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The Construction of Scottishness in James Hogg's
The Queen's Wake

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in English
at Massey University

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1996

**ABSTRACT: THE CONSTRUCTION OF SCOTTISHNESS IN JAMES HOGG'S
*THE QUEEN'S WAKE***

James Hogg was a Scottish Romantic, born in 1770 at Ettrick Farm in the Scottish Lowlands. Hogg became known as “the Ettrick Shepherd” as he had worked on local farms from the age of six, having had only six months of formal education. He is probably best known for his novel *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*; however, it is his most famous narrative poem, *The Queen's Wake*, that this thesis focuses on.

This poem, published in 1813, is a successful continuation of the traditions of the eighteenth-century revival of Scottish poetry, following such notables as Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns. Near the beginning of *The Queen's Wake*, Hogg explains his desire to preserve traditional Scottish songs, through the persona of the Ettrick Shepherd:

Alas! Those lays of fire once more
Are wreck'd 'mid heaps of mouldering lore!
And feeble he who dares presume
That heavenly wake-light to relume.
But grieved the legendary lay
Should perish from this land for aye,
While sings the lark above the wold,
And all his flocks rest in the fold,
Fondly he strikes, beside the pen,
The harp of Yarrow's bracken glen. (347-56)

The Queen's Wake is a nationalistic poem celebrating the return of Mary Stuart to Scotland from France in 1561. In the poem Hogg creates a narrative framework in which he sets twelve lays, each sung by a different bard, and hence representative of a different region. The poet contrasts these rugged, hardy Scots with an Italian competitor, Rizzio, “that gay and simpering man” (440). This thesis looks at the way in which Hogg uses images and motifs within his descriptions of these bards, and their regions, and within their lays themselves, to construct a national Scottish identity:

Not only does Hogg provide appropriate materials for each of the minstrels depending on their regions and backgrounds, but he distinguishes among each singer in character and dress. Each becomes both a type *and* an individual. (Smith 93)

Hogg's twelve minstrels present twelve different points-of-view on the Scottish condition, yet each part is related to the whole through careful repetitions, contrasts, and parallels. Hogg uses various themes such as patriotism, tradition, superstition, nature, fighting and humour throughout *The Queen's Wake* to indicate that the diverse parts presented by the bards contribute to a composite image of Scottishness.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to my supervisor, Dr. Greg Crossan, for his hard work, constructive comments and unfailing support. I would also like to thank Robert Petre, Special Printed Collections Curator at the Alexander Turnbull Library, for his help in providing a first edition copy of *The Queen's Wake*, and Douglas Mack, president of the James Hogg Society in Scotland, for his information and encouragement. Finally, thanks to my family, especially my mother, Margaret Shanks, who is always there when I need her.

TEXTUAL NOTE

All references to *The Queen's Wake*, unless otherwise stated, are to the first edition, as reprinted in James Hogg, *The Queen's Wake: A Legendary Poem*, London and Edinburgh: William and Robert Chambers, 1867. References to Hogg's annotations from this edition are denoted in the text by the abbreviation 'QW.' All other references to *The Queen's Wake* are to a later edition of the poem, as reprinted in William Wallace's collection of Hogg's poetry. The lineation given for quotations from either edition is my own.

INTRODUCTION

James Hogg reached the height of his fame (or notoriety) in the literary circles of 1820s-30s Edinburgh as the “Ettrick Shepherd,” drunken and coarse buffoon of Professor John Wilson’s “Noctes Ambrosianae,” published regularly in *Blackwood’s Magazine*. He was supposed to epitomise the bluff vulgarity of the Scottish peasantry.¹ Hogg was at once proud of the fame this brought, and embarrassed by the liberties taken in his name. Of Wilson he writes:

My friends in general have been of the opinion that he has amused himself and the public too often at my expense; but, except in one instance, which terminated very ill for me, and in which I had no more concern than the man in the moon, I never discerned any evil design on his part, and thought it all excellent sport. At the same time, I must acknowledge, that it was using too much freedom with any author, to print his name in full, to poems, letters, and essays, which he himself never saw. I do not say that he has done this; but either he or someone else has done it many a time. (*Memoir* 49)

Hogg’s “Ettrick Shepherd” persona, which enjoyed a circulation as wide as that of *Blackwood’s Magazine*, was well known but not particularly accurate. Memoirist William Howitt noted:

Such was my own opinion, derived from this source, of Hogg, and from prints of him, with wide open mouth and huge straggling teeth, in full

