

## **Sir Walter Scott – August 15, 1771 to September 21, 1832**



Walter Scott – the son of a solicitor - was born in College Wynd in the Old Town of Edinburgh on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1771. The precocious little boy was stricken with polio at 18 months, but survived, albeit made seriously lame. In an attempt to cure this, he was sent to live at his grandparent's farm in the borders region where both sides of his ancestry originated.

Like the houses of Douglas, Johnstone, and Maxwell, his own antecedents were forever battling the other fierce clans and the often brutal no-man's-land battles with England throughout the 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Here the young survivor was taught by his aunt Jenny to read, to emulate the border speech patterns, and to become acquainted with the old border tales and legends that were to feature prominently in so many of his literary works.

In January 1775 he returned to Edinburgh, and that summer was taken by his aunt to Bath for spa treatments. In the winter of 1776 he went back to his grandparent's border farm for a time, and was treated to more unsuccessful water therapy at Prestonpans the following summer. Evidently much effort was expended to reduce the crippling effects of his polio, but to little avail. For the rest of his life he walked with a pronounced limp.

He began studies with a tutor in Edinburgh in 1778 to prepare him for entry to the Royal High School of Edinburgh, at which he commenced a pupil in October 1779. At the age of 12, he enrolled as an undergraduate at the University of Edinburgh...very young by today's standards, but it was not uncommon for young men to begin their university education at about 13. He died at Abbotsford on 21<sup>st</sup> September 1832 and was buried at Dryburgh Abbey.

Despite the young Walter being the ninth child in the family, he bore his father's Christian name. Five of his siblings had already died in infancy, and a sixth – a sister - would soon also succumb at only 5 months of age. His father was a very successful lawyer, rising to the top of his profession as a senior partner in his firm. His mother (a Rutherford) reliably traced her ancestry to the Earls of Douglas, which yielded a rich web of high society contacts that allowed her husband to quickly become well connected in their early days in Edinburgh.

The Union of the Crowns took place in April 1603; Charles the 1<sup>st</sup> was executed in January 1649; Charles II died in 1685, succeeded by his brother James the II; William and Mary were proclaimed King and Queen of the United Kingdom in 1689; the Massacre of Glencoe took place on February 13<sup>th</sup> 1692; the Darien Colony was founded in November 1699; the Union of Parliaments took place on March 5<sup>th</sup> 1707; the Jacobite rebellions followed in 1715 and 1745.

These events and others conspired to all but destroy Scotland's former vibrant establishment, as well as many of the people's natural aspirations - politically, economically, socially, militarily and culturally. The transfer of the Scottish Royal Court and much of the gentry's wealth and influence to Westminster in 1603 was completed with the Union of Parliaments in 1707, moving the legislative power, taxation and even some of Scotland's trade to London.

However, with the advent of the Scottish 'enlightenment', Edinburgh's star was once again in the ascendant, and Scott was born at just about the right time to be swept along on the train of its glory.

Young Walter studied classics at the University of Edinburgh, and upon graduating three years later, began an apprenticeship in his father's firm that was intended to lead to his qualifying as a solicitor - or Writer of the Signet as it was described at that time in Scotland. He had already made the acquaintance of Adam Ferguson whose father (the esteemed Professor Adam Ferguson) hosted meetings of the Edinburgh literati in his home, which gave Scott access to many literary soirees. It was there that he was befriended by the blind poet, Thomas Blacklock, who took him under his wing, lending him books and introducing him to James Macpherson's Ossian cycle of poems. During the winter of 1786-87, the 16-year-old had the good fortune to meet briefly with Robert Burns. In 1789-90, Scott returned to Edinburgh University to study law, after which he commenced the practice of law in Edinburgh. In 1792, he was admitted to the Faculty of Advocates, becoming the equivalent of an English barrister.

