Interview with Professor Ian Duncan on Sir Walter Scott: The novel “as a kind of total environment of human life”

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Earlier this month the WSWS published an article marking two hundred years since the publication of Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* in July 1814, generally considered to be the first historical novel.

Waverley, we suggested, was often thought to be “the first work that treated the past not primarily as ornament on a tale of ‘timeless’ morals and manners, but from the point of view of its own distinct significance as the necessary and comprehensible prelude to the present.” The influence of *Waverley* and Scott’s body of work as a whole on the subsequent course of literature and culture generally was enormous.

As part of the effort to deepen an understanding of Scott’s role and contribution, as well as to further encourage the reading of his works, I wrote to Professor Ian Duncan, the author of an introduction to a Penguin Classics edition of *Waverley* (reprint, 2012), and asked if he would consider an interview on the subject. He kindly agreed, and the resulting conversation will be found below.

Professor Duncan currently teaches at the University of California, Berkeley, where he was appointed to the Florence Green Bixby Chair in English in 2011. After studying at King's College, Cambridge and Yale University, he taught for several years in the Yale English department and later at the University of Oregon. Duncan is the author of *Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel* (Cambridge, 1992) and *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton, 2007).

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David Walsh: I quoted your sentence in the Penguin introduction to *Waverley*, where you suggest the book “has a strong claim to be the most influential work in the modern history of the novel.” Could you expand a bit on why you think that’s the case?

Ian Duncan: Obviously it’s a bit polemical to say that, people could come up with other candidates. But there are several reasons why that may be the case.

Scott makes the novel historical. It’s not just a matter of inventing a new, specialized genre of historical novel, but Scott makes the novel itself, as a literary form, deeply responsive to history understood as a kind of total environment of human life. In other words, *Waverley* is not just a novel about kings, queens and nobles set in the past, it grasps a sense of the entirety of social life as historically formed.

And novelists who follow, even when ostensibly they’re not writing historical novels, figures like George Eliot in Britain, or Balzac in France, or Tolstoy in Russia, have a profoundly historical sense of human existence that, I think, flows out of Scott. So that’s the argument that Georg Lukács made in the 1930s and I think it’s one that still holds.

There are other issues. I think the way Scott opens up the stylistic and linguistic range of the novel to a much wider domain of social life than was available before, so that you have peasants, working class characters, being given a kind of dignity, speaking their language, their lives being represented in something like their own terms, in ways that again there is no precedent for in the novel. That would be hugely influential, despite Scott’s own personal politics, in creating a much more democratic sense of what the novel could achieve as a literary form.

In connection with that, he allows the novel to encompass a much greater stylistic and linguistic variety, popular languages, technical languages, again, than we had seen before in the novel. That leads straight into the Modernist revolutions in the novel, as well as mainstream 19th century Realism.

The way that *Waverley* sets a rather weak protagonist [Edward Waverley himself] at the center of the novel was profoundly consequential. Again, there’s some precedent for that. Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* [1795-96], which founded the genre of the *Bildungsroman* [the novel of education or formation], does that. But the notion that the novel is the genre not of an exceptional hero, but an average, mediocre human whose story really is about development, rather than coming in with a fully formed character, again, is something that Scott brings into the novel and popularizes.

DW: I think the textured, layered character of the book is extraordinary. The various cultural and historical allusions … There was something very new about *Waverley* and it obviously made an enormous impression.

ID: Presumably not all of the readers would have got that, again, that’s one of the wonderful things about Scott’s novels, they appeal on all sorts of levels. There were those who read the books for the plot, for the comedy, and didn’t get all of the layers.

DW: But I think you *feel* that quality. Have you read accounts of the popular reaction, or the readership’s reaction, explanations of why people reacted as enthusiastically as they did?

ID: Yes. There’s always the problem of recovering a genuinely popular response as distinct from the elite and critics and so on, but we have some correspondence, word of mouth. There was first of all a local response, a Scottish response to having Scots speech and Scots characters represented, but nevertheless the bulk of Scott’s readers were in England, that’s where the market was, that was where most of the copies of his novels were sent by steamship to be sold.

I think the delight in the sheer extent and wealth of entire social worlds being made available to readers was a huge part of his appeal. There’s a wonderful phrase by [writer and essayist] William Hazlitt, who did not see eye-to-eye with Scott on social and political questions, about the *Waverley* novels being “almost like a new edition of human nature.” And I think he’s getting at the sense of the largeness of Scott’s achievement.

Comparisons with Shakespeare were routine; that was the figure that people reached for to compare Scott with in terms of literary works that gave this comprehensive vision of human life.

