

## Scott and the Biographers

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THE life of Sir Walter Scott is an invitation to biography. The story is essentially a success story, although it began with disappointment in love and very nearly ended in bankruptcy. The mixture of romance and realism that Scott's latest biographer<sup>1</sup> discovers in his novels was the determining constituent of his character. Abbotsford may stand as its epitome. Scott made the money to build it, and his fervent historical imagination decreed the way it should be built. When his fortunes crashed and his powers began to fail, it still stood as it stands today. The interesting question is whether his work stands with it.

Our knowledge of Scott, and our answer to the question, will now depend upon two major biographies. Each is a classic in its kind. For many of us Lockhart's life of his father-in-law has a place only a notch or two below Boswell. Lockhart was a controversial character, and his accuracy cannot always be relied upon. 'To be one of the best and one of the kindest as well as one of the cleverest men I know,' Scott wrote to his daughter, 'John's taste and talent for making enemies and powerful enemies is something extraordinary.' His gifts were those of the satirist, and the satirist — unlike the story-teller — takes unpopularity in his stride. Yet the note of Lockhart's life of Scott is a *pietas* that never cloys, and a judgement that rarely loses its balance. He is writing from a close knowledge of his subject, and of events still recent in memory. The book is immediate and intimate, as Boswell is immediate and intimate. Although Lockhart was younger than Boswell, they both belonged to an eighteenth century whose manners and style survived into the age of industrial unrest and parliamentary reform. Lockhart's prose, easy and eloquent throughout its 700 pages, preserves the authority of a classic mould. In eschewing the pompous it never descends to the

<sup>1</sup> Edgar Johnson, *Sir Walter Scott — The Great Unknown*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2 volumes, 1970, pp. 1397.

familiar. It keeps the reader, as it keeps the subject, at exactly the right distance; and its summary of Scott's character is a masterpiece of perception. Lockhart faces squarely the apparent *hubris* of Abbotsford:

Perhaps no great poet ever made his literature so completely ancillary to the objects and purposes of practical life. However his imagination might expatiate, it was sure to rest over his home. The sanctities of domestic love and social duty were never forgotten; and the same circumstance that most ennobles all his triumphs affords also the best apology for his errors.

This poses, and also begs, a number of questions. Scott's poetry is not to be despised; for T. S. Eliot it supplied a yardstick by which to measure the more considerable achievement of Byron. In *On Poetry and Poets* Eliot discerned in busts of the two poets a certain resemblance in the shape of the head:

The comparison does honour to Byron, and when you examine the two faces there is no further resemblance. Were one a person who liked to have busts about, a bust of Scott would be something one could live with. There is an air of nobility about that head, an air of magnanimity, and of that inner and perhaps unconscious serenity that belongs to great writers who are also great men. But Byron — that pudgy face suggesting a tendency to corpulence, that weakly sensual mouth; that restless triviality of expression; and worst of all that blind look of the self-conscious beauty; the bust of Byron is that of a man who was every inch the touring tragedian.

We might have expected Eliot to recognize greatness in the character of Scott — more important things apart, both men were Tories in a sense that the average Tory of today would hardly understand if you explained it to him. But it is gratifying that he also recognized greatness in Scott as a writer, and one wishes that he had devoted an essay to him. He might not, however, have agreed with Lockhart and Southey and Byron and many of Scott's contemporaries in saluting him as a great poet. Scott was a skilful, inventive and tireless versifier, but he held his own poetry of small account. 'Byron,' he admitted, 'hits the mark where I don't even pretend to fledge my arrow'; and with *Childe Harold* he had 'bet him out of the field' — a field to which he only occasionally returned. Nevertheless, it was upon the four long narrative poems — *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, *Marmion*, *The*

*Lady of the Lake*, and *Rokeby* — that Scott's fame initially rested; so securely, indeed, that he was not tempted to put his name to *Waverley*.

