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# An evaluation of the twentieth century British and American criticism of Sir Walter Scott's major narrative poems

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# AN EVALUATION OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY BRITISH AND AMERICAN CRITICISM OF SIR WALTER SCOTT'S MAJOR NARRATIVE POEMS

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# CHAPTER I

## THE PROBLEM AND DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

The student of literature must be aware of the changing reputations of literary figures. The popularity of many is ephemeral, while others attain after death a ranking undreamed of by their contemporaries. The comparative merit of some remains a matter of controversy. Such a figure is that of Sir Walter Scott. Scott himself once said that his literary position depended upon the caprice of the public more than upon their critical judgment. The modesty of Scott's self-evaluation led the writer to an interest in the current reputation of Scott as a poet. Upon investigation, it was discovered that no summary of critical opinion, such as that of James Hillhouse in The Waverley Novels and Their Critics, was available. It was the writer's purpose, therefore, to attempt a study of Scott's poetry similar to the study Mr. Hillhouse has made of the novels, though one much smaller in scope.

### I. THE PROBLEM

Statement of the problem. It was the purpose of this study (1) to evaluate the twentieth century British and American criticism of Sir Walter Scott's major narrative poems; (2) to note any significant changes in attitude by the critics toward his narrative poetry during the present century.

Importance of the study. Sir Walter Scott's poems were received with enthusiasm at the time of their publication. It is well known that the sales of the poems were tremendous and that the popularity of the poems continued for some time, though overshadowed to some extent by the Waverley novels. However, since the time of Scott himself, criticism of his narrative poems has been profuse and varied. Undoubtedly, the amount of criticism produced has lessened through the years; but during the twentieth century there has been much written about his merits and defects as a poet. This is, in itself, proof that the reputation of Sir Walter Scott as a narrative poet is not dead; but to what extent is it alive? At the opening of the century, one of the critics states merely that Scott is chronologically important in the history of literature; another writes that Scott cannot be counted among the best poets of the world. Almost a generation later, one critic speaks of him as "a writer in the first rank of genius."[1] Another asks, "Has any poetry since Shakespeare, allowing for all the difference in depth and insight and wealth of expression and rhythm, given so much the impression of a bubbling spring of original, creative power?"[2] Such disparate views would

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[1] W. Macneile Dixon, An Apology for the Arts (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1944), p. 160.

[2] Herbert J. C. Grierson, Sir Walter Scott, Bart. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), p. 102.

indicate that the argument concerning Scott's poetic merit is still being waged and that there is need for an evaluation of recent criticism to determine contemporary opinion. As John Haynes Holmes states:

> The question of the ranking of Sir Walter Scott as a poet has always been an occasion of dispute. Agreement with Matthew Arnold, who includes his name on 'the roll of our chief poetical names, besides Shakespeare and Milton, from the age of Elizabeth downwards, and going through it' . . . would certainly be general. But opinions would differ to-day, as they have differed ever since Scott's own day, as to his precise place in this list of distinguished names.[3]

Mr. Holmes contends that Scott's poetry is neglected today and that it should be re-evaluated.

## II. DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

British and American criticism. Material used in this study was limited to British and American opinion as expressed in British and American publications.

Major narrative poems. It would be impossible in a study of this kind to consider Scott's poetry in its entirety. As a means of narrowing the topic, the major narrative poems were chosen as the basis of study. These are The Lay of the Last Minstrel, Marmion, and The Lady of the Lake. However, limitation of the topic was not the only reason for such choice. It was felt further that these three poems in

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[3] John Haynes Holmes, The Heart of Scott's Poetry. (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), p. ix.

themselves represent the best of Scott's narrative poetry. This claim is supported by such persons as Stopford A. Brooke and George Woodberry. The latter states: ". . . on these three tales in verse, together with a score of lyrics, his permanent vogue as what he might have called a 'rhymer' rests."[4]

## III. ORGANIZATION OF REMAINDER OF THESIS

This study has been organized on a chronological basis under three major headings: (1) criticism from 1900 to 1916; (2) criticism from 1917 to 1932; and (3) criticism from 1933 to 1949. The divisions were chosen arbitrarily. The only significant date noted was that of 1932, the centenary celebration of Sir Walter Scott, in which a greater proportion of critical material appeared. In each of these periods, the material was treated under the following headings: (1) style; (2) epic quality; (3) technique; (4) intellectual depth; (5) lyric passages; and (6) general evaluation.

## IV. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To the knowledge of the writer, no work has appeared to date that deals with the criticism of Sir Walter Scott's narrative poetry over any length of time. As has already

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[4] George Edward Woodberry, Great Writers (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1912), pp. 49-50.

been noted, James Hillhouse studied the criticism of the Waverley novels, but his analysis includes only slight references to the poems. Criticism of the poetry is confined to periodical and newspaper articles, biographical material, and general literary works. Each of these represents, of course, the critical opinion of the writer alone. The biographies of Scott yield varying amounts of critical opinion. William Henry Hudson's Life of Scott and John Buchan's Sir Walter Scott contain detailed criticism, while the biographies of Scott by Andrew Lang and Sir Herbert J. C. Grierson offer very little. Scholarly works such as W. J. Courthope's History of English Poetry and Oliver Elton's Survey of English Literature include criticism of the poetry as do such publications as W. J. Dawson's Makers of Poetry and Stopford A. Brooke's Studies in Poetry. Probably the most comprehensive study of Scott's poetry is that of John Haynes Holmes in The Heart of Scott's Poetry, in which he considers the merits and defects usually attributed to the poetry. However, Dr. Holmes in no way sets up his work as representative of anything but his own evaluation.

## CHAPTER II

## CRITICISM OF SCOTT'S NARRATIVE POETRY 1900-1916

The criticism from 1900 to 1916 of Scott's major narrative poems can be grouped under the following classifications: (1) style; (2) epic quality; (3) technique; (4) the intellectual depth; (5) lyric passages; and (6) general evaluation. In each of these categories it has been the purpose of the writer to examine the criticism and to compare the attitudes of the critics.

### I. STYLE

The style of Sir Walter Scott has no unique features other than what can be best termed descriptive style and narrative style. The unanimity of the critics in this period is particularly apparent in their analysis of Scott's descriptive style. Admiration for this facility of Scott in portraying the landscape, the manners of the medieval period, and the spirits that stirred the Highland warriors is virtually universal. The highest tribute to Scott's descriptive power is that given by Dr. William Henry Hudson,[1] Professor of English at Stanford University, who states that there has never been any serious question about this point, even among

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[1] William Henry Hudson, Sir Walter Scott (London: Sands and Company, 1901), pp. 244-247.

critics who see no other poetic excellence in Scott's poetry. The Melrose scene, the description of Loch Katrine in The Lady of the Lake, and that of Edinburgh in Marmion are cited by Professor Hudson as examples of the best of Scott's work. An equally striking defense of Scott's descriptive style is made by A. H. Miles, who states that Scott's powers of description have been "rarely equalled and never surpassed."[2] Although his opinion does not speak well for the poem as a whole, to the British scholar, W. J. Courthope,[3] the sole poetic merit of the Lay of the Last Minstrel is found in its descriptions.

However, the descriptions are not wholly free from criticism. The detail with which Scott sometimes overburdened his descriptive passages led Professor Hudson to state:

> The most obvious faults of Scott's descriptions . . . are due to his antiquarian zeal and instinct of historic minutiae of architecture, local allusion, and dress, that what he intends for a picture becomes a mere inventory or catalogue. But it is very rarely that such defects are to be noted in his scenes of movement and action, in which Scott is almost always at his best.[4]

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[2] A. H. Miles, editor, The Poets and Poetry of the Nineteenth Century (London: George Routledge and Sons, Ltd., 1905), I, 357-358.

[3] W. J. Courthope, A History of English Poetry (London: Macmillan and Company, Ltd., 1910), VI, 407.

