‘TOO FRIVOLOUS TO INTEREST THE PUBLIC’?

Walter Scott, Richard Polwhele, and Archipelagic Correspondence

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[ABSTRACT]

The Cornish writer Richard Polwhele and Sir Walter Scott corresponded on matters literary and social for a period of 25 years at the start of the nineteenth century without ever meeting. This article examines the published traces of this epistolary acquaintance and establishes what it might tell us about the lines of connection and dissemination it was possible to establish in Romantic Britain between what might otherwise be thought of as outlying areas of the nation. The article contributes to a number of recent archipelagic attempts to better understand the distributed or devolved nature of print culture within the nations and regions of Britain, in this case through a focus on the interconnections between them.

KEYWORDS *Richard Polwhele, Walter Scott, Poetry, Regionalism, Letter Correspondence.*

In late August 1825, the Cornish clergyman, poet, antiquarian, and controversialist Richard Polwhele wrote to Sir Walter Scott asking for permission to print a selection of the letters he had received from Scott. The two men had never met in person, but had continued correspondence on matters antiquarian, literary and, almost certainly, personal, over a period of nearly 25 years. On 6 October, Scott wrote back granting permission, though he thought ‘the greater part of them are too frivolous to interest the public.’[1] A number of letters appeared in volume two of Polwhele’s *Traditions and Recollections: Domestic, Clerical, and Literary* of 1826, and a slightly larger selection dedicated to John Gibson Lockhart and glorying under the not insubstantial title of *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott addressed to the Rev R Polwhele; D Gilbert Esq; Francis Douce, Esq, &c., &c. Accompanied by an Autobiographical Memoir of Lieut. General Sir Hussey Vivian* was eventually published in 1832 in London by Polwhele’s long-time publisher John Nichols and Son. It is not clear from the published correspondence whether this larger collection was what Polwhele had in mind when he wrote to Scott in the first place. Of the 28 letters published, 20 are to Polwhele, one is to Gilbert concerning Polwhele, two are to Douce on non-Polwhele matters. One suspects that the letters that do not have direct connection to Polwhele owe their presence to the assumption that, in the words of Nichols’s advertisement ‘nothing that has ever proceeded from the pen of Walter Scott will be unacceptable to the public.’[2] The volume also contains

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some 200 'introductory lines' by Polwhele, the significant proportion of which are from one of his own letters to Scott. Despite Nichols's confidence, it has to be said that the intervening 181 years have done little to unsettle Scott's initial prediction, and this testament to a quarter of a century's epistolary friendship lies largely forgotten and unread.

This essay aims to redress this neglect (in scholarly terms at least) by arguing that this slim 1832 volume of letters offers an interesting contribution to an increasingly important intersection between two of the recent ways in which critics have questioned the 'Romantic ideology': namely archipelagic understandings of Romantic literary culture, and our increasing sense of the importance of sociability, collaboration and conversation to Romantic culture. As I have argued elsewhere,[3] Polwhele is a figure who should benefit from what Nicholas Roe terms the current 'sharper awareness of the decentred energies of Romantic culture'; the belief that 'regionalism . . . is a key critical dynamic of Romantic studies now' and the conclusion that 'canonical marginality and regional cultures are . . . urgently in need of reassessment within England.'[4] That said, the ways in which such rehabilitation is conducted needs careful attention if it is not to fall victim to the temptations of a naïve assertion in the face of an unfeeling critical establishment. As Murray Pittock puts it, 'the self-congratulation of elements in a local elite are identified as provincial braggadocio by the metropolitan eye, which as a result sees no reason to alter its own perspectives', the upshot of which is 'the prevalence of caricature born either of an exaggerated sense of self-worth or an ignorant desire to dismiss.'[5]

It is in the context of this methodological uncertainty that recent understandings of Romanticism as a phenomenon that 'continued to define itself in terms of conversation' can help to formulate a more sensitive model of attention to regional literatures.[6] An understanding of the neglected regional literary figures of British Romanticism in terms of their interconnections and relationships with others is not without drawbacks. It can lead to a crude reductionism that asserts that the writer discussed is only of value because of a relationship with a previously recognised 'great' (an equation that only reinforces the status quo), and it is vulnerable to the accusation that it is itself a broadly Addisonian (or Johnsonian) version of eighteenth-century culture, and therefore inherently Anglo-cum-metrocentric. Yet, it remains the case that the most satisfying attempts to characterise a version of the past that 'denotes the historiography of no single nation but of a problematic and uncompleted experiment in the creation and interaction of several nations' focus, if only metaphorically, on dialogue and exchange in ways that are more fruitful than shrill assertions of individual worth.[7] In this way, Murray Pittock speaks of the recovery of the 'discarded dialogues of Romanticism in these isles',[8] while Alan Rawes and Gerard Carruthers refer to the 'negotiated dialogues where complicated questions of aesthetics, cultural politics, and nation are asked, and answered in equally complex fashion.'[9] Equally, John Kerrigan characterises archipelagic criticism as a process of 'stripp[ing] away modern Anglo-Centric and Victorian imperial paradigms to recover the long, *braided*

histories played out across the British-Irish archipelago'.[10] The interest in the sociable and archipelagic comes together in John Brewer's claim that provincial intellectuals saw 'themselves not as distant extensions, much less poor imitations, of metropolitan culture, but as integral and important parts of a national, even international, culture',[11] or in Peter Clark's notion of a particularly 'polycentric' British Enlightenment.[12] David Chandler has found evidence for both of these claims in his 'empirical study of the actual mechanisms and patterns of literary production on the ground' in Norwich. In Chandler's work, Norwich emerges as part of the 'increasingly intricate and decentralised national network of literary production' in late eighteenth-century Britain.'[13] That said, relatively little of this work has been explicitly archipelagic in considering the interconnection of these regional nodes of activity, their part of a wider network of non-metropolitan print culture. For example, Chandler focuses on the print culture of Norwich rather than the connections between Norwich and other provincial cities, and Norbert Schürer's account of Jane Cave Winscom's provincial literary career as one conducted entirely separately from the publishing world of London and furthered through engagement with the 'local community wherever she happened to be living' does not consider the links between those communities.[14] In other words the present essay adds to our understanding of the importance of intra-regional provincial print culture through its focus on interconnections between a writer based in Cornwall and Scottish print culture rather than considering Cornish print culture in isolation.

