My Mind to Me a Kingdom Is: Appreciating Sir Walter Scott's Historical Fiction

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Sir Walter Scott was so influential that the modern world cannot banish him. Many certainly try: time and again you will find Scott's writing dismissed as florid, slapdash and antiquated (as if these were defects). You will hear it said that *no one reads Walter Scott anymore*. You will hear people mock the chivalric themes of the medieval novels or Scott's fondness for digressions and elaborate descriptions.

Yet no matter how unfashionable Scott becomes, his influence remains unavoidable. Scott's historical fictions were the most important novels of the nineteenth-century – everyone read them. His legacy is all around us; many people today, whether they know it or not, live in Scott-land. Towns all over the world are named after his novels and poems, from Ivanhoe, Melbourne to Kenilworth Square, Dublin. Some of the most famous musical works were inspired by Scott's writing, such as Schubert's 'Ave Maria', Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* and even 'Hail to the Chief' (the anthem of the president of the United States). Anyone excited by legends of Jacobites and Highlanders and Merry Men in old English forests will unknowingly, but inevitably, draw on Scott's work. Those who enjoy historical novels such as *War and Peace* or *The Betrothed* have to acknowledge the overwhelming influence of Scott on these works. So many of the great men and women of the last two hundred years – from Ho Chi Minh to C.S. Lewis to Virginia Woolf – were enthusiasts of Scott's work.

Many today will open up a Waverley novel (so called because he wrote them anonymously – each subsequent novel was 'by the Author of *Waverley*') and wonder why they were so universally popular. The pace and style of the novels are contrary to modern tastes. It is perhaps better to start with Scott's life – or better yet, his death. The year was 1832 and Scott had experienced several strokes brought on by overwork in a valiant attempt to pay off his colossal debts. The printing company in which he was a partner collapsed in 1825 and Scott was left with the bill. He refused to declare himself bankrupt; he even refused to accept financial assistance readily offered by his friends and acquaintances. His health, never perfect, got much worse. A year into his debt his wife died. His last few years were therefore his most difficult, and we see in his *Journal* – one of the most honest and moving autobiographies ever written – his noble determination to fight melancholy and survive:

"My mind to me a kingdom is." I am rightful monarch; and, God to aid, I will not be dethroned by any rebellious passion that may rear its standard against me.[1]

Come his sixty-first year it became apparent that he had exhausted what life he had left. Having just returned from Rome (one of his few reluctant trips abroad), his poor health forced him to stay indefinitely in a London hotel. During this time he longed for one thing: to return to Abbotsford, the extraordinary quasi-feudal 'flibbertigibbet of a house'[2] that he had built with the unprecedented financial success of the Waverley novels. Eventually his physicians consented. He had been in a listless and pathetic state, but as the carriage neared Abbotsford 'his excitement became ungovernable,' according to Lockhart (his son-in-law and biographer).[3] Upon entering, his health seemed much improved and he begged to be wheeled through the various rooms. Scott repeatedly exclaimed, 'I have seen much, but nothing like my ain house—give me one turn more!'[4] This was the last burst of great energy before his death two months later. He died in a makeshift bed in his dining room, placed by the bay window so that he could look upon the River Tweed in his final days.

Such wonder and love is Scott's gift to us. I feel as if I ride through his novels; a love of adventure is everywhere. I feel his almost unique generosity—an inviolable love of the world he inhabits. 'I have rarely, if ever,' wrote Scott in his *Journal*, 'found any one out of whom I could not extract amusement or edification.'[5] Scott helps us to love and be interested in others in a way few but great storytellers can.

