**How Walter Scott Started the American Civil War**

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A week ago this morning, I was standing in the magnificent library of Walter Scott’s baronial home, Abbotsford. It’s one of those early Victorian Gothic monstrocities, complete with moss-covered stone, a turret, battlements and a (now dry) moat, with a commanding view of the Tweed River. The library is an especially fine room with a magnificently carved wooden ceiling, imitating the stone tracery at the Chapel of Rosslyn which is now the northern most point of pilgrimage of all the *DaVinci Code* fanatics. And it struck me, looking at all the assembled Scott ephemera: This is the man who started the American Civil War!

No doubt you learned in grade school that it started at Fort Sumter and that slavery and states’ rights had something to do with it. But no. The Civil War sprang with fully loaded double-barrels from the pages of *Ivanhoe*. No doubt about it. We have it on the best authority: *Harper’s* in the decades right after the war.

I used to wonder: is there *anything* redeeming to be said about Walter Scott? All those gallant knights. The historical vision that is never, actually, very historic? The pride of homeland? The chauvinism? The longing for the golden past, lost in the industrial age? Walter Scott is a Romantic, of course. He was wildly popular. There were the intellectual Romantics, like Novalis, Tieck and the Schlegels, and then there is the Romantic of trivial sentimentality and muddled thinking: Sir Walter Scott.

Standing in the man’s house, I thought it would violate the rules of hospitality to trash him. So I went ahead and posted the only thing by Scott that ever struck me as halfway amusing—the passage about lawyers and history that appears midway in *Guy Mannering*, an otherwise imminently forgettable novel.

But the charge laid at Scott’s doorstep isn’t so absurd as it might at first seem. Here’s how my favorite American writer makes the case. *Harper’s* own Mark Twain, in *Life on the Mississippi*:

Then comes Sir Walter Scott with his enchantments, and by his single might checks this wave of progress, and even turns it back; sets the world in love with dreams and phantoms; with decayed and swinish forms of religion; with decayed and degraded systems of government; with the sillinesses and emptinesses, sham grandeurs, sham gauds, and sham chivalries of a brainless and worthless long-vanished society. He did measureless harm; more real and lasting harm, perhaps, than any other individual that ever wrote. Most of the world has now outlived good part of these harms, though by no means all of them; but in our South they flourish pretty forcefully still. Not so forcefully as half a generation ago, perhaps, but still forcefully. There, the genuine and wholesome civilization of the nineteenth century is curiously confused and commingled with the Walter Scott Middle-Age sham civilization; and so you have practical, common-sense, progressive ideas, and progressive works; mixed up with the duel, the inflated speech, and the jejune romanticism of an absurd past that is dead, and out of charity ought to be buried. But for the Sir Walter disease, the character of the Southerner–or Southron, according to Sir Walter’s starchier way of phrasing it– would be wholly modern, in place of modern and medieval mixed, and the South would be fully a generation further advanced than it is. It was Sir Walter that made every gentleman in the South a Major or a Colonel, or a General or a Judge, before the war; and it was he, also, that made these gentlemen value these bogus decorations. For it was he that created rank and caste down there, and also reverence for rank and caste, and pride and pleasure in them. Enough is laid on slavery, without fathering upon it these creations and contributions of Sir Walter.

Sir Walter had so large a hand in making Southern character, as it existed before the war, that he is in great measure responsible for the war. It seems a little harsh toward a dead man to say that we never should have had any war but for Sir Walter; and yet something of a plausible argument might, perhaps, be made in support of that wild proposition. The Southerner of the American Revolution owned slaves; so did the Southerner of the Civil War: but the former resembles the latter as an Englishman resembles a Frenchman. The change of character can be traced rather more easily to Sir Walter’s influence than to that of any other thing or person.

One may observe, by one or two signs, how deeply that influence penetrated, and how strongly it holds. If one take up a Northern or Southern literary periodical of forty or fifty years ago, he will find it filled with wordy, windy, flowery ‘eloquence,’ romanticism, sentimentality–all imitated from Sir Walter, and sufficiently badly done, too– innocent travesties of his style and methods, in fact. This sort of literature being the fashion in both sections of the country, there was opportunity for the fairest competition; and as a consequence, the South was able to show as many well-known literary names, proportioned to population, as the North could.

