History in Scott’s Novels

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History in Scott's Novels.

In this paper it is our purpose to show how Sir Walter Scott handled history in his so-called historical novels, concrete illustrations being taken from Kenilworth, The Abbot, and The Fortunes of Nigel. As an introduction to this study we will give briefly, Scott's own theory of a historical romance.

Scott regarded himself as a romancer—not as a historian—and in so doing felt that he was not to be measured by the standard which a historian is called upon to satisfy. When he departed from the facts of history he was usually aware of it, and believed to such degree that he was best serving his art and his readers. He knew from the prefaces to
Ivanhoe and Quentin Durward, that Scott had a definite idea of the historical novel, and in the main followed it, though he was not always able to stick strictly to his outline of plot when developing a novel. To Scott, there was no difference between history and the historical novel. In the latter, instead of a mere series of historical episodes with no central point, there was to be a unity of form developed out of the history of a period or put into it by the imaginative genius of the author — the occurrences to be so magnetized as to form a complete picture. Scott felt that if he represented the preceding ages in general outline as they were and remained true to the character of the times with which he dealt, that he was at liberty to pay
tribute to his art, and thus he justified his freedom.

Perhaps we can get his point of view from a portion of the dedicatory Epistle to France, in which he writes:

"The scarcity of materials is indeed a formidable difficulty, but to those deeply read in antiquity little concerning the private life of our ancestors lie scattered through the pages of our various historians, bearing a slender proportion to the other matters of which they treat; but still, when collected together, sufficient to throw considerable light upon the vie privée of our forefathers. The severe antiquity may think by intermingling fiction with truth, I am collecting the wealth of history with modern inventions and impressing upon the rising generation..."
false ideas of the age which I describe. It is true that I
neither can nor do pretend
to the observation of complete
accuracy even in matters
of outward costume, much
less in the more important
points of language and man-
ners. It is necessary for ex-
citing interest of any kind
that the subject assumed
should be translated into
the manners as well as the
language of the times in which
we live.

In this book, I have
so far explained our ancient
manners in modern language
and so far detailed the charac-
ters and sentiments of my
persons that the modern reader
will not find himself, I hope much
abstracted by the repulsive
dryness of mere antiquity. In
this, I respectfully contend, I
have in no respect exceeded
the fair license due to the author of a fictitious composition. The late ingenious Mr. Sterritt limited the popularity of his Greenhow Hall by expelling from it everything which was not sufficiently obsolete to be altogether forgotten and unintelligible.

"The passions, the sources from which sentiments and manners must spring in all their modifications, are generally the same in all ranks and conditions of all countries and ages, and it follows, as a matter of course, that the opinions, habits of thinking and actions, however influenced by the peculiar state of society, must still, upon the whole, bear a strong resemblance to each other."

We do not maintain that Scott was always accurate in his historical data; for he was not
and Shakespeare's justification for manipulating the facts of history was, that he must have dramatic effects, and it was for these dramatic effects that Scott tampered with the facts. He crowded together incidents, interchanged episodes and brought in events which did not occur nor for which there is any authority in the records of the time. But why was a writer of fictitious romance not justified in prolonging Amy Robsart's life fifteen years so that she could meet Queen Elizabeth at Kenilworth, if by so doing he could present a dramatic situation and portray in vivid colors with a few strokes the pomp, the show, the gaiety and the crimes of the Elizabethan period? Scott knew he was not delivering to fact when he had
Queen Elizabeth in 1575 refers to A Midsummer Night's Dream, but this was an effective thing for the Queen to do, and who was going to read his novels for history? When critics called his attention to these anachronisms, Scott coolly called their attention to others they had not observed.

But there is a difference between misrepresenting poets and misrepresenting the distinguishing characteristics of a period. The latter was not as important in Scott's eyes as the spirit, and so keen was his appreciation of this spirit that the facts almost arranged themselves to fit the times. Although there have been objections to Scott's representation of medieval life because it is not accurate, popular appreciation has not been lessened on this
account. He is accused of not having understood Gothic architecture, the language of feudal times, and the relations between the Saxons and the Normans. What does this matter? If we get the spirit and the general effect we can dispense with precision of detail.

