Symbolizing Succession: Walter Scott’s and Charlotte Yonge’s Uses of Heraldry

by Diana Powell

Family coats of arms and wider representations of the landed gentry — including portraits, armour, and ancestral houses — were employed by Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) in his novels to pass down inherited ideas, duties, and beliefs to his protagonist-heirs, who are then charged with faithfully embodying their inheritance in a changed and changing world. This essay will examine Scott’s interest in transmitting and adapting the past through heraldic symbols in his novel Waverley (1814), and Scott’s influence on the popular Victorian author Charlotte Yonge (1823–1901) who also used coats of arms, mottos, and land to represent inherited principles in her Tractarian novel The Pillars of the House (1873). Feudal inheritors naturally faced less opposition in adapting their inheritance than modern heirs who faced changes political and social that threatened to render obsolete their founding principles. In Waverley, the young English heir must negotiate his ancestors’ Stuart loyalties during the Jacobite uprising of 1745. Waverley has been chosen as a case study, rather than one of Scott’s novels with a medieval setting, because it reveals the difficulties besetting the continuation of an ancient idea in relatively modern times. Likewise, one of Yonge’s later novels is chosen in order to heighten the fact that Yonge, worried about the survival of her own faith and aware of the great social changes brought about by industrialization, spiritualized Scott’s inheritance in her novels. For Yonge, family coats of arms represented a family’s moral and religious obligations rather than the traditional duties of the then-diminishing landed gentry. Whereas heraldic symbols in Waverley might cause the heir presumptive to question which side of the battle he should be on, for Yonge, these symbols were a reminder of an enduring commitment to pass on the faith to the next generation. As such, her protagonists, the Underwood family, have a motto and coat of arms that are symbols not of temporal power, but of patient suffering and endurance. For both Scott and Yonge, heraldic symbols offered stability and continuity through the family line but also adaptability with each new heir: coats of arms and emblems, and what they represented symbolically, could be tested in new circumstances.

Scott described heraldry’s beginnings in his essay ‘On Chivalry’, written for The Encyclopædia Britannica in 1818:

> There was deadly offence taken if one knight, without right, assumed the armorial bearings of another; and history is full of disputes on that head, some of which terminated fatally. The heralds were the persons appealed to on these occasions, when the dispute was carried on in peace, and hence flowed the science, as it was called, of Heraldry, with all its fantastic niceties. By degrees the crest and device became also hereditary, as well as the bearings on the shield. In addition to his armorial bearings, the knight distinguished himself in battle by shouting out his war-cry, which was echoed by his followers. It was usually the name of some favourite saint, united with that of his own family.¹

Scott shows the development of heraldic representation, from a war-time practicality of identification to a social widening of that identity through family and faith. Thus, a young knight rides into battle with a charged emblem that represents not only his lineage, but also, as will be argued, his inherited responsibilities. Scott’s interest in protagonists who are caught between disparate loyalties emphasizes the high symbolic status of the coat of arms: an ongoing but, significantly, unwritten form of guidance for the heir, who can, by taking up the sword and shield, reinterpret them.

Despite its antiquarian associations for many people today, for Scott and Yonge heraldry’s power lay in its ability to communicate ancient principles, not for the sole purpose of preservation, but to give them new life. Despite his antiquarian interests, as a historical novelist

Scott attempted to revive and recreate rather than to preserve the past. He wrote that *Waverley* was a very old attempt of mine to embody some traits of those characters and manners peculiar to Scotland, the last remnants of which vanished during my own youth, so that few or no traces now remain. Embodiment is key. To make the past present and achieve some translatability in the novel, some license must be taken. Scott understood that dogmatic adherence to the past could lead to its rejection, which is why he makes his antiquarian characters the object of gentle mockery. The Baron of Bradwardine’s obsession with the right to remove the Chevalier’s boots in *Waverley* and Lady Margaret’s worshipful approach to a chair that Charles II once sat in in *The Tale of Old Mortality* (1816) are humorous reminders that a past that still matters cannot be embodied in ceremonial forms or physical objects alone.