But a change has come, and there is no opportunity now for a fair competition between North and South. For the North has thrown out that old inflated style, whereas the Southern writer still clings to it–clings to it and has a restricted market for his wares, as a consequence. There is as much literary talent in the South, now, as ever there was, of course; but its work can gain but slight currency under present conditions; the authors write for the past, not the present; they use obsolete forms, and a dead language. But when a Southerner of genius writes modern English, his book goes upon crutches no longer, but upon wings; and they carry it swiftly all about America and England, and through the great English reprint publishing houses of Germany– as witness the experience of Mr. Cable and Uncle Remus, two of the very few Southern authors who do not write in the Southern style. Instead of three or four widely-known literary names, the South ought to have a dozen or two–and will have them when Sir Walter’s time is out.

So there you have the Bill of Indictment. Walter Scott, the wrecker of culture—the man who substitutes mushy illusion for sober reason. Walter Scott, the man who left a whole generation of Southerners thinking about the idyllic life and plantation agriculture, with its natural order of aristocracy and slavery. Walter Scott, the enemy of modernity, of technology and democracy. Is Twain off his rocker? Is he overplaying things for comic effect? Well, certainly he is. But as with much of Twain’s marvelous irony, it’s effective because there is so much truth in it. The Southerners did warp themselves into something very strange, both before the Civil War and in the decades afterwards. They embraced a vision of a world that never was: a world of a White southern gentility and aristocracy, built on the backs of a vile and brutish institution that they would wish into the margins. And Walter Scott stoked those fires. My first encounter with Scott came with a complete set of the Waverley novels, musty and Victorian, handed down from one generation of aspiring Southerners to the next. For the Southern culture that emerged early in the nineteenth century, Walter Scott was literature. Indeed, there wasn’t much else.

But Twain’s sentence is not half so damning as that of *Harper’s* editor-in-chief George William Curtis in the March 1891 edition. Curtis, one of the titans of the Republican party, and a speechwriter to several Republican presidents or presidential candidates, delivers a judgment based on a review of Scott’s *Journal.* He starts like I did in that strange pile at Abbotsford which is so close to Scott’s character—and particularly the irrational, imprudent part of it. Scott took out an enormous loan to buy and built this monstrocity, and it left him in financial peril throughout his life. But Curtis turns quickly to Thomas Carlyle, who was born and lived, like Scott, within a stone’s throw of the English frontier, but has come to reflect the essence of the Scottish character:

Whoever reads this Journal, as he lays it down, should take up Carlyle’s article on Scott published in the *Westminster Review* when Lockhart’s Life appeared. It is the estimate of the great Scotchman by the greatest Scotchman who followed him, and who belonged to the new era as distinctively as Scott to the old. There is no writing of Carlyle’s in which his human feeling and sympathy are more tenderly and beautifully expressed; and it is the more striking because the review is the first significant sign of the reaction against Scott. It is the judgment of a radical, inquisitive, serious, introspective age, to which Scott could seem only a pleasant minstrel and storyteller who had no “message to deliver.”

A man like Carlyle, who held that men had no business, in an earnest world, to be drivelling about happiness, and who laughed with Titanic scorn at those who, like the old smoke-jack, were always whining, “Once I was hap-hap-happy, now I am meeserable,” could find in Scott only a superficial and healthy good-nature, a childlike and unquestioning acquiescence in shallow and formal answers to the vital problems of life and destiny that ought to shake men’s souls with the effort of adequate explanation. Tales of chivalry and romances of the border, historical pictures of feudal England and the Crusades, were only lullabies of an indolent and careless age–sugar-candy for children, not strong meat for men. Confronted with the question, was Scott a great man? Carlyle, kindly, reluctantly, regretfully, answers, “he was a strong and healthy man.”

But what travail of the soul does he soothe? What inward pain does he allay? What spiritual thirst assuage? Shakespeare drops immortal balm upon the weary heart of man; Dante speaks to his inner want; Goethe mirrors the unrest and the aspiration of an intellectual age. But Scott, says Carlyle, tells romantic or touching tales of costume and manners; his figures are quaint clothes, not persons; he never touches the real springs of life.

A very harsh, and very fair assessment. Scott does not belong to the world of great literature. He is the forerunner of the Harlequin romance, what my old professors in Germany would have called *Trivialliteratur.* By putting Scott on a pedestal, far nobler and greater culture and values were swept away. Twain is correct on this point, and Curtis feels it too. It’s the values of the American Revolution that got pushed to the side.

No, Scott didn’t man the batteries that fired on Fort Sumter. He did far worse than that.

Works Cited

Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (1883)

George William Curtis, *The Editor’s Easy Chair*, [*Harper’s*, Mar. 1891](http://harpers.org/media/pages/1891/03/pdf/HarpersMagazine-1891-03-0065078.pdf)