The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club

Annual Dinner, Friday, 2nd March, 2012

The 103rd Annual Dinner was held in the New Club, Princes Street, Edinburgh, with some 60 members congregating in the New Club for drinks before proceeding to the Long Room, which provided an admirable venue for the event.

Professor Purdie's introduction, as Chairman, of those at the Top Table was followed by this beautifully composed Grace by the Very Rev. Allan Maclean of Dochgarroch:

> O Almighty God, tonight we remember Sir Walter Scott, the 'Author of Waverley', and 'the best loved Scotsman who ever lived'.
>
> We give thanks for the pleasure we enjoy from Scott, the person and the author, from the characters he drew, the plots he invented, the times he recreated and the use he made of the power of the pen.
>
> This year we also remember Scott of Parliament House; the home and haunt, along with Clerihugh's Tavern, of so many of Scott's friends and of his characters, not least Mr Paulus Pleydell, with his consciousness of power and love of teasing, and his clerk Driver, who could 'write for hours after he could not speak'.
>
> And finally we gives thanks for Edinburgh,
>
> 'The antique buildings, climbing high,
> Whose Gothic frontlets sought the sky,'
>
> Edinburgh where Mr Pleydell was councillor; recalling all that it meant to Scott, not least, in his own words, 'its busy day and social night'.
>
> And for the 'social night' of this Gathering and Dinner, we pray that you will bless these gifts to our use as also ourselves in your service, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Dinner was then served, consisting of:
Rosette of Smoked Salmon with Lemon Dressing and Quails Egg Salad
Supreme of Guinea Fowl wrapped in Pancetta with Wild Mushroom Cream
New Club Individual Fruits Gelee de Riesling with a Quenelle of Crème Fraiche
Coffee and Mints

After The Loyal Toast, *the Chairman called upon the President, Professor Emeritus Claire Lamont, to propose the Toast to the Memory of Sir Walter Scott. The following is a transcript of her address:*

Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured by your inviting me to be this year's President, and to propose this evening's toast to the Immortal Memory of Walter Scott. I thank you very warmly. Scott, referring to the Theatrical Fund Dinner of 1827, at which he presided, remarked 'I am no orator; and upon such occasions … I say as well as I can what the time requires'. That has a lot of Scott's practicality in it, and I shall take it as my model.

We have probably all asked ourselves how we first became acquainted with Scott. In my case it was in the family. My father was much moved by Scott as a poet, in particular the tragic lines on 'Flodden's fatal field' from *Marmion*, 'Where shiver'd was fair Scotland's spear, / And broken was her shield!' In a more cheerful vein,

from the same poem, he would quote 'Young Lochinvar', 'So faithful in love, and so dauntless in war, / There never was knight like the young Lochinvar.' I don't think my mother read the poems; she liked biography and knew Scott well from reading Lockhart. She appreciated Scott as a 'good man', a response which echoes the earliest of the speeches given at this annual dinner. In her last years she lived in Melrose and we were experienced Abbotsford visitors. We knew how to avoid the armour and weapons, to glory in the library and its view of the Tweed, and to stand in blissful contemplation of the Coalport china in the dining-room – the set with the large pink roses. My mother knew Dame Jean Maxwell-Scott as they met occasionally over various good works in the Melrose area. You will know that our name, Lamont, is subject to various alien pronunciations. Some of these were creeping into Melrose, and Dame Jean once referred to my mother as 'the lady who knows how to pronounce her own name'.

