

1

Introductory

Until recently there would have been something rather odd about the appearance of a book on Scott in a series of this kind. 'The literary criticism of the last thirty years' has had little time for him, and very scant enthusiasm. Does this book mean, then, a change of front, a concession, or a rediscovery?

It means none of those things, except to the extent that the re-reading of however familiar an author must always involve some element of rediscovery. No doubt this has been the case in the preparation of this book. It does not mean, though, an exultant proclamation that a prolonged foray into Scott after unjust neglect has revealed achievement of a wholly unsuspected nature. I have been a reader of the *Waverley Novels* for some twenty years, enjoying and re-reading some of them very much more than others, and I do not offer this study as embodying that dramatically radical type of rediscovery for which 'conversion' is the popular word. Still less is the book meant as an obligatory concession to the fact that nowadays more and more critics are disposed to take Scott seriously. No wind of critical change is imposing a strategically opportune change of critical tack.

Nevertheless, the amount and kind of attention now being given to Scott do have a bearing on this study. In recent years at least three substantial books have been published, there have been several smaller works plus a quantity of articles, and 1971 saw a serious academic conference at the University of Edinburgh celebrating the bicentenary of his birth. All signs point to a Scott Revival, soon to be in full flood.

This book does not represent an abandonment to the current; nor, on the other hand, does it set out to debunk reawakening enthusiasm for Scott in itself. I start from the conviction that there are important and valuable things in his work, but in trying to put my case for this I shall keep in mind another belief: that if

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09781-9 - Walter Scott
 Robin Mayhead
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

WALTER SCOTT

a Scott Revival is upon us, we must look very discriminatingly at just what is being revived.

At this point, however, discrimination must for a while be turned on the assumptions lurking behind my opening paragraphs. They may be roughly reduced to something like the following: Scott's status has been regarded as dubious for much of the twentieth century so far, and despite the promise of revival is controversial even today. No doubt some readers of middle age, bored long ago at school by *Kenilworth* or *The Talisman*, for instance, would think 'dubious' too charitable a word, for if literature has come to mean anything to them it is in spite of Scott rather than because of him. Yet there are others of around their generation whose similarly unhappy schoolroom experience made them assume that Scott was unworthy of their time when Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and D. H. Lawrence were to be explored, who have found, sometimes by pure chance, sometimes by following up a stray critical remark which has struck them, either that the books they once found so tiresome were only partly representative, or that at school they had been offered representative and sophisticated works in an uncomprehending way.

Such readers almost always maintain strong reservations about large areas of Scott's output, ranging from a regard for perhaps one third of it, through the opinion that only a very few of the novels and next to none of the poems are worthwhile, to something approaching the view expressed in a footnote by F. R. Leavis:

Scott was primarily a kind of inspired folk-lorist, qualified to have done in fiction something analogous to the ballad-opera: the only live part of *Red-gauntlet* now is 'Wandering Willie's Tale', and 'The Two Drovers' remains in esteem while the heroics of the historical novels no longer command respect. He was a great and very intelligent man; but, not having the creative writer's interest in literature, he made no serious attempt to work out his own form and break away from the bad tradition of the eighteenth-century romance. Of his books *The Heart of Midlothian* comes the nearest to being a great novel, but hardly *is* that: too many allowances and deductions have to be made. (*The Great Tradition* (London, 1948), p. 5.)

While not being absolutely dismissed, Scott is there firmly placed as having very limited significance in terms of positive achievement.

INTRODUCTORY

Somewhere between that view and the other positions I have roughly charted comes this, from a companion volume to the present book:

And while that part of Scott's enormous output that deals with the heroism and humanity of common people in a familiar setting shares today something of the critical acclaim accorded to Jane Austen's work, the reputation of his historical novels (so great in his and Jane Austen's time) has been seen to dwindle into comparative insignificance. (Yasmine Gooneratne, *Jane Austen* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 1.)

This study will certainly find itself considering the kind of truth that both passages contain, though this will only be after particular works have actually been considered. Meanwhile a question must be asked: Will the common assumption of the two critics that Scott's once immense reputation is today, for fairly obvious reasons, drastically diminished, be generally accepted or even understood?

