

The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club

The Ninety First Annual Dinner

2001

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, Thank you, Chairman, for your kind and undeserved introduction.
BEFORE I start I would like to make sure that you can all hear me. There can be nothing worse than listening to a speaker you cannot hear unless it be listening to one you can hear! But I am sure you will all be able to hear and will approve the decision that it is both inappropriate and infra dig, for members to be asked for blank cheques to help to defray the expenses of the Speaker ... I mean tonight's speaker, not one in another place!

You may wonder why an old man should have the temerity or perhaps the stupidity to undertake to address you. I certainly had grave doubts and my decision to accept such a signal honour is due to my late dear wife's encouragement, together with the approval of Sir Walter himself. In his *Journal*, of which more later, he wrote: 'A man of eighty and upwards may be allowed to talk long because in the nature of things he cannot have long to talk.'

'Tempora mutantur nos et mutamur in illis' Times change and we change with them. It is a sad commentary on our times that few people nowadays read Scott. In a recent quiz programme not one of four competitors could identify the author of *The Bride of Lammermoor*. However we have not all "mutamurred" and I am sure there is no one here tonight who does not still appreciate the life and works of the author whom we are gathered to honour.

Not being endowed with the histrionic attributes of my immediate predecessor nor the academic qualifications of many previous presidents I decided that rather than indulge in some recondite analytical discussion on one of the novels it might be more interesting to consider Scott's Life rather than his Works. I was encouraged to find that this met with the approval of W. M. Parker who wrote the introduction to probably the greatest biography after *Boswell's Life of Johnson – The Life of S. W. S.* by J. G. Lockhart, Scott's son-in-law. Parker wrote: 'I should like to advocate to both adult and young readers, who wish to win to the heart of Scott, that they would do well to read Lockhart's life before embarking on any of the great romancer's works. If, having done so, they then give themselves up to Scott's poems and novels, they will find a relish in, and a comprehension of, these works less likely to be obtained without that prior knowledge of Scott's life, mind and character.'

Much detail about his early life is to be found in his memoirs published in 1808, which are an uninhibited account of his deeds and misdeeds. I am sure in doing this he discovered the truth of Virgil's words: '*Forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit*' - 'It will be pleasant some time to recall even these things.'

As he writes himself: 'I was born on 15th August 1771 in a house belonging to my father, at the head of the College Wynd.' This was near to Kirk o' Field, the scene of Darnley's murder, some 204 years previously; this in turn is almost exactly where the south-east corner of the Old Quad of the University is now situated. I am indebted to Magnus Magnusson for this interesting information.

The family shortly moved to 25 George Square, a terraced house situated on the west side of a lovely square which has been largely desecrated by modern architecture, known as progress and improvement. His father had twelve children, but only five survived early youth. Scott says that his eldest brother Robert who

served in the army had a good singing voice, a virtue that was never seen in himself. It should be appreciated that, although born in Edinburgh in the mid period of the Scottish Enlightenment, Scott was a Borderer by blood and inheritance. He claims that his birth was neither distinguished nor sordid but esteemed gentle. Among the ancestors whom he was wont to recall was Auld Watt of Harden whose name he made to ring in many a ditty.

He writes that he was an uncommonly healthy child until he was eighteen months old when one morning he wakened with a bad fever. This lasted three days and on the fourth he lost the power in his right leg. All sorts of remedies were tried without success; in truth he had what today would be termed poliomyelitis. It is a sad thought that if Scott had not had polio the *Waverley Novels* et al. would probably never have been written as he always hankered after an army career. He often alluded to the remarkable circumstance of an ancestor having also been lame, recorded by an old chronicler of the clan, Scott of Satchells, who wrote:

“It is four hundred winters past in order
Since that Buccleuch was Warden in the Border.
A son he had at that same tide,
Which was so lame could neither run nor ride.”