DW: You would think as well there must have been a fascination with

this examination of recent national or bi-national history, the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745. This is only 70 years after those events. When I went to see Spielberg's *Lincoln*, which has its strengths and weaknesses, the audience watched and listened with rapt attention. People were thinking "This is our history."

Scott's *Waverley*, about a relatively recent historical period, must have been riveting to people.

ID: I think that's right. There had been Gothic novels, but they're about this stylized, unreal past, which is remote, whereas Scott makes the point that this is just over the horizon of living memory, it's the history that has made us what we are.

DW: What about the influence of Scott in America? Was there a craze similar to the one in Britain and Europe? I was reading this morning about Herman Melville, who loved Scott as a youth and apparently absorbed all his works.

ID: Scott's influence and readership in America were enormous. Writers of the generation before Melville, notably Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper, were deeply shaped by his work. Cooper in relation to the American frontier, Irving takes the more antiquarian side of Scott, rather than the historical.

But even when you get the more original figures, like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Melville, who are trying to break away from imitating European models, they're still deeply formed by Scott and the kinds of problems he raises, including what does it mean to be historically in the Americas?

If you think of something like Melville's *Moby Dick*, and its attempt to represent a kind of human world, a social ecology, on board a whaling ship, again, that's something Scott has made available, that diversity of languages, races, nationalities, combined in this sort of doomed, heroic action. There is a way in which it restages some of the basic plots of the Scott's novels.

The figure of Captain Ahab, the critique of the fanatic as hero, is something that we find in some of Scott's novels, like *Old Mortality* [1816].

DW: Or *Redgauntlet* [1824], which I think is a wonderful book.

ID: It may be my favorite Scott novel.

DW: What about the Scottish Enlightenment, or the Enlightenment more generally? Why did such a figure as Scott emerge in Scotland, in Edinburgh, at the end of the 18th century?

ID: Scott was educated in the institutions of the Scottish Enlightenment. He went to the Edinburgh high school, Edinburgh University. One of his teachers was Dugald Stewart, who was Adam Smith's biographer, and the main figure for transmitting Enlightenment thought to the next generation. So he was absolutely steeped in that.

What people generally suggest about the influence of the Enlightenment on Scott is that he takes over its historicism, the social historicism of Adam Ferguson and Smith. I think he gets David Hume's skepticism as well. He has a profoundly skeptical temper.

At the same time, although it's important, I wouldn't want to exaggerate the Scottishness of Scott. I think his works are great because they're open to a kind of broad European, continental cross-current of not only literary, but also philosophical writing and thinking. I think the novels are very sensitive to that. Just as the Scottish Enlightenment figures were in a debate with the French, the Germans.

DW: I know you've written about approaches to teaching Scott, I wonder what challenges you've found in teaching his novels.

ID: I find that the more students know, the more difficult it is to have them read Scott. The first time I taught Scott was at Yale, this was 20 years ago or so, and the students there knew enough to know that they weren't supposed to like him. They'd been educated enough to know that Scott was not one of the "great writers."

Whereas I found at my next job, at the University of Oregon, where I had wonderful students, that they didn't have the sort of cultural capital of their Yale counterparts, and they tended to be much more open-minded, they were much more prepared to take the work on its own terms.

I think if you can get over the fear of the language, and you also *do* need a certain amount of historical information, you find the novels are highly accessible and engaging.

When I was a student at Cambridge in the 1970s, Scott was barely mentioned. F.R. Leavis [the influential British literary critic] kicked Scott out of the great tradition on the grounds that he was "an inspired folklorist." He didn't fit the formalist canons of literary greatness that prevailed in the academy in this country, as well as Great Britain. I think some of that has changed.

DW: There's also the "left" literary criticism of Scott. We're quite hostile to those circles.

ID: Scott is often the person that is reached for as the conservative, white male writer you position against the writer you are trying to champion or recover, and it's often done by people who haven't actually read the novels. Scott is just a place-holder in this rather crude reading, this circular logic, whereby Scott's politics are meant to determine the novel.

DW: What do you think of Lukács' comments in *The Historical Novel* [1937]?

ID: It's a great essay on Scott. There are shortcomings and inaccuracies, it's partial, but it remains quite powerful, even just heuristically, for opening up a discussion about Scott's achievement. Lukács gets at some important things, including the ways the novels both illuminate and are made possible by their historical moment.

DW: Any final thoughts? What is the future of interest in Scott?

ID: I think it would be great if more people read Scott, including *Ivanhoe* [1820], one of the great novels of the 19th century. It's quite different from *Waverley* and the Scottish novels, and it gets condescended to as a kind of medievalist potboiler. I think it's very powerful and profound piece of writing.

The most admirable character in *Ivanhoe* is Rebecca, the Jewish girl. And the entire English nation formation at the end is shown to be a rather mean and petty affair, from which she is excluded.