

**MEMORIES OF SIR
WALTER SCOTT**

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Memories of Sir Walter Scott by James Skene

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JAMES SKENE

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From the Picture by

SIR HENRY RABBITT, R.A.

James Keene

[Frontispiece]

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THE SKENE PAPERS

MEMORIES OF
SIR WALTER SCOTT

BY JAMES SKENE

EDITED BY BASIL THOMSON

WITH PORTRAIT

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PREFATORY NOTE

Eleven years we now may tell,
Since we have known each other well ;
Since, riding side by side, our hand
First drew the voluntary brand ;
And sure, through many a varied scene,
Unkindness never came between.

Marmion. Introduction to Canto iv.

JAMES SKENE of Rubislaw, near Aberdeen, was born on the 7th March 1775. His father, a brilliant but erratic young barrister, died the year after his birth, and he was left to the guardianship of his mother, the heiress of the Jacobite Moirs of Stoneywood, a woman of character and eccentricity, who shocked her contemporaries by such extravagances as making her annual journey to Edinburgh on horseback in a scarlet riding-habit. By the early death of his elder brother he inherited Rubislaw at the age of sixteen, and his mother then removed him from the High School at Edinburgh and set him to find his way alone to Hanau in Germany to complete his education—no small feat for a boy of sixteen in the year of the Revolution. Returning from Germany with a fluent knowledge of French and German, and a taste for German literature,

he applied himself to the study of law, and was admitted to the Scottish Bar in 1797. It was his acquaintance with contemporary German literature, as he himself narrates, which procured him an introduction to Sir Walter Scott, just then fired with the spirit of Bürger. The acquaintance soon ripened in the atmosphere of *camaraderie* that enveloped the Edinburgh Light Horse in which they both held commissions. The martial fever that possessed them at this period excited some ridicule among their fellow-advocates.

Skene's tastes were artistic and scientific rather than literary, and Scott, who considered him 'the first amateur draughtsman in Scotland,' had a high opinion of his talent. The pencil sketches and water-colour drawings that adorn the journals of his foreign travels are exquisitely finished, though the etchings he published of the 'Waverley Localities' scarcely do him justice. In the ballad-hunting expeditions in Ettrick Forest, which were an excuse for the wild 'cross-country riding that they both loved, Skene was seldom without his sketch-book.

'As thou with pencil, I with pen,
The features traced of hill and glen.'

At the peace of 1802 Skene took the road again. Landing at Calais he traversed Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and Italy in leisurely fashion. He was now twenty-seven, and, as he

frankly admits, it was the *Sentimental Journey* that inspired him to keep a journal of his travels, a habit which happily he was never able to shake off.

After exploring Sicily he returned slowly through France, where he had made many friends and acquired a local knowledge which was afterwards turned to account by his friend in *Quentin Durward*.

On his return he fell in love with Jane, the daughter of Sir William Forbes of Pitsligo. Before the date of the marriage was fixed, Sir William fell ill, and knowing that his end was near, he sent for Skene and insisted on the marriage being solemnised by his bedside that he might die happy.

'And such a lot, my Skene, was thine,
When thou of late wert doomed to twine,
Just when thy bridal hour was by,
The cypress with the myrtle tie.'

For the eight years following his marriage in 1806, Skene lived the life of a cultured country gentleman, in Kincardineshire and Edinburgh, paying frequent visits to Scott at Ashestiel, and meeting him daily in Edinburgh. In 1816 he returned to Edinburgh for the education of his children, and here he set himself, with Scott's help, to reorganise the literary and scientific societies, which had fallen on evil days. As Secretary to the Royal Society and Curator of its Library and Museum under Scott's presidency,

and as a member of the Antiquarian Society, he became keenly interested in antiquarian research, and later, as Secretary to the Board of Trustees and Manufactures, he did much for the promotion of the Fine Arts in Scotland. In 1820 he took his family to Aix-en-Provence for a prolonged sojourn, and there was born his seventh child, Felicia, known afterwards as the pioneer of the modern Prison Visitor. Of his other children the best known was his second son, William, Historiographer Royal for Scotland, and author of *Celtic Scotland*, who died in 1892 at the age of eighty-three.

On his return from France, Skene lived in Edinburgh, and from the time of Scott's financial ruin the intimacy between the two men seems to have become closer. It fell naturally to Skene to organise the national memorial to his dead friend. His papers of 1832 are full of letters from subscribers in remote parts of the earth.

His third son, my grandfather, who was quartered at Malta with his regiment, having made a romantic marriage with a daughter of Jacques Rizo-Rangabé, the head of an old Fanariot family in Athens, sold his commission and settled in Greece, and he sent home such a glowing picture of the climate that Skene set out with his whole family overland to pay him a visit. Under the glamour of his first few weeks in that enchanted country, he bought a considerable property and built a villa in which he lived for nearly eight years. Two of his daughters

married in the country. His journal and sketches of that period are of the highest interest. It was perhaps the happiest time of his life, but at length an acute nostalgia carried him back to England, and in 1844 he settled permanently at Frewen Hall, near Oxford, where he died in 1864, in his ninetieth year, his wife having preceded him by a few months.

He was a man of much industry and many accomplishments. He spoke French, German, and Italian fluently, and had more than a superficial knowledge of the science of his time. His writings fill many volumes of manuscript, and yet so great was his modesty that, beyond a few papers to the journals of scientific societies and a volume of etchings, he published nothing. His literary bent was too weak a plant to grow up under the shadow of a great tree. Had Scott belonged to another generation it is possible that Skene's wide experience and his keen observation would have brought him some measure of literary fame. This volume of recollections and letters was written for the purpose of preserving among his descendants the memory of his intimacy with Scott. He placed it freely at Lockhart's disposal, but he seems to have felt, and to have impressed the feeling on his sons, that to publish it without the permission of his dead friend would be an act of impropriety. The MS. was lent by his daughter to Mr. David Douglas when the famous journal was going through the press, and hence it comes that several