Some suggestions have been made regarding the attitudes of older readers, but what of those who are a deal younger? *Kenilworth* and *The Talisman* no longer brood over schoolrooms far and wide. No more is Scott thought of as the ideally 'safe' and improving author for young minds. To many of the young, indeed, he is merely a name, and although some may have a vague notion that he is a bit of a bore they will not feel a dislike based on personal recollection. They will not necessarily be grateful to the teacher or critic who tells them that there is no harm in ignoring Scott, whereas their elders often gasped with incredulous relief at such tidings. Moreover, quite apart from the fact that Scott has not been impressed upon them as a 'figure', they may by no means think it axiomatic that the 'historical novel' is an inferior genre.

Now there is much to be thankful for in such reflections. A writer has everything to gain when his readers are uncorrupted by literary prejudices, and I hope that this book may urge some of the innocent in the direction of Scott. But literary prejudice can take many forms. There will only be loss, both for the reader's enjoyment and for Scott's reputation, if the Revival turns out to be the exhumation of dusty old bones, however many doctoral theses may

WALTER SCOTT

be derived from them. An open-minded reader, downright bored by a bad Scott novel to which he has been sent by a zealous revivalist, will conclude that he has been sold a fake assiduously promulgated by the academic industry. He will not be surprised to hear older people recall with outrage the days when Scott was foisted upon them as a 'great' writer. Where, after all, lies the the difference between the old-style injunction to admire Scott's 'characters', for example, and a modishly new-style invitation to study his 'image-patterns', if the book in question is simply intolerable?

I think that the danger of Scott's reinstallation as a stock Great Name, honoured nowadays by up-to-date critical jargon but as big a bore as ever, quite alarmingly exists. Thus, although this book welcomes the unprejudiced reader and does not trouble to defend Scott against the more common charges of the pre-revival twentieth century, it does have a certain defensive function in view: to protect him against the claims of those who seek to give him the wrong kind of eminence, when the best service one can render him is to discriminate sharply. No one can afford to waste time on dry bones; there is more than enough real literature to be read.

Here a word of advance apology is needed – apology for referring again to other critics when the work of this book remains to be done. I hope this will be excused for the sake of the opportunity it affords conveniently to make a point fundamental to my undertaking. An anthology of essays which appeared in 1968 (D. D. Devlin (ed.), *Modern Judgements: Walter Scott* (London)), while containing some excellent material, has disquieting features. At the end of his introductory essay the editor approvingly quotes from a fellow enthusiast who argues *against* the contention that Scott is ill-served by those who take seriously works which have the reputation of being inferior, and proposes that one should approach such books 'on what appear to be their own terms'. 'And this,' he says, 'means avoiding many familiar traps, refusing to condemn the self-effacing Scott out of his own mouth, and trying not to defend him on grounds partly or wholly irrelevant.' To this the editor adds, 'It means, in fact, giving Scott something of

INTRODUCTORY

the critical attention and intelligence that has been lavished on other novelists in the past thirty years.’

Such sentiments are admirable in themselves: admirable in laying stress on sensible standards of judgement, and in warning us not to be misled by Scott’s own remarks about his careless habits in composition. But there lurks within those words ‘*on what appear to be their own terms*’ an implicit danger, a danger exemplified here and there by some of the articles in the volume itself. An essay on *Ivanhoe*, for instance, points to parallels between what many have seen merely as a ‘boy’s book’ and other Scott novels which may be accepted with a more ready seriousness, yet fails, for me, to make a case for regarding that work as really interesting in itself, parallels or no parallels. The demonstration that *Ivanhoe* is ‘about’ some of the same things as, say, *Rob Roy*, does not rescue the prose of its tournaments and catastrophes from being a turgid bore. And while it would be monstrous to deny the importance of disengaging what a novel is most centrally ‘about’ as a means of finding one’s way into the work as a whole, it must be regarded strictly as a preliminary tactic, in no way to be taken as an easy substitute for total response. If what appear to be *Ivanhoe*’s ‘own terms’ are of any importance, they must be terms in which the author’s intelligence and sensitivity show themselves, as sometimes, even in that novel, they do. But clearly the phrase ‘on what appear to be their own terms’, pushed to an extreme, could justify sheer rubbish.

