

Two hundred years since the publication of *Waverley*

Sir Walter Scott and the drama of history

By David Walsh
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Monday marked 200 years since the publication of *Waverley*, a novel by Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), an event of genuine artistic and intellectual significance. *Waverley* is widely considered the first historical novel—that is, the first work that treated the past not primarily as ornament on a tale of “timeless” morals and manners, but from the point of view of its own distinct significance as the necessary and comprehensible prelude to the present.

Literary critic Leslie Stephens observed that “the special characteristic of Scott as distinguished from his predecessors is precisely his clear perception that the characters whom he loved so well and described so vividly were the products of a long historical evolution.”

Scott’s book follows Edward Waverley, a young, high-born Englishman, as he becomes involved for a time in the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745—the effort, launched in Scotland, to restore the Stuart dynasty to the British throne. The uprising, led by Charles Edward Stuart (“Bonnie Prince Charlie”), was in large measure an effort to turn the clock back to feudal times and forestall the spread of capitalistic relations. Highland clans and Scottish landowners opposed to the 1707 union of England and Scotland and those Scottish merchants who had been damaged by that union—along with a section of English aristocrats—took part in or sympathized with the unsuccessful rebellion against the government of George II.

Scott brilliantly portrays the uprising and its consequences from the social, political and moral points of view (in his study of the family, private property and the state, for instance, Friedrich Engels wrote, “Walter Scott’s novels bring the Scotch highland clan vividly before our eyes”), without sacrificing tension and spontaneity. The reader encounters a host of characters, English and Scottish (and even French), from many social backgrounds and taken from life. *Waverley* is an artistic accomplishment of the highest order, even if it is not yet Scott’s very finest work.

The novel has a great historical value, but that in and of itself would not be a compelling enough reason to recommend it to a wide audience or to urge a consideration of Scott’s body of work as a whole, which is the primary motive for this article. *Waverley* is immensely enjoyable and entertaining, dramatic and gripping, and almost “Shakespearean” in its objectivity. Scott is able, to a remarkable degree, to give the principal parties their respective due. This certainly includes the clan and Jacobite leaders, even while he recognizes and identifies the hopeless and retrograde nature of their rebellion.

Scott was on the eve of his 43rd birthday in July 1814. He was already a celebrated narrative poet—*The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), *Marmion* (1808), *The Lady of the Lake* (1810)—and, in fact, *Waverley* was published anonymously in part to protect his existing reputation should the book fail to please the public. Scott had read and studied voraciously, accumulating a store of local and national history, poetry, ballads, folk tales and more, as well as undergoing a more conventional education. *Waverley*, with its profusion of cultural and historical allusions, is the

book of a man well into life. In its richness and maturity, it is not a typical “first novel,” in that sense.

The appearance of Scott’s novel made an immediate and enormous impression. According to the Walter Scott Digital Archive at the Edinburgh University Library, “The success of *Waverley* was phenomenal and established Scott as a novelist with an international reputation. The first edition of one thousand copies sold out within two days of publication, and by November a fourth edition was at the presses.”

Ian Duncan, in an introduction to a recent edition of *Waverley*, suggests that the book “has a strong claim to be the most influential work in the modern history of the novel.” Scott went on to author another two dozen novels over the next decade and a half or so, in the process becoming the most lionized and popular literary figure of his day.

Thirteen of the novels, including most of the highly regarded ones, are set between 1644 and 1799, most of those in Scotland (or northern England), and treat various sides of the great historical transitions of the day. The subject is often civil war or internecine religious conflict, in which hostile social forces violently collide, treated generally through the activities of rather unheroic and secondary figures.

Scott’s stature in the first third of the nineteenth century and beyond is almost impossible to conceive of today. He became a venerated, even adored, figure, whose work reached wide layers of the reading public and influenced countless writers, including Victor Hugo, Alexander Pushkin, Honoré de Balzac, Alexandre Dumas, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Gustave Flaubert and Leo Tolstoy.

