

ISSN: 0976-8165

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English

BI-MONTHLY REFEREED AND INDEXED, OPEN ACCESS E-JOURNAL

The Criterion



October 2014 Vol. 5, Issue-5

5th Year of Open Access



Editor-In-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Mrs. Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>

Historical Imagination and Anachronism in Walter Scott's *The Heart of Midlothian*

Darsha Jani

Head, Department of English
Municipal Arts & Urban Bank Science College, Mehsana
North Gujarat.

Abstract:

Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), an eminent historical novelist who hailed from Edinburgh, the capital city of Scotland, established himself as a writer of great repute and distinction through his invaluable contribution to the genre of historical novel in English literature. Rightly called the 'Father of Regional and Historical Novel in English literature', Scott accorded a proper form and shape to the historical novel. It is his art of skillful manipulation of events and inculcation of splendid imagination that the past relived in its resplendent colours in his novels with the result that his novels emerged as vibrant, animated and magnificent pieces of literature.

The present paper focusses on the noticeable alterations in the facts of history that Scott has made while dealing with the original story in his most distinguished novel *The Heart of Midlothian*. The emphasis is on the fact that in spite of many anachronisms and deviations from the historical truth, the novel produces an ennobling impression on the mind of the reader and his experience of reading turns out to be all the more captivating and engrossing.

Keywords: anachronism, historical novelist, deviation, Tolbooth and Porteous riots

Introduction

Sir Walter Scott is considered to be the prime architect of historical novels in English literature on account of his prodigious skill of romanticizing the dry historical events and presenting them in invigorating and exhilarating manner. In his well-known novel, *The Heart of Midlothian*, Scott has made sweeping changes in the original story and the bearings of historical personages but the final outcome of the novel is impressive and absorbing. Such deviations are the prerogative of a historical novelist because his aim in writing a historical novel is not to depict the facts of history but to present them in an innovative manner; by embellishing them with prismatic colours of his imagination. Baker rightly remarks: "To present and interpret facts is the historian's business; to summon up a past epoch, to show men and women alive in it and behaving as they must have behaved in the circumstances, is the labour and joy of the genuine historical novelist". (Baker: 99) The attempt has been to show how in the present novel *The Heart of Midlothian*, Sir Walter Scott in spite of making conspicuous alterations in the facts of history has been able to produce an attention catching and fascinating piece of work.

Historical Background of *The Heart of Midlothian*

The Heart of Midlothian is the seventh of Sir Walter Scott's Waverley Novels and is considered one of the finest novels written by him. The title of the book refers to the Old Tolbooth Prison in Edinburgh, Scotland (pulled down in 1815), at the time in the heart of the Scottish country of

Midlothian. The historical backdrop was the event known as the Porteous Riots. In 1736, a riot broke out in Edinburgh over the execution of two smugglers. The Captain of the City Guards, Captain John Porteous ordered the soldiers to fire into the crowd killing several people. Porteous was later killed by a lynch mob who stormed the Old Tolbooth.

The second and main element of the novel is based on a story Scott claimed to have received in an unsigned letter. It is about a certain Helen Walker who had travelled all the way to London by foot, in order to receive a royal pardon for her sister, who was unjustly charged with infanticide. Scott has put Jeanie Deans in the place of Walker who was a young woman from a family of highly devout Presbyterians. Jeanie walks to London hoping to achieve an audience with the Queen Caroline through the influence of the Duke of Argyll. In the conduct of the main story of the novel, Scott does not violate the basic truth of history. The historical persons act in a manner perfectly consistent with their characters as known to us through books of history, but Scott makes these persons alive before us with greater vitality than they possess in history textbooks. There is a skillful interweaving of historical and fictitious incidents in the novel; the author has drawn the living portraits of certain historical personalities in order to create the atmosphere and spirit of a past epoch.

