

We are indebted to Peabody & Co. the American agents of the London Athenæum, for a highly interesting number of that journal, containing a biography of Sir Walter Scott, by Allan Cunningham, who, with Leigh Hunt, Hood, Hervey, the three Howitts, Miss Jowsbury, Charles Lamb, Leitch Ritchie, and other popular writers, is numbered among the contributors to that journal, considered the best literary, as the Spectator is the best miscellaneous weekly, in London. The following are extracts:

Sir Walter Scott could claim descent from a long line of martial ancestors. Through his father, whose name he bore, he reckoned kin with those great families who scarcely count the Duke of Buccleuch their head; and through his mother, Elizabeth Ruthven, he was connected with the warlike family of Swinton of Swinton, long known in the Scottish wars. His father was a Writer to the Signet, in Edinburgh, and much esteemed in his profession, but not otherwise remarkable: his mother had great natural talents, and was not only related to that lady who sung so sweetly of the 'Flowers of the Forest,' but was herself a poetess of taste and genius, and a lover of what her son calls "the art unteachable, untaught." She was acquainted with Allan Ramsay, and intimate with Blacklock, Beattie, and Burns. Sir Walter, the eldest of fourteen children, all of whom he survived, was born in Edinburgh, on the 15th of August, 1771. Before he was two years old, he received a fall out of the arms of a careless nurse, which injured his right foot, and rendered 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 grandame'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.

Scott is said to have been an indolent student; he says otherwise himself, and no one need doubt his assertion; indeed, his works of fiction are all more or less impressed with the stamp of law; and Gifford, the sarcastic editor of the *Quarterly Review*, made it a matter of reproach, that his plots were law pleas, and that he had too much of the Court of Session in his compositions. This was by way of requital for having drawn the critic's character in that of Sir Mungo Malagrowth, and, therefore, ought not to be considered as an objection of much weight. "The severe studies," Scott observes, "necessary to render me fit for my profession, occupied the great part of my time, and the society of my friends and companions, who were about to enter life along with me, filled up the interval with the usual amusements of young men. I was in a situation, which rendered serious labor indispensable; for neither possessing on the one hand, any of those peculiar advantages, which are supposed to favor a hasty advance in the profession of the law, nor being on the other hand exposed to unusual obstacles, to interrupt my progress, I might reasonably expect to succeed according to the greater or less degree of trouble which I should take to qualify myself as a pleader.

A work which has not the merit of originality laid the foundation of Sir Walter's fame: this was the 'Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border,' in three volumes; two of which contained genuine old ballads, and the third imitations; the whole illustrated with notes more valuable, and infinitely more amusing, than the ballads themselves; nor is it unworthy of remark, that they came from the press of Ballantyne at Kelso—a name since grown famous for beautiful type and elegant arrangement. It was received with universal approbation.

The first fruit of his defection from the weightier matters of the law, was the 'Lay of the Last Minstrel,'—a poem of such beauty and spirit, as more than justified his choice, had any one been disposed to censure him for forsaking "law's dry dusty arts," and entering into the service of the muse. The history of the rise and progress of this poem, the author has himself related. It chanced that the young Countess of Dalkeith came to the land of her husband; and as she was desirous of becoming acquainted with its customs and traditions, she found many willing to satisfy her curiosity; amongst others, Mr. Beattie, of Mickledele, who declared he had a memory for an old-world idle story, but none for

a sound evangelical sermon, was ready with his legends, and, with some others of a less remarkable kind, related the story of Gilpin Horner. "The young Countess," said Scott, "much delighted with the legend, and the gravity and full confidence with which it was told, enjoined it on me, as a task, to compose a ballad on the subject. Of course, to hear was to obey; and thus the goblin story, objected to by several critics, as an excrescence upon the poem, was, in fact, the occasion of its being written." How the goblin page could have been spared out of the poem, no critic took it upon him to say: his presence or his power pervades every part: much that is done in war or love is influenced by him; and we may as well require the sap to be taken out of a tree in spring, with the hope that it will live, as take away the page and the book of gramery: the interest of the poem depends, in short, upon the supernatural; and the supernatural was the belief of the times, of which the poet gives so true an image.

Having got a subject from the lips of a lady, the poet says, he took, for the model of his verse, the 'Christabel' of Coleridge, and immediately wrote several passages in that wild irregular measure, which he submitted to two friends of acknowledged taste: they shook their heads at verses composed on principles they had not been accustomed to: they looked upon these specimens as a desperate departure from the settled principles of taste, and as an insult to the established maxims of the learned and the critical. They made a full pause at the startling line—

Jesu Maria, shield us well!

took up their hats, and went on their way. It appeared, however, that on their road home they considered the matter ripely, and concluded that, tho' both the subject and manner of verse were much out of the common way, it would be best for the poet to go on with the composition. Thus cheered, the task proceeded; but the author, still doubtful, or perhaps willing, like Pope, to soothe the churlish criticism, submitted it to Mr. Jeffrey, who had been for some time distinguished for critical talent; the plan and verse met his approbation; and now, says Scott, "the poem, being once licensed by the critics as fit for the market, was soon finished, proceeding at the rate of about a canto a week. It was finally published in 1805, and may be regarded as the first work in which the writer, who has been since so voluminous, laid his claim to be considered as an original writer."

