

The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club

Mrs. Patricia Maxwell-Scott

89th Annual Dinner: *Friday 6th March 1998 in The Balmoral Hotel*

The President in rising to propose the toast of “The Memory of Sir Walter Scott,” said:

Mr Chairman, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, I have just said to Jean, before I started, while our Chairman was making his **very** kind remarks, I just said to her “you know Jeanie should I say that we’ve often been compared to Hinge and Bracket?” and she said “I think **they** would appreciate that”. But all the moving of the lamp and one thing and another at this Top Table, it was really rather like them indeed. Anyway, I first of all would like to say how very much I appreciate the honour of being your President. It is something I shall never forget and will prize above all. I am talking tonight, not as a Scott scholar, but as a descendant of Sir Walter Scott’s. Or, as our American visitors often say, as an ancestor. And I can assure you that at the end of a day, we feel very much like ancestors. I have been asked to tell you a little bit about our childhood at Abbotsford, we have been very blessed and it’s been absolutely thrilling. I would like first of all to say that I couldn’t have done anything at all without Jean. She has been such a tremendous help in everything that we’ve done together in running the house. When we were very small, seven and five, my father came with our American stepmother back to Abbotsford, he’d been in the army and before that sadly the house had been let for about 40 years in my grandmother’s time. So he came back and we were brought up from then at Abbotsford itself. I must say one of the things that we really did not like very much was having to go and sing in the Chinese drawing room during the winter. You see the house was open only for a very limited time, although it had been open since 1833 since the year after Scott died. But during the summer in my father’s time at Abbotsford it was only opened a bit in the summer and the visitors were kept very much to the rooms and did not get into the grounds at all. But in the winter, or in the winter months, my stepmother would preside over a silver teapot and hot water jug and a lovely set of china entertaining her guests, some of them from abroad, and her great entertainment, which she thought was delightful, but we didn’t, was for the two little girls to come in and sing in the Chinese drawing room for the guests. We would sing of course Jock of Hazeldean, we would sing Bonnie Dundee and we would also sing lovely Scottish songs like the Eriskay Lovelilt. We were much appreciated by the visitors, I **think**, but we found it very frightening and were desperate to get away. I always pushed Jean through the door first, as the whole of my childhood was always that of getting Jean ‘through the door first’. I could get out afterwards. Now the thing is that we also, you will be glad to hear, had our own parties and our own friends who would come, and then we would play robbers, hide and seek and sardines in the house and you can guess, for those of you who have been to Abbotsford, how terrifying it was to play those games in the entrance hall and the other rooms specially when they were so badly lit, you see it was gaslight, as you know, in those days. Sir Walter, of course, had made his own gas from oil and he was terribly proud of it — it smelt and it went up and down and it was quite frightening. It was a dim religious light. We only put electricity into the house in 1962! You can picture the joy and the excitement of the electricity, specially when we had a party with all the workmen and our friends who had contributed to the electrifying of Abbotsford. The chandelier in the middle of the Chinese drawing room was lit up for the occasion and it was most exciting and the house was floodlit for a whole week. It really looked very dramatic, especially from the river. It looked like a fairy castle and how Sir Walter would have loved it. We had a great many visitors in those days, not as many as now of course, and the charge was only 6d each, perhaps just as well as they only had a limited view of the house. But I think that when my father and stepmother were away, they were often allowed a little more licence by way of perhaps a 6d or a shilling to the custodian.

I don't think that perhaps any of you have really seen the bedrooms, which is what Scott had made in his part of the house, they are reached by a spiral staircase and are very liveable, not enormous, that was where his children would sleep. Sir Walter, himself, had a little staircase reaching down from his dressing room to his study. He would come down early in the morning and write for about three or four hours before breakfast, and then he would join his family for breakfast. All he would have would be a small fire burning and then of course during those years when he had to work so hard to pay off the debt he would also work very late into the night. He was always accompanied by his beloved dogs, and to this day the tradition at Abbotsford continues with animals. We have dogs, we have chickens, peacocks, peahens and a peacock and we even have budgerigars. I think the star really of all our animals is Sir Wattie, which you may have heard about, who was Jean's horse, who went to the Olympics in Seoul and won two silver medals and he also won Badminton on two occasions. So that was a tremendous joy to us and he is still alive at 23, and well you will be glad to hear.

