The Reception of Sir Walter Scott in Italy after 1945

By Arianna Granata

2021 is the 250th anniversary of the birth of Sir Walter Scott, and, on this occasion, many events, initiatives, and new critical studies have been prepared for publication and organised by many scholars across numerous institutions. Together with the celebrations of his anniversary, the publication of the Edinburgh Edition of the *Waverley Novels*, from 1993–2012, is symptomatic of, and has been a driving force in, the revival Scott has experienced during recent years. However, the renewed interest in Scott has seemingly had little resonance in Italy.

Although Scott profoundly influenced the birth of the Italian novel and the development of the modern historical novel – in Italy and in the rest of Europe – it seems that, nowadays, Scott remains a rather ghostly presence in the Italian literary and cultural panorama. Given the average Italian reader's scant knowledge of Scott, and the author's minor presence in middle school, high school, and university syllabi, he seems to have definitively lost his appeal among contemporary Italian readers and critics. References to his importance as the father of the historical novel can mostly be found in high school literature manuals (where he is often compared to, and rightly seen as the forebear of, Manzoni) and scarcely elsewhere. Moreover, the 250th anniversary is having no effect in Italy, overshadowed, perhaps as most literary things are this year, by the concurrent 700th anniversary of Dante's death.

Previously, in the first half of the nineteenth century, Walter Scott had a significant impact on Italian literary culture, being widely read via the Italian translations of Gaetano Barbieri, Virginio Soncini, and Vincenzo Lancetti. He experienced his heyday starting from the Italian publication of *Kenilworth* and *The Lady of the Lake* in 1821. Scott's historical novel fomented some prejudices among the more conservative and classicist critics (who still considered poetry as the chief literary genre for the instruction and amusement of readers), yet it is undeniable that the Italian translations of his works immediately met great favour

among the public. To testify this popularity, it is sufficient to consider the number of translations from 1820 to 1840: almost 370 instances of Scott's poetry and prose.[1] His fame became so great in Italy that a journalist of the time wrote 'you can find books of *Kenilworth* and *Ivanhoe* everywhere. All the ladies dress like Walter Scott's characters. His popularity is immense. Everyone started to imitate the manners of *Kenilworth* or *Ivanhoe*.'[2]

Firstly, Scott reached Italy thanks to a series of translations made from French, especially of A. J. B. Defauconpret. However, these versions had been subjected to several modifications according to the needs and ideologies of post-Napoleonic French society. In this regard, Paul Barnaby in his article 'Restoration Politics and Sentimental Poetics in A. J. B. Defauconpret's Translations of Sir Walter Scott'[3] points out that Defauconpret's approach to Scott's novel (here he refers specifically to *Old Mortality*) 'was to reconfigure the novel radically for a Legitimist, Catholic, post-Napoleonic readership, not only escaping censorship but providing Scott with his French breakthrough and first major European

success.'[4] Thanks to the French translations, Scott's novels 'became familiar, directly or indirectly, to many European readers. In Italy, Poland, Russia, and Spain they were widely read long before indigenous versions appeared. Manzoni, Mickiewicz, and Pushkin all first encountered Scott in Defauconpret's French.' [5]

Regarding the first Italian translations of Scott's works, Anna Benedetti's study *Le Traduzioni italiane da Walter Scott e i loro anglicismi*[6] (The Translation from Walter Scott and his anglicisms), published in 1974, is fascinating. Benedetti highlights the close dependence of the first Italian translations on the French ones. A number of omissions and modifications implemented by the French are found exactly in many Italian editions of Scott's novels. For example in the dialogue between Bothwell and Balfour de Burley,[7] in both the French and Italian versions of *Old Mortality,* lines of dialogue are cut to remove religious matter abstruse to the foreign reader. Additionally, many titles were similarly modified by French and Italian translators: *Old Mortality* (1816) was, indeed, translated into French as *Les Puritains d' Ecosse* (1817) and later into Italian as *I puritani di Scozia* (1822); A *Legend of Montrose* (1819) was translated into French as *L'officer de fortune* (1819) and later in Italian as *L'Officiale di fortuna* (1822).

