

# The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club

**Dr. O. H. Mavor (James Bridie)**

40<sup>th</sup> Annual Dinner: *Wednesday 24th March 1947 in the Music Hall*

The Chairman in rising to propose the toast of "The Memory of Sir Walter Scott" said:

In this place on the 23rd of February 1827 Sir Walter took the Chair at the Theatrical Fund Dinner. On that memorable occasion he confessed to the authorship of the Waverley Novels. I wish it were possible for me to confess to the authorship of the novels of Mr Neil Gunn or Mr Eric Linklater or Mr Compton Mackenzie. But alas, such a confession would not be believed. It would be outside the bounds of practical possibility. I have learned in sixty hard years to overstep those bounds as seldom as possible. The only confession I have to make to-night is one that will be readily believed. I confess my inadequacy for the high office which has been thrust upon me.

Fortunately the duty of keeping Scott's memory green rests on many willing shoulders. On an ordinary occasion it might have been enough for me to mumble a few quotations from Scott himself and from some of his many admirers and then to sit down, my perfunctory task done. But this is no ordinary occasion. The locusts have eaten a series of years and this Club, and I as its President, must begin again. I shall do my best, but you must not expect from me more than a sort of introduction to a foreword to a preface to the many noble and uplifting speeches that will be made by my successors in this office in the years to come.

In 1827 Scott gave considerable thought to his Chairmanship of that stirring and historic gathering. In 1948 so have I.

Scott's prescription was not particularly helpful. At times our ever living Patron was, like Matthew Arnold, not entirely serious. He says in his journal, "*There are three hundred tickets given out. I fear it will be uncomfortable.*" He then puts down two or three simple rules for the benefit of his posterity, of whom I am one. His first rule is to hurry the bottle round for five or six rounds without prosing himself or permitting others to prose. His second rule is to push on and keep moving—not to think of saying fine things—nobody cares for them any more than for fine music, which is often too liberally bestowed on such occasions.

*"You will find," he says, "people satisfied with wonderfully indifferent jokes if you can but hit the taste of the company, which depends much on its character. Even a very high party, primed with all the cold irony and non est tanti feelings or no feelings of fashionable folks, may be stormed by a jovial, rough, round, and ready preses."*

So far so good. I feel moderately jovial. I am rough enough in all conscience. And there seems no doubt that I am round.

Sir Walter says that the authority even of a Chairman must be very cautiously exercised. That, also, I intend.

He goes on:

*"When you have drunk a few glasses to play the good fellow and banish modesty (if you are unlucky enough to have such a troublesome companion) then beware of the cup too much. Nothing is so ridiculous as a drunken preses."*

*“Lastly, always speak short and Skeoch doch na skiel —cut a tale with a drink.*

*‘This is the purpose and intent  
Of gude Schir Walter’s testament.’”*

Perhaps these advices are not so unhelpful after all. There hangs around them a certain alcoholic aroma; but we can discount that as belonging to more spacious times than ours. The very words themselves save posterity from ten minutes’ laborious, painful, and concise characterisation, for they bring brilliantly before us a picture of the man who sat here a hundred and twenty years ago. A radiant man. A humane man. A witty man. A pawky man. A canny man. A man with his head packed full of the most abstruse knowledge who could yet lend his mind to tiny points of comic detail and exult in the mouse as he did in the mountain. In short, a Raeburn portrait of Scott done by himself on an odd scrap of paper.

Now I hope you feel that Sir Walter is here in person, pushing round the drinks sufficiently but not too much, and that I can follow his advice and push on.

Let us talk for a few minutes about Scott as a writer and use as our text a quotation from *The Edinburgh Review* of 1808 when a certain mandarin had the following things to say of *Marmion*.

