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Ian D. Kane

Vanderbilt Children's Hospital

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**SIR WALTER SCOTT AND JOHN CLARE:
AN UNPUBLISHED LETTER**

Ian D. Kane

Among manuscript holdings in the University of South Carolina's G. Ross Roy Collection, bound in an extra-illustrated copy of James M'Kie's *The Burns Calendar*, is an apparently-unpublished letter by Sir Walter Scott.¹ The letter, written from Edinburgh on May 31, 1820, to a Captain Shirwill, gives Scott's guarded response to a request for him to help the Northamptonshire poet John Clare:

Dear Sir

I send you the book for Mr. Clare which I could not forward sooner owing to my being called to the country on some business. I am naturally such an idle and reluctant correspondent that I must beg that the trifling compliment comes from yourself Mr. Clare's friend and official patron. It would give me great pain to have the appearance of neglecting anything which he might think it proper to say on the occasion and yet to speak the truth I am afraid that temptation would be too much for me and I should be a very careless & negligent correspondent.

Mr. Lockhart is much engaged with professional business but will with pleasure take an opportunity to make some selection from Mr. Clare's poetry with such recommendation as he can give.

I beg my most respectful compliments to Mrs. Shirwill and am very much

Dear Sir

Your faithful humble Servant

Edin^b. 31 May

Walter Scott

¹ James M'Kie, ed., *The Burns Calendar* (Kilmarnock: J. M. M'Kie, 1874); the Scott letter (with other material) has been bound in between the unnumbered calendar pages for January and February.

Dear Sir

I send you the book for Mr. Clarke which I could not forward sooner owing to my being called to the country on some business. I am naturally such an idle and idle but correspondent that I must beg that the trifling compliment comes from yourself, Mr. Clarke's kind and affectionate father. It would give me great pain to have the appearance of reflecting anything which he might think it proper to bring in the occasion and yet to speak the truth. I am afraid that temptation would be too much for me and I should be a very clumsy and ungrateful correspondent.

Mr. Lockhart is much engaged with professional business but will take pleasure to have an opportunity to make some selection from Mr. Clarke's poetry with such recommendations as he can give.

I beg my most respectful compliments to Mrs. Clarke and am very much

Edinburgh 31 January
1820.

Dear Sir
Your faithful humble servant
Walter Scott

The letter documents and clarifies Scott's reaction to Clare, then still a newcomer among published poets. Only a few months earlier, in January 1820, Clare had published his first collection, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life* (London: Taylor & Hessey and E. Drury, 1820). The recipient of the letter, Captain Markham E. Shirwill, of Mortlake, Surrey, was a moneyed gentleman with literary aspirations, who attempted to manoeuvre Scott into acting as Clare's patron, a role Scott was clearly reluctant to take on. In February 1820, shortly after the publication of Clare's volume, Shirwill, who had previously had no connection to Clare, sent to him a sum of money for his parents.² On that same day Shirwill wrote to Scott, and mentioned Clare to him, hoping to boost Clare's reputation and stature. Clare's characteristically under-punctuated reply to Shirwill's letter has been published:

Stamford Feb 9. 1820

Sir

I thank you for your kind notice of me & the present your letter contained I percieve by your mention of the Celebrated Walter Scott you are a Gentleman of Literary pursuits & one who can do me a great deal of good which you have so kindly under taken the trouble to do.³

In April of 1820, on assuming his baronetcy, Scott visited London, where he was approached by Shirwill, who spoke to him about Clare. Shirwill later bragged of the meeting, saying that his "spoils of victory" were a copy of *The Lady of the Lake* by Scott and two pounds that were to go towards purchasing books of Clare's choosing; Clare chose Currie's *Life and Works of Robert Burns*, Southey's *Life of Nelson*, and Chatterton's *Life and Works*.⁴ Clare had been flattered by the gift, and replied to Shirwill on April 8, 1820:

Dear Sir

Your notice of the kindness of the Hon Baronet Sir Walter Scott towards a Clown so unworthy of his notice has affected my feelings in such a dergree that I can scarcely write an Answer give him my gratitude you can prove it sincere give him a thousand thanks had I been told last year that I shoud have been noticed by

² Mark Storey, ed., *Letters of John Clare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 30.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ J. W. Tibble and Anne Tibble, *John Clare: A Life* (London: Michael Joseph, 1972), 139.

that Celebrated Poet—I don't know but I think it would have overwhelmed me & tumd my SENSES.⁵

On returning home to Scotland, Scott had been expected to send Clare a copy of *The Lady of the Lake* (presumably with a short note and signature).⁶ When Clare received the other books, purchased with Scott's money, he inquired from Shirwill about the missing volume:

I knew not the price of books & therefore you should not notice my claims any further then the sum amounted to but it is done & I thank you once more for all favours you have so kindly bestowed—there is mystery in not sending 'Lady of the Lake' perhaps Sir Walter Scott is returning by Stamford & if he does you should tell me.⁷