[4] Hudson, op. cit., p. 248.

Henry Beers[5] expresses the opinion that Scott's pictures are colored by sentiment, but he considers this a characteristic of the genre rather than an arraignment of the poet. Scott's descriptions are vivid, picturesque, and exciting to the imagination, writes Mr. Beers, but particularly so when the verses are touched with the passion of patriotism. Thomas Parrott sees in Scott's descriptions an excellent portrayal of the spirit of medievalism. He states:

> . . . with all our increase of knowledge and painstaking accuracy of expression it is doubtful whether any poet since Scott's day has ever penned a message so instinct with medievalism as the well-known description of Branksome at the opening of the Lay or the scarcely less famous Mass in Melrose Abbey at its close. Here as nowhere else in modern English literature the romantic past is seized and realized in its most dominating features, warfare and religious devotion.[6]

The most serious defect in Scott's descriptions is the stereotyped language which he employs frequently. Arthur Symons, the most derogatory critic of this period, admits that Scott's feeling for nature was deep and genuine but contends that he could not express this depth and sincerity in poetic form. Mr. Symons calls the description of Loch Katrine in Lady of the Lake pretty and accurate, but he feels that Scott's poetic vocabulary is trite and conventional.

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[5] Henry A. Beers, A History of English Romanticism in the Nineteenth Century (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1901), p. 2.

[6] Thomas Marc Parrott, Studies of a Booklover (New York: James Pott and Company, 1904), p. 244.

> Scott puts down in words exactly what the average person feels. Now it is the poet's business to interpret, illuminate, or at the least to evoke in a more exquisite form, all that the ordinary person is capable of feeling vaguely, by way of enjoyment. Until the poet has transformed poetry into ecstasy there can be no poetry. Scott's genuine love of nature, so profound in feeling . . . was never able to translate itself into poetry.[7]

In spite of Professor Hudson's glowing praise of Sir Walter Scott's descriptive power, he, too, criticizes the banality of his language. He attributes this to Scott's facility and speed in composition. W. J. Dawson[8] agrees that Sir Walter Scott's imagery is largely unoriginal but finds compensation for that fact in the spontaneity, simplicity, and vivid directness of phrase which characterizes Scott's descriptions.

Agreement is found, also, in the criticism of Scott's narrative style. Professor Hudson believes Scott will stand securely as a narrative and descriptive poet, regardless of various changes in literary fashion, while W. P. Ker[9] describes his story-telling ability as exceptional. All agree that Sir Walter knew how to tell a story. He depicted a

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[7] Arthur Symons, "Was Sir Walter Scott a Poet?" The Atlantic Monthly, XCIV (November, 1904), 668.

[8] W. J. Dawson, The Makers of English Poetry (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1906), p. 73.

[9] W. P. Ker, Chambers' Cyclopaedia of English Literature (London and Edinburgh: W. and R. Chambers, Limited, 1903), III, 33.

world of action and through a swiftly flowing narrative he made his created world a real one. Again, Mr. Symons provides the only serious dissent. As measured by Mr. Symons' standard, Scott's verse tales are not poems. First, as already stated, he believes Scott lacked discrimination in his choice of language. Second, he maintains that merit in narration and that alone means very little in the final judgment of poetry. He acknowledges that Scott attained success in sustained narration, but he states succinctly: ". . . skill in story telling never made any man a poet. . ."[10] Mr. Goldwin Smith, in an answering article, dismisses Mr. Symons' analysis and states that Scott must be judged by what he did, not by what he did not do. He remarks: "Scott, like Homer, Virgil, Tasso, and Milton, is a narrative poet and must be judged by the interest of his story and by his poetic skill in telling it."[11]

The battle scenes created by Scott are a natural adjunct to a discussion of Scott's narrative and descriptive power. The critics are almost wholly in agreement that these battle scenes, and particularly the Battle of Flodden in Marmion, represent the finest of Scott's powers. A story cited frequently in the criticism of this period is that of Sir Adam Fergusson, who read the Battle of Flodden aloud to his

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[10] Symons, op. cit., p. 666.

[11] Goldwin Smith, "Scott's Poetry Again," The Atlantic Monthly, XCV (March, 1905), 300.

soldiers while they were exposed to the fire of the French. The men were so stirred by the account that, in spite of their hazardous situation, they broke into cheers. Many critics consider this incident proof of Scott's worth and power. Mr. Symons, however, flatly denies this assumption; the fact that the soldiers were inspired by the poetry does not make it good poetry.

## II. EPIC QUALITY

The importance of the favorable estimate of Scott's battle scenes lies in the resulting attempts to claim that Scott is an epic poet, a second Homer. The epic quality is denied emphatically by Andrew Lang.[12] It is partially admitted by Henry Beers, who qualifies his claim by stating that Scott's poems are very different from and inferior to Homer's epic, but, notwithstanding, they are epics. He cites as proof the fight in the Trossachs in Lady of the Lake; Flodden Field, the trial of Constance, and Marmion's defiance to Douglas in Marmion; William of Deloraine's ride to Melrose in Lay of the Last Minstrel. Others find the epic quality in varying forms and degree. Mr. Parrott speaks thus of the Battle of Flodden:

> Words are too weak to praise the battlepiece with which the poem ends. It stands, along with the battles of the Iliad and the slaughter of the Nibeluns in Atli's Hall, as one of the three great

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[12] Andrew Lang, Sir Walter Scott (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), p. 42.

> poetic expressions of the fighting spirit in man, ancient, medieval, and modern.[13]

Professor Hudson calls Scott "the one latter-day inheritor of Homer's martial lyre."[14] George Woodberry takes somewhat the same line:

> He is the most martial of English poets; excepting a half-dozen lyrics and ballads by Campbell, and one or two others, there is nothing in our poetry to rival him in this respect. This is the Homeric quality that some find in his verse, and there is truth in the remark.[15]

Agreement with this view is expressed by Thomas Seccombe, who wrote in the Times Literary Supplement on July 9, 1914:

> The merit of his poetry as a whole has no doubt been questioned by latter-day critics. Yet as a martial poet he still has no complete rival. There is Homeric quality and life in his lays--the lays of a self-taught poet in whom there is more power than craft, more spontaneity than art, more life than skill.[16]

Goldwin Smith concludes that Homer and Scott are akin to each other in the writing of martial and chivalric poetry, while Laurie Magnus[17] calls Scott's poems and novels Homeric in their range and power. An article in the Living Age states: "Scott cannot give us the great figures of the

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[13] Parrott, op. cit., p. 256.

[14] Hudson, op. cit., p. 250.

[15] Woodberry, op. cit., p. 51.

[16] Scott Centenary Articles (London: Oxford University Press, Humphrey Milford, 1932), p. 13.

[17] Laurie Magnus, English Literature in the Nineteenth Century (London: Andrew Melrose, 1909), p. 108.

'Iliad,' cannot rise to its height and greatness of action and character, but he can make us live its joy of battle over again and not ignobly."[18]

## III. TECHNIQUE

Although the critics recognize a high degree of superiority in Scott's general narrative and descriptive power, they do not do so in their analysis of specific aspects of his technique. Lack of unity in the structure of the poems is a defect which weakens the forcefulness of the poems as a whole. The critics agree on this point, but they do not agree on the poem in which this is best exemplified. Mr. Hudson points out that the poems seem to be made up of a series of episodes held together by a very thin thread of narrative.

> . . . while no poet has ever managed certain kinds of isolated incidents with finer effect, he rarely succeeds in bringing his materials together in a compact and well-balanced whole. The Lady of the Lake, indeed, is the only one of his verse-romances which, structurally, is to be pronounced at all satisfactory. . . .[19]

The structure of Marmion, he continues, is so confusing that on first perusal it is difficult to follow the story.

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[18] "Scott's Poetry," The Living Age, CCLXIII (October 16, 1909), 162.

