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**Edgar Johnson. Sir Walter Scott: The Great Unknown. 2 vols. New York. The Macmillan Company. 1970. cxiii, 1397 pp. \$25.00.**

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## BOOK REVIEW

Edgar Johnson. *Sir Walter Scott: The Great Unknown*. 2 vols. New York. The Macmillan Company. 1970. cxiii, 1397 pp. \$25.00.

A biography can be definitive in two senses: either because it is complete and fair-minded in presenting all the available facts, or because it presents facts in conjunction with a theory of a man's life so compelling that we grasp the life as a whole without an exhaustive narration. Edgar Johnson's biography of Scott is of the first kind and has the scholarly virtue of unobtrusively documenting the source of each known fact, so that if a reader should doubt or discover an incongruity, he can make his own estimate of the difficulty. This was the right choice for this biographer and this subject. The broad questions that Johnson poses in his Introduction are moralistic and evaluative—was Scott a great and good man?—rather than exploratory and theoretical; and the two volumes present the man rather than explain him. The practical, working question that he asks from page to page of the biography is, what happened to, by, or near Scott in the hours and days of which we have any record. Thus, for example, when the novelist, his daughter Anne, and son-in-law Lockhart arrive in Ireland, "one cheerful mason, smoking a pipe, wore a coat all patched like a crazy quilt in red, black, green, and yellow." We may never hear of this mason again (we do not), but there is a document that attests his presence (in this case Lockhart), and even in this trivial instance a principle of selection is operating. The mason is not merely a colorful patch in Scott's line of vision, but someone singled out, jotted down, remembered from the mass of unrecordable detail by a second someone who was there. Implicit in the casual phrases of the modern biographer, like "smoking a pipe," is the celebration of fact, the principle of romantic biography that Carlyle pronounced in *Past and Present*: "For King Lackland *was* there, verily he . . . There, we say, is the grand peculiarity; the immeasurable one; distinguishing, to a really infinite degree, the poorest historical Fact from all Fiction whatsoever." Johnson's *Sir Walter Scott* is a continuous narrative of fact in this sense. It is as complete a set of facts as we can reasonably hope to have organized in readable form on this subject; it comprises

the life of one who shared this romantic principle (helped fix it in the modern imagination) and yet wrote fictions.

Perhaps every definitive biography should strive to be theoretical as well as factual? Are we certain only of facts, and are facts ever certain without a theory that interprets them? There are biographies, no less respectful of fact, that are more venturesome and more nearly explanations of a man's life. One thinks of the convincing extrapolations from fact in Leon Edel's biography of James, or of Johnson's own fine biography of Dickens: the more-or-less clear facts of the blacking warehouse and of Mary Hogarth's death, the mysterious facts of the boyhood injury and of Minny Temple, reverberate and explain the life as a whole because the biographer risks a theory about them. The events of Scott's life, however, somehow resist interpretation. Johnson presses as hard as possible what is known of Scott's disappointed love for Williamina Belches; but the figure of Green Mantle in *Redgauntlet* represents nothing highly essential to Scott's imagination, and the tears shed for Die Vernon on horseback near the end of *Rob Roy* are quickly dried, many readers have objected, by the galloping happy ending. I dwell on the old issue of the love affair simply to bear out the difference from these other writers. Scott probably was more fully in control of his feelings and intelligence, further removed from his work.

Ordinarily we theorize about a person's life by thinking of the major epochs that mark it off from all other lives and divide it into significant periods. With Scott it is almost as if the only epochs we are sure we understand are his birth and death; and, more than most men, he felt that his life had begun before his birth in the career of his ancestors, just as he was determined that his good name should live after him. We judge that the laming of the eighteen-month-old child must have radically affected the entire life of the man, but we do not see clearly how. Very likely it contributed to his stoicism, and, by deprivation, it may have made him more fascinated by things military than otherwise might have been the case. It is not altogether clear, even after Johnson's sifting of the testimony, the degree to which Scott's lameness physically limited him in later life. Next, Scott's accession to the responsibilities of a young advocate and of a husband does not seem to have been traumatic either; though clearly it is important that he did not have to think of his role in society as that of a writer and that he was happily married before he became a writer. Nor do the births of his children or the deaths of his parents seem to hold important keys to his life as a whole. He seems to have experienced some (not irreverent) relief from his father's comparatively early death, and to have been neither too close nor too

