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John Gibson Lockhart
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Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott

As son-in-law and literary executor to Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), John Gibson Lockhart (1794–1854) was uniquely placed to produce a definitive biography of the great poet and novelist. First published in 1837–8, shortly after Scott's death, this celebrated seven-volume work is based on personal memories, correspondence, and Scott's autobiographical sketches. Wide-ranging in his purview, Lockhart is also detailed in his descriptions: the *Aberdeen Journal* of the day observed that the volumes trace Scott's life and literary efforts with 'the most minute distinctness'. Volume 7 covers the period from 1826 until Scott's death in 1832. This was perhaps the darkest chapter in Scott's life, during which his financial woes forced him to sell the copyright for the Waverley novels. This final volume also includes an appendix listing Scott's publications as well as an index of names.

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VOLUME 7

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MEMOIRS
OF THE LIFE
OF
SIR WALTER SCOTT, BART.

VOLUME THE SEVENTH.

MDCCCXXXVIII.

ROBERT CADELL, EDINBURGH.

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P R E F A C E.

London, February 10, 1838.

IN dismissing the last volume of this Work I have to apologize for some mistakes, which shall be corrected in the text, should it reach a second edition. I notice such as have been pointed out to me, but I am afraid very many more might be detected on a careful revision, and I shall be thankful for any suggestions on this head.

I find, from the evidence of documents kindly forwarded to me by my friend, Dr Macfarlane, Principal of the University of Glasgow, that the cause of the minister, M'Naught, in which Sir Walter Scott made his first appearance at the bar of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, was heard in May 1793, not 1795.

It appears, that another person alluded to in connexion with his early practice as a barrister, Mr Knox, killed accidentally in July, 1795, was not *door-keeper* to the Faculty of Advocates, but *bar-keeper* to the Court of

Session. These situations are not, it seems, held by individuals of exactly the same rank in society ; and a relation of the bar-keeper has favoured me with a conspectus of his pedigree ; which, however, I do not think it necessary to insert here.

I have received a letter from Kelso, complaining sharply of an extract from Sir Walter's MSS., in which (vol. I. p. 119) a lady, known to him in his youth, is described as having been seen by him afterwards in the situation of governess to a manufacturer's children in Paisley. For this mistake, if it was one, I cannot account.

I have been informed of my error in stating (vol. II. p. 2) that Francis, the eighth Lord Napier, had been a lord of the bedchamber. I had confounded him, it seems, with the late Earl of Morton, who succeeded him as Commissioner to the General Assembly. It also has been communicated to me, by more than one correspondent, that I must have relied too much on my own very early recollections, in mixing Lord Napier's name with a little story told in a note on the same page. It is said by an ancient gentlewoman, to whose accuracy I bow, that the real hero of that anecdote was another gentleman of the same name.

I regret having introduced (vol. II. p. 11) Mr Archi-

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bald Park, brother of the African traveller, as being a Sheriff's Officer of Selkirkshire; whereas, at the time when he gave Scott assistance in seizing a criminal, he was the tenant of an extensive farm on the Buccleuch estate, and had accidentally been riding with the Sheriff. —I am also sorry to find that the Scotch Judge, who so unfeelingly condemned an old acquaintance to death (vol. III. p. 342), was not Lord Braxfield, as stated by me, but a still more distinguished, or at least, celebrated person, “his yoke-fellow of the bench.” I can only say that, to the best of my recollection and belief, Sir Walter always told the story of his early friend, Braxfield.

Lastly, The Honourable Colonel Murray, who commanded the 18th hussars in 1821, assures me that the dissolution of that corps had no connexion whatever with certain trivial irregularities on which Sir Walter Scott gave advice and admonition to his son the Cornet (vol. V., ch. 3.) I thought I had sufficiently conveyed my belief that the rumours which reached Sir Walter, and called forth his paternal remarks, were grossly exaggerated; but I shall make my statement clearer, in case of the text being revised.

And now, as no other opportunity may be afforded me, I may as well say a few words on some of the general criticisms with which these volumes have been honoured while in the course of publication.

The criticisms have, of course, been contradictory on all points; but more seem to agree in censuring the length of the book, than as to any other topic either of blame or commendation. I suggest, in the first place, that if Scott really was a great man, and also a good man, his life deserves to be given in much detail; and that the object being to bring out the character, feelings, and manners of the man, this was likely to be effected better by letting him speak for himself, wherever I could, than by any elaborate process of distilling and concentrating the pith and essence into a formal continuous essay;—because on the former plan, the reader is really treated as a judge, who has the evidence led in his presence, in place of being presented merely with the statement of the counsel, which he might have both inclination and reason to receive with distrust. Let it be granted to me, that Scott belonged to the class of first-rate men, and I may very safely ask—who would be sorry to possess a biography of any such man of a former time in full and honest detail? If his greatness was a delusion, I grant that these Memoirs are vastly too copious; but had I not been one of those who consider it as a real substantial greatness, I should have been very unwilling to spend time on any record of it whatever.

