

1996

John Gibson Lockhart's *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart*, or the Absent Author

Isabelle Bour

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bour, Isabelle (1996) "John Gibson Lockhart's *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart*, or the Absent Author," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 29: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol29/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

Isabelle Bour

John Gibson Lockhart's *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart*, or the Absent Author

John Gibson Lockhart's *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart* (1837-38) is considered the best biography in the English language, after Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791). Both use the "inductive," accumulative method, stringing together various kinds of documents—letters, diaries, memoirs—sometimes merely juxtaposing them, but more often linking them by narrative.¹ Lockhart's book, however, was published nearly forty years after Boswell's, and reflects the intervening changes in episteme,² especially the historicization of all forms of knowledge. This study will investigate how the image of the biographical subject—Walter Scott—is constructed and how his inscription into history is achieved. This will entail analyzing the effects of Lockhart's biographical method.

What image of Walter Scott ultimately emerges from his seven-volume biography? What are we told about this "Great Unknown," and does he become

¹Francis Russell Hart has examined the major differences between these two major biographies in his *Lockhart as Romantic Biographer* (Edinburgh, 1971).

²V. Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses* (Paris, 1966); trans. Alan Sheridan, *The Order of Things* (London, 1970). Stephen Bann defines an *episteme* as an "epistemological totality, within which the various discourses of an age are structurally related to one another," (*The Clothing of Clío: A study of the representation of history in nineteenth-century Britain and France* [Cambridge, 1984], p. 82).

(as he said of himself when anticipating a financial calamity in December 1825) the “Too-well-known”?³

Two levels, and their interaction, will be considered: first that of narration and text, and then that of story.⁴ The most striking fact about the text of the biography as a material entity is its discontinuity; it is made up of heterogeneous materials: the biographer’s narrative takes up only about a third of the book, and Lockhart is at pains to emphasize that the generous excerpting from, or *in extenso* reproduction of, primary material is what his biography is about. The criteria for inclusion of documents are their intrinsic interest, their representative nature but also, quite simply, their availability (p. 91, Ch. 10). Lockhart’s main compositional axiom is that documents speak for themselves (p. 184, Ch. 19). If no letter from Scott or one of his friends and no memoirs are available about a particular episode in Scott’s life, Lockhart will quote from one of his own letters, thus preferring to appear as a character in the story he is telling rather than as the narrator of it (pp. 557-64, Ch. 63). Again, rather than assuming narrative authority, he refers the reader to writings by Scott which will give him the necessary data about an event; thus, about Scott’s journey to Waterloo in 1815, Lockhart urges the reader to consult *Paul’s Letters to his Kinfolk*; these *Letters*, though their framework is fictional, are described by Lockhart as “that genuine fragment of the author’s autobiography” (p. 316, Ch. 35).

In the biographer’s narrative assessment and comments are, though not as scarce as has been said, unemphatic and restrained; Lockhart is usually a chronicler of events, eschewing psychological analysis and synthesizing portraits of Scott; rare exceptions are his depiction of Scott at the beginning of his literary career, around 1800-1802 (pp. 93-4, Ch. 10) and the great closing assessment in the last chapter (84) of the book. This careful avoidance of narrative guidance is also displayed in Lockhart’s emphasizing that association of ideas sometimes dictates choice of material (p. 213, Ch. 22). It is significant that he only explains and justifies his biographical method at the very end of the *Life* (p. 754, Ch. 84); there he stresses that he wanted his biography of Scott to be an autobiography, and claims that he “refrained from obtruding almost any-

³Diary entry for 18th December 1825, in J. G. Lockhart’s *Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart* (London, 1893), p. 587, Ch. 65. Further references to this *Life* will be given in the text. Because of the considerable number of editions of this work, chapter numbers will also be supplied.

