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SCOTT'S LAST WORDS

Peter Garside

“My dear, be a good man—be virtuous—be religious—be a good man. Nothing else will give you any comfort when you come to lie here.” Walter Scott’s dying words as recounted by J. G. Lockhart in his classic *Life of Scott* gained widespread credence and admiration in the Victorian era, and with their apparent intimation of Scott’s own personal goodness, suggestion of a committed religious belief based on works, and surrounding lachrymosity might be said to have been well-calculated to achieve just that goal.¹ In Andrew Lang’s *Life and Letters* (1897) of Lockhart himself, where the surrounding account is lauded as exhibiting “a tenderness and a delicate self-control unsurpassed in literature,” they are not only repeated verbatim, but also seen as reverberating in Lockhart’s own thoughts shortly before his own death at Abbotsford in 1854.² They also feature as something of a hardy perennial in post-Lockhart Scott biographies of the period, and even beyond, allowing Scott one final moment of grandiloquence, while at the same time providing the biographers themselves with an appealing way of rounding off their own narratives. A late example here can be found in John Buchan’s *Sir Walter Scott* (1932), where Lockhart is depicted as being called to Scott’s bedside and finding him “conscious again, but in the last extremity of weakness;” the words then being aired in full and left unchallenged.³

As the new century progressed however these words came to be increasingly seen as a fabrication, and indeed might be viewed as the first of a series of romantic Lockhartian inventions to have been discredited. In general terms their supposed piety faced a more hostile audience: one, if

¹ J. G. Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.*, 7 vols (Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, 1837-8), VII: 393. Henceforth cited as *Life*.

² Andrew Lang, *The Life and Letters of John Gibson Lockhart*, 2 vols (London: John C. Nimmo, 1897), II: 74.

³ John Buchan, *Sir Walter Scott* (London: Cassell, 1932), 334.

maintaining any interest in “last words,” likely to prioritize irreverent over “official” versions. Furthermore, enhanced access by scholars to the Abbotsford Papers and related correspondence, especially that involving Scott’s innermost family, made it more clear that for much of the journey back from Italy to home in 1832 Scott was in a comatose state, and in his final weeks largely unable to express himself and reportedly prone to long screaming episodes. In this light the Lockhart balloon would no doubt have spluttered out unaided, but a more decisive pinprick was applied. H. J. C. Grierson’s revelation in his 1938 biography that “this pious myth”—representing in his view “a concession to the censorious piety of the Evangelical age”—came as the result of an appeal from a “lady relative” of Scott’s concerned that future detractors would vilify him as an irreligious person. Without revealing the identity of the said lady, Grierson quoted her words in full: “When you write anything of the last very melancholy weeks at Abbotsford I think it will be most valuable to mention any of the few remarks he uttered when his mind was clear of a religious tendency such as I heard he said occasionally, Oh be virtuous! It is ones only comfort in a dying state! and anything of that kind, for there *are* wicked people who will take a *pleasure* in saying that he was not a religious man; and *proving the contrary will do much good.*”⁴ Following biographers have generally swallowed Grierson’s accusation whole, while in the process the “lady relative” has morphed into an evangelical one. Thus John Sutherland in his own *Life* of 1995 alludes to “an evangelical lady ask[ing] Lockhart to confect a pious scene and dialogue just like this,” while adding that “The probability is that Scott never regained consciousness in his last days.”⁵ Likewise Eileen Dunlop in her 2016 critical biography has Grierson unearthing “a damning letter to Lockhart from an evangelical lady urging him, for the spiritual encouragement of his readers, to invent just such a story.”⁶ Nowadays the term “evangelical” is more than likely to conjure up an image of a puritanical proto-Victorian Mrs Grundy, intent in this case on applying a heavy glossing of piety over Scott’s more secular spirit.

In fact in personal terms it is hard to think of anything further from the truth. As Grierson well knew, but for some reason failed to disclose, the person in question was no other than Mrs Harriet Scott of Harden, one of Scott’s longest-standing friends, the wife of his neighbour and clan “chieftain” Hugh, laird of Harden, and a formidable woman in her own

⁴ Sir Herbert Grierson, *Sir Walter Scott, Bart.* (London: Constable, 1938), 299-300.

⁵ John Sutherland, *The Life of Walter Scott* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 355.