Despite such differences, Italian translations of Scott's works succeeded in fostering his popularity throughout the Italian peninsula and encouraged Italian authors also to write historical novels. Most importantly, Scott inspired the birth of the very first Italian novel, *The Betrothed* (1827) by Alessandro Manzoni, which simultaneously inaugurated the historical genre in Italy. As Murray Pittock points out in his recent study *The Reception of Sir Walter Scott in Europe* (2007)[8], 'Manzoni's novel is arguably the greatest novel deriving from the influence of Scott […] Two of Scott's chief traits, the use of the Picturesque to frame a situation, and the historiographical philosophizing over the problems of a historical era into which he nevertheless enters with gusto, are early evident in Manzoni's text'.[9] Nevertheless, the precise relationship between Scott and Manzoni's practice has been the centre of some nationalistic critical debate. Here, for some commentators, more pertinent than Scott's influence on Manzoni was the perspective that Renaissance Italian and other foreign authors, such as Cervantes and Ariosto, were foundational for his novel-writing.[10]

Today Scott is broadly recognised as the father of the modern historical fiction, in Italy as elsewhere. A recent example here is Matteo Sarni's *The Sign and the Frame: reading The Betrothed in the light of Scott's novels* (2013).[11] This critical work highlights the crucial elements Manzoni took from Scott in writing *The Betrothed*. These include telling history through universal characters with which 'every man' can identify. Also, great historical events are the background for the lives of ordinary people, living through such important historical moments. Important similarities also encompass an anthropological sensitivity, romantically symbolic settings and the use by the author of historical documentation (on this aspect, Manzoni perhaps becomes even more meticulous in describing and reporting the historical and cultural context than Scott with whole chapters largely taken up with such 'real' history). Following *The Betrothed*, many other Italian authors were inspired by Scott to take up the genre of the historical novel. Those include: Massimo d'Azeglio's *Ettore Fieramosca* (1833), Tommaso Grossi's *Marco Visconti* (1834), Francesco Guerazzi's *The Siege of Florence* (1836) (already known for the novel *The Battle of Benevento*, published in 1827) and Cesare Cantù's *Margherita Pusterla* (1838). The love for the picturesque, the adventure structure of the plot and the description of historical events, are again chief among the characteristics these authors took from Scott.[12]

After Scott's Italian heyday, his popularity started to decline dramatically. This phenomenon is strongly connected to the cultural and political changes that occurred in Italy after 1860. 1860 was the year of Italian Unification or *Risorgimento* (Resurgence) when a series of socio-political upheavals resulted in the consolidation of different regions of the Italian Peninsula into a single state, the Kingdom of Italy. Initially, this nationalistic ideals endeavour energised the Italian populace. But after 1860, a sense of disappointment and dissatisfaction – as a result of the few real changes brought by the Union – spread throughout Italy. The historical genre underwent significant transformations in this period, moving away from Scott's and Manzoni's traditional historical novel to embrace a new, apparently more intimate way to fictionally narrate history. Post-Unification Italian historical fiction focused on the local, on micro-histories, small communities, and regionality. Significant historical novels such as *The Viceroys* (1894) by Federico De Roberto, *The old and the young* (1913) by Luigi Pirandello, and *The Leopard* (1957) by Tomasi di Lampedusa expressed a distrust in historical progress and underlined the failure of the Italian Risorgimento.

Later, in the first half of the twentieth century, the rise of the avant-garde movements and the establishment of Benedetto Croce's criticism regarding literary genres and historical fiction led to a further underestimation of Walter Scott's works.[13] In his essay entitled *Walter Scott*[14] (published on the literary magazine *La Critica* in 1923 and later included in *Poesia e non Poesia* 1950), Croce acknowledges the direct dependence of the Italian historical novel on Scott, although states that the latter was incapable of creating interesting and memorable plots. Indeed, according to Croce, the only novel worth reading was *The Heart of Mid-Lothian* (1818).[15] Together with Emilio Cecchi and Mario Praz (other influential Italian critics in the first half of the twentieth century), Croce profoundly influenced the aesthetic evaluation of the foreign literary production for Italy arguing the need for radical new native sensibilities.

Given the history briefly sketched above, it is not surprising that in the study *The Reception of Sir Walter Scott in Europe* (2007) a discrete chapter on Scott's influence in Italy is not included. Although Walter Scott's Italian fortune is treated in passing throughout the volume, Professor Pittock admits in his introduction that 'it proved impossible to obtain a satisfactory coverage of Portugal and Italy'.[16] One might ask: why was it difficult to collect enough material to dedicate a chapter to Italy? What was the extent of the reception of Scott from the first Italian translations onwards? What happened to Scott's popularity following an undoubted initial phase of enthusiasm? What are the reasons behind the decline in his popularity? From 1821 to the 1970s, a few studies have discussed the Italian impact of Scott. However, a comprehensive analysis of his most recent Italian reception is still missing. His dwindling popularity in the later twentieth century, though, does not mean that Scott is altogether absent in Italian culture. The need to explore Scott's presence and its lack, both equally revealing lenses, from the mid-twentieth-century onwards has been the starting point of my research project at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore and the University of Glasgow. The project, titled *The Reception of Walter Scott in Italy after 1945*, aims to make an original contribution to Scott reception studies.