⁴V. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London, 1983), p. 3: “Story” designates the narrated events, abstracted from their disposition in the text and reconstructed in their chronological order, together with the participants in these events. Whereas “story” is a succession of events, “text” is a spoken or written discourse which undertakes their telling The act or process of production is the third aspect—“narration.”

thing of comment." This, which chimes in with the usual view of Lockhart's biography, while broadly true (there are far fewer comments and judgments than in Boswell, for instance), is unwarranted, as it ignores the assessments of Scott's works that nearly always accompany information about their publication, and also his appraisal of Scott's personality (Lockhart is mostly laudatory, his main reservations concern Scott's levity in business matters, a puzzle to which he repeatedly reverts). In this same passage at the end of the book Lockhart also declares that he will not conclude his biography with the usual panoptic purple patch, pronouncing "*ex cathedra*, on the whole structure and complexion of a great mind"; yet after this disclaimer he launches into just such a moral portrait. Significantly, this is also a *historical* portrait: Lockhart, starting from Scott's early fondness for genealogy and family histories, shows how this expanded into an interest in Scottish and English history. Thus Lockhart, who describes himself as "the compiler of these pages" (p. 361, Ch. 41) can be said to have an ideal image of himself as a biographer which does not correspond to his practice.

The prevalence of documentary material over authorial/authoritative telling is a correlative of a splintering of narrative focalization: there is no single unifying perspective on events and persons. Lockhart does not seem to impose *his* vision of Scott; he would like the reader to believe that he merely selected the material—if that. It is rather as if the material presented itself. In other words, what is offered the reader is mimesis rather than diegesis. This goes with a refusal of emplotment—planning Scott's life-story teleologically, viewing the various stages of his life as part of a pattern. Emplotment is an essential aspect of fiction, and the *Life* is predicated on the idea that it will seem all the more truthful as it stays clear of fictional techniques, as it is made up of "historical" documents. History tells itself.

It has already been noted that Lockhart passes judgment on Scott's character mostly when he tries to explain his blindness in his business dealings with Archibald Constable and the Ballantyne brothers. Interestingly, just as Lockhart's narrative presence asserts itself at this point, the *Life* has a plot from the time of the collapse of the printing-house in 1826; from then on Scott is shown as an epic hero, bent on defeating Debt, and racing against time in the form of age and ill-health. Even before that crisis is reached, the language of the *Life* flittingly becomes that of a novel when Lockhart, after mentioning the essential part played by Alexander Gibson Hunter and James Ballantyne in these difficulties introduces James's brother John thus: "a third person, hitherto unnamed, was about this time beginning to exercise (influence) over the concerns of James Ballantyne" (p. 166, Ch. 18). He then proceeds to give contrasted and evaluative portraits of the two brothers—an unusual device in the *Life*.

Except in those sections of the *Life* that concern Scott as a businessman, Lockhart does not follow a narrative or a psychological model—which might have been Scott's life doomed to end in disaster, Scott as Prometheus or tormented hero, or even Scott as the produce of his Scottish environment. Of

course, Lockhart's anti-systematic, anti-organizational stance is in itself a positive choice, which has as many implications as any other rhetorical and narrative model.

The image of Walter Scott develops gradually, thanks to the accumulation of documents, of data and details. The succession of documents is the textual equivalent, and sign, of the passing of time, and it "creates" the identity of a man which, for Lockhart, is essentially psychological. The logic of time, which is that of reality (especially in an *episteme* which views reality in historical terms, and for which events happen not only *in* time, but *through* time) prevails over the structural constraints of plot, which is a manifestation, and an effect, of imagination. This "text-time" progressively creates an image of Scott which, in turn, provides the succession of miscellaneous documents with its focus.

While on the level of narration the law of reality (characterized by the use of "raw" material and multiple focalization) prevails, on the level of the story (the events in Scott's life related in the *Life*, considered apart from the way in which they are told) the imaginary wins over the real. In other words, Scott's life seems to have been ruled by precisely those plots, those fictional patterns that his biographer studiously avoids.

Of course, Scott's everyday life was anything but romantic or romance-like, rigorously divided as it was into periods devoted to well-defined activities. There was no plot in that life, only a repeated pattern with variations. The major events in it were the quick succession of the publication of his works; the most important were his historical romances in verse and in prose which changed the course of Western literature, and also found their way back into Scott's life, through his hubristic desire to become a Scottish laird with a vast estate. His compulsive buying of land at high prices, his ever more ambitious plans for Abbotsford were a projection of his fantasies onto life; Scott was aware of this, when he said that Abbotsford would be "a romance of a house" (p. 474, Ch. 55). In other words, it is a kind of fictional discourse, just like his published works. Another major instance of a projection of the imaginary onto reality is the "staging" by Scott of George IV's visit to Scotland in 1822. Lockhart stresses that this elaborate pageantry, the tawdriness of which Scott was totally unaware of, displayed "the extent to which he had allowed his imagination to get the mastery over him" (p. 485, Ch. 56), and considers Abbotsford as a product of the same imaginary powers as presided over the production of his best writings (p. 755, Ch. 84). He sees the ambivalence of Scott's "day-dreams" (*ibid.*), of his living "more than half his life in worlds purely fantastic" (pp. 756-7, Ch. 84), and adds that Scott "became the dupe of his own delusions" (p. 757, Ch. 84). Lockhart concludes that "He [Scott] must pay the penalty, as well as reap the glory, of this life-long abstraction of reveries, this self-abandonment of Fairyland" (p. 576, Ch. 44). Scott himself, after his financial disaster, wrote in his diary "My life, though not without its fits of working and