His grandfather, Dr. Rutherford, recommended that he be sent to stay in the country and he was despatched to a farmhouse at Sandy-Knowe, Smailholm, where he stayed for many months. He was at this time described as “a sweet-tempered bairn, a darling with all about the house”. He had a lucky escape here when a maid who was looking after him and hated him, because she blamed him for being separated from her lover in Edinburgh, was about to cut his throat with her scissors and bury him in the moss. She was discovered just in time and promptly dismissed. It is believed she finished up in a lunatic asylum.

Whilst living in the Borders his aunt Janet Scott read to him and he was able to repeat by heart long passages from the *Ballad of Hardyknute* - and he was only two years old. A rather impatient visitor was so annoyed at his loud talking that he remarked ‘One may as well speak in the mouth of a cannon as where that child is’.

His health, thanks to the country air, was excellent at this time and he was able to stand, walk and even run, unlike his ancestor, and he had a little crutch.

At about four years old he was sent to other relations in Bath and went by boat from Edinburgh to London, the journey taking about ten days, as it almost does now! He stayed in Bath about a year and went to the Pump Room, but the celebrated baths did nothing for his lameness. As an aside some of you may recall the BBC announcer years ago who introduced an orchestra as playing from the Bathroom Pump. He attended a day school and his aunt also taught him. He wrote that he never acquired a just pronunciation nor could he read with much propriety. Somehow he had acquired a superstitious terror of statuary of all kinds and Jacob's Ladder outside Bath Abbey horrified him.

He returned to George Square in Edinburgh in 1776. At this time (aged five) he went to a private school and had various tutors. In addition he read aloud to his mother- Pope's *Homer*, Allan Ramsay, *Pilgrim's Progress*, the *Arabian Nights* and Shakespeare. He was particularly attracted to the wonderful and the terrible (his words) –“common taste of children but in which I have remained a child to this day”.

A leader of Edinburgh Literary Society met Walter at his father's and was so taken with him that she wrote a friend: ‘I last night supped in Mr. Walter Scott's. He has the most extraordinary genius of a boy I ever saw. He was reading a poem to his mother when I went in. I made him read on; it was the description of a shipwreck. His passion rose with the storm. He lifted his eyes and hands. "That's the mast gone," says he

"crash it goes! They will all perish". He turned to me and said, "That is too melancholy. I had better read you something more amusing"! I preferred a little chat and asked his opinion of Milton and other books he was reading which he gave me wonderfully. Do you think this a very silly story? Pray, what age do you suppose this boy to be? Name it now - twelve or fourteen? No such thing. He is not quite six years old. He has a lame leg for which he was a year in Bath and has acquired the perfect English accent.'

In 1779 he went to the Royal High School only for classics, but did little Greek. He was behind the class in both Latin and Greek. Again *tempora mutantur* - not even Latin is taught there now! He wrote later that the only unhappy years he passed were at the High School, which he thoroughly detested on account of the confinement.

At this time the High School was the most important in Scotland, intimately connected with the literature and progress of the Kingdom. Its pre-eminence was probably due to its long monopoly in the capital and was invaluable because men of the highest and lowest rank of society sent their children to be educated there. It is interesting to note, in view of the present government's obsession with class sizes, that there were 100 boys in each class. And the regime was harsh and competitive; Scott admits that he was *indifferently* well beaten at school, but wrote in his Journal that 'I am now certain that twice as much discipline would have been well bestowed'. But there was a great spirit of camaraderie among the pupils and this stood Scott in good stead because he had a need of such companionship after the relative isolation of his early years.

He did not make any great figure at the High School and admitted to being incorrigibly idle! But I question whether he knew the meaning of the word. He commonly disgusted any kind master as much by negligence and frivolity as pleased him by flashes of intellect and wit. But he acquired a deep knowledge of Latin, which encouraged logical thought and the intelligent construction of sentences.

In his own words he left the High School- in 1783- with a great quantity of general information, ill arranged and collected without system, yet deeply impressed on his mind and gilded by a vivid and active imagination.

Besides the HS which he attended from 1779 to 1783 he went to a writing and arithmetic class and also had a resident tutor for French.

