

Fifty-eighth Annual Dinner

1966

The Annual Dinner was held in the North British Hotel on Friday, 4th March 1966. The Hon. Lord Cameron presided over a company of 249. After the toast of "The Queen" had been honoured Mr W. A. Elliott proposed the toast of "Her Majesty's Forces", to which Major-General H. L. E. C. Leask replied. "The City of Edinburgh" was proposed by Mr Alastair M. Dunnett, and Bailie Mrs Ross, M.A. (representing the Lord Provost) replied. The Chairman then rose to propose the toast "The Memory of Sir Walter Scott". What follows is a recorded and edited version of Lord Cameron's speech which was subsequently broadcast by the B.B.C.

Day and daily I pass Scott's beloved 39 Castle Street and tread his daily path to and from Parliament House in summer sun and winter snow, so tonight, with your permission, I will seek to present neither eulogy nor analysis for neither of which I am equipped, but a few reflections upon a more domestic, and possibly pedestrian, theme—Scott and his native city the influence, if you like, of such an environment and such an upbringing upon a man by heredity deep-rooted in the soil of Lowland and Border Scotland. A man with the blood of the moss troopers in his veins, and with a mind trained and conditioned by her historic, and individual, system of jurisprudence. When Edinburgh has laid her hand upon a man's shoulder, the memory of that touch does not readily fade or be easily forgot. Could Stevenson forget, even in the far South Seas, the hills of home, Caerketton and Allermuir, and his longing to see "the hills of sheep, and the homes of the silent vanished races, and winds austere and pure; to hear again above the graves of the martyrs the peewits crying, and to hear no more at all". Fashions change in letters as in most other things. Today Scott's novels tend, for the most part, to lie undisturbed on the library shelves. Perhaps he has suffered over the years from too frequent prescription for the young. And I quite frankly own that I find some of his novels pretty heavy going. But I can at least say with truth that time and time again I can, and do, return to *Rob Roy*, to *Guy Mannering*, to *Redgauntlet*, to *The Heart of Midlothian*, to *The Antiquary*, and to *Waverley* himself—sometimes to be savoured in sips, at leisure, f' sometimes, like the claret beloved of Hermand, Braxfield and Newton, and of Scott himself if his wine bills be of any guide, in generous and galloping potations. The romantic tide which carried Scott's favour and fame across Europe has ended. But the romantic is not in much fashion today and the more mundane accompaniments of literary fame tend to fade as that fame declines in popular esteem. Where today are those "boons and blessings to men, the Pickwick, the Owl and the Waverley pen"?

The Clyde and her lochs no longer echo to the paddles of *Marmion*, *Kenilworth*, *Waverley*, who met a fitting end in battle off the beaches of Dunkirk, and *Lucy Ashton* and the rest of that fleet. The last *Jeanie Deans* paddled her way past the Cloch Lighthouse for the last time but a few weeks ago. Where are those stout locomotives in douce North British livery, *Adam Woodcock*, *Meg Merrilees*, *the Lady of Avenel*, *the Dougal Crater*, and the rest, pulling out in mighty puffs through Waverley tunnels—where indeed are the trains? It is at least a measure of the grip which Scott has held over the minds of his fellow-countrymen that his memory should have been preserved in so many practical everyday ways and things. Railway stations, locomotives, pleasure steamers, Rob Roy canoes, pen nibs, and even jam jars as some here may recall those pots produced by Scott of Carlisle. But, one thing is clear enough; these things would not have been had Scott been a remote, impersonal, literary figure. It is Scott the man, perhaps more than Scott the writer, who still commands our respect, our admiration, and indeed our affection. A man most human in the mingling of so many diverse qualities, and it is as a man, but a man of Edinburgh, that I ask you to think of him with me tonight. Scott was essentially a man of Edinburgh. Not only so, but one who regarded his city with a depth of affection that sprang from a passionate, though controlled, nature; from an imagination fired and coloured by the troubled records of this storm-beaten capital; with an eye that was quick to note, an ear that was quick to catch and record, the quirk of a figure or a turn of speech. You may recall, as a matter of history, how the fireplace in Parliament Hall used to echo the laughter of listening groups as "Peveril of the Peak" standing amongst his friends and brethren would tell in his Border burr some drollery of the day or the newest anecdote or mimicry of "Esky," the learned, crabbit, and eccentric Esk Braxfield's successor as justice Clerk. I am glad to think that above that very fireplace today there hangs a painting of the Parliament Hall as it was in Scott's day, with Scott at the fireplace; and in the distance across the floor, Newton "The Mighty," in one of the

alcoves of the Outer House, as it then was, and if you look closely you will see Poor Peter Peebles walking with, I daresay, Saunders Fairford, Clerk to the Signet. The Edinburgh of Scott.