*“We must remind our readers that we never entertained much partiality for this sort of composition and ventured on a former occasion to express our regret that an author endowed with such talents should consume them in imitations of obsolete extravagance and in the representation of manners and sentiments in which none of his readers can be supposed to take much interest, except the few who can judge of their exactness. To write a modern romance of chivalry seems to be much such a phantasy as to build a modern abbey or an English pagoda. For once, however, it may be excused as a pretty caprice of genius; but a second production of the same sort is entitled to less indulgence and imposes a sort of duty to drive the author from so idle a task by a fair exposition of the faults which are in a manner inseparable from its execution.”*

The reviewer goes on to urge Mr Scott to desert his extravagant and old-fashioned themes and to take up some phase of modern life—to expound urgent contemporary problems in a fictional form. This was in 1808, I remind you. If, by some miracle, another Scott were to appear in 1948 our pundits would write about him in the same manner and almost in the same words. Nothing is more unchangeable than this penchant of reviewers for taking St Bernard dogs rabbiting.

I cannot help thinking that the beetle-watcher is a model to all critics. The beetle-watcher observes his victim carefully and evolves from his observation a general idea of how beetles behave. He may even try to find out the laws governing the behaviour of beetles and to make some distinction between the qualities of different varieties of beetle. What he does not do is try to teach the beetle his business. He is too humble-minded for that. He begins with the assumption that the beetle knows his own business or he wouldn’t be a beetle at all. If the College of Critics carved above its doorway these words, *“The beetle acts according to its nature and knows its own business,”* our critics would be as admirable as our beetle-watchers, and that is saying a good deal.

I have dwelt on this aspect because Scott, who was not easily intimidated, was intimidated by the critics. He said, *“No one shall find me rowing against the stream; I care not who knows it—I write for the general amusement.”* It is touching that this very great man should have found it necessary to defend himself in such a fashion. If he had said, *“I write masterpieces for the general*

*amusement,*” he would have said no more than the truth. Shakespeare and Cervantes and Balzac wrote for the general amusement. It is part of the god-like liberality that was in their nature. They did not discourse in novel phrases of their complicated state of mind. They did not lash their hysterical fellow creatures into bomb throwing and throat slitting because they desired to be bullied by one pack of gas-bags rather than another. They had no *nostalgie pour la boue* to drive them into realism, which is the word now applied to the sport of muck-raking. They wrote for the general amusement.

They were, in fact, what are called escapists—poor-spirited wretches who could not face up to facts like the masters of English prose and verse whose achievements mark our present phase of evolution from bad to better. They have to be content with Prospero’s miserable boast:—

*“I have bedimmed  
The noontide sun, called forth the mutinous winds,  
And twixt the green sea and the azured vault  
Set roaring war: to the dread rattling thunder  
Have I given fire, and rifted Jove’s stout oak  
With his own bolt: the strong-based promontory  
Have I made shake: and by the spurs plucked up  
The pine and cedar: graves, at my command,  
Have waked their sleepers, ope’d, and let them forth  
By my so potent art.”*

All these things the Wizard of the North did. As normal, sensitive, adult, sophisticated, modern people we must regret that he wasted his time on such things; but we have a curious aching consciousness that there is a gap somewhere, a hiatus, now that the escapists have escaped indeed to sunnier and more spacious climes. Nobody in Scotland or elsewhere can do these conjuring tricks now. We must be content with the plain and hygienic walls of our suitably conducted prison house. We must be grateful for the attempts that are made to improve its amenities and not foster, by foresight or reflection, any impious impulses to escape—except perhaps by the rational, normal and extremely modern processes of individual or race suicide.

My lords, ladies, and gentlemen, I have another confession to make to you. I do not mean what I say. I do not think it matters a tuppenny toss whether a great writer is an escapist or not. I do not think it matters a tuppenny toss whether any writer is an escapist or not, so long as he writes with enthusiasm—that is to say with his whole body, soul, and mind. That is the real gap of which we are conscious, this lack of enthusiasm. Our modern authors in Scotland and elsewhere cannot follow the gleam because they have one eye on the pundits and the other on themselves. The result is a horrible squinting aspect and an uncertain mincing gait. Our authors cannot, as the Americans say, get places. They cannot get anywhere.