Among his companions his good nature and flow of a ready imagination rendered him very popular. His lameness made him compensate in address for his inability to be active and an admiring audience would assemble regularly to listen to the inexhaustible narrator.

At this time he admits that he had a prodigious memory for passages of poetry, a playhouse ditty and above all a Border-raid ballad, but names, dates, etc. escaped him.

At the age of twelve he wrote his first poem which goes as follows:

"In awful ruins Aetna thunders nigh,
And sends in pitchy whirlwinds to the sky,
Black clouds of smoke, which, still as they aspire,
From their dark sides there bursts the glowing fire.
At other times huge balls of fire are tossed,
That lick the stars, and in the smoke are lost.
Sometimes the mount, with vast convulsions torn,
Emits huge rocks, which instantly are borne
With loud explosions to the starry skies.

The stones made liquid as the huge mass flies.
Then back again with greater weight recoils
While Aetna thundering from the bottom boils”.

He attended Edinburgh University from 1783 to 1786, and again from 1789 to 1792. Sadly, his knowledge of Greek was inferior to his classmates and he developed contempt of the language and resolved not to learn it. As a result he was known as the GREEK BLOCKHEAD.

In 1786 at the age of fifteen he was indentured to his father for five years. He disliked office drudgery and living in town. But he worked hard as a writer's apprentice earning 3d. a page and wrote 120 pages at one sitting. He spent this money in learning Italian and Spanish and in buying books. It is believed he had over 1,200 books by the time he was eleven.

His greatest intimate from school days was John Irving, later a W.S. They composed romances for each other's amusement in which the miraculous and the martial always predominated. I am sure members here tonight would have no difficulty in picturing the young Walter - I was going to say, striding, but it was limping, - along over Arthur's Seat and Salisbury Crags declaiming to his friend about some hero or another. These walks continued for about three years and had a considerable effect in turning Scott's imagination to the chivalrous and romantic in poetry and prose. On many an evening they must have `tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky', as W. J. Cory wrote about Heraclitus.

He attended an Italian class twice a week and became proficient enough to read Dante, and other eminent Italian authors - at the age of fifteen/sixteen! He also collected old songs or romances in the circulating library in Parliament Square.

So, in his late teens he was reasonably proficient`in French, German, Italian, besides Latin.

From 1788 until 1808 he enjoyed robust health, except, as he wrote, when he did not take exercise or lived too convivially - the latter, occasionally, had been the error of his youth. His youthful energy was diverted into social activities and reading and membership of various clubs and societies and he also did some hard drinking. Incidentally his father was most abstemious except on special occasions. Part of this period was again spent in Kelso where he met his first girl friend and wrote her poems. It was here also that he met James Ballantyne, an acquaintanceship which was to prove disastrous.

In 1790 he refused a partnership with his father, and in 1792 was called to the bar. He and his great friend William Clerk attended Parliament House regularly where he again became popular as a story-teller among the lawyers of the Outer-House, including Thomas Thomson and William Erskine. He attended a German class at this time and one of his first publications was a translation of Goethe.

But don't think Scott was a whited sepulchre! There is a story of his attendance with a lot of young Tory friends at the Edinburgh Theatre where a party of Irish medical students made themselves objectionable by drowning out the national anthem and cheering seditious speeches. Scott and his friends confronted the Irish and a stern battle ensued with many a cracked head. Five of them, including Scott, were subsequently bound over and had to give bail.

It is interesting to note however that about the same time a young German lady of high rank described him as `looking much younger than his twenty-five years. He seemed bashful and awkward; but there were from the first such gleams of superior sense and spirit in his conversation that I was hardly surprised later that I felt myself to be talking to a man of genius. He was most modest about himself. I remember particularly how he laughed at himself.'

