The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club

Prof. Peter Garside

116th Annual Dinner: *Thursday 7th May 2026 in the New Club, Edinburgh*

Madam Chair, Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, this tribute to Sir Walter comes after some twenty years of active membership of the Club, first as Member, then as Secretary, followed by a spell as Chairperson. All of which has been exhilarating and has led me conclude that the wide-reaching engagements of the Club place it on a par in promoting knowledge of Sir Walter with those activities participated in through my parallel existence as an academic and literary editor. In all these spheres however, I must confess to having had a sneaking desire to one day hold one of those roles operating on a ceremonial rather than functional level, a few moments of supposed glory rather than hours of often solitary graft. 'Well, here it is at last—the distinguished thing'.[1] Mind you it has involved a long wait. When first approached as to taking on the position, I remember asking Lee Simpson if this would involve me becoming the oldest ever President of the Club. True to form within the hour Lee came back with a comprehensive list of ex-Presidents, with dates of tenure and ages while holding the position. And as partly anticipated, yes, it turned out that I would be so, narrowly beating by a few months Fraser Elgin, President in 2000. Being on the cusp of 84 then exceeds—to give one example—Harold Macmillan, who in his address of 1973 described himself as being at an 'advanced age' having 'just completed my eighteenth year'—he means that he's 79. My own recollections of Macmillan are indeed of a revered elderly figure, but those were the days when public figures cultivated the gravitas that age brought with it. All this puts into a somewhat sad perspective the case of Sir Walter himself, whose own life ended in his early sixties, and whose extensive literary output was compacted in a space of only three decades. If sometimes we are in danger of being over-dazzled by the image of towering literary genius, it is perhaps worth reflecting for a moment on the more human side of the story. Well do I remember Dame Jean Maxwell-Scott at Abbotsford referring to the original occupant of the house as 'that poor man'—a salutary reminder that the family's view of their ancestor might have varied in some respects from that of the public at large.

While full participation in the Club and its events became possible when finally moving to Edinburgh in 2005, there were several earlier points of intersection between us. One of these came when, still working at Cardiff University, I was asked to write an Introduction to a selection of past Presidential addresses in a small volume to mark the centenary of the Club in 1994. The invitation came through Professor Ian Campbell, but behind that I sensed the presence of David Daiches, who had examined my PhD at Cambridge, and Dr Archie Turnbull, President of the Club that year and Secretary of the Edinburgh University Press. The elegant cloth-bound volume that emerged, *Talking About Scott*, including addresses by John Buchan, C. S. Lewis, Magnus Magnusson and others, bears testimony to the distinctive production values cultivated by Archie.[2] It was Archie too who was a major force in getting the Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels off the ground, the first three volumes including my own edition of *The Black Dwarf* appearing in 1993. In all this was a moment of peculiar buoyancy, one that made writing a fitting Introduction all that much easier. Text in those days tended to be king in academic circles, with some of the fiercer of those labelling themselves as Critical Theorists going so far as proclaim the death of the author altogether; and in this case one was able to hold out the prospect of new editions of the Waverley novels shorn of the encrustations of the Victorian period. Yet even so I found it impossible to exclude the presence of Sir Walter himself. One passage from a Journal entry of December 1825 struck me as especially apposite:

What a life mine has been. Half educated, almost wholly neglected or left to myself …. getting forward and held a bold and clever fellow … Broken hearted for two years—My heart handsomely pieced again … Once at the verge of ruin yet opend new sources of wealth almost overflowing—now taken in my pitch of pride and nearly wingd … And what is the be the end of it?[3]

Among other things, the passage is recognisable as representing one of those 'what if' moments, looking back at corners turned in the past while speculating hard possibilities in the future. What if (say) Scott had been successful in his courtship of Williamina Belsches? Alternatively, looking to the future, what if the present financial crisis blows over? or if it proves fatal leading to the loss of Abbotsford? The same sense of uncertainty in human affairs serves as a recurrent theme in the novels, as protagonists are immersed in the dynamic currents of their era. Scott's unmistakable voice as found here also not only permeates writing such as the Letters and Journal but can be sensed throughout his imaginative works, providing an anchor for the reader.