[19] Hudson, op. cit., p. 243.

However, Mr. Parrott finds in Marmion Scott's first true plot rather than the mere succession of incidents so characteristic of the Lay and Lady of the Lake. Equally varied opinions are found among the critics already mentioned. The plot of the Lay of the Last Minstrel receives the greatest amount of criticism, chiefly because of the pranks of the Goblin Page. The actions of the Page, remarks Goldwin Smith, are extraneous to the story.

> The plot, though not without interest, is ill constructed; the natural and supernatural parts are not interwoven with each other. The mysterious powers of the lady of Branksome, the mighty book of Michael Scott . . . and the Elfin Page have hardly anything to do with the story.[20]

Mr. Courthope echoes this same criticism. Mr. Miles acknowledges that the reader may not understand exactly what the Goblin Page did or did not do, but he doubts if anyone really cares if the answer could be given. He maintains that the Page's pranks are very important in the plot since the incidents of the story turn on him. The position of Mr. Miles is reinforced by the similar opinion of Professor T. F. Henderson in the Cambridge History of English Literature[21] and by William Minto[22] in the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

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[20] Smith, op. cit., 302.

[21] T. F. Henderson, Cambridge History of English Literature (Cambridge: University Press, 1916), XII, 10.

[22] William Minto, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11th edition, XXIV, 471-472.

Only a small amount of criticism of Scott's character portrayal is found in this period. Emphasis is placed on the power of Scott to make his characters vivid and alive. Stopford A. Brooke states:

> Sir William of Deloraine, Roderick Dhu, the Lord of Harden, Sir David Lyndsay, Marmion, the Douglas in Marmion, the Douglas in The Lady of the Lake, James IV, stand out so clear that we should know them if we met them now on a Border moor. Nor is his outline less luminous when he treats of the Border farmer, of the small chieftain, of the archer, and the Highland vassal.[23]

Mr. Parrott is not as inclusive as Mr. Brooke and mentions only the reality of the representatives of the English yeomanry in the Lay. Mr. Brooke, it should be added, considers Marmion an ignoble character and a great mistake in the poem. This view is held also by Mr. Courthope, who declares that Marmion is not a "worthy speciman of the feudal age."[24] Oliver Elton[25] describes him as a stock villain and labels the poem faulty in conduct because of him. To Mr. Henderson, the character of Marmion is the main blot of the poem.

The critics of this period recognize that Scott's choice of metre led him to a conventional pattern which was

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[23] Stopford A. Brooke, Studies in Poetry (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1907), pp. 107-108.

[24] Courthope, op. cit., p. 409.

[25] Oliver Elton, A Survey of English Literature, 1780-1830 (London: Edward Arnold, 1912), I, 314.

adopted by a host of imitators and used to a point of satiety. T. S. Omond, however, finds much to commend in Scott's technical pattern.

> Taking a hint from Coleridge, which in the nature of things could have been only a hint, he invented the admirable adaptation which forms the metre of his chief poems. . . . This elastic metre was admirably adapted to his free, spirited, unconventional narration. As a vehicle of narrative, indeed, it is unsurpassable in English. In this respect, though in no other, it may even be compared to the Greek hexameter. . . . The perfection of this vehicle . . . forms Scott's first claim to eminence.[26]

The metre in the Lay and Marmion, according to Mr. Elton, is a versatile, appropriate one, but it does not prove monotonous. Mr. Woodberry calls Scott's metre a "careless cross-country gallop"[27] but, like Mr. Elton, stresses the appropriateness of this metre to the unevenness and power of the tales as a whole. This appropriateness is emphasized also by Mr. Seccombe, who, perhaps through coincidence, mentions the "cross-country gallop" of the metre, the description used by Mr. Woodberry. The only opinion that contrasts sharply with these is that of George Saintsbury, whose statement represents also a considerable contrast to the criticism of Arthur Symons. Mr. Saintsbury calls Scott a master of prosody and states:

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[26] T. S. Omond, The Romantic Triumph (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), p. 9.

[27] Woodberry, op. cit., p. 50.

> . . . it is desirable to repeat a note of warning which has to be sounded whenever Scott is mentioned. He did 'write with ease,' but to think that because he did so, he wrote without art, is to find yourself between the parapets of the Pons Asinorum, if not plunging down the hell within the gates of the Paradise of Fools.[28]

## IV. INTELLECTUAL DEPTH

The facility of the metre, as well as the swiftly moving narrative and picturesque descriptions, led the critics to depreciate the poetry because there is no depth of thought in it. The stories are well told, it is granted; but they have no great significance. The characters are vividly drawn, but their inner emotions are not revealed. The landscape is prettily painted, but it is the external side alone of nature that is reflected. Although many of the critics of the early 1900's repeat this criticism, they defend Scott in numerous ways. Mr. Omond believes readers may turn to Scott when they are weary of the psychological analysis and the "aimless melancholy and perpetual unrest of modern poetry."[29] Mr. Brooke shares this view. Mr. Parrott remarks that one cannot feel for Wordsworth, Byron, or Shelley the warm affection one feels for Scott. The very simplicity of Scott's verse seems to appeal to these critics. This is best exemplified in a statement in the periodical, the Living Age.

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[28] George Saintsbury, A History of English Prosody (London: Macmillan and Company, Limited, 1910), III, 80.

[29] Omond, op. cit., p. 10.

> He was the very voice of what was greatest in the great aristocracy which carried England through the long years of war that filled his middle life. . . . And he put it into language which both the intellectual . . . and the unintellectual . . . could understand. That was his great service.[30]

This article does not deny that the simplicity of the thought and language is a weakness of the poetry, but it contends that much also is gained by this simplicity. This same attitude is expressed by Sir Gilbert Parker, who states: ". . . he did not write down to lower intellects. That is one vital reason in every land under the British flag Scott, with Burns, is so pervasive an influence."[31] Mr. Woodberry writes:

> It is said that he 'pleases boys'; that is not against him. The obviousness of his meaning, the fact that his ideas, images and language are within easy reach of the average mind, the presence of much ordinariness in the substance, as they partly account for his ready popularity and its wide spread, also denote his permanent appeal; for with all this, which is called his commonness, there goes that most uncommon power to stir the blood, to send the soul out of doors, to revivify lost romantic modes of life in all their picturesque colour, their daring spirit, their emotional reality. He makes his reader live the life, and it is not only the life of a past age but it is one of the great permanent types of life.[32]

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[30] The Living Age, op. cit., p. 162.

[31] Sir Gilbert Parker, "The Genius of Scott," Harper's Weekly, LIV (March 5, 1910), 15.

[32] Woodberry, op. cit., pp. 51-52.

Professor Hudson, on the other hand, does not defend him; after recognition of the pleasantness of his verse, he points out that the shallowness of Scott's poetry is the reason he cannot be placed among the really great poets of the world.

## V. LYRIC PASSAGES

It is interesting to note that specific passages of Scott's narrative poems and lyrics appearing in the novels receive as much commendation as do the narrative poems themselves. This is clearly seen in Mr. Omond's statement:

> . . . it is often forgotten that Scott remained a poet to the end. The song, and ballads, and scraps of motto and other verse scattered through his novels form no inconsiderable part of his poetry, and contain some of his very best work. . . . Indeed, the judicious lover of Scott's verse will lay even more stress on the short poems than on the long ones which come to mind at mention of his name. Tastes change, and versified narrative may go out of fashion, despite fire, and description, and character-drawing, and the rest. But songs and ballads never pall. Scott, at his best, equals any of his contemporaries as a song-writer, and excels them as a ballad-writer.[33]

H. D. Sedgwick draws the attention of his readers to the large number of Scott's poems Palgrave has inserted in the Golden Treasury and remarks: "There are few poems that have the peculiar beauty of Scott's lyrics."[34] The lyrics are commended also by W. P. Ker, who says they have a magic seldom found

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[33] Omond, op. cit., pp. 13-14.

