

# The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club

## Sir Walter Scott and James Hogg: A City and Country Friendship

Dr. Gillian Hughes.

Sir Walter Scott and James Hogg were friends of more than thirty years' standing at the time of Scott's death in September 1832. Despite the difference in their social position and literary reputation, some jealousies on Hogg's side and some condescension on the part of Scott, it was a relationship that persisted, both in Edinburgh and in the Scottish Borders where it had been formed and where its roots were nourished. 'What are kings or emperors' declared Hogg, 'compared with Sir Walter Scott? Dust and Sand!' His love for and dependence upon Scott was often expressed as a family relationship: Scott gave him 'such advices and reflections as a father would send' and when Hogg's young friend Lockhart married Scott's daughter Hogg then 'regarded him as belonging to the same family with me, I a step-son, and he a legitimate younger brother'. In fact, Hogg was almost certainly the elder of the two, but Scott occupied a position of unshakeable seniority that derived from the beginning of their friendship when Scott was collecting material for *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*.

Originally this was more a matter of social position than literary reputation. In 1802 the narrative poems and Waverley Novels were non-existent, and Scott's adjutor John Leyden had published more extensively than Scott himself had done. To the inhabitants of Ettrick Forest Scott was primarily 'the Shirra', a local dignitary who also happened to have antiquarian proclivities that some of them were able and willing to gratify. The available evidence suggests that Hogg moved into Scott's orbit only gradually, through William Laidlaw of Blackhouse farm and Andrew Mercer, both of whom were seeking out materials for the *Minstrelsy*. Hogg's letter to Laidlaw of 20 July 1801 shows Hogg responding to enquiries about the ballads 'The Sang of the Outlaw Murray' and 'The Dowie Denes of Yarrow' at a time when he was clearly unacquainted with Scott personally (*Letters*, I, 11-13). By 30 June [1802] Hogg was able to refer to Scott as 'a person I had seen and conversed with' (*Letters*, I, 15), and it seems likely that this initial meeting may have taken place in Edinburgh. Certainly Hogg visited Scott at Castle Street that July on his way to the Highlands, when he obtained a number of introductions that would be useful to him on his way. Almost thirty years later Hogg wrote an account of his supposed first meeting with Scott for the *Edinburgh Literary Journal* that was invested with a great deal more significance, a ballad-hunting Scott seeking out Hogg on his own ground at Ettrickhouse, a dramatic tour de force in which Scott was famously reproved by Hogg's mother for his transmission of the oral Border ballads into print:

'[...] ye hae spoilt them a'thegither. They war made for singing, an' no for reading; and they're nouter right spelled nor right setten down.' (*Altrive Tales*, p. 61)

This is a splendid piece of Romantic myth-making, which embodies an important truth, that the relationship of Scott and Hogg was generally at its closest in the Borders rather than in Edinburgh. Indeed, at one stage it seems that Scott envisaged Hogg as someone rather like Tom Purdie or William Laidlaw, key figures in Scott's life as a country gentleman. As Richard Jackson has demonstrated, Scott had received a previous intimation of the sale by auction of the Yarrow estate of Broadmeadows in the spring of 1803: had he been the purchaser Scott would have employed Hogg as his farm manager. In the event John Boyd was the successful bidder, but Scott then made strenuous efforts to find employment for Hogg elsewhere:

Sir Walter was so vexed on my account [...] that he actually engaged me to Lord Porchester as his chief shepherd to have a riding horse, house and small farm free of rent, and £20 over and above, but with this strict proviso that "I was to put my poetical talent under lock and key for ever" (*Anecdotes*, p. 8)

In view of Hogg's later achievements the proviso is a startling one, but it should be remembered that if Scott at the time was primarily a ballad collector and the Shirra, Hogg was primarily a source of traditional ballads, a shepherd with a purely local reputation as an amateur song-writer.