Description of the Porteous Riots

The chapters 2-7 of the novel *The Heart of Midlothian* contain a vivid account of the Porteous riots in the city of Edinburgh and even historians have recognized the authenticity of the riots which took place in the year 1736. Describing Captain Porteous, a name memorable in the traditions of Edinburgh as well as in the records of criminal jurisprudence, Scott remarks,

“It was only by his military skill, and an alert and resolute character as an officer of police, that he merited this promotion, for he is said to have been a man of profligate habits, an unnatural son, and a brutal husband... his harsh and fierce manners rendered him formidable to rioters or other disturbers of the public peace.” (32)

It is a well-established fact that Porteous' authority over his corps of soldiers was extreme and unwarranted. When Andrew Wilson, a notorious smuggler was handed over to him by the jailer, he ordered him to be manacled so that he might be conducted to the place of execution. The handcuffs were found to be too small for the wrists of big-boned Wilson, yet Porteous proceeded with his own hands to force them till they clasped together, to the acute discomfort of the criminal. When Wilson protested against such ill-treatment, Captain Porteous replied, “*It signifies little, your pain will be soon at an end*” (36). Wilson reiterates, “*Your cruelty is great, you know not how soon you yourself may have occasion to ask the mercy, which you are now refusing to a fellow-creature. May God forgive you.*” (36) There was no violence when the execution took place. But immediately after the execution, there arose a “*tumult among the multitude*” (37). Many stones were pelted at Porteous and his guards; some mischief took place; and the mob started pressing forward with “*whoops, shrieks, howls and exclamations*” (37).

A young fellow leapt to the scaffold and cut the rope by which the criminal was suspended. Others tried to carry off the body. The sudden insurrection against his authority invoked the fury of Porteous. “He sprung from the scaffold, snatched a musket from one of his

soldiers, commanded the party to give fire, and... shooting a man dead on the spot. Several soldiers obeyed his command... six or seven persons were slain, and a great many more hurt and wounded. (37)

Porteous had exceeded his powers and had done a grave wrong. The Lords of Justiciary passed sentence of death against Captain John Porteous, adjudging him, *“to be hanged on a gibbet at the common place of execution, on Wednesday, 8th September, 1736, and all his moveable property to be forfeited to the king's use, according to the Scottish law in cases of wilful murder.”* (38) On the day of the execution of Captain Porteous, the place of execution was crowded almost to suffocation by the people of Edinburgh wanting to witness the hanging of Porteous who in their opinion fully deserved the sentence of death. Scott gives a vivid description of the scene:

“The area of the Grassmarket resembled a huge dark lake or sea of human heads, in the centre of which arose the fatal tree, tall, black, and ominous, from which dangled the deadly halter... the erect beam and empty noose... became, objects of terror and of solemn interest. (42)

The people were thirsty for vengeance. But, though people waited and waited, there was no sign of the hanging, so there began a murmur among them about what could have happened. Eventually, it was announced that the execution of the sentence of death pronounced against John Porteous, the Captain-lieutenant of the City Guard of Edinburgh, present prisoner in the Tolbooth of that city, be respited for six weeks from the time appointed for his execution.

“The assembled spectators uttered a groan, or rather a roar of indignation and disappointed revenge, similar to that of a tiger from whom his meal has been rent by his keeper when he was just about to devour it.” (42)

The mob started proceeding towards Tolbooth prison. At first they were about hundred, then they numbered thousands, and after that the strength kept on increasing every moment. As the only weapons they had were staves and sticks, they decided to disarm the City Guard and procure arms for themselves. Having done that, they raised a tremendous shout of *“Porteous! Porteous! To the Tolbooth! To the Tolbooth!”* (61).

Very soon Tolbooth prison got surrounded completely by enraged multitude whose sole intention was to carry out the sentence of death that had originally been awarded to Porteous but had not been implemented. Finding it difficult to smash the gate, the mob lighted a huge fire close to the gate and in a short while, the more forward among the rioters, had already rushed into the prison. Porteous was dragged from his lurking-place with the intention of putting him to death on the spot. The person addressed by others as Madge Wildfire wearing female apparel, said that *“We will have him die where a murderer should die, on the common gibbet - We will have him die where he spilled the blood of so many innocents!”* (68)

A loud shout of applause followed the proposal, and the shout, *“To the gallows with the murderer! - To the Grassmarket with him!”* (68). When Reuben Butler, the clergyman objected to the hanging, Madge Wildfire retorted, *“Blood must have blood”* (70). Reuben Butler then turned

to Porteous and exhorted him to turn to God and said his prayers, but Porteous replied that his sin as well as his blood would lie at the door of those who were going to murder him. Madge Wildfire thereupon reminded Porteous of the brutal manner in which he had treated Wilson at that very spot. Butler tried to pacify people saying:

“For God's sake, remember it is the image of your Creator which you are about to deface in the person of this unfortunate man! Wretched as he is, and wicked as he may be he has a share in every promise of Scripture... Do not destroy soul and body; give him time for preparation.(72)

But the general cry was “*Away with him - away with him!*”(72). Porteous was hanged to death. The mob seems completely satisfied with the vengeance they had prosecuted. When the people were fully satisfied that life had abandoned their victim, they dispersed in every direction, throwing down the weapons they had brought to carry out their purpose.