[34] H. D. Sedgwick, Jr., "Lockhart's Life of Scott," The Atlantic Monthly, XC (December, 1902), 763.

in Scott's narrative verse. Mr. Brooke believes Scott was greatest in his lyrics and mentions as typical examples of great lyrics "Rosabelle," "Where shall the lover rest," "He is gone on the mountains," and "Young Lochinvar." The most sweeping statement is that made by Oliver Elton, who declares that Scott became one of the greatest of our lyric poets.

> Scott remains . . . the chief of our lyrical poets, or of our singing poets, between Burns, or Blake, and Shelley. He has more song in him than Wordsworth, though he has none of the power requisite for creating a great ode or a high metaphysical lyric; and more than Coleridge, in the proper sense of the term song . . . Scott would have been a great poet if he had left only his songs; he would have been a less alloyed poet had he written nothing else. The best of them excel all the rest of his verse, however good; their regular, average performance is above that of his other verse; as for the worst in either kind, that does not exist for us at all, so that the comparison may be spared.[35]

While Edmund Gosse[36] makes no such high claim, he readily admits that in many of the songs the highest excellence is found.

## VI. GENERAL EVALUATION

Consideration of the criticism of Sir Walter Scott's narrative poetry must certainly include the general evaluation of his worth and work offered by the critics. In many

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[35] Elton, op. cit., p. 317.

[36] Edmund Gosse, An Illustrated History of English Literature (New York: The Macmillan and Company, Ltd., 1904), IV, 68.

cases, the most telling criticism is revealed in terms of general evaluation rather than in measurement of his work in terms of style and technique. For example, no critic in this period questions Scott's historical importance. His metre may be monotonous; his diction too facile; his images unoriginal; his plots poorly constructed. Nevertheless, he represents a turning point in the history of English literature. As Professor Hudson writes:

> Scott's place . . . in the evolution of English poetry is perfectly clear. . . . Scott, unlike Wordsworth, never set out to accomplish a poetic revolution. But as the forerunner of Byron, and the real popularizer of the romantic movement, he did accomplish one none the less.[37]

Henry Beers calls him the middle point and the culmination of English romanticism. This estimate is reiterated by H. D. Sedgwick and Thomas Parrott. Edmund Gosse recognizes Scott's historical importance thus:

> Perhaps if he had possessed a more delicate ear, a subtler sense of the phases of landscape, something of that mysticism and passion which we unwillingly have to admit that we miss in his poetry, he might not have interpreted so lucidly to millions of readers the principles of the romantic revival. . . . but Scott . . . with his vigor of invention and his masculine sense of flowing style, took a prominent and honorable part in the reformation of English poetry.[38]

William Vaughan Moody and Robert Morss Lovett write simply: "Scott's metrical tales did much to popularize romanticism

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[37] Hudson, op. cit., p. 237.

[38] Gosse, op. cit., pp. 68-69.

in its broader phases. He was, however, not much in earnest as a poet . . . Scott cheerfully recognized his place . . . and began his far greater work in prose."[39]

Accompanying this recognition of Scott's historical importance is a tendency to praise his poetry because of its healthy, inspiring tone. This is true in the case of T. S. Omond, who exclaims:

> . . . no writer did more to disseminate the spirit of Romance. His success, indeed, produced more than one revolution. It killed the old bad Grub Street tradition of literature. It proved that poems thoroughly healthy in tone could compete with the most highly spiced productions of the Minerva Press.[40]

W. J. Dawson praises the poetry because it has not the slightest trace of the morbid, while Mr. Brooke finds comfort in turning to the simple, sweet, romantic verse of Scott. Although Scott's poetry is depreciated because of its simplicity and lack of intellectual depth, there is a great deal of emphasis on the character of Scott and the great moral virtues reflected in the poetry as a result of the integrity of the poet. H. D. Sedgwick believes Scott should be praised because he followed consistently the ways of honor; though tastes may change, Scott's works will never die because the life of a great man never loses its interest. Affection for

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[39] William Vaughan Moody and Robert Morss Lovett, A History of English Literature (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), p. 283.

[40] Omond, op. cit., p. 12.

the warm personality of Scott, says Mr. Parrott, assures him a permanent place among the great names of the world's literature. If Scott does not stop to moralize, writes A. H. Miles, his heart beats through his story and the reader cannot help but feel the strong moral force inherent in the poetry. Both Goldwin Smith and Sir Gilbert Parker, in the Atlantic Monthly and Harper's Weekly respectively, eulogize the character of Scott in this same vein.

In spite of the vigorous championing of Scott's poetry, there is a general admission that its appeal is mainly to the young. Mr. Moody and Mr. Lovett state:

> Scott himself described the peculiar excellence of his poetry truly enough, though with characteristic modesty, as consisting in a 'hurried frankness of composition which pleases soldiers, sailors, and young people of bold and active disposition.'[41]

Many of the critics grant this, but they refuse to recognize it as a limitation to the greatness of Scott. Delighting boyhood is something, says Professor Hudson; and though we may go back to Scott with subdued pleasure, we may be grateful for the refuge he offers from the perplexing problems of the modern world. Mr. Brooke believes the cherishing of romance in the minds of men, and especially of the young, is a power that will not die. The poetry of Scott, he says further, is an excellent foundation for the appreciation and

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41 Moody and Lovett, loc. cit.

love of all other poetry. Earlier, Andrew Lang also praises Scott for leading youth into the world of romance. But to Arthur Symons, the appeal of Scott's verse to boys is its one and only virtue. It is well, he adds, that there should be a poet for boys and for those to whom poetry appeals by something in it which is not poetry. The final word in this period on this issue is expressed by George Woodberry. The fact that Scott pleases boys does not distress Mr. Woodberry. Indeed, pleasing boys is a virtue in itself; in addition, Scott succeeds in transferring great energy and power to both boy and man and, as a result, offers a permanent appeal.

It is most interesting, in the light of the above discussion, to note that Scott's name is sometimes coupled with that of Shakespeare. Mr. Woodberry himself claims that Scott did for his district what Shakespeare did for the kingdom. A higher estimate is that of C. W. Collins,[42] who believes Scott occupies an even greater space in the national life than Shakespeare: Scott made the union between England and Scotland a fait accompli. Although Professor Hudson is one who finds a great difference between Scott and Shakespeare, he feels that such a comparison is justified.

Neglect of Scott's poetry in favor of his novels can be noted to a slight extent in this period. H. D. Sedgwick,

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[42] C. W. Collins, "Sir Walter Scott: His Friends and Critics," Blackwood's Magazine, CLXXXVII (February, 1910), 187.

in his review of Lockhart's Life in the Atlantic Monthly, ranks Scott as a novelist with Shakespeare, Dante, and Cervantes; but, in his consideration of Scott as a poet, he is content to extoll the merits of the lyrics and to point out that because of Scott's character his works will not die. In a nine-page essay in his book, Makers of Poetry, W. J. Dawson devotes only two pages to criticism of Scott as a poet. The remaining seven pages consider his novels and his life. Essentially the same treatment is repeated by Laurie Magnus in his historical and critical survey of nineteenth century English literature. Although George Woodberry gives more critical attention to the poetry than do Mr. Sedgwick and Mr. Dawson, his attention is also focused on the novels.

The general evaluation of Scott's poetry in this period cannot be reduced to any one statement. Mr. Symons denies that Scott was a poet; his appeal is the appeal of prose. Mr. Brooke acknowledges that Scott's truest genius belongs to prose, but his first three narrative poems are brilliant things. He points out, however, that no one claims Scott as one of the greater poets nor did Scott himself claim this distinction. The Living Age admits that the novelist is greater than the poet; but, this article adds, if poetry must take the whole of life for its province, we must admit that Scott did a part of the work of poetry that no one since has so well performed. Probably the most eloquent tribute is

that of Sir Gilbert Parker: "Peace and all hail to this high Master, and greater and greater fame!"[43]

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[43] Parker, op. cit., p. 30.

