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Richard Humphrey
Excerpt
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Introduction

A landmark of literature is a work from which successions of readers – or subsequent authors, and hence literary historians – take their bearings. It may crystallize an experience or epitomize an age. It may initiate a genre or exemplify a mode. It may influence intellectual life or even enlarge the readership of literature and the possibilities of publishing. Or, in a rare instance, it may do all of these things. Such a rare instance is Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814).

The sheer number and quality of writers who took their bearings from *Waverley* would ensure its position in literary history. One has only to study the plots, casts and themes of the cream of European novelists in the 1820s and 1830s – from Balzac to Stendhal, from Pushkin to Gogol, from Manzoni to Tieck – to discover that this story set in and around the 1745 Jacobite rising in Scotland not only struck a chord all over Europe: it dictated much of the subsequent score too. On his death in 1832, *The Times* could justly call Scott's name and work 'not only British but European – not only European but universal'.

Such emulation is accorded only to innovation. There had been countless novels set in the past before. But with its new sense for the qualitative difference between present and past, and with its new awareness of causation and interconnection within that changing past, *Waverley* was more. In 1832, the *Caledonian Mercury* could hail Scott as the 'Columbus of fiction'. And as early as 1826 and 1827, the German critics Alexis and Menzel had named the territory he opened up: Scott was the discoverer of the 'genuine historical novel', the 'founder of the historical novel as a literary species *sui generis*'.

From *Waverley*, however, the above novelists derived more than the manifold possibilities of a new genre. In *Waverley*,

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wrote Tieck, bygone Scotland is 'so depicted that one is veritably living with all the people'; in Scott, wrote Pushkin, 'we get to know past times as though we were living a day-to-day life in them ourselves'. And the earliest reviews abound in such words as 'accurate', 'faithful', 'minute' and 'correct'. For *Waverley* contains passages of social description and analysis which are among the earliest examples – and exemplars – of conscientious realism. And here emulation is not restricted to *historical* novelists, nor does it restrict them to *historical* novels. Balzac's historical novel *Les Chouans* is one facet of Scott's influence; his *Comédie humaine* is another.

This imaginative sympathy for the otherness of the past and this successful recreation, over a broad social spectrum, of the vitality of the past did not go unnoticed among those writers traditionally entrusted with the past. 'Scott', declared Macaulay in 1828, 'has used those fragments of truth which historians have thrown behind them in a manner which may well excite their envy'. Even the austere Ranke confessed that Scott 'played a principal part in awakening my sympathy for the actions and passions of past ages'. And again these voices were echoed all over Europe. So much so that, writes Croce, 'no one can write a sound history of historical writing in the nineteenth century without giving generous credit to Walter Scott'. Of course, Scott's work as a whole is the testator here. But if subsequent historiography does turn away from 'drum and trumpet' reports, does portray the political and the social in the 'inseparable conjunction and intermixture' Macaulay called for, then it is to *Waverley*, in which this shift is first and signally exhibited, that the legacy must be traced.

This broad influence would have been unlikely had *Waverley* not been what it *also* was: a landmark in publishing. Capturing the imagination of Edinburgh on its appearance on 7 July 1814, selling out within five weeks, finding six thousand buyers within six months, going through eight editions in five years and into at least six European languages within thirteen years, *Waverley* opened, in the words of Richard Altick, a 'new era in fiction'. And now that *Waverley* has long since given its name not only to Scott's 'Waverley Novels' (1814–31), but to a town, a

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railway station, hotels, bookstores, note-paper, the Waverley pen (that came ‘as a Boon and a Blessing to men’), a record label, a biscuit factory, knick-knacks and whatnot, it can be difficult to see the book for the ballyhoo. Nothing obscures like success.

Two things, however, must be remembered. Firstly, *Waverley* was not just a bestseller: it was the *first* bestseller, or, in the more precise phrase of A.N. Wilson, ‘the first bestselling novel in the modern sense’. And secondly, this bestseller attracted the best readers – and then held them.

It would not have *created* a broad novel-reading public if it had not enacted conflicts essential to its age. As Coleridge recognized as early as 1820, Scott dramatizes ‘the contest between the two great moving principles of social humanity’ – ‘religious adherence to the past and the ancient’ versus ‘the mighty instincts of progression and free agency’. And within that struggle, ever-renewed in, and ever speaking to, our own age of exponential change, are two further conflicts equally central to its age and ours: the conflict between tight-bonded community and more diffuse society, between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*; and that between dominant, domineering nation and prized neighbour.

