

Raleigh

Scott was an original and powerful cultural and intellectual force. Like Wordsworth, to whom he was allied in many ways, he had put together a new combination and, like Wordsworth, he was a mover and shaker: the world would never be seen in quite the same way after the Waverley novels had been absorbed. Scott did not cause the American Civil War, as Mark Twain claimed; nevertheless, almost every steam-boat that pulled in to Hannibal bore the name of a Scott heroine. To have been alive and literate in the nineteenth century was to have been affected in some way by the Waverley novels.

The obvious appeals of the Waverley novels can easily be enumerated: their originality, their humor, the earthiness and quaintness of the Scottish dialogue, the individuality of the characters, the melodrama, the sentiment, the good spirits, the “sound” morality, the conventional love story and happy ending, the nature descriptions, the historical accounts, the thrilling battles, the intriguing mystery of the author the splendid profusion of it all as the early Waverleys poured forth. Scott had put together a whole new amalgam of literary elements, unique in England and in Europe. Coleridge had foreseen much of this when he described to an unknown correspondent, in December 1811, the elements that had gone into Scott’s poetry:

But no insect was ever more like in the color of it’s skin & juices to the Leaf It fed on, than Scott’s Muse is to Scott himself — Habitually conversant with the antiquities of his country, & of all Europe during the ruder periods of Society, living as It were, in whatever is found in them imposing either to the Fancy or interesting to the Feelings, passionately fond of natural Scenery, abundant in local Anecdote, and besides learned in

All the Antique Scrolls of Faery Land,
And all the thrilling Tales of Chivalry
Processions, Tournaments, Spells, Chivalry.⁸

I wish to do two things in this essay: first, to point out the less readily apparent reasons why Scott should have appealed to the Victorians, and second, with the gift of hindsight, such as it is, and even at the cost of indulging in a little amateur sociological analysis, to speculate about the possible appeals that Scott had to nineteenth-century people, appeals of which they were probably not fully aware.

I

One of the least understandable appeals of Scott’s novels is what was thought to be their great realism, of which, in the context of the conventional novel of the day (Austen, of course, excepted), they were prize examples. In 1853 Delacroix read Lermontov and Pushkin for the first time, and they brought back to his mind the initial response to Scott: “There is an extraordinary feeling of reality about them, the quality that took everybody by surprise in Sir Walter Scott’s novels when they first appeared.”⁷ But in his own lifetime, and in consequence of his theories about the “advance” of art, Delacroix, who had once admired Scott and in fact had gone to England in the 1820’s to study him and Byron and Hunt, came to admire him less and less as he grew older. By the 1850’s he was complaining about the long-windedness and the overabundance of detail in Scott’s and Cooper’s novels.