Lockhart tells us disappointingly little about Scott's obstinate anonymity; and this is all the more surprising in that Scott himself deals with the matter very fully and frankly in the introduction to the 1829 edition of *Waverley*. Moreover Lockhart's observation that Scott's writing was 'completely ancillary to the objects and purposes of practical life' — in other words, the Gothic fantasy of Abbotsford and a way of life which was 'a romantic idealization of Scottish aristocracy' — raises the question as to how far Scott was a conscious artist at all. Lockhart speaks of his pen's 'dashing trot' across the paper, of the daily copy being despatched to Edinburgh, of the hard bargaining between Constable, Longman, and Murray, of the astronomical sales and mounting royalties. There can be no doubt that Scott enjoyed writing, but in so far as he hesitated at all it was for the right ending rather than the right word. To say this is not to disparage his style; the style is excellent for his purposes of narrative and description. There is hardly a sentence that does not read easily aloud — a test before which the self-conscious stylist not infrequently fails. You will hear the same nonsense talked about Balzac's style as you hear about Scott's. Nor is it to disparage the sweep of his imagination and the grand strategy of his storytelling. It is only to say that he did not write with the canons of literary criticism buzzing in his head. Like Dickens and Balzac, he wrote because he could not help writing, but he did not think that the chief business of life was to be put into literature; and much as he appreciated his contemporary fame, he does not appear to have cared a fig for immortality.

With Hazlitt and Lamb, Southey and Coleridge, all writing, and the massive shade of Johnson not far behind, literary criticism was certainly in the air. Lockhart himself was a critic of discernment, with plenty of acid in his ink, but in his life of Scott he virtually dispenses with criticism altogether. A bare paragraph telling us that the sales of *Quentin Durward* started slowly, and that *Count Robert of Paris* would have been the better for never starting at all, a casual compliment for *The Fortunes of Nigel* and *Anne of Geierstein*, these and similar conventional

allusions to the work in progress, are all he offers to the reader. It is Scott the man, in his variety and vigour, his social and family relationships, in health and infirmity, fame and misfortune, that he brings unforgettably before us. When Scott is recorded as saying that 'literary fame was a bright feather in the cap, but not the substantial cover of a well protected head', we understand the priorities of his ambitions; and Lockhart's apology for Abbotsford may stand without demur:

He wished to revive the interior life of the castles he had emulated — their wide open joyous reception of all comers, but especially of kinsmen and neighbours — ballads and pibrochs to enliven flowing bowls and *quaighs* — jolly hunting fields in which yeoman and gentleman might ride side by side — and mirthful dances, where no Sir Piercey Shafton need blush to lead out the miller's daughter. In the brightest meridian of his genius and fame, this was his *beau idéal*. There was much kindness surely in such ambition — in spite of the apparent contradiction in terms, was there not really much humility about it?

On one vital point, however, Lockhart was held to reticence. He was not able, with so many of Scott's family still living, and himself in close relation to them, to discuss in any but the most general terms Scott's attachment to Williamina Belsches. In fact he does not even mention her by name. Yet the disappointment of this love affair, as we know by Scott's own admission, left a scar that was never completely healed. The marriage to Charlotte had its adequate quota of romance, and was as happy as either could have hoped for. Scott's *Journal* is evidence of how sorely her premature death afflicted him, and at a moment when he was faced with financial ruin. But long after Williamina herself had died, it was only with a trepidation of the heart that he could bring himself to meet her mother. Scott's sensitivity was the counterpart to his resilience, and Edwin Muir may well have been right in suggesting that the loss of Williamina paralysed his ability to deal with physical passion in his novels. When his characters come to emotional grips they talk in a language that was never heard in life, and that no literary convention can justify.

So for this reason, and for one other, there was room for a new and definitive biography of Scott. Mr Edgar Johnson has memorably supplied it. If Scott spent a million words in writing

about Napoleon, we should not complain if Mr Johnson spends half a million in writing about Scott. Making a much greater use of Scott's Journals and correspondence than Lockhart, he gives the Williamina idyll all the weight it should properly carry; no detail of Scott's financial dealings or social life is omitted; the secret partnership with Ballantyne is explained and justified; his family relationships are thoroughly explored; and within the framework of a patient chronological sequence the growth of Scott as a literary artist is carefully analysed. Mr Johnson is a sensitive critic as well as a scrupulous biographer. He does not write so well as Lockhart, but that is only to say that he is writing in the twentieth century. He writes well enough, far better than most American professors, and is uncontaminated by their intolerable jargon. No doubt he discusses Scott with a sophistication by which Scott himself might have been surprised; comparisons with Proust and Faulkner have not hitherto occurred to the handful of critics who have bothered to discuss Scott at all. But in treating Scott seriously as a great imaginative writer he has not only filled up what was lacking in Lockhart; he has removed Scott from the Wardour Street where too many people were ready to confine him.