Do you recall what the husbandman said to Bertram in *Castle Dangerous*?

*“I know not what the lads of this country are made of—  
not of the same clay as their fathers, to be sure—not sprung from the heather, which fears  
neither wind nor rain, but from some delicate plant of a foreign country, which will not  
thrive unless it be nourished under glass, with a murrain to it.”*

An uneasy, twittering, demi-silence has fallen on Scotland, as it has on the rest of the world. We are no longer comforted by the steady boom of great writers, springing from such constant

founts of energy and gusto as our own Smollett, our own Scott, our own Hume, our own Christopher North, our own Hogg, our own Carlyle, the noisiest of them all.

It is not a dead silence that has come upon us. After a long interval we are conscious that the Muses have migrated back to us and they are very vocal in their nesting. I wonder what Scott would have thought of the new Lallans Poets.

In some ways he might have approved them. He would not, I think, have adhered very closely to their pattern...

*"Och Alban, dour an jurummelt-wud,  
Richt nourriss for ane Lallans Makar..."*

He might think, perhaps rightly, that, "*O Caledonia, stern and wild,*" was, maybe, better.

At least he loved to wander over the moors where they are grubbing so diligently—often on the same quest. He loved to unearth strange old words, covered with earth and reeking with an ancient life. He would have been interested in the work of those who unearth these words and string them into uncouth coronals.

At the very least, he would not have used the very foolish reproach that the coronals are unintelligible to the talkie-fed denizens of our housing schemes. If they can learn American, they can learn Scots, and I think that they would be better so employed.

What would our street-dwellers make of this?—

*"...by the grace o' Mercy, the horse swarved round, and I fell aff at the tae side as the ball whistled by at the tither, and the fell auld lord took the whig such a swauk wi' his broadsword that he made twa pieces of his head, and down fell the lurdane wi' a' his bowk abune me."*

*"You were rather obliged to the old lord, I think,"* said Ravenswood.

*"Was I? my sartie! first for bringing me into jeopardy, would I nould I—and then for whombling a chield on the tap o' me, that dang the very wind out of my body?—I hae been short-winded ever since and canna gang twenty yards without peghing like a miller's aiver."*  
*"You lost, then, your place as trumpeter?"* said Ravenswood.

*"Lost it? to be sure I lost it,"* replied the sexton, *"for I couldna hae played pew upon a dry humlock..."*

I should like to ask our street-dwellers whether they know the significance of a hurle-burle swire, and whether that is the way to pronounce it. What is grogram? And what is a cockernony? What is it to be geizend, or to be in a kippage? If they were advised to go to the third bourock beyond the muckle through-stane, how would they proceed?

They would, of course, be in a church-yard; and Sir Walter was a great church-yard fancier. I rather think he would have liked Hugh MacDiarmid's *Crowdie Knowe*.

*Oh to be in Crowdieknowe  
When the last trumpet blows,  
An' see the deid come loupin owre*

*The auld grey wa's.  
Muckle men wi' tousled beards,  
I grat at as a bairn,  
'll scramble frae the croodit clay  
Wi' feck o' swearin'."*

I am perfectly certain he would have liked Douglas Young's verses about the cypress bush:—

*"The Minister said it wald dee,  
the cypress buss I plantit.  
But the buss grew til a tree  
naething dauntit.  
It's growan stark and heich,  
derk and straucht and sinister,  
kirkyaird-like and dreich.  
But whaur's the Minister?"*

If he is listening now—and what is the use of us being here if he isn't?—I hope he will take these little verses back with him to Elysium and chuckle over them with Urquhart and Dunbar and Burns and Quintus Horatius Flaccus.

