

**SWD – A Chronic
Case in Muscovy?**
Reading Walter Scott
in other Unions

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It may be that it is the adventurous pitch of the narrative in the novels of Sir Walter Scott that results in their being viewed in many parts of the world nowadays as a literature suitable for children. Is it indeed only in Scotland that his work is taken seriously now by adults and believed by many to have had serious implications for and effects on society at large? Not quite, though the number of serious readers of Scott beyond these shores may be decreasing by the day. Evidence of how seriously Scott has been taken across the world at certain times are examined here, and the range from Twain's accusation of a pathological payload in his work, to a suggestion of therapeutic social effect for post-Soviet Russia certainly seems to indicate there has been no slacking in cosmopolitan hermeneutics when it comes to Scott appreciation. A point of special interest for Scottish readers at this historical moment however, (bearing in mind Scott's strong support for the Union and for Scotland's special place in that Union) may be that in both the cases examined here – North America/USA and Russia/USSR – his critical importance comes at point of crisis for those political Unions.

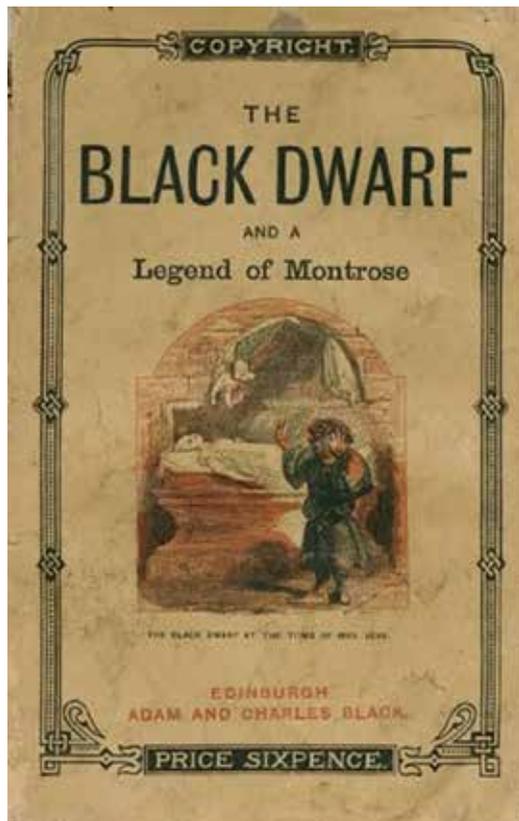
The charges and accusations brought down on Walter Scott's head by Mark Twain have an overwrought air, can seem, in their obsessively narrow focus, to consist somewhat in hyperbole of partisanship and professional jealousy. 'The Sir Walter disease' (SWD), Twain alleges, with its 'pernicious... silliness' its 'inflated speech and jejeune romanticism of an absurd past' not only undermined the good work of Cervantes in clearing out the muddle headed admiration of sham medievalism, but 're-enslaved' minds set free by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, such that Scott did 'more real and lasting harm than any other individual that ever wrote' and ultimately, through his effect on the Southern character, was himself the cause of the American Civil War. The attack is nothing if not sustained, though Twain does admit that this last clause is something of a 'wild proposition'. Nonetheless, he maintains it is a 'plausible' one.

As we watch the recent eruptions of violence at Charlottesville, where protests about the ongoing legacy of slavery in South face aggressive and murderous counter-demonstrations of white supremacists, that plausibility palpably gathers strength. How are we to account for an apparent and enduring obsession in many white Southerners with rank and caste, with separations and segregations of races, with their turning of their backs on progress? Twain, for one, is in no doubt of the power of literature in the nineteenth century, and conceives of the great harm that can be done to a society by the influence of the rhetorical world of just one novel – nominating in this case *Ivanhoe*. His professional literary response was, of course, to publish in 1889 his anti-Scott romance of the Connecticut Yankee mechanic who debunks the medieval magic of Arthurian legend.