For most people, however, the earliest memory of Scott comes from school-days. Certainly it was school that introduced me to Scott the novelist. At too young an age – perhaps about ten – we were supposed to read *Ivanhoe*. I was terrified by the character of Front-de-Boeuf, and lost the courage to continue reading. (I was a perfect candidate for Professor Purdie's abbreviated version.) For O-level we read *Guy Mannering*, which was altogether more successful. I finished the book and even managed to write an exam answer on 'loyalty' in the novel. Before that, however, I had a more emotionally challenging Scott experience. In the holiday before the exam our teacher set us the task of reading another Scott novel. We could choose which. I was somewhat daunted by this requirement and left it very late in the holiday to start. I was staying with my grandparents who had a complete set of the Waverley Novels in a bookcase in the hall. I pulled them all out on to the carpet and set about discovering which of the novels was the shortest. I omitted the tales as I recognised that they wouldn't cut it with the teacher, and came to the conclusion that *The Bride of Lammermoor* was the shortest. (That is not correct – I could have confounded the teacher by reading *The Black Dwarf* or *Castle Dangerous*.) I read *The Bride*, unable to put it down, and as I got to the end alarmed my kindly grandparents with my floods of tears.

I know now that the set of Waverley Novels that I pulled down was the Centenary Edition of 1870-71 – the centenary being of Scott's birth. It was in 25 volumes, dark blue cloth with gilt lettering. The set came my way decades later. The experience imprinted on me the belief that a Scott novel did not stand alone, but only as part of a set known as the Waverley Novels.

The first complete edition of Scott's novels was the result of the financial crash of 1826 and its publisher was Robert Cadell. This is the edition known as the Magnum, short for Magnum Opus, and was published serially, one volume per month, between 1829 and 1833. The series of 48 small red volumes had got as far as *Woodstock* when Scott died in 1832. It is a remarkable publication. For it Scott revised his texts for the last time, and added a new Introduction and notes to each novel. This new material has a strong autobiographical vein – a complete contrast to the anonymity maintained in the publication of the novels singly. The Magnum volumes were priced at 5 shillings each, making it cheaper than the first editions had been. The cheapness is only really visible in the small type used for the new notes. It was an astounding publishing success. The passionate desire of readers for information about the teasingly anonymous author, and about the sources of the newly forming genre of the historical novel pushed up demand beyond reckoning.

The Magnum was reprinted time and again throughout the rest of the nineteenth century. First Cadell reprinted it; then after his death in 1849 the copyright was bought by the Edinburgh firm of A. & C. Black. They produced complete sets for all purses: in calf or morocco, cloth or paper covers, with generous type or small type, sometimes diminished further by being printed in double columns. A. & C. Black even sold bookcases to accommodate the more expensive sets, and boxes for the cheaper ones. The bookcases give us a hint: was a collected edition of the Waverley Novels becoming a cultural symbol, part of a properly furnished house?

The popularity of these series takes some explanation, since they greatly lessened the availability of single titles. It seems that the personal material which Scott had added to the Magnum, about himself as a writer and the origins of his novels, drew Victorian readers to purchase a set. But for how long could that last? When the Magnum started to go out of copyright in the early 1870s other firms nipped in with reprints, and some of these abridged the celebrated Magnum additions, indicating perhaps a kind of weariness setting in, or a change of taste. My story of pulling out a set of the Waverley Novels dates from the 1950s. Many Scots of my age will have similar memories. Younger people, however, will have another story, of seeing complete sets of the Waverley Novels in second-hand bookshops, and, later, in Oxfam shops.

That is part of the long dip in Scott's reputation. It was a slow dip: I remember my supervisor, Mary Lascelles, telling me that in her childhood there was a rule in the house, 'No Walter Scott before lunch'. Clearly there was no dip there. The twentieth century saw the revival of publication of single titles by Scott – Everyman did so, and we now have paperbacks from Oxford University Press, Penguin and others. The disadvantage here is that these publishers will reprint only some of the novels. One may always have to go back to a complete set of the Waverley Novels to find the less popular works. Happily, the collected edition has reinvented itself in the form of the Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels. I felt it to be a moment in the history of Scott's reputation when the National Library of Scotland replaced the Border Edition of the Waverley Novels on its open shelves – the one with notes by Andrew Lang – with the Edinburgh Edition. That not only contains modern scholarship, but lets you buy a single title if you wish.