Ivanhoe is not sheer rubbish, but this study assumes that such interest as it has, together with that of similar historical fantasias, is more rewardingly apparent elsewhere. Though the curious reader may in time want to look at such works, I believe that the job of discrimination, in the hope that this will do Scott positive good, may best be performed in terms of far more immediately interesting novels. At the same time I wish it to be stressed that *Ivanhoe* and the like are not being ignored because they are ‘historical’, for that would be to fall into the facile assumption regarding the historical novel already queried. Scott at his best is ‘historical’ in the way that Dickens, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy are, in that he brings alive the movements and tensions that

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-09781-9 - Walter Scott
Robin Mayhead
Excerpt
[More information](#)

WALTER SCOTT

have shaped a society and continue to shape it. He is very much concerned with tradition, and with the forces which make against it. But what I have called historical fantasias (and I am thinking of books like *Kenilworth*, *The Talisman*, *The Betrothed*, and *Count Robert of Paris*, as well as *Ivanhoe*), though aspects of them almost inevitably overlap with interests in the major novels, are altogether more remote from the living realities of Scott's own time, let alone our own, and point forward to the historical best-seller of the twentieth century, whose 'history' is simply a matter of evoking the past for its own exotic Technicolor sake.

But now something must be said about the plan of this book, and its terms of reference. Despite my fears about the wrong kind of Scott Revival, I certainly cannot claim that my intention of being discriminating is in itself original. The most rewarding of Scott's recent critics are precisely those who believe that the only way to interest people in him is to get rid of the dead or doubtful wood. Broadly speaking their principle of discrimination has been the view that his best works are those which deal wholly or mainly with Scotland and with periods not too distant from his own lifetime. I have myself followed that principle in the past, and I do not reject it now. But, like all literary assumptions, it runs the risk of degenerating into unquestioned cliché.

Therefore, although the view of Scott's successes as being mainly 'Scottish-based', so to speak, will no doubt emerge from this book as still a sound one, I have been at some pains to avoid making it central. One result is that despite the highly selective list of novels treated, some have been included which are not among those invariably favoured by the revivalists of today. The disposition of books over chapters, moreover, has not necessarily been dictated by the more obvious kinds of preoccupation they possess. While it is true that *Waverley*, *Rob Roy*, and *Redgauntlet*, share rebellion, real or planned, as one common theme, they will not be taken as a group, as I want to stress what seems to me each book's individual quality and distinct centre of interest. This may lead at times to emphases a little at odds with some current approaches, but they are not proposed irresponsibly. The principal aim of the study is to rouse interest in the newcomer by way of

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-09781-9 - Walter Scott
Robin Mayhead
Excerpt
[More information](#)

INTRODUCTORY

scrutiny of particular works, and it will be so much the better if it can provoke fresh responses in readers who already have some acquaintance with Scott.

The next two chapters will consider in some detail a pair of novels chosen as most idiosyncratically illustrating varied aspects of Scott's preoccupations and techniques. Thereafter groups of other novels will be more briefly discussed in the light of what seem to be his own best standards, and the final chapters will attempt to assess the place he has for the modern reader as poet and critic.

Before ending the present chapter, however, and as a means of leading into the body of the book, let us take a look at a specific passage of Scott's prose to offset the foregoing pages of generalization. Here is the portrait of King James I from a sometimes brilliant novel, *The Fortunes of Nigel*:

He was deeply learned, without possessing useful knowledge; sagacious in many individual cases, without having real wisdom; fond of his power, and desirous to maintain and augment it, yet willing to resign the direction of that, and of himself, to the most unworthy favourites; a big and bold asserter of his rights in words, yet one who tamely saw them trampled on in deeds; a lover of negotiations, in which he was always outwitted; and one who feared war, where conquest might have been easy. He was fond of his dignity, while he was perpetually degrading it by undue familiarity; capable of much public labour, yet often neglecting it for the meanest amusement; a wit, though a pedant; and a scholar, though fond of the conversation of the ignorant and uneducated. Even his timidity of temper was not uniform; and there were moments of his life, and those critical, in which he showed the spirit of his ancestors. He was laborious in trifles, and a trifler where serious labour was required; devout in his sentiments, and yet too often profane in his language; just and beneficent by nature, he yet gave way to the iniquities and oppression of others. He was penurious respecting money which he had to give from his own hand, yet inconsiderately and unboundedly profuse of that which he did not see. In a word, those good qualities which displayed themselves in particular cases and occasions, were not of a nature sufficiently firm and comprehensive to regulate his general conduct; and, showing themselves as they occasionally did, only entitled James to the character bestowed on him by Sully – that he was the wisest fool in Christendom.