⁶ Eileen Dunlop, *Sir Walter Scott: A Life in Story* (Edinburgh: National Museums Scotland, 2016), 227.

right.⁷ The daughter of Count Hans Moritz von Bruhl, Saxon ambassador to the Court of St James, Harriet had married Hugh Scott (later Lord Polwarth) on 29 September 1795, about which time she sat for her portrait by Raeburn. In a letter of 23 August 1795, at a highly uncertain moment in his own relationship with Williamina Belsches, Scott viewed with excitement the prospect of the “great marriage” between “Scott of Harden, and a daughter of Count Bruhl, the famous chess-player,” and the likelihood of their returning shortly to the Hardens’ seat at Mertoun House in the Borders: “I wish they may come down soon, as we shall have fine racketing, of which I will, probably, get my share.”⁸ Two years later, it was to the Hardens that Scott naturally turned for support in forwarding his own plans for marriage—as he confided to his wife-to-be Charlotte: “I went to Mertoun yesterday in order to talk over the most interesting subject which can ever engage me with Mr. and Mrs. Scott ... You will like Mrs. Scott much” (*Letters*, I: 71). Harriet was also instrumental at an early stage in encouraging Scott’s literary ambitions, procuring for him German texts which helped make his early translations possible. In another of her letters to Lockhart in the wake of Scott’s death, Harriet recalled first meeting the would-be poet when “he must have been then six & twenty & altho’ I was two years younger I remember considering him as almost a Boy, his appearance & manner so young & awkward.”⁹

In all some forty letters from Scott to Harriet have survived, mostly available to Grierson, though only twelve of these appear in his edition of the *Letters*. Now mainly deposited in National Records of Scotland [GD157/2011-12], these papers also contain a number of Scott manuscript poems, including a 4-stanza poem beginning “Of old, when vassals to their head,” dedicated to Charles Walter Scott, the Hardens’ eldest child born in 1796 who was to die prematurely aged nine, and in which Scott evokes the spirit of the old Border robber Scotts of Harden, from whom he felt descended as well expressing his own present-day fealty. Notwithstanding the poem’s overriding hectic patriarchy, in the lines “At your command / Shall Painting raise her glowing hand / And stretch her buckler o’er the Muse”¹⁰ it is hard not to sense the presence of Harriet, whose skill as an

⁷ The original of Harriet Scott’s letter to Lockhart, dated 1 November 1832, is in National Library of Scotland [NLS] MS 935, ff. 128-9. Grierson’s transcription is verbally accurate apart from “few remarks” actually reading “few sentences.” Thanks are due to the Trustees of NLS for permission to quote from manuscripts in their care.

⁸ *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. H. J. C. Grierson and others, 12 vols (London: Constable, 1932-7), I: 42. Henceforth cited as *Letters*.

⁹ NLS, MS 1554, f. 59^v-60^r (6 October 1832).

¹⁰ Original holograph of the poem in National Records of Scotland [NRS] GD157/2011/1/18, forming the basis of the text as first published in Walter Scott,

artist was to be noted by Scott when writing to her at some length from Naples on 6 March 1832: “I envied your management of the pencil when at Malta, as frequently elsewhere.”¹¹

After Scott’s move to Abbotsford in 1812, about 8 miles from Mertoun House lower down the Tweed, relationships between the families became even closer. Conversations with Hugh usually concerned local affairs—turnpikes, gas lighting, the career of his eldest surviving son Henry, who became MP for Roxburghshire—but on social occasions the Hardens regularly featured as a couple, and one has a strong feeling that the presiding spirit here more often than not was Harriet. From letters to others, there is evidence that Scott thought Hugh somewhat of “a dawdler habitually irresolute,” whereas Harriet was undeniably “a lady of shrewd sense and knowledge of the world” and in the fullest sense “a woman of fashion” (*Letters*, IV: 349; VIII: 471; IX: 61). Together they showed a knack of being there when it mattered, visiting Scott’s mother shortly before her death (*Letters*, V: 93), and then arriving at Abbotsford in May 1826 when his wife Charlotte was on her deathbed and Scott despite shows of resolution in dire need of support.¹² In widowhood, Mertoun House provided one of Scott’s strongest refuges. In a Journal entry of 21 July 1826 he records himself ensconced in “a little room which I had not occupied since I was a bachelor but often before in my frequent intercourse with this kind and hospitable family” (*Journal*, 200). Scott’s remaining Christmases thereafter were regularly spent with the Hardens. In particular, Harriet shows signs of wanting to provide protection for Scott’s younger daughter Anne, who had suffered badly through her mother’s death and father’s insolvency. One feature of this evidently was church attendance, Scott in a letter to his son Walter of 24 December 1830 mentioning how “Anne goes to Mertoun to go with Mrs Scott to chapel tomorrow at Kelso” (*Letters*, XI: 449). This must refer to St Andrew’s Chapel, built in 1769, originally the home of a “qualified” congregation under an Anglican priest, which in 1826 had become part of the newly amalgamated Scottish Episcopal Church.

On one heightened occasion in these relationships matters concerning religion, death, bereavement, as well as Scott’s own poetry writing,

The Shorter Poems, ed. P. D. Garside and Gillian Hughes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 110.

¹¹ *Letters*, XII: 44. This represents the chronologically the third from last item in Grierson’s edition. In originally offering it to Lockhart on 1 November 1832, Harriet Scott described it as “a very clear letter” requiring only a few modifications and worthy of being published in whole (NLS MS 935, f. 128^v).

