

Walter Scott, His life and Personality by Hesketh Pearson.

One of the most interesting developments in literature during the twentieth Century has been the writing of biography. Those of us who are a little older can remember the dull books, usually running to two volumes, describing the lives of the great, and including quantities of their long letters. Often these books spoke only praise of their subjects, suppressing any unpleasant traits, leaving out important details, if they did not conform to the idea of the hero..indeed often making the man described a wooden creature, much less human than the people we know.

Fortunately, during the last thirty years, this has been changed. One of the people, who had the greatest influence in re-making, so to speak, biography was an English scholar, Lytton Strachey, who began to publish just before the beginning of the First World War. He ~~began~~ <sup>started</sup> began by writing short biographies of French authors, with whose work he was very familiar and he went on to full length biographies. These were so excellent that the people he wrote about seemed to live before our eyes. He was not afraid to show up weaknesses in his subjects, to let us know that those, who acquired fame, were human like ourselves..in fact his biographical writing was revolutionary.

He had many imitators, ...imitators who had much less learning than he, and who went to the extreme of "debunking"

as we say those who in the past had been held up as tremendous heroes. A great deal of poor biography was written ...also another development came in its train...the dramatized biography that tried to read like a novel, which seems false from beginning to end. But in spite of all this, genuine and brilliant biographers have emerged and today we are fortunate enough to find most lifelike and excellent portraits of figures of the past in every branch of achievement.

When all is said and done, it seems to me, there is no more satisfying book to read than a good biography. All of us pass through the world in the same way...to read of the manner in which others, possibly more, or less, fortunate than ourselves have faced the joys and sorrows, crises and difficulties of life, has a fascination always new, always intriguing. We can find comfort in reading of difficulties overcome with courage, a sense of companionship with men and women, who have had sorrows like our own, and inspiration in watching the development of genius or talent or other achievement worthy of praise.

Today there are several excellent writers of biography both in England and in America. The author of the book I wish to review is Hesketh Pearson, an Englishman. He has written the lives of Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw and Benjamin Disraeli. Recently this book on the Life and Personality of Walter Scott has come from his pen. Earlier bio-

biographies of Scott have been written. The first was by his son-in-law, John Lockhart, but it is extremely long and old fashioned. The first edition was in 10 volumes though an abbreviation (long enough) was made later. John Buchan, a Scotsman and a great admirer of Scott, has written a good biography but it seems to me none has been so well rounded and vivid as the book I am to review today.

It might be asked why I should choose this subject. There are several reasons, but perhaps two will suffice to mention. One <sup>is</sup> ~~of that~~ Walter Scott, in the writing of living historical novels, gave a turn to the history of English Literature and had <sup>tremendous</sup> ~~an~~ influence on all western writing; and his poems reflect the romantic taste~~s~~ of his time. The other is that he was a noble creature and lived a virtuous, honorable life which is an inspiration to read about. To quote a sentence from this book: " There is no writer in history in whom brotherliness, generosity and catholicity were conjoined as they were in Scott." the author might have added modesty and boyish enthusiasm.

In order to appreciate the story of the life of Walter Scott, we must put ourselves back into the 18th century. We must remember that he was born in 1771, before the American or the French Revolution, in a time when travelling was very slow, when England and Scotland seemed much more separated than they are now, when there were great contrasts between

rich and poor when <sup>i</sup>most of his adult life there was war and misery on the continent, and Europe was <sup>r</sup>dominated by the devastation of the Napoleonic wars. He <sup>r</sup>lived in the reigns of Geo. III, Geo. IV, William IV and he died before Victoria became queen. It was a time of great changes and the beginnings of the industrial revolution.

His father was a Scots lawyer and held an office under the government. Walter, himself, was born in Edinburgh and lived a good part of his life there. When he was a small child of 18 months, he had an attack of polio, which resulted in the paralysis of his right leg. He took a long time, in consequence, to learn to walk and he was lame all his life. This never made him bitter or despondent and when he had fully grown, he enjoyed the most robust health and was able to endure a vigorous outdoor life. But as a child he was weak. His parents were clever enough to send him to grandparents in the country...in the Border country, between England and Scotland that became the beloved scene of so many of his poems and stories...and there he found not only affection from <sup>r</sup>grandfather, aunts and uncles, but an interest in country stories that intrigued him all his life.

When he was in his teens he went to a High School in Edinburgh where he was not very happy, but later he went to another school in Kelso, near Edinburgh <sup>r</sup>which he liked better. Later again he attended Edinburgh <sup>r</sup>University. While he was there he was high-spirited and made friends

easily, absorbed his learning without difficulty. His father wanted him to study law and he did so and was admitted to the Bar when he was 21, but his real heart wasn't in it. His interests from his earliest days had been the romantic ballads and the ancient history of Scotland and the Border Country, particularly the old songs of the wars with the English and the feudal fights between the rival clans and these he was continually collecting, investigating and enjoying. He would like to have been an officer in the army but, alas, his lameness prevented this. However, later on, when fear of invasion by Napoleon was current, he joined enthusiastically a cavalry regiment of defense, was made quartermaster, took part in drills and practice skirmishes, all of which he thoroughly enjoyed. He could ride easily and spent many hours on horseback.

