

## CHAPTER I

*Introduction*  
*Walter Scott and the Environment*

Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,  
 Who never to himself hath said,  
 This is my own, my native land!  
 Walter Scott, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*<sup>1</sup>

Ettrick Forest boasts finely shaped hills and clear romantic streams; but, alas! they are bare, to wildness, and denuded of the beautiful natural wood with which they were formerly shaded.

Walter Scott to George Ellis, 19 May 1804<sup>2</sup>

Not so much of all literature survives  
 As any wisp of scriota that thrives  
 On a rock . . .  
 These bare stones bring me straight back to reality.  
 Hugh MacDiarmid, from *On a Raised Beach: a Poem*<sup>3</sup>

This book's central argument is that Walter Scott, one of the most globally influential and popular writers of the nineteenth century, needs to be reread so that the full extent of his contribution to environmental literature and ecological historiography can be understood. That contribution is as remarkable as it is neglected. Scott has been studied almost entirely for the ways in which he explored the relationships between human communities and their socio-political development. Since he was educated in the Edinburgh of the Scottish Enlightenment, that approach might be expected. Yet natural science was also a key area of Scottish Enlightenment enquiry, and one of its more important intellectual and literary exports.

The move from Enlightenment science to Romantic nature writing, with its emphasis on feeling as a means to knowledge, sharpens the demand for a study of the kind undertaken here. As an antiquarian, Scott was always interested in the relationship of the past to the present. Best known for his historical poems and novels, his prolific output over almost four decades (1795–1832) and across genres of poetry in

translation, ballad collection, original short and long poetry, verse drama, prose fiction, literary journalism, letters and personal record keeping constitutes one of the nineteenth century's most significant critical enquiries into a nation's environmental history. *Walter Scott and the Greening of Scotland* provides an overdue exploration of that enquiry, critiquing Scott's writing specifically from an environmental perspective. The book accounts for an immediate and local, as well as more expansive, understanding of the history of the land and its significance to the people who live on it. My chapters investigate Scott's use of language and natural science, tracing the impact of his environmentalism across national literary boundaries. In doing so, they respond to a timeliness that is present both in his writing and in environmental literary studies now. As well as paying attention to global climate change and the need for detailed studies of literature's role in making public the events that contributed to that situation, any enquiry of this kind needs to address matters of environmental justice and arguments about the Anthropocene as an epoch in which the whole earth has been altered by human activity. This is a study, moreover, that begins with a focus on the earth in the form of soil and ends by looking through the sky to the stars. Then there is the temporal matter of Scott's mature works reaching their bicentenary. Those anniversaries invite a reappraisal of Scott's importance, 200 and more years on from the moment when enthusiastic, engaged readers first took notice of his writing.

The aim of my book, then, is to reassess Walter Scott's writing from the new, more environmental perspective that I have begun outlining. In the course of my investigations, the chapters that follow enter into in a dialogue with twenty-first-century ecocriticism. The book asks how Scott's poems, novels and prose non-fiction represent a history of local environmental change, assessing the immediacy of that writing against temporally longer and geographically wider-reaching effects. Scott is known for his interest in ballads and metrical romances that mapped human histories, as well as for his historical novels. Georg Lukács' *The Historical Novel* was the pioneering study of that socio-historical focus on his work, and still has plenty of relevance.<sup>4</sup> Since Lukács, the expansive volume of critical enquiry into Scott's groundbreaking representations of people and the events that shaped their lives has brought a variety of theoretical and critical perspectives to bear on his work. Yet no book-length study has looked at his equivalent contribution to the memory mapping of the natural world. Green zones emerge in his writing, attending in main texts and in substantial bodies of notes as well as in

### Introduction

3

introductory essays to several centuries of change in land use. Scott addressed issues ranging from the drainage of marshes in the former 'debatable' lands of the Borders to the increase in monocultural pasturage for sheep farming across Scotland; and from deforestation and reforestation using native rather than imported species to the effects on the land of depopulation through mass migration (effectively, an exchange with Canada of people for trees). His storytelling depends upon shifting riparian environments, and brought into print the folklore of mountain, island, lake and seashore communities.

