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Biography:

Sir Walter Scott (1771 - 1832): Born in 1771 in Edinburgh. At the age of 1 year, Scott suf-
fered from polio and lost the use of his right leg. In order to recuperate, his parents sent
him to Sandyknowe, his grandfather’s sheep farm in the Borders, where he had an early
exposure to Border lore and legend, and began a fascination with the Jacobite cause.

After moving between the Borders, Edinburgh and Bath to improve his health, Scott
finally returned to Edinburgh in 1778, where he was educated privately for admission to
the High School of Edinburgh, which he entered the following year. At the age of 12, he
matriculated at Edinburgh University, and entered his father’s legal practice at 15.

A talented and energetic person, Scott became a lawyer, and pursued this profession all
his adult life, in spite of his numerous social commitments and prolific writing. He made his
first literary appearance with The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border: a collection of bal-
lads, but his first success as an author was in poetry with The Lay of the Last Minstrel, and
most outstandingly, The Lady of the Lake, a bestseller. Scott promoted an image of a wild,
bloody, romantic, mysterious Scotland, which is still a valid stereotype of the country today.
Abandoning poetry, he took to novel writing, and with his anonymous sequence of The
Waverley Novels (Waverley, Guy Mannering, Rob Roy, Heart of Midlothian and others),
he gained worldwide acclaim.

Scott produced a new novel every year; and his appetite for money led him to a misin-
vestment. His subsequent bankruptcy Scott faced with dignity and an ever increasing liter-
ary output. For six years, he wrote to clear his debts, at a terrible price to his health. He
suffered a series of strokes, and died in 1832.

Scott is best remembered for his fiction, but he produced a great amount of poetry,
biography, translations, and critical prose as well. He had a huge influence on the Romantic
movement worldwide, and it was not just literature, but also painting and opera appropri-
ating his characters, scenes and ideas about Scotland.
Sir Walter Scott
1771-1832

Contexts:

Sir Walter Scott & the Reinvention of Scotland

Along with Robert Burns, Walter Scott stands as one of Scotland's pre-eminent writers. Like Burns, it is difficult to separate the myth from the man and to gain any real perspective on his work. Also like Burns is his prominence on the Scottish tourist trail – from his eye-arresting landmark monument on Edinburgh's Princes Street (the famous 'Gothic rocket') to his pastoral home at Abbotsford in the Borders, interest in Scott himself often transcends and obscures his writing. Even Edinburgh's Waverley train station was named after one of his books.

Why is this? A lot of it has to do with Scott's reinvention of Scotland.

During Scott's time Scotland was a country very much ill at ease with itself and had been living through a period of great upheaval and change. The Union of the Parliaments in 1707 had divided the country in half – those in favour of Union, those against. Many were worried that Scotland would lose its distinct national identity altogether; others saw that as a reasonable price to pay for political and financial stability. There were a number of real advantages to Scotland's union with England, but these were offset by some serious drawbacks. These arguments still go on today. In Scott's time, however, the wind of change had cast a lot of cultural debris, and it was difficult for people to see a way ahead. Scotland was changing, old ways were dying out, new ways were arriving in an inexorable flood and being resisted.

Scott knew a thing or two about the nation's history. He even created some if it himself. He loved his country deeply, but as a lawyer and a Tory he believed that the Union was the best option for Scotland (particularly for those with money). Separation would turn the clock back 100 years. While he was studying for his Bar exams, he took walking tours in the Border country. This was his ancestral home where he had grown up with tales and songs from relatives and neighbours for whom the Battle of Culloden was still within living memory. Scott began to note these ballads down as he travelled through the Borders, adapting and amending their rhymes and rhythms, tweaking existing verses, adding his own. The ballads were published as The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Borders in 1802 and became an immediate and surprisingly popular success which encouraged Scott in his own original writings.