¹ A physical description written by the prominent editor Samuel Hall, who met him during his triumphant visit to London in 1832, reinforces Hogg’s essential Scottishness:

Up rose a man, hale and hearty as a mountain breeze, fresh as a branch of hill-side heather, with a visage unequivocally Scotch, high cheek bones, a sharp and clear grey eye, an expansive forehead, sandy hair, and with ruddy cheeks, which the late nights and late mornings of a month in London had not yet swallowed. His form was manly and muscular, and his voice strong and gladsome, with a rich Scottish accent, which he probably, on that occasion, rather heightened than depressed. His appearance that evening may be described by one word, and that word purely English. It was HEARTY! (384)

roars of drunken laughter, that, on meeting him in London, I was quite amazed to find him so smooth, well-looking, and gentlemanly a sort of person. (37)

While he was not strictly the “Ettrick Shepherd” of the “Noctes Ambrosianae,” Hogg was indeed a shepherd, born and bred in Ettrick. Hogg’s father, Robert Hogg, was also a shepherd who, having saved some money, leased the farms of Ettrick House and Ettrick Hall. At six, Hogg attended classes in the nearby schoolhouse, and was learning to read the Shorter Catechism and the Proverbs of Solomon when his father went bankrupt. Destitute, the Hoggs were forced to send young James into service, shepherding on a neighbouring farm; his half-yearly wages were a ewe lamb and a pair of new shoes. He attended school again in the winter quarter of the following year, after which his formal education was terminated:

The whole of his career of schooling he computes at about half a year, but says that his old schoolmaster even denied this, declaring that he was never at his school at all! What a stock of education on which to set up as shepherd, farmer, and poet! (Howitt 30)

Apparently unaware of an entry in the Ettrick parish register recording his baptism on the 9th of December 1770, Hogg gives his birth date in his *Memoir of the Author’s Life* as the 25th of January, 1772 (4). Hogg convinced himself that he shared Burns’s birthday and that belief strengthened his resolve to become a poet.² Given his background, such an ambition was rather extraordinary:

Every day I pondered on the genius and fate of Burns. I wept, and always thought with myself—what is to hinder me from succeeding Burns? I too was born on the 25th of January, and I have much more time to read and compose than any ploughman could have, and can sing more old songs than ever ploughman could in the world. But then I wept again

² Hogg was “at last undeceived by the parish register and mourned over having two less years to live” (Batho 11).

because I could not write. However, I resolved to be a poet and follow in the steps of Burns. (*Memoir 11*)

Although he lacked formal education, Hogg's upbringing was enriched by traditional songs of Scotland, imparted to him by his mother, Margaret Laidlaw. At fourteen, Hogg bought an old violin for five shillings, on which he played these tunes:

...and my bed being always in stables and cow-houses, I disturbed nobody but my associate quadrupeds, whom I believed to be greatly delighted with my strains. At all events they never complained, which the biped part of my neighbours did frequently, to my utter pity and indignation. (*Memoir 7*)

The traditional ballads of his youth provided a basis for Hogg's early attempts at poetry. In 1794 he contributed "The Mistakes of a Night," a song of his own composition, anonymously to *The Scots Magazine*. "Donald M'Donald," dealing with the threatened invasion by Napoleon, was published in 1800, also anonymously: "the popularity of my song was unbounded, and yet no one ever knew or inquired who was the author" (*Memoir 14*). The next year, Hogg published a pamphlet of poems, to kill time while attending the Edinburgh market:

Not knowing how to pass the interim, it came into my head that I would write a poem or two from my memory, and get them printed. The thought had no sooner struck me than it was put in practice; and I was to select, not the best poems, but those that I remembered best. I wrote several of these during my short stay, and gave them all to a person to print at my expense, and, having sold off my sheep on Wednesday morning, I returned to the Forest. (*Memoir 15*)

These early literary attempts were unremarkable, and Hogg continued to work as a shepherd. While in the service of Mr. Harkness of Mitchell-Slack in Nithsdale, Hogg published *The Mountain Bard*, which finally brought financial success. In addition, he

was paid eighty-six pounds for an essay, *The Shepherd's Guide: being a practical treatise on the diseases of sheep*. This new-found wealth brought its own problems:

Being now master of nearly three hundred pounds, I went perfectly mad. I took first one pasture farm, at exactly one half more than it was worth, having been cheated into it by a great rascal, who meant to rob me of all I had, and which, in the course of one year, he effected by dint of law. But in the mean time, having taken another extensive farm, I found myself fairly involved in business far above my capital. It would have required at least one thousand pounds for every one hundred pounds that I possessed, to have managed all that I had taken in hand; so I got every day out of one strait and confusion into a worse. I blundered and struggled on for three years between these two places, giving up all thoughts of poetry or literature of any kind. (*Memoir* 18)