Central to such an effort must be a consideration of why we might find documents such as this of value and interest, of what it may or may not be possible to say about the volume, and for what it might be significant. The subject of the volume of letters is ostensibly Scott – in the literal sense that they are his letters – yet, from a revisionist point of view, it is what they tell us about Polwhele, or at least the relationship between Scott and Polwhele, which is of central concern. Indeed this is barely revisionist given the description in the advertisement of the publication as 'a memorial to the intercourse enjoyed with Sir Walter Scott by the Rev Richard Polwhele', a characterisation that immediately shifts a significant proportion of the emphasis of the volume away from Scott to Polwhele himself. At the same time, however, the point of the exercise is not the hitching of Polwhele's star to Scott's bandwagon in order backhandedly and simplistically to establish the importance of the former. Something like this may have been the equation in Polwhele's mind of course as he wrote to his friend, however paradoxical an effort at self-assertion that might be, given that it comes at the cost of Polwhele rendering himself invisible. But leaving aside the (lack of) credibility of any such a claim, such a simplistic conclusion would run counter to the spirit of a revisionism that seeks a more subtle way of interrogating literary general knowledge than claiming value via a hitherto underemphasised relationship or influence. In other words, the claims that can be responsibly made about this volume, and the relationship to which it testifies, are limited and specific; but it is more, not less, interesting as a consequence.

Before moving on to the letters themselves, it is worth establishing the relative position of the two men at the outset of their correspondence in September 1803. In obvious ways, Scott needs little introduction, though it should be remembered this is not the 'Wizard of the North', but a man at the outset of a literary career, the success of which was far from certain. He had started *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* in 1802, but it would not be published until 1805. He could count himself pleased with the success of his first published effort *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, the third volume of which had appeared in May 1803, even if Ina Ferris has recently noted that *The Monthly Review* regarded the *Minstrelsy* as a somewhat pretentious effort, the type 'produced by provincial gentlemen as what we would call vanity publishing'.[15] If Scott was at the beginning of his literary career, then Polwhele was approaching the not inconsiderable high-water mark in his reputation as a poet, antiquarian and staunch defender of Church and King. By 1803, he was something of a darling of the literary Right, something that would have only increased his allure for Scott.

Born just outside Truro in 1760, Polwhele died on the same family estate in 1838. In between times, he was a clergyman, poet, polemical journalist and reviewer, translator, satirist, enthusiastic club man, memoirist, antiquarian, and county historian. To the literary historian, Polwhele is known today for one thing, *The Unsex'd Females* (1798), a rabidly anti-Jacobin attack on radical female authorship. That said, his career and interests stretched far beyond this invective. His poetic career began precociously under the encouragement of Cornelius Cardew, the headmaster of Truro Grammar School and John 'Peter Pindar' Wolcot, family friend and mentor to Polwhele. His first volume, *The Fate of Lewellyn* (1778) 'by a young gentleman of Truro School' was published (and critically panned) the year he started at Oxford, though his first poem, in the unlikely shape of a birthday Ode in honour of the republican historian Catherine Macaulay, had been published with five others in 1777. Polwhele left Christ Church Oxford without a degree in 1782 and proceeded to spend much of the 1780s as a curate at Kenton on the Exe estuary, where he socialised amongst the county set and local literati, what General John Graves Simcoe referred to as 'the choice spirits of the West'.[16] Some, such as Richard Hole, author of *Arthur or the North Enchantment* (1789), shared his interest in creating a mythic past for the South West; others, such as his near-neighbour John Swete, shared his passion for antiquarianism; others still, such as the doctor Hugh Downman, shared the interest in didactic poetry that was evidenced in his *The Art of Eloquence* (1785). During this time, Polwhele completed one of his most enduring works – his translation of *The Idylls, Epigrams, and Fragments of Theocritus, Bion, and Moschus, with the Elegies of Tyrtaeus* (1786) – and began collecting materials for his first county history. He also drew together the works of the poets of the region in a two volume *Poems, Chiefly by Gentlemen of Devonshire and Cornwall* (1792). He was, furthermore a founder member of the Exeter Society of Gentlemen, which met from 1792 and produced a volume of Essays in 1796. If there was such a thing as a Devon or Exeter 'Enlightenment', commit-

ted to the ideals of polite and sociable learning, then the activities of Polwhele and his friends were it.

Polwhele's sustained interest in the landscape and history of Devon and Cornwall manifested itself in various ways over a career of nearly 60 years. The heroic romance and tragedy of his youth (much influenced by Macpherson's *Ossian*) continued into his maturity in poems such as *Fair Isabel of Cotehele* (1815), a six-volume heroic romance. But in poetry it also took more internalised forms, in *Pictures from Nature in 19 Sonnets* (1786) and in such poems as *The Influence of Local Attachment* (written 1790, published in 1796), and his 'Ode on the River Colly' (1792). The *Influence of Local Attachment* was perhaps Polwhele's most significant poetic work. It enjoyed a high enough profile for the *Monthly Review* to go to the trouble of accusing it of plagiarising Samuel Rogers' *Pleasures of Memory* (something strenuously denied by Polwhele) and was, as we shall see, central to Scott's admiration for Polwhele. More recently David Hill Radcliffe has cited it as a key part of the Spenserian tradition that evolved through the late eighteenth century.[17] Away from poetry, *The Historical Views of Devonshire* (1793), *History of Devonshire* (1793–1806) and, in particular, his *History of Cornwall* (1803–1807; 7 vols 1816) are all key documents in the historiography of the region. The first two are rather uneven and were considered somewhat disappointing at the time, but posterity has been kinder: the most wide-ranging survey of writing about the area describes his collective efforts 'magnificent studies' that 'scarcely have an equal' for their time.[18]

