



---

## **Natives, Outcasts, and Aliens: Sir Walter Scott and the Writing of Modern London**

**John Williams  
(Independent, UK)**

***The Literary London Journal, Volume 10 Number 2 (Autumn 2013)***

<1>The main character in Sir Walter Scott's novel *The Fortunes of Nigel* (1822) is London, minutely observed at a time of crucial importance for the foundation of the Union between Scotland and England about which Scott felt so passionately. Uniquely for the Waverley Novels, *Nigel* (apart from two brief excursions to Greenwich and Enfield Chase) is set entirely in London, a circumstance that brings about what Iain Sinclair claims to be inevitable in London writing: 'the set always overwhelms its incidental human puppets' (34). With characteristic thoroughness, Scott researched and described the metropolis as he found it to be in 1623/4, a city teeming with people from all parts of England and Scotland, adjusting themselves economically and psychologically to the post-Elizabethan age (Jordan 519).

<2>When it has been discussed at all, *Nigel* is understood to be concerned primarily with presenting a more balanced assessment of the character of King James VI of Scotland and I of England than was more generally to be found in the literature of the day. In particular, Scott was responding to Abel Moysey's novel of 1819, *Forman: A Tale*, where the 'mean countenance and duck-legged, ungainly figure' belong to a King 'pretty free with his cups, as appeared in some measure by his articulation; and still more by the flush on his cheek, and unsteadiness of his humid eye' (I, 79, III, 77). Scott's reading on the period, along with his commitment to the Union in his own time, produced a verdict on James which, though sympathetic, was by no means flattering.

<3>This was a moment in history when Scott could explore the tension between, on the one hand, an irresistible momentum within society towards modernisation, and on the other, powerful arguments insisting on the need to preserve traditional beliefs and customs in order to maintain social and political stability. Readers of the Waverley novels, which began to appear in 1814, therefore encountered a very contemporary agenda through a series of plots set in a variety of colourfully recreated periods of history, and an equally varied, evocatively realised multitude of personalities who inhabited actual locations in Scotland and England. This process has been generally

understood to have forged a new genre for the novel form, and readers, intrigued by the 'Historical Fiction' they were enjoying for the first time, quickly came to expect something more from Scott than an unrelenting incarceration in the claustrophobic streets of early seventeenth century London, no matter how vigorously they were depicted, or how entertaining his cast of characters proved to be. *The Fortunes of Nigel*, therefore, was not a success with its early readers and has long since ceased to find a place beyond a passing mention in scholarly studies of Scott. Frank Jordan's scholarly edition of the novel, published in 2004, appears not to have brought about any change in this situation.

<4>As an important work in the context of literary London studies, *Nigel's* significance appears to have been completely missed; in Ian Cunningham's *Reader's Guide to Writer's London* of 2001, for example, there is a passing mention of Scott as a visitor to London, and of Wordsworth commenting that he found the madness of William Blake more interesting than the sanity of Sir Walter Scott, but no mention whatever is made of *The Fortunes of Nigel* (46). Peter Ackroyd gives *The Heart of Midlothian*, with its brief, sketchy London location scenes, a passing nod in *Thames Sacred River*, but *The Fortunes of Nigel* is nowhere mentioned (433).

### 'Historical Psychogeography'

<5>While Scott swiftly became immensely popular with nineteenth century readers in Britain and across Europe, the response of English writers to Scott's novels is characterised by the patronising comment made by his fellow countryman, Thomas Carlyle: Scott, he declared, had 'no message whatever to deliver to the world' (82). George Eliot read her way through the Waverley novels at the age of nine (Karl 22), but seems to concur with Carlyle when in Chapter 14 of *Felix Holt the Radical* (1866) she points up the aristocratic dimness of the Dubarry sisters when it comes to understanding the significance of religious dissent on contemporary political issues, by noting that both had learnt what little history they knew from reading *Woodstock*. However, set in 1832, the year of the Great Reform Act, Eliot's magnificent, subtle essay on the untrustworthy nature of nostalgia for times past that constitutes the Introduction to *Felix Holt*, was made possible by her reading of Scott, not least I suspect, from her knowledge of the first chapter of *Old Mortality*, although there is no direct evidence for this, as Rosemary Ashton has noted (282). In *Romola* (1863), where Eliot attempts to weave historical research on a much earlier period into the fabric of a novel intended to convey social and religious themes pertinent to England in the 1860s, she manifestly failed to achieve the necessary balance between historical detail and story-telling that became a feature of Scott's art as a novelist. In 1981, Judith Wilt was at pains to illustrate the ubiquity of Scott's influence on nineteenth century novelists, his 'heroes and heroines surface over and over in the works of the great nineteenth century writers, obliquely paying the debt' (8). In few places is this more evident than in Dickens's historical novels *Barnaby Rudge*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*, and also in *Bleak House*.

