Sir Walter Scott as Historical Novelist: Part I

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Sir Walter Scott as Historical Novelist

Part I.
Scott's opinions on historical fiction

For Scott the story-teller, history, both written and traditional, was a reservoir of material; an extension of that personal experience which is the basis of all creative work. Old books were for him a quarry,¹ the possession of which relieved him from all fears that he might work himself out.² He speaks of "supplying [i.e. supplementing] his own indolence or poverty of invention," but this of course is his modest way of saying that his huge background of reading and his powerful memory provide him with a source of endless suggestiveness and stimulus.³

This does not mean that a novelist can simply "read up" a period and then write a story about it. Historical knowledge can enlarge the writer's stock of experience effectively only if it is deep as well as wide; something which, through long familiarity, has sunk deep into his mind, and has become part of himself. Only then can a historical novel escape the charge of being vinaigre, and therefore unconvincing. Herein, said Scott, lay the decisive advantage he possessed over his imitators.⁴

The novelist seeks to exploit his quarry in two ways. Firstly, he looks for hints to be worked up in fiction. In comparison with the finished work, the original suggestion may well seem insignificant; yet it cannot be so, since it was needed to set the creative process in motion.⁵ Anything which provided opportunities for artistic contrast

¹Chronicles of the Canongate, 13. Henceforth cited as Canongate. References to Sir Walter Scott's original public writings, unless otherwise stated, are to the last issue of his complete works (Edinburgh: A. and C. Black, 1877-1882) consisting of Poetical Works in 12 volumes, the Waverley Novels in 48 volumes, and the Miscellaneous Prose Works in 30 volumes. It should be noted that The Minister's of the Scottish Border (henceforth cited as Ministers), though not, strictly speaking, original work, constitutes Vols. I-IV of the Poetical Works.


⁵Peveril of the Peak, 1, 64. Henceforth cited as Peveril.
was welcomed by Scott — Norman and Saxon, Highland and Lowland, Huguenot and Catholic; Richard and Saladin — all these and others are praised for their suitability. Special value attached to historical events and persons which are already known to the public, as being on that account likely to facilitate the novelist's reception. *Quentin Durward*, for example, had "unusual success on the continent, where the historical allusions awakened more familiar ideas" than they did in England, or than the Scotch and English novels awakened abroad. In this respect, he followed the example of the mediaeval romancers, who based their compositions on traditional subjects and familiar names. "An air of authenticity was thus obtained; the prejudices of the audience conciliated; and the feudal baron believed as firmly in the exploits of Roland and Oliver as a sturdy Celt of our day in the equally sophisticated poems of Ossian." Scott made one proviso here, however; it was clearly inadvisable for the novelist to use events already fully described by a well-known historian, since any departure from well-established truth would have a disagreeable effect; the case of Columbus is cited. Nothing is permissible which would inhibit the characteristic activity of free development from a basic suggestion.

But secondly, Scott was not prepared to carry out the process of development without further assistance from his pool of historical knowledge. Whereas the Baron of Bradwardine "only mumbered his memory with matters of fact; the cold, dry, hard outlines which history delineates," "Edward, on the contrary loved to fill up and round the sketch with the colouring of a warm and vivid imagination," and one might suppose that this delightful process was to take place as it were in a vacuum. In fact, however, the stores of history had a key role to play here too, by providing in part, that wealth of minute detail about individual life which Scott favoured, even in formal historical composition, and which was at least as useful in fiction as the principal means of lending verisimilitude to the narrative. For Scott, if a story is thus detailed, it is life-like and interesting; if it is general, it is dull. His taste was Homeric rather than Virgilian. So often is this point made by Scott that we must regard it as of funda-
mental importance for his art. He clearly regarded himself as a worker in the school of Defoe and Swift, specially qualified by nature and training.

Caution is required, however; not all minute circumstances are useable. Specific sayings and doings can hardly fail to interest; but mere antiquarian detail about the customs of past ages, being impersonal in character, may very easily become boring. Sir Walter thought, however, that this mistake was more likely to be made by the novelist who "crammed" for the task, than by himself, though he did admit the possibility that he himself might have sinned in this regard. — Again, thefts from history must not be too open; Scott condemned the man who lifted long passages from Defoe’s Plague Year.