The essential ecological framework in which Scott situated his intellectual and emotional life is captured in a brief statement that he made to Washington Irving, that 'if I did not see the heather, at least once a-year, *I think I should die!*'<sup>5</sup> The connection here of heather with sight, thought and remaining alive invites closer enquiry. While often associated with the Highlands, common heather, *Calluna vulgaris* grows prolifically in the acidic soils of heathland, bogs and moorland throughout Scotland. Scott knew it not least from the childhood years that he spent at his grandfather's Sandyknowe farm in Roxburghshire and, in his adult life, from the Eildon Hills that he could see from his Abbotsford estate. Historically controlled by burning in the interest of farming and field sports, heather is a hardy plant that is resistant to the effects of grazing where more succulent plants are eaten by sheep, cattle and horses. If it disappears, the reason is usually mechanical removal or interference with the soil through use of fertilizers. Heather also grows in some mixed woodland where the soil is acidic, along with Scots pine and oak. These ecological contexts with their communities of herbaceous plants, trees and habitats emerge as the heart-beat of Scott's writing about his nation's land. His affiliation as a Romantic writer for whom wandering solitary characters and an imaginative contemplation of the natural world are as important as for Wordsworth, can be seen in another declaration of his affection for the Scottish Borders that he made to Irving, about his preferred home from his childhood until his death in 1832: 'It may be partiality, but to my eye, these grey hills and all this wild border country have beauties peculiar to themselves. I like the very nakedness of the land; it has something bold, and stern, and solitary about it'.<sup>6</sup>

Scott and Wordsworth are often read for their contrastive contribution to Romantic poetry, mainly because of their differing styles when it came to balancing narrative, lyric and reflective content. However, Stephen Gill has shown that their thirty-year friendship was actually sympathetic on matters that connect the environment, a spirit of place and experiential

composition.<sup>7</sup> Gill makes his case with reference to four poems by Wordsworth, each of which concerns a river that Scott introduced him to as a literary subject. Those poems are 'Yarrow Unvisited' (1803), written after the poet and his sister Dorothy had met Scott in Melrose and Jedburgh, 'Yarrow Visited' (1814), 'Yarrow Revisited' (1835) and 'Musings Near Aquapendente' (1842), the latter three of which connect both poets with the river Yarrow as a muse. Looking back to Irving's anecdotes, this first of several comparisons that I shall make between Scott and Wordsworth established their shared contemplative association of solitariness with an entire human and non-human environment.

Farmland, forests, rivers and shorelines are Scottish environments where man-made changes can quickly be seen and where the impact on cultural practices is most rapidly felt, not least because of demographic alteration. By the late eighteenth century, urban drift had led to a depopulation of the Borders that Scott had personally witnessed. By way of environmental history, Scott's poetry and his historical fiction address shifts in the ecologies of these places that took place over many centuries. Species loss in flora and fauna is shown to occur alongside the reduction in human populations. In his personal life, Scott's interests in farming, forestry and fishing are further recorded in letters, essays, journals and reports. His childhood years were divided between the city and country. He lived for part of the year in Edinburgh and the rest of the time mainly stayed at his grandfather's farm, as mentioned above, which was located at the small village of Smailholm between Melrose and Kelso. During that time, he developed the deep love of the natural environment and culture of the Borders that led to his collecting of ballads for his first major publication, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802–1803).

*Walter Scott and the Greening of Scotland* enquires into ways in which the nineteenth-century environmental imagination can help our understanding of the twenty-first-century global crisis. It does this by investigating a problem-laden history (beginning with Scott and his historical imagination, and very much still with us) shaped by conflicts of interest between business-oriented economies, local communities and their traditions, and the land itself. Climate change and pollution are issues about which Scott showed concern; for example, his letters pay regular attention to shifts in weather patterns and their effects on plants, animals and birds. Contamination of the soil and water was another of his concerns, developing out of his activities in farming, arboriculture and hunting. Fossil fuel consumption and its effects emerge as an area of interest extending beyond initial concerns about financial investment. Scott was one of the first

*Introduction*

5

people to appreciate the desirability of finding cleaner ways of producing carbon-based energy. I investigate later in this introduction the part he played as Chairman of the Edinburgh Oil and Gas Company, particularly in its competition against the Edinburgh Coal Gas Company to secure the contract for lighting the city of Edinburgh.

