

Due secoli con Ivanhoe

Atti della Giornata di Studio, Pisa 18 ottobre 2018

a cura di DOMITILLA CAMPANILE

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DOMITILLA CAMPANILE

INTRODUZIONE

Introdurre un volume dedicato a *Ivanhoe* a duecento anni dalla pubblicazione è un compito lieve; un romanzo continuamente ristampato, tradotto e trasposto in tutte le forme visive e sonore disponibili nelle varie epoche si è già conquistato un'attenzione particolare. *Ivanhoe*, in ogni caso, meriterebbe da parte degli studiosi il riguardo dovuto a un'opera che, insieme ad altre di Sir Walter Scott, ha creato il genere letterario noto come romanzo storico. Forse, però, non è così difficile comprendere come – salvo alcune eccezioni – il romanzo scottiano abbia suscitato, in realtà, un interesse accademico tenue; non di rado, infatti, capita che la grande popolarità di un testo possa rappresentare un ostacolo più che un invito alla ricerca.

Sarebbe fuori luogo, però, insistere su questo fenomeno per introdurre un volume dedicato a *Ivanhoe*; piuttosto che biasimare quanto non è stato fatto, è più gradevole notare come le tendenze intransigenti stiano diventando meno accentuate e che sempre più spesso un numero sempre più ampio di studiosi si stia impegnando in ricerche considerate in passato non degne di esplorazione.

Credo che il miglior favore che si possa fare ai lettori sia ora cedere la parola all'Autore. Non si può introdurre meglio un volume su *Ivanhoe*, né si possono trovare risposte migliori a tutte le varie obiezioni suscitate dal romanzo storico di quelle fornite nella *Dedicatory Epistle* che Laurence Templeton, alter ego di Sir Walter Scott, indirizza proprio in *Ivanhoe* all'immaginario pedante Rev. Dr. Dryasdust. Se il Rev. Dryasdust è immaginario, non sono immaginarie le critiche respinte da Scott con impareggiabile ironia e assoluto dominio della materia. Il cognome del noioso antiquario, Rev. Dryasdust, lascia già pregustare il resto.

**DEDICATORY EPISTLE
TO**

THE REV. DR DRYASDUST, F.A.S.

Residing in the Castle-Gate, York.
Much esteemed and dear Sir,

It is scarcely necessary to mention the various and concurring reasons which induce me to place your name at the head of the following work. Yet the chief of these reasons may perhaps be refuted by the imperfections of the performance. Could I have hoped to render it worthy of your patronage, the public would at once have seen the propriety of inscribing a work designed to illustrate the domestic antiquities of England, and particularly of our Saxon forefathers, to the learned author of the *Essays upon the Horn of King Ulphus*, and on the Lands bestowed by him upon the patrimony of St Peter. I am conscious, however, that the slight, unsatisfactory, and trivial manner, in which the result of my antiquarian researches has been recorded in the following pages, takes the work from under that class which bears the proud motto, "Detur digniori". On the contrary, I fear I shall incur the censure of presumption in placing the venerable name of Dr Jonas Dryasdust at the head of a publication, which the more grave antiquary will perhaps class with the idle novels and romances of the day. I am anxious to vindicate myself from such a charge; for although I might trust to your friendship for an apo-

logy in your eyes, yet I would not willingly stand conviction in those of the public of so grave a crime, as my fears lead me to anticipate my being charged with.

I must therefore remind you, that when we first talked over together that class of productions, in one of which the private and family affairs of your learned northern friend, Mr Oldbuck of Monkbarns, were so unjustifiably exposed to the public, some discussion occurred between us concerning the cause of the popularity these works have attained in this idle age, which, whatever other merit they possess, must be admitted to be hastily written, and in violation of every rule assigned to the epepeia. It seemed then to be your opinion, that the charm lay entirely in the art with which the unknown author had availed himself, like a second M'Pherson, of the antiquarian stores which lay scattered around him, supplying his own indolence or poverty of invention, by the incidents which had actually taken place in his country at no distant period, by introducing real characters, and scarcely suppressing real names. It was not above sixty or seventy years, you observed, since the whole north of Scotland was under a state of government nearly as simple and as patriarchal as those of our good allies the Mohawks and Iroquois. Admitting that the author cannot himself

be supposed to have witnessed those times, he must have lived, you observed, among persons who had acted and suffered in them; and even within these thirty years, such an infinite change has taken place in the manners of Scotland, that men look back upon the habits of society proper to their immediate ancestors, as we do on those of the reign of Queen Anne, or even the period of the Revolution. Having thus materials of every kind lying strewn around him, there was little, you observed, to embarrass the author, but the difficulty of choice. It was no wonder, therefore, that, having begun to work a mine so plentiful, he should have derived from his works fully more credit and profit than the facility of his labours merited.