It is also a voice which can be applied to our own circumstances. To apply the 'what if' test to my own case, nothing in my earlier years would point towards a conclusion such as the present. As a schoolboy in Buxton, Derbyshire, at the heart of England, I vaguely remember one my grandfathers having a set of the Waverley Novels but never felt any inclination to look beyond the covers. My eventual University destination—Cambridge in the early 1960s—was hardly more propitious for arousing any budding interest in Scott. Some elder members of Senior Common rooms there still no doubt recalled E. M. Forster's mocking account of the plot of *The Antiquary* in the lecture-halls.[4] More immediately we faced the stern if scruffy figure of F. R. Leavis, with moral intensity in literature and criticism now being paramount. In his *The Great Tradition* (1948) Leavis had reduced Scott's status to a passing footnote: 'He was a great and very intelligent man; but, not having the creative writer's interest in literature, he made no serious attempt to work out his own form and break away from the bad tradition of the eighteenth-century romance.'[5] Thus the symbiotic relationship between the man and the artist was shattered at a stroke. By the time of my finals in 1963 I hadn't read a word of Scott, nor for that matter Jane Austen—and look where she stands now!

Only when spending a year at Harvard University as a postgraduate student, during 1963-64, did I first start reading Scott. Two influences, in what seemed a more open intellectual environment, stand out here. The first was a module on British Historical Writing given by a young Professor called Edgar Rosenberg,[6] in which it became clear that Scott stood as an important fulcrum between an older type of historiography charting the doings of a narrow body of public figures and a more vital form of historical narrative reflecting a fuller span of society and giving an impression of what it might have been like living in the times depicted. The other influence came through the purchase of an American paperback translation of George Lukács' *The Historical Novel*,[7] the work of a Hungarian Marxist which had been available in Russian since the 1930s but was virtually unknown in Anglo-American circles. Lukacs placed the Waverley novels at the head of a whole European school of advanced social-historical fiction. Thus, in a somewhat roundabout way, it was European-wide perspective that ultimately led back to Scott's more immediate milieu in Scotland. A route that admittedly involved further work at Cambridge in pursuit of a doctorate. My own thesis when completed in 1970, somewhat portentously titled 'Intellectual Origins of Scott's View of History in the Waverley Novels', set out to link Scott with both the 'philosophical historians' of the Enlightenment and literary antiquaries in Scotland at the same period.

Returning to the vantage point of 1994, it is amazing to see how many advances there have since been. Amongst notable contributions can be counted the completion of EEWN, and the ongoing Edinburgh Edition of the Poetry under Alison Lumsden—one of several key practitioners in this room today. Along with allied activities, this has allowed Scott to be placed in a much firmer cultural framework, at the centre of a booming publishing industry in Edinburgh at this period for example, or as the leading protagonist in 'the Scotch novel' viewed as broader phenomenon. Gone for the most part are the tired dualities of earlier criticism: Scott as an arch-Unionist (good or bad according to opinion); or as a proto-nationalist (mostly good to those proposing it). In several ways too Scott and the world he inhabited have become more physically present to us now. Here one might point to the sterling restoration work done at Abbotsford; as well, only recently, Lee Simpson's online record of Edinburgh locations associated with Scott.[8]

If there is one large remaining area of perplexity in all this then it exists in the field of biography. And at this juncture the figure of John Gibson Lockhart naturally looms large. While Lockhart's *Life of Scott* by the end of the nineteenth century had gained the reputation of a classic literary biography, second only to Boswell's Johnson, modern critics have tended to pick fault with it, stretching from aberrations in its handling of

materials to cases of outright mendacity in storytelling. It is probably no great secret by now that for the past five or so years I've been at work on a new edition of Lockhart's *Life*, one which was lodged in the hands of Edinburgh University Press only last week, and if you'll bear with me I'd like to devote the remaining part of this address to suggesting why some revaluation might be in order.

