

Sir Walter Scott: A Supreme Purveyor of Scottish History and Society**Dr. Huda A. Galaby**

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***Abstract:** Sir Walter Scott's novels portray a World of romance, fascination that holds within it modern themes and interests: racial prejudice, social justice, religious differences, rebellion, commerce and imperial economy, the rights of women. All these are woven by a born storyteller whose influence during his life time and two generations after on English and European novelists is apparent. Balzac, Merimee, Tolstoy, George Eliot estimated his contribution to the novel; the popular art of the nineteenth century, especially in Victorian England. It is his true self and Scottish identity that gives his novels their unique flavor. They are woven journeys by the vocation of Scott in the Scottish literary settings in Scottish history and society. That past and society needed to be traversed by an artistic eye and depicted by a talented storyteller who shows the Highlands, Glasgow and other cities as a fascinating World that is not given its freedom to show its treasures. He opened a closed door for the English, European, American readership. His true contribution to the novel is making historical romances a means to combine the past and the present through his own bridge that can be seen by visionary eyes that try to pave a good trodden road for the posterity.*

Sir Walter Scott's range is Kaleidoscopic in the sense that it is brightly coloured to satisfy different tastes, people at different times. It is not fair to consider him "extremely successful in his own day". If his novels have "fallen of fashion in modern times" as Martin Stephan states (118), It is not Scott's fault. It is because the critic's eye falls, short of his true spirit and his art. His historical novels and interest, most of all, in the history of Scotland give his work a special flavor that leads the meditating mind to give his intentions of choosing such range more than a passing thought. Walter Allen has ascertained Scott's unique taste when he states that "Scott grasped, as no other English novelist has done, the organic relationship between man and man, man and place, man and society, and man and his past of history". (120) Scott is one of those great "sages" in Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" He belongs to that city of the mind that the poet wants to sail to so as to be taught how to enjoy the beauty of art. He has created a simple world that opened a new vista for novelists as Allen has explained that writing of the past enabled Scott to deal" with life as a finished thing, a complete process, and this is unquestionable, for all that it was the source of much of his strength ...Scott is one of the great extraverts of literature, like Tolostoy a master of the normal. On his lower level, however Scott was triumphantly successful. At his greatest he was writing epic, and when one considers certain specific passages, those great scenes of action such as the account of the ambush in Rob Roy, the pitched battles of Old

Morality, or the storming of the tolbooth in the Heart of Midlothian, one sees immediately what novelists like Tolostoy and Stendhal owed to him. (120)

A question springs to the mind concerning Scott's preference of the historical rather than the contemporary scene and why he makes such choice that puts him misleadingly in a narrow alley as a historical novelist, Scot Locates his characters and scenes in distant times and places where they can work away from the consciousness of the reader's actualities of his daily life. Nothing can prevent Scott from exploring the idealized realm of sentiment. Thus, he throws over life a pleasing glamour in his themes that deal with love and heroic adventures. Reading Scott is like drinking from an everlasting spring that is provided by a rich well. His novels, poems were a source of inspiration for other novelists. Charlotte Bonte's heroine; Jane Eyre reads "Marmion", "While I was eagerly glancing at the bright pages of Marmion (for Marmion. It was) ... (354)

George Eliot took her readers into a journey to Scott's world of romance, heroes, heroines, battles and distant isles in *The Mill on The Floss*. It lasted from Maggie's childhood to womanhood. Maggie lived with stories in Scott's novels as no other heroine did. Tom's favourite heroes are Scott's heroes who did wonders during battles. Tom's interest in fighting rather than mathematics or Latin grammar is apparent in his adoration of the armourer hero of Scott's *Noval the Fair Maid of Perth*; Henry Smith, "he could tell such wonderful fighting stories about Hal of The Wynd, for example and other heroes who were especial favourites with Tom,(166). Another incident in chapter twenty seven of Scott's *noval Talisman* of cutting a cushion in an instant (166) was also Tom's favourite. The scene of a battle in 1314 between the Scots under Robert Bruce

And the English, in which the Scots were victorious, is admired by Tom, "But when Robert Bruce, on the black pony, rose in his stirrups, and lifting his good battle-axe, cracked at once the helmet and the skull of the too-hasty knight at Bannockburn " (166) that battle was described in Scott's poem " The Lord of the Isles ".

