

## Editorial

WORTHY scholars and critics from many parts of the world are gathering in Edinburgh this summer to celebrate the bi-centenary of Sir Walter Scott's birth. It is a time to proclaim his merits, long unduly pushed aside by the more immediate impact of those contemporary-mad critics and teachers who lurch, often pathetically, from the lush intensities of Lawrence into the soliloquies of Salinger or the murmurings of Malamud. They seek, no doubt, to be with it, to seem contemporaries of their pupils. Better to be outwith it, in the Scottish phrase, to explore what may be unfashionable but is undoubtedly literature and, despite fashion, lasting literature. But some critics now show signs of sanity about Scott: the general reader has never neglected him, but whether his works need the specialist's attention is doubtful. Why, for instance, should we concentrate on *The Heart of Midlothian*, good as it is? There are lesser novels largely unspoiled by critics shooting over them (*The Pirate*, for example) and they offer vistas as expansive as much of the highlands of Scott's art.

This question of the power of critical fashion is puzzling. Is it specially a function of our age? At first we might think that the age's emphasis on speed, its quick capacity for influencing taste through mass media, had destroyed readers' appetites for slow developing novels laid on to a large canvas, their details — of place, personality, political background — attended to with loving, leisurely care. We might toy with the idea that those long radio and television-less nineteenth-century nights could well use, indeed, may have urgently needed, in addition to home-made music, dancing, games, or talk, the long novel, for private reading, for reading aloud, for discussion. And we might say this was a time for the writers of long, vast novels to flourish.

It would, however, be over-facile to argue thus when in our age the bulk of *Ulysses* or *Middlemarch* (a slow, laborious read if ever there was) or *War and Peace* are still savoured — in their different ways. There is, perhaps, a changing climate of opinion

in these matters, and should be. But the critical response can be discouraging as well as encouraging, since it can dismiss large areas of literature without stimulating the reader into seeing for himself or herself what is being passed over — often with an indecently superficial glibness.

Sir Compton Mackenzie's reputation offers us a good example of this. Mass communication brings quick comment on his magnificent memoirs, the *Octaves*, which are then read and appreciated, while the film of his gay story *Whisky Galore* is, luckily, repeated enough for his rich capacity for comedy to be appreciated and thus some of his comic novels come to be read by fresh audiences. But the critics seem reluctant to return to *The Four Winds of Love*. Does the reading public know of it? If so, it may be time to remind them to reconsider it now it can be regarded independently of its original reception; if not, surely it is time their attention was drawn to this Jamesian romantic exploration of past and continuing European experience.

This complex novel bears the mark of the true novelist, in this case a man possessing Scott's largeness, indeed nobility of outlook, energy — even at ninety — and ability to write with lively zest, urbane wit, and a sense of style that matches the author's own personality. Like Scott, a man of many interests and activities, a man of many friendships, he has in recent years graced Scott's own city, a city rich in memories of writers and itself, as home and subject of literature, a strong link in Scotland's continuing literary tradition.

New aspects of that tradition are explored in this issue of *ARIEL*, for, through the aid of the Scottish Arts Council, we have been able to include twenty-three new poems by Scottish poets, to give our readers some feel of the poetry being written by Scots today. In this number, then, we praise Scott, pay a heartfelt tribute to Monty Mackenzie, and salute the makars.

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