However, Scott merely forwarded to Shirwill an unsigned copy of the book, and Shirwill in turn eventually sent it on to Clare, some three months later, on July 6, 1820. Scott skirted the reasons behind refusing to send Clare a personalized copy of his book. He certainly realized that what he had done was less than polite:

... It would give me great pain to have the appearance of neglecting anything which he might think it proper to say on the occasion.⁸

Scott justified his action (or lack thereof) by claiming that an honest attempt at satisfying Shirwill's request would have been impossible: "to speak the truth I am afraid that temptation would be too much for me and I should be a very careless & negligent correspondent."⁹ It is entirely possible that Scott had been given samples of Clare's work by Shirwill, and, after reading them, had not wished to write what would have in essence been a note of recommendation of Clare's poetry. Shirwill gave his account of the situation to Clare in his letter accompanying Scott's book:

All my endeavours, all my efforts of persuasion, proved fruitless in the anxious desire I had expressed to Him, that He would address a few lines to you in the blank leaf. Sir W. seemed bound hand and head, not from any disapprobation of your talent or

⁵ Storey, 44.

⁶ Tibble and Tibble, 139.

⁷ Clare to Shirwill, May 3, 1820, in Storey, p. 54.

⁸ Scott's letter to Shirwill (transcribed above).

⁹ Ibid.

taste, but occasioned by the high path in which he strides in the literary field of the present day.¹⁰

Six days later (July 12) came Clare's response to Shirwill's letter:

I thought Sir Walter a different person his omitting to write his name in the book shows a stiffness of pride too much affected with little things There was a day when as a poet he shone little above his humble servant. He has patronized the 'Ettrick Shepherd' and some others but—I was going on, but murmurs are useless.¹¹

Although Clare's opinion of Scott the man had been greatly altered, he did not allow this incident to sully his opinion of Scott's work. On September 12, 1820, he wrote to Shirwill once more:

I have read Sir Walters 'Lady of the Lake' & the opening & ending I think the most sublime I ever read many parts of [it] are very beautiful to me tho I loose half its sweetness by not knowing the customs of the age it describes.¹²

Several other details of Scott's letter to Captain Shirwill are worth noting. Scott's innocuous comment that he had been "called to the country on some business"¹³ in fact alludes to him having entertained Prince Gustavus of Sweden at his home in Abbotsford. He wrote a letter to his son Walter Scott, junior, postmarked the same day (May 31) as his letter to Captain Shirwill:

I was at Abbotsford for three days last week to receive Count Itterberg [i.e. Prince Gustavus] who seemd very happy while with us and was much affected when he took his leave.¹⁴

It was indeed a busy period of time for Scott, thus contributing to his description of himself as an "idle and reluctant" and "careless and negligent" correspondent.¹⁵ Besides entertaining the Prince of Sweden, Scott had just seen his daughter Sophia married to John Gibson Lockhart, later Scott's biographer. The pair were married on April 29, and returned

¹⁰ Shirwill to Clare, July 6, 1820, in Tibble and Tibble, p. 139.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Storey, p. 95.

¹³ Scott's letter to Shirwill.

¹⁴ H. J. C. Grierson, ed., *Centenary Edition of the Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, 12 vols (London: Constable, 1932-37), 5:195. For identification of Prince Itterburgh with Gustavus, see Grierson, 5:128 or James C. Corson, *Notes and Index to Sir Herbert Grierson's Edition of the Letters of Sir Walter Scott* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

¹⁵ Scott's letter to Shirwill (above).

from their honeymoon on May 12.¹⁶ Lockhart, in Scott's words "much engaged with professional business," was at this time a lawyer and a contributor to several literary reviews and magazines.¹⁷

At the close of his letter, Scott had sounded hopeful as he told Shirwill that his new son-in-law was willing to review Clare's poetry, but the notice of Clare's *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life* that Lockhart contributed a few weeks later to the June number of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* was less than kind.¹⁸ Although Clare may have known of the relationship between Scott and Lockhart, his resentment at the review was directed only at Lockhart. In a letter to publisher John Taylor in March of 1821, Clare said of him: "Lockhart is a d---d knave & a coward & my insignificant self would tell him so to his teeth—but Mr G tells me to stick to a cudgel when I quarrel."¹⁹

The Roy Collection letter has not been included in any published compilations of Scott's letters, and is not listed in the Millgate Union Catalogue of Walter Scott Correspondence,²⁰ but it is significant in documenting Scott's attitude to the aspiring poet John Clare, a relationship that would otherwise be seen only from Clare's perspective, and it also provides evidence of Scott's response to the pushiness of Clare's would-be patron, Captain Shirwill.

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¹⁶ J. G. Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.* (Boston: Otis, Broaders, 1837), 4:268.

¹⁷ Scott's letter to Shirwill.

¹⁸ [J. G. Lockhart], "Extracts from Mr. Wastle's Diary," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 7 (1820): 322; reprinted in Mark Storey, ed., *Clare: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973): 103. .

¹⁹ Storey, *Letters*, 164.

²⁰ The Millgate Catalogue in on the Web from the National Library of Scotland, at: <http://www.nls.uk/catalogues/resources/scott/index.cfm>