Eliot's heroine Maggie is always taken away from her frustrating reality into Scott's world of romance that put his dark heroines in a serious of bad luck that made their love affairs and unhappy. Maggie's walks with Philip enriched her empty life with dreams and hopes when she demanded from him to provide her with a story, "If you could give me some story, now, where the dark woman triumphs, it would restore the balance. I want to avenge Rebecca and Flora MacIvor , and Minna and all the rest of the dark unhappy ones".(332) All these heroines of Scott's novels (*Ivanhoe*, *Waverley* and *The Pirate*) were dark-haired like herself. Maggie also mentioned "The Pirate "she said, taking the book from Philip's hands. " O, I began that once, I read to where Minna is walking with Cleveland, and I could never get to read the rest. I went on with it in my own head, and I made several endings; but they were all unhappy. I could never make a happy ending out of the beginning. Poor Minna! I wonder what the real end .For a long while I couldn't get my mind away from the Shetland Isles. I used to feel the wind blowing on

me from the rough sea. (306) *The Pirate* is a romance by Scott, set in the Shetlands; at the end of the novel Minna and Cleveland are separated forever.

Scott's store of romance, tales, ballads set in history were part of his cultural well that penetrated deeply and successfully into the past of Scotland. He gave the romance of Scotland a new flavor that made it stand unique and presented it to the English, to the Scottish and to Europeans as well. Scott's life and writing reflect a mental growth away from children's interests in running and living in adventures, what he could not do in reality was done in imagination. He grew up and lived with Scottish rich folklore, books were his ardent love. They formed his life beginning with an avid reader to a prolific poet and novelist. Being a great novelist and a great man, Scott's way of living cannot be separated from his epic writing. He created a myth out of his life. It can be related to what Sampson called the extraordinary life he lived "as a result of a mischance of infancy that left him lone" (514). A life that was entwined with imagination, reading and living in Scotland's stories, ballads, folklore and drinking oral literature from the formative years he lived with his grandmother. His great country house and Abbotsford that was built in his beloved border country by the river Tweed is part of the myth he created of his life. The way he furnished it with "historical relics and provided with the latest technological improvements (such as lighting by gas", become a symbol of Scott's view of history, which was concerned with continuity between the past and the present."

(The Norton Anthology of English Literature 300).

The continuity between the past and the present lies in the consciousness of Scott and can be traced in his portrayal of a world of romance and fascination that holds within it modern themes and interests, racial prejudice, social justice, religious differences, rebellion, commerce and imperial economy, the rights of women. It is his true self and Scottish identity that give his novels their unique flavor. His interest of the old Border tales and ballads led him to devote much of his leisure to the exploration of the Border Country. His mind explored a store of legends, myths, stories, ballads and folklore that seemed infinite and of great influence that belonged to "a three-voiced country in which Gaelic, Scots and English were clearly seen as co-existing national languages" (Alan Riach 8)

Scott's upbringing, character and identity are deeply indicative of the power of a dominant culture that is characterized by diversity. Such diversity springs from a three voiced country that has a unique setting. A writer, poet, born storyteller like Scott cannot be separated from such diversity. His rich prolific works came as he was able to meet the requirement of his own imagination by using his mettle. He cannot be summarized to a category of the subliterate (5) by modernist taste as Petri Liukkonen indicates nor as "The four Ages of Poetry Scott ..." in a description detached from truth and justice and being involved in prejudice and monolithic thinking, "...the poet is wallowing in the rubbish of departed ignorance". Peacock cannot hide his racist bias in his criticism of Scott, "Verses from *The Lady of the Lake*, including 'Hail to the

chief who in triumph advances!’ “were put to music ... and became the march ... played to honour the president of the United States” (2)

Petri Liukkonen shows how a modernist classifies Scott and how Thomas love peacock classifies the historian and the philosopher and degrades not only Scott the poet but Byron, Wordsworth and Coleridge as well. A question has to be raised why did Scott publish his novels anonymously or under pseudonym ? Is it because of a feeling of a colonial oppression ? Is it because the novel is not dignified genre as poetry and Drama? Is it because a historical novel is an unknown genre ? Is it because he wants to examine the reaction of his readership ? It can be because of all these numerous reasons, he chooses to do so, “He consistently refused to acknowledge his authorship of the novels”.

