Generic Issues in Teaching Anthologies: Simms and the Example of Walter Scott

Patrick G. Scott

University of South Carolina - Columbia, scottp@mailbox.sc.edu

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Response 5:

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David Moltke-Hansen paints a persuasive contrast between the growth over the past fifty years of serious scholarship on William Gilmore Simms and the marginal place that Simms has in the major undergraduate teaching anthologies. There is a further factor worth considering, alongside the socio-political or ideological, regional or sectional, and disciplinary/pedagogic factors to which he traces Simms’s marginalization. Though Simms scholars have explored and revalued Simms’s work in a wide variety of literary genres, his most significant accomplishment for most literary historians is still his full-length historical fiction. Teaching anthologies have traditionally focused on poetry, supplemented by thematic selections of non-fiction prose (“background”), and, particularly for twentieth century authors, by short stories. As Moltke-Hansen himself suggests, for Simms to get a more secure role in undergraduate surveys, Simmsians will need to adjust their generic focus away from Simms as novelist, towards his non-fiction prose and short fiction.

A comparison with how the anthologists have dealt with Simms’s great precursor Sir Walter Scott is instructive in factoring the relationship between ideological, regional, and generic issues. Every literary historian recognizes the worldwide and transformative impact of Scott’s Waverley novels, yet for half a century Scott has been allotted only minimal space in the major teaching anthology, the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (nine editions, since 1962), and his work in the novel still gets short shrift. This is surprising, because, though the primary editor for the relevant section was the redoubtable American Romanticist M. H. Abrams, the original Norton editorial team included the major Scott scholar of the mid-twentieth century, David Daiches. One can therefore discount regional disdain or neglect. Despite the Norton title-emphasis on *English* literature, the Norton had no intrinsic bias against Scottish writers — the Romantic section opened in 1962 with over twenty pages of Robert Burns, on whom Daiches also wrote, and by the third edition (1974), the twentieth-century section, edited by Daiches, gave sixteen pages to the Scots nationalist poet Hugh MacDiarmid, another Daiches specialty.

But for over thirty years Scott did not appear among the major Romantic-period authors, and was represented only by three short poems, tucked into a general section of minor Romantic Lyric Poets. The poems themselves varied a little (‘Jock o’
Hazeldean” and “Proud Maisie” held their places but “Coronach” was replaced in 1974 by “The Dreary Change”), yet they gave the teacher or student no hint or clue to Scott’s real achievement, and I doubt they were often even assigned for outside reading.

The change came with the sixth edition (1993). Abrams had earlier handed on the Romantic section to a new editor, Jack Stillinger, and the Scott section was upgraded in two ways. First it was taken out of the catchall minor poets section, and promoted to equal billing if not equal space with other major Romantic-period writers, and second, for the first time, it featured a substantial piece of Scott’s fiction, upping his allotted page-count from three to twenty-three. Along with some of the same short poems, the sixth edition included Scott’s short story “The Two Drovers,” a wonderful epitome of themes (tradition vs. modernization, highland vs. lowland, superstition vs. rationality, honor vs. law) that Scott dealt with in his full-length novels. For the seventh edition (2000), perhaps to claw back a few pages, the prose selection was an extract from a major Scott novel, ch. 1 of The Heart of Midlothian, and for the eighth edition (2006), the editors substituted “Wandering Willie’s Tale,” a stand-alone supernatural folk-tale, extracted from Scott’s Redgauntlet, that had often been included in Scottish short story collections. The Norton’s most recent iteration, the ninth edition (2012), retains “Wandering Willie’s Tale” and “Proud Maisie,” together with Scott’s Introduction to his Lay of the Last Minstrel, and adds a section from Scott’s historical poem Marmion among the supplementary items in the e-book version.

Scott’s exclusion was not so much ideological (liberal suspicion of a self-proclaimed Tory, nationalist suspicion of a leading unionist), or regional (London or Oxbridge-based neglect of a leading Scottish writer), as generic; his most distinctive works, the novels, were inherently unanthologizable, and his most-anthologizable writings (the short lyrics) failed both as teachable texts and as introductions to his major work and significance. The record of Scott’s shameful exclusion, and then partial reinsertion, into the available teaching canon reinforces Dr. Moltke-Hansen’s finding that the best way to promote the teaching of an author is to put forward and promote works that are evidently teachable—essays or prose extracts that connect with a theme of current teaching interest (such as the idea of self-consciously American authorship in the 1830s and 40s), or short stories that are rich literary works in their own right but also encapsulate wider themes both for the author and for the interpretation of the historical period and literary development. Certainly, the example of Scott suggests that it will be wise to take account of generic constraints, not just ideological or literary commitments, in efforts to promote Smms’s work more widely.

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