The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club

The Ninety Fourth Annual Dinner

On hearing I'd been elected President of the Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club, my Toronto friend Eric Robertson, a great Scott collector and a native of this city, thrust into my hands a rather dusty volume containing the annual reports of the Club from its inception in 1894 to 1921. The first thing that struck me was the familiarity of the names of many of those present at the inaugural dinner in November 1894: Ballantyne, Boswell, Erskine, Ferrier, Hogg, Pringle, Thomson, Waldie, Wilson--names that come up again and again in the pages of Lockhart's Life of Scott. Here surely were the sons and grandsons of members of Scott's own circle of friends. One of the important pieces of business at the meeting which preceded that first dinner was the election of the next President of the Club: the speech nominating Sheriff Jameson noted not only 'that he would bring stores of legal lore and native humour to adorn the post,' but that he could himself claim a direct, if somewhat tenuous, connection back to Scott: 'one of Sir Walter's brothers or uncles having married a M'Culloch of Ardwall, and Sheriff Jameson having also married into that family'. Having read thus far I was beginning to feel distinctly uncomfortable about my own qualifications for office. I'd no claim to 'stores of legal lore and native humour'--qualifications eminently fulfilled by my immediate predecessor Judge David Edward, who spoke here so wonderfully last year--nor could I claim any direct connection with Scott's Edinburgh, let alone with his relations by marriage. What's more, I couldn't help noticing that at those early dinners in the Waterloo Rooms ladies were present only as onlookers in the gallery.

I began to feel rather desperate--would my numerous visits to Abbotsford count? Did it matter that I knew it was Scott's brother, not his uncle, who'd married a M'Culloch of Ardwall, and that in the introduction to the new Penguin edition of Guy Mannering I'd argued rather strongly for the role of the M'Culloch family in providing material for that novel? As for Edinburgh connections, perhaps it would help that the subject of my first book, the historian Thomas Babington Macaulay, was for a dozen years, at two different periods, Member of Parliament for the city (1839-47; 1852-56). But it was only when I came to look through the rules of the Club, printed at the front of the volume Eric Robertson had loaned me, that I began to feel more comfortable. Rule 2 sets out as the second of the Club's three main objects: 'the collection and preservation of letters and other relics connected with [Scott's] name'. Here was ground on which I could take my stand. For I can claim, quite unabashedly, to have read more Scott letters than anyone in the world--even including Scott himself, who never had time to read through what he'd written before putting it in the post. Indeed, I've given the past seven years of my working life to preparing an electronic catalogue of those letters that is designed to increase their accessibility to scholars and Scott admirers all over the world. Here was not only a justification for my accepting your presidency, but a subject on which I could talk at this dinner.

If you wonder how I came by my initial interest in Scott more than thirty years ago, then the answer is, again, Macaulay. The longer I worked on his essays and historical writings, the more anxious I became about my inadequate knowledge of Walter Scott. Not only was Scott the conduit through which Scottish Enlightenment ideas about historical process passed into the mainstream of Victorian thought, but Macaulay himself clearly recognised Scott as the monarch of that Debateable Land of history he was himself so ambitious to re-conquer. In an early essay for, of course, the Edinburgh Review, Macaulay speaks of Scott's having 'used those fragments of truth which historians have scornfully thrown behind them, in a manner which may well excite their envy,' and goes on to proclaim, with all the confidence of youth, that 'a truly great historian would reclaim those materials which the novelist has appropriated . . . .

We should not then have to look for the wars and votes of the Puritans in Clarendon, and for their phraseology in Old Mortality; for one half of King James in Hume, and for the other half in the Fortunes of Nigel.'1 These were bold words, but when, twenty years later, Macaulay set out to describe in his History what happened in Scotland in the immediate aftermath of the Glorious Revolution, he confessed to something very like an anxiety attack; recording in his journal that he needed to go north and walk over the actual ground of some of the Scottish battles, he added--a touch desperately--that Sir Walter had been there before him.

