

The Character and Writings of SIR WALTER SCOTT.

Sir Walter Scott, for the special work which he set himself to accomplish, viz the portrayal of all phases and conditions of Scottish life and character and the writing of vivid life like historical romances, was exceptionally favored in his ancestry, parentage, social standing and education. Descended on both sides of the house from some of the most renowned border chieftains, numbering among his ancestors immediate and remote Montrosiers and Jacobites and born in the middle ranks of life, all his antecedents and surroundings conspired to make him what he undoubtedly became, the greatest master of romance in the language and the aptest and most faithful delineator of the richly compounded many sided national character his country has ever produced.

Thus born and nurtured in the odor of romance, taking it in with his "mother's milk" and occupying a position half way between the two extremes of society (and thus in a degree familiar with both) Sir Walter Scott was exceptionally circumstanced for the development of his genius, and like a true genius rose equal to the occasion.

His education (that of a writer to the Signet) also tended to the development of his peculiar powers. A lawyer is in a sense an antiquary by profession. He has at least as much to do with the past as the present. He lives half of his life in more or less remote ages and his present is in the very strictest sense, in a far stricter sense than the ordinary "layman" can conceive, the product and outcome of the past. He has practically no future, his work being connected solely and wholly with actualities, with what is and what has been. The "will be" cannot from the nature of things enter with his calculations because he, of all men must accept things just exactly as he finds them, the least of all men can allow himself to be influenced by the possibilities, probabilities or even practical certainties of the immediate future.

A lawyer therefore who possesses a single mark of antiquarian enthusiasm is bound to become largely influenced—in sensibly it may—by the spirit of bygone and nevertheless remote ages. Knowing as he does that law is simply the reapplication and readjustment of eternal principles, under varying forms, that in regard to the great fundamental principles of right and justice there is nothing new under the sun, he learns to respect the wisdom of past ages and he comes to realize how profoundly we, of today have been shaped and moulded by events which to the ordinary "lay" mind are meaningless and uninteresting and unworthy of more than a superficial glance. If therefore he is any better than a mere drudge or philistine he is certain to become somewhat of an antiquarian i. e. an admirer of, and a liver in the past.

True as this in all ages must be—for man can never disassociate himself from the influences of the past—it was especially so in the early manhood of Sir Walter Scott, when nearly all the ancient forms of law still survived in all their pomp and circumstances and many of the old feudal statutes; those already repealed having been, in nearly every case, in force well within the memory of living men. The Scottish legal system in Sir Walter's youth and early manhood, like many other things, was in a transitional condition and although showing unmistakable indications of approaching change or mortification was yet substantially in outward form, in its methods of procedure, etc., of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. To be a lawyer in Scotland, therefore, in the latter part of the eighteenth century, was to be a professional antiquary in a degree difficult to conceive of by us, of the present day. It was to live at least half one's time in the days of the Stuarts, to wear the dress, as it were, and to speak the language of a bygone age, to transport oneself to the days and surroundings, and ideas of the Scotland of the middle of the preceding century.

Such a life, therefore, Sir Walter Scott of necessity lived. Few people perhaps have realized how much we owe to his legal training for the development of his genius. As it is the evidences of it we manifest in almost everyone of his romances. He wrote of the past as a professional land surveyor would of an estate whose every field he had gone over. And this accounts for the marvellous fidelity of his

historical pictures. He had imbibed the spirit of the past, and like some great actor could so thoroughly identify himself with the characters that he imparted to them or shared of his own individuality, and thus they became living, breathing men and women and not puppets cut out of wood and put on wires. Sir Walter Scott possessed in a remarkable degree that essentially English, (or Anglo-Saxon or British) quality of literal accuracy and lofty idealism and his characters, though real, and never commonplace and though heroic, and never still d. High pitched, strongly colored they may be but they are everywhere and always human. The power then not only of thinking or dreaming, but of living in the past which contributed so largely to his great success as an historical writer was, we may well believe, largely due to his legal training which brought him within close and intimate touch with the past.

Again the times in which he lived, was in another sense peculiarly favorable to the production of his romances, especially those dealing with covenanted Montrooping and Jacobite times. For those times were just near enough to glean authentic information about eye witnesses, or the children of eye witnesses, and just remote enough to make the information so obtained impartial trust-worthy, all violent party feeling having died down, just as has now for some time been the case with the history of the American Revolution.

