

# THE VICTORIAN NOVEL HISTORICAL 1840-1880



ANDREW SANDERS

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*To my mother and father*

# Preface

To all intents and purposes the historical novel sprang to life, fully accoutred and mature, with the appearance of *Waverley* in 1814, to be followed in fecund succession by the twenty-eight stories, not all of them historical, known collectively as the 'Waverley novels'. As any student of literature knows, Scott's impact on European culture was immense, for a time exceeding even Shakespeare's, and it proved to have an influence that was as popular as it was lasting. Scott alerted his readers to history and, by looking at politics, society, regionalism, or landscape in a new way, he made them aware of the vital links between the past and the present. If Scott's art now seems hard to appreciate as fervently as the Victorians appreciated it, if it now strikes us as stiff or impenetrable, it is still generally acknowledged that *Waverley* gave the European novel profitable new bearings. Nevertheless, as Scott's international reputation has declined this century, so, unfortunately, has the critical prestige of many of the historical novels written by his admiring, and often greater, successors.

Historical fiction remained in vogue throughout the European world for most of the nineteenth century; from Fenimore Cooper and Hawthorne in the far West, to Pushkin and Tolstoi in the East; from Galdos in Spain, to Sienkiewicz in Poland; from Manzoni in Italy, to Dumas, Hugo, Merimée, Balzac and Flaubert in France. 'Only historical novels are tolerable because they teach history', Flaubert wrote sardonically in the *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, commenting on a common enough bourgeois prejudice. But, as an acquaintance with *Salammbô* might suggest, comparatively few historical novels of the period actually set out to teach history; most were directed by their authors at the same audience, with the same moral presuppositions, as stories dealing with contemporary life. They may have been more exotic in their subject matter, and they certainly required specialist research on the novelist's part, but their prestige and their steady popularity were founded on the same principles of good story-telling, 'high-seriousness', and social and

psychological realism. To both readers and writers, history added a vital dimension to the proper concerns of the present.

This book does not set out to offer a survey of the variety and range of nineteenth-century historical fiction, nor does it attempt to be definitive. It confines itself to England, and to the fifty years following Scott's death. More precisely, it examines critically a select number of novels, written more or less under Scott's influence, between 1840 and 1880, and it places its main emphases on works by the great mid-century writers: Dickens and Thackeray, George Eliot and Mrs Gaskell. It omits reference to Trollope's early and inconsequential *La Vendée*, and it looks at one of Harrison Ainsworth's enduringly popular, and extravagant, stories rather than at one of the now forgotten G. P. R. James's. I have chosen to deal with one late novel by Scott's dourest Victorian successor, Bulwer-Lytton, but not with Frederick Marryat, any of Charles Lever's excursions into history, nor with R. D. Blackmore's *Lorna Doone*. I consider two novels by the now neglected Charles Kingsley in two separate chapters, though in the first I deal with *Hyperborea* together with Catholic novels provoked by its unflattering picture of the early Church. In concluding with Hardy's *The Trumpet-Major* of 1880, I stop short of the best historical novels of R. L. Stevenson, and of both Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* and Shorthouse's *John Inglesant*. I have taken as my starting-point the sub-title to *Waverley* — 'Tis Sixty Years Since — and I have looked exclusively at novels which deal with a period anterior to a novelist's own lifetime. Thus, I have a chapter on *Romola* rather than one on *Middlemarch*, and I have not discussed Meredith's Italian stories, *Sandra Belloni* and *Vittoria*, which have sometimes been regarded as historical novels. My introductory chapter is meant purely as an introduction; my real argument is contained in the chapters which follow. The brief discussion of Charles Reade's *The Cloister and the Hearth* in the introductory chapter attempts to view the novel as representative of much of the once popular and acclaimed, but to us unfocused, historical fiction of the period.

Appropriately enough, this study was provoked by a past controversy on the relationship between literature and history. If, to E. H. Carr, history is the study of causes, I have become persuaded that historical novels consider historical effects.

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*Birkbeck College*  
*October 1977*

ANDREW SANDERS

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# I Introduction

History may be servitude,  
History may be freedom. See, now they vanish,  
The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,  
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.