But equally, Scott could not have held such *distinguished* readers if these conflicts had not memorably found the appropriate form. As literature – declared the other European Olympian, Goethe, in 1828 – *Waverley* could ‘without hesitation, be set beside the best works that have ever been written in this world.’ As history – G.M. Trevelyan could state as late as 1937 – *Waverley* was ‘the best history book on the ’45, considered as a social phenomenon in its particular time and place’. And what finally cements the achievement of the work is that it both moves on to new forms and reflects on those it leaves behind: it is a negotiation between romance and realism, ballad and novel, old history and new. Here, in other words, is a fundamental and pivotal text of the modern age. *Waverley* does not just ‘add a stone to the cairn’: it is a cairn in its own right – a fourfold landmark of literature.

This brief volume cannot hope to map in detail all the

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territory such a landmark surveys and serves. Geographically, temporally and intellectually the area is considerably broader than the above sketch. Topographically it contains some notoriously difficult terrain – the marshlands of realism, the disputed marches between novel and history, the slough of whether the historical novel *is* a genre *sui generis*. Nevertheless, the dual perspective required by the present series – looking not only from monument to territory but back again – can hope to add fresh understanding. Carlyle, mapping the same ground in 1838, wrote that *Waverley* was ‘an event memorable in the annals of British Literature; in the annals of British Bookselling thrice and four times memorable’. The present author would be happy if he managed to show that *Waverley* was more memorable in other annals – those of *Scottish* society and thought, of Napoleonic Europe, of European and world literature, and, not least, of our own concerns.

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Chapter 1

Scott's changing world and the making of *Waverley*

1 The Napoleonic years

O who, that shared them, ever shall forget
 The emotions of the spirit-rousing time ...

The Lord of the Isles, VI

Napoleonic Europe is to the historical novel what ancient Greece is to tragic drama: both one of its enduring themes and its birthplace. Not only was the turbulence of those years to attract the cream of historical novelists, from Balzac, Stendhal and Thackeray through Tolstoy and Pérez Galdós to Fontane, Hardy and Conrad, but *Waverley* itself, the inaugurator of the genre, was begun, Scott states, in 1805, just weeks after Trafalgar (or, others suggest, around 1808–10, with the Peninsular War in full flow), resumed in Autumn 1813, on the eve of the Battle of Nations at Leipzig and published in July 1814 less than a year before Waterloo. Indeed, on its day of publication, Thursday, 7 July 1814, the British nation was officially – if prematurely – celebrating peace in Europe.

What a context! But – is it one? Does it in any way help to account for *Waverley*, and if so, for how much and why?

The circumstantial evidence linking Scott (1771–1832) and Bonaparte is, to be sure, strong. After all, the two men shared the same birthday – Napoleon being just two years Scott's senior – and so took their respective *gradus ad Parnassum* in step. As the opening chronology details, Scott became a student and advocate between Revolution and 9 Thermidor, a translator and published poet between Directory and 18 Brumaire, a published anthologer and renowned poet between Consulate and Austerlitz, and an editor, laureate nominee and lauded historical novelist (and owner-builder of his country seat at Abbotsford) between then and St Helena. The twenty-five central years of his life thus spanned wars which, if not the

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bloodiest Europe had known, were unprecedented in their extent, territorial implications, institutional and social impact and sheer cost. Chronology and common sense alone might lead one to echo Goethe, who, reviewing Scott's life in 1827, exclaimed, 'What must he have experienced living so in such a time?' Only, a conjuncture is not a connection.

Again, to link the two men would not be anachronistic. On the contrary, it became part of the rhetoric of the age: Balzac mentioned them in one breath; Henry Cockburn wrote that Scott's 'advances were like the conquests of Napoleon: each new achievement overshadowing the last' (196); and on Scott's death, *The Athenaeum* even likened the emergence of *Waverley* to the Hundred Days. Only, nice conceits are not connections either.

