



Sir Walter Scott's Journal

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SIR WALTER SCOTT'S Journal has been described as one of the great books of the world, since in it he succeeded in giving a convincing picture of his own greatness. It was not only his quiet and unobtrusive heroism that enabled him to do this but also the natural simplicity and dignity of his character. He started keeping his *Gurnal*, as he preferred to call it, on 20 November 1825, during the last few years of his life and only three weeks before he was overtaken by the financial storm that ruined him. On the very day he got news of his bankruptcy the Journal records that he received a visit from a neighbour, one R. P. Gillies, an impecunious literary hack who was to pester Scott for help almost for the rest of his life. Some idea of the type of man Gillies was may be gathered from the fact that he had once asked Scott to put his name to a book he intended to write. It was characteristic of Scott that on this occasion he never even mentioned that only that day he had learned of his own bankruptcy. On 14 December the Journal begins to assume a very ominous note. The publishing house of Hurst and Robinson, as well as Constable, had failed, and it now appears certain 'that I must go with poor James Ballantyne for company'. He knew he had been rash and imprudent in embarking on publishing, and leaving the control of business matters largely to others; he had never tried to absolve himself from the major share of the blame, yet the thought that he might lose Abbotsford made his heart bleed.

This news will make sad hearts at Darnick or in the cottages of Abbotsford which I do not nourish the least hope of preserving. It has been my Delilah . . . I was to have gone there on saturday in joy and prosperity to receive my friends — my dogs will wait for me in vain . . . Poor Willie Laidlaw! Poor Tom Purdie! This will be news to wring your hearts, and many a poor fellow's besides to whom my prosperity was daily bread.

By the turn of the year Scott knew that there was no hope, and if he was to avoid the disgrace of bankruptcy, the loss of Abbotsford, as well as satisfy his own conscience, he must struggle to pay off by writing the huge sum of £130,000 for which, a sleeping partner in the printing firm of Ballantyne, he had become liable. He wrote: 'I feel quite composed and determined to labour', and noted on the same day that he had completed the equivalent of twenty printed pages of *Woodstock*, which was the first novel to be published after his bankruptcy. But breaking the awful news to his wife and younger daughter Anne, and explaining how exactly the reversal of fortune would affect their lives was a more harrowing task. 'A painful scene after dinner, and another after supper, endeavouring to convince these poor dear creatures that they must not look for miracles, but consider the misfortune as certain, and only to be lessened by patience and labour.' Yet such was the amazing elasticity of Scott's mind and temperament that he was soon heard laughing and joking with his old friend Willie Clerk, which shocked his daughter Anne who marvelled that he could laugh and jest in the face of such a calamity!

He now had to start retrenching in earnest, give up entertaining, and set about selling no. 39 Castle Street, which had been his Edinburgh home, when the Courts were sitting, for nearly thirty years. To begin with the domestic staff and the farm hands at Abbotsford would have to be drastically reduced. Among the former Dalgleish, the butler, cried and made scenes and refused to go. And the Journal describes how he and Willie Laidlaw, the factor, dealt with the farm situation. They worked on the true negro-driving principle of self-interest

the only principle I know which never swerves from its object. We chose all the active and powerful men turning old age and infirmity adrift. I cannot help this for a guinea cannot do the work of five but I will contrive to make it easier to the sufferers.

On 15 March 1826, he left 39 Castle Street. The removal, the sale of pictures and furniture, the sorting out of old letters and papers had been a great strain on Scott and had made him cruelly nervous: 'Things that have had their day of importance with me I can never forget, though the merest trifles.' At the same time he is surprised at the seeming indifference of his wife.

