

# The King and the City: On the Iconology of George IV in Edinburgh

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*This paper considers the iconography of George IV's visit to Edinburgh in 1822. It shifts attention from the ways in which his body was staged within the urban fabric (in the various paintings, drawings and prints that were produced on the occasion of the royal visit) onto the way in which the city was unfolded before the king's eye. This was orchestrated in various ways: by control of the routes taken by the royal procession through the city; by the marshalling and costuming of the citizenry; and by various temporary erections, which included a series of 'triumphal arches' through which the king passed. The paper stresses the character of the king's visit as an optical event, a kind of spectacular that entailed a very specific structure of spectatorship: the king observed the city, and the city watched the king, watching it. This hierarchical structure of display and observation would become the lodestone of James Simpson's argument, expressed in a series of letters to Scott after the visit, regarding its moral consequences. More generally, the optical presentation of the city to the king is intriguingly situated at the intersection of multiple visual modalities in which the urban fabric, at the same time as it is being made to appear as a sequence of theatrical and symbolically-loaded tableaux, becomes the object of a peculiarly modern touristic appreciation.*

## 1.

The story of George IV's visit to Edinburgh in 1822 is well known. Scholars have often stressed its pantomimic aspects, and their writing has capitalised upon the improbable costumery and paraphernalia of the event and its larger-than-life cast of characters all acting under the direction of the stage manager, Sir Walter Scott. And in terms of the critique of ideology, the king's visit has come to stand as one of the classic historical sites of the 'invention of tradition', even if, as the scepticism of many contemporary responses shows, its ideological efficacy was always rather questionable. It may be difficult to avoid incredulity when dealing with the visit, but, at least for the length of a paper, I'm going to try to spurn the usual pleasures of writing of this event.

My initial intention was that the focus would be upon the figure of the king in the city, and that the paper would analyse, by reference to the political context of his visit, the ways in which his body was staged within the urban fabric in the various paintings, drawings and prints that were produced on the occasion of the royal visit. But on reading – particularly the various 'eye-witness' accounts of the king's entry into the city from

Leith – more closely, it became clear that what was equally, and perhaps more, important was the way in which the city was, in a highly calculated way, unfolded before the king's eye. This was orchestrated in various ways: by control of the route taken by the procession through the city; by the marshalling and costuming of the citizenry; and by various temporary erections, which included a series of 'triumphal arches' through which the king passed and an encampment of 'military tents' upon Salisbury Crags and Arthur's Seat. It seems to me to be important to stress the king's visit as an optical event, a kind of spectacular in which both the king and the city were staged. Furthermore, this entailed a very specific structure of spectatorship: the king observed the city, and the city watched the king, watching it. As I'll try to point out, this involved, at particular points, an emblematisation of the body of the king and the citizenry. This hierarchical structure of display and observation would in fact become the lodestone of James Simpson's argument, expressed in a series of letters to Scott after the visit, regarding its moral consequences. More generally, the optical presentation of the city to the king is intriguing because it is situated at the intersection of multiple visual modalities: the urban fabric, which is made to appear as a sequence of theatrical and symbolically-loaded tableaux, also becomes the object of a peculiarly touristic appreciation; at moments, too, the panorama is invoked.

## 2.

When George IV stepped onto the quayside at Leith on 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1822, he was the first Hanoverian monarch to step onto Scottish soil. The royal squadron had in fact dropped anchor the previous day, when Walter Scott had sailed to the royal yacht to present the king with a brooch with the motto *Long Life to the King of Scotland*, and a silver knife, fork, and spoon that had belonged to Prince Charles Édouard Stuart. Thus began a set of symbolic displacements and identifications intended to stress the unification of the Hanoverian and Stuart lineages in the figure of the king. As Scott had insisted in his anonymously published and widely circulated stage-directions for the event, *Hints Addressed to the Inhabitants of Edinburgh and Others, in Prospect of His Majesty's Visit*, "King George IV comes hither as the descendant of a long line of Scottish kings. The blood of the heroic Bruce is in his veins ... In short, we are THE CLAN, and our king is THE CHIEF."<sup>3</sup>

Following the ceremonies at the quayside, the royal procession moved along St. Bernard Street in Leith, where it passed below a triumphal arch inscribed with the motto 'Scotland Hails With Joy The Presence Of Her King'. From there it moved along Constitution Street where it met another, this time proclaiming, in English and Latin, 'O Happy Day'. Continuing, the procession turned and began the slow climb toward Edinburgh along Leith Walk. "No city in Europe can boast a nobler avenue" boasted Scott in his *Hints*.<sup>4</sup> At Union Street another arch was encountered, this sited at the boundary of the royalty and representing the city-gate. Here the Usher of the White Rod advanced and, knocking on the door, demanded entry for the king. When the royal carriage had passed through, the Lord Provost presented the monarch with the keys to the city.

