

# **WALTER SCOTT**

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Robin Mayhead

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**WALTER SCOTT**

**ROBIN MAYHEAD**

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# ***Walter Scott***

*by Robin Mayhead*



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## ***Walter Scott—his life and works***

### *Scott's reputation and career*

No major British author has suffered more from changing literary fashions than Sir Walter Scott. During his lifetime (1771-1832) he became a figure of both national and European significance. To Goethe, for example, *Waverley* was one of 'the best things that have ever been written in the world'; while the appearance of *Quentin Durward* (1832) created a literary sensation in Paris, which gave Scott the kind of continental reputation hitherto enjoyed among his compatriots only by Byron. Yet as early as the 1870s we find Leslie Stephen speaking of 'the decay of interest in Scott', and voicing a suspicion that 'the great "Wizard" has lost some of his magic power, and that the warmth of our first love is departed'. As for the Continent, what could be more damaging than the verdict of the Scandinavian critic Georg Brandes (quoted in John Buchan's biography of Scott) that he is a writer 'whom all grown-up people have read, and no grown-up people read'?

Although he has continued to be read, there has been a widespread feeling in the present century that Scott is not really worth the serious attention of adults. To an age that has taken its critical bearings in fiction from novelists

such as James, Conrad, and Joyce, Scott has seemed all too plainly to be little more than an outdated best-seller, an astute commercial entertainer completely without serious interests or artistic conscience. Once regarded as at least an unexceptionable author for the schoolroom, he has come to be thought of by many as a downright bore and the positive enemy of a lively enjoyment of literature in the young. In the past decade or so, however, there have been signs of a real revival of interest. Not only has serious critical attention been given to some of the individual novels, but scattered references to Scott in writings devoted to other authors reveal distinct changes of attitude. Thus we find one critic associating him with Fielding, Jane Austen, and Dickens, and another grouping him with Dickens and Bunyan as being probably one of our most widely read authors 'of great powers and permanent interest'. It remains true, nonetheless, that to a very great number of intelligent readers Scott seems an author not worth bothering about.

It is the main object of this book to try to correct that view. A case for taking Scott seriously will be set out in the second part of this Introduction, and will be illustrated and amplified by the subsequent extracts and commentaries. Meanwhile it is in place to give a brief factual sketch of his writing career, and to indicate his position in literary history. (A brief biographical sketch will be found in Appendix A.)

Scott's life as a writer of significance really dates from the publication of *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802-3), a collection of traditional ballad poetry, with notes and introductory essays. In 1805, with the appearance of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, Scott emerged as a poet in his own right, and there followed a series of verse narratives: *Marmion* (1808), *The Lady of the Lake* (1810), *The Vision of Don Roderick* (1811), *Rokeby* (1813), *The Bridal of Triermain* (1813), and *The Lord of the Isles* (1815). The last of those poems was in fact published after he

had turned from verse narrative to the novel, a change of direction largely brought about by the phenomenal success of Byron's *Childe Harold*, which Scott recognised as a serious challenge to his own popularity as a poet.

His career as a novelist (though his authorship of the books was for long officially undisclosed) began with *Waverley* (1814), the first of an unbroken line of works with a Scottish background, of which the last were *A Legend of Montrose* and *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819). He returned to Scottish themes from time to time in his subsequent books, notably *Redgauntlet* (1824) and *The Fair Maid of Perth* (1828), but some of his greatest successes with the reading public of the age were achieved by novels such as *Ivanhoe* (1820) and *Kenilworth* (1821), which deal with non-Scottish material and remote periods of history. Scott's last novels, *Count Robert of Paris* and *Castle Dangerous*, appeared in 1832, the year of his death.

To the historian of literature, Scott exhibits certain very obvious features of the Romantic Movement. With Wordsworth, for instance, he shares a predilection for picturesque and often wild landscape (though, as we shall see, in a rather special way), and with Coleridge a taste for the supernatural or suggestions of the supernatural. Both of these characteristics, together with a liking for venerable buildings (particularly when ruined) and antiquity in general, link him with the line of popular Romanticism represented by Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (the first 'thriller' in the English language), Mrs. Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and Matthew Lewis's *Ambrosio* or *The Monk*. The last-named, published in 1795, made a deep impression upon Scott, and there is certainly a way in which he has to be regarded as a successor to the masters of the 'Tales of Terror'. He is given to introducing the supernatural, for example, for what may appear to be merely sensational reasons. The respective apparitions of the 'Bodach Glas' in *Waverley*, of old blind Alice in *The Bride of Lammermoor*, and of Aldobrand Oldenbuck in

*The Antiquary*, bear little relation to what is genuinely valuable and interesting in those novels.

Yet in connection with the first two instances, at any rate, an important point emerges. The two spectres may put us in mind of the Gothic 'thriller', but they belong at the same time to that world of Scottish oral tradition which is one of the sources of Scott's strength. Much of what is most striking in his work was drawn from the tales and ballads that filled his mother's memory, and from the rich stock of traditional lore imbibed from his grandmother. The story of *The Bride of Lammermoor*, for example, was orally communicated to him in his childhood, so he felt perfectly at liberty to introduce supernatural incidents into his novel if the original tale contained them. As the author himself remarks, 'this could not be called a Scottish story unless it manifested a tinge of Scottish superstition'.

'Scottish superstition', indeed, far from being necessarily associated with his weaknesses, could lead at the highest level to what is probably Scott's most perfect single piece of writing, 'Wandering Willie's Tale' in *Redgauntlet*. Nevertheless it could, on the other hand, be all too readily exploited to gratify the taste of a public reared on the 'Tales of Terror'. The popular taste of the time is in fact liable to intrude almost anywhere in the Waverley Novels. We can see this happening even in one of the finest of them, *The Heart of Midlothian*, where the character of George Robertson, seducer of Effie Deans, is in direct line of descent from such figures as Montoni in Mrs. Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and similar picturesque villains in the 'Tales of Terror'.

To show just how disconcertingly close Scott can be to Mrs. Radcliffe, here is the description of Robertson as he first appears to Reuben Butler :

The fiery eye, the abrupt demeanour, the occasionally harsh, yet studiously subdued tone of voice—the features,