Sir Walter Scott was therefore in real vital touch with both the old and the new world. With the stately romantic picturesque world of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with the world of the Stuarts and the early Georges, the Covenanters, Roundheads, Puritans, Cavaliers and Jacobites and with the hard practical prosaic world of the nineteenth century with its Liberals and Conservatives, its railroads and telegraphs, its thousand and one appliances of speed and utility so fatal to romance and so destructive of that dreamy leisure in which the spirit of romance lives and moves and has its being. At the time of his birth how many common places of every day life were then in existence which have now become matters of ancient history and which have faded into the memories of a misty past as remote from us of to-day as the "dark ages."

In 1771, the date of Sir Walter's birth, the American "plantations" were an integral portion of the British Empire; George Washington was still a loyal subject of King George the Catholic disabilities were in full force, the French Revolution had not been heard of, Frederic the great was still alive, Prince Charles Stuart still continued to nourish hopes of regaining the British Crown, the Highland Clans broken and oppressed were still in a half savage state and little more advanced in civilization than they had been a century previous, the sword was an indispensable adjunct to the full dress of a gentleman, people were strung up by the score every week for shoplifting and highway robbery, prize fighting, cock fighting, bull baiting and many other barbarous amusements were legally indulged in by persons of the highest quality, boroughs of half a dozen novels returned members to Parliament, thousands still implicitly believed in the divine right of kings, Manchester, Birmingham, Live pool Glasgow were small country towns whose aggregate population did not equal that of an average market town of to-day and were, if I am not mistaken altogether unrepresented in Parliament. At the time of Sir Walter's birth their must have been people living who dimly remembered the landing of William Prince of Orange in 1688, and some who had been born in the reign of Charles II and whose parents may have seen Oliver Cromwell thousands who remembered the union of the Scottish and English Parliaments and tens of thousands who remembered the Jacobite rebellion of 1715 and as many who had taken active part in that of 1745. There quite possibly might have been people living who retained a dim recollection of the persecutions of the Covenanters and whose fathers and grandfathers had suffered in those stormy times. And there were doubtless people living who remembered when the Montrosiers plied their trade upon the borders and did a considerable amount of cattle lifting on the quiet, when Willie of Westburn flattered the degenerate representatives of such border heroes as Johnnie Armstrong, the hair'd Jock, Hobbie Noble, Christie's Will, Jock o' the Lyde, Hengie the Greenie, Watt Tishin and the olden Montrosiers were international robbers, who in lifting gear levied war not upon individuals but upon hostile nations.

Between them, these two eras so distinct from each other, and yet so inextricably merged, stood Sir Walter between the old world and the new.

And we find as a consequence he was

imbued with the spirit of both. By virtue of his robust practical masculine understanding he was abreast with any reformer of the present day. His novels voice the most "enlightened" and "progressive" ideas in regard to religion and politics which today the world has only half learned but at the same time he had a tender sentimental artistic love for the old regime which continually manifests itself and seems to beautify and soften the hard angularity of his Scottish common sense. Like all his countrymen he was a whimsical mixture of apparently conflicting extremes and shades of feeling and this is due largely to his living in this transitional period already described. Of him it might be said as in fact of a good many of us today, in his head he was a Reformer in his heart a Tory. He could not bind himself to the past but the old order was changing and giving place to a newer and what was under the circumstances a better state of things, but for all that his heart passionately rebelled against the disappearance of what by the force of old association, was precious and venerable.

By instinct, sentiment and preference, if not by sober conviction, a Tory of Tories Sir Walter Scott by a curious coincidence died in the year of the Reform Bill, when it may be said the death blow was given to that chivalrous high pitched old world Toryism of which probably as regards representative men he was among the last which in its open and avowed advocacy no doubt died with him.

A word as to his private character. Sir Walter Scott was emphatically a good man and what was even better a well balanced man. Of hundreds of good high principled men in public and in private life this latter cannot, unfortunately be said.

Governed by fine motives and following high ideals they are often betrayed by physical infirmities by errors and defects in judgment and by a lack of saving common sense into many false positions. But Sir Walter Scott was not of this type of man. To use an illustration the machinery he carried was not too strong or heavy for the ship. He had a healthy mind and a healthy judgment. Unlike so many exceptionally clever men he had plenty of common sense and self control and while possessing the brain of a genius possessed moreover all the useful qualities of a common place, ordinary plodder. And in the higher qualities he was preeminently gifted he was, in his noble fortitude under the crushing blows of exceptionally cruel misfortune, in his unswerving rectitude of purpose, his overflowing kindness, geniality and generosity, his stainless domestic life, his patriotism, his faithfulness to his friends and in the general and irresistible love ability of his character—in all these respects what a man he was—a man with the brain of a genius, the heart of a boy the courage of a hero of romance, the patience and faithfulness of a woman, the guilelessness of a child, and the moral and mental strength of a giant.