In 1895 the Quarterly Review stated:

"If Scott has given us such pictures of historical events or such estimates of historical personages as are calculated to convey false impressions, where false impressions may be mischiefous and seriously prevent our judgment on political or religious subjects, that is a fair matter for criticism and worthy of general attention. But many of the objections raised to Scott's Reederal..."
pictures are fit only to be discussed by a society of antiquarians."

The historian knows of Scott's inaccuracies so he comes to
the Waverley Novels prejudiced, not willing to acknowledge
that the genius of the author
in making felt the life of
an age and brighten the dis-
agreement in dates. Some
of our modern critics are
especially severe; one of whom
has written:

"Scott is not the only novelist
who has poisoned with
his cleverly woven plots the
dry roots of history, or in
essentially portrayed the char-
acter of some eminent per-
sonage. ** Sir Walter Scott, by
the magic of his genius, will
bewitch his audience into
believing him to have been
an expert writer of history
as well as of romance."
The historical novels of Scott will still command a wide circulation when the works of our leading modern historians shall have been left unread and undusted on the bookshelf."

When we remember that Scott is not studying the private life of the individual so much as the character of a reign, we find it less justifiable that the criticism of historical inaccuracy should be urged against him. Perhaps Lord Bacon's maxim that a mixture of a lie doth ever add pleasure, is not especially fitting as applied to Scott, for his Truth gives pleasure as often as his lie, and we are reminded of this saying when we read severe criticisms on him for his misleading statements having to do with history.
It seems to me that in Scott we see the Middle Ages as men of those times saw them and not as modern historians see them, many of whom, though unintentionally, judge the past centuries and their conditions by nineteenth century standards. There is a historical perspective which is very hard for even historians of our times to obtain. They often give us the impression that certain features of the old days of chivalry were as much a marvel to the people of that time as they are to us. In the days of crude civilization and less organized conditions of society men must have regarded much of the unjustly and inequity with the view that, whatever is, is right— and through oppression
Rome and early England it was endured rather than criticized and opposed.
Scott has been severely criticized for painting only one side—the brilliant side of
the times with which he deals; the pleasant side of the
people and for not giving
enough of the realistic harsh-ness which existed. These criti-
cies are viewing the reign of
James I. from the stand-
point of a modern English-
man or American, and not,
as we believe, an Englishman
of the seventeenth century
viewed it.
Some knowledge of the prin-
ciple governing him in the
selection of his periods may
be gathered from his preface
to The Fortunes of Nigel, in
which he has written:
"The reign of James I. gave
unbounded scope to innen.
tion in the fable while at the same time it afforded greater variety and discrimination of character than could, with historical consistency, have been introduced if the scene had been laid a century earlier.

The most picturesque period of history is that when the ancient rough and mild manners of a barbaric age are just beginning to be moulded upon and contrasted by the illumination of increased or revived learning and the influences of renewed or reformed religion. The strong contrast produced by the opposition of ancient manners, to those which are gradually subduing them, affords the lights and shadows necessary to give effect to a fictitious narrative.
Ivanhoe are given reasons for changing material and for the choice of the period.

"It is plain that frequent publication must finally wear out the public favor unless some device could be devised to give the appearance of novelty to subsequent productions. The period of the narrative adopted, was the reign of Richard I; not only as abounding with characters whose very names were sure to attract general attention, but as affording a striking contrast between the Saxons, by whose soil the soil was cultivated, and the Normans who still reigned in it as conquerors."

Scott seemed to have had almost an instinct for discerning what material would work up well and lend itself to a combination of romance and history. Other
novelists have made more subtle analysis of character and given more excellent minute description than he but they have written mostly of their own times and countries, while Dickens and Thackeray were not more at home in London than Scott was in dealing with the Crusaders and Elizabethans.

In the preceding pages reference has been made to Scott's variation from the facts of history, and as illustration of this some study of the anachronisms in Trollyworth was undertaken, with the following results.

