



Old Mortality

Walter Scott , Angus Calder (Introduction)

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Perhaps the finest and certainly the most readable of Scott's Waverley novels, *Old Mortality* is a swift-moving historical romance that pits an anachronistically liberal hero against the forces of fanaticism in seventeenth-century Scotland - the period notorious as "the killing time." Its central character, Henry Morton, finds himself torn between his love for a royalist's granddaughter and his loyalty to his oppressed countrymen.

Old Mortality Details

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From Reader Review Old Mortality for online ebook

Perry Whitford says

Near the end of *Old Mortality* the hero of the story, Henry Morton, soldier and survivor of the Scottish sectarian skirmishes of the second half of the 18th century, gets all whimsical, musing:

"Let the tide of the world wax or wane as it will...enough will be found to fill the places which chance renders vacant; and, in the usual occupations and amusements of life, human beings will succeed each other as leaves upon the same tree, with the same individual difference and the same general resemblance."

After reading half a dozen or so of Scott's *Waverly* novels over the last few years, that pretty much sums up the feeling I have for the series. So much is familiar here, the time and place, the historical backdrop, the stagy devices of the plot, all wrapped up in the gentle trappings of romanticism.

But there is a certain dissimilitude too.

The aforementioned Morton is not so passive as the titular Waverley from the first novel, or Frank Osbaldistone from *Rob Roy*, while the romanticism is tempered and offset at times by a welcome realism. Scott is particularly unstinting (by his standards) in his portrayal of the unconscionable behaviour of religious fanatics at war.

The historical characters who inhabit the tale, men from a time of bloody recrimination in Scottish history, are suitably brutalised by their behaviour. Claverhouse and John Balfour of Burley, the foes at sword's edge, still have the sheen of romanticism surrounding them, but their ruthlessness is also evident.

The preachers in particular are appalling in their hatefulness, breathing fire and brimstone, trading rhetorical warfare with quotations from scripture. Their excesses are rightly lamented or scorned by the sympathetic characters.

A bloodier, grittier *Waverley* classic.

Christina says

Fascinating story set during the Scottish uprisings against James VII (II of England) prior to the Glorious Revolution. A part of British history rarely mentioned in English schools, and which we really should be aware of.

Radical preachers inciting their followers to attack and kill those whose religion is less zealous than their own, or of another sect entirely, to the extent that they take up arms against the Government Army. Sound familiar?

Charlene says

I am just starting this one. I have this set of Sir Walter Scott, *Waverly Novels*, Soho Edition printed in

1903...and if I have them on my shelf, they deserve to be read. On this one, so far so good. In the Intro, the name of the book is clarified...Old Mortality is an old man who left his life behind and has been traveling the rural moors of Scotland cleaning up grave markers from people who died for their faith. The narrator of the story actually meets the old man when he is twenty years into his travels, and goes back to the beginning of the conflicts that caused the people to defend their faith in the first place, before they died...And that is where I am at right now.

It is not as hard a read as Charles Dickens' "Old Curiosity Shop", but it does take longer for me than contemporary novels because of the English/Scottish slang, but I like the challenge!

OK UPDATE.... I finally finished it and although it was a good story, I felt the ending could have come together better. AND never in my life have I ever had to use scissors to split pages that were not cut when it was printed! I am pretty sure that I am the only one who has ever read this book in my possession for all of its 103 years!

Nikolay Nikiforov says

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Katherine Holmes says

I love Sir Walter Scott's novels and read him every four years or so. So I tried Old Mortality. I thought I wouldn't get through this one. One thing about his novels is the dialect writing - difficult to read sometimes. This novel was full of it at the beginning but that's because of the conflict between the aristocrats and the peasants in Scotland. As I went with the appealing main character, I found the rendition of this religious conflict to parallel the Revolutionary War. It seemed very similar to me and I hadn't known about this war in Scotland. Caught up, I read to the end. He's such a great historical author.

Cambusken says

Brilliant narrative filled with tumultuous action and vivid detail, accompanied by sly comment and humour. I doubt if many people share (or ever shared) Scott's wistful longing after a time of noble families and faithful servants (the evidence of this book is, he didn't manage to convince himself). This vision does not intrude much, in fact is part of the period detail. His sympathetic insight into vastly different, complex people, and

complex situations, must surely be unique. Certainly accompanied by such easy narrative and vivid style. One of the greats.