Scott was undoubtedly trying to do him a kindness, even though Hogg later reproached him in *The Queen's Wake* with the lines, 'But sure, a bard might well have known! Another's feelings by his own!'. In fact (as he was to do later also in supporting Hogg's request to the Duke of Buccleuch for the lease of the large farm of Mount Benger against his own better judgment) Scott was ultimately content to help Hogg in the way that Hogg wanted him to do, by supporting Hogg's projected poetry collection, *The Mountain Bard* (1807). Scott suggested Hogg as a publisher in Archibald Constable, pushed Hogg's subjects, found Hogg a publisher in Archibald Constable, pushed Hogg's subscription list by enlisting his own friends, and even repeated one of the component ballads to Caroline, Princess of Wales when he visited her in London in 1806. The volume was appropriately dedicated to him. In doing this Scott kept Hogg's poetic ambitions alive during a very difficult period of his life, when he was working in Dumfriesshire between 1805 and 1809 as shepherd to a master 'void of any taste as to literary things', with no time for his favourite studies, and at a further remove from Edinburgh's print culture (*Letters*, I, 50). Hogg clearly clung to Scott as a lifeline. 'A constant correspondence between us will be necessary', he wrote in May [1806], 'I am half mad because I cannot have a single conversation with you about things' (*Letters*, I, 65). Hogg's financial incompetence, however, meant that he threw away his subsequent literary profits in unsuccessful farming in Dumfriesshire. From a worldly point of view Hogg was no better off by 1810 than he had been in 1803, and as he was unable to earn his bread as a shepherd he moved to Edinburgh to attempt a second career in literature. Meantime Scott had advanced substantially on all fronts: he had gained an additional legal appointment as Principal Clerk to the Court of Session, and his narrative poems of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* and *Marmion* were unprecedented best-sellers.

With his usual generosity Scott continued to assist Hogg in Edinburgh. He became the first subscriber to Hogg's weekly periodical *The Spy* and persuaded a number of his friends to subscribe also (*Letters*, I, 105, 107). He prudently advised Hogg to obtain a settlement with his creditors in Dumfriesshire, so that Hogg's future earnings would not be at risk, and promoted his part-time employment as a valuer of pasture land. His judgment of Hogg's literary potential was somewhat cooler by this time, however. In sending a copy of Hogg's song-collection *The Forest Minstrel* to Lady Dalkeith, to whom the work was dedicated, he expressed his fear that 'your Ladyship will find but little amusement in it for the poor fellow has just talent sufficient to spoil him for his own trade without having enough to support him by literature'. If this is a harsh assessment of the powers of the future author of *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* it is a not unreasonable view of the financially hopeless would-be Edinburgh literary man of 1810. With a rare failure of self-confidence Hogg himself wrote despondently to Scott on 8 September, 'I have sometimes been eiry for losing your countenance [...] when a man loses conceit [sic] of himself he thinks and not without foundation that every body does the [same]' (*Letters*, I, 106). Residence in Edinburgh must also have emphasised to Hogg that while Scott was his most important and influential friend and patron, he was only one among a multitude of Scott's humbler acquaintances there.

Hogg's thumbnail sketches of Scott in Edinburgh tend to emphasise his business as a lawyer or his distance from the observer. Hogg relates how he used to breakfast with Scott in Castle Street to 'enjoy an hour's conversation with him before he went to the court of Session' or how Scott stopped work to greet him in the Parliament House (*Anecdotes*, pp. 12, 66). In *The Three Perils of Woman* (1823) the elderly store-farmer Daniel Bell says Scott may be seen 'every day from the gallery of the Parliament-House' in 'the round pew close in before the lords', and his daughter Gatty sees Scott in a box at the Theatre Royal, noting, 'He did not look often at the players, but when he did he made his lips thin, and looked out at the tail of his eye, as if he deemed it all a joke'. It was during the time of Hogg's residence in Edinburgh that the only serious quarrel between Scott and himself arose, in the autumn of 1814, when Scott apparently declined to contribute to Hogg's projected poetical repository. Mutual alienation is signified by Scott's ubiquity and his physical remoteness. 'I could not even endure to see him at a distance', Hogg wrote

(*Altrive Tales*, p. 40). The breach was mended early the following year, when Hogg was touched to learn that during his recent dangerous illness Scott had enquired after him daily and even offered to pay for medical attendance. In general, though, the Scott of Edinburgh, a public man with many claims upon his attention and a firm standing among the capital's legal and cultural elite, was remote from the Hogg of Edinburgh, a would-be literary man and only one of Scott's many literary protégé.