He will certainly like them better than most of what passes for poetry to-day across the border; though he no doubt treats the Southron poets with perfect respect and courtesy, as tolerance was part of his nature. You remember that he objected to the reporters of *The Edinburgh Weekly Journal* for making him speak with great impropriety and petulance respecting the opinions of those who do not approve of dramatic entertainments. I have found myself speaking with great impropriety and petulance on the same topic. Let Sir Walter's words be a lesson to me and to all of us.

But to our tale. You will expect me to be a little less general and a little more particular on the topic of the evening. To this expectation I reply with another confession. I am making as many confessions as the panel in a Communist Court of Justice.

Do not be afraid. I am not going to admit ignorance of Scott. I have read at least two-thirds of everything he ever printed, and that is a good deal. What I must confess is that I am no great reader. Nearly all I know of English and other literature was hammered into me by my father, and he has been dead for over thirty years. To-day even the greatest writers are, to me, more soporific than stimulant.

I should therefore be dishonest if I asked you to share with me to-night a mutual delight in some of the great and glowing passages of our author's writings. My own delight is constant and sincere. But I know that to many of you the great passages mean more than that. It is impertinent and even blasphemous for an ardent admirer of a beautiful woman to praise to her lover her gestures, motions, and her smile, however beguiling these may be.

For that reason I shall not recall to you, as so many of my predecessors have done, any resounding scenes from the novels or luminous lines from the poems. These are your own possession and pride. You may have comforted yourself during an air raid with the meeting of Diana and Francis or Fitzjames's fight with Roderick Dhu. For me, no. I am not made that way.

This, however, I will admit:

When I first went to London at a very early age I saw its mean streets with the eyes of Dickens and its squares and terraces through the eyes of Thackeray. When I went to India it was the India of Kipling that I saw. Perthshire and Stirlingshire, Edinburgh, and the Scottish border overwhelmingly mean Scott to me.

It is one of the qualities of great literature that it can do this thing—that it can cover places in the visible earth with a strange light long after the eyes of the author have been closed for ever.

This faculty of transmuting places and people belongs very particularly to great improvisers like Scott. These are persons who spend long periods of their lives in absorbing through every sense organ an enormous variety of impressions and in sorting them and storing them till the time comes to give them back to the world.

One of the best painters Scotland ever produced was Quentin Pringle of Glasgow. He spent most of his time mending gasogenes in the Saltmarket of that city. When he was tired of mending gasogenes he went for walks in the country and looked at green leaves and listened to birds.

Quite suddenly, at intervals of two, five, ten, or even twenty years he would shut his shop and begin to paint. When he had delivered the goods he would go back to making gasogenes and to talking about his periodic explosions of happy energy.

It is interesting to note that he was a pointilliste. His shimmering effects of light were helped by the splitting of a scene into innumerable little even areas—like the tracery made by the wire on the gasogenes.

So it was with Scott. He was a recipient man. His early invalidism gave him a hunger for life, and he was an enormous eater. All that he absorbed was turned, almost automatically, into the material of literature. This material, when he gave it forth, was orderly, disciplined, and *designed*. His gasogene workshops were his law office and the Courts... forgive me, I had no intention of making a foolish joke about gasogenes. What I intended to say is that these places gave Scott's mind a consecutive, orderly trend. He was no emotional splurger. His outbursts of energy were controlled and canalised. In short, they are works of art. It was this that produced what Cockburn described on the first appearance of *Waverley* as "*an electric shock of delight*." That impact and that delight have not much weakened with the years.

From the hill behind my house I can see Ben Lomond and many of the peaks that were the stamping ground of the stag at eve. So do the works of Scott range themselves to the sight. When one is growing old and stiff in the joints one no longer climbs a mountain or two every year. But the mountains are eternally there, a possession for us and for generations to come.

*"I will lift up mine eyes to the hills whence cometh my help."*

Not everybody feels in this way about Scott. There are those who say he is loquacious and rambling and, like the hills, there is too much scenery in him. I have spoken of some of these people. Edmund Gosse was once visited by his niece or somebody or other who asked him how he employed his time. He said, "*I am reading a Waverley Novel a day*." She said, "*Are you enjoying that?*" He said, "*No*."