Scott says that Amy Robsart, the heroine, was the daughter of Sir Hugh Robsart, whose seat was called Lidcote Hall on the boundary of Devonshire and Hereford; he states that Sir Hugh died very soon after his...
daughter. History tells us that the real Amy Robsart was the only legitimate child of Sir John Robsart, whose estate was in Warwickshire. His death seems to have taken place over six years before Amy's death at Chinnor, which, history records, occurred in 1560, and Echling pleaded to present her at Kenilworth during the festivities in 1575. As to Amy's marriage, from the novel, the news of a secret union and life with Lord Dudley, which does not coincide with the fact that on June 4, 1550, their marriage ceremony was performed publicly in the presence of King Edward VI at Sheen, Richmond.

On September 24, 1564, Lord Robert Dudley was created Earl of Leicester, and as Amy Robsart died in 1560, she
was never more than Lady Robert Dudley, though Scott mentions her throughout Kenilworth as the "Countess of Leicester."

Anthony Foster, the guardian of Edmund Hall, or Fossette, as it appears in the Chronicles, is described in Kenilworth as "a vulgar, lowbred puritanical clerk," while history represents him as anything but a puritanical cleric. Though vulgar rather, as a high-minded gentleman and scholar. He and his wife lived at Cumnor place, renting it till 1561, the year after Amy Robsard's death, when they purchased the estate from William Queen. Richard Verney, or Verney, diocese, but there is no record of his being in the service of Leicester, though in letters written by him to Burghley, 1575, Leicester
mentions "a young Varney" for whom he acted as guardian.

In chapter XVII of Stainworth, the Lord of Lincoln is represented as having said, "My Lord of Sussex must be excused for his rude and old world housekeeping, since he has as yet no wife." Varney remarked concerning Sussex, that the Queen took him up roundly and asked what my Lord Sussex had to do with a wife. In April 1555, Lord Sussex was married to Frances Sidney, founderess of Sidney-Sussex College, Cambridge, who lived till 1589.

One of the persons whom Scott has made to figure in the festivities at Stainworth is Sir Walter Raleigh; but if histories are to be believed, during the year 1575, the year in which the revels took place, he was not in England.
at all, but was abroad during the entire year.

As is fitting for the court of Elizabeth, a member of great dramatists and literary men are discussed, and also quoted. Among these is Shakespeare. He was born in 1564, although in 1575 he is represented as having already written "Venus and Adonis", 1593, and Elizabeth quotes from "Dvorcius and Cleopatra" 1599, which must therefore have been produced by a boy of eleven. In chapter XVII, Leicester says:

"So, William Shakespeare—wild Will!—thou hast given my nephew, Philip Sidney, love powder—he cannot sleep without thy Venus and Adonis under his pillow, though in reality Venus and Adonis was not published till after the death of Sir Philip Sidney."
According to Scott, "Arcadia" was written before 1575, whereas Sidney did not begin it till 1580 and it was not published till 1590.

The period presented in Kenilworth is the most questionable in Elizabeth's whole life, and presumably Scott made a deliberate choice of this as he did of the most brilliant period of Mary Stuart's for The Abbot, as seeming to him to be the most suitable background for the contrasted characters of the two queens. In the Introduction to Kenilworth he writes:

"A certain degree of success, real or supposed, in the declinations of Queen Mary, naturally induced the author to attempt something similar respecting her sister and foe, the celebrated Elizabeth," and as Scott was an ardent
and loyal Scot; elman; we can judge for ourselves what his addition; the toward Mary’s sister and foe was.

History portrays Elizabeth as a peculiar combination of masculine and feminine qualities, but Scott has brought out more strongly the masculine side of the nature, subordinating any feminine charms and graces she might have had. We see her as “a great unwonnable sovereign” — political, shrewd, weighing and weighing, against immediate gain, unscrupulous, when desired ends could be obtained only by deceit, persevering and governing her subjects by her powerful will, capricious and vindictive, craving attention and fond of flattery. Yet this picture is brilliant for Scott had forced the facts of history and they glowed with
fire and color.