Macaulay thus led me to Scott, and once I began to read the Waverley Novels and the poems my fate was sealed. I no longer wanted to read Scott in order to understand the Victorians, I wanted to read him for himself. But this doesn't in itself explain how or why I found myself in the mid 1990s combing the libraries of the world for Scott's own letters and those that were written to him. My first reading of Lockhart's Life had made me aware early on not only that Scott was a wonderful correspondent himself but that he enjoyed the friendship of other marvellous letter writers, such as Lady Louisa Stuart and J. S. B. Morritt. I wanted to read both sides of such correspondences and didn't anticipate any great difficulty in achieving this. I felt innocently confident that all of Scott's own letters had been gathered into the twelve-volume Centenary Edition, edited by Sir Herbert Grierson in the 1930s, and that any interesting incoming letters that had failed to catch Lockhart's eye would have been included in the two anthologies from Scott's Letter-Books that Wilfred Partington published in 1930 and 1932. But once I began to call up Scott's manuscripts on my visits to the National Library of Scotland or the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, I quickly became aware that a great deal of non-literary manuscript material survived, much of it in the form of unpublished correspondence.

My attention was first attracted by some long and interesting letters that were, to my surprise, absent from Grierson's twelve volumes, but I quickly registered that even the shortest unpublished note to James Ballantyne or Robert Cadell might contain information important to anyone preparing a new edition of one of Scott's works. As my own interest in publishing history grew over the years, I found myself increasingly citing letters that referred to such matters as the progress of individual works through the press or negotiations about their sale to Constable or Longman. But I began also to yearn for some means of drawing attention to unpublished letters that dealt interestingly, and sometimes importantly, not only with author-publisher-printer relations, but with topics as various as the politics of the day or the best way to manage the woods and forests on the Buccleuch estate. With an increasingly missionary fervour, I began to feel that political and cultural historians needed to know about these documents--who, after all, would think of looking in the West Yorkshire Archives in Leeds for Scott's unpublished letters to the great Foreign Secretary and later Prime Minister George Canning, or expect to find in the library of the University of Kentucky one of the very few of his many letters to the actor Daniel Terry that still survive in autograph manuscript form?

By 1995 I'd decided it was my duty to do something about this situation. I could have embarked on a selected edition of those unpublished Scott letters that struck me as especially significant. But that would have taken many years to complete and, like any selection, it would run the risk of excluding items crucial to potential users with important but specialised interests. What seemed to me dull or of minor concern--a legal quibble, a minute piece of agricultural advice, a note to James Ballantyne saying merely 'I return

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[1] *Edinburgh Review* 47 (1828): 365.

sheet Q'--could be a crucial piece of evidence for some other scholar. And a selected edition of Scott's own letters would do nothing to make the vast body of incoming correspondence more widely known. What's more, before I could begin on even a small selected edition of Scott's own unpublished letters I would ideally need to locate every letter that survived in order to make my choice. What, moreover, was I going to do about those letters that Grierson published only from printed versions or other copies, but whose original manuscripts could now be traced, often revealing important omissions or discrepancies in the Centenary Edition texts?

Given that I was nearer to the end of my career than the beginning, I decided that the only responsible course was to take on the basic work of locating as many of the outgoing and incoming letters as humanly possible so that other scholars would know where to find not only the manuscripts of published letters, but also, and even more crucially, those of unpublished letters of whose very existence they might well not be aware. If by using the knowledge I'd acquired during the past thirty years, I could establish a date for each letter, identify the correspondent, give a precise reference to the current location of the manuscript, indicate whether it had ever been published, make it possible to find similar details for all other letters by or to the same correspondent, or written in the same year, and so forth, then I would be creating an important research tool and laying the foundations for a possible future edition. I knew from the start that such a reference tool would have to be in electronic form, hence susceptible to infinite correction and expansion, but cherished the private hope that if at some time in the twenty-first century the opportunity ever arose of replacing the Grierson volumes with a truly comprehensive edition, its as yet unborn editors would perhaps say an occasional prayer for the repose of my soul.