At this point I want to cite an extended passage from an anonymous account which was published in the same year as the visit. I'm quoting this because it powerfully conveys the serial tableaux-like quality of the unfolding city: even the attribution of the book – *By an Eye-Witness of Most of the Scenes which were then Exhibited* – gives us the impression of a sequence of pictures. So, after passing through the arch at Union Street

*(...) a new scene opened upon the view of the august Stranger at every step of his progress towards the palace of his ancestors. A number of streets diverge from the head of the magnificent avenue by which he had entered the city; the route through it on which he had now entered is of a spacious breadth, and lined with noble buildings; the long ranges of palaces to the north, and in front ... were succeeded in diversified panorama by the romantic accumulation of buildings on the south side of a picturesque valley; on the one hand was the castle, towering in majestic grandeur, fitted to recall the recollection of many a past event, on the other hand was the Calton-hill, crowned with Nelson's monument ... These objects, as they passed in succession under his Majesty's review, evidently excited his admiration: and at last, when he came in full view of the buildings of Waterloo-Place, he fairly stood up in his carriage and exclaimed, 'How superb!' His Majesty was also deeply struck with the bold scenery of Arthur's seat and Salisbury Crags ... When the turrets of Holyrood came into view, the anthem of 'God save the King' was sung, which had a fine effect; and as the procession moved forward, and arrived in front of the Palace, the shouts of the multitudes*

*which covered the eastern and southern slopes of the Calton and Abbey hills were heard like the noise of so many waters.*<sup>5</sup>

As I said, this description comes from the anonymous "eye-witness", but extracts could easily have been drawn from the accounts by, for example, Robert Mudie or James Simpson to make the same point. The structure of the descriptions is remarkably similar, with a constant insistence on the viewpoint of the king. One of the engravings by W.H. Lizars that accompany Mudie's text illustrates the arch erected at Union Street. Figuratively it seems strangely impoverished and underplayed; but the optical structure of the narratives of the royal entry suggest that the arches were not so much iconographic figures in the city-scape, as markers of certain moments when, as it were, the curtain came down and the scene was changed.

## 3.

The sense of the visit of the king as manifested through a series of frames that locate him in varying relationships to the city and its citizenry is central to the various paintings and graphic representations produced. J.M.W. Turner's proposal for a cycle of paintings recording the main events, from the king's arrival on 14<sup>th</sup> August to his departure on 29<sup>th</sup>, stands out.<sup>6</sup> But equally striking is the way apparently singular images were consciously located within a notional pictorial series. This is nicely illustrated by a commercial pamphlet that was issued to advertise a copper-plate print, taken after a painting that was on public display at an address in Princes Street in 1822 illustrating George's arrival at Holyrood Palace. The pamphlet pointedly locates the subject of the print, the entry to Holyrood, within a sequence of scenes that it textually reconstructs, beginning with the disembarkation at Leith.<sup>7</sup>

The descriptions of the tableaux presented to the king during his entry smack strongly of associationist aesthetics. Certainly by 1822, associationist approaches to art were commonplace. They had been given a powerful formulation 30 years earlier in Archibald Alison's *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* (1790), which went through another four editions between 1811 and 1817. Its influence was widespread and Constable, for one, counted himself an admirer. The popularity of Alison's work was encouraged by a lengthy review of the second edition by Francis Jeffrey, published in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1811. Scott knew Jeffrey well; the critic



had reviewed *Marmion*, if intemperately, and in August 1810 penitentially sent him proofs of his article on *Lady of the Lake* prior to publication. Scott and Alison were certainly acquainted: in fact in the letter which accompanied the proofs Jeffrey had invited Scott to a dinner at his house with guests that included Alison, also an Edinburgh resident.<sup>8</sup> It's difficult to be precise about the influence of Alison's thought on Scott, and how it might relate to Scott's orchestration of the royal visit. But in any event, associationism was in the air.

