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STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE


"There is no Mistress Quickly in Scott," and this lamentation is at the center of Miss Keith's study. The response to so lively and prejudiced a book must be lively and prejudiced. But one's liveliest response is undercut by the sad caution that the author did not live to revise her typescript. Had she done so, to be sure, this would not have become another *Russet Coat* (her 1956 study of Burns' poetry). It would have remained in the shadow-land of "personality" study, haunted by the odd suspicion that Scott's "personality" can be preserved only at the price of his "dust-covered" novels. But whatever changes might have been made, the book as is should not be treated to *nil nisi bonum* pap. It is much too alive. Scott seems more alive for her vigorously idiosyncratic study—and this in spite of the fact that Miss Keith repeats every dead and deadening cliché ever inflicted on the meteoric fame of the Author of Waverley.

Take her at her word, quote her out of a sometimes baffling context, and you puzzle why she wrote at all. Certainly in her condescensions she outdoes Muir and Craig and Welsh and Mrs. Van Gent. The novels have "a marked absence of passion" (the old French complaint), "the whole air as sterile and as icy as the North Pole itself." They manifest their author's "determined refusal to think out moral questions for himself—to think out anything at all." He did not like people, could not make plots, and "the vast majority of the characters in the Waverley Novels are today sawdust—or worse." He was an amorist; he lacked the great artist's "understanding of sin"; the "spot of adultery" Byron prescribed was, alas! denied him. His genius was throttled by everything: Calvinism ("the colour of the Catechism's dread contents and of its ghoulish atmosphere"); Kirk and Law; "this severe new Edinburgh," whence "his imagination fled to warm Glasgow"; his literary advisers—the "two purblind moles" Ballantyne and "the equally stupid Erskine," the "prim," the "priggish" Lockhart (as unfairly used as in *The Russet Coat*); finally and most startling, the "banal, deadening, suffocating" influence of his cruelly dull, Philistine children and wife. In short, "George Square and Castle Street between them defeated Scott." There is no Mistress Quickly in the Calvinistic early novels, and the later ones are overcome by a pagan and brutal taste for blood. Throughout is a "flatness" that "makes him largely unreadable today." But then, "no one, perhaps, reads Scott today."
REVIEWS

Often, then, what she calls the "enigma" of Scott's personality, garishly drawn in the picturesque mode of Caledonian antisyzygy, is nothing to the mystery of Miss Keith's motive. But a solution is hinted by the mode and by Scott's own sustained love of picturesque contrast. A "remarkable dualism... with fatal effect, eventually spread over and coloured his entire personality." Placidity and passion, benevolence and (to his sons and Constable) brutality, intellectual vacuity and creative vigor, the rough Borderer's directness and the deceit and duplicity of the stifled child—"antinomies like these, at once so deep-seated and so violent, range through every cranny of Scott's being... the deeper you dig into his personality, the more profound the chasms that open to your reeling gaze—the more furious the hidden fires that burn, rending and tearing him." He is, when we are done, a flamboyantly contradictory creature of his own picturesque imagination, worthy company for his imaginary kin—the shrewd and sentimental Oldbuck, the vengeful Romantic snob Mannering, the ruthless mercenary pedant Dalgerty, the wise fool James VI of Nigel and the superstitious cynic Louis XI of Durward. Scott has, it is true, "a certain affinity with the queer streaks in human nature" (like Browning); and if he was the tormented walking anomaly Miss Keith makes him, all of these vividly ambiguous figures take on new life as self-projections. Attracted "so fatally all his life" by the "queer streaks" and the "illicit," the rowdy Border reiver is liberated at last from what Una Pope-Hennessy called the "urbane dignity" and "the magnificent monument designed by his son-in-law."

It is not so simple, unfortunately. And in this decade of new books and new perspectives on the Author of Waverley it is startling to find an interpretation redolent of the Carswell generation of thirty years since, when debunking was the day's sport and a kind of swashbuckling uncritical anti-Calvinism sounded the voice of liberation in Scottish studies. Neither Scott nor the "priggish Lockhart" can be blamed if Mistress Quickly is really hard to find outside of Hal's immature Eastcheap, and one suspects that the causeway gaiety of "ancient pre-Reformation" Scotland, however indispensable a myth for the Modern Makars, was much less sentimentalized by the Enlightened Author of Waverley than by his recent liberators. (Miss Keith forgot that in The Rarest Coat the 18th Century was Scotland's Golden Age.) To make the patriarchal stability of Dandie Dinmont's Liddesdale into a "Bohemian world, of no fixed values, and where no one, mercifully, had heard of John Calvin" is fair neither to Calvin nor to Scott, any more than it is fair to Morritt or Erskine or the devoted Lockhart to say...
that Sheriff Shortreed was "the best companion [Scott] ever had or was ever to have."

Sentimental, exaggerated, The Author of Waverley nonetheless is often remarkably suggestive and richly perceptive. One may be startled to hear that Sir Piercie of The Monastery is Scott's finest Englishman, or that the imaginative parts of "Wandering Willie's Tale" are plagiarized from "Tam o' Shanter," or that spiritual pride "oozes from every pore" of Jeannie in a book whose "point and kernel" is the passion of Effie and her lover. But the recognition of psychological and ethical mastery in The Bride of Lammermoor is fine, as is the recognition of The Fair Maid of Perth as "the last great novel." The Aristotelian attention given tragic crises in Old Mortality is due acknowledgement of a third novel superior to The Heart of Midlothian. The view that "the whole mise-en-scene" of the "later and pagan novels" is "by far the most original of Scott's work" is welcome corrective to the "theatrical pasteboard" prejudice still current. The extended demonstration of Scott's "naturally pictorial" genius, through "colour-studies" of numerous vivid scenes, is an illuminating appendix to Ian Jack's recent chapter (English Literature, 1815-1832). The analysis of the use of Scots—"invariably with its quality telling out against the quieter tones of the English"—is a suggestive beginning on a little studied topic. And most interesting, because most corrective of notions that Scott is not truly Scottish, is the linguistic and stylistic link of Scott with Knox, raconteurs in the same tradition, historians thematically harnessed to the same "great central clash of Kirk and State," narrators like Carlyle animated by the same spectacle of turbulent personalities and the "heady mixture of religion and fighting."

We marvel Miss Keith could have found the Waverley Novels "almost unreadable" or could have thought their Author's "personality" a separable being. For she has read the novels closely and energetically, and her enjoyment of them needs no defensive maneuvers. We can only regret that her vigorous spirit had found no company among the increasingly numerous new enthusiasts of the Author of Waverley, some of whom surely would have found the courage to reassure her that Scott is neither unreadable nor unread.

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[ 266 ]