Admitting (as I could not deny) the general truth of these conclusions, I cannot but think it strange that no attempt has been made to excite an interest for the traditions and manners of Old England, similar to that which has been obtained in behalf of those of our poorer and less celebrated neighbours. The Kendal green, though its date is more ancient, ought surely to be as dear to our feelings, as the variegated tartans of the north. The name of Robin Hood, if duly conjured with, should raise a spirit as soon as that of Rob Roy; and the patriots of England deserve no less their renown in our modern circles, than the Bruces and Wallaces of Caledonia. If the scenery of the south be less romantic and sublime than that of the northern mountains, it must be allowed to pos-

sess in the same proportion superior softness and beauty; and upon the whole, we feel ourselves entitled to exclaim with the patriotic Syrian—“Are not Pharpar and Abana, rivers of Damascus, better than all the rivers of Israel?”

Your objections to such an attempt, my dear Doctor, were, you may remember, two-fold. You insisted upon the advantages which the Scotsman possessed, from the very recent existence of that state of society in which his scene was to be laid. Many now alive, you remarked, well remembered persons who had not only seen the celebrated Roy M’Gregor, but had feasted, and even fought with him. All those minute circumstances belonging to private life and domestic character, all that gives verisimilitude to a narrative, and individuality to the persons introduced, is still known and remembered in Scotland; whereas in England, civilisation has been so long complete, that our ideas of our ancestors are only to be gleaned from musty records and chronicles, the authors of which seem perversely to have conspired to suppress in their narratives all interesting details, in order to find room for flowers of monkish eloquence, or trite reflections upon morals. To match an English and a Scottish author in the rival task of embodying and reviving the traditions of their respective countries, would be, you alleged, in the highest degree unequal and unjust. The Scottish magician, you said, was, like Lucan’s witch, at li-

berty to walk over the recent field of battle, and to select for the subject of resuscitation by his sorceries, a body whose limbs had recently quivered with existence, and whose throat had but just uttered the last note of agony. Such a subject even the powerful Erictho was compelled to select, as alone capable of being reanimated even by "her" potent magic—

—*gelidas leto scrutata medullas,
Pulmonis rigidi stantes sine vulnere fibras
Invenit, et vocem defuncto in corpore quaerit.*

The English author, on the other hand, without supposing him less of a conjuror than the Northern Warlock, can, you observed, only have the liberty of selecting his subject amidst the dust of antiquity, where nothing was to be found but dry, sapless, mouldering, and disjointed bones, such as those which filled the valley of Jehoshaphat. You expressed, besides, your apprehension, that the unpatriotic prejudices of my countrymen would not allow fair play to such a work as that of which I endeavoured to demonstrate the probable success. And this, you said, was not entirely owing to the more general prejudice in favour of that which is foreign, but that it rested partly upon improbabilities, arising out of the circumstances in which the English reader is placed. If you describe to him a set of wild manners, and a state of primitive society existing in the Highlands of Scotland, he is much disposed to acquiesce in the truth of what is asserted. And reason good. If he be of the ordinary class of readers, he has either never

seen those remote districts at all, or he has wandered through those desolate regions in the course of a summer tour, eating bad dinners, sleeping on truckle beds, stalking from desolation to desolation, and fully prepared to believe the strangest things that could be told him of a people, wild and extravagant enough to be attached to scenery so extraordinary. But the same worthy person, when placed in his own snug parlour, and surrounded by all the comforts of an Englishman's fireside, is not half so much disposed to believe that his own ancestors led a very different life from himself; that the shattered tower, which now forms a vista from his window, once held a baron who would have hung him up at his own door without any form of trial; that the hinds, by whom his little pet-farm is managed, a few centuries ago would have been his slaves; and that the complete influence of feudal tyranny once extended over the neighbouring village, where the attorney is now a man of more importance than the lord of the manor.

