

The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club

Sir Henry Craik

9th Annual Dinner: *Friday 14th November 1902 in The North British Station Hotel*

The **Chairman**, who was cordially received, in proposing the toast of “The Memory of Sir Walter Scott,” said—Gentlemen, my first appeal is to your sympathy. When your Committee, otherwise so wise in their selection, descended from the distinguished men who have graced this chair to seek for an occupant in the dusty purlieus of bureaucracy, amidst the entanglements of red tape—(laughter)—I felt that the honour was too tempting to be refused, much as I felt my own powers were inferior to the task. I called before myself from that receptacle to which all our thoughts to-night are turned instances that might well have warned me from this dangerous attempt. I recalled the pathetic figure of Dominie Sampson when he attempted an oratory that was not his, how he “stopped, gasped, rolled horribly his eyes, and descended down the steps of the pulpit” over the heads of the good wives who made these their regular pew in church; I recalled—perhaps it is still more apposite—how Triptolemus Yellowlees, lecturing upon the theories of agriculture as it might be upon educational codes—(laughter)—was roughly called upon by the Udaller for a song; I recalled the fate still more dire which the false Herald, le Glorieux, met when he was called upon to decipher a heraldic scroll, the very terms of which he had not practised and was ignorant of. Gentlemen, all these dire examples might have deterred me, but your temptation was too tempting. I feel, however, when I touch this high theme, reminded of something in those prefaces which to some of us give a rarer relish to the feast of Scott’s novels. I touch this theme only as a Dryasdust, or, perhaps, if my daily avocations may give me more propinquity to his calling, as might our respectable friend Jedediah Cleishbotham, the dominie of Gandercleuch. I have not, however, the advantage that he had of solacing myself that all objections to his exposition of these novels were inspired only by the envy that dogs the heels of merit. I feel that I, like him, in the recesses of officialdom, may well be ignorant of the world “that now is and the generation of our day.”

But, gentlemen, I have a safe and sure foundation to trust to, whatever my defects may be. I know I can trust to a lavish enthusiasm on your part that will compensate for them. Be it mine only to draw a small cupful from that ever-flowing stream of enthusiastic praise that carries towards Scott and present it to your lips; may it not be muddled by any ill flavour from mistakes of mine, and if it is then I would ask you, drop that kindly epitaph over it which once more suggests our friend Jedediah Cleishbotham. Think of it only as “the dominie’s dribble o’ drink.”

Gentlemen, the theme we have to treat of to-night is said to be threadbare. Our praise is said to be overdone. We have heard both these statements advanced with an air of authority. The theme, forsooth, is threadbare. But are there no aspects of Scott’s genius, are there no facets in that gem, that will catch new light for us if we explore them and reveal new brilliancy to our eyes? Are there not chambers in that well-stored granary that we may still explore? But our critics tell us further that our praise is overdone. I profess myself to be, as I think I can count that you are, an enthusiastic devotee of Scott, in my admiration for whom I know no bounds. If that admiration is extravagant I am not ashamed of it. We may well catch our breath, and bate our voices, in fear lest by the tribute of ill-judging praise we may cast for a moment some dimness on his everlasting lustre. But it is our reverence, not the timidity of our admiration, that gives us pause. Scott has, indeed, commanded, for three generations, an ungrudging tribute of reverence, and that, perhaps, may make his praise in a certain sense hackneyed. But hackneyed if it be, what is the compelling reason why this tribute is given? It is because of this one supreme quality—that to his large humanity, that speaks to all time, he has joined that tender intimacy with each individual which, only in the rarest instances, even the most consummate genius can achieve. (Cheers.) These rare instances have something of the quality of the heavenly bodies. Do you remember the words put in the mouth of Richie Moniplies in *The Fortunes of Nigel*?

It’s hame, and it’s hame, and it’s hame we fain would be,
Though the cloud is in the lift, and the wind is on the lea;

For the sun through the mirk blinks blithe on mine e'e,
Says, "I'll shine on ye yet in your ain country!"

With that tender intimacy which makes the chiefest stroke of genius, the sun identifies itself for the moment with Richie Moniplies and owns the same country for its own.

