

## THE LAIRD OF ABBOTSFORD\*

THIS is certainly the very type of biography Scott would most have desired. For him history was the clash of personalities, was a sustained human drama; he could only think of it as dynamic, moving, alive. While he was moved by ancient things, he had wit enough to know that ancient things were but relics of a living age; yet because of the living age they were descended from, he was content with relics. His imagination supplied all the life that had departed from them. Yet, curiously, his imagination seems to have needed a centre on which to focus. Clairvoyant as he was, he needed some personal belonging of the dead to be put in front of him before he could see him as once he was in his habit as a man. Hence he developed an overwhelming passion for collecting the flotsam of heroic ages; to Lady Scott it was a tiresome interference with the orderliness of house-keeping, to Sir Walter it was the central need for his creative power to set itself working. Out of it his memory, working under the spell of the contact, was roused to see and describe the man and his age. The long sword of Montrose was the most sacred object of the shrine of Abbotsford; it not only pleased Sir Walter to see it, but it actually moved him to understand Montrose. There was a curious earthliness about Sir Walter; he might weave romances in the air, but he wove them out of the solid materials of the earth. He was no Ariel, but compacted of the visible. His beginning was always in the visible, even when afterwards he danced off into the dainty ways of the Fairy Queen with Thomas the Rhymer. His very fairy Queen herself had tricks and habits that were not unlike some of the

\* *The Laird of Abbotsford*. By Dame Una Pope-Hennessy. (Putnam, 1932; 7/6 net.)

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personal idiosyncrasies of the friends he met : she, too, was of solid form and familiar guise.

Thus from the point of view of his novels there was hardly a character that appeared in them, whether their setting was ancient or modern, who was not recognisable amongst his acquaintances. Of course he did not merely describe them literally as they were, but in his descriptions of the characters of his books there was always enough by which his friends were able to recognise his circle. It was this fact that made so many of those who knew him absolutely certain that he was the author of the *Waverley Novels*, even when he most publicly denied it. In one of the prefaces he has described himself.

Even his poetry was no less built on facts. Sometimes he is autobiographical. Dame Una shows this to be especially true in the *Bridal of Triermain*, which, under her investigation, becomes for the first time a key to all that period of his life when he courted Charlotte, and to the immediate years that followed. Again, when in his poems and ballads he described the countryside, he did it so exactly that no traveller who visits it needs any other guide book than his poems to find his way about. Indeed, *Rokeby* was actually written with a guide book and a map spread before him on the table in the cave as he wrote. Thus deliberately he made imagination tributary to sight and memory; his ladder reached the heavens, but it stood solid on the earth.

Perhaps it may seem that such a literary need as this implies a lower gift in Walter Scott than the gifts of Shelley or Keats; and no doubt he was not of their stature. He was not as great as they, nor was his greatness shown in the same way. But he had greatness, none the less. He did inspire; he was himself inspired. To the age that read him, and was moved by him, the earth grew fairer because of what he had said

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about it. Like every artist he showed people the beauties they had looked at but never seen: 'Were it not for Scott, Greta and Tees might have gurgled out their lives with no audience than that of the local villagers and the gentry of the Hall. Scott has made a present of the place to the World.' In a larger way he taught his Scottish people to see their country against the background of their noble past. His mission was to inspire them and, indeed, all those about whose nation or district he wrote, to see their present as the result of a long chain of events, chivalrous and romantic, vicious and brutal, dainty and fair, and again to see it not as produced by the tendencies of our age or atmosphere or some involuntary and evolutionary progress, something impersonal and automatic; but as the achievement of human wills, of personal endeavour, often of deliberate design. He lived in the time when men believed in the power of the will to transform the world. Believing this, they did transform their world. Scott was one of the vigorous minds which helped forward this work of transformation. He worked through the spell of his romance, and his romance touched them because it was not winged and all in fairyland, but because it limped and dragged a little on the earth. It was at least as lame as he.

What made him almost unique in his generation was his apparent attraction for Catholic ages and ideals; though it must be remembered that he could appreciate his Scottish Covenanters more and the best of the Cromwellians no less than the monks and nuns and pieties of the medieval times. Thus even before the pens of the great patrons of Emancipation had begun to stir themselves, and long before the Tractarians, he had fearlessly shown the beauties of the older order of faith. He borrowed, it is true, from *Christabel* his haunting line: 'Jesu Maria shield us well,' but at least he had the courage to borrow it.

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Dame Una, in her charming study, shows how it was through Goethe and Schiller that his romanticism traced its ancestry and how from them it grew to its richer development. His slipshod translations from the German that were so ludicrously false to the text were a definite training that produced in him a richer and more confident vein of writing than he would else have reached. They were his first real appeals to the public; they awakened an interest in this European movement in his readers, but they chiefly awakened himself to his power and his need.

Even his French wife, whose mysterious origin is laid bare to us by Dame Una as far as at present is possible, had her part in opening to him the wider range of Continental influences, and he in his turn was enabled ultimately through *Quentin Durward* to influence the Continent.