This survey started by alluding to Polwhele's political writings, and it is important to note that his Tory credentials went beyond *The Unsex'd Females*, particularly in matters of doctrine. He attacked, amongst other things, Methodism (both published sermons and pamphlets), and was a stalwart contributor to the loyalist press, especially the *British Critic* and *Anti-Jacobin Review*.[19] He also had what today might be called 'presence in the field', as his work was widely reviewed and recommended by like-minded individuals. Number 33 of John Watkins' *The Peeper: A Collection of Essays, Moral, Biographical and Literary*, entitled 'On the Social Relation and Domestic Attachment' ends by quoting Polwhele's *Influence of Local Attachment* and its belief in the 'usefulness [of local attachment] to our families, in the exercise of domestic virtues, and, on a wider scale, to our country'.[20] Indeed, it goes so far as to recommend the purchase of a copy by all readers. *Local Attachment* is not an explicitly political poem, though in its promotion of a sentimental attachment to home, family, and native scene it elucidates a conservative patriotic discourse most famously developed by Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* with its emphasis on the 'little platoon' as 'the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country and to mankind'.[21] Similarly Polwhele's friend, the controversialist and antiquarian John Whitaker, devoted a significant number of his reviews for the vehemently anti-Jacobin *British Critic* (for which he was a major contributor) to various of Polwhele's publications, which must have further established them within the conservative literary

establishment.[22] His connection with the Devonian Grandee Sir George Yonge led to the *History of Devonshire* being dedicated to King George III, and subscribers to his *Poems Chiefly by Gentlemen* included Prime Minister William Pitt, Pitt's brother Chatham and Pitt's successor as Prime Minister William Grenville (the latter being an old Christ Church acquaintance of Polwhele). Though it should be noted that, in a rather typically Polwhelean moment, one of the reasons this is known is the letter from Polwhele to John Nichols on 15 December 1794, in which Polwhele complains about the famous subscribers who have yet to pay up.[23]

One further aspect of Polwhele's career is worth touching upon, as it provides the most immediate context for the volume of Scott's letters under discussion here. During the last fifteen years of his life, Polwhele devoted most of his energies to his memoirs, which appeared variously as *Traditions and Recollections: Domestic, Clerical and Literary* (1826), *Biographical Sketches of Cornwall* (1831) and *Reminiscences in Prose and Verse* (1836). While these can be rather repetitive and formless, and are not as well known or as comprehensive as his friend John Nichols's *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century* (1812–1815), they do represent an invaluable and much-cited source of information about literary, publishing and political networks and activities during the period. During this phase in his career, Polwhele ostensibly records the correspondence he has enjoyed from a range of famous and not so famous figures in order to offer an insight into these individuals. He is, of course, also demonstrating how well connected a national literary figure he had been in ways that are themselves revealing of the literary, biographical and wider cultural values and assumptions of the day. In these works (as in the Scott volume), what is important about this activity is less the degree to which Polwhele succeeds in establishing his own reputation, and more the manner in which he stages the attempt.

Such questions of staging are important in the Scott volume because it seems likely that Polwhele was selective in choosing the letters of Scott's in his possession that he published (unusually so for a man whose editorial instincts veered to antiquarian comprehensiveness). He does not reproduce more than three letters from any one year, and there is a period of some nine years between letters at one point. This may, of course, merely prove how desultory their correspondence was, but a comparison with the *Millgate Union Catalogue of Walter Scott Correspondence* is instructive. It only lists 19 letters to Polwhele by Scott, even though Polwhele published 20. The discrepancy is probably on account of Scott's first letter going via a third party, but the differences do not end there. Within his 20 Polwhele publishes three letters that are not in the *Catalogue*, while the *Catalogue* indexes three letters by Scott to Polwhele that Polwhele did not chose to reproduce. In some ways the first of these facts is the most intriguing, since it suggests a body of letters available to Polwhele not currently known to scholarship (and which may subsequently have been lost). The catalogue also records 24 letters by Polwhele to Scott, a number of which, when compared with the pattern of known letters from Scott, have no obvious reply. This is particularly notable in the years between 1816 and 1820 when it appears that Polwhele was writing to Scott on

something approaching a regular basis – certainly regularly enough to have suggested he was getting at least some sort of reply.

There is some internal if similarly circumstantial evidence to the existence of these missing letters. On 10 July 1814, for example, Scott refers to a letter he is about to send offering Polwhele advice on a manuscript (probably *Fair Isabel of Cotehele*). This letter is not reproduced (and is not indexed in the *Catalogue*, which contains nothing between 10 July 1814 and a letter of September 1814 also reprinted by Polwhele). Perhaps most strikingly, there are (as we shall see) occasions where Scott demonstrates an awareness of Polwhele's circumstances that hints at a level of intimacy that must have been established and maintained by more than the subject matter represented by the published letters. Of course, the reader only ever witnesses one side of this conversation, and it is impossible to know what exactly Scott is responding to. But the matter-of-factness with which he mentions things in passing (often things unconnected with the immediate context of the letter) does suggest other communication and knowledge, probably of a personal nature. In isolation, each of these circumstances can be explained away in a number of different ways. But taken together, they convey the impression of a more expansive relationship of which the reader is witnessing only some edited highlights. In any case, it is important to be clear about what is at stake and what is not at stake in understanding this body of letters as a sample. The point is not (as it would be if this was a reductive exercise in establishing Polwhele's importance purely on the basis of his relationship with Scott) to explain away an inconveniently slender body of evidence as merely a selection from a more substantial body of work vouching a more substantial relationship. Nor is it primarily about the squirrelling out of undiscovered facts or supposing lost caches of letters (though the idea of a box of letters from Scott sitting in the attic of a rectory in Cornwall, undiscovered to this day, is a rather appealing one). Rather, seeing the volume as a selection allows for consideration of the ways in which Polwhele chooses to stage their correspondence (and the network of literary exchange to which it testifies), how he wishes to represent it and what, of course, might slip through about which Polwhele is himself unconscious. With this in mind, in the rest of this essay I am going to discuss the different types of letters the reader is offered as a means of knowing this friendship and the significance for a more substantial understanding of literary culture across the British archipelago.