Inspired by his work in the Borders, a few years later he published The Lay of the Last Minstrel, his first major poetic work. It too was an instant success in Scotland and in England, selling many thousands of copies. After this he continued to publish long narrative poems, such as Marmion and The Lady of the Lake, each one more successful than the last. His poems made him a household name in Britain and secured his reputation as a great writer in many countries in Europe, and in the USA. Scott rode a wave of fame and
Sir Walter Scott
1771-1832

adulation unheard of until the arrival of Lord Byron, whose poetry proved to be even better and more successful than Scott’s.

At this time, with sales of his latest long poem, *Rokeby* (1812), down substantially on his previous works, Scott realised that Byron had stolen his crown and he didn’t attempt to win it back – at least not through poetry. He turned to novels.

His first was *Waverley*. Published in 1815, it had been several years in the making and had been inspired by Scott’s travels in the Highlands and by the stories he heard there from people who had witnessed and could remember the revolution in 1745, when the followers of the Stuart family tried to reassert their claim on the monarchy. The revolution had failed but a great deal of resentment and pro-Jacobite feeling remained in Scotland, particularly in the north. The Highland Clearances were also in operation at this time, bringing about the extermination of an ancient way of life in order to clear a path for a more modern culture. The 1745 rebellion provided the historical and scenic backdrop for *Waverley* and the theme of cultural conflict would run through the majority of his novels thereafter.

The kind of reception that greeted *Waverley* on publication would make every modern writer jealous. The first edition sold out within days, the critics loved it, and it set Scott on course to becoming one of the wealthiest writers in the country. He had created the first literary bestseller.

He wrote many more novels, each time exploring a different aspect of Scottish history, much of it very recent and within living memory. In a way you could say that Scott gave Scotland back to the people. For too long the fate of the nation had been in the hands of politicians and nobles and landowners and businessmen. The Scots as a nation felt the country was slipping out of their grasp. What Scott did was to give the people a history they could feel and become emotionally involved in. It was history – but with plenty of emphasis on ‘story’.

And Scott was never one to let facts get in the way of a good story, despite thorough research. Indeed the few negative reviews that *Waverley* received were critical of its inaccuracies. There are parallels here in the way that Hollywood treats factual subject matter; notably with the epic William Wallace bio-pic *Braveheart* (1996), which was roundly boo-ed by historians and academics for getting all manner of things wrong – from dates to costume, from who said what to whom, and who was alive and who wasn’t born yet. Yet it was the biggest movie of the year. It was loved by audiences the world over who flocked to it in their millions, and in Scotland it caused a resurgence in nationalist feeling and gave the Scottish National Party a healthy boost up the opinion polls. The comparison may be crude, but Scott’s fiction had much the same impact. In fact, it would be true to say that movies like *Braveheart* are direct descendants of Scott’s novels.

Scott’s achievement was to personalise massive events. If you think of a historical event...
that you see on television or in the paper – like a war, or an earthquake, or a famine – it is impossible to comprehend the enormity of it. We think of it abstractly, see it as a collection of horrible images, a line of terrified faces; we find it difficult to put ourselves in the places of the people caught up in it. We are, inevitably, at a distance – in time, in place, in emotion. But when we hear the stories of these people, when we listen to what they went through then we begin to relate in a more human way to this event.

This is what Scott did with Scottish history. He introduced psychology, made it personal. Before Scott, there were history books and there were novels. The history books were written with a view to the bigger picture: the great leaders, the battles, the crucial events. In novels, historical events are like a scenic backdrop in a theatre against which various romances are played out – we see what's going on behind the characters, but they aren't really involved in it. Scott brought the two forms together; something no-one had done before. He threw his characters into that history, and often his fictional characters would meet 'real' historical characters. The landscape – physical and political – was a real one in his books, not just a backdrop. He shows the real impact of history on the lives of ordinary – and extraordinary – individuals. We see and share their suffering, their joy, their loves, their deaths. And we gain an insight into the forces that shaped their lives and the world around them.

But he was a novelist, not a historian; he was writing entertainment, not reporting history. Of course he got some of the historical stuff wrong – his characters must take precedence. But, like all great fiction writers, he included enough of the truth to make his novels seem the more convincing.