In deciding whether or not to attempt a given topic from history, Scott applied these two criteria. The Armada was rejected as already too well known; for Pocahontas, Scott did not possess the necessary familiarity with American and Indian manners. King Alfred would not do because the novelist had "no clear idea either of the country in which Alfred warred or of the manners of the Saxons of his day"; a sea-story was equally out of the question, since his own ignorance of the sea would oblige him to be either dull or fantastic. Modern readers of Scott may be surprised to hear that he regarded himself as a realist even in writing his narrative poems; but there is no doubt that he did. He told a correspondent that Marmion was intended to display "ancient costume, diction, and manners," not his "own ingenuity in making an ideal world," nor yet generalised descriptions which would fit a tale of the Iroquois as well as one about feudal Europe. The Lady of the Lake was undertaken with some qualms, because the poet distrusted his own Highland background, and he refused to follow James Macpherson into the imaginary world of his


12 Journal, 248; Waverley, I, 15.


15 Letters, VII, 81.

16 Letters, III, 234.

17 Letters, XII, 383.

18 Letters, II, 55-6.
Ossianic poems. Scott was an obstinate disbeliever in "Ossian." Although he could refer to himself as a "second Macpherson," the description is not entirely appropriate.—If Scott questioned his qualifications to write about the Highlands, he had no doubt at all that he was disqualified to write about Wales; we must therefore conclude that The Betrothed was against his own rules.

In the same realistic spirit, Scott liked where possible to know all about the localities figuring in his fictions — geographical features, flora and fauna, place-names, anecdotes of local history: all these could help in giving individuality and life to his descriptions.

We now come to the modification which every rigid principle must undergo in the stress of practical operations. In this case the realist’s difficulty lies not only in acquiring a plentiful store of “minute circumstances” from the history of earlier periods, but also in using them appropriately and accurately. The difficulty obviously becomes greater as the author moves further away, chronologically and culturally, from his own environment. Scott could at least profess to give a vivid and exact account of Border life in the 16th Century, or of the Highlands in the same period, but he was quite frank in stating that he ran into difficulties with the 12th Century. The Dedicatory Epistle to Ivanhoe enunciates the principle that the historical novel must “introduce nothing inconsistent with the manners of the age,” and yet the 'Epistle' was really written as an apology for Scott’s departure from the principle in this case. The topics of Robin Hood and Richard the Lion-Heart, Normans and Saxons, offered raw material too attractive to be resisted, but 12th Century annals were lamentably deficient in the minute circumstances of domestic life and character which Scott wanted to aid the working-up process. In such a dilemma, the minute circumstances must be "faked," i.e. borrowed from a nearby period, richer in the needed matter — in this case, the Froissart period. Most readers would not notice the licence, and the historians who did would appreciate the reasons for it. Language is a typical difficulty; it is im-

18 Letters, II, 317; I, 303, 259, 324, 347. The project which ultimately took shape as The Lady of the Lake was actually suspended in favour of Marmion.
20 Ivanhoe, I, 18; Legend of Montrose, 118. Henceforth cited as Legend.
21 Letters, XI, 86.
22 e.g. Letters, IV, 189; VI, 266.
23 Lay of the Last Minstrel, 37.
24 Letters, XII, 286.
25 Ivanhoe, I, 28.
26 Ivanhoe, I, 29-30.
possible to tell the story of Ivanhoe in the language of the 1190's and still sell copies; the taste of Scott's day will not tolerate language which "awakens modern associations"; he must therefore compromise by using an archaic style which is still well understood, and which, as we know, proves to be quasi-Elizabethan. Thus "he that would please the modern world, yet present the exact impression of a tale of the Middle Ages, will repeatedly find that he will be obliged, in despite of his utmost exertions, to sacrifice the last to the first object, and eternally expose himself to the just censure of the rigid antiquary..."; just as one cannot present King Lear either in modern dress or in woald and bear-skins.

These difficulties, however, are less formidable than they seem; there is balm in Gilead. After all, the "passions" are common to all men in all classes and in all ages, "however influenced by the peculiar state of society," and there is much justification for introducing matter which would be appropriate in any period. — This is the familiar 18th Century view of the basic uniformity of human nature in all situations. As a concrete illustration, Scott mentions the case of Chatterton, who, when composing his spurious mediaeval poems, made too much use of obsolete words and too little of words common to mediaeval and modern English. It would thus appear that generalised narrative, such as Scott has already rejected, need not always be dull, and may be a good antidote to the over-employment of antiquarian detail.