T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*

‘Consider History’, Carlyle told his readers in 1833, ‘with the beginnings of it stretching dimly into the remote Time; emerging darkly out of the mysterious Eternity: the end of it enveloping *us* at this hour, whereof we at this hour, both as actors and relators, form part!’<sup>1</sup> The nineteenth century was an acutely historical age; it believed in the efficacy of the study of the past; it avidly collected the relics and the art of the past; and it rejoiced, just as Carlyle did, in the idea of being enveloped by Time, past, present, and future. If the century witnessed change on an unprecedented scale, in society and politics as much as in science and invention, a good deal of its art and its thought looked back, sometimes nostalgically, to traditions and to alternative forms. To confident European apologists for the age it was a century of progress, and the idea of progress was to be tested by a reconsideration and a resifting of all that had gone before to shape the attitudes and ideas of the present. To Carlyle history moved in cycles, each one moved into the next by the Hero, representative of the will of the times. In the labyrinthine sentences of an equally influential thinker, Hegel, history was the unfolding of Spirit (*Geist*):

The principle of *Development* involves also the existence of a latent germ of being – a capacity or potentiality striving to realise itself. This formal conception finds actual existence in Spirit; which has the History of the World for its theatre, its possession, and the sphere of its realization. It is not of such a nature as to be tossed to and fro amid the superficial play of accidents, but it is rather the absolute arbiter of things; entirely unmoved by contingencies, which, indeed, it applies and manages for its own pur-

poses. . . . The goal of attainment we determined at the outset: it is Spirit in its *completeness*, in its essential nature, *i.e.*, Freedom. This is development – that whereby it receives meaning and importance. . . .<sup>2</sup>

Hegel's notion of a 'dialectic of transition' can be paralleled, less complexly, by a wide range of European thinkers and popularisers of other people's thought. Once it could be argued and accepted that the present had grown by a reasonable and organic process out of the past, the actual study of history became the necessary inheritance of every good citizen, no longer just the preserve of Dr Jonas Dryasdust. History was 'not only the fittest study, but the only study, and includes all others whatsoever', it was 'the true Epic poem, and universal Divine Scripture'.<sup>3</sup> Revolutions had been brought about by revivals before, by Florentine humanists and Stuart lawyers looking at the future through the spectacles of precedent, but men of the nineteenth century saw themselves caught up in the forward movement of time by the very fact of their being debtors to the acts and monuments of their ancestors. Their present had an extra significance because it had a lineage and because it appeared to form part of an observable process. Hegel's idea of development could be married to Darwinian evolutionary theory, or, more crudely, to the outward and visible signs of change in any industrialised nation. Regardless of the fact that the concept was condemned by Pope Pius IX, and the very word 'progress' banned by Tsar Nicholas I, rational observation seemed to prove the idea valid. To Macaulay, writing in 1835, the history of England was 'emphatically the history of progress . . . the history of a constant movement of the public mind, of a constant change in the institutions of a great society'.<sup>4</sup> European man was on the move, industrially, colonially, and intellectually, and the study of history was called upon to justify his aggressive movement.

Historical fiction had a particular appeal to a progressive age, though its roots lay deep in the history of European literature and civilisation. To the Jews, history had special meaning and importance as the record of a divine mission in the past, and as a perpetual reminder of the continuance of that mission into the future. Christian Europe inherited the prejudice that history would prove it right, despite temporary persecution or natural disaster; the Creator was the Alpha and the Omega, the beginner and the finisher of Time, and human history had a pivotal centre in the fact of the Incarnation, the

crossing of a divine with a human dimension. The New Testament ends with a plea for the speedy return of Christ as the Pantocrator at the end of Time. The Jewish sense of a past that cannot be abandoned was inherited by a Church looking to the new Jerusalem from the ruins of the old and, despite periodic rifts in the Christian tradition, the idea of a future worked out with reference to the past remained a constant in both conservative and radical interpretations of Scripture. If Byzantine and Holy Roman Emperors saw their rule as statically prefiguring a perfect and eternal order, sixteenth-century Reformers were to assert that they broke the mould of an erring Church only to restore a primitive model.

Of all the great Roman writers, Virgil had most appealed to Christian sensibilities, often so intolerant of the pagan past, largely because of his sense of the epic, progressive sweep of history and its movement towards fulfilment. Aeneas's vision of the future of Rome is awarded to him amongst the shades of his ancestors, but his role in Virgil's epic scheme also resembles the Judaeo-Christian concept of a predestined redeemer realising ancient prophecy. The Virgil of the *Eclogues* had been equally open to sympathetic Christian adoption. The Church had come to see its own role as that of the guardian of the relics of the old *Imperium*; the Empire had been sanctioned by God in order to allow for the easy spread of the Gospel. To St Augustine, if Rome fell to the Barbarians, its fall suggested that the new Rome, like the new Jerusalem, existed as the celestial city of God. The classical epic, therefore, became available – like the chronicles of the Jews – for new interpretation, while retaining its old authority.