In 1810, finally bankrupt, Hogg wrapped his plaid round his shoulders and set off for Edinburgh, “determined, since no better could be, to push my fortune as a literary man” (*Memoir* 18). Upon his arrival in the capital, Hogg published a collection of traditional songs, two-thirds of which he wrote himself, called *The Forest Minstrel*. Although one thousand copies were published, at five shillings each, Hogg received nothing from the sale of this work. Finding it difficult to gain employment, he began his own magazine, *The Spy*, the publication of which continued for a year.

Hogg was also an active and keen participant in a debating society, the Forum, to which he attributes the success of his next publication, *The Queen's Wake*: “I might and would have written the ‘Queen's Wake’ had the Forum never existed, but without the weekly lessons that I got there I could not have succeeded as I did” (*Memoir* 23). First published in 1813, *The Queen's Wake* is a collection of traditional ballads and tales which proved a turning point in Hogg's literary career. On the day of its publication Hogg met William Dunlop, a man with “a great deal of rough common sense” (*Memoir* 26), in the street. Mr. Dunlop greeted him thus:

“Ye useless poetical deevil that ye're!” said he, “what hae ye been doing a' this time?”—“What doing, Willie! what do you mean?”—

“D—n your stupid head, ye hae been pestering us wi’ fourpenny papers an’ daft shilly-shally sangs, an’ blethering an’ speakin’ i’ the Forum, an’ yet had stuff in ye to produce a thing like this!”—“Ay, Willie,” said I; “have you seen my new beuk?”—“Ay, faith, that I have, man; and it has lickit me out o’ a night’s sleep. Ye hae hit the right nail on the head now. Yon’s the very thing, sir.”—“I’m very glad to hear you sae, Willie; but what do ye ken about poems?”—“Never ye mind how I ken; I gi’e ye my word for it, yon’s the thing that will do. If ye hadna made a fool o’ yoursel’ afore, man, yon would hae sold better than ever a book sold. Od, wha wad hae thought there was as muckle in that sheep’s-head o’ your’s? —d——d stupid poetical deevil that ye’re!” And with that he went away, laughing and miscalling me over his shoulder. (*Memoir* 26)

At forty-three, Hogg had found recognition as man of poetic genius.³

The ingenuity of the *Wake* lies in its structure: twelve tales are sung within the narrative framework of a celebration in honour of the return of Mary Stuart to Edinburgh from France in 1561. A total of thirty bards perform for the Queen in Holyrood Palace over three nights; however Hogg’s poem only records twelve of their songs, explaining:

Certes that many a bard of name,
 Who there appear’d and strove for fame,
 No record names nor minstrel’s tongue;
 Not even are known the lays they sung. (1041-4)

In a burst of poetic modesty, Hogg laments his failure to record all thirty lays:

’Tis said that thirty bards appear’d,
 That thirty names were register’d,

³ Hogg’s entrance into the literary world was not without its awkward moments. While holidaying with the Wordsworths, Professor Wilson, De Quincey and others, Hogg witnessed a meteor streaking across the sky and commented: “‘Hout, me’m! it is neither mair nor less than joost a treeumphal airch, raised in honour of the meeting of the poets.’ ‘That’s not amiss.—Eh? Eh?—that’s very good,’ said the Professor, laughing. But Wordsworth, who had De Quincey’s arm, gave a grunt, and turned on his heel, and leading the little opium-chewer aside, he addressed him in these disdainful and venomous words:—‘Poets? Poets?—What does the fellow mean?—Where are they?’” (*Memoir* 70)

With whom were titled chiefs combined;
 But some are lost, and some declined.
 Woe's me, that all my mountain lore
 Has been unfit to rescue more!
 And that my guideless rustic skill
 Has told these ancient tales so ill! (5161-8)

Of course, the recital of the full thirty lays would have made Hogg's poem of an unmanageable, perhaps unreadable, length.