Obviously, our artist is not going to allow his creativity to be shackled by theories, and any statement of Scott's principles must do justice to their flexibility. Perhaps it would be fair to say, summing up, that he has a marked liking for "period" detail, authentic if possible; if not, he would accept period detail which may be a century or so "out," but is at least not modern; and finally, there is much "general" material, characteristic of all or most periods, which must be used, though with caution.

Scott was fully aware that this particular problem was of recent origin. He points out that up to the time of Walpole's Castle of Otranto, the public had not been offended by the presentation of old stories

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Footnotes:
20 Ivanhoe, I, 27; Waverley, I, 96.
21 Ivanhoe, I, 26.
in modern costume and language, whether on the stage or in novels. Thus the growing sophistication of public taste presents a new challenge to the artist.

So far, our exposé of Scott's views has suggested that he respected historical authenticity, and was prepared to sacrifice it only in case of need. But a much more cavalier tone can frequently be found in his writings. "We know in general that a salutation [i.e., kissing] continued for a long period to be permitted by fashion, as much as the more lately licensed freedoms of shaking hands and offering the arm; and with this general knowledge it is of little consequence to us at what particular year of God men of quality were restrained from kissing their cousins, or whether Richardson has made an anachronism in that important matter." Scott is very light-hearted about liberties with chronology, illustrating Johnson's remark, "nothing is so obsequious to the imagination as time" (see the Shakespeare Preface). "What signify dates in a true story?" asked Scott in his Journal (p. 230); and if they signify little in sober history, they signify even less in fiction. A character in Woodstock, a tale of the year 1631, quotes from Fielding's verse, and Scott flippantly suggests that Fielding must have adopted the lines in question from tradition. (The case of Charles II, who in the same novel displays a proleptic and rather uncharacteristic acquaintance with Samson Agonistes, published in 1671, might have been more difficult to shrug off, if Scott had noticed the slip.) When he says "it is for local antiquaries to discover" whether Arthur Philipson, living in the later 15th Century, crossed from Kehl to Strassburg by the modern bridge, by an older one, or by ferry, Scott seems to speak as an old experienced novelist who is something weary of being checked for inaccuracy in such matters, and is humorously determined not to commit himself this time. But he never abandoned the belief that "heralds like poets are at liberty to commit anachronisms for the sake of effect."

About matters of historical fact, apart from chronology, Scott claims equal freedom for the novelist. "Odzooks, must one swear to the truth

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33 Lives, I, 61.
34 Woodstock, II, 133.
35 See also Journal, 101.
36 Woodstock, II, 144.
37 Anne of Geierstein, II, 109.
38 Letters, XII, 475.
of a song?” is quoted in the Prefatory Letter to Peveril. He explained to the historian Charles Mills that in writing The Talisman he was not writing history, and claimed the right to invent a female relation for Richard the Lion-Heart (Edith Plantagenet) if he needed her in his romantic fiction. “Were accuracy of any consequence in a fictitious narrative...” says the poet. Admitting that he had represented Sir Thomas Dalzell as being present at Bothwell Brig, and as wearing boots contrary to the testimony of Captain Creichton, Scott says “we may charitably suggest that he [the author] was writing a romance [i.e. Old Mortality] and not a history.” It is of little consequence to foreign nations how many Earls of Northumberland fell in the contest of York and Lancaster, or whether Shakespeare is correct in the pedigree of Roger Mortimer.” In a note on the battle of Langside, appended to The Abbot, Scott says that in spite of the superior information of a correspondent to the effect that Queen Mary saw the battle from Cathcart Castle, and not Crookston, Scott does not wish to disturb the tradition; the public, he thinks, will not relish a change. Incidentally, we learn that he had derived his own information from a play! There is little doubt that in some cases he allowed ascertained fact to give way to public taste, and that he shared that taste himself.