<6>The whole of southeast England may be swathed in fog and knee-deep in mud, but in *Bleak House* Dickens insists that 'the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest near the leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation: Temple Bar' (14). The Temple Bar guarded the western approach to the City of London, the point where the Strand becomes Fleet Street. Today, Horace Jones's memorial stands on the site occupied first

by the wooden mediaeval Bar, then by Wren's stone structure that replaced it in the 1670s. This was demolished in 1877-8. Roy Porter comments that its survival until this time 'marked a divided metropolis' (154). Commenting on Wren's failure to win approval for his scheme to reorder the streets of the City of London after the Great Fire, Nicholas Hawksmoor complained, '... we have noe City, nor Streets, nor Houses, but a Chaos of Dirty Rotten Sheds, allways Tumbling or taking fire, with winding Crooked passages (Scarse practicable) Lakes of Mud and Rills of Stinking Mire Running through them' (qtd. in Hart 193). It is at Temple Bar, alongside the church of St. Dunstan-in-the-West, that Scott begins the action of *The Fortunes of Nigel*. This is where David Ramsay has his shop; Ramsay is a clock-maker, but he prefers to spend his time investigating the occult power of numbers rather than plying his mechanical trade. Compared to the Jacobean period Scott writes about, however, where the physical presence of the Temple Bar endorsed the division between east and west in the metropolis, in Dickens's time the Strand had become an open highway leading down to Whitehall. Despite the continuing presence of the stone structure, therefore, it was more a case of the idea of this division that continued to have a powerful influence; Scott will have encountered the notion of an east-west divide as primarily a state of mind, something lodged in the London psyche by historical circumstances. It is still very much in evidence in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) when Clarissa's daughter Elizabeth takes a daring bus ride up the Strand and alights on the very edge of Fleet Street:

She looked up Fleet Street, she walked just a little way towards St. Paul's, shyly, like someone penetrating on tiptoe, exploring a strange house by night with a candle, on edge lest the owner should suddenly fling wide his bedroom door and ask her business, nor did she dare wander off into queer alleys, tempting by-streets, any more than in a strange house open doors which might be bedroom doors, or lead straight to the larder. For no Dalloways came down the Strand daily; she was a pioneer, a stray, venturing, trusting. (121)

In 2011 a no less intrepid Londoner has commented, 'Everybody has their own London and they don't often move outside it.... Anything else is an adventure' (Taylor 52).

<7>The turbulent, contradictory and unpredictable City of London, stretching from Temple Bar in the west to the Tower of London in the east, encapsulates the fascination that the metropolis has had for generations of writers and artists. Described by Dickens in Chapter 14 of *Barnaby Rudge* as being one of the most dangerous areas of eighteenth century London, this is the place where the weary litigants of *Bleak House* seek justice. Side by side with institutions that should bind society together, punishing the wrong doer, rewarding the virtuous, giving coherence to the whole, are to be found forces capable of subverting order: printing presses in the vicinity of St. Bride's and St. Paul's Churchyard as likely to be peddling sedition as loyal addresses; self-serving, corrupt lawyers and judges; merchants and bankers lining their own pockets at the expense of their naïve and defenceless victims; and all of this set within a polyglot community, many of whom took advantage of the Whitefriars district – otherwise known as Alsatia, a place of uncertain borders separated from the Inner Temple by the width of a narrow lane – to avoid the pursuit of the law whose institutions stand cheek-by-jowl with the warren of streets they called their own between the river and Fleet Street. Roy Porter calls this 'the London no one owned and everyone feared' (86). In 1878 Walter Thornbury noted that in the seventeenth century 'The mischievous right of sanctuary was preserved to the district, and confirmed by James I' (I, 183). Despite the formal

revocation of its status at the end of the seventeenth century, Alsatia retained its dubious reputation well into the following century (Picard 43-4).

<8>Scott was indebted to Thomas Shadwell's play of 1688, *The Squire of Alsatia*, along with the Falstaff scenes in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* for the theatrical sense of Alsatia that the novel contains. Shadwell has Sir Edward Belford say, 'Methinks 'tis strange, that places so near the King's palace should be no parts of his dominions' (86). The notion of a kingdom of lawlessness existing at the heart of a metropolis otherwise subject to the rule of legitimate law is taken up by Dickens in *Bleak House* where Tom All Alone's is the refuge of the disinherited, while in *Oliver Twist* Jacob's Island and the Faringdon district fulfil the same purpose (Smith 192). In 1896, Arthur Morrison's *A Child of the Jago* locates another such district off the Bethnal Green Road (the 'Old Jago' was Morrison's fictional name for the Old Nichol):

Beyond the archway [of the Old Jago] the police could not venture, except in large companies. A young constable who tried it once, getting ahead of two companions in his ardour, was laid low as he emerged from the passage, by a fire-grate adroitly let drop from an upper window. (124)

Fear of the alien, or alienated, is everywhere in London fiction, and in *The Fortunes of Nigel* the alien from Scotland joins with 'Alstatian' aliens living within the heart of the city. From the plague that lurks within Tom All Alone's to the paranoia of Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (published the year after Morrison's *A Child of the Jago*, and in the same year as *Dracula*) through to Neil Gaiman's novel *Neverwhere* (1996), the metropolitan experience of alienation, fear of the alien and the issue of assimilation run throughout London fiction, and Scott's *The Fortunes of Nigel* is the first novel to engage with these themes.