## CHAPTER III

## CRITICISM OF SCOTT'S NARRATIVE POETRY 1917-1932

The quantity of critical material produced in the second period of this evaluation indicates a decline in interest in the poetic work of Scott. However, there is still a fair amount of specific criticism which allows the material to be organized under the same categories used in Chapter II. It should be noted that 1932 marks the centenary celebration of Sir Walter Scott and, as a result, there is a relatively sharp increase in the amount written about him. As will be seen, however, much of this material is devoted to the eminence of Scott as a novelist.

### I. STYLE

Criticism of the style of Sir Walter Scott in this period cannot be so readily divided into consideration of his descriptive and narrative power. The comments, with few exceptions, are stated in brief, broad terms. Edwin Watts Chubb says that the chief charm of Scott's style is his naturalness: ". . . he writes well, though not brilliantly; neither his prose nor his poetry furnish many notable sayings . . ."[1] The Quarterly Review emphasizes the spirit

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[1] Edwin Watts Chubb, Masters of English Literature (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Company, 1917), p. 287.

Scott is able to create:

> . . . read the finest stanzas in the three great poems of Scott, with all their anachronisms, all (if you will) their absurdities, and you will call for your sorry garron and dash out into the midnight after William of Deloraine . . . Read the sixth canto of 'Marmion' and you will feel yourself listening in the English ranks to the 'stifled hum' of the advancing Scotts . . . If Marmion's dying words have become hackneyed, or even ludicrous, from their very simplicity, are they any the less great?[2]

The New Republic[3] says simply that Scott's poetry has a power that cannot be denied in its descriptions of nature and in the energetic narrative. Frederick E. Pierce[4] also notes the vigor of the narrative and claims Scott wrote the best battle poetry of modern Europe. In his History of English Literature, John Buchan[5] characterizes Scott's style as bold, rapid, and free, a style which he used to best advantage in descriptions of action. He adds, however, that the descriptions are too often overloaded with many details of topographical and archeological details. In a later work, a biography of Scott, Mr. Buchan does not make this criticism. He says instead:

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[2] C. R. L. Fletcher, "Sir Walter Scott," The Quarterly Review, CCXLIV (January, 1925), 24.

[3] Robert Morss Lovett, "The Centenary of Scott," The New Republic, LXXII (November 9, 1932), 361.

[4] Frederick E. Pierce, "Humanism, Romance-Coated," The Saturday Review of Literature, IX (October 1, 1932), 143.

[5] John Buchan, A History of English Literature (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Limited, 1923), p. 430.

> . . . he invented a new kind of description, a light, glittering summary of relevant features which rarely impedes the flow of the tale. . . . The secret of success lies in the effortless choice of significant and memorable details . . .[6]

He speaks more warmly also of Scott's narrative power, saying that, in this respect, except for Chaucer and Burns in "Tam O'Shanter," Scott has no serious rival. However, in both the biography and the earlier history, Mr. Buchan points out the frequent triteness of Scott's language. Mr. Buchan's Life of Scott and John Haynes Holmes' The Heart of Scott's Poetry represent the most comprehensive works on the poetry of Scott in this period. Dr. Holmes has collected what he believes to be the best of Scott's poems and includes the shorter lyrics and ballads as well as passages from the long narrative poems. A thorough criticism of the poetry is included as a preface to the selections. The criticism of Mr. Buchan and Dr. Holmes is quite similar in content, but Dr. Holmes is more detailed and more complimentary to Scott. Both agree that the style is uneven and slovenly, but Dr. Holmes sees a progressive evolution in the three narrative poems. In the Lay he sees the freshness, spontaneity, and speed which was, according to Dr. Holmes, Scott's largest claim to posterity as a poet. He states:

> 'The Lay of the Last Minstrel' is not the greatest of Scott's poems, but it is the freshest, the most

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[6] John Buchan, Sir Walter Scott (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1932), p. 113.

> spontaneous, the most vital, and by all odds the most revealing. In the easy, rapid, careless lines of this transfigured ballad, we have the whole story of Scott's origin as a poet, and the full revelation of his nature and distinctive powers.[7]

Marmion, he continues, contains most of the noblest poetry Scott ever wrote. Specific passages he mentions are the opening stanzas, the trial of Constance, and the Battle of Flodden. But the Lady of the Lake is the most artistic of the three and conveys to the reader the intensive delight in the landscape which makes Scott "one of the supreme poets of all time."[8] The most striking characteristic of Scott's style as seen by Dr. Holmes is its energy.

> . . . the outstanding fact about the poetry of Sir Walter Scott to-day is that it is still vigorously alive. Dispute may be endless about its merit; there can be no dispute about its vitality. . . . As vital as the man who conceived them, they endure with a vigor which seems imperishable. . . . Here they are--underrated by the critics, sneered at and scoffed at by the litterati, indubitably outmoded in style and content, but still widely known and joyfully read. Nor yet has Scott lost his hold upon the popular imagination. For our age . . . his poetry still holds the power of living literature.[9]

Dr. Holmes emphasizes the permanent appeal of the poems by pointing out that they retain their place in the school and college curriculum as one of the best introductions to a knowledge and love of English verse. He is convinced that

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[7] Holmes, op. cit., pp. xviii-xix.

[8] Ibid., p. xii.

[9] Ibid., p. xi.

a love of Scott leads to appreciation of Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, Keats, and Wordsworth.

## II. EPIC QUALITY

Little claim is made in this period of the epic quality assigned to Scott in his earlier criticism. Before 1932, Mr. Chubb is the only critic who mentions it and he does not assent to the comparison of Scott and Homer. In 1932 the tie is once more revived by Dr. Pierce, who asks, "Where, outside of Homer, is there anything finer than the description of Flodden Field in 'Marmion'?"[10] Mr. Buchan calls Scott's type of poetic narrative a kind of miniature epic and sees Homeric quality in Scott's use of place names and family names.

> This is one of the matters in which Scott is akin to Homer. Another is the sudden drop into a humorous simplicity which Jeffrey disliked . . . It is part of Scott's gift . . . of linking his heroics with mother earth.[11]

Dr. Holmes objects to this likening of Scott to Homer, because he feels such comparison is detrimental to Scott. He admits there is a similarity in several respects: the simplicity of their style, the poetic use of place names, the understanding of the passions of men at war.

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[10] Pierce, loc. cit.

[11] Buchan, Sir Walter Scott, op. cit., pp. 113-114.

> The Homeric viewpoint and touch, even achievement, are here in these poems of the Scottish bard. Yet is the comparison unfair, since Scott's work looms to no such colossal heights as that of Homer. . . . to bring the two into juxtaposition, is to dwarf the one in comparison with the other. . . . Furthermore, to speak of Scott's poetry in epic terms is to convey a false impression of its essential character and worth. This poetry has not the proportions of the epic . . .[12]

This viewpoint is shared by William Rose Benet,[13] who, it should be noted, finds in Dr. Holmes' book a just evaluation of the poetry of Scott.

## III. TECHNIQUE

Only three critics in this period are concerned with the structure of the poems. Mr. Fletcher in the Quarterly Review points out that Scott himself realized that Gilpin Horner fitted into the story of the Lay very badly. Dr. Holmes sees an evolution of Scott's technical power such as he finds in his style. Marmion has a superb, architectural design not found in the Lay, while the Lady of the Lake represents Scott's most finished product.

> 'The Lady of the Lake,' if not the greatest, is without question the most finished and artistic of Scott's productions. In this piece the poet attained for the first and only time a perfect fusion of the ballad spirit and the structural form. . . . The story is not broken into

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[12] Holmes, op. cit., pp. xiii-xiv.

