Unwept, Unhonoured, and Unsung

By The Unreliable Narrator

It has become fashionable, of late, to point out that the novels of Sir Walter Scott are scarcely read, now; to remark that few would willingly pick up *Waverley*, let alone give shelf-space to *Peveril of the Peak* (it killed Prince Albert and it can do the same for you). Often this is framed within the kind of museful sorrow which laments falling standards in mental arithmetic, or the decline in the art of conkers. Scott and all his works now lie in that dusty, tumbled attic of things which once were fun, or were of some utility, or were at least *good for you* in a spinachy sort of way. Or good for other people – mostly children, and at a distance – at any rate.

It's true. Undoubtedly, Scott is not widely read. Everybody knows he just wrote big, baggy potboilers, full of long-winded prose and cardboard characters. Puffed-up piles of pages with nothing in them of interest to the modern reader. All that tartan guff, it's all fake, anyhow. And he was a Unionist. And a Tory. Bastard.

But – controversial, I know – might there be a tad more to Scott than everything we already know about him, having never read him? He did more-or-less invent the historical novel, after all. He was the first author to set the past convincingly *in the past*, at a remove, where things were different. Writing as he did at a time of epochal change in human civilisation, his historical tales cocked an ear up to the accelerating roar of progress. 'Tis sixty years since? It might as well have been six hundred. Oh aye, there's that. True enough. I'll give him that.

And his stuff was popular. I mean, wildly popular, from Siberia to Alaska and back round again the other way. For much of modernity's total span, if there was literature anywhere in a house, be it country seat or log cabin, odds on it included a set of the Waverley novels. You could love him or hate him, you could sink him in the Mississippi, but you couldn't avoid him. Scott defined the nineteenth-century novel, not least because publishing is a business and the public bought him in buckets. Bands and orchestras tooted out Scott tunes, operas and plays honked his plots around the stage. Yes, it was commercial; and yes, it was written at a frantic pace; but the man dominated global literature for the best part of a hundred years. He must have been doing something right.

Scott's characters, too: are they perhaps more complex than we give them credit for? There's a range to them, a depth, a texture too – his protagonists can be flawed, and unheroic (and still they may bludgeon tigers and box orang-utans). Even his poor, his peasants have their own dignities and voices, and do more than merely carry spears and prop up jokes. These are living men and women of wild Romance and sceptical Enlightenment; valour and vainglory; intelligence and madness; simplicity, duplicity, lies, and truth.

Yes, his visions of Scotland's past – Scott-land, tushery, tourist-kitsch – may be partial, and part-pretend, but whose are not? His visions of England's past are no less fake, and are no less powerfully influential: a nation born out of Norman conquest and Saxon blood; Robin Hood, splitting the arrow (recently reprised in that most English of entertainments, *Dr Who* – made in Wales, by Scots); Queen Elizabeth's puddle and Raleigh's cloak. The Palace of Westminster, seat of government of these our own United Kingdoms, is one part Kennaquhair and one part Hogwarts, and why? Our apt and undying passion for antic flummery, discovered and distilled by good Sir Walter.

The interesting question now becomes, why is Scott so little studied? The man has the second-largest memorial to any writer in the world, a gothic rocket-ship perpetually poised for takeoff on Princes Street; how can serious scholars of any literature written anywhere since 1805 not include Scott's gravity in their own calculations? His fans and followers – to drop a name or two – list among their teeming thousands Jane Austen, Honoré de Balzac, Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Alexandre Dumas, George Eliot, Friedrich Engels, Gustave Flaubert, Victor Hugo, Washington Irving, Karl Marx, Herman Melville, Alexander Pushkin and Leo Tolstoy. Where are the journals, the institutes of Scott Studies? What,

quite, is the problem, pal?

Some answers on slightly more of a postcard might begin to emerge, because of course Scott has not been wholly neglected. The size of the academic gap might be enormous, but the response to that is merely: there is work to be done, so sit down and write. Herewith in this edition of *The Bottle Imp* are some ventures to that score. Douglas Gifford considers the matter of our inheritance, in **Scott's Legacy to Scottish Historical Fiction**; Susan Oliver scouts out the territory in **Walter Scott and the Matter of Landscape: Ecologies of Violence for our Time**; Graham Tulloch goes around the world to mark **Two Hundred Years of Waverley in Australia**; Caroline McCracken-Flesher beams in with **Future Scotts: The Aliens have Landed**; Robert Irvine brings us bang up to date with **Reading Waverley in 2014**; and Alison Lumsden waxes multifarious in **Waverley, Adaptation, and the University of Aberdeen Bernard C. Lloyd Collection of Scott Materials**. For the Scots Word of the Season, Maggie Scott brings in the haill **Clamjamfry**, and Alison Grant spelunks the Gaelic place-name ***Uamh***.

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