Fran says

This early nineteenth century Scottish novel is actually historical fiction about the battle between the Royalists and Covenanters in the late 17th century. It is a typical nineteenth century novel, with a lot of characters, description and coincidences to make the plot work. At the same time, I learned details of a period during the Scottish civil wars over religion. Like any nineteenth century novel, it is a leisurely read. However, it is a little more difficult than other novels because some of the characters speak in Scottish dialect.

Arlomisty says

Excellent book! This is a little known Sir Walter Scott book, but it's packed full of adventure, romance, and battles... this takes place in the mid to late 1600's in the Scottish Highlands. Our hero Henry Morton finds himself in a series of events that put him into the middle of a national rebellion between Scotland and England... he's taken prisoner and condemned to die by hanging when during transportation (with several other prisoners) the detachment of troops that he is with are drawn into a battle and are routed... Morton escapes and that begins his adventures in the Highlands! I recommend this book to anyone... a classic indeed! (I don't know why this has never been made into a movie... it would make a great one!)

Stephen Hicks says

Old Mortality was the first Sir Walter Scott book I had the pleasure of picking up. There are pretty significant growing pains when it comes to becoming fluent in the Scottish dialect he so often writes in, but, by the end, that regional detail really adds to the overall texture of the book. I also enjoyed this book as it gave me some insight and initiated some extra-curricular research into the Presbyterian tradition of which I am a part.

This book centers around the tensions between religious zeal, civil discord, minority oppression, and nobility. And Scott weaves a most brilliant web of those tensions in some fantastic characters like Henry Morton and Burley of Balfour, and Lord Evandale. The storyline really picked up after the first 75-100 pages and after that the pages turned themselves.

This book has the ability to provoke some very penetrating questions with its historically contextualized plot. The perennial concept of church v state; Christian unity between denominations; interpretation/application of Old Testament texts; the extreme politicization of religious dogma; civility and mercy in the face of your enemies; a classy chivalrous romantic subplot. It's all there.

Caitlin says

Sometimes, when I've been reading things written by living writers, I wonder why I keep coming back to Scott (et al.) Certainly much of the everyday matter in his books is foreign to me. He'll have been dead 229 years on September 15.

The Tale of Old Mortality is one of the books that makes me remember why. Like many of my favorite books, it's playful, and it has a sense of being incomplete.

The story is a fairly typical _Waverly_ story--there's a reluctant moderate hero drawn into a fractious struggle. Neither side of the civil uprising comes off too well, but, in the end, the establishment wins because it's the sanest. The book is an indictment of zealotry, which feels relevant today. To the extent that splinter religious sects ought to be able to practice, they're tolerated in Scott's world. To the extent their own intolerance would keep others from practicing their own religions, the extremists are discredited. It's a Lockean view.

One of the most charming things about this, like other Scott novels, is the neutral common-man figures. Cuddie Headrigg and Niel Blane are the good guys--because they're more interested in earning an honest living than in fighting over matters of principle. They're comic relief sometimes, but they're the grounding feature in the story. If we just had extreme Presbyterians on the one hand and extreme Royalists on the other, the book might have to decide on a winner. It doesn't here, because religion and politics change and fade.

There are great, quotable moments throughout the book, though perhaps my favorite involve Claverhouse. What does it mean to be a killer and a gentleman? Same with Burley--what does it mean to be a religious man and a killer?

For those who don't read old books, this may be a challenge, but by the time the second Volume begins, it's quite fast and engrossing.

James says

Old Mortality is not as well known nor is it as popular as Rob Roy, Ivanhoe or Kenilworth, all of which followed it in the five years subsequent to its publication in 1816. It also precedes The Heart of Midlothian and The Bride of Lammermoor, both of which were part of Scott's series of novels "Tales of My Landlord". But Old Mortality is considered one of Scott's best novels.