He subtitles his biography: *The Great Unknown*; he might equally well have subtitled it *The Great Unread*. The whirligig of time has never brought in a more cruel revenge on a writer's contemporary popularity. Others are free, but Scott abides our question. Dickens, Jane Austen, and Emily Brontë are secure; George Eliot has returned under the wing of Dr Leavis, and Trollope has returned without that dubious protection; *Vanity Fair* challenges *Middlemarch* as the greatest of English novels; people fight for the first editions of Conrad and Henry James. In the meanwhile there is a film of *Ivanhoe*. Almost alone among English critics Lord David Cecil has done a measure of justice to Scott, linking him with Hardy and even with Shakespeare for the tragic sense of life. But there is a stronger case for the defence than Lord David had room for in an essay which is now forgotten by nearly everyone except Mr Johnson. For it is safe to affirm that Mr Johnson has read not only everything that Scott wrote but everything that anybody has ever written about Scott. I wish, however, that he had included a little more foreign criticism.

We are given Goethe's encomium, but Balzac's was even more to the point:

Scott's chief and splendid claim to originality is that he was the first novelist to relate man to the circumstances and traditions, political, social, religious and natural of the society in which he lives.

This brings us close to Tolstoy, and Mr Johnson does not hesitate to quote *Anne of Geierstein* as a fair approximation to *War and Peace* — just as he compares the battle of Prestonpans in *Waverley* with the battle of Waterloo in the *Chartreuse de Parme*. The state of manners and laws, Scott pointed out in the opening chapter of *Waverley*, are no less crucial for character than the deep-rooted essences of human nature itself. This, in Mr Johnson's view, was 'Scott's revolutionary insight as an imaginative writer'.

But where Mr Johnson strikes a new note is in his refusal to be bemused by the condescending clichés which have admitted the earlier novels with their Scottish setting and mastery of Erse vernacular, their vivid character parts like Nicol Jarvie and Cuddie Headrigg, Andrew Fairservice and Edie Ochiltree, only to dismiss the later ones as cloak and dagger, boot and saddle, romances woven against a pasteboard décor of battlements and portcullis. Lord David Cecil was right to stress the realism of Scott — for the realist matched the romantic in his character — and Mr Johnson shows in one instance after another how a realistic understanding of history, and of human beings, came to balance his *penchant* for the improbable and the picturesque, and to correct his native prejudice. Alike in his prejudice and his impartiality, Scott is very Shakespearian — which is not surprising since he could hardly open his mouth or put pen to paper without a quotation from the poet whose 'brogues' he declared himself 'unworthy to buckle'.

When Bernard Shaw went on a trip to the Orkneys and Shetlands he took with him a copy of *The Pirate*. Now *The Pirate* is not one of the more popular, or indeed one of the best, of Scott's novels, although Mr Johnson makes out an interesting case for its merits. However that may be, it persuaded Shaw that as story-tellers and entertainers Shakespeare and Scott were out in front and 'the rest nowhere'. It was an astonishing tribute from

the iconoclast of anti-romanticism. Of course people will always read a great storyteller for the sake of the story, as they will listen to a great playwright for the sake of the plot; and both Shakespeare and Scott have suffered from this perfectly natural predilection. Then they become interested in the characters and the thematic counterpoint, and finally in what may broadly be described as the poetry. With Shakespeare the poetry will often saturate the whole play; in the case of Scott the novelist is a greater poet than the versifier. *The Heart of Midlothian* and *The Bride of Lammermoor* and much of *Redgauntlet* are enveloped in a dimension of 'poetry' which reminds us of *Wuthering Heights* or *The Return of the Native* or *Heart of Darkness* — not in the least because they are written in poetic prose, but because the writer's imagination is working here at a particular degree of incandescence. The realism of Scott has much in common with the realism of Shakespeare; one thinks of Doll Tearsheet and Justice Shallow, who are more 'poetic' creations than Bolingbroke and Prince Hal, although the former speak in prose and the latter, more often than not, in verse.