At the outset of their friendship their correspondence is scholarly in nature, a part of, in Adam Fox's words, the 'collaborative and communal dimension' of eighteenth-century antiquarianism.[24] In fact, Scott and Polwhele's acquaintance came about by chance, via a third party, and as a result of both men's antiquarian efforts and reputations. In the summer of 1803, Scott met two Cornishmen lodging in the Tweedside village of Clovenford. One of the Cornishmen, Clement Carlyon, by coincidence shared a surname with a Cornish place name in *Sir Tristram*, the text of which metrical romance Scott was at that time preparing for the press, and a manuscript of which, according to Carlyon, Scott was able to

produce from his pocket. Scott wanted to know whether there was still a Cornish port named Carlyon, and, more generally, what Carlyon thought of the text. Carlyon confessed his ignorance on matters Cornish, but suggested that Polwhele might be approached, specifically because Polwhele was at that time engaged on matters Arthurian by way of a supplement to chapter 11 of the second volume of the *History of Cornwall.*[25]

This story fits with what is known about the genesis of *Sir Tristram*. It has been established that Scott started editing and preparing notes for the edition in early 1801, and by October 1802 the edition was set in type, though it would not be available to the public until September 1804. The delay was because, according to John Sutherland, Scott was 'nervous about his scholarship' and eager to 'reassure himself and convert his antiquarian friends to his thesis' about the provenance of the poems (in vain as it turned out).[26] So, it is more than possible that Scott had a fair copy of the text with him in September 1803, and this eagerness to reach out to scholars who may help corroborate his notes is also consistent with Sutherland's view of the process of bringing *Sir Tristram* to print. Furthermore, Scott did write to Polwhele, via Carlyon, on 1 September 1803. Polwhele apparently did not reply until 16 January 1804, and Scott sent his first letter in person less than two weeks later, on 27 January. This is perhaps indicative of who was the more eager of the two at this moment in time. On 27 Scott gives further details of the poem, and answered one particular point in Thomas Malory's version of the Tristram legend that seemed to have outraged Polwhele, namely the alleged cowardice of the Cornish. Scott reassures him that there is not the 'least allusion' to what he terms the 'heresy' of Cornish cowardice in the 'ancient poems'.[27] The *Morte d'Arthur*, says Scott, has 'no authority whatever, being merely the shadow of a shade, an awkward abridgement of prose romances'.[28] Scott moves his letter to a close with the promise to answer any other questions Polwhele may have. He also poses some more of his own as evidence of Cornish traditions and the places associated with Tristram. Finally, Scott compliments Polwhele by suggesting that he is a man 'to whose literary and poetical fame our northern capital is no stranger'.[29] So began the correspondence that would last, on and off, for a quarter of a century. In many ways it conforms to Rosemary Sweet's description of the content and function of exchanges between such correspondents: the 'free exchange of artefacts, manuscripts, and books, the performance of services (such as making transcriptions, identifying references) and the opportunity to exercise patronage by which the recipient was assisted, and the credit and reputation of the patron was enhanced.'[30] But where Polwhele and Scott's relationship complicates this model is in the dynamic nature of the power relations between the two men. In 1803, one could make a relatively strong case for saying Polwhele was performing the role of patron (and indeed being constructed in the role by Scott). It would not remain that way for long. It also differs from Sweet's description in the way in which it broadens itself beyond the strictly antiquarian and into other areas, in particular the workings of the book trade.

In fact, the letters Polwhele chooses to print are almost entirely to do with the business of literature. At the simplest level, the two men swapped books. Polwhele sends Scott of his poetic and historical works, with which Scott (in the letters reproduced by Polwhele) announces himself well pleased. Indeed Scott seemed genuinely to have admired Polwhele's poetry, and he would publically acknowledge the debt owed to Polwhele's verse by one of the most famous passages of his own, the opening of the sixth canto of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*:

> Breathes there a man, with soul so dead,
> Who never to himself hath said,
> This is my own—my native land?
> Whose heart hath ne'er within him burned
> As home his footsteps he hath turned
> From wandering on a foreign strand[31]

Scott was happy to admit that this was inspired by the opening lines of the first book of *The Influence of Local Attachment*:

> Breathes there a spirit in this ample orb
> That owes affection for no fav'rite clime;
> Such as the sordid passions ne'er absorb,
> Glowing in gen'rous hearts, unchill'd by time
> Is it – ye sophists! – a venial crime
> To damp the love of home with scornful mirth?
> Though, led by scientific views sublime,
> Ye range, with various search, the realms of earth, —
> Seeks no returning sigh the region of your birth?[32]

At the same time, many of Scott's letters to Polwhele are in fact notes accompanying books he is sending his Cornish friend. For example, in July 1811, this was one of 50 privately printed copies of an edition of his *Don Roderick*. On 11 October 1810, Scott writes enclosing a set of his three-volume edition of Anna Seward's poems (Seward, 'the Swan of Lichfield', had died in March 1809). Looked at from the point of view of the negotiation and maintenance of friendship based on mutual respect and admiration, it is worth noting that this edition contained Seward's 'Sonnet to the Rev. Richard Polwhele on his poem *The Influence of Local Attachment*':

> POLWHELE, whose genius, in the colours clear
> Of poesy and philosophic art,
> Traces the sweetest impulse of the heart,
> Scorn, for thy Muse, the envy-sharpen'd spear,
> In darkness thrown, when shielded by desert

She seeks the lyric fane. To virtue dear
Thy verse esteeming, feeling minds impart
Their vital smile, their consecrating tear.
Fancy and judgment view with gracious eyes
Its kindred tints, that paint the silent power
Of local objects, deeds of high emprize
To prompt; while their delightful spells restore
The precious vanish'd days of former joys,
By Love, or Fame, enwreath'd with many a flower.[33]

Sweet has suggested that the gift economy at the heart of relationships such as this offered both parties 'affirmation of [their] own taste', since, 'by flattering the learning and discernment of his correspondent', a writer was 'indirectly laying claim to such approbation for himself'.[34] This is happening to a rather head-spinning (indeed consequentially potentially nauseating) degree here, as Scott gifts Polwhele something he has himself produced, but which includes a poem by a third party in praise of Polwhele.