And now a necessarily very brief and imperfect critique upon some of his prose writings.

It is said, and it must be acknowledged, with a considerable show of truth that Sir Walter Scott is declining in popularity with the present generation. People do not seem to read his books as eagerly and universally as they did some twenty five or thirty years ago. His name no longer evokes among the young people of the day, the same enthusiastic admiration as it did in the boyhood of the present middle aged generation. One quite frequently meets people of apparently good education, and fairly wide reading who frankly avow that they have not read and have no particular desire to read Sir Walter Scott's novels, some again of the same class who are ashamed to admit that they have read or tried to read them, and found them too heavy to more than skim over. Of course to the older generation, to us who have been brought up to revere Sir Walter Scott as the Shakespeare of Scotland and very king among the kings of the pen this is a heresy, and it jars painfully upon our sense of the established fitness of things, and we angrily and even passionately rebel against it. But it is nevertheless only too true that

although the after glow of Sir Walter Scott's fame still reddens the horizon, he is not as universally revered as he was well within the memory of comparatively young men.

His writings undoubtedly still occupy their place among English classics, people will still languidly admit that they are well worth studying by those who have the time or inclination to do so, and no one, except the Frenchman Taine and Carlyle the archcrank of any literary standing has ventured to depreciate their intrinsic excellence, but then popularity with the general reading public has diminished in a painfully marked degree. It no longer at least in the popular estimation, forms an indispensable part of the education or literary training of the young, as was most undoubtedly the case in my own boyhood.

How many boys for instance read Sir Walter nowadays? The boy today who reads the Waverley novel is looked upon as a sort of superior being whose tastes for solid heavy reading mark him out as being intellectually bear and shoulders above the average; a sort of prodigy in fact. Thirty years ago nine boys out of ten eagerly devoured the Waverley novels, and scarcely one who had not most of the characters and leading incidents thereof on his finger ends, and who could not have passed a stiff examination in them. Today scarcely one boy in ten knows the names of let alone reads the Waverley novels.

This unmistakable decline in the popularity of Sir Walter Scott's writings seems to me nothing short of a national calamity. If our mental and moral health and vigor be dependent as it most undoubtedly is upon the wholesomeness from readings, and if in youth we lay the foundation of the literary tastes and sympathies that will dominate our after life, it certainly augurs badly for the rising generation that such a grand bracing healthy writer as Sir Walter Scott, should be so rapidly losing his hold upon the young. For no one can read Sir Walter Scott's novels without being sensibly better therefor. His novels, morally, are a liberal education in themselves. In every line of them is reflected his own manly simple clean well balanced mind and character. To read them is like breathing mountain air. As he says himself in a celebrated passage in his life of Goldsmith "nothing has ever done so much to reconcile us with human nature as his writings." There is a cheeriness, a kindness, a sweetness, a sunniness, a downright good humor about them a veritable moral tonic to all classes of men. To us who have learned to love him by early association, whose admiration of him is a sort of religion, his own words in regard to Goldsmith again apply "we learned to love him in our youth and we return to him again and again with undiminished pleasure in our middle and old age."

No writer who can influence men like this, who can enter into their very being, deserves to be spoken of except with words of the profoundest reverence, and can descend from his exalted position without making us sensibly poorer. And this is especially true of Sir Walter Scott. For of him it may unhesitatingly be said as of very few famous writers, that his influence is all for good and in no wise or degree for evil. He is emphatically a wholesome writer, absolutely free from everything that would in any way directly or indirectly tend to confuse the boundary line between right and wrong. His lines between good and evil are always sharply and clearly drawn. With him black is always black and white is always white. He has sometimes been mildly sneered at as a sort of goody-goody writer. His standard is said to be always conventional, the sort of standard that rules us in our every day life. But even so, this is to me just another proof of his wholeheartedness of his works. He sets up no false ideals, he calls everything by its own name, and his morality is the plain serviceable morality of the home and freeds, the kind of morality that will wear and wash.