An Edinburgh of tall dark lands, of sombre closes steep and crooked wynds, the Edinburgh whose backbone was the High Street and Canongate, that indeed was the flowing artery of its traffic and its life. That was the city into which Scott was born and which formed him. But it was also an Edinburgh of mystery and of menace, dark winding stairs, barred doors, blind windows, as well as a city of pride and pageantry; and one that was set in a glowing and gracious countryside, whose green fields, lanes and shaggy woods lipped the cliffs of its castle rock and the very verges of its defensive walls. It was an Edinburgh, where every building had its story, grim or gay, of taverns like Fortunes, or Clerihugh's in Writer's Court, where counsel consulted and solid burghers feasted in roisterous plenty. Of clubs, whimsical in title, the Ante Manum, the Wig, and the Cape; of men of learning, and men of wit, of criminals and cutthroats, of men of law and men of no law. I would, therefore, invite you tonight to come with me on a brief pilgrimage in that Edinburgh; from College Wynd- now Guthrie Street- in whose insalubrious precincts Walter Scott was born, one of five survivors of twelve children, six of whom died in early infancy-a sufficiently grim commentary on the sanitary standards of Edinburgh in the late eighteenth century. In the narrow space of half a mile, the leisurely stroll of an idle ten minutes, how much of the city finds a place in novel after novel. Brown Square, the home of Saunders Fairford and his son, Alan, where Herries of Birrenswark dined, and toasted the King over the water. Where Greenmantle made her mysterious call (at twelve o'clock, the time appointed by James Wilkinson, the faithful and discreet butler, "when the house would be quiet, and your father at the bank" ; James's weakness was the bottle, as you recall), and where Peter Peebles got so lamentably drunk, in consultation, in the great cause of Peebles against Plainstones. The Parliament House has scarcely ever lacked its Peter Peebles no longer "Poor" but now "A.P." But that's another story and another "end of an auld sang". A cast of a few yards on there is Greyfriar ; Old Greyfriars Church where Darsie Latimer fell in love with a voice. Greyfriars whose kirkyard, today so quiet and trimly kept, held in squalid captivity the prisoners from Bothwell Brig, whose hapless procession Henry Morton witnessed in *Old Mortality*; prisoners kept there before their dispatch to the living death of the plantations in the West Indies, or to the swifter glorification of God in the Grassmarket.

Greyfriars kirkyard where lies Sir George Mackenzie of Rosehaugh- "the bluidy advocate Mackenzie of *Wandering Willie's Tale*- who for his worldly wit and wisdom had been to the rest as a God"- the founder of the Advocates' Library; one of Scotland's greatest, and least regarded, benefactors. From Greyfriars to George's Square is but a step; George's Square, until a few years ago practically unchanged from Scott's day, before its Georgian decencies crumbled beneath the load of academic concrete. If you recall it was in number twenty-five that Scott found his home. Well, a short walk from George's Square to the West Bow, to the story of Porteous. And then one comes to the High Street itself, to Parliament House and the Tolbooth, The Heart of Midlothian. I cannot resist, I confess, one word of Scott's own picture of the High Street "clanging with the voices of oyster-women and the bells of piemen. The extraordinary height of the houses was marked by lights which, glimmering irregularly along their front, ascended so high among the attics they seemed at length to twinkle in the middle sky". How often has the lofty skyline of the old town glimmered like that among the stars to us of this later generation? And the Parliament House where Paulus Pleydell walked the boards from nine o'clock in the morning as you recall, where Alan Fairford made his great appearance *in praesentia dominorum* in the cause of Poor Peter Peebles. You may remember the judicial jest on that occasion when Lord Bladderskate, whose judicial title I cannot find in the Books of Council and Session, said "Pray to Heaven we keep oor ain wits", and was answered by one of his brethren "Amen, amen, for some of us have but few to spare". Parliament House, in whose ancient Justiciary Court the trial of poor Effie Deans was staged, in whose Laigh Hall, that ancient dark Gothic room, recently so well restored, the Privy Council interrogated MacBriar and others, the prisoners of Bothwell Brig, an interrogation which took place at the hands of Lauderdale and General Thomas Dalziel of the Binns whose flowing beard concealed some very Muscovite ideas of justice. But when Scott, as college student, and young advocate, lived in George's Square, the pressure of Edinburgh's past and her present was more instant than it can ever be today, and for him, Edinburgh past and Edinburgh present were a fusion of history and daily life; of sentiment and reality. But Scott, too, was a man of contrasts.