While I own the force of these objections, I must confess, at the same time, that they do not appear to me to be altogether insurmountable. The scantiness of materials is indeed a formidable difficulty; but no one knows better than Dr Dryasdust, that to those deeply read in antiquity, hints concerning the private life of our ancestors lie scattered through the pages of our various historians, bearing, indeed, a slender proportion to the other matters of which they

treat, but still, when collected together, sufficient to throw considerable light upon the “vie prive” of our forefathers; indeed, I am convinced, that however I myself may fail in the ensuing attempt, yet, with more labour in collecting, or more skill in using, the materials within his reach, illustrated as they have been by the labours of Dr Henry, of the late Mr Strutt, and, above all, of Mr Sharon Turner, an abler hand would have been successful; and therefore I protest, beforehand, against any argument which may be founded on the failure of the present experiment.

On the other hand, I have already said, that if any thing like a true picture of old English manners could be drawn, I would trust to the good-nature and good sense of my countrymen for insuring its favourable reception.

Having thus replied, to the best of my power, to the first class of your objections, or at least having shown my resolution to overleap the barriers which your prudence has raised, I will be brief in noticing that which is more peculiar to myself. It seems to be your opinion, that the very office of an antiquary, employed in grave, and, as the vulgar will sometimes allege, in toilsome and minute research, must be considered as incapacitating him from successfully compounding a tale of this sort. But permit me to say, my dear Doctor, that this objection is rather formal than substantial. It is true, that such slight compositions might not suit the severer genius of

our friend Mr Oldbuck. Yet Horace Walpole wrote a goblin tale which has thrilled through many a bosom; and George Ellis could transfer all the playful fascination of a humour, as delightful as it was uncommon, into his Abridgement of the Ancient Metrical Romances. So that, however I may have occasion to rue my present audacity, I have at least the most respectable precedents in my favour.

Still the severer antiquary may think, that, by thus intermingling fiction with truth, I am polluting the well of history with modern inventions, and impressing upon the rising generation false ideas of the age which I describe. I cannot but in some sense admit the force of this reasoning, which I yet hope to traverse by the following considerations.

It is true, that I neither can, nor do pretend, to the observation of complete accuracy, even in matters of outward costume, much less in the more important points of language and manners. But the same motive which prevents my writing the dialogue of the piece in Anglo-Saxon or in Norman-French, and which prohibits my sending forth to the public this essay printed with the types of Caxton or Wynken de Worde, prevents my attempting to confine myself within the limits of the period in which my story is laid. It is necessary, for exciting interest of any kind, that the subject assumed should be, as it were, translated into the manners, as well as the language, of the age we live in. No fascination

has ever been attached to Oriental literature, equal to that produced by Mr Galland's first translation of the Arabian Tales; in which, retaining on the one hand the splendour of Eastern costume, and on the other the wildness of Eastern fiction, he mixed these with just so much ordinary feeling and expression, as rendered them interesting and intelligible, while he abridged the long-winded narratives, curtailed the monotonous reflections, and rejected the endless repetitions of the Arabian original. The tales, therefore, though less purely Oriental than in their first concoction, were eminently better fitted for the European market, and obtained an unrivalled degree of public favour, which they certainly would never have gained had not the manners and style been in some degree familiarized to the feelings and habits of the western reader.

In point of justice, therefore, to the multitudes who will, I trust, devour this book with avidity, I have so far explained our ancient manners in modern language, and so far detailed the characters and sentiments of my persons, that the modern reader will not find himself, I should hope, much trammelled by the repulsive dryness of mere antiquity. In this, I respectfully contend, I have in no respect exceeded the fair license due to the author of a fictitious composition. The late ingenious Mr Strutt, in his romance of Queen-Hoo-Hall, 5 acted upon another principle; and in distinguishing between what was ancient and modern, forgot, as it

appears to me, that extensive neutral ground, the large proportion, that is, of manners and sentiments which are common to us and to our ancestors, having been handed down unaltered from them to us, or which, arising out of the principles of our common nature, must have existed alike in either state of society. In this manner, a man of talent, and of great antiquarian erudition, limited the popularity of his work, by excluding from it every thing which was not sufficiently obsolete to be altogether forgotten and unintelligible.

The license which I would here vindicate, is so necessary to the execution of my plan, that I will crave your patience while I illustrate my argument a little farther.

He who first opens Chaucer, or any other ancient poet, is so much struck with the obsolete spelling, multiplied consonants, and antiquated appearance of the language, that he is apt to lay the work down in despair, as encrusted too deep with the rust of antiquity, to permit his judging of its merits or tasting its beauties. But if some intelligent and accomplished friend points out to him, that the difficulties by which he is startled are more in appearance than reality, if, by reading aloud to him, or by reducing the ordinary words to the modern orthography, he satisfies his proselyte that only about one-tenth part of the words employed are in fact obsolete, the novice may be easily persuaded to approach the "well of English undefiled," with the certainty that a slender degree of

patience will enable him to to enjoy both the humour and the pathos with which old Geoffrey delighted the age of Cressy and of Poitiers.

