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English Literature for Schools

TALES OF A GRANDFATHER

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SIR WALTER SCOTT

TALES
OF A GRANDFATHER

Being the History of Scotland from
the earliest period to the battle
of Flodden in 1513

Edited with Introduction and Notes

by

P. GILES, M.A., LL.D (Abdn.)
Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge

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PREFATORY NOTE

THE present volume contains the complete text of Scott's *Tales of a Grandfather* to the battle of Flodden in 1513. As it was decided to include the notes added to the edition of 1836, the text of these has been verified, and the references given, where necessary, to later and more accessible editions of the authors quoted. In the notes at the end, a few corrections, called for by the fuller publication of Scottish records since Scott's time, have been made, and references given to the early Scottish sources whence the *Tales* were drawn. In these sources, most of which have been recently republished by the Scottish Text Society, a schoolmaster or an intelligent pupil will find not a few other tales scarcely inferior in interest or picturesqueness to those which Scott related to his little grandson. Anyone who will spend an hour or two in familiarising himself with the apparently uncouth spelling will soon discover that Pitscottie is an excellent storyteller, and that Barbour and Wyntoun write in a language much closer to English of the present day than is that of Chaucer or the author (or authors) of *Piers the Plowman*.

P. G.

7 January 1909

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Frontmatter
More information

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I	How Scotland and England came to be separate kingdoms	1
II	The Story of Macbeth	13
III	The Feudal System, and the Norman Conquest	26
IV	Malcolm Canmore to William the Lion . .	34
V	Alexander II, Alexander III and the Danish invasion	51
VI	Death of Alexander III and usurpation of Edward I	56
VII	The Story of Sir William Wallace . . .	66
VIII	The Rise of Robert the Bruce . . .	82
IX	The exploits of Douglas and Randolph . .	106
X	The battle of Bannockburn	121
XI	Exploits of the Scottish chiefs. Death of Robert the Bruce	130
XII	Of the Government of Scotland . . .	145
XIII	David II and the return of Baliol . . .	158

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CAMBRIDGE

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Edited with Introduction and Notes by P. Giles
Frontmatter
More information

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
XIV	Sieges and Tournaments	168
XV	Return, captivity, and death of David II .	178
XVI	Robert II. The battle of Otterburn . .	185
XVII	Robert III. Clan feuds. Capture of Prince James	194
XVIII	Regency of Albany. Return of James I .	204
XIX	Reign of James I	211
XX	James II and the Douglasses	221
XXI	Overthrow of the Douglasses. Death of James II	229
XXII	James III and his favourites	245
XXIII	Accession and marriage of James IV . .	266
XXIV	Battle of Flodden and death of James IV .	279

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INTRODUCTION

I. THE AUTHOR

THE story of Sir Walter Scott is so well known that it need not be dwelt upon at length. The fourth surviving child of Walter Scott, a Writer to the Signet or solicitor in Edinburgh, and of Anne Rutherford his wife, the author of the *Tales of a Grandfather* was born in 1771. As a child he was for a considerable time a cripple and unable to take part in the usual sports of boys. In the hope that an open air life would benefit him, he was sent to live with his grandfather at Sandyknowe, about five miles west of Kelso. Smailholm Tower where Scott later laid the scene of his *Eve of St John* is close by, and the whole countryside is full of legend. A hundred and thirty years ago the romantic tales of the freebooting chieftains of the Border clans were still told round the winter fire. The Scotts themselves belonged to a clan, many members of which had taken part in earlier times in raids upon "the auld enemy England," to drive 'a prey,' or to rescue a fellow-freebooter captured and imprisoned in Carlisle. Of such stories the little Walter could not hear enough. In fancy he lived amid battlefields and heroes' deeds, and in his manhood many of the incidents of his tales, both in prose and in verse, were drawn from generally believed tales of Border adventure.

As he grew up, his health became stronger. Though he was always lame, he became a fearless climber among the precipices of the Castle rock at Edinburgh, and later an untiring rider. School