[13] William Rose Benet, "The Harp of the North," The Saturday Review of Literature, VIII (May 7, 1932), 716.

> fragments, as in 'Marmion,' but is linked, scene after scene, into a single chain of narrative. It soars quickly at the start into the far realms of beauty, and is held there, on the effortless pinions of joyous song, to the end.[14]

Mr. Buchan, also, notes a progressive advance in technical skill, pointing out that the Lay and Marmion are faulty in construction, though the latter rises to a fine tragic conclusion, while the Lady of the Lake gets its effects swiftly and surely.

Mr. Buchan and Dr. Holmes are the only critics in this period who mention character portrayal. In his History of English Literature Mr. Buchan is somewhat disparaging. He believes Scott dramatizes his characters in a picturesque and sympathetic manner with extraordinary success, but he deplores the lack of insight on the part of Scott. The inner emotions of the characters are not revealed. Dr. Holmes summarizes his point of view by stating simply that the characters are pasteboard figures.

Again Mr. Buchan and Dr. Holmes are the only critics who mention specifically the metre used by Scott. Only Mr. Buchan's criticism is favorable.

> He essayed a new type of poetic narrative, a kind of miniature style. He discovered a measure which was apt for both rapid movement and detailed description. In a very simple rhythm he introduced variations which prevent monotony and permit of vigorous emphasis, and yet in no way break the flow.[15]

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[14] Holmes, op. cit., pp. xx-xxi.

[15] Buchan, Sir Walter Scott, op. cit., p. 111.

## IV. INTELLECTUAL DEPTH

Lack of intellectual depth is again charged against Scott, but again the support of such a charge is not conclusive. Mr. Buchan says Scott's poetry exhibits a light weight of thought as well as trite moralizing. Because of Scott's deficiency in intellectual and spiritual power, Mr. Buchan is unable to rate Scott among the greatest English poets. Dr. Holmes is more lenient. He states:

> Thoughts he was not interested in; ideas he had none. But force . . . this he had in abundance. It was this in its pure essence which made Scott, in the words of Professor Frederick T. Pierce, of Yale, 'the greatest battle-poet in the English language.' It was this mingled with a sense of beauty, best revealed in his nature poetry--a richness of imagination, lavishly displayed in his narratives--and in his lyrics and songs, at least a command of artistry--which gives him as a poet, in the end and all around, what Carlyle all too reluctantly confessed, in terms far underestimating the real fact, as 'the indisputable impress of worth.'[16]

The lack of intellectual insight is important to Dr. Holmes only insofar as it is related to the claim of relationship between Scott and Homer. It is the absence of the tragic note, the sense of fate and circumstance, that again proves Scott's work was not of epic proportions. The Quarterly Review gives an oblique defense of Scott in this disagreement. Mr. Fletcher mentions William Wordsworth's comment that Scott never wrote anything in his verse that appeals to the immortal part of man. "Alas," says Mr. Fletcher, "we know that

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[16] Holmes, op. cit., pp. xxix-xxx.

William Wordsworth thought no poet but himself had done so; and, in our estimation, he was so much the greatest of English poets that perhaps he was right."[17] Yet Mr. Fletcher adds that few people can make their spirits a part of the majestic thought of Wordsworth or Keats, whereas anyone reading the poems of Scott is immediately captured by their spirit and verve. The most aggressive defense against the viewpoint that Scott displays a shallowness in his work is that of Mr. W. M. Dixon in his speech before the Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club in 1931. Mr. Dixon is convinced that the world is out of step with Scott rather than vice versa. The present generation, writes Mr. Dixon, shows an aversion to life while Scott filled his writings with the joy of life. Mr. Dixon exclaims indignantly against those who depreciate Sir Walter Scott.

> 'He wrote nothing,' it was said and repeated, 'that appealed to the immortal part of man.' Then, in the name of the saints at once, I ask, 'What is immortal in us?' Of all the charges against him this is the charge to which I listen with the keenest impatience. As if the best in us could be aroused only by sermons! As if the breathing earth, the hills and streams, the movements of the human heart, of which he wrote, as if his sweetness of temper, his magnanimity, his fortitude, his transparent, deep affections, which shine through every sentence, were not divine! For my part I count him among the heavenly influences.[18]

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[17] Fletcher, op. cit., p. 20.

[18] Dixon, op. cit., p. 161.

## V. LYRIC PASSAGES

It is agreed in this period that, regardless of one's opinion of Scott's poetic powers, high praise must be given to his lyric passages. The Quarterly Review states: "Nor must we forget, whether we call Scott poet or minstrel, the marvellous songs and snatches of song, both in the Poems and the Novels."[19] Dr. Pierce points out that the beauty of the lyrics is generally acknowledged. Both Dr. Holmes and Mr. Buchan give great emphasis to the beauty of the individual lyrics in the narrative poems, a beauty which William Rose Benet also recognizes. In the mind of Mr. Buchan, it is in the lyrics that Scott attains his highest poetic stature. These lyrics foreshadowed what the novels reveal--"a Shakespearian gift of producing little snatches of music which fit into their place with an exquisite and effortless aptness."[20] He says further: "He has been called with justice the greatest of our lyric poets between Burns and Shelley, greater than Coleridge or Wordsworth because more truly a singer. . . . in his greater lyrics Scott penetrated to the final mystery of the poet."[21]

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[19] Fletcher, op. cit., p. 27.

[20] Buchan, Sir Walter Scott, op. cit., p. 86.

[21] Ibid., p. 115.

## VI. GENERAL EVALUATION

The historical importance of Scott is quickly recognized in this period in such an evaluation as that of John Buchan in his History of English Literature. In the evolution of English poetry, Scott stands as the first great popular exponent of the revival of the romantic past. It is more explicitly stated by H. N. Fairchild:

> Scott's tremendous influence as a popularizer of the Middle Ages was due not only to the positive merits of the poems but also to the fact that he exploited chiefly those elements of the past which any normal reader of his own day would have found picturesque and exciting. He introduced the romantic past to thousands who would have recoiled from the queerness of Coleridge's Christabel.[22]

Dr. Holmes agrees, too, that Scott has a historical significance. If poetry had its beginnings in the lays of the old minstrels, remarks Dr. Holmes, Scott's songs have made an imperishable contribution to the literature of the English race. He points out, also, that a greater proportion of Scott's poetry has endured than the corresponding portions out of the writings of greater poets such as Dryden, Shelley, and Wordsworth.

Estimates of Scott's final place in literature as a poet are varied in character. Edwin Chubb expresses his belief that if Scott had written only poetry, he would be but

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[22] Hoxie Neale Fairchild, The Romantic Quest (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), p. 263.

a lesser light in English literature; his fame rests chiefly on his novels. However, Mr. Chubb redeems this low estimate in his final analysis by calling Scott a poet of no mean order. Approximately ten years later, L. F. Abbott[23] is more certain of Scott's permanence and describes him as the author of some of the most enduring poems and tales in English literature. Mr. Abbott is, however, much more concerned with the personality of Scott and praise of his novels than with the merits of the poems. This same high praise of Sir Walter Scott's character is continued by W. E. Gunn,[24] who mentions neither the poems nor the novels except to point out the universal recognition of his versatility, his genius for story-telling, his industry and endurance. Donald Carswell[25] occupies himself primarily with an analysis of the novels and with an attack on the legendary view of Scott created by Lockhart, but he estimates that the sum and substance of the average educated person's opinion of Scott is that he was a very good poet. A renewal of interest in Scott was predicted by John Geddie in 1927.

> There are reasons for believing that Walter Scott is better understood and more admired and beloved

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23 Lawrence F. Abbott, "Sir Walter Scott," The Outlook, CXLIII (June 14, 1926), 370.