Scott seems to have coveted a professional military career, which of course his lameness precluded. Undaunted, he enlisted as a volunteer in the 1<sup>st</sup> Lothian and Border Yeomanry. Despite his handicap, he was admired by his peers for the tireless way in which he always pushed himself to the limits of his physical ability; he was an avid walker, and he loved to ride...an activity that he was able to enjoy without much disadvantage.

In 1797 – perhaps still on the rebound from a recent disastrous *affaire du coeur* - he embarked on a serendipitous trip to the Lake District to visit an old college friend. There he met and fell in love with Charlotte Genevieve Charpentier, although she had already adopted the more English name of Carpenter. Her now-deceased parents were French, and she had become a ward of Lord Downshire, as well as a British citizen. After a whirlwind courtship lasting only three weeks, Walter proposed and they were married on Christmas Eve 1797. It remained a happy union, and they had five children, four of whom survived beyond the time of Scott's death. Charlotte predeceased Walter in 1826.

In 1799, he was appointed Sheriff-Depute of the County of Selkirk, making him in effect a county judge. His duties were seasonal, requiring him to sit in Selkirk for four months from mid-July to mid-November, which meant he could reside in Edinburgh for the remainder of the year. During those early years of his marriage, he made an adequate, but still not generous living from his work as an Advocate, supplemented by his Sheriff-Deputy salary of £300 per annum and his wife's income. In 1806, he managed to secure the additional position of Principal Clerk of the Court of Sessions in Edinburgh which would required him to work for only the 6 months each year that the court was in session. Fortuitously, this time period did not conflict with the months he was required to sit as Sheriff-Depute in Selkirk. This post paid him an additional £800 per annum.

Scott's many sojourns in the Borders were important and memorable to him, inspiring a fascination for the old border tales that became known to him more through the oral tradition than through published sources, which were virtually non-existent; he would soon change that.

He began his professional writing career at age 25, first by translating and publishing a collection of German ballads that would signal his lifelong interest in Scottish history, as well as its legends. This required him to learn the rudiments of the German language, although the quality of his translations was sometimes a little wanting.

Scott has been recognized as one of the foremost poets of his age. His first serious foray into this realm was at the age of 10 or 11. While attending the Royal High School of Edinburgh, Scott translated Horace and Virgil into English verse, which involved considerable original composition on his part...quite a feat of Latin scholarship for one so young, but also an ambitious nascent attempt at poetical expression.

His developing interest in poetry is most evident during his years at the University of Edinburgh, but his first published poetical work – a ballad – did not appear until 1799. However, his real debut was the publication of *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. This was a collection of old border ballads that Scott had been documenting from as far back as 1792 during his frequent visits to the borders. Like Burns however, he did not hesitate to ‘repair’ and improve upon the originals, inserting new stanzas and liberally changing wordings, but also composing verses for legends as yet unrhymed. The *Minstrelsy* – the first edition of which comprised two volumes, later enlarged with new material to three - was hugely successful, and was translated into many languages. He published a number of other major poetical works over the next 13 years.

*The Lay of the Last Minstrel* appeared in 1805, again to rave reviews and unprecedented sales. His fame was sealed. Well known lines from this work include:

**Breathes there the man with soul so dead  
Who never to himself hath said,  
This is my own, my native land!**

*Lay of the Last Minstrel. Canto vi. Stanza 1.*

And:

**In peace, Love tunes the shepherd’s reed;  
In war, he mounts the warrior’s steed;  
In halls, in gay attire is seen;  
In hamlets, dances on the green.  
Love rules the court, the camp, the grove,  
And men below and saints above;  
For Love is heaven, and heaven is Love.**

*Lay of the Last Minstrel. Canto iii. Stanza 1.*

His second narrative poem, *Marmion*, was published in 1808, and sales proved to be even more brisk than for the *The Lay*, containing as it does some of his most acclaimed and remembered lines...including perhaps his most Shakespearian-like quotable quote:

**Yet Clare’s sharp questions must I shun  
Must separate Constance from the nun**

**Oh! What a tangled web we weave  
When first we practice to deceive!**

But the critics (and his adoring public) found this opus less satisfying than *The Lay*.

