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## Margaret Wolfit

### DEARLY BELOVED SCOTT

When Mary Ann Evans was seven years old, her elder sister Chrissie was lent a copy of *Waverley*. Unfortunately, the book had to be returned before Mary Ann had finished reading it: this distressed her greatly, and she began to write out the story herself.

Maggie Tulliver, in *The Mill on the Floss*, says of Scott's novel *The Pirate*,

'Oh, I began it once. I read to where Minna is walking with Cleveland and I could never get to read the rest. I went on with it in my own head, and I made several endings - but they were all unhappy ....'<sup>1</sup>

In the summer of 1871, at the time of Scott's centenary, Marian (as she now called herself) wrote to Alexander Main that she worshipped Scott, tracing her first reading back to when she was seven years old and saying how she had read Scott to her father, thus comforting his last years. She added 'No other writer would serve as a substitute for Scott and my life at that time would have been much more difficult without him. It is a personal grief - a heart wound to me when I hear a depreciating or slighting word about Scott'.<sup>2</sup> It is clear that he was the writer who first fired her imagination as a child and remained, indeed, an inspiration and influence throughout her life.

During her first year at the Misses Franklin's school in Coventry (she was then thirteen) Mary Ann read Bulwer Lytton's *Devereux* and probably much of Scott, who was writing until his death in 1832. Later, in her early twenties, she wrote rather pompously to her friend and early mentor, Maria Lewis, about Scott's life as depicted by his biographer Lockhart that 'all biography is interesting and instructive. Sir Walter Scott himself is the best commentary on the effect of romances and novels. He sacrificed almost his integrity for the sake of acting out the character of the Scotch Laird, which he had so often depicted'.<sup>3</sup>

She became more radical when she moved to Coventry with her father and met Charles and Cara Bray. Their influence brought about a marked change in her ideas: at one point they took her to visit the *Waverley* country, while among the interesting people she met at their home was James Simpson, an old friend of Scott's and a champion of free elementary education. Scott's father had been a 'high and dry' Calvinist, but his son 'early put behind him Calvinism and all that it implied, he disliked the intense preoccupation of a man with his own soul which imported evangelicalism from England and detested the new industrialism'.<sup>4</sup>

Mary Ann caused her father great distress when she refused to go to church with him, and the result was a Holy War between them. To the inquiry of a friend in later years as to what influence helped to change her orthodox views, she replied 'Oh, Walter Scott's.' It is ironical that the novelist whose work both father and daughter had read together with such

love and enjoyment should also have been the cause of so much anguish in the family. Was it in a mood of revenge and exasperation that Robert Evans left, in his will, his volumes of Scott not to Mary Ann, as one would have supposed, but to his eldest daughter Fanny by his first marriage?

In July 1854 Marian Evans went to Weimar with G. H. Lewes as his mistress. Lewes was collecting material for a life of Goethe. The latter had been a great admirer of Scott, praising him as a great artist who wrote so clearly and truly about those experiences of life on which he, Goethe, had meditated for so long. When he re-read *Waverley* in his old age he felt constrained to place it alongside the best things that had ever been written in the world. The admiration was mutual. As early as 1788 Scott had begun to study German literature via the influence of the Edinburgh Royal Society, and he subsequently translated Goethe's *Gotz von Berlichingen*.<sup>5</sup> This was the first work to carry Scott's name: ironically, he toured the continent in his last years but did not get to see Goethe, who died while Scott was in Naples. Scott is reported to have said 'He at least died at home'.

When Lewes and Marian returned from Germany they settled in lodgings at Richmond. Marian wrote articles in order to make money, and Scott was never far from her mind. She wrote to Charles Bray on 7 May 1855 that she required 'my dear old friend, Walter Scott's novels', in a handy edition because she was going to write an article for *Frazer's* magazine. She asked Bray to lend her 'your two volumed double columned edition'. A few months later, in September, she returned it, noting that she had read *Old Mortality* and *The Fair Maid of Perth* to George, who 'was too ill to listen to anything else'.<sup>6</sup> One wonders what Marian's memories and feelings were as she read to the sick George the novels that had meant so much to her father and herself. It is hard to imagine Robert Evans approving his daughter's choice of a husband.