24 W. E. Gunn, "A Very Great Man," The Spectator, CCXII (August 16, 1930), 212.

25 Donald Carswell, "The Legend of Abbotsford," The Nineteenth Century, CXII (September, 1932), 376.

> by the generation that is passing; and that he will be even more read and more honoured and reverenced, in the future than in the past.[26]

One sign of such reverence is the number of new editions of his works appearing at this time and, adds Mr. Geddie, especially of his novels. Indeed, throughout the entire article, he speaks of Scott, the novelist, rather than Scott, the poet. His entire thesis is somewhat nullified by his concluding praise of Scott's life: "It is the character, revealed in the pages of Lockhart and in his 'Journal,' that holds us with a spell stronger than any wielded by the pen or tongue of the Wizard."[27] Edmund Blunden ascribes the popularity of the narrative poems to the novelty of the scenes and action described. When the novelty faded, virtues preserved were:

> . . . here and there the swing of the martial verse, the expression of ideal courage, the wide or minute descriptions (castle and mountains are not so common as to render fine description necessary). Reading Scott's poems was the nearest many would ever approach to anything more desperate than a quarrel between two cabmen, and such vicarious war and adventure has obvious advantages.[28]

This rather negative criticism appears as one of our articles in the Queen's Quarterly in commemoration of Scott's centenary. W. M. Dixon's speech cited earlier (as reprinted in Mr. Dixon's

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[26] John Geddie, "The Renascence of Scott," The Sir Walter Scott Quarterly, I (April, 1927), 2.

[27] Ibid., p. 5.

[28] Edmund Blunden, "The Poetry of Scott," The Queen's Quarterly, XXXIX (November, 1932), 602.

book, An Apology for the Arts) is one of these four articles and easily compensates for Mr. Blunden's lack of fervor. But it is the life of Scott that he praises.

> For some reason character is, alas, often divorced from talent. But when I am inclined to dwell upon his literary defects, I think of the man, and he rises once more to his heroic stature. And when all is said that can be said in his dispraise, I still approach with reverence a writer in the first rank of creative genius, who has given happiness to millions, who has nations for his audience. . . . When I ponder it I cannot avoid the conviction that it is not so much talent as the great soul that makes the great writer.[29]

The remaining articles by James Miller and M. O. Smith deal only with the novels. Preoccupation with an analysis of the novels and those alone is a notable characteristic of the entire group of articles published at the time of Scott's centenary celebration. A. M. Mackenzie in the London Mercury; J. R. G. Bolton in the Bookman; David Cecil in the Atlantic Monthly; Edwin Muir in the Spectator; Horace Gregory in the Nation--all omit even the slightest reference to the poems, an indication of at least some truth that the poems are not so highly considered and well remembered as men such as Mr. Dixon would have us believe.

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[29] Dixon, op. cit., p. 160.

## CHAPTER IV

## CRITICISM OF SCOTT'S NARRATIVE POETRY 1933-1949

The amount of criticism of Scott's narrative poetry from 1933 to the present is meagre compared to the references found in the previous periods. There is little analysis of Scott's skill and technique. To facilitate comparisons, however, approximately the same headings have been used in this chapter as were employed in the preceding chapters. They are: (1) style and technique; (2) epic quality; (3) lyric passages; and (4) general evaluation.

### I. STYLE AND TECHNIQUE

The most detailed treatment of Scott's style and technique is that by Sir Herbert Grierson and J. C. Smith in their Critical History of English Poetry.[1] Their criticism follows the conventional pattern set forth so clearly in the first period, 1900-1916. The faults, they say, are obvious. The metre is monotonous; the plots are unhappily constructed; the style is characterized by verbal laxities. To offset these faults, they note that Scott was able to create exciting action set against excellent natural backgrounds. Scott was at his best in describing rapid movement, a power that was

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[1] Herbert J. C. Grierson and J. C. Smith, A Critical History of English Poetry (London: Chatto and Windus, 1947), pp. 333-336.

at its height in the battle of Flodden in Marmion. Essentially the same criticism is made by Charles Grosvenor Osgood[2] in 1935. However, the significance of Mr. Osgood's comments is lessened considerably by his indication that the virtues of Scott's poems were but a preparation for the greater performance of the novels.

## II. EPIC QUALITY

The presence of an epic quality is again found by the critics in this period, but the voices proclaiming it are weaker. The story of the battle in Marmion, according to Mr. Grierson and Mr. Smith, is worthy of being called an epic, while Mr. Osgood finds an epic quality in Scott's use of names. He states: "Scott shared with Homer and Virgil and Milton the epic power to link names of men and places into a melody that forthwith endows a man or a place with the distinction of poetry, and sets them apart from all others."[3] In a more recent source, Ernest Bernbaum speaks of the comparison between Scott and Homer thus: ". . . despite the obvious differences, the resemblances were too many to be denied."[4]

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[2] Charles Grosvenor Osgood, The Voice of England (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935), pp. 421-422.

[3] Osgood, op. cit., p. 421.

[4] Ernest Bernbaum, Guide Through the Romantic Movement (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1949), p. 142.

## III. LYRIC PASSAGES

The most obvious characteristic of the criticism of this period is the wholehearted endorsement of Scott's lyrics. Mr. Osgood, for example, has no reservations in his praise.

> But though he gave over the writing of metrical romances, he had shown in them one supreme proof of his eminence as a poet which never declined. This is the interpolated songs. Scott was . . . a maker of pure song that sings itself.[5]

Edwin Muir[6] depreciates the narrative poems as second-rate but feels Scott demonstrates high imagination in several of his lyrics. John Shand asks, "If all his Waverley novels in verse--The Lady of the Lake, Marmion, and the others--are too outmoded in subject and style to please today's taste in poetry, ought not the connoisseur to recognize the peculiar beauty of his lyrics and ballads?"[7] Mr. Grierson and Mr. Smith point out that if the long poems have sunk in the estimate of the critics, his songs have risen. A later work, a history of literature edited by Albert C. Baugh, carries the statement: "Only in the lyric did he curb his redundancy and often achieve a condensed poignancy."[8] George Sampson

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[5] Osgood, op. cit., p. 422.

[6] Edwin Muir, "Walter Scott," From Anne to Victoria, edited by Bonamy Dobree (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), p. 545.

[7] John Shand, "The Good-Natured Genius," The Nineteenth Century, CXLIV (October, 1948), 226.

[8] Albert C. Baugh, editor, A Literary History of England (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1948), p. 1210.

criticizes the narrative poems because they do not appeal to the profounder emotions, but he says of the lyrics:

> Scott's power as a writer of pure lyric is underestimated by the countrymen of Burns. In the novels, as well as in the poetic romances, there are lyrical strains of exquisite quality. The English songs of Scott have no parallel in Burns. . . . Scott's martial odes form another group of successful compositions.[9]

## IV. GENERAL EVALUATION

While there is very little positive criticism found in this period, there is also very little destructive criticism. There is instead a general recognition of the limitation imposed on Scott's poetic worth by the type of the poetry itself. It is narrative verse and such verse is not the medium of the twentieth century. But judged solely as narrative verse, the poetry does not suffer to any great extent in the hands of the critics. Sir Herbert Grierson,[10] in his biography of Scott, says his poetry is pleasant and romantic; it may not be great poetry, but it is delightful poetry. He reminds his readers that Scott's poems have lived on while imitations were still-born. This same faint praise is found in his later critical work written in collaboration with

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[9] George Sampson, The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature (Cambridge, England: At the University Press, 1941), p. 622.

[10] Grierson, Sir Walter Scott, Bart., pp. 101-102.