Today's publishing has done a lot for Scott's reputation, and will do more when the edition of Scott's poems is finished. There are other positive pointers that we are climbing out of the dip. There is a Centre for Scott Studies in Aberdeen University; Jane Millgate's electronic catalogue of Scott's letters is based in the National Library; the Walter Scott Digital Archive is based in Edinburgh University Library; Scott conferences continue to expand: last year there was a Scott conference in Wyoming; this year there is to be one in Paris. Abbotsford is being restored. And now Scott even has a Twitter account. It's disappointing that films have not done Scott more justice, concentrating as they do too much on medieval chivalry and hordes of highlanders. I live not far from the philosopher, Mary Midgley, now in her nineties. When I last called she was reading *Guy Mannering*, and we had a good conversation on the suitability of the novel for a television series. Talking of hordes of highlanders I hope you have all seen the gender-shift on the cover of Peter Garside's edition of *Waverley* from Penguin.

So there are plenty of things happening in the Scott world which people of my generation notice; but what about today's young people? They may not even see the Waverley Novels in an Oxfam shop, since they seem to have disappeared. They won't mind since for them a complete set can always be downloaded on to Kindle. The task of introducing Scott is now largely left to teachers, of which I was one. I used to teach Scott in Newcastle University, and my experience may reflect what has gone on in other places. When I first went to Newcastle we had a course on The Novel, which started with Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and went solemnly through the famous novelists of almost three hundred years to end with some arresting contemporary title. My contribution included lecturing on Scott and the historical novel – but I can't recall much enthusiasm from the students, largely because the novelist immediately before Scott was Jane Austen. When in the 1990s we gave up that sort of lecture course and devised shorter modules I found that the best way to deal with the Austen/Scott tension was to teach both together. My course was called Jane Austen and Walter Scott, and it was always oversubscribed. That did not mean success, because having signed up the young women would come to tell me that they would like to do only the Austen part of the course. I said that was impossible; they had to do both authors, and would be required to write on both in the exam. They weren't pleased, but they didn't leave the course. As all teachers know, a Jane Austen course will attract so many girls that the boys hesitate to join it. If you make it Austen and Scott you will get the boys – who start out much better at tackling Scott than the girls, perhaps because the latter are sulking and, wanting domestic novels, refuse at first to be interested in politics or history.

The first task is to get them to read the novels – I used to concentrate on *Waverley* and *The Bride of Lammermoor*, and in both cases would tell them to skip the first chapters and start where the story starts. We'd ask ourselves why the opening chapters are there when we got to the end. They didn't like the slow starts, but they were fine once they got going. Scott and Austen were contemporaries, and putting them together is enlightening about both. The students came to realise that Jane Austen never created a woman like Flora Mac-Ivor – her women exist outside the world of ideas; Austen's novels tell the story of no more than two generations of a family; contrast this with Scott's characters formed by a much longer inheritance. Both novelists portray young women whose freedom is curtailed by the older generation; but compare being urged by Mrs Bennet to marry Mr Collins with being prevented by Lady Ashton from marrying that great operatic hero Edgar Ravenswood. The students were fascinated by the extreme situations which Scott presents; no Austen heroine goes mad.

Jane Austen acknowledged the limits of her world – she described herself as writing on a small piece of ivory. Scott, in his posthumous tribute to her, describes the generosity of his range as his 'Big Bow wow strain'. Austen mentions several English counties in her novels, but we get little sense of their geography. Scott's novels are rich with descriptions of landscape, especially in Scotland. Scott of course is a historical novelist; Austen instinctively turned down an invitation to write a historical novel. Scott gives an interesting account of his understanding of history. In youth he was a compulsive reader and history was his favourite. As a consequence when he went up to

Edinburgh University he had in his mind a vast fund of historical facts. When he got there he found that this was not what was taught. He did not know that he was participating in the Scottish Enlightenment – that term was not in use then, and is indeed a product of the last few decades. What he was taught in the University was not history in terms of facts relating to the past, but the principles of the evolutionary movements which govern history. Scott recognised this as the 'philosophy of history' and was grateful for the fact that when he was introduced to its principles he was already 'furnished with a powerful host of examples in illustration of them'. It is that combination of the theory of history plus the events of the past which made Scott a historical novelist, and Jane Austen, lacking both of these, an astute observer of a modern world.

