19th April 2024

History

"Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on reinventiveness. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*

One of the good things about my recent visit to Abbottsford House, the home in the Scottish Borders of Sir Walter Scott, is that the ticket permits me entrance to Abbottsford for the whole of the year ahead. A great idea, I reckon, as there is *so* much more I need to go back to see, so that I can take in its meaning and significance.

Here is living history. The door of the demolished Old Tolbooth prison in Edinburgh is built into an exterior wall in Abbottsford ("the door to nowhere", our guide said) and the prison keys hang in the hallway. On display are two Highland broadswords used at the Battle of Culloden, and relics of the Battle of Waterloo. One of the skulls in the entrance hall is believed to be a cast of the skull of Robert the Bruce, made when Bruce's tomb was opened in Dunfermline Abbey a few years before Abbottsford was built. There's a writing cabinet made from wood salvaged from a ship-wrecked galleon of the Spanish Armada, and a chair made from "the only remaining wood of the House of Robroyston" in which William Walace was killed. There are newspaper cuttings of the trials of Edinburgh's notorious body-snatchers, Burke and Hare. You see why I need to go back?

Walter Scott was a collector *par excellence.* A macabre fascination with Scotland's gruesome past? Possibly a hoarder? Maybe. But for me, his eclectic collection is a reminder that history matters – Scotland's story, significant events, international history, noteworthy people, ancient sagas – not just so a record can be kept, and historical episodes highlighted, but so that lessons can be learned. This is not being stuck in the past, yearning for halcyon days or, indeed, moving on from unfortunate events. This is learning, and reinventing, and, hopefully, not repeating historical mistakes.

The writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes reminds us, "There is nothing new under the sun." My visit to Abbottsford suggested to me that Sir Walter Scott knew that well enough.

A prayer for today

Lord, I'm grateful that I have a little part to play in your history. Amen

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