Pushkin, the great Russian poet, for example, wrote: “The influence of Walter Scott can be felt in every province of the literature of his age. The new school of French historians formed itself under the influence of the Scottish novelist. He showed them entirely new sources which had so far remained unknown despite the existence of the historical drama of Shakespeare and Goethe.” Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* owes a direct and unmistakable debt to Scott.

Both Charles Dickens’s *Barnaby Rudge* and, more successfully, *A Tale of Two Cities* would have been unthinkable without the earlier writer’s example. In a letter, Dickens wrote of reading such Scott novels as “*Kenilworth* [1821]...with greater delight than ever,” and also noted that “in Scott’s *Diary* which I have been looking at this morning, there are thoughts which have been mine by day and by night.”

George Eliot, another major English novelist, also admired Scott tremendously. A biographer comments that her “passion for books seems to have sprung into being on her first contact with Sir Walter Scott,” when she read *Waverley* in 1827 or so. The biography continues, “The love of Scott lasted throughout her life,” and cites Eliot’s later comment, “It is a personal grief, a heart wound to me, when I hear a depreciatory or slighting word about Scott.”

The latter’s poems and novels inspired operas (Donizetti, Rossini, Bizet), musical pieces (Schubert, Mendelssohn, Berlioz, Sullivan), theatrical works and paintings. Eleanor Marx observed that her father

“read and reread Walter Scott; he admired him and knew him almost as well as he knew Fielding and Balzac.” Franz Mehring commented that Marx “recognized a number of Walter Scott’s novels as being models of their kind.” He apparently considered *Old Mortality* (1816), which treats the conflict between Scottish Presbyterian rebels (“Covenanters”) and Royalists in the late seventeenth century, to be a particular “masterpiece.”

Ironically, Scott’s *The Lady of the Lake* was so popular that it inspired both abolitionist Frederick Douglass (who, after his escape from slavery in 1838, chose his last name from a central character) and the Ku Klux Klan (which allegedly adopted the custom of cross burning from the Scottish clans’ tradition depicted in the work).

A conservative in his political and social views, Scott nevertheless breathed the same air as his more radical (although, in some cases, only in their youth) contemporaries William Wordsworth, Ludwig van Beethoven, Friedrich Hölderlin, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Robert Owen, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Friedrich von Schlegel (all born in the years 1770 to 1772!). The great event here is the French Revolution of 1789, which erupted when they were at an impressionable age.

Scott was hostile to the French Revolution and social upheaval in general, although *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818) opens with a scintillating account of a popular revolt. In any event, something of the drama of the stormy era unquestionably entered his bloodstream—and never left it. As Trotsky noted in a very different context, “the ‘spirit’ of an epoch...is reflected in everybody, in those who accept it and who embody it, as well as in those who hopelessly struggle against it.” (It is not for nothing that Scott authored a nine-volume biography of Napoleon in 1825-1827.) One becomes aware of this intense dramatic element as the best of Scott’s novels progress toward their climactic confrontations.

He was a product in part of the Scottish Enlightenment. As Peter Garside has pointed out, “There is still a tendency...to think of Scott solely as a nineteenth-century figure, but of course his first thirty years [half his life] were spent in eighteenth-century Edinburgh” (*Scott and the “Philosophical” Historians*, 1975). Garside continued, “Scott had a strong sense of the intellectual and cultural importance of the Scottish Enlightenment as a whole,” which included such figures as Adam Smith, David Hume and Robert Burns.

Occurring in a “post-revolutionary” society, the Scottish Enlightenment had a politically moderate coloring for the most part, but its humanism, belief in reason, general broadmindedness and hostility to the arrogance of authority certainly helped shape Scott’s outlook. (One of his professors at the University of Edinburgh in 1790-1791 was the Enlightenment philosopher Dugald Stewart, who was a sympathizer of the French Revolution, at least in its initial stages, and fell under suspicion as a result.)