<9>Scott uses Alsatia to parody the modern state as well as to challenge it. When a young law student helps Nigel to escape to Alsatia he explains:

'... our neighbouring state of Alsatia, which the law calls the sanctuary of Whitefriars, has its mutations and revolutions like greater kingdoms ... Our traditions and records speak of twenty revolutions within the last twelve years, in which the aforesaid state has repeatedly changed from absolute despotism to republicanism, not forgetting the intermediate stages of oligarchy, limited monarchy, and even gynocracy; for I myself remember Alsatia governed for nearly nine months by an old fishwoman ...' (188-9)

The fog described in the opening chapters of *Bleak House* symbolises far more than the impenetrable recesses of the legal system. It represents the indefinable character of London itself which flows into the frequently contradictory personalities of those who people the pages of the novels that belong to the genre of London Fiction. To the west of Temple Bar the City looks towards Westminster, which since the accession of the Tudors had begun to establish itself as the seat of the country's Kings and Queens and its parliament. This was an area much easier to access from the City by the river than by land before the Strand began to be developed later in the seventeenth century. In *The Fortunes of Nigel* Scott explains that Nigel, Lord Glenvarloch, travels from his humble lodgings in the City of London to Westminster by boat in order to petition the King for the return of his inheritance, because in James I's reign, 'few ventured on horseback through the narrow and crowded streets of the city, and coaches were then a luxury

reserved only for the higher nobility, and to which no citizen, whatever was his wealth, presumed to aspire' (105).

<10>It was the disturbingly anarchic mix of ethnicity that characterised the population ebbing and flowing between the City and Westminster that had stuck in Wordsworth's memory when in the early nineteenth century he was working on Book VII of *The Prelude*:

The Jew; the stately and slow-moving Turk ...  
The Swede, the Russian; from the genial south,  
The Frenchman and the Spaniard; from remote  
America, the hunter Indian; Moors,  
Malays, Lascars, the Tartar and Chinese,  
And Negro ladies in white muslin gowns. (238, lines 231 & 239-43, 1805 text)

It was this same characteristic of London that Hugh Walpole, one of the most successful writers of London novels between the wars, continued to celebrate in *Captain Nicholas* (1934): '... you slip for a brief moment, into a no-man's-land where all the peoples of the world may meet, regardless of caste, of financial status, of home or country' (92). Londoners continue to perceive this as a defining feature of their city: 'People coming in, going out. And it's a bit like you'll never see Trafalgar Square without a pigeon, no matter how hard the Mayor tries. They're going to be there. You're not going to stop London. You're not going to stop the flow' (Taylor 102).

<11>Scott's research into early seventeenth century London had revealed a similarly volatile picture, but in *The Fortunes of Nigel* it suited him to draw particular attention to the racial friction that existed between a predominantly English population (though drawn from many areas of the country outside London) and a large influx of Scots, for many of whom, including Nigel, the experience of living in London was one of profound alienation. Nigel's experiences, like those of Richard Mayhew in Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere*, prompts the reader to wonder how the London we know and think of as 'normal' would look to an 'alien' (89). Scott's novel thus very clearly belongs in the tradition of his successors, and like Wordsworth, Dickens, Walpole and countless others, he is writing about London after the fashion of those who have found there, in Christina Hardyment's words, 'a territory exhaustively tramped by "psychogeographers" seeking to knit its past with its future' (157).

<12>Scott describes Westminster in the early seventeenth century as inhabited by a broadly homogeneous population of Royalty, the aristocracy and their dependents. Commoners had little or no place there other than as hopeful supplicants looking for favours from the great and the good. Looking east, beyond Whitefriars and Alsatia to the Blackfriars district stretching up into Farringdon, the aristocracy might mingle incognito with the lower orders as they made use of the numerous gaming houses or 'ordinaries' of the district. The corrupt, villainous Lord Dalgarno explains to the prudish Nigel what an ordinary is:

'... a late invented institution, sacred to Bacchus and Comus, where the first noble gallants of the time meet with the first and most ethereal wits of the age, - where the wine is the very soul of the choicest grape, refined as the genius of the poet, and ancient and generous as the blood of the nobles...'. 'By all which rhapsody,' said Lord

Glenvarloch, 'I can only understand ... that we are going to a choice tavern, where we shall be handsomely entertained, on paying probably as handsome a reckoning.'

(137)

Nigel's resolve is soon softened, and it is not long before, through the lure of the gaming table, the city begins to corrode his moral principles, much to the disgust of his servant, Richie Moniplies.

<13>Having sated themselves with the pleasures of Blackfriars and Farringdon, the aristocrats could travel west, beyond the Temple Bar to where the Royal Parks offered them a security comparable to that which (by a very different code) Alsatia offered its marginalised criminal inhabitants. Following Dalgarno's successful attempt to lure Nigel into the decadent life-style of the London aristocracy, the young Scot then discovers that his noble friend is not to be trusted and challenges him to a duel; but he does so in St. James's Park, unaware that the Park lies legally within the precincts of the Court. As Dalgarno beats a hasty retreat, an incredulous Nigel has the consequences of what he has done explained to him:

A decent-looking elderly man, who observed that Lord Glenvarloch remained on the spot, taking compassion on his youthful appearance, said to him, 'Are you aware this is a Star-Chamber business, young gentleman, and that it may cost you your right hand? – Shift for yourself before the keepers or constables come up – Get into Whitefriars or somewhere, for sanctuary and concealment, till you can make friends or quit the city.' (180)

Nigel, an alien in London from the outset, is now rendered doubly so. Dalgarno is no less Scottish in origin than Nigel, but the consequences of his adoption of English manners, specifically those of the Court in London (to the chagrin of his father who remains very much a Scot even while he is also a courtier) are linked to the deterioration of his moral fibre. Scott is here beginning to explore the complex issue of alienation and assimilation within the racial mix of London's population in a way that links it to many recent examples of the genre, including Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) and Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani* (2006). As with these later novels, in *The Fortunes of Nigel*, London takes on the role of a character in its own right, interacting in all its regional complexity with the complexity of its human subjects.