With the Renaissance and the Reformation a growing sense of nationhood demanded a modern epic in the vernacular, expressive either of national or religious aspiration. The epic strain endured a metamorphosis into the novel, and especially into the historical novel, whether on the grand Russian scale, as in *War and Peace*, or as the focus of patriotic or spiritual hopes, as in the novels of Manzoni or Sienkiewicz, or even as George Eliot's *Romola* (where the heroine's name suggests her epic role). Virgil had glimpsed time moving forward, and he saw its direction sanctioned by the Roman hegemony; European novelists of the nineteenth century were less sure of their bearings, but they looked for meaning in realism, and in giving substance to the men of the past, by studying the forces moulding human society. They were no longer intent on clothing legend with flesh; they saw themselves instead as observers and recorders, or, in Carlyle's terms, as 'actors and relators' of history.

The past was no longer vaguely peopled with giants and heroes; it could be seen in the same terms as the present, with a hero's quest determined by knowable and reasonably familiar circumstances. James Joyce was later to see myth '*sub specie temporis nostri*'; Victorian historical novelists attempted to do the same with history, but they were also attempting to see the entire course of history '*sub specie aeternitatis*', ever present and eternal, and 'enveloping us at this hour'.

To many nineteenth-century critics the European novel had come of age with the work of Sir Walter Scott, the first major novelist to have transcended what were regarded as the limitations of a picaresque or a domestic tradition by seeing man as a diverse, noble, historic animal, more aware of himself by reference to the historic forces that had moulded him. As Scott himself had remarked in the postscript to *Waverley*, we are like those 'who drift down the stream of a deep and smooth river', unaware of the progress we have made 'until we fix our eye on the now distant point from which we have been drifted'.<sup>5</sup> To Hazlitt, on the defensive in 1825, Scott's novels seemed 'almost like a new edition of human nature', while to Heine in 1837, Scott 'effected a revolution, or rather a restoration, in novel-writing'.<sup>6</sup> To Balzac, prefacing his own *Comédie Humaine* in 1842, Scott seemed to have discovered the key to rendering 'the drama of three or four thousand people who make up society interesting'; the *Waverley* novels, he added, had raised fiction 'to the philosophical worth of history'.<sup>7</sup> Even Carlyle, not a determined admirer of fiction, felt obliged to admit that 'these Historical Novels have taught all men this truth . . . that the bygone ages of the world were actually filled by living men, not by protocols, state-papers, controversies and abstractions of men'.<sup>8</sup>

To Macaulay, however, Scott had changed not just the novel, but the very way in which history ought to be written. In its 'ideal state of perfection' history was a compound of poetry and philosophy, but with Scott the poetry of historical romance had triumphed to the detriment of the historian's philosophy:

To make the past present, to bring the distant near, to place us in the society of a great man or on the eminence which overlooks the field of a mighty battle, to invest with the reality of human flesh and blood beings whom we are too much inclined to consider as personified qualities in an allegory, to call up our ancestors before us with all their peculiarities of language, manners, and garb, to

show us over their houses, to seat us at their tables, to rummage their old-fashioned wardrobes, to explain the uses of their ponderous furniture, these parts of the duty which properly belongs to the historian have been appropriated by the historical novelist.<sup>9</sup>

Scott had in fact made the novel not just morally serious, in Defoe's or Richardson's sense, but socially serious; not merely an entertainment, but an entertaining educator. He had not simply poached on the historian's demesne, however much the admiring but vexed Macaulay may have thought he did, he had broadened the scope of the novel by developing existing strains in eighteenth-century thought and literature, and by reconsidering precedents, above all the precedents of the epic tradition and the plays of Shakespeare. The power of the Waverley novels, as it struck Scott's admirers, lay not in what he had resurrected in history, but in how and why he had given it new life. Scott had learnt to shape his material according to the philosophical principles of the Scottish Enlightenment, but he learnt his craft as a writer from his inheritance from the Classics and, above all, from the plays of Shakespeare.<sup>10</sup>

