

The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club

The Ninety Third Annual Dinner

Madam Deputy Provost, Mr Chairman, Dame Jean Maxwell-Scott,
My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen

In *The Bride of Lammermoor*, when the Master of Ravenswood has been insulted by Lady Ashton, he gallops away taking the path to the Mermaiden's Fountain. There he sees a figure that he takes to be Lucy Ashton. But it is the ghost of blind Alice who, he later discovers, had died at that very moment. Scott says:

“We are bound to tell the tale as we have received it; and, ... this could not be called a Scottish story unless it manifested a tinge of Scottish superstition.”¹

So, this being a Scottish occasion, let me begin with a tinge of Scottish superstition.

In February last year, I was sitting on a train from Paris to Luxembourg.. I had read *Guy Mannering* over the Christmas holidays and had just finished reading *The Antiquary* on the train. As I sat looking out of the window at the soggy valley of the Marne, it occurred to me to wonder what had happened to the Walter Scott Club and whether it was still going strong.

I arrived back in Luxembourg and there, behind the door, was a letter from Duncan MacGregor inviting me to be your President and, consequently, to speak at tonight's dinner.

Naturally, Scottish superstition made it impossible for me to refuse, and, for your part, you must believe, for good or ill, that it was 'meant'. But you have set me an impossible task. Everything that can be said about Scott has already been said many times before, and even that has been said several times before by my predecessors.

I think Stanley Baldwin said it best. I found his Presidential Address of 1930 in a book of speeches with the unpromising title of *This Torch of Freedom*.² Incidentally, it is an interesting reflection on the literacy of that generation of politicians that, after his address on Walter Scott comes one on the artist, Sir Edward Burne-Jones. At any rate, this is how he began:

¹ *The Bride of Lammermoor*, Chapter 23.

² Stanley Baldwin, *This Torch of Freedom*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1935, pages 155-172.

“I cannot imagine a greater compliment which you have in your power to pay to an Englishman than to invite him to be president of this club and to address such a gathering in Walter Scott’s own city. I accepted your invitation with alacrity and I am indeed proud to be here.

“But when the hour is come that I should speak to you of Scott, my mind goes back to the bewilderment with which, as a small boy, I read the opening paragraph of *The Tale of Two Cities* – ‘It was the best of times: it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom: it was the age of foolishness.’

“And so I might say of my task - it is the easiest of tasks; it is the hardest of tasks. Easy, because whatever I shall say will come straight from the heart; hard, because everything that can be said has been said before. There speaks to you no professor of literature; you will hear no subtle criticism, no profound analysis; but a plain, unadorned account of what Walter Scott has meant to one of the millions of those who dwell in that part of Great Britain called England. ...

“The first books in the library at home which swam into my ken were the author’s edition of the novels. ... Before I could read them, I used to pore over the little steel engraved frontispieces and vignettes, every one of which is stamped in my earliest memory. The picture of Di Vernon on her father’s arm stirred my romantic heart, for she - I confess it to you - was my first love: the vignettes of Dirk Hatteraick breaking Glossin’s neck strengthened my faith in an ultimate justice that ruled the world. ...

“Such was Scott to me in my earliest days. A household word at home, the gateway which enticed my first steps into the world of poetry, history and romance. ...”

Sadly, Scott was not *my* gateway to poetry, history and romance. Like too many others, I was given the wrong book at the wrong age. When I was eleven or twelve, my headmaster told me to read *A Legend of Montrose*. In Nelson’s Classics, that book has 22 pages of Introduction and a further eleven pages of description before anybody speaks. At that age, I had not yet learned to skip. (I only learned that much later – it’s the only way lawyers can keep their sanity.) So I never got beyond those 33 pages, and I did not look at Scott again for almost ten years. Then I picked up a pocket edition of *The Antiquary* in a second-hand bookshop in Perth and I was hooked.

It is said that Lord President Inglis used to read the Waverley novels from beginning to end every year. I can’t claim to have read all of them, even once. But your invitation to speak tonight encouraged me to read as much as I could in the course of the last year – a total of eleven and a half novels in fifteen months – and I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you for that.