It is worth noting that Scott was willing to allow this latitude to other writers besides himself; speaking of a novel about the Gowrie Conspiracy, the work of a Mrs. Logan, he says, “I believe she made the facts (as she certainly had a right to do) give way to the hypothesis which she preferred.” We must suppose, therefore, that, when he informed Wordsworth of the fact that a historical personage put to death by that poet in his White Doe of Rylstone, had in fact escaped abroad, he was merely being generally informative. Wordsworth was no better pleased to be put right than lesser men; “a plague of your industrious antiquarianism,” he said. This little incident shows once more that Scott was not as other poets, but a genuine antiquary as well.

As a romancer, Scott normally relied upon his existing knowledge,
and did not trouble much about special research — for him, as for the authors of a famous parody, "history is what you remember." Of Marmion, he stated frankly that the poem did not give any historical account of Flodden, and that he had done no original research on that topic. The "real" history is given in the notes, with Pinkerton as authority.) In the Introduction to Woodstock, Scott says he wrote the novel with a distant recollection of reading something, he knew not what, about events at Woodstock in 1649, and only afterwards did he come across some printed material on the subject. Similarly, we find him asking someone for material about "Blue-gowns," or the King's Bedesmen, with a view to writing the historical notes for The Antiquary; and yet it was 12 or 15 years since he had written that novel itself — featuring Edie Ochiltree, the Blue-gown — without apparently feeling any need for such special inquiries.—Yet he could on occasion do some reading for bits of local colour while engaged on a romance, as in the case of Kenilworth and The Pirate.

While conscious that the "rigid antiquary" would be shocked by his freedoms with history, Scott always maintained that novels were works of mere amusement, to which historical criteria had no direct and strict application. He knew that Prynne, in the 17th Century, had attacked the authors of historical plays for their liberties with history, and in this controversy he sided with the dramatist against the critic. The romancer's only indispensable rule is to be interesting; the rest can be left to fate: tout genre se permet hors le genre ennuyant. "Scenes in which our ancestors thought deeply, acted fiercely, and died desperately, are to us tales to divert the tedium of a winter's evening," and so are not sacred from the embroiderer's art. It is true that Scott also said that if a novel be faithful to history, the author "takes his seat on the bench of the historians of his country"; but this high claim is made only once, when he was under pressure from Presbyterian criticism of Old Mortality; it seems quite certain that in the ordinary way he was satisfied when his novels succeeded as novels. There are two classes of readers, he says; those who are stimulated by historical novels to try the real thing, and those who are too idle to read serious

47 Letters, II, 3.
48 Letters, X, 511.
49 Letters, VI, 265, 449.
51 *Journal*, 100; *Letters*, III, 191; *Letters*, V, 61.
52 *Camongate*, 143.

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history, but who none the less do learn something about history from these fictions. Thus there is no-one who cannot benefit from historical novels. As to their capacity for doing harm, Scott doubts if the charms of fiction could ever be really responsible for diverting attention from serious history; and in any case "the difference is but nominal betwixt those who read novels because they dislike history — and those who dislike history because they read novels." 84 The value of historical novels as a stimulant to serious study is asserted in a number of places in Scott's writings,85 and we are therefore to suppose that he believed in it strongly. Of their value to others, Scott's favourite illustration was the Duke of Marlborough, who was reported as saying that he had never read any history outside Shakespeare's plays86 — at least for the 15th Century.

And yet, after all, Scott does admit certain restrictions on the freedom of the historical novelist. "You may defeat the Romans in spite of Tacitus," says Jonathan Oldbuck, à propos of the "Caledoniad," a projected epic poem;87 but Scott would never go as far as this. His principle may be summed up in the word "plausibility"; even in the field of manners, so much more important in his eyes than that of the facts of political history,88 the author need not adhere to ascertained fact, but may introduce whatever is plausible and natural, and contains no obvious anachronism — for example, Bois-Guilbert in Ivanhoe may be waited upon by negro slaves, even if it should prove impossible to show that negro slavery existed in 12th Century England,89 since his opponents in Palestine undoubtedly had them. Here and there we find other examples of Scott's principle discussed. He condemns Dryden for putting classical quotation in the mouths of Moorish characters, and for representing Mohammedans as addicted to human sacrifice,90 but he thinks Dryden was justified in his speculation about the fate of King Sebastian of Portugal, since there really was something of a mystery about his death. Criticising Southery's Madoc, Scott remarked

