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WALTER SCOTT AND PORTUGAL

by Maria Laura Bettencourt Pires

In his work *Chronicles of Canongate*, which was published in 1827 - therefore after he had already written some of his most famous novels, such as *Waverley: or 'tis Sixty Years Since* (1814), *Rob Roy* (1818), *Ivanhoe* (1820) and *Kenilworth* (1821) - Walter Scott expressed the desire that his work might be well known in Scotland, as we can see in the following quotation:

Now I am ambitious that my compositions, though having their origins in this valley of Holyrood, should not only be extended into those exalted regions I have mentioned [the new town] but also that they should cross the Forth, astonish the long town of Kirkcaldy, enchant the skippers and the colliers of East Fife, venture even into the classic arcades of St. Andrews, and travel as much farther to the North as the breath of applause will carry their sails.

Two hundred and fifty years later, we can now easily conclude that his wish was generously granted. For, in fact, the “breath of applause” to which he then referred took his fame not only to his native land, as he wanted, but also all over the world.

His influence was in fact greatly felt in Europe. His work being imitated practically in every country, such as Belgium, France, where he inspired such important writers as Victor Hugo and Merimée and Italy, where Manzoni, following his footsteps, became a famous historical novelist. In Germany, Goethe - besides mentioning *Waverley* - apparently used Scott's *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830) as an inspiration for a battle scene in his famous *Faust II*.

His vogue was also felt in Portugal not only in the area of fiction but also of poetry and drama. Some of the most important Portuguese romantic writers,

such as Alexandre Herculano and Almeida Garrett, were influenced by him. According to research done by Portuguese academics¹ his influence was so important that he can be considered as one of the “English muses” for our Romanticism.

Due to these circumstances, it is undeniable that he deserves the impressive place attributed to him in the history of European literature. On the other hand, Walter Scott’s fame and literary importance as the creator of a new *genre*, the historical novel, is such that he must be considered one of those authors that belong to the world literature .

In this field, we must refer that, besides the already mentioned Scottish influence in Europe, his vogue also reached the United States. In that country, it influenced such famous American writers as James Fenimore Cooper the popular author of the historical novels that constitute the “Leather-Stocking Series”, such as *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) and *The Deerslayer* (1841) - and Zane Grey, who contributed to the popularity of the figure of the cowboy thus initiating what would become a field of inspiration for the cinema.

From a cultural point of view, Scott’s work also inspired and influenced much of what can be considered as one of the most distinctive characteristics of American culture: the way of life and the gentle manners of the South. Indeed, Southern gentry, due to its social origins and traditions, lived much more according to British ways and fashions than the Northerners. It is well known that some plantation owners, besides spending long periods in England and sending their sons to study in British universities, even came to the point of organising tournaments. These “medieval games” were organised according to the descriptions read in Scott’s novels and Southern gentlemen participated in them in an active and sophisticated fashion. It is sometimes said that Southern concepts of honour - related, for instance, to the existence of duels - and even those of social hierarchy, implied in the acceptance of slavery, could also be part of the Scottian vogue in the South of the United States.

On the other hand, and almost in direct opposition to this view, according to some scholars, Scott’s work contributed to raise and promote interest for the culture of the people and to develop the consciousness of a national tradition. This movement was, however, already present since the beginning in the United States, or at least since the War of Independence that lasted from 1775 to 1783.

¹On this topic, see Lia Correia Raitt, *Garrett and the English Muse*, London: Tamesis Books Limited, 1983 and Maria Laura Bettencourt Pires, *Walter Scott e o Romantismo Português*, Lisboa: Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 1979.

We can wonder, again from a different perspective, if the American Revolution might have inspired Scott.

Some consider, and have often expressed the opinion, that Scott’s world fame was the result of the fact that his ideas corresponded to the so-called “spirit of the age”. However, the truth is that he is still famous and appreciated nowadays and what distinguishes a true work of art is the fact that it continues to exert its attraction for many centuries. When we consider Scott’s novels, we see that, nowadays, besides still being widely read, they even inspire popular films and television series, like, for instance, *Ivanhoe*. On the other hand, in our time, there are countless conferences all over the world whose topic is Scott’s work. Academics do much research and publish books that still study unknown aspects of his literary production.