So much is evident to the common reader, but where Mr Johnson deserves our thanks is in laying bare the realism of Scott's approach to history. After all, the historical novel can only justify itself as a literary genre if it keeps faith with history. We do not ask of the historical novelist that he shall be invariably accurate — Scott's inaccuracies are legion — but we do ask that his characters shall be faithful to their prototypes, and that their conflicting points of view shall be presented with regard to the evidence. In some ways the fantasy of *Abbotsford* — and Mr Johnson spares us no detail of its elaboration — with Rob Roy's pistols and other abracadabra of the great Antiquary, has done Scott a serious disservice. It has emphasized one aspect of his character and of his vision at the expense of the other. We do well to remember that he was a Borderer with a shrewd eye to Highland extravagance. Helen MacGregor in *Rob Roy* is picturesque but impossible; McIntyre in *The Antiquary* is not even picturesque; the magnificence of MacIvor in *Waverley* is gravely flawed; so is the feudal chivalry in *Ivanhoe* and the crusading chivalry in *The Talisman*. Scott nursed a residue of Jacobite loyalties, although they cooled a little under the warmth of Hanoverian favours;

and the ambivalence of his own feelings is plain to read whenever he touches the theme which had divided England and Scotland from the time of the Civil War down to his own day. He was himself instrumental in securing the reinstatement of those Scottish peers who had forfeited their titles after the '45.

Waverley obeys his heart rather than his head when he engages himself under the standard of the Young Pretender; Colonel Talbot, whose life he spares at Prestonpans, recognizes the sincerity of his motives although he cannot approve of them; Henry Morton in *Old Mortality* sees the justice of the Covenanters' cause, but is repelled by their fanaticism; Claverhouse and Balfour of Burley in the same novel are equally ruthless, but neither is altogether wanting in nobility; Redgauntlet follows the straight line of Jacobite loyalty into an exile from which there can be no return, but the ageing and amorous Pretender — 'a fading and failing Ascanius' — is shown to be unworthy of the sacrifices a few last adherents are prepared to make on his behalf; and the offer of a free pardon which sends them home is magnanimous. Here — in what many regard as Scott's greatest novel — he is giving to popular legend the imprimatur of history, but he is perfectly frank in doing so. Perhaps Mr Johnson slightly undervalues the book in proportion to the praise he distributes elsewhere; on the other hand he sends us back to *Woodstock* with a quite unfamiliar appreciation of its quality, placing it with *Waverley* and *Old Mortality* among the author's greater achievements.

The achievement is all the greater when it is seen in the light of Scott's biography. It was written in the throes of his financial crisis and of Charlotte's fatal illness, and these left their marks upon the story.

The threat of being ejected from Woodstock, which looms over old Sir Henry Lee . . . echoes Scott's fear of losing Abbotsford, and Sir Henry's proud defiance of poverty is Scott's own. 'I shall wear coarser clothes' he says 'I shall feed on more ordinary food — men will not doff their cap to me as they were wont, when I was the great and wealthy. What of that? Old Harry Lee loves his honour better than his title, his faith better than his land and lordship.'

Things did not quite come to that at Abbotsford, and no cap failed to be doffed when Sir Walter passed by; but for all that

*Woodstock*, with the exception of *Redgauntlet*, is the most autobiographical of his novels. More than any of them it testifies to his stoic resilience. Scott can have had little natural sympathy with Cromwell; yet his portrait of that unlovely man came nearer to the real Cromwell, in John Buchan's opinion, 'than any picture of him before Carlyle's'. Scott had recognized his complexity, his mixture of mysticism and magnanimity, his essential loneliness. Mr Johnson suggests that Scott had even improved upon Carlyle, for Carlyle could never resist the temptation to make all his heroes like himself. It would have required a degree of historical infidelity of which Scott was quite incapable to make Oliver Cromwell like Walter Scott; and since a letter from Carlyle was among the rare letters that Scott is recorded to have left unanswered — a slight that Carlyle neither forgot nor forgave — neither man would have relished the comparison. Carlyle's apotheosis of the French Revolution would have seemed to Scott as biased as his apotheosis of Cromwell — although Scott's analysis of the Revolution in his life of Bonaparte was altogether too impartial for certain of his Tory admirers. No one ever accused Scott of betraying his principles; he might with reason have been accused of betraying his prejudices.

