zetland Islands*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: James Ballantyne, 1809), I, p.71.
- ⁷ Mary A. Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010), p.18.
- ⁸ Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), p.7.
- ⁹ James Chandler, *England in 1819* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- ¹⁰ Ann Rigney, ‘Making Publics in 1814: *Waverley* and the Culture of Commemoration’, paper given at *On or About 1814: A Symposium on Literature in History*, University of California, Berkeley, 2014. I am very grateful to the author for a copy of this paper.
- ¹¹ Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present*, p.104.

¹² ‘Vacation 1814: Voyage in the Lighthouse Yacht to Nova Zembla, and the Lord knows Where’, in John G. Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.* 7 vols (Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, 1837), III, pp.136-277 (pp.143 and 244). Further references are given following quotations in the text.

¹³ See also Philip Shaw’s study of post-Waterloo writing as a way of confronting a moment that tested the limits of national self-definition. Shaw traces in Scott’s *The Antiquary* ‘illusions redeemed and rechannelled in the service of the state.’ *Waterloo and the Romantic Imagination* (Basingstoke: New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p.63.

¹⁴ See Julian D’Arcy and Kirsten Wolf, ‘Sir Walter Scott and *Eyrbyggja Saga*’, *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 22/1 (1985), 30-43. For Scott’s knowledge of Nordic culture see Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 60-83.

¹⁵ *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. H. J. C. Grierson (London: Constable, 1932-37), 12 vols, VII,

¹⁶ *Letters*, VII, p.12.

¹⁷ Shetland had been the subject of a solitary national tale published earlier in 1821 when Dorothea Campbell’s *Harley Radington* tested the limits of a form usually set in the much more culturally inscribed regions of Ireland and the West of Scotland. See Penny Fielding, ‘Genre, Geography and the National Tale: D. P. Campbell’s *Harley Radington*’, *European Romantic Review* 23/5 (2012) 593-611.

¹⁸ Walter Scott, *The Pirate*, ed. Mark Weinstein and Alison Lumsden (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p.389. Further references are given following quotations in the text.

¹⁹ Ian Duncan, ‘The Trouble with Man: Scott, Romance, and World History in the Age of Lamarck’, *Romantic Frictions*, ed. Theresa M. Kelley, *Romantic Circles* (November, 2011)

<www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/frictions/HTML/praxis.2011.duncan.html>. See also Evan

Gottlieb's account of Scott's 'novelistic negotiation of Britain's post-Napoleonic role as a world power'. *Romantic Globalism: British Literature and Modern World Order, 1750-1830* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2014), p.13.

²⁰ *View of the Zetland Islands*, I, v-vi. The South Shetland islands in the South Atlantic were not so named until 1819. By contrast, the Western Isles of Scotland were already established in colonial toponymy: James Cook had named the 'New Hebrides' (now Vanuatu) in 1774.

²¹ For the differences between Shetland and Orkney in the novel see Mark Ryan Smith, *The Literature of Shetland* (Lerwick: Shetland Times, 2015), pp. 32-37.

²² Arnold Schmidt identifies in *The Pirate* a more immediate condemnation of slavery: 'the hypocrisy evident in the novel mirrors contradictions in 19th-century British society, where the civic virtues of a seemingly ethical society conflict with the imperial economy that makes that society possible.' 'Walter Scott's *The Pirate*: Imperialism, Nationalism and Bourgeois Values', in *Fictions of the Sea*, ed. by Bernhard Klein (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 89-103 (p.91).

²³ Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p.282.

²⁴ Markman Ellis, "'The Cane-Land Isles": Commerce and Empire in Late Eighteenth-Century Georgic and Pastoral Poetry', in *Islands in History and Representation* (London: Routledge, 2003), 43-62 (55).

²⁵ Kevis Goodman argues that eighteenth-century Georgic self-consciously mediates the work it represents. The act of reading does not duplicate the labour it describes, but rather generates forms of affect that disrupt access to history; it gives rise to experiences that take place in the present but that cannot be fully articulated as historical experience. Goodman's emphasis on the reading experience is beyond the scope of this essay, but it is relevant that Georgic, for Goodman, is another kind of troubled present, one that she calls 'the presentness

of ongoing history beyond lived experience, or phenomenological verification'. *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 64.

²⁶ Samuel Baker, *Written on the Water: British Romanticism and the Maritime Culture of Empire* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press), p.83.

²⁷ 'Life of Dryden' in *Works of John Dryden*, 18 vols. (London: William Miller 1808), I, p.386.

²⁸ Chad T. May's reading of the novel moves away from the distinction between history and romance to identify its historiography as a traumatic resurrection of the past in the present, figured particularly in treatment of Norna's own violent past. "'The Horrors of My Tale': Trauma, the Historical Imagination and Sir Walter Scott', *Pacific Coast Philology* , 4/1 (2005) 98-116.

²⁹ Catherine Jones argues that the novel provides 'a case study of a society that is still at an early stage of development, before the division of labour and before allodial tenures are converted into feudal' but that this stadial approach is disrupted by popular memory. *Literary Memory: Scott's Waverley Novels and the Psychology of Narrative* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2003), p.91.