A generally tolerant and democratic sensibility is to be found in Scott’s work—for instance, in his scathing treatment of anti-Semitism in *Ivanhoe* (1819). In addition, it would be difficult to imagine this rather contemptuous passing comment by one of the central female characters in *Waverley* appearing in a novel prior to Scott’s day: “I believe all men (that is, who deserve the name) are pretty much alike; there is generally more courage required to run away. They have besides, when confronted with each other, a certain instinct for strife, as we see in other male animals, such as dogs, bulls, and so forth.”

(Scott, to his credit, was a sincere admirer of Jane Austen, among other female writers. In his journal, he commented, quite wonderfully, “The Big Bow-wow strain [!] I can do myself like any now going; but the exquisite touch [referring to Austen], which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting, from the truth of the description and the sentiment, is denied to me. What a pity such a gifted creature died so early!”)

David Daiches, in his 1951 essay “Scott’s Achievement as a Novelist,” rejected the notion of Scott as an “ultra-romantic figure.” Instead, he

argued, “Scott’s best and characteristic novels are a very different matter. They might with justice be called ‘antiromantic’ fiction.... It is worth noting that the heroine of the novel considered by most critics to be Scott’s best [*The Heart of Midlothian*] is a humble Scottish working girl.”

That heroine, Jeanie Deans, travels to London by foot to try to obtain a reprieve for her sister, falsely charged with child-murder. When she reaches the English capital, “she pours out her heart in her humble Scots diction” to the queen. “And when Jeanie tries to find out how she can repay the kindness of the noble duke who had helped her to her interview with the queen, she asks, ‘Does your honour like cheese?’ That is the real Scott touch.”

Scott’s historical novels, argued famed essayist Thomas Carlyle, “taught all men this truth, which looks like a truism, and yet was as good as unknown to writers of history and others, till so taught: that the bygone ages of the world were actually filled by living men, not by protocols, state-papers, controversies, and abstractions of men.”

One tends to remember, as Daiches pointed out, the minor or “middle” characters who abound in Scott’s work, the practical and energetic Scottish lawyers and farmers, the eccentric pedants and courthouse hangers-on, the landladies and tavern-keepers, the adventurers and vagabonds, the merchants and gypsies. The novelist is moved by the traditional heroism of an earlier day (and saddened by its passing), but finds it impotent, while he takes satisfaction in “the peace, prosperity and progress which he felt had been assured by the Union with England in 1707” and brings colorfully to life those who are making the most, for better or worse, of the new conditions.

Scott’s writings began to fall out of favor in the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and it is not terribly difficult to figure out why. There are areas of life, as Scott himself indicates in his comment about Jane Austen, excluded from his work. The rise of the psychological novel and its more intimate, fluid treatment of human relationships made Scott a less attractive figure. His deliberately roundabout style, his often leisurely, sometimes careless approach, which suggested a real or imaginary rural world in an earlier age, seemed both artificial and stodgy in the light of mid-century realism and, later, naturalism.

Mark Twain famously ridiculed Scott in *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), amusingly, if mistakenly, accusing the Scottish writer (clearly with *Ivanhoe* and such in mind) of setting “the world in love with dreams and phantoms; with decayed and swinish forms of religion; with decayed and degraded systems of government; with the sillinesses and emptinesses, sham grandeurs, sham gauds, and sham chivalries of a brainless and worthless long-vanished society.”

On the other hand, bourgeois critics and writers took advantage, so to speak, of Scott’s weak side and his less appealing qualities as part of a wider attack, after the 1848 revolutions and the appearance on the historical scene of the working class, against the very concept of historical change and progress. As conscious or unconscious defenders of the status quo, which was now *threatened from below*, historians and novelists alike increasingly tended to treat society in an unhistorical manner, accepting the given social order and relationships as having existed from all time.

As the left-wing Hungarian critic Georg Lukács argued, in *The Historical Novel* (1937), “Since history...is no longer conceived [after 1848] as the prehistory of the present, or, if it is, then in a superficial, unilinear, evolutionary way, the endeavours of the earlier period to grasp the stages of the historical process in their real individuality, as they really were objectively, lose their living interest.... [H]istory is *modernized*. This means the historian [or novelist] proceeds from the belief that the fundamental structure of the past is economically and ideologically the same as that of the present. Thus, in order to understand the present all one has to do is to attribute the thoughts, feelings and motives of present-day men to the past.”