Even among those who are allergic to Scott there is a sense of his majesty. Ruskin might have been thinking of him, when he wrote these words about Titian:—

*“Nobody cares much at heart about Titian; only there is a strange undercurrent of everlasting murmur about his name, which means the deep consent of all great men that he is greater than they.”*

This is perhaps the only true criterion of greatness in literature or in anything else. We recognise at once that it applies to Scott.

It is doubtful whether he ever sought this kind of greatness. Popularity he sought and enjoyed abundantly when it came. The hard saying—*“Nobody cares much at heart about Scott”*—would, perhaps, have hurt him more than the strange undercurrent of everlasting murmur would have uplifted him.

At anyrate, it is not true; or so far it is not true. We in this room are by no means nobodies and we care very much about Scott. It is possible that he is not now widely read for what he called *“amusement.”* The honest, painstaking, and continuous efforts of our schoolmasters to destroy our enjoyment of the classics has been applied to Scott with some success. When Scott is as old as Titian he may be read only by professors and their victims. I do not know.

Of one thing we may be certain—that this *feeling* of greatness will remain and endure, though we may be hard put to it to discover exactly in what it consists. Carlyle himself struggled to analyse it in his noble review of Lockhart’s *Life*.

He was a specialist in greatness. He had laboriously examined all its elements and had come to strong and definite conclusions. Scott did not fit these conclusions. He had no fire in his belly (Carlyle says) to burn up all the world. He did not wrestle alone with ideas in the wilderness of his own mind. He said few memorable things. His ambitions were infantile and vulgar. He had not, in short, the qualities that made Napoleon and Oliver Cromwell and John Knox and Karl Marx and Lenin and Frederick the Great such a blessing to mankind. This was awkward for Carlyle; but Carlyle was an honest man.

Every line of the essay buzzes with the Everlasting Murmur, pulsates with the Deep Consent that Scott was a greater man than he; and to be greater than Carlyle was somewhat. He could never have used phrases like these of a little man:

*“Scott was a genuine man.... No affectation, fantasticality or distortion dwelt in him; no shadow of cant. Nay, withal, was he not a right brave and strong man, according to his kind? What a load of toil, what a measure of felicity, he quietly bore along with him; with what quiet strength he both worked on this earth, and enjoyed in it; invincible to evil fortune and to good! A most composed, invincible man; in difficulty and distress knowing no discouragement, Samson-like carrying off on his strong Samson-shoulders the gates that would imprison him; in danger and menace, laughing at the whisper of fear. And then, with such a sunny current of true humour and humanity, a free, joyful sympathy with so many things; what of fire he had all lying so beautifully latent, as radical latent heat, as fruitful internal warmth of life; a most robust, healthy man!”*

The words of Mercury are harsh after the songs of Apollo. It is not for me to try to improve upon that. It shows us a great man, an immortal man without a shadow of a doubt. That living spirit is living to-day to help us in our dark times and to teach us to defend our birthright of individuality

and freedom against any fire-bellied, hubristic monsters who would burn us up and stamp us to fine, exquisitely homogeneous powder.

Carlyle's tribute is high and wide and enthusiastic. Perhaps too high and too wide for an occasion like this. May I bring back to you the man himself as he appears so vividly in Cockburn's memoirs? I shall read it to you, and then I shall have done.

*"Dear Scott! When he was among us we thought we worshipped him at least as much as his modesty would permit. But now that he is gone we feel as if we had not enjoyed or cherished him half enough. How would we cling to him were he to reappear! It is a pleasure which the next generation may envy that I still hear his voice and see his form. I see him in the 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 its 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."*

They are before us to-night—at last. I ask you to rise and drink to his Memory.

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<https://www.walterscottclub.com/>

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