Whereas past critics have tended to assume a coherent entity in the *Life of Scott* as a work, in fact it is hard to think of a biography that has undergone so many transformations. The initial suggestion that Lockhart should write one originates from Scott himself, whose will states:

I do request and intreat my affectionate son in law the said John Gibson Lockhart, who has during all connections with me shown me the duty and kindness of a son, to draw up such a sketch, using in that matter such letters correspondence and diaries as shall be found in my repositories.[9]

Terms with the publisher Robert Cadell for a work of five or six volumes were discussed during a meeting in the immediate wake of Scott's death on 21 September 1832, this forming part of a larger arrangement whereby Cadell would provide a loan to cover Scott's remaining debts.[10] Family and close friends clearly welcomed Lockhart's assumption of the role of official biographer. As early as 3 October Walter junior, Scott's elder son, was sending a batch of materials found at Abbotsford, including the Ashestiel 'Memoirs' that hitherto have served as the opening section in all published editions of the *Life*.[11] All this providing grist to the mill for Lockhart's original resolve to allow Scott as much as possible to speak in his own voice, with himself primarily the 'compiler' or 'editor' of the work. Back in their home in London Lockhart and his wife Sophia—Scott' elder daughter—set about conducting a larger trawl of material from various sources, with particular attention given to Scott's dispersed original letters and to anecdotal information pertaining to his formative years. The result in the family home at 24 Sussex Place, where Sophia supervised a team copying material, must have been at times chaotic. Lockhart for his part was under pressure from several quarters, not least from Cadell whose own agenda differed considerably.[12] Eventually Lockhart gave up a resolve not to commence publication until he had completed the whole, and monthly publication began in March 1837, evenly at first but with a fracturing in the sequence with the fifth volume. The reason for this lay in the tragic death of Sophia in May 1837. That Lockhart did return to work bears witness to a capacity for endurance bordering on the self-sacrificial, the final seventh volume swelling beyond the length of the others, through its inclusion of large extracts from the Journal.

In all the completed first edition of *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart* covers 2910 pages, comprising at a rough estimate some 875,000 words. Of this only about a third consists of Lockhart's own narrative and recollections, the bulk of the remainder being made up of separately foregrounded materials, such as the Letters and Journal, Scott's Diary of his 1814 Lighthouse Voyage, and the memoirs of others. If this now seems to represent an element of overloading, it is worth bearing in mind that much of this material was entirely fresh for contemporary readers, and in danger of being lost if not so recorded.[13] The second edition of the *Memoirs* in ten volumes followed in 1839 in more orderly fashion; and in the 1840s Cadell tested a further area of the market with a double-columned one volume edition. The final versions of the full *Memoirs* occur with A.W. Pollard's five-volume set for Macmillan in 1900, and the more splendid 10-volume Edinburgh edition of 1902-03, the latter a reflection of a high point in Scott's reputation. In general scholars have tended to cite this 'larger' version of the *Life*, though there is little agreement as to which individual edition might claim priority.

A parallel line of publication is found in the case of the abridged version of the *Life* first published under the title of *Narrative of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.* late in 1848. As with the previous version, this was initiated through financial dealings with Robert Cadell, as part of a larger settlement whereby Cadell would clear debts relating to the Abbotsford estate in return for full ownership of the Scott copyrights. In all, this abridgement—including the Ashestiel 'Memoirs'—comprises some 285,000 words, making it approximately one-third of the larger versions of the *Life*. Amongst omissions, the curtailment of previously foregrounded letters, either by integrating them into the main narrative or by omitting them entirely, is one outstanding feature. Another notable element is the omission of the 1814 Lighthouse Tour Diary in its entirety. The two-volume structure of the work also works to Lockhart's advantage, the first volume mainly

comprising the memorials of others, while the second is vivified by his own personal recollections. Lockhart also takes advantage of the 1848 vantage point to take the family record up to his own son Walter's accession to Abbotsford, and the memorialisation of Scott so far as the Monument just over the road from us, inaugurated as recently as 1846. A second edition of the abridged version was published in 1853 in one volume form; then again, using the same plates, as the Centenary edition in 1871. In turn the abridgement first entered the Everyman's Library in 1906, subsequently appearing in 1957 with a short Introduction by W. M. Parker, the last recorded printing of which was in 1969. It is this version one suspects that has been most used by general readers; and it is noticeable how the trajectories of almost all modern biographies of Scott follow the pattern set by the Lockhart abridgement.