<14>Dalgarno's alienated state is rooted in the fact that the 'Englishness' he has embraced is shown by Scott to be an effete, decadent hangover from the Elizabethan age, faced now with extinction in the new age of reason, proto-capitalism and the continued rise to prominence of the middle classes. He belongs to an age that is swiftly becoming irrelevant to the present unless it is prepared to reinvent itself. Although like Scott's other Waverley heroes he does not realise it, Nigel is constrained to act in a way that will reconcile him to the future. These are issues that Scott, throughout the whole series of Waverley novels, was engaging with in relation to the state of the Union of Scotland and England in the early nineteenth century.

<15>The full extent of Scott's research on London in the reign of King James I and VI is given in Frank Jordan's edition of the novel. It seems likely that his interest in London's history had been in part prompted by the need to provide a satisfactory setting for Jeanie Deans's sojourn in London in *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818), but Jordan notes

that in 1811 Scott provided the notes and an Introduction for a *Secret History of the Court of James the First*, a two-volume by-product of the work he was then doing on *Somers' Tracts*; this, Scott wrote, 'made me wonderfully well acquainted with the little traits which mark'd parties & characters in the 17th Century' (408). It was by this route that Scott, with no conscious intention to innovate, but simply because he was who he was, became the first novelist in English to weave the fruits of closely researched history and specific, intelligent psychological observation into the structure of the novel form. Through his fiction, he was able to explore the way the application of the law could affect people's lives and characters. In this he was an expert, using observations garnered from his legal work in Edinburgh and his frequent travels through the borders on legal business; following on from this, he was fascinated by the complexities of society, and by the events and circumstances that created those complexities; this was coupled with his close observation of human behaviour, particularly when it was at its most quirky and eccentric. The process by which Scott brought these ingredients together resulted in fiction that began to take on a distinctively new, post-eighteenth century character; he began to produce novels that asked questions about the psychology of his characters in ways that had not been done before.

<16>While we can see clearly that in *Great Expectations* Pip's residence in London enables Dickens to explore his failings with a degree of psychological intricacy we never encounter in Defoe, Fielding or Smollett, the same is also true of the way we begin to understand the youthful character of Scott's Lord Glenvarloch in *The Fortunes of Nigel*. Dickens never saw fit to acknowledge a debt to Scott. Fedor Dostoevsky, on the other hand, wrote in 1880 that at the age of twelve he read his way through everything Scott had written (Margarshack 73). Scott's study of the mental state, and eventual deterioration into madness, of John Balfour of Burley in *Old Mortality* points the way to Dostoevsky's tortuous exploration of the mind of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* as he paces the streets of St. Petersburg. Indeed, in Dostoevsky's *Demons* the indecisive Stepan Trofimovitch, a writer tormented by the conflict between his natural sympathy for liberalism and his love of traditional values and culture, might almost be a caricature of the author of *Waverley*.

### **London Gothic**

<17>Scott was by no means alone in beginning to break new ground in this way in late eighteenth, early nineteenth century fiction; so-called Gothic and Jacobin novelists were equally important and influential in extending the boundaries of the genre as an exercise in psychological character analysis. Compared to the contrived settings and elaborate plotting of novels like Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, however, Scott's Balfour in *Old Mortality*, Jonathan Oldbuck in *The Antiquarian*, the eponymous Guy Mannering, and the miserly Trapbois in *Nigel* are examples of characters whose contradictory behaviour is framed by narratives rooted in a historically located world. Scott's obsessives, bigots, liars, prudes and those who are for ever unsure what to think or do, live out their psycho-dramas within the realm of historically identifiable events, not within a world predominantly of the novelist's own invention. David Ramsay the clock maker, for example, was indeed, as Scott discovered from his research, 'maker of watches and horologes to his Majesty' (Jordan 528). Scott uses Ramsay's addiction to occult calculation in the same way that he does Mannering's youthful compilation of horoscopes in *Guy Mannering* to dramatise the idea of a world on the brink of moving from an age governed by superstitious,

irrational beliefs into one where rational observation and scientific calculation inform an enlightened age. Ramsay (as we have seen) is never happier than when closeted in his inner room investigating the occult power of numbers while leaving the selling of his wares to his apprentices. In this respect *Nigel* presages Peter Ackroyd's novel *Hawksmoor* (1985) where London is used as a location to explore the friction between the influence of the occult in the seventeenth century and the growing belief in the power of deductive, mathematically construed reasoning.