It was precisely Scott’s ability to translate the core principles and ideas of the past to a new audience that made him so attractive to the Tractarians, who saw absolute adherence to the letter of the law as fanatical. The prominent Tractarian John Henry Newman (1801–90) wrote critically of ‘antiquarian fanatics’ who were ‘urging the ancient doctrine and discipline upon the present age in any other except essential points, and not allowing fully that many things are unessential.’ The Tractarians, who feared Evangelicalism on one side and German Higher Criticism on the other, saw themselves as the *Via Media*. Between the letter of the law and its dismissal stood the Church. Newman, who believed strongly in Apostolic Succession, argued in his sermon ‘Personal Influence’ that the embodiment of scripture, a teacher’s representative example, could allow the ‘like-minded’ to ‘succeed him.’ In order for faith to remain relevant, there must be a living example and embodiment of it.

The Catholic Emancipation Act (1829) and the Reform Act of 1832 felt to many Tractarians like direct attacks on the Church of England. As Catholics and Dissenters were given more rights and the Church of England’s presence in Ireland was greatly diminished, the Tractarians turned to Scott as an example of how ancient ideas could be transmitted to and adopted by modern readers. John Keble (1792-1866) reflected in his review of J. G. Lockhart’s biography of Scott that Scott’s works promoted a respect and admiration for the past that laid the groundwork for the Tractarians:

> Whatever of good feeling and salutary prejudice exists in favour of ancient institutions, […] is it not in good measure attributable to the chivalrous tone which his writings have diffused over the studies and tastes of those who are now in the prime of manhood? His rod, like that of a beneficent enchanter, has touched and guarded hundreds, both men and women, who would else have been reforming enthusiasts.

Scott had not only fascinated his readers; he had also encouraged a cultural movement away from modernity’s destructive tendencies: this ‘chivalrous tone’ encouraged the return to principles and ideas that were still powerful and attractive.

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2 Scott’s home, Abbotsford, Roxburghshire, displays his collection, which includes suits of armour as well as artefacts once owned by Napoleon and Rob Roy.  
According to Michael McKeon, ‘questions of virtue have an inherently narrative focus because they are concerned with genealogical succession and individual progress, with how human capacity is manifested in and through time’. Just as *Waverley* would be Scott’s attempt to perpetuate Scottish customs and beliefs, so Charlotte Yonge would use *Pillars of the House* to defend her faith. In both novels, the heraldic emblems ensure an ongoing, developing relationship between the present and the past.

**Waverley: The Problems of Adaptation**

Scott’s protagonist Edward Waverley begins life estranged from his family estate. His father Richard’s rebellion from the family’s political and social beliefs has led to Edward’s separation from his inheritance. Richard abandoned his unpromising aristocratic role as younger son to become a self-made man and a Whig politician. It is through the symbols of inheritance, namely the family shield, that Edward is first made aware of his ideological and material inheritance. Through a chance meeting as an infant, Edward instinctively claims his family arms (Fig. 1) and is reclaimed by the senior line of his family:

> I know not […] in what manner [Edward] associated a shield emblazoned with three ermines with the idea of personal property, but he no sooner beheld this family emblem than he stoutly determined on vindicating his right to the splendid vehicle on which it was displayed. The Baronet arrived while the boy’s maid was in vain endeavouring to make him desist from his determination to appropriate the gilded coach and six. [...] In the round-faced rosy cherub before him, bearing his eye and his name, and vindicating a hereditary title to his family, affection, and patronage, by means of a tie which Sir Everard held as sacred as either Garter or Blue-mantle, Providence seemed to have granted to him the very object best calculated to fill up the void in his hopes and his affections.

The language verges on the religious: Edward is reborn into the ‘sacred’ family line in that moment. The abrupt transformation, however, is only visible to Sir Everard, who, as the childless head of the family, feels the change most acutely. The language glorifies the reconnection of the new heir with his past, but the moment is also ‘vindicating’ for all Waverleys. As the new heir, Edward strengthens the family line but also ensures that its ideas and beliefs have a relevance

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*Fig. 1: Sans tache* (without spots): a rendition of the Waverley family arms. © Peter N. Lindfield.