The song of the eighth bard, "The Witch of Fife," and the thirteenth bard's lay, "Kilmeny," have justifiably attracted the most favourable attention from literary critics. Both songs draw on traditional sources, but Hogg has fashioned each into his own creation. "The Witch of Fife" is a grotesquely comic ballad, moving with the velocity of the witches' flight. The descriptive language of the lay, written in old Scots dialect, is as fantastic as its subject matter:

And aye we mountit the sea-greene hillis,
 Quhill we brushit thro' the cludis of the hevin;
 Than sousit downright, like the stern-shot light,
 Fra the liftis blue casement driven. (1201-4)

This boisterousness contrasts with the ethereal serenity of "Kilmeny." This serenity is expressed in the lay's lingering iambic cadence. The pure beauty of the central character, Kilmeny, is echoed by Hogg's use of language:

In that greine wene Kilmeny lay,
 Her bosom happit with flouris gay;
 But the ayre was soft, and the silence deipe,
 And bonny Kilmeny fell sound asleipe.
 Scho kend ne mair, nor openit her e'e,
 Till wekit by the hymnis of ane farr countrye. (2877-82)

Interestingly, these two lays, the most commonly remarked upon and anthologised extracts from *The Queen's Wake*, are the only two written in Hogg's pseudo-archaic Scots. Yet neither of them wins a prize at the end of the wake. That honour goes to Gardyn, the singer of a gothic horror story, "Young Kennedy." The Ettrick bard's lay, "Old David," is awarded a consolation prize, a magic harp "framed by wizard of the wild" (5362).

The celebration itself is framed within the circumstances of its retelling. The narrator implores:

Then list, ye maidens, to my lay,
 Though old the tale and past the day;
 Those wakes, now play'd by minstrels poor,
 At midnight's darkest, chilliest hour—
 Those humble wakes now scorn'd by all,
 Were first begun in courtly hall,
 When royal Mary, blithe of mood,
 Kept holiday at Holyrood. (83-90)

In this way, Hogg cleverly writes himself into the lay. He is the narrator, the bard who first played his harp "by lone Saint Mary's side" (14).⁴ Hogg's presence in the *Wake* is neatly explained. The magic harp given as a consolation prize to the Ettrick bard by Queen Mary is the "Mountain Lyre" (8) of the introduction, which Hogg plays in accompaniment to his tale. At the end of *The Queen's Wake* the magic lyre becomes a symbol for poetic talent as Hogg acknowledges the influence of his friendship with Walter Scott and of his upbringing, full of traditional ballads sung to him by his mother:

Blest be his generous heart for aye!
 He told me where the relic lay;
 Pointed my way with ready will,
 Afar on Ettrick's wildest hill;
 Watch'd my first notes with curious eye,

⁴ This refers to St. Mary's Loch in Ettrick Forest. A memorial to Hogg stands at the head of the lake.

And wonder'd at my minstrelsy:
 He little ween'd a parent's tongue
 Such strains had o'er my cradle sung. (5468-75)

While it is true that Hogg revered Scott as his mentor and adviser, Scott did not always encourage Hogg's literary endeavours:

O could the bard I loved so long
 Reprove my fond aspiring song?
 Or could his tongue of candour say
 That I should throw my harp away?
 Just when her notes began with skill
 To sound beneath the southern hill,
 And twine around my bosom's core,
 How could we part forevermore?
 'Twas kindness all, I cannot blame,
 For bootless is the minstrel flame;
 But sure a bard might well have known
 Another's feelings by his own! (ed. Wallace 5476-87)

These lines refer to Scott's attempt to secure lodgings for Hogg on the condition that he should "put [his] poetical talent under lock and key for ever!" In his *Memoir of the Author's Life*, Hogg asks indignantly: "Does any body think Sir Walter was right there?" (116). Surely Scott's reputation as perhaps the most famous Scottish writer ever has never been threatened by that of the Ettrick Shepherd, despite the occasional dissenter such as Fitz-Greene Halleck:

Halleck ever held James Hogg in high estimation as a poet, and he told me once that few poems had afforded him so much delight as "The Queen's Wake." He deemed the Shepherd's lines, written for the famous Buccleugh Border celebration, much superior to Sir Walter Scott's. (James Wilson qtd. in Moulton 267-8)

Certainly Hogg followed Scott's example and took his advice to heart. For example, the narrative framework of *The Queen's Wake* consists of quick-moving octosyllabic couplets, imitating Scott's style in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* and *The Lady of the Lake*.⁵ Furthermore, between the second and third editions of the poem, Hogg changed the ending of "The Witch of Fife" at Scott's insistence. Valentina Bold comments that the amended ending, although attractive to sensitive literary audiences, lacks integrity. She goes on to say that Scott's interference shows contempt for peasant poets, who are only acceptable if shorn of offensive characteristics (77).