And again Skene of Rubislaw wrote of his friendship as 'an intimacy of which I shall for ever think with so much pride - a friendship so pure and cordial as to have been able to withstand all the vicissitudes of nearly forty years, without ever having sustained even a casual chill from unkind thought or word ... I never could perceive the slightest shade of variance from that simplicity of character with which he impressed me on the first hour of our meeting'.

Among the many illustrious men he met during his life was William Wordsworth, who referred to his 'lively, entertaining conversation, full of anecdote, and averse from disquisition: the same unaffected modesty about himself. The same cheerful and benevolent and hopeful views of man and the world. He partly read and partly recited, sometimes in an enthusiastic style of chant, the first four cantos of the Lay; the novelty of the manners, the clear picturesque descriptions and the easy glowing energy of much of the verse greatly delighted me'.

The report of one of his early and most important cases reads like a paragraph from a modern tabloid. It concerned a Rev. Mr. McNaught whose trial on charges of habitual drunkenness, singing of lewd and profane songs, promoting irregular marriages as a J.P., was taking place before the General Assembly of the Kirk. Scott made a speech of considerable length, starting in a low voice but gathering more confidence and repeating some coarse specimens of his client's alleged conversation. His tone was so bold and free that he was called to order by one of the leading members of the Court. He became confused and when he had to recite a stanza of one of McNaught's convivial ditties his friends in the gallery shouted out 'hear, hear - encore - encore' and were immediately ejected. However, his visit to Galloway where the trial took place was not unmitigated disaster. He was later able to recall the scenery for extensive use in *Guy Mannering*.

In 1797 he wooed unsuccessfully Williamina Belsches who instead married Sir William Forbes of Pitsligo; perhaps a fortunate disappointment as she died at the age of thirty-five. On the rebound, although he denies this, he married Charlotte Charpentier of Lyons at Carlisle Cathedral. He was happily married for some twenty-nine years.

In the same year he became quartermaster of the Royal Edinburgh Light Dragoons.

1798 saw the birth of his first son and he set up house in 39 Castle Street where he remained until the mid-1820's. Two daughters and another son, Charles, followed. In 1799 his father died. In that same year he was appointed Sheriff of Selkirkshire.

In 1802-1803 the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Borders* (3 vols) made him famous. This was followed in 1805 by the *Lay of the Last Minstrel*. His clear and vigorous story-telling, honest pathos and the Scottish elements hit the public imagination and it was followed by several other poetic romances.

In 1804 he moved to Ashiestiel and shortly thereafter he was appointed Clerk to the Court of Session (unpaid!). He managed to find time to visit Southey and Wordsworth in London.

In 1809 he became a sleeping partner in a printing and later publishing firm owned by James Ballantyne, which subsequently proved disastrous.

In 1811 he made the greatest purchase of his life by acquiring Cartley Hole (often nicknamed Clarty Hole) at Abbotsford, the land extending for about half a mile along the Tweed. He spent huge sums on building it and crammed it with masses of antiquities. The library ceiling is a copy of Roslin Chapel and the ceiling of the hall is emblazoned with the heraldic devices of every house or clan with which he had connections. The motto of the house is 'Clausus tutus ero' - I will be safe when I am enclosed'.

Although in *The Lay* he wrote:

“If thou would'st view fair Melrose aright
Go visit it by the pale moonlight”.

he later admitted that he had never done so himself - and yet he lived only a few miles away!

His major poems were written in the years 1805 to 1812, - *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, *Marmion*, *Lady of the Lake* and *Rokeby*. About 1805 he started to write a novel, entitled *Waverley*, with the sub-title “*Tis Sixty Years Since*”. After writing seven chapters he showed the manuscript to a critical friend (William Erskine) whose opinion was unfavourable so he threw it aside and only years later, when searching for some fishing flies, did he find it in a drawer. *Waverley*, which was about the Jacobites in 1745 and depicted the *modus vivendi* of a now vanished Highland Scottish society, was published in 1814 and was an immediate success. The authorship was kept secret and until 1827 the identity of the Great Unknown and the Wizard of the North was not revealed although it was a poorly kept secret. Tired of narrative poetry and the growing popularity of Byron he turned to writing historical novels and between 1814 and his death on 21 September 1832 he wrote a further twenty-six historical novels.