Under the reign of the last Stewarts, there was an anxious wish on the part of government to counteract, by every means in their power, the strict or puritanical spirit which had been the chief characteristic of the republican government. The novel takes its title from the nickname of Robert Paterson, a Scotsman of the 18th century who late in life decided to travel around Scotland re-engraving the tombs of 17th century Covenanter martyrs. The first chapter of the novel describes a meeting between him and the novel's fictitious narrator.

The novel tells the story of Henry Morton, who shelters John Balfour of Burley, one of the assassins of Archbishop James Sharp. As a consequence Morton joins Burley in an uprising of Covenanters (who wanted the re-establishment of Presbyterianism in Scotland) which was eventually defeated at the Battle of Bothwell

Bridge in 1679, by forces led by the Duke of Monmouth and John Graham of Claverhouse. The bulk of the novel describes the progress of the rebellion from its initial success at the Battle of Drumclog, and the growth of factionalism which hastened its defeat. Henry's involvement in the rebellion causes a conflict of loyalties for him, since he is in love with Edith Bellenden who belongs to a family who oppose the uprising. Henry's beliefs are not as extreme as those of Burley and many other rebel leaders, which leads to his involvement in the factional disputes. The novel also shows their oppressors, led by Claverhouse, to be extreme in their beliefs and methods. Comic relief is provided by Cuddie Headrigg, a peasant who reluctantly joins the rebellion because of his personal loyalty to Morton, as well as his own fanatical mother. This novel is both interesting and exciting in its historical detail. More importantly it addresses the questions of the relative merits of 'enthusiasm' and moderation, of extremism and consensus, when the nation is swept by rebellion and violent change.

Victoria Jackson says

Not my favourite period, Charles II at time of Covenanters in Scotland rebelling against religious laws, but quite enjoyed the action and history of this period. Starts with a Paterson - Old Mortality - who travelled around Scotland cleaning off the gravestones of all the people who died for the cause so they won't be forgotten. Very good

Edward says

I have avoided Walter Scott as one of those long-winded 19th century writers of historical romance that I don't have time to read, whatever their merits. But a friend recommended OLD MORTALITY, claiming it was one of Scott's better novels, so I picked it up reluctantly. I was pleasantly surprised. It depicts the late 17th century religious wars between the Scottish Presbyterian "Covenanters" and the English Crown. The Covenanters believed in a purity of doctrine that allowed them total liberty and would make their religion the sole form of worship in Scotland, The Crown, on the other hand, saw them as anarchic rebels who had to be subdued and punished for sedition. Otherwise, there would be no public order in the north, and worse, a separate and hostile state.

There were, however, different degrees of belief among the Covenanters, from radicals who justified any form violence against the government forces, including assassinations of non-combatants. These include the crazed preacher, Habakkuk Mucklewrath (who still had a following, crazed or not), and a cold-blooded operative, John Burley, to more moderate members, regarded as backsliders and compromisers by the radicals. Scott apparently did accurate historical research, and while he employs fictional characters in his story, the details of strategies on both sides are authentic.

Scott's novel begins in leisurely fashion by describing an old man, many years after the wars, who goes about the countryside cleaning and repairing deteriorating grave markers of Covenanters who were killed in the wars. He goes by the name of "Old Morality", and serves to remind the reader that without his efforts, and by symbolic extension, Scott's story, these religious warriors of the past and what they fought for would be forgotten.

Scott moves his story along by following the chief character, Henry Morton of Milnwood, a moderate. He has some sympathy with the Covenanters in their fight for religious liberty but is appalled by the

indiscriminate violence that is practiced. He reflects, though, "it is impossible to deny the praise of devoted courage in peasants, who without leaders, without money, without any fixed plan of action and almost without arms, borne out by their innate zeal and a detestation of their rulers, ventured to declare open war against the established government, supported by a regular army and the whole force of three kingdoms."

After an initial stunning victory against over-confident soldiers, the king's reinforcements come from the south and the final outcome is inevitable - the rebels are viciously put down. Morton uneasily tries to straddle the conflict and does gain some respect from both sides But in the end, he goes into exile in Holland, and while at the end he does return and reunites with the woman he loves, I feel this is an obligatory happy ending convention and the less said about it, the better. .