Ever since you honoured me with the invitation to propose this toast I have been curious about that well-known phrase, the 'immortal memory', which is usually thought to apply exclusively to Robert Burns. I was surprised to find that the earliest reference in the *Oxford English Dictionary* to the phase 'immortal memory', applied to a writer, dates from 1928. E. C. Webster is quoted as writing in that year: 'I am as fond of Burns as any, and have read a good deal of his poetry, … but I am not one of those who believe that the Immortal Memory can only be preserved by a yearly pickling in alcohol.' We of course are totally sceptical of the date 1928 as the earliest of the toasts to Scott proposed by Presidents of this society, in 1894, uses the phrase 'immortal memory' as do many later ones. What stops us from bundling our example off to the *OED* is that they want an instance of the phrase in a published source. I have been asking friends whether they know other writers whose 'immortal memory' is celebrated. One answer is Dr Johnson. There are annual dinners in memory of Johnson and I gather that the phrase is used there. The Johnson being celebrated is not the compiler of the *Dictionary* so much as the hero of James Boswell's biography. I consulted friends about the 'immortal memory' and whether writers were the only artists so honoured: did anyone know of a musician or a painter allowed an 'immortal memory'? They didn't, and as we fell silent somebody asked if the phrase had a classical origin. I consulted a Professor of Latin, Michael Reeve, who found the phrase in Erasmus. Erasmus, in a letter of 1519, lamenting those writers whose works had been lost in the dark ages describes them as 'innumeros scriptores immortali memoria dignos' – many writers worthy of an immortal memory. It would have taken a scholar to make the leap from Erasmus to Burns; but it's nice to think that it may have happened.

The term is not now used for writers whose works are lost, but for writers who make a particular contribution. Burns and Johnson, however great their differences, have in common an affinity with ordinary people, especially those struggling in poverty, and a belief in the sharing of food and drink as a remedy for loneliness and social marginalisation. Scott was certainly genial enough to be in their company. 'Immortal memories' seem to be for writers who help us out of our individualism to join in a celebration of human existence which is communal and giving. We know that Scott was hugely hospitable at Abbotsford; but how does a novelist achieve this outreach to others? We see within Scott's novels and in our act of reading the qualities which Burns celebrates. We all know that Scott's novels orchestrate the different levels of society; his poor and marginalised characters are as vivid to us as Burns' are. Anyone deep in a novel is pulled out of themselves and into the world of the novel which is shared with all other readers. This is the communality of the mind which a novel can create.

There are, however, some occasions on which we want our great writers to do something specific for us – to speak to our present circumstances. I cannot share this festive evening with other lovers of Scott without giving a thought to the current debate over his country's future. Mr Salmond asks to hold a referendum on the subject in 2014. Does he know that a significant section of his electorate associates that year with something else, the two-hundredth anniversary of the publication of *Waverley*? The destruction of the Highland clans in that novel illustrates the clash between the philosophical principles of history and the brute reality of historical facts. *Waverley* may appear to be a Hanoverian novel, as the wealthy young English hero marries the biddable Rose Bradwardine; but no reader forgets the fate of the Jacobite characters, the death of Fergus Mac-Ivor and Flora's retreat to France. What does this do for us now, when our circumstances appear so different? Like most really great novels, *Waverley* does not offer a direct answer to a question put two centuries later; but it does enrich our thinking and inform our choices.

I should like in conclusion to turn to an earlier, less complicated work, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*. In that poem we have some of the most eloquent of Scott's writing about Scotland:

> O Caledonia! Stern and wild,
> Meet nurse for a poetic child!
> Land of brown heath and shaggy wood,
> Land of the mountain and the flood,

Land of my sires! what mortal hand
Can e'er untie the filial band,
That knits me to thy rugged strand!