It is often forgotten that one of Scott's impulses in writing *Waverley* was the same one that initially set off Cervantes, Fielding, and Jane Austen — that is, to laugh off the stage the currently fashionable romances in the name of realism. Thus in the first chapter of *Waverley*, Scott announced what the novel could have been but was not, and ticked off the current fashions. He could have called it “Waverley: a Tale of Other Days,” with a castle, an aged butler, owls shrieking, and so on; or ‘Waverley: A Romance from the German,” with an evil Abbot, a tyrannous Duke, Rosicrucians, and so on; or “Waverley: A Sentimental Tale,” with a heroine with “auburn hair”; or “Waverley: A Tale of the Times,” concerned with the latest doings in the world of Fashion. His own object, he said, was to describe men rather than manners; to show those possessions common to men in all stages of society; to show the violence of “our ancestors”; and to take his leaves from “the great book of Nature.” In the fifth chapter he paused to apologize to those readers “who take up novels merely for amusement,” for going into so much detail about “old-fashioned politics,” that is, Whig and Tory, Hanoverians and Jacobites, but his story would be unintelligible without this knowledge. His hero, however pallid he turns out to be, comes not out of the world of fiction and romance but is rooted in history itself by belonging to a historic family that had hereditarily fought for idealistic, and often losing, causes. The first Scottish village encountered in *Waverley* is a miserable cluster of mud huts, around which play children in a “primitive” state of nakedness. Their features were “rough,” although Scott adds, like a good Scotsman, “remarkably intelligent.” As it turns out, Rosa is the heroine with the “auburn hair,” metaphorically speaking, but she is counterbalanced by Flora MacIvor, the strong woman and dedicated Jacobite. The whole Highland part had a ring of authenticity. Even Wordsworth, who was not lavish of praise, especially not for Scott, thought this aspect of *Waverley* completely convincing. Moreover, the romantic and conventional plot of the hero and the two young ladies of his affections did not hang in the air but was embedded in, and dominated by, authentic history, by what had actually happened-- the Jacobite uprising of 1745-- and that not too long ago. (The original sub-title had been “‘Tis fifty years since.”) All the subsidiary Scottish characters were convincing and spoke a colorful, bizarre, funny, and seemingly realistic speech. Throughout his career Scott was always aware of the physicality of his characters, heroes and heroines excepted. The men tend to be burly and the women shapely, and one is always made aware, either by description or by action, of this great physical vitality. Finally, it was a world where people would fight at an instant and die for a cause. At the same time Scott's realism was not eighteenth-century realism with its descriptions of sexual peccadillos and its scatological references. There was none of the odor of “the bad century” in Scott's world, nothing that could not be read to the whole family.

A second original characteristic of the world of the Waverley novels was a great enlargement of the genre itself, temporally, spatially, and sociologically. Scott moved things back into the past but not into a past that was finished or irrelevant to contemporary concerns. Even the later medieval novels usually possessed a contemporary relevance. Similarly, great spatial panoramas began to appear in English fiction: the snow-covered mountains of northern Scotland in *A Legend of Montrose*; in *Old Mortality*, a castle tower commanding two immense panoramas: one wasted and dreary, the other cultivated and beautiful; then through the trees of the cultivated one comes a troop of soldiers, half-seen, half-hidden, winding their way to the castle; in *Rob Roy*, a huge lake in the northern Highlands. Finally, what had been predominantly a middle-class affair, the novel, Scott enlarged upwards to include nobility and royalty and downwards to include farmers, peasants, barbarians, and all the gradations of society, although, it should be said, the middle class always remained the real balance wheel and the center of gravity

for all other classes.

At the same time, and over in the other direction, the Waverley novels were great compendiums of fact and information. Like a history book they had footnotes, and not only for historical facts but for general information as well. What did Glasgow Cathedral look like at the time of Rob Roy? How was a Highland hut built and what did the Highlanders use for fuel? Scott's novels were full of *things*: swords, armour, clothing, books, and so on. In *Rob Roy* before a dinner: "huge, smoking dishes, loaded with substantial fare, . . . cups, flagons, bottles, yea, barrels of liquor."

As no novels before, they pointed to and were allied with contemporary art and architecture. Historically, Scottish art had largely manifested itself in portraits, but after the advent of the Waverley novels pictures from Scottish history and legend became as popular as those based upon domestic and social incidents. Similarly, in the genre of landscape painting Scott fired the imaginations of his own and the next generation. William Allan, who had been helped by Scott's purchases of *his* work, was specifically influenced by Scott to turn to pictures of historical romance. David Wilkie too devoted himself, like Scott, to memorializing what was passing away.⁸ Twice in his career, in 1818 and again in 1831, Turner himself was engaged to do illustrations for Scott's work. In 1831, Robert Cadell, Scott's publisher, suggested that Turner's pencil was needed to secure the success of an edition of Scott's collected poems. Without Turner, they could expect 3,000 subscribers, with him 8,000. In 1831 Turner visited Scotland, annoyed a lot of people, and made his sketches, twelve of which, as drawings, were exhibited in London in 1832. Scott's appeal, then, was eminently pictorial, and his work and that of contemporary painters seemed to go hand in hand. J. G. Lockhart, early in his biography, referred to Pitt's quoting some lines of Scott's poetry and remarking: "This is the sort of thing which I might have expected in painting, but would never have fancied capable of being given in poetry."⁹ Moreover, Scott's frequent references to Wilkie in the Waverley novels and his attempts to rival painting — he was in fact a frustrated painter himself — in his natural descriptions, with the resulting inference that prose and painting were analogous, were taken up later by Henry James and Proust and a whole generation of Western writers who conceived of writing, at least in part, in terms of painting.