The popularity of his books in Scotland made the Scots proud once again of their nation and the culture they thought was about to be swallowed by their more powerful neighbour. Scott not only gave the Scottish people a history and characters they could believe and invest their emotions in, he also gave it to the world. The romance – and the myth – of the Highlands was born.

Scott’s influence has been downplayed a lot in the past, but recently critics have increasingly been acknowledging the place Walter Scott has in the history of the development of the novel. His work was written at the beginning of the 19th century, the golden age of the novel. He was read widely, not only at home in Britain, but across the Atlantic and throughout Europe. From Dickens to Dumas, Hawthorne to Hugo, Tolstoy to Trollope, Scott’s craft informed and shaped the craft of future novelists who would plunder history for their fiction. He created the blueprint for literary fiction that these writers and others would refine and take to a level of sophistication that looking back makes Scott seem like a mere apprentice. But it was his example they followed.

The theme of division within Scotland is strong in Scott’s fiction and it is one he took up in nearly all of his novels. He didn’t have to look hard to find division, for it existed in every level of society. Even Edinburgh, the city in which he lived, had been split in two:
the Old Town (Auld Reekie of the slums and stinking open sewers) and the New Town (with its clean Classical town houses and elegant thoroughfares). It is a necessity in drama of any kind to have conflict – whether Cops against Robbers, Cowboys against Indians, the individual against the state. But Scott wrote about the internal conflicts going on in Scotland. He put Jacobites (who looked to a glorious independent Scotland of the past) against Hanoverians (who looked forward to a united Britain); he pitted lowlander against highlander; outlaw against Establishment.

This theme of division continues to be one of the dominant themes in Scottish literature generally; except later we find that the theme has become more internalised. Not only is the individual up against the ‘system’ (often in the form of vast unnameable State institutions), he is also turned against himself – from Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Jeckyl and Hyde* to Alasdair Gray’s *Lanark* to James Kelman’s *How Late It Was, How Late*.

Scott lived through extraordinary times. His achievement was not only to reflect the changes going on around him, but to define them. Much of the Scotland we recognise in tourist adverts and Hollywood movies, many of our most familiar symbols and myths can be traced right back to the remarkable and original fiction of Walter Scott.

**Contexts:**

**Sir Walter Scott & the Honours of Scotland**

Walter Scott was fanatical about history. He researched it and heard it first-hand from people who had lived through turbulent events like the Battle of Culloden and the ‘45 rebellion. He borrowed frequently from the lending library – a useful innovation that had begun in Edinburgh fifty or so years before – reading up on the various accounts of events in Scotland’s past.

Scott was also very much the Establishment man who believed strongly in the united fortunes of Scotland and England. He was well enough connected in Scotland. He was a lawyer whose father held the most senior legal office in Scotland; he was also a Tory, and a familiar face in the literary salons of Edinburgh. With his growing success in the legal profession and national fame from his writing Scott gradually brought himself into the acquaintance of the London Establishment. There he became friends with, among others, the future King George IV.

Scott went about synthesising these two central facets of his life. On one hand a passion for history, on the other a desire to see Scotland and England not just politically united, but joined in their hearts and minds.

From his reading, Scott knew that Scotland’s Crown jewels had been lost and forgotten.
The Crown jewels (a crown, a sword and a sceptre; known as the Honours of Scotland) are the oldest sovereign regalia in the British Isles. They date from the late 15th – early 16th centuries and were commonly used in State ceremonies as symbols for conferring power and to represent the authority of the monarch. They were last used to crown a new monarch in 1651 for Charles II’s coronation; thereafter they were used in sittings of the Scottish Parliament. After the Union in 1707, state power was transferred to London and the Honours, now redundant, were stored in the vaults of Edinburgh Castle.

Scott recognised the symbolic power of the Crown jewels and he saw their restoration as part of a patriotic plan to bring the two nations together. There was a great deal of resentment against the English at large in Scotland, but Scott believed if the Prince was seen to restore these important symbols, along with peerages forfeited in the Jacobite rebellions, and the return of the mighty cannon Mons Meg which had been confiscated and taken to the Tower of London, then this would go a long way to healing the divide.