The Minstrel who speaks those patriotic words has already described a truce agreed on the banks of the Teviot between an army of Scottish borderers and an English army from Cumberland:

They met and sate them mingled down,
Without a threat, without a frown,
As brothers meet in foreign land:
The hands the spear that lately grasp'd,
Were interchanged in greeting dear;
Visors were raised, and faces shown,
And many a friend, to friend made known,
Partook of social cheer.
Some drove the jolly bowl about;
With dice and draughts some chas'd the day;
And some with many a merry shout,
In riot revelry, and rout,
Pursued the foot-ball play.

I'm not sure how harmonious foot-ball actually is today; but we get the point. Scott's Minstrel leaves us with this very simple advice: love your country and live in peace with your neighbours.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my pleasure to ask you to be upstanding to drink to the Immortal Memory of Walter Scott.

The Chairman expressed the deep appreciation of the members to the President for her excellent Toast, and then asked Richard Keen, Q. C., to respond to the Toast to ***The Faculty of Advocates***:

In 1785 the young Walter Scott was apprenticed to his father, a successful Writer to the Signet and entered upon what he referred to later as the dry and barren wilderness of forms and conveyances. His work consisted mainly of copying legal documents from which he at least acquired the ability to write long and fast. By 1789 Scot had come to the conclusion that he could not tolerate life as a solicitor. A decision which many of us can of course understand and respect. He therefore determined to pursue a career at the Bar.

As Scott described it, the Bar was 'the line of ambition and liberty'. For the next three years he applied himself energetically to the study necessary to pass the Faculty of Advocates examinations in moral philosophy, universal history and civil law. As Scott himself admitted these were the only years of his life which he applied to learning 'with stern, steady and undeviating industry'.

Scott was called to the Bar on July 11 1792 having submitted his thesis in Latin on the prescribed topic: **'De cadaveris damnatorum'** - Concerning the disposal of the bodies of condemned criminals. This was dedicated to a Scott family neighbour in Edinburgh Lord Braxfield, who as many of you will be aware, probably did more for the supply of **cadaveris damnatorum** than any Scottish judge before or since. It is recorded that Lord Braxfield was so flattered by Scott's dedication of the thesis that he helped him find work on the Jedburgh Circuit.

During his early years at the Bar Scott enjoyed what has been described as a fair and promising practice. His experiences as a fledgling advocate are echoed in those of Alan Fairford in the 1824 novel *Redgauntlet* which paints a vivid picture of life in Parliament House in the late 18th century.

David Marshall, in *Sir Walter Scott and Scots Law*, noted:

> True, his Fee Book shows no startling success but it does exhibit a steadily growing practice of a varied character and a study of the law reports reflects similar success. Comparing his early professional earnings with, for example, those of Jeffrey, about whose success as an advocate there has never been any question, one may claim that Scott's practice compared very favourably with those of his contemporaries.

In his first three years in practice Scott earned £24.3shillings, £57.15s and £105. Figures which I must confess compare quite favourably with my own first years at the Bar. His professional standing is reflected in his appointment in 1797 as one of the Examiners for the Faculty of Advocates and his appointment later as one of the curators of the Advocates Library. During his career at the Bar Scott appeared before the House of Lords, the Court of Session, High Court of Justiciary and various Sheriff Courts.

In December 1799 he was appointed Sheriff of Selkirkshire an office he held until 1832. This did not, however, preclude him from private practice at the Bar and it was not until 1806 that he finally laid aside what David Marshall described as the 'arduous and anxious life' of an advocate. In that same year Scott was appointed one of the Clerks of Session and held that office for the next 25 years. Against that background the verdict of Hesketh Pearson in *Walter Scott: His Life and Personality*:

> It cannot be said that he made a notable figure in the courts of law, or that his services as an advocate were eagerly sought-

might be regarded as somewhat harsh. Pearson goes on to suggest that Scott received a certain amount of work from his father, and no doubt from his father's friends, and that if not much in demand within the court he became popular with his fellow lawyers as a storyteller. There is evidence of Scott employing the talents of both callings.