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in the present. Sir Everard is also rescued by this renewal. As he has not married, or fathered a child, he will now look to Edward as his legal and ideological heir.

The coat of arms is not only the catalyst for a reunion but is also, as a visual reminder of the Waverleys’ collective history, a powerful inhibitor. Earlier in the story, it is a glance at the family arms, hung prominently in Waverley Hall, that arrests Sir Everard as he is about to disinherit his ‘disloyal’ brother in anger:

This scion had committed a further offence against the head and source of their gentility, by the intermarriage of their representative with Judith, heiress of Oliver Bradshawe, of Highley Park, whose arms, the same with those of Bradshawe the regicide, they had quartered with the ancient coat of Waverley, [...] He looked at the attorney with some desire to issue his fiat, when the sun, emerging from behind a cloud, poured at once its chequered light through the stained window of the gloomy cabinet in which they were seated. The Baronet’s eye, as he raised it to the splendour, fell right upon the central scutcheon, impressed with the same device which his ancestor was said to have borne in the field of Hastings; three ermines passant, argent, in a field azure, with its appropriate motto, sans tache. “May our name rather perish,” thought Sir Everard, “than that ancient and loyal symbol should be blended with the dishonoured insignia of a traitorous round-head!”

All this was the effect of the glimpse of a sun-beam just sufficient to light Lawyer Clippurse to mend his pen. The pen was mended in vain. The attorney was dismissed, with directions to hold himself in readiness on the first summons.10

The irony is that in considering disinheritance, Sir Everard risks committing anew the very attack on succession for which he condemns his sister-in-law’s ancestors. At first, it is the historical, ended conflict, refreshed through its representation in the coat of arms, that magnifies the injury of his brother’s marriage. Yet while Richard Waverley’s choice of wife indicates his modern political views, it is not such an extreme a break with the past as Sir Everard’s reaction threatens to be. Although the family motto, sans tache (‘spotless’), seems to encourage in its heirs uncompromising extremes, the glimpse of the shield reorders their importance and Sir Everard narrowly avoids destroying the house of Waverley. For, by disinheriting his brother, Sir Everard would have committed fresh treachery, using the modern form of the law to manipulate succession and ultimately ending the family line in the person of himself, Sir Everard. The family arms remind Sir Everard of his duty not only to history but also to the future: he must adapt his ‘spotless’ position to a greyer union.

After his initial meeting with his bachelor uncle, Edward moves to the family home on the estate of Waverley-Honour. His physical transfer back to the family seat is still complicated by his loyalty to his father, yet apart from negotiating between his father’s and his uncle’s very different choices of tutor, Edward’s youth is uneventful. His allegiance to his disparate loyalties, Jacobite-Tory and Hanoverian-Whig, however, are tested when his father enlists him in the army of King George II. Although serving the king is a family tradition, the difficulty of which king is heightened as latent political and social divisions become more distinct in the days before the Jacobite rising of 1745. Whether or not Edward can adapt his inheritance in these new circumstances becomes the central question of the novel. Despite his conflicting feelings about Edward’s commission, Sir Everard negotiates for him the rank of Captain. Excited by the adventure and his sense of fulfilling the heroic roles of his knight-ancestors, Edward is unaware of the changes that will result from this venture. When Sir Everard goes to take leave of him, Edward is standing, holding the family sword, beneath a painting of its original owner. Again it is Sir Everard, not his chosen heir, who realizes the importance of this moment:

Sir Everard entered, and after a glance at the picture and another at his nephew, began a little speech, which, however, soon dropt into the natural simplicity of his common manner, agitated upon the present occasion by no common feeling.

