

**CLARENDON PRESS
SERIES; SCOTT, LAY OF
THE LAST MINSTREL**

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SCOTT

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Clarendon Press Series

SCOTT

LAY OF THE LAST MINSTREL

EDITED

WITH PREFACE AND NOTES

BY

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EDITOR'S PREFACE.

SIR WALTER SCOTT made a great reputation by his metrical romances before he began to write romances in prose, and 'The Lay of the Last Minstrel,' published in 1805, when the author was in his thirty-fourth year, was the first of his metrical romances. It became more immediately and widely popular than any poem ever published before. It came upon the ear of the world like a strain from a long-forgotten instrument suddenly taken up by a natural master, and played with surpassing skill and spontaneous unaffected rapture. It was as if men had all of a sudden, while they were bent soberly over their every-day work, heard a flourish of trumpets and looked up in amazement to see before them a procession of strange and dazzling figures out of the past centuries,—mail-clad knights, courteous squires, hardy yeomen, fair ladies, bowmen, bloodhounds, impish dwarfs and wizards. The novel metre of the 'Lay' added to the charm of the novel matter. It was quick, lively, varied—a contrast to the solemn, majestic, monotonous measures used in the serious poetry of the eighteenth century. To complete the influence of the new poet, it so happened that his countrymen were in circumstances peculiarly disposing them to listen to him. England was then in a heroic mood. Napoleon was thundering at the gates. We were in the heat of a struggle for existence. Branksome Hall, with its warriors keeping watch day and night in complete mail, was a picturesque image of the England of 1805. Circumstances were thus favourable to the Minstrel's advent; but, indeed, a poem so full of fresh and vigorous action, and universally intelligible feeling, must have been popular in any age and any circumstances.

Commentary on a poem so simple, hearty, and energetic is not likely to be read, but, for the sake of the student, one may put together a few notes on its history and disputable points connected with its structure and relations to other literature.

I. THE INCEPTION OF THE POEM.

Scott has given a minute account of his beginnings as a poet, and of the boyish tastes, influences, and accidents that gradually led him on to the composition of the 'Lay.' The story is told with his customary frankness, humour, and absence of pretension in an *Essay on Imitations of the Ancient Ballad*, and an *Introduction to the Lay of the Last Minstrel*, both written in the spring of 1830 for a new edition of his works. Additional details are given in the fragment of autobiography printed at the beginning of Lockhart's 'Life.' The opening chapters of 'Waverley' may also be read to get an idea of Scott's boyhood; the account of Edward Waverley's education and his romantic aspirations is indirectly autobiographic, an idealised reflection of the novelist's own youth. We shall see that even Scott's direct autobiography was coloured by his literary habits and tastes, but I will state first what he tells us about himself, with any comment or amplification that may occur.

Scott definitely ascribes the awakening of his poetical ambition to a chance meeting with 'Monk' Lewis. 'Finding Lewis,' he says, '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 of poetry by which he had raised himself to fame.'

This was in 1795 or 1796, when Scott was a young man of twenty-four, recently admitted to the Scottish Bar, and not taking very kindly to the profession, although his father was a Writer to the Signet, or solicitor. Up to that time, apart from school exercises in verse, and 'the usual tribute to a mistress's eyebrow,' he had not, he says, 'indulged the wish to couple so much as *love* and *dove*.' But long before this he had been a devouring reader of poetry and fiction, and especially of ballads and romances. Among lovers of poetry throughout Great Britain a general interest in old ballads had been awakened by the publication of Percy's 'Reliques of Ancient Poetry' in 1765. The ballad was in fashion when Scott was a boy, and nowhere more in fashion than in his native town of Edinburgh, where collection after collection of old and new was published, and

Burns and a host of less celebrated contemporaries raised the taste for simple poetry to something like a passion. Circumstances combined with natural inclination to make Scott a specially ardent reader of ballads. His family belonged to the great ballad-district, the Scottish Borderland. Some of his own ancestors had furnished themes for the ballad-singer. He was the lineal descendant of a Border chief 'Wat' or Walter Scott of Harden, whose wife was celebrated in song as the Flower of Yarrow. (See 'Lay,' Canto iv.). The history of various families of the 'right honourable' clan to which he belonged had been 'gathered out of ancient chronicles, histories, and traditions of our fathers' in the seventeenth century by another Walter Scott, Scott of Satchells, 'an old souldier and no scholler, and one that can write nanè, but just the letters of his name.' Scott delighted to think of himself as the descendant of heroes 'of the persuasion and calling of Robin Hood and Little John.' From his earliest days his imagination was fed with stirring tales about the exploits of Border worthies, Wight Willie of Aikwood, Jamie Tellfer of the fair Dodhead, and so forth; and he had contracted such a passion for ballads at the age of thirteen that when Percy's collection first fell in his way, as he tells us himself in his autobiography, he became so absorbed in the book as to forget his dinner. 'The summer day sped onward so fast, that notwithstanding the sharp appetite of thirteen, I forgot the hour of dinner, was sought for with anxiety, and was still found entranced in my intellectual banquet.' When with this keen appetite for romantic story, Scott had devoured all that lay within his reach in English, he learnt French and Italian for the purpose of indulging it still farther, reading through Tressan's romances, the Bibliothèque Bleue, the Bibliothèque de Romans, Dante, Boiardo, and Pulci, and 'fastening like a tiger upon every collection of old songs which chance threw in his way.' Subsequently, his attention being drawn to the new romantic literature of Germany by Henry Mackenzie, author of the *Man of Feeling*, who lectured on the subject in Edinburgh in 1788, he learnt German sufficiently well to read Schiller and Goethe. To this introduction to German literature he attaches great importance in his account of his youthful progress in poetry.

He was thus ready to be awakened to a sense of his own