At once realist and romantic, and while the past-this patina of faded glory and the sadness of defeated endeavour might fire his imagination, he could, and did, see beneath the enchanted surface to the often base and sometimes sordid realities below. Thus, consider Bailie Nicol Jarvie's assessment in *Rob Roy* of the fundamental ills of the Highland economy and of the real impelling forces towards that ill-conducted enterprise of the 'Fifteen, overpopulation and underemployment, with clan chiefs tottering on the verge of bankruptcy. A very different and more realistic picture this than one of a spontaneous outburst of romantic loyalty to a displaced dynasty. I sometimes wish that Rob Roy, and this particular passage, was made prescribed reading for those who view the Highlands through tartan-rimmed spectacles. While it's true that Scott, as my immediate predecessor in this chair has pointed out, could clearly see beyond the outward brave show to the tawdriness, tinsel, and self-deluding folly beneath, of a harking back to good old days which, if they ever existed, were never good, yet he could not quite throw off the spell of the past calling him back with ancestral voices.

But Scott was not merely the Minstrel of the Borders, the Wizard of the North, he was a man who lived to the full the life of the real Edinburgh of his day. Not only was he a sheriff with a close and regular attendance to the work of his sheriffdom, not only was he a careful and well regarded Clerk of Session, but he was much more. He was a leading member and President of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, a director of an insurance company, and a director, one actively concerned, in the affairs of the Edinburgh Oil-Gas Company. If that was not enough he was a keen and practical forester. His was the interest which helped to change the face of Tweedside and, by his example at Abbotsford, he showed what could be done.

And his constant pride in his Abbotsford plantations, as well as a distinguished contribution to the *Quarterly Review* of 1828 on the planting of waste-lands, demonstrates the practical value of that interest. And it also finds an echo in *The Heart of Midlothian* in the words of the drunken old Laird of Dumbiedykes to his son when on his deathbed. "Jock, when ye hae naething else tae do, ye may be aye pittin' in a tree. It'll be growing Jock, when you're sleeping." Wise words and as wise today as when they were first written.

Scott, as you may recall, like some Edinburgh men of his time became an enthusiastic volunteer during the war against Napoleon as General Leask has recalled. As a veteran yeoman he greeted the dissolution by a Tory administration of that force with gloom and foreboding, for he recorded in his journal -and I would love to be accurate-"on the 12th March 1828 the dissolution of the yeomanry was the act of the last ministry. The present did not alter the measure on account of the expense saved. I am, if not the oldest, one of the oldest, yeomen, and have seen the rise, progress, and now the fall, of this very constitutional part of the national force. It gave the young men a sort of military and high spirited character which always does honour to a country. I wish Parliament as they have turned the yeomen adrift somewhat scornfully, may not have occasion to draw them in again." This, I hasten to add, in case I be convicted of being controversial, was in 1828, not in 1966, and the writer not a Territorial Colonel of, shall I say, the Lothian and Border Horse, but a middle-aged Conservative sheriff of Selkirk. But if the story of Edinburgh came alive under his touch, so do her people and what a gallery they are. From Paulus Pleydell to Mrs Howden, who with feminine acuity and relevance today made this comment on one aspect of the Porteous theme. "I dinna ken muckle aboot the law, but a ken when we had oor King an' a chancellor and parliament men o' oor ain we could aye peeble them wi' stanes when they werena' guid bairns, but naeboddy's nails can reach the length o' London." Aye.