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10 Ibid., pp. 8-9.
“Nephew,” he said; and then, as mending his phrase, “My dear Edward—it is God’s will, and also the will of your father, whom, under God, it is your duty to obey, that you should leave us to take up the profession of arms, in which so many of your ancestors have been distinguished. I have made such arrangements as will enable you to take the field as their descendant, and as the probable heir of the house of Waverley—And, sir, in the field of battle you will remember what name you bear—and, Edward, my dear boy, remember also that you are the last of that race, and the only hope of its revival depends upon you; therefore, as far as duty and honour permit, avoid danger—I mean unnecessary danger—And keep no company with rakes, gamblers, and whigs, of whom, it is to be feared, there are but too many in the service into which you are going.\textsuperscript{11}

Sir Everard is torn between addressing Edward’s inherited duty and his individuality. Thus, he initially approaches Edward with a formal ‘speech’ on his responsibility to the collective family honour, but Sir Everard’s emotional connection to his nephew forbids such an impersonal parting, and the ‘common manner’ of a fatherly uncle creeps in. This modified approach is vital: to address Edward only as an heir with duties would be unfeeling, but to tell Edward only of his concern and love would reduce his negotiation of his nephew’s representative role and responsibilities. What might appear a clumsy parting speech is actually the creation of a space for Edward’s future, wherein he revives and reclaims the past on a personal and representative level. Edward does not simply replace the knight in the portrait. Language is key to this careful adjustment: ‘unnecessary’ (‘unnecessary danger’). Although Sir Everard is at times portrayed as a quixotic character, his pause in punctuation ‘— I mean unnecessary danger—’ communicates his desire, through redefining danger, for both levels of responsibility, the personal and collective, to be embodied together in Edward.

Sir Everard’s awareness of Edward’s less than straightforward fulfilment of his ancestor’s role stands in contrast to Sir Everard’s friend and Edward’s Jacobite Scottish host, the Baron of Bradwardine, whose determined adherence to the past makes him a semi-comical character in the novel. The ludicrousness of his position is apparent in his description of the family coat of arms:

“It represents,” he said, “the chosen crest of our family, a bear, as ye observe, and rampant; because a good herald will depict every animal in its noblest posture, as a horse salient, a greyhound currant, and, as may be inferred, a ravenous animal in actu ferociori, or in a voracious, lacerating, and devouring posture. [...] And thus, as Virgilius hath it —

\begin{quote}
Mutemus clypeos, Danaumque insignia nobis
Aptemus.*
\end{quote}

* ‘Then change we shields and their devices bear.’ Dryden\textsuperscript{12}

The Baron’s speech reveals his approach to the minutiae of tradition and, unwittingly, his lack of comprehension of its meaning for the times: directions in Virgil’s poem mimic his lack of understanding that the shields are ‘Greek to us,’ yet the Baron follows them. This inflexible approach to inheritance is unsustainable, and the human cost of the Baron’s blind obedience is made clear when, rather than reward his faithful daughter Rose, the Baron follows tradition, despite not being bound by the restrictions of an entail, and in his will leaves his family home, Tully-Veolan, to a nineteenth or twentieth cousin. The Baron’s failures are made apparent when Tully-Veolan is sacked by the Hanoverian army and the distant cousin shows disloyalty by selling his inheritance. The point becomes even more poignant if, as has been claimed, Scott based Tully-Veolan on Traquair House, Peeblesshire, the longest continually inhabited home in Scotland. Understanding the family arms’ symbolic status is, therefore, essential to the family’s continued power and future fulfilment.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p. 27.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 49.
Edward will rescue both Waverley and Bradwardine inheritances through his marriage to the Baron’s daughter Rose. When Edward asks for Rose’s hand, it is significant that the Baron is landless, and feels he cannot press too hard ‘to insist upon certain compliances respecting name and bearings’, a circumstance for which Edward is grateful: ‘Heaven be praised, thought Edward to himself, “that Sir Everard does not hear these scruples! the three ermines passant and rampant bear would certainly have gone together by the ears.”’ The older generation, like their heraldry, cannot find such an easy meeting ground as Edward and Rose. That is not to say that the Bradwardine line is eclipsed through Edward’s marriage. Instead, Edward’s and Rose’s marriage is instrumental in the modification and continuation of both inheritances. With the help of his English protector Colonel Talbot, and in a complicated series of legal property transfers, Edward secures Tully-Veolan, restores it, and ensures that it will pass after the Baron’s death to himself, Rose, and their issue. The Baron then adds a legal clause whereby if Rose and Edward have more than one son, Tully-Veolan will go to the second son, who is to carry the Bradwardine name and arms alone. This re-grafting of the line of succession ensures its continuation yet also hints at the possibility that one day members of the family may once again be positioned on opposing sides in political conflict. Yet the restoration, of not only the Bradwardine family seat, but also of its coat of arms, its owner, and its potential heirs shows not the loss of 1745, but a future promise.