At a time when books remained, relatively speaking, expensive, the maintenance of acquaintance through the gifting of one's books made other statements about the value one might ascribe to the relationship and indeed one's economic and social status. It seems to have been a feature of other of Polwhele's friendships. William Bligh (of the mutiny fame) was one such acquaintance.[35] They met when Bligh was arrested and hauled before Polwhele (in his capacity as Justice of the Peace) for snooping around Cornish beaches. Bligh was, in fact, surveying on behalf of the Admiralty, probably in 1798. After this conspicuously inauspicious start the men became friends (Bligh was of Cornish extraction and Polwhele's eldest son was in the Navy). It is known that Bligh gifted Polwhele three of his own books, and de Montluzin speculates that this is likely to have been reciprocated.[36] Certainly, Polwhele's correspondence with his friend and bookseller John Nichols provides evidence of the store he set by such things. On 18 April 1792, Polwhele wrote to Nichols with nine copies of the two-volume set of *Poems by Gentlemen of Devonshire and Cornwall*, one for Nichols and eight for a list of friends, including Anna Seward, William Hayley, William Cowper, Erasmus Darwin.[37] Polwhele's *Traditions* also dutifully records the letters of thanks and congratulation he received in response from these individuals. On other occasions, he is asking for copies of works of his that Nichols is selling to be sent to correspondents as far afield as Bishop Auckland and Lincoln.[38]

Of course, this exchange of material had an implicit and at times explicit purpose beyond friendship gift-exchange and what Sweet terms the 'reciprocity of obligation'.[39] The men were swapping books so the other could review them. Thus, in 1808, Polwhele asks Scott to review his 1796 *Influence of Local Attachment* (which would reach its fourth edition by 1810) in the *Quarterly Review*. Polwhele also wanted Scott to put in a good word for him as a potential contributor with the editor William Gifford, both of which Scott says he is happy to attempt (and

he was still asking Gifford about reviewing *Influence* two years later). Equally, we know from Scott's letter of acknowledgement that in 1815 Polwhele sends Scott two copies of *Fair Isabel of Cotehele*, one for Scott himself, and one for Francis Jeffrey. Scott reassures his friend 'that I will not fail to put [it] into [his] hands . . . and request him to read it with attention.'[40] Nor, it should be said, was this all one-way traffic. Scott tells Polwhele he is going to send him something he calls in a letter of 1810 'Northern Antiquities' and suggests that Polwhele reviews it in the *Quarterly*. This book was not his edition of Thomas Percy's 1770 translation of Paul Henri Mallet's *Northern Antiquities*, but something that appeared some four years later than this letter as *Illustrations of Northern Antiquities from the earlier Teutonic and Scandinavian Romances* (1814). Such goings-on were an essential part of the way in which the wheels of the book reviewing business were oiled, given that review copies were not routinely issued by publishers.[41]

In 1810, the book that was eventually published as *Illustrations of Northern Antiquities* was to be the first volume of a projected series. On two occasions, in October and December of that year, Scott writes to ask Polwhele to contribute. As Scott puts it in his second letter, 'if you have any thing lying by you which you would entrust to this motley caravan, we will be much honoured.'[42] Such comments gloss Scott's efforts to get Polwhele's work published in Edinburgh. From the perspective of the twenty-first century, it would be easy to assume that this dimension to their friendship came from (the now obscure) Polwhele's desire to be published. Yet, this would be to overlook the fact that Polwhele had no difficulty in finding booksellers (including major ones) willing to publish his material in London, Bath, Exeter, or in Cornwall itself. Indeed, the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* suggests that Polwhele's reputation has suffered as a result of his 'fatal fluency of composition', implying that had Polwhele found it harder to find his way into print his standing as a poet might be higher.[43] That is as may be, but what is clear is that the establishment of an Edinburgh outlet was not merely a question of expediency on Polwhele's part, and, at least, initially was probably as much to do with Scott's needs as those of Polwhele. The letters tell the stories of two particular poems that Polwhele attempted to get published in Edinburgh, with mixed success.

In early 1812, Polwhele sent Scott with the manuscript of his poem *The Deserted Village-School* to see if Scott could find an Edinburgh publisher. This was a long politically-motivated parody in forty-two Spenserian stanzas of Oliver Goldsmith and William Shenstone, taking as its subject a then-current controversy about the most effective form of education in teaching useful skills for the lower classes. The specific details of the controversy (between the supporters of two similar but subtly different methods of education associated with Joseph Lancaster and Andrew Bell) need not detain this essay. Suffice it to say Polwhele takes the characteristically contrary – reactionary – approach of disagreeing with both factions on the grounds that both tend towards the breaking of local and domestic attachment. Scott wrote to Polwhele on 29 February 1812 telling him that even though he 'liked the poetry very much, and much of the sentiment

also', he could not see the bookseller Ballantyne publishing this. According to Scott, all of Edinburgh had taken one side or the other in this debate and 'no one will care to bring forth a poem that laughs at both.'[44] Scott fears that 'suspicion of authorship would probably attach' to himself, and continues that he will 'not urge' Ballantyne to publish. Scott reports that he will be in Edinburgh within the week, will get a definitive answer to convey along with, he assumes, the unwanted manuscript, back to Cornwall. But despite Scott's prediction, and as Polwhele's matter-of-fact note on the letter relates, Ballantyne did in fact publish the *Deserted Village-School* that spring. If this attempt ended in success (albeit against Scott's better judgement), less happy was the fate awaiting Polwhele's completion of Beattie's *The Minstrel; or, The Progress of Genius* (1771/2), in Edinburgh at least. In December 1811, Scott reports that the Ballantynes 'will esteem themselves happy and proud to publish any thing of yours', and that their slight hesitation prompted by the fact that it is a continuation of a well known poem has been overcome by Scott's suggestion of a title page which should not advertise the poem as a continuation, with such declarations being 'reserved for the preface or introduction'.[45]

Whatever might be made of this rather sharp practice, it is certainly evidence of Scott's engagement with, and investment in, the project of publishing Polwhele. Unfortunately for Polwhele, however, the financial hardships in the publishing world (and beyond) of 1812 doomed the poem with Ballantynes, though it was eventually published by the well-known London firm of Rivington in 1814. Moreover it has been identified by David Hill Radcliffe as one of the more significant attempts made to continue the poem around this time.[46] In breaking the news to Polwhele, Scott was adamant that this retrenchment of the business was the sole reason for their last minute refusal since 'independent of the merit of the performance itself, your name alone would have been sufficient to recommend any thing to a publisher in Scotland.'[47] By the same token, the following year, Scott was still encouraging Polwhele that 'assuredly I will have the greatest pleasure in reading anything of yours, and recommending it to the booksellers.'[48]

Scott's would-be patronage of Polwhele went beyond finding a home for his finished manuscripts. In 1814, at the beginning of a period during which, according to Catherine Jones, Scott was planning to write a history of Scotland, they discussed the possibility of Polwhele undertaking some such venture (at Polwhele's suggestion, it appears).[49] Scott is confident that he will be able to provide Polwhele with the necessary contacts and introductions to access the archives he needs in Edinburgh, but the letter (dated 3 April 1814) ends on a bittersweet note:

> but I fear that without a residence of many months in this place, very little could be done; and I should rejoice to think this were possible for you, as I should then have the pleasure to improve our epistolary into personal acquaintance. But I doubt whether your other avocations will permit your making so great a sacrifice to your literary pursuits.[50]

Scott's references to the burdens of Polwhele's clerical and domestic duties in West Cornwall make this a poignant moment, all the more so because Polwhele himself very rarely otherwise makes mention of such things anywhere in his work. Yet, he must have discussed them with his Scottish friend. It is perhaps needless to say that there is no evidence that Polwhele did ever go to Edinburgh.