Which version then might realistically represent the best option for a new, fully annotated edition? In the case of the larger *Memoirs* a substantial part of its materials, albeit new to Lockhart's original readers, have since appeared in more accurate forms, as in the Grierson *Letters*, W. E. K. Anderson's *Journal*, and David Hewitt's edition of the Ashestiel 'Memoirs'. Any attempt to handle this swathe of material would involve large procedural issues. Should one attempt to correct such within the text, for instance? or instead use the annotation, which would inevitably lead to an endless chain of 'Lockhart is mistaken' kind of entries? In comparison the abridged version of 1848, our eventual choice, is relatively devoid of such encumbrances. In working on this text, I have been increasingly impressed with the vigour of its narrative, as well as the freshness and even delicacy of Lockhart's freed-up personal recollections, as when a resident at Chiefswood Cottage on the Abbotsford estate with Sophia. Lockhart was also present at Abbotsford throughout the months leading up to Scott's death, and the sections dealing with Scott's mounting fragilities—his inability to recognise once familiar modern poetry, despair at not being able to resume with the pen in his study, and recourse to spiritual texts deep in his memory—are profoundly moving and often feel remarkably genuine. On the other hand, one might argue, greater exposure is granted to those more suspect narrative moments—the ever-moving hand composing *Waverley*, nighttime ride to Polton, or Scott's alleged 'last words'—but, as I have argued elsewhere,[14] these often carry a special emblematic significance. For those concerned with more particular forms of accuracy, the new edition will provide a full range of Explanatory and Textual Notes, the latter also offering a record of significant omissions from the larger versions of the *Life*, as well as tracking new text as provided by the 1848 edition. In this regard, it is anticipated that the edition will serve an encyclopaedic purpose. But most of all the aim is to capture afresh the dynamic connection between author and subject, teller and tale, which shapes this unique literary biography.

And so, it is to the memory of Walter Scott, especially as revealed through the window provided by 'his son-in-law, biographer, and friend'[15] Lockhart, that I ask you now to raise your glasses: Sir Walter Scott.

[1] Reported words of Henry James, on approaching death.
[2] *Talking About Scott*, ed. by Ian Campbell and Peter Garside (Edinburgh, 1994).
[3] *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. by W. E. K. Anderson (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1998), p. 51 (entry for 18 December 1825).
[4] See *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Edward Arnold, 1927), Chapter 2.
[5] F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948), p. 14.
[6] (1925-2015), American scholar who ended his career as Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Cornell University. Born of Jewish parents, he had fled Nazi Germany, arriving at New York City in 1940 without speaking English.
[7] Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. from the German by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Boston: Beacon Paperback, 1963).
[8] Available at https://www.walterscottclub.com/walkingtour/locations.
[9] Draft will, Lloyds Banking Group plc Archives: Acc. 2006/029. The final will has not been located.
[10] As recorded in Cadell's Diary entry for 27 September, NLS MS 21043, fols 126v-127r.
[11] NLS MS 1554, fols 55-56. The 'Memoirs' is omitted in the forthcoming edition on the grounds of it having since become available superior forms, notably in David Hewitt (ed.), *Scott on Himself* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1981).
[12] A fuller account of Cadell's influence, both in terms of the production and contents of the biography, can be found in my article, 'Lockhart's Life of Scott: A Physical Journey', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 51: 2 (2025), 161-70.
[13] It is to credit to Lockhart's maintenance of the materials that so many of them are now intact and publicly available, a large majority in the National Library of Scotland.
[14] See, for example, my article 'Scott's Last Words', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 47: 2 (2021), 25-40.
[15] Words inscribed on Lockart's tomb at Dryburgh Abbey.