Before I go on, I pause a moment to pay tribute to the editors and publishers of the Edinburgh Edition. Many passages, particularly in the Scottish novels, have become more vivid. Some fascinating things are restored – notably Colonel Mannering’s descriptions of those he meets in Edinburgh: John Clerk of Eldin, Monboddo, Ferguson and Kames. The Introductions and Notes explained almost everything I wanted to know. Even better, several volumes of the Edinburgh Edition are now available in Penguin – more convenient for trains and aeroplanes and also – perhaps especially - for reading in bed. So please keep it up.

What did I learn from this year of Scott that I can usefully pass on to this audience, many if not most of whom know a great deal more about him than I do? Nothing, I think, except – taking my cue from Stanley Baldwin – a little of what Scott has meant to me.

I knew already that, of all the great writers, he is the one I would most like to have met. Indeed, in an odd sort of way, having spent 25 years working in Parliament House, I almost feel that I have met him. Parliament House is full of Scott and the Scottish novels are full of Parliament House. As you go in and out of the Advocates’ Library, there he is, sitting with his coat over the back of his chair and his stick between his knees. *Sic sedebat*, says the inscription, “This is how he used to sit”. It is significant that the Faculty chose to have a statue, not of a lawyer in robes or dressed as a latter-day Roman senator, but of Scott as they knew him day by day.

“Dear Scott,” says Cockburn, “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.”³

The novels are full of Parliament House allusions and Parliament House humour. I hope it is not indelicate, in present company, to remind you how Meg Dods, mistress of the Cleikum Inn, reacts when Mr Touchwood tells her that a lord has come to stay at St Ronan’s Well, the rival ‘Spaw’:

“A lord” ejaculated the astonished Mrs Dods; “a lord come down to the Waal – they will be neither to haud nor to bind now – ance wud and aye waur – a lord! – set them up and shute them

³ Quoted by Lord Cameron in his Presidential Address (1966) – in Alan Frazer (ed.) *An Edinburgh Keepsake*, University Press, Edinburgh, 1971, page 158.

forward – a lord! – the Lord have a care of us! – a lord at the hottle! – Maister Touchwood, it’s my mind he will only prove to be a Lord of Session.”⁴

In Parliament House at least, the authorship of the Waverley novels must have been the worst kept secret in the world. In the opening Chapter of *Heart of Midlothian*, Peter Pattieson meets Halkit and Hardie – Hardie being a young advocate. Hardie says,

“The end of uncertainty is the death of interest, and hence it happens that no one now reads novels.”

“Hear him, ye gods!” returned his companion, “I assure you, Mr Pattieson, you will hardly visit this learned gentleman, but you are likely to find the new novel most in repute lying on his table, snugly intrenched, however, between Stair’s Institutes or an open volume of Morison’s Decisions.”

“Do I deny it?” said the hopeful jurisconsult, “or wherefore should I, since it is well known these Delilahs seduce my wisers and my betters. May they not be found lurking amidst the multiplied memorials of our most distinguished counsel, and even peeping from under the cushion of a judge’s arm-chair? Our seniors at the bar, within the bar, and even on the bench read novels, and, if not belied, some of them have written novels into the bargain.”⁵

“Our seniors *within* the bar” were, of course, the Clerks of Session and Scott was one of them.

One of the most touching pictures of Scott as a member of Faculty comes at the end of an early Chapter of Lockhart’s *Life*:

“[Scott] was earnest and serious in his belief that the new rulers of the country were disposed to abolish many of its most valuable institutions; and he regarded with special jealousy certain schemes of innovation with respect to the courts of law and the administration of justice, which were set on foot by the Crown Officers for Scotland. At a debate of the Faculty of Advocates on some of these propositions, he made a speech much longer than any he had ever before delivered in that assembly; and several who heard it have assured me that it had a flow and energy of eloquence for which those who knew him best had been quite unprepared. When the meeting broke up, he walked across *the Mound*, on his way to Castle Street between Mr Jeffrey and another of his reforming friends, who complimented him on the rhetorical powers he had been displaying, and would willingly have treated the subject-matter of the discussion playfully. But

⁴ *St Ronan’s Well*, Chapter 15.