85 Black Dwarf, 385; Fortunes of Nigel, I, 21 (henceforth cited as Nigel); Peveril, I, 66.
86 Review, James Bosden, Memoirs of the Life of John Philip Kemble, 158 (Prose Works, XX); Peveril, I, 67.
87 Antiquary, I, 214.
88 Letters, XI, 86.
89 Ivanhoe, I, 382.
90 Dryden, VII, 280.
on the similarity of the story to that of Columbus,61 and said, "Could anyone bear the story of a second city being taken by a wooden horse." (In the same spirit, Sir Launcelot Greaves is condemned62 as a repetition of Don Quixote in the incongruous setting of 18th Century England.) Scott demurred to Logan's tragedy of Runnamede, which, it seems, represented the Saxons as still existing in 1215 as a "high-minded and martial race of nobles." 63 (In comparison with this, Scott's own picture of Cedric and Athelstan as leader of the last faint shadow of a Saxon party in England, is guilty of nothing more than sailing a trifle near the wind.) He was unwilling to marry Ivanhoe to Rebecca, partly because "the prejudices of the age rendered such an union [between Jew and Christian] almost impossible." 64 As we have seen, Froissart may be used to help out a picture of the twelfth century, but Scott forbids the introduction of a tea-table scene into the history of John of Gaunt,65 and pours much scorn on William Godwin for causing the same old hero to make a speech in a turgid 18th Century style to Geoffrey Chaucer.66 There are passages in Dryden's Aeneid, says Scott, "which in the revolution of a few pages, transport our ideas from the time of Troy's siege to that of the court of Augustus, and thence downward to the reign of William the Third of Britain." 67 As we have already seen, the manners of Europe will not do duty in pioneering America; the life of the landsman will not furnish a sea story, and King Alfred is too remote for any treatment to be credible.

Welsh history seems to provide a border-line case; for although Scott declined on one occasion to undertake a Welsh story,68 he had already tried one in The Betrothed, and obviously with qualms. Dr. Dryasdust, who seems to personify the historian's corner of Scott's conscience, complains in the original introduction to that novel that the Welsh will not approve of the manners expressed, and that the author should have done more reading in Welsh history.69 In his

61 Letters, I, 288, 325.
62 Lives, I, 150.
63 Ivanhoe, I, 5.
64 Ivanhoe, I, 15.
65 Review, George Ellis, Specimens of Early English Metrical Romances, 52. (Prose Works, XVII).
67 Life of Dryden, 438 (Prose Works, II).
68 Letters, XI, 84.
69 Betrothed, 23.
Introduction to *Anne of Geierstein*, Scott apologises for taking more liberties with history than usual; 70 this admission seems obviously to have been prompted by criticism from Switzerland (see the same Introduction), since British readers will scarcely find *Anne* more inaccurate than other novels. We must assume that plausibility for Scott means plausibility for that elusive person, the average reader; historians are not average readers, nor are Swiss critics of Scott's Swiss stories, nor yet Welsh critics of his Welsh stories. Doubtless Scottish critics of Scottish stories would qualify as average readers for Scott.

We need not expect involved casuistical discussion from a confessedly unphilosophical writer, but Scott does give clear indications that plausibility is a relative thing. Having changed the religion of the Countess of Derby in *Peveril*, he remarks that the truth abouth this, however important it may once have been, does not matter now. 71 Samuel Richardson's ignorance of high life distressed Lady Mary Wortley Montague; but so evanescent are the details of fashionable good breeding that Richardson's errors worry no-one in Scott's generation 72 — except no doubt the antiquary. Mrs. Radcliffe, it seems, was wrong in many details about the Inquisition, but Scott dismisses this censure on the ground that the code of the Inquisition "is happily but little known to us." 73 All this seems to imply a practical distinction between knowledge derived from books and knowledge based on direct personal experience. Contradict this latter in the slightest, and the reader is up in arms; whereas the former must be quite seriously violated before the average reader is roused to protest; if he notices small errors, he is not hurt by them. Therefore, a poem about Nelson by a landsman will not do, because the slightest inaccuracy will rouse a "hundred critics in blue and white"; 74 knights and moss-troopers, on the other hand, are all dead, and you are safe, provided gross inconsistencies are avoided. One way of doing this is to "avoid in prudence all well-known paths of history," 75 we have already noticed that this practice has the additional advantage of allowing free play to the artist's imagination.