Now I think perhaps you would like to know a little bit about the garden, because the garden doesn't figure much in literature although I must say after a TV programme the other day, called the Great Garden Game, we seem to have had quite a few enquiries from visitors who want to come and see the garden as opposed to the house. So we have to be very tactful and try and say well you just see the whole thing, because if they go round the garden they tend to wander into the house as well, so we just make this the rule. Now the garden. Sir Walter had his lovely walled garden and he had central heating in the walls and he found that most convenient because he could see that his fruit wasn't in any way killed by late frosts. There is an aisle going up to the greenhouse which he called his 'orangerie' where he would love to sit of an evening, and listen to his piper, John of Skye, saying his evening prayers for his family and then playing the pipes. I think that's a lovely idea isn't it, a charming picture of him doing that? The topiary, which is in the courtyard, was planted much later, by Sir Walter's granddaughter and her husband, Charlotte and James Hope Scott, who also built the William Burn end of the house, which is the part we live in, which is also very comfortable and attractive. I should tell you about Tom Purdie. I'm sure that many of you know already that Tom Purdie came in front of Sir Walter in the Sheriff Court in Selkirk, for poaching. Scott thought to himself, now this is a very good poacher he'll make an excellent gamekeeper and he took him into his employment and they were great lifelong friends. He always said about Tom that he could trust him with a measure of gold but not with a measure of whisky. Tom and he would go out planting trees, which was Scott's great hobby and he rarely went out of the house without a few acorns in his pocket. There was a window in the small dining room, which earlier was his first study, and he had it specially made at one side so that he could look out into the courtyard and call to Tom "now's the time to go out and plant trees". We have the joy today of enjoying those trees, especially – now I must also tell you, as I'm sure you probably know, many of his plantations were planted in the form of the battlefield at the Battle of Waterloo with the troop dispositions. Sadly, quite a lot of the trees had to be cut down during the last war, but some of them are still there which is most gratifying.

So then I go on through my **very long** life, to the great highlight in 1932 that was the centenary of Sir Walter's death, and I was quite young at the time and luckily John Buchan made the speech, but I had to unveil the bust of Scott in Galashiels and I remember very well wearing a black and white shepherd plaid cloak and skirt, very large, because my stepmother's idea was that we should have all our clothes much bigger than we needed because we would grow into them. Then I come to the bi-centenary, which many of you will remember, it was a wonderful year. To start with the British Tourist Authority and the Scottish Tourist Board very kindly organised for me to go to America and I went on a three week tour starting in New York and on to Boston, Chicago, Washington and down to Dallas. I remember in Dallas going into the TV studio very early in the morning, I think it was 7am, and the door opened and in walked a nun, I nearly fell over. I thought "my goodness what's a nun doing here at 7 o'clock in the morning in a TV studio?". But she was a

lady who had a school and she was talking about education and so on. Then I went across to Los Angeles and San Francisco and up back across Canada. It was simply wonderful, and nearly killed me but I loved it, and the kindness I received was overwhelming. Then the 15th August was **the** birthday, the day of our beloved Sir Walter, it was a marvellous day at the time. To start with there had been two excellent exhibitions in Edinburgh, one in Parliament House, which was opened by HRH the Duchess of Gloucester, Princess Alice, Jean's Princess Alice, and the other was in the Waverley Market. Then on the day itself it was really a very exciting time, because we had to start with the mail which went, with the first day covers with Sir Walter's stamp, from Abbotsford in the mail coach, with myself and the postmaster from Galashiels, Mr Barker, and his little West Highland Terrier. I had to wear the shepherd plaid cloak, I don't seem to get away from it, and I also wore that a lot of times in America. We went from Abbotsford to Melrose and it was absolutely unforgettable. Everyone was terribly thrilled and Melrose rose to the occasion.

There was a great welcome, so that was very exciting. Then that night there were beacons throughout the Borders and the house was floodlit again, so it was a memorable event. It was a long time ago now. We had after that a number of fêtes and parties and various entertainment, in the grounds. I remember one we had for the Red Cross down by the river, and a lot of people came and it was a very successful day.

