Scott, Stevenson and the Battle of Prestonpans

The East Lothian landscape hides its secrets well. As you pass by Prestonpans on your way south on the A1 the landscape is a veritable forest of electricity pylons. Yet here on a misty September morning the Jacobite army of Bonnie Prince Charlie devastated the Redcoat army of Johnny Cope. Just to the north of the road is Bankton House, the home of Colonel Gardiner, one of the Redcoat officers who by a strange quirk of fortune met his end, fighting for King George II, a quarter of a mile from his own house. Should you turn off at the Bankton slipway and turn down to Cockenzie, slow your car after 200 yds and as you look to the east you will be staring into the advancing Jacobite clans. As you look to the west you are staring at the Redcoat line of battle and perhaps in your imagination you can see General Cope nervously riding along his line of troops trying to put some courage into them for the approaching fray.

Viewed across the years the victory can be seen as a false dawn and the prelude to the depressing march back from Derby and Culloden. But in another sense the battle sowed the seeds for a tremendous flowering of literature and an interpretation of Scottish life and values which still has important lessons for us in the 21st Century. When I first came to live in East Lothian 30 years ago I began to hear mention of Colonel Gardiner of Prestonpans. I could see the obelisk, guarded by four lions, that stands before his house. When I asked local people why Colonel Gardiner was singled out for a monument, there came the answer that he was a very pious soldier who was revered by local people and so when he was killed in the battle leading Gardiner's Dragoons they decided to erect a monument in honour of him. And yet, when I took a look at the monument it became clear that they took over 100 years to show how much they loved him, for it was not until 1853 that the monument was erected. Hmm…..

Thereby hangs a tale which illumines so much of the strange contradictory life and attitude of post-Act of Union Scotland. Both Sir Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson were Edinburgh men with East Lothian connections. Scott as a boy was frequently taken out to Prestonpans for therapeutic bathing and visited spots, like St Clements Wells, with battle connections. The stories he heard as a boy stirred his imagination and years later he spun the tale for all the world to hear. Stevenson spent many happy days in North Berwick as a boy and both *Catriona* and *Weir of Hermiston* display a detailed knowledge of the county.

It is difficult at this distance in time, and in another world with new media, to convey quite the impact that the first of Scott's historical novels had upon the English speaking world. Suffice it to say that when *Waverley* was published in 1814 it took the world by storm. Everybody was reading it. It tells the tale of Edward Waverley, an English dragoons officer in Colonel Gardiner's regiment who deserted to the Jacobites a couple of months before the battle. He of course is a fictional character, but in the central chapter of the book, "*The Conflict*", he charges in with the Highland clans and comes upon the dying form of his old commanding officer. This chapter also gives the narrative detail upon which the denouement of the tale depends. Waverley saved the life of Colonel Talbot , just as in real life Stewart of Invernahyle saved the life of Colonel Whitefoord. It is this act of chivalry which in the end turns the tale for Waverley after the defeat at Culloden.

Move on 70 years and in 1886 Stevenson wrote *Kidnapped* . Sitting in his house, *Skerryvore,* in Bournemouth he wrote within 12 months both *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Kidnapped.* Many a reader has enjoyed *Kidnapped* without taking in the connection with the famous battle. You will find it in Chapter 12 *"I hear of the Red Fox"*. After the siege of the Roundhouse on the Brig *Covenant,* David Balfour and Alan Breck sit chatting. Suddenly, to David's shock, it becomes clear that Alan Breck had once been a Redcoat! (He the man who is now the quintessence of a proud Jacobite.) The exchange between the two men goes like this:

"What," cried I, "were you in the English army?"
"That was I," cried Alan. "But I deserted to the right side at Prestonpans – and that's some comfort."
I could scarcely share this view: holding desertion under arms for an unpardonable fault in honour. But for all I was so young I was wiser than say my thought.
"Dear,dear," says I, "the punishment is death."

So here we have two of Scotland's greatest writers both of whom feature twin characters in their greatest novels, Waverley and Gardiner, Balfour and Stewart; of whom Waverley and Balfour were fictitious , but Gardiner and Stewart most definitely historical; *and they both tell of a deserter from the Redcoat side to the Jacobite side at Prestonpans.*

It has been said of Stevenson that despite the fame of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde,* truth to tell he could scarcely lift a pen without describing the essentially schizophrenic nature of the individual. True in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* he puts the split within one human frame, but in so many of his other novels he plays out the same theme with a pair of characters each of whom have contrasting personalities. *The Master of Ballantrae* superbly plays this theme between the reserved Henry, who stays at home, and the adventurous Jacobite, James. In *Kidnapped* we see David Balfour and Alan Breck Stewart traversing Scotland, practically joined at the hip. Stevenson we are told in his younger days dreamt every night of himself involved in Jacobite adventures. Of course we know that his problems of health precluded an adventuring life-style.