In order to understand the situation with regard to Scott's own letters it's worth looking a little more closely at the history of the Grierson edition. Publication was specifically projected for 1932, the centenary of Scott's death, and much of the preliminary work was done under pressure in order to meet that deadline. The expectation was that six volumes would be enough, but, as Grierson explains in the 'Editor's Preface', it quickly became apparent 'that an undertaking, planned for about six volumes, could not possibly, even with omissions, be completed under ten or twelve.'2 The reference to 'omissions' clearly indicates that it was never the intention to include all of Scott's letters but only those which 'were obtainable and seemed to be of any importance.'3

Given the primarily literary focus of the editors, letters dealing with the financial affairs of Scott's printing and publishing concerns, with his day-to-day legal work as Sheriff of Selkirk, or with his management of local politics in the Buccleuch interest were often omitted or curtailed. And as the edition progressed and its bulk grew, the 'importance' criterion seems to have been applied with increasing rigour. The search for letters in American locations had been from the first somewhat haphazard, and the late discovery of significant collections of important letters led to a number of hasty rearrangements and the printing of groups of American-held letters out of their proper sequence. All of Scott's letters to his brother Tom held by the Huntington Library were thus published in an appendix to the first volume, while the fascinating letters on medieval romance written to George Ellis were represented in the early volumes of the edition by the extracts printed in Lockhart's Life, only for the remaining segments to be awkwardly supplied in

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[2] *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*. 12 vols. Ed. H. J. C. Grierson et al (London: Constable, 1932-37), 1: x.

[3] *Letters* 1: vii.

Volume 12 from the original manuscripts in the Pierpont Morgan Library. Even in Scotland unexpected caches turned up, requiring further ungainly appendices.

But while the Grierson edition exhibits numerous signs of the pressures under which it was produced, it remains an heroic achievement that makes available, in whole or in part, over 3,500 Scott letters. And the usefulness of the twelve volumes was enormously enhanced by the publication in 1979 of J. C. Corson's Notes and Index. It remains true, however, that for letters printed by Grierson from nineteenth-century copies or only as brief extracts, scholars really need to consult the surviving original manuscripts. The location of those originals was one of the problems I hoped to address, but, far more importantly, I wanted to provide records for the many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Scott letters that had never found their way into Grierson's twelve volumes, as well as for the vast body of his incoming correspondence. So, with the blessing of Dame Jean Maxwell-Scott and the active encouragement of the National Library of Scotland and the Pierpont Morgan Library--the two largest repositories of Scott letters--and research funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, I began the search for every letter by or to Scott still surviving in holograph, manuscript or typed copy, facsimile, photographic copy, or printed form. Had I known how many letters I'd myself have to write in the months and years that followed, how much I would have to learn about the mysteries of databases and web pages--or, indeed, that I'd end up creating nearly 14,000 records, I might never have begun. But the rewards have been ample--not only the minor triumphs of finding a new batch of letters, dating a particularly recalcitrant little note, or tracking down an apparently unidentifiable correspondent, but also the increasing pleasure I have taken in getting to know Scott himself. And I can state unequivocally, that while not discounting his occasional failings, the more of Scott's letters I have read, the higher has risen my opinion of him as a human being.

From the outset of my work I had the help of two invaluable research assistants in Toronto--Richard Frank, who designed the original database and helped me throughout the project with his computer expertise, and Sharon Ragaz, who was especially involved in creating records for incoming letters and in tracking down printed versions. Meanwhile in the National Library of Scotland Dr Iain Brown became in effect a fourth member of the team, constantly on the look-out for unrecorded items of correspondence and sharing with us his detailed knowledge not only of the NLS manuscript holdings but of Scottish history and culture. And this is perhaps the place to mention Archie Turnbull, who encouraged me from the first with this project, and was tireless in enquiring about its progress. His death just a few weeks ago was a great personal loss for his many friends, and a loss also to the entire field of Scott publishing and scholarship.

Locating the incoming correspondence was fairly straightforward. Many of the letters from members of Scott's family had been transferred to the National Library of Scotland in the 1920s and 30s by Major-General Maxwell-Scott, while the main body--now made up as 46 large volumes--had been purchased at a Sotheby's auction in 1921 by Sir Hugh Walpole and subsequently bequeathed to the Library. These volumes, comprising the bulk of the letters received by Scott in the years of his fame, had been initially organised by the faithful George Huntly Gordon in the 1820s, between bouts of his work on the catalogue of the Abbotsford Library--work for which he was to receive no credit when the catalogue was taken over and published by Robert Cadell's friend J. G. Cochrane after Scott's death. The National Library did not actually receive the Walpole bequest until 1941, but the final item in Eric Robertson's collection of early Scott Club material reports Walpole's response to the toast to 'Literature' at the 1921 dinner. In that speech he expressed delight in his recent acquisition of Scott's incoming letters and made the public vow that, providing he himself 'did not become bankrupt in the meantime,' he intended the collection should 'return to the country to which it belonged'.

