The Black Dwarf: A Peeblesshire Legend

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Sir Walter Scott's novel, *The Black Dwarf*, published with *Old Mortality* in December 1816, has, not surprisingly, been greeted ever since with little enthusiasm. Scott lays himself open to modern critics by his self-depreciation, and his review of his own *Tales of My Landlord* in 1817 (an attempt to prove to Murray that he was not their author) adds fuel to complaints against *The Black Dwarf*. Few have recognised any merit in the work. Saintsbury, however, declared that he had 'always thought the early part of *The Black Dwarf* as happy as all but the best of Scott's works', and Andrew Lang numbered it among his childhood favourites. Lockhart regarded it of 'singular interest' as the lame Scott's study of physical deformity, and this is doubtless what attracted Byron to the work, which he wrote that he had read 'with great pleasure'.

In his excellent essay on Scott, V. S. Pritchett (1946:45) cited it as an example of Scott's inability to reach beyond his historical recollections—the Black Dwarf lives immortal in the novel, accurate in superficial detail, as Scott saw his original in the flesh, but deeper than that unreal and idealised into a mere type. This draws one to consider the character of Scott's recollection from whom the portrait is derived.

David Ritchie would survive in his idealised form in the novel of 1816; but for our knowledge of his original self we are largely indebted to the brothers Chambers, founders of the publishing firm. Four years after the publication of *The Black Dwarf*, when the Author of Waverley still remained hidden behind his smoke-screen of anonymity, William Chambers (1820) wrote a small volume gathering together much of the Ritchie legend, and offering him as the original of the Black Dwarf. 1822 saw his brother Robert delving into the originals of other characters besides, in *Illustrations of the Author of Waverley*. This he revised and enlarged in 1825. Soon after, rumour became reality and Scott could now write Introductions to all his works, supplying such information about his subjects as had for the previous inquirers remained only surmise: these were published posthumously in 1833. In his Introduction to *The Black Dwarf*, Scott even draws on the results of Robert Chambers's research to embellish his description.

The next to treat David Ritchie at any length was Dr John Brown, the author of *Rab and his Friends*, who compiled an interesting study of the Dwarf out of a correspondence in 1858 with one Robert Craig. It was in the form of an essay entitled 'The Black Dwarf's Bones', later published in *Horae Subsecivae* (pp. 341–62, Edinburgh 1864). One of Robert Craig's neighbours was Professor John Veitch, author of *The*

History and Poetry of the Scottish Border. He wrote much of the valley he loved, of that 'sweetest stream of all the South', where Ritchie chose to live and roam: an essay for *Blackwood's* (republished in *Border Essays* in 1896) called 'The Vale of Manor and the Black Dwarf' well evokes the natural spirit of the glen. One other minor source should perhaps be mentioned, since it is so often quoted: William Chambers's *History of Peeblesshire* (1864:402). Of these six accounts of the dwarf Veitch's is perhaps the most sympathetic.

Before starting a Tour to the Lakes in 1797, Walter Scott, the young advocate as yet in literary obscurity, stayed a few days at Hallyards, near Peebles, the Manor Valley house of Professor Adam Ferguson whose son was accompanying Scott on his trip. During this stay Scott met David Ritchie, a dwarf under four feet high. Robert Craig, himself a medical man, describes him diligently—he had a body of normal size, but quite stunted legs. 'They were bent in every direction, so that Mungo Park, then a surgeon in Peebles,. . . said he could compare them to nothing but a pair of corkscrews; but the principal turn they took was from the knees outwards, so that he rested on his inner ankles, and the lower part of his tibias . . ..' Evidently prepared to strike a vivid impression on the local people, Ritchie had developed eccentricities which fostered speculative superstition. He became the Brown Man of the Moors, the local sprite of the neighbourhood, perhaps even the Devil himself. Ritchie had gained what was all-important to him—recognition, a reputation. Consequently the visitor was led to see the valley's showpiece, and the character lasted nineteen years in Scott's memory before being committed to paper as Canny Elshie.