¹² *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. W. E. K. Anderson (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1998), 161 (entry for 5 May 1826). Henceforth cited as *Journal*.

combined dynamically. The starting point came with the death of the Rev. George William Scott, fourth son of Hugh and Harriet, which Scott first heard of through a letter of 11 June 1830 from George's brother Henry reporting "your old favourite George has been carried off by a severe typhous fever."¹³ Scott's personal sadness is reflected in a *Journal* entry of 15 June: "Poor dear boy! I am sorry for him and yet more for his parents" (671). Later on 19 September 1830, Harriet wrote to Scott asking if he would pen an inscription for a commemorative tablet in Kentisbeare Church, in Devonshire, where George had been rector: "It would be a great satisfaction to us if you would write a few lines ... merely expressive of your own kind feeling as a friend and a relation."¹⁴ On previous occasions Scott had found the production of such funerary pieces as burdensome; but in this instance, and perhaps with an accentuated sense of his own mortality, he accepted the task as one close to his heart: "I cannot be at all sure that I shall be in the least successful on the subject you mention but I will attempt that subject with deep feeling on my own part and a sympathy with your sorrows and will send you the scroll in the course of a few days."¹⁵ George's death he added had affected him as much as if it had been one of his own sons. The result is the "Inscription for the Monument to the Rev. George Scott," which appears in the *Shorter Poems* volume of the new Edinburgh Edition of Walter Scott's Poetry [EEWSP] as follows:

To youth, to age, alike, this tablet pale
 Tells the brief moral of its tragic tale.
 Art thou a parent? Reverence this bier,
 The parents' fondest hopes lie buried here.
 Art thou a youth, prepared on life to start,
 With opening talents and a generous heart,
 Fair hopes and flattering prospects all thine own?
 Lo! here their end—a monumental stone.
 But let submission tame each murmuring thought,
 Heaven crown'd its champion ere the fight was fought. (287)

In sending Harriet his lines Scott volunteered if she approved to have them pointed and printed by James Ballantyne; an offer which she accepted though retaining the manuscript and sending back her own hand-written copy for the purpose.¹⁶ As a result it is possible to trace a number of changes in the penultimate line where Scott had originally written "sorrowing" before altering this to "murmuring" ("But let submission tame

¹³ NLS MS 3913, f. 178^r.

¹⁴ NLS MS 3914, f. 49^r.

¹⁵ NRS GD157/2012/25 (26 September 1830).

¹⁶ The original holograph of the poem with Scott's accompanying note survives in NRS, GD157/2012/26/1; Harriet Scott's transcript is found in NLS MS 894, f. 59.

each murmuring thought”), which Harriet presumably through misreading interpreted as “mourning,” all printed versions prior to EEWSF then reverting to Scott’s original and better scanning “sorrowing.” On further examination however Scott’s manuscript revision to “murmuring” (as now restored) proves to be both deliberate and biblically well-informed, the expression denoting a faithless questioning of God’s purpose (as by those in Psalm 106.25 who “murmured in their tents, and hearkened not unto the voice of the Lord”). While apparently less theologically astute in this case than Scott, Harriet was no doubt gratified by the end-result, and also by having in her possession the holograph of what she firmly believed to represent his “*last poetical Lines*.”¹⁷

To what extent might Scott himself be considered religious? His Presbyterian upbringing through attendance at Old Greyfriars, in Edinburgh, where his father was an Elder, undoubtedly left its mark. Two of his earliest poems, “On a Thunder-Storm” and “On the Setting Sun,” written while a pupil at the High School, strongly echo nonconformist texts such as Isaac Watts’s metrical *Psalms of David*.¹⁸ Later in 1806 and 1807 he attended the General Assembly as a Ruling Elder for Selkirk; though service as such was a fairly routine activity for an aspiring young advocate of the day and was indeed to be replicated by Lockhart himself in the session for 1818.¹⁹ In his married life there are signs of a leaning towards the “qualified” Episcopalianism of the day—the couple were listed as members of the congregation at Charlotte Chapel, in Rose Street, along with the Duke of Buccleuch, the banker Sir William Forbes, and other Scottish worthies—though the primary mover in matters such as arrangement of baptisms and marriages appears to have been Charlotte, whose own funeral was conducted according to the English service by Edward Bannerman Ramsay, of St George’s Episcopal Chapel, York Place, where Lady Scott had latterly attended when in town. A more positive shift in allegiance might be sought in Scott’s decision to have his

¹⁷ NLS MS 1554, f. 60^v (letter to Lockhart of 6 October 1832).

¹⁸ See *Shorter Poems*, ed. Garside and Hughes, [1]-2, 301-2. The third line of “On the Setting Sun” (“Their great Creator’s praise”) in particular echoes Watts’s *The Psalms of David* (London: J. Clark, 1719), Psalm 104, line 1: “My soul, thy great Creator’s praise” (269).