The friendship was considerably strengthened when Hogg achieved his breakthrough success as a poet with the publication of *The Queen's Wake* at the start of 1813. A renewal of self-confidence obviously made him less anxious as to how he was viewed by others. For his part, Scott was clearly impressed by the poem, responding to Byron's praise of it, for example, by pronouncing Hogg 'a wonderful creature for his opportunities' (Scott, *Letters*, III, 373). Hogg's affairs took another marked upturn in February 1815 when the Duke of Buccleuch offered him the small farm of Eltrive Moss in Yarrow for life at a nominal rent, effectively becoming Hogg's patron and folding him into a network that already included Scott himself. The battle of Waterloo had ended twenty years of war with France that June. In celebration, Scott wrote a poem *On the Field of Waterloo*, Hogg composed another as 'a small tribute to our heroes' (*Letters*, I, 256), and local patriotism in Selkirkshire was to take the form of an inter-parish football match under the Buccleuch auspices. Hogg's poem marking the occasion, *To the ancient Banner of Buccleuch* and Scott's, *The Lifting of the Banner*, were subsequently published together as *The Ettrick Garland*, and the event was noticed in the London as well as the Edinburgh press. At a partial remove from the print culture of Edinburgh, Hogg could forget his anxieties about being undervalued by Scott and enjoy literary collaboration within a quasi-feudal structure.

As long ago as 1805 Hogg had sought to appeal to Scott's feudal proclivities by reminding him of a long-distant bond between their Border ancestors, that his own Hogg forebears 'farmed the lands of Fauldshope &c under the Scotts of Harden or Oakwood' (*Letters*, I, 48). Now that bond seemed to have been recreated and was duly alluded to whenever Hogg sought the exertion of Scott's influence, though often in an exaggerated, comic form designed to deflect any impatience Scott might have felt with fresh demands. Scott was greatly amused in the summer of 1821, for instance, that Hogg had declined an invitation to accompany him to the coronation of George IV on the grounds that he had to purchase farm stock at St Boswells Fair, and in asking for his advice that autumn with regard to a serious quarrel with the publisher William Blackwood Hogg reminded him of it:

"Like every other vassal whose situation with his chief is perfectly understood though never once mentioned I always sit wisely still unless either called out by you to some great weapon shaw or when I find marauders and freebooters encroaching on my own privileges. In this last case I am never behind viz. in asking indemnities although in the former one (as in the late coronation Bellandine) I sometimes show a little obstinacy to budge. I am fairly in Jamie Telfer's situation and therefore I come lang eight mile barefoot to Abbot's Ha' in hopes to have a rise in my favour." (*Letters*, II, 115)

Hogg was genuinely angry with Blackwood, but could not resist giving his letter a comic turn, inviting Scott to choose among alternative retaliations against the offending publisher—'Shall I answer him in print? pursue him at law to which it will soon come if I answer him? or knock out his brains?' (p. 116). Scott seriously advised Hogg to ignore the offence, since public opinion would be on Hogg's side after *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* had attacked one of its own contributors. However, he also responded less gravely, 'As to knocking out of brains that is talking no how—if you could knock any brains into a bookseller you should have my consent' (Scott, *Letters*, XII, 446).

This quasi-feudal network is most clearly embodied in the verse dedication to the eldest daughter of the Duke of Buccleuch of Hogg's novel *The Brownie of Bodsbeck* (1818), diplomatically described by Scott to the Duke himself as 'the best of the volume' (Scott, *Letters*, V, 156). 'To the Right Honourable Lady Anne Scott, of Buccleuch' reminds the Episcopalian descendant of the Duke of Monmouth, that in the

cause of political and religious liberty 'Thy fathers bled as well as mine'. Hogg's poem places the following tale of past political and religious dissensions in the context of a modern harmony centred on Bowhill, where the Lady Anne, in imitation of her dead mother, protects and cherishes the people of the Borders and the Ettrick Shepherd, acknowledging 'Bonds which the Heavens alone can rend, | With Chief, with Father, and with Friend' (*Brownie*, p. 178). Scott could not have failed to admire Hogg's poem, which embodies his own instinctive response to the sufferings of the poor in the post-Napoleonic period, that all could be well if landowners would take paternal care of the people depending upon them. It is difficult to judge how far Hogg's acquiescence in this view was simply strategic, an attempt to deflect criticism of the novel itself.

