Two Literary Immortals

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Around the first quarter mark of the nineteenth century two writers struggled for existence and recognition.

In 1826 Sir Walter Scott, Scottish poet and novelist, was financially ruined by the failure of the publishing house of Ballantyne and Company. Too proud to ask for assistance, he began to write, against time and in spite of ill health, in order that his debts might be wholly cleared. With much greater speed than in his more famous days, he slaved feverishly at this self-imposed task until paralysis cut short a career as notably sad as that in store for a younger writer, Edgar Allen Poe, who published his first successful manuscript one year after the death of Scott.

Poe, after dismissal from West Point, gained a little literary recognition because of his prize story, Manuscript Found in a Bottle. Because of this recognition, he was hired, like Scott, by a publishing company. He edited a magazine and was gaining a reputation as a critic when his fondness for drink resulted in the loss of his editorship. Gradually he sank into miserable poverty.

Both men were possessed of extremely independent spirits, and both neglected their opportunities for higher education, more because of their dislike of conforming to rules than anything else.

Scott, despite his lack of formal education, was called to the bar in 1792 and there followed a series of political offices, none of which seemed to interest him, although he discharged each one faithfully. During this time he had begun to write poetry in his leisure hours. There was a novelty and a freshness about Scott's writings which gave him a taste of success before his poetry was eclipsed by the great Lord Byron. Scott turned to prose and to the historical novel, which made its debut in Scott's handwriting. After his success in this new field, he became careless and lax in his habits and toward his duties, but he never stopped writing. At times his scenes and his characters were overdrawn and too romantic, but his diverting action and the organization of his plots promise that his name will be enduring. Scott also attempted critical prose but was not unusually successful in this field.

Poe, like Scott, has the distinction of beginning a new type of fiction, the detective story. There are limitations to the poetry of Poe as well as to the poetry of Scott. Poe believed that "poetry is the rhythmical creation of beauty," that the highest form of beauty is sadness, and that the object of poetry is pleasure, not truth. His talent did not extend beyond the limits of this theory, but he wins his reader by a haunting melody of strange words and an indescribable atmosphere of unreality and mystery. His poems seem to lack the element looked for by some who prefer beauty of thought to beauty of form.

Poe inherited a weak constitution from his invalid actress mother, who died of pneumonia and left her son an orphan at the age of two or three. (The date is disputed.) This unfortunate frailty of health, the torture of watching his beloved wife fade away in the midst of miserable poverty, and his mania for drink drove Edgar Allen Poe to a premature grave.
Poe, because of his own weakness of character, it is true, never had an opportunity to do anything else but write to exist. Sir Walter Scott, a victim of poor health since childhood and with a huge debt hanging heavy over his head, certainly did not compose for the satisfaction of composing alone. The unfortunate positions of these two thwarted men of genius provoked an immense amount of mediocrity that contrasts sharply with Poe's immortal Raven and with Scott's unsurpassed Waverly Novels.

The tragedies of Edgar Allen Poe and of Sir Walter Scott will be lamented as long as their masterful prose and poetry are studied and loved. Weaknesses of character in the two artists have been forgiven and now lie forgotten between the covers of The Gold Bug and buried deep in the adventures of Ivanhoe.

Wendell Willkie

FRANCES TALKINGTON

Wendell Willkie was a liberal man and a man with a great American spirit. Willkie was not a politician because he could not compromise for his own advantage. He never let bitter criticism from his opponents dissuade him from the policy or method of action which he believed right.

In the recent campaign he was on the fence. At his death he had not yet, at least so far as the public was concerned, made up his mind which course to follow. Those closest to him say he probably would have pointed out the weaknesses and deficiencies in the policies of both nominees and let the public weigh the criticisms. No one will know for sure which side he would have taken.

Wendell Willkie had no sympathy for the domestic policies of the present administration or with the methods of the Washington regime. But even though he criticized certain mistakes, he felt that Roosevelt and Hull were working in the right direction on foreign affairs, the important issue today.

Willkie was misunderstood by many people when he spoke for more cooperation with Britain in 1940, and after the election many anti-Willkie Republicans smeared his views with subversive literature. According to Dr. Gallup, twenty percent of the independent voters would have heard their own views reflected in his.

It is my belief that more men should follow his example. More men should become independent thinkers with no intention to hold public office but only to serve the best interests of their country.