There is at least one instance to the fore where Scott rejected a detail as unplausible, even though it was consistent with historical

70 *Anne of Geierstein*, I, 1.
74 *Letters*, XII, 383.
75 *Fair Maid*, I, 24 ff; *Letters*, III, 234; IV, 475; *Journal*, 573.
fact. An artist illustrating *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* was instructed
not to show the Laird of Buccleuch holding a golf-club; “the game is
doubtless ancient but it is also modern and by certain associations
rather vulgar in a Scotchman’s eye.” 76 (Few people, even today, would
forbear a smile on being informed that Queen Mary Stewart was a
keen golfer.) In certain other cases, where he suspected that his
readers might be capricious, Scott gave his authority. The cruelties of
the Norman barons in *Ivanhoe*, which might be rejected by a generation
brought up to revere the heroes of Magna Carta, are substantiated 77
from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’s* well-known account of the Nineteen
Long Winters. This case is interesting, because Scott is justifying him-
self to ordinary readers, not to students of history, who would need no
reassuring on this particular point. Similarly, the proposed marriage
between Saladin and Edith Plantagenet in *The Talisman* is defended
in a footnote 78 from the charge of improbability, by a reference to
Mills’ *History of the Crusades* for the case of Saladin’s brother and the
widowed Queen of Naples. (When Scott jocously added that Mills
did not seem ever to have met Edith Plantagenet in history, that
historian wrote an offended letter, and had to be smoothed down
by an explanation in words of one syllable.)

Another limitation upon the novelist’s freedom in handling the
facts of history remains to be mentioned. Scott acknowledged the
claims of individual and party sensibility. He spent a good deal of time
apologising to people, Highlanders in particular, 79 for things he had
said about their ancestors; and in the case of the Swiss reader who
wrote to him about *Anne of Geierstein*, he thought it “probably of
less consequence” that he had traduced the political character of an
Emperor, than that he had impugned the gentry of his correspondent’s
forebears. 80 Scott seems to have been struck by the indignation
aroused by *Old Mortality* amongst those to whom he referred in
private as “the godly”; not only did he represent the extreme Covenant-
ers more favourably afterwards, in the characters of David Deans
and Mr. Bide-the-Bent, 81 but he allowed himself to be so much in-
hhibited in painting the Puritan Bridgenorth that he felt obliged to

76 *Letters*, XII, 380.
77 *Ivanhoe*, I, 377.
78 *Talisman*, 276.
80 *Anne of Geierstein*, I, 2.
81 A minor but important character in *Brute of Lammermoor*. Henceforth
cited as *Brute*. 

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apologise\textsuperscript{52} for the colourlessness of the character in the Prefatory Letter to Peveril, specifically alleging as the cause, his respect for religious feelings.

Like many other men who deliver their views chiefly in the form of scattered \textit{obiter dicta}, Scott is not always self-consistent. At times he seems to set a high value on historical authenticity for its own sake; but more often he seems to be principally anxious that the general reader shall not be shocked. For this purpose, much untruth may be tolerated, whereas some truth must be excluded, or at least specially bolstered up. The foregoing exposition of Scott may seem to show him starting off with something like the historian's ideals, but later modifying them more and more under pressure from the practical needs of novel-writing and novel-selling. This exposition, however, is merely an attempt to fit Scott's numerous remarks into some sort of logical sequence; it cannot pretend to be an analysis of the development of his ideas. That is a history which will never be written, for the materials are lost. As in the case of many other late starters, his opinions and attitudes had ripened before he became an author, and changed very little during thirty years' activity. Scott was always very much the historian, and, simultaneously, very very much the creative artist.

The historical novelist, then, starts with a mass of well-digested material, both general and detailed, drawn from the history of many countries and periods; upon which elements his creative imagination is free to work, subject only to the not very formidable restrictions of plausibility and respect for feelings. Historical authenticity is desirable, but is in practice liable to modification by such factors as the state of the author's knowledge, the nature of his materials, and the character of his readers. "Be interesting, plausible, and considerate," might be Scott's motto.

\textit{(To be continued)}

EDINBURGH

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Peveril}, I, 68.