<18>Scott juxtaposes Ramsay's irretrievably superstitious mind with the modern, calculating mind of George Heriot, and it is Heriot who is able to negotiate the means whereby Nigel can begin to appeal to the King for redress. Secure and dependable as Heriot is made out to be by Scott, he places within his household a mysterious Catholic recluse, Lady Hermione, who epitomises the state of alienation that characterises the dark side of London evident throughout the novel. Though her character is fictional, she may well have been suggested to Scott by his knowledge of such a woman who was 'at one time the subject of much gossip among the Jacobean of London' (Jordan 527).

<19>This tale of alienation within a tale of assimilation provides a plot line that takes us away from the city into the highways, byways and monasteries of Europe. In due course it further incriminates the novel's villain, Lord Dalgarno. Framed within his vividly realised London location, therefore, Scott (using Hermione herself as narrator) gives himself the opportunity to narrate a Gothic tale in the style of Ann Radcliffe. Over against the experience of alienation in seventeenth century London that claims historical reality, Scott sets the manifestly romantic trope of the friendless Gothic heroine. For Nigel, condemned to hide in the grim district of Alsatia, the ubiquitous fog of London exile is there to emphasise his unpleasant fate as a fugitive while he looks from the window of the room where he is effectively imprisoned:

He went to the window of his apartment, and found the street enveloped in one of those thick, dingy, yellow-coloured fogs, which often invest the lower part of London and Westminster. – Amid the darkness, dense and palpable, were seen to wander like phantoms a reveller or two, whom the morning had surprised where the evening left them.... Although it was broad day in the other parts of the city, it was scarce dawn yet in Alsatia ... (240)

Hermione tells her story to Ramsay's daughter, Margaret, of whom it has already been said in the novel that, 'Romances have cracked her brain' (102). While we can hardly envy Hermione, the picturesque circumstances of her predicament are drawn from a tradition of fiction that promises eventual liberation far more readily than the sordid circumstances of Nigel, who languishes in voluntary incarceration in the house of Trapbois, the senile miser, and his ill-favoured, embittered daughter Martha. Nigel's fog-bound room by the Thames may have less entertainment value than the mysterious and beautiful Hermione wringing her hands 'among the mountains of Guadarrama' (222), but it points the way forward to an existential, nightmare vision of city alienation exemplified in J. G. Ballard's *Concrete Island* (1974). Scott does not hesitate to use Gothic tropes when Nigel is eventually imprisoned in the Tower of London and left to await the barbaric punishment that is his due for assaulting Lord Dalgarno in St. James's Park:

The dark and low arch, which seemed, like the entrance to Dante's Hell, to forbid hope of regress – the muttered sounds of the warders, and petty formalities observed in opening



and shutting the grated wicket – the cold and constrained salutation of the Lieutenant of the fortress, who showed his prisoner that distant and measured respect which authority pays as a tax to Decorum, all struck upon Nigel's heart, impressing on him the cruel consciousness of captivity. (311-2)

For all this, Scott would have us believe that what dismays Nigel most is his sense of himself as an alien; even the dependable George Heriot seems to have lost faith in him: 'The feeling that he is the object of general dislike and dereliction, seems to be one of the most unendurably painful to which a human being can be subjected' (343).

<20>The contrast between the employment of picturesque Gothic reserved for Lady Hermione's narrative and Scott's use of Gothic to describe Nigel in the Tower of London is striking. However, Ramsay's daughter Margaret has managed to gain admittance to his cell disguised as a boy, and the use of such a predictable Gothic cliché, which stretches the reader's ability to believe the fiction well beyond breaking point, softens even this episode in the novel. The modernity of Scott is nevertheless clearly discernible, and for further evidence of this we should turn to the eventual death of Dalgarno. Scott's style when recounting scenes of battle could be remarkably direct and prosaic and free from any kind of embellishment that might serve to romanticise the events. The battle scenes in *Old Mortality*, for example, have a stark realism that was new to fiction, and Dalgarno's death is in the same category. By the time he has ended up in the Tower, Nigel also stands accused of attempting to seduce his landlord's young wife while he was living in Blackfriars. In fact it is Dalgarno who has lured her away, and they are together when he meets his end:

Lord Dalgarno started up, and shading his eyes with his hand, gazed eagerly down the alley; when at the same instant, he received a shot, which, grazing his hand, passed right through his brain, and laid him a lifeless corpse at the feet, or rather across the lap, of the unfortunate victim of his profligacy. The countenance, whose varied expression she had been watching for the last five minutes, was convulsed for an instant, and then stiffened into rigidity for ever. (392-3)

Even the hastiness of the composition of this passage, which must account for Scott not going back to clarify whether Dalgarno lay at the woman's feet or (the far more dramatic second thought) 'across the lap' adds to the effect of prosaic reportage which reflects the author's engagement with narrative as emerging from history, as opposed to narrative as a part of story-telling entertainment. Fictional as this section of the novel is, the 'Historical Novel' is presenting itself as a true chronicle of events: no convents amid the rugged Spanish mountains, no trembling women in men's clothing, simply a bullet through the brain, a spasm, then death.