Scott's first case was not actually in Parliament House but before the General Assembly of the Kirk where he was instructed to defend a Galloway minister named McNaught who was charged among other things with habitual drunkenness and the singing of obscene songs. Scott journeyed into Galloway to obtain evidence on behalf of his client, but discovered little in his favour. However he was able to argue that the Minister had been inebriated only three times in 14 years and that on each occasion he had been led on by his companions to utter improper expressions.

> His senses being once gone (Scott argued), he is no more than a human machine as insensible of misconduct in speech or action as a parrot or an automaton. For a man can no more be held a common swearer, or an habitual talker of obscenity, because he has been guilty of using such expressions when intoxicated, than he can be termed an idiot, because, when intoxicated, he has spoken nonsense.

His speech at the General Assembly was not a success - perhaps not aided by his colleagues in the public gallery interrupting proceedings with cries of 'Hear Hear' and 'Encore Encore!' when they thought Scott had made a particularly good point. The end result was that his client was removed from the ministry.

Some of Scott's legal pleadings are worthy of note because they contain a characteristic sentence or two. In 1795 there is a record of Scott opening his pleadings or Informations as follows:

> Murder or the premeditated slaughter of a citizen, is a crime of so deep and scarlet a dye that there is scarce a nation to be found in which it has not, from the earliest period, been deemed worthy of a capital punishment.

Scott's client in this case was a young man who, having just been discharged from a ship of war, had a small cannon his possession--as one does! He took the weapon to Liberton's Wynd, where he loaded it and mounted it on the stair leading to the house of Robert Playfair, writer. When the youth discharged the cannon David Knox, recently door-keeper to the Faculty of Advocates, was killed instantaneously. In the circumstances Scott's efforts were understandably concentrated on having the charge reduced from murder to culpable homicide, ridiculing the idea that

> this poor lad was wicked enough to disregard the lives of his fellow citizens and, in pursuit of a very frivolous amusement, to exhibit a wanton barbarity worthy of a Marat or a Carrier

I am not sure that either Marat or Carrier was ever responsible for wantonly discharging a cannon in an Edinburgh close. But in the event Scott's client was acquitted of murder.

In another case in which his client was charged with forgery Scott submitted that he had been a minor player in the affair:

> A dead fly will corrupt a box of precious ointment and the irregular punishment of the most obscure and guilty individual may pervert this noblest form of jurisprudence.

The court did not take long to convict.

Scott was luckier with an old poacher and sheep stealer for whom he obtained a favourable verdict at Jedburgh. 'You're a lucky scoundrel'**,** Scott is reputed to have told his client. 'I'm just o' your mind Mr Scott', came the reply, 'and I'll send ye a salmon the morn'. Assuming the promised salmon did arrive it would no doubt have been of the poached variety.

One on occasion as a young advocate Scott ended up on the wrong side of the law. In 1794 not too long after the French Revolution a number of Irish medical students adopted the habit of occupying the theatre pit to jeer at the national anthem and cheer anything said on stage that could be interpreted as even mildly seditious. This behaviour irritated some younger members of the Bar at Parliament House and one evening Scott and some fellow advocates, all of whom were of a Tory disposition, arrived at the theatre armed with cudgels, determined to ensure that the anthem was sung without disturbance. As the first note was struck the Irish students covered their heads and began to jeer whereupon Scott and his friends joined battle until the Irish students, bloody and bruised, were driven out into the street. Scott and four others were summoned to court and bound over to keep the peace after receiving an offer from the bench to stand surety for their future good behaviour.

Even as Scott withdrew from active practice at the Bar to spend more time at his beloved Abbotsford and to write his way out of the debt that came to engulf him, he did not forget the Faculty of Advocates. Following his death the magnificent library which he had accumulated at Abbotsford came into the care of the Faculty which has sought to maintain it at its original home of Abbotsford.

We as a Faculty take pride in all our members. But we take particular pride in one so distinguished as Sir Walter Scott.

The evening was brought to a close with a Vote of Thanks proposed by Sheriff Isobel Poole.