To pursue this a little farther. If our neophyte, strong in the new-born love of antiquity, were to undertake to imitate what he had learnt to admire, it must be allowed he would act very injudiciously, if he were to select from the Glossary the obsolete words which it contains, and employ those exclusively of all phrases and vocables retained in modern days. This was the error of the unfortunate Chatterton. In order to give his language the appearance of antiquity, he rejected every word that was modern, and produced a dialect entirely different from any that had ever been spoken in Great Britain. He who would imitate an ancient language with success, must attend rather to its grammatical character, turn of expression, and mode of arrangement, than labour to collect extraordinary and antiquated terms, which, as I have already averred, do not in ancient authors approach the number of words still in use, though perhaps somewhat altered in sense and spelling, in the proportion of one to ten.

What I have applied to language, is still more justly applicable to sentiments and manners. The passions, the sources from which these must spring in all their modifications, are generally the same in all ranks and conditions, all countries and ages; and it follows, as a matter of course, that the opinions, habits of thinking, and actions, however influenced by

the peculiar state of society, must still, upon the whole, bear a strong resemblance to each other. Our ancestors were not more distinct from us, surely, than Jews are from Christians; they had “eyes, hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions;” were “fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer,” as ourselves. The tenor, therefore, of their affections and feelings, must have borne the same general proportion to our own.

It follows, therefore, that of the materials which an author has to use in a romance, or fictitious composition, such as I have ventured to attempt, he will find that a great proportion, both of language and manners, is as proper to the present time as to those in which he has laid his time of action. The freedom of choice which this allows him, is therefore much greater, and the difficulty of his task much more diminished, than at first appears. To take an illustration from a sister art, the antiquarian details may be said to represent the peculiar features of a landscape under delineation of the pencil. His feudal tower must arise in due majesty; the figures which he introduces must have the costume and character of their age; the piece must represent the peculiar features of the scene which he has chosen for his subject, with all its appropriate elevation of rock, or precipitate descent of cataract. His general colouring, too, must be copied from

Nature: The sky must be clouded or serene, according to the climate, and the general tints must be those which prevail in a natural landscape. So far the painter is bound down by the rules of his art, to a precise imitation of the features of Nature; but it is not required that he should descend to copy all her more minute features, or represent with absolute exactness the very herbs, flowers, and trees, with which the spot is decorated. These, as well as all the more minute points of light and shadow, are attributes proper to scenery in general, natural to each situation, and subject to the artist's disposal, as his taste or pleasure may dictate.

It is true, that this license is confined in either case within legitimate bounds. The painter must introduce no ornament inconsistent with the climate or country of his landscape; he must not plant cypress trees upon Inch-Merrin, or Scottish firs among the ruins of Persepolis; and the author lies under a corresponding restraint. However far he may venture in a more full detail of passions and feelings, than is to be found in the ancient compositions which he imitates, he must introduce nothing inconsistent with the manners of the age; his knights, squires, grooms, and yeomen, may be more fully drawn than in the hard, dry delineations of an ancient illuminated manuscript, but the character and costume of the age must remain inviolate; they must be the same figures, drawn by a better pencil, or, to speak more modestly, executed in an age when the princi-

ples of art were better understood. His language must not be exclusively obsolete and unintelligible; but he should admit, if possible, no word or turn of phraseology betraying an origin directly modern. It is one thing to make use of the language and sentiments which are common to ourselves and our forefathers, and it is another to invest them with the sentiments and dialect exclusively proper to their descendants.

This, my dear friend, I have found the most difficult part of my task; and, to speak frankly, I hardly expect to satisfy your less partial judgment, and more extensive knowledge of such subjects, since I have hardly been able to please my own.