Unsurprisingly, this aspect of Scott also appealed to the boundlessly genial G. K. Chesterton. In his essay on Scott, Chesterton describes how the author of *Waverley* not merely inspired fascination in people and history, but in things:

One of the profound philosophical truths which are almost confined to infants is [the] love of things, not for their use or origin, but for their own inherent characteristics … Like a true child, [Scott] almost ignored the distinction between the animate and inanimate. A two-handed sword might be carried only by a menial in a procession, but it was something important and immeasurably fascinating—it was a two-handed sword.[6]

This explains many of Scott's peculiarities—for example why, despite being an unabashed antiquary, he felt he must be the first man in Scotland to fit his home with an ultra-modern gas lighting system (so extravagant and temperamental that it required the

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[1] Walter Scott, *Journal*, 31 May 1826.
[2] Scott, "11 October 1817", *Letters To and From Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe, Volume II* (Edinburgh: Blackwood and Sons, 1888), 166.
[3] J.G. Lockhart, "July 1832" in *Life of Sir Walter Scott* (Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, 1839), 207
[4] Ibid., 209.
[5] Scott, *Journal,* 27 December 1825.
[6] G. K. Chesterton, "The Position of Sir Walter Scott", *Twelve Types* (London: Arthur L. Humphreys, 1902), 191.

employment of a labourer for five hours each day).[7] It is perhaps childish, but in the best Chestertonian sense.

Naturally, battles and other 'big set pieces' are something Scott does well. One can feel every blow, every charge, hear the horses gallop, the men shout, feel the rain pounding, the storm coming, the mud splattering. None who have read it will forget the doomed Battle of Prestonpans in *Waverley* or the magical opening chapters of *The Talisman*, where Crusader and Saracen meet near the Dead Sea. Indeed, these great clashes of belief are something Scott does with extraordinary skill and sympathy, whether they be between Jacobite and Hanoverian or medieval Christian and Muslim.

Generally Scott paints best with broad strokes. For example, the dialogue in Scott's novels is often oratorical. The comparison many made in his time was to Shakespeare (though Scott characteristically dismissed this, writing in his *Journal*: 'The blockheads talk of my being like Shakespeare—not fit to tie his brogues'[8]). Characters often speak in an improbably noble way, sometimes in lengthy soliloquies, yet Scott seems to touch upon the truth of the characters far more than were he to use supposedly realistic speech. As a result Scott's characters possess a now-uncommon heroic quality—most curiously in those characters who are not heroes. In his novels he excelled at showing the virtues of even those factions and beliefs which he constitutionally loathed. The Covenanter fanatic Ephraim Macbriar is therefore given an awesome speech when tortured to death by Royalists:

Flesh and blood may shrink under the sufferings you can doom me to, and poor frail nature may shed tears or send forth cries; but I trust my soul is anchored firmly on the rock of ages.[9]

On the other hand, there is the wayward romantic spirit of Edward Waverley, an unremarkable young man in many ways, someone inclined towards idleness and with few firm political opinions. He is seduced by the novelty and passion of Jacobitism and becomes an unlikely hero. Through his adventure, we see the way in which a person can become swept up in a cause, realising only too late the extent of what this means:

It was at that instant, that, looking around him, he saw the wild dress and appearance of his Highland associates, heard their whispers in an uncouth and unknown language, looked upon his own dress, so unlike that which he had worn from his infancy, and wished to awake from what seemed at the moment a dream, strange, horrible, and unnatural. "Good God!" he muttered, "am I then a traitor to my country, a renegade to my standard, and a foe … to my native England!"[10]

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[7] A. N. Wilson, *A Life of Sir Walter Scott* (London: Oxford University Press, 1996), 55.
[8] Scott, *Journal*, 11 December 1826.
[9] Scott, *Old Morality*, Chapter 36.
[10] Scott, *Waverley*, Chapter 46.

I find myself admiring Scott as a philosopher without a philosophy. His worldview is so natural, so encompassing, so imperfect, that it can hardly be called a philosophy. Yet there is a vision of how we should live and how society should be structured, one that would come to profoundly influence British political thought, from radical socialism to Disraelian Toryism.