It is interesting when turning the pages of him who caught no small spark of fire from off the altar of Scott's genius, Robert Louis Stevenson, to find that precisely the same thought occurred to him. "It is one of the chief features of the heavenly bodies," says Stevenson, "that they belong to everybody in particular." That note of personal intimacy combined with width of range is a quality, which only the most consummate genius can attain to. Scott speaks to all mankind. He speaks also to each man in his closet and to the recesses of his heart. (Cheers.)

Criticism to-night is not our task. We do not bring to the grave of Scott the paltry tribute of a critical estimate. We bring to him the humble offering of our praise; and I believe that one of the chief qualities that command this praise is just this universality and individuality in the genius of Scott.

It may seem to you a mere commonplace to say so. But this quality leads us on to one achievement of Scott's, a most notable one, which in my humble opinion has scarcely sufficiently been recognised. It is this quality that links him to the greatest figure in all the history of the human mind—the figure of Shakspeare. (Hear, hear.) Think what Shakspeare was to Scott. Scott was like his own Wilfrid Wycliffe, as you remember in *Rokeby*—

*Hour after hour he loved to pore
On Shakspeare's rich and varied lore.*

And it is somewhat strange, but yet interesting, to find that same familiar acquaintance with Shakspeare which belongs to the innocent and heroic Wilfrid is ascribed also as its one redeeming feature to the character of the villain Dalgarno in the "*Fortunes of Nigel*." It was a familiar intercourse between kindred spirits which did much for Scott, and, through Scott, did much for us.

Have we considered sufficiently what Scott really did for familiarising Shakspeare to us? Does it seem to you a light thing that he did so? Do not think that I am merely ascribing to him the paltry attribute of critical acumen, or merely vaunting for him some higher power of literary appreciation. No, the bond was something far nobler and deeper. Across two centuries of time the genius most akin to Shakspeare's stretched out his hand and feasted as none other had done before upon the richness spread upon Shakspeare's table. He lived as his familiar friends with Shakspeare's characters, he wove Shakspeare's language into his very being, and by the prerogative of genius he used that currency which came straight from the mint of the greatest coiner of language the world has ever seen. (Cheers.)

"Shakspeare," says Scott, in a letter to Lady Abercorn, "slept from the days of Charles I. until Garrick awaked him." Yes, gentlemen, but what a feeble awakening was that, in the purlieus of the eighteenth century theatres, amongst commentators, amongst annotators, amongst analysts, amongst grammarians—what a feeble awakening compared with that by which Scott made Shakspeare "familiar as a household word" to us.

Look at Scott's prose. Think how he introduces Shakspeare at every turn, almost in every chapter. Have you ever observed in reading the letters of Malachi Malagrowther, how, even there, on the most uninviting theme of the banking currency of Scotland, hardly a page occurs in which there are not at least one or two quotations from Shakspeare? Have you noticed how he weaves it into his poetry; how he makes it speak in his current conversation; how hardly a familiar letter is found in which Scott did not make use of that glorious currency? He did more than all the commentators, all the annotators, all the actors, and all the artists that spent their time and their labour to make Shakspeare a familiar word to us. He brought him to lighten up the obscure ways of human tragedy and comedy, to cast upon the dulness of life rays, as it were, of myriad sunbeams.

This leads us naturally to another attribute of Scott's. It was not from Shakspeare only that he sought inspiration, not Shakspeare only that he made familiar to us.

In another field he did a work which would have won an ample meed of fame for any lesser man. Gentlemen, we are met in a notable year. This is the centenary of the publication of *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. (Cheers.) Will those who know those wonderful Prolegomena decry the power of Scott to use racy, fluent, picturesque prose? But apart from that, think of what he did for these forgotten, nameless ballad-mongers. To use his own words, he found them "walking with free step and with unconstrained will upon the wilds of Parnassus," and he made them ours. We had other labourers in the field—the good work done by our friend Allan Ramsay, the episcopal labours of Percy, the captious, fractious accuracy of Ritson, who made an enemy of every fellow-labourer in the field except Scott, whose spirit was too ample for such feeble squabblings as pleased the soul of Ritson. All did their work. One tuned their wild notes to his milder lyre, another gathered their treasures, a third accurately measured their sources. But what did they all compared with the work of Scott? He caught the note that came resonant from out the past. He awaked the echoes of their romance; he made real the dreamland of their pathos and their passion. (Cheers.) He made them live and breathe for us. Had he no other record standing to his name than that of being an antiquarian, such as no antiquarian ever was before or since, Scott would still command our reverent, our humble, our ungrudging admiration. But even in this field he did more. He made our history a very proverb for its pathos and its dramatic interest, and it is my firm belief that he rescued a side of the national genius in Scotland that but for him might well have perished and been forgotten a century ago. (Cheers.)