During the 19th century, Walter Scott’s popularity can be attributed to the innovation he brought to British literature with the creation of a new literary genre, the historical novel. The author himself defined it thus:

The strong contrast produced by the opposition of ancient manners to those which are gradually subduing them, affords the lights and shadows necessary to give effect to a fictitious narrative.

It is undeniable that, in 1814 with the publication of *Waverley or 'tis Sixty Years Since*, a new era started in British fiction. Although several novels that could be classified as historical had been published before *Waverley*, Scott’s literary creation was indeed new because:

- it contained a detailed and realistic description of the environment,
- it promoted the readers’ interest for popular characters,
- it included dialogues in vernacular language,
- it reconstructed the past giving it historic meaning,
- Scott, besides having a romantic imagination, had historic erudition and a perfect knowledge of old habits and ways of dressing thus using History as a background for his plots.

Obviously, as we all know, every literary work is influenced by what was written before. Scott’s is no exception to this rule. He benefited, for instance, from works such as *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Gibbon. The good reception the historical novel had resulted also from the generalised vogue of interest for the Middle Ages. This vogue was evident in the taste for neo-gothic in architecture, that we can see, for instance, in the Houses of Parliament in London. The taste for things past was also created and developed by the

importance the antiquarians acquired in the British society, as Scott so well tells us about his character Mr Oldbuck in his novel *The Antiquary*.

The 'romantic' interpretation of the past paved the way for Scott's historical novel. On the other hand, a new conscience of the past was also caused in Europe by the social and historic conditions of the time, such as:

- the union of Scotland to the Crown of England
- the French Revolution and its consequent events
- the Industrial Revolution
- the increase of the number of readers
- the creation of "travelling" libraries

We must also mention other facts, such as:

- the public being already tired of reading gothic novels and anxious for something new
- Scott's being born in Scotland, one of the most romantic countries, with both beautiful and wild landscapes, that evoked the past, and where old traditions were still sung in popular poetry
- Scott's sense of humour.

I shall now focus with somewhat more detail on the question of Scott's influence in Portugal and try to explain the reasons for the vogue of the Scottish writer in my country. It was only after 1832, when the Portuguese exiles started returning from France and England, where they had been due to political reasons, that we had the beginning of a type of literary Romantic revolution in Portugal. The interests of the middle class or bourgeoisie became more generalised. Literature stopped being something produced only by the best for the best, "para raros apenas", as we say in Portuguese, that is, only for those belonging to the highest social classes. It started to show democratic tendencies and began describing the simple everyday life of the common people.

The contacts our writers and intellectuals established in France and England during their stay are often mentioned as the real causes of change. However the social and political conditions in the country also contributed to the modernisation of our literary world. Some Marxist scholars even say that, after the Civil War (1832-1834), it was only the triumph of the liberal principles that allowed the new literary doctrines to spread and be followed.

Anyhow - independently from which point of view you see the complexity of such a movement as Romanticism - it is undeniable that Scott is among the foreign writers who brought the new artistic tendencies to Portugal. We consider his name to be the most important due to his above referred characteristics and to the fact that the three most well-known Portuguese historical

novelists: Alexandre Herculano, Almeida Garrett and Rebelo da Silva, suffered the influence of the "Scottish bard", as Garrett called him.

Scott was certainly read by the Portuguese élite who were interested in literature and could read his work either in English or French. However, the far greater sections of the Portuguese public could only appreciate it after the first Portuguese translations were published. From then on everybody in Portugal seemed to have read and praised him.