⁵ *Heart of Midlothian*, Chapter 1.

his feelings had been moved to an extent far beyond their apprehension: he exclaimed, ‘No, no - ‘tis no laughing matter; little by little, whatever your wishes may be, you will destroy and undermine, until nothing of what makes Scotland Scotland shall remain.’ And so saying, he turned round to conceal his agitation - but not until Mr Jeffrey saw tears gushing down his cheeks - resting his head until he recovered himself on the wall of the Mound. Seldom, if ever, in his more advanced age, did any feelings obtain such mastery.”⁶

Luckily, we have an almost verbatim report of Scott’s speech on that occasion, and it is stirring stuff. Incidentally, it shows that the practices of the spin doctors were not unknown in the early years of the nineteenth century:

“Mr Walter Scott rose, to express to the Faculty, before entering upon the merits of the question, his surprise at the very peculiar form, in which the business had been brought forward by the proposers of the motion. He could not but recollect that, about six months ago, a meeting of Faculty had been held upon the subject, at which it was proposed to consider the abstract propositions contained in the resolutions of the House of Lords; and in particular, whether the evils, in the administration of civil justice, were so great as to require a positive interference of the Legislature. In answer to this, the Faculty had been told pretty roundly, that it would be the height of presumption to attempt to criticise the proposed measure till they should see it in detail, till they should learn all its bearings, and thereby become actually and intimately acquainted with the intentions of Government. The language employed, was much that which an old gentleman, with a very emphatic name, Sir Anthony Absolute, employs to his son: - ‘Sir,’ says the young man, ‘it is surely unreasonable in you to make me marry a young lady whom I never saw.’ - ‘Sir,’ retorts the father, ‘I think it is much more unreasonable in you to *object* to a young lady you never saw.’ The Faculty yielded. This mess of political and judicial cookery was prepared with due mystery and secrecy. The Judges of the Supreme Courts, the Professors of the Civil Law, and Law of Scotland, every man that wore a bar gown, or was qualified by education to form an opinion on so important a subject, were carefully excluded, by the state artists, from even witnessing their operations; - just as children are driven from the kitchen under pain of a dish-clout being fastened to their tails. At length it is served up to table; the covers are removed by the honourable mover and seconder of the motion, who seem to act as *traiteurs*; and now the question put to the unfortunate wights for whom it is prepared, is not, ‘Is this a good dinner?’ but, ‘Gentlemen, ought you to have ordered a dinner, or no?’

.....

“There was much founded upon the general clamour of the country against the administration of the courts. This he thought was greatly exaggerated, both in extent and foundation. ... As to the usual clamour of the ‘Law’s delay’, it had existed in every country, under every form of judicial

⁶ J.G. Lockhart, *Memoirs of Sir Walter Scott*, Chapter 15 (end).

administration, from China to Peru; it was the usual theme of satirists in all ages; and would continue to be so, until justice should learn to move at as quick time as the wishes of the litigants. Were the English courts exempted from such imputation? Enquire in Westminster Hall: Go into the Court of Chancery; or rather ask those whose suits depended on either, whether the easy and unexpensive access to the Temples of the Law, or the extreme expedition with which she dismissed her votaries, were there the usual themes of panegyric. ...

“He disliked the proposed bill, as being founded and defended on what he should venture to call Anglomania – a rage of imitating English forms and practices, similar to what prevailed in France about the time of the Revolution, respecting their manners and dress. This might be called ‘playing at being Englishmen’; ... We may very effectually destroy our own integrity of judicial system; but we can no more make it the English law, than a Frenchman could make his feelings those of an Englishman, by wearing boots, a drab great coat, and a round hat instead of a cocked one. – His brother, Mr Cathcart, had thrown out a tempting lure to the Faculty, which was very readily snatched at by another learned brother, who seemed to consider riches as the *summum bonum*, who had assured us that by this means we should acquire riches, the first of human blessings, and that riches would make our juries upright, our judges honest, ourselves virtuous; in short, we will all be healthy, wealthy and wise. He was disposed to dispute the gentleman’s conclusions, but it was unnecessary. He feared that even his premises would prove very delusive. We should have liberty from English statesmen to make of our own laws what we pleased; but not a step nearer would we be to the golden stream of preferment, which the gentleman described so feelingly as flowing down upon the Bar of England.”⁷