*The Brownie of Bodsbeck*, although drafted before the publication of Scott's *Old Mortality*, was in several ways a deliberate challenge to its depiction of the Covenanting struggle. Scott expressed his disapproval in writing to the Duke of Buccleuch that Hogg had 'slandered Claverhouse to please the Cameronians who never read novels & therefore will not be pleased' (Scott, *Letters*, V, 156). The novels of both writers concern themselves with wartime atrocities and the sufferings of a hapless civilian population under military rule (a pertinent theme in the years following Waterloo), yet class and upbringing dictated very different underlying allegiances. Scott's Burley is a man who is barely able to exert 'mastery over his heated and enthusiastic imagination', while his Claverhouse, though just as clearly responsible for atrocities as Burley, is a tragic figure, a Froissart knight adrift in a society that is no longer willing to disregard the 'sweeping from the face of the earth some few hundred of villain churles'. For Hogg, however, Claverhouse was the demonic persecutor of Covenanting legend, rider of an infernal steed and proof against lead. Scott's verdict was somewhat wide of the mark, however: Hogg was not so much choosing to defer to the Cameronians as expressing an inherited view of the Covenanters. As he told Scott, 'It is the picture I hae been bred up in the belief o' sin' ever I was born and I had it frae them whom I was most bound to honour and believe' (*Anecdotes*, pp. 50-51).

The revival of interest in Hogg's work over the past forty years has allowed a clearer view of the relationship between Scott's written work and that of Hogg. It has always been obvious that *The Mountain Bard* follows the lead given by Scott in *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, that *The Brownie of Bodsbeck* covers some of the territory of Scott's *Old Mortality*, and that *The Three Perils of Man* provides in some senses a back-story to *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*. For much of the twentieth century at least Hogg's works were viewed as weak imitations of Scott's, but they are now increasingly read as responses to them, contributions to an ongoing dialogue.

Their intercourse was personal as well as literary, of course. Hogg visited at Abbotsford, where he was an attraction to other guests such as Mrs Hughes, the wife of a canon of St Paul's, one of the few contemporary readers to praise *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* and for whom Hogg wrote out an autograph poem there in August 1828. Scott, with a houseful of guests, was grateful that 'Hogg who roars or grunts in a good natured stile keeps Mother Hughes in play' (Scott, *Letters*, X, 482). Scott would also run across Hogg casually on his estate, when Hogg was staying with his early friend William Laidlaw. When Scott dropped in to breakfast at Kaeside one morning Hogg was vexed to notice that 'Mrs Laidlaw regarded him so much as a door neighbour that she did not even put new tea in the tea-pot' (*Anecdotes*, p. 29). Hogg's younger brother, David, was the Abbotsford shepherd and Scott recollected that on one occasion Hogg was summoned from his brother's cottage down to the house at Abbotsford to play at cards with the late Duchess of Buccleuch. At another time, David Hogg, a sedate character, was considerably startled at being effusively embraced by a visiting French count under the mistaken impression that he himself was the celebrated Ettrick Shepherd. Other visits were focused less absurdly on the connection between two well-known literary men, with Hogg applying to Scott for information on the historical background of various works he was preparing for publication, particularly his *Jacobite Relics of Scotland* (1819-21).

Hogg's lack of education was of course freely admitted by himself. What he did have was an unrivalled knowledge of local anecdote and legendary lore, and during at least one visit to Abbotsford at the beginning of January 1818 there were stimulating exchanges between Scott, Hogg, and Laidlaw, each of whom produced an article for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* at around that time on the subject of famous or notorious dogs. Scott's *Alarming Increase of Depravity Among Animals* had appeared in the October 1817 issue of *Blackwood's*. Hogg reported that they were as 'merry as larks' within doors during the bad weather of his visit (*Letters*, I, 324), and shortly afterwards Laidlaw's *Sagacity of a Shepherd's Dog* appeared in the magazine's January issue and Hogg's *Further Anecdotes of the Shepherd's Dog* in the one for March. Laidlaw's article compared a good magazine to 'a general conversation of well-informed people in a literary society, who have met together to give their opinions freely, for one another's mutual entertainment', and no doubt this also described the recent meeting at Abbotsford.