strong exertion, has been a sort of dream" (p. 592, Ch. 64).⁵ It is worth noting that this projection of fantasies onto reality constitutes a denial of time, of the passing of time—the Highland pageantry of George IV's visit re-enacts Scotland's past, though things are rather more intricate, as this past is itself largely mythical; Abbotsford collapses the difference between past and present.⁶ The logic of dreams, which governed Scott's life, is fundamentally achronic. Interestingly, it is precisely this order of time that structures Lockhart's biography, as has been seen above.

It is in the workings of the mechanism of projection—fantasy into book or house—that one glimpses the inner recesses of the mind of the writer. Lockhart makes no attempt at delving into that psyche: empathy or sympathetic identification are made difficult by the multiple focalization and the primarily mimetic mode of the *Life*; besides, Lockhart states that he wanted to do no more than "lay before the reader those parts of Sir Walter's character to which we have access, as they were indicated in his sayings and doings" (p. 754, Ch. 84). That "character," as presented by Lockhart, is not *essentially* that of a writer, though it is as a writer that Scott was interesting to Lockhart's readers. The author appears only in connection with mostly mundane or factual references to his literary works, and with his financial collapse. The image of Scott (except in his diary, kept more or less regularly from November 1825, just when financial difficulties were looming) is that of a man with little inwardness. Indeed, he is very much an ordinary man, with mostly worldly concerns, bent on accumulating material possessions, writing mostly so as to finance his purchases. As Hart puts it "Lockhart's conception of Scott was less literary than social; Scott was the centre of a society grounded in paternalistic fidelity, the incarnation of a rural aristocracy which was no more."⁷ Scott himself only saw literature as an activity of much less moment than avocations that had a direct bearing on life, as we learn from John B. Saurey Morrilt's Memorandum:

Keenly enjoying literature as he did, and indulging his own love of it in perpetual composition, he always maintained the same estimate of it as subordinate and aux-

⁵More quotations, exemplifying both the beneficent and harmful effects of imagination in Scott's life can be found in Hart's final chapter, pp. 164-252.

⁶It is symptomatic that Lockhart only belatedly—in the second edition of the *Life*—provided a description of Abbotsford, and then not his own, but Allan Cunningham's (pp. 551-4, Ch. 62). Initially, such a description had not seemed necessary to him, though the house had become a synecdochical equivalent of Scott the writer, and attracted thousands of visitors.

⁷Hart, p. 177.

iliary to the purposes of life, and rather talked of men and events than of books and criticism. (p. 163, Ch. 62)⁸

Lockhart's Scott is neither a prophet, as Leslie Stephen remarked in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, nor a romantic hero.

In fact, he only becomes a tragic hero after that most worldly event, the failure of his printing concern. Then at last he becomes an archetypal figure, a sort of Sisyphus. He is tragic because imagination has forced him back to the real world; his life and his works have finally come together. Lockhart says of Scott in the autumn of 1827:

His Diary shows (what perhaps many of his intimates doubted during his lifetime) that, in spite of the dignified equanimity which characterised all his conversation with mankind, he had his full share of the delicate sensibilities, the mysterious ups and downs, the wayward melancholy, and fantastic sunbeams of the poetical temperament. (p. 671, Ch. 74)

While tragic romance and life merge, Scott feels that impecuniosity and his commitment to pay off his debts will make it impossible for him to write fiction:

The feast of fancy will be over with the feeling of independence. He (the Unknown) shall no longer have the delight of waking in the morning with bright ideas in his mind, hasten to commit them to paper, and count them monthly, as the means of planting such *scaurs*, and purchasing such wastes; replacing dreams of fiction by other prospective visions of walks by

“Fountain heads, and pathless groves;
Places which pale passion loves.”

