

**LIFE OF SIR
WALTER SCOTT**

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Life of Sir Walter Scott by Francis Turner Palgrave

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FRANCIS TURNER PALGRAVE

**LIFE OF SIR
WALTER SCOTT**



SIR WALTER SCOTT, BART

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A Centennial Offering.

1771—1871.

L I F E

—OF—

Sir Walter Scott; 1

WITH REMARKS UPON HIS WRITINGS,

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FRANCIS TURNER PALGRAVE. 24 - 1871

WITH AN ESSAY ON SCOTT,

BY DAVID MASSON, M.A.

AND

DRYBURGH ABBEY: A POEM.

BY CHARLES SWAIN.

1801—1874.

PHILADELPHIA:
PORTER & COATES.

1871.

SIR WALTER SCOTT.

WITHIN that small number of our countrymen who have been known and admired throughout the civilized world during this century, three hold a place of unrivalled pre-eminence,—Wellington, Scott, and Byron. Each of the three kingdoms claims one of these heroes; but although Ireland and England may also point to something distinguishably national in the genius of their sons, yet it will not be disputed that Scotland is far more exclusively and fully represented by Marmion and the Heart of Midlothian, than the spirit of England by Childe Harold, or that of Ireland by the Peninsular campaigns. We read in the early ages of the world how whole nations sprang from, and were known by the name of some one great chief, to whom a more than human rank was assigned by the poetry and the gratitude of later generations. Doris and Ionia were personified in Ion and Dorus. It appears not altogether fanciful to think similarly of Scott: in the phrase employed by the historians of Greece, he might be styled the *eponymous hero* of Scotland. He sums up, or seems to sum up, in the most conspicuous manner, those leading qualities in which his countrymen, at least his countrymen of old, differ from their fellow Britons. No one human being can, however, be completely the representative man of his race, and some points may be observed in Scott which do not altogether reflect the national image. Yet, on the whole, Mr. Carlyle's estimate will probably be accepted as the truth: "No Scotchman of his time was more entirely Scotch than Walter Scott; the good

and the not so good, which all Scotchmen inherit, ran through every fibre of him."

The first and best reason for attempting the sketch of a poet's life is to throw light upon his poetry. In the case of Scott, whose verse forms only the earlier half of his writings, such a sketch would in strictness end with his forty-fifth year. It would be unpleasant, however, to break off thus: and the story of his career, even if he had not been author of "Marmion" and "Old Mortality," is in itself one of the most interesting which we possess. An eminently good and noble-hearted man, tried by almost equal extremes of fortune, and victorious over both,—the life of Scott would be a tragic drama in the fullest sense, moving and teaching us at once through pity, and love, and terror, even if he had not also, in many ways, deserved the title of greatness. The aim of these pages will hence be to present a biography, complete in its main points, and including some remarks on Scott's position as a writer, which the accompanying narrative will, it is hoped, render easily intelligible.

Scott's life may be conveniently divided into three periods: that of the child and the youth who had not yet found where his strength lay (1771-1799): that of his poetry, whether edited and translated by him, or original (1799-1814): that of his novels, his wealth and his poverty (1814-1832). The time when his powers were fully matured, and his happiest years, would lie about midway across the second and third of these periods; for the full "flower of his life" was fugitive in proportion to its brilliancy. A perceptible air of unity marks the lives of most poets. The character and circumstances of Scott, on the contrary, present a crowd of singular contrasts; there is a deep underlying harmony, which it is the main object of

this sketch to trace, but at first sight he is a strikingly complex creature; the number of antitheses about him, which aid in making him so representative a Scotchman, is the first and one of the main points which the reader should bear in mind. An antithesis of this kind meets us at once in the story; indeed, preceding the poet's birth, it exercised perhaps the most marked influence amongst the circumstances which moulded his career. Both in its position and its traditions, his family was eminently typical of much that we associate with his country. Though a solicitor of moderate means, at a time when the profession had not won its way to a liberal standing in popular estimation, Scott's father, also Walter, reckoned socially as of "gentle blood," in virtue less of his high character than of his Border descent, which was traced through the Scotts of Harden to the main stem (now holding the dual honors of Buccleuch), in the fourteenth century. The coarse plundering life of this and other clans, whose restlessness and roving warfare were long the misfortune and misery of the "Marches," has received from Scott all the tints which poetry could throw over an age softened by distance; the romance which it had in his eyes may have been increased by the curious resemblance which the energetic anarchy of the Border families establishes between them and the clans, more correctly so called, of the Highlands; yet, if we turn from ballads to the actual story of the frontier raids, it is that common tale of unholy ravage and murder which rather deserved the curse, than the consecration of poetry. Remark also that the forays, so dear in the poet's eyes, do not belong to the warfare for the independence of Scotland; that they had very little political coloring, and were, in fact, picturesque fragments of a barbar-

ous time maintained long after date, through the mutual jealousy of the two neighbor kingdoms. They exhibit the law of hand against the law of head; or, again, from a more poetical point of view, they may be regarded as bold protests in favor of individuality, against the monotonizing character of civilized and peaceful existence. Like much that we shall have to note in Scott's own career, the border clans were, in a certain sense, practical anachronisms, whose very likeness to the wild Highlanders of the north placed them in striking contrast to the love of law and peaceful thrift which lies deep in the Scottish nature, and, until a few years before Scott's birth, led the Lowlanders to regard their Celtic fellow-countrymen with a contempt and hatred, in effacing which it was the noble mission of his own genius to be the main instrument.

These family details are here dwelt on, because they bear upon that quality which is peculiar to Scott's genius, and makes at once its strength and its weakness. It would be difficult to name another instance of a mind so habitually balanced between the real and the unreal. There have been those who had, for example, a stronger grasp of past ages; but they have either comprehended them without regretting, as Hallam and Macaulay; or have distinctly preferred them and adopted their ways of thought. Poets, again, have manifested as great a power as Scott over the actual and the present, as Burns and Crabbe,—but they had no sympathy with the past: or have chosen their subjects in the past, as Dryden in his Fables, and Byron in his Plays,—but theirs was a simple poetical expedient, not a sympathetic revival of former times: or they have lived in an ideal world, as Shelley,—but then that world was their own creation, and entirely

absorbed them: or they have believed in and reproduced their own age, together with one long anterior, as Milton,—but then their older subject-matter was religion: or, in another way, as Shakespeare, they have recast all ages in their own mind; or were barely conscious of the difference between the ages, as Chaucer and Dante. But it will strike every reader how decidedly Scott's poetical conception of the past, and his relations to the present, differ from those just enumerated. As a child of the critical eighteenth century, and the son of a shrewd Scotch solicitor, Scott was, on one side, a born skeptic in romance, the Middle Ages, and Jacobitism,—as a cadet of the Scotts of Harden, and a man of the strongest imaginative temperament, he was likewise a born believer. Now, not only his writings, which in the strictest sense reproduce himself, but his life and character, present a continual half-conscious attempt at a real and practical compromise between these opposing elements. In the details, what struck his contemporaries was plain but genial common sense; in the whole, what strikes the later student is the predominance of the poetical impulse. Whilst the peculiar blending of the elements is what gives Scott his place in our literature, and renders him singularly interesting as a man, it cannot be concealed that it carried certain weaknesses with it: he had *les défauts de ses qualités*. And in this compromise between past and present, romance and prose, which he attempted, beside that great and long-continued error which ruined his worldly prosperity, and dispossessed him of the castle of his dreams, one may note some minor inconsistencies, which have exposed him to censure from those who did not observe the peculiarity of his nature. Thus, although naturally one of the most independent of men, we find him treat-