In architecture Scott had a similar effect. Henry-Russell Hitchcock says that Scottish Baronial architecture was always "evocative" of Scott's novels and that associated with the Baronial style was a whole iconography of literary and patriotic figures: Scott's characters, kilts, tartans, Wilkie's Highland peasants, and Edwin Landseer's animals. And of course the two most famous Scottish Baronial homes were first, Abbotsford and, second, Balmoral. The rage for this architecture became so strong in Scotland that by the 1850's even the warehouses in Edinburgh were turreted.¹¹ Moreover, the same style finally permeated the architecture of the entire island. "The Scottish Baronial, combining the feudally romantic picturesqueness of the Castellated with the muddled Mannerist detail of the Jacobethan, was an almost perfect Early Victorian stylism" (Hitchcock, p. 284).

Other appeals of Scott are less readily obvious, but they were nevertheless real to the Victorians. Nassau Senior, who reviewed each of the Waverley novels as it appeared and later published abstracts of his reviews, is a case in point.² He had first read *Waverley* (author then anonymous) at a watering place. He was feeling dull and disgusted with the usual novel fare at his disposal, one item of which was *Waverley*. But any port in a storm: "So we opened it, at hazard, in the second volume, and instantly found ourselves, with as much surprise as Waverley himself, and with about the same effect, in the centre of the Chevalier's court" (p. 17).

Three years later Senior wrote that the Waverley series had grown to “a line of three and twenty volumes” (p.8). This phenomenon was *enough* to alarm, German diligence, and in English it constituted “the most striking literary phenomena of the age” (p. 1). Historically, said Senior, imaginative prose had been allied either to comedy and had given accurate and pleasing pictures of human nature, or to tragic romance, taking place in a remote Gothic past and falsifying human nature. Scott abolished this dichotomy and put together a completely original mixture of the two previously antithetical sides. He made the great familiar, and he made the past believable; his agents were the mighty of the earth, his subject the happiness of states. He managed to treat lofty subjects with a minuteness of detail, something that only Homer, Euripides, and Shakespeare had been able to do before. The legal background and trappings that Scott attached to so many of his novels gave them a great plausibility. For it was law that controlled and regulated the greater part of human actions. Scott’s other subject, war, was ostensibly an interruption of the working of the law; yet, Senior goes on to say, in time of war, “the forms of law are never in more constant use. Men who would not rob or murder, *will* sequester and condemn”(p. 6). Dealing with battles, princes, lost causes, and so on, the *Waverley* novels were in the lofty regions of romance, yet, for the first time in fiction, these subjects were treated with telling and realistic detail, with the everyday facts of life always apparent: “we feel convinced that though the details presented to us never existed, yet they must resemble what really happened; and that while the leading persons and events are as remote from those of ordinary life as the inventions of Scuderi, the picture of human nature is as faithful as could have been given by Fielding or Le Sage” (p. 8). Added to this unique combination of romance and realism were other amalgams, principally the mingling of mirth and pathos in the mood and the alternation of the narrative and the dramatic in the mode. At times these admixtures were objectionable, but by and large it was all so admirably managed that it pleased both the reader who was partial to a particular mode and the one whose taste was universal. Senior was by no means uncritical of Scott, and he reiterated all the familiar criticisms: the often sloppy prose, the confused plots, the historical mistakes, the involved and tedious beginnings, the constant re-creation, in book after book, of the same cast of characters. Yet there was no Waverley novel without some merit, and in his best efforts there was always the joy of watching what the unknown author could or would do