The real heart of the story is the struggle, one that Scott treats even-handedly. Again, Morton is at the center. At one point, he asks a rhetorical question of his guard that goes unanswered. "Is there a difference between the blood. . . of gallant soldiers and noble gentlemen, and the red puddle that stagnates in the veins of psalm-singing mechanics, crackbrained demagogues, and sullen boors - some distinction between spilling a flash of generous wine and dashing down a can full of base muddy ale?"

OLD MORTALITY and its long-ago struggles still echo in today's world with the efforts to defeat ISIS, another fanatical religious movement The difference is that ISIS has the technological firepower to inflict far more damage than did the 17th Covenanters. But for both, there was no compromise nor negotiation.

Kim says

"*Old Mortality*" is a novel by Sir Walter Scott set in 1679 in south west Scotland. Along with "*The Black Dwarf*", it forms Scott's "*Tales of My Landlord*". "*Old Mortality*" was planned as the second volume of the Tales, which was originally to consist of four volumes each containing a separate regional tale. As the story took hold of Scott's imagination, however, it expanded to fill three volumes, the standard length for a novel. The two novels were published together in 1816. "*Old Mortality*" is considered by many as one of Scott's best novels. I am not one of the many, this book just made me tired, it made me feel worn out by the end. It didn't help that I had just got through "*The Black Dwarf*" that almost drove me crazy with the Scottish dialect, and it also probably didn't help that we were stranded in a hotel room with our only means of transportation broken down in a truck garage at the time, but even in perfect circumstances "*Old Mortality*" still wouldn't be on my favorite list.

If I had to tell you what this book was about in one sentence, which is how my sister always asks me to tell her what books are about "in one sentence". I'd tell you it was a book about people hating other people. Everybody in this book seemed to hate everybody else in this book. There were so many different groups of people hating so many other different groups of people that I'm not sure how they kept straight who it was that was on their side and who it was that was their enemy and it would have made life much easier just to try to get along with each other. But that doesn't happen. So as far as I can tell the Protestants hated the Catholics, and the Catholics hated the Protestants, the Presbyterians hated the Catholics and the Episcopalians and the Episcopalians hated them back; there are Jacobites and Covenanters and rigid Presbyterians and moderate Presbyterians. There are gentry and landowners and crown vassals, tenants, peasants, Dukes and Lords and Generals and lots and lots of soldiers. They all spend most of their time

fighting with at least half of the other groups mentioned in the book. The Covenanters have an easier way, instead of trying to figure out who to fight with, they just fight with everyone as seen here during a sermon given by one of their pastors:

"presently he charged the guilt and misery of the people on the awful negligence of their rulers, who had not only failed to establish presbytery as the national religion, but had tolerated sectaries of various descriptions, Papists, Prelatists, Erastians, assuming the name of Presbyterians, Independents, Socinians, and Quakers: all of whom Kettledrummy proposed, by one sweeping act, to expel from the land, and thus re-edify in its integrity the beauty of the sanctuary."

Then there is this:

"Burley and his confederates had drawn together a considerable body of these sectaries, amounting to a hundred horse and about fifteen hundred foot, clouded and severe in aspect, morose and jealous in communication, haughty of heart, and confident, as men who believed that the pale of salvation was open for them exclusively; while all other Christians, however slight were the shades of difference of doctrine from their own, were in fact little better than outcasts or reprobates."

And then this:

"You are right," said Claverhouse, with a smile; "you are very right—we are both fanatics; but there is some distinction between the fanaticism of honour and that of dark and sullen superstition."

"Yet you both shed blood without mercy or remorse," said Morton, who could not suppress his feelings.

"Surely," said Claverhouse, with the same composure; "but of what kind?—There is a difference, I trust, between the blood of learned and reverend prelates and scholars, of gallant soldiers and noble gentlemen, and the red puddle that stagnates in the veins of psalm-singing mechanics, crackbrained demagogues, and sullen boors;—some distinction, in short, between spilling a flask of generous wine, and dashing down a can full of base muddy ale?"

As I said, I just get tired of everybody fighting.