Scott obtained permission from Prince George – the future King – to go into the Castle to look for the Honours. Previous searches in the Castle had yielded nothing, but such was Scott’s knowledge, conviction, and enthusiasm that a long and breathless search through sealed storerooms and dusty vaults eventually resulted in success.

The Honours of Scotland were put on display in Edinburgh Castle, and the triumph of the find paved the way for George IV’s famous visit to Scotland four years later and the beginning of a new identity for Scotland.
Lochinvar:

Oh, young Lochinvar is come out of the west,
Through the wide Border his steed was the best;
And save his good broadsword he weapons had none.
He rode all unarmed and he rode all alone.
So faithful in love and so dauntless in war;
There never was knight like the young Lochinvar:

He stayed not for brake and he stopped not for stone,
He swam the Eske river where ford there was none,
But ere he alighted at Netherby gate
The bride had consented, the gallant came late:
For a laggard in love and a dastard in war
Was to wed the fair Ellen of brave Lochinvar:

So boldly he entered the Netherby Hall,
Among bride’s-men, and kinsmen, and brothers, and all:
Then spoke the bride’s father; his hand on his sword,
(For the poor craven bridegroom said never a word,)
“Oh! come ye in peace here, or come ye in war,
Or to dance at our bridal, young Lord Lochinvar?”

“I long wooed your daughter; my suit you denied;—
Love swells like the Solway, but ebbs like its tide—
And now am I come, with this lost love of mine,
To lead but one measure, drink one cup of wine,
There are maidens in Scotland more lovely by far;
That would gladly be bride to the young Lochinvar:

The bride kissed the goblet; the knight took it up,
He quaffed off the wine, and he threw down the cup.
She looked down to blush, and she looked up to sigh,
With a smile on her lips and a tear in her eye.
He took her soft hand ere her mother could bar;—
“Now tread we a measure!” said young Lochinvar:

So stately his form, and so lovely her face,
That never a hall such a galliard did grace;
While her mother did fret, and her father did fume,
And the bridgroom stood dangling his bonnet and plume;
And the bride-maidens whispered, “‘Twere better by far
To have matched our fair cousin with young Lochinvar:”
One touch to her hand and one word in her ear,
When they reached the hall-door, and the charger stood near;
So light to the croupe the fair lady he swung,
So light to the saddle before he he sprung!
“She is won! we are gone, over bank, bush and scaur;
They’ll have fleet steeds that follow,” quoth young Lochinvar.

There was mounting ’mong Graemes of the Netherby clan;
Forsters, Fenwicks, and Musgraves, they rode and they ran!
There was racing and chasing on Cannobie Lee,
But the lost bride of Netherby ne’er did they see.
So daring in love and so dauntless in war;
Have ye e’er heard of gallant like young Lochinvar?
Further Reading

Edinburgh University Walter Scott Digital Archive
It's all here.
http://www.walterscott.lib.ed.ac.uk/

Poetry Online
Key works by Scott on the web.
http://eirlibrary.utoronto.ca/rpo/display/poet290.html

Scott in Finland
Good general introduction to the man and his work from Finnish literature website.
http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/wscott.htm

The Walter Scott Way
walking tour through the Scottish Borders – Walter Scott country
http://www.sirwalterscottwayfsnet.co.uk/

The following websites will be of general interest to the student of Scottish literature:

Scottish Literary Tour Trust
Featuring an extensive section on the Makars’ Literary Tour
http://www.scot-lit-tour.co.uk

National Library of Scotland
Homepage of the NLS.
http://www.nls.uk/

Scottish Poetry Library
A very attractively laid out website with information on some of the major poets of the 20th century along with detailed readings of their best-known works.
http://www.spl.org.uk/index.html

SLAINTE
The name stands for Scottish Librarians Across the Internet. This excellent site features brief, well-written biographies of many of the great Scottish writers.
http://www.slainte.org.uk/Scotauth/scauhome.htm