Lukács's work, in fact, led to a revival of interest in Scott, and it is worth briefly going over a number of his conceptions. Like many intellectuals in the Stalinist orbit, Lukács was at his most useful when dealing with eras very distant in time from his own. When he arrived at the twentieth century, his literary criticism inevitably strained and twisted to conform to both the Stalinist political and cultural lines.

In *The Historical Novel*, Lukács first addresses the rise of a new, widespread historical consciousness out of which a writer such as Scott could emerge. He associates that development with "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." The quick succession of upheavals between 1789 and 1814 "gives them a qualitatively distinct character, it makes their historical character far more visible than would be the case in isolated, individual instances."

Moreover, discussing the new, mass character of the armies in the Napoleonic wars, the far-flung experiences of hundreds of thousands, or millions, which extended from Egypt to Russia, Lukács remarked, "Hence the concrete possibilities for men to comprehend their own existence as something historically conditioned, for them to see in history something which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them."

In the wake of the Restoration of the European monarchies after Napoleon's final defeat in 1815, a new type of argument in favor of historical progress had to emerge: "According to the new interpretation the reasonableness of human progress develops ever increasingly out of the inner conflict of social forces in history itself; according to this interpretation history itself is the bearer and realizer of human progress. The most important thing here is the increasing historical awareness of the decisive role played in human progress by the struggle of classes in history."

Although Britain was held up in the early nineteenth century as the model of peaceful, upward development, keen observers such as Scott, wrote Lukács, "were made to see that this peaceful development was peaceful only as the ideal of an historical conception.... The organic character of England's development is a resultant made up of the components of ceaseless class struggles and their bloody resolution in great or small, successful or abortive uprisings." Much of Scott's novel-writing concerns these episodes.

Scott's choice of "mediocre, average" heroes pointed to his renunciation of Romanticism and his effort "to portray the struggles and antagonisms of history by means of characters who, in their psychology and destiny, always represent social trends and historical forces." Lukács continued, "For the hero of the epic is life itself and not the individual."

"In Scott's most important novels historically unknown, semi-historical or entirely non-historical persons play the leading role.... Scott thus lets his important figures grow out of the being of the age, he never explains the age from the position of its great representatives.... For the being of the age can only appear as a broad and many-sided picture if the everyday life of the people, the joys and sorrows, crises and confusions of average human beings are portrayed."

There is a great deal more to be said on the subject of Scott and the historical novel, but let this suffice as an introduction. If any readers, unfamiliar with the novelist's work, develop an interest in his novels as the result of this essay, its purpose is served.

Scott remains a contentious figure. A portion of "leftist" critics denounce him up and down as nothing but a Tory and a royalist. In the context of the upcoming vote on Scottish independence, Scott has been dismissed in some quarters as "no Scottish patriot," while Scotland's first minister, Alex Salmond, expressed the hope that the novelist "might have moved towards a 'Yes' vote [in favor of independence]." This is ahistorical nonsense. The "keen" artistic observer today, if such a one

could be found, would expose both the official "Yes" and "No" camps as enemies of the mass of the people.

Nearly all of Scott's novels have something to recommend them, if only the aforementioned dramatic intensity, but he is certainly most knowing, most urgent and most concrete in those novels treating Scottish history and social relations: *Waverley*, *Guy Mannering* (1815), *The Antiquary* (1816), *Old Mortality*, *Rob Roy* (1817), *The Heart of Midlothian*, *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819) and *Redgauntlet* (1824).

But one could also certainly put in a word or two for *Ivanhoe*, *The Monastery* (1820), *The Abbott* (1820), *Kenilworth*, *The Fortunes of Nigel* (1822), *Quentin Durward* (1823), *The Talisman* (1825) and *The Fair Maid of Perth* (1828).

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