Polwhele's interest in preserving details surrounding mechanisms and networks of patronage, publication and dissemination is notable. It can in part be explained by antiquarian punctiliousness (and an antiquarian overestimation of just how fascinating such minutiae might be), but it is also the case that it seems to have run deep in Polwhele's sense of himself as a literary figure of some importance, a player within a national print culture. It is equally strong in the series of memoirs that provide the most immediate context for the Scott volume. It is possible to read, for example, of Polwhele's early relationship with the agricultural reformer and keen sponsor of young literary talent Edmund Rack (1735?–1787). Rack was an agricultural reformer (the founding secretary of what is now the Bath and West of England Agricultural Society) and man of letters (he was also the founding secretary of the Bath Philosophical Society). Rack was part of the Macaulay circle, of which Polwhele became part in 1777, and a great encourager of literary talent (he even published his *Mentor's Letters to Youth* in 1777). Rack was also a source of contacts and outlets for publications through the late 1770s and early 1780s while Polwhele was at Oxford. Evidence for their relationship is preserved in their published correspondence. On 19 November 1778, Rack writes reporting a fatal duel in Bath that has the town ablaze with gossip:

> I therefore wish thee immediately to write an elegy on the transaction and send me by the coach; I will have it printed directly, and doubt not its having a rapid sale. The city is struck with a kind of horror. Call it the Duellists, the Fatal Duel, or any better name.[51]

Other letters show evidence of Rack editing Polwhele's poetry, but also of him passing it on to others, and feeding back their revisions and comments to Polwhele. Similarly, Polwhele reproduces his correspondence from a slightly later date over his *History of Devon* with Sir George Yonge, MP for Honiton in Devon, sometime colonial governor (and secretary of state for war under Pitt until 1794). Yonge provided introductions, manuscripts, warnings, advice and indeed financial assistance. His role encompassed leading the negotiations that secured the *History* a dedication to George III and more mundane tasks such as taking notes in the British Library on Polwhele's behalf and sending them down to Cornwall. Polwhele was so pleased with Yonge's help, since it stood in marked contrast to the obstructiveness of some of the other Devonian gentry during the course of a rather fraught research process, be-devilled by local shenanigans. As a consequence of this, he wrote a sonnet on the subject in 1791. Polwhele rarely sold himself and his activities short, but even by his own high standards, this poem came to a somewhat startlingly Miltonic conclusion:

Whilst Yonge still prompts me to enlarge my views,
And bids me sore with no ignoble flight;
. . .
Shall not the *Spirit of Research* proceed,
And, spurning *Envy*, grasp the historic meed?[52]

This interest in the backstory to publications shades in its tone – if not its intention – into a further preoccupation: gossip of a broadly literary nature (though it should be said that the scandal of Catherine Macaulay's marriage and much Exeter and Truro-related personal gossip do surface in his memoirs). The fact of Scott's gift of a set of his edition of Seward's poems was noted above, but his accompanying letter included the trade gossip that Constable intends publishing her letters in full. Scott goes on to other matters, but it is clear from the note Polwhele attaches to the letter that it is this, and the occasion it affords for an anecdote, that interests him:

I have read Miss Seward's Letters with great satisfaction. With her scenes in general I am but little acquainted: but I am well acquainted with many of her characters.

He goes on to relate a personal anecdote about poets Hannah More and Ann Yearsley, and ends the note with a confession. Seward, while complimentary about the *Devon and Cornwall* volume as a whole, had expressed her disapproval of a travesty of Shenstone it contained, ostensibly the work of one Major Edward Drewe, a cashiered infantry officer, one-time minor *cause celebré* (on account of his court martial) and drinking friend of Polwhele's: 'had I told Miss Seward', confesses the latter, 'that the ridicule which has thus raised her indignation, was started and pursued by the Major and myself, over a bottle of claret, my name would never, perhaps, have occurred in the list of her honoured friends.'[53]

Again Polwhele is here evoking a world of literary friendship and production consistent in method and content with that conjured by his *Traditions and Recollections*, for example in a long letter dating from 1782 relating his doings at Oxford. He recalls bumping into Erasmus Darwin on the stage back from Cornwall and their travelling together as far as Bristol, where their different destinations led to a parting of their ways 'with tears reciprocally shed'.[54] Distraught, Polwhele recalls fleeing to the house of Hannah More, whereupon she cheered him up by reading aloud a poem in manuscript of his friend and mentor John Wolcot's that he happened to have in his pocket. This offers us a remarkably vivid picture of the circulation of literary texts and the prepublication networks of provincial literary culture in the late eighteenth century, even if it is also rather gossipy and involves a quite heroic amount of name-dropping.