¹⁹ Scott’s election by the Magistrates and Town Council, as well as appointment as an elder in the parish of Duddingston in 1806, is detailed by Hew Scott in a letter to Lockhart of 29 September 1838, NLS MS 935, ff. 132-3. For Lockhart’s own serving as a ruling elder for the Presbytery of Glasgow, see *The Principal Acts of the General Assembly* (Edinburgh: printed by Peter Hill, 1818), 23. The presence of “many juvenile advocates” is noted as a feature of the Assembly in Lockhart’s *Peter’s Letters to His Kinsfolk*, “2nd edn”, 3 vols (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1819), III: 58.

mother buried in the grounds of the newly-consecrated St John's Chapel at the West End of Princes Street, rather than with his father in the old family plot at Greyfriars; though a concern for security in the face of a current alarm over grave-robbing appears to have been a decisive factor. A rekindled attraction to ancient Catholicism might seem to underlie his own desire to be buried in the grounds of Dryburgh Abbey; but in this case the main driving force seems to have been the assertion of an ancestral right belonging his forebears the Haliburtons, with Scott having extracted a promise to honour such an arrangement from the Earl of Buchan as early as 1790 (see *Letters*, I: 15, 15n, 83). His overall position in terms of doctrine and denomination might thus be regarded as broadly ecumenical; and his reported pleasure at Edward Cheney's remark, when the two were Rome in May 1832, that "no religion had any cause to complain of him" rings true (*Life*, VII: 377). As to his own practice, there are scant reference to attendance at Church—all the signs are that he preferred to work on Sunday. The *Journal* contains at least one reference to Sunday prayers being read at Abbotsford, in which case the English service book was apparently used; and such was definitely the case when he and Anne visited Mertoun.²⁰

On a parallel front, there is plenty of evidence relating to Scott's knowledge of the convention of "last words." The belief that such have special value, on the grounds that no-one on the point of death is likely to varnish the truth, is longstanding. Scott was fully aware of the main traditions that fed into the convention: Classical antiquity, Christian martyrdom, the last speeches of condemned criminals, dying words of celebrated statesman, and more recently still those of literary figures. In the latter instance, the words to a friend attributed to George Lyttleton by Samuel Johnson in *Lives of the Poets* seem particularly close: "Be good, be virtuous, my lord; you must come to this."²¹ In his own *Life* of Dryden, Scott describes the poet as "sensible till nearly his last moments" and dying

²⁰ See *Journal*, 609, 695 (entries for 5 April 1829, 26 December 1830). A rare mention of Church attendance is found in the entry for 23 December 1827: "Went to church at Borthwick with the family and heard a well composed, well delivered, sensible discourse from Mr. Wright the clergyman" (453). Scott's familiarity with the Presbyterian sermon aided the production of his doctrinally orthodox *Religious Discourses by a Layman* (London: Henry Colburn, 1828), originally written in 1824 to help his friend and amanuensis George Huntly Gordon's ordination in the Church of Scotland.

²¹ Samuel Johnson, *Prefaces, Biographical and Critical, to the Works of the English Poets*, vol. X (London: J. Nichols, 1781), 20. A possible connection in this respect is noted in Hesketh Pearson, *Walter Scott, His Life and Personality* (London: Methuen, 1954), 283.

“with submission and entire resignation to the divine will;”²² whereas in the case of Swift he brushes over a near-silence of three years, in the process eschewing Johnson’s famous “expired a driveller and a show,” though the words were to reverberate in the light of his own fears at a later point.²³ The novels are filled with dramatic last expostulations, notable among them Fergus Mac-Ivor’s defiant “God save King *James!*” on being led away to execution (“These were the last words which Waverley heard him speak”).²⁴ An instance of how the would-be heroic might coexist with the banal or scurrilous is also provided by the account of Lord Lovat’s execution in *Tales of a Grandfather*, where the Horatian “Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori” is offset colloquially by “The more mischief the better sport!,” spoken as scaffolding for spectators collapsed.²⁵ Scott’s personal records likewise show a fascination for “last words” in his own time. One instance occurs in the Ashestiel “Memoirs” with the demise of his old High School teacher Alexander Adam: “But it grows dark—the boys may dismiss”—this fitting in with a category in which a “ruling passion” expresses itself for one last time.²⁶ The Journal throughout is flecked with observations on the growing number of passing friends and acquaintances, as well as other assorted notorieties. Perhaps the most revealing example of all there however occurs with Charlotte’s death at Abbotsford on 14 May 1826. According to Anne in a letter to her sister Sophia: “He [the doctor] ... came to the bed and said she was gone. Mamma said in a soft sweet voice *No* and that breath was the last.” Scott was away on court business at the time, and the Journal entry on seeing her corpse came two days later. This is then followed by another entry of 18 May in which Scott appears as if psychologically compelled to recall words for his own sanity: “I rememberd the last sight of her—she raised herself in bed and tried to turn her eyes after me and said with a sort of smile ‘You all have such melancholy faces.’ These were the last words I

²² *The Prose Works of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.*, 28 vols (Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, 1834-6), I: 371.