Scots Online
From essays to an online dictionary this is a web-based resource with everything you could possibly need to know about the Scots language and how it is used.
http://www.scots-online.org/
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Shudder at the Niffer
An essay in Scots about Scots.
http://www.fleimin.demon.co.uk/Bletherskite/Shudder_At_The_Niffer.htm

Gaelic & Scottish Connections
A resource on Gaelic language and culture, featuring poetry and essays and an online dictionary.
http://www.gaelicscottish.com/

Electric Scotland
Electric Scotland is a real mixed bag of Scottish paraphernalia with nationalist overtones. This page in particular allows you to hear and read complete Scots poems, from MacDiarmid to Dunbar.
http://www.electricscotland.com/si/features/scots/complete.htm

Literature links
An encyclopaedic web of links to Scots magazines, monuments, libraries and languages.
http://www.burryman.com/scotland.html - lit

Project Gutenberg
This is a web-based publisher of copyright expired books.
http://www.ibiblio.org/gutenberg/cgi-bin/sdb/t9.cgi/

Poetry Archive
A good, user-friendly site, sponsored by a bookseller, which features examples from some of the best poets in the world.
http://www.poetry-archive.com/

Poem Index
Almost 900 poems in the English language from 13th to 19th centuries.
http://tcsu.trin.cam.ac.uk/~john/pgbev/html-interface/full-index.html

Representative Poetry On-line
An enormous and easy to use resource based at the University of Toronto featuring alphabetical and chronological lists of 450 poets with substantial selections of their work.
http://eirlibrary.utoronto.ca/rpo/display/poet42.html

Scottish PEN
The name stands for Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists and Novelists and exists to promote the friendly co-operation between writers in the interests of freedom of expression throughout the world.
http://www.scottishpen.org/
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Writers’ Portraits
Photographic and biographical pen portraits of some of Scotland’s greatest contemporary writers.
http://www.nls.uk/writestuff/

Anthologies

The Book of Prefaces
edited and glossed by Alasdair Gray
Bloomsbury (2000)
Every home should have one. Dust jacket contains this advice: “Warning to Parents, Teachers, Librarians, Booksellers. Do not let smart children handle this book. It will help them pass examinations without reading anything else.”

The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Scottish Poetry
Edited by Douglas Dunn
Faber & Faber (1992)
A detailed account of the dramatic transformations the Scottish verse underwent in the previous century, with an enlightening introduction by Dunn.

The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse
edited by Robert Crawford and Mick Imlah
Penguin (2000)
A beautifully presented chronology of some of the greatest Scottish poetry, from the 6th century to the present.

The Penguin Book of Scottish Verse
edited by Tom Scott
Penguin (1970)
Earlier incarnation of above, edited by Scott – a recent inductee to Makars’ Court. Contains the infamous and controversial rude verse attributed to Burns. Makes for an interesting comparison with Crawford & Imlah’s anthology.

An Anthology of Scottish Women Poets
Edited by Catherine Kerrigan
Edinburgh University Press (1991)
Covers folksong, ballad, Scots and Anglo-Scots, from the middle ages to contemporary poets.

Studies and Criticism

Scottish Literature
eds Douglas Gifford, et al
Sir Walter Scott
1771-1832

This is all just about all you need to know about Scottish literature. A comprehensive, and very readable book. Excellent.

**The Mainstream Companion to Scottish Literature**
Trevor Royle
Mainstream (1993)
Alphabetically arranged standard reference on Scottish literature.

**Modern Scottish Literature**
Alan Bold
Longman (1983)
Learned, erudite discussion of the major writers and texts of Scottish literature in the 20th century. Brilliant study material for Higher English.

**Imagine a City: Glasgow In Fiction**
Moira Burgess
Argyll (1998)
The definitive work on Glasgow's place in Scottish literature, written by the author of the Makars Court Tour script.

**A History of Scottish Women's Writing**
edited by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan
Edinburgh University Press (1997)
This is the best book around for Scottish women's writing at the moment. Tone can be a bit academic in places.

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