This cannot be; but I may work substantial husbandry, *i.e.* write history and such concerns. (Diary entry for 18th December 1825; p. 587, Ch. 65)

The real kills the imaginary. When Scott becomes a romantic hero he stops being able to write romances.

His attempt to bring romance to or into life by becoming a Scottish laird was brought to an abrupt end by his confrontation with the symbolic value of

⁸Lockhart repeatedly makes the same point. See p. 204, Ch. 22; p. 322, Ch. 35 is particularly explicit: “Scott never considered any amount of literary distinction as entitled to be spoken of in the same breath with mastery in the higher departments of practical life—least of all, with the glory of a first-rate captain. To have done things worthy to be written, was in his eyes a dignity to which no man made any approach, who had only written things to be read. He on two occasions, which I can never forget, betrayed painful uneasiness when his works were alluded to as reflecting honour on the age that had produced Watt's improvement of the steam-engine, and the safety lamp of Sir Humphry Davy. Such was his modest creed—”

money; Scott discovered to his cost that money *represented* his rôle in society as a "businessman," that it involved him in transactions in the book market, and was not just a wonderfully easy way of exchanging the figments of his imagination for stone and land.

Until 1826 Scott had not fully existed as a responsible being in so far as he had never investigated the financial soundness of the printing business. Lockhart wonders at the inconsistency in Scott's behavior: while he kept very precise accounts of his small domestic expenses, he never once—even after a first crisis in 1813—went through the printing business's accounts (p. 765, Ch. 84).

This material "unaccountability" coincided with Scott's anonymity as the author of the novels. It took the collapse of his worldly prosperity to get him to acknowledge his prose fiction; his name—an essential symbolical aspect of individual and social identity—had so far been missing from the title-pages of his novels. He lost affluence, but acquired a name, thus becoming part of society as a novelist; his social "inscription" was strengthened—however painfully—by his decision to try to pay his creditors rather than becoming a bankrupt. He now needed money not to expand his "romance of a house" and his estate, but to leave an untainted name. All this is well thematized in Lockhart's employment of the end of Scott's life as a stoic struggle against age and disease. (Scott chose to believe that he had achieved his aim: when in Italy in 1832, and already much confused, he often referred to his relief at clearing off his debts.)⁹

Through its accumulation of documents, its multiple focalization and its refusal of emplotment and of a teleological view of the life of its subject, Lockhart's biography, on the level of discourse, aims at a certain kind of truthfulness and objectivity, at meeting the demands of the real. This method results in a very pointillistic picture of Scott, whose personality unfolds slowly as the chapters go by, and this picture is unified only by the faculty of imagination which, while it caused Scott to live long outside time, also brought him back to the harshness of empirical reality. This multiple portrait, which is homological to the variety of material used by Lockhart, is also that of a very worldly man, who only belatedly turns into a stoic hero.

Can one conclude, as F. R. Hart did, that J. G. Lockhart is a romantic biographer? His narrative stance is tantamount to rejecting an individual voice (though any narrator has such a voice, whether he likes it or not), and his avoidance of diegesis and of sympathetic identification with Scott, added to the absence of any intimate material except for Scott's late diary, tend to blur the subjective identity of the biographee; the world of mind and passions is not the world in which Scott is shown to move. To that extent, Lockhart is not a "romantic" biographer. As it is only far into the book that Scott is shown as coming to terms with what made him the writer he was—the world of imagina

⁹See for instance his letter to Mrs Scott of Harden, dated 6th March 1832 (p. 744, Ch. 82).

tion—should not Lockhart's book be described as the life of an absent writer by an absent biographer?

University of Versailles

SCOTTISH TEXT SOCIETY

New editions of original texts

For over 100 years the STS has published an extensive list of poetry and prose from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, edited by leading scholars. Forthcoming publications include *Andrew Crawford's Collection of Ballads and Songs II* and a two volume set of David Hume of Godscroft's *History of the House of Douglas and Angus*.

Annual Subscription in return for which members receive the Society's annual volume at less than the normal retail price and the opportunity to purchase other STS volumes: £20 (individuals), £25 (institutions).

For further information please contact: Miss L. Pike, Secretary, Scottish Text Society, 27 George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LD, Scotland.