I say, might have perished and been forgotten. Because, gentlemen, this is another centenary. In the year 1802 *The Edinburgh Review* appeared. As Scotsmen we gladly share the triumphs of that notable periodical. We join in the jubilations with which this centenary has been received. We greet it on the completion of what is a long and on the whole a creditable career. May we also, gentlemen, congratulate it that in the year 1902 it does not repeat precisely the echoes of its earlier days—(hear, hear)—that it does not find in the adulation of its country's foes its favourite theme, and that it has forgotten something that made its pages irksome to Scott, when they were dominated largely by the ebullitions of that turbulent lawyer who flitted for a time like a stormy-petrel on the waves of politics, rested for a short space in the ease and dignity of the woolsack, and then subsided in the soporific languor of the benches of the House of Lords, to be fitfully rejuvenescent with the occasional outbursts of a turbulent and angry temper. (Hear, hear.)

But, gentlemen, far be it from me to make this combination of centenaries a ground for reviving the ashes of forgotten political controversies. I seek rather to point to the contrast in spirit between Scott and those who started "*The Edinburgh Review*." How did these advocates of reform greet the first rising of a new genius? Compare them with Scott. Scott revered Wordsworth and Coleridge, and he greeted the rival genius of Byron with a lavish generosity. "*The Edinburgh Review*" found that Wordsworth "would never do." The contrast between the two is typified in that memorable scene which Lockhart gives to us, as it occurred upon the Mound, when Scott, in a passionate emotion which his manly constraint seldom showed, burst out upon the light-hearted banter of Jeffrey by saying, "Bit by bit you will destroy one thing after another until all that has made Scotland Scotland will be no more." (Cheers.)

That was the outward symptom of what entered into Scott's very being. Listen to his words spoken in no unfriendly spirit and with no paltry jealousy—for which Scott's genius had no room—these words spoken of Jeffrey. "I believe," he says in a letter to Joanna Baillie, "that he wants that taste for poetry which is essential to its real enjoyment and necessary to criticise it with justice. He is learned with the most learned in all its canons and its laws. He knows to a nicety its proper modulation. He is a good interpreter of the sentiments it conveys, but he is without that enthusiastic feeling that, like sunset upon the landscape, throws light upon every beauty and palliates, if it cannot hide, every defect." (Cheers.) These were the words of sober justice and truth, and they are valuable more for what they tell us of Scott than for what they criticise in Jeffrey. They tell us what was Scott's chiefest quality, that permeated all his work and moved and stirred his being to its inmost fibres—that poetic feeling which was predominantly his. Remember that Scotland at that time stood, I firmly believe it, at the parting of two ways—a nation ready to take her place among the great nations of the earth, moving forward with a new prosperity, eager for reform, strenuous against abuses. Was it to do the task laid before it any the better if it became forgetful of the past, or if it did not nourish its

growing energies on reverence for that past? Scott's answer, unlike that of the Edinburgh Reviewers, was distinctly "No," and it was an answer for which we Scotsmen at the present day owe him eternal gratitude.