And yet, even though Scott should not keep his high place in the estimation of future ages, it must always be allowed that he held one of the first in that of his own age—not in his own country alone, but all

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over the civilized world; that he mixed largely with the most eminent of his contemporaries, and observed keenly the events of a critical period—a period of great deeds, and, above all, of great changes;—and such being the case, I conceive it to be probable that, even supposing his poetry and novels to be comparatively little read a hundred or two hundred years hence, the student of history, and especially of manners, would not be sorry to have access to him “in his habit as he lived.” For my own part, I certainly should be exceedingly thankful if any one were to dig out of the dust of the Bodleian or the British Museum a detailed life, however unambitiously compiled, of any clever accomplished man who had access to the distinguished society of any interesting period in our annals. Nay, they must have been very lofty philosophers, indeed, who did not rejoice in the disinterring of Pepys’s Diary—the work of a vain, silly, transparent, coxcomb, without either solid talents or solid virtues, but still one who had rare opportunities of observation.

There is, however, one circumstance of very peculiar interest which, I venture to say, always must attach to Sir Walter Scott. Let him have been whatever else, he was admitted, by all the Scotchmen of his time, to be the most faithful portrayer of the national character and manners of his own country and he was (as he says of his Croftangry) “a Borderer between two ages”—that in which the Scotch still preserved the ancient impress of

thought, feeling, demeanour, and dialect, and that when whatever stamped them a separate distinct people was destined to be obliterated. The amalgamation of the sister countries on all points has already advanced far, and will soon be completed.

I have also considered it as my duty to keep in view what Sir Walter's own notions of biography were. He says, in an early letter to Miss Seward (vol. I. p. 374), "Biography loses all its interest with me, when the shades and lights of the principal character are not accurately and faithfully detailed. I can no more sympathize with a mere eulogist than I can with a ranting hero on the stage; and it unfortunately happens that some of our disrespect is apt, rather unjustly, to be transferred to the subject of the panegyric in the one case, and to poor Cato in the other." He has elsewhere smiled over Queen Elizabeth's famous admonition to Zuccherò, that she expected him to paint her without any shadows on the face. Walker flattered fine ladies, I daresay, as lavishly as Lawrence; but he knew Oliver Cromwell too well either to omit his wart, or cover it with a beauty-spot of court plaster. I despise—and Scott himself would have despised—the notion of painting a great and masculine character unfaithfully—of leaving out any thing essential to the preservation of the man as he was, which the limner finds it in his power to represent. There will be at best enough of omissions. Copy as you may, you can give neither life nor motion.

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With such sentiments I find it difficult to understand how many biographies are undertaken at all. It was my comfort and support in undertaking this, that I felt a perfect conviction from the beginning, that I should best please those to whom Scott's memory is dearest, by placing the truth, and the whole truth, before the reader. And, as far as regards them, I have not been disappointed.

At the same time, I consider myself bound not to accept all the praise which the openness of my revelations has brought me from some quarters, while others have complained of it, and condemned it. A little reflection might have suggested that the materials for the business part of Sir Walter's history could not be exclusively in the keeping of his executors. Had I been capable of meditating to mock the world, for purposes of my own, with an unfair and partial statement on that class of matters, I must have known that this could not be done, without giving such an impression of other dead persons as must necessarily induce their representatives to open their own cabinets for themselves. Moreover, I should have thought it might have occurred to any one that Scott and his associates in business lived and died in the midst of a keen and closely observant small society; and that even if all their executors had joined in a cunning attempt to disguise what really occurred, there are many men still alive in Edinburgh who could have effectually exposed any such juggle.

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As for the reclamations which have been put forth on the score that I have wilfully distorted the character and conduct of other men, for the purpose of raising Scott at their expense, I have already expressed my regret that my sense of duty to his memory should have extorted from me the particulars in question. If the complaining parties can produce documents to overthrow my statements—let them do so. But even then I should be entitled to ask, why those documents were kept back from me? I can most safely say, that while I have withheld many passages in Scott's letters and diaries that would have pained these gentlemen, I have scrupulously printed every line that bore favourably on their predecessors. Indeed, I am not aware that I have suppressed any thing, in the immense mass of MSS. at my disposal, which seemed to me likely to give unmixed pleasure to any one individual or family with whom Sir Walter Scott had any kind of connexion. I have been willing to gratify his friends. I assuredly have not availed myself of his remains for the purpose of gratifying any grudge or spleen of my own.

J. G. L.

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