Walter Scott claimed to have planted more than a million trees. He also wrote passionately against a future in which industrial forestry would see large monoculture plantations of non-native species replacing old growth woodlands. Two of his articles for the *Quarterly Review*, published late in his life in 1827 and 1828, critically examined economic definitions of ‘waste land’, influencing practice and policies in arboriculture across Britain. Another recollection of Washington Irving is that when the two men were walking together at Leith port in Edinburgh, Scott responded to seeing a huge, imported white pine log by talking about the tree’s life and ecological role in the forests of North America: the transatlantic lumber trade in which emigrant Scots, in effect, were exchanged for cargoes of timber was a catalyst for his environmental imagination. At that time, deforestation in North America was interfering with complex ecologies that had evolved over millennia. Clear-cuts were already initiating climate change. In Chapter 5, I discuss Scott’s interest on the one hand in the loss of people through emigration to North America and on the other to his concern over the importation (mostly from Canada, on returning ships) of non-native tree species to replace what had been lost over hundreds of years of deforestation in Scotland for the sake of both agriculture and pasturage.

Meanwhile, everyday people in Scott’s novels comment on the effects of a decline in the number of salmon in Scotland’s rivers, due to over-netting in estuaries. Fictional fisherwomen haggle over the pricing of common and rarer species (i.e. herring, haddock, lumpfish, John Dory and turbot). People lose their livelihoods. Some lose their lives. Modern breeds of cattle are compared with extinct species whose larger bones had been found preserved in peat marshes. Descriptions in Scott’s novels even contributed to breed standards for some types of working dog, as in the case of the ‘mustard (sandy/brown) and pepper (blue/ grey)’ Dandy Dinmont Terriers that feature in *Guy Mannering*.<sup>8</sup> Fruit trees and pasture for livestock are watered by streams that flow through sites of massacre, transferring minerals and organic compounds along the food chain. Wildflowers tenuously cling to existence at the edge of trails, near to the spot where, according to legend, the thirteenth-century Scottish poet Thomas of Erceldoune, known as the Rhymer, was taken on a

subterranean journey of discovery by an elf-woman. Stones accumulate deer hair, lichens and particles of soil that permeate their surface and reveal a still-unfolding history beyond the human lives memorialized in their inscriptions: the unchanging solidity of rock is brought into question by that organic process of transformation. These stories, sometimes reclaimed, were told, retold and elaborated by Scott.

Environmental justice, with the attention that it draws to the allocation of damaged or less productive land to the poorest and most endangered people, is an issue in Scott's writing and its afterlife. Authors born in Scotland, who during the nineteenth century travelled to make new lives in North America, show how Scott influenced their ways of thinking about New World ecologies and people. Environmentalist John Muir attributed his own interest in storytelling and literary landscapes to being raised on Walter Scott's poems and novels (he was born at Dunbar, near Edinburgh). In the thin mountain soils of California's High Sierra, in the moraine of glaciers, and in cultural practices he encountered among people in the western United States and Alaska, Muir recalled the Scotland about which Scott had written. Towards the close of the nineteenth century, Robert Louis Stevenson revisited Scott's Master of Ravenswood, who in *The Bride of Lammermoor* had died in quicksand along the Lothian coast, transplanting the cultural legacy of Scottish Romanticism into the frozen winter soil of upstate New York forests. In Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae*, an inscribed stone commemorates the burial place of émigré James Durie, the eponymous Master, whose death results from a failure of environmental and cultural understanding. The present book will trace these and many other developments that began with Scott's environmental imagination, analysing and interpreting their implications for literary and environmental history.

Rob Nixon's environmental justice and land ethics theory in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, arguing that the First World cannot easily see, let alone comprehend the effects of 'slow time' catastrophes lived by the world's poorest people in degraded environments, frames my enquiries into Scott's treatment of crises affecting rural communities, such as damage to soil structures, the depletion of resources and alterations to water supply. Nixon explores violence that 'occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all'. His insistence that attention be given to the 'calamitous repercussions' of gradual damage is helpful in understanding the impact of the human as well as the non-human environmental justice issues that arise