But all through this so human story told convincingly, humorously, and with such a capital zest by Dame Una, there is one secret which is neither veiled nor unveiled, but omitted, the secret of Scott's faith, a dark and mysterious current, which runs

'in caverns measureless to man,  
And sinks in silence to a sunless ocean.'

The book, however, is not to blame; it is an 'informal presentation of Sir Walter Scott.' Its informal method is its very value. It takes for granted that we already know the main facts of his life, or perhaps that we do not desire to know them, and gives us instead the man himself in his habit as he lived. It is able to do this precisely because it is informal though never desultory, it is like very vivid conversation. The reader almost shares the writing of the book. Certain points, however, are more clearly stated here than in

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any other life, the mysterious origin of Lady Scott, for instance; the early date and autobiographical importance of *Triermain* are almost alone dealt with here as they should be; the complicated business arrangements between Scott and the Ballantynes, and between both these and Constable also, are found here in a simple, clear and just presentation such as elsewhere would be looked for in vain. Informal though it be, this life is the best we have of Scott, the man, the author, the great teller of tales, the host, with his foibles and his caution and his business instincts, and his careful self-protection, and his extravagances, and his moods of high spirits and of steady unbroken work.

His place, too, in the development of the spirit of his age is shown us, out of Goethe and Horace Walpole, helped by Coleridge into the romantic movement that flowered in Ruskin and the 'nineties, under the heady influence of a decadent France. Yet that romantic movement all along from its very beginnings was already definitely doomed. At its very end in the 'nineties it was perhaps very nearly rescued to life. So very nearly did it recover itself. For remember what it was. It aimed at the recovery of medieval loveliness, the architecture, the arts, the ideals, the chivalry, the high honour of that Catholic age. It so badly failed to live in enduring greatness, for remember what it lacked. It attempted the impossible in its endeavour to reintroduce medieval art and ideals without the religion that inspired and justified them, that gave them birth and made them true. To repeat, from the beginning it was doomed because it was false, unreal, untrue. Implying that art was a trick that could be copied and not a life that could be lived, it set to work to reproduce the older achievements, not by being re-illuminated by their inner spirit, but by minute observance of their outer shell. It did not try to share the mysterious secrets of its life, but only the obvious

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achievements of that life. Yet its final ending was almost a recovery, for the men of the 'nineties did in so many instances recover the Catholic faith; but by recovering it they found themselves forced out of that movement to inaugurate a new one. The faith was too strong for them, too young, too vigorous: it would not run into the old modes and methods. It found wholly new forms.

Inheriting from Walpole and Goethe, Scott in turn produced Ruskin and the 'nineties, from whom (though they would not like to be reminded of it) has come all the modern art that is not negroid, Epstein, for instance, but only in his earlier manner, in his portrait-busts of children, Eric Gill, too, especially in his middle period, Derrick, Suffolk, Robinson and the rest. It has hunted people into the Catholic Church because it has shown them how unreal else their art was: or, again, where their art was true it has driven them back into the truth at last. But what makes Scott now such heavy reading is precisely his lack of liveliness, not in the management of his story, where he is often superb, nor in the general accuracy of the historic portraiture (the descriptions in *Quentin Durward*, in *Nigel*, in *The Talisman* and *Ivanhoe* are sometimes perfect) but in the unreality of the whole. Monastic life, and generally the inner heart of medieval life, are missed entirely. That is why the other novels, *Old Mortality*, *Guy Mannering*, *Waverley*, etc., have a greater life. Dame Una hints this often; she does not say it. It is perhaps not wise to say it openly. We are sure that literary criticism will see it more clearly as his works find their place at last. The Catholic to whom the inner springs of medieval life are evident, since he shares them, will find the books more unreal than will the non-Catholic; yet the Catholic will certainly be grateful to his memory who rebuilt the ruins of medieval monastery, nunnery, preceptory, castle,

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manor-house, and cottage, and made their old life live again within their walls.

Industry, sympathy, desire, power of description, imagination, a kindly pen, all these were his; but faith was denied him. Lacking faith, his attempt to reproduce the art that faith had fashioned failed; his genius succeeded not in his ideals, but in his ideas; not in his buildings, but in his books. His dreams were shattered, but his achievements stand. But in no artist is the achievement commensurate with the vision, unless the vision has been so narrow and petty that its dream-walls can be scaled. He was great through his imagination and his sympathy, his power to make the past live, to make it plausible, to invest it with interest, to show its life. His humanism was wide and full of pity and reverence. Scotland found in him a knight-errant to proclaim her glories as a challenge to the whole earth.

We do most sincerely recommend this *Life* by Dame Una Pope-Hennessy, because she has presented to us this knight-errant and shown us what he was like with all his armour off, that strange mixture of romance and business instincts, of lavish expenditure and cautious planning, of boisterous hospitality and delicate sensitiveness, who wove and is woven into the stuff of all his books. He was almost Shakespearian in the completeness of the scale of life in his writings. Dame Una has dealt with him worthily. Everyone who reads this book will most certainly know Sir Walter Scott.

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