Scott's imaginative depiction of the past showed contemporaries that, contrary to the arrogance of the era (and of so many eras), there are other, better ways for a society to be organised. He understood, as Claverhouse says in *Old Mortality*, that 'habit, duty, and necessity reconcile men to every thing.'[11] Scott made readers stop and wonder if there were things to which we should not reconcile ourselves. And so it was Scott's writings that inspired, for example, the radical ideals of John Ruskin and William Morris – both had their worldviews formed by reading the Waverley novels. According to a 1906 survey of Labour's 29 MPs, Scott was among their favourite authors.[12] (None, by the way, named Marx or Engels – the other favourites included Ruskin, the Bible, Carlyle and Dickens.) Ramsay MacDonald, the first Labour prime minister, claimed that the Waverley novels 'opened out the great world of national life for me and led me on to politics.'[13] Scott's novels had such a strong social conscience; as George Heriot says in *The Fortunes of Nigel,* 'Never mock the stranger or the poor—the black ox has not trod on your foot yet—you know not what lands you may travel in, or what clothes you may wear, before you die.'[14] His noblest characters are usually the lowliest.

Within the Tory tradition, Scott's influence is clearly evident from the neo-medieval Young England movement to the paternal Toryism of Harold MacMillan (who found Scott 'an unfailing source of respite and comfort – especially amidst the ephemeral, but often painful, troubles of political life.'[15]) Scott was in fact an ardent Tory, but we often forget that it was a time in which many of the greatest social reformers were Tories, from Richard Oastler leading the cause of factory workers to the Earl of Shaftesbury's legislative battles against child labour and the unjust treatment of the mentally ill. John Ruskin at times referred to himself as a communist, yet also described himself as a 'violent Tory of the old school'.[16]

In showing readers the past – from its virtues to its vices, its nobility to its madness – Scott was inviting comparison with the modern, industrial and supposedly Enlightened age, which though he in some ways belonged to practically and intellectually, he did not belong to sentimentally. There is often a quiet melancholy in Scott's novels as a result – a love of a past that is irretrievably gone, a sense even of anticlimax as time and again we

[11] Scott, *Old Morality*, Chapter 34.
[12] Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (Yale Note Bene, 2021), 42.
[13] Rose, *Intellectual Life*, 40.
[14] Scott, *The Fortunes of Nigel*, Chapter 2.
[15] Harold MacMillan, *The Sixty-Seventh Annual Report to The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club*, 1 March 1974, accessed 13 March 2024, https://www.walterscottclub.com/1973-the-right-hon-harold-macmillan
[16] John Ruskin, *Praeterita*, Chapter 1.

find ourselves hoping for the success of those we know are destined to lose. In *Ivanhoe* we know that the Saxons will never reclaim their country. We know that the fictional third Jacobite rebellion in *Redgauntlet* is doomed before it has ever started—the last pathetic embers of a noble fame. We see in *Quentin Durward* that the Age of Chivalry is dying, to be superseded by the Age of Politics.

Scott's own age has been superseded by one that does not appreciate him, and moreover does not know or care about what it has lost. Imagine this counterfactual: what if Beethoven were rarely performed? A few years ago we celebrated the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth with a great wave of articles, concerts and documentaries. The year after we celebrated (or should have celebrated) Scott's 250th anniversary. Scott and Beethoven died within a few years of each other and achieved comparable levels of cultural influence. If Beethoven became a neglected composer, one programmed as seldom as Dussek or Reicha, it would be a sign that we would have lost something profound, something greater than even his music. Yet this is what has happened with Scott.

One reason for Beethoven's enduring popularity is that he is commonly celebrated as a revolutionary artist, while Scott is not. Whether true or not, Beethoven is portrayed as having changed convention and strenuously fought for new sounds, driven by a wild and individualist temperament. Scott tried to reimagine times past, to hear again old sounds of which we had lost all but the echoes, and he did all this in his gentle, selfless and heroic way. He revived and reinvented a neglected history; now we must revive for ourselves his neglected works. After all, we belong to an age in which it is increasingly felt that we ought to fundamentally revisit our understanding of the past. How better to do so than with the illuminating power of Scott's imagination?

Bibliography

As there are so many editions of the Waverley novels, Scott's *Journal,* and Ruskin's *Praeterita*, I have used chapter numbers or journal entry-dates rather than refer to particular editions.

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