distant from his longer-lived mother. He lived before the Victorian age; and the close family relations that seem to us so crucial even in lives of great imaginative talents may have been subsumed for Scott by his extraordinary, virtually superhuman gregariousness. Scott was so open to friendship, so various in his acquaintance, so tolerant even of persons intrinsically boring, so loyal and inspiring of loyalty, that relationships within his own family—ultimately a tiny fraction of his acquaintance—may have had less significance than they do for ordinary men. Was this openness itself one result of his lameness? It was openness combined with a certain relish for secrecy, evident not only in the great game of anonymity but in the secret meaning that is inherent in joking, which he loved. Finally, Scott's extraordinary memory, his capacity to recall and transmit words, his superhuman verbal existence, must have been the result or cause of an imbalance that we associate with genius. There is some evidence that he had ordinary or less than ordinary taste and smell, ability to draw, or ear for music that was not accompanied by words. What else could he have been besides a writer and raconteur? Still, just why this man became so great a writer awaits the investigation of some Erik Erikson—though it would be helpful, naturally, if we could reach some agreement first about what kind of literature Scott wrote.

Johnson does not often assay the relation of the myriad facts to Scott's work, and, given the exaggerations and distortions of much biographical criticism, his restraint is refreshing. The values that guide the events of Scott's life—his loyalty and generosity to persons, his respect for landed propriety and rank—are evident enough in his fiction. His code of honor is manifest in the one epoch of the life for which Johnson does establish a theoretical frame: his death. For after the failure of Constable and Company and of Ballantyne and Company, the purpose of Scott becomes not to die without honor. So clearly is honorable death the most important epoch of Scott's life, that it is impossible to imagine how we would think of him as an individual if he had *not* failed in business. Fairly and dispassionately Johnson details the heroic years after 1825, without submitting to the temptation of blaming individuals. He is assisted by the fine passages in Scott's *Journal*, and one of the gifts of this biography to the reader is that for the first time the deep stoicism and self-respect manifest in the *Journal* can be fully appreciated in context.

For the literary historian the epoch that matters most in Scott's life is the advent of *Waverley*, or the moment in which he turned from the writing of poetry to novels. Johnson renders this moment in detail and convinces us that Scott made the transition easily and naturally, from motives of self-interest and adventurousness; but here he does

not supply any theory from which we can gauge the full significance of the turn, perhaps because he does not completely share the received opinion that Scott's novels are of greater and more permanent value than his poems. That is, nevertheless, the view of literary history; the year 1814 remains one of the significant moments in world literature, and the date that commemorates Scott's most original undertaking. One slight clue to its significance for Scott is that he needed to revise and rewrite hardly at all after he turned to prose. He needed to discard less, with the result that his new works contained more. They contained more than one kind of thing: most notably, a contrast of styles. Of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* Johnson incidentally notes, "It is characteristic of Scott that even in a scene of such high excitement he can make a joke"; but Scott's freedom to do so was severely limited before he turned to prose. In *Waverley*, with hardly a thought about it, Scott reclaimed the inspiration of Shakespeare's history plays; he introduced the first of his clowns, David Gellatley, "not much unlike one of Shakespeare's roynish clowns"; he alternated scenes of comic and serious interest; and employed a contrasting style, Scottish dialect, to answer and comment upon the motives and manners of the principal characters. Without the interplay of scenes and styles, and without the wide opportunity to introduce the anecdotic material of which this biography is so full, there would be no such thing as Scott's "realism," which we admire, but which is as difficult to assess as the realism of Shakespeare's plays. The realism resides, even, in the jokes.

The years of work that have gone into the biography, the skill and authority of the biographer, make some technical shortcomings more regrettable than they would be in an ordinary book. The index is not quite full enough; it arbitrarily omits a good many references to the text that are quite parallel to those it does list. But I am not sure what should be done about this, since the index already fills forty-five pages. Running heads in the notes at the end of the volumes, however, would greatly simplify the search for footnotes to a particular chapter or page in the text. To find a note with the present system, one has to search back in the text for the chapter *and* part number, then do the same in the notes. References to the *Waverley Novels* in the notes are to the Border Edition (48 vols., London, 1893), and Johnson explicitly cites chapter as well as page numbers, for the benefit of readers of other editions. But these chapter numbers are in fact useless to anyone with a one-volume-per-novel edition. There is no definitive edition of the novels except the "Magnum Opus" of 1829-33, and though renumbering of chapters for each new volume made good sense in the first editions because Scott divided the novels strategically

into volumes as he wrote them, these divisions were obliterated in all of the collected editions. The only solution to the problem, it seems to me, is to cite page numbers from the text quoted but to standardize chapter numbers as they are found in most modern editions: namely, by numbering them consecutively from beginning to end of the novel. As it is, the reader of *Sir Walter Scott* cannot easily locate a quoted passage, for example, in Johnson's own edition of *Rob Roy*.