Scott's Gothic imagination invented a malignant figure, personifying misanthropy. William Chambers's oft-quoted description of the interview between Scott and Ritchie is twisted through the same essentially dramatic purpose—the whole confrontation lasts about two minutes, hardly a word passes, and Scott emerges 'as pale as ashes, . . . his person shaking in every limb' (Chambers 1864:404); Ritchie is 'the misanthrope'. A romanticised picture. If we are to believe Lockhart, this was all: 'they staid [at Hallyards] for a day or two, in the course of which Scott had his first and *only* interview . . .' (Lockhart 1862, I:364) (my italics). How then can one account for Scott's words in his Introduction? 'The author understood him to say he had even been in Dublin' and 'the author has heard his most unmusical voice repeat the celebrated description of Paradise . . .' (Scott 1893:321). It would not be fitting dramatically for the 'misanthrope' to communicate so readily the tale of his life's wanderings, or to recite the words of Milton, however unmelodiously: Chambers seems to have sacrificed accuracy for effect. It also brings one to question the motives for both brothers' interest in the dwarf—the headstone by his grave 'erected by W. and R. Chambers, 1845'.

Reading the *Illustrations*, one is struck by the author's rather callous attitude towards his subject: the dwarf turns from an awkward and unfortunate freak of nature into a literary curiosity. Ritchie had a normal, though simple, sister, called Agnes, living in

part of his cottage, with whom he was not on friendly terms, and who outlived him by some years. Scott regretted in 1833 that 'a sort of "local sympathy" and the curiosity then expressed concerning the author of Waverley and the subjects of his novels exposed the woman to inquiries which gave her pain . . .' (Scott 1893:327). One fancies that Robert Chambers's two articles of 1817 (one in *Blackwood's*, the other in *The Scots Magazine*) caused some of the mischief. Chambers, with a journalist's indifference to personal privacy, descended on her at the dwarf's cottage in 1820, and described the occasion with tactless relish in his *Illustrations* (1884:117–33). Why would they not permit the dead to rest? she asked.

David Ritchie was born at Easter Happrew. His deformity hindered him from finding work there, and he said he went far afield in search of it. Disillusioned by the normal-sized world, he came in about 1762 to the Manor Valley, secluded and beautiful, and built his own world—cottage and garden. From then on he lived largely off both what the parish provided and what he gained from going the round of his benefactors. He appears to have been a gentle man, though easily roused if provoked. In 1802 his landlord, Sir James Nasmyth of Posso, replaced his old cottage with the one to which the tourist is directed today by the Chambers Institution at Peebles. Many writers bemoan the slates that superseded the thatch; but the tiny door still remains. In this house he spent the remaining nine years of his life. He died in 1811, and was buried in Manor Kirkyard—a mossy stone, transfixed by an iron bar, covers his grave.

Then came five years of rest. In 1816, however, the *Tales* were published, and he was identified as the original Black Dwarf. Now he was resuscitated by all—even by those who had ignored him during his lifetime—and many was the fond tale of himself and his feats. Apart from his legs, he was immensely strong, and like Chaucer's Miller could butt a door down with his head; he once heaved a tree out of the ground that two men had not been able to move in hours; but in more pastoral pursuits, we hear that he was responsible for cultivating a small patch of heath behind his cottage, making it the most beautiful garden in all the valley. He loved nature, read Shenstone's Pastorals and Allan Ramsay's *Gentle Shepherd* with avidity (among many other works), and had wished to have been buried on Woodhill, a place of great natural beauty.

The visitor to Manor Valley today will find it quite as beautiful and unspoilt. The dwarf only is gone, and his influence may yet survive in the statue of David Ritchie (a caricature, John Buchan's brother Walter tells us, by one Forrest of Leith) standing beside the Hallyards driveway. The irony of it is that Time has paid more attention to him as a black effigy than as a being with blood in his veins.

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