If I were to embark on extensive quotation from unpublished letters--something I must save for another occasion or we would be here all night--I would begin with the appeals for advice and assistance from the young men and women, often in desperate circumstances, who approached Scott for help with their own attempts at poetry or prose. Though Scott always began his reply by saying he made it a practice never to offer detailed literary advice, by the second paragraph he was usually engaged in a helpful critique of the poem, play, or novel they had sent. At the same time he would end his letter with gently-phrased warnings about pinning too many hopes on the chances of the literary marketplace. In a number of such cases we know Scott put himself to considerable further trouble, replying to subsequent letters and offering yet more comments on works in progress or advice on dealing with publishers. And when his critical admiration, or just his human sympathy, was particularly engaged, he would draw on his own literary capital with Constable or other publishers in order to get a work into print. At the very least he would always subscribe for a number of copies of any book the aspiring author already had in the press.

That even Scott's patience had its limits is illustrated by the amusing account Lockhart gives of the arrival of the post during his own very first visit to Abbotsford. The size of the postbag on that morning in October 1818 was so large that Lord Melville, also a guest, asked Scott 'what election was on hand--not doubting that there must be some very particular reason for such a shoal of letters,' but this was, in fact, just a normal day's load. And you have to remember that at that period the recipient paid the postage. Scott confided to his guests that despite the generous amounts of 'free' correspondence he received, as a result of franks provided by friends in parliament or in government office, his annual bill for postage on letters received seldom came to less than £150 a year. (This amounts to half the annual salary he received as Sheriff of Selkirk!) And this did not include the money he paid for coach parcels, which were 'a perfect ruination.'[4] By way of illustration Scott then recounted a disaster that had befallen him the preceding spring, when he 'opened a huge lump of a despatch' without checking whether it bore a frank, only to discover that it contained a manuscript play 'by a young lady of New York, who kindly requested me to read and correct it, equip it with prologue and epilogue, procure for it a favourable reception from the manager of Drury Lane, and make Murray or Constable bleed handsomely for the copyright.' The cost to Scott of the postage on this one package was over £5. And this was not the end of the sad story Scott had to tell: 'A fortnight or so after another packet, of not less formidable bulk, arrived, and I was absent enough to break the seal too without examination. Conceive my horror when out jumped the same identical tragedy of The Cherokee Lovers, with a second epistle from the authoress, stating that, as the winds had been boisterous, she feared the vessel intrusted with her former communication might have foundered, and therefore judged it prudent to forward a duplicate.'[5] Although I have not found any trace of Scott's reply to this particular correspondent, I would not in fact be surprised to learn that he sent her some useful literary advice.

As I indicated earlier, tracing the letters Scott received did not present much difficulty, since virtually all of them have ended up in the Abbotsford or Walpole Collections in the National Library. But finding Scott's own letters proved a far greater challenge. While many of these had also come to the National Library over the years, others lay widely scattered in different corners of the world. No one, it seems, ever threw away a piece of paper with Walter Scott written at the bottom--even his cheques and bills survive in large numbers--although, as I soon inconveniently discovered, quite a few people had responded to the importunities of

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[4] John Gibson Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart*. 7 vols (Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, 1837-38), 4: 195.

[5] Lockhart 4: 195-96.

autograph hunters by cutting off not only the letter's signature but also its all-important date and address line. Some of Scott's letters were written to visitors to Abbotsford who had returned home to France, Germany, Russia, or the United States; others were carried as family treasures by emigrants moving to New Zealand, Australia, or Canada. Groups of such letters often ended up in local repositories in those countries, while a good many significant collections assembled by committed Scott collectors and enthusiasts had found their way, by gift or purchase, into institutional libraries, great and small, in Britain and North America. I was able to establish fairly quickly that the National Library itself held just over 3,000 letters in Scott's own hand or in that of an amanuensis, but my challenge was to track down those that had travelled further afield.

