

# **REMINISCENCES OF SIR WALTER SCOTT**

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Reminiscences of Sir Walter Scott by John Gibson

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**JOHN GIBSON**

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SIR WALTER SCOTT**



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OF  
SIR WALTER SCOTT

BY  
JOHN GIBSON  
WRITER TO THE MONET

EDINBURGH  
ADAM AND CHARLES BLACK

1871.

## REMINISCENCES.

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Observing from the newspapers that it is intended to celebrate in some way or other the Centenary of the birth of Sir Walter Scott, it occurs to me that this is a fitting occasion for giving to the public some of my own reminiscences of this illustrious man, and a few, out of very many in my possession, of his letters which have not hitherto been printed. Mr. Lockhart's admirable life is so comprehensive and complete, that I believe very little more can be said of much general interest; but as I am now the only survivor of those who were intimately connected with Sir Walter's affairs during the last ten or twelve years of his life, and as I had more opportunities than any other person of observing the noble exertions he made for the benefit of those whom he had unwittingly involved in his misfortunes, I can, on these matters, speak with some authority, and I wish to say something

bearing rather on his moral worth than on his intellect and genius, before I also am called away, which cannot be a distant event. Should it be thought that, after all, what I narrate in these desultory notes is of small consequence, I can only plead that even trifles connected with the history of our modern Shakespeare cannot be altogether uninteresting.

My acquaintance with Sir Walter Scott commenced in the year 1822, though I had occasionally met him previously. At that time, owing to the infirm health of my friend and old master, Mr. Hay Donaldson, Writer to the Signet, the principal charge of his business devolved upon me, having then myself been a Writer to the Signet of three years' standing. Mr. Donaldson was one of Sir Walter's intimate friends, and enjoyed much of his confidence in most matters, though I doubt if he was ever made aware of Sir Walter's unfortunate connection with mercantile business, as being actually a partner in the house of James Ballantyne and Company, printers. At least he never mentioned it to me, and at Mr. Donaldson's death, in 1822, when I became Sir Walter's law-agent, and necessarily enjoyed a good deal of his confidence, the fact of his being so involved in business was unknown to me till the catastrophe

in January 1826, when concealment was no longer possible.

Mr. Donaldson was well acquainted with Sir Walter's mother, a sister of Dr. Daniel Rutherford, Professor of Botany in the University of Edinburgh, a lady of much intelligence, and to whom, I suppose, her son was indebted for his own mental superiority, in so far as genius and talent can be considered hereditary. Mr. Donaldson repeatedly mentioned to me circumstances connected with Sir Walter's early life which he had learned from his mother, and one of which occurs to me as so singular as to be worth repeating. When a young child, his nurse took him to Arthur's Seat, and under a maniacal impulse took with her a pair of scissors, with the intention of cutting the child's throat. Providentially her courage failed her, but when she returned she told what she had intended to do, and showed the scissors she had taken with her. It need not be added that care was taken she should never have another such opportunity.\*

In reference to Sir Walter's lameness, his mother, after he became eminent, used to speak

\* It did not occur to me till very lately, that this incident is referred to by Sir Walter Scott in his autobiography. He, however, makes the scene not Arthur Seat, but the crags at Smallholm; and, of course, his must be the correct account.



of his infirmity as a *blessing*, adding, that but for it he would have been a soldier, and would in all probability have fallen in battle.

On the death of Mr. Donaldson I received a very kind letter from Sir Walter, continuing his law business under my charge, and adding, "I expect Major —— in eight or ten days. Perhaps you would not think it too much trouble to begin our personal acquaintance by a visit to this place when that gentleman comes here, and we can then better settle what is to be done in the matter.

"I begin to think that I cannot do better than pursue a sale of my tains next Session, for grain will scarce ever, if produced at all, be cheaper than this year.—I am, dear Sir, your obedient servant,  
WALTER SCOTT.

"ABBOTSFORD, 12<sup>th</sup> October 1822."

In consequence of the invitation in the above letter, I paid my first visit to Abbotsford in the early part of November 1822. When I arrived Sir Walter was out of doors, walking in his woods, and I was put into his business room, where I found his table covered with books, some of which I saw referred to the Isle of Man. From this it was natural to conjecture that the next tale would

refer to that island, and accordingly the next was "Peveril of the Peak." It is needless to say that this visit to me was most interesting, and Sir Walter's manner very kind. Several friends were residing in the house, all of whom, with Sir Walter's own family, have now, alas ! passed away. Mrs. Lockhart sung such old ballads as her father wished, accompanying them on the harp, and a gentleman, with great spirit, and to Sir Walter's great gratification, sung, "Blue bonnets over the Border." The whole evening passed off pleasantly, but quietly, as befitting a domestic party, the conversation being every now and then enlivened by one of Sir Walter's innumerable stories.

I had not at this time been distinctly informed that Sir Walter was the author of all the Waverley Novels, but, like most people not in the secret, was always satisfied with the argument, who else could it be? When "Peveril of the Peak" appeared, a copy was handed into my house with the words, "From the Author" on the fly-leaf, but not in Sir Walter's own handwriting; and in like manner a copy of every succeeding work was sent me with the same inscription. This, of course, would have settled the question with me, even if I had previously had any doubt, which I had not. So long as the authorship was not expressly avowed,

I felt a delicacy in thanking Sir Walter for his kindness, but after it became necessary to state the authorship publicly, I took an opportunity of thanking him, when he told me that it had always been his custom to give his publisher a list of the parties to whom he wished copies sent, and added, "The list was always headed by our Royal Master."

In reference to the supposed authorship of the novels before it was made public, it was often remarked as a proof that they were all Sir Walter's, that he was never known to refer to them, though they were the constant topic of conversation in every company at the time. I recollect, however, one striking instance to the contrary. In the month of January 1821, a dinner was given in the Waterloo Rooms, Edinburgh, to a large party of gentlemen—I think about forty—to celebrate the serving Heir, as it is called in Scotland, of a young gentleman to the large estates of his ancestors. Sir Walter having been Chancellor of the Inquest, also presided at the dinner, and after the usual toasts on such occasions, he rose, and, with a smiling face, spoke to the following effect:—"Gentlemen—I daresay you have all read of a man called Dandie Dinmont, and his dogs. He had old Pepper and old Mustard, and young Pepper and young Mustard, and little Pepper and