There are more misprints and anomalies in the quoted texts than are really desirable in a biography that must serve as a library reference work and is likely to be pillaged left and right for years to come. These bothered me enough to cause me to check references in two randomly chosen chapters (Pt. V, ch. 7, "The Scent of Roast Meat" and Pt. VII, ch. 1, "The Keel of the New Lugger") against Sir Herbert Grierson's edition of the *Letters*, the one major source for Johnson that I have available. This was a salutary lesson in the amount of work that went into the biography; that one can unwind the work in this way itself testifies to Johnson's special ability to fuse scholarship with flowing narrative. But I am also puzzled by the result. Of more than a hundred references to the *Letters* in the two chapters, only four cite page numbers that are slightly in error; and these are easily located by the correspondent and date of the letter. Only one date is transcribed incorrectly, and that is an obvious misprint. On the other hand, there are at least fifty discrepancies between quoted texts and the sources in the *Letters*, apart from the changes in punctuation that Johnson allows for in his Preface. Despite the statement in the preface, spellings have been altered, words have been changed, dropped, or added. One would begin to distrust the texts altogether if it were not for a further statement in the preface that "letters . . . from printed sources have been checked wherever possible with the manuscript originals and, if necessary, corrected from them"—a practice that might account for many discrepancies. But in that case the footnote should refer to the manuscript, with only a cross reference to the published *Letters*; and in only one instance in these two chapters does Johnson use such a procedure. In another instance, on page 464 (f.n. 62), the abbreviations, ampersands, etc. clearly show that Johnson is transcribing a manuscript or something close to it, but the footnote still refers to the *Letters*. If a student of the relations of Scott and Constable wished to know whether the novelist wrote "free profits" or "fair profits," the footnote will not tell him Johnson's source. I would trust Johnson's reading of the holograph rather than Lockhart's—if that is what Johnson read. The footnote states that he read Grierson's transcription of Lockhart. To add to the confusion, the explanation that Johnson is silently preferring a manuscript source wherever "necessary" is quite contradicted by other

clusters of discrepancies in the same chapter. In these the text given in the biography is just as obviously *more* distant from Scott's hand than the text in the *Letters* to which the footnote refers. On p. 456 (f.n. 14) Johnson prints "Edinburgh" for Grierson's "Edinr.," "his late transatlantic voyage" for "his transatlantic voyage"; "Jacobite" for "jacobite"; "yeoman-cavalryman" for "yeomanry cavalry man"; "Scottish" for "Scotish." If these changes are intentional, then there has been more alteration in the texts than stated. On page 466 (f.n. 76) he prints "*has* had" for "has had"; "averred" for "averd"; "fixed" for "fixd"; "the Monday when he sickened" for "the Monday on which Walter sickend"; "pleaded headache" for "pleaded his headache"; "wild-ducks" for "wild ducks"; "consequences" for "consequence." The direction of these changes seems counter to Johnson's usual practice, as is the case also with a footnote on page xlix (f.n. 42), where he writes "Somerville is completed and I presume delivered" for Grierson's "Somerville is finishd & I presume deliverd." But enough, I am dizzy already; there are thousands of footnotes in these two volumes. The conflicting direction of these discrepancies however, I wish had been resolved before the book went to press; then the remaining errors might have come within the inevitable number to be hoped for from such an intricate task of documentation. The point to remember is that the interests of two aims, the writing and the documentation of the biography, for both of which we are indebted to Johnson, in practice conflict most strenuously: each makes the other more difficult to control, and the trick is to ride around the rink with a foot planted firmly on each horse, to ride and ride a very long distance in a life as splendidly elaborated as this.