As to the actual characters in the book, our hero is Henry Morton of Milnwood, a moderate Presbyterian, Morton is arrested for harbouring John Burley of Balfour, a Covenanting friend of his father. Unknown to Morton, Burley has participated in the murder of Archbishop Sharpe of St. Andrews (hated by the Covenanters for deserting their cause and aiding the restoration of Episcopalianism), the event triggers the uprising. Morton is sentenced to death but is saved through the intervention of Lord Evandale, rival for the hand of Edith Bellenden, the woman both men love. Edith belongs to a Royalist family, that's not important to me any more than it's important that Evandale is a Lord or Morton is a Presbyterian, but it's important to everyone else in the novel, so picture me sighing right now.

As the story goes on the men become friends even though they are fighting on opposite sides of this annoying war. Morton doesn't like the oppressive behaviour of the government forces which I can't really blame him for especially after they plan to execute him, so he joins the Covenanters and becomes one of their military leaders. He tries to check the cruel fanaticism of many of his colleagues, it doesn't work but he tries, however I just never really came to like Morton, oh I liked him better than a lot of the other people in the novel, but anyone would. One of the only people I did really like was Lord Evandale. I was cheering for him the whole book. We also have the Reverend Gabriel Kettledrummy one of the Covenantors who loved to

talk and talk and talk:

"Two mortal hours did he preach at a breathing; and certainly no lungs, or doctrine, excepting his own, could have kept up, for so long a time, the attention of men in such precarious circumstances. But he possessed in perfection a sort of rude and familiar eloquence peculiar to the preachers of that period, which, though it would have been fastidiously rejected by an audience which possessed any portion of taste, was a cake of the right leaven for the palates of those whom he now addressed."

Just knowing I was about to hear a two hour sermon from anyone just may be enough to get me to go to the next church down the street, or in the case of my church, the one across the street. And Gabriel is just a regular guy compared to another of the Covenantor preachers, Habakkuk Mucklewrath:

"Who talks of safe conduct and of peace?" said a shrill, broken, and overstrained voice, from the crowd.

"Peace, brother Habakkuk," said Macbriar, in a soothing tone, to the speaker.

"I will not hold my peace," reiterated the strange and unnatural voice; "is this a time to speak of peace, when the earth quakes, and the mountains are rent, and the rivers are changed into blood, and the two-edged sword is drawn from the sheath to drink gore as if it were water, and devour flesh as the fire devours dry stubble?"

While he spoke thus, the orator struggled forward to the inner part of the circle, and presented to Morton's wondering eyes a figure worthy of such a voice and such language. The rags of a dress which had once been black, added to the tattered fragments of a shepherd's plaid, composed a covering scarce fit for the purposes of decency, much less for those of warmth or comfort. A long beard, as white as snow, hung down on his breast, and mingled with bushy, uncombed, grizzled hair, which hung in elf-locks around his wild and staring visage. The features seemed to be extenuated by penury and famine, until they hardly retained the likeness of a human aspect. The eyes, grey, wild, and wandering, evidently betokened a bewildered imagination. He held in his hand a rusty sword, clotted with blood, as were his long lean hands, which were garnished at the extremity with nails like eagle's claws.

"In the name of Heaven! who is he?" said Morton, in a whisper to Poundtext, surprised, shocked, and even startled, at this ghastly apparition, which looked more like the resurrection of some cannibal priest, or druid red from his human sacrifice, than like an earthly mortal.

"It is Habakkuk Mucklewrath," answered Poundtext, in the same tone, "whom the enemy have long detained in captivity in forts and castles, until his understanding hath departed from him, and, as I fear, an evil demon hath possessed him. Nevertheless, our violent brethren will have it, that he speaketh of the spirit, and that they fructify by his pouring forth."

Here he was interrupted by Mucklewrath, who cried in a voice that made the very beams of the roof quiver—"Who talks of peace and safe conduct? who speaks of mercy to the bloody house of the malignants? I say take the infants and dash them against the stones; take the daughters and the mothers of the house and hurl them from the battlements of their trust, that the dogs may fatten on their blood as they did on that of Jezabel, the spouse of Ahab, and that their carcasses may be dung to the face of the field even in the portion of their fathers!"