<21>Nigel's eventual liberation is followed by his marriage to Margaret Ramsay. Without Scott's political agenda we might well have expected to see him married off to Lady Hermione. Plot resolution through marriage was a familiar enough device in fiction for Scott's readers; but here the Scottish nobleman's union with a tradesman's daughter (a tradesman whose obsession with magic has been gently ridiculed throughout) points us to an understanding of how the times, not just novels, were changing. Scott portrays King James comically determined to prove Ramsay's noble lineage in order to make the marriage respectable. At the same time, however, Scott shows the King as instrumental in establishing not only the circumstances which allow for the marriage of Nigel and

Margaret, but also for creating a new role for Kingship in a country where the roles and privileges of the nobility are being drastically reordered. Hard-headed business sense is required to replace outmoded ideas of chivalry. The violent death of Dalgarno symbolises this shift. In the process of charting Nigel's course through the novel, from penniless alien to a man who has discovered a role for himself both at court and back in his native Scotland, Scott has also mapped London, its geography and its inhabitants. It is a patchwork of distinct territories, and this is the model we recognise repeatedly explored and exploited by subsequent London novelists and Londoners: 'The only thing that is truly Londonish about London is that is all bits and pieces of everybody else' (Taylor 70). 'Unlike Manhattan, Paris or Rome', Pamela Church Gibson writes, 'central London has no coherent geographical centre or urban grid' (363).

### **London 'Englishes': the Challenge of Assimilation**

<22>In London novels ever since Scott wrote *The Fortunes of Nigel*, this lack of metropolitan coherence has been repeatedly represented through a lack of linguistic cohesion. As seminal figures in a long line of immigrant, marginalised and alienated figures who wander through Hogarthian streets in London fiction, Nigel and his fellow Scots are no less identifiable as aliens by their speech than are the arrivals of the Windrush generation in Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*. Christina Hardyment suggests that language lies at the heart of the ideal of assimilation that runs through Zadie Smith's work from *White Teeth* to *N-W* (2012), while a similar quest is evident in Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani*, 'written in an intriguing mixture of English, Punjabi, Urdu, obscenities, rap and textspeak' (161). Early in *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* (1960), Andrew Salkey's Johnnie Sobert, 'Jamaican. R.C. Middle class', is questioned about his accent in an exchange that illustrates his insecurity both as an individual and as a Londoner:

'Where did you get that Welsh accent, Mr. Sobert? Or is that rude?' 'Not from Wales, I don't think.' 'But it's decidedly Welsh.' 'It's been described as decidedly Northern Irish, as well.' 'I hope you don't mind talking about it? It's rather puzzling, really.' 'I know.' (15, 19)

<23>In *The Fortunes of Nigel* Scott uses Lowland Scots dialect as a mark of the alien, and in all his novels language invariably lies at the heart of his observation of character; when names are mispronounced we can assume that an intentional point is being made. Following the *Bildungsroman* tradition embraced by Scott, Nigel must first lose the name he comes to London with, in order to find it again along with his duly improved and matured self. He is asked what his assumed name will be when he flees to Alsatia:

'I will be called Grahame,' said Nigel; 'It was my mother's name.' 'Grime,' repeated the Templar, 'will suit Alsatia well enough, both a grim and grimy place of refuge.' 'I said Grahame, sir, not Grime,' said Nigel, something shortly, and laying an emphasis on the vowel; for few Scotsmen understand raillery upon the subject of their names. 'I beg pardon, my lord,' answered the undisconcerted punster, 'but Graam will suit the circumstance too – it signifies tribulation in the High Dutch, and your lordship must be considered as a man under trouble.' (192)

His first interview with the Falstaffian 'Sovereign' of Alsatia continues in the same vein, but as Nigel attempts to hold on to his identity by being in control of his change of name, he only succeeds in revealing his intention to deceive:

'I thought, sir,' answered Nigel, with as much haughtiness as was consistent with the cool distance which he desired to preserve, 'I had told you my name at present was Nigel Grahame.' His eminence of Whitefriars on this burst out into a loud, chuckling, impudent laugh, repeating the word, till his voice was almost inarticulate, – 'Niggle Green – Niggle Green – Niggle Green! – why, my lord, you would be queered in the drinking of a penny pot of Malmsie, if you cry before you are touched. Why, you have told me the secret even now, had I not had a shrewd guess of it before.... How you look now!' (255-6)

<24>In Selvon's *Lonely Londoners*, Galahad (whose real name is Henry Oliver), experiencing his first English winter, says that '... I find when I talk smoke coming out of my mouth', to which his friend replies, 'Sometimes the words freeze and you have to melt it to hear the talk' (15). We might interpret this as a reference to the need for the alien to be in constant need of a process of translation. The Scots who are resident in London in *The Fortunes of Nigel* are shown to be always aware of the need to adapt and translate not only language, but their personalities and their appearance if need be. What Katie Wales has written of London since the mid-twentieth century could equally apply to the London of James I: linguistically it is 'a multi-dimensional physical space, where different voices and argots jostle with each other in different kinds of London "Englishes"' (39).