My research can be divided into two main parts: the first one reprises and gives a critical literature review of the existing bibliography regarding Scott's early reception in Italy. In this initial section I consider: Luigi Fassò's *Saggio di ricerche intorno alla fortuna di Walter Scott in Italia* (1906); 'Traduttori Italiani di

Walter Scott'; Anna Benedetti's *Le traduzioni italiane da Walter Scott e i loro anglicismi* (1994); Franca Ruggieri Punzo's *Walter Scott in Italia (1821–1971)*, and the article 'Walter Scott in Italia e il romanzo storico' written by E. Irace and G. Pedullà.[17] The study of these works allows us to comprehend the trajectory and also qualitative aspects of Scott's Italian reception. In particular, Franca Ruggieri Punzo's *Walter Scott in Italia* represents a pivotal study of Scott's fortune in Italy. Published in 1974, it traces his critical reception from the first Italian translations of *Kenilworth* and *The Lady of the Lake,* in 1821*,* to Francesco Russo's polemical article in the *Espresso* magazine (1971). Francesco Russo, a famous Italian journalist, wrote, for the occasion of the Edinburgh Festival's commemoration of the bicentenary of Scott's birth, an acute article on Scott's novels and his importance as the father of the modern historical novel. He generally assumed though that Scott was more interested into the prolific production of books to pay his debts rather than writing with profound historical and psychological intent.[18]

As the basis of her study, Franca Ruggieri Punzo takes essays, reviews and introductions to Walter Scott Italian editions, and excerpts from Italian and English literature anthologies from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1970s. In the last chapter of her book, titled "La critica recente (1939–1971)" (recent criticism), she highlights Scott's role as the father of the historical genre, but contends that he is latterly little more than a point of reference in literature manuals for teaching courses. Moreover, she points out that there are no significant recent critical studies that discuss Scott's life and works. This lack of substantial criticism undoubtedly accounts for the marked decline of interest in Scott, which began in the second half of the nineteenth century and largely continues today.

The second part of my project analyses Scott's reception and fortune in Italy from the mid-twentieth century on. The research is still evolving, far from yet complete, but it is possible to reveal some interesting primary findings. Contrary to what one might suspect, Scott's lingering presence still influences Italian historical fiction, especially with regard to the post-modernist genre. If we consider works such Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980), we find that some elements borrowed from Scott are still largely present in here: the old manuscript as primary historical source to the novel, the anthropological analysis of character, the clear distinction between past and present time, meticulous historical documentation and great historical events forming the background to a plot

featuring protagonists of lesser (indeed fictional) historical importance. Post-modernist historical fiction in Italy frequently looks back to the historical novels of Manzoni and Scott, even while innovating. One major difference of course is where the post-modernist historical novel uses extratextual strategies to make the reader aware of the the non-reliability of the 'history' narrated.

Italian scholars who have researched Scott from the 1970s include, for example, Erica Villari with a series of essays regarding the study of Scott's novels main characteristics, Carla Sassi and her analysis of Scott's *oeuvre*, Matteo Sarni, already cited, Stefania Lutazzi and her account of Scott's influence on the ninenteenth-century Roman poet G. G. Belli in writing his *Zibaldone*, and Simone Signaroli.[19] The latter is an archivist who recently opened a WordPress blog titled *L'angolo di Scott* (Scott's Corner).[20] Another noteworthy preliminary finding in my project is that Walter Scott is still discussed and studied in depth in Italian and English literature manuals, where his works are still often compared with Manzoni's *The Betrothed*. Finally, several publishing houses still publish new editions of a small number of Scott's novels and they also give helpful annotation towards understanding of his works. One example is the Garzanti publishing house publications, which provide extensive critiques of Scott's themes in their introductions. *La sposa di Lammermoor* (The Bride of Lammermoor), *L'Antiquario* (The Antiquary), *Ivanhoe* are just a few examples. [21]

My research project aims to building a comprehensive portrait of Scott's reception and cultural imprint in Italy in the twentieth century, considering new translations, editions and adaptations. The study of his recent reception also throws interesting light on Italian socio-literary culture and on the Italian historical novel itself. The study will investigate how the genre has changed and developed over two centuries and how Scott's presence still resonates in Italy.2021 is the 250th anniversary of the birth of Sir Walter Scott, and, on this occasion, many events, initiatives, and new critical studies have been prepared for publication and organised by many scholars across numerous institutions. Together with the celebrations of his anniversary, the publication of the Edinburgh Edition of the *Waverley Novels*, from 1993–2012, is symptomatic of, and has been a driving force in, the revival Scott has experienced during recent years. However, the renewed interest in Scott has seemingly had little resonance in Italy.

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