Twain wrote at a time when the influence of Scott appeared to him to be already on the wane in America. The critique appears in *Life on the Mississippi* which was published in 1883. In it Twain refers to a period 'forty or fifty years ago' when writing was filled with 'romanticism, sentimentality – all imitated from Sir Walter, and sufficiently badly done too' and that these confused and absurd habits of thought affected the character of the southerner and led to the civil war in the 1860s. At the end of the passage Twain looks forward to the period when 'Sir Walter's time is out.'

Yet, in the final analysis, how mature and considered is a critical stance which sees Scott's writing as having a purely and uniquely pejorative effect on the world? Can we seriously assert that the only knock-on from Scott's oeuvre was to retard progress, to mislead and muddle the easily-influenced into dangerous views of history and social formations? Or is that an effect that was particular to readers in the American South who had been rendered by their own historical situation peculiarly susceptible to taking reactionary instruction from Scott's medieval romances?



Intelligence travels to us from through history and across the globe which may indeed complicate our reading of that critical stance. If in the American 1880s Twain could assert that we were on the brink of the period where Scott's time would be out, what are we to make of a certain popularity of the 'Scottish wizard' in Russia a century later? The Soviet magazine *Ogonek*, which had readership of 1.5 million, polled its public in 1987 as to what they would most like to read in the coming year. As a result the magazine set out to publish a fifteen-volume complete works of Sir Walter Scott for 1988.



Scott's work had been greatly popular in nineteenth century Russia just as it had been in America at that time. Perhaps its influence on Russian character was of a different and more varied quality from the type that Twain claimed to have worked on the readers in the American south? Writers as prominent in Russia as Twain in his home country were influenced by Scott's works and commented on them in various different modes. Pushkin's historical novel *The Captain's Daughter* (1836) shows great influence and a particular narrative similarity to *Rob Roy* and was written after Pushkin remarked to a friend 'once I've got my act together I will take that Walter Scott to task'. Gogol's *Taras Bulba* (1835) may have been a totally ahistorical and partisan novel with none of the moderate detachment for which Scott was renowned in some parts (though not, evidently by Twain), but nonetheless its enthusiastic author once declared that Scott was a 'genius'. Dostoevsky was a keen reader of Scott as a young man and he recommended in later life that all young people should read him; and although Tolstoy denied that Scott was a great figure of world literature, it seems unlikely that Tolstoy's great epic historical novel *War and Peace* (1869) would have ever seen the light of day if Scott had not blazed an original trail. For not only was Tolstoy's great epic set with the formal conceit of composition sixty years from the date of the actual story (as with the famously subtitled dating of Scott's *Waverley*), but its heroes are peripheral figures who sustain the narrative unities of time, place and historical action just in the manner of the great literary innovation of Scott's novels whereby the lives of ordinary folk serve to frame and focus on important historical events.

If the critical appreciation of Scott by Russian authors appears thus to take in a broader range of both positive and negative aspects than Twain's hard-nosed assessment of him in America, should we take the evident popularity of Scott's work as late as the *Ogonek* 1980s survey as testimony that the Slavs also suffered more chronically from their own version of SWD? The truth is that Scott's reputation had apparently hit the buffers in the east just around the same time as it did in Twain's west – around the beginning of the twentieth century – although that was arguably for an entirely different set of reasons caused by very different cultural circumstances. Scott's work may have simply outlived its fashionable status in the USA and gradually fallen (as predicted by Twain) into desuetude as a popular reading choice or a plausible literary style, but in the USSR it appears at first to have been rather swept from the public awareness by the policy of the centralising authorities. For while the communists were keen on promoting and the teaching of the work of the four Russian writers named above, all of whom either claimed or demonstrated an influence of Scott on their writing, the Bolshevik state seemed to disapprove of Scott's own work and no single edition was published for the first ten years after the Revolution. On the one hand, this might seem strange given these approved writers apparently owed so much to Scott's example, but on the other we could hardly be surprised that the Bolsheviks in the full flush of the post-revolutionary twenties found little interest in the profile of the notoriously bourgeois Tory author.

