REVIEW


In 1994, Northcote House (www.northcotehouse.co.uk) in association with the British Council (www.britishcouncil.org) launched the series *Writers and Their Work*, which sought ‘to bring neglected or marginalized writers to a wider readership.’ The series currently boasts more than a hundred titles, with a further hundred in preparation, encompassing a wide range of authors, genres and periods, including Restoration poetess Aphra Behn, postcolonial novelist and essayist Chinua Achebe (*Things Fall Apart*), Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, living novelists Kazuo Ishiguro (*The Remains of the Day*) and Muriel Spark (*Memento Mori*), living poets Seamus Heaney and Carol Ann Duffy, American novelists Stephen Crane (*The Red Badge of Courage*) and Edith Wharton (*Ethan Frome*), and an individual study on each of Shakespeare’s plays. In 2006, Sir Walter Scott joined the ranks and, although in recent decades Scott has been neither neglected nor marginalized by scholars, Harriet Harvey Wood’s brief critical biography of Scott is a welcome addition to the canon.

In the nineteenth century, Scott was a literary powerhouse. By the age of thirty, he was both a successful lawyer and Sheriff of Selkirkshire; over the next three decades, he would ‘write a new chapter in the history of British authorship’, churning out poems, novels, editorial collections, biographies, histories, and essays ‘which few other writers of any age could equal and none could surpass.’ (p. 1) By the early years of the twentieth century, however, the literary world had all but forgotten the ‘Wizard of the North.’ To be sure, it was still fashionable to visit Abbotsford, Scott’s baronial mansion on the Scottish Borders, and to display a finely bound, uncut edition of the Waverley Novels on one’s library shelves, but other than a few stalwarts – David Douglas,
Margaret Ball, Ernest Bernbaum, James T. Hillhouse and the two Sir Herbert’s (Butterfield and Grierson) – the scholarly community expressed little interest in either Scott’s novels or poetry. All this changed dramatically in the latter half of the twentieth century. The foundation of Scott’s rehabilitation was laid by Grierson’s 1932 edition of Scott’s letters (which, at twelve volumes, represents a fraction of Scott’s lifetime epistolary output), followed, in the early 1950s, by the publication of three influential essays: David Daiches’ ‘Scott’s Achievement as a Novelist’ in *Nineteenth Century Fiction* (1951), S. Stewart Gordon’s ‘Waverley and the Unified Design’ in *English Literary History* (1951) and Duncan Forbes’ ‘The Rationalism of Walter Scott’ in the *Cambridge Journal* (1953). It was, however, Georg Lukács’ chapter on ‘Scott and the Classical Form of the Historical Novel’ in *The Historical Novel* (1962) that opened the floodgates. Since then, the flow of scholarly publications devoted to Scott has been steady and shows no signs of letting up.

And yet, for all that Scott has been rehabilitated by modern critics and scholars, ‘he is not much read, especially by the young.’ (p. 4) To some extent, the sheer density of the Waverley Novels is to blame. No one could accuse Scott’s novels of being easy reads (it took this reviewer, for instance, a full week to make it through *Waverley!*). But equally, if not more important, few young readers know much about Scott’s life, making it difficult to see the Waverley Novels in context. Scott has been a popular subject for biographers for almost two centuries, ever since the publication of Robert Chamber’s *Life of Sir Walter Scott* (1834), James Hogg’s *Domestic Manners and Private Life of Sir Walter Scott* (1834) and John Gibson Lockhart’s *Memoirs of the Life of Walter Scott, Bart.* (1837-38). For decades, Lockhart’s biography was the yardstick against which all other biographies were measured, and it was not surpassed until the 1890s, by Andrew Lang’s *Sir Walter Scott* (1896). At least one notable biography has appeared each decade since then. (p. 108-9) The most recent addition, and by far the most comprehensive and critical, was John Sutherland’s 1995 *The Life of Walter Scott*. None of these biographies, however, are geared toward students. This is the gap that Wood’s study fills.

Wood begins her biography of Scott where all biographers do: at the beginning (the Mad Hatter would approve). In a scant eight
pages, Wood sums up the first thirty years of Scott’s life, fast-forwarding readers through the Sandyknowe years, his early education, the trips to Bath and Prestonpans to treat his lameness, a six-month convalescent stay in Kelso, matriculation at the University of Edinburgh, apprenticeship under his father, a failed romance, marriage, the bar and the beginning of Scott’s career as a poet (Chapter 1). The bulk of the biography is given over to summary, both of the poems (Chapter 3) and the Waverley Novels (Chapters 4 and 5), followed by an examination of the last years of Scott’s life, particularly those chronicled by the author in his Journal, an exceptionally insightful piece of self-reflective writing and one of the most famous such works in literary history (Chapter 6). Finally, in the last chapter, Wood considers Scott’s legacy, his contributions to literature, history and Scotland.

As biographies of Scott go, John Sutherland’s detailed and revealing *The Life of Sir Walter Scott* (1995) is the gold standard, and, ultimately, Wood’s offering of the same is not a serious competitor for the title of ‘Best Scott Biography.’ What we have here is a barebones, quick-and-dirty, ‘Scott for Beginners’ biography – and there is something to be said for that. Most of what is written about Scott these days is geared toward the academic community. Such weighty tomes and dense articles are not the sort of thing one would (or should) use to initiate the Scott novice. Wood’s study, on the other hand, is the ideal introduction to the life and works of ‘the Scottish Prospero.’ Writing in an engaging and lively style, Wood hits all the high points of Scott’s life, without burying the reader in quotations or minutiae, supplies excellent summaries (and a handy timeline) of Scott’s literary works, identifying the major motifs and themes in each, and provides the student reader with a decent (though far from exhaustive) guide to modern Scott scholarship. As an introduction and guide, then, Harriet Harvey Wood’s *Sir Walter Scott* deserves top marks.

*Megan Selva*  
*University of Guelph*