In *Woodstock*, as in *Old Mortality*, *Waverley*, and *Redgauntlet* which follow it in historical sequence, the author's sympathies are strictly balanced:

Sir Henry Lee belongs to the old school, sustained by a lofty code of loyalty and devotion. Wildrake is a psychological kinsman of the Lovelaces and Sucklings, reckless, as his name implies, lax and in-temperate, but not without a sense of humour and principle. Charles II, when he appears, disguised as the Scottish page Louis Kerneguy, represents the emergent and still more wanton breed of Villiers and Rochester, his friends and companions in indulgence and cold sensuality, yet not altogether unsusceptible to the appeals of decency and high feeling.

Here, as elsewhere, private destinies are interwoven with public conflicts; and Mr Johnson does well to quote another critic, Georg Lukács, who saw that for Scott 'the great transformations of history' were 'transformations of popular life'. The anarchy of the Highland clans, the turbulent and dissolute London of James I in *The Fortunes of Nigel*, the craft of Louis XI

pitted against the power of Burgundy, in Scott's treatment of all these Lukács recognized 'the great poet of history, because he has a deeper, and more genuine and differentiated sense of historical necessity than any writer before him'. To which we may add Mr Johnson's succinct summary that 'the most meaningful human contentions, for Scott, are inflamed not by the dark forces of depravity but by the conflict of loyalties rooted in warring values'.

For all this we are grateful; Mr Johnson has redressed a balance of appreciation that had tilted too far in one direction. And yet a doubt — or at least a question mark — remains. Granted the depth and breadth of Scott's historical vision, the pertinacity and piety of his research, the facility of his pen and the fecundity of his imagination, must we not conclude that he captivates us most surely when he is writing on his own ground? King James I in *The Fortunes of Nigel* is irresistible, because Scott might have met his like in the Edinburgh law courts; for the reader he reigns by virtue of the Scottish rather than the English crown. But which of Scott's 'leading juveniles', unless it be Waverley himself, has the vitality of the 'character parts' that support them? Which of his heroines, unless it be Jeanie Deans, Diana Vernon, and Julia Mannering, deeply engage our sympathies? In his evasion of direct sexuality Scott has deviated from the robustness of Fielding and Smollett, in whose immediate posterity he stands, but he is mercifully free from the sentimentality of Dickens; his faults are not those of taste, but of prolixity. Mr Johnson has seen through the occasionally colourless characters to the always colourful themes; and the themes go deeper than the plots of a good story, however closely they are held to them. They go so deep that we find ourselves looking for a Tolstoy, and a shade disappointed when we do not, after all, discover him. There is a difference between history and historical fiction. In history we expect the individual to be integrated with the drama; in historical fiction we expect the drama to be subordinated to the individual. We only ask of the characters that they be alive, and we do not mind in the least if they are irrelevant. The characters in Scott, with certain exceptions, live more vitally the closer they are to their author in place and time, and the more recent the history he is dealing with the more convincingly he deals with it.

Mr Johnson has seen astringency in Scott, as Scott himself saluted the astringency in Jane Austen — and Miss Austen was an admirer of *Waverley*. 'For all its epic sweep, wild scenes, and clashing drama' *Waverley*, for Mr Johnson, 'is not a romantic novel at all but an ironic novel of a young man's education . . . Far from being the romantic hero of a romantic tale, *Waverley* is the realistic protagonist of a realistic novel'. It is perhaps too much to hope that many people will acquire Mr Johnson's two massive volumes at a fairly massive price, and the common reader would be grateful for the chapters of criticism published separately. We had learnt from Lockhart how great a man was Scott, and Lockhart took it for granted that everyone regarded him as a great writer. That judgement can no longer be taken for granted. Scott emerges as no less great a man from Mr Johnson's 1400 pages; and if his plea for the greatness of Scott as writer is a speech for the defence rather than a judicial summing up, it is a speech that will convince any but the most biased jury.

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