To conceal the hand that penned so rapidly these charming fictions, (the *Waverly Novels*,) Scott still openly kept the field as an author, and not only wrote a poem on the battle of Waterloo, but a prose account of that memorable strife, which far exceeds the description he afterwards inserted in his 'Life of Napoleon.' The poem, though full of the whirlwind of battle, and vivid and animated in an extreme degree, met with a sharp reception from the critics;—not so Paul's prose relation which coming without a name, and evidently the work of one who had made inquiries among the chief officers, and mastered all the incidents and localities of Waterloo, was greeted with much cheering and many welcomes. During this busy period all writers seemed busy save Scott:—to those friends who visited him he was seldom invisible. He performed the duties of a friend to his friends—of father to his children—of a master to his household—and of a sheriff to the county—soothing differences and healing discord; and did not at all appear oppressed with these duties: he still was at leisure, and found time to arrange and publish the Poems of Anna Seward, the Life and Works of Swift, Lord Somers's Tracts, Sir Ralph Sadler's State Papers, and the Border Antiquities of England and Scotland. All this strengthened the arguments of those—and they were many—who refused to believe that he was the author of the *Waverly Novels*. Several persons, to whom, either in seriousness or derision, they were attributed, put on a look of reserve and mystery, and talking in the manner of men embarrassed by a secret of which they dread the discovery. All this must have been amusing in a high degree to such a man as Scott, who had an eye and an ear for the ridiculous, and could enjoy the absurdities of his friends and acquaintances without seeming moved.

I have said that Pitt and Fox smiled on the minstrel and his works; the former, it appears, expressed a desire to William Dundas to be of service to the poet; and the situation of a principal clerk in the Court of Session having been pointed out as likely to be soon vacant, arrangements were made by which the incumbent was permitted to retire on his full salary, the poet performing the duty gratis till death should render it no longer necessary. Pitt

died before he could sanction this arrangement, tho' the commission lay in the office ready for the signature of His Majesty. What was left undone by Pitt was fulfilled by his successor, Fox, for Earl Spencer, in the handsomest manner, gave directions that all should be completed as Pitt had planned. For five or six years the poet labored without recompense; at last all obstacles were removed, and he obtained the emoluments of his situation. For these marks of ministerial kindness, Whig and Tory, Scott speaks with the most humble thankfulness; he was certainly the best judge, at least, of his own feelings, but when we consider that the Court of Session requires such services, and that the places are filled up with men who cannot have a tithe of his talent, our admiration of government patronage will be lessened.

It was with the advice of Erskine, that, in 1796, he published a poem called 'The Chase,' and the ballad of 'William and Helen' from the German. "In this little work, (says a northern authority,) indications were to be found of that leaning towards romantic incident and parade of chivalry, which has since characterized Mr. Scott's greater works, and given a new tone to the public feeling in matters of poetry." In 1799 he published 'Goetz of Berlinghen,' from the German of Goethe. None of these productions was of such moment as to carry his name beyond the circle of his more immediate acquaintances: the German literature, with many brilliant things from nature, is too startling and grotesque, though sobered down by the taste of such excellent translators as Carlyle, Lord Francis Gower, and Coleridge. Even the two fine ballads of 'Glenfinlas,' and the 'Eve of St. John,' were thought to have a touch too much of the German spirit.

It was thought the author wished to show that high life had its miseries too, when he wrote the 'Bride of Lammermoor.' There is an air of sadness shed largely over this whole composition: though we dislike the touchy haughtiness of Ravenswood, we give him our sympathy largely, as the last of his race, and one whose fate has been settled by prophesy before, as the witch-wife said, "the sark gaed o'er his head." There is a poetic, a tragic grandeur about the romantic, which lifts it high into the regions of imagination: the approaching fate of the Master is shadowed out in almost every page; the croaking of the old crenes; the conversation with John Mortsheugh,—it is needless to particularize more—all indicate coming destruction. With the exception of 'Kenilworth,' it is the most melancholy of all the works of Scott. The scene is laid on property belonging to the family of Hall; and I was present when Captain Basil Hall purchased sixty-one pages of the original manuscript for fourteen guineas: it is generally known that the outline of the story is true: and that this great domestic tragedy was wrought in a family of respectability and name.

When I went to Sir Walter's residence in Piccadilly, I had much of the same palpitation of heart which Boswell experienced when introduced to Johnson: he welcomed me with both hands, and with such kind and complimentary words, that confusion and fear alike fled. He turned the conversation upon song, and said, he had long wished to know me, on account of some songs which were reckoned old, but which he were assured were mine; "at all events," said he, "they are not old—but are far too good to be old: I dare say you know what songs I mean." I was now much embarrassed; I never owned the songs nor denied them, but said, I hoped to see him soon again, for that if he were willing to sit, my friend, Mr. Chantrey, was anxious to make his bust—as a memorial, to preserve in his collection, of the author of 'Marmion.' To this he consented. While Sir Walter remained in London, we had several conversations, and I was glad to see that he was sometimes pleased with what I said, as well as with what I did. So much was he sought after while he sat to Chantrey, that strangers begged leave to stand in the sculptor's galleries, to see him as he went in and out. The bust was at last finished in marble; the sculptor labored most anxiously, and I never saw him work more successfully: in one long sitting of three hours he chiselled the whole face over, communicating to it the grave humor and comic penetration for which the original was so remarkable. This fine work is now in Abbotsford, with an inscription, saying, it is a present to Sir Walter Scott from Francis Chantrey;—I hope it will never be elsewhere.

*Death of Andrea, Husband of Queen Joanna of Naples.*—On the night of the 18th September was perpetrated the crime of which, from the manner of