The Pillars of the House: Spiritualizing Inheritance

The Pillars of the House was written seven years after the death of the leading Tractarian John Keble and twenty-eight years after the Tractarians’ most eloquent polemicist, John Henry Newman, had converted to Roman Catholicism. The novel is concerned with the restoration of a faith and a Church that seemed increasingly marginalized in modern Britain. Yonge’s broad cast of characters and even wider list of topics and settings (including British colonialism, emigration to Australia, the London theatre and art scene) make the novel consciously contemporary in its sense of Britain’s changing and changed culture. In comparison, The Heir of Redclyffe (1853), written twenty years earlier, is Yonge’s initial template for the question of how to make the past relevant to the future, employing a setting and format which are closer to those of Yonge’s literary predecessor, Scott. Guy Morville, the ‘heir’ of this earlier novel, inherits the ancestral home from his grandfather.

The Pillars of the House, in contrast, begins with the heir indirectly and lawfully displaced from his inheritance by his family. Felix, the main protagonist of Pillars, is the eldest son of a clergyman whose wife (also his cousin) was denied her inheritance by a badly-written will. To the surprise of their local community and friends, the Underwoods look for reasons to forgive, instead of contesting the will, effectively resigning the land and accepting a life of poverty as their providential lot. The Underwood coat of arms is emphasized from the beginning (Fig. 2):

Mr. Underwood opened the first leaf of a volume of St. Augustine, beside him, a relic of former days, the family shield and motto within — namely, a cross potent, or crutch-shaped, and the old English motto, ‘UNDER WODE, UNDER RODE.’

‘Under wood, under rood,’ he repeated. ‘It was once but sing-song to me. Now what a sermon! The load is the Cross. Bear thy cross, and thy cross will bear thee, like little Geraldine’s cross potent — Rod and Rood, Cross and Crutch — all the same etymologically and veritably.’

13 Ibid., pp. 337–8.
Yonge poignantly ties together the motto, shield, and saint, but with an unexpected formulation. The Underwood arms are not something to boast of or defend, but a burden to bear, a point made explicit by their relevance to the disability of Underwood's children – here, Geraldine's need for a crutch. As a symbol, the borne cross is a reminder of their spiritual duty, and Felix's patience and forbearance replace a more straightforward heroism. In quietly putting down their feelings of bitterness and regret the family fulfils its inheritance in changing times.

Yonge's separation of the rightful heir from the land is significant, because it is a separation from the old order. Alexander Welsh reflects on the ways in which Christian principles, such as 'unselfishness' and 'stewardship', had become tied to land ownership at the close of the eighteenth century. It is not surprising considering that Christianity faced threats from roughly the same forces of modernization as did the feudal squires and lords of the manor. The Industrial Revolution used steam power to free the economy from its agricultural roots, to transform energies and products and transport goods, emphasizing mobility and change over regular location. Inheritance, therefore, could no longer simply be embodied on the physical, material, level. If the land itself was no longer to be the source of the nation's wealth, the vocational work that had proceeded within land ownership now had to go on inwardly, spiritually.

As if in declaration of the novel's contemporary status, Yonge goes to great lengths to make the Underwoods' new circumstances non-traditional and unstable. The instability suggested through the family's sudden poverty is exacerbated by the early death of Mr Underwood and the incapacity and death of Mrs Underwood. At sixteen, Felix, the eldest son and heir, becomes the head of the household to twelve other children and is forced to leave school and go into trade, further distancing him from his aristocratic heritage. Although Felix's position makes him outwardly the most modern sibling, his inner principles and his strong faith make him one of the 'pillars' of the family, a strongly willed metaphor for the emotional and religious stability that replaces the physical object it represents, namely their hereditary home.