In 1813 he refused the poet laureateship of England and suggested Southey instead.

By the time Ballantyne was on the verge of bankruptcy and from then on everything he wrote was done to make money and pay off debts.

An incident which occurred shortly after *Marmion* was written illustrates Scott's prodigious memory, his perspicacity and his wit. On his way to Rokeby to visit his old friend Morritt he stopped at Flodden Field where the proprietor of the nearby inn greeted him effusively, telling him the pub had benefited largely as a result of the publication of *Marmion*. He thought a Scott's Head would make an excellent sign post. Scott demurred so he then suggested some words from the poem.

Scott thought for a minute and then recited:

“Drink, weary pilgrim, drink and pray
For the kind soul of Sybil Grey”.

He told the innkeeper to strike out one letter from the first line and he would have exactly what he was looking for: the quotation, then read:

“Drink, weary pilgrim, drink and pay”.

In 1815 he visited Paris and the battlefield of Waterloo and was quite awed by Wellington. He subsequently wrote a *Life of Napoleon* which was published in 1827.

In 1817 he was violently ill with gallstones and this complaint remained with him until 1820. However he was not inactive and during this time found the Scottish regalia intact in the Crown Room in Edinburgh Castle: they had not been seen since 1707. He made several visits to London, meeting the Prince Regent, who in 1820 as George IV made him a baronet.

He recalls that:

“No subject was ever more graciously received by a Sovereign for he scarce would permit me to kneel, shook hands with me repeatedly and said more civil and kind things than I care to repeat.”

On 29 April 1820 Sophia Charlotte his elder daughter was married to John Gibson Lockhart. In the same year he founded the Celtic Society of Edinburgh where all members wore tartan kilts.

In 1822 one of the biggest events of his life was the visit to Edinburgh of George IV. Scott was much involved in the arrangements for the visit and issued all sorts of instructions about protocol and behaviour. He presented his Majesty with a beautiful St. Andrew's Cross wrought in pearls in the name of the Ladies of Edinburgh. The king proceeded to Edinburgh by way of Leith Walk, which Scott described as the noblest avenue in Europe. Escorted by the Yeomanry Cavalry of the County of Midlothian, the route was via Leith Walk, York Place, Queen Street, Charlotte Square, Princes Street, Waterloo Bridge, and so down to the Palace of Holyrood. The visit was an unparalleled success.

In 1825 he began his Journal which he spelt, even with his knowledge of French, as *Gurnal* and is a more or less daily record of his life and views right up to his death. Entries reveal more than all his novels his character and humanity.

The last twenty or so years of his life comprised his sheriff court work at Selkirk, writing the Waverley Novels and other lesser known works, riding around the Borders, fishing and passing the time of day with all and sundry. He also travelled a lot and entertained, except on Sunday nights which he reserved for family. Also of course his involvement as quartermaster of the Light Horse Volunteers took up a lot of time - drill at five in the morning - then on to Parliament House for four or five hours and study in the evening.

Sadly his wife Charlotte died in 1826 and about the same time Scott became involved in the bookselling bankruptcy and he was left with debts of £114,000.

He entered into a Trust with his creditors and managed to protect the ownership of Abbotsford but had to sell 39 Castle Street.

In 1827 he finally admitted to the authorship of *Waverley* and the Waverley Novels.

In 1828 he suffered a paralytic stroke and resigned Clerkship of Court and declined Privy Councillorship. From this time on he was not in good health.

In 1831 the new King, William IV, provided a yacht for a visit to Italy. After a long stay in Naples he returned home very sick and died shortly afterwards. His death was very probably precipitated by the action of a vociferous and hostile mob in Jedburgh earlier in the year who threw stones at his carriage in protest at his opposition to the Reform Bill. *Sic transit gloria mundi!*

Cognisance of the time factor laid down by the Honorary Secretary prevents further anecdotes, but I hope that the following excerpts from his Journal will illustrate his common sense, his humour, his humanity and convince us of the greatness of the man.