Those who know the Waverley novels must be surprised to find in them so many and such widely different historical portraits, all executed by the hand of such a master hand they seem to follow us about, as if with living eyes," instead of being masses of lines and colors, and so instinct with life and character that ample devotion seems to have been made for a little devotion from the dry-as-dust statistics and facts which constitute only the skeleton of history, and tell us as much about it as an anatomical museum does of human character."

Where can we find more vivid delineation of James I, than in The Fardels of Nigel; of Cromwell, and Charles II, than in Woodstock; of Elizabeth...
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Where can we find more vivid delineation of James I, than in The Fortunes of Nigel; of Cromwell, and Charles II, than in Woodstock; of Elizabeth
Sussex and Leicester, than in territorial, and of Mary Stuart, than in The Abbot? While no period of English history is more difficult to depict than that of the struggle of the Edicts for the Crown, yet Scott has succeeded admirably with the portions he has undertaken and no other poet or novelist has been as successful in his treatment of Mary Stuart for a heroine.

Scott's historical novels may be grouped in three classes: those founded on feudalism, those relating to Scottish Reformation, and those concerned with the romance of the Edicts. In eight novels, covering more than two hundred years and extending from the deposition of Mary to the reign of George III, what Shakespeare did for the Wars
of the Roses has been done by Scott for the Edwardian cause.

In history or fiction there is no more tragic character than Mary, Queen of Scots, and from her life the author of The Abbot has selected the portion which, on account of its significant events, their rapid succession and the climates involved, is most suitably adapted to poetic or novelistic treatment. Our interest is aroused in the beginning, kept up throughout and dissatisfied in the end.

Scott's feeling for Mary was that of a chivalrous knight toward one whom he regarded as a beautiful and unfortunate woman, subjected to the greatest extremes of fortune, yet maintaining throughout the most queenly dignity.

In The Abbot, she sits like a
pre-eminently queenly, beautiful, resplendent yet her royal dignity; a neither of accomplishments and quick wit, possessing adulate such grace and charm that in place of a mere woman she is an empress. The brilliant portrait has been shaded with weaknesses necessary to a consistent characterization, yet they have not lessened the attractiveness of the picture.

Scott refused to write a life of Mary because he said that his feeling for her and the facts of history did not seem to agree. He does not tell us anywhere just what his opinion of Mary's guilt was, or just what facts he believed her to have taken in the tragedies, yet there is an almost baffling and a mysterious sense of guilt surrounding
her which seems to enhance
the power she holds over us.
We are convinced of Bothwell's
guilt and so our sympathy
is not for him, but for the
imprisoned and unfortunate
queen, who does no longer
is simply Mary, Queen of Scots,
and one of the most real and
fascinating of women.
Sir Walter was hardly less
successful in portraying
Maria's son, James I into The
Fortunes of Nigel. The supposed
hero, Nigel, is really in the
background and we are in-
derested in him only because
through his adventures an
opportunity is given us to
see James, his court and
his associates, Charles and
Buckingham. Critics have
taken little exception to
Scott's characterization of
James, "the wisest of fools,
and the most foolish of blinds."
He is presented in public and in private life, in both showing his pedantry, his meanness and his audacity. Scott has been faithful to history in contrasting in the personality of James his noble pretentions and his mean practices, his occasional generosity and his continuous greed; his acquaintance with books and his lack of knowledge of men.

Lockeard, in writing of The Fortunes of Nigel, gives as his judgment, that "no other one of Scott's novels leaves so complete an impression as the picture of an age; that there is hardly a single picturesque point of manner and diction by Ben Jonson and his contemporaries, but has been dovetailed into this story, thus presenting a brilliant sketch of the times."
As was mentioned in the beginning of this paper, it was Scott's purpose to give as vividly and as accurately as possible the color and spirit of a period; to be true in general broad outlines, the amplification to be fictitious and according to his own discretion. So it seems to us as if Scott's conception of a historical novel was something like this: A historical novel—not a history, but a novel of entertainment is one in which local color and historical perspective have been observed, in which events of historical interest and well known historical figures have prominent place, though not mere dull historical descriptions, but flesh and blood characters, infused with life and made living by the genius of the author.
This may not be the final type of the historical novel, but it has been adhered to with little variation since Sir Walter's time and is the accepted type today.
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