Marxist theory rejected what it saw as the bourgeois notion of the importance of the individual as an agent in history, and conceived instead of a 'scientific' explanation of history through the methodology of dialectical materialism. If that dogmatic approach were strictly the reason for rejecting the work of Scott however, we could wonder why the equally bourgeois novels of the four Russian writers above were not also put away by the communists now in charge? What about the highly individualistic narrators in Dostoevsky's novels and those peripheral individuals close to the great events we see in Tolstoy's masterwork? The difference surely lies in the serious qualities developed in the delineation and deployment of those individual characters and in what way they could offer up material for a politicised analysis of any perceived scope for the active individual in history. That is to say that Dostoevsky and Tolstoy – among others – may have learned from Scott's work how to pose the peripheral individual in the moment of history, but the character of their individual is often highly developed into a much more complex social and psychological being. While Scott's principal characters operating in the context of historical events of great importance are generally of a simple hearted, neutral, naïve and good-willed type – such as Jeannie Deans in *The Heart of Midlothian*, Edward Waverley in the eponymous novel, and Henry Morton in *Old Mortality* – we see in *War and Peace* the profound and philosophical soul searching of Pierre Bezukhov; the atrocities committed in execution of the exhaustive ethical explorations of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*; and the existential provocations of the anonymous narrator of *Notes from the Underground*.

Scott's work was, however, rehabilitated in communist thought when Hungarian critic and philosopher Gyorgy Lukacs published in Russian in 1937 his assessment of the new historical consciousness Scott was able to develop in his novels. Lukacs was indeed the first to point to the debt that Tolstoy owed to Scott's narrative style. Yet what is arguably much more interesting than the critical and theoretical rehabilitation of Scott's work for the regime, is the popular rediscovery of the novels in later twentieth century Russia –which may or may not have been enabled by that relaxing of the authorities' attitude. The first spike in interest came with the republication of 300 000 copies of a twenty volume edition of Scott's complete works in the early sixties (subscribers had to queue overnight to get their copy); we have already mentioned the *Ogonek* case in the late eighties above, and several other significant Scottian phenomena followed close behind that, such as the publishing of a Russian dual *Fair Maid of Perth* and *Black Dwarf* edition in 1992 which sold over 25 000 copies. What is most immediately noticeable is the historical nature of the specific era in which this surge in Russian popular interest takes place. What we appear to see is that the deepest, darkest time of Stalinism is also the dark era for Scott in Soviet Russia. In the early sixties the complete edition is published just as Kruschchov comes to power with his thaw of the Stalinist tyrannical grip on the country. The politics of the later cited era of Scott's popularity follow an even clearer example when Gorbachov becomes General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1985 with his policy 'restructuring' (perestroika) as a loosening of the party's grip on society, and his staying in that position until 1991 with the eventual collapse of the regime of the Soviet Union.



Can a case thus be made for a relationship between the breaking up of centralised Soviet power and a subsequent surge in popular Russian interest in the novels of Sir Walter Scott? And if so, on what basis? What might the Russian reader, liberated from the ruthless centralisation and de-personalisation of Soviet communist power, be looking for in the works of Scott? It suited Twain's argument to imply, focussing largely on *Ivanhoe*, that Scott's work was simply full of 'medievalism'. But of course this is not the case. If we were to take the three Scott novels mentioned above, then we find that in fact they deal with themes that were for Scott of relatively recent history, and of history which had, furthermore, a lingering effect and relevance in his day (and arguably in our day too...). *Heart of Midlothian* (1818) deals with religious and political aspects of Scottish life that took place eighty years before it was written, *Waverley* (1814) engages with the Jacobite Rising in Scotland which took place in 1745, and *Old Mortality* (1816) engages with the theme of religious wars in Scotland in the 1680s. What might be of interest for the Russian reader in the periods set out above (1960s and 1980/90s) is that not only do these novels themselves deal with eras of social, political and religious change and turmoil, but where those principal characters may be merely ordinary and lack the spiritual and intellectual interest of those of, say, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, their engagement in the 'situation' is surely no less revealing. Is it the case that the relief of a set of alternative political possibilities and world views could be found in Scott's writings for a Soviet citizenry who had been subjected to decades of a rigid and dogmatic centrally controlled political, social and economic orthodoxy? Certainly in the novels cited here, dealing with relatively recent history,