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studies did not interest him and he made no great mark as a scholar. For a time he was taken into his father's office, but being dissatisfied with the work of a solicitor, he read for the Bar. He did not attend very closely to his professional studies. Long rambles in various parts of southern Scotland interested him much more, and his somewhat stern father was moved to say that he thought the best calling for Walter was to be a pedlar. Owing no doubt to his devotion to other pursuits, his progress at the Bar was slow. In 1799 he was appointed sheriff-depute of Selkirkshire and in 1806 was made a clerk of the Court of Session. These offices at first brought him in only a small income. In 1797 he married Charlotte Carpenter, the daughter of a French refugee. Desirous of adding to his income, Scott began to devote his leisure time to literature. He had no exalted notions as to the mission of the literary man; he wrote because he was interested and because money could be made by writing. He was resolved that literature should be his "staff, but not his crutch." He was steeped in the romances of the middle ages and in the legendary lore of his own country; consequently to write of these themes was for him an easy task. German was then a "newly discovered language," and his earliest experiments in literature were translations from the German, first of Bürger's romantic ballad *Lenore* (1796), next of Goethe's romantic drama *Götz von Berlichingen* (1798). The Ballads of Southern Scotland, which he had been collecting all his life, appeared in 1802 as the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. In Scott's time the duty of an editor of ballad poetry was more laxly interpreted than now, and it has been suspected that some of the best of the ballads in the *Minstrelsy* owed more to the editor than they did to tradition.

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Encouraged by his success Scott turned to original invention. In 1798–9 he had written some songs and ballads. In 1805 appeared the first of his romances in verse—*The Lay of the Last Minstrel*. This was followed by *Marmion* in 1808, *The Lady of the Lake* in 1810, *The Vision of Don Roderick* in 1811, *Rokeby* in 1812, *The Bridal of Triermain* in 1813, and *The Lord of the Isles* in 1815. Before then Scott's popularity as a poet, which was at first very great, had been eclipsed to a considerable extent by Byron. He therefore took up once more in 1813 a work which he had begun and laid aside in 1805 and resumed for a brief space in 1810. In 1814 this was published under the title of *Waverley*. It was the first of a long series of prose romances, which have made the name of Walter Scott famous in every quarter of the world. His fertility was extraordinary; besides a constant stream of original works, he occupied a considerable part of his time in editing the works of earlier authors and in writing articles for the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Quarterly Review*.

The ideal which Scott set before himself was to be a Border laird. "It had been," he says in the Introduction to *Rokeby* written in 1830, "It had been, though the gratification was long postponed, an early wish of mine to connect myself with my mother-earth, and prosecute those experiments by which a species of creative power is exercised over the face of nature." Literary success was important to him only as a means to this end. In 1811 he bought a farm on Tweedside between Melrose and Selkirk. It had the unpleasing name of *Clarty Hole*, but Scott rechristened it Abbotsford. He began to build a baronial mansion and to add field to field. He had been long collecting a fine library and a

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More information

museum of medieval armour and other antiquities, which found and still find a home at Abbotsford.

Scott seems to have thought that the pursuit of romantic literature might be regarded as incompatible with his professional duties as a lawyer. His income at the Bar had decreased when he became famous as a poet. The novels therefore were published anonymously, and though many persons guessed that Scott had a hand in them, it was not till February 1827 that he publicly avowed himself the sole author.

Another means to attain his end was his secret partnership in the printing business of John and James Ballantyne, his old schoolfellows. The Ballantynes were poor business men and the undertaking, which began in 1808, had involved Scott in difficulties as early as 1813—difficulties, indeed, which *Waverley* was resumed in order to relieve.

In 1820 Scott was made a Baronet, and had attained his first ambition. He had become a Border proprietor and had endowed a titled family. But his prosperity was not fated to last. The year 1825 was very disastrous for commercial houses generally. Among those who were ruined were the Ballantynes and the great publishing house of Constable, which had published many of the novels and with which Scott was also deeply involved. Scott found himself saddled with a debt of about £130,000.

Misfortune showed the inborn greatness of the man. He refused to declare himself bankrupt, but handed over his property to trustees to be administered for the behoof of his creditors, and began literally to write off this enormous debt. The tale of his labours during the next five years and of his marvellous success in his undertaking is as fine as anything in romance. As Scott himself said of a

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fine example of commercial honesty in similar circumstances: "This is a man to whom statues should be erected, and pilgrims should go to see him."

His *Journal*, which, with some breaks, records his history during the years of misfortune, till his hand was no longer able to hold the pen, inspires the reader with the deepest admiration for the unflinching fortitude and manly courage of its author. Bowed down by domestic sorrow as well as by financial disaster, this brave man never hesitated for a moment in his self-appointed task. He died in September 1832, the victim of overwork, while the task he had undertaken was still incomplete. Happily the new copyright act prolonged the interest of his family in his works, and in 1847 "the estate, as well as the house and its appendages, became at last unfettered."

Lady Scott had died at the time of his greatest troubles in 1826. Their family of two sons and two daughters survived him. His elder son died childless, the younger was never married. His younger daughter Anne died unmarried in 1833; the elder, Sophia, was married in 1820 to John Gibson Lockhart, whose *Life of Scott* is justly celebrated as one of the best biographies in the English language. Lockhart's grand-daughter, the Hon. Mrs Maxwell-Scott, and her children are now Scott's only surviving descendants.