Such a writer therefore as Sir Walter Scott cannot be neglected or become unpopular without serious loss to the general public, for it is hardly likely that anyone will ever be able to take his place, to wield his enormous influence, to become as it were, the bosom friend of every reader, to get into our very bones, to charm and bewitch as he did and still does, to make his characters like dear old friends with whom from time to time we renew our acquaintance, and so to impress his individuality upon us as to become our daily familiar companion. No there is nothing more certain than this, that whether or not Sir Walter retains or regains his position in literature, no man will ever fill the same place in our hearts and understandings as he did.

To speak more critically Sir Walter Scott is a romancer pure and simple, and this branch of literary art maybe described as landscape painting. He paints upon a large canvass with a free hand and in strong brilliant but not glaring colors. His work possesses the double beauty of design and execution. His plots are as well conceived as his stories are told,

which is a somewhat uncommon combination of excellences. Not every good architect is a good builder of a house. Many a writer who might be named with all reverence, have been a clumsy plot builder and infinitely more than one who while capable of hammering out a good close jointed plot cannot adequately clothe the skeleton. Good story designers, they are bad story tellers.

But this is not the case with Sir Walter. His stories are good, extensive and interesting, quantitatively and qualitatively. His pictures are as well and minutely painted as they are boldly conceived. Though covering yards of canvas there is no daubing, it is dash work about the eyes. As has been said of celebrated painters every figure is a study.

As such therefore Sir Walter is the king of romances, the father of the historical novel in the modern sense, and he was the founder of a distinct school of fiction. All historical novelists since his day are his conscious or unconscious imitators. In this sphere of literature he shines resplendent and he dearly fulfills and meets every requirement of the successful historical novelist.

How to be a successful historical novelist and romancer is, as I take it to be able to do three things equally well; to make the remote near, the improbable probable, and the impossible possible.

All this then Sir Walter did to perfection. His pictures of bygone times and persons and as real and life-like as a photograph and bring us face to face with the men and women of a remote past and almost within sound of their voices. At the touch of his magic wand the dry bones are clothed with warm living flesh and the ground gives up its dead. How genuinely human and life-like are his Oliver Cromwell, James I. Claverhouse, Queen Elizabeth, Charles II. Mary Queen of Scots and other historical characters. In his enchanted pages they really live again, they do not stalk or glide across our vision, tricked out in the habit lamens of the stage, and speaking in the muffled and affected tones of fibrate actors, they are not mere cleverly constructed automata mechanically saying the right thing at the right time and doing the right thing at the right place, jerked about by a hidden hand, but they are men and women of like passions with ourselves, sharing all our hopes and fears and pains and infirmities, full of human foibles and feelings, and as such intensely human and natural and therefore intensely interesting. Sir Walter's historical characters are born not made, they grow instead of being manufactured. The difference between Sir Walter and all his imitators however able, is the difference between an artist and a mechanic.

An artist, whatever may be his technical ignorance is always an artist, this work however otherwise defective always shows it, a mechanic however clever and well instructed is always a mechanic. His work however perfectly executed always shows it. Scott's historical characters are artistic with unstudied art, with that perfect naturalness that is the result of a sort of inspiration and whose secret cannot be learned. All his characters therefore possess the indescribable charm of perfect naturalness, who walk on their own legs, speak with their own voices. They are not painted wax work figures, cunningly put together, furnished with springs and placed on wheels, things although exquisitely designed get fatally lacking in the one essential requisite. Such are the historical characters of Ainsworth, Grant and other able and interesting writers. These men are clever mechanics, not artists but imitators, not creators, and therefore their works and those of the Master cannot be mentioned in the one breath.

In consequence therefore of their perfect naturalness, Scott's historical characters appeal to us in a way that is, even in the teeth of our strong, critical better judgment, more or less irresistible. We become profoundly interested in and contract an admiration for them in spite of ourselves, one touch of nature makes all men and ages akin. And this is what Scott does, we learn to love and sympathize with his historical characters because they are created in our own likeness, heart answers to heart across the ages, and we find it impossible to resist the influence of their personality, in some subtle way the spirit of their individuality creeps over us, and masters us and rules us in some degree ever after. Who can it that a familiar friend himself with Scott's novels that can or has escaped this. Who can say how far the Waverley novels have been colored and permanently directed his historical instinct and predilections. How many in fact have had all their historical ideas reversed and revolutionized by making the acquaintance of and coming to live with his historical characters.

Feel or think as we may upon the great issues of the past we cannot remain hostile or even indifferent to Scott's characters, although they may represent principles for whose overthrow we would drain our dearest veins. Who can help loving the good

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