After an unfortunate engagement when his fiancée suddenly married another man, which Scott found a great blow, he was very happily married to a lady of French extraction, Charlotte Carpenter. She and her mother, father and brother had escaped from the French Revolution and taken refuge in Scotland. She was vivacious in the French manner and her English speech was tinged with Gallicisms, but she made a happy home for her husband and their four children, 2 sons and 2 daughters, Walter and Charles, Sophia and Anne. Indeed in his relations to his children we see Walter Scott at his kindest and best.

<sup>He</sup> (Walter Scott) practised as a barrister and in the course of time was made Clerk of the Sessions and Sheriff of Selkirk, which meant that for four months of the year he attended the courts in Edinburgh...but the rest of the time his life was spent in the country. At first he lived in a country house called Ashetiel and there he surrounded himself with his dogs and his horses and his friends.

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Always his bent was a literary one, but he loved to ride far afield with friends, meet shepherds and old farmers in the glens and vales of the Border country and gather old ballads from them. He was in love with the history of his country. It occurred to him to collect these ballads in a book. In 1802 the first of three volumes appeared which he had collected, called The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border.

When these proved very successful Scott wondered if he couldn't write an old ballad himself in the ancient manner, like those that had been sung by the minstrels of other days. The result was The Lay of the Last Minstrel, his first long poem. This was followed quickly by Marmion and then his famous The Lady of the Lake. It is difficult for us today to understand the tremendous success that these long narrative poems had. He was acclaimed a leading poet, called to London where he met the great, was greeted by the Prince Regent, read aloud from his works to the unfortunate Queen Caroline and was praised on all hands. His poems were full

of the kind of thing very much in vogue in those days... battle scenes, ghosts, spells cast by strange spirits, haunted chambers, and the wild scenery of glen and mountain. Quotations from the poems of Walter Scott became common coinage... and indeed has not much of it persisted to our own day? Every schoolboy is familiar with the opening lines of the Sixth Canto of the Waverley of the Last Minstrel:

"Breathes there a man with soul so dead  
 Who never to himself has said  
 This is my own, my native land.  
 Whose heart hath ne'er within him burned  
 As home his footsteps he hath turned  
 From wondering on a foreign strand."

While Scott had been at school in Kelso, a town near Edinburgh, he had made friends with two brothers, James and John Ballantyne. They were interested in a paper called the Kelso Enquirer, when they grew older. They were anxious to become printers and publishers and Scott, out of friendship and because of his very good nature, decided to become a secret partner of their enterprise. He was beginning to make good money from his poems as well as other critical writing, he was full of good health and his mind was teeming with possible further projects, so he thought this enterprise would be a good venture. But it led at last to his undoing. The Ballantynes were pleasant enough as friends, but they were utterly without a business sense. John, especially, was the most amusing companion, who charmed Scott with his humor and his stories, but he was careless, unpunctual, if not really dishonest. Scott sank a great deal of money in this business.

The brothers moved to Edinburgh and their schemes resulted in more losses even than their carelessness produced, by the fact that Scott often wanted to help struggling young writers, so he would suggest that the Ballantynes in conjunction with Constable, publish their work. It was often very poor and the consequence was a dead loss. The whole enterprise covered a great number of years and Scott himself did not insist on examining the business sufficiently, till, later on, it was ruined beyond repair. But this was still far in the future.

Today Scott is remembered as the author of wonderful historical novels. The writing of the first is an interesting story. Shortly after he had written his first successful poems, he thought he could tell a story in prose about his beloved Scotland and he began Waverley, his first novel, and then forgot it and put it away in a drawer. Several years later, one day he was looking for some fishing tackle and came upon the MS in the drawer with fish hooks and such. He took it out, reread it, saw its possibilities and finished it. By this time he had also come to the conclusion that much as he enjoyed writing poetry, a new poet had arisen, Lord Byron, whose Childe Harold had taken the country by storm. You will remember that this was the poem about which it was said Byron woke to find himself famous. The legend is that Scott felt he could not compete with so gifted a poet, though he had the most generous feeling towards Byron and met him on several occasions.



Waverley was published anonymously. It was from the first a great success. The author, being a landowner and a gentleman thought novel writing was not quite "the thing"; besides he rather liked a mystery and so for a time he remained anonymous and had all the world guessing as to who this successful story-teller was. Waverley was published in 1814 when Scott was 43, It was quickly followed by Guy Mannering advertised as by the author of Waverley...Hence we have the expression The Waverley Novels. Waverley started the 19th century romantic movement in fiction and with its successors changed the direction of imaginative literature in every civilised country.