It is clear that observers were highly sensitive to the politico-historical associations of the scenes that were presented to the king and with which he interacted. James Simpson found the landing at Leith "suitable to our naval character, associated with thoughts of victory" yet at the same time tinged with melancholy for this too was the pier upon which Mary Stuart knelt in "youthful loveliness and early widowhood"<sup>9</sup>; when the castle appeared it was described rather awkwardly by the anonymous "eye-witness" as "fitted to recall the recollection of many a past event"<sup>10</sup>; the prisons which the king passed on rounding Calton Hill signified the rule of law in the Hanoverian state whose justice was obviously even accepted by the inmates who "in spite of their unhappy conditions, manifested their union of feeling with the passing scene without, by the display of banners of welcome"<sup>11</sup>; the monument to Nelson upon Calton Hill instantly evoked "triumphs attained over insolent fire"<sup>12</sup> and the "the hero whose nautical thunders had restored the courses of the political world"<sup>13</sup>; and the scene of Arthur's Seat and Salisbury Crags, which had been encamped with tents for the occasion and whose likeness to a highland landscape was much remarked upon, may have suggested the military subduing of the highland landscape after the 'forty-five'. Here the documents' insistence on the 'panoramic' viewpoint of the king seems not insignificant. The historical emergence of the panorama as a representational form is closely linked to Thomas and Paul Sandby and to Hanoverian military activities in the highlands in the second half of the eighteenth century. Certainly, recent scholarship has emphasised the commanding, instrumental character of the elevated panoramic view, one recent essay concluding: "The panoramic visual field ... is an important coloniser's tool, first brought to perfection against [the Highland Scots] before being exported across the globe in the service of Hanoverian geopolitical ambition."<sup>14</sup> Of all the scenes, however, the most "picturesque and most national" was adjudged by Mudie to be the king's

descent to the palace at Holyrood. He looked, Mudie, writes, "...with emotions which may well be conceived, upon the gilded spires of his ancestors."<sup>15</sup>

Andrew Hemingway's studies have underlined the character of associationist aesthetics as a 'proto-semiology', and have pointed out its proximity to early nineteenth-century preoccupations with antiquities, local topography, and national landscape and the ideologies within which those preoccupations were embedded.<sup>16</sup> Here we are, I would argue, in the midst of a series of ideas and forces central to the rise of Romanticism, at least in the Scottish context. Association, through the vehicle of the imagination, which is accorded a new centrality, transports us away from the immediacy of the object, that is, from the empirical content of perception. This is entirely in accord with the re-imagining of the city that Scott's literature invites: that is to say, a new consideration of the fabric of the city as a complex of signs that convey historical events and the national past. Indeed in some ways, the treatment of the city in its presentation to the king as a sequence of tableaux seems anticipated in the dramatic rendering Scott's own works, such as the stage sets devised by Alexander Nasmyth in 1820 for *The Heart of Midlothian*.

#### 4.

The particular mode of spectatorship enjoined by the visit, to which I referred at the start, is most clearly evident in the events of 22 August, when the king proceeded from the Palace to the Castle. Along the route, on either side, the citizenry were arrayed – according to estate, profession, and incorporation – in what amounted to a symbolic display of the body politic. Scott spelled out the arrangements in his Hints, which had been so contrived, he went on, "... that his Majesty will, on this occasion, have a full view of the various classes of his subjects, while, at the same moment, they will have the most full and gratifying sight of their PRINCE."<sup>17</sup> "Scotland and Scotchmen", he reminded his readers, "are altogether a new subject for his observation."<sup>18</sup> The emblematic quality of the event is clear: the gardeners stood with elaborate constructions of flowers and fruit; the glass-blowers with their rods<sup>19</sup>; the incorporated crafts all with their banners "as in ancient times."<sup>20</sup> This emblemism, however, paled alongside that of the figure of the king who, on arriving at the castle, ascended to the Half-Moon Battery before turning and waving to the crowds below. Simpson's description in his letters to Scott

drives home the point in no uncertain terms: "While he looked round on the noble picture of the city and country, land and sea, hill and valley spread out before him, and saw at one glance the assembled myriads of his subjects by whom he had just been hailed, he was himself visible to every eye; and alone, on the battlements, the royal standard waving over his head, the artillery flashing under his feet, while every tongue shouted and every eye glistened, stood the commanding figure of the British Monarch, the father of the people, blessing and blessed by his exulting children."<sup>21</sup>