I began my search for Scott correspondence by posting over a thousand letters of enquiry to libraries in all parts of the world. Many of the librarians and archivists who responded to these initial letters sent helpful suggestions about additional places I might look, and I combined these leads with the information I was assembling from catalogues and other finding aids, both printed and electronic, so that my list of potential locations was constantly growing. This led, of course, to yet more letters of enquiry going out, even as the first responses were still coming in thick and fast. New Zealand was particularly rewarding, but the returns from Australia and Canada were, comparatively speaking, meagre. Don't ask me why. One very good letter did turn up in the archives of the Hudson Bay Company in Winnipeg, though only in the form of a Victorian manuscript copy, the original having reputedly been lost in a fire. It was a long letter dealing with emigration policy from Scott to Lady Katherine Halkett, sister of the Fifth Earl of Selkirk, organiser of the Selkirk plantation in what was to become Manitoba. A few months later I found the unburned original in the Beinecke Library at Yale University, and had to report this to a distinctly disappointed archivist in Winnipeg.

Many small groups of letters turned up in record offices up and down Britain or in university collections in Britain and the United States, but some came to light in more surprising places. For example, the Kunstsammlung der Veste in the German city of Coburg--a place I had previously associated only with Prince Albert--turned out not only to own a page of the manuscript of Kenilworth, but two Scott letters. Sometimes I found myself visiting libraries that I hadn't known existed even in places I thought I knew well, for example, a subscription library in New York that dated back to the eighteenth century. Alerted by a colleague, I was able to see there a group of letters from Scott to the old school friend, Edinburgh Bailie Robert Johnston, who had obtained for him the stones from the Heart of Midlothian that he built into the wall at Abbotsford. Remarkably--or at any rate curiously--the letters had once belonged to that great admirer of Scott (though not of Abbotsford), John Ruskin. Who knows what Ruskin's motives were in purchasing those letters at auction? Perhaps they were a reminder of his own early courtship of Scott's grand-daughter Charlotte, or maybe it was simply that the author of The Stones of Venice could not resist this little memento of the stones of Edinburgh.

But while small libraries had their own rewards, I had to concentrate on the larger collections of Scott letters: the Pierpont Morgan in New York, of course, but also the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library and the Fales Collection at New York University, the Brotherton Collection at Leeds University, the Hornel Library in Kirkcudbright, the British Library, the libraries of Yale, Princeton, and Harvard--these were all high on my list. As for the collections of the Edinburgh University Library and the National Library of Scotland, they have continued to grow throughout the seven years of the project, involving repeated visits to these institutions as well as to the Register House, the location of numerous family collections containing Scott letters. And just in the past few months I have had access, through the kindness

of Professor David Hewitt, to a significant group of letters acquired by the University of Aberdeen as part of the important Lloyd Collection. Wherever possible I have examined the original document and obtained a photocopy, though for smaller or more inaccessible groups of letters I have had to rely on photocopy or microfilm alone. Whether I visited the library or merely obtained copies, follow-up enquiries must have made mine a dreaded name to librarians all over the world.

In some cases institutions made no charge for copies, but payment for other batches made me all too familiar with the foreign draft counter in my local bank. Occasionally a system of barter came into play: the microfilm of a small group of letters I originally traced to Berlin, only to learn that they had moved to Krakow in Poland after the war, was eventually paid for by my sending the Krakow university library a Toronto-published volume on medieval studies that they particularly needed but had too little foreign currency to purchase.

While the search for autograph manuscripts or early copies continued, I was also gathering information on letters that only survived in print. Fortunately the University of Toronto's library is rich in nineteenth-century memoirs and biographies, as well as in Victorian periodicals, and a surprising number of otherwise unknown Scott letters can be found in such volumes. Currently there are about 450 records in the Catalogue for letters that survive only in printed form, either in the pages of the Grierson edition or in such unlikely places as Memorials of Coleorton (1887) or The History and Antiquities of the Borough of Lyme Regis and Charmouth (1834).