²³ *Prose Works*, II: 403. For Scott’s later allusion to the line from Samuel Johnson’s *Vanity of Human Wishes*, see his *Journal* entry for 21 December 1830: “But the fear is the blow be not sufficient to destroy life and that I should linger on ‘an idiot and a show’” (692).

²⁴ Walter Scott, *Waverley*, ed. P. D. Garside (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 350. Fergus’s words echo those reportedly spoken by the Jacobite Lord Balmerino prior to his beheading at Tower Hill, London in 1746.

²⁵ Walter Scott, *Tales of a Grandfather*, 3rd series, 3 vols (Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, 1830), III: 319-20.

²⁶ *Scott on Himself*, ed. David Hewitt (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1981), 24.

ever heard her utter.”²⁷ Imagined or real, the words here fit another common trope whereby the dying person shows more concern for others than themselves, as to be reflected later in Scott’s parting refusal, according to Lockhart, of his suggestion that Anne and Sophia be called: “‘No,’ said he, ‘don’t disturb them. Poor souls! I know they were up all night—God bless you all.’”²⁸

It is worth adding that in an earlier period of his life Scott had already found himself apparently close to death. During the spring and early summer of 1819 he had suffered cruelly from stomach cramps, probably as a result of gallstones. According to Lockhart’s account at one point the debilitation was so severe that he called his family to his bedside:

I must not forget to set down what his daughter Sophia afterwards told me of his conduct upon one night, in June, when he really did despair of himself. He then called his children about his bed, and took leave of them with solemn tenderness. After giving them, one by one, such advice as suited their years and characters, he added, “For myself, my dears, I am unconscious of ever having done any man an injury, or omitted any fair opportunity of doing any man a benefit. I well know that no human life can appear otherwise than weak and filthy in the eyes of God; but I rely on the merits and intercession of our Redeemer.” He then laid his hand on their heads, and said, “God bless you! Live so that you may all hope to meet each other in a better place hereafter. And now leave me that I may turn my face to the wall.” (*Life*, IV: 278)

In the “set-piece” nature of this description, and its pointed eliciting of an affective response, one might suspect the hand of the novelist rather than the biographer, and certainly in works such as *Valerius* (1821), his first novel, Lockhart expresses an acute interest in dying words and what might be gleaned from them.²⁹ However in the present instance he could claim an impeccable first-hand witness in Sophia, subsequently his wife, who at the time would have been at the impressionable age of nineteen. It is highly unlikely that Lockhart would have unduly tampered with her testimony, or invented something from scratch, at a time when Sophia herself was actively engaged in the production of the *Life* of her father, during the

²⁷ *Journal*, 166n, 168; the original of Anne’s letter to Sophia, headed “Sunday,” is in NLS MS 1552, ff. 179-80.

²⁸ *Life*, VII: 393-94. The exchange appears immediately after Scott’s parting address to Lockhart.

²⁹ As in the words of the narrator: “We see a being standing on the edge of a precipice, to which the only thing we know certainly, is, that we ourselves shall one day be brought; and shall it be possible to feel no curiosity concerning the manner in which he conducts himself on that giddy bank?” (*Valerius; A Roman Story*, 3 vols (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1821), II: 6.).

months prior to her own death in May 1837. There can be little doubt too about the severity of Scott's illness early in June 1819, when still in Edinburgh, notwithstanding the air of stoicism conveyed to friends in letters. "It will perhaps shade off into a mild chronic complaint," he wrote to Adam Ferguson on 3 June, but "If it returns frequently with the same violence, I shall break up by degrees and follow my dear Chief" (*Letters*, V: 393). Ferguson had just recently returned from Lisbon, accompanying the body of the 4th Duke of Buccleuch who died there in April, and Scott is clearly contemplating following in the same path. Lastly, the words accorded to Scott by Lockhart closely match religious beliefs in relation to death expressed by Scott elsewhere, notably a resignation to the divine will and confidence in the power of redemption; while the expression "God bless you" was to occur again in Lockhart's account of the final farewell, as observed above.