It is somewhat of a curiosity to my mind that Scott made no use of that mass of idiosyncratic material that lay so close to his hand-indeed, literally, at his ear, the Scottish Bench of his day. The "auld fifteen"-and what a crew. Eskgrove, Hermand, Meadowbank, Balmuto, to mention but a few. Still, he made up for it with Paulus Pleydell, Advocate of the Scottish Bar, Andrew Crosbie in real life whose portrait you can still see in Parliament Hall.

I wish some of our young men today would learn from Pleydell how to watch a witness under cross-examination and never let go of him. But it was in Pleydell's mouth, you recall, that Scott put the words which he used at the opening of the Edinburgh Academy: "A lawyer without history or literature is a mechanic, a mere working mason. If he possesses some knowledge of these, he may venture to call himself an architect." Whether drawing a full length portrait as in Pleydell, or in sketching an outline with a phrase, Scott catches the living likeness of his Edinburgh folk. The people of the High Street, of its lands and cellars, closes and wynds; these live while at times the greater characters smack somewhat

of the pasteboard when their joints and sentiments alike creak ponderously. And if Scott loved Edinburgh and its people, that affection was fully returned- proverbially, a prophet is not without honour save in his own country, but in his own city as in his own countryside, Walter Scott was a beloved figure, and if authority of this proposition were needed I can cite Henry Cockburn, lover of Edinburgh and Scotland too, who wrote in his journal on reading the last volume of *Lockhart's Life*, these words : "Dear Scott, when he was among us we thought we worshipped him, at least as much as his modesty would permit and now that he is gone we feel as if we had not enjoyed or cherished him half enough. I still hear his voice and see his form. I see him in court and on the street, in company and by the Tweed. The plain dress, the guttural burred voice, the lame walk, the thoughtful heavy face with his mantling smile, the honest hearty manner, the joyous laugh, the sing-song feeling recitation, the graphic story, they are all before me a hundred times a day." And Cockburn was a Whig and Scott a hard-` hitting Tory, in days when political differences cut very deep. But if Scott owed much to Edinburgh, Edinburgh in turn owes a deep debt to Scott. His genius floodlit her past and brought that past to life to live side by side with her present. On nights of festival and celebration today we floodlight our Castle, the crown of old St Giles', and the College dome, but it's the floodlight of genius that set this city before the world against the background of its turbulent but richly-coloured history. These are no cloud-capped towers or gorgeous palaces that fade into the insubstantial years leaving not a wrack behind. Turn round, and you can see from this window the fantastic Gothic of Meikle Kemp's monument etched against the stern and sombre masses of the Castle rock with its crown of battery, tower and palace ; the romantic against the practical and real. So long as these stones remain and memory holds, so will this city hold in due remembrance the fame of one who so deeply loved her people and her history and the sights and the sounds of her streets.

I was brought up on Scott, Scott, in heavy old-fashioned volumes chosen one by one from a legal library in the Parliament House of Edinburgh. And to a somewhat solitary and unduly bookish schoolboy the clash of sword and buckler, and the brawls of Leslies and Seatons in the High Street causeway, the shouts and cries of the Porteous mob sweeping down the West Bow to the Grassmarket, the skirl of pipes as the Highlanders swept down to Holyrood after Prestonpans, and the sights and sounds of Pleydell's Edinburgh, with its high finks, its taverns, and its crowded life, were as real as the rattle of the cable cars jolting their way to Goldenacre, or the raucous sounds of weekend revelry from neighbouring streets. And still today the magic of these memories remains as strong as it was half a century ago. I had almost said 'tis sixty years since. But let Sir Walter, as is only just, himself have the last word, for I do not believe that more fully or more clearly set out could there be his love for his native city than in the lines in which he describes Marmion's first sight of Edinburgh as he rides in from the south and breasts the last ridge between him and the city.

Still on the spot Lord Marmion stayed,
For fairer scene he ne'er surveyed,
When, sated with the martial show
That peopled all the plain below,
The wandering eye could o'er it go,
And mark the distant city glow
With gloomy splendour red;
Such dusky grandeur clothed the height,
Where the huge Castle holds its state,
And all the steep slope down,
Whose ridgy back heaves to the sky,
Piled deep and massy, close and high,
Mine own romantic town!

The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club.

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Scanned from the original 1966 Bulletin and converted by Lee A. Simpson in Feb 2007.

Complete transcript of the proceedings available upon request.

lee@walterscottclub.org.uk