Scott's life would not command such a biography if it were not for the works of literature and scholarship that once flowed from his pen; and Edgar Johnson has interspersed in the biography, as he did in his life of Dickens, chapters of critical commentary. Much previous criticism is summarized here, together with insights and emphases by Johnson that are of considerable interest. The tendency of his criticism as a whole, however, seems wrong-headed to me; the tone often suggests criticism written fifty years ago. This is because Johnson enters the lists to defend his champion, as if the main task of criticism were to make sure that no one discredits Scott. Granted that Scott's achievements, especially the *Waverley Novels*, are widely underrated, this response largely obscures their qualities. The important theme that Johnson himself most wishes to isolate, a relation between man and history, will not easily be defined without much more challenging questions and argument. He is surely influenced by Georg Lukács's interpretation of Scott in *The Historical Novel*, but Lukács continually calls

attention to the problematic nature of Scott's historicism, whereas the subject becomes in Johnson's chapters a refrain rather than an argument. The tendency always to praise Scott leads him to exaggeration, as in casual comparisons of *Anne of Geierstein* with *War and Peace*, or of Scott's general position with that of Darwin. More disturbingly, the very real difficulties of understanding Scott's fictions are brushed aside. Johnson is fully versed in Scott criticism from the beginning, yet it is as if the most interesting recent ideas about Scott do not touch him. He is admittedly and agreeably indebted to Francis R. Hart, but what he finds congenial in Hart are not the new ideas so much as the particular aspects of Scott that Hart singles out for praise. Hart also has interesting things to say about Scott's romantic narratives; but in the catechism of praise and blame "romance" and "romantic" are not as good things as "realism" and "realistic." Therefore a fairly typical refrain of Johnson's chapters is, "Far from being the romantic hero of a romantic tale, Waverley is the realistic protagonist of a realistic novel." The difficult definition and implications of such words are made subordinate to eulogy. Lukács, Hart, and this reviewer have all had important things to say about Scott's heroes; but since the heroes have sometimes been made fun of, notably by Scott himself, Johnson must be on the look-out, not for theories or explanations of the hero, but for "imperceptive readers" who think the heroes are all alike or not to Scott's credit. The thrust of this argument is all wrong. The anxiety to praise Scott even gets in the way of ranking his achievements; for though Johnson does discriminate and knows which novels he thinks better than others, one is left with the impression nonetheless, by the end of this account, that they are everyone of them required reading except *The Surgeon's Daughter* and *Castle Dangerous*.

Nor must Scott be allowed to criticize himself, unless from modesty, for "half the uncritical clichés of Scott criticism are drawn from his own self-disparagements." Scott must be credited with something more than false modesty, however. He is the first major critic of the novel in English; he should have some ability to understand his own work. The issue is not confined to those fresh things he had to say about Edward Waverley, but one that is implicit in Scott's work, especially after his turn to the novel—perhaps one of the explanations of his success in the novel. From the first chapter of *Waverley* Scott kept the habit of surrounding his fictional enterprises with self-mockery; behind elaborate prefaces and pseudonymous editors he created a serious (or half serious?) center, itself not simple at all. Johnson's critical chapters leave the impression of a sober, perhaps somewhat dull, novelist determined to examine "how history makes men and men make history," etc. that seems slightly incongruous with the complicated



intentions, the love for humor and anecdote and good times displayed in this immensely detailed life. Scott is big and complex for Johnson, but never problematic. What do bigness and complexity consist of in literature, if not of ambiguities, uncertainty, and unresolved contradictions, managed with skill? Can Scott's realism be understood apart from his immersion in ballad and romance? And what is the relation of realism and romance? These questions will not be answered if we believe there is nothing inadvertent, nothing deliberately or otherwise ironic in Scott's work. His realism is bound to be harder to define than the realism of later nineteenth-century novelists who accepted that label, and theirs is not simple. The well-intentioned and by-in-large just praise of Scott in Johnson's book, finally, cannot account for the irony of literary history with which Johnson should be most concerned: the general neglect of Scott after the nineteenth century.

The critical chapters in *Sir Walter Scott*, however, have the artful effect of breaking up the continuous detail of Johnson's inclusive narrative. They focus on those monuments of Scott's making for which we take an interest in his day-to-day life. They are intended in part, surely, for readers who are not acquainted with all of Scott's novels and poems. For others they appeal on friendly terms to a common experience and afford a respite from the narrative of the life itself, during which the reader is always in the power of, and beholden to, the biographer—and therefore on unequal terms. Johnson is really a master of narrative design and tact. I do not like his chapter titles much (a couple of them are instanced above). Like captions in *Time* magazine, they highlight snatches of phrase that, when finally discovered in the text, do not sustain the weight of denotation. The part titles are fine, because the general reader can anticipate their reference well enough; but I defy even the specialist to guess more than a few of the allusions in the chapter titles. Apart from this, I cannot fault the overall design of Johnson's book except to complain that the only irony he admits, he expresses in the subtitle, *The Great Unknown*.

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