In the twenty-first century, readership might, will and must try to escape the ills and of evils of the new technology in communications, that murdered the sense of place, time and identity into the distant past not through history but romance. The master of historical is Scott whose romance can create a feeling of living a second life with heroes, heroines and even minor characters like Wamba and Gurth in *Ivanhoe*. When love, joy and loyalty are displaced with hatred, bitterness and betrayal in the real world of the readers, they can escape to the loyal world of people like Wamba and Gurth. Such escape to such world will make life worth living. Wamba; the jester asks Cedric to forgive Gurth, “Who stole a week from your service to bestow on your son” (Scott 350). Scott lays the foundation of the romance in distanced eras to create his characters in a world of fantasy interwoven with adventures, coincidences and fabulous landscape that is clouded with optimism. His choices cannot be uprooted from the social, economic, political and religious belief, of Scott’s times. He starts a trend of romance that paves the way to Thomas Hardy’s naturalism and Dickens’s pathos. Scott’s novels can be a panacea for the twenty-first century’s social tumults and psychological troubles. Readers are not asked to make a passive escapades but reevaluate their social maladies with different visions after coming back from Scott’s world to their real one. Sometimes they return more bewildered, depressed and dulled. But looking from a distance at the two worlds, they can see an intangible link that would help understand life better.

Robert Louis Stevenson understands that link as he is an apt disciple who can see the mastery of Scott; his forefather and can be associated with Scott in one way or can be distanced in another to take his own route that has been diverged from the main one. Stevenson’s “aesthetics of passivity, chance and landscape” (Lumsden 72) cannot be served from Scott’s wide impact.

Scott’s persistence to elaborate Scottish identity in his stories, heroes, heroines, landscape is a consistent defense for the Scottish dream of independence that has been felt since 1703. This desire to have their own independence and be a free country again and not a part of the UK is an example of the “longing for freedom” from the side of the “Oppressed”. (1) That sense of

oppression cannot be ignored as readers see continually Scottish vision lying in Scott and Stevenson's writings. The sense of depression and bewilderment in Stevenson's writing cannot be separated from that longing. Scott's delineation of Scottish image in his novels cannot be seen as a clear cut one but as a part of the Scottish dream of being themselves. The sense of being different from the English who rule them is felt everywhere between the lines in Scott's novels and poems. It is traced in Stevenson's the disciple of Scott.

History and society are of great importance to Scott. He can see in them a vital relatedness as man can fulfill his desires and dreams through the society's "creative function" or fail to attain them through the society's "suppressing function". (11) Scott has known earlier than Fromm that "Man's nature, his passions, and anxieties are a cultural product; as a matter of fact, man himself is the most important creation and achievement of the continuous human effort, the record of which we call history". (11) Scott's trial to establish the Scottish identity in its ballads through his collection of the Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border Shows that "man is not only made by history – history is made by man". (11,12) Scott's novels are a proof of a great man's attempt to create an influence on the social process and history. His historical novels are a means to build a new understanding of history to be like a street light in a dark and strange city during a moonless night for the posterity.

Scott's novels are woven journeys by his vocation in the Scottish literary setting in Scottish history and Society. That past and society needed to be traversed by an artistic eye and depicted by a talented storyteller who shows the Highlands, Glasgow and other cities as a fascinating world that is not given its freedom to show its treasures. He opened a closed door for the English, European, American readership. His true contribution to the novel is making historical romances a means to combine the past and the present through his own bridge that can be seen by visionary eyes that try to pave a good trodden road for the posterity.