One of the things that struck me about the book comes not so much from the book as from reading things about the book other people have written. At different places I have read how Scott was clearly not

sympathetic to the Covenantors, that he portrayed them in such a bad light. That the *"coolness of Scott's attitude to the Covenantors was unmistakable"*. I hadn't seen it that way. Yes, he certainly made the Covenantors seem awful to me, but he made those on the other side of the argument, the government I guess it would be, pretty awful too. I thought pretty near everyone in the book, everyone holding a weapon or a bible that is, were just plain crazy, no matter what side they were on. One of the reasons given in an article I read as to why you could tell that Scott was against the Covenantors was that *"there was no beautiful maiden on the Covenanters' side, to present their cause to us in ardent and seductive terms"*. I will admit that, the only main female character that I can remember who was a Covenanter was Cuddie Headrigg's mother, and that lady was crazier than I am. I'm still sticking to Covenantors or no Covenantors, these people were crazy.

The last character that I want to mention, one I did like, is Cuddie Headrigg. Cuddie is a peasant who reluctantly joins the rebellion because of his personal loyalty to Morton, as well as his own fanatical Covenanting mother, this lady almost drove me crazy; Cuddie acts as a manservant to Morton and he was the one who would make me smile, when I could understand what he was saying that is which brings me to this, the Scottish dialect again. Here you go, enjoy some samples:

"I wotna if it's pillaging, or how ye ca't," said Cuddie, "but it comes natural to a body, and it's a profitable trade. Our folk had tirl'd the dead dragoons as bare as bawbees before we were loose amaisht.—But when I saw the Whigs a' weel yokit by the lugs to Kettledrummle and the other chield, I set off at the lang trot on my ain errand and your honour's. Sae I took up the syke a wee bit, away to the right, where I saw the marks o'mony a horsefoot, and sure eneugh I cam to a place where there had been some clean leatherin', and a' the puir chields were lying there buskit wi' their claes just as they had put them on that morning—naebody had found out that pose o' carcages—and wha suld be in the midst thereof (as my mither says) but our auld acquaintance, Sergeant Bothwell?"

There's also:

"Haena I e'en now?" said Cuddie, with great exultation. "I tauld ye I wasna that dooms stupid, if it cam to lifting things.—And forby, I hae gotten twa gude horse. A feckless loon of a Straven weaver, that has left his loom and his bein house to sit skirling on a cauld hill-side, had caught twa dragoon naigs, and he could neither gar them hup nor wind, sae he took a gowd noble for them baith—I suld hae tried him wi' half the siller, but it's an unco ill place to get change in—Ye'll find the siller's missing out o' Bothwell's purse."

I cheated the leddy for your clavers, but I wasna gaun to cheat my joe. But she may marry whae she likes now, for I'm clean dung ower. This is a waur dirdum than we got frae Mr Gudyill when ye garr'd me refuse to eat the plum-porridge on Yule-eve, as if it were ony matter to God or man whether a pleughman had suppit on minched pies or sour sowens."

And again:

"That wad sort ill wi' the auld leddy, to be sure," said Cuddie; "she wad hardly win ower a lang day in the baggage-wain."

"Then sic a flyting as there wad be between them, a' about Whig and Tory," continued Jenny.

"To be sure," said Cuddie, "the auld leddy 's unto kittle in thae points."

If you have all that sorted out and are ready for more, go get the book, between The Black Dwarf and Old Mortality there is plenty of Scottish dialect for you to get through. I am tempted to put both books on my re-read lists mainly because I can tell I am finally getting the hang of the dialect, some of it anyway, others is

still a mystery, so since it is slowly becoming clearer to me, perhaps in a re-read it would read so much easier and smoother. However, I am in no mood right now for a trip back through Waverly and I have a feeling that by the time the book comes up again on my re-reading I'll have forgotten my Scottish dialect all over again. Oh well, such is life. On to the next book.

Carol Storm says

Sir Walter Scott goes nasty -- beyond knights and damsels -- into a world of religious hatred and sectarian violence that remains more relevant than ever today!

I read this book as a teenager in the Seventies, and what I loved even better than the action, adventure, and romance was the striking similarities between the "culture war" of 17th century Scotland and the lingering bitterness in America at the end of the Vietnam era.

The story of the Protestant uprising in rural Scotland depicts short-haired, religious "Covenanters" who despise learning, culture, pleasure and the arts against long-haired, aristocratic "Cavaliers" who despise religion, morality, and hard work but consider themselves refined and truly civilized.

