

## Comment

### *Mr Blair and Ivanhoe*

Tony Blair, Prime Minister in waiting, told Sue Lawley on *Desert Island Discs* that the book he would like on the desert island would be Scott's *Ivanhoe*. Perhaps he had been advised that BBC1 was about to screen a new version of the novel. He could say that he had read the book before the televised version drew the attention of viewers (and voters) to its existence. Needless to say, a few days after the broadcast, a centre-page feature by Catherine Bennett in *The Guardian* mocked Mr Blair's choice and assured us that *all* Scott's novels are too boring for words. That the Labour leader reads such tushery could seem as laughable as the fact that John Major's father sold garden gnomes.

Mr Blair's choice of *Ivanhoe* is of interest to us since this journal is at present edited from the house in Edinburgh which the family occupied when Walter Scott was young. George's Square, as it was originally called, after the builder's brother, was a handsome quadrangle of three-storey terraced houses, with a large private garden in the middle, in which residents once grazed a few sheep and cattle. The whole of the south side, and most of the north and east sides, were knocked down by the University of Edinburgh in the 1960s to make way for new buildings. (At least the dental school—planned 'in a friendly neo-Fascist style' [Gifford, McWilliam and Walker, 1984]—has never been built.) The contract of feu between the builder and Scott's father is dated 20 May 1772. Scott himself, afflicted by poliomyelitis, spent his early years with his grandparents in the country. He seems not to have lived permanently in George Square until 1778, when he was seven. He passed the next twenty years in the house, moving with relief (he did not get on with his father) to the other side of town when he got married. His immensely productive literary career, it has to be admitted, began only after his marriage—he composed nothing while he lived in his father's house, except legal documents.

Though he was to return to a Scottish theme in *Redgauntlet* (1824), one of his finest books, Scott seems deliberately to aim *Ivanhoe* at his many readers in England. From the outset it was a bestseller. The first edition of 8,000 copies sold out in weeks, despite the high price of thirty shillings for the three-volumed set. In the end, it was to be the most popular novel of one of the most popular British authors throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. By the 1940s, however, it was ceasing to be standard childhood reading—though perhaps, at Mr Blair's Edinburgh school, it may still have been read. With its fair-haired Saxon serfs and gentry, tyrannical Norman barons and licentious

monks, exotic Templars, gallant outlaws (Robin Hood), complicated Jews, not to mention Richard the Lionheart himself (in disguise), the novel has provided generations of readers with most of what they know about late twelfth-century England. More than that, however, *Ivanhoe* helped to form the Whig myth of the superiority of the Anglo-Saxons over the French and other Continentals.

It was not Scott who invented the myth that an ancient Saxon democratic community was extinguished by the 'Norman Yoke'. Nor did he explicitly suggest that the defeat of the Napoleonic empire at Waterloo in 1815 marked the triumphant return of the Anglo-Saxons to centre stage. Nevertheless, however subliminally, the novel undoubtedly preferred the honest folk of the greenwood (the scene is set between Leicester and Sheffield) to the sinister feudal usurpers. Of course, as Scott knew, the barons who established the rights of Englishmen in 1215 were of Norman extraction. For that matter, many of the British commanders in the Napoleonic Wars, and in the expansion of the Empire generally, were Scottish and Irish. (Scott's own wife was French, supposedly a refugee from the terror.) Scott himself was to mastermind the visit of King George IV to Edinburgh in 1822, inaugurating the transformation of the Hanoverian dynasty into (part-time) Highland lairds. In many ways, Scott played a decisive part in creating the 'imagined community' (in Benedict Anderson's influential phrase) which was Britain—England, really—during the heyday of the Empire.

It is not difficult to see how the Anglo-Saxons have still to defend their freedoms against foreign autocrats—faceless bureaucrats now, rather than vizored knights. Rebecca, the young Jewess, is charged with witchcraft and seeks a champion from 'Merry England—the hospitable, the generous, the free, where so many are ready to peril their lives for honour'. Wilfrid of Ivanhoe takes up her cause, a Saxon by birth and upbringing but also a chivalrous knight returned from the Crusade. At one level, the novel explores the possibility of reconciliation between Saxon and Norman, each taking what is best into 'merry England'. In the end, however, the Jewess and her father choose to leave England for a more secure life in Moslem Spain—'the people of England are a fierce race, quarrelling ever with their neighbours or among themselves, and ready to plunge the sword into the bowels of each other'. What Mr Blair makes of this quite complex and many-layered novel one does not know; but some of the issues, some of the myths, that Scott dramatizes, retain a hold on people who will never read *Ivanhoe*—well, not until they have seen the film.

F.K.