

**Fiona Price, *Reinventing Liberty: Nation, Commerce and the Historical Novel from Walpole to Scott*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. Pp. 241. ISBN 978147440296.**

In 1999, Katie Trumpener's magisterial book, *Bardic Nationalism*, brought together for systematic analysis what had hitherto appeared as distinctive genres: the national tale and the historical novel. One of its incidental effects was to downplay both the originality and the substance of Walter Scott's achievement in the light of the huge body of earlier work from which he is presumed to have lifted both themes and material. That much of this was the work of female novelists had already been anticipated in a ground-breaking essay by Peter Garside, 'Popular Fiction and the National Tale: Hidden Origins of Scott's *Waverley*' (1991), in which he suggests Scott and his circle were concerned to 'masculinise' the production of prose fiction. Trumpener conceived her work as a major revision of literary history and thus it carried, perhaps inevitably, a distinct hostility to Scott as an ideologue of reactionary unionism and imperialism.

While lacking the crackle and fizz of Trumpener's polemic, Fiona Price's new study, drawing on more recent studies in the field, is never overtly hostile in this way. Nevertheless the terms of her analysis have a tendency to close down the distinctive qualities of Scott's art in placing him at the head of a long line of the development of the genre. The novelists she discusses in the early chapters are read, almost allegorically, against competing eighteenth-century historiographies of the English Revolution: that of British 'ancient liberties'; the stadial version of history proposed by Scottish Enlightenment writers; the Burkean rhetoric of an archaic chivalry. Ann Radcliffe, Maria Edgeworth, Frances Burney, Lady Morgan (née Owenson), and Charlotte Smith are, by now, more or less canonical, and Price makes a strong case for the interest of Radcliffe's posthumously published *Gaston de Blondville* (1826). Price's addition of Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* to those novels by Clara Reeve, Sophia Lee, Anna Maria and Jane Porter that are seen as direct antecedents of the historical novel is perhaps surprising. It gives however a certain empirical force to her argument insofar as Walpole's father, Sir Robert, played a notorious role in the putatively 'corrupt' regime of the early Hanoverian monarchy and was a key point of reference in the debates about the preservation of political liberties after the expulsion of the Stuart dynasty. Indeed, Price's originality is to figure these earlier eighteenth-century controversies as being every bit as important as those of the 'revolution debates' of the 1790s in shaping the historical novel and the national tale. We are reminded that the idea of the Norman Yoke, invoked by the seventeenth-century English revolutionaries and literally applied to the neck of an Anglo-Saxon serf in the first chapter of Scott's *Ivanhoe*, had a long cultural afterlife in the eighteenth-century. Although without mentioning the cult of Alfred the 'Great' (cf. its apotheosis in Viscount Cobham's Stowe Gardens), Price draws our attention to a number of novels with Anglo-Saxon settings as evidence of its pertinence.

*Ivanhoe*, in fact, is one of the few Scott novels to which Price gives extended attention. The others, *The Antiquary* and *St Ronan's Well*, are the two in which Scott deals with virtually contemporary material. It is here that the problem lies, for while Price recognises Scott's 'anxiety' about radical social change, the limits as well as the absurdities of the chivalric code, she pays too little attention to the texture of Scott's writing, the subtle distribution of the reader's sympathies across a whole range of individual characters, not least his extraordinary capacity for reproducing the eloquence of the people in their straitened circumstances. The very excesses of his own literary production runs against the grain of any ideological closure. It is the speaking voices of *The Antiquary* that undermine his own political agenda, however complex that is, as Price in her conclusion concedes. Thus she misses the full force of Edie Ochiltree's reproaches to the fanciful posturing of the petty lairds who preside over what is

presented as a living fishing community. Edie has a longer story than she allows: he was a day labourer and a soldier before he was an itinerant bedesman and beggar. These voices of popular resistance are even more marked in those novels that Price does not discuss.

In the final chapter Price emerges from the constraints of her own deeply scholarly approach to make some bolder claims. Following Carlyle she invokes his category of artistic ‘fire’, concluding that ‘this fire, this resistance, is present in the historical novelists of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries...these novelists fight in order to maintain a sense of agency in the face of political change’ (231).

*Simon Edwards*  
*Centre for Inter-American Studies, Karl-Franzens University of Graz*