When I read the book I felt a deep identification with the Covenanters. Not only were they clearly related to the Puritans who founded America, but the people they hated -- foppish, decadent, arrogant and overly cultured Cavaliers -- reminded me in striking ways of the spoiled, self-involved student protestors of the Sixties, many of whom later became college professors, journalists, and the like. It was no fun being a teenager in the Seventies, because these nice people were always around -- on the radio, on Television, at the movies -- to remind teenagers like me that we didn't count, that our music was second rate, that we had nothing useful to contribute to American life, and that our very existence was somehow a betrayal of values we never supported in the first place.

Perhaps the most chilling moment in OLD MORTALITY is when Sgt. Bothwell -- boozed up, and equally drunk on his own aristocratic identity as a "bastard" grandson of King James I -- attempts to mock Burley of Balfour, in much the same way a Manhattan professor of the mid-Eighties might ridicule a Born Again preacher, or a Vietnam Veteran, (or even, dare I suggest, a scholarship student from out of town.)

Without ever losing his temper, Balfour challenges Bothwell, knocks him down, knocks the wind out of him, and promises with deadly calm to meet him again any time and fix things so that he will never get up again. It's a strangely modern scene, tough and gripping and worthy of Quentin Tarantino at his best. The terrible hatred between these two men prefigures the epic clash between "hardhats" and "longhairs" in the Sixties -- except that in OLD MORTALITY the hardhats win.

Shocking!!!

Surreysmum says

[These notes were made in 1983:]. I really liked this novel. It is constructed on the simplest of "triangle" plans - one man too many; both admirable; the one the lady doesn't want dies a noble death in the arms of the one she does. Add to that the utterly splendid re-creation of the language of the Covenanters (in pulpit and out - it's much the same!) and enough battles to keep the bloodthirsty among us happy, and we have a novel whose scope and handling of characters (sentimental and caricatured) reminds one curiously of Dickens. But the insistent theme of the book - the wrongness of fanaticism - on any side, in any cause - is pure Scott. He does it very nicely - doesn't preach too much, unlike Messrs. Kettledrummy and Poundtext! - but it's there in the situation, and driven wickedly home by the (no doubt historically correct) conjunction of Covenanters and Jacobites in the closing chapters of the book. It's also there on the personal level - poor Cuddie Headrigg is caught between two women - his ranting mother, Mause, and the aristocrat Lady Margaret. On the more "moderate" level, poor Edith, too, is caught between a left-winger (Morton) and a right-winger (Evandale), and it is when either of these two move out toward the edges from their central position that things go awry (and incidentally the plot moves along). The whole thing is interestingly buried in layers of prefatory material. There's Jedediah Cleishbotham, publishing the work of his deceased protégé, Peter Pattieson, who got his history from Old Mortality (not himself an eye-witness) and various other sources, named and unnamed. Yet this very oral nature of the transmission (at least up to Pattieson) gives verisimilitude to the strikingly realistic detail of speech and manner which Scott actually pulled out of published sermons and the like. People have been telling me for years that this is Scott's best novel, and now I am inclined to believe them.

Lucy says

For saying it's Sir Walter, this was very readable apart from the framing device, which I found horribly confusing - 'Old Mortality' has nothing to do with the story really. It is surprisingly gruesome in parts, and as usual with this author the hero is a bit of a cipher. The minor characters are fairly wonderful, though, an awful lot of mad Scotsmen.....

Susan says

Brutal history and local dialect throughout made this a wee challenge of a read. But Scott is a rich and rewarding teller of tales and I look forward to reading more of his Waverley Novels.

Emmanuel Wallart says

A travel through old Scotland. Good story but the end is a little deceiving.

Carolyn Lochhead says

Like every other Walter Scott book I've read, (um, about two, since you ask), this novel starts with around

100 pages of dull, porridgey prose, but by the end, turns into an entrancing gallop through one of the bloodiest periods of Scotland's history. It's no doubt easier to get into if you already have a good grasp of 17th century Scottish history - It's not every book that has me trying desperately to figure out whether Mary Queen of Scots came before or after Charles I, in order to fully understand the narrative. But even if you couldn't find Scotland on a map, this is still, eventually, a very good read.