Scott’s Toryism was not blind. Later in the same debate, he voted with his contemporaries, Francis Jeffrey and George Joseph Bell, both of them enthusiastic Whigs, in favour of a motion to *reduce* the number of judges in the Court of Session on the grounds, as Jeffrey put it, that “nothing degrades Judges in the opinion of the world, so much as having nothing to do”.

Nor was his devotion to Scottish legal institutions a blind devotion to Scots law as such, much as he loved its peculiarities and preserved them for us to enjoy. We know from Bell’s Preface to his *Commentaries on the Law of Scotland* that there were grounds for feeling that Scots law had fallen seriously behind English law in its failure to adapt to the needs of the times. In the *Life of Napoleon* Scott gives a reasonably sympathetic description of the *Code Napoléon*, its motives and its methods. Then, by way of comparison he launches into a panegyric of the Common Law of England which he likens to “the vaults of some huge Gothic building, dark indeed, and ill arranged, but containing an

⁷ *Substance of the Speeches delivered by some Members of the Faculty of Advocates at the Meetings on 28 February, 2 and 3 March 1807 to consider the Bill “for better regulating the Courts of Justice in Scotland and the Administration of Justice therein”* (Advocates’ Library, Law Tracts, I, 2), page 32 ff.

immense store of commodities, which those acquainted with its recesses seldom fail to be able to produce to such as have occasion for them”.⁸

What comes out, from his speech to the Faculty, from the *Life of Napoleon* and from many of the novels, is Scott’s conviction that institutions adapt themselves to the needs of the people for whose benefit they exist. And that is a lesson that has not been lost on me in the particular institution where I work.

Most of the Scottish institutions Scott was concerned to preserve have long passed away, not always for the better. But if what made Scotland Scotland was the spirit, the language and the sense of humour of its people, then Scott did more to preserve them for us than any other man, even Burns.

It has been a curious experience rereading the Waverley novels over the past year. Once into a book, I want to go on reading, not to find out what happens because I know what happens, but because I want to meet again Wandering Willie, Baillie Nicol Jarvie, Dandie Dinmont, the Antiquary, Meg Merrilees, Mause and Cuddie Headrigg, Greenmantle, and a host of other characters who have almost become old friends.

I would have to admit that, in comparison with his Scots characters, some of Scott’s English-speaking heroes and heroines are pretty limp. But then, so are some of the heroes and heroines in Jane Austen and Dickens. Becky Sharp is more fun than Amelia Sedley, and we love Glencora Palliser because she is naughty. Yet there are some fine passages for the heroines too.

In *Woodstock*, the fugitive Charles II, with all the charm and all the irresponsibility of the Stuarts, tries to persuade the heroine, Alice Lee, to become his mistress. He uses arguments about the unhappy lot of royalty forced into dynastic marriages that have a certain resonance today. Having failed with one line of argument, he tries another tack, setting up her father, the old Cavalier, Sir Henry Lee, against the man with whom she is in love, the Roundhead Markham Everard. She replies:

“My Liege, ... this passes my patience. I have heard, without expressing anger, the most ignominious persuasions addressed to myself, and I have vindicated myself for refusing to be the paramour of a fugitive prince, as if I had been excusing myself from accepting a share of an actual crown. But do you think I can hear all who are dear to me slandered without emotion or reply? I will not, sir; and were you seated with all the terrors of your father’s Star Chamber around you, you should hear me defend the absent and the innocent. Of my father I will say nothing, but that if he is now without wealth, without state – almost without a sheltering home

⁸ *Life of Napoleon*, Chapter 66. Professor Jane Milgate told me after the dinner that this quotation was taken from David Hume without acknowledgment!