These stories tend to date from Polwhele's youth and relative pomp and seem to stress an idea of coterie, albeit one carefully constructed via the imperatives of professional authorship. In contrast a rather sad narrative emerges from the volume of Scott letters, which date from the rather anti-climactic second half of Pol-

whele's career. Throughout Scott is fulsome and remains genuine in his praise of his Cornish correspondent. He is 'a great master of northern lore' on 11 October 1810, and Scott closes that same letter by telling Polwhele that 'if you knew how much I admire your poem on Local Attachment, you would not have threatened me with so terrible a compliment as that of laying down your own harp.'[55] He was delighted with Polwhele's work on Devon and Cornwall, telling him in December 1812 that he had never before seen 'topographical labours conducted at once with the accuracy of the antiquary and the elegance of the man of general literature' and reassuring Polwhele that the work was 'interesting to the general reader and essential to the purpose of the English historian'. 'Your name smoothed all difficulties', he tells Polwhele in 1811 (in connection with Polwhele's attempt at continuing Beattie's *The Minstrel*), while in 1815 Scott remained firm in his view that the *Influence of Local Attachment* is 'one of the poems of modern times which has afforded me the most pleasure'.[56] Yet all that said, the sense of their inverse trajectories is strong. At the outset of their correspondence, the exchange seems two-way, and while Scott's admiration for Polwhele appears to remain staunch, the longer they knew each other, the more one-way become the requests for favours. In 1829, in the last reply to Polwhele published, Scott is explaining his inability, despite enquiries to 'find the means of aiding your very natural wish on behalf of your young relatives', noting that 'I have far less interest in the literary circles of Scotland than you may imagine; but if I can be of service to you it will make me happy.'[57] That same letter makes it clear from the occasion of its writing that Polwhele has written in advance to ask whether Scott would like a copy of his latest works (he would 'be most happy in placing [it] on my shelves, in addition to your other valuable works') rather than feeling able just to send them as in years gone by. Equally Scott's apologetic references to the increasing delays in responding (on 16 November 1812 he refers to a reproach on the point he has received from Polwhele) and their relative, but significantly more brief nature as time goes on indicate the changing dynamics of their relationship. In 1803 it was Polwhele who apparently took six months to reply, and who received an eager, earnest and lengthy response from Scott within ten days. Taken severally but especially collectively, these details tell their own story about a literary friendship of increasing inequality. On their own, they suggest a narrative of considerable and rather touching personal interest, but it is also possible to establish its significance in two further ways.

Firstly, the list of increasingly baroque explanations called forth by Scott to excuse his delays in replying effectively, dramatise the practical difficulties of maintaining a correspondence over such a distance. Indeed, Scott's letters offer a pretty comprehensive list of the challenges to such a relationship in a way that might be obscured through the efforts of a more conscientious – or less busy – correspondent. On 21 July 1808 he is apologising for a delay on the grounds that 'owing to my residence in London for these some months past, I did not receive your letter till my return to Edinburgh.'[58] Again, in August 1813, 'your letter has had a most weary dance after me through the North of England, where I have

been rambling a good while; and, being disappointed in an intended visit to my friend Morris at Rokeby, all my letters miscarried for a season, being sent his charge.'[59] Generally speaking, it is clear that the direction of mail to intermediaries acting on behalf of both men was a significant factor in both maintaining and potentially delaying correspondence. In 1814, Scott had this to offer by way of an explanation of a delay in returning a manuscript to Polwhele, an explanation that reads like something that would not be out of place in the editorial preface to a Waverley novel:

> I wrote to you in winter upon the subject of your curious and valuable MS. which I think fully equal to any you have yet written; as that letter did not reach you, I will mention its principal points, in the parcel consisting of the MS itself, which I will return tomorrow. Your poem, with some material papers of my own, has been for some months in a situation rather more secure than accessible; for, in the hurry attending my removal from one house in the country to another, my furniture was deposited in a hay-loft; and at the bottom of a heap of old arms, helmets, and broad-swords, fenced in with a cheveux-de-frise of chairs, tables, and bed posts, stood a small bureau, containing all my own papers and your beautiful poem. I could not trust the key of this treasure-chest to anyone but myself, and I only got my matters a little arranged last week, when I recovered your verses and brought them to town with me. (3 April 1814)[60]

In the same letter, Scott offers an example of a practical difficulty that is nothing to do with the disorganised nature of a correspondent when he says he 'take[s] the liberty to send you a copy of a poem I lately published, but which was originally in rather a cumbrous form to be transmitted so many hundred miles'.[61]

There are other occasions when Scott's embarrassment could summon extravagant flights of fancy, as he sought to acknowledge the potential hurtfulness of so belated a reply through humorous distraction:

> I have been a long and distant wanderer from home; and though I reached this cottage six weeks ago, I only got 'Isabel' yesterday. She was in my house at Castle Street, in possession of an old housekeeper; who, knowing perhaps from youthful experience the dangers which attend young ladies on their travels, kept her with some other captives until my wife, going to town to attend a grand musical festival, made a general jail delivery, and sent among many, but none so welcome packets, the fair maiden of Cotehele. (4 November 1815)[62]

The reader is left to conclude that Scott would have been a less interesting, albeit for Polwhele less frustrating, correspondent, had he replied on time.

The second point to be made about the narrative of declining fortunes and reputation the volume offers is that it suggests interesting questions about Polwhele's self-presentation and the way in which he seeks to locate literary reputation and substance. As we have seen, the volume is of a piece with what can only be interpreted as a concerted attempt to establish his credentials as a man of

letters at the outset of the nineteenth century through his memoirs. These trace his life and career by reproducing his voluminous correspondence with figures across the kingdom and indicate the various ways in which he partook in literary culture on the national stage (he was not alone in this, as friends, such as William Hayley, attempt much the same thing). In 1834, Polwhele told his friend (and erstwhile staging post for some of Scott's correspondence to Polwhele) Davies Gilbert that he had collected 56 volumes of correspondence, though it appears that he published only a fraction in the end. In the preface to the *Traditions and Recollections*, Polwhele says that his purpose is to give 'clear and interesting views of characters and transactions' through the publication of their letters, a principle he adopts from William Mason's *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Mr Gray* (1775), as Polwhele himself makes clear in the advertisement to his *Life of John Whittaker* (1831). Ostensibly, the subject is always the writer of the letter. Yet, the *Transactions and Recollections* is organised in sections according to the phases of Polwhele's own life (school days in Truro, time at Oxford, curacy in Kenton, holding the living at Manaccan and so on), a feature that along with its editorial commentary, underlines a broader point about the importance of the recipient in what we are reading. Polwhele is the significant feature of this book even if he apparently lacks the cultural confidence to offer a more straightforward and unambiguous account of his own literary stature. It is as if Polwhele can only tell the story of his own life through the words of others written to him.