Thomas Carlyle "wondered" in his diary that was dated October 1831 "if there was something in Scott's deep recognition of the work of the past ..." (59) Catherine Jones tried to focus on Scott's early novels to the middle period of his writing career. Her aim was to analyze the ways of Scott in his "different genres of historical writing" she also pays attention to the minor historical genres, such as memoir. Such works shaped Scott's understanding and interpretation of the relation of the past to the present, the progress of society from primitivism to civilization" (59) Scott's mastery of storytelling makes his Waverley novels a collection of fabulous descriptions and amazing characters that take the reader to a world of magic as if those plots and characters are written to lead the reader to a road from present to past and vice versa to see and judge and come back with a certain vision to the present. His novels are not written to take the place of a history book but enlighten the readers with true vision about Scotland that has to be seen as a separate identity from England. His themes are not the themes of the English novel of his time till the end of the nineteenth century. His themes of the historical novels are very modern. They start from racial prejudice to commerce and imperial economy and the rights

of women. Scotland and its relation to imperial UK as an inferior part of it is an obvious example of racial prejudice. When Scots who participated in the first world war are called “women from hell”, this is nothing but racial prejudice. The rights of women can be traced clearly in Rob Roy and Ivanhoe. Rebecca not only stands for the rights of women only but religious differences. No Jewess in English literature till the time of Scott was given such elegance beauty, justice and sacrifice.

Scott’s novels feature a Highland setting beginning from his first novel, Waverley (1814) till the very end, Rob Roy is the third novel that has a Highland setting a theme. Waverley and Rob Roy are related to the history, society and culture of Scotland. Rob Roy has also colonized Glasgow. It used the literary imagination. Scott influenced novelists from Scotland to choose Glasgow as their setting. John Galt is from the west of Scotland and contemporary of Scott has chosen Glasgow as the city from which Nicol Jarvie in the Entail (1823) (vii) Scott’s influence during his life time till the end of the nineteenth century is a great impact on English. Scottish and European novelists, writers and readership. Charles Dickens in his literary tourism visited Scott’s Cultural and Scottish mansion in Abbotsform. Beethoven wrote about Scott even if as a critical writing. This means that his writings were grasped once they were published by a vast and great number of readers from different countries and cultures. Scott’s Highlands remain his “Highlands, the Highlands of Rob Roy and The Lady of the Lake” (vii) and the modern tourist still find them today as Scott has delineated them. The settings of Scott acquire fascination from distance. The combination of distance and fascination has given and defined Scott’s place in a modern tradition of representation of the the Gaelic Highlands Society and Culture (viii). Rob Roy marked the return not only to a Highland of the Lady of The Lake, and to the Jacobite historical theme of Waverley. It dealt with the rising of 1715 not that of the ‘45.

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Sir Walter Scott was from childhood fascinated by the history and culture of his native Scotland. In his early 30s he published *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, a three-volume collection of Scottish border ballads. Many of Scott's *Waverley Novels* are set in historical Scotland and insightfully portray the customs and attitudes of Scottish society. Learn more. What did Sir Walter Scott write? His deep knowledge of Scottish history and society and his acute observation of its mores and attitudes enabled him to play the part of a social historian in insightful depictions of the whole range of Scottish society, from beggars and rustics to the middle classes and the professions and on up to the landowning nobility. Sir Walter Scott was a Scottish historical poet, novelist and playwright. Check out this biography to know about his childhood, life, achievements, works & timeline. Furthermore, his deep knowledge of Scottish history and society and his acute observation enabled him to rightfully depict the same in his writings. Recommended Lists: Recommended Lists: Novelists. Scottish Men. University Of Edinburgh. Leo Poets. Scott was the ninth child of Anne Rutherford and Walter Scott, a solicitor and member of the private Scottish society known as the Writers of the Signet, so called for their entitlement to use the Scottish King's seal – known as the signet – when drawing up legal documents. Whilst the Scott's home near the University was a popular area for lecturers and professionals like Scott's father to live, in reality the small, overcrowded alleyway saw little natural light and clean air and suffered from a lack of proper sanitation. Already an avid reader of epic romances, poetry, history and travel books, Walter returned to Edinburgh to study classics at the University from November 1783.