Let me touch upon the relation between Scott and another contemporary who owned the same impulses, who was in many respects akin by very brotherhood to Scott, but whose memory is perhaps in our day unduly neglected. He was a man parted from Scott by some political and, by what was still worse perhaps, by ecclesiastical differences, but who none the less had a character, an impulse, an enthusiasm like his own—I mean Thomas Chalmers. Have you ever thought how much of union there was between these two? Each was stirred by an enthusiastic love for the romantic history of his country. Each dwelt with loving sympathy upon the scenes that enshrined that history. Each felt misgiving when changes occurred that seemed unfaithful to her traditions. Each felt—we have their own word for it—that the career which would best have attracted him was the career of my friend on my right—the career of a soldier. (Cheers.) Each felt the disasters to his country's arms as a personal blow; each would have given up life, and thought it not worth having except as citizens of a great country worthy of their patriotic sentiment; each was inspired by lavish loyalty, and each loved the old and quaint ways of the ancient regime, and believed it to be not incompatible with the truest liberty; each looked with dread upon the triumph of an uneducated proletariat; each in his social economics dwelt upon the old and kindly ways of Scotland, and dreaded lest individual independence and manhood might be swamped and merged in the gulf of an overmastering Socialism; each hated anarchism and dreaded its excesses. If I remember right, they met only once upon a common platform, and more's the pity. But never let us forget how akin they were in spirit, and how in the things that stirred them most, the enthusiasms that were the chief impulses of their lives, Scott and Chalmers, these two great figures of the same phase of our history, were akin in nature and in character. (Cheers.) But Scott added to the endowment which they had in common a power that was far greater than any which Chalmers could wield, that power of which I have already spoken, the power of poetic insight. You remember Swift's words, too true when we think of the sad history of the poets,

Not empire to the rising sun
By valour, conduct, fortune won,
Not highest wisdom in debates
For framing laws to govern States,
Not skill in sciences profound,
So large to grasp the circle round,
Such heavenly influence require
As how to strike the Muse's lyre.

But, he adds, in words the realism of which I shall spare you, a description of the most outcast of mankind, who yet do not stand lower than the poet, nor are more disqualified by fate to rise in Church or State—

Than he whom Phoebus in his ire
Has blasted with poetic fire.

Swift was a pessimist, but Swift saw truly; yet Swift never knew Scott, never knew that one instance which proved, if it ever was proved in the world, that the poetic faculty might be joined with the greatest balance of judgment, the greatest heroism, the greatest amount of saving commonsense—(cheers)—and it is just the union of these qualities that brings us to what is the supreme excellence of quality in the last in the series of Scott's works on which I have to touch—that wonderful treasure house of his novels.

Think what our position would have been if, from the cold formality of the eighteenth century, we had passed direct into the murky labyrinths of the modern problem play, of the "novel with a purpose," of the novel with a theological theme, of the novel which covers a feeble philosophy with what it calls a realistic drawing of life, that clothes its vapidness in a specious garment of licentiousness. Think what our position would have been had we come straight from the formality of the eighteenth century to face all these without the broad shield and strong buckler that Scott's genius placed before us. (Cheers.) As a prophylactic Scott defended us from much; but he gave us yet more. Here, more than in all the rest of his works, he

speaks to all humanity. But he also speaks to each man alone, and to each hour, and to each period of his life; he touched us in our boyhood; he made our pulses beat quicker, he raised our hopes higher; he warmed our best impulses; he made our day dreams seem more real. In the drudgery of life, when we are gall-worn hacks of labour, he is the one light,

The golden branch amongst the shadows,
Star that gildeth yet the barren shore.

When we are lonely are we not free of that glorious company that he has made to live as our choice companions? We think of that carouse to which Piper Steenie was admitted, in "Wandering Willie's Tale," where Claverhouse, "beautiful as when he lived, sat apart with a haughty, melancholy countenance." But it is another revelry that now they hold. Their fights, their triumphs, their defeats, their joys and their sorrows, their passions and their gaiety, all these are now forgotten, and they sit above in the security of the immortals.

They sit beside their nectar, and the bolts are hurled
Far below them in the valleys, and the clouds are lightly curled
Round their golden houses, girdled with a gleaming world.

There they sit, and they invite the most lonely drudge among us to be free of their glorious company.
(Cheers.)

And at last, when shadows gather round us, when griefs strike us with a new poignancy, when baffled hopes and disappointments gather over us, where can we in the deepest grief, in the profoundest melancholy, seek a better consolation as if in a stream of water undefiled than in the pages of Sir Walter Scott? (Cheers.)

Gentlemen, for all he has done for humanity, for all he has done for our country, for his manly, bounteous genius, for the help he has given to each of us, alone and apart, let us pay him the tribute of a profound and an enduring gratitude. Gentlemen, I ask you, standing and in silence, to drink to "The Immortal Memory of Sir Walter Scott."

The toast accordingly was pledged in silence, after which a hearty round of cheers was accorded to the Chairman for his address.

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