

VARIOUS

THE MIRROR OF
LITERATURE,
AMUSEMENT, AND
INSTRUCTION. VOLUME
20, NO. 571
(SUPPLEMENTARY
NUMBER)

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Amusement, and Instruction.
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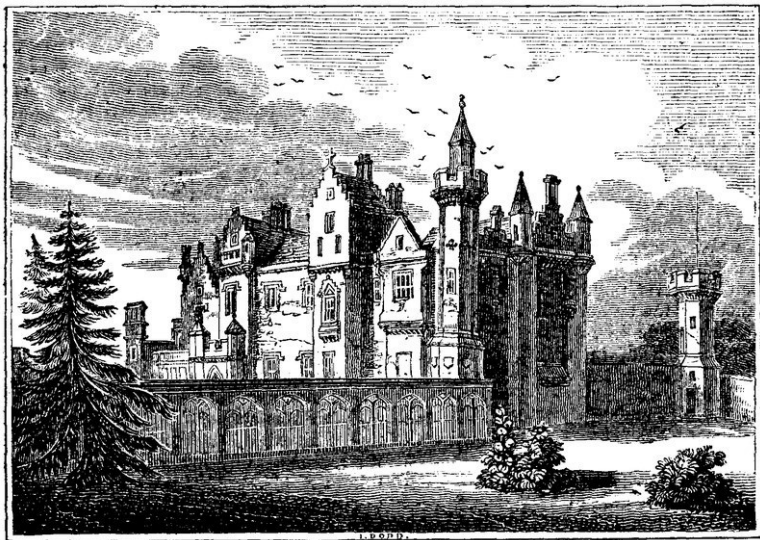
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The Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction / Volume 20, No. 571
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Содержание

CHILDHOOD	8
EDUCATION	10
LOVE OF READING	14
STUDIES IN THE LAW	17
FIRST LITERARY ATTEMPTS	18
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	21

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ABBOTSFORD, (FROM THE GARDEN, see page 247.)

Sir Walter Scott was the third son of Walter Scott, Esq., Writer to the Signet, in Edinburgh, and Anne, daughter of Dr. John Rutherford, Professor of Medicine in the University of the above city. His ancestry numbers several distinguished persons; though the well-earned fame of Sir Walter Scott renders his pedigree comparatively uninteresting; inasmuch as it illustrates the saw of an olden poet, that

Learning is an addition beyond
Nobility of birth: honour of blood,
Without the ornament of knowledge, is
A glorious ignorance.

SHIRLEY.

Sir Walter was born at Edinburgh, on the 15th of August, 1771—or, on the birthday of Napoleon Buonaparte. His father was a man of prosperous fortune and good report; and for many years was "an elder in the parish church of Old Grey Friars, while Dr. Robertson, the historian, acted as one of the ministers. The other clergyman was Dr. John Erskine, of whom Sir Walter has given an animated picture in his novel of *Guy Mannering*."¹ Mrs. Scott is described as a well-educated gentlewoman, possessing considerable natural talents; though she did not enjoy the acquaintance of Allan Ramsay, Blacklock, Beattie, and Burns, as has been stated by some biographers.

¹ Chamber's Life of Sir Walter Scott.

She, however, advantageously mixed in literary society, and from her superintendence of the early education of her eldest son, Walter, there is reason to infer that such advantages may have influenced his habits and taste. He was the third of a family, consisting of six sons and one daughter. The cleverest of the sons is stated by Sir Walter to have been Daniel, a sailor, who died young. Thomas, the next brother to Sir Walter, was a man of considerable talent, and before the avowal of the authorship of the *Waverley Novels*, report ascribed to him a great part or the whole of them. Sir Walter observes—"Those who remember that gentleman (of the 70th regiment, then stationed in Canada) will readily grant, that, with general talent at least equal to those of his elder brother, he added a power of social humour, and a deep insight into human character, which rendered him an universally delightful member of society, and that the habit of composition alone was wanting to render him equally successful as a writer. The Author of *Waverley* was so persuaded of the truth of this, that he warmly pressed his brother to make such an experiment, and willingly undertook all the trouble of correcting and superintending the press." Ill health, however, unfitted Mr. Scott for the task, though "the author believes his brother would have made himself distinguished in that striking field, in which, since that period, Mr. Cooper has achieved so many triumphs."²

The house in which Sir Walter Scott was born no longer exists. It was situated at the head of the College Wynd, at its

² General Preface to the *Waverley Novels*, 41 vols.

entrance into North College-street. It was thus described by Sir Walter in 1825:—"It consisted of two flats above Mr. Keith's, and belonged to my father, Mr. Walter Scott, Writer to the Signet. There I had the chance to be born, 15th of August, 1771. My father, soon after my birth, removed to George's Square, and let the house in the College Wynd, first to Mr. Dundas, of Philipstoun, and afterwards to Mr. William Keith, father of Sir Alexander Keith. It was purchased by the public, together with Mr. Keith's (the inferior floors), and pulled down to make way for the new College."