That is writing of splendid authority; pointed yet expansive, weighty yet urbane. But to describe it like that is by no means to hold it up for admiration merely as a specimen of 'style', for the

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09781-9 - Walter Scott
 Robin Mayhead
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

WALTER SCOTT

felicities of the language are inseparably bound up with the activity of a lively, judging intelligence. The impression of *rightness* in the wording, of a neat symmetry in the constructions, reflects a fair, flexible, yet firm mind in the author, intent upon a portrait that may give some notion of his sitter's manifold complexities.

Thus the many antitheses are not a mere stylistic trick designed to produce a surface effect of elegance, but are a natural outgrowth of the critically assessing intelligence. To take just one of them: 'He was laborious in trifles, and a trifler where serious labour was required.' That is not simply pretty, but facile, verbal juggling; the second half of the antithesis is not just a clever though pointless echoing of the first. 'He was *laborious* in trifles', with its heavy spoken stress on the adjective (the passage should be read aloud to be fully enjoyed), gives a sense of ponderously doddering absurdity. The tone is amused, if a little contemptuous. But in the second half it becomes really scornful: 'and a *trifler* where *serious labour* was required'. If we normally think of 'trifles' merely as things that we do not take seriously, a '*trifler*', on the other hand, is more than likely to be a person of whom we definitely disapprove. And that is certainly the way in which Scott reacts to James at this point. The king emerges here as not only absurd but morally reprehensible into the bargain. Faced with the demanded and the demanding, he can do nothing but play about, and this qualifies what had been mainly amusement at his heavy bumbling over matters of no importance. By his deft opposition of 'trifles' and 'trifler', 'laborious' and 'labour', Scott attains an ironic vigour reflecting a play of mind that is both serious and amused, caught in the tight structure of pointed aphorism.

One could comment on many effective things in the passage. There is the characterization of James as 'a *big and bold* asserter of his rights in words', where the alliteration suggests blustering inflation until it collapses into the deflating effect of 'tamely saw them trampled on in deeds'. Even the repeated use of the word 'fond', which could at first suggest a lack of variety in the prose, becomes a virtue when we remember the old link between 'fond' and 'foolish'. The whole passage, indeed, moves superbly to-

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-09781-9 - Walter Scott
Robin Mayhead
Excerpt
[More information](#)

INTRODUCTORY

wards that final summing-up of the king as ‘the wisest fool in Christendom’. Above all the writing impresses by its balanced fairness, with the sense one feels of Scott’s positive relish in depicting so contradictory a man. And it is from that appetite for the complex and contradictory that the next chapter begins.

2

‘Waverley’

In the history of Scotland which he published under the title *Tales of a Grandfather*, Scott has this to say about the Union that joined the formerly separate kingdoms of England and Scotland under one government:

On the 1st of May 1707 the Union took place, amid the dejection and despair which attend on the downfall of an ancient state, and under a sullen expression of discontent that was far from promising the course of prosperity which the treaty finally produced.

And here I must point out to you at some length that, although there could never be a doubt that the Union in itself was a most desirable event, yet by the erroneous mode in which it was pushed on and opposed by all parties concerned, such obstacles were thrown in the way of the benefits it was calculated to produce as to interpose a longer interval of years betwixt the date of the treaty and the national advantages arising out of it, than the term spent by the Jews in the wilderness ere they attained the promised land.

The second paragraph is especially interesting, for although it has the air of simply being emphatic explanation, designed to avoid misunderstanding of the Union’s real implications, its tone suggests very mixed feelings in the author himself. After all the melancholy surrounding ‘the downfall of an ancient state’, Scott seems rather suspiciously anxious to rush totally committed to the Union’s defence, with that urgent ‘*And here I must point out to you at some length*’. He is particular to put the blame for trouble upon the ‘parties concerned’ rather than on the idea of Union itself, yet it is hard not to feel that he may be doing this to reassure himself, as well as the reader, that the event was indeed ‘most desirable’.

That hint of ambiguity is highly characteristic not only of the attitudes of Scott himself, but the attitudes of others towards him. In the heyday of his nineteenth-century fame he was thought of very much as a classic of ‘English’ literature, a view which extended well into the present century, as many older readers