After a fishing expedition where he had been surprised at the depth of the water he wrote: `Your deepest pools, like your deepest politicians and philosophers, often turn out more shallow than expected.'

Again he was being realistic and condemnatory of his own profession when he wrote: `Most attorneys have been suspected, more or less justly, of making their fortunes at the expense of their clients.' I might wryly say `Plus ca change plus c'est la meme chose'.

Nor would his views on the press go amiss today: 'The Newspapers told about fifty lies about this matter as usual but one would have little to do who should mind them.'

The question of corporal punishment is a topic of discussion today but so it was 2,500 years ago. The Greeks had no doubts about the matter and if only Scott had persevered with his studies he would have enjoyed quoting the dictum:

ὁ μὴ δαρεῖσθαι ἀνθρώπος οὐ παιδεύεται!

(The man who has not been thrashed has not been educated).

He admitted that his experiences at the High School coloured his attitude and he made his view clear when he wrote: 'I am an enemy to corporal punishment. But there are many boys who will not attend without it. It is an instant and irresistible motive, and I love boys' heads too much to spoil them at the expense of their opposite extremity.'

You may be surprised to hear of his views on his fellow Scots:

'My countrymen, taken in their general capacity, are not people to have recourse to in adverse circumstances. John Bull is a better beast in misfortune.'

And again:

"The art of quiet and entertaining conversation which is always easy as well as entertaining is I think chiefly known in England. In Scotland we are pedantic and wrangle or we run away with the harrows on some topic we chance to be discursive upon."

He was a genuine and very modest man: "The blockheads talk of my being like Shakespeare - I am not fit to tie his brogues.' And again: 'Long life to thy fame and peace to thy soul, Rob Burns. When I want to express a sentiment I feel strongly, I find the phrase in Shakespeare or thee.'

Many of us, I am sure, would admit to the same following shortcoming:

I have had all my life a longing to do something else when I am called to a particular labour, a vile contradictory humour which I can not get rid of.'

Finally, and in the days of the old highland sermons this would indicate that there was only another half hour to go - I hasten to add that does not apply tonight!

It may be instructive to compare Scott's attributes, and his incredibly full and fulfilling life, against the criteria laid down by Rudyard Kipling in his great poem "*If*".

"If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same."

Well, he certainly did that - his lameness, his financial disasters, his illness in 1817/20, the loss of his wife, and general bad health in his latter years, together with his fame as the outstanding author of his time.

"Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build `em up with worn-out tools!"

He qualifies here again, with his financial problems, at a time when he was not in good health.

“If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings - nor lose the common touch.”

Kipling must have had Scott in mind when he wrote these lines. He loved nothing more than to spend an hour talking to a shepherd and a few days later he would enjoy the King's company in London. His best friends were a poacher turned gamekeeper, Tom Purdie, and his farm manager, Will Laidlaw.

And lastly:

“If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the earth and everything that's in it,
And - which is more - you'll be a Man, my son.”

As a prodigious writer, an intrepid traveller, a keen sportsman, a conscientious lawyer, a genial host and the presiding genius of the domestic hearth surely he did all of that. He could well say with Horace “*Exegi monumentum aere perennius*” I have built a monument more lasting than bronze - and than the one not far from here.

On his deathbed his last words were to his son-in-law –“My dear, be a good man - be virtuous - be religious - be a good man. Nothing else will give you any comfort when you come to lie here”.

It is impossible to do justice to the life of such a man in thirty minutes but I submit that no Scotsman in history has done more for literature, as the originator of the historical novel, and unhesitatingly for his nation in so many diverse ways, than Walter Scott.

I would now ask you to be upstanding and drink to the memory of, in my estimation and I hope yours, the greatest and finest Scotsman in our long history, Sir Walter Scott.

Fraser Elgin

The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club.