In later years Scott would have had ample time to reflect further on last words for himself whenever his thoughts fell in that direction. In one sense it might even be claimed that the *Journal* itself, from its commencement in November 1825, represents one concerted final statement; just as its entries are permeated with momentary considerations of what he would like to be able to say or have said about him, as well as growing apprehensions that he might not be able to say anything at all. Another, relatively neglected, source can be found among the last verses he wrote, several of which are uncharacteristically intimate in nature, and which reflect a variety of responses as his prospects were eroded by insolvency, his wife's death, and a succession of strokes. One instance is found in the verses written for David Stewart of Garth, who had requested a piece containing multiple signatures of "Walter Scott," which he could distribute among friends; though in the event the poem (as appended to a letter of 18 October 1828) was left intact. In this each of a sequence of couplets serves as a kind doggerel epitaph for the writer right up to the concluding: "Call this vile stuff—I reckon it not / So there's an end of Walter Scott."³⁰ Another case is provided by the "Lines Written in Dora Wordsworth's Album," composed in September 1831 just before Scott's departure for London prior to his Mediterranean journey, and in which after rather impressively comparing the "gifted eye" he had shared with Wordsworth with his present "palsied" state, Scott then appears to stumble in falling back on a valedictory Tory patriotism (reminiscent of his gladiatorial "Moriturus vos saluto," as

³⁰ *Shorter Poems*, ed. Garside and Hughes, 284. These verses gain added poignancy, when considered in the light of the imminent departure of David Stewart to take up his new appointment as governor of St Lucia in the Caribbean, and the likelihood that the two friends would never meet again.

dramatically described by Lockhart, at an anti-Reform political meeting earlier that year).³¹

The storm might whistle round my head
 I would not deprecate the ill
 So I might say when it was sped
 My Country be thou Glorious still.³²

In a subsequent Journal entry Scott himself feared he had “made an ill favoured botch;” and according to Wordsworth Scott at the time had remarked “they are probably the last verses I shall ever write.”³³

Scott's actual last lines however are found in his “Verses Written at the Request of the Countess Wolkonsky, a Russian Lady,” most probably composed in Naples in early April 1832, of which three imperfect holograph versions have survived, from which the last item in the EEWSP *Shorter Poems* volume is reconstituted:

Lady, they say thy Native land
 Unlike this clime of fruit and flowers
 Loves like the Minstrel's northern strand
 The sterner shore of nature's powers
 Even Beauty's powers of Empery
 Grow feeble mid decaying bowers
 Until even you mayst set a task
 Too heavy for the poet's powers.

Mortals in vain—so says the Text—
 Seek grapes from briars from thistles corn
 Say can fair Wolkonsky expect
 Fruit from a withered Scottish thorn?
 Time once there was alas but now
 That time returns not new again
 The shades upon the Dial cast
 Proceed but pass not back again.

Yet in this land of lengthened day
 Where April wears the autumn's hue
 Awakened by the genial ray
 Thoughts of past visions strive to blow

³¹ *Life*, VII: 267. There is evidence that Scott's evocation of Suetonius's original *Morturi te salutant* (“those who are about to die salute you”) might have been in a more impersonal or collective form than in Lockhart.

³² *Shorter Poems*, 288-9, from Dora's Album, now preserved by the Wordsworth Trust at Grasmere (DCMS 122), and editorially emended to allow for Scott's verbal stuttering.

³³ *Journal*, 742; *The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth*, ed. Jared Curtis (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1993), 51.

The blood grows warm the nerves expand
 The stiffened fingers take the pen
 And³⁴

As a whole the fragment poignantly reflects Scott's situation while in Italy, lionized as a celebrity, encouraged to engage in a culturally redolent landscape, yet debilitated to a point where even the physical act of writing was a challenge.³⁵ Two features are especially worth noting. One is the continuing accuracy of Scott's biblical memory: the first two lines of the second stanza directly recalling Matthew 7.16 ("Do men gather grapes of thorn, or figs of thistles?"); while the last two in the same stanza allude to Old Testament legend in which the dying Hezekiah is offered a choice of the shadow on the sun-dial being moved forward or backwards (see 2 Kings 20.10-11, Isaiah 38.8). Also noteworthy is the solitary "And" at the final line, whereby a hiatus stretches into a void. Insofar as written testimony is concerned, this itself might lay claim to represent Scott's true last word.

During his final weeks after his return to Abbotsford early in July 1832 Scott was tended to primarily by his two daughters, along with Lockhart, the two sons Walter and Charles only being called in during the last few days. The main witnesses for Scott's failure to speak, bursts of anger, and prolonged bouts of screaming are Anne and Sophia. In undated letters to Walter, junior, Anne complains of "constant screaming" ("He screamed without ceasing *six and twenty hours*"); while Sophia in letter of her own of 30 August describes how "he has just awoke ... as wild and violent as before."³⁶ Both of the sisters were under other forms of extreme pressure. Even back in September 1831 Wordsworth and his daughter had been concerned whether Anne would be able to carry on, and since then she been through the mill of the Mediterranean trip only to be faced by new pressures on both emotional and physical levels. Sophia for her part, having recently lost her son John Hugh (whose middle name was after Hugh Scott, his godfather), must have been desperately worried about her two remaining young children. "When all is over," she writes on 16 September, "Anne and I and the children will leave this now miserable

³⁴ *Shorter Poems*, 289-90: on the three manuscript versions, see 635-7.