Then there are highlights like, for instance, the lovely visit of the Sir Walter Scott Club. On two occasions, I think I'm right in saying, when we were entertained by the Gilmours, who you remember were so charming and so delightful. And then that marvellous evening when Tom Fleming came and recited. You could have heard a pin drop as he narrated *Wandering Willie's Tale*, that was absolutely fabulous.

We have a lot of very interesting people who come to Abbotsford. For instance we had, (I wasn't there, believe it or not,) Queen Victoria and, bless her heart, she greatly enjoyed taking tea with the family and having Selkirk bannock. She loved that, thought that was absolutely wonderful. Then in 1923 King George V and Queen Mary came, but I was banished anyway then, and they came with the Duke and Duchess of York, who later of course became King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. We also had their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester. Then a very great highlight in 1988 – a visit from her Majesty The Queen and HRH the Duke of Edinburgh. It was a private visit but it was absolutely wonderful. They were only there 20 minutes but it went off very well and they were perfectly charming. I'm sure Jean would agree with me. Then we have other visitors who come. Some of the most important people come very simply and without any announcement and Jean and I love seeing them and they are very, very welcome. To mention but a few, we had Joan Sutherland, she came without saying she was coming and we suddenly heard that she was in the library and we rushed up and talked to her. Also Paul Eddington and Harry Secombe, he was doing *Highway* and that was great fun, simply charming. Who else did we have? – Oh yes, Maggie Smith and her husband, that was delightful too, they took tea with us, it was a garden open day. We love all our visitors, we're very lucky to have them. After I'd been to America, I think instead of 40,000 which had been coming each year for some years we seem to have gone up to about 60,000, which is where we've more or less stayed now. But they all appreciate the things that they see, practically all of them I'm sure, and I can't help thinking how much Sir Walter would have been so touched and delighted to find how interested they are in the objects that he so lovingly collected. Now there are at the moment about forty descendants, direct descendants, of Sir Walter's, including ourselves and my cousins, my father was one of eight, and the thing is that by the end of each summer we have far more than that and we've probably got another 40 kinsmen! The Americans come in, not only the Americans, but mostly, and sometimes they'll say that they think they're descended from Scott, or they've got some relationship with Scott and so on and we have to be very, very tactful and we don't want to disillusion them because they've perhaps believed this all

their lives, and I mean, it's a long time, you know. So we're very tactful and just say how lovely it is to have another kinsman. But there are one or two remarks that I thought would amuse you; somebody came in one day and thought it was Robert Burn's house and he said "do you know it's a very odd thing, but I always thought that Robert Burns lived in a little house", do you see it wasn't quite what he'd thought. Then we have people who ask if Sir Walter Raleigh lived here, and they of course look for his cloak, so we have to very tactfully disillusion them. Then, what else do we have Jean? Yes, Scott of the Antarctic. Absolutely, that's another really good one. Now I can't think whether there's any more, but of course we have letters from people, saying, you know, "we're related" and "would you send us a family tree" and so on. But they are all individual and all very welcome. We are so lucky Ladies and Gentlemen, Sir Walter was so blessed in the people who worked for him. They became such friends of his and we, Jean and I, have been more than blessed by the same thing, the same relationship and the most wonderful people who work for us over the years, and we are really just like one big family.

Sir Walter had four lives simultaneously, he was a writer, he was a lawyer, he was a family man and he was a Clerk of Works to his own house. Jean and I have been privileged to live in that house with all its individual style and its quirkiness, and it's been a tremendous experience, and I think we've shared it, I hope, with a lot of people too. I feel Mr Chairman that I cannot go on any longer, because I'm sure on a night like this that you're all longing to get home and be sure it's not snowing now. But I have a very, very happy duty to perform now, Ladies and Gentlemen, I do want to thank you and above all, members of the Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club, for all the help and all the tremendous devotion that you have shown and your great kindness and those of your guests to the memory of Sir Walter. It's been most moving and I do thank you with all my heart. Ladies and Gentlemen, I have very, very, great pleasure in asking you to be upstanding and drink to the memory of Sir Walter Scott.

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

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