It is not until late in the novel, after all thirteen of the Underwood children have grown up, that the prospect of Felix as actually taking possession of the property at Vale Leston is reintroduced, as if at any earlier point the ease of wealth and property might have affected Felix as it did his younger sibling Edgar. Edgar, raised by a rich uncle away from the family home, forgets his duty and eventually descends into crime. Although Felix's ascent is triumphant, his adjustment to the new role is anything but idyllic, as it is complicated by the obligation he feels to his former position as newspaper owner and editor as well as by the fact that the last squire's son squandered money, leaving him unable to sustain the management of property without an external source of income. Felix's practical need, his commitment to restore the much-neglected parish church, and his professional loyalty are all reasons for remaining in trade. When Felix first tells his clergyman brother Clement of his plan, Clement argues against it:

'It will do you harm in the neighbourhood. You will never take your proper place;' then, as Felix half smiled, 'you wonder at these arguments from me? Yes, but I know the neighbourhood better than you do, and I do not like to see your influence and usefulness crippled.'

'That may be; but the choice lies between being looked down on for being in trade and continuing in this wrong to the Church.'

'Surely we could live at small expense here! We have all been used to frugality.'

'Yes, and I have seen that stinting has not a happy effect. In such a house as this, we cannot live as we have done at home. We can do without display, but plain hospitality we must have, and debt would be worse than trade. Ah, Clem! the old home has made you the exclusive aristocrat again! Recollect, such a restitution must involve sacrifice of some sort. We must have the Underwood “rood” some way or other. You are ready enough to let it be in money and luxury, but can't you let it be in — what shall I call it — consideration?'

16 Yonge, Pillars, II, 229.
Generating large debts or ignoring his responsibility to the Church would, ironically, maintain Felix’s aristocratic role by clinging to past forms while denying their founding principles. Without principles (the ‘rood’), the inherited house is weakened, and undermined by hypocrisy. Felix breaks with the accepted protocol in order to reclaim its true meaning and function. Excitingly, this act of true redemption — the repair not only of a long-neglected church but also the correction of his uncle’s family’s behaviour — seems almost rebellious.

Yonge uses the family home to represent the relationship she hopes the nation will have with the Church, namely one of obedience and self-sacrifice. But the guiding principle for this change is drawn from the coat of arms, suggesting restoration rather than creation. By the end of the novel, a new heir is in place, and the family’s spiritual and physical inheritance is safeguarded.

**Conclusion**

Both Scott and Yonge understood the potential of heraldic symbols to communicate and adapt inherited ideas. In Scott’s and Yonge’s hands, heraldic objects are far more than objects preserved and venerated from the past, as if in museum space. Scott’s restoration of the Baron’s coat of arms navigates on a familial level what the law and politics at that time could not do, namely ensure the continuance of a distinctly Scottish past. Yet this restoration is not merely a return of the Bradwardine estate to its former glory. It is also a renewal: the Baron’s Damascene-like conversion allows him to drop the ‘scales’ of ceremonial minutia for this new awareness of his family’s principles. In the aftermath of the uprising, it is the family heraldry, freed of historic trappings and returned to its essential meaning and symbolic power, that will find new potentiality in Rose’s and Edward’s marriage. Scott’s successful navigation of a clear threat to Scottish history on a familial level was adapted by Yonge to protect faith on a personal level.

Yonge takes the pattern Scott develops and moves heraldry further away from its recognized traditions by employing it in a consciously modern setting. By making the family crest explicitly Christian, Yonge evokes Scott’s definition of heraldry, which tied family crests to the saints, but divorces the need for the material possessions of nobility. Yonge then emboldens the symbol by returning it to the battleground; it is the heroes’ guide in their personal, spiritual warfare. The rood of the Underwood family arms speaks to all members of the family, correcting sinner and strengthening saint to do their true duty. In their impoverished circumstances, the family arms show the orphaned Underwood children, not what they have lost, as the symbols of his family home plague Scott’s impoverished protagonist in *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819), but the principles which can be personally held, regardless of the times or circumstances. By offering a spiritual crest, Yonge creates a potent symbol that can still be inherited today.