He was now beginning to make a great deal of money and his dear ambition was to found a family estate for himself and his children's children. He therefore bought on the banks of the River Tweed a large piece of land not far from Melrose Abbey. He then began a labor of love which was to build on to a building already there, to reconstruct and enlarge until he had completed the famous Abbotsford, which everyone knows as the grand seat of Sir Walter Scott.

By this time he had been made Sheriff of Selkirk but even so he was able to spend many hours at his desk, turning out one novel after another, one story after another. His energy and industry were tremendous. There is no point in listing all his works, but let me mention twelve, many names of which you will find familiar: The Antiquary, Old

Mortality, Rob Roy, The Bride of Lammermoor, Ivanhoe, The Monastery, the Abbot, Kenilworth, The Pirate, The Fortunes of Nigel, the Talisman, Quentin Durward...and so on and so on. His duties as a Sheriff and his writings brought him in a good deal of money and this he spent lavishly on the construction and embellishment of Abbotsford. When the house was completed, he loved inviting as many as twenty or thirty guests to visit him at a time. He filled his halls and stately rooms with pictures and armory, shields and swords on pannelled walls...Indeed his love of romance and history displayed itself in his country seat.

It is difficult for us to realise the popularity and the admiration that came to Scott as a consequence of his writings. His novels were translated into nearly all the European languages, people began to visit Scotland on holiday to view the places Scott had immortalized in his works...especially Lake Katrine, the lake of the Lady of the Lake. The Prince Regent, later George IVth, was so taken with his work as well as with his personality that after Scott had acted as host to the prince on his visit to Edinburgh, he wished to confer a title on the distinguished author and Scott was happy to receive a baronetcy, though in his usual way, he made light of the honor.

All this time he was not punctilious as he should have been in discovering the business side of Ballantyne and Co. It was going from bad to worse, owing to the careless-

ness of the two brothers. In 1821 John Ballantyne died. He left Scott 2000 pounds in his will but unfortunately he died so heavily in debt that his heirs never got a penny. The year 1825 was a disastrous one financially throughout England and Scotland and it was a shock to Scott to find that his publishers were in an insecure position. Generosity, trustfulness, indifference and improvidence were equally in Scott's nature and the combination resulted in catastrophe.

I cannot go into all the painful details of his ruin, but ruin it was. He determined, however, to repay as many of his debts as he could, so he wrote frantically and the efforts at last killed him. Life at its best had been for Sir Walter a pleasant dream; it suddenly became a nightmare. With his usual buoyancy he was at first as cheerful as he could be. The family had to retrench in every direction. Servants had to be dismissed but several refused to go. He had to sell the things in his Edinburgh house and he retired permanently to Abbotsford. Very shortly after this, his wife died and this added another burden to his sad heart. He did some travelling later with his daughter, Anne, to London and Paris. But his health began to decline in 1829 and it was suggested later that he take a long sea voyage. His son was attached to the British Legation in Naples and a frigate was put at Sir Walter's disposal by the Admiralty for the journey. His daughter Anne accompanied him. They visited Malta and Rome and came home across Europe.

But on his arrival home in August he was too ill to continue any work and in September 1832 he died.

Hesketh Pearson has given us a wonderfully clear and sympathetic picture of this remarkable man. <sup>One has a feeling that his biographer fell in love with his subject, so he proceeded.</sup> There are criticisms of course, for his novels had faults, many of which we know. He was unable to describe young love and many of his characters were rather wooden and his descriptions of scenery were too long. But his story-telling gifts outweigh his faults and his genius for bringing the past alive again was so extraordinary that he will always be considered the historical novelist par excellence. He is immensely wholesome, cheerful and genial, always on the side of the good, the true and the beautiful, yet capable of an artist's appreciation of eccentricity, comicality and sheer villainy. He was beyond any question, the note of genius.

The two outstanding characteristics of Scott were his <sup>e</sup>benignity and his humility. To illustrate the former let me tell you two stories:

Tom Purdie  
John Ballantyne's widow

Concerning his humility, he so much enjoyed writing that he could not understand why what he did caused such a stir. At one time he was offered the Poet Laureateship but <sup>he</sup> ~~in~~ said in reply that he already held one if not two offices under the crown and a third was too much. He suggested Southey be

given the honor and this was done.

An interesting description of his physical appearance is given by his biographer and this may help to make him live in your mind's eye.

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On Prince's Street in Edinburgh there is a magnificent statue of Sir Walter Scott, the most illustrious son of Scotland, whom all love to honor.

Here then very briefly is the story of Scott's life. Much has been left out..for it was a very rich life, full of great writing, many friends and many good works. Though most of us do not read Scott today and fashions have changed in books as they have in so many other directions, we cannot fail to understand his importance in the history of English Literature and we surely would like to salute his memory as that of a great and good man.

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