It is a commonplace to say that in Kidnapped we see the Highlander and the Lowlander portrayed side by side with all their virtues and vices, but there is much ,much more to it than that. Of his book *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* he wrote later, "Man is not truly one, but truly two. I say two because the state of my own knowledge does not pass beyond that point. Others will follow, others will outstrip me on the same lines; and I hazard the guess that man will ultimately be known for a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous and independent denizens." Thus did Stevenson anticipate 20th Century psychology. The outstanding depiction of Stevenson's depth psychology is to be accessed in Frank McLynn's brilliant biography published in 1993. McLynn talks of *"two main strands in traditional Scottish culture, the Calvinistic and the Jacobite, representing in RLS's case the competing tugs of the conscious and the unconscious, the determined and the voluntaristic, the life-denying Thanatos principle and the life-enhancing Eros. Though brought up in the Calvinistic tradition, Stevenson preferred the Jacobite sensibility, which can be seen in psychic terms as a bid to achieve wholeness."* It may be that the enduring appeal of *Kidnapped* is in the interplay between the two men and the two sides of Scottish life in the eighteenth century, but more than that there is the shadow of a hope that we can achieve

wholeness through in some way accompanying them on their journey. Which is perhaps simply another way of saying that as the two men Alan Breck and David Balfour set out on their walk across Scotland, you and I can, if we will, walk between them and achieve our own process of individuation. The Scottish nation needs to face up to the strengths of both of these principles because they are there in our marrow. Each is a source of strength. They are twin pillars, some days we lean on one, some on the other, and some of us even lean on both pillars and smile into the Scottish sun and mist; and we're not weaker but stronger for it.

Both writers spoke of deserters. Of all figures in storytelling isn't the deserter the most hang-dog of the lot! He's a weakling, an unstable man. Nobody wants to be associated with the deserter. And yet the deserter is the man who has the moment of insight. He starts again. He is free from the shackles of the past. As Scott and Stevenson thought about the events of 1745 they both saw a world in which choices had to be made. To make the right choice , even late in the day as it is for a deserter, is energising. But neither Alan Breck nor Waverley were just deserters, they were turncoats, they joined the other side. You only need to read a little of the adventures of Alan Breck or Edward Waverley to feel that each in their own way they had found themselves when they had made the decision. It was so very much the right thing to do. Perhaps what both Scott and Stevenson are saying to us is a form of post-modernism. We today live in a world in which we can choose our identity. Go to Inuit communities in Canada and you'll find people from Europe who feel that they want to be part of that community. Visit the tattered remnants of Scottish Gaeldom and you'll find English people and Germans who want to be part of it. It's a luxury that earlier generations did not have. In the figure of the deserter both Scott and Stevenson were saying to us that there is freedom which we can have if we want it. In the victory at Prestonpans both writers spotted that there was a "hinge" in Scottish history that in jubilant Jacobitism spoke of an open future. You don't have to stay where fate has put you and with that decision comes the beginning of life's adventure.

When we celebrate the victory at Prestonpans, what are we doing? Putting our heads in the sand and saying,"OK, I know that it all ended in tears at Culloden, but hey I'd rather think of the time we won!" The historical equivalent of the quote which can be seen on cards of condolence, "They tell me he's dead but I don't have to believe it if I don't want to!" No what we are doing is this: we are taking our theme from two of our greatest writers. When geniuses separately point us in the same direction we ignore it at our peril. Both men were saying to us that having the courage to choose your direction in life is a piece of courage which is not just deeply human but deeply and distinctly Scottish. In *Kidnapped* think of the number of times when David Balfour makes a courageous decision, and how often fate intervenes and snatches back the initiative, to be followed by another adjustment and decision from David. In Waverley almost the entire first half of the book is taken up with Waverley simply hugging himself with delight at the thought that weeks ago he had never met a Highlander and now here he is in the heart of the Highlands finding not only a community of people but a landscape which he had never seen before, and they were <u>both</u> good and exciting! "Wow", he's saying to himself , "if I'd not made that decision a few weeks back I'd never have known about any of this." In September 1745 there were groups of people up and down the land making their minds up, not just meekly accepting the hand that fate had dealt them. Scott and Stevenson are telling us that it is good and liberating to do the deciding for ourselves.

So why was the memorial to Colonel Gardiner erected so long after his death? It was erected then because as people by the million read Waverley and his later novels they wanted to visit the scenes about which he wrote. They came to Edinburgh and Prestonpans to visit the scenes of *Waverley* and *The Heart of Midlothian*, as tourists and wanted to see at least something. So in 1853 the monument was erected "out of time" but still teaching us a lesson if we will but listen.

2083 Words

Peter R. MacKenzie

peter@elongniddry14436.freeserve.co.uk