And again, to link the new genre itself to the Napoleonic upheavals is a long-standing theoretical position. In an important essay of 1827, 'Walter Scott and His Century', the German critic Menzel sees the genre as 'the true child of its time', reflecting the national struggles, *levées en masse* and democratic stirrings of the age. Such thoughts are echoed in the now best-known sociology of the genre, Lukács's *The Historical Novel* (1937, tr. 1962) – which argues that the genre emerged not least because of 'the French Revolution, the revolutionary wars and the rise and fall of Napoleon, which for the first time made history a *mass experience*, and moreover on a European scale' (20) – but neither Lukács nor Menzel give what such theory requires, namely biographical evidence of the link between that experience and the Scott of *Waverley*. Contentions, however, are not connections either.

Now, the connections *can* be made. His earliest biographer, Lockhart, shows Scott helping form a cavalry defence unit in 1797, charting the campaigns closely, especially from 1809 on, celebrating allied successes with his household and, in 1813, illumining his Edinburgh windows with candles on Wellington's entering Paris. In 1815, Scott went hot-foot to Paris himself via the battlefield at Waterloo and a year later, in a lengthy but little-known essay entitled '1814', published in the *Edinburgh Annual Register* for that year, wrote: 'Neither will the sensations

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which we have felt during this remarkable era be ever erased from the minds on which they were so powerfully impressed' (AR 366).

More telling is that '1814' is by no means an isolated incursion into the Napoleonic years. Scott's extensive correspondence offers a running commentary on them – especially from 1808 on – with Bonaparte both wondered at as a general 'possessing the genius and talents of an Eastern conqueror' (L III, 451), as a figure who has attained 'the most unbounded authority ever vested in the hands of one man' (L III, 440), and deplored as an 'evil demon' and 'tyrannical monster' (L II, 135), as 'the arch enemy of mankind' and the 'Devil' incarnate (L III, 440). During the Wars, both *Marmion* (1808) and the *Vision of Don Roderick* (1811) allude to them (the latter's profits going to aid their victims). And afterwards the 1815 trip gives rise to *Paul's Letters to His Kinsfolk* (1816), a travelogue through war-racked Europe; his third historical novel, *The Antiquary* (1816), revolves around a rumoured Napoleonic invasion of Scotland; and for some two years in the mid-1820s he toils over a seven-volume *Life of Napoleon Buonaparte* (1827).

More telling again, however, is that *Waverley* itself is a novel of extended journeys and military encounters, of nations in conflict and leaders in contention, of the civilian on the battlefield and of history coming home to him and others – a novel which could understandably be seen as a response to the Napoleonic age, could be seen in the terms Menzel proposes. Indeed the very language of the campaigns finds its way into the novel, a crowd of irate villagers being termed a 'levy en masse' (153), and the highlanders once being said to have 'bivouacked' (116) on the heather.

Thus although Scott would not, like Balzac, proclaim, 'What he could not complete with the sword I shall accomplish with the pen', there are grounds for saying that by 1815 Napoleon had for twenty years 'ridden Scott's imagination' (Buchan, 147). If Romantic literature is indeed 'the sum total of the ways in which man's self-awareness was affected by the Revolutionary-Napoleonic disruption' (Talmon, 136), then Scott is on these grounds also a Romantic.

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And yet for all this evidence - circumstantial, biographical and textual – those who would view the Napoleonic years as the sole or prime context in which *Waverley* is to be understood must still face two awkward objections. They must explain how, from Carlyle through Grierson to Daiches, strong accounts of Scott have been written which mention this context scarcely or not at all. And that done, they must also explain why Scott – unlike his illustrious successors listed at the outset – scarcely touches on these years in historical fiction. The Napoleonic years thesis might explain why a genre with such topoi arose: it cannot explain why the first exemplar of the genre is sited not in the Napoleonic years but in the farther past, and written both about and in a European country *relatively* little affected by those Wars – Scotland.

Waverley, one must conclude, though born in the Napoleonic years, cannot be accounted for solely in terms of them, and so other terms must now be sought.

2 The Age of History and the Scottish Enlightenment

... which has perhaps at no period been equalled, considering the depth and variety of talent it embraced and concentrated.