Shakespeare's use — though to a conventional historian it might be seen as abuse — of history had been highly selective and had required both a telescoping of events and frequent inventive addition, but it had proved dramatically effective and supremely influential. If, to the Romantics, Shakespeare had emerged as an English equivalent to the Greek and Roman epic poets, his work had also served to mould English attitudes to national history and had shaped the prejudice that historical compromise had softened the impact of tragic circumstance. Henry IV's troubled reign stems from Bolingbroke's deposition of his predecessor, but his kingship counters the divisions dating back to Richard II's lack of control; the victories of Henry V redeem the old sin of usurpation, though the chaos made by his heirs requires a strong dynasty to bring about a new compromise and order. The closing speech of the consistently popular *Life and Death of King Richard III* had pointed the idea:

O, now, let Richmond and Elizabeth,  
The true succeders of each royal house,  
By God's fair ordinance conjoin together;  
And let their heirs (God, if thy will be so)

Enrich the time to come with smooth-fac'd peace,  
 With smiling plenty, and fair prosperous days.  
 Abate the edge of traitors, gracious Lord,  
 That would reduce these bloody days again,  
 And make poor England weep in streams of blood.  
 Let them not live to taste this land's increase,  
 That would with treason wound this fair land's peace.  
 Now civil wounds are stopp'd, peace lives again:  
 That she may long live here, God say amen.

History unfolds violently in Shakespeare's history plays, but a recognition of the need for order and the blessings of peace leads the kingdom towards a reconciling balance; Richmond's succession as Henry VII is viewed as a confirmation of the power of healing, not as a further usurpation, and England returns the Amen he directs to heaven at the end of the play. Like an Aeneas, blessed by the gods and his earthly father, Richmond, blessed by a Christian heaven and the saintly Henry VI, goes on to found a strong dynasty and to cast the kingdoms old into another mould.

Though the centre of the History Plays is held by the court characters, Shakespeare had increasingly shown the politics of the court affecting a broad spectrum of society beyond Westminster, even indicating that sound government was partly dependent upon popular assent to the throne. The themes of the Histories are to some extent echoed in the more political Comedies and in the Tragedies, where a decisive battle or a dynastic marriage can bring opposing forces to a point of rest or synthesis. Tudor and Stuart England, we sense, was to see a present lesson in the representation of its various and vexed past on the stage.

Scott shared with Shakespeare a dread of disorder and a *prédilection d'artiste* for describing the social perils of disorder. Like Shakespeare, he generally shows himself politically and morally conservative while being supremely able to evoke and understand the passions which divide nations, classes, families and friends. It was by no means casually that Scott chose as the motto to *Waverley* a quotation from *Henry IV, Part 2* – 'Under which king, Bezonian? Speak or die!' – a quotation which served his purpose in suggesting both his own debt to Shakespeare and in announcing the fact that his tale was to discuss the divisions caused by a disputed royal succession. The line is Pistol's, and it is addressed harmlessly enough to Justice Shallow in his Gloucestershire garden, but it indicates, with a whiff of violence and

bravado, that court affairs *do* touch the ordinary citizen and his fortunes. It was Shakespeare's balance of public and private worlds, and his mixing of historical with invented, but representative, characters in the History Plays which taught Scott most, and which, through Scott, helped to determine much of the later development of the Victorian novel. Shakespeare's movement to peaceful compromise gave Scott a suggestion of his own dialectic shape for a story; Shakespeare's diversity of characterisation helped Scott to work out his own mix of classes and parties.

The often melancholy influence of Shakespeare on nineteenth-century drama is familiar enough from the failures it produced, like Tennyson's or Keats's attempts at poetical theatre, and from its partial successes like Schiller's *Don Carlos* or Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*, but Shakespeare's influence on the Victorian historical novel was both more consistent and more productive. The History Plays, and particularly the Henry IV plays, had depicted popular life; although the king remains the fount of justice and order, as well as the crowned national figurehead, he is by no means the chief centre of interest in the plays named after him. An audience might well find Prince Hal more immediate and complex, Hotspur more starkly a man of the times, or a Falstaff or a Shallow more rounded and actively appealing. The play as a whole, however, leads us to appreciate the nature of rule, and the responsibility shared by the ruler and the ruled. Hal, free of the deadening restriction of the court, is given an education which prepares him for the burden which has fallen so heavily on his father, and we see him as his father's successor, knowing both himself and those he governs. The England of the History Plays is glimpsed earning its living, or at leisure, even while it is troubled or galvanised by civil or foreign wars. In the generation before Scott's, Dr Johnson had been quite fulsome in his praise of Shakespeare's achievement:

None of Shakespeare's plays are more read than the *First and Second Parts of Henry the Fourth*. Perhaps no author has ever in two plays afforded so much delight. The great events are interesting, for the fate of the kingdoms depends upon them; the slighter occurrences are diverting, and, except one or two, sufficiently probable; the incidents are multiplied with wonderful fertility of invention, and the characters diversified with the utmost nicety of discernment, and the profoundest skill in the nature of man.<sup>11</sup>

It is interesting to contrast Johnson's appreciation of Shakespeare

with Henry James's tribute to Sir Walter Scott:

Before him no prose-writer had exhibited so vast and rich an imagination: it had not, indeed, been supposed that in prose the imaginative faculty was capable of such extended use. Since Shakespeare, no writer had created so immense a gallery of portraits, nor, on the whole, had any portraits been so lifelike. Men and women, for almost the first time out of poetry, were presented in their habits as they lived. The Waverley characters were all instinct with something of the poetic fire . . . Scott was a born story-teller: we can give him no higher praise.<sup>12</sup>

James, like so many of his contemporaries, saw nothing incongruous in linking Scott's name to Shakespeare's. The Victorians over-rated Scott's genius perhaps because they were too awed by its presence to be able to place it in any less flattering perspective. Scott had influenced them all too much, from childhood onwards, for them to doubt his authority as the *fons et origo* of much of their art and literature. They were nevertheless correct in the assumption that Scott *was* Shakespearean in his balance of comic and tragic elements, and in his mixing of love and resignation, of disaster and blessing, and in his sense of history as immanent. His characters are moved not by the fates or the stars, but by their psychological, social and historical selves. Like Prince Hal, most of Scott's characters undergo an educative process, moving among the very men and women affecting, or affected by, the system of order in the state; they grow in understanding, and they grasp and interpret the world around them. Scott's most original and important innovation was his perception that environment shapes the human consciousness, and his novels brought it forcibly home to his readers that characters are the product of the landscapes, townscapes and social groups which have formed them. Ultimately, the Waverley novels lack the breadth of Shakespeare's invention, his poetry, and the variety of his response to a subject from play to play, but, as James argued, Scott had given the prose fiction of the nineteenth century a new seriousness and purpose. The impact of Scott's understanding of the nature of man and society was to point the Victorian novel towards social realism, and Victorian thinkers to a greater awareness of social responsibility.

Despite the sharp decline in Scott's critical reputation in this century, the Waverley novels have not lacked powerful friends and com-



mitted advocates, notable amongst them being Georg Lukács, a critic himself moulded by his study of Hegel and Marx. To Lukács, Scott's art is both progressive and in a true sense revolutionary, structured on the economic and ideological basis of the European reaction to the Revolution in France. Scott's inherent conservatism, which Lukács readily acknowledges, is seen as giving him a special kind of objectivity as a social critic, for by studying conflict, and by seeking to balance political opposites, Scott emerges as a dialectical thinker looking forward to Hegel and Marx. To Lukács, the 'classical form of the historical novel' evolved by Scott shows a real understanding of the 'progressive' nature of a compromise which leads to evolution, Hegel's 'dialectic of transition':

He attempts by fathoming historically the whole of English development to find a 'middle way' for himself between warring extremes. He finds in English history the consolation that the most violent vicissitudes of class struggle have always finally calmed down into a glorious 'middle way'. Thus, out of the struggle of the Saxons and Normans there arose the English nation, neither Saxon nor Norman; in the same way the bloody Wars of the Roses gave rise to the illustrious reign of the House of Tudor, especially that of Queen Elizabeth; and those class struggles which manifested themselves in the Cromwellian Revolution were finally evened out in the England of today, after a long period of uncertainty and civil war, by the 'Glorious Revolution' and its aftermath.<sup>13</sup>

Scott's conservative 'middle way' allows for a broad view which stretches panoramically from Scotland, through England, to Europe beyond. But the essence of his compromise lies in his use of what Lukács styles a 'neutral' hero, a figure caught up, like Edward Waverley, in a political crisis, and coming into immediate contact with men and causes which represent the extremes of political division. The neutral hero stands as the representative of society as a whole, and is able to learn from the extremes he sees and from the humanised historical figures he meets, not as heroes but as men among men.

Lukács is a forceful apologist, despite the fact that his analysis tends to distort or under-rate the work of Scott's major successors in the English tradition. He sees the historical novel as the recorder of social evolution and of 'the life of the people' and he is led to trace a line running through Stendhal, Balzac and Tolstoi rather than one which can readily accommodate a Dickensian or Thackerayan dissent or