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Four Notes on Scott

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Four Notes on Scott

Four brief items will be of interest to scholars working on aspects of the latter half of Sir Walter Scott's literary career.

1. Perhaps the most important is a six-line variant reading for *The Field of Waterloo* (1815) that seems not to have been previously collected. In his *Personal Memoirs: Or Reminiscences of Men and Manners* (London, 1830) Pryse Lockhart Gordon, a British citizen living at Brussels, recalls a visit from Byron in May 1816. With Gordon as cicerone, the two spent a day on the battlefield at Waterloo and had coffee together in the evening, after their return.

Gordon had also been Scott's guide when the latter visited Waterloo in August 1815. At Mrs. Gordon's request, Scott wrote six lines of original verse in her album — a first try at a portion of the poem he already had in mind. When Byron came in 1816 Mrs. Gordon made a similar request and he acceded, writing two stanzas that later appeared in the third canto of *Childe Harold*. This information is relevant because Byron read Scott's contribution aloud and Gordon quotes it at this time, not in his chapter on Scott. Here are the six lines:

For high and deathless is the name,
Oh Hougomont, thy ruins claim!
The sound of Cressy none shall own,
And Agincourt shall be unknown,
And Blenheim be a nameless spot,
Long ere thy glories are forgot.

This passage should be compared with *The Field of Waterloo*, section xxiii.

The other three items that I have are all to be found in the *Edinburgh Annual Register*, an unsuccessful yearly chronicle that Scott was instrumental in founding and with which he continued to be associated.

2. On 1 October 1824 Scott was in Edinburgh to preside over the official opening of a new classical academy. He spoke at length on various aspects of education. Lockhart summarizes Scott's remarks from a detailed transcript of them by the academy's secretary, John Russell. An independent version, adding new information (but also omitting some), appears in the *Edinburgh Annual Register* for 1824 (II, 324-326). Scott "highly approved" of one curricular innovation — a course in English literature.

3. Lockhart fails to mention a meeting of the Society of Scottish Antiquaries that fall which the *Edinburgh Annual Register* again records.

In the evening the members dined elegantly at Barry's Hotel, Prince's Street. Several remarks that passed between Scott and Lord Elgin are preserved, but the most interesting exchange is the following:

Lord Meadowbank rose, observing, that as it was agreed by all, that we were greatly indebted to the author of *Waverley* for the antiquarian information contained in his productions, which were now so deservedly popular, it must be considered that a period may in the course of time arrive when conjectures on the real name of the author will give rise to numerous erudite antiquarian researches and disquisitions, in which posterity will be engaged. For which reason he would beg leave to propose a health, which he had not the least doubt would meet with general approbation—the health of “The Great Unknown.”

Sir Walter Scott soon afterwards got up, remarking that it was familiar to the company present that a most every year the Antiquarian Society of Edinburgh received most valuable presents, consisting of documents relative to the Orkney and Shetland Islands, from their old yet anonymous correspondent who signs himself A. Z. The society was therefore under the greatest obligations to drink his health, and this he proposed, because much had been just now said about “The Great Unknown.” Now, it was very possible, that under the self-same appellation of A. Z. the individual was concealed to whom the title of “The Great Unknown” most properly belongs. For when it is considered that, within the alphabetical limits of A. and Z. are included the various letters of our language, the real name of The Great Unknown may no doubt be traced among them. (1824, II, 330)

This charming anecdote belongs in accounts of the authorship controversy, and new instances of Scott's graceful social wit are always welcome. The last toast of the evening, I may add, was to “The immortal memory of Jonathan Oldbuck,” Scott's title character in *The Antiquary*.

4. The *Edinburgh Annual Register* for 1825 (published 1827) gives us new information about Scott's trip to Ireland that year. We learn, for example, that he arrived at Killarney around noon on 5 August, visiting Muckross Abbey that same day and the famous lakes the next. Scott and his party dined on Dina's Island, in the Upper Lake. According to this account, “There were several parties on the lake, all anxious to catch a sight of the ‘Great Unknown.’” It was only on 23 February 1827 that the secret of the authorship had been officially dispelled, so this early acknowledgment of it in print has unusual significance. We also learn from a note on the same page of the *Edinburgh Annual Register* that Scott and his party stopped briefly at the Imperial Hotel, Cork, on 9 August before proceeding to Blarney. (1825, II, 157)

Perhaps what we should retain from these four items, apart from their factual content, is a renewed appreciation for the breadth of Scott's life as a public figure and for that personal aura of his (not solely explainable by fame) which made even a stop for lunch worthy of posterity.

Note: Scholars unable to consult Pryse Lockhart Gordon in the original will find the relevant passage in Ernest J. Lovell, Jr., ed., *His Very Self and Voice: Collected Conversations of Lord Byron* (New York, 1954), pp. 179-180.

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