Scott -- Byron

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Notes and Documents

Scott — Byron

The following incomplete sketch of Scott and Byron by John Galt may be found as Item 000930-934 in the Dominion National Archives at Ottawa. It is primarily of interest in that it mentions a meeting between Galt and Scott. Such a meeting is not mentioned, to my knowledge, by any of the biographers of Galt and Scott. It must have taken place in late October, 1831.

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My acquaintance with Byron himself was form'd accidental and I have in the memoir which I afterwards wrote of him, said all that I know of that distinguished genius. It has been by some supposed that I looked askance at his merits, and because I have mentioned various limitations that are obvious in his work, that I regarded him invidiously. Those who have said so or think so do me injustice; nor are they capable of appreciating how I felt or how such rare talents should be considered. It does not follow that because a man is transcendent in some things he is great in all. The injudicious admirers of Byron however seem to think he is, and perhaps I am blamable in numbering himself among them. But in those peculiarities in which he excelled, in energy of thought, picturesque expression, and that lurid kind of sentiment derived from, what the painters would call, studying too much the cold colours, he has no superior, and accordingly while I give him praise for originality in those qualities as generously as those who see him always unspoiled can desire, am I therefore not to be at liberty to say his verse is often prosaic and his conceptions jejune? As a poet, I place him in the very first rank, I do homage to him as such, but I cannot discern that his Lordship, more than many others has any peculiar claim upon my esteem. As for his heroism, I laugh at it, and rank his meddling with the Greek cause, instead of being the effect of moral or mental enterprise, the cramp and spurn of misanthropic indiges-

1 The argument in this paragraph is one of Galt's many defences of his controversial biography, Life of Lord Byron, published in London by Colburn and Bentley in 1830.
tion. And I say so because I wish myself to be understood very plainly, especially as what I have said of him may be the only thing by which as a literary man I shall hereafter be remembered.

Of Sir Walter Scott I can speak less decidedly, for I knew him only as an author—our personal acquaintance was not great and except about half an hour alone with him on the day before he went abroad benumbed in his faculties with his fatal illness, I would not properly be said to have been much in his company and therefore it is only of him as an author that I can speak, in which capacity I do not, though I think him a much more agreeable poet, think him to be at all compared for a single instant with Byron. He relates his semi-epics certainly with great beauty, a vivacity quite unexampled and often gleams possessed of that fine frenzy which is the poetical element, but in general his verse scarcely rises beyond respectable mediocrity, but in romance he towers into unapproachable excellence.

Of his different novels and romances, I do not profess myself to be a proper judge—I am only sure of what please myself, not of its worth. Thus it happens that while I have always regarded The Antiquary as one of his happiest productions to my taste I have not been insensible to the vigour of his pencilling in what are perhaps greater works. Ivanhoe in this respect I regard as his master piece and yet if required to give reasons for saying so I could not draw them from my own feelings because I do think that its merits can only be classed, not compared, with some of the rarest efforts of the human mind, and can only be read to be duly valued by passages, for it is one of those books in which the bright truth, and the deep insights with which it abounds can be only properly seen in quotations. No writer but himself ever made the limning of crimes beautiful and yet withheld from that beauty the power of captivating. Byron in one of his freaks of genius made sensuality by giving to it benevolence in Sardanapalis almost a virtue, but Scott has never encouraged in himself the indulgence of such eccentricity; all with him is wholesome, pure, open, and robust.

Lord Byron says that all great authors are voluminous. This is not correct. Nations have constructed pyramids, but only one man has existed in all time capable of creating the Apollo.

What circulating library....

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