<25>The significance of there being different kinds of 'London "Englishes"' becomes particularly apparent in *The Fortunes of Nigel* at the point in the novel where Nigel has left Alsatia and instead of escaping to the continent, decides to go to Greenwich in order to appeal directly to the King in the light of the injustice that has been done to him. He is recognised and helped by James's cook, Laurie Linklater, a Scotsman who has become bi-lingual; Linklater's behaviour may remind us of Harris in Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*: 'Harris is a fellar who like to play ladedda.... And when he dress, you think is some Englishman going to work in the city, bowler and umbrella, and briefcase tuck under the arm, with The Times fold up in the pocket so the name would show' (103). Linklater is able to pass himself off among native Londoners with some distinction for a foppish English cook who speaks an impressive aristocratic language when among the English outside the court, but otherwise uses his native Scottish dialect in the kitchens and when addressing the King. As narrator, Scott makes no direct comment on the cook's strategy, we are left to discover the man's chameleon ability, involving his speech, dress, and his manner, for ourselves, and to reflect on it as yet one more example in a novel full of such examples of the identity crises that metropolitan living brings about.

<26>In a Greenwich barber's shop we see Linklater in a 'milk-white jerkin, and hose of white kersey; a white apron twisted around his body in the manner of a sash....' The reader has no idea who this man really is, and Scott reinforces our assumption of what he is by the nature of his description of the cook's demeanour: 'one of those priests of Comus whom the vulgar call cooks'. He complains 'in a lofty strain of voice', 'This will never answer ... the King twice asked for sweet-breads, and fricassied coxcombs, which are a favourite dish of his most Sacred Majesty' (299).

<27>Meanwhile, out of the corner of his eye, Linklater realises who Nigel is and surreptitiously gets him out of the shop where he is likely to be recognised by the others. Talking to him in secret, as the conversation progresses, Scott has him gradually lose his English accent and revert to his native Scots dialect. He begins, 'Good lord, my Lord Glenvarloch – why will you endanger your self thus?' Within a couple of paragraphs, thinking of Nigel's manservant, he is saying, '... for Richie, who was always wilful, "wadnae be guided by me," as the sang says. But nobody amangst these brave English cooks can kittle up his Majesty's most sacred palate with our own gusty Scottish dishes. So I e'en betook myself to my craft....' His Majesty's favourite food, he tells Nigel, is not sweetbreads and coxcombs, but 'a mess of friar's chicken for the soup, and a savoury hachis, that made the whole cabal coup the crans' (301). Linklater's final phrase is roughly to be translated as: 'That is how I got one over on the English cooks, and got the job here'!

<28>Assimilation, by whatever means, is what Scott returns to repeatedly in this novel. Released from the Tower of London, and with Dalgarno's knavery unmasked, we have seen that Nigel's reconciliation to the modern world is reinforced by his marriage to Margaret Ramsay. Margaret we might think of as second-generation, and as such she is as much a Londoner as she is a Scot. Her marriage to Nigel, however, means that she will now return to Scotland. A far more interesting marriage settlement than Nigel's awaits us at the end of the novel. Nigel's manservant, the puritanical, fiercely nationalistic, irascible Richie Moniplies, marries the grim-featured Martha Trapbois, daughter of the murdered miser in whose house Nigel lodged while in Alsatia. They are the most unlikely couple imaginable, but through their union Scott can suggest that even the most seemingly insurmountable barriers to cohabitation can be negotiated. Behind Martha's dour exterior, Scott shows us someone who is intelligent and who retains the capacity for caring. While confined to Alsatia, she devotes herself to her father's welfare, and her strategy for survival is to keep emotion at bay. This is a type of stoical woman who fascinated Scott, and she recurs in various guises throughout the novels. Martha's response to her father's death is an example of Scott taking the traditional form of writing fiction at this time forward to something that proffered a degree of realism with respect both to the action and the psychological observation involved; at the same time it maximises its emotional impact by subtly conjuring up the rhythms of elegiac verse. The old miser lies dead in their house:

His unfortunate daughter went up to his body, and had even the courage to remove the sheet which had been decently disposed over it. She put her hand on the heart, but there was no throb – held a feather to the lips, but there was no motion – then kissed with deep reverence the starting veins of the pale forehead – and then the emaciated hand. 'I would you could hear me,' she said, – 'Father! I would you could hear me swear, that, if I now save what you most valued on earth, it is only to assist me in obtaining vengeance for your death.' She replaced the covering, and, without a tear, a sigh, or an additional word of any kind, renewed her efforts, until they conveyed the strong-box betwixt them into Lord Glenvarloch's sleeping apartment (282-3).

<29>The novel concludes not with a celebration of Nigel's coming marriage, but with the union of Martha Trapbois and Richie Moniplies, presided over by the King. Richie has been instrumental in helping Martha unmask her father's murderer, a sub-plot which, once concluded, also assists in the unravelling of the many wrongs that have been heaped on Nigel. Richie and Martha have become allies, both of them isolated aliens in a

hostile world, but how can so unlikely a pair possibly survive as a married couple? Upon the fate of their union, it would seem, hangs the fate of the Union. How will Richie cope with a partner who seems to be by nature hostile? Comic as these final paragraphs of the novel are, Scott has reserved his most serious thoughts on the matter of the Union of Scotland and England for Martha who, although through her plain looks and humourless character, invites ridicule when we first meet her in the story, has by now earned our respect:

'There are fools, sire,' replied she, 'who have wit, and fools who have courage, and fools who have learning, and are great fools notwithstanding. – I chose this man because he was my protector when I was desolate, and neither for his wit nor his wisdom. He is truly honest, and has a heart and hand that make amends for some folly. Since I was condemned to seek a protector through the world, which is to me a wilderness, I may thank God that I have come by no worse.' (406)

Scotland and England, Edinburgh and London: a marriage of convenience that could be a great deal worse. Indeed, if honesty is the watchword, such a union might flourish.