Scott's protagonists are always situated in some awkward place between at least two very hostile parties. Edward Waverley is an Englishman who attaches himself to the Scots Jacobite army who march to overthrow the Hanoverian government in London, and Henry Morton is a Covenanter, whose life is saved by the Royalist arch-enemy, Claverhouse, when he is mortally threatened by some extreme elements on his own side, are just two examples of this type of pluralist situation. As such Scott's novels are never merely partisan in the retailing of these great events; the character of the hero, stuck between two or more sides, is always one of tolerance and moderation, and the political sentiments that win out are never radical or fanatical. Indeed this liminal notion of the borderline between two opposing parties as a heterotopic space of coexisting differences is a theme which Scott develops into an even deeper spatio-philosophical trope in the novels *The Black Dwarf* (1816) and *Redgauntlet* (1824) – both set in his own native Scottish Borders region.



The point here, *pace* Twain, is that this moderate spirit that one finds in Scott's novels is surely an ample evidence of how 'Enlightenment' values did in fact work in him. Scott was raised in late eighteenth century Edinburgh and attended school and University there. As Ian Duncan points out he may have been a Tory in politics but he 'was educated in the moderate Whig tradition of the late Enlightenment'. Scott had been taught at University by the philosopher Dugald Stewart, the great Whig intellectual and expounder of the Scottish Common sense school of philosophy. Stewart and Scott impressed one another as teacher and student respectively and they remained good friends until their later years ('Stewart was most impressive and eloquent' wrote Scott in his Journal on hearing of his friend's death in 1828). Of particular importance in the teaching connection with Scott is Dugald Stewart's coining of the term 'conjectural history' which referred to a methodological approach found in the historiography of Adam Smith, Hume, Fergusson and other writers and thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment. Conjectural history is a deductive method of reconstructing historical development through a rational extrapolation from human nature. Basically gaps in the historical record are made up through speculation based on presumed knowledge of the developmental stage of a given society, combined with an understanding of the supposedly timeless universal qualities of human nature. Under such a definition we can see how conjectural history has a close relationship to Scott's method in the historical novel as described above, where, for example, the events in medieval England, or Covenanting or Jacobite Scotland, are recounted through the vagaries of the passions and emotions of individual characters caught up in the structures and events of those particular historical periods. Scott's understandings and abilities in composition of those timeless qualities of his human characters were drawn from his extensive researches into folk culture; the songs, poetry and ballads of the people of the country, and this is what makes them so different from the urbane, intellectual culture seen in the protagonists of both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy.

So which is it to be, and must we choose between alternative critical views of Scott and his work? Was he a medieval mythomaniac, a fantasist obsessed with fairy stories whose obsessive and essentialist elaborations of dated social formations led to dangerous and vicious opinionising, and thus was ultimately to blame for the intellectual and social degeneration of society? Or an enlightened and patient teaser-out of the scope and consequences for individual action and the individual conscience by ordinary folk in the great sweep of historical events, who could thus provide lessons for liberty and a freedom from the pernicious blight of fanaticism? Both and neither, seems the only possible answer. If Twain's reading is an accurate one, it is also a reductive one, or rather it speaks of the danger inherent in a certain type of literature of being read reductively by a people who have edged themselves into a very difficult and potentially fanatical corner. The Russian case here can only be hypothetical, it is not clear without much more research that even if the hypothesis of a socially and politically therapeutic reading of Scott were an aim, however blind, of that surge in readers, then what could have been the result, if any? And how would that result have paid into the society we see now under Putin? It is testimony indeed to the strength of Scott's humane vision of the movement of history and society that we can take a page out of some of his best books and negotiate a way to maintain the co-existence in one world of two so evidently contrary critical positions without feeling the necessity to come down definitely, desperately or hopefully on one side or the other.