Hogg's own localised knowledge of traditional Scottish songs and stories is amplified through the voices of the twelve bards who perform in *The Queen's Wake*, making this poem a representation of aspects of the wider Scottish nation. His twelve bards present twelve different points-of-view on the Scottish condition, "yet each part is related to the whole through careful repetitions, contrasts and parallels... There is a definite attempt by Hogg, then, to indicate that the diverse parts contribute to a unity, in the same way that different groups of people make up the Scottish nation" (Groves 50). The nationalistic import of the poem is reinforced by its geographical coverage. Hogg has used a range of settings for the lays, running the length and breadth of Scotland.⁶

The nationalistic aspects of the poem are highlighted against a background of Scottish history. Following the reign of Mary Queen of Scots, the Union of the Crowns in 1603 was the first step in a process which culminated in the Act of Union of 1707. The formation of Britain through the integration of Scotland, England and Wales meant the extinction of Scottish parliamentary independence. The conditions of the treaty safeguarded the kirk and the Scottish legal and education systems, institutions often considered more important for Scottish national identity than parliament. However, the loss of a national parliament signalled the end of Scotland's status as a sovereign state, the "gauge and emblem" of a nation's freedom (Anderson 16). Legally, Scotland's sovereignty was not surrendered to England in 1707: it was surrendered *with* England's,

⁵ The opening couplet of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* finds an echo in these lines from *The Queen's Wake*: "Loud blew the blast—the evening came,/ The way was long, the minstrel lame" (2235-6).

⁶ See Appendix I.

the two kingdoms amalgamating to form a new state. However, due to Scotland's small population and comparative lack of wealth, the partnership was grossly unfair.⁷

Following these Acts of Union, the language and culture of the Scottish Lowlands, formerly protected by centuries of hostility, were slowly dominated by the encroaching English. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the Battle of Culloden in 1745,⁶ the British Parliament "devised legislation to undermine the cultural, political and economic distinctiveness of the Scottish Highlands. The wearing of tartan was banned on pain of imprisonment" (Colley *Britons* 119). The formation of Britain was a union of policy, not of affection (Colley 12). The size and status of Scotland made integration a politically and economically attractive option. However, as minor members of this new British nation, the Scots seemed doomed to lose their distinctive language and culture.

Hogg, writing more than a century after political amalgamation with England, creates a nationalistic tone in *The Queen's Wake* that is distinctly Scottish. He does this in several ways. First, from his early-nineteenth-century vantage point, Hogg looks back to the reign of Mary Stuart⁸, a time when Scotland was a sovereign state. Emphasising this autonomy, he sets the wake in Edinburgh, the focus of a distinctly Scottish cultural life. Using bards from various regions of Scotland, Hogg provides a wealth of Scottish song and story, the cultural by-products of national fervour, expressing the love inspired by a nation (Anderson 129). Hogg recounts the songs of these bards to the accompaniment of his own lyre, placing their poetry within the narrative framework of his own poem. The narrative framework, in its turn, works within the confines of actual events, as detailed in Hogg's annotations to the text. This movement from the interior to the exterior of the poem, constantly reinforced in *The Queen's Wake* by the narrative interruptions between the lays and emphasised finally by Hogg's notes, gives confirmation of the solidity of the single community Hogg is creating, embracing characters, author and reader (Anderson 33).

⁷ "Scotland had only about one-fifth the population of England: her wealth (as contemporaries measured it in terms of the yield from the land tax and from customs and excise revenue) was hardly one-fortieth: on these grounds, therefore, she was given representation in the Westminster Parliament of only six seats among 206 in the House of Lords, and forty-five among 568 in the House of Commons" (Smout 216).

⁸ The importance of Queen Mary's position in the *Wake* is reinforced by the dedication of the poem to her descendant, Princess Charlotte, daughter of George IV. Hogg explains: "As it related to the amusements of a young queen, I thought I could dedicate it to no one so appropriately as to her royal and beautiful descendant, the Princess Charlotte; which I did" (*Memoir* 31).

This idea of community is the basis of nationalism. The people of each nation are joined by common symbols, traditions, heroes, and places. The Scots, of course, are Celts and Watson notes that traditionally the Celts “valued hospitality, music, poetry, and feasts with plenty of fermented liquor to drink. Above all else they took pride in personal courage on the battlefield... Celtic society was patriarchal, based on tradition and status within the tribe as well as loyalty to the family and its elaborate ties of kinship... Songs and epics were composed and recited by privileged tribal bards” (9). In *The Queen's Wake* Hogg uses these traditional, shared images to construct a picture of Scottish nationalism.