His next major work, *The Lady of the Lake* followed in 1810, which was set in the Trossachs. Franz Schubert, inspired by his devotion to the Virgin Mary, adopted the verses titled 'Hymn to the Virgin' directly from this poem and set them to music in his *Ave Maria*. A sample of other lines from this poem is:

**The rose is fairest when 'tis budding new,  
And hope is brightest when it dawns from fears.  
The rose is sweetest wash'd with morning dew,  
And love is loveliest when embalm'd in tears.**

Lady of the Lake. Canto iv. Stanza 1.

A number of other major poetical works were published up until 1813, but after that his novels seem to have taken most of his time and energies.

His first published novel, *Waverley*, gave its name to his main body of non-poetical works. *Waverly* was published anonymously in 1814, the first of the so-called *Waverley Novels*; curiously, it was not until 1827 that Scott acknowledged his authorship of the Waverley Novels. His motives for striving to remain anonymous are somewhat unclear, but it seems that he was afraid the novels might not be sufficiently successful and thus might degrade his highly esteemed reputation as a poet. He seems also to have worried that his appointments as Sheriff-Deputy and Clerk of the Court of Sessions may have been at risk if his being a novelist (considered a questionable career at the time) were made public. But with their triumphant success of his novels, he belatedly acknowledged what most of his admirers already strongly surmised.

The umbrella title of *The Waverley Novels* has loosely come to include most of his novels that were not part of another major series known as *Tales of my Landlord*, written under an obscure nom de plume. But the categorization is really quite arbitrary. Suffice to say that he published somewhere in the region of 40 novels, biographies and other major non-poetical works, as well as an eclectic variety of less remembered publications.

As a leading public figure and with a keen sense of history and practicality, Scott recognised the necessity of removing the strictures imposed so cruelly on Scotland after Culloden. He understood the need to seek Royal patronage in order to gain access to the corridors of power at Westminster, and the importance of linkages that would allow Scotland to exploit the opportunities of the growing Empire. He was also very aware of the benefits to Scottish merchant ships of the protection provided by the Royal Navy; also the need for affiliations with the coffee and trading houses of London. Scotland was a small fish in a very large and rapidly growing pond, but she had much to gain by grasping the coattails of the burgeoning British Empire.

At least he was making the right connections in Scotland and Westminster. In 1818 he was awarded a Royal Warrant by the Prince Regent (later George IV) to lead a committee to search for the Scottish Crown jewels which were believed to have been concealed behind an Edinburgh Castle wall in 1707. The search was a success (they were found concealed in the castle's throne room) and partly for that, in 1820, 'Sir' Walter received his well-deserved baronetcy.

As a further measure of his acceptance by the Scottish establishment and at the specific request of the king, Scott was asked to take the lead role in planning the program of events in connection with the State visit to Scotland of King George IV in 1822. In the event, he concocted what some saw as an over-the-top 21-day pageant. As part of that, he persuaded the pompous monarch to dress in elaborate Royal Stuart highland finery so as to appear much like a reincarnated Bonnie Prince Charlie, arguing that George was descended in part from the same Stuart line. The ridiculous and obese George was mercilessly lampooned in England for his part in these 'one and twenty daft days', but Scott's role in encouraging the king and other participants to dress so extravagantly in tartan regalia – however burlesque - did much to make the kilt and all its accoutrements fashionable and turned them into sartorial symbols of Scottish identity and pride that have survived to this day. And we Burnsians are helping to carry on that tradition!