Guy Mannering, XXXIX

For many, these other terms are offered not so much by historians as by historians of history. From R. G. Collingwood through Sir Herbert Butterfield to Foucault the period of Scott's life has been seen as the threshold of modern historiography and whatever the cause of *that* development – be it social change, the collapse of the theodicy or the comparative 'de-historicization' of Man – it is plausible to see that emergence as a precondition of the parallel emergence of historical fiction. A prominent exponent of this view, Avrom Fleishman, argues:

Only when the changes in men's predominant activities had begun to reflect themselves in the ways in which they conceived history did the literary expression of a sense of history begin to burgeon, only then did it take the peculiar form of the historical novel. (17)

Waverley so considered is thus the child less of the Napoleonic Age than of the Age of History.

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Here too the circumstantial evidence appears compelling. The mid-eighteenth century was a time in which philosophers turned historian, or historians, philosopher, the resulting *philosophie de l'histoire* presuming to explicate what society should be from what it had (or had not) been. Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des lois* (1748) Voltaire's *Essai sur les moeurs* (1756), and Rousseau's *Contrat social* (1762) are just the best known of a stream of works aiming not just to describe society but to change it. They were accompanied, moreover, by a flood of popular histories – with universal histories especially in vogue – so that in 1769 David Hume could claim that 'History is now the favourite reading'. By Scott's birth, book catalogues confirm, no discipline was more read, written and written *about* than history.

Moreover, as the very name of Hume suggests, this was a development which did have a specifically, even a predominantly, Scottish element. The years 1740 to 1790 saw Edinburgh emerge as the justly dubbed 'Athens of the North', and much of the renowned work of this Scottish Enlightenment had a firm historical direction. In philosophy, Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), in economics, Adam Smith's *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), in sociology, Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), in linguistic anthropology, Lord Monboddo's *Of the Origin and Progress of Languages* (1773–92) not to mention in history itself, Hume's *History of England* (1754), William Robertson's histories of Scotland, America and ancient India and Lord Kames's *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774) – there is scarcely an academic discipline to which the Scottish mind did not make a major European, and origin-oriented contribution. Small wonder Hegel was soon to write that 'English philosophizing is restricted to Edinburgh and Glasgow'!

Nor is there any difficulty in establishing a connection between this historical ferment and Scott, the first twenty-five years of whose life coincide with, and are spent increasingly among the households and clubs, the literati and 'eaterati', of Edinburgh's Golden Age. In his first *Memoirs* (1808) Scott

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admittedly writes of his early years that ‘names, dates and the other technicalities of history escaped me in a most melancholy degree’ and that ‘the philosophy of history, a much more important subject, was also a sealed book at this period of my life’ (Hewitt, 1981, 27). Among his earliest known writings, however – listed in the chronology – are two 1789 papers ‘On the Origins of ...’ and, as his vast and beautifully preserved library shows, the seals of *philosophie de l’histoire* were later broken. Almost all the above works, Scottish and continental, were present on his shelves, and cheek by jowl with them – in what is perhaps the best relief map we have of this remarkable mind – was a huge congeries of histories, renowned and recondite, from Hume to Gibbon, from Froissart to Mably, and beyond. In his second historical novel, *Guy Mannering* (1815) Scott refers to Robertson, ‘our historian of Scotland, of the Continent, and of America’ and gives his hero letters of introduction not only to him but to Hume, Ferguson and Adam Smith into the bargain (*GM* 39).

From this Enlightenment context come four things essential to *Waverley*. First and foremost is its broader scope of historical enquiry – *Waverley* being famed in its day for its ‘wider sweep’. Further there is its sense of progress and ‘improvement’ – a key term in Scott’s oeuvre. Then from Ferguson (with whose family the Scotts were friends), come, thirdly, the very tone and terms in which the ‘rude culture’ of the highlanders will be described. And finally, from Hume, (who stated that the ‘first quality of an historian is to be true and impartial’ and whom Rousseau described as *le seul historien qui jamais ait écrit avec impartialité*) comes an advance towards balanced history. But for the new scope and tone of Golden Age history there might have been no long journey for Edward to make, no ‘rude’ highlanders for him to encounter, no wavering to be done between his cause and theirs.

Above all, however, Edward’s journey could not have been what it also and decisively is – not just a *geographical* journey to a far-flung region, but a *temporal* journey back to an earlier stage of society. One of the major new historiographic topoi of the late Enlightenment was an awareness of the co-existence