It may well be that her failing health was to blame, for on

16 May she died. Scott had been forced to leave her very ill at Abbotsford in order to return to his legal duties in Edinburgh. A great deal has been written about the relationship of Scott and his wife. Charlotte Carpenter was a French woman, whose father had fled to England from the Revolution, and Scott met her at a little watering place on Lake Windermere where he was taking a holiday. He had not concealed from her the fact that it was only a year since he had been passionately and desperately in love with a certain Williamina Belches, an heiress with some of Scotland's best blood in her veins, and what a shock it had been to him when she announced her betrothal to young William Forbes, the heir to a title and a big position in the banking world. Years after his marriage Scott confessed to a friend that the mutual feelings of Charlotte and himself had fallen something short of love in its fullest sense, since a person who has once been nearly drowned is not easily tempted to risk getting out of his depth again. When he saw that Williamina was irretrievably lost to him he sought a practical solution to the problem and turned his attention elsewhere. As he said, his heart was handsomely mended but the crack would remain to his dying day.

Yet it must not be thought that Scott was the sort of man to live for thirty years with the wife of his choice, who had been a gay, attentive and loyal partner, the devoted mother of his four children, the sharer in his fame and success, without feeling deeply her loss. She may not have been able to share his mental and imaginative life but she had sterling qualities which had brought Scott much happiness, and he was not ungrateful. His Journal records with rare and tragic eloquence the depth of his grief over her death. On hearing the news he hurried back to Abbotsford, to find his daughter Anne exhausted and distraught with grief:

I have seen her, the figure I beheld is, and is not, my Charlotte — my thirty years companion. There is the same symmetry of form, though those limbs are rigid which were once so graceful and elastic — but that yellow masque, with pinched features, which seems to mock life rather than emulate it, can it be the face that was once so full of lively expression? . . .

Another day, and a bright one to the external world, again opens on us — the air soft and the flowers smiling and the leaves glittering. They cannot refresh her to whom mild weather was a natural enjoyment. Cearments of lead and of wood already hold her — cold earth

must have her soon. But it is not my Charlotte, it is not the bride of my youth, the mother of my children, that will be laid among the ruins of Dryburgh, which we have so often visited in gaiety and pastime. No, no. She is sentient and conscious of my emotions somewhere, somehow; *where* we cannot tell; *how* we cannot tell. Yet would I not at this moment renounce the mysterious yet certain hope that I shall see her in a better world, *for all that this world can give me . . .*

They are arranging the chamber of death; that which was long the apartment of connubial happiness, and of whose arrangements (better than in richer houses), she was so proud. They are treading fast and thick — For weeks you could have heard a foot-fall — Oh my God!

Scott was not the sort of person to abandon himself to a long and unavailing grief and soon settled down again to the long labour of paying off his debts. His social activities when in Edinburgh were much restricted; since he now had no home in the city of which he was the leading citizen, and had to reside in Mrs Brown's bug-ridden lodgings, he was not able to give any more dinner parties. Anne kept house for him at Abbotsford. In a letter to her brother Charles she reveals the strain that at this time was imposed both on her and her father by the cruel reversal of fortune which they were facing in their different ways. She complained that the fireside talk was of nothing but *money, money*, and 'as speaking about it wont bring it back, I wish Papa would be quiet on the subject of pounds, shillings and pence'. The *Journal too* reveals a similar strain: twice Scott complains that Anne had defaulted in her household accounts 'which is hardly treating me *fairly*'. But there is a more characteristic entry on the occasion when she took him to dine with a friend on the wrong date. He said nothing 'as the fault might so easily have been my own'.

During the ensuing few years Scott was almost *entirely* wedded to his labours, or rather to the literary drudgery of paying off his debts. But though he was living a much restricted life yet such a famous, popular and sociable character was in big demand at dinner parties and in ladies' drawing-rooms. Moreover, the habits of half a lifetime are not easily surrendered. There is no greater testimony to the courage, balance and sweetness of his nature that, while he was steadily undermining his health by his toils, he allowed practically nothing of this to be seen by those with whom

he was in almost daily contact. Besides writing there were his legal duties, both in Edinburgh and at Abbotsford; he was also one of Scotland's leading antiquaries besides being President of the Royal Society of Scotland and one of the directors of the Edinburgh Coal Gas Co., which firm had installed gas lighting at Abbotsford. It is therefore not surprising that we find him complaining on 13 February 1827, that 'the dining parties come thick and fast, and interfere with work extremely'. Of one such party he wrote significantly: 'Everything around seemed to say that beauty, power, wealth, honour, were but things of a day.' Already, like Ecclesiastes, he had a presentiment that the feasting and the fun, as well as the long days of his labour under the sun, would soon be over.