Marian was now loved and cared for, and the result was the emergence of the novelist George Eliot. Lewes sent her first manuscript ('Amos Barton') to the Edinburgh publisher John Blackwood, who proved to be a kind and tactful friend to George Eliot. It is fascinating that Blackwood should be the publisher chosen by Lewes. Resident in Edinburgh, Scott's experience with this well-known publishing family had been somewhat different. John Buchan, one of Scott's biographers, says that Scott disliked Blackwood's father. He was taken to the splendid Blackwood shop in Princes Street, but 'was a little shy of the "Maga" group and he was not attracted by Blackwood's blunt manner and the steady grey eyes under the shaggy brows - yet had he been in Blackwood's hands rather than Constable's his fate might well have been different, for the former was the canniest mind in the book trade, one who would never venture where he could not comfortably retreat'.<sup>7</sup>

Scott's association with *his* publisher ended in financial disaster: Lewes chose well, for he and Marian were sorely in need of money, and George Eliot's association with *her* publisher was both lucrative and long-standing.

There is another connection of interest. Scott's first novel *Waverley* was published anonymously. He wrote to a friend:

I shall not own 'Waverley' - my chief reason is that it would prevent me of the pleasure of writing again. In truth, I am not sure it would be considered quite decorous of me as a Clerk of Sessions to write novels.<sup>8</sup>

He kept his anonymity for seven years. His best critic J. L. Adolphus, wrote an amusing exposé to Richard Heber comparing the poet to the novelist with this quotation from *Twelfth Night*: 'An apple cleft in two is not more like than these two creatures'.

Marian hid herself behind a *nom-de-plume*. A woman living with a married man was reason enough for maintaining her anonymity for as long as possible, but when her work was attributed to one Liggins it became necessary to reveal her secret. The parallel with Scott did not escape her own notice, and she told Cara Bray in a letter that posterity might accept Liggins as the author:

Why not! A man a little while ago wrote a pamphlet to prove that the 'Waverley Novels' were chiefly written not by Walter Scott - but by Thomas Scott and his wife Elizabeth: the main evidence being that several people thought Thomas Scott cleverer than Walter . . . . The writer expected to get a great reputation by his pamphlet.<sup>9</sup>

On January 1st 1860 George gave Marian an inscribed set of the Waverley novels, 'To Marian Evans Lewes - the Best of Novelists and Wives - these works of her longest venerated and best loved Romanticist are given by her grateful husband'.<sup>10</sup> Marian now considered that George loved Scott as much as she did.

When *The Mill on the Floss* was published in 1860 Marian's identity was known, but it did not affect the success of the book. In the first three weeks 5,600 copies were sold, and immediate comparisons were made with the sale of the Waverley novels. While she was working out the plot for *Romola* she re-read *The Pirate*, in order to examine Scott's treatment of history. Ironically *Romola*, the only one of her works not published by Blackwood, was her least successful novel.

In the summer of 1871 George Eliot was among the notable guests invited to sit at the Head table to celebrate the centenary Festival of Scott's birth in Edinburgh. She told Cara Bray 'I worship Scott so devoutly that I leaped foolishly with a consent to go to Edinburgh feeling that I should have a good happy cry', but she was critical of what might happen and, fearful, asked Lewes to write to the committee withdrawing.<sup>11</sup> Instead she celebrated Scott's birthday quietly by working on *Middlemarch*. I like to think that it was on that day that she wrote the sonnet which appears as the epigraph to chapter 57, in which she celebrates the genius of the man who inspired her:

They numbereth scarce eight summers when a name  
 Rose on their souls and stirred such motions there  
 As thrill the buds and shape their hidden frame  
 At penetration of the quickening air:  
 His name who told of loyal Evan Dhu,  
 Of quaint Bradwardine, and Vich Ian Vor,  
 Making the little world their childhood knew  
 Large with a land of mountain, lake, and scaur,  
 And larger yet with wonder, love, belief  
 Toward Walter Scott, who living far away  
 Sent them this wealth of joy and noble grief.  
 The book and they must part, but day by day,  
 In lines that thwart like portly spiders ran,  
 They wrote the tale, from Tully Veolan.

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## Notes

1. Quoted in *George Eliot: A Biography*, by Gordon S. Haight (Oxford 1968), 7. (Hereafter *Haight*)
2. *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven, 1954-78) V,175 (Hereafter *Letters*)
3. *Letters* I, 24
4. John Buchan, *Sir Walter Scott*(1932), 47 (Hereafter *Buchan*)
5. *Buchan*, 57
6. *Letters* II, 200, 201, 215
7. *Buchan* 213
8. *Buchan* 122
9. *Letters* III, 171
10. Quoted in *Haight* 319
11. Quoted in *Haight*, 439.