Scott in his own lifetime had become a classic. Much criticism has been lavished upon the carelessness of his style—a defect arising partly from the speed with which his best works were written, partly from his indifference to literary finish—, much also because his works were not something that they never were intended to be. In some remarks made to a friend in the last year of his life Scott has expressed his own feeling about his works: "I have

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been perhaps the most voluminous author of the day; and it *is* a comfort to me to think that I have tried to unsettle no man's faith, to corrupt no man's principle, and that I have written nothing which on my deathbed I should wish blotted."

2. The Book

One of the greatest tasks which Scott undertook in the interest of his creditors was a life of Napoleon Bonaparte, on which he toiled for two years, finding it, as he wrote to a friend, an absolute millstone about his neck, not permitting him to think his own thoughts, to work his own work, or to write his own letters. Before it was altogether finished Scott wrote in his *Journal* on May 24, 1827: "A good thought came into my head: to write stories for little Johnnie Lockhart from the History of Scotland, like those taken from the History of England. I will not write mine quite so simply as Croker has done. I am persuaded both children and the lower class of readers hate books which are written *down* to their capacity, and love those that are more composed for their elders and betters. I will make, if possible, a book that a child will understand, yet a man will feel some temptation to peruse should he chance to take it up. It will require, however, a simplicity of style not quite my own. The grand and interesting consists in ideas, not in words."

The little Johnnie Lockhart for whom the stories were intended was John Hugh Lockhart, Scott's little grandson, at this time six years old. The child was prematurely brilliant in intellect, but weakly and crippled in body. He died before his grandfather, in December 1831. Scott was devoted to the boy, "that poor delicate child, so clever, so animated, yet holding by this earth with so fearfully slight a tenure," and the stories were told to him

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before they were put upon paper. Scott's memory was stored with the tales of the early poets and chroniclers of Scotland; he had but to select what he considered most suitable for the comprehension of his listener. The *Tales* were not meant to be a complete history, though they might well encourage the reading of history, even as the tales told at Sandyknowe had influenced Scott's whole career. James Ballantyne, who acted as critic before publication for most of Scott's works, complained first that the tales were too infantine, later that they were too historical. "He calls out for starch," writes Scott in his *Journal*, "and is afraid of his cravat being too stiff." But by July 26, 1827 the first volume was finished. On September 17 the second volume was begun and on the 23rd Scott records that it was nearly half finished. On September 27 he writes: "The morning was damp, dripping and unpleasant; so I even made a work of necessity, and set to the *Tales* like a dragon. I murdered McLellan of Bomby at 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. A wild world, my masters, this Scotland of ours must have been. No fear of want of interest; no lassitude in those days for want of work—

> For treason, d'ye see,
> Was to them a dish of tea,
> And murder bread and butter."

The last proofs of the First Series of three volumes were corrected on November 19 and the work appeared early in December. Though Scott's friends had been doubtful, the *Tales* had an immediate and a great success. "Their reception," says Lockhart, "was more rapturous than that of any of his works since *Ivanhoe*. He had solved for the first time the problem of narrating history, so

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as at once to excite and gratify the curiosity of youth, and please and instruct the wisest of mature minds. The popularity of the book has grown with every year that has since elapsed; it is equally prized in the library, the boudoir, the schoolroom, and the nursery; it is adopted as the happiest of manuals not only in Scotland, but wherever the English tongue is spoken; nay, it is to be seen in the hands of old and young all over the civilized world, and has, I have little doubt, extended the knowledge of Scottish history in quarters where little or no interest had ever before been awakened as to any other parts of that subject, except those immediately connected with Mary Stuart and the Chevalier."

Since these words were written, fashion in the study of history has changed, and more modern historians emphasise the importance of movements and make less of the importance of men of action. But probably Johnnie Lockhart's feelings have been shared by most readers of his age. So thoroughly in sympathy was he with the Middle Ages that, as Mr Andrew Lang tell us, "he dirked his brother (not seriously) with a pair of scissors." He also sent a message to his grandfather to say that "he very much dislikes the chapter on Civilisation, and it is his desire that you will never say anything more about it, for he dislikes it extremely." No historian has yet arisen who has been able to make constitutional problems either interesting or intelligible to the minds of children: to these action and men of action are the only important factors in history, and probably in no way could an enthusiasm for history be better inspired in the young than by the reading of Scott's *Tales of a Grandfather* supplemented by a selection of the *Border Ballads*, on which part at least of them is founded.

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