But the most significant party he attended at this time was that of the celebrated Theatrical Fund Dinner at which Scott took the chair. At this dinner, attended by several hundred people, in answer to an accusation made by Lord Meadowbank the Judge he pleaded guilty to being the author of the *Waverley Novels*. The matter had long been an open secret although the novels were published anonymously and Scott had denied even to friends that he had written them. The applause from his countrymen was prolonged and deafening, and Scott's admission received wide publicity in the papers.

And what of the books he had been writing at this time to pay off his debts? *Woodstock* and the *Life of Napoleon* were the first, the latter bringing in the unprecedented sum of £20,000 to the creditors. Next appeared *The Chronicles of the Canongate*, which contained two of his best short pieces, *The Highland Widow* and *The Two Drovers*. He also wrote a little later *Tales of a Grandfather*, which consisted of Scottish history told in a way that would appeal equally to the young and the not so young. One morning, while the rain was pattering merrily against his study window at Abbotsford, he relates how he 'murdered Maclellan of Bomby at the Thrieve Castle — stabbed the Black Douglas in the town of Stirling — astonished King James before Roxburgh — and stifled the Earl of Mar in his bath in the Canongate'. It was indeed a wild world that of Scottish history! But the greatest novel he wrote after his bankruptcy was *The Fair Maid of Perth*, a tale of feudal Scotland in the reign of Robert III. It is the most convincing

of his historical novels in which he goes far back in time, and contains scenes equal to his best, concluding with a Homeric climax when the two rival clans fight a battle of extermination in front of the weeping old king and his nobles on the North Inch of Perth. The Journal records the inception and progress of this book, and shows that at one time Scott wrote one third of it in twelve days, and at another inspiration failed completely so that for several days he was unable to write a line. His last novel written before the onslaught of the paralytic strokes that killed him was *Anne of Geierstein*. He remarked of it that 'the material was excellent but the power to use it was failing'. This picture of the epoch of *Quentin Durward* from the Burgundian side would have been more highly considered if anyone but Scott had written it. His last two novels, *Count Robert of Paris* and *Castle Dangerous*, written with a damaged brain, must not be judged from any literary standpoint, but rather as the desperate efforts of a failing giant to pay off his debts and retrieve his honour.

In the autumn of 1827 he received a shock — a ghost from the past came back into his life and stirred up long dormant emotions and memories. His first love Williamina had been dead seventeen years. After Scott had received his *congé* she had married Sir William Forbes and had borne him six children. She was a young woman when she died. Her mother, Lady Jane Stuart, was still alive and now wrote to Scott asking him to call on her. The meeting was a painful one and they both wept. Unable to resist he paid her a second visit:

and fairly softened myself like an old fool, with recalling old stories, till I was fit for nothing but shedding tears and repeating verses the whole night. The very grave gives up its dead, and time rolls back thirty years to add to my perplexities . . . What a romance to tell, and told I fear it will be one day. And then my three years of dreaming and my two years of awakening will be chronicled doubtless. But the dead will feel no pain.

After yet another visit Scott's practical nature reasserted itself and he resumed his labours. At this period his fame seems to have reached its zenith. Wherever he was seen, whether in his native city or London or Paris, he became instantly the object of applause and the most lively curiosity. At Durham, in the old baronial halls of the Bishop's Palace, he shared the honours of the evening with

the Duke of Wellington. A characteristically modest entry remarks that he played the jackal to the Duke with a certain amount of success. In London, at a big gathering, a pretty young lady approached with a pair of scissors and demanded a lock of his hair, which he thought was not worth refusing. He stipulated though for a kiss in payment which he was permitted to take. On one of his last visits to London he dined with the Duchess of Kent where he met the little Princess Victoria, heir to the throne. 'She is fair, like the Royal Family, but does not look as if she would be pretty.' He hoped they would change her name.

Meanwhile with all his own troubles and burdens Scott was never more alive to the troubles and needs of others. Gillies was always on his door-step cap in hand knowing that Scott's charity would never fail. One entry records: 'A precatory letter from Gillies . . . it is wonderful that knowing the situation I am in, the poor fellow presses so hard. Sure, I am pulling for life, and it is hard to ask me to pull another man's oar as well as my own.' And he concludes by saying he will do what he can to help. Soon Gillies is back again imploring Scott to try and persuade someone to lend him money. 'I could not get him to understand that I was decidedly averse to write to another gentleman with whom I was hardly acquainted to do that which I would not do myself.' A little later the tormentor visits Scott at midnight in Edinburgh just as he was getting into bed after an exhausting day. Scott persuaded him to return on the morrow. 'Gillies made his appearance. I told him frankly that I thought he conducted his affairs too irregularly for anyone to assist him, and I could not in charity advise anyone to encourage subscriptions, but that I should subscribe myself. So I made over to him about £50.'

There is another entry of this time which shows the unsleeping nature of Scott's charity:

A poor young woman came here this morning, well dressed and well behaved, with a strong northern accent. She talked incoherently a long story of a lover and a brother both dead. I would have kept her here till I wrote to her friends, particularly to Mr Sutherland (an Aberdeen bookseller), to inform them where she is, but my daughter and her maidens were frightened, as indeed there might be room for it, so I sent her in one of Davison's chaises to the Castle at Jedburgh and wrote to Mr Shortreed to see she is humanely treated. I have also written to her brother.

At this time he received a visit from his old friend and political adversary Lord Cockburn who found him alone at Abbotsford. He found his company and talk just as delightful and amusing as ever, and said that he had not changed *at all since they were law students together* and Scott was famous for nothing except his ability to mimic the more eccentric of the High Court judges. He added that his simplicity and naturalness after all his fame were absolutely incredible.

But his labours were beginning to take their toll. He was now nearing sixty but he was prematurely aged. His Journal records headaches, rheumatism, attacks of giddiness, hypochondria, a tendency to be morbidly nervous on occasions, and an ever increasing difficulty in walking with great pain in his lame leg. Daily and hourly he was being reminded of his mortality! On the afternoon of 15 February 1830, he had just returned from the Court when he fell speechless at his daughter's feet. It was some time before he could speak. Meanwhile a surgeon was sent for and he was bled and put on a diet. It was the first of the paralytic strokes that were to kill him, and *friends noticed that he now had a droop to one corner of his mouth and a slight impediment in his speech.* The following November he had a second stroke. His health now began to decline rapidly, and the Journal shows that he was only too aware of the deterioration; which was not improved by the bleeding, blistering, which the medical fraternity prescribed, *not to mention the diet of pulped bread and macaroni, which made starvation seem a pleasant alternative.* But he refused absolutely to give up work in spite of the fact that he was so ill.

I only know that to live as I am just now is a gift little worth having. I think I will be in the Secret next week unless I *recruit greatly*. . . I have suffered terribly, that is the truth, rather in body than in mind, and I often wish I could lie down and sleep without waking. But I will fight it out if I can.

Soon he could scarcely walk at all, and had to be placed like a sack of wheat on an old nag for exercise, with two servants walking at his side to prevent him falling off. In this sorry state he was seen by a neighbour, Miss Brewster, and mentions that he was actually ashamed to be seen by her —

Sir Dennis Brand, and on so poor a steed!