If Polwhele's publication of Scott's correspondence is part of a larger urge to demonstrate his place within the literary world, it shows the fundamental importance of connectedness, an importance so crucial that it trumped the fact that the price to personal dignity of demonstrating this connection was high. As Polwhele himself puts it in the preface to the Scott volume, Polwhele was one who 'never trusted his own strength—never confided in his own judgment; but, in all his literary productions, invariably looked up to others for assistance or support'.[63] It seems that this is the main message to be taken from the volume. In terms of what we might conventionally think of as achievement, the volume is rather a document of Polwhele's decline, if not failure, as he goes from being a source of authority to source of vaguely embarrassing requests for favours for himself and his family. This pattern is repeated in his other memoirs, as he becomes ever more blatant in tapping up old friends and acquaintances – including Grenville – for a good turn, or even just a good word. Indeed, the only thing more poignant than the increasingly modest nature of the requests, as Polwhele scales down his ambition, is the moment when he moves from asking for himself to asking on behalf of his sons. But as documents of connectivity, of Polwhele's continued place within networks of literature and print, of his access to important people in order to ask them for a job, these works are triumphant, even if the evidence provided by those requests bespeaks a more profound failure.

So to conclude, what value does Scott's correspondence with Polwhele have for the more secure understanding of what Kerrigan calls the 'braided' histories of the British Isles? At its most straightforward, it says something about

the interconnections and liaisons it was possible to establish in Romantic-era Britain; collaborations and networks stretching many hundreds of miles. These networks might have been delicate, and they may have relied on intermediaries and been infuriatingly slow-moving and prone to delays, particularly when their target was as peripatetic as Scott appears to have been for considerable periods of time. Communication might have been haphazard and limited by the ability to transport bulky packages, and it occasionally could go entirely astray. Yet for all these vicissitudes, letters (or occasionally their replacements) eventually reached their intended recipients; were eventually responded to; business got done; and communication was maintained. The manuscript becalmed in Scott's hayloft as described on 3 April 1814 was almost certainly *Fair Isabelle of Cotehele*, the receipt of which Scott is belatedly acknowledging on 4 November 1815. Equally, for all the logistical challenges posed by moving books around in the post, what also emerges is the central importance of swapping publications to this relationship. Such movement of printed and manuscript material was not merely social, but part of significant business transactions. Ultimately, the letters are also a testament to the business that could be done, and done with no particular reference to the London book trade. Edinburgh in particular emerges as a place where Polwhele, who had no particular problems getting published throughout his career, sought to get material published. It is a vivid if modest example of the truth of Ian Duncan's recent observation that Edinburgh 'became visible as a world capital of Romanticism in the first third of the nineteenth century'.[64] While Polwhele and Scott's relationship does nothing in itself to prove Duncan's later contention that it was in Edinburgh that 'the genres that would dominate the nineteenth-century literary marketplace acquired their definitive form',[65] nevertheless the fact that a Cornish writer was doing (or attempting to do) the range of business he was, across both poetry and topographical writing and within the world of reviewing, does suggest the ways in which Edinburgh was an important part of a national print culture, a culture that contained an axis of influence and interest that cannot be entirely encapsulated and understood if it is thought about merely in terms of a centralised London book trade. This did not always go according to plan, as the sad episode of Polwhele's continuation of Beattie's *Minstrel* demonstrates. However this does not undermine the central point here to do with the evidence of intra-regional networks of authorship and print offered by Scott and Polwhele's relationship. Indeed the fact that Polwhele went on to publish that work in London demonstrates the genuinely national publishing world in which authors had multiple potential outlets available to them and might publish in London as a compensation for a venture falling through elsewhere. This not only reverses what might be assumed to be the standard polarity of provincial publication standing in for metropolitan failure, but also shows that the situation was more complex and sophisticated than previously assumed. Schürer has recently lamented the 'overwhelming pull of the London metropolis' in narratives of provincial literary endeavour that stress links with London as a way of explaining the sophistication of that endeavour.[66] He seeks to balance the

'skewed conclusions of scholarship' that emphasises 'metropolitan connections' with a vision of self-sustaining provincial literary culture in which writers 'could be successful without the London literary market-place'.[67] Polwhele's career, on the evidence provided by his engagement with Scott, need not be seen in either of these exclusive categories but rather as one built upon publishing, where the market proved most propitious.

Yet, it is also important to reiterate the importance of the study of such correspondence as a counter-weight to the sort of regional revisionism that ends up in the crude assertion of individual importance. An awareness of the existence of his correspondence with Scott does nothing to advance a reductive assertion of Polwhele's status, given that it is more a document of Polwhele's return to obscurity than of his rise to prominence. As such it registers an ambiguous sense of Polwhele as a literary figure.

Furthermore, the way in which Polwhele backs onto the stage via his correspondence with others does not articulate a firm sense of individual worth as we understand it. At best, it demonstrates the essentially connective mindset at work here, a notion of literary and social identity firmly embedded within a broader sociability; at worst, it suggests an element of cultural cringe. Yet what it does do much more unambiguously is offer an advance on Chandler's 'increasingly intricate and decentralised national network of literary production' in the British Isles during the Romantic period because it offers an insight into the networks of dissemination, of opinion and influence forming across geographically distant regions of Britain. As such, it provides us with a way of articulating the importance of understanding the place of regional writers within, and their contribution to, nineteenth-century literary culture that does not rely on wire-drawn, tired, or otherwise wearingly unconvincing claims to previously unacknowledged individual greatness.

Notes

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5 Murray G. H. Pittock, *Scottish Nationality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 147.

6 Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762 to 1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 133.

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21 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (London: Penguin, 1986), 135.

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28 Ibid., 14.

29 Ibid., 15.

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37 MS Eng.lett.c.36.f.74.

38 MS Eng.lett.c.36.f.76–7.

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45 *Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, 38–9.

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51 Polwhele, *Traditions*, 120.

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53 *Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, 29.

54 Polwhele, *Traditions*, 87.

55 *Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, 28.

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57 Ibid., 85.

58 Ibid., 19.

59 Ibid., 50.

60 Ibid., 54–55.

61 Ibid., 54.

62 Ibid., 65–66.

63 Ibid., v.

64 Ian Duncan, 'Urban Space and Enlightened Romanticism', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Romanticism*, ed. Murray Pittock (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 72.

65 Ibid., 72.

66 Schurer, 'Jane Cave Winscom', 215.

67 Ibid., 427 and 428.