Like all researchers I could multiply these details of the chase--but as someone who always skips the hunting chapters in Trollope novels, I know that such accounts quickly bore the listener. But I must at least take a moment to reflect on the special pleasure associated with tracking down letters still in private hands. The rewards here come from sharing in the enthusiasm of the collectors who own them or in being allowed to examine the original documents in the actual places to which they were sent. I recorded some letters, for example, while sitting under the famous Raeburn portrait of Scott at Bowhill, and others in a warm kitchen in what had once been Scott's bedroom when he visited the home of an old friend in Fife. At Balcarres, while checking the originals of Scott's wonderful letters to Lady Anne Barnard, author of 'Auld Robin Gray', I was also shown the amazing volumes in which Lady Anne illustrated the text of her journals with brilliantly finished colour portraits of notable contemporaries such as Lord Byron, or quick sketches of people and places she encountered during her travels in the Cape Province of South Africa during the closing years of the eighteenth century. While visiting the archives at Castle Ashby to record nearly a hundred Scott letters written to members of the Maclean Clephane family, I was shown the Raeburn marriage portraits of Margaret Maclean Clephane and her husband Lord Compton. I'd always known she was beautiful, but having no idea what he looked like I had secretly suspected that her marriage might have been prompted by prudence rather than by passion. After all, how many young English aristocrats were likely to show up on the Isle of Mull clutching an introduction from Walter Scott? But once I had seen the darkly handsome, almost Byronic figure of the young Lord Compton, I realised that his money and title had probably had very little to do with the match.

As of the beginning of March 2003 my search has brought the number of known Scott letters to just over 7,000. This almost exactly doubles the approximately 3,500 in the twelve volumes of the Grierson edition. Of that 7,000 total of Scott letters, about 3,200 seem never to have been published. If you're interested in the raw numbers for letters to Scott, then I've so far located just over 6,500, of which about 5,000 appear to be unpublished. The earliest of Scott's own letters is written to his mother from Kelso and dates from September 1788 when he was 17, a date that strikes me as surprisingly late. I can't help thinking even at five years old such a precocious little boy might well have written a line to his mother from Bath when he was sent there for his health, and that she would surely have kept such an epistle. And would there not have been letters home during his six-month stay in Kelso at the age of thirteen, the months that saw him

studying at the school of Lancelot Whale and making his first acquaintance with James Ballantyne? If anybody were to find such childhood letters, we would have treasures indeed. On a more melancholy note, the last Scott letter I can confidently date was written on 16 April 1832, the day he left Naples for what was to be his final journey home.

To those who showed me their private treasures, and to everyone else who helped in the search, whether owner, librarian, archivist, researcher, or Scott enthusiast, I will always be deeply grateful. And I suspect and indeed trust that the list of helpers will continue to grow. Though the Catalogue has just been made available on the web it remains very much a 'Work in Progress' whose electronic form makes it easy to revise. I need the sharp eyes of everyone knowledgeable about Scott and his world to point out the mistakes and suggest improvements and additions, and I ask everyone here this evening to test out the Union Catalogue of Scott Correspondence on the National Library of Scotland website[6] and send me a note of corrections and omissions that need to be made good. I shall also hope to hear from you about the Scott letters that must still be lurking unseen in drawers, trunks, and attics all over Scotland. I would dearly love the official 'launch' of the Catalogue by the National Library this week to be the occasion for discovering major caches of new material--perhaps even those lost letters to his youthful friend Charles Kerr that might give us a wholly fresh insight into the autobiographical elements in Redgauntlet. I should perhaps add, that I offer a 'Witness Protection Program,' so that if you want to suggest the names of friends or relations I might contact, your secret will be safe with me. Let us all remember that 'the collection and preservation of letters' was one of the founding purposes of this Club. And I am sure Walter Scott, that famous collector of gabions, will bless us in our task. It is, of course, Sir Walter whose memory we meet to celebrate and my last and pleasantest duty of this evening is to ask you to rise and raise a glass in his honour.

Jane Millgate
7 March 2003

The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club.

[6] http://www.nls.uk/catalogues/resources/scott/