I am conscious that I shall be found still more faulty in the tone of keeping and costume, by those who may be disposed rigidly to examine my Tale, with reference to the manners of the exact period in which my actors flourished: It may be, that I have introduced little which can positively be termed modern; but, on the other hand, it is extremely probable that I may have confused the manners of two or three centuries, and introduced, during the reign of Richard the First, circumstances appropriated to a period either considerably earlier, or a good deal later than that era. It is my comfort, that errors of this kind will escape the general class of readers, and that I may share in the ill-deserved applause of those architects, who, in their modern Gothic, do not hesitate to introduce, without rule or method, orna-

ments proper to different styles and to different periods of the art. Those whose extensive researches have given them the means of judging my backslidings with more severity, will probably be lenient in proportion to their knowledge of the difficulty of my task. My honest and neglected friend, Ingulphus, has furnished me with many a valuable hint; but the light afforded by the Monk of Croydon, and Geoffrey de Vinsauff, is dimmed by such a conglomeration of uninteresting and unintelligible matter, that we gladly fly for relief to the delightful pages of the gallant Froissart, although he flourished at a period so much more remote from the date of my history. If, therefore, my dear friend, you have generosity enough to pardon the presumptuous attempt, to frame for myself a minstrel coronet, partly out of the pearls of pure antiquity, and partly from the Bristol stones and paste, with which I have endeavoured to imitate them, I am convinced your opinion of the difficulty of the task will reconcile you to the imperfect manner of its execution.

Of my materials I have but little to say. They may be chiefly found in the singular Anglo-Norman MS., which Sir Arthur Wardour preserves with such jealous care in the third drawer of his oaken cabinet, scarcely allowing any one to touch it, and being himself not able to read one syllable of its contents. I should never have got his consent, on my visit to Scotland, to read in those precious pages for so many hours, had I not

promised to designate it by some emphatic mode of printing, as {The Wardour Manuscript}; giving it, thereby, an individuality as important as the Bannatyne MS., the Auchinleck MS., and any other monument of the patience of a Gothic scrivener. I have sent, for your private consideration, a list of the contents of this curious piece, which I shall perhaps subjoin, with your approbation, to the third volume of my Tale, in case the printer's devil should continue impatient for copy, when the whole of my narrative has been imposed.

Adieu, my dear friend; I have said enough to explain, if not to vindicate, the attempt which I have made, and which, in spite of your doubts, and my own incapacity, I am still willing to believe has not been altogether made in vain.

I hope you are now well recovered from your spring fit of the gout, and shall be happy if the advice of your learned physician should recommend a tour to these parts. Several curiosities have been lately dug up near the wall, as well as at the ancient station of Habitancum. Talking of the latter, I suppose you have long since heard the news, that a sulky churlish boor has destroyed the ancient statue, or rather bas-relief, popularly called Robin of Redesdale. It seems Robin's fame attracted more visitants than was consistent with the growth of the heather, upon a moor worth a shilling an acre. Reverend as you write yourself, be revengeful for once, and pray with me that he may be visited with such a fit of the

stone, as if he had all the fragments of poor Robin in that region of his viscera where the disease holds its seat. Tell this not in Gath, lest the Scots rejoice that they have at length found a parallel instance among their neighbours, to that barbarous deed which demolished Arthur's Oven. But there is no end to lamentation, when we betake ourselves to such subjects. My respectful compliments attend Miss Dryasdust; I endeavoured to match the spectacles agreeable to her commission, during my late journey to London, and hope she has received them safe, and found them satisfactory. I send this by the blind carrier, so that probably it may be some time upon its journey¹.

¹ This anticipation proved but too true, as my learned correspondent did not receive my letter until a twelve-month after it was written. I mention this circumstance, that a gentleman attached to the cause of learning, who now holds the principal control of the post-office, may consider whether by some mitigation of the present enormous rates, some favour might not be shown to the correspondents of the principal Literary and Antiquarian Societies. I understand, indeed, that this experiment was once tried, but that the mail-coach having broke down under the weight of packages addressed to members of the Society of Antiquaries, it was relinquished as a hazardous experiment. Surely, however it would be possible to build these vehicles in a form more substantial, stronger in the perch, and broader in the wheels, so as to support the weight of Antiquarian learning; when, if they should be found to travel more slowly, they would be not the less agreeable to quiet travellers like myself.—L. T.]

The last news which I hear from Edinburgh is, that the gentleman who fills the situation of Secretary to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland², is the best amateur draftsman in that kingdom, and that much is expected from his skill and zeal in delineating those specimens of national antiquity, which are either mouldering under the slow touch of time, or swept away by modern taste, with the same besom of destruction which John Knox used at the Reformation. Once more adieu; "vale tandem, non immemor mei". Believe me to be,

Reverend, and very dear Sir,
Your most faithful humble Servant.
Laurence Templeton.
Toppingwold, near Egremont,
Cumberland, Nov. 17, 1817.

² Mr Skene of Rubislaw is here intimated, to whose taste and skill the author is indebted for a series of etchings, exhibiting the various localities alluded to in these novels.

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