*Introduction*

7

in Scott's writing.<sup>9</sup> As an author and a sheriff, Scott was always interested in the ways in which matters of justice and legality were connected with storytelling and its representations of time. Most of the stories that arise in his books involve aggression in one form or another. Where periods of human conflict and acts of ecologically felt violence are concerned, his work was all published during three-and-a-half particularly turbulent decades. Those years included the major international wars of the Napoleonic period, the development of radical new farming technologies during what became known as the agricultural revolution, and the globally expansive, militarily backed, thrust of the British Empire. On their own and more so in combination, these contexts all involve an acceleration of the pace at which life was experienced. As a consequence, older lifestyles based around natural rhythms and longstanding conditions of the land became increasingly conceptualized as wasteful; of time, opportunity, land, resources and money. Associating slower, more traditional lifestyles with a past that could be remembered nostalgically and incorporated into a narrative of 'improvement' created an alternative environmental epistemology based in the laissez-faire economics proposed by Enlightenment political economists including Adam Smith. Land, rivers and coastal waters were understood as material resources with exploitable potential on the one hand, and as 'legacy' landscapes and seascapes in need of preservation because of their contribution to a marketable national character on the other.<sup>10</sup> In reality, these attitudes resulted in conflict because habitats and the ecosystems they support could not easily fit both models. Hugh MacDiarmid would later write in his poem *On a Raised Beach*, originally published in his 1934 collection *Stony Limits and Other Poems*, that 'impatience is a poor qualification for immortality'.<sup>11</sup>

The ballads in *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* and long narrative poems including *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* and *The Lady of the Lake* question the ethics of improvement through their dependence on a collective memory that is associated with specific components in local ecologies. Those local ecologies are frequently seen to be fragile, with tropes of memory giving rise to a literary activism that draws attention to losses resulting from choices in land management. A ballad from Scott's *Minstrelsy* such as 'The Flowers of the Forest', in which imagery of flora is both actual and a metonymic commemoration of war dead, shows how ecologically dependent elegiac and historical narratives can be. Timothy Morton has shown that, as a genre, elegy is overwhelmingly environmental, because its techniques depend upon echoes of grief that resound between the human mourner and a non-human world.<sup>12</sup> At the same



time, ecologies themselves tend to be elegiac because they so often bear witness to loss and decline in the natural world including the death of species. As Fiona Stafford points out, the Border ballads of the *Minstrelsy*, along with Scott's accompanying framework of introductory essays and notes, use the conventions of elegy to impress on readers that the object of lament has gone forever, and that life necessarily moves on.<sup>13</sup> Stafford's important study looks at the sociological function of the ballads for Scott as he mediated to readers the cultural history of the Borders. Where the non-human foil for mourning or nostalgia that is invoked by elegy has also disappeared, what is left is a more problematic space of absence in which literature continues repeating the cycle of grief. 'The Flowers of the Forest', which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, is an example especially because of the second part that Scott added to the original ballad. Scott's *The Antiquary*, *The Bride of Lammermoor*, *The Heart of Mid-Lothian* and *Redgauntlet* are novels that further address problems of conflict in the use and aesthetic values associated with farmed coastal environments, rivers, estuaries and the sea. His letters and journals show how concerns about the preservation of memory and the land, which inform his poetry and prose fiction, influenced his management practices on his own estate, as well as informing his criticism of the stewardship of other landowners. One other question that arises is whether Scott's experience as a landowner, and one who spent his last years living with insolvency, enabled him fully to understand the problems faced by Scotland's poorer inhabitants in their daily relationships with the non-human world.

### Land Ethics

Walter Scott has probably contributed more than any writer to perceptions of Scotland as a land of mountains, moorlands, heather, mists and water. But does his writing look beyond such a stereotypical terrain to demonstrate an agency arising not just from the human histories that form the basis for his plots, but also from the land itself? To what extent did he write about woodlands, rivers, soil and mountains as phenomena existing outside the control of, or manifesting resistance to, the interventions of modern society? Is there anything in his poetry and fiction that advocates or supports what we might call a land ethic? I refer here to something understood as 'a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence', specifically involving humankind's 'relation to the land', as first proposed by Aldo Leopold in the late 1940s.<sup>14</sup> The relevance of Leopold's land ethic, published 117 years after Scott's death,