In his reflections on the royal entry into Edinburgh on 15<sup>th</sup> August, Simpson had argued that a "moral power" flowed from the sight of the king in the city. His presence "enhanced" what was around it (city, trophy, and mountain scenery, as the author put it) and his regard revitalised them for the citizenry. As Simpson writes: "The King's eye was on these, and, at the same moment, they were new in their interest to the oldest inhabitant." This anticipates the argument he would build in his final two letters which becomes, at the same time, an assault upon Jacobinism: these also underscore the primary importance of the king's visit as an optical event; its moral and political consequences derive, for Simpson, from its character as a spectacle. Drawing on Adam Smith's argument in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Simpson posits that we have a natural tendency to sympathise with the successes of others, rather than with their disappointments; and this in turn leads us to strive for what we call 'distinction', which derives from the sympathy of others with one's success and joy. Simpson quotes Smith: "The man of rank is observed by all the world. Every body is eager to look at him, and to conceive, by sympathy, the joy and exaltation with which his circumstances naturally inspire him. His notions are the objects of the public care. Scarce a word, scarce a gesture can fall from him that is altogether neglected. In a great assembly he is the person upon whom all direct their eyes; it is upon him that the passions seem all to wait with expectation, in order to receive that movement and distinction that he shall impress upon them."<sup>22</sup> This scopophilic drive which hierarchical social systems satisfy is what republicanism fails to reckon with; and this, at the same time, is a failure to reckon with the human constitution itself. In place of the king, republicanism substitutes the grim spectacle of the guillotine, only in time to reinvent him as an Emperor/Dictator. Smith's philosophy of sympathy allows Simpson to ascribe

a particular moral consequence to the emblematic spectacle of the king in the city whereby its very splendour is the occasion, he argues, for a deep class *rapprochement* founded upon a 'natural' dynamics of sympathy in which the body politic unites before the spectacle of the king and is confirmed in it.

#### NOTES TO THE TEXT

<sup>1</sup> This text was originally presented at the *Sixth International Conference on Urban History: Power, Knowledge and Society in the City*, Edinburgh, 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> September, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> I am referring of course to Hugh Trevor-Roper's essay "The Invention of Tradition: the Highland Tradition of Scotland" in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1994): 15-41.

<sup>3</sup> (Walter Scott), *Hints Addressed to the Inhabitants of Edinburgh and Others, in Prospect of His Majesty's Visit, by an Old Citizen*, Bell and Bradfute, etc., Edinburgh (1822): 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> Scott: 11.

<sup>5</sup> *A Narrative of the Visit of George IV to Scotland, in August 1822: By an Eye Witness of Most of the Scenes which were then Exhibited*, Macredie, Skelly and Co., Princes Street; and T. Nelson, High Street, Edinburgh (1822): 25-26.

<sup>6</sup> Gerald Finley, *Turner and George the Fourth in Edinburgh, 1822*, Tate Gallery and Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh (1981): 25-49.

<sup>7</sup> *A Picturesque Sketch of the Landing of His Most Gracious Majesty King George IV from the Royal Squadron Lying in Leith Roads on the 16<sup>th</sup> Day [sic] of August 1822 to His Arrival at the Palace of Holyrood in the City of Edinburgh*, Printed for the author at the Observer Office, Edinburgh (1822).

<sup>8</sup> David Douglas (ed), *Familiar letters of Sir Walter Scott*, vol. 1, David Douglas, Edinburgh (1894): 185-186.

<sup>9</sup> James Simpson, *Letters to Sir Walter Scott, BART., on the Moral and Political Character and Effects of the Visit to Scotland in August 1822, of his Majesty King George IV*, Waugh and Innes, Hunter Square, etc., Edinburgh (1822): 44.

<sup>10</sup> *A Narrative ...* : 25

<sup>11</sup> *A Picturesque Sketch ...* : 6

<sup>12</sup> *A Narrative ...* : 26

<sup>13</sup> *A Picturesque Sketch ...* : 6

<sup>14</sup> Michael Charlesworth, "Thomas Sandby Climbs the Hoover Stand: the Politics of Panoramic Drawing in Eighteenth-Century Britain" in *Art History*, vol. 19, no. 2, June (1996): 247-266; 263. See also Andrew Kennedy, "Representing the Three Kingdoms: Hanoverianism and the Virtuosi's Museum" in Mark Dorrian and Gillian Rose, *Deterritorialisations: Revisioning Landscapes and Politics*, Black Dog Publishing, London (2004).

<sup>15</sup> Robert Mudie, *A Historical Account of His Majesty's Visit to Scotland*, Oliver and Boyd, High Street, Edinburgh (1822): 108.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Hemingway, *Landscape Imagery and Urban Culture in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1992): 72.

<sup>17</sup> Scott: 20.

<sup>18</sup> Scott: 21.

<sup>19</sup> *A Narrative ...* : 43.

<sup>20</sup> Scott, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Simpson: 24.

<sup>22</sup> Simpson: 115.