³⁵ For a valuable appraisal of the ambivalent nature of Scott's engagement with his Classical surroundings, see Iain Gordon Brown, *Frolics in the Face of Europe: Sir Walter Scott, Continental Travel and the Tradition of the Grand Tour* ([Stroud]: Fonthill, 2020).

³⁶ NLS MS 1554, 47^r, 45^r, 33^r.

place for ever.”³⁷ A somewhat different perspective however is provided by William Laidlaw, Scott’s steward and amanuensis, who had guarded Abbotsford during his absence, and was clearly considered as something of a rock by the various participants. According to his record, Scott had recognized him on his arrival early in July, and continued to do so for some time. In a letter later that month he reports how “Sir Walter is generally collected in the morning, and very restless and troublesome to his daughters during the afternoon and night; often raving, but always quiet, and generally shewing command of himself when Lockhart comes in.” The same letter adds that “Once, when Lockhart spoke of his restlessness, he replied: ‘There will be rest in the grave.’”³⁸ Writing to Walter about his father on 27 August Laidlaw also questioned Anne’s description of “screaming:” “really it has no analogy to that: it is far more like the Cries of Sailors while they are hauling ropes but more irregular.”³⁹ While Laidlaw is no doubt influenced here, as he undoubtedly was later, by a concern to preserve his employer’s dignity, the implication that Scott’s incapacities were of a physiological as much a mental nature deserves to be taken seriously.

A further glimpse of the relationship between Scott and Lockhart is found in a letter of Laidlaw’s of 22 September 1832 to his brother George reporting Scott’s death on the preceding day. Laidlaw here describes how on one of the final days (most probably Monday 17th is meant) Scott had awoken “more collected than he had been for a long time,” allowing Lockhart to conclude some business relating to his salary as Sheriff: “Mr Lockhart came & read the receipt to him & he sat up (in the bed) and made a Cross for his name with his left hand.”⁴⁰ Among Laidlaw’s other correspondents at this time was Harriet Scott, who on 11 September had written anxiously “in the expectation that our excellent Friend’s sufferings have come to a close & in the hope that he is rewarded for all the good he did in life.” The same letter also shows a particular concern for the fate of Anne Scott: “The change in *her* situation is *great*, lately elevated to almost the highest pitch in which human vanity could place a young woman—now, all that has vanishd, & I trust Walter will be lenient towards any little asperities which such a change may occasion in a person with a very

³⁷ Robert Carruthers, “Abbotsford Notanda,” in Robert Chambers, *Life of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. W. Chambers (London and Edinburgh: W. & R. Chambers, 1871), 187.

³⁸ Carruthers, “Abbotsford Notanda,” 185-6.

³⁹ NLS MS 1554, f. 31^r.

⁴⁰ NLS MS Acc 9084/9. Part of loose folder of Letters and Papers of the Laidlaw family, 1777-1840.

delicate constitution.”⁴¹ Lockhart in the *Life* mentions Harriet as one of several close female relations who tended to Scott “for a day or two at a time” (VII: 393), and there is evidence that for some time she had been attempting to orchestrate medical attention for both Anne and Scott at Abbotsford. Certainly if Scott had indeed made remarks of a “religious tendency” Harriet was in a good position to have heard them. Nor in view of her other qualities does it seem likely she could have easily made them up.

In any case there is no absolute need to find any source at all for Lockhart’s version of the “last words” in Harriet’s testimony. For a start, there is a clear gap between her letter of 1 November 1832 and the time when Lockhart would have been composing his concluding chapters. As Karl S. Guthke has pointed out, there is a literal overlap of no more than two words between her letter and Lockhart’s eventual account.⁴² Further suggestions are also thrown out in Francis Hart’s brief commentary on this specific issue in his *Lockhart as Romantic Biographer* (1971), among them the possibilities of temporal displacement and of Scott himself having staged such an incident.⁴³ This in turn needs to be seen in the context of Hart’s larger discussion of Lockhart’s narrative methods, in which the eliding of incidents and anachronistic license are seen as recurrent features. The dramatic incidents with which Lockhart is prone to punctuate his narrative—for instance, the unceasing hand completing the larger part of *Waverley* in 39 Castle Street, Edinburgh, that Lockhart could not possibly have seen for chronological (and spatial) reasons—have met with justifiable scepticism.⁴⁴ But the stories have still persisted, aided arguably by their containing a real kernel of truth. In this respect one can picture Lockhart in the present case piecing together fragments of what had previously been uttered (with possibly some reprising of the circumstances

⁴¹ NLS MS Acc 9084/9. In the event, it was the Lockharts rather than her brother Walter who provided Anne’s main protection for her few remaining years.

⁴² Karl S. Guthke, *Last Words: Variations on Theme of Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 176.

⁴³ Francis Hart, *Lockhart as Romantic Biographer* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1971), 238.