and needful food – it is because he spent all in the service of the King. He needed not to commit any act of treachery or villainy to obtain wealth – he had an ample competence in his own possessions. For Markham Everard, he knows no such thing as selfishness – he would not, for broad England, had she the treasures of Peru in her bosom and a paradise on her surface, do a deed that would disgrace his own name, or injure the feelings of another. Kings, my liege, may take a lesson from him. My liege, for the present I take my leave.”⁹

Nowadays, we have a designer historian to tell us about the Civil Wars on the television. There is an actor with a wart on his nose to play the part of Cromwell and another one with a wispy beard to play Charles I. There are lots of noisy, and ultimately meaningless, shots of blood, slaughter and mayhem. I don’t know whether, in the light of modern research, *Woodstock* is good history. But Cromwell, in Scott’s hands, became for me a real, believable person - not just a great military commander but a man with a divine mission tortured by his leading role in the execution of the King.

Here he is at Windsor, talking to himself as he looks at Van Dyke’s portrait of Charles I:

“That Flemish painter, that Antonio Vandyke – what a power he has! Steel may mutilate, warriors may waste and destroy, still the King stands uninjured by time; and our grandchildren, while they read his history, may look on his image, and compare the melancholy features with the woeful tale. It was a stern necessity – it was an awful deed! The calm pride of that eye might have ruled worlds of crouching Frenchmen, or supple Italians, or formal Spaniards; but its glances only roused the native courage of the stern Englishman. ...

“What is that piece of painted canvas to me more than others? No, let him show to others the reproaches of that cold, calm face – that proud yet complaining eye. Those who have acted on higher respects have no cause to start at painted shadows. Not wealth nor power brought me from my obscurity. The oppressed consciences – the injured liberties of England – were the banner that I followed. ... I dare the world – ay, living or dead I challenge – to assert that I armed for a private cause, or as a means of enlarging my fortunes.”¹⁰

That, so it seems to me, is not simply historical imagination, but real psychological insight. Since September last year, we have been preoccupied with the psychology and persuasive power of the religious fanatic. For us in the modern west, it has become hard to understand. But Scott understood it and could describe it – deranged, perhaps, but inspired – in *Woodstock*, and even more vividly in *Old Mortality*, when Habakkuk Meiklewrath addresses the Covenanters after the battle of Loudon Hill:

⁹ *Woodstock*, Chapter 26.

¹⁰ *Woodstock*, Chapter 8.

“Who talks of signs and wonders? Am I not Habakkuk Meiklewrath, whose name is changed to Magor-Missabib, because I am made a terror unto myself and unto all that are around me? – I heard it – Where did I hear it? Was it not in the tower of the Bass, that overhange the wide wild sea? – And it howled in the winds, and it roared in the billows, and it screamed, and it whistled, and it clanged, with the scream and the clang and the whistle of the sea-birds, as they floated, and flew, and dropped, and dived, on the bosom of the waters. I saw it – Where did I see it? – Was it not from the high peaks of Dumbarton, when I looked westward upon the fertile land, and northward on the wild Highland hills, when the clouds gathered and the tempest came, and lightnings of Heaven flashed in sheets as wide as the banners of an host? – What did I see? – Dead corpses and wounded horses, the rushing together of battle, and garments rolled in blood. – What heard I? – the voice that cried, Slay, slay – smite – slay utterly – let not your eye have pity – slay utterly, old and young, the maiden, the child, and the woman whose hair is grey - Defile the house and fill the courts with the slain!”

“We receive the command” exclaimed more than one of the company. “Six days he hath not spoken nor broken bread, and now his tongue is unloosed! – We receive the command; as he hath said, so will we do.”¹¹

And more calmly, but hardly less scarily, Balfour of Burley:

“Thou wilt find,” he said, “that the stubborn and hard-hearted generation with whom we deal, must be chastised with scorpions ere their hearts be humbled, and ere they accept the punishment of their iniquity. The word is gone forth against them, ‘I will bring a sword upon you that shall avenge the quarrel of my Covenant.’ But what is done shall be done gravely, and with discretion, like that of the worthy James Melvin, who executed judgment on the tyrant and oppressor, Cardinal Beaton.”