<30>But Scott cannot leave the matter here. This problematic union results in a final act that dramatically, and comically, marks the passing of the old world and the dawn of the new. Dalgarno and all he stood for is dead, it is time for the new nobility to rise. King James is so impressed by Martha's tribute to Richie that he decides to Knight him on the spot. The King's paranoid aversion to weapons – swords and daggers in particular – is well attested, so the decision is not without an element of danger for Richie: He took the drawn sword, and with averted eyes, for it was a sight he loved not to look on, endeavoured to lay it on Richie's shoulder, but nearly stuck it into his eye. Richie, starting back, attempted to rise, but was held down by Lowestoffe, while, Sir Mungo guiding the royal weapon, the honour-bestowing blow was given and received: '*Surge, carnifex* – Rise up, Sir Richard Moniplies, of Castle-Collop! – And, my lords and lieges, let us all to our dinner, for the cock-a-leekie is cooling.' (406)

\*

<31>The London setting of *The Fortunes of Nigel* renders it a unique novel within the Waverley series. All Scott's recurring themes are there, however, and it merits a great deal more attention than it has hitherto been given in the critical literature that exists on the Waverley Novels. It is equally an important novel in the context of the representation of London in British fiction, and although its significance in this respect has been completely ignored, it existed as a stepping stone for readers who were to encounter the modern nineteenth century novel as it evolved to explore the relationship between humanity and its environment in increasingly sophisticated ways.

## Works Cited

Ackroyd, Peter. *Thames Sacred River*, London: Vintage, 2007.

Ashton, Rosemary. *George Eliot: A Life*. London: Penguin Books, 1997.

Carlyle, Thomas. 'Sir Walter Scott' (1838), in *Scottish and Other Miscellanies* (1915). London: J. M. Dent, 1915.

Cunningham, Ian. *Reader's Guide to Writer's London*. London: Prion, 2001.

Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. London: Penguin Books, 2003.

Gaiman, Neil. *Neverwhere*. London: BBC, 1996.

Gibson, Pamela Church. 'Imaginary Landscapes, Jumbled Topographies: Cinematic London'. *London from Punk to Blair*. Ed. Joe Kerr and Andrew Gibson. London: Reaktion Books, 2003. 363-69.

Hardyment, Christina. *Writing Britain: Wastelands to Wonderlands*. London: British Library, 2012.

Hart, Vaughn. *Nicholas Hawksmoor: Rebuilding Ancient Wonders*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002.

Karl, Frederick. *George Eliot: A Biography*. London: Harper Collins, 1995.

Margashack, David. *Dostoevsky*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1975.

Morrison, Arthur. *A Child of the Jago*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1982.

Moysey, Abel. *Foreman: A Tale*, 3 vols. London: 1819.

Picard, Liza. *Dr. Johnson's London*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000.

Porter, Roy. *London: A Social History*. London: Penguin Books, 2000.

Salkey, Andrew. *Escape to an Autumn Pavement*. Leeds: Hutchinson, 2009.

Scott, Walter. *The Fortunes of Nigel*. Ed. Frank Jordan. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.

Selvon, Sam. *The Lonely Londoners*. London: Penguin Books, 2006.

Shadwell, Thomas. *The Squire of Alsatia*. London, 1688.

Sinclair, Iain. *Ghost Milk*. London: Penguin Books, 2011.

Smith, Stephen. *Underground London: Travels Beneath the City's Streets*. London: Abacus, 2004.

Taylor, Craig. *Londoners*. London: Granta, 2011.

Thornbury, Walter. *Old and New London*. 4 vols. London: Cassell, Potter, Galpin & Co., 1878.

Wales, Katie. 'London and Language'. *London from Punk to Blair*. Eds. Joe Kerr and Andrew Gibson. London: Reaktion Books, 2003. 36-40.

Walpole, Hugh. *Captain Nicholas*. London: Macmillan, 1934.

Wilt, Judith. *Secret Leaves: The Novels of Walter Scott*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway*. London: Vintage Books, 2004.

Wordsworth, William, *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*. Ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, Stephen Gill. New York & London: W. W. Norton, 1979.

### **To Cite This Article:**

John Williams, 'Natives, Outcasts, and Aliens: Sir Walter Scott and the Writing of Modern London'. *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 10 Number 2 (Autumn 2013). Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/autumn2013/williams.pdf>

---

### **About The Literary London Journal**

*The Literary London Journal* is the free, online, open-access journal of the Literary London Society. Founded in 2003 by Lawrence Phillips, who edited the journal between 2003 and 2011, it is the first and only journal to provide a common forum for scholars and students engaged specifically in the study of London and literature. From the start, *The Literary London Journal* has aimed to publish the best new research relating to London and literature.

The journal is online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/>

*The Literary London Journal* is fully peer-reviewed. It is published twice a year, in spring and autumn, and is indexed by the MLA International Bibliography. For past issues and information about submissions, please visit the journal home page.

ISSN: 1744-0807 | <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/>

---