The most popular magazines published long articles about his life and his popularity. Frequent references were made to the translations and to Scott's other works and to his biography in several of the most important magazines of the time, such as *Correio das Damas* and *Revista Universal Lisbonense* and there are countless quotations and references to Walter Scott in the Portuguese press. Therefore, as I said somewhere else, it is difficult to select the texts that will best demonstrate how appreciated he was in Portugal. He was called "the father of the historical novel", "the king of novelists", "the first English novelist", "immortal Walter Scott". His fame was such that a society, entitled "*Sociedade Propagadora de Conhecimentos Uteis*", was created with the sole objective of publishing the translations of his works. To have an idea of the importance of this society we need only to consider that, besides having among its members the most famous names of the literary scene of the time, such as Alexandre Herculano, Almeida Garrett and Castilho, the King, D. Pedro V himself, was also a member. During my research about Scott's vogue in Portugal, I could verify that, besides those who occasionally translated some of his novels, there were at least three translators who devoted their time exclusively to Scott's works. Due to the popularity of the novels, there are even different translations of the same novel thus enabling us to make comparisons.

It is also worth mentioning that Walter Scott himself seemed also interested in Portugal. He must have been aware of our sufferings during the Peninsular War and Napoleon's occupation of the country for, in 1811, when he composed the poem *The Vision of Don Roderick*, he dedicated it to the "Committee of Subscribers for the Relief of the Portuguese Sufferers". This poem inspired Southey for his famous poem *Don Roderick*, written in 1814, and which is also about Roderick, (Rodrigo) the last Goth.

In his poetry, Scott is even more romantic than in his novels. Garrett, in his work entitled *O Romanceiro*, recognises this situation when he says:

"... muito antes do nomeado escocês já tinha havido tentativas para nacionalizar a poesia... mas a verdadeira restauração da poesia dos trovadores e menestrelis, sem questão nem disputa, só Walter Scott a fez popular na Europa".

In his preface to *O Romanceiro*, Garrett declares repeatedly how much he feels himself in debt to Scott. He points out the importance of the "Scottish bard" for the evolution and modernisation of Portuguese poetry, that he thinks has been for a long time the preferred form of literary expression in Portugal.

Scott's vogue was also felt in the field of drama and opera. Most of the operas inspired by his work, like, for instance, *O Pirata* (1842), *Lucia de Lammermoor* (1843) *O Templário* (1843), were presented in Portugal. On the other hand, when we consider the area of fiction, we must mention Alexandre Herculano and his historical novels, like *O Monge* and *Eurico, O Presbítero*. Here, obviously, the name of the author of *Waverley* immediately comes to mind. Almeida Garrett, with his work entitled *Arco de Sant'ana*, together with many other novelists - such as Rebelo da Silva, who was also a professor of history and who wrote, among other novels, *A Mocidade de D. João V* with their choice of plots occurring in far away epochs, mysterious "cavaleiros negros", evoking the Black Knight in *Ivanhoe*, "donzelas de formas aéreas", like Herculano's Hermengarda, who so much reminds us of the "White Lady", Scott's unforgettable angelic heroine, are ample proof of what I have been trying to illustrate.

I made some brief references to the influence of the political context on our Romantic literature. But Scott and his work besides bringing something new to the literary field in Portugal also benefited from the fact that it came at the right time. Portuguese society was then in great need of evasion from the harsh realities and wanted desperately to escape into the past. The Middle Ages, with its monuments, legends, superstitions and mysteries, and the colourful tournaments and battles, filled this need. In a way, this explains the reception of Scott's works and his strong influence on Portuguese Romantic literature.

We can even go further and consider Scott's influence on the works of such nineteenth century great writers as Camilo de Castelo Branco (with his historical novel *O Judeu*), Eça de Queirós (with his novel *A Ilustre Casa de Ramires*) and, obviously, Ramalho Ortigão (*Lendas e Narrativas* written in collaboration with Eça). Following this line of thought, we could thus even, nowadays, refer also the famous novelist José Saramago, who won so many prizes, with his *Memorial do Convento* and other historical novels.

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Maria Laura Bettencourt is a Professor at the Open University and has dedicated herself to Anglo Portuguese studies for many years. She is an expert on Beckford and has contributed to the British Historical Society by giving talks and writing articles for the Annual Reports.