The benefits of the friendship for Hogg are immediately obvious, but those for Scott perhaps less so. Plainly Scott was touched by the honour in which he was sincerely held by Hogg. Writing to Lockhart about dining at Hogg's Yarrow home in the autumn of 1828, Scott, despite falling in with the pig puns favoured by the members of the *Blackwood's* set, was obviously moved by Hogg's attention to him: 'I must not omit to tell you that we roused the busy boar at Mount Benger on our return and partook of an excellent mess at his trough given with great kindly feeling' (Scott, *Letters*, X, 508). Witnessing Scott's withdrawal in an agony of pain from his own dining-table in Castle Street in March 1817 and hearing John Ballantyne express his fears after leaving the house that Scott's illness was serious Hogg had apparently threatened to knock Ballantyne down. The following morning he wrote to Scott, declaring 'I never knew ye were so dear to me till last night when I saw your seat taken by another—That circumstance engendered ideas that were unbreakable' (*Letters*, I, 292). The letter Hogg wrote to Scott on learning of his financial ruin early in 1826 is similarly concerned and affectionate:

Did it not look so like affectation sheer selfishness or apathy I could not mention the business of which the country's feelings of regret appear to be uniform namely your grievous [sic] involvement with the house of Constable and Co. It is a sharp blow upon a grey head but far from being a deadly one as I know that head will rise with increased dignity above the rubbish of a fallen house the walls of which were only paper [...] "An sae will we yet An' sae will we yet When we fell we ay got up again An' sae will we yet" (*Letters*, II, 239)

Hogg's distress at Scott's altered state on their final meeting by the Gordon Arms Inn in Yarrow in September 1830 is clear when he remarks 'I wanted to make him laugh but I could not even make him smile' (*Anecdotes*, p. 74)

A more important benefit to Scott from his friendship with Hogg was that, through Hogg's wealth of local traditions, Scott could at times reconnect with his very earliest childhood memories. Hogg gives one example, where Scott asked him if his tale of 'The Hunt of Eildon' was based on tradition, adding 'For whenever I read it I struck me that I had heard something of the same nature but how or where I could not recollect. I think it must have been when I was in the cradle' (*Anecdotes*, p. 23). There is a similar striving after a half-forgotten memory in an allusion in Scott's *Journal* entry for 10 February 1827 to the tradition upon which Hogg's ballad *The Pedlar* was founded:

I do not know why, but from my childhood I have seen something fearful or melancholy at least about a Mill. Whether I had been frightened at the machinery when very young, of which I think I have some shadowy recollection—whether I had heard the story of the Miller of Thirlstane and similar melancholinar tragedies, I cannot tell. But not even recollection of the Lass of Peatie's mill, or the Miller of Mansfield or 'he who dwelt on the river Dee' have ever got over my inclination to connect gloom with a Mill, especially when sun is setting.

Contact with Hogg could obviously sometimes take Scott back to a very early stage in his life indeed, and one that was of crucial importance to his own literary work. Scott's draft advertisement for the subscription edition of *The Queen's Wake* expresses his appreciation of Hogg rather neatly:

His efforts have been dedicated to the peculiar service of Caledonia. He has described her mountains and glens, embodied her legends, cherished and preserved her decaying traditions, celebrated her heroes, and animated her public spirit. To him we & our posterity will owe not only that much relative to Scotland has been preserved but that it has been rendered worthy of preservation and will pass down to future generations with an interest which the simple legends did not in themselves possess. (*Queen's Wake*, p. 397)

Local Border legend was an area where Scott and Hogg met on more equal terms. In revising for the eighth edition of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* a note concerning the wizard Michael Scott's magical retaliation against a local farmer and his wife, Scott stated that he had previously been 'censured for inaccuracy' and brought his version of the legend much more into line with Hogg's account (which related to one of his own ancestors, the witch of Fauldshop), published in notes to *The Mountain Bard* of 1807 and *The Queen's Wake* of 1813. The succession of notes by Scott and Hogg about the wizard of Aikwood and the local witch, when pulled together, provide another indication of the fascinating and continued conversation between the two writers about legendary lore that helped to maintain Scott's interest in and regard for Hogg.

It is unfortunate that our view of the friendship between Scott and Hogg has been so heavily coloured by Lockhart's magisterial biography of his father-in-law. Lockhart's own relationship with Hogg was considerably affected by Hogg's role as the 'boozing buffoon' of the '*Notes Ambrosianae*' series in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, and had ended furthermore in a quarrel over Hogg's publication of his *Anecdotes of Scott*. His biography, while terming Hogg 'perhaps, the most remarkable man that ever wore the maud of a shepherd', also declares indignantly that 'it had been better for his fame had his end been of earlier date, for he did not follow his best benefactor until he had insulted his dust'. Far from intending to insult Scott's dust Hogg had mourned most sincerely the loss of 'the best and most steady friend that I ever had in the world' (*Letters*, III, 92), and by comparison to Scott he had pronounced even kings and emperors to be but 'Dust and Sand'.

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