⁴⁴ *Life*, III: 128-9. For a deconstruction, focussing on the impossibility of Lockhart being in George Street to witness such an occurrence in 1814, see Sutherland, *Life of Walter Scott*, 171. The present writer has further confirmed that it would be impossible to view Scott’s study at the back of his Castle Street house from such a vantage point. The story nevertheless helps give a vivid sense of Scott’s rapid completion of the bulk his novel during a few weeks early in summer that year, as well as serving as a reminder that a large proportion of Scott’s writing was carried out in Edinburgh and not mainly at Abbotsford as is sometimes assumed.

in 1819), or even formulating what he felt Scott would have said if he could.

Nonetheless on the present occasion Lockhart was in a uniquely privileged position as a witness, being in attendance at Abbotsford for virtually the whole duration, even though as late as the day before the sailing to Scotland he had been unsure whether financial circumstances would allow him to join the party.⁴⁵ Edgar Johnson in his biography has him leaving in "Late in July" to consult with Henry Cockburn about matters relating to Scott's position as sheriff, and then returning from this "in mid-August."⁴⁶ Reference to surviving letters of Lockhart's dated from Abbotsford indicate that the only windows for such an excursion would have been between 16-18 or 23-28 August: Lockhart himself in the *Life* refers to leaving Sir Walter for just "a single day" (VII: 391).

Lockhart's larger account of this period also rings true on a number of fronts, as in the case of the tenacity of Scott's biblical memory compared with his failure to recollect the modern poetry of Crabbe. In a similar way, the small detail of Scott's appearing to remember perfectly his grandson Walter's repetition of "some of Dr Watt's hymns" brings to mind Scott's own childhood poems, as mentioned earlier (see *Life*, VII: 387-9). The context given for the alleged last words on Monday, 17 September is also close to that in Laidlaw's letter to George, which Lockhart is unlikely to have known about. Whether a man only able to sign his name with a cross should be able to speak so eloquently is a moot point; but in a state of consciousness a number of pressing concerns could feasibly have come to mind. In one respect, Scott in his last internal conversations might have been wondering whether indeed he himself had been a good man, considering the disarray around him. In other respects, he had more than enough cause for hoping that Lockhart would prove to be one. As early as 1820 he had come to the conclusion that it was Lockhart rather than his own sons who was best-equipped to manage his literary interests;⁴⁷ and at a time when Robert Cadell was busy weaving schemes of financial salvation which in the outcome were to serve mainly his own interests, this might never have seemed more pressing. The *Letters* and *Journal* are also filled

⁴⁵ As is evident from two letters to the publisher John Murray of 6 and 7 July, in the Murray Archive (NLS MS 42449, unfoliated). In the first of these Lockhart writes: "it is now quite settled that Sir W. & the Ladies go on Saturday Evg [7 July] but I am sorry to say, sorry & humiliated, that on looking into my affairs here I find myself so embarrassed that it will be all but impossible for me to accompany them." The letter of 7 July then thanks Murray for financial support.

⁴⁶ Edgar Johnson, *Sir Walter Scott: The Great Unknown*, 2 vols (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1970), 1268, 1274.

⁴⁷ See *Letters*, VI: 188-9 (Scott to J. B. S. Morritt, 19 May 1820).

with moments where Scott is found advising Lockhart to put aside potentially dangerous satirical leanings to advance a more stable literary career. At the time of the death, too, the Lockharts were the only ones to have provided offspring to carry on the family succession which was so dear to Scott's heart. Lockhart was also clearly Scott's designated heir insofar as carrying on his literary and public legacy.

In his *Familiar Anecdotes of Sir Walter Scott* James Hogg gives the impression of going out of his way to bless Lockhart for his attentions to the "illustrious sufferer." "The toil and watching that he patiently endured one would have thought was beyond human nature to have stood and yet I never saw him look better or healthier all the while."⁴⁸ In a letter to Laidlaw in the aftermath Harriet Scott paints a different picture: "Lockhart I am sorry to say looks very ill."⁴⁹ Though decidedly different in tone, the two statements are not necessarily contradictory. For ten weeks at Abbotsford, fielding responsibilities on a variety of fronts, Lockhart's capabilities must have been stretched to full, leading to behavioural patterns which to external observers might have looked like a form of exhilaration; a year later, facing a backlog of professional, domestic, and financial pressures, there was room enough for despondency. Further to this there was the overhanging obligation of honouring Scott's memory, an inescapable duty not entirely invited on his part. In this light, it is perhaps appropriate to reflect more favourably on how fully, and against great difficulties, Lockhart might be said to have accomplished such a hidden inducement in Scott's "last words."

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⁴⁸ James Hogg, *Anecdotes of Scott*, ed. Jill Rubenstein (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 75.

⁴⁹ NLS MS Acc 9084/9 (letter of 8 February 1833).