Influences on Scott

Scott has presented the circumstances of Porteous riots and political conspiracy with a great accuracy in the novel. From the early childhood, Scott was fascinated by the political events of the past as he had heard lot many stories from his grandmother when he was recuperating from his illness. His love for narrating historical events finds expression in the novel as he has described in great detail the circumstances that led to the hanging of Captain John Porteous. Moreover the Revenge Motive dominates in the novel. It is also because Scott was immensely impressed by the dramas of Shakespeare. As it is found in all the four tragedies of mature period of Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, the revenge element predominates. Scott has also employed the technique of Revenge in his novels. Other characters like Wilson, Robertson, Duke of Argyll and Queen Caroline are the historical personalities mentioned in the books of British history that constitute the main action of the novel.

Scott was also highly influenced by the works of Edgar Allan Poe, the supreme American novelist of the Terror School, who enriched literature by his tales of horror and wonder. Such tales did much to stimulate and fertilize the genius of Scott. The glimpse of horror is clearly visible in Scott's description of the temperament of mob and its disposition and eagerness in the hanging of Porteous.

Main Story of the Novel

The main story of the novel *The Heart of Midlothian* is fictitious - the seduction of Effie, the charge of child murder against her, her trial and conviction and the royal pardon obtained by her sister Jeanie. The heroine of the novel is Jeanie, a fictitious character modelled, however, on an actual person, Helen Walker, the obscure Dumfries-shire woman who, eighty years before, after declining to lie under oath to save her sister Isabella's life, had walked to London to beg a reprieve for her. Scott had received the account of Helen Walker early in 1817 from an anonymous correspondent.

Scott states in the postscript that Helen was the daughter of a small farmer in a place called Dalwhairn, in the parish of Irongray; where, after the death of her father, she lived as a Scottish peasant, to support her mother by her own unremitting labour and hardship. She declined every proposal of saving her sister's life at the expense of truth. She therefore borrowed a sum of money sufficient for her journey, walked the whole distance to London barefoot, and made her way to John Duke of Argyle. Scott points out:

“She was heard to say, that, by the Almighty's strength, she had been enabled to meet the Duke at the most critical moment, which, if lost, would have caused the inevitable forfeiture of her sister's life.” (541)

Isabella or Tibby Walker (Helen's sister) saved from the fate, is married by the person who had wronged her, (named *Waugh*) and lived happily thereafter. Helen Walker died about the end of the year 1791, and her remains are interred in the churchyard of her native parish of Irongray, in a cemetery on the banks of the Cairn. Scott has changed the names of the characters in the novel - Helen named as Jeanie and Isabella as Effie whereas Effie's lover as Robertson (Mr. George Staunton) instead of *Waugh*. Scott has brilliantly interwoven two actual events - Porteous Riots and the incident of Helen Walker in the novel and has imparted to it an imaginative flavour that is simply fascinating.

Conclusion

Scott does not distort history, but in fact, he enlivens and revitalizes it. He uses his imaginative and dramatic gifts to make his narration of historical facts like Porteous riots gripping, and to make his portrayal of historical personages like the Duke of Argyle and Queen Caroline fascinating, but not at the cost of truth. He certainly introduces fictitious incidents into the life of historical personages but this he does with great skill so as not to sacrifice plausibility or credibility. Such incidents become more interesting for being related to historical personalities, especially because of the harmony between the fictitious actions and the historically established character of those personalities - as is the case with Queen Caroline's pardon of Jeanie at the recommendation of the Duke of Argyle. Scott portrays the historical personalities convincingly and recreates the atmosphere of the past with great success, though the contemporariness that Scott depicts through his novel cannot be overlooked. Scott's sense of history not only broadens his panorama but deepens it and achieves an extra dimension. He has perceived the novel in the historical context and has attempted to present through it, the cultural and intellectual history of the times.

Works Cited:

- Scott, Walter. *The Heart of Midlothian*. ed. Tony Inglis, 'Introduction and notes to 1830 edition' London: Penguin Books, 1994. Print
- Baker, E. A. *A Guide to Historical Fiction*, Vol. 6, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1914. Print