J. C. Smith. They consider his poetry important historically and add: "Intrinsically, its value is far from negligible . . ."[11] G. K. Chesterton emphasizes the important influence Scott wielded on Goethe, Victor Hugo, and Byron, who, he believes, would not have been themselves without Scott. In his estimation, Scott will never suffer permanent oblivion for two reasons: the eloquence of his oratory and the ideal of honor he expressed. Mr. Chesterton states: "The reply of the Lady of Branksome, to the foes who hold her son as a hostage, is almost doggerel considered as poetry; but it is direct and even deadly considered as oratory."[12] B. Ifors Evans[13] believes the natural limitation imposed by Scott by his choice of narrative verse is a factor that prevents a wide recognition of his genius. He compares Scott with Dryden and regrets that Scott chose to ignore the world of imagination for the practical world. On the other hand, W. M. Parker[14] praises Scott for recognizing his own limitations. Scott knew, writes Mr. Parker, that the romantic, not the philosophical, side of poetry was his true province.

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[11] Grierson and Smith, op. cit., p. 300.

[12] G. K. Chesterton, All I Survey (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1933), p. 265.

[13] B. Ifor Evans, Tradition and Romanticism (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1940), p. 67.

[14] W. M. Parker, "Suggestions for Scott's Muse," The Times Literary Supplement (March 23, 1940), p. 152.

David Daiches[15] mentions briefly that the narrative poems, though so little read now, are excellent stuff of their kind. John Shand acknowledges that the stories are readable and clear in meaning, but they have no extra graces to commend them. It should be noted, in the midst of these mild comments, that Hugh Walpole is more optimistic in his judgment than any other in this period. He speaks of Scott as both novelist and poet when he says: "I fancy that to-day, in 1938, he occupies in critical estimation a lowlier place than will ever be his again."[16] He recommends the narrative poems as an occasional alternative to the current popular novel and adds:

> There is, I suppose, much loose bad poetry here . . . I have not space here to go into their many virtues, but I recommend some young modernist critic, who is looking around for some new fashion of astonishing the world, to give his attention seriously to them; he would discover a zest, a movement, an accuracy of vision that would astonish him.[17]

Mr. Walpole then devotes the remainder of his article to the Waverley novels. Neglect of the poetry is found in other sources in this period. Dame Una Pope-Hennessy contributes a critical estimate of the novels with no mention of the

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15 David Daiches, A Study of Literature (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1948), p. 154.

16 Hugh Walpole, "Sir Walter Scott To-Day," The Times Literary Supplement (April 30, 1938), p. vi.

17 Loc. cit.

poetry in an article in Essays by Divers Hands. In his book, Literary Appreciations, George McLean Harper praises the novels highly but does not speak of the poetry, yet he writes of the poetry of George Herbert, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and William Watson. Alan D. McKillop makes an excellent survey of the attitude toward Scott's poetry at the time of his centenary celebration in 1932. Many people still read and like Scott's work, Dr. McKillop explains, but the typical admirer is usually a conservative person who thinks young people today read trash. The defense of Scott, he believes, is conducted by those already committed to the classics and even they assume a condescending air toward him. Dr. McKillop offers specific criticism of the novels only and admits that Scott, along with Byron, has lost ground as a poet. Dr. McKillop's faith in Scott, however, remains unshaken if his work is considered in relation to his character. Both poems and novels gain significance and interest "when they are considered as integral parts of the great career recorded by Lockhart."[18] Furthermore, he points out, in any evaluation they cannot be separated from the life of the man himself. A more recent evaluation is that of Ernest Bernbaum, who states: "With the exception of Shakespeare and Milton, no English authors outrank such great Romantics as Wordsworth,

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[18] Alan Dugald McKillop, "Sir Walter Scott in the Twentieth Century," The Rice Institute Pamphlet, XX (April, 1933), 215.

Coleridge, Scott, Byron, Keats, Shelley, and Carlyle . . ."[19]

Although there is little objective evidence in this period or in the two preceding periods that one critic has influenced another unduly, it would have to be acknowledged that such influence existed. This is particularly apparent in the summary provided by Mr. Needleman and Mr. Otis in the College Outline Series. They say of Scott:

> His great reputation rests much less upon his poetry than upon his novels. As poet his sense of rhythm is defective and his fluence becomes monotonous. Not only is his verse often careless and diffuse, not only are his moralizings of the tritest, but he is deficient in intellectual and spiritual power. Scott is valued for his sheer energy and unsophisticated style, for the dramatic picturesqueness of his subjects, for a superb power to present heroic action, especially in battle, and for a palpitating narrative swiftly paced by the cross-country gallop of the metre. Like his novels, his verse is often loaded down with description; like them, too, his poetry does not address the soul of man. While not belonging to the order of our greatest poets, Scott achieved two things that were to distinguish his historical novels--a scenic setting steeped in the historic or legendary interest of the past and the suggestion of an epoch.[20]

The "cross-country gallop of the metre" was so-called by Mr. Woodberry and Mr. Seccombe in the first period. Here again, also, is the complaint that Scott does not "address the soul of man."

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[19] Bernbaum, op. cit., p. 3.

[20] Morriss H. Needleman and William Bradley Otis, An Outline-History of English Literature Since Milton (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1938), p. 208.

# CHAPTER V

## SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary. The first significant point that seems clear in this study is that the attitude of the critics has not so much changed in the past fifty years as the number of critics concerned with Scott's poetry has decreased. In the first period, 1900-1916, the criticism is fairly abundant. In the second period, 1917-1932, there is a decrease in the amount written about Scott with much more emphasis on the novels than on the poetry. This is not to imply that in the first period there was not some neglect of the poetry in favor of the novels. That is to be expected. Scott's ability as a novelist is undeniably greater than his skill as a poet. But the decrease in critical comment hardly seems justified on this basis. The number of articles appearing in 1932, Scott's centenary, is large; yet few offer criticism of the poetry. This tendency is continued in the third period, 1933-1949. To offset this tendency, it must be pointed out that in each of these periods there was at least one biography of Scott published. In the first period, William Henry Hudson's and Andrew Lang's books appeared. John Buchan's Sir Walter Scott was published in the second period as well as Dr. Holmes' The Heart of Scott's Poetry, which, though not biographical, is an evaluation of the poetry greater in scope than any other work found in this study. In the third period,

Sir Herbert Grierson produced Sir Walter Scott, Bart. The number of biographies written leads to a second conclusion. The character of Scott seems to be an important factor in keeping alive the reputation of Scott, the poet.

It seems clear that the attitude of the critics has changed to some extent. The criticism of Scott's style in the second and third periods is less enthusiastic in tone, but it is agreed in all three periods that he is able to create scenes of action set against picturesque landscapes that will always be vivid to the reader. The battle scenes represent Scott at his greatest as a poet. Scott was able to create isolated scenes with memorable effect; but his poems lack unity, and much of the long narrative poems is not good poetry because of the monotonous metre and stereotyped language. An epic quality is strongly upheld in the first period, but this quality receives much less emphasis in the other periods. Concern about the lack of intellectual depth is quite serious in the first period. It loses much of its interest to the critics in the second period, and it receives little mention at all in the third period. As this criticism has lessened, the praise of Scott's lyrics has increased. The comments grow steadily more certain that the reputation of many of the lyrics is rising while the reputation of the long poems is declining. The historical importance of Scott's poetry is acknowledged consistently throughout the twentieth century criticism, and his influence on others receives steady attention.

It should be pointed out that the bulk of the criticism of Scott's poetry is British in origin. It should also be noted that the criticism is limited primarily to the academic critics.

Conclusion. There has been a loss of interest in Sir Walter Scott's major narrative poetry during the present century. However, it is still held fairly high in the estimation of some literary scholars for two reasons: (1) his historical importance; and (2) his ability to create isolated scenes that still retain much of their power. The attitude of the critics has changed to the extent that they find less to praise in the narrative poems and more to praise in the lyric passages in these poems.

Recommendations for further research. The criticism of Scott's lyrics in both poems and novels is a subject which could well be considered by the student interested in the work of Scott. It was also noted that there was an interesting similarity between the criticism of Scott's poetry and of his novels which might bear investigation.

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