*Introduction*

9

is its basis in something of primary importance to Scott: the necessary morality that informs the relationships of communities with the land and environment. For Leopold, a land ethic ‘enlarges the boundaries of community to include soils, waters, plants and animals, or collectively: the land’.<sup>15</sup> He proposes responsible management (not the exclusion of humans) in which respect and sympathy exist among people for everything that composes the ecology of an area.<sup>16</sup> Scott understood human relationships with the land in ways that valued it and its biotic communities, to use another of Leopold’s terms, beyond merely its potential to generate economic wealth. His writing makes the case time and again for a sympathetic and collectively responsible approach by people to place. Whether he evinces a philosophy of land relations that is willing to subordinate human interests that are mostly economically driven to the survival of vulnerable non-human elements is a more complex matter requiring further investigation.

As a plantsman, ecologist, antiquarian, lawyer and author, Scott mediated and drew attention to matters of environmental justice and land ethics, more than a century before Leopold’s ‘Land Ethic’ essay, which concludes *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There* (1949), established the case for that latter term. Leopold’s interest in a land ethic began during his years as a young adult after college while he was working as a ranger in the Apache and Carson National Forests in Eastern Arizona and New Mexico. I shall return to Leopold in more detail later in this introduction. But for now, it is relevant to observe that his early job as a ranger required him to eliminate as many wolves as possible in the interest of protecting deer for hunting. A conversation between two characters in Scott’s novel *Redgauntlet* (1824) begins by comparing the prolonged slow violence suffered by sheep as a result of their being raised as stock with the sudden spectacle of an attack on them by a wild predator such as a wolf:

‘Were a wolf’, he said, ‘to come even now upon yonder flocks, they would crowd for protection, doubtless, around the shepherd and his dogs; yet they are bitten and harassed daily by the one, shorn, and finally killed and eaten by the other’.<sup>17</sup>

The debate develops into a further consideration of animal rights and farming practice alongside the ethics of ‘sports, as they are called, which have the sufferings of animals for their end and object . . . making their protected agony a principle of delight and enjoyment’. The same character, Quaker fisheries entrepreneur Joshua Geddes, later comments on the corruption of animal nature by men in the cause of dogfighting: ‘men

arm their bull-dogs with spiked collars, and their game-cocks with steel spurs, to aid them in fight, so they corrupt, by education, the best and mildest natures, until fortitude and spirit become stubbornness and ferocity'. Returning to wolves, they probably became extinct in Scotland during the middle of the eighteenth century although the last officially recorded killing was in 1680, ironically during a period of intensive religious and political persecution that itself became known as the Killing Time, in which several of Scott's works are set.<sup>18</sup> Scott, who enjoyed mutton and was a keen hunter as well as a sheep farmer, expressed a sympathetic understanding for the quality of life of animals, birds and fish. That sympathy is explainable through David Hume's Scottish Enlightenment theory of human understanding. For Scott as for Hume the imagination of the sympathizer works through a process of personal experience, observation and associationism by which the passions transcend the barrier to knowledge that arises from otherness, inducing a sense of shared feeling that itself becomes a form of knowledge. Moreover, Scott's case for humankind's ethical awareness and moral understanding of its place within a region's and the earth's biosystems doesn't end with hunting and farming, but extends to the damage caused to river and estuarine environments by the exploitation of hydrological resources including commercial overfishing. These issues are explored in greater detail in the chapters that follow. In summary, this book is interested in showing how Scott used poetry and prose to treat conflicts of interest affecting entire ecosystems.

Other questions arise: was Scott mostly concerned to encourage the idea of a Romantic, largely pastoral but otherwise wild Scotland, nostalgic for a time when a mainly rural society had closer ties to the land than to cities, such as would support the maintenance of a strong local as well as national communal identity? Does his representation of environmental issues including concerns about state and commercially motivated deforestation, planting policies, changes in land use and his own intervention to preserve stocks of fish in rivers, provide any effective counterpoint to identity politics that are based in an urban-centred, capital-driven political economy? These are pertinent questions for readers in the twenty-first century, when it is difficult to imagine a Scotland unaffected by climate change, acid rain, habitat and species loss, and without debates about how to balance an economy based upon exploitable resources (oil and gas, in particular) with the demands for access made by the tourist industry and the lobby for conservation. They are also questions that draw attention to the scale and impact of Scott's contribution to the environmental