“I own to you,” replied Morton, “that I feel still more abhorrent at cold-blooded and premeditated cruelty, than at that which is practised in the heat of zeal and resentment.”

“Thou art yet but a youth,” replied Balfour, “and hast not learned how light in the balance are a few drops of blood in comparison to the weight and importance of this great national testimony. ...”¹²

¹¹ *Old Mortality*, Chapter 22.

¹² *Ibidem*.

Claverhouse and Lauderdale, on the other side, are equally ruthless, and have no compunction in ordering the immediate execution of Morton or Macbriar because they refuse to disclose the whereabouts of Balfour of Burley.

In a different but parallel mode is the poetical insanity of Madge Wildfire, and I think, too, that we can learn something of human nature from Scott's sympathetic picture of her:

"But that is Madge Wildfire, as she calls herself," said the man of law

"Ay, that I am," said Madge, "and that I have ever been since I was something better – Heigh ho. ... But I canna mind when that was – it was lang syne, at ony rate, and I'll ne'er fash my thumb about it. –

"I glance like the wildfire through country and town;
I'm seen on the causeway – I'm seen on the down;
The lightning that flashes so bright and so free,
Is scarcely so blithe or so bonny as me. ...

"I'm Madge of the country, I'm Madge of the town,
And I'm Madge of the lad I am blithest to own –
The Lady of Beever indiamonds may shine,
But has not a heart half so lightsome as mine.

"I am Queen of the Wake, and I'm Lady of May,
And I lead the blithe ring round the May-pole today;
The wild-fire that flashes so fair and so free
Was never so bright or so bonny as me."¹³

Madge is Scott's creation, her madness is his creation and her songs are his creation, especially *Proud Maisie* which she sings on her death-bed (but I would not dare to recite it). And yet always, even with the tragedy, there comes humour, and it struck me, when I varied my reading with a bit of Compton Mackenzie, that Scott is also the first in a line of great Scots humorists.

One of the sub-plots in *Old Mortality* is the story of Cuddie Headrigg, always in search of a quiet life, and his mother Mause, always ready with a word in season – except it's the wrong word in the wrong season. She hopes that Lady Margaret Bellenden will be brought to see the error of her ways.

“The error of my ways?” interrupted Lady Margaret, “The error of *my* ways, ye uncivil woman? .. I’ll hae nae whiggery in the barony of Tillietudlem – the next thing wad be to set up a conventicle in my very withdrawing room.”¹⁴

When Morton returns to Milnewood bringing Cuddie Headrigg, the old housekeeper, Ailie Wilson, says:

“Cuddie? What garr’d ye bring that ill-fa’ard, unlucky loon alang wi’ ye? It was him and his randie mither began a’ the mischief in this house.”

“Tut, tut,” replied Cuddie, “ye should forget and forgi’e mistress. Mither’s in Glasgow wi’ her tittie, and sall plague ye nae mair...”¹⁵

Is that not the inspiration for the moment in *Whisky Galore*, when Mrs Campbell scents that her son, George, the headmaster of Garyboo, is minded to marry Catriona Macleod?

“Well, I’m not going to interfere in the matter. I’ll go and live in Glasgow with your aunt Ina.”

“But you hate Glasgow, mother,” her son objected.

“Never mind if I do. The Lord chastiseth those whom he loves, and who am I to set myself up against the Lord.”¹⁶

Madam Deputy Provost, with that entirely irrelevant side-swipe at your native city, our sister-city of the west, it is time for me to come to an end. I haven’t said half the things that I could have said or that I would like to have said.

Mr Chairman, Dame Jean, My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, you have done me a great honour in asking me to be your President. I can only thank you for taking me back yet again to Scott, and it is with pride and genuine enthusiasm that I ask you now to rise and drink a toast to his memory.

Sir David Edward

1st March 2002

The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club.

¹³ *Heart of Midlothian*, Chapters 16 and 31.

¹⁴ *Old Mortality*, Chapter 7.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, Chapter 27.

¹⁶ Compton Mackenzie, *Whisky Galore*, Chapter 4.