But all did not continue to go well for Sir Walter. His troubles began with business dealings involving the Ballantyne brothers - James and John. Scott first met James Ballantyne in 1783 at Kelso Grammar School that they both attended for a time. A firm friendship soon developed, leading to close business partnerships that ended badly for all of them. The story of their business dealings is too lengthy to describe in detail here, and in any case became inextricably caught up in a much more complex web of corporate machinations and disasters. However, in brief, James became Scott's contract printer for most of his works. The amount of this business alone would have threatened to overwhelm any small under-capitalized printer, but Ballantyne's problems were made more critical by the considerable work he took on for other Edinburgh customers. To avoid financial collapse, Scott provided substantial capital injections in return for a half partnership in the enterprise. Scott then decided to set up his own publishing house to cash in on the enormous profits he was generating for his then-publisher. He decided that James's younger brother John should head up this venture; this was a curious and unfortunate lapse of judgement as John had already proved himself singularly feckless and unreliable in his past business involvements. Not surprisingly, he soon ran into financial difficulties and he too had to be bailed out by Scott. Eventually Scott had to buy out James's whole share of the original printing company, and replace John as manager of the publishing house.

In the meantime, in 1812 Scott had taken out a large mortgage and other loans in order to purchase Cartley Hole Farm, on which he planned to build Abbotsford. He raised substantial additional capital to build and adorn his Abbotsford manor house, the cost of the house alone being estimated at £25,000. In 1825 his debts (including those of his business partner James Ballantyne, which he very honourably agreed to assume) amounted to a whopping £121,000...estimated at the equivalent of £10 million pounds today, but probably more. The huge costs associated with Abbotsford and his quite lavish lifestyle accounted for much of this debt, but the disastrous state of his business dealings and their gross mismanagement were even more to blame. A national banking crisis in 1825/26 was the last straw in bringing his affairs to a head, and he was faced with few options short of outright bankruptcy. For various reasons (including his pride and his keen sense of honour) he determined to write his way out of debt. With the

approval of his creditors who did not want to be seen to humiliate and drag down Scotland's national treasure, a trust deed was established to retire his debts over time. Under its terms, Scott would pay in the entire revenue from all of his literary sources until the debts were discharged. As part of the agreement with the trustee, he was permitted to continue to occupy his beloved Abbotsford during his lifetime, along with other concessions that would allow him to retain his existing sources of non-writing income and live a modestly comfortable life as a country gentleman.

True to his commitment, Scott spent the remaining nearly 7 years of his life writing in a fury of determination, imposing a strain on his already-frail health that led to a stroke and a comparatively early death in 1832. By then he had reduced his indebtedness to £53,000. Under the terms of the trust, later sales of copyright reduced this to zero by 1847.

The strength of Scott's poetry was its descriptive and narrative content. His best passages of rapid and warlike flight remain unequalled in the language. The lyrical note was entirely fresh, entirely his own. He was not a reflective poet straining to behold what is hidden from men; the deeds, not the thoughts of men were his matter. So potent was his genius, inspiring the martial tramp and clang of his measures that he made the new world listen to the accents of the old. Scott was not an elegiac poet, nor do we find him expressing his own intimate emotions. He was no Shelley or Byron, and should not be compared with them.

In the field of English prose Scott reigned supreme, at least during his lifetime. It is said that he invented the modern historical novel, although admirers of Fielding, Smollett and others might challenge that claim. But he did produce an impressive volume of magnificent works of historical literature that remain classics to this day, although – rightly or not – later critics accused him of being too wordy, slipshod and a poor developer of plot. Those judgements seem hardly fair when applied to thrilling masterpieces like *Ivanhoe*, *Heart of Midlothian*, *Redgauntlet* and many others of his novels.

Nevertheless, Scott's popularity as a novelist waned in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but he is still recognized by many as an innovative writer and a key figure in the development of Scottish and world literature. He was a man of his time when grandiose verbosity was in fashion, and so his legacy should not suffer on that account. Perhaps not until Charles Dickens began his memorable career was Scott challenged as the greatest story-teller in the world of English literature.

And if not the sole 'inventor' of the historical novel, arguably he became its greatest master, and the first English language author to have a truly international career in his lifetime. His genius helped to restore Scotland's pride in its illustrious history and its distinct nationhood. Scots wha hae! Wha's like us?

From a work-in-progress draft by **Bob Watson**: 26<sup>th</sup> October, 2010

Edited and completed by Jim McLaughlin for the Bob Carnie Group – October 2011