'I believe detestable folly of this kind is the very last that leaves us. One would have thought I ought to have little vanity at this time of day. But it is the abiding appurtenance of the old Adam, and I write for penance what, like a fool, I actually felt.'

It was now decided that Scott should seek during the coming winter months the milder climate of southern Europe in a final attempt to regain his health. Through the influence of a Naval friend the Admiralty kindly placed the frigate *Barham* at his disposal to take him and his party to Naples. He was accompanied by his daughter Anne, his elder son Major Walter Scott who had obtained leave of absence from his regiment for the purpose, and two servants. He arrived in London where he stayed with Lockhart and his elder daughter Sophia. Mrs Hughes, the wife of a Canon of St Paul's and the Grandmother of the author of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, who had been a frequent visitor to Abbotsford, has given a picture of Scott at this time. 'Words cannot describe the fearful change which had taken place since our last meeting. Heavy and helpless he seemed hardly able to drag his limbs along — a sort of imbecility at times overspread his countenance, a fixed look of sorrow hung upon his brow.' And to make matters worse his memory, once so phenomenal, had now gone and he told the same story several times over.

The journey was a forlorn hope. The little party sailed to Malta, and then went to Naples where they stayed three months. But Scott was visibly declining and took little interest in the scenes of antiquity around him. He did though write two stories, *The Siege of Malta* and *Il Bizarro*, which revealed only too clearly that his brain had gone and his writing days were over. The decay of his mind had now set in in earnest, and he began to have illusions that his debts were paid, and wrote to Cadell, who had taken James Ballantyne's place in the printing firm, about the possibility of spending a further £10,000 on the purchase of land.

It should here be stated that Scott by writing had paid off in a little over four years £90,000 of the debt, and the rest was paid off after his death by the sale of the remaining copyright on the novels to Cadell, who made a considerable fortune out of them. Thus *alone* of the publishing firms that had been involved in Scott's ruin the firm of Ballantyne, which was Scott's firm, paid up

twenty shillings in the pound. So Abbotsford was redeemed and remained in the possession of his family.

As his health showed no sign of improvement and he began to develop an ungovernable desire to get home a travelling carriage was bought for £200 and the sorrowful party set out for home. By this time he had made his last entry in the Journal which is dated 15 April 1832, five months before he died.

The rest is soon told. He had a further stroke on the way home down the Rhine, and was with difficulty brought by steamboat from Rotterdam to London, where he lay for several weeks in a kind of stupor in a hotel in Jermyn Street.¹ Anxious enquiries were constant, not only from Royalty and other important people but from the small groups who clustered daily round the hotel where he lay. At last it was decided to take him on the last stage of his journey to Abbotsford. He was conveyed by steamboat to the north of England and then by carriage to his beloved home. As they descended the glen of Gala Water it became obvious that he was beginning to recognize the familiar scene. And when the triple heights of the Eildons came into view his excitement became ungovernable and restraint had to be used to keep him in the carriage. Soon he was carried into his own hall, where he sat smiling and sobbing as old friends and his dogs clustered round his chair to welcome him. During his last weeks he was frequently wheeled by Lockhart and Willie Laidlaw out of doors among the roses or up and down the hall and library. 'I have seen much,' he kept repeating, 'but nothing like my ain house — give me one turn more.'

He died peacefully on 21 September, a warm sunny day with the murmur of the Tweed distinctly audible as his sorrowing family gathered round his bed. The same day his friend Lord Cockburn, who had been on a visit to the Border, passed Abbotsford and saw it reposing by the Tweed, surrounded by its fading woods, and seemingly basking in the glow of a sweet autumnal day. It was not until he reached Edinburgh that he learned its owner was dead. He wrote briefly a fitting epitaph for the great writer and patriot who had just reached the end of his toils and his journey: 'Scotland never owed so much to one man.'

¹ This hotel was destroyed by enemy action in the last war.