CHILDHOOD

Mr. Cunningham relates some interesting particulars of this period. Before Sir Walter was two years old, his nurse let him fall out of her arms, so as to injure his right foot, and render him lame for life: "This accident did not otherwise affect his health; he was, as I have been informed by a lady who chanced to live near him, a remarkably active and dauntless boy, full of all manner of fun, and ready for all manner of mischief. He calls himself, in one of his introductions to *Marmion*—

A self-willed imp; a grondame's child;

and I have heard it averred, that the circumstance of his lame foot prompted him to take the lead among all the stirring boys in the street where he lived, or the school which he attended: he desired, perhaps, to show them, that there was a spirit which could triumph over all impediments."³ If this statement be correct, it is a somewhat remarkable coincidence with the circumstance of Lord Byron's lameness; though, happily, the influence of the accident on the temperament of Scott is not traceable beyond his early years.

Sir Walter was subsequently removed from Edinburgh, for the improvement of his health, to the farm-house of Sandyknowe,

³ Life of Sir Walter Scott; in the Athenaeum, No. 258.

then inhabited by his paternal grandfather, and situated in the loveliest part of the Vale of Tweed. In the neighbourhood, upon a considerable eminence, stands Smailholm Tower, a Border fort which the future poet enshrined in his admirable ballad, *The Eve of St. John*. The romantic influence of the scenery of the whole district is told with much vigour and sweetness in the introduction to the third canto of *Marmion*.

EDUCATION

Little is known of the schooldom of Scott, that denotes anything like precocious talent. It is, however better ascertained that his early rambles amidst the Tweed scenery retarded his educational pursuits. He received the rudiments of knowledge under the home tuition of his mother; next attended an ordinary school at Edinburgh, and was then placed at the High School, his name first appearing in the school register in the year 1779. His masters, Mr. Luke Fraser, and Dr. Adam, were erudite and pains-taking teachers; but, to borrow a phrase from Montaigne, they could neither lodge it with him, nor make him espouse it, and Chambers illustratively relates, "apparently, neither the care of the master, nor the inborn genius of the pupil, availed much in this case; for it is said that the twenty-fifth place was no uncommon situation in the class for the future Author of the *Waverley Novels*." Perhaps the only anecdote of any early indication of talent that can be relied on is that related by Mr. Cunningham, of Burns:—"The poet, while at Professor Ferguson's one day, was struck by some lines attached to a print of a Soldier dying in the snow, and inquired who was the author: none of the old or the learned spoke, when the future author of *Marmion* answered, 'They are by Langhorne.' Burns, fixing his large, bright eyes on the boy, and, striding up to him, said, it is no common course of reading which has taught you this—'this

lad,' said he to the company, will be heard of yet."

At school, Sir Walter represents himself to have excelled in what may be termed the *art*, or, as Swift calls it, the "knack," of narrating a story, which, by the way, is as companionable an acquirement at school as elsewhere. His account is as follows:—"I must refer to a very early period of my life, were I to point out my first achievements as a tale-teller—but I believe some of my old school-fellows can still bear witness that I had a distinguished character for that talent, at a time when the applause of my companions was my recompense for the disgraces and punishments which the future romance writer incurred for being idle himself, and keeping others idle, during hours that should have been employed on our tasks. The chief enjoyment of my holydays was to escape with a chosen friend, who had the same taste with myself, and alternately to recite to each other such wild adventures as we were able to devise. We told, each in turn, interminable tales of knight-errantry and battles and enchantments, which were continued from one day to another as opportunity offered, without our ever thinking of bringing them to a conclusion. As we observed a strict secrecy on the subject of this intercourse, it acquired all the character of a concealed pleasure; and we used to select for the scenes of our indulgence, long walks through the solitary and romantic environs of Arthur's Seat, Salisbury Crag, Braid Hills, and similar places in the vicinity of Edinburgh, and the recollection of those holydays still forms an *oasis* in the pilgrimage which I

have to look back upon."⁴

This excellence in tale-telling drew Scott's attention from graver studies; but it was an indication of genius which may be regarded as the corner-stone of his future fame. This reminds us of Steele's idea, that "a story-teller is born as well as a poet." Scott, about this time, received some instructions in music, which was then considered a branch of ordinary education in Scotland; but the future poet, to use a familiar expression, wanted "an ear." Throughout life he, however, was highly susceptible of the delights of music, though his own execution was confined to a single song, with which he attempted to enliven the social board, but, it is stated, with such unmusical oddity as to content his hearers with a single specimen of his vocal talent. His early rambles around the "hills and holms of the border," is said to have kindled in Scott the love of painting landscapes, not strictly in accordance with the rules of art, though certainly from nature herself. Such attempts in art, by the way, are by no means uncommon in the early lives of men of genius; and, they are to be regarded, in many instances as their earliest appreciation of the beauties of nature.

In 1783, Scott was placed at the University of Edinburgh, where his studies were as irregular as at the High School: at the latter he is said to have made his first attempt at versification in the description of a thunderstorm in six lines, the recital of which afforded his mother considerable pleasure and promise; and, on

⁴ General Preface, p. ii.

another occasion, he is stated to have remarked, during a journey over a sterile district of Scotland, in a day of drizzling rain, "It is only nature weeping for the barrenness of her soil."

LOVE OF READING

Scott's early love of reading is described to have been of enthusiastic character, and to have been fostered by an accident at this period of his life. He had just given over the amusements of boyhood, and began to prepare himself for the serious business of life, or the study of the law, when, to use his own words, "a long illness threw him back on the kingdom of fiction, as it were by a species of fatality." His autobiography of this period is extremely interesting:—"My indisposition arose in part at least, from my having broken a blood-vessel; and motion and speech were for a long time pronounced positively dangerous. For several weeks I was confined strictly to my bed, during which time I was not allowed to speak above a whisper, to eat more than a spoonful or two of boiled rice, or to have more covering than one thin counterpane. When the reader is informed that I was at this time a growing youth, with the spirits, appetite, and impatience of fifteen, and suffered, of course, greatly under this severe regimen, which the repeated return of my disorder rendered indispensable, he will not be surprised that I was abandoned to my own discretion, so far as reading (my almost sole amusement) was concerned, and still less so, that I abused the indulgence which left my time so much at my own disposal.

"There was at this time a circulating library at Edinburgh, founded, I believe, by the celebrated Allan Ramsay, which,

besides containing a most respectable collection of books of every description, was, as might have been expected, peculiarly rich in works of fiction. I was plunged into this great ocean of reading without compass or pilot; and unless when some one had the charity to play at chess with me, I was allowed to do nothing save read, from morning to night. As my taste and appetite were gratified in nothing else, I indemnified myself by becoming a glutton of books. Accordingly, I believe, I read almost all the old romances, old plays, and epic poetry, in that formidable collection, and no doubt was unconsciously amassing materials for the task in which it has been my lot to be so much employed.

"At the same time, I did not in all respects abuse the license permitted me. Familiar acquaintance with the specious miracles of fiction brought with it some degree of satiety, and I began by degrees to seek in histories, memoirs, voyages and travels, and the like, events nearly as wonderful as those which were the works of the imagination, with the additional advantage that they were, at least, in a great measure true. The lapse of nearly two years, during which I was left to the service of my own free will, was followed by a temporary residence in the country, where I was again very lonely, but for the amusement which I derived from a good, though old-fashioned, library. The vague and wild use which I made of this advantage I cannot describe better than by referring my reader to the desultory studies of Waverley in a similar situation; the passages concerning whose reading were

imitated from recollections of my own."⁵

⁵ General Preface, &c.

STUDIES IN THE LAW

Upon the re-establishment of his health, Scott returned to Edinburgh, and resumed his studies in the law, which had been interrupted by illness. He states his progress to have been neither slow nor unsatisfactory, though by others he is said to have been an indolent student. He speaks of his "severe studies" occupying the greater part of his time, and amidst their dulness he seems to have underrated the incidents of his private life, which he afterwards related to the world with some share of self-satisfaction.

He appears to have succeeded tolerably in his legal lucubrations; for, in 1792, he was called to the bar as an advocate. He established himself in good style in Edinburgh, but had little practice; though the accounts of his progress are somewhat contradictory. That he passed much of his time in acquiring other than professional knowledge is more certain, though he rarely attempted composition. Mr. Chambers, with all his diligence and advantages for research, (and they are very meritorious and considerable,) "has not been able to detect any fugitive pieces of Sir Walter's in any of the periodical publications of the day, nor even any attempt to get one intruded (?) unless the following notice in Dr. Anderson's *Bee* for May 9, 1792, refers to him:—"The Editor regrets that the verses of *W.S.* are *too defective for publication.*"

FIRST LITERARY ATTEMPTS

About this time Sir Walter employed his leisure in collecting the ballad poetry of the Scottish Border. His inducement to this task was subsequently described by him as follows:—

"A period," says Sir Walter, "when this particular taste for the popular ballad was in the most extravagant degree of fashion, became the occasion, unexpectedly indeed, of my deserting the profession to which I was educated, and in which I had sufficiently advantageous prospects for a person of limited ambition. * * I may remark that, although the assertion has been made, it is a mistake to suppose that my situation in life or place in society were materially altered by such success as I attained in literary attempts. My birth, without giving the least pretension to distinction, was that of a gentleman, and connected me with several respectable families and accomplished persons. My education had been a good one, although I was deprived of its full benefit by indifferent health, just at the period when I ought to have been most sedulous in improving it." He then describes his circumstances as easy, with a moderate degree of business for his standing, and "the friendship of more than one person of consideration, efficiently disposed to aid his views in life." In short, he describes himself as "beyond all apprehension of want." He then notices the low ebb of poetry in Britain for the previous ten years; the fashionable but slender poetical reputation

of Hayley, then in the wane; "the Bard of Memory slumbered on his laurels, and he of Hope had scarce begun to attract his share of public attention;" Cowper was dead, and had not left an extensive popularity; "Burns, whose genius our southern neighbours could hardly yet comprehend, had long confined himself to song-writing; and the realms of Parnassus seemed to lie open to the first bold invader." The gradual introduction of German literature into this country during such a dearth of native talent, now led Sir Walter to the study of the German language. He also became acquainted with Mr. G. Lewis, author of *The Monk*, who had already published some successful imitations of the German ballad school. "Out of this acquaintance," says Sir Walter, "consequences arose, which altered almost all the Scottish ballad-maker's future prospects of life. In early youth I had been an eager student of ballad poetry, and the tree is still in my recollection, beneath which I lay and first entered upon the enchanting perusal of Percy's *Reliques of Ancient Poetry*. The taste of another person had strongly encouraged my own researches into this species of legendary lore; but I had never dreamed of an attempt to imitate what gave me so much pleasure." He then speaks of some successful metrical translations which he made at the High School; but in original rhyme he was less fortunate. "In short," says Sir Walter, "except the usual tribute to a mistress' eyebrow, which is the language of passion rather than poetry, I had not for ten years indulged the wish to couple so much as *love* and *dove*, when finding Lewis in

possession of so much reputation, and, conceiving that, if I fell behind him in poetical powers, I considerably exceeded him in general information, I suddenly took it into my head to attempt the style by which he had raised himself to fame." Sir Walter next hearing a striking passage from Mr. W. Taylor's translation of Bürger's *Leonore*, was induced to procure a copy of the original poem from Germany, and "the book had only been a few hours in my possession, when I found myself giving an animated account of the poem to a friend, and rashly added a promise to furnish a copy in English ballad verse. I well recollect that I began my task after supper, and finished it about daybreak the next morning, (it consists of 66 stanzas,) by which time the ideas which the task had a tendency to summon up, were rather of an uncomfortable character." This success encouraged Sir Walter to publish his translation of *Leonore* with that of *Der Wilde Jäger* (the Wild Huntsman,) in a thin quarto; but, other translations appearing at the same time, Sir Walter's adventure proved a dead loss: "and a great part of the edition was condemned to the service of the trunk-maker." This failure did not discourage Sir Walter; for, early in 1799 he published *Goetz of Berlichingen*, a tragedy, from the German of Goëthe. We thus see that Sir Walter did not conceal his obligation to Lewis, for his aid in his translations; but Lord Byron's assertion